



Our journey to new places using different spaces: A teaching degree totally online

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The investment in technology to support delivery through Open University Australia (OUA) is a significant step in opening up the potential to increase efficiencies in service delivery to remote locations and indeed the world - as well as to develop new course offerings that do not add to the strain on 'physical' resources. Whilst Curtin University is currently the 'only player' in the Bachelor of Education Primary Education OUA arena it is wise to consolidate its leading position by understanding the distinct and real trends of student attraction and retention to enhance its status, position and ultimate economic viability in this sphere. This paper reports on a pilot study conducted to determine the student attrition rates in the very first offering of four OUA units in study period one. The results of the pilot study have informed the design of a much larger research project which aims to profile the students participating in the OUA Bachelor of Education Primary course in order to develop a greater understanding of those factors that impact on attrition rates thus informing future practice.

Keywords: Online course, attrition, open university australia, bachelor of education, primary

Introduction

Curtin University of Technology in Perth, Western Australia, has made a significant commitment of resources in e-Learning technology in order to meet the growing demand in higher education for contemporary learning methodologies that offer students more choice and control over the structure, sequence, method and timing of their learning activities. The university-wide Strategic Plan clearly articulates the University's aims of achieving a position as one of the top 20 universities in Asia by 2020 by 'ensuring that Curtin as an organisation and a service provider, responds to the changing needs of the region, including the changing needs of ... staff, ...students, and their prospective employers' (2009). A parallel focus is a growing requirement to 'improve efficiency and productivity, diversify profit streams' (2009) and reconcile the lack of teaching space by optimising the use of existing buildings and resources.

The Flexible Learning Policy has underpinned Curtin's effort on the University's use of flexible and innovative learning methods designed to enhance the quality of the student experience and to derive a strategic market edge in the highly competitive higher education sector. There are flexible learning projects already underway at Curtin but by far the largest is within the School of Education in Humanities. Through the Open Universities Australia (OUA) delivery of the Bachelor of Education Primary degree, the School of Education quadrupled its enrolment in the first year of the degree. This important initiative has single-handedly improved the financial status of the school and positioned Curtin within an enviable market niche as the only provider in Australia to provide a teacher education degree fully online with the exception of the field experience component.

Given that all five universities in Western Australia offer primary teacher education programs, this market differentiation in such a tight marketplace is crucial to the future success of the School of Education. Potential students provide a variety of reasons for choosing an online course. These include: those who may otherwise not be able to consider a change of career; those whose work, family or other commitments prevent attendance on-campus; and generation Y and Z learners who value the flexibility of such an option. These kinds of demographic situations have not been able to be satisfied by courses that other Faculties of Education may be able to offer. The investment in technology to support delivery

through OUA is a significant step in opening up the potential to increase efficiencies in service delivery to remote locations and indeed the world as well as to develop new course offerings that do not add to the strain on 'physical' resources. Whilst Curtin University is currently the 'only player' in the Primary Education arena it has been a wise decision to consolidate its leading position by understanding the distinct and real trends of student attraction and retention to enhance its status, position and ultimate economic viability in this sphere.

This paper reports on the School of Education's journey to new places through the delivery of a Bachelor of Education course totally online through Open University Australia. This journey challenged current practices and enabled teaching staff to explore new spaces.

Online learning

Although online learning could be considered a recent phenomenon, the growth of alternatives to face-to-face instruction has been steady since the mid 1800s (Parker, 1999). For example, according to figures released by Open Universities Australia, the online learning environment has enjoyed strong growth with undergraduate enrolment numbers expanding in the four years between 2004 and 2008, from 23, 958 to 69, 928.

While there is a demand for people to be life long learners there are also pressures from employment and family responsibilities that impact on the ability to access education. This has encouraged a search for learning programs that can offer something other than the traditional face-to-face environment.

