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Frances Myers, Hayley Glover & Carey Stephens

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Learner interrupted: understanding the stories behind the codes – a qualitative analysis of HE distance-learner withdrawals

Frances Myers [a], Hayley Glover [b] and Carey Stephens [b]

[a]Off-Campus, University of Bolton, Bolton, UK; [b]Faculty of Business and Law, Open University, UK

ABSTRACT

Successful retention of students through understanding their motivations and behaviours is a challenge to universities worldwide. Whilst the impact of withdrawals is an issue for all institutions, attrition for distance-learning providers is particularly problematic owing to higher non-completion rates, less physical visibility, and because distance-learners tend to have more complex lives. This paper examines students' personal stories explaining their decisions to withdraw from university study. It considers 641 written discourses initiated by students as part of their requests to withdraw, covering the challenges they face, and the complex combinations of factors that contribute to their decisions to give up. This qualitative approach was adopted as a necessary complement to the quantitative rush of metrics information that universities now provide on withdrawal figures. Three themes selected are: *deferral/withdrawal, time available*, and *preparedness for study*. The paper concludes that complementary qualitative insights both add clarity and detail to institutional understanding and reduces oversimplification of complex decision-making from unidimensional quantitative approaches.

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Introduction

This article presents a qualitative analysis of active student withdrawals in a distance-learning context, highlighting wider concerns around retention and progression found throughout the higher education (HE) sector. Learner support plays a key role for many students; however, successful intervention strategies are particularly resonant for distance, digitally led and open HE providers with traditionally higher rates of withdrawal (see Bornschlegl and Cashman 2019).

Whilst universities have always invested in student success, recent changes to financial regimes have shone a light on student experience and institutional retention figures (see Muller 2018, 74). This has led to a potentially damaging over-reliance on quantitative analysis, metrics, and league tables; 'once we become fixated on measurement, we easily slip into believing that more is better' (Muller 2018, 67). This view is supported by Lybeck (2017) who states that 'metrics [are] becoming the cart which drove the horses.'

The introduction of student loans has impacted the nature of relationships between students and their universities, with contestation about the extent to which students are seen as HE consumers and are measured as such in terms of service provision. Bunce, Baird, and Jones (2017, 1959) note potential perception changes between students seeking to learn to those explicitly seeking a qualification as one outcome. They argue that changes have led to students increased expectations around service standards. This in turn drives the institution to collect and evaluate data. The dominance of analysis via what the numbers say has led to a subsuming of more qualitative

CONTACT Frances Myers f.myers@bolton.ac.uk University of Bolton, Deane Road, Bolton BL3 5AB

evaluation, downplaying student voices instead of foregrounding 'their story, their experience, their perspective' (Dzarkiria 2008, 103). It is suggested here that qualitative analysis is an important contributor to institutional knowledge around student withdrawal and decision-making processes.

A second impact on the relationship between students and universities has been the potentially transforming effects of technological enhancements and associated pedagogical innovations as one facet of our hyperconnected society. Whilst this paper does not focus on the contributions of technologies to student retention, it acknowledges that these changes have been particularly active in the distance sector, moving it into greater prominence. Much good work has been achieved through educators taking advantage of improved technological infrastructures and a plethora of platform tools available to support student learning and personal engagement (see e.g. Ames et al. 2020).

It also needs to be acknowledged that there are huge variances in both the scope and purpose of distance education providers. Just as perceptions were changed by the advent of student fees, the future promise of 'one to many personalisation' for online learners as heralded by the Ed Tech industry needs to be recognised as distinct from students personal learning taking place in the online sphere (see Morrish 2021). However, with all of the excitement that has been generated through technological possibilities, the human drivers behind student retention and progression remain.

The project explored reasons for students considering withdrawal, specifically distance-learning undergraduates studying introductory level courses in Business and Law at a UK university. At the university studied, the large cohorts of first year undergraduates (level 4 UK framework) typically undertake 60 credits over 9 months, via a blended online and face-to-face teaching model.

