

STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE RETENTION OF POSTGRADUATE BUSINESS STUDENTS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION COURSES: An Australian Case

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ABSTRACT

In spite of the clear value of postgraduate business students to many providers of distance education courses, the factors affecting the retention of these students have received limited attention in the literature. In addressing this gap, this paper presents the findings of a qualitative study into the factors affecting the retention of postgraduate business students at a major Australian distance education university. The findings of this study suggest that a range of situational, dispositional and attitudinal factors impact upon student retention on this context, both as enablers of and obstacles to ongoing participation. In many cases, these factors differ to those identified in the existing literature on student retention. Based on these findings, we present a range of strategies designed to improve the retention of postgraduate business students by maximising enabling factors and minimising the impact of any identified obstacles. Limitations of the study and suggestions for further research are also presented.

Keywords: Distance education; student retention; retention strategies; postgraduate; Australia.

INTRODUCTION

Postgraduate business students represent a significant source of enrolments and, hence, student-based income for Australian higher education providers. As recently as 2010, postgraduate enrolments in business courses accounted for around a third of all postgraduate enrolments in the Australian higher education sector, and nearly a tenth of all higher education enrolments overall. Moreover, a great many of these students, typically in an attempt to balance study with work, family and other extra-curricular activities, choose to undertake their studies by distance education.

Indeed, one-fifth of all students enrolled in a course of study at an Australian higher education institution undertake at least some of their studies by distance education (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2011).

Fee-paying international students comprise a greater than average proportion of enrolments in business courses at Australian higher education institutions; around half in 2010, compared with just over a quarter of enrolments in all fields (DEEWR, 2011).

This dependence on international student enrolments poses a threat to the providers of these courses, as international student demand for places in Australian higher education continues to wane as a result of the strong Australian dollar, changed student visa requirements, aggressive competition from the USA and UK higher education sectors, and recent negative publicity concerning the safety of onshore international students (Lane & Akerman, 2010). Therefore, maximising revenue from currently enrolled domestic and international students through improved retention strategies will be of increasing importance to providers of postgraduate business courses if they wish to remain financially viable in the immediate term, as fee-paying international students become increasingly hard to recruit.

The logic of customer retention in the services sector - that it requires fewer resources to retain existing customers than to recruit new ones - applies as much to higher education as any commercial service (Bejou, 2005), yet the process of retaining existing students is less understood than the process of recruiting new students (Derby & Smith, 2004; Trotter & Cove, 2005). This is especially true for distance education student retention, in spite of the fact that this model typically experiences higher drop-out rates when compared with on-campus delivery (Tresman, 2002).

In order to address this relative lack of information concerning the retention of distance education students in general, and postgraduate business distance education students in particular, this paper presents a range of strategies intended to improve the retention of students in this context.

These strategies are based on the findings of an exploratory case study into the factors affecting the retention of postgraduate business distance education students at an Australian university where the majority of the student body undertake their studies by distance education. Readers with a stake in the provision of postgraduate business courses by distance education may use these strategies as a starting point for improving their student retention rates, or use them to validate their current approaches.

In this paper, we first provide a brief overview of the literature addressing the factors which can potentially affect student retention. We then present an overview of the primary research on which this paper is based, including the qualitative methodology and a summary of the key findings.

Next, a range of strategies designed to improve the retention of postgraduate business distance education students are discussed. Finally, limitations of this research are acknowledged, avenues for further research in this area are noted and conclusions are drawn.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much of the research into higher education student retention has been conducted in the context of 'traditional' undergraduate students taking their studies on campus. A smaller number of studies (e.g. Gibson & Graff, 1992; Kember, 1989; Smith, 2004; Tresman, 2002; Truluck, 2007) have focused on mature aged students undertaking their studies by distance education, with even fewer studies (e.g. Carroll, Ng & Birch, 2009; Geri, Mendelson & Gefen, 2007) focusing on the retention of postgraduate distance education students. This is cause for concern because, as previously mentioned, distance education is often prone to higher attrition rates than traditional on-campus course delivery.

