

Program packaging and e-support for online student retention

Ann Deden

Open Universities Australia

Open Universities Australia provides open access to online distance university study for people who have not been able to enter universities through normal admissions pathways. Many lack the study management and academic writing skills required for success. Each year, between 60 and 70 per cent of our new students give up after one unit. We are now testing a suite of low-cost online interventions aimed at ameliorating the skills impediments to student retention. E-support elements include:

- *Online 24x7 provision of 'just-in-time' interactive help modules, each taking about two hours to complete. Students obtain help in project managing their study – from goal setting through and orientation to preparing for and sitting exams.*
- *Online 24X7 provision of interactive modules that resource teach students to analyse university assignments and to write, research and edit assigned papers at an appropriate level.*
- *Targeted tutorial support in first-year units that focuses on early social engagement, assignment preparation, and exam preparation.*

Program packaging intervention has taken the form of two foundation year programs: UniPrep and BizPrep. Each package spans three of our four yearly study periods, and utilizes the above supports as well as a sequence of three for-credit units in academic skills, career exploration, and a first subject in their discipline. Initial results are encouraging. By early 2006, we should have indicative data suggesting which programs can be continued, improved, or discontinued.

Background

Corporate context

Open Universities Australia (OUA) is a distance/online education brokerage owned by seven Australian public universities:

- Curtin University of Technology, Western Australia
- Griffith University, Queensland
- Macquarie University, New South Wales
- Monash University, Victoria
- Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), Victoria
- Swinburne University, Victoria
- University of South Australia, South Australia

The OUA organization serves its consortium by packaging, marketing, and handling student registration and fees processes for the courses they provide. Degrees are awarded by the provider universities. Collaborative curriculum construction means consortium members can incorporate relevant units from other members into their own degree programs. This helps minimize competition and improve program flexibility.

All registrations are full-fee, but prices are kept below the cost of on-campus programs. Students register for units (subjects) rather than for degree programs. While there are some prerequisites, students are free to follow their own personal interests. Typically, our students do not enrol for degrees until they have almost completed their programs.

Equity and access

Open access is the cornerstone of Open Universities' charter. In the past, OUA (previously Open Learning Australia or OLA) has interpreted open access in two ways:

1. An absence of academic entry requirements
2. Flexible delivery times and modes, removing the barriers of time and distance

Because it provides open access and because most of our students are over the age of twenty, OUA's students are all classified as 'equity' students by DEST, and can be used to demonstrate each university's performance on the equity dimension in annual reports to the government.

In a domestic market where demand for university places far outstrips available government-supported places, there is little incentive for universities to develop support programs that have significant ongoing staffing costs. With open access central to our mission, and no imposed limit on the number of students we can serve, OUA is committed to finding cost-effective ways to help its students succeed. We have, therefore, added a third element to our open access mission:

3. Provision of academic skill-building programs and resources to help people succeed once they commit to study

The retention challenge

Low retention rates

Year to year retention figures in Table 1 show the number of students continuing with OUA each year as a percentage of total students for the previous year.

Table 1: Year to year retention (study periods 1 to 3) 2001-2004

Year	2001	2002	2003	2004
New	4,050	4,766	4,574	4,400
Returned	2562	3080	3539	3723
Student	6,612	7,846	8,113	8,123
Increase in returnees	422	518	459	184
% returned from previous year	46.04%	46.58%	45.11%	45.89%

Across the spectrum of university distance/online providers, the retention rate is usually well over 50 per cent. In the corporate training world, completion of online training can range from very low to very high, depending on the contextual 'carrots and sticks'. Certainly, our open-access students would not match students screened and admitted to traditional university programs. Many do not have degree objectives when they start studying. Nor, in most cases, would they be studying within a corporate incentive context.

OUA students, on the other hand, are free agents who can sample, start, stop, restart, etc. as they wish. Most come to us with weak academic backgrounds and no university study skills. Locus of control appears to vary widely, from people who express a strong preference for highly teacher-structured learning to that of favouring self-directed project work. Our students

also vary in their web proficiency. Clearly, if we want to improve student retention, we need to find effective ways to address their weaknesses so that they can benefit from the opportunity at hand.