The paper evaluates initial online texts sent by these students concerned about their studies, in order to hear from them in their own words. Discourses initiated by students were narrative in character, tended not to be fully formed and often related information about study worries in an unmanaged, fluid fashion (see Gabriel 2004, 72). The objective of this paper is therefore to allow the dialogues of students considering withdrawal to be brought to the fore, to understand more about the challenges they face.

Brown et al. (2015, 173) state that retention is often framed in institutional, rather than student, terms. Self-service solutions via the web add to this problem, promoting institutional quantitative reasons for withdrawal rather than surfacing complex problems discussed with advisory staff. This paper aims to consider evidence to promote adaptation from the dominance of short-term atomistic support focused on a single issue, critiqued by Simpson (2009) as seemingly 'ad hoc', to a more proactive, holistic, and longer-term student support system.

In summary, this study focused on how students articulate thoughts and feelings around deferment or withdrawal from a distance-learning environment. The purpose was to allow better understanding of the detailed personal stories behind their decisions. Uncovering these stories has potential to improve dialogues the university has with students whilst they are in a fluid state of considering options before either post-event rationalisation or institutional classification. This could enable the university to act in a timely manner before outcomes become fixed.

Literature review

Factors in student retention can be divided into those that are applicable across the sector and additional factors that are particularly pertinent to distance education. Many of the latter relate to higher attrition levels in the distance environment, with Simpson (2013, 2) positioning this as a 'distance education deficit'. The literature review therefore considers the more general frameworks first before moving on to the specifics of withdrawal considerations in distance learning. Beer and Lawson (2018, 497) define student attrition as a 'wicked problem'. They conceptualise this as an interplay of complex, multi-faceted external issues that universities may have little control over and which may not be 'fixed' by University strategy or policy. The authors go on to note that the hierarchical and bureaucratic nature of universities relies on stability and predictability to solve problems. Whilst this may offer efficiency it also limits innovation and flexibility (Jansen, Cammock, and Conner 2011).

Research on retention, attrition, and progression in HE is a well-established field. Early studies such as Tinto (1975, 89) focused on the lumping together of very different forms and characteristics of 'leaving behaviour' by students. He compared extensive literature around the dropout process, summarising that much remained unknown, particularly in relation to inadequate conceptualisations of student withdrawal types. This seminal article highlights how, institutionally, temporary leaving and transfer is often placed together with more permanent withdrawal. Investigating variations on Tinto's (1975, 106) 'lack of congruency', essentially a mismatch between individual fit and circumstance and the climate of their chosen institution, remains key to much research in the field. However, its continued importance to scholarship suggests that there is room for new approaches to considering student withdrawal.

This theme of congruency is also compatible with later studies, which develop ideas around demographic criteria to analyse student success initiatives. Thomas (2002) seeks to understand both students' contextual influences for persistence as well as how institutional values and practices impact on retention. She highlights a list of factors including institutions' 'willingness' (439) to accommodate students' needs, as well as not assuming they have 'access to time and other resources' (439). These contextual approaches have been incredibly helpful to educational researchers in surfacing issues around student diversity such as lack of confidence. Limits of these approaches, however, are raised by Cotton, Nash, and Kneale (2017, 63), who note they can undermine students' own agency and lead to 'overly deterministic views of their chances of success'. This may be exacerbated in the distance-learning sphere where students are less visible.

In his 2006 contribution, Tinto returns to review the then current state of retention work, highlighting how student attrition studies have evolved from using a psychological lens and thus ascribing success or failure to the student themselves (victim blaming) through to making explicit connections between individual, involvement and integration. Tight (2019) updates these ideas, pushing the pendulum further to consider how once financing shifted from state to student, retention responsibilities explicitly shifted from student to the institution. He attributes this change of focus to how interest in retention has been supplanted by scholarship of engagement, calling for better understanding of the students' own perspectives.

