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Factors Related to Students' Drop Out from a Distance Language Learning Programme

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Abstract

This paper presents a study that examined the reasons for dropping out of a distance language learning programme offered by an open university in Indonesia. A purposive sample of students who registered for English writing courses at the university was used. To gain a better understanding of the issues, the study also sought information from lecturers and online tutors. A longitudinal research design employing mixed methods was used over four stages of data collection. The research instruments were self-administered questionnaires followed by semi-structured interviews. The qualitative data related to the reasons for dropping out were analysed with NVivo version 10. The findings indicated that the major reasons that led the students to drop out were lack of basic skills in English, unmet expectations, feelings of isolation, and the inability to balance work, family, and study responsibilities. The study offers a theoretical framework to describe the factors related to student dropout from a distance language learning programme. This study also offers models of interaction, teaching and learning in distance language learning to minimise the dropout rate.

Keywords: distance learning, dropout, English writing, Indonesia

Introduction

It is worth noting that this paper is part of the author's PhD research that investigated the factors that affect student achievement in a distance learning English writing course in Indonesia and examined the reasons for dropping out of the course. This paper focuses on reporting the results of the exploration and investigation of the factors related to dropout in the distance learning context. The idea to focus on student dropout originated from the situation that there has been a decline in the number of students who proceed to the higher levels of a set of English writing courses offered at a distance learning university in Indonesia.[1] Thus, measures need to be taken to support the students and improve student retention.

[1]To maintain compliance with ethics principles, the name of the university remains anonymous

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Issues related to student dropout in the distance learning programme is complex (Kember, 1989). Compared to dropout rates in conventional universities, it is generally considered that dropout rates in distance learning higher education universities are higher (Willging & Johnson, 2009). It is important to highlight that the term dropout used in open and distance education is not the same as that used in a face-to-face university, as open and distance education students can resume their studies at any time (Powell, 2009). Some universities, however, employ dropout system.

Review of Literature

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of dropout in distance university, particularly in distance langguage learning and to indentify the issues related to student dropout the researcher conducted a systematic literature review and search. The issues were then classiefied into some themes. A careful reading of the articles collected showed that the themes related to student dropout in distance learning were associated with two main areas: conflict between study and family/employment responsibilities and irrelevant expectations and dissatisfaction with the programmes. The following table demonstrates the previous studies regarding the causes of student dropout in distance learning.

Table 1. The causes of student dropout in distance learning

Conflict between study and family/employment responsibilities	Irrelevant expectations and dissatisfaction with the programmes.
• Parker (1999) • Xenos, Pierrakeas, and Pintelas (2002) • Pierrakeas, Xenos, Panagiotakopoulos, and Vergidis (2004) • Willging and Johnson (2009)	• Chyung, Winiecki, and Fenner (1998) • Park and Choi (2009) • Willging and Johnson (2009)

Parker (1999), Xenos et al. (2002), Pierrakeas et al. (2004), and Willging and Johnson (2009) found that family and employment responsibilities are among the factors that lead students to drop out of programmes. Meanwhile, Chyung et al. (1998) found that the decision to drop out of or continue a distance master's degree programme is determined by satisfaction with the programme in the early stages. Chyung et al. also found that the mismatch between the courses and personal/employment interest leads students to dropout. Park and Choi (2009)

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and Willging and Johnson (2009) concluded that students who are satisfied with their courses and find that the courses are relevant to them tend to continue.

In addition, Hurd (2007) found that being isolated from peers and tutors leads adult distance language learning students to feel more anxious. Given that distance learning programmes require students to fully understand the characteristics of distance learning, Pierrakeas et al. (2004) and (Nash, 2005) found that students who underestimate distance learning are likely to drop out of a distance learning programme. Thus, distance learning students should be well prepared before they decide to study a distance learning programme to prevent them from dropping out. Willging and Johnson (2009) found that the inability to adapt to new learning systems and the technology used in distance learning leads the students to feel frustrated.

Xenos et al. (2002) found that computer literacy and previous education, including training, are among the factors that affect the decision of students to drop out. However, Furnborough and Truman (2009) and Park and Choi (2009) found that educational level does not directly affect the dropout decision. Another important thing that is related to the reasons behind dropping out of a distance learning programme is that the students lack the prerequisite knowledge (Pierrakeas et al., 2004). In terms of support, lack of support can lead students to drop out of a distance learning programme. Parker (1999) found that students attribute their reasons for dropping out to the lack of computer equipment and financial resources. Similarly, lack of support, including from family and institutions leads students to dropout (Park & Choi, 2009; Pierrakeas et al., 2004).