Retention measurement

The only indicator of students' goals that we have at present is a marketing survey result indicating that about two-thirds of our new students intend to complete an entire award program through OUA. Without knowing students' academic objectives (such as gaining two units' credit and admission to an on-campus program, or completing a degree started elsewhere) and how they evolve over time, it is not possible for us to measure retention in terms of program completion, as a university might.

Margaret Martinez (2003, pp 2-3) offers some measures OUA can use. She defines *attrition* as the number of students who fail to complete the unit in which they are registered. And she defines *retention* as the number of students who simply progress from one part of a program to the next. She used the term *persistence* to describe the behaviour of continuing until one reaches one's educational goal. We would like to begin measuring all three dimensions.

Retention factors

Research by others indicates a spectrum of factors that play a significant role in students' decisions not to continue. Gibson (1998) categorizes these into:

- Student factors: educational background, motivation, and self-concept
- Situational factors: job and life changes
- Education system factors: admission criteria, course features and advising support

Within the realm of student self-concept, notions of locus of control, self-efficacy and self-directedness – all of which might be summed up as autonomy – appear to be important in students' distance/online success (Parker, 1999; Lynch and Dembo, 2004; Diaz, 2002).

In the area of educational system factors, Judy A. Serwatka (2005) has highlighted the work of Olgren (2004) and her own research into the area of faculty interaction. She has pointed out that online teachers need to interact with their students in that online environment, using various community-building techniques such as initial ice-breakers to ensure students develop comfort engaging in online discussions and activities.

Retention strategies being piloted

Over the past two years, OUA has developed and begun piloting a number of student support initiatives aimed at retaining more of our students whose academic background may be minimal. In this venture, collaboration amongst our course-providing universities has played a vital role. The initiatives attempt to address all three types of retention factors.

Study skills courses

The first step was to encourage program providers to incorporate or strongly recommend one of three existing for-credit study skills courses already in the Handbook – each offered by a different university. The vast majority of our programs now have this feature. Providers are happy to use skills units others have built. While these units develop academic skills, they also address motivational and self-efficacy issues such as the development of learning communities and management of study time. A fourth study skills unit focuses primarily on career goal setting and planning, while strengthening online communications and self-management skills. The universities involved are: Macquarie, Monash, Murdoch and the University of South Australia.

Just-in-time skills resources

The second step was to create more self-study skills resources in the student section of OUA's website. The criteria for these resources were that:

- They had to provide engaging, interactive online self-study learning environments that a student could use in a personalized way. The lists of study and writing tips found on many universities' learning skills web pages tell but do not teach.
- They had to substitute, as well as possible, for one-on-one guidance from a live tutor.
- They had to be available on a 24x7 basis, for use as needed.
- They had to be broken into modules that would not take more than two hours to complete, since they would often be accessed when a student was confronting a problem that needed a quick solution.

This effort has so far resulted in:

- Five *Quick Skills Modules* that focus on the management of one's study (addressing locus of control and self-efficacy issues) – extremely important concerns for new students, especially for those learning on their own without the imposed structures of classroom attendance. These modules were created and are managed for OUA by Murdoch University. They use a business management paradigm to strengthen students' appreciation of the need to bring their management skills and perspective to bear on their own learning. Figure 1 illustrates the self-management style of these modules.