However, whilst Tight's analysis is focused on the macro-responsibilities of retention, as promoted through governmental metrics, it is less orientated towards the needs of individual students. In an age of HE expansion and massification, students still need their institution to hear and understand their individual voices to avoid pigeonholing. With this shift from institutional interest to institutional responsibility, higher education institution (HEI) abilities to promote and deliver student success continues to drive debate within the sector (see e.g. Gaskell 2006). It is notable that a recent body of literature has emerged from a number of different countries reflecting the growing importance of retention issues (see e.g. Cotton, Nash, and Kneale 2017; Beer and Lawson 2017). Cross-national comparisons help to foster debate around distance learning, retention, and commonalities of student support.

There are many possible initiatives available to universities to support student continuation. This study focuses instead on issues that consider the student's own active role and agency in retention or withdrawal from their courses. Whilst McGivney (2004) provides a useful taxonomy of retention and completion patterns, her comments on 'intermittent' progress as part of a learners' journey may have dated due to funding factors. However, her analysis of non-completion as a complex issue remains highly pertinent. She notes students often use perceived 'acceptable' or 'least threatening' (McGivney 2004, 37) reasons for premature withdrawal.

Many retention initiatives are driven through an understanding that withdrawal is detrimental to student and institution alike (Webb and Cotton 2018). This has not changed, however, changes to funding rules and the impact of non-success have exacerbated complex situations for students.

Historically, withdrawal has always been tied to self-esteem and feelings of failure (Bennett, Kottasz, and Nocciolino 2007, 123), and viewed as an 'emotional' decision (Nichols 2010, 95). If feelings of failure and reinforcement about returning could be successfully managed, it *could* be a 'necessary and constructive act' (Gaskell, Gibbons, and Simpson 1990, 51) for longer-term retention improvements.

The extent to which students' personal and social issues lead to withdrawal as opposed to institutional factors (Gaskell 2006) is a key question. Brown et al. (2015, 2) draw on Zepke and Leach (2010) to comment upon the extent to which 'soft factors', such as caring responsibilities, particularly impact distance learners. This is further evidenced via studies such as Sauvé et al. (2018) and Kember (2009). Stuart (2017) explicitly links these factors in her 'golden triangle' approach, which links student and context, institution and its culture and relationship to place as critical to retention and success.

The distance-learning context, whilst no different in terms of aims around student progress, provides its own idiosyncrasies in relation to the latter concept of 'place'. Although contributors such as Tait (2000) draw on long traditions of emphasis on service to students as prevalent in modern distance education, an interesting research gap is still presented, in taking the benefit of the many existing studies on retention which have focussed on campus-based support functions (e.g. Bennett, Kottasz, and Nocciolino 2007). Early interventions (Yorke 2004) may be considered particularly pertinent for students in their first year of HE and of the greatest benefit to the institution for investment of scarce resources for maximum value (Van Schalkwyk 2010).

The very early nature of some of these discourses and subsequent withdrawal is particularly relevant to the distance learning environment (Yorke 2004), indicating need for personal engagement by both parties early on to establish an active psychological contract. Harris et al. (2016) refer to key ideas around 'preparedness'. Practical examples for creating this state of 'preparedness' are offered by Nichols (2010, 94) which include support surveys, orientation, and personal contact. The affective nature of the induction cycle and engagement with it by students on retention is presented by Forrester et al. (2005).

Brown, Hughes, and Delaney (2015, 173) observe that typical distance learners have different backgrounds from campus students. However, Butcher and Rose-Adams (2015, 132–133) also raise other problems particularly applicable in distance learning, namely that externally marketised ideas around 'choice' and 'flexibility' as concepts don't often exist for these learners. For them personal circumstances dictate that study is either this mode or not to study. Their view is that flexible approaches may not be personalised and responsive and students were often isolated.