On-line learning offers formal education in a variety of time frames. However, this move to learning in a flexible place and space comes with exceedingly high attrition rates (Parker, 1999) with many studies identifying a range of reasons for this lack of persistence "...the behavior of continuing action despite the presence of obstacles" (Rovai, 2002, p.1), as an important measure of higher education program effectiveness. However, the factors that support the persistence are complex and influenced by many characteristics. Attrition is defined as "a decline in the number of students from the beginning to the end of the course, program, institution, or system under review" (Berge & Huang, 2004, p. 4).

Researchers acknowledge that identifying the reasons behind high attrition rates is complex. Willing and Johnson (2004) suggest that many of the reasons suggested for high attrition rates are unique to this online learning environment, explaining that while issues around "isolation, disconnectedness and technological problems" are likely to be common problems for students, there are an additional range of reasons that are "varied and unique to each individual". Regardless of the reasons identified, it is important to have knowledge of which approaches and strategies will support student engagement with the educational content but also with the online learning itself as lack of ability in this area will affect the chances of successful outcomes.

Many researchers have identified a range of attrition rates. Diaz (2002) defined drop out rates at between 20% and 50%. According to Flood (2002) eight out of ten people who begin an online course fail to complete it. Lynch (2001) found student drop out rates to be as high as 50%. Willing and Johnson (2004) suggest that those students who are enrolled in some form of distance education are twice as likely to drop out as their face-to-face counterparts. Describing a study of students participating in a computer programming course, Dutton, Dutton and Perry (2005) found that 72.2% of online students completed the course compared with 90.3% of the on campus students.

Whatever the figures, there appears to be consensus in the literature that dropout rates in online programs are known to be significant. The cost of losing a student is high in terms of time, effort and money for both student and the institution (Willing & Johnson, 2004), so universities who offer online courses need to be able to predict, with some level of accuracy, the potential attrition rate for their students, as well as have the ability to track those students who may be at risk. However, as identified in other studies, the monitoring of potential dropout students is not an easy task. There is no systematic process that allows for immediate identification and tracking of those students who are likely to be at risk, and this may impact on the ability of lecturers to provide the required support, particularly in the early stages of a course when the attrition rates are highest.

Open University Australia

Open University Australia (OUA) was established in 1993 and is designed for open access to undergraduate programs. They currently offer 900 units, and 60 qualifications from 15 of Australia's

Universities and TAFE Colleges. OUA provides an equivalent qualification to an on-campus degree. OUA is owned by seven Australian universities, of which Curtin University is one, and an additional eight institutions combine to form the Consortium of partners and providers. The School of Education commenced the provision of an online Bachelor of Education, Primary degree in March 2009. This degree is being rolled out over the next four years.

The School of Education's journey

The School of Education at Curtin University has been preparing professionals for practice in a wide range of education-related fields since 1974. It is known throughout Australia for the quality of its programs, excellent teaching and the success of its graduates. The school offers pre-service courses in early childhood, primary and secondary teaching. In addition, it also offers a Graduate Diploma in Education in Secondary Education for those who already have a first degree such as Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science. The School of Education also offers a number of Higher Education Post Graduate Degrees.

The University's School of Education has had a long history with the delivery of courses utilizing a number of different modes: face to face, external paper-based, external online and more recently the majority of our face to face courses are delivered employing blended learning environments. However, as noted earlier 2009 has seen a new delivery mode for the Bachelor of Education, Primary Degree emerge through the partnership with Open University Australia. This transition from delivering a face to face course to a totally online course brought with it many challenges, not the least being reconceptualising the pedagogical benefits of employing such a delivery mode for a Degree which is traditionally seen as a very practical one. Other challenges that were recognised at the onset were: having to learn a new Learning Management System introduced by the University; the necessity for the online course to mirror the on campus content and experience; and the four study periods as opposed to the typical two semester approach adopted by the School. The continuous offering of units across four study period, without any break in between, were particularly challenging in that they affected the numbers of teaching staff required to work in units, the commitment of these teachers to teach while their face to face colleagues' teaching commitments were complete, as well as issues to do with marking student work while engaging in the next round of study.

