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Jessica Pinchbeck & Caroline Heaney

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Jessica Pinchbeck and Caroline Heaney [iD]

School of Education, Childhood, Youth and Sport, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

ABSTRACT

Student retention and success are key performance indicators within higher education. One of the key opportunities to address both of these lies with the support offered to students who fail a module but are entitled to resubmit. This study investigates the value of implementing a resubmission intervention to improve the quantity and quality of student resubmissions on a level 1 distance learning module. The intervention consisted of an online synchronous tutorial session and a supporting asynchronous forum. The effectiveness of the intervention was measured by comparing the resubmission and pass rates to a previous presentation with no intervention. It was found that resubmission and pass rates were higher where the intervention was used suggesting that a resubmission intervention can increase the quality and quantity of submissions. Whilst, these findings are useful, it is important to acknowledge that there are additional factors that can impact the quantity and quality of resubmissions.

Introduction

This paper outlines a case example of an intervention aimed at increasing student retention and success in level 1 sport and fitness students at The Open University in the UK. The Open University supports approximately 200,000 distance learning students each year studying over 600 undergraduate, postgraduate and professional modules forming a range of qualifications (Slade & Prinsloo, 2015). Whilst, the mission of the university 'to be open to people, places, methods and ideas' maximises inclusivity and opens university education to those who it would otherwise be unavailable to, it does lead to challenges in developing and retaining students. Open distance learning higher education such as that offered by The Open University is particularly vulnerable to concerns over student retention (Gaskell & Mills, 2014) and studies have revealed that online courses have greater dropout rates than traditional face-to-face institutions (Wolf, Zdrahal, Nikolov & Pantucek, 2013). Student retention is a key performance indicator and as such strategies to enhance student retention and success are encouraged. Given the university's mission, one of the key groups that need to be supported and retained are lower achieving students. This paper investigates an intervention designed to support and improve the outcomes of one of the most vulnerable

groups of students – those who fail a module, but are entitled to resubmit (termed 'resubmission students' throughout this paper). These students are likely to experience low levels of self-efficacy with regard to their academic skills and performance which may negatively impact on their perceived ability to pass a module on the second attempt. This could lead to non-submission or repeated failure. In a study exploring the support offered to failing and failed part-time students in higher education. Whitehead (2013) found that lack of self-confidence was a prominent theme and in particular a lack of 'academic confidence' was evident in students with lower levels of academic attainment. The case example discussed in the current paper specifically investigates level 1 students studying the entry module of a sport and fitness degree, who are perhaps particularly vulnerable to a lack of academic confidence due to their inexperience of academic study.

One of the key challenges of distance education is to reduce isolation and to create a safe and secure learning environment in which students feel part of a community. The development of a collaborative online community is fundamental to student retention with various studies (e.g. Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Reisman, 2003; Rovai, 2007) linking dropout in distance learners to feelings of isolation. Robertson et al. (2008) state that distance learning often lacks the sense of community commonly found in face-to-face learning and that an effective online learning environment can help nurture an individual's feeling of connectedness, which contributes to successful learning and ultimately positively impacts retention and achievement rates.

Creating a sense of community and a feeling of support is even more essential for resubmission students as one could argue that they are one of the most vulnerable groups of students in a cohort and require the greatest level of academic and pastoral support. For the sport and fitness students, in this case example, there is a community structure provided during the normal duration of a module – students are assigned to a tutor along with a group of other students and this group acts as a supportive community who communicate through modalities such as asynchronous forums and synchronous tutorials in an online classroom. However, within Open University structures, upon completion of the module the 'community' that has previously been available to the student dissipates as other students pass the module and move on. The peer community of the tutor group is removed once the module is completed and the tutor is no longer responsible for providing advice, guidance and support to the student entitled to resubmit. Current university systems do not provide a clear support network for resubmission students. As such resubmission students are often isolated and are simply left to resubmit their work by themselves or to actively seek the one-to-one support they are entitled to by contacting the university. Anderson (2006, cited in Simpson, 2013) claims that self-referral, such as this, does not work and argues that students who are most in need of services are less likely to refer themselves. The case study described in this paper therefore, sought to provide a support intervention that was automatically available to all resubmission students which comprised of a forum, an online tutorial and one-to-one support from a tutor.

As well as making such provision automatically available to resubmission students it is important to support it with strategies that encourage students to engage with it. This is particularly important as students who do less well are typically poor engagers (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009). With a specific focus on failing students Attree, Johnston, and Livermore (2014) investigated the use of an intervention consisting of academic advice and guidance delivered over the telephone to improve student outcomes. It was found that students who

received the intervention had higher retention and success rates than those who did not access the intervention. Similar results have been reported by Shin (2010) and Sweet (2011) who concluded that telephone contact with distance learning students can be vital to academic success and course completion (Shin, 2010) and can have a positive effect on student commitment and persistence (Sweet, 2011). In his review of the literature, Simpson (2013) examined a variety of studies focusing on proactive support in distance education and concluded that there is clear evidence that proactive contact increases student retention.