In her seminal work into mature aged students, Cross (1981) described three types of barriers to their successful participation in higher education:

- situational barriers, which arise from their life circumstances, such as the need to spend time with family, care for dependents and undertake work responsibilities;
- institutional barriers, which result from the procedures, policies and structures of the educational institution; and
- dispositional barriers, which are individually and collectively held beliefs, values, attitudes and perceptions that may inhibit participation in organised learning activities.

This framework was subsequently adapted by Gibson and Graff (1992), who used it to investigate mature aged student retention in a distance education context. While Cross (1981) originally intended this framework to explain mature aged students' decision regarding whether or not to participate in higher education, Gibson and Graff (1992) proposed that these barriers to participation would likely continue to be important as students re-evaluate their ongoing participation throughout their studies.

In other words, these barriers are as relevant to an investigation into student retention as they are into student recruitment.

This same framework was adopted by the present authors for this study because the non-prescriptive nature of the factors contained with this model makes it an ideal theoretical framework for an exploratory study.

It should be noted that while Cross (1981), and Gibson and Graff (1992) focused solely on the obstacles (i.e. barriers) to mature aged students' participation in tertiary education, an examination of the student retention literature reveals a range of enablers which may serve to enhance student retention (e.g. Chyung, 2001; Gaide, 2004; Lesht & Shaik, 2005; Simpson, 2004). As such, the term 'factors' is used throughout this paper to encompass both obstacles to and enablers of student retention, which may be situational, institutional or dispositional in nature.

Five key situational factors emerged from the literature as barriers to mature aged students' ongoing participation in higher education: work pressures (e.g. Mason & Weller, 2000; Powers & Mitchell, 1997), financial pressures (e.g. Palmer, 2001; Yorke, 1999; Yorke et al., 1997), family commitments (e.g. Ashby, 2004; Christie, Munro & Fisher, 2004; Gibson & Graf, 1992; Truluck, 2007), the independent study context itself (Gibson & Graff, 1992), and the health of the student (e.g. Christie, Munro & Fischer, 2004; Simpson, 2004).

It is worthy of note regarding situational factors that Pompper (2006) concluded that the many students who withdraw from study only to re-enrol at a later date indicate that they originally withdrew as a result of one or more situational obstacles, implying that once their circumstances had changed they were free to re-enrol.

The five key institutional factors revealed in the literature are the responsiveness of academic staff members (e.g. Lesht & Shaik, 2005; Vines, 1998), distance education program design (e.g. Gibson & Graff, 1992; Lesht & Shaik, 2005; Mabrito, 2004; Moller, 1998; Vines, 1998; Wang, Sierra & Folger, 2003; Witt & Wayne, 1998), relevance of the program to students' career goals and objectives (e.g. Voss & Gruber, 2006), student support systems (e.g. Gibson & Graff, 1992; Simpson, 2004), and whether student orientation programs were conducted at course commencement (e.g. Chandler, Levin & Levin, 2002; Derby & Smith, 2004; Rowley, 2003).

The four key dispositional (or attitudinal) factors emerging from the literature that serve to enhance or inhibit student retention are student motivation (e.g. Houle, 1961; Lauer, 2002), whether students embark on their studies with realistic goals and intentions (e.g. Seidman, 2005; Voss & Gruber, 2006; Watson, Johnson & Austin, 2004), students' self-confidence as learners (Cross, 1981; Gibson & Graff, 1992) and students' satisfaction with their course experience (Athiyaman, 1997; DeShields, Kara & Kaynak, 2005; Douglas, Douglas & Barnes, 2006; Longden, 2002; Seidman, 2005; Taylor, 2005).

