



---

## **SUSTAINABILITY FOR WHOM? PLANNING FOR STUDENT SUCCESS IN OPEN EDUCATION AND DISTANCE LEARNING**

*Alan Tait, The Open University, United Kingdom*

---

Sustainability lies at the heart of the new UN Development Goals (the SDG's) for the period 2015-2030, and education has a specific Goal, namely

*“Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.” (UNESCO, 2015)*

The very significant growth in post-secondary education demanded world-wide, from some 260m to 400m learners, will need the development of open education and distance learning systems (OEDL) on a substantial scale. Even in Europe, as a developed region, there will be the need to contribute to this priority not only in overall growth in particular in some countries but also in population segments that remain with higher levels of exclusion, and also more widely from the perspective of quality for OEDL.

This paper, which draws on an ICDE report (Tait, 2015) takes student success as a core element of quality for the sustainability of OEDL, and therefore for post-secondary education to contribute to sustainability for our societies in the future. Student success rates are widely reported to be lower for part-time than full-time students, and lower for OEDL than for part-time students as a whole. There is an imperative to improve student success rates firstly for the sake of students who invest their self-esteem, time and money in OEDL programmes, and also for the reputation of OEDL's contribution to educational systems and of the institutions who teach significantly or entirely using OEDL methods (Grau-Valldosera & Minguillon, 2014; Hart, 2012). As major effort goes into fulfilling UN SDG 4, OEDL programmes will need to improve student success rates to make a reality of the UN aspiration for significantly higher numbers of successful post-secondary and lifelong learners.

### **Student success in open education and distance learning programmes**

The first issue to be addressed is to ask what is specific to OEDL programmes in relation to student success. It is certainly widely, though not universally, the case that student success in part-time modes of study is less than that of full-time students, and within the part-time cohorts students on OEDL programmes generally do less well in terms of module and qualification completion than part-time campus based students. Exceptions to these generalisations have been recorded, for example in a case where students in an online programme have completed at higher levels than the parallel campus-based programme, due it is argued to very effective learning design (Creelman & Reneland-Forsman, 2013). However,

overall for the OEDL sector there is an issue to be addressed of lower rates of student success in OEDL programmes, both objectively where data reveals that, and in less formal terms of perception and reputation.

If we accept in the first place that rates of student success are an issue for OEDL programmes, care is needed in proposing explanations of cause and effect. There are in everyday discourse two main poles of explanation: the strengths and weaknesses of the students who study in these programmes, and strengths and weaknesses of OEDL modes of study themselves. The challenges for successful study of part-time students, who form the great majority of students on OEDL programmes, are well known. Students on OEDL programmes are more likely to be

- adult or post-experience, in the sense that they have not come to study directly from school;
- be studying in the post-secondary sector;
- be part-time students with family or work responsibilities, or both;
- have gained access to programmes of study that are more open than those of the elite universities.

In addition, students on OEDL programmes may to a greater or lesser extent depending on the educational culture and history of their country come from families with less or no history of post-secondary education, and to come from lower socio-economic demographic cohorts than those in traditional universities or programmes. These students are admitted to study, especially at undergraduate level, because their path to post-secondary education has not been smooth or easy. Institutions who seek to admit and serve these OEDL students take a deliberate and purposeful risk in doing so, in accordance with their mission and values (Tait, 2014).

However the achievement of institutional mission driven by the values of access and inclusion can be threatened from a number of perspectives, which have to be carefully managed. Firstly, institutional missions that are focused on access and inclusion are in conflict with the mission of those institutions who have developed narratives of excellence based on selection and exclusion, and who widely dominate accounts of excellence and hierarchy in education. There will always be voices who ask if *these sorts of people* – i.e. the wider and newer population cohorts served by OEDL programmes – are worthy of educational opportunity, and these voices are often influential in shaping wider social attitudes to institutions that choose to offer OEDL programmes.