This journey towards adopting a totally online learning space was new to all staff involved in the creation and delivery of the first four units in study period one. Interestingly, this experience or lack of experience created a common bond between the lecturers involved, whereby they shared ideas, compared approaches and helped one another problem solve issues and concerns that arose throughout the planning, creating and delivery of the units. One of the most pressing concerns, the attrition rate, appeared to be very high. It was difficult to ascertain whether students had withdrawn because of other commitments, withdrawn because of difficulty with the content, or because of difficulty with interaction within an online environment. It was also difficult to gauge at which stage in the process, students had actually withdrawn, or had stopped participating.

These concerns caused the lecturers to initiate a pilot study to examine the available data more closely to identify whether there was a real issue with attrition. The research questions which guided the pilot study were:

- What is the attrition rate for each unit in the OUA Bachelor of Education, Primary course for study period one?
- At which stage of each unit are students opting to withdraw/ or become inactive?

For the purpose of this paper, a student was seen to be inactive if they failed to submit their required assessment pieces as identified in the unit outline.

The pilot study

The pilot study occurred during a thirteen week study period that ran from March to May in 2009. Four Core unit units were offered during the study period: Introduction to Curriculum; Professional Practice in Primary Education; Technologies for Learning; and Development & Education. Students enrolled in these units were made up of three groups of students. The largest of the groups was made up of students attempting to meet the entry requirements to be admitted to the Bachelor of Education, Primary Degree Program. (There are no specific academic entry requirements for Open University Undergraduate Degrees. Students are required to pass two of the core units. When those units are successfully completed,

students are offered a place in the Program). The second group consisted of a minority of students who were already enrolled in the Bachelor of Education degree.

The third group contained students who were involved in other university online degrees, and were using these units as elective units for their other degree.

Each of the groups had a range of students who differed in age, academic ability, familiarisation with Information Technology, family circumstances etc. All units were offered through Curtin University of Technology Learning Management System, Blackboard. Although students had to purchase required textbooks, all other learning materials were provided online within each Blackboard site.

Each unit had a unit coordinator who taught within the unit, as well as having responsibility for the overseeing of the unit and support of tutors. Tutors worked with groups of around 50 students to support student learning through interactive socially constructivist strategies and practices that encouraged students to be involved in discussion within the blackboard site, where opportunities were created for students to learn new materials by making connections to what they already knew, in the belief that students are active creators of their own knowledge. To be active, students were encouraged to ask questions, explore and assess what they already knew, and what they needed to know. Because these units are core units for a teaching degree, students were encouraged to make links between theory and classroom practice.

Participants

The data from the very first 13 week study period (March-May) of this course (2009) was interrogated to address the research questions which guided this initial pilot study. As stated, the sample involved four core units: Introduction to Curriculum, Professional Practice in Primary Education, Technologies for Learning, Development & Education. Table 1 provides a brief description, and depicts the number of students enrolled in each of the units.

Table 1: Study period 1 units

Units	Syllabus Statement	Student enrolment
Introduction to curriculum	This unit provides an introduction to the idea of curriculum including key terms, alternative models of curriculum, and the processes and products of curriculum. Specific areas covered include the historical development of curricula to foster inclusion of all students. Curriculum integration, the development of school-based curricula, and the way in which teachers use curriculum documents for planning are also covered. An important element of the unit is assessment, evaluation and reporting.	273
Professional practice in primary education	Introduction to the complexities of the teaching profession. What it means to be an effective teacher and ways in which the interaction between the teacher, learner and environment affects learning. Examination and application of teaching and management strategies. Teacher professionalism, ethics and duty of care.	208
Technologies for learning	The impact of information and communication technologies upon learning and teaching. The use of a range of software and hardware in educational contexts. Approaches to the utilisation, development and evaluation of e-resources. Development of an e-portfolio.	47
Development & education	Physical, cognitive, social, emotional and moral development across the lifespan. Relationship between development and education.	398