Gaskell (2006) also raises the important question of the extent to which increasing e-learning offerings and associated pedagogies might contribute to social inclusion and success or if it presents barriers. Concerns about VLE (virtual learning environments) as 'passive' experiences for students were also raised. Heaton-Shrestha, May, and Burke (2009, 88) commented on varying inclusivity for those who lurk (Preece, Nonnecke, and Andrews 2004) or see online teaching as more of a repository rather than a living, active space for engagement. Student perceptions of low one-to-one contact with non-traditional delivery methods were also associated with contemplation of withdrawal as were lower levels of peer engagement and high assessment load by Webb and Cotton (2018). They recommend these as key areas for retention initiatives.

Similarly, Wimpenny and Savin-Baden (2013, 323) highlight student alienation in relation to staff behaviours and responses – citing a sense of injustice, and 'being an inconvenience'. They also consider rhetoric of openness, access, and inclusivity to be 'increasingly false' (2013, 325). Similar issues around institutional drivers for resilience as a key facet for successful retention and progression are also alluded to by Cotton, Nash, and Kneale (2017), who caution against too much emphasis on the students' own role in success. Whilst they highlight mutual reinforcement of structural and individual factors in inhibiting success, they draw short of pinpointing the neoliberalist mantra of meritocracy (see Littler 2018) as having a role in burdening the student with responsibility for their studies.

Whatever the context of the HEI studied, approaches examined could also be broadly divided into studies that focus upon institutional methods, initiatives, and best practices for increasing retention, and those focused on hearing and understanding student voices. This unintentional muffling of individual student needs in institutional discourses on attrition, retention and success have been remarked upon in several contributions. Roberts (2011, 185), draws on Wickens, Forbes, and Tribe (2006) to say that students 'remain "shadowy figures", with their voices often being unheard in the development of retention strategies'. Roberts' recommendations include student-centred research to ensure progress for increasingly diverse student bodies (2011, 183).

An additional and complementary view of a privileging of quantitative data over qualitative comments gathered from student feedback has been put forward by Grebennikov and Shah (2013, 606). They write that: 'successful universities should include a focus on what students have to say in their own words and incorporate such feedback into their priorities.' They call for triangulation of varying sources of data about and by students linked to timely responses from the institution as helping increase satisfaction and retention as well as improving both the face-to-face and online student experience.

Quantitative indicators and accompanying interventions for student retention have tended to be based on long-established demographic and social categorisations such as age, gender, postcode judgements and ethnicity. More recently, Webb and Cotton (2018) proposed that such initiatives may be more successful based on other relevant factors such as prior learning experience or qualifications. Another factor in using established quantitative indicators has been the historical difficulty in securing student participants for comment on their reasons for withdrawal, both for reasons of sensitivity and difficulty in gaining contact with this group. Therefore, the adopted approach offered two key benefits; firstly, being able to use the students' own words and secondly, not disturbing those who had moved on.

Methodology

Sample and data collection

The dataset consisted of 641 contact records from students who initiated withdrawal-orientated dialogue via an online webform between 2015 and 2017. These students were all registered on introductory-level Business or Law modules and were all looking to defer, reduce, or cancel study. The primary reason for sampling introductory-level students rather than those further along is that this cohort require most support for success (see e.g. Myers et al. 2019). By using anonymised historical records, with no direct contact, it was confirmed that ethics approval was not required.

The 'student home' page enables students to select self-service options to help the university triage queries. Students can select one of 14 headings to initially route their query, which is directed to an appropriate adviser. A free-text area is available to write their concerns in their own words. It is extracts from these verbatim comments written by students that we evaluated in this study. Three of these 14 headings directly relate to withdrawal or stopping study (as opposed to e.g. requests for additional materials, special circumstances or additional support) and these were the 641 selected for analysis. These three institutionally determined headings were; *progress concern, concerned about continuing with a module, changing my study plans.*

NB. It should be noted that all students in the sample set were *actively* looking to withdraw/defer. Along with the rest of the sector, the institution recognises two main types of withdrawal. Active, where the student makes a joint decision in dialogue with a study adviser, and passive where the student disappears, and it is incumbent on the institution to try to contact to help. This paper solely focuses on active dialogues. (For a discussion on passive withdrawal, see Stephens and Myers 2014).