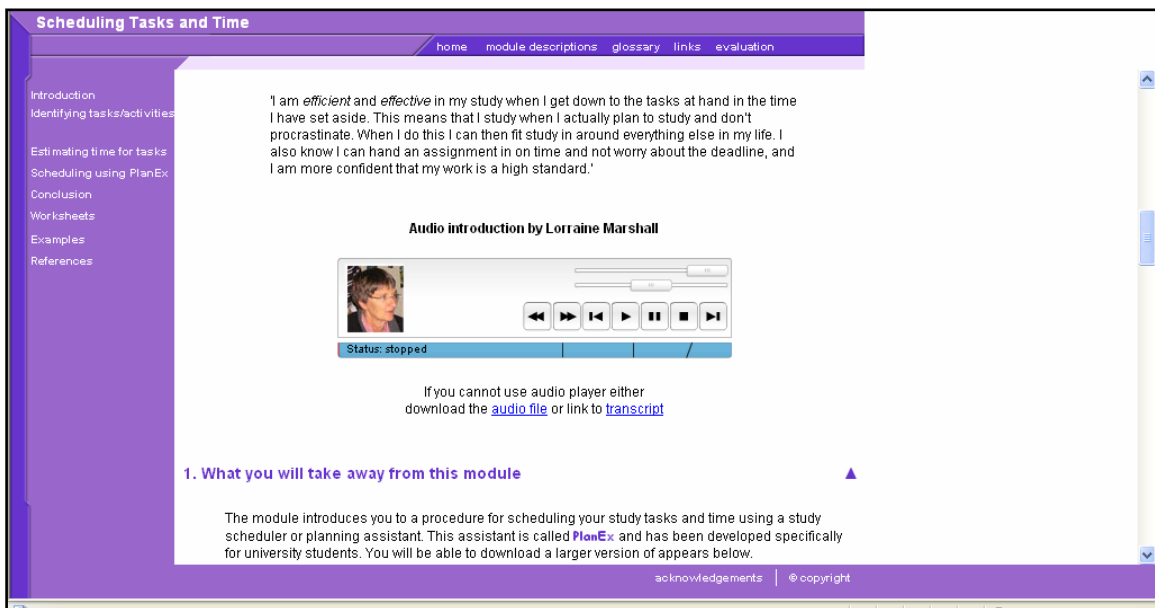



Figure 1: Sample Quick Skills module screens

Plans are underway for at least one additional module addressing how to manage online learning. The titles of the existing modules are:

- 1 Setting Study Goals and Objectives
 - 2 Managing Risks and Optimising Potential
 - 3 Getting to Know Your Study Materials
 - 4 Scheduling Tasks and Time
 - 5 Knowing it and Showing it: Preparing for and Sitting Exams
-  nsing of the *Gateway to Academic Literacy* created and managed by Macquarie University – a writing skills product broken into numerous modules with interactive study

of case examples across a growing range of subject areas. This resource set is strictly focused on sharpening reading, critical thinking and writing skills.

These online resources have been gradually introduced in 2005, and, to date, have been accessed by over 900 students. A modest ten dollars per module fee is charged for the Quick Skills Modules to cover the cost of running them on the Murdoch web server. In the first half of 2005, 942 students used these modules. Because Macquarie's Gateway program is hosted on an OUA server, there is no maintenance fee. OUA students access it at no cost, but also no usage record.

Also, to compensate for minimal one-on-one academic advising, the OUA Handbook and website now include a substantial section dedicated to guiding students in choosing their most appropriate pathways to university success. This is done using an informal self-quiz with scores interpreted into four learner type categories. Each category is provided with its own particular recommended study pattern and pace.

Prep programs

For students with low scores on the self-assessment, or who prefer learning in a more structured context, OUA and its providers have created two packages that bundle the Quick Skills Modules with progressively more challenging coursework, starting with one of the skills units. These Prep program packages are among the study patterns recommended in the pathway advice. At present, there are two such packages:

- UniPrep – a generic bridging program, particularly appropriate for people with interests in the arts and humanities
- BizPrep – a bridging program focused on business students' needs for a gentle introduction to accounting

Both Prep programs run for three study periods (thirty-nine weeks). They each include a for-credit learning skills course plus the Quick Skills Modules and the Gateway to Academic Literacy, plus another for-credit first-year course. Approximately fifty students per study period have enrolled in and completed at least one study period of each Prep program. However, the drop rate so far has been 37.9 per cent. Results so far indicate that once people have completed the initial skills unit and Quick Skills Modules, they feel ready to make their own choices and have the confidence to take more than a single unit in subsequent study periods. Thus, only 25.8 per cent have actually stopped studying with OUA – producing a retention rate of 74.2 per cent for this group. Next year, the Prep programs will be only two study periods in length, and will offer more choices of skills and content units.