The impact of these various factors on student retention in the context of postgraduate business students in distance education courses was investigated through an exploratory case study, the specifics of which are discussed in the next section.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As relatively little prior research had been conducted in this area, an exploratory qualitative case study methodology was adopted so that rich descriptions could be obtained from students and academic staff members, thus providing the authors with a comprehensive understanding of the impact of each factor in a real-world setting (Aaker, Kumar & Day, 1998; Zikmund, 2003). The primary source of case study evidence was 18 semi-structured in-depth interviews, each of around 45 minutes' duration, conducted with purposively sampled current and former postgraduate business students in three categories:

- 'active' students who were progressing through their studies at a normal rate,
- 'delayed' students who were progressing through their studies but at a slower than normal rate and 'exited' students who had withdrawn from their academic program prior to completion.

'Delayed' and 'exited' students were interviewed in order to explore the factors which had adversely impacted their participation in higher education, while 'active' students were interviewed to provide a basis for comparison. The research sample was broadly representative of the target student population at the case institution in terms of gender distribution, while a balance of interviewees with and without dependent children was selected so that the impact of this particular factor could be investigated. Interviewing continued until no substantively different issues were forthcoming from the interviews (Driedger, Gallois, Sanders & Santesso, 2006). The data analysis for this case study involved the identification of key themes and issues in the interview transcripts and was guided by a provisional research framework developed from the literature review. Care was taken by the researchers throughout this phase of the research process to ensure that any new issues emerging from the interviews were incorporated into the provisional research framework rather than being dismissed as irrelevant because they were not consistent with the existing body of research.

Moreover, because the lead researcher was also a postgraduate business student at the time the study, additional care was needed to ensure that his own pre-conceived beliefs and attitudes concerning the factors affecting postgraduate student retention did not bias the analysis of interview data or the presentation of research findings. The minimisation of researcher bias was further aided by audio recording and verbatim transcription of all in-depth interviews.

KEY FINDINGS

A number of key themes for both current and former postgraduate business students emerged from the in-depth interviews. These themes are summarised in Table 1 and discussed in detail below.

Table: 1
Summary of qualitative interview data

Factor	Impact	Respondent category			Total
		Active	Delayed	Exited	
Employment status/workload	Enabler	-	-	-	-
	Obstacle	-	6	6	12
Family commitments	Enabler	-	-	-	-
	Obstacle	-	3	2	5
The health of the student	Enabler	-	-	-	-
	Obstacle	-	-	1	1
Total situational factors	Enabler	-	-	-	-
	Obstacle	-	9	9	18
Distance education program design	Enabler	5	4	2	11
	Obstacle	1	1	3	5
Relevance of the program	Enabler	6	-	-	6
	Obstacle	-	3	3	6
Student support systems	Enabler	1	-	-	1
	Obstacle	1	3	1	5
Student orientation	Enabler	1	2	1	4
	Obstacle	-	-	-	-
Academic staff responsiveness	Enabler	-	-	-	-
	Obstacle	-	1	-	1
Total institutional factors	Enabler	13	6	3	22
	Obstacle	2	8	7	17
Motivation to continue study	Enabler	6	-	-	6
	Obstacle	-	2	5	7
Realistic goals and intentions	Enabler	6	6	-	12
	Obstacle	-	-	3	3
Total dispositional factors	Enabler	12	6	-	18
	Obstacle	-	2	-	2

Notes. Numerals represent the number of interviewees who identified a factor as being an enabler of or an obstacle to their continued participation in study.

Two key situational factors emerged as impacting the retention of postgraduate business students undertaking their studies by distance education:

- their employment commitments and
- their family commitments.

In line with a number of prior studies (e.g. Mason & Weller, 2000; Powers & Mitchell, 1997), the majority of exited and delayed interviewees reported that their employment commitments adversely affected their ability to participate in higher education since it limited the time that they could dedicate to their studies. Also in line with much existing student retention literature (e.g. Ashby, 2004; Christie, Munro & Fisher, 2004; Gibson & Graf, 1992; Truluck, 2007), having dependent children served as an obstacle for some interviewees because it limited the time available for study. On the other hand, some active students indicated that they were able to successfully balance their study and family commitments by scheduling regular study time and adhering to this schedule, which supports similar findings reported by Tresman (2002). Poor health was also identified by one interviewee as having contributed to his withdrawal, which echoes similar findings reported by Christie, Munro and Fischer (2004), and Simpson (2004).

