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Editorial

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Editorial

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Welcome to this edition of Open Learning. It is a privilege for me to edit this second edition of the Journal following in the footsteps of Chris Douce, Simon Bell and Gill Kirkup, who was a friend and colleague that I had the pleasure of working with in the Institute of Educational Technology at The Open University for a number of years, before she retired.

I would now like to move on to my overview of the articles presented in this current edition, which in a variety of guises helps us to reflect upon the thorny issue of student retention, (Simpson 2004). The opening paper raises the persistent problem, which we as distance educators continually grapple with, namely student retention and satisfaction. Bornschlegl & Cashman (this issue) draw our attention to three main factors that are directly related to either student retention or satisfaction. These being;

- **Student factors** which primarily consists of previous student educational experience, age and interest in a specific course of study
- **Environmental factors**, such as insufficient time (Whitelock, Thorpe & Galley, 2015) Social integration, particularly family support rank highly in this cluster
- **Programme factors** include course design, assessment and feedback, students' interactions among themselves and with the institution, together with technology support.

Bornschlegl & Cashman set out to understand what combination of factors could predict student satisfaction together with their intentions to persist with their studies. This exploratory study with undergraduate students consisted of a 15 minute online survey. The sample size was relatively small but large enough for the findings to be subjected to a robust hierarchical multiple regression analysis. The surprising finding for me was that entertainment value was positively correlated with retention. The authors used Pine & Gilmore's (1998) definition of an entertaining experience for students which is students participating more passively than actively with the subject material. The researchers therefore suggested that the use of video could be used to support entertaining learning experiences as advocated by Gil, Candelas, Garcia and Jara (2012). Consequently we are left with the question of how can we produce higher quality videos that are good learning materials but are expensive to produce? Can the use of Open Educational Resources be part of the solution? Bornschlegl & Cashman present us with a new way of looking at relatively old technologies, as the OUUK originally offered lectures broadcasted on the BBC, and then offered videos to students to assist with their learning but all these materials were expensive to produce. So can this pedagogical approach be considered an innovation?

Coughlan, Pitt & Farrow's paper investigates whether Open Educational Resources (OERs) can present opportunities for pedagogical innovation. OERs are interesting in themselves as they do not specify any particular delivery mechanism. It has been argued that OERs can change learning and teaching through a wider access to high quality resources which in turn can form a catalyst for innovation. Coughlan et al use a case study methodology to investigate OER usage in a project called Bridge to Success (B2S) which was constructed to prepare adults to move onto a college level education in the United States, adopting a pedagogy that promoted student reflection. The researchers interviewed educators from the 12 organisations who had used OERs in the Bridge to Success project. Their findings led them to propose three types of innovation related to OER implementation. These being:

(a) Specific adoption – where educators could change their teaching more easily than with proprietary materials

(b) Preferred practice – where the adoption of OER becomes a longer term practice which can reduce cost and lead to a greater awareness of more open approaches to learning and teaching

(c) Foundations for innovation – an example being the introduction of an online learning feature to an existing face to face course

With this in mind, can OERs facilitate a change of thinking about module content that can provide new ways of thinking about progression and retention especially with respect to engaging reflective activities?

The third paper in this edition by Adil Fathelrahman also investigates the role of the reflective teacher in improving course delivery. By this, the author means reflective practice arising from studying student feedback which in turn supports improvements to the quality of the course offered to the students. The types of feedback obtained by Fathelrahman from his students, on a Management Information Systems course in Saudi Arabia, was by email, telephone calls, discussion forums and direct messages during lectures. The most interesting finding from this paper was the use of socio-emotive data collected from the students to assist in discovering an appropriate solution to the problem students raised about receiving their course materials through recorded resources. Taking into account personal feelings is becoming part of automatic analysis systems for free text comments and was used as early as 2003 by Whitelock, Watt, Raw & Moreale to understand how tutors used socio-emotive feedback to help students improve their essays and remain studying on their module.

Another way to look at retention and progression is through the notion of student engagement. Shah & Cheng (this issue). Engagement is indeed a difficult concept to define. Studies to date with undergraduate students have focused upon personal qualities. Positive factors include students' confidence and control. Appropriate learning challenges and assessments are important, together with the trust between teachers and students. This paper investigates open access courses that enable students to move forward into Higher Education. A qualitative methodology was adopted where a survey was administered. The response rate was only 38% (n=468). An interesting feature of the survey, which was benchmarked with national engagement questionnaires in Australia, UK and USA and customised for open access students, was its focus on probing student motivation to complete their studies. Almost a third of the students, who responded to the survey, were considering withdrawing. These authors found that ; "The key predictors of student engagement on open access enabling courses include on-time submission of assessment, accessing learning material online, time spent studying off-campus, attending classes and a feeling of belonging to the university". Nguyen, Rienties, Toetenel, Ferguson and Whitelock (2017) have also probed the role of assessment with respect to engagement, which drives learning which in turn impacts upon retention.

The previous paper investigated preparing 'access students' to move into Higher Education. The next paper by Hilliam & Calvert (this issue), approaches a similar problem of updating skill sets for a diverse group of students, only this time it is about teaching statistics to students from different subject areas who need to become competent in statistics as part of their overall qualification, which is often not in Mathematics. The module described was developed at the UK's Open University using topics that would be of interest to students studying Economics, Psychology, Criminology, Computing, Social Science, Education, Business and Engineering. So what topics would interest all these students who do not necessarily wish to engage in subjects they believe to be too mathematical for them? The answer seems very obvious when revealed but is often difficult to discover when in the thick of module production. The solution centres on real-world experiences, namely, money, health and education.

The module materials were in the form of printed text with complementary online resources containing over 70 screen-casts demonstrating key teaching examples. The module also employed interactive computer animations to explore particular concepts such as sensitivity and resistance. The most important finding from adopting Hilliam & Calvert's approach, which makes use of both formative t (practical quizzes) and summative assessments is that this module (M140) has one of the highest retention and pass rates for any Level 1 module at The Open University. Not only was retention high, but the satisfaction rating for students who declared a disability was also high where 88% agreed they were satisfied with the teaching material. 77% passed the module. Not surprisingly, this module won an OU Teaching Award for Excellence in promoting equality in 2014. We now start to close the circle on the topic introduced in the first paper for this issue which was about student retention and satisfaction.

We also have recommendations for a "good read" from the two book reviews that complete this edition of Open Learning and we are grateful to Pinsuda Srisontisuk and Kam Cheong Li for their reviews.

"Understanding digital technologies and young children: an international perspective" edited by Susanne Garvis and Narelle Lemon.

The individual chapters in this book start to answer the call for more research to investigate the impact that digital technologies are having on child development. Most of the book explores the use of tablet computers but other devices, such as electronic whiteboards, desktop computers and cameras, are also discussed. Understanding the next generation of learners is important to findings, such as those reported by Bornschlegl & Cashman, in stressing the importance of entertaining learning experiences for student retention and satisfaction.

Kam Cheong Li has reviewed "E-learning in China", edited by Haijun Zeng, Huaying Bao and Geng Chen. This thought provoking book opens up our current knowledge about E-Learning in China but only in the Higher Education sector.

All contributions help us to find new ways to reflect upon generic pedagogical problems for Open, Distance and e-Learning.

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