

**SOLVING THE PROBLEM OF ATTRITION IN AN OPEN AND DISTANCE  
LEARNING INSTITUTION**

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## ABSTRACT

Attrition has always been an issue in Open and Distance learning. This is not different in National Open University of Nigeria where students' drop-out has been noticed. The researchers were therefore interested in knowing the rate and causes of students' withdrawal. Though some people have argued that calculating the attrition rate of the university at this point is unnecessary, previous researchers have said it is desirable.

All 2003/2004 MBA students of Lagos Study Centre formed the population for the research. This programme is supposed to have turned out two sets of graduates. Furthermore, research questions were raised and to answer the questions all the students in this programme at the 2003/2004 set who were identified to have withdrawn formed the sample and this gave 178 respondents. Structured interview was administered to the respondents through phone calls. Using simple analysis, the result revealed that out of 439 students that were administered in the programme in 2003/2004 only 13.7% are left. The causes of withdrawal of 86.3% were mainly attributed to institutional procedure problems, pattern of facilitation schedule, non-availability of course materials, poor tutorial facilitation and poor academic and administrative support. The researchers therefore suggested ways to arrest the rate of attrition.

## INTRODUCTION

The National Open University of Nigeria was resuscitated and launched by President Olusegun Obasanjo on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2002 (NOUN Student Handbook, 2008/2009) with the mandate of delivering affordable, qualitative and accessible education to all Nigerians. To kick-start the academic function of NOUN, 10,026 foundation students were admitted into some programmes in four schools namely: the School of Arts and Social Sciences, the School of Business and Human Resources Management, the School of Education and the School of Science and Technology alongside the Centre for Continuous Education and Workplace Training for the 2003/2004 academic session. As of today, five sessions after its take off, the university have not been able to graduate any set of students. Due to this delay some of the students have decided to withdraw from the programme. As a result there are reasons to assume that there is a high attrition rate in NOUN.

Some people have argued that calculating the attrition rate of the university at this point is unnecessary but we feel that if attrition is defined as the drop out rate or non-completion rate, which in other words is the number of students who had enrolled in a course but do not fulfil all the course requirements nor complete the course, then it is proper to do so right now since some students have already dropped out of the programme. Doing this at this time would help the university to be able to know the rate of its attrition, compare the rate with that of other open and distance learning universities and put its art together to reduce the rate. Apart from this, it has been asserted that the experience of the UK Open University is that 35% or more of eLearners withdraw before submitting their first assignment Tyler-Smith (2006). This shows that attrition rate can even be calculated before the completion of the first semester and it is also a pointer to the fact that a learner's initial experience with distance learning may well have a significant impact on a decision to drop out.

It is hoped that by the end of this research work, we would be able to make some recommendations that would go a long way in helping the National Open University of Nigeria as well as other open universities that would be starting in Africa and indeed in any other part of the world. For some reasons which would be indicated later, the Masters in Business Administration

of the School of the School of Business and Human Resources Management would be used as the population for the study.

## **ATTRITION IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING**

Since the inception of Open and Distance education, attrition has always been an issue. In corroboration of this, Harold Henke (2001) says:

Distance education has evolved greatly in the past decade, from paper based correspondence courses, to televised (or video taped) courses, to Computer Based Training, to web based courses, to interactive multimedia such as streaming video, each changing the way students participate in education. *Whatever the format or distribution method, attrition has always been an issue.* (Italics mine).

From the above, it is clear that no matter the methodology, attrition has always been an issue in open and distance learning. Therefore, attrition has nothing to do with methodology. It is a perennial problem in distance learning. Studies in attrition in distance learning is important for two major reasons: there is the need to assess the cost effectiveness of open and distance education in comparison with the traditional classroom-based education and the determination of approaches to increase the effectiveness of distance learning and to increase student engagement in that form of learning (Tyler-Keith, 2006).

A lot of work in terms of researches has been done on attrition. Some open and distance universities have determined their attrition rate and have identified causes and also proposed solutions to the problem. This paper is concerned with the determination of the attrition rate of National Open University of Nigeria, the identification of the factors leading to the rate of attrition and also proposes solutions to curb or reduce the rate of attrition.

Because of the assumed high rate of attrition in distance and open learning programmes, many studies have been carried out in an attempt not only to explain the reasons for the high attrition rate but also to show that “distance education is an effective and viable method of structuring and delivering education” (Garrison, 1987, 95). It also has to be pointed out that most of these studies based their measurement of attrition on programmes. This is also responsible for the decision in this paper to focus on the MBA programme of the NOUN as a basis of drawing inference for the institution’s attrition rate.