A key finding of this research was that two situational obstacles identified in previous student retention studies, financial pressures (*cf.* Palmer, 2001; Yorke, 1999; Yorke et al., 1997; etc.) and the independent study context (*cf.* Gibson & Graff, 1992) did not have a major impact on the individuals in this study. Interviewees did not consider independent study to be a major obstacle because, as postgraduate students, the majority had successfully completed distance education courses in the past, while financial pressures did not appear to be a problem because interviewees in this study were typically studying part time whilst in full-time paid employment.

Five institutional factors impact on student retention in this context:

- distance education program design,
- course relevance,
- student support systems,
- student orientation programs and
- the responsiveness of academic staff members (faculty).

In line with a great deal of previous research (e.g. Gibson & Graff, 1992; Lesht & Shaik, 2005; Mabrito, 2004; Moller, 1998; Vines, 1998; Wang, Sierra & Folger, 2003; Witt & Wayne, 1998), interviewees indicated that a well-designed distance education program was an important enabling factor, especially with regard to facilitating interaction between students through delivery was also identified as a key aspect of distance education program through local study groups, online discussion forums and on-campus residential schools. Design because the specific course delivery methods employed by the institution had the potential to resolve or exacerbate the impact of a student being time-poor. Along the lines of certain prior research into student retention (e.g. Voss & Gruber, 2006), the perceived irrelevance of the course also appeared to serve as an obstacle to students' ongoing participation in their studies, with a third of interviewees indicating that they would likely have continued with their studies if they believed that what they were learning would help them in their day-to-day careers.

According to interviewees, the lack (or, at least, the perceived lack) of proactive student support systems in place within the case institution also appeared to have a negative impact on student retention, as did the lack of a formal orientation program for distance education students; both of which are in line with some previous research that indicates that effective student support systems (e.g. Gibson & Graff, 1992; Simpson, 2004) and face-to-face student orientation programs (e.g. Chandler, Levin & Levin, 2002; Derby & Smith, 2004; Rowley, 2003) can have a positive impact on student retention. In contrast to some existing student retention literature (*cf.* Lesht & Shaik, 2005; Vines, 1998; etc.), although interviewees generally agreed that poor responsiveness from academic staff members did impact negatively on their overall course experience, it was not considered by interviewees to be a major factor in their decision to persevere or withdraw from their studies. Two dispositional factors had a major impact on student retention in this context:

- student motivation and
- whether students had clear and realistic goals and intentions for their studies.

Consistent with prior research (Houle, 1961; Lauer, 2002), interviewees generally agreed that they remained motivated to persevere with their studies when they believed that they would lead to enhanced career opportunities or would allow them to perform better in their current job; however motivation was not sufficient for some interviewees, who reported that other insurmountable obstacles—typically situational obstacles—resulted in their withdrawal.

The findings from this study also suggested that, in line with previous research in the field (e.g. Seidman, 2005; Voss & Gruber, 2006; Watson, Johnson & Austin, 2004), interviewees who did not embark on their studies with a clear career-related goal were more likely to withdraw from their studies, while those who linked their motivation to a clear career-oriented goal generally tended to persevere. In contrast to some existing research (e.g. Cross, 1981; Gibson & Graff, 1992), students' self-efficacy did not appear to have a major impact in this context because, as postgraduate students, interviewees had successfully undertaken tertiary studies in the past. Moreover, student satisfaction did not appear to be closely related to student retention in this context. A number of dissatisfied interviewees persevered with their studies because they believed that the value of having the degree outweighed their feelings of dissatisfaction with their course experience, while other interviewees who indicated a high level of satisfaction with their course experience still withdrew due to situational obstacles, which they considered to be insurmountable at the time, such as work and family commitments.