Online tutorial support project

Finally, our student support efforts have been capped by a trial Online Tutorial Support Project. This project focuses on improving the quality of tutors' online interaction with their students, and their ability to encourage more effective peer interaction in asynchronous discussions. In addition to addressing the role of the instructor as recommended by Serwatka (2005), the project attempts to follow the recommendations of Anthony Picciano (2002) regarding the contribution to learning outcomes and to the motivational influence of online community participation to course completion that can be achieved through enhancing students' sense of *social presence* in the class.

A prior trial of simply funding additional tutor time did not improve completion or retention. In the 2005 program, OUA trains the tutors in critical first-year courses in particular online tutoring techniques. If successful, this sort of approach will be implemented across most first year courses.

At this point, we only have data from seven subjects offered in our first study period in 2005. While pass levels have not improved in those subjects, there were substantial decreases in the percentages of students who failed or withdrew. The number of students with "incomplete"

status grew substantially. It will be interesting to see what marks these students obtain when they complete their work. In the past, most of these have turned into failing grades.

The only tentative conclusion one can draw at this time is that the use of the Online Tutorial Support methods including icebreakers and other discussion board activities are at least engaging more students. In the past, withdrawal and fail rates were higher mostly due to people who signed up for units but never participated.

Conclusion and next steps

Although these initiatives are still in their early pilot phases, they have contributed to a 7.76 per cent increase in student retention between 2004 and 2005.

Table 2: Year to year retention (study periods 1 to 3) 2001-2005

Year	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
New Students	4,050	4,766	4,574	4,400	7,857
Returned Students	2562	3080	3539	3723	4358
Total Students	6,612	7,846	8,113	8,123	12,215
Increase in Returnees	422	518	459	184	635
% returned from previous year	46.04%	46.58%	45.11%	45.89%	53.65%

Over the entire prior history of OLA/OUA, nothing increased retention by more than 1.5 per cent.

Our immediate next steps are to continue monitoring and analysing the results of our pilot projects. Given our planning cycle, we are already committed to continuing the Prep programs, though in modified form, based on findings to date. We will be expanding tutor training to encompass a wider range of tutor skills and all first-year units. The program will be modified as needed, based on this year's findings.

Copyright © 2005 {Deden, A }The author assigns to ODLAA and educational non-profit institutions a nonexclusive license to use this document for personal use and in courses of instruction provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The author also grants to ODLAA a nonexclusive license to publish this document in electronic or print form within ODLAA publications and/or the world wide web. Any other usage is prohibited without the express permission of the author.

References

- Diaz, D.P. (2002) Online drop rates revisited. *The Technology Source*, May/June 2002. The University of North Carolina. Retrieved September 1, 2005 from http://technologysource.org/article/online_drop_rates_revisited/
- Gibson, C.C. (1998) The distance learner's academic self-concept. In C. C. Gibson (Ed.), *Distance learners in higher education: institutional responses for quality outcomes* (pp. 65-76). Madison, Wisconsin: Atwood Publishing.
- Lynch, R. & Dembo, M. (2002) The relationship between self-regulation and online learning in a blended learning context. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 5 (2). Retrieved September 1, 2005 from <http://www.irrod.org.content/v5.2/lynch-dembo.html>

- Martinez, M. (2003) High attrition rates in e-learning: challenges, predictors, and solutions. *The eLearning Developers' Journal*, July 14. Retrieved September 1, 2005 from <http://www.eLearningGuild.com>
- Parker, A. (1999) A study of variables that predict dropout from distance education. *International Journal of Educational Technology*, 1 (2). Retrieved September 1, 2005 from <http://www.ao.uiuc.edu/ijet/v1n2/parker/index.html>
- Picciano, A.G. (2002) Beyond student perceptions: Issues of interaction, presence and performance in an online course. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks* 6 (1). Retrieved September 1, 2005 from <http://www.aln.org/publications/jaln/index.asp>
- Serwatka, J.A. (2005) Improving retention in distance learning Cclasses. *International Journal of Instructional Technology and Distance Learning*, 2 (1). Retrieved September 1, 2005 from http://www.itdl.org/Journal/Jan_05/article06.htm