Instruments

Blackboard, a learning management system, is the medium of delivery for the OUA units at Curtin University. The Blackboard system enables tracking of student access, participation with learning tasks and particular tools (discussion, email, chat) providing the lecturers with valuable data regarding student levels of activity. Although many students were very active participants, the Blackboard data highlighted a number of issues that were of concern to teaching personnel. In particular, a cohort of students remained inactive and the assumption was that they were not engaged. It was noted that over time participation of some students declined, whilst others remained totally inactive. For the purpose of this

paper the submission of assessment tasks provided the data which indicated the level of activity (active or inactive) over the course of the study period of 13 weeks.

Results

It is important to reiterate that students do not require any entry requirements for these particular OUA units. In other words, anyone is able to enroll in these units. The GradeCentre (Figure 1) within Blackboard provided useful information regarding when the assessments were submitted and when the students last accessed the Blackboard resource. The following table (Table 2) identifies the number of students enrolled in each unit, the assessment submission patterns and the attrition rate for each of the four units.

Last Access	Availability
August 17, 2009	Available
August 18, 2009	Available
August 17, 2009	Available
August 18, 2009	Available
August 20, 2009	Available
August 17, 2009	Available
August 22, 2009	Available
	Unavailable
August 20, 2009	Available

Figure 1: GradeCentre in Blackboard

Table 2: Assessment submissions and attrition rate for OUA study period 1

Category & Order of Assignment Submission	Technologies for Learning N=47	Introduction to Curriculum N=273	Development & Education N=398	Professional Practice N=208	Total N= 926 Average
Withdrew Prior to the Census Date (end of week 3)	3%	15.2%	8.5%	11.6%	9.6%
Nil submission after Assignment 1	21%	16%	9%	2.4%	12.1%
Nil submission after Assignment 2	0	5.8%	3.5%	4%	3.3%
Nil submission after Assignment 3	0	0	2%	0%	0.5%
Nil submissions but still remained enrolled	25%	22%	24%	17%	22%
Completed all assignments	51%	41%	53%	65%	52.5%
Attrition rate (Number of enrolments – number completed all assignments).	49%	59%	47%	35%	47.5%

The data was collected for these specific entry points as the researchers believed that the assessments may have been key triggers for the attrition. This will be discussed further in the Findings section. The average attrition rate across the four units was 47.5%. There was an early attrition rate of 9.6% (average), where students formally withdrew prior to the census date which is typically at the end of the third week of the study period. When students withdraw before this census date, apart from OUA administration charges, students are not required to pay for the tuition costs of the unit. Alternatively, if students withdraw after the census date, they are required to pay the full tuition fee. On average, a total of 22% of students remained enrolled but did not complete any of the assessments. Interestingly, just over half (52.5%) of the students who enrolled completed all of the assessments.

As indicated earlier, one of the OUA conditions is that each unit mirrors the corresponding on campus unit and thus, it was appropriate to gather the data from the on campus units found in Table 3 from the

University student record system. Unfortunately, the researchers did not have access to the detailed assessment data as presented in the previous table, which would have enabled a more appropriate comparison. Table 3 provides the number of enrolments, withdrawals, and those students who successfully passed the face-to-face units for semester 1, 2009 in the same units as OUA study period 1.

Table 3: Data for the equivalent Bentley Campus units semester 1, 2009

Category and order of assignment submission	Technologies for Learning	Introduction to Curriculum	Development & Education	Professional Practice
Enrolled	205	82	155	101
Withdrawn	4	3	5	1
Remained enrolled but did not complete all assessments	17	8	6	6
Attrition rate (Number of enrolments – number withdrawal + students who remained enrolled but did not complete all assessments).	10.2%	13.4%	7%	6.9%

The average attrition rate for the four on campus based units in Semester 1, 2009 was 9.3%. The University has a dedicated system that enables the identification of the attrition rates for each campus and for different groups of students who are enrolled in their courses. This resource is made available to all University staff. The average attrition rate for all on campus students for the period of 2007-2008 was 14%. The attrition rate for all on campus Education students for the same period was 12%.