Secondly, students who come forward to study without the social and cultural capital of the elite are also taking a significant risk in terms of self-esteem, money paid in fees, and time committed to study at the expense of family and leisure. This mission of access and inclusion must mean that the institutions offering OEDL programmes need, in partnership with students, to manage that risk in transparent and responsible ways. The opportunity for success will however always have in these contexts a higher risk of failure than those institutions who teach the children of families who have often already enjoyed post-secondary education, who study full-time straight after school, and who regulate admission in

conventional and selective ways. As reported in the USA context “graduation rates were highest at post-secondary degree-granting institutions that were the most selective (i.e. had the lowest admissions acceptance rates), and graduation rates were lowest at institutions that were the least selective (i.e. had open admissions policies)” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). The mission of inclusion and access which for the most part is that of OEDL Programmes lies therefore in seeking to achieve something different from the elite universities, and can be proud of that.

This ambition is sometimes explicitly reflected in mission statements, or is informally part of the goal of being more flexible and accessible. It needs however to be understood by those planning OEDL programmes, and senior leadership in institutions which decide to diversify their mission into online or blended programmes, that they will be more likely to admit students with lower grades of High School leaving certificate or entry qualifications and with the challenges of managing part-time study with working life and family responsibilities. This will impact negatively on module and programme completion outcomes as compared with traditional full-time student in highly selective colleges or universities. This takes nothing away from the value and importance of a mission that attempts to widen opportunity and contribute to sustainability in societies for the future. But it brings a particular set of responsibilities that must focus on supporting opportunity and success at the same time as widening access. There is clearly a tension between wanting to maximise registration numbers and being responsible in advising intending students about their preparedness for study. While the responsibility may in the end lie with the student to take the decision, it must be in a context of ethical recruitment practice that is closer to advising a client than selling a product. There is sadly and shamefully a history in OEDL of commercial motives conflicting with that sense of responsibility, and too many recent instances of institutions, in particular private for-profit colleges, where admissions practice has not been ethically and transparently managed, to the severe detriment of the students who pay high fees, and accumulate debt without the benefit of qualification. These debts have in the recent episode in the USA been supported by government and taxpayer who make loans which are at severe risk of non-repayment and default (Economist, 2013).

This is the background for student success in OEDL. The remainder of this paper is concerned with summarising the range of practices that best support student success for sustainability (for an overall introduction see Brindley, Walti and Zawacki-Richter, 2004).

### **The framework of practice to support student success**

A framework to support student success is an organic whole-institution system, that is to say it must be based on the student’s whole experience of study. It is sometimes in accounts of practice limited to a heading of student support, but important though this element is, this is an inadequate approach to supporting the overall student experience.

In summary there are a number of key elements that support practice for student success:

- pre-study information, advice, guidance and admission;
- curriculum or programme design for student success;
- intervention at key points and in response to student need;
- assessment to support learning as well as to judge achievement;
- individualised and personalised systems of support to students;
- information and logistical systems that communicate between all relevant participants in the system;
- managing for student success.

The deployment of these elements in OEDL programmes and educational systems will of necessity reflect the specific programme needs, institutional capacities, technology affordances and cultures and histories of the country or region.

### **Pre-study information, advice, guidance and admission**

This stage in the cycle of activities in a student's engagement with the institution is crucial. As noted above it is here that the tension between student acquisition and business growth, the ambitions of both student and institution in terms of opportunity, and the ethics of supporting clients rather than achieving sales targets are felt at their most acute.

### **Marketing**

Sales and marketing activities are essential if the institution is to make its offer known to relevant sectors of the public. However, misleading statements, for example, about how easy it is to study will lead some students to register on an unrealistic basis and to individual disappointment and high dropout statistics.

### **Information**

Information on all dimensions of study must be clear to the enquirer, including recommended educational levels needed for the programme, time needed for study, number of years needed to complete the programme, the curriculum character of the programme including learning and work-related outcomes, the systems for student support, assessment schedules, and fee levels and the nature of the customer commitment.

### **Advice and guidance**

There need to be channels of communication open to enquirers so that he or she can engage on an individual basis with questions about study. The advice and guidance staff should have their professional goals derived from enquirer satisfaction, not sales targets.

