UNIT 3   MONITORING LEARNERS' PROGRESS

3.0   INTRODUCTION

Education is not simply acquiring knowledge. Education is holistic in nature which not only provides knowledge but also brings about personality change in learners. A good curriculum, therefore, not only covers the content, but also the means by which the content can be transacted and assimilated in a most congenial and interactive environment. You are aware that the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system uses pre-packaged study materials to provide instruction to learners who have limited opportunities to interact with their teachers and peer learners as compared to their counterparts studying in conventional face to face classroom mode. Studying at a distance, therefore, is very demanding as distance learners have to study on their own without much opportunity for interaction and immediate feedback.

In this unit we will try to find out why some learners successfully study through distance mode while others do not. We will also examine the causes of student attrition, categorize the types, and throw light on some well known models of attrition. We shall also discuss the factors that contribute to learner success and the measures that can be adopted for student persistence. The discussion in this unit is based on the inferences drawn from the empirical research studies conducted at some of the Open Universities across the globe.

We hope that this unit would be of particular interest to you as it will give you an insight into the issue of learners' progress and will probably help you in managing student dropout.

3.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After completing this unit you will be able to:

- Identify the factors that contribute to student withdrawal and lead to attrition;

- List the factors that influence achievement and course completion;

- Explain some well known attrition models;

- Describe the types of attrition; and

- Discuss the methods for reducing attrition.

3.2 ATTRITION: CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

First of all, let us try to understand what is learner retention (success) and learner attrition (dropout)? Learner retention refers to a learner's successful completion of a programme without dropping out in between or at all from the programme. On the other hand, the learner attrition means those learners who could not complete their programmes successfully because of low grades or those who dropped out in between for certain reasons that we will be discussing in this unit. Learner retention and learner attrition are often said to be two sides of the same coin or can be viewed as two sides of the same research question. Studies report that dropout rates are higher and course completion rates are lower for distance education courses compared to face to face learning. Why is this so? High completion rates primarily depend upon the motivation level of the learners. The higher the motivation level the greater is the success. Of course, there are other factors that contribute to course completion too, such as 'good' learning materials and delivery system, and strictly observed deadlines. Several studies have been conducted to find out the reasons for learner success. In fact some researchers have even developed models of learner attrition.

Distance education has been able to attract not only a large number of learners but also a very heterogeneous group of learners, including those who have been deprived of educational opportunities and those who are first generation learners. In fact ODL institutions, particularly open universities have made specific efforts to reach out to the deprived sections of society. With regard to open universities it may also be necessary to review the admission policy. Open admissions policy gives everyone the freedom to join a course/programme at the university level, even though they may not have the basic necessary educational background, even though such numbers may be small. Since such learners have not been through the structured and vertically moving learning, it is therefore expected that many such learners may not complete their programmes/courses successfully. Open universities also give the freedom to all its learners to take more than one programme at a time and follow a modular approach towards programme completion. It is difficult to find out whether a learner has dropped out from a course, a programme or the institution because

learners have the freedom to finish one course or module and can leave with interim qualifications such as certificates, diplomas or just course credits and be "successful" in their own terms. Many a times they can move to another institution to complete their learning or can take as many years/semesters off as they like and yet complete their programme of study as a learner has the freedom to complete his/her programme in the maximum period allotted. Even if a learner has not completed a programme in the maximum period allotted, he/she has the option to re-admit and carry forward his/her previous credits earned. The maximum period varies from 2-6-8-10 years depending upon the nature and level of the programme. Thus, several factors are critical for successful completion or non-completion of a distance education programme.

Having done the conceptual analysis of the factors leading to attrition, let us now look at some well known models of attrition.

Check Your Progress 1

Notes: a) *Space is given below for your answer.*

b) *Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.*

What is meant by learner attrition?

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3.2.1 Attrition Models

You may be aware that the issue of retention came to the fore only in the second half of the twentieth century when non-completion of a programme came to be viewed as failure on part of the learners. Most of the research studies done are of conventional campus student progress, particularly in the United States. Attrition has been looked upon as a reflection of individual learner's lack of attributes, skills and motivation. In the 1970s researchers brought a new dimension to this issue by focusing on the environment and in particular the role of institution that had an impact on learner's success. One of the earliest propounders of this new line of thinking was Tinto (1975).