### **Rates of Attrition in Previous Programmes Studied**

As had been stated earlier, it has been assumed that distance education carries with it a high attrition rate. Parker (1999) argues that “with the growth of distance education has come the problem of exceedingly high attrition rates”. For example, in a research carried out by Wickersham and Dooley (2001) on a Swine Continuing Education conducted by the National Pork Producer’s Council, it was discovered that out of the 84 participants enrolled in the Spring 1999 programme only 23 completed the entire course. This would give an attrition rate of 72.6%. In the second running of the programme in Fall 2000, 77 out of 133 completed all the courses. This would give an attrition rate of 42%. In another research carried out by Henke and Russum on two courses, namely Infoprint Manager Overview and Printing Fundamentals that was conducted over a nine month period shows that the attrition rate for Infoprint Manager Overview was 19% and Printing Fundamentals was 23%. Tyler-Smith (2006), citing Carter (1996) suggests that in

some institutions, attrition rate exceeds 40%, Diaz (2002) put the rate at between 20-50% and Carr (2000) estimate it to be 10-20% higher than the traditional on-campus education.

It has to be noted however that the validity of these reporting have been questioned. It has been argued by Wang et al. (2003) that these reporting are either unreliable and or misleading. Tinto (1982) in Berge and Huang (2004) have reported in the traditional classroom-based teaching, the overall drop-out rates for undergraduates in US higher education is between 40 and 45%. It is said that this has been consistent for the most part of the last century. Thus it has been asserted that the so called high attrition rate in distance, at least in the US, may not be extraordinarily higher than the traditional education rate.

### **Factors Responsible for Attrition in Open and Distance Education**

Many studies have been carried out concerning attrition rate and the reasons for attrition in distance education. This forms a veritable background for this paper. Researchers have noted that the factors contributing to attrition are complex and as a result of this complexity, there are also no simple solutions. Cross (1981) classified barriers to distance education into three subheadings, namely: situational, institutional and dispositional. While not contradicting these sub divisions reflected in Cross' work, other research work has added another subheading. Enckevoort et al. (eds.) (1986) added what is called epistemological variable.

#### ***Situational Barriers***

According to Wickersham and Dooley (2001) situational barrier include a poor learning environment, lack of time due to work or home responsibilities and the geographical location of the study centre to the students' residence or office.

#### ***Institutional Barriers***

Institutional barriers include the cost of the programme, problems with institutional procedures, course scheduling, course availability and the quality of tutorial assistance as well as the quality of the support the learners receive from the Learners' Support Service.

#### ***Dispositional Barriers***

Dispositional barriers include lack of a clear goal on the part of the students, the stress of multiple roles, time management ability, the different learning style when compared to that of the conventional university, adult pride, social and economic factors.

#### ***Epistemological Barriers***

Epistemological barriers include diversity of the different academic disciplines such as the research paradigms and communication techniques.

In asserting factors that are responsible for attrition in distance education, it is important to consider the opinions of the learners themselves. This was the step taken by Wang et al. (2003). They sent out sample surveys and in the response it was discovered that distance learners identified four primary factors leading to their dropping out: personal motivation, instructional design of the course/programme, conflicts between study, work and family and the feelings that they had learned what they wanted or needed to learn.

This research work takes all these factors into consideration in the construction of the questionnaire that would measure the response of the students to the reasons for withdrawing from the course. In fact, the questions were sent to students who have withdrawn from the course to ascertain their reasons fro withdrawing.

## **Proposed Solutions to the Attrition Problem**

One of the major work on the solutions to attrition in open and distance education is the work of Tinto (1975, 1987) “Longitudinal Model of Individual Departure” that indicated a complex interaction of family context and background, personal motivation, abilities and depth of commitment to completion; previous educational experiences and achievement; and institutional support ((Tyler-Smith, 2006). This model has been used as a means of reforming institutional retention strategies and also to predict attrition rates. It has to be stated however that Kember (1989) and Sweet (1986) point out that Tinto’s studies were carried out with campus-based students who are based in a different environment and so his results may not be entirely suitable for distance learning. The following are suggested strategies to follow in reducing attrition rate:

Salmon (2004) suggests that since e-learning is central to most distance programmes, in the early stages, the course content and course activities should be limited and there should be a focus on activities that would “promote the formation of an individual’s identity on line, the development of learning group cohesion and the setting of group norms, expectations and the rules around online discussions”.