Data analysis

Stage one evaluation of the dataset was undertaken individually by members of the research group who each familiarised themselves with the data before collaborating on initial manual codes (Braun and Clarke 2006). Each individual coder commented on a lack of neat fit between heading and actual text. Whilst some had straightforward matches, e.g. 'I just do not have the spare time or capacity with working', under the heading of *changing my study plans*, most texts were personal stories which referred to more than one issue. This demonstrates a complexity that is lost by existing unidimensional approaches where system capture is limited to a single heading. E.g. one student wrote in under *progress concerns* to reduce study intensity, citing additional caring responsibilities, a new job and suffering from stress. They went on to say that study gave them purpose but as time had gone on, they were finding it harder to cope.

It was therefore decided to use a data-driven approach to organise coding rather than pre-existing institutional classifications. Existing institutional metric headings did not reflect the complex nature of study and personal issues raised by students, i.e. 'our' words are not 'their' words. Whilst institutional categories for withdrawal are useful for internal routing and statistical analyses, they obscure students' complex realities, messy problems, and human stories. Rather than a focus on atomistic reporting, the researchers' knowledge and experience as teaching academics orientated them towards everyday complexities they hear from struggling students.

During stage 2 the team put the whole 641 student contact record discourses into NVivo10. This enabled a second stage of evaluation, collating and negotiating initial code groups into our own broader thematic evidence-based headings. Keyword searches were initially undertaken to find the most populous terms used by students which were set as nodes and used as theme drivers. Outlying comments were then categorised by mutual consent, e.g. where a student said, 'I'm too busy', this was categorised as a time issue. Where students' queries hit multiple issues, they were included in all relevant themes. By doing this the team hoped to go beyond what was available from standard reporting through what the numbers say or accepting existing assumptions.

Results

An inductive approach to content analysis drew out a range of topics. The three most frequent were classified as *deferral/withdrawal, time available* and *preparedness for study*. Samples of verbatim texts as illustrative of the new themes were then identified via NVivo coding. These are presented and discussed below under those headings.

Deferral/withdrawal was raised 777 times in the dataset. Whilst researchers originally expected to find students intending to *defer* (i.e. postpone) as a separate category than *withdraw* (i.e. cancel study), this was not the case. Students used the terms interchangeably and repeatedly within the same messages, e.g. '*please cancel … I would like to defer …* '. Sometimes they raised a distinction; e.g. '*am I able to defer or can you cancel this for me?*'. Interchangeability demonstrates a mismatch between expected organisational terminology and that of the students themselves. It was therefore decided to code these together to avoid existing assumptions about student intent.

Time available was raised 351 times and was the most straightforward of the categories chosen. Students generally articulated this problem clearly, e.g. 'Due to work commitments I am unable to give the time and dedication the course deserves and desires'.

Preparedness for study was raised on 124 occasions. This was the most difficult category for researchers to agree codes, as students used a broad variety of phrases, from the straightforward e.g. 'In all honesty I had done nowhere enough preparation' to a more nuanced 'material is more advanced than I thought'.

Whilst recording of multiple issues within single texts presented data difficulties in terms of defining root causes, what this approach yielded instead was a rich, complex picture. Whilst this paper has focused on the most populous problems, others occurred. These included intertwining of life events with study concerns, as well as underpinning factors linked to confidence and resilience. Other issues such as teaching methods/materials (72 references) and health issues (50 references) were noted in the discourses as well as various references to assistance with study options such as a workplace promotion needing a different qualification. Some students, however, needed real guidance. E.g. one asked to '*postpone*' due to a '*wrong choice in studying Business Management*' and wanted help to restart Law the following year despite stating family difficulties and unexpected unemployment. Such complexity indicated that engaged students rarely suggest giving up due to a single contraindication, rather combinations of adversities.

Discussion

From the results of the dataset above, we discuss here the three key themes that emerged. In the following sections, we frame analyses to allow students own voices to take centre stage. This approach follows Roberts (2011) recommendations for retention strategies that bring learners out of the shadows in a more student-centred way.