Student Integration Model of Tinto (1975)

The most commonly referred model of learner retention/attrition is Tinto's Student Integration Model. According to Tinto's model, a learner persists (continues learning till completion of a programme) or drops out (in-between without completion of a programme) by their degree of academic integration and social integration. Tinto's theory basically asserts the matching between the learner's motivation and academic ability and the institution's academic and social characteristics that shape the underlying commitments i.e. commitment to an educational goal and commitment to remain with the institution. It is a longitudinal model that asserts primary factors related to learner withdrawal, which are the personal characteristics of the learner and the nature of the learner's interaction with the institution over different periods and the most critical period is the first year of college.

Tinto's model is influenced by Spady's (1971) research, who found an analogy between committing suicide and dropping out of school as in both instances a person leaves a social system. The French philosopher Durkheim (1961) had found that some people committed suicide because they lacked that values of the social system in which they participated and because they were not supported by a group of friends. Tinto borrowed Spady's use of Durkheim's two postulates to identify the concepts of academic and social integration.

A major gap in Tinto's theory has been the role of internal factors in shaping perceptions and commitments. There are variables that prevent attrition other than institutional ones such as parental support, the ability to pay which are variables external to the institution. This was a rather narrow treatment of learner's personal characteristics. Hence in 1993, Tinto revised his model, which has been discussed in the succeeding paragraphs.

Student Attrition Model of Bean (1980)

The model propounded by John Bean was quite similar to Tinto's original model but Bean included environmental variables (external factors outside the college) that might affect retention and learner's intentions, an important factor of student retention. Bean asserts that learner's background variables, particularly high school educational experiences, educational goals and family support influence the learner's behaviour and attitude towards his/her interaction with the college or university. The learner's interaction with the college/ institution influences the learner to develop a set of attitudes towards himself or herself as a learner towards the institution. Further his/her academic capability indicated by grades obtained and the loyalties to the institution are the pull factors that determine a student's persistence.

Conceptual Model of Non-Traditional Attrition of Bean and Metzner (1985)

In 1985 Bean and Metzner developed a model of learner retention for non-traditional learners based on Tinto's model, which reduced the emphasis on social integration factors since non-traditional learners (working persons, older age group persons, adults, etc.) have less interaction with others on campus as compared to traditional as well as residential learners.

They determined that non-traditional learners are distinguished from their traditional counterparts by their intense academic and vocational orientation to college. Therefore, according to this research, the traditional social environment of the campus is as important as the academic offerings. Interaction with faculty and peers are not of the same duration and intensity and therefore differ in their influence on attrition. Consequently, outside encouragement, from family and community, appear to replace on-campus support as a key to retention.

Social Integration Model of Tinto (1993)

Tinto developed a sociological model that emphasizes on "the actions of the various actors in the collegiate environment, such as students, faculty and staff" (Tinto, 1993, p122) and analyzed how their interactions form social and academic communities in higher education institutions. This revised theory of Tinto was influenced by Van

Gennep's (1960) social anthropological study of the rites of passage in tribal societies. This social integration model of successful integration into collegiate communities corresponds to Van Gennep's concept of incorporation, which is the ability for individuals to take on new patterns of interaction with members of the new group and to establish themselves in that group. Successful integration in the dominant (internal college) community and multiple (external) communities (such as family, neighborhood, office, etc.), increases learner persistence. If the external community is not conducive to the learner's commitment to attend college, he/she can be easily pulled away from the institution. Further membership in sub-groups of the college community also contributes to persistence.

Open Learning Model of Kember (1995)

Kember drew from Tinto's model and modified it to develop a model of drop-outs studying through distance mode. Kember's model rationally addressed a different target group and quite a different study situation in which learners have to study in isolation and have to integrate the demands of their courses with the demands of their families, employers and friends. Kember evolved his own *Open Learning Model* (1995) which like Tinto's model is an interpretation of two dimensions: academic and social entry characteristics, social interpretation and academic interpretation. Kember's model identified four key constructs: social integration, academic integration, external attribution, and academic incompatibility. Kember built these constructs, together with background characteristics, into a causal model of learner progress and then tested it using path analysis (Woodley, et al, 2001). However Kember's model of learner progress focused on adult learners studying at a distance who study part-time and are faced with social demands that they have to cope with alongside the academic demands. They are likely to be working, and to have family, and social commitments. According to Kember's model learners enter a course of study with a number of predetermined personal traits (e.g., gender, prior education and salary) which "guide" the learner down one or two tracks in the model i.e. the positive path or the negative path. Those learners with positive attributes will proceed down the positive path and will be better able to integrate socially and academically. In order to achieve social integration a learner would receive broad ranging support and encouragement from those who have an impact on their day-to-day lives. Academic integration in the model reflects the degree of affiliation between the learner and the course encompassing and all elements of contact between an institution and the learners whether these are of an academic, administrative or social nature. The learners who move through the study process on the negative path, will have difficulty in achieving social and academic integration and will be less likely to perform satisfactorily in their final grade point average score (GPA) (Woodley, 2003).