Collectively the literature discussed in this paper would suggest that a structured intervention aimed at preparing students for resubmission within a supportive community environment would be of benefit to students due to resubmit their work on a level 1 module. The purpose of this study was therefore, to investigate the impact of an intervention for resubmission students consisting of an online tutorial and an accompanying forum, aimed at extending the online community and support available to encourage more failing students to resubmit and to increase the quality of resubmissions.

Method

Participants

The participants were students ($n = 65$) from three cohorts (2012/13 $n = 19$, 2013/14 $n = 26$ and 2014/15 $n = 20$) of a level 1 sport and fitness distance learning module at The Open University who were eligible to resubmit their end of module assessment. Students eligible to resubmit are those who have successfully passed the continuous assessment component of the module, but have failed the end of module assessment component. These students are entitled to resubmit a revised version of the same end of module assessment for a second and final chance to pass the module. The first cohort of students (2012/13) received no intervention, whilst the 2013/14 and 2014/15 cohorts received the resubmission intervention (outlined below).

The tutor who implemented the intervention ($n = 1$) for both cohorts was also considered as a participant in the study. The tutor was an experienced tutor on the module who was selected due to his good record of student support and retention.

Intervention

The intervention consisted of initial one-to-one telephone or email contact with each student by the tutor followed by a synchronous online group tutorial session delivered by the tutor and held in an online classroom platform which students were familiar with through the delivery of the module. The tutorial was designed to provide students with support, guidance, motivation and encouragement to write an improved end of module assessment. The online tutorial was supported by an asynchronous forum, moderated by the tutor, open for two weeks prior to the resubmission deadline. This provided a further platform for the students to ask questions, share concerns and interact with the tutor and their peers right up to the resubmission date. The tutor also remained available for one-to-one support throughout this period.

Procedure

A case study design was utilised which used the naturally occurring groups of students who had failed but were entitled to resubmit in their real-life study environment across three presentations of a module. As such, this study provides an in-depth view of three small groups of specific students and their resubmission performance.

In the 2013/14 academic year, approximately two weeks in advance of the online tutorial session, the tutor contacted each student in the cohort eligible to resubmit their end of module assessment by email to introduce himself and advise them of the support available. Students who did not respond to this email were contacted by telephone to ensure that they were aware of the support available and the date and time of the online tutorial. An online tutorial was then held approximately two weeks in advance of the deadline for the resubmission of the end of module assessment. This tutorial was recorded for students who were unable to attend and for students who wished to revisit the content of the session. Following the tutorial, the online forum opened and remained open for two weeks. The tutor moderated and contributed to this forum throughout this period and also offered one-to-one support via email or telephone. This process was repeated in the 2014/15 academic year.

Data were collected on attendance at the tutorial sessions and engagement with the forum. Resubmission rates and pass rates were also calculated for both the 2013/14 and 2014/15 cohorts (intervention groups). These data were then compared with resubmission rates and pass rates, taken from historical data, on the 2012/13 cohort that did not use the resubmission intervention (control group). The only support received by students in the 2012/13 cohort was a standard email from student services advising them of the resubmission requirements and to contact their Student Support Team if they required further assistance.

Measures

The quantity of submissions was measured by the resubmission rate. The resubmission rate (%) of each cohort of students was calculated by dividing the number of students who resubmitted their end of module assessment by the number of students who were eligible to do so.

The quality of submissions was measured by the pass rate. The pass rate (%) of each cohort of students was calculated by dividing number of students that passed the end of module assessment on resubmission by the number of students who were eligible to resubmit.

Student engagement was measured through the collection of data on tutorial attendance and participation in the forum. Data on attendance at the online tutorial sessions was calculated by viewing the recorded tutorials and manually counting the number of students who attended. Unfortunately, data on how many students accessed the recordings was not available.

Engagement with the resubmission forum was measured by the number of students who had either read or posted an item in at least one discussion thread. This data were then further analysed in terms of the number of tutor posts and the number of student posts.

Overall engagement with the resubmission intervention was measured by cross referencing the students who attended the online tutorial and those who engaged with the

Table 1. Resubmission and pass rates.