It is here that the channels of communication in terms of technology will need to be selected according to the needs and capabilities of the enquirer cohort. These may include face to face, letter, telephone and email, or a combination of these, and may include newer practices of web-based access to peer support through wiki's, and to study materials (Ali & Fadziel, 2012). There should be quality assurance for this, as for all other elements that support student

success, to include systems to provide feedback on accuracy, helpfulness and timeliness of enquirer interactions.

### ***Admissions***

The interaction with the enquirer may lead to admission, and if so should be managed on a transparent basis in terms of commitments to patterns of study, cost and commitment. Interaction with the enquirer may also lead to a decision by the enquirer or the institution not to proceed with registration, and this should be regarded as a legitimate outcome.

### **Curriculum or programme for student success**

Innovation in OEDL systems has focused much on learning design for student success, significantly because teaching in new ways demanded attention to the process of learning that might be assumed in the past in campus based systems. These have included the pioneering of learning outcomes, continuous assessment derived from those learning outcomes, the use of diagrams and other visual supports in learning materials, and the use of radio and television for both core and supplementary teaching. Effective learning design will deliver, amongst other things, student engagement, that is to say will support a positive engagement between the learner and his or her programme of study. The resilience of that engagement is core to delivering student success and mitigating drop-out.

Curriculum relevance is also key. It is essential that the module or programme is accurately described in the documents that form the basis of the student decision to pursue that area of study. The nature of programmes of study derive from a range of determinants or influences. These are driven in OEDL contexts above all by what students want to study, in other words by the market. But that market can be substantially influenced by what institutions tell students is relevant and valuable, especially from the employment and livelihood perspectives. This needs to be honest and not unrealistic in terms of possibilities, and will demand outcomes in skills and competence as well as academic knowledge. It may demand knowledge of labour market trends, insofar as they can be understood. Other drivers of curriculum design will include regulation from government as well as in some cases from professional bodies; academic understanding of disciplines and academic currency; and the major issues that are important in society e.g. sustainability; HIV-AIDS; and ethics. These may well not all be in alignment and considerable skill is needed to resolve tensions between them in a compelling curriculum offer.

## **Intervention at key points and in response to student need**

The stages of the student experience provide the structure for organisation of learner support and in particular intervention to support individual students. These are commonly represented as:

- pre-study: post registration, and review of readiness to start;
- in-course: early contact; first assignment; mid module; qualification progress check; preparing for examination;
- through qualification: support for next module choice and qualification planning.

Intervention should be both universal, taking the points in the schedule above as times when all students may need support; and individual when prompts reveal that a student is having difficulty or not making progress, for example failing to submit an assignment. Intervention has been practised in many OEDL systems for many years, and has been demonstrated to improve student completion. The capacity to utilise digitally-held data in real time - the practise of learning analytics - now makes intervention potentially much more immediate and powerful. It is clear that learning analytics has significant potential to support student success, but remains at this stage relatively unfulfilled as a practice. There are also ethical and legal issues about data protection which have yet to be fully resolved, in particular in some jurisdictions (Slade & Prinsloo, 2013).

## **Assessment**

Assessment plays a crucial part in supporting students to success. It is integral to learning design and pedagogy, not as an add-on at a subsequent stage. Assessment strategies are originally derived from the learning objectives of the module, and include both knowledge and skills. OEDL programmes have for many years used both formative and summative assessment, and both continuous and final assessment. This range of assessment practices acknowledges the needs of adult learners. Online learning systems now have the capacity to provide frequent shorter assessment tasks which support student engagement and diagnose learning at shorter intervals, thus supporting student success.

## **Personalised support**

At the heart of a teaching system which operates at a physical distance from its students to support them to success lies its capacity to provide personalised support: in other words to recognise and respond to the learner as an individual. It is here in particular that the roles of tutor, counsellor, guidance worker, and careers advisor have developed, supported by information systems (Sungkatavat & Boonyarataphan, 2012). The advent of the web has made possible the potential of much easier student-tutor and student-student communication, through email and electronic conferences. In some OEDL systems student support is enhanced through social clubs and networks. The development of student peer support through Facebook, wiki's and other similar crowd approaches offers much for student support.