Kember's model also recognises that part-time learners usually take twice as long to complete a course of study compared to their full-time counterparts. Throughout this protracted study period the circumstances in a learner's life are likely to change. To accommodate the changing aspects of life, the model includes a re-cycling loop and a cost/benefit variable. The cost/benefit variable and re-cycling loop are of particular importance as the model is linear and learners pass through the model constantly. Some learners will ask themselves

whether all the study is worth the effort, and as long as the benefits outweigh the costs, the learner will continue to study.

Theoretical Model of Non-Traditional Student Attrition of Wylie (2004)

This conceptual model by Wylie has two critical processes which are sequential and causal namely; Pre-Enrolment Evaluation and Re-Evaluation and Disengagement factors. In his model Wylie considers the background variables identified in the Bean (1980) and Tinto (1975) namely that of age, gender, enrolment status, high school performance etc. In addition to background he has also considered other variables namely: Academic, Environmental, Course Utility and Self-worth which he hypothesized as the process of evaluation that the learner undertakes prior to course enrolment and participation. The depth of these evaluations will be different for every learner and the combination of influences of the many variables comprised in each of the five pre-course factors will also vary between individuals. These factors may also play a role in a learner's determination to withdraw, it is suggested that this occurs during a separate set of processes of re-evaluation, separation and disengagement. It is postulated that this action begins following their enrolment. Research suggests that it is at this time of transition into the study programme that the learner is most vulnerable to withdrawal as pointed out by Tinto (1993). The learner weighs the implications of withdrawal or persistence regarding the extent of negative outcomes on extrinsic aspects such as employment prospects and intrinsic factors such as self-esteem and self-efficacy.

After disengagement sets in the learner increases the distance/separation from his/her study commitment. During this period the learner creates a host of socially acceptable explanations for having dropped out of the programme of study, mostly citing factors external to their control (e.g. work demands, insufficient time for study, illness, financial difficulties, family demands) in order to salvage some self-esteem. Those who succeed prefer to point to internal causes in order to enhance their self-esteem (Kember, 1999, p.114, as quoted in Wylie, 2004). According to Wylie, studying the self-concept may be more valuable in identifying the vulnerable learner; and an appropriately designed intervention may reduce the significant number of dropouts. With the application of an appropriate intervention, the impact of the theorised cyclic pattern of disengagement from the study commitment may be averted.

A Review of the Models

The theories of retention of the 1990s were inadequate to deal with either specific populations or individual decisions. The economic and the cultural factors typical of sub-group of learners that may affect retention decisions were discussed in several articles, which were analyzed and published by John Braxton (2000) in *"Rethinking the Departure Puzzle; New Theory and Research on College Student Retention"*. Braxton has highlighted economic, social, psychological, organizational and interactional factors to explain the concept of retention. The economic influence on retention pertains to the ability to pay, family resources, student aid, etc. and how this investment will pay off in the future. Societal factors that influence retention focus on what kind and how many friends, a learner makes/has. Lack of campus activities, large class sizes and inadequate staff are some of the organizational

issues that affect retention. The level of maturity and psychological characteristics of the learners play an equally important role as do the interactions between the learner and the institution.

However, all the above mentioned models have been criticized in their tendency to generalize learners' needs and experiences without analyzing the combined or interactive effect of learner, institutional and other factors on persistence. This point can be explained with the help of an example. According to Astin (1993) peer group interaction promoting learner's involvement in the institution is one of the most potent influences on growth and development during undergraduate years. This could be true for a traditional age full time learner but would not be applicable to a non-traditional mature adult learner. This has however been dealt with in a relatively new model developed by Wylie (2004) in which he takes into account disparate attributes of non-traditional mature learners.

Check Your Progress 2

Notes: a) *Space is given below for your answer.*

b) *Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.*

List the well known models of Learner Attrition discussed in this unit and briefly describe their major postulates.