This finding is especially noteworthy, as it contrasts the findings of a wide range of studies in the student retention and services marketing literature (Athiyaman, 1997; DeShields, Kara & Kaynak, 2005; Douglas, Douglas & Barnes, 2006; Longden, 2002; Seidman, 2005; Taylor, 2005; etc.), which propose a strong link between course satisfaction and student retention. Based on the findings from the in-depth interviews, the authors developed a range of proactive retention strategies designed to maximise enabling factors whilst minimising the impact of identified obstacles. These strategies are summarised in Table 2 and described in the next section.

STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE RETENTION

Proposed strategies to address situational factors

A clear theme which emerged from both the interviews and a considerable body of student retention literature was that a lack of study time due to external factors, such as work and family commitments, was a major obstacle to students' ongoing participation in higher education. For the majority of interviewees, this manifested itself as an inability to complete formal assessment tasks by the due date. Hence, it is recommended that:

- distance education providers consider flexible assessment deadlines for postgraduate distance education students, such as granting extensions to students who are too busy in their professional careers to successfully complete an assessment task by the due date, and ensure that all students are aware that this flexibility exists. It also emerged from the interviews and the literature (e.g. Tresman, 2002) that students whose academic lives are well integrated with their extra-institutional lives, such as their work and family commitments, are less likely to withdraw from their studies. Hence, it is recommended that
- distance education providers encourage methods and techniques of successfully integrating study with work and family commitments (e.g. scheduling daily study time, studying at work during scheduled breaks) to students on a regular and ongoing basis.
- Even if distance education providers are unable to help students address these situational issues at the time, as will almost certainly be the case in some instances, prior research (Pompper, 2006) has implied that students who withdraw from study due to situational obstacles often re-enrol once these obstacles have been resolved or addressed. As such, it is recommended that
- distance education providers strive to maintain an ongoing relationship with students who have withdrawn from their studies to ensure that, should they decide to return to study, they do not choose to enrol with a competing distance education provider.

Proposed Strategies to Address Institutional Factors

The findings of this research indicated that interviewees believed that their participation in higher education was aided through face-to-face participation with other distance education students undertaking the same courses, as this assisted them with their understanding of the course content and helped foster a sense of comradeship with their fellow students, which, in turn, helped them to realise that they were not alone. Hence, it is recommended that:

- distance education providers strive to facilitate distance education 'learning communities' such as locally-based study groups in which distance education students may choose to participate, because students in distance education courses tend to be more successful when they are presented with opportunities for interaction with their peers (Mabrito, 2004). As an example of this strategy at work, one 'active' interviewee in this study who had previously participated in student-organised study groups in his local region explained that it "helped [him] persevere because [he] learned a lot; it was good to have the comradeship as well".
- Moreover, offering an optional face-to-face student orientation program could also prove beneficial in this regard, as it would give students the opportunity to meet their instructors and 'classmates', and perhaps allow them to form their own informal learning communities. This would also likely help students to establish a sense of belonging to the institution (Lesht & Shaik, 2005).

As this research also revealed that inflexible course delivery methods could lead to student withdrawal, it is recommended that distance education providers investigate how their students would prefer to study, such as online course materials, printed study guides or a combination of both, and allow students to select the mode which best suits their needs.

By way of example, one currently enrolled interviewee indicated that he "[studies] best by reading and writing", while one 'exited' interviewee explained that printed study materials contributed to his withdrawal because he "spent all day reading at work, so ... the last thing [he] wanted to do [at home] was pick up a study book and read".

A strong theme which emerged from the interviews and the literature (e.g. Seidman, 2005; Voss & Gruber, 2006; Watson, Johnson & Austin, 2004) was that students were far more likely to persevere with their studies if they believed that their course would lead to enhanced career opportunities or, at the very least, would allow them to perform more effectively in their day-to-day employment.

One 'exited' interviewee, for example, revealed that he "probably would have continued with [his] studies if ... it helped [him] run [his] business".

As such, it is of great importance for distance education providers to (7) ensure that their suite of postgraduate business courses is able to both assist students in achieving their individual career goals as well as addressing specific industry needs for knowledge and skills.