Research Question, Participants and Research Designs

The research question was what causes students to drop out of the programme. The research methods employed in this study combined inductive and deductive approaches under the philosophical framework of pragmatism to organise the research. A deductive approach was used to generate quantitative data through measuring the variables in the forms of statistical analysis. In addition, an inductive approach was used to gather qualitative data which in turn were used to draw conclusions and construct a theory. On the whole, the research design of the current study was mixed methods under the paradigm of pragmatist worldview.

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The participants were the students who registered for the Writing 1 course in Semester 2 of 2012. Sampling a cohort of students until they registered for the Writing 4 course enabled identification of students who did not proceed to the next level of the English course. With regard to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011), this study employed a longitudinal cohort study that used mixed methods.

Four hundred and five students took the Writing 1 examination and they were all invited to participate in the survey as an entire cohort of students. This cohort became the focus of data collection over four stages. The number of participants for each data collection can be seen in Table 2 below.

Table2. Participant Size

Stage	Number of Participants	
	Questionnaire	Interview
One	164	10
Two	52	8
Three	25	6
Four	16	8

Analysis and Results

It is generally thought that non-completion rates among distance learning students are higher than students attending conventional universities (Parker, 1999). In the first, second, and fourth stages, some students attempted to exit the Programme of Study. However, their actual departure happened in the first and second stages. This information was indicated by the students in the questionnaires which contained open-ended questions to find out the reasons for not progressing. The student dropout rate declined in the following semesters. This might indicate that the students were more persistent. Some students admitted that they were able to internalise the principles of distance learning, including regulating self-managed learning, setting a target to achieve and looking for opportunities to study.

A lack of basic skills of English and the inability to maintain a balance between study, work, and life, particularly for those in employment, were identified as the two major findings from the study. A closer look at the findings of the current study reveals that dropouts fall into two types: students who directly leave the Programme of Study once they fail in the first examination and those who remain in the Programme of Study, but eventually quit because

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they are not able to improve their English skills. These findings are consistent with other research findings which found that achievement and satisfaction are predictors of student persistence (Joo, Lim, & Kim, 2013). In other words, achievement is a factor that influences whether a student continues their study or drops out.

A lack of basic skills of English coupled with family and employment responsibilities and a lack of support from the university (lecturers and tutors), particularly in the form of feedback provisions and peer interactions often lead students to drop out of the programme. This finding supports the ideas of Tait (2003) and Nunan (1992) that learning support for distance learning students is essential.

Early exit seems to be a common phenomenon in distance learning. Powell (2009) compared student retention and dropout at four different open distance universities employing multiple resits and found that nearly one half of students in the four universities did not continue after taking one or two courses. This study found that early dropout was strongly linked to a lack of basic skills in English. Lacking basic skills in English makes it difficult for students to follow the courses, which eventually affects their achievement. The findings of the current study showed that at Stage 1, despite being able to resit examinations, a student decided to exit from the Programme of Study because of failure to pass the examination. The finding seems to be consistent with Nash (2005) who found that failure in examinations causes students to drop out.

Another student left because of the accumulation of not having strong basic skills and poor expectations. These findings are in accord with previous studies, including those conducted by Chyung et al. (1998) and Park and Choi (2009), which indicate that students' low interest and employment cause students to drop out. The finding is also in agreement with Pierrakeas et al.'s (2004) findings which show that lack of prerequisite knowledge affects students' decision to drop out of a distance learning programme. These findings suggest that there is a need for specific guidance for students to understand the programme prior to enrolling on the programme itself.

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The findings of this study show that students in employment have difficulties balancing work and study responsibilities, which affects their study time and eventually their achievement in the examinations. As stated by Kember (1989), success in distance learning is linked to students' ability to manage their time for their family, employment and study. It has been demonstrated that study responsibilities often interfere with family and employment responsibilities, which in turn lead to the decision to drop out of a distance learning programme (Parker, 1999; Pierrakeas et al., 2004; Willging & Johnson, 2009).

The current study shows that family and work responsibilities often lead students to give up their study, especially those students whose employment/employers are not supportive. This was explained by Simpson (2006), who finds that distance learning students working for more than 15 hours a week appear to have a greater tendency to drop out. However, the current study found that a small number of students with high motivation, strong goal commitment and supportive employment were committed to studying although their working hours were long.