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3.2.2 Causes of Attrition

Keegan (1986) in his book "the Foundations of Distance Education" refers to certain "push" and "pull" factors responsible for off campus discontinuation. A "pull" factor is one which draws the distance learner away from the course, for example a change of employment or family commitments etc. A "push" factor relates to factors for which the institution is responsible such as poor quality materials, or delay in dispatch of materials which are within the parameters of the institution.

Several studies have been conducted on this very crucial aspect. The vast literature available in the form of books, articles in journals, edited books and conference proceedings dedicated to this theme have covered many aspects pertaining to discontinuance or non-completion of courses/programmes offered through distance mode.

Thus many of the studies on dropouts in distance education pertain to open universities. Given below are a few examples. If you are interested you can access these studies from the sources mentioned under references.

- The Open University, UK, Kennedy and Powell (1976)

- Athabasca University and Netherlands Open University – Powell (1991)

- The Fern Universitat – Peters (1992)

- Korea National Open University – Shin & Kim (1999)

- Open University of Hong Kong – Kember, et al (1991); Li. et al (2000); Jegede, et al (1999)

- Open Learning Agency – Sweet (1986)

- Athabasca University – Powell, et al (1990); May (1994)

- Indira Gandhi National Open University – Taplin (2000); Sivaswaroop (1999); Kumar (1999); Biswas (2001); Fozdar, et al, 2006; Srivastava (2007)

- Allama Iqbal Open University – Batool & Bakker (1997).

There are several reasons why students dropout, some of which have been discussed below based on the findings of the research studies quoted above.

i)   *Workload*

Studying at a distance requires discipline and independent study. Distance learners are bound to exhibit differences in behaviour as the nature of studying at a distance varies according to their individual workloads interfaced with commitments. Lack of time management due to workload is a major cause of dropouts.

ii) *Family commitments*

Closely linked with workload is the issue of family commitments which add to the workload and create problems of insufficient time, which has been pointed by many researchers.

iii) *Health related/unexpected circumstances*

Another major negative factor specially is that of health or unexpected circumstances which may include death of a close one such as spouse/ child, divorce, loss of job, change of job, etc. These unexpected circumstances could disrupt studies and lead to dropouts.

iv) *Negative Personality Traits*

It is equally true that discontinuance often results from personality traits of individual learners, which are outside the control of the institution. Researchers have quoted under confidence as one of the major reasons for dropping out. Lack of self discipline and fear of exams are also identified as prime factors for student attrition.

v)   *Lack of Study Skills*

Distance learners are isolated as they lack immediate support of a teacher and are dispersed and separated physically from the institution as well as their peer group. Therefore they cannot get immediate clarification for the doubts that come up during the course of their study. Both traditional and non-traditional age group of learners who enroll in distance education may lack the basic reading, writing and mathematical skills required to pursue their studies at the college level either because they lacked these skills even in their high school days or because they had forgotten them due to passage of time. Mostly being adults with different roles to perform at their homes, offices, in their families, they have to coordinate different areas of their lives, which influence their studies.

vi) *Institutional Negligence*

In distance education settings technology is used through which both information and communication flow. Access to technology, being used for the delivery of instruction as well as support would also vary depending upon the background of the learners. Also, familiarity with its usage is yet another important factor which could either inhibit or foster communication between the teacher and the taught. There are several factors that can hamper or help in the process of learning. It is the responsibility of the institution to make the distance learners feel less isolated and more familiar with the system and adept with the usage of technology. The institution also has to ensure various access points and avenues for interaction and feedback for the learners with the institution and among themselves. In fact a committed facilitator (tutor-counsellor) can significantly reduce dropout by serving as a facilitator. Lack of feedback and proper support by a tutor counsellor led to dropouts. Also dissatisfaction with the course quality can have an adverse effect. Non-receipt of course materials on time can also demotivate distance learners.

vii) *Changed Goals*

Distance learners are a heterogeneous group, coming from diverse backgrounds and experiences, which affect their ability and willingness to participate in any educational endeavour. Distance learners generally have different motivational levels and goals too. Some of them are interested in obtaining a degree to qualify for better jobs or change their lives. Yet some may take courses to broaden their education and are not really interested in completing a degree. A change in motivation level or goal can easily make them discontinue the programme.

The above discussion reveals that learning at a distance is demanding and can lead to student attrition. Student attrition can be of different types that we shall examine in the next sub-section.