While the creation of learning resources is for the most part uniform for all learners, and benefits from the cost-effectiveness of scale, individualised support to students has the opposite cost dynamic, i.e. it increases with the number of students. There will therefore need to be serious consideration given to how much of an overall teaching budget is given to the production of learning resources, and how much to individualised student support. Too often in the institutional histories of OEDL the resources have been allocated to production of learning materials, with individualised support coming into the budget as an afterthought. A holistic and transparent approach that recognises the importance of both elements is more likely to lead to the most effective outcomes in terms of student success.

## **Information and logistical systems**

The combination of logistics and information systems has in one form or another been crucial to OEDL programmes from correspondence models to today's online. The contribution to student success of effective and timely management of learning embedded in learning and teaching materials, assessment, and learner support services is central. Learner Management Systems (LMS) have provided an integrating framework for many years now, from both commercial and open source models, e.g. Moodle.

## **Managing for student success**

All of the above mean that Student Success is at one and the same crucial to the purposes of OEDL programmes and institutions and challenging to achieve, at least as compared with highly selective post-secondary systems. Attention to this proposition underpins the ways in which quality for sustainability can be made a reality for OEDL programmes in the future, and for the realisation of UN SDG 4 for education.

## **References**

1. Ali, A., & Fadziel, M. (2012). Open University Malaysia. In I. S. Jung, T. M. Wong & T. Belawati (Eds.), *Quality assurance in distance education and e-learning: Challenges and solution from Asia*, (pp. 258 –274). New Delhi: Sage Publications.
2. Brindley, J.E., Walti, C. & Zawacki-Richter, O. (Eds.) (2004). *Learner support in open, distance and online learning environments*. Oldenburg: Studien und Berichte der Arbeitsstelle Fernstudienforschung der Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg, Bibliotheks und Informationssystem der Universität Oldenburg.
3. Creelman, A., & Reneland-Forsman, L. (2013). Completion rates – a false trail to measuring course quality? *European Journal of Open, Distance and E-Learning*, 2013(2). Retrieved from [http://www.eurodl.org/materials/contrib/2013/Creelman\\_Reneland-Forsman.pdf](http://www.eurodl.org/materials/contrib/2013/Creelman_Reneland-Forsman.pdf)
4. Economist Magazine (2013). Why do Americans mistrust for-profit universities? Retrieved from <http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2013/07/economist-explains-0>

## **Sustainability for Whom? Planning for Student Success in Open Education and Distance Learning**

Alan Tait

5. Grau-Valldosera, J., & Minguillon, J. (2014). Rethinking dropout in online higher education: the case of the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya. *International Review of Research on Open and Distributed Learning*, 15(1). Retrieved from <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/1628>
6. Hart, C. (2012). Factors associated with student persistence in an online program of study: a review of the literature. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, 11(1), 19-42.
7. National Center for Education Statistics (2015). *Graduation Rates*. Retrieved from [www.nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=40](http://www.nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=40)
8. Slade, S., & Prinsloo, P. (2013). Learning analytics, ethical issues and dilemmas. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 57(10), 1509-1528.
9. Sungkatavat, P. & Boonyarataphan, T. (2012). Thailand's Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University. In I. S. Jung, T. M. Wong & T. Belawati (Eds.), *Quality assurance in distance education and e-learning*, (pp. 25-41). New Delhi: Sage Publications.
10. Tait, A. (2014). From place to virtual space: reconfiguring student support for distance and e-learning in the digital age. *Open Praxis*, 6(1). Retrieved from <http://openpraxis.org/index.php/OpenPraxis/article/view/102>
11. Tait, A. (2015). *Student Success in Open, Distance and E-Learning*. The ICDE Report Series. Oslo: International Council for Open and Distance Education. Retrieved from [http://www.icde.org/assets/WHAT\\_WE\\_DO/studentsuccess.pdf](http://www.icde.org/assets/WHAT_WE_DO/studentsuccess.pdf)
12. UNESCO (2015). *Sustainable Development Goals for Education*. Paris: UNESCO. Retrieved from <http://en.unesco.org/sdgs/ed>