Full Length Research Paper

Risk behaviours and early warning signals for ODL dropout students in Nigeria: Implications for counselling

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This research was conducted to identify the risk behaviours and early warning signals for dropout students in Nigeria with particular reference to the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). The research design used for this study was a descriptive survey via causal comparative technique to describe the current status of risk behaviour and early warning signals among NOUN students. The sample of 1,440 registered students was stratified randomly and was selected from 18 study centres in the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria. A self designed 15 items questionnaire was used for the study. Percentile and chi square statistics via SPSS version.16 were used for the analysis. Fifteen hypotheses (behaviours) were formulated and the students were asked to indicate which among the test items were applicable to them. Four of these risk behaviours and early warning signals of open and distance learning (ODL) dropout students were identified among significant number of NOUN students. The researcher went further to find out whether the gender of the students has a significant influence on their risk behaviour or not. The finding indicated that gender has no significant influence on the risk behaviour of NOUN students. In conclusion therefore, the researcher suggested possible counselling proactive and preventive intervention strategies on how support staff, especially student counsellors, can help such students overcome these obstacles.

Key words: Risk, behaviour, warning, signals, dropout, open and distance learning, implications, counselling, attrition.

INTRODUCTION

Students’ attrition and completion rate in programmes of any distance learning institution is of immense importance to the existence of such institution and its quality assurance policy, and it deserves continuous attention from researchers, administrators of distance education institutions and education policy makers. The research has shown that there is a high rate of dropout students in the open and distance learning (ODL) system as compared to the conventional face-to-face classroom educational system. Bearing in mind this phenomenon, it becomes imperative to identify the risk behaviours that are likely to make NOUN students drop out of their programmes prematurely if not detected early enough and if the proactive measures are not taken to checkmate it.

The choice of the National Open University of Nigeria for this research is hinged on the fact that it is the only single and flexible mode for the open and distance university in Nigeria. It is important to note at this juncture, that the purpose of this research is not to identify the reasons why students drop out of NOUN programmes. This is because it is too early to talk about dropping out when the university has not reached the maximum flexible eight academic sessions allowed for an undergraduate student to stage on the programme and the maximum four years for a postgraduate student.

The purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to identify the risk behaviours and early warning signals among the NOUN students and also determine whether gender has a significant influence on these behaviours or not. The aim therefore was to
keep in constant touch with students of such behaviours and initiate prompt remedial actions to be taken by the University or distance learners themselves and other related service providers. The researcher believes that by providing the students with appropriate and correct information, suggesting appropriate course of action, clarifying their needs, feeling or motivation will go a long way in assisting them take appropriate decisions that will eventually reduce, to the barest minimum, the rate of drop outs associated with ODL.

The general objective is therefore to identify the risk behaviours and warning signals for dropout students in NOUN and phantom out counselling intervention strategies early enough to avert this situation.

Objectives of the study
1. To identify the risk behaviours applicable to a significant number of NOUN students.
2. To determine whether or not gender has a significant influence on the identified risk behaviours of NOUN students.
3. To proffer possible counselling intervention strategies that could be used to retain students on their programmes in NOUN.

RESEARCH DESIGN
The study was a descriptive survey research designed on the platform of causal comparative techniques. As a descriptive research, the causal comparative technique is used when the need to discover how and why a particular phenomenon occurs and what factors contribute to the occurrence