Tyler-Smith (2006) is of the opinion that it is profitable to work on the principle that to be forewarned is to be forearmed. This would be done by informing the learners of the complexity and challenging tasks involved in distance learning and let them also know that they are not the ones experiencing the complexity of distance learning.

## **SURVEY: STRATEGY**

The first group of students who were enrolled in 2003/2004 session were identified from the university’s data base in order to ascertain the total number of students registered for that session. It is assumed that the group of students enrolled in that particular session would have graduated in the 2006/2007 session for those in a four-year programme and those admitted for MBA and other post-graduate studies should have graduated a minimum of two sets, all thing being equal.

The data revealed a total number of 10,026 students registered across 25 study centres. The Lagos study centre has the highest number of enrolment which sums up to 4,029 representing 42.2% of the total population.

In selecting the survey tool and distribution method, it was important to contact every student who has dropped out of the programme in all the centres. The difficulty of getting accurate information on the concerned students made the researcher to settle for Lagos study centre since it has a good representation of the total population and also has more accurate phone numbers and e-mail addresses that could be used to reach the target population.

It has to be noted that for this research work, the phone interview was the major option left because most of the e-mail addresses written for the student in the database were not correct as there was no response or delivery failure notice and there was no contact addressee that could have been used as an alternative.

Out of the total number of students registered in the Lagos Study Centre, the MBA students who should have completed their programmes by now were the set that provided more accurate phone numbers. The researchers thus decided to use the MBA students for the research work.

## **Survey: Design**

From the database of the university, 439 students representing 35.1% of the total number of students in the Lagos Study Centre at the 2003/2004 session registered for the MBA programme. The researchers felt this number is representative for the purpose of the research. The MBA students are subdivided as follows:

|                            |     |
|----------------------------|-----|
| Banking and Finance        | 46  |
| Corporate Governance       | 54  |
| e-Banking                  | 01  |
| e-Business/e-Commerce      | 22  |
| e-Learning                 | 01  |
| e-Library                  | 04  |
| Financial Management       | 106 |
| Information Technology     | 54  |
| Human Resources Management | 151 |
| Total                      | 439 |

In 2005/2006 session, the total number of the same set of students has reduced to 135 and in the 2007/2008 only 60 students were registered as at May 2008 (about four weeks to the semester's examination). Using the elimination method, all the students that were not registered as at May 2008 were selected and we had a total of 339 students. That is, only 13.7% were left in the programme while 86.3% has dropped.

From the record provided in the database, most of the phone numbers and e-mails provided were wrong. At the end of the phone number/e-mail verification exercise only 178 students were left with correct phone-numbers. It was this number that formed the population used for the research. The researchers were able to reach the 178 students through the assistance provided by the present class representative of the said set of MBA who provided some phone numbers of students who are no longer in the programme. The percentage of the total number of students used was 40.5% of the total number of students who were no more in the programme.

As said earlier, to get response from the students, phone interview was used as suggested by Salant and Dillman (1994). The interview was structured. In structuring the questions, three major criteria, namely situational barriers, institutional barriers and dispositional barriers were considered. Items were developed on each of these headings (see Appendix A). In structuring the items, the word "attrition" or "dropped out" were not used.

Following the recommendations of Salant and Dillman (1994), Shneiderman (1998), the survey items were written using the Likert scale to measure students' opinions. The items were further subjected to content and construct validity with the reliability at 0.85%. Respondents were also allowed to make free comments outside the structured items.

Using the structured items, the students were interviewed through phone by the researchers and the responses were ticked accordingly by the researchers.

## **Survey: Response Rate**

The survey response rates are as follows:

A total of 178 students were selected and only 170 responded. The other 8 refused interview. Therefore, it could be said that the response rate is 95.5%. Considering the recommendation of Salant and Dillman (1994) that 60-70% response rate for telephone calls and e-mails are adequate, it therefore means that this survey has a very good response rate probably because the researchers were lucky to identify respondents who were willing to speak or who have been looking for an avenue to express their plight as revealed in the free comment by some of them.