Check Your Progress 3

Notes: a) *Space is given below for your answer.*

b) *Compare your answer with the given at the end of this unit.*

What are the three important reasons for attrition?

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3.2.3 Types of Attrition

You are aware that attrition is the opposite of retention. Learners who successfully complete each semester and progress through the entire duration of the programmes of study will be termed as successful learners or retained learners. On the other hand, learners who do not complete the programme of study would come under the category of attrition. There are so many circumstances that lead to such a situation which we have listed below:

- A learner who has not submitted any assignment or not sent in any work.

- A learner who does not fulfil some course requirements such as attending a residential programme/practical sessions that are compulsory.

- A learner who does not sit for the examination conducted by the institution.

- A learner who fails the assessment and does not succeed in completing the programme.

- A learner who has got himself/herself transferred from an institution where he/she had enrolled to another institution will become a dropout.

- A learner who leaves the institution for a while and returns within the valid period of his/her registration.

- A learner who leaves the institution abruptly and does not return to that institution and or to any other educational institution is a dropout.

- A learner who may slow down and who is on the rolls but is not pursuing his/her studies for whatever reasons.

- A learner who enrolls for a programme but chooses to complete only a few courses and not the entire programme. As per the institutional records he/she will be considered as a dropout.

- A learner, who quits the institution due to a particular reason but returns back to the institution and re-registers as his/her registration period is over, will also be a dropout.

Thus, a variety of situations would put the learner under the category of attrition, and term him/her as a dropout. Woodley (2003) has broadly classified them as "voluntary", "involuntary", "avoidable" and "unavoidable" dropouts.

Voluntary dropouts would be the learners who choose to leave as opposed to being dismissed by the institution. These would be learners who have changed their minds concerning the costs and benefits of further study. These would also include those learners who enrol in a programme with no intention of completing the assessment. They are studying out of interest and do not want/need to face the rigours of assignments and examinations.

Involuntary dropouts would be learners who are told by the institution that that they cannot continue on a programme because their academic performance is not satisfactory or because they have infringed some regulation.

Unavoidable dropouts would be learners who due to some crisis might not be able to continue with their studies, such as a life-threatening illness, or financial crisis or they might have to deal with some major domestic or occupational crisis.

Avoidable dropouts are learners who have psychologically dropped out and have cut down on their studies because of which they are failing in the examinations and are not able to successfully complete the

course/programme and the dropout could have been avoided had the institution made special efforts to motivate the learners to continue their studies.

3.3 FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO DISTANCE LEARNER'S ACHIEVEMENT (SUCCESS)

Knowles (1980) in explaining the advantages of knowing the learner believes that learner's behaviour is influenced by a combination of learner's needs, plus the learner's situation and personal characteristics. There are several studies that have examined various aspects of studying at a distance that have contributed to learner success, which have been discussed below.

3.3.1 Background of Learners

Distance education places new demand on the learners as the competencies required for success in distance education are not quite the same as those needed for success in conventional campus-based education. The environments are different. The learning activities are different. Relationships are different. Thus many distance learners express a feeling of being cut off from their teachers and peer groups. They may also experience stress and frustration related to the using of unfamiliar technologies for interacting with the content as well as their peers and facilitators and the institution itself. All this greatly depends upon the background of the learners. The ability to study at a distance requires emotionally independent, self-directed learners. The learner's background characteristics, such as that of age, gender, level of formal education, are related to persistence, which has been established by the findings of various studies. In fact, the previous participation in a distance education programme proves to be more beneficial to a distance learner in coping with studying at a distance.

3.3.2 Motivation Level

Motivation is of utmost importance for achieving any kind of success. Determination and the will to succeed enables distance learners to complete their programmes of study. Motivation can be driven by various factors such as; vocational or academic or even social for that matter. Many distance learners pursue their studies with the objective of improving their academic qualification for career prospects or professional development or their looking for new employment opportunities or changing their career or profession. Another strong motivational factor is to improve personal life or social position.

3.3.3 Study Pattern

Distance learners develop their own study patterns, which may include: learning styles, study habits, study strategy i.e. planned study/ learning or regulated study, physical posture and study timings. As we know that learning styles vary, which can be classified under two broad categories; surface or deep approaches to study. Deep learners begin with an intention to understand the content and maintain a rigorous interaction with it, whereas surface learners' main intention is to complete the task requirements which are necessary for completion of a course, such as answering assignments and studying the content from the examination point of view. Learning may be surface or deep

and more or less successful depending upon learners' cognitive competencies and biases but above all motivation. It has also been found that distance learners succeed by working in groups.