Deferral/withdrawal

Where students propose a change in study intention and contact the university a conversation is triggered with a study advisor to discuss options and support. As noted by Heaton-Shrestha, May, and Burke (2009, 84) students' feelings of attachment to study and the institution are key to deciding if to withdraw or remain studying. Much of this may be due to what Brown, Hughes, and Delaney (2015, 182) state as 'failings among distance education providers to establish connectedness with and between their students'. That students *did* feel a commitment to their studies was evidenced in the content and tone of their conversations with many apologising for feeling unable to continue, and for asking for support and resources to help from the institution.

In the dataset, students often interchangeably used the term 'defer' as well as the institutional term 'withdrawal', indicating desire to put study on hold, not to end it, as evidenced in the verbatim quotes below:

> I deferred this unit... due to ill health... Please can I be removed from this course and once I've been discharged from the hospital, I will contact you again to take up my studies. Apologies for any inconvenience...

> I need to cancel as I have fallen horrendously behind and despite my tutor having given me extensions... I find I am still falling behind and struggling to get things done on time. I was wondering about the availability of a deferral so I can come back... in the future...

While students often wanted mid-way options of deferring, or simply time to pause and consider options, in England and Wales the current financial implications of students' fees and loans often meant they had to make a decision to continue or to cease study when they may not have been psychologically ready to do so (www.gov.uk/student-finance). In these circumstances, regulatory necessity was beyond both parties control and, following further investigation through the student management system, led to a finality that did not truly reflect the wishes of either party. In this way, being registered as an active student or not was a binary state and this made a return to study or withdrawal a more significant step, both in terms of administrative process and the psychological contract than if there were ability to simply 'pause'. Tom (1999, 267) purports that if support mechanisms could offer a 'stopping out rather than dropping out', retention levels could be improved. Having withdrawn part way through a module, students were much less likely to resume study.

Students often seemed to struggle with gauging a realistic level of study intensity with their existing commitments.

> I am so far behind on my studies that I don't feel I am able to catch [up], ... I can't catch up on law and keep on top of business management so can I defer.... until later in the year? At the moment I am really stressed over it and don't know which way to turn

With working, there was often a fuzziness around their status as part-time or full-time student and implications for academic workload (see Lentell and Perraton 2009). Being at a distance seemed to offer more opportunity for initial denial of problems for students before sudden realisation, e.g.

> I know I've put this behind job and the children, but now it's gone too long... I'm really sorry I can't catch up...

Life also intervened for many students, leaving their original timescales and plans at serious risk, e.g.

> is it possible I can defer my module. . .. I thought I would be able to cope especially with a 7-month-old baby and coping as a single parent but. . .

Whilst often these students intended to return to study:

> I am writing to enquire about deferring my study. I have recently started a new job, and unfortunately have found that I am unable to commit the time and focus. . .. therefore rather than risk failing the module, I would rather bank my assessment scores.

One mitigating approach could be the formalisation of re-entry plans put in place as they cease study which would give a defined return date and pathway. Park, Perry, and Edwards (2011) also highlight the particular need for counselling and realistic expectation setting. It is clear from the discourses that students are starting to make those plans themselves, although they are not always compatible with institutional frameworks. This consideration is highlighted by Keegan (2009, 80) who writes how in a scarce resource environment, this can result in institutional privileging of its own needs, such as for absolute clarity on student numbers.

Time available

In our evaluation we separated out students who noted an issue with preparedness for study (below) in early weeks to those who later on in the module discussed time available for study. Three hundred and fifty-one student texts were at least partly around issues of time available, highlighting just what a significant issue pressure of time is and that part-time students can struggle more than those on traditional full-time pathways. The nature of part-time and/or distance study often means students are carving out time late at night or in small chunks around other responsibilities:

> I'm really not one shirking my responsibilities, but I have to put work first in this instance, I'm losing sleep and stressing about getting everything done in time which is also impacting my ability and effort at work. I just seem to be fighting a losing battle at the minute

This fractional time can be more challenging and potentially less productive. It also raises challenges of working in an asynchronous manner as students can lack immediate tutor, peer or adviser support. This idea of quality time concurs with Wimpenny and Savin-Baden (2013, 320) who raise student perceptions as bounded by time and playing a role on '*intent* to persist'.

