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Problem

Macquarie University has a strong commitment to providing students from diverse social and cultural backgrounds with educational opportunities and its Open Universities Australia (OUA) courses remove many of the traditional barriers to study. While OUA student numbers have remained strong since the program's inception, retention has proved a persistent problem. For some students, moving on may be in their best interests. However, for the majority of students, attrition is disadvantageous in the sense that they fail to succeed in an effort that may have provided many social and economic benefits down the track. In addition to the adverse impact on students, attrition creates a number of problems for the university. For every student that is not retained, there is a loss of direct income and this may eventually reduce the number of teaching positions available and reduce the level of government funding received for other teaching and research (as this is partly based on retention rates). Attrition also places downward pressure on student admission standards, as the University will inevitably be forced to recruit even more students than preferred.

Students

Since there are no entry requirements for first-year undergraduate units, OUA courses attract a broad range of students. These include busy professional workers wishing to upgrade or diversify their skills; career changers looking to enter academia or some other profession; traditional students at Macquarie or elsewhere; non-traditional students who may be studying part-time, of mature age or a language background other than English; high risk students with limited academic experience and limited awareness of the tertiary learning experience; mature-aged students studying purely out of personal interest; incarcerated persons; and international students from a language background other than English, some of whom may be studying to fulfill Australian entry requirements or to facilitate international relocation. Just under half come from families where neither parent has a university qualification and around a quarter are from the lower five deciles for socio-economic status as determined by postcode. Similar to the statistics of the higher education sector in general, around 5% of students identify as having a disability.

Retention

We know that OUA is an important entry point into higher education for many students from diverse backgrounds, and what we also know is that the real challenge is effectively engaging and supporting such students so that those who want to stay and succeed are afforded every opportunity to do so. Research also indicates that there is a spectrum of factors that play a role in a student's decision to cease study (see further reading). These can be grouped into three key categories:

1. Student factors: educational background, motivation and self-concept.
2. Situational factors: employment, financial and life changes.
3. Education system factors: admission criteria, course features, online environment, and administrative/academic support.

Definitions of student engagement vary widely, but there is general agreement that it requires the investment and commitment of both the student and the institution, and that there are strategies those institutions can use to enhance engagement. While OUA tutors have most control over factors that fall within the third category, it must be recognised that they are also likely to be the first point of contact for at-risk students and are often best placed to take immediate and local action to avert potential attrition. The tips below are intended to aid retention and improve student satisfaction and success, but they are neither exhaustive nor specific in nature.

1 **START EARLY AND KEEP ORDER:** It is good practice to develop structure and order by making two clearly labeled ‘announcements’ and a post in the ‘general discussion forum’ at the very beginning of any unit. The former are class-wide and are usually directly mailed to student accounts (for those that check them) in addition to being available online like a regular post. The first should outline: your role, your contact details (some like to include their telephone number, but this is by no means necessary); what you expect of the students, the assessment schedule and return method/dates; support services; and some initial instructions about what they will need to do in the first week. The second announcement should outline what you expect by way of online participation and ‘netiquette’. Many have found it useful to talk of fostering a ‘community of enquiry’ in which the tutor guides the discussion and interjects only when necessary, rather than answering all the questions/queries. To this extent, if your unit has weekly questions or topics that need addressing, it is often good to structure the debate by creating threads for each of these over the first few weeks. This leaves room for greater student participation and the development of academic autonomy. Keep in mind that this may be a student’s first university-level learning experience, so these announcements should be firm but very much welcoming/positive. Make it clear that students can also contact you directly should they need assistance. Students need a ‘point person’ that knows who they are, what they are doing and what they are trying to accomplish. The third post should be made in the general discussion forum as a very friendly personal introduction, encouraging the students to add their own.

2 **CREATE A SUPPORTIVE DISTANCE LEARNING COMMUNITY:** OUA tutors need to interact with their students in the online environment on a regular basis using various community-building techniques such as initial ice-breakers to ensure that students develop comfort engaging in online discussions, dialogues and activities at the earliest possible stage, as this is closely linked with satisfaction and success. Students can quickly fall behind and may be daunted by the task of catching up if too much time is allowed to pass, particularly in large or difficult units. They need to feel as though they are a critical part of a larger community. Having a strong online presence, responding quickly to questions and thanking students for good contributions can reinforce their role in the collective. You can also let students know that they were missed when they return to the forum after a period away. This is important because it is pretty safe to assume that if students are not engaged and do not perceive themselves as an integral part of their environment, they will likely choose to leave and seek an environment where their needs are met, and we want to avoid that. Students are also turning to social media, including Facebook and Twitter. This presents a valuable opportunity to connect on a social level and make the tutor more approachable, though it must be made clear that iLearn is the place for any academic discussion and that some obvious boundaries must be maintained. If there is a cluster of students in one geographic area (identifiable via the introductions and the student list provided to you), it may even be feasible for them to meet occasionally in person at a mutually convenient time and place for a student study group. While research has proven that a student’s relationship with their instructor is most important, relationships with other students play a useful secondary role in improving engagement.