Although being separated from peers and institutions is the nature of distance learning, new distance learning students often find it difficult to develop self-managed learning, which, in turn, makes them feel alone and isolated. In the current study, feeling alone and isolated particularly happened to students who did not participate in the online tutorials. However, the current study also suggested that participating in the online tutorial did not immediately free the students from feeling isolated. A possible reason for this situation was that the number of tutees in one online tutorial class were so large that it prevented the tutors from developing direct interaction with the tutees and among the tutees. The current study also found that a potential cause of student resignation is the feeling of isolation. In Stage 3, it was found that feeling isolated, as well as long working hours and personal and family responsibilities lead students to take a study break. The researcher strongly believes that if these problems remain unsolved, this might in turn lead to dropping out. In his study of students who had dropped out of a distance learning course, Nash (2005) also found that feeling isolated is common to distance learning students.

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The other possible reason for dropping out of the programme is financial challenges. The interviews with students in the last stage revealed that economic and financial challenges might force them to quit the programme of studies. These findings are consistent with Parker's (1999) findings which showed that inability to pay the school fee leads students to drop out of programmes. The students, however, suggested that instead of resigning from the programme of studies, they would take a study break so that that can resume their studies at any time.

The current study established a theoretical framework for student dropout from distance language learning. Although there are some models of dropping out from distance education (Kember, 1989), based on the findings on student achievement and dropout this study proposes a theoretical framework of dropping out from distance learning (see Figure 1 below).

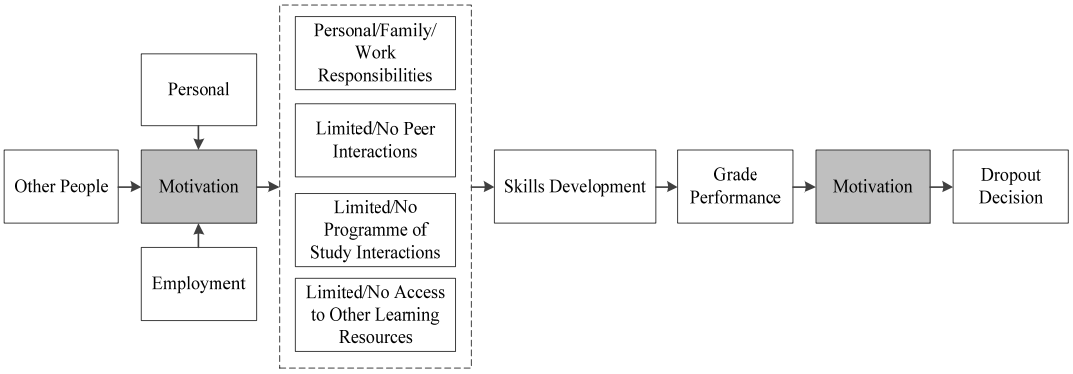


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework for Dropping Out from a Distance Language Learning Programme

The main findings that might explain the decision to drop out of the programme of studies were found in the first and second stage. It could be argued that the first two semesters of the programme are critical as learning under a distance mode is new for most students. The current study showed that some students enrolling on the programme of studies have very limited knowledge and understanding of distance learning, including self-managed learning.

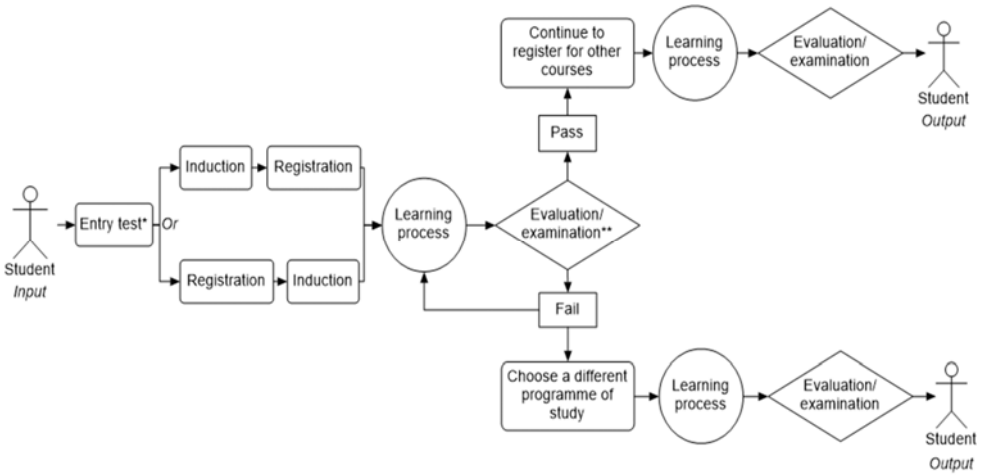
Motivation plays an important role in determining student progress (Galusha, 1997). It is clear that motivation to study varied among the students of this study. However, the findings of