	2012/13 cohort (no intervention) ($n = 19$) (%)	2013/14 cohort (with intervention) ($n = 26$) (%)	2014/15 cohort (with intervention) ($n = 20$) (%)
Resubmission rate (% submissions of those eligible to resubmit)	84	96	90
Pass rate (% of those eligible to resubmit that passed)	31.5	54	35

Table 2. Student engagement with the resubmission intervention.

	2013/14 cohort ($n = 26$)	2014/15 cohort ($n = 20$)
Engagement with forum	• 13 (50%) students engaged – three posted and 10 as readers • Tutor started seven discussion threads	• 4 (20%) students engaged – one posted and three as readers • Tutor started three discussion threads
Engagement with online tutorial	• Six (23%) attended session • Four of these had engaged with the forum • Two of these students had not engaged at all with the forum	• Two (10%) attended 1st session • Both of these students had engaged with the forum
Overall engagement with the intervention (number of students engaging with forum and/or tutorial)	• 15 Students (58%)	• Four students (20%)

forum to produce the total number of students who engaged with any aspect of the intervention.

Results

Table 1 shows the resubmission rates and pass rates for the three cohorts – one without the intervention and two with the intervention. The data in Table 2 shows the student engagement with the intervention as measured by participation in the forum and/or online tutorial.

Discussion

The results indicate that the resubmission intervention had a positive impact on the level 1 sport and fitness students. The introduction of the resubmission intervention in the 2013/14 academic year, led to an improvement in the resubmission and pass rates on the module amongst students who had failed, but were entitled to resubmit. This supports previous studies that show proactive support aids student retention (e.g. Simpson, 2013), performance (e.g. Shin, 2010) and persistence (e.g. Sweet, 2011), particularly in vulnerable failing students (Attree et al., 2014). The first intervention conducted with the 2013/14 cohort was the most successful with 96% of students submitting their end of module assessment and a 54% pass rate, which was an improvement on 2012/13, when there was no intervention. In 2014/15, where the intervention was implemented for the second year, both the submission and pass

rates were lower, but still remained higher than in 2012/13, when there was no intervention.

The greater success of the 2013/14 intervention is attributed to the greater levels of engagement seen compared to the 2014/15 intervention (58% overall engagement compared to 20%). In 2013/14, 50% of students engaged with the resubmission forum compared to just 20% of students in 2014/15. Tutor engagement also appeared lower; the tutor posted seven discussion threads in 2013/14, compared to just three in 2014/15. This may suggest that greater involvement on the forum by the tutor could be linked to greater student activity on the forum which in turn may boost the quality and quantity of resubmissions. The level of activity on the resubmission forum may influence the development of an online community amongst the resubmission students, which has been documented as important to retention in distance learning students (Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Reisman, 2003; Rovai, 2007; Robertson et al., 2008). The difference in forum activity between the two cohorts may partly explain the difference between the 2013/14 and 2014/15 data with the 2013/14 cohort experiencing a greater sense of online community through a more active forum. The online tutorial was also less well attended in 2014/15, further illustrating a less active online community for this cohort. Future interventions aimed at enhancing the outcomes of resubmission students should therefore, focus on incorporating strategies to maximise engagement.

Whilst, this study has provided valuable information about the impact of resubmission interventions for distance learning students it is important to note that, due to the specific context of the participants and the intervention, caution must be exercised not to generalise these findings more broadly. In addition, it should be acknowledged that resubmission outcomes can be influenced by a myriad of other contributing factors beyond the scope of the intervention such as work, life or family situation. A limitation of this study is that it failed to investigate these. A further limitation is that it was not possible to collect data on students who engaged by listening to the recording of the tutorial. Future studies in this area should aim to examine the impact of interventions from a more holistic perspective and consider all forms of engagement.

Conclusion

This small-scale case study highlights the potential benefits that proactive support can provide for level 1 resubmission students in an open distance learning environment and highlights the need for further investigation in this area. For example, further tracking of these students as they progress to other modules will enable a deeper insight into the extent of the effectiveness of this extra support. Future studies evaluating the use of such interventions at different levels of study would also enhance this area of investigation further. In addition, the inclusion of data regarding the impact of individual support by the tutor (e.g. telephone or email) would be beneficial as would the collection of qualitative data exploring student experiences of resubmission and resubmission interventions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Jessica Pinchbeck is a lecturer in sport and fitness at The Open University. She has worked in distance education for 8 years and has an interest in the impact of the effective use of tools such as forums and online classrooms to enhance the distance learning experiences of sport and fitness students.

Caroline Heaney is a senior lecturer in sport and fitness at The Open University. She is a sport and exercise psychologist who has worked in distance learning for 10 years. She has an interest in the effective delivery of sport and fitness through distance learning and the role of social media in distance learning.

ORCID

Caroline Heaney http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7763-2223

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