It has also been found that studying in a separate room helped. Even physical posture plays an important role, specially, sitting upright. Regulated study or planned study proved to be crucial to success. Researchers have found a close link between learner success and study hours put in and also study timings.

3.3.4 Institutional Commitment

Institutions have responded to the needs of distance learners in three major areas, namely, instructional design, course delivery system and learner support services. High completion rates also depend on "good" learning materials and delivery system and strictly observed deadlines. Materials developed on the principles of instructional design not only build learning activeness in the materials and promote learning but also enable the learners to interact with the content. Materials that are readily available, on time and easy to use do have a positive impact on the learners and their learning outcomes.

Good outcomes can be attributed to the improved administrative services of the university (or DE institution) and close monitoring and guidance of the staff. In fact a few studies have stressed on the important role played in counseling and tutoring support in student success. It is the institutional responsibility to maintain interaction with the distance learners, which is definitely vital for student motivation and ultimately success. Also information about databases and library services is important to distance learner's self direction. Equally important are induction/orientation programmes for newly enrolled distance learners.

Check Your Progress 4

Notes: a) *Space is given below for your answer.*

b) *Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.*

What are the factors that contribute to learner success?

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3.4 MEASURES TO REDUCE ATTRITION

From the discussion in the foregoing sections it is quite clear that the role of the institution in learner retention is vital. Ensuring the involvement or engagement of the learners particularly in the first year is the most crucial and critical. How to make this happen is the biggest challenge before educational institutions. Let us look at the measures that institutions should adopt to enhance student persistence. The institutional actions have to be multi-layered in order to be effective.

3.4.1   Pre-admission Counselling

It is important for institutions to provide pre-admission counselling at the time of admission to prospective learners to facilitate them in making the right choice of the programme of study. Learners should be able to identify their needs and set realistic goals at the time of registration. Pre-entry assessment is the first step to prevent dropout.

3.4.2   Student Induction

The next step is to arrange an induction into the system: to familiarize the newly entrants regarding their roles and responsibilities as distance learners. Also the institutional commitment should also be spelt out at such programmes. This would help learners make the social and academic transition to the new and possibly more challenging period of distance learning that they have chosen. A starter's kit or a Programme Guide developed for the newly enrolled learners will also serve the purpose.

3.4.3   Faculty and Staff Development

It is increasingly clear that faculty and staff actions are critical to institutional efforts in improving retention. The institutions need to invest in faculty and staff development programmes to enhance the introduction of varying curricular, pedagogical, evaluation and assessment practices that impact student learning (Tinto, 2005, Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

3.4.4   Collaborative Learning

We know that academic and social interaction creates involvement of the learners and this fosters persistence. It is therefore the responsibility of the educational institution to get learners actively involved by providing avenues for interaction and feedback, shared and collaborative learning. By asking learners to construct knowledge together, this would involve learners both socially and intellectually and in the jargon of the theories of retention and attrition promote academic and social integration.

3.4.5   Student Tracking

Besides creating learning communities through promotion of collaborative and shared learning, it is equally important to regularly review the progress of the learners. The institution should use definite measures to this end which in today's parlance is known as student tracking.

The check list for student tracking should include:

i)   Scheduling contact between the institution and the learners. Further ensuring that the schedules prepared are realistic and also providing alternatives to the learners to reschedule if necessary.

ii)   Formative assessment through assignments, seminars, workshops, logbooks, workbooks, etc. should be carried out. The assessment should be throughout the learning process and the feedback on assessment should be time bound and periodic through written comments.

iii) Help desk services should be provided preferably round the clock 24x7. Replies provided should be accurate and definite and the approach should be problem solving.

iv) Proactive measures could be adopted by alerting the learners about the forthcoming activities and events, the dates of submission for internal assessment attending counseling sessions etc. In fact the new ICT provides many such services and solutions for distance learners. For example: adopting an Learning Management System (LMS) platform can make learning resources and services accessible to all learners. Also the LMS will be able to follow the progress to the learners. The LMS learning manager memorizes the learner's actions and thus gives an extremely rich education data (time spent on each learning unit, number of attempts, data of last attempt, progress level, learner's answers etc.) for effectively monitoring learners' progress.