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the current study suggest that motivation depends on both intrinsic (personal) and extrinsic (other people and employer/employment) motivation. Intrinsic motivation might be personal commitment or positive spirit, while extrinsic motivation might be the influence of other people, including family, employer/employment, peers and partners.

As motivation is not static (Hurd, 2006; Wlodkowski, 1999), the current study showed that individual motivation and commitment are often disrupted during the learning process. The disruptions to motivation could be from family and employment responsibilities for those who are married or in employment, and from minimum (or no) interaction with peers, lecturers, and online tutors. Inability to cope with disruptions has an impact on skills development, which eventually affects grade performance.

The current study showed that attaining low grades in examinations and making little progress in writing skills contribute towards the decision to drop out of the Programme of Study. This has an impact on motivation which is a fundamental factor in the organisation of responsible and autonomous learning (Spratt, Humphreys, & Chan, 2002). Furthermore, motivation and the ability to maintain motivation have been identified as contributing factors to successful distance learning in an English writing course in this study. This is supported by Xiao (2012) who found that motivation influences success in distance English language learning. Further, the researcher introduced a model in order to minimise student drop out in a distance learning context. The following figure illustrates the process.



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Figure 2. A Model of the Student Recruitment Process and Procedure to Improve Learning Process and Minimise Dropout Rate

Bird and Morgan (2003) argued that good information at pre-entry helps distance student candidates avoid abrupt transitions, which in turn improves student satisfaction and retention. One of the procedures to identify distance student candidates is through an entry test. The entry test for admission can be conducted through an online self-test where candidates are able to examine their skills and knowledge of English language and also examine Information and Communication Technology literacy. Instead of pass or fail results, the results of the entry test might be in the form of advice and recommendations about whether the candidates have the minimum requirements to join the Programme of Study. Those who do not meet the requirements could be recommended to choose other programmes of studies or to ask lecturers for academic advice. The strength of such approach is that the lecturers might understand the students' needs and capacities (Galusha, 1997). Nichols (2010) concluded that understanding student characteristics and skills helped the Programme of Study to identify the most suitable learning support and monitor the student academic progress.

Another line of thought on improving the language teaching-learning process in distance learning is to have an induction experience. At the induction, candidates could establish firmer expectations about the distance learning system, including how to register for courses, academic counselling, independent learning, online tutorials, examinations, prerequisite skills and technical requirements for the programme (Motteram & Forrester, 2005). According to Duggleby (2000), students should be aware of these matters before the course is begun. These practices reflect the principle of andragogy (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005). A good induction might ensure the students are well prepared and well informed which, in turn, would help them adjust to the new learning arrangements.

Once the students are ready, they could register for some basic courses offered in the early semesters. Savard, Mitchell, Abrami and Corso (1995) argued that distance learning students should be equipped with appropriate skills. After one semester, the lecturers identify the students' progress. Students who fail or show little improvement after one semester could be

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recommended to choose another programme of studies or receive special treatment for improvement.

The model demonstrates admission and student recruitment processes in distance learning. By applying this model, students who face learning difficulties that might lead them to drop out could be identified at the early stages and they might benefit from having consultation with the lecturers both synchronously and asynchronously.

Summary and Conclusions

Based on the data analyses, it has been found that there are two major issues which lead students to drop out of the programme. Lack of basic skills of English and unmet expectations are two major causes of early exit. The inability to balance work, family and study responsibilities is the other issue that appears to lead students to drop out. It was also found that financial difficulty is another possible issue that might lead students to drop out.

Taken together, the findings of all studies suggest that distance learning students should be well prepared prior to enrolling on the programme. Students should understand that a distance learning university is not the same as a conventional university. This may also imply that distance learning universities should ensure that information about their distance learning system is accessible to anyone. Equally important, support from family, employment, peers and institutions is an essential element in the whole process of learning in a distance learning context.

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