Table 4 provides the latest enrolment figures for study period 2 (June – August). The only figures the researchers were able to obtain at present were the early attrition rates for this study period. OUA study period 2 units are available for the face to face students in semester 2 (July – November). The units being offered in study period 2 follow the previous units sequentially and ideally this is the order the on campus students would normally follow.

Table 4: Study period 2 OUA units

Unit Title	Enrolled (10/08/09)	Withdrawal Prior to Census Date (10/08/09)	Early Attrition	Currently Enrolled (17/08/09)
Literacy Education	278	32	11.7%	246
Mathematics Education	432	43	9.9%	369
Learning, Teaching & Assessment	821	83	10.1%	738
Professional Practice 2	32	5	15.6%	27
Average attrition rate			11.8%	

As part of the moderation process, Open Universities Australia survey students for satisfaction ratings. The student feedback data for each Curtin OUA unit, across the first two study periods, was scanned to identify common challenges for the students. The general consensus was that students wanted: more interaction; more feedback from the tutor; sample assessments to act as models and guidance; less technical issues; a better turn around in assignment feedback so that they were aware of their progress, more consistency across assignment marking, and more consistency across the structure of the Education units they were completing.

Summary of key results

Table 5 provides a summary of the attrition rates for the units being delivered in the OUA study period 1, and the equivalent units being delivered on campus in semester 1, 2009.

Initial findings

- What is the attrition rate for each unit in the OUA Bachelor of Education, Primary course for study period one?
- At which stage of each unit are students opting to withdraw/ or become inactive?

Table 5: Summary attrition rates for OUA study period 1 and on campus semester 1

Category & order of assignment submission	Technologies for learning	Introduction to curriculum	Development and education	Professional practice	Average attrition
OUA Study period 1 attrition rate	49%	59%	47%	35%	47.5%
On campus semester 1 attrition rate	10.2%	13.4%	7%	6.9%	9.3%

The average attrition rate for the four units over study period one was 47.5%, supporting the findings of Diaz (2002) and Lynch (2001). It appears that the greatest volume of attrition occurred early in the unit with an average of 36% becoming inactive. At this stage it would be difficult to determine the factors that impacted their decision to cease participating in the unit.

The average attrition rate for the on campus students across the same OUA was 9.3%. In comparison the attrition rate for the online students was five times greater than the on campus students. This figure is far greater than recognized by other studies such as Dutton, Dutton and Perry (2005) and Willging and Johnson (2004). An average of 52.5% of the OUA students completed all of the assessments in study period 1.

Willging and Johnson (2004) identified that there are various reason for a high attrition rate for online courses such as 'isolation, disconnectedness and technological problems'. Interestingly, the OUA students expressed similar concerns in their end of unit student survey. Comments such as the need for more interaction and feedback could very easily contribute to the feeling of isolation and disconnectedness by the students. The issue of technical problems was certainly evident in the OUA students.

One of the key findings from this initial pilot project was to identify how difficult it actually was to track individual students. As noted earlier OUA students are able to enroll in any of the units, with the very recent exception of Literacy and Mathematics, which have pre-requisites due to the field experience component, without actually being part of the Bachelor of Education Primary Course. OUA students must actually formally apply to become an OUA student completing a Bachelor of Education Degree. The University must devise a more systematic manner to track these students.

According to the data gathered for the pilot project it appears that students are opting to withdraw/ or become inactive at a number of different stages. The first being, those who withdraw prior to the census date (before week 3), followed by those students who become inactive after the submission of their first assignment. It appears that some students (22%) do not submit any assignments, but choose not to withdraw from the unit. It would be interesting to investigate, why this occurs.

