

Strategies for higher retention in online degree courses

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Abstract

The number of online programs in the higher education sector has grown dramatically in the last decade, and with it, an increase in online attrition has become a recurring problem worldwide. Literature on online attrition in higher degree programs, have highlighted cultural issues, motivation, effectiveness of Learning Management Systems and online pedagogies as major players in high attrition rates. Researchers have followed different approaches to determine attrition issues, such as interviewing students who dropped out of their online courses, analysing how much they interacted online with other students and also by researching the types of learners who make the choice of enrolling in online degree programs. Research has focused on the learners' view of the problem, which has provided educators with good insights into the issue but no real solutions. Low retention has educational as well as economic implications, resulting in unfinished degrees and in universities losing a valuable source of revenue. Low online retention has also been attributed to the quality of education delivered by universities, hence the need to research strategies that can be successfully applied online to increase retention. This research aimed to examine successful engagement strategies specifically applied to increase online retention by 18 online lecturers in six countries (Australia, Brazil, Canada, Norway, Spain and The United States of America) who teach online degree courses. Using qualitative case studies from six countries, the researcher explored online lecturers' successful engagement strategies on four main thematic areas that emerged and were identified by the gap in the literature: cultural issues,

motivation, effectiveness of Learning Management Systems and online pedagogies. Results indicated the following:

- Cultural diversity can be successfully used to support student engagement with the use of appropriate collaborative and interactive activities;
- Student motivation can be increased by the use of challenging, problem-solving and authentic activities, the use of multimedia resources and constant lecturers' online presence;
- The use of Learning Management Systems could be simplified by providing more technical training to online lecturers;
- Online pedagogies of choice are a combination of constructivist and connectivist theories.

Another major finding is that, surprisingly, there were many similarities on the views of eLearning applications when a comparison was made between countries and universities. One explanation could be that the online courses represented in this research were developed in the English language, reflecting traditions of Western knowledge and their academic systems. This research contends that lecturers who are knowledgeable in online pedagogical strategies are able to maintain high student engagement, which consequently leads to increased retention. The main recommendation of this research is for lecturers to continuously evaluate eLearning pedagogical strategies that address different learning styles and the diversity of learners, while keeping abreast of emerging trends of eLearning in educational settings.

CERTIFICATION

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently submitted for any other degree of qualification.

Signature



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