### Survey: Results

| S/N                           | Criteria   | Results (N=178)                               |
|-------------------------------|--|---|
| <b>Situational Barriers</b>   |  |   |
| 1.                            | Did you withdraw as a result of poor learning environment?                 | Yes = 4.5%<br>No = 91%<br>No Response 4.5%    |
| 2.                            | Did you withdraw as a result of lack of time due to work or home pressure? | Yes = 0%<br>No = 95.5%<br>No Response 4.5%    |
| 3.                            | Did you withdraw because of the geographical location of the centre?       | Yes = 0%<br>No = 85.5%<br>No Response 4.5%    |
| <b>Institutional Barriers</b> |  |   |
| 4.                            | Did you withdraw because of the financial implication of the programme?    | Yes = 10.1%<br>No = 85.4%<br>No Response 4.5% |
| 5.                            | Did you withdraw because of problems with institutional procedures?        | Yes = 95.5%<br>No = 0%<br>No Response 4.5%    |
| 6.                            | Did you withdraw due to the pattern of facilitation schedule?              | Yes = 84.3%<br>No = 11.2%<br>No Response 4.5% |
| 7.                            | Did you withdraw because your course materials were not available?         | Yes = 91.6%<br>No = 3.9%<br>No Response 4.5%  |
| 8.                            | Did you withdraw because of poor tutorial facilitation?                    | Yes = 78.6%<br>No = 16.9%<br>No Response 4.5% |
| 9.                            | Did you withdraw because of the poor academic and administrative support?  | Yes = 84.8%<br>No = 10.7%<br>No Response 4.5% |
| <b>Dispositional Barriers</b> |  |   |
| 10.                           | Did you withdraw because of the too many activities in your schedule?      | Yes = 0%<br>No = 95.5%<br>No Response 4.5%    |
| 11.                           | Did you withdraw because of the inability to cope with the learning style? | Yes = 0%<br>No = 95.5%<br>No Response 4.5%    |
| 12.                           | Did you withdraw because of family pressures?                              | Yes = 5.6%<br>No = 89.9%<br>No Response 4.5%  |

|     |  |  |
|-----|--|--|
| 13. | Did you loose interest in the programme because of the rigour of getting your data filled online           | Yes = 16.9%<br>No = 78.6%<br>No Response 4.5%                      |
| 14. | Could it be that the loss of interest arose as a result of the difficulty faced in assessing NOUN website? | Yes = 0%<br>No = 95.5%<br>No Response 4.5%                         |
| 15. | Did you withdraw because of the inability to cope with the number of courses offered?                      | Yes = 0%<br>No = 95.5%<br>No Response 4.5%                         |
| 16. | Did you withdraw because of poor health condition?   | Yes = 0%<br>No = 95.5%<br>No Response 4.5%                         |
| 17. | Did you withdraw because of the instability of the university's academic calendar?                         | Yes = 95.5%<br>No = 0%<br>No Response 4.5%                         |
| 18. | Will you return to the programme if the university's academic calendar stabilizes?                         | Yes = 39.3%<br>No = 16.9%<br>Uncertain = 39.3%<br>No Response 4.5% |

### Survey: Discussion

Before the survey, the following questions were postulated:

- What are the causes of students' withdrawal from the university?
- How can the university reduce the rate of students' withdrawal?

The findings revealed some interesting points:

The major causes of students' withdrawal rest on institutional barriers. The causes and percentages were revealed thus:

| Cause                                    | Percentage |
|--|------------|
| Institutional Procedure Problems         | 95.5%      |
| Pattern of facilitation schedule         | 84.3%      |
| Non-availability of course materials     | 91.6%      |
| Poor tutorial facilitation               | 78.6%      |
| Poor academic and administrative support | 84.8%      |

The institutional procedure was a major problem to the students as they showed a great dissatisfaction on the stability of the university's academic calendar as the delay affects their status on their jobs. This dissatisfaction is reflected in their comments as equally shown in the percentage response. A good number were not equally satisfied with the mode of facilitation schedule.

The comments it has to be stated was not restricted to the post-graduate programmes alone but also extends to the undergraduate levels. The students expressed bitterness over the non-availability of course materials which they perceived as the greatest hindrance to learning in the National Open University of Nigeria. They also expressed concern over poor tutorial facilitation. They were not satisfied with the mode of facilitation by the tutorial facilitators.

Lastly, as far as the students were concerned, the manner in which they were handled for academic and administrative support was demoralizing. Some expressed that if they had a good support they might have considered staying on for the programme.

These findings have some correlation with the work of Wang et al. (2003) who identified four primary factors leading to dropping out: personal motivation, instruction design of the course/programme, conflict between study, work and family and the feelings that they had learnt what they needed to learn. The major area of correlation however rest on the motivation. Personal motivation is a major key to academic success. The area of conflict between work, study and family did not actually have a string impact on the students' withdrawal probably because of the strong personal aspiration in achieving higher academic status which would also be a motivational factor on their jobs. Also in line with the work of Encevtort et al. (1986) epistemological variables are determinant variables for assessing drop out rate.