3.4.6 Identifying at Risk Learners

The educational institution should also have a mechanism for identifying at risk learners. This can be done only through regular monitoring of the learners' progress. The institution should be able to provide special academic assistance to learners who are not coping well with their studies which is reflected through their low grades/ marks obtained in their formative assessment. Also the institution should establish special contact with the learners who are not on track which will be evident from their non-participation in various activities including submission of assignments, attending examinations etc. Low income group learners should be encouraged by the institution by providing them financial support in order to ensure their persistence. Likewise differently-abled learners should be identified by the institution at the time of their entry and provide them the necessary support that is required by such learners.

Check Your Progress 5

Notes: a) *Space is given below for your answer.*

b) *Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.*

What are the methods that can be adopted by an institution for student tracking?

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3.5 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit you would have realized that we have reviewed the available literature on learner success as well as learner attrition in distance education. The findings of these studies have been pieced together to present a holistic picture of the factors that contribute to learner success and attrition.

We have also examined some well known attrition models postulated by Tinto, Bean, Kember, Bean and Metzner, and Wylie. The different types of attrition in higher education with particular reference to ODL were described. A variety of situations that put the learner under the category of attrition, and term him/her as a dropout were discussed. These were broadly classified as 'voluntary', 'involuntary', 'avoidable' and 'unavoidable' dropouts.

The causes for student attrition were also highlighted on the basis of empirical data analysed in various research studies. If you can recall, generally the causes for student attrition are: workload, family commitments, lack of study skills, health related/unexpected circumstances, negative personality traits, changed goals and institutional negligence.

In this unit we have also looked at the flip side of the issue of attrition by identifying the factors that play an important role and have contributed to learner success, which is again based on empirical research namely: background of the learners, motivation level, study pattern and institutional commitment.

Finally we have discussed the measures to reduce attrition. Surely you will agree that learner/student (both terms have been used interchangeably in this unit) persistence can be enhanced through some definite proactive steps by any educational institution. In this section the need and importance of pre-admission counselling and student induction have been spelt out. Also the need for designing programmes for the development of faculty and staff is essential. Further a sound system of student tracking and identification of at risk learners helps in reducing attrition, besides creating avenues for frequent interaction and feedback to ensure learners' involvement and thereby persistence.

3.6 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS

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3.7 FEEDBACK TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS QUESTIONS

Check Your Progress 1

Learner attrition means those learners who could not complete their programmes successfully because of low grades or those who dropped out in between for certain reasons.

Check Your Progress 2

The answer to the question can be traced from sub-section 3.2.1.

Check Your Progress 3

The three important reasons for attrition are mentioned below:

i)   Workload

Studying at a distance requires discipline and independent study. Distance learners were bound to exhibit differences in behaviour as the nature of studying at a distance varies according to their individual workloads interfaced with commitments. Lack of time management due to workload is a major cause of dropouts.

ii)   Family commitments

Closely linked with workload is the issue of family commitments which add to the workload and create problems of insufficient time, which has been pointed by many researchers.

iii) Lack of Study Skills

Distance learners are isolated as they lack immediate support of a teacher and are dispersed and separated physically from the institution as well as their peer group. Therefore they cannot get immediate clarification for the doubts that come up during the course of their study. Both traditional age and non-traditional age group of learners who enroll in distance education may lack the basic reading, writing and mathematical skills required to pursue their studies at the college level either because they lacked these skills even in their high school days or because they had forgotten them due to passage of time.

Check Your Progress 4

The factors contributing to learners' success are:

1)   Background of the learners

2)   Motivation level

3)   Study pattern

4)   Institutional commitment

Check Your Progress 5

The methods for tracking students may include:

i)   Scheduling contact between the institution and the learners. Further ensuring that the schedules prepared are realistic and also providing alternatives to the learners to reschedule if necessary.

ii) Formative assessment through assignments, seminars, workshops, logbooks, workbooks, etc. should be carried out. The assessment should be throughout the learning process and the feedback on assessment should be time bound and periodic through written comments.

iii) Help desk services should be provided preferably round the clock 24x7. Replies provided should be accurate and definite and the approach should be problem solving.

iv) Proactive measures could be adopted by alerting the learners about the forthcoming activities and events, the dates of submission for internal assessment, attending counseling sessions etc. In fact the new ICT provides many such services and solutions for distance learners.