Time issues in many cases seemed to accumulate as a realisation prompted by their need for an extension(s) for example. For some this led on to them questioning if they could or should continue.

> I have already begun to fall behind in my studies. . . I highly underestimated the workload. . . but on top of my full-time degree (which I am already struggling with) I fear I will not be able to pass either with a decent grade if I do them both at the same time

For those lacking time, their requests often reflected a need for live, synchronous contact and personal guidance on options. This wish exemplifies another challenge faced by distance learners, namely convenient access to university staff. Whilst the institution has an established process of following up through a variety of media, the value of a timely one-to-one personal conversation with a trained advisor should not be underestimated.

> I am worried about what to do or where to turn. I would like to talk about differing [sic] my course for next autumn please? Would it be possible to discuss this?

What was also notable in analysis of these time-related texts was how some students appeared to internalise *all* responsibility for being unable to continue. Apologies for their problems featured in 39 texts with students variously identifying themselves as '*truly*', '*terribly*', or '*so very sorry*' and offering '*apologies for seeming pushy*'. This indicates a new phase of retention initiative is required. Time-bound to catch students during the fluid, active and intense state of considering withdrawal options within a window of opportunity. Lack of daily micro-interactions with students in the distance sphere mean that the institution needs to look for other cues, as 'student drift' (Stephens and Myers 2014, 55) and denial become easier in this environment. Whilst there is no institutional 'victim blaming' as highlighted by Tinto (2006), quick intervention is required to prevent students' self-blame becoming fixed and deterring future study.

Preparedness for study

Harris et al. (2016) note the fundamental importance of educational preparedness as a factor in student retention. Evidence here points that it is particularly important for distance learners. Ideally students should have a realistic awareness of the commitments needed for successful study before module registration, and certainly before module start, e.g.

> I just know I won't be prepared. I understand this is a huge disappointment to you and it is an even greater one to me.

The value of successful induction should include known areas such as study skills, assignment requirements and peer-networking but is also a window for planning their approach to study. In the distance environment this requires active learner commitment and engagement. Brown, Hughes, and Delaney (2015, 181–182) note this 'at risk' period of a gap between what students thought studying would be like and the actualities.

> I've started to have a look at the modules and I'm really worried I've taken on more than I can handle. Can you give me some advice. . .?

Students need to gain an early awareness of themselves as active and reflective learners and not simply passive recipients of study content. This was particularly noted as an issue by Heaton-Shrestha, May, and Burke (2009, 87) that online study could encourage a 'semi-detached' and reactive approach to engagement.

> I hadn't appreciated how many hours would be expected of a part-time module.

In the dataset this matched evidence where students were some weeks in before realising they were not ready to study, or University was not for them:

> I don't think I'm ready to partake a degree right now and I wouldn't be able to do my best if I was to start. . . now

> I have had great difficulty with writing in my own words and writing essays. I have also been struggling with the technical language used. My intention is to try and improve on these three problem areas of mine and then return to studying

Lack of preparedness and realisation of commitment provoked particular anxieties for part-time and distance student when things did not work out. Brown, Hughes, and Delaney (2015, 183) note, 'feelings of isolation and despair' among distance students where problems were layered and cumulative, e.g.

> I am finding it hard dealing with depression, I lost my dad almost a year ago, I also have a child under two and another under 7 plus I am trying to build a business of my own, all things combined makes it hard to find any time to study unfortunately. Sorry.

This highlights the fundamental importance to issues of retention of ensuring clear and personalised study advice, pre-registration guidance and subsequent 'mandatory orientation' (Park, Perry, and Edwards 2011, 42). Recommendations would include a full dialogue with an advisor for every new student to bridge the distance-gap.