3 **METRICS AND EARLY ALERTING:** While most universities carefully track enrolments and completions, it is just as important to track what happens in between, as this is the critical period where it is possible to identify underperforming students. Tutors can very easily monitor participants via login records under the ‘Navigation’ tab or manually searching the relevant forum. Those that have not responded to the first few weeks of the course can then be followed up and asked if everything is okay and whether anything can be done to assist them. All first-year units also have weekly quizzes factored into the assessment schedule, providing instructors with another opportunity to track participation and chase up those students at risk. Just as importantly, tutors should ensure that

they track assignment submissions and communicate with those running late. Students often confuse their dates or are otherwise reluctant to ask for an extension or flexibility. Some incarcerated and disabled students also communicate via an education officer or personal assistant who may be busy and not have the same regard for university deadlines.

4 **OPTIMISE THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE:** Engagement is concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions to optimise the student experience and enhance educational outcomes. The first hurdle for many students is becoming familiar with Macquarie's technical and administrative systems. Tutors can ease the burden and open the student experience by ensuring that participants know how to use the discussion board, send a 'dialogue' message and contact the University's IT support services, OUA's counseling hotline (and Skype service) and the free third-party Smarthinking proofreading/academic guidance service. In terms of extensions, Macquarie has tried to streamline and standardise the process by appointing a single person to grant approvals across the entire OUA program. However, if tutors are contacted directly and student is only taking one unit, it is best for them to use common sense and deal with the problem locally, granting an extension or offering an alternative form of assessment, if it's appropriate. It is important to recognise that because most online students are working during non-traditional times and may need support after typical business hours or on weekends, students will often turn to academic staff or other students for assistance. Allow fellow students to answer simple questions, but always encourage students to seek accurate advice from the proper source when the situation permits. Many Macquarie OUA courses also deal with emotional topics and it's not uncommon for the material to elicit psychologically powerful responses from some students that may already be struggling with what can be an isolating environment. Should this occur, refer the student to the appropriate counseling service as soon as possible (this may be a 24 hour Lifeline service or similar).

5 **MARKING:** Students are entitled to timely and constructive feedback on their assignments and general achievements/progress. It is most effective to utilise Grademark and the linked Gradebook service to provide feedback on written assignments. If time permits, this should include in-text comments and a general overarching comment. It is also possible to include a digital marking rubric. Apart this, it's good practice to provide a post-marking explanation of the grading system and some general comments about the assignment, along with a statement concerning whether resubmissions are accepted and what the policy is if a student is unsatisfied with their marks. In some cases, it might prove beneficial to post one of the better assignments (with the permission of the student) to give the class a better idea of what was expected. Doing so before papers are digitally released reduces the potential for unhappy students sparking some sort of open and heated discussion on the forum, to be viewed by the entire class. Tutors might also like to email students who performed really well and congratulate them, encouraging them to assist others via the discussion forum.

6 **RELATE TO THE REAL WORLD:** As a good deal of OUA students are studying to further their career, change careers or enter the workforce, they should perceive that the goals of their learning experience are directly related to their personal goals and what they see as relevant to the 'real world'. With many units, the real world relevance will be obvious. In others, tutors will be required to work harder to highlight this relevance through their weekly guidance posts or the like. Introducing collaborative learning techniques in the forum, where possible, will further encourage the more worldly students to share their real world experiences and make them feel as though they are a valuable party of the online community in demonstrating the real world applicability of what they have learned to the others.

7 **GO LIVE:** From an instructional perspective, the tutors that have the best success with student retention are those who actively engage students. All of the above tips will assist, however, technology and bandwidth increases mean that staff are now better able to meet student expectations. Tutors can now include audiovisual introductions and make the most of synchronous chat sessions. Some might like to establish 'virtual office hours' via the chat function, allowing students to raise any questions about the course or whatever else they might like to discuss. Student chat sessions may also prove beneficial without the need for moderation, though it will be necessary to extend the netiquette that should have already been discussed to this new forum.

8 **THE PERSONAL TOUCH:** Some researchers have suggested that it is most beneficial to make a personal connection with each student via a phone call before the program begins, reiterating the information provided in the first unit announcement, asking about the student's personal situation and goals, and answering any preliminary questions. If the student is receptive to this initial call, it is followed by a mid-study period call, in which it is asked whether there have been any problems and whether they have adequately prepared for the mid-study period assessment (which is fairly typical across units). In some instances, a form of 'exit interview' is conducted upon unit completion. Time and pay constraints will limit this sort of personal attention in the OUA context and may only be feasible in smaller units, though the phone calls may be targeted at those identified as being at risk or perhaps substituted with personalised emails. Limited trials at Macquarie have shown that students were generally pleased to have been contacted and, in some cases, the call made the difference between failure and success. However, it must also be recognised that students will not be accustomed to this sort of personal attention and that some may perceive it as an invasion of privacy. Pursue at your own risk and consult with your course convenor!

9 **PEDAGOGY AND TUTOR TRAINING.** There is a large (and flawed) assumption that academics who successfully teach on-campus classes will automatically succeed in teaching the online equivalent. Online instruction requires a distinct set of skills for a course to be successful and retention rates kept low, and even experienced teachers need to adapt their pedagogy for online work. Macquarie has an online tutor-training course available to those new to this kind of teaching or those who may need a refresher in best practice. For those more experienced or with some novel ideas, it would also be valuable if you could share your tips and recommendations with your peers so that our students can advance and we can improve our skills as a department. The readings from which these tips have been drawn are below, along with some recommended additional reading.

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