On the issue of continuity by the said students, 39.3% indicated their willingness to return to their programmes if the academic calendar stabilizes. 16.9% have already made up their minds that there is no coming back (as some of them have started and are about to complete some other programmes with other conventional universities) while 39.3% also expressed uncertainty. It is important to note that the university if it tidies up her activities can make some of these students return as their fear rests more on the smooth running academic calendar and the prompt release as well as accurate release of results.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings, the following are some proposed solutions to reduce the attrition rate among the students of the National Open University of Nigeria, Lagos:

- The university should try to stabilize its academic calendar to encourage students' continuity since a good number of the students are enrolled for job enhancement.
- Course material production and review should be given a priority. This is because the inability of the university to have a smooth running academic calendar lies on the fact most course materials needed to continue the following semester are not yet available. If these are available, the academic calendar would run smoothly.
- Students' academic result should be released timely so that the students can access their academic progress.
- All facilitators should be trained to meet the demands of ODL standards.
- All staff of the university should be educated on the staff/learner relationship in an ODL setting through workshops and seminars. The role of learners' support is not and should not be domiciled in Learners' Support Unit alone since most of the learners do not use this unit but rather seek assistance from any person recognized as staff.
- All academic staff must be mandated to have a PGD in ODL/e-learning if they are to become career staff in the university. The university can plan this through a staff development programme.
- The Database needs to be updated. During the course of research it was discovered that there is no continuity in the data of the students. For example, in the 2004/2005 session we have the list of the first set of students but in the 2005/2006 the records of the students were not carried over, thus only the list of fresh students were on the database. Secondly, a larger percentage of the phone numbers and the e-mail addresses given online were inaccurate. There is the need to get to the current students and put accurate information

on the database and also update the sessional admissions' list to give the overview of previous admissions.

## CONCLUSION

One major fundamental mistake that the National Open University of Nigeria, has made is the opening up of the University for Students' Admission when most of the course materials are not available. One would thus warn emerging and existing ODL institutions that admissions should not be made neither are new programmes are to be initiated except the course materials for the first three years (for a 4-year course) or the first four years (for a 5-year course) are available. One would want to suggest further researches in the area of attrition in Africa because it is glaring that most of the factors that would have led to attrition in Western countries may not be applicable to Africa as shown in the students' response to the questionnaire. One wonders if we would have had any student withdrawing if there had been no institutional problems and if all course materials had been available.

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### Appendix 1

Structured Interview Questions to elicit the cause of Attrition in NOUN

*Tick as Appropriate*

What programme were you running in NOUN? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your year of Admission? \_\_\_\_\_

| S/N | Criteria   | Yes | No |
|-----|--|-----|----|
|     | <b>Situational Barriers</b>  |     |    |
| 1.  | Did you withdraw as a result of poor learning environment?   |     |    |
| 2.  | Did you withdraw as a result of lack of time due to work or home pressure?                                 |     |    |
| 3.  | Did you withdraw because of the geographical location of the centre?                                       |     |    |
|     | <b>Institutional Barriers</b>  |     |    |
| 4.  | Did you withdraw because of the financial implication of the programme?                                    |     |    |
| 5.  | Did you withdraw because of problems with institutional procedures?  |     |    |
| 6.  | Did you withdraw due to the pattern of facilitation schedule?  |     |    |
| 7.  | Did you withdraw because your course materials were not available?   |     |    |
| 8.  | Did you withdraw because of poor tutorial facilitation?  |     |    |
| 9.  | Did you withdraw because of the poor academic and administrative support?                                  |     |    |
|     | <b>Dispositional Barriers</b>  |     |    |
| 10. | Did you withdraw because of the too many activities in your schedule?                                      |     |    |
| 11. | Did you withdraw because of the inability to cope with the learning style?                                 |     |    |
| 12. | Did you withdraw because of family pressures?  |     |    |
| 13. | Did you loose interest in the programme because of the rigour of getting your data filled online           |     |    |
| 14. | Could it be that the loss of interest arose as a result of the difficulty faced in assessing NOUN website? |     |    |
| 15. | Did you withdraw because of the inability to cope with the number of courses offered?                      |     |    |
| 16. | Did you withdraw because of poor health condition?   |     |    |
| 17. | Did you withdraw because of the instability of the university's academic calendar?                         |     |    |
| 18. | Will you return to the programme if the university's academic calendar stabilizes?                         |     |    |