LISTENING AND LEARNING? PRIVILEGING THE STUDENT VOICE IN E-LEARNING DISCOURSES OF WITHDRAWAL: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Along with the burgeoning expansion of online platforms for student learning in higher education have come complementary analytics tools to rate student engagement, learning, success and progression. As, in the UK, institutions embrace these tools as part of government-led attainment targets and awards (e.g. Teaching Excellence Framework), the 'quantitative rush' to measure and evaluate retention from the institutional perspective risks muffling the individual student voices that can be heard through qualitative approaches to their learning journeys. This is particularly relevant for introductory level students as they seek to navigate the unknown of their first year of higher education, and it is recognised that introductory students require the greatest levels of pastoral care to succeed.

Enhancements to University CRM systems have created an opportunity for the preservation of narratives of withdrawal made by students as they engage with the university to defer, reduce or cancel their studies. This is particularly important in the distance learning sector, both because these dialogues have been less visible to the institution than through traditional campus support provision, and because part time students tend to have more complex lives. These narratives have permitted a criteria of authenticity and criticality to institutionally led discourses around withdrawal. They demonstrate the importance of considering the student experience, motivation and participation with the university, rather than the privileging of institutional frames of reference.

Similarities and differences in perceptions around the meanings and values of their higher education experiences, and reasons for withdrawing have been developed thematically in this paper to better understand student motivation, and provide a useful triangulation to output from quantitative studies on retention. Key word findings from these introductory level students enrolled on Business and Law modules within a UK business school include the following: Dialogue on personal concerns, the time commitment to study successfully, and how stressors, both inside and outside of the study environment impact the student's ability to commit, or wish to commit to their courses.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses the motivation and participation of distance learning students in terms of student support and retention and progression, specifically studying Undergraduate, introductory level Business and Law modules. More specifically it evaluates contact initiated by students who have become concerned about continuing with their studies, and the way these opening discourses are categorised and fielded by the University. Evidence from a sample dataset of c.600 students registered on these courses, who contacted the institution during 2016/7 to explore options for continuing in higher education are considered.

The initial research identified webform headings used by the University as potentially problematic in themselves, given that they present the issue as singular rather than the multifaceted and complex problems initiated by students. Discourses started by students did not readily appear to fit these institutional headings, i.e. 'our' words are not 'their' words. Whilst the categorisations offer the institution a useful framework for statistical analysis and routing for advice, there is therefore recognition that they obscure the complex reality, messy problems and human stories presented by students. Given the institutional aim is a seamless journey for every student, this paper aims to consider adaptation from a short term atomistic nature of support design to develop a more holistic and longer term approach to student support, in a proactive way. This philosophy

of support is successfully operated currently for groups with known additional requirements, such as those with disabilities or armed services personnel, although its potential benefits have not been explored for wider application at present.

2. LITERATURE

The literature field for student retention, attrition and progression is rich and well established, and institutional ability to promote student success has been the subject of much debate (e.g. Gaskell, 2006). Long standing evidence of the detrimental impact of withdrawal on student and institution alike drives many of these retention initiatives (Webb and Cotton, 2018). This paper acknowledges that universities can make many positive changes to support student motivation and participation, whilst the primary focus here is on issues that consider the student's own active role in retention. How far student withdrawal depends on personal and social issues rather than institutional activities is, therefore, a key question (Gaskell, 2006). Stuart (2017) draws attention to these interlinkages in her "golden triangle" approach, which considers student and context, institution and culture and relationship to place.

The idiosyncrasies of the distance learning context in relation to "place" provide a unique and interesting research gap, particularly as many studies on retention have focussed on campus based support functions (e.g. Bennett et al, 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 from Higher Education is particularly relevant to the distance learning environment (Yorke, 2004), indicating a 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", and the affective nature of the induction cycle and engagement with it by students on retention is presented by Forrester et al (2005).

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 to some student groups. Concerns about VLE environments as "passive" experiences for students were also raised by Heaton-Shrestha et al (2009: 88), who comment on varying inclusivity for those who lurk (Preece, 2000) or see online teaching as more of a repository for materials rather than a living, active space for student engagement. Student perceptions of low one to one contact and 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.

Whatever the context of the HEI studied, approaches examined could also be broadly divided into those studies that focus upon institutional methods, initiatives and best practices for increasing retention, and those that focus 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, notably Roberts (2011: 185), who draws from Wickens et al, (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 Leonid 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 (see p606) and improve both face to face and online student experience.

3. METHOD

Webb and Cotton (2018) posit that quantitative indicators around retention have tended to be based upon demographic and social antecedents, (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity) and suggest that interventions may be more successful if based on other factors, e.g. prior learning experience. Therefore the research team opted to

consider the rather neglected qualitative aspects of information gleaned from student withdrawal data in selecting the discourses initiated as part of the process of withdrawal in order to provide a more triangulated approach.

Researchers therefore used an inductive approach; first, independently reading the scripts and coding thematically before coming together to combine mutually agreed themes (Glazer and Strauss 2006). The research team considered a sample dataset of c.600 students who had contacted the institution's student support team, using a webform with categories provided by the institution from which students self-select what they deem to be an appropriate match to their concerns over their study. Under the broad heading, students write a free-text summary of their issues, which is the material studied here. Of the 14 categories provided by the university, this dataset focusses upon student conversations that had been categorised by the students themselves under the headings: Progress concern; Concerned about continuing with a module; Changing my study plans. These three headings were considered by the Student Support team to most closely match student concerns about issues relating to student retention including study participation and motivation.