The pilot study helped us to confirm our original suspicion that there was a real issue with student attrition in the OUA units. However, as with most research studies many other research questions surface that demand to be answered. Some of these questions that surfaced: Is withdrawal linked to early assignment submission?; Is the attrition rate different for first time students?; Does the tutor behaviour impact on student attrition? Hence, the following section, Future Implications, outlines the proposal of an extended future research project which will help address some of these questions.

Future implications

Berg and Huang's (2004) model will serve as a theoretical guide for the following proposed research project. Berg and Huang (2004) believe that models of attrition and retention need to reflect variables within the following key areas: Personal; Institutional and Circumstantial.

Personal variables include: demographic variables such as age, gender, ethnicity, place of residence and socioeconomic status; individual variables such as academic skills and abilities, motivation and commitment; and prior educational experiences.

Institutional variables include: bureaucratic variables such as policies and funding; academic variables such as structural and normative systems; and social variables such as social system and mechanisms for social integration.

Circumstantial variables include: institutional interactions that are either internal or external to the institution.

Aims of the proposed study

This follow-up research project will involve those students participating in the Bachelor of Education Primary Program who are enrolled through OUA. In order to develop student profiles for those students who stay for the short term or those who stay for the long term the following key questions will guide the study:

- What are the personal variables such as age, gender, ethnicity, income, academic experience and personal attributes for learning, of this particular cohort of students?
- Adopting Berge and Huang's (2004) model, which variables (personal, institutional and circumstantial) impact on student retention?
- What structures and strategies need to be implemented to encourage OUA students to complete a unit and ultimately, to complete the course?

Design of proposed project

A mixed method approach will be adopted where quantitative and qualitative data will be gathered using online questionnaires and telephone interviews. The participants will be those students enrolled in OUA study periods one and two in 2010. The study will be divided into five distinct phases from December 2009 – December 2010.

Phase One: Literature review & questionnaire development

An extensive literature review will be conducted in this phase focusing on identifying survey instruments which have been validated in other retention and attrition studies. For example, the tools created by Wang et al. (2003), and Muilenberg and Berge (2005). A questionnaire for all students enrolling and one for those who withdraw or drop-out will be developed and implemented for online use. This phase will also involve applying for ethics clearance.

Phase Two: Administering the questionnaires

The initial questionnaire will be administered to all students who enrol into the OUA BEd Primary program units in study periods 1 and 2. This will involve a total of 16 units running across two year levels. The students will be asked to complete the questionnaire through the announcement function on the Learning Management System where a direct link to the questionnaire will be made.

The second questionnaire will be administered to those students who withdraw or drop-out. This will be determined using a number of strategies: OUA Coordinator will be informed; monitor student use of Blackboard. These students will be contacted via email and asked to complete the questionnaire.

Phase Three: Interviews

The aim of the telephone interviews during this phase is to investigate those variables which may impact on student retention in more depth. A random sample of 5% of the students will be selected for this phase.

Phase Four: Data analysis

The software program SPSS will be used for the analysis of the quantitative data and N*VIVO for the analysis of the qualitative data obtained from the open-ended questions in the questionnaire and the telephone interviews.

Conclusion

Online courses have become an integral part of most University's revenue as more and more students are opting to study in this mode. Student attrition and retention has long been of great concern to educators and has a history of being measured in order to determine the effectiveness of programs and student university experience. Ultimately student attrition, has a huge impact on university revenue. The aim of the pilot study was to identify the attrition rate for the new Bachelor of Education, Primary course that was being delivered through Open University Australia. The pilot study revealed that, on average, just over half of the students who enrolled actually completed the unit. This confirmed the concerns expressed by the researchers, and thus initiated the planning for a future research project which attempts to identify in some detail those factors that impact student retention.

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