Our evaluation highlights that there appears to be a gap between passive information provided (i.e. online) and active personalised guidance in terms of getting ready for that level and intensity of study as part of an informed and engaged decision process. It is in both the interests of student and institution to be ready for study and for students to have a realistic understanding rather than an idealised vision. This is particularly important for distance learners who have to become self-directed and independent more quickly in order to avoid a dissonance between expectation and reality (Harris et al. 2016);

> I have been reading as much as I can, I struggled at first… I just don't know what to do to catch up with what I have struggled with. Spend hours reading and studying but. Nothing seems to sink in. Please could someone offer me some advice?

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the value in hearing student 'voices' in their own words, in a natural context, rather than via institutional terminology. By foregrounding these voices, students emerge from the 'shadowy' state noted by Roberts (2011, 185). By raising qualitative aspects this paper adds to the literature and presents three key areas where analysing what the students *actually* said shines a light on the messy realities of the withdrawal situation.

Based on this qualitative analysis, we have identified the central importance of three main dialogues around withdrawal to positively inform strategic development of retention initiatives. As highlighted by Park, Perry, and Edwards (2011, 45), it remains a key role of the educator to minimise attrition and 'reclaim' students at risk of dropping out.

The distance HE model has long been acknowledged to be more inclusive to different types of students. The nature of distance-learning, however, adds further challenges to students who may already be at a disadvantage, fitting in their studies around complex lives. Thomas (2002) concludes a need for systemic change where institutions take more responsibility for students. Findings from this paper support this idea, e.g. increased interactions before students actually start work would support *preparedness for study* such as development of interactive induction material. This goes on to support the inclusive curriculum and collaborative pedagogy.

In terms of different intent by student *deferrers and withdrawers*, the institution can help students mitigate failure and encourage re-entry by offering structured, timely study re-engagement plans. Findings indicate struggling students would benefit from a more traditional relationship with named people who collaboratively embody the institution whether that is a personal tutor, member of faculty or an adviser. In many of the dialogues we studied, where students were open to strategies for staying, they often referred to conversations started with a named contact. This concurs with Park, Perry, and Edwards (2011) who write of successful students referring to X as the main reason they did not drop out.

In terms of *time available* for study, the institution needs to look at priority triage rather than a first-come-first-served approach to student queries. This is in order to best take advantage of giving individualised guidance and advice to students who are within the window of opportunity for re-engagement.

The themes explored above should not be considered exhaustive, as this paper represents work in progress. The team are now engaged with fresh data around pedagogical interactions, through considering the identified smaller sub-theme of teaching methods/materials and potential impacts from those interactions prior to withdrawal.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Frances Myers has worked in higher education for 20 years, at the Open University and the University of Bolton, following a career in corporate management and training. Her research work is mainly in organisational storymaking, corporate and public myths, and identity work, although she retains a keen interest in student support and progression issues.

Hayley Glover has been an academic at the OU for ten years focused on supporting quality teaching and learning across both the Business and Law schools, managing Associate Lecturers and ensuring they are guided and supported to teach students effectively to achieve success through the delivery of learning rooted in pedagogic excellence. My research and scholarship activity has focused on distance and online pedagogy innovation to enhance qualification success, retention and progression.

Carey Stephens has been a Lecturer in the Faculty of Business & Law at the Open University for over 18 years; working with academic colleagues and our part time tutor community to offer an outstanding student experience to our students. She is currently on a two year secondment representing the Faculty as a lead on negotiations for a new permanent tutor contract; an exciting new development to end casualisation. She is also a part time tutor, teaching and supporting Business degree students and Apprentices through their learning journey. Carey has been researching issues around student retention and the importance of listening to our students. My current research focuses on the student voice and the institutional response.

ORCID

Frances Myers http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3872-3581
Hayley Glover http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3097-9171
Carey Stephens http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6297-2647

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