A review of the full text however, revealed that categories offered by the institution and selected from by students did not necessarily reflect the narratives, therefore categories were derived by the team from the actual text rather than the a priori institutional fields. All of the student narratives are underpinned by a complex picture of issues including a whole range of life events independent to the institution, as well as factors linked to student confidence and resilience, and also study related issues such as course choice, skills development and method of study delivery. Discussion in this working paper examines three of the researcher derived themes, based on the most populated groups: Conversations around deferral/ withdrawal, preparedness for study and time available.

NVivo10 was then used to provide samples of verbatim text as evidence of each theme via a key word search.

4. DISCUSSION

Concerns around learner retention and progression are found across the HE sector. For a distance learning institution this is particularly recognised as a concern given the higher rates of attrition that are commonly found and the different means of checking and measuring student engagement from face to face institutions. Along with the rest of the sector, the institution recognises two main types of student withdrawal from a module / qualification. Active, where the student is in contact with the institution which triggers a dialogue with a study advisor for guidance; and passive, where the student disappears and it is incumbent on the institution to contact the student with offers of help and advice. In the latter case, despite attempts, the student may remain inert. This paper solely focuses on those active dialogues and not on the passive withdrawals. (For a further discussion on passive withdrawals please see Stephens and Myers 2014).

4.1 Conversations around 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 et al (2009 p.84) students' feelings of attachment to study and the institution are key factors when deciding if to withdraw or remain studying. 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 at that point in time. In the dataset, students often used their own term 'defer' rather than the institutional term 'withdrawal', indicating their desire to put study on hold, not to end it, as evidenced in the verbatim quotes below:

"Good morning I deferred this unit from October 2015 to April 2016 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 this may cause."

" 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 to this qualification in the future ".

While students often want a mid-way option of deferring, in England and Wales the current financial implications of students' fees and loans mean they often have to make a decision to continue or to cease study when they may not be ready to do so. In these circumstances regulatory necessity was beyond both parties control and led to a finality that did not truly reflect the wishes of either. In regards to wider retention the binary state of being registered for study or not made the return to study a more significant step both in terms of administrative process and psychological contract than if the student could have simply been 'paused', an unintentional outcome of the regulatory context.

Examples include:

"I am just wondering what I need to do now as I am so far behind on my studies that I don't feel I am able to catch [up] , I am also due to start an introduction to business management this month also and don't know what I do. 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."

"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."

"is it possible if I can defer my module for February next year. I thought I would be able to cope especially with a 7 month old baby and coping as a single parent but…"

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.

4.2 Preparedness for Study

Harris et al (2014) note the fundamental importance of educational preparedness as a factor in student retention. Ideally students should have a realistic awareness of the commitments needed for successful study before module registration, and certainly before module start. This points to a critical window between registration and payment and module formal start in which the student has chance to fully reflect on their plans before they actively commit to a programme of studying. Whilst induction programmes can then offer students information and advice in such areas as study skills, assignment requirements and peer networking, for distance institutions this still requires learners to proactively commit. Students need to have an awareness of themselves as active and reflective learners and not simply passive recipients of study content. This was particularly noted as an issue by Shrestha et al (2009: 87) that online could encourage a "semi-detached" approach to engagement.

In the dataset this matched evidence in some dialogues where the students may not have fully understood the commitments of study before registering and module start, and in some cases being several weeks into the module before coming to the realisation they may not be ready or best placed to study at that point in time.

"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 on what my options are please?"

"I wish to cancel my enrolment and interest in the business degree, 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 the degree now."

"I put myself down to study in January ... I have now changed my mind about university as I just don't think I am ready due to a few personal reasons.   I was wondering how I opt out of the course please?"

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

Our evaluation highlights again that there appears to be a gap between the terms used by the institution, for example, preparedness for study, induction and study skills development, with the verbatim words used by students, such as getting ready. Clear guidance during the recruitment process should seek to get the student to consider their readiness for that level and intensity of study, or offer alternative routes to build necessary skills as part of an informed decision process (Harris et al 2016). 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 of study in order to avoid a dissonance between expectation and reality.

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

"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"

"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."

" 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? "

4.3 Time Available

Of the 600 student discourses, some 350 were at least in part around issues of time available for study, 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. (For a further discussion on a "fuzzy dividing line" between a student registered as full time with a job and someone with a job who is a part time student, see Stephens and Myers, 2014, and Perraton, 2009: 275). In our evaluation we separated out students who noted an issue with preparedness for study from those discussing their time available for study. The latter issue in many cases seemed to build up over time 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 with their studies.

"I have already begun to fall behind in my studies and it is proving difficult to keep on top of that.   I highly underestimated the workload I have to contend with this year, 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"

"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 "

" 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 to be a pain. I'm not sure which is the best choice for me to be honest"

For these students in our evaluation who have proactively contacted the institution, this may reflect a need to talk and share concerns and potential plans highlighting the fundamental important role of a high quality student support advisory team. 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 with someone"

"Hi, I am contacting to discuss withdrawing from my studies, time has not allowed me to fully participate and this will not be changing in the foreseeable future".

This also prompts a recommendation for a range of timely 'getting back on track' study support initiatives and advice about catching up. Whilst the institution does provide standardised automated support at key points in the student journey, the one-to-many approach is no substitute for truly personal dialogue (see Park et al, 2011: 42, Collins et al, 2016).

5. SUMMARY AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Based on this initial 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 et al (2011: 45) it remains a key role of the educator to minimise attrition and "reclaim" students at risk of dropping out. Findings indicate that institutional terminology promotes a relationship with the institution, whereas 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 is in agreement with Park et al (2011) who write of successful students referring to X as the main reason they did not drop out.

The themes explored above should not be considered exhaustive; this conference paper therefore represents work in progress, and the study continues to develop analysis around student-led withdrawal and potential re-entry discourse. It is planned to utilise comparative studies of student dialogue to further develop retention and progression strategies. Future areas of exploration include the impact of pre-module guidance and induction, both general and subject specific.

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