Moreover, it may be of benefit for providers of postgraduate business courses to (8) consider implementing an assessment scheme focused on practical, possibly even workplace-based assessment tasks as an additional means of maximising the workplace relevance of their courses.

Furthermore, it should be stressed that it is not sufficient for distance education providers to offer a suite of relevant and engaging courses if students do not enrol in the course which is most appropriate for their individual goals and objectives.

To this end, it is recommended that (9) distance education providers offer some form of pre-enrolment career counselling so as to facilitate that the most appropriate match between student and course is achieved (Gibson & Graff, 1992).

And also ensure that pre-enrolment information about the nature and scope of particular courses is both comprehensive and accurate (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998), in order to increase the likelihood that students commence with realistic expectations of their studies.

Table: 2
Summary of proposed student retention strategies

Situational factors	Institutional factors	Dispositional factors
1) Provide flexibility in assessment 2) Promote methods for students to integrate their academic and extra-institutional lives 3) Maintain an ongoing relationship with exited students	4) Facilitate distance education 'learning communities' 5) Offer an optional face-to-face student orientation program 6) Investigate how distance education students prefer to study 7) Provide a suite of relevant and engaging courses 8) Implement a practically-focused course assessment scheme 9) Offer pre-enrolment career counselling to new students	10) Introduce activities that assist students in exploring and deciding upon suitable career goals

Proposed Strategies to Address Dispositional Factors

The findings of this research suggested that interviewees who do not have clearly defined career goals were more likely to become de-motivated and withdraw from their studies than those who held clear and realistic goals. This was well illustrated by an 'active' interviewee, who stated that she "did feel like 'throwing in the towel' occasionally, but continued because ... the [career-related] benefits of having the degree outweighed the inconvenience of having to study".

Hence, it is recommended that (10) distance education providers, in collaboration with careers guidance professionals, develop and implement compulsory activities that assist students in exploring and deciding upon suitable career goals (Seidman, 2005).

These goal-development activities could conceivably be undertaken as a component of any pre-enrolment career counselling program offered to commencing students (as discussed previously), or, alternately, could be administered in the form of an assessment task in a foundation course taken by all new postgraduate business students.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Although this paper has doubtless provided some new insights into the factors affecting the retention of the under-researched cohort of postgraduate business students undertaking their studies by distance education, as well as a range of strategies to enhance the retention of these students, the findings of this research are not necessarily generalisable to other distance education providers as a consequence of the research design.

Replication of this research in other distance education providers would be beneficial to determine whether the factors identified through this research are applicable in broader institutional and national contexts.

Additionally, the findings of this qualitative study could be used as the basis for further quantitative investigation, which would serve to validate the findings of this exploratory research and allow them to be more broadly generalisable.

CONCLUSIONS

Maximising revenue from currently enrolled students through improved retention strategies will clearly be of increasing importance to postgraduate distance education providers if they wish to remain financially viable in increasingly uncertain economic times.

However the process of retaining existing students is far less understood than the process of recruiting new students, especially in the case of postgraduate business students enrolled in distance education courses.

This paper has striven to address this knowledge gap by investigating the factors which impact upon student retention in this context and presenting a range of proactive student retention strategies based on solid qualitative research conducted within a leading Australian Distance Education University.

This research identified a range of situational, institutional and dispositional factors which impacted upon students' ongoing participation in higher education, although in this particular context the differences between those students who persevered and those who did not can largely be summarised thus: the students who persevered with their studies generally appeared to be better at balancing their extra-institutional lives with their studies, tended to embark on their studies with clear career-oriented goals and genuinely believed that their studies would help them achieve these goals.

Finally, it should be emphasised that, while based on an in-depth qualitative investigation, these research findings are not necessarily generalisable to other distance education providers due to the nature of the research design.

It is therefore recommended that similar research, or research with a similar aim, be conducted with students from other distance education providers to determine whether the factors identified through this exploratory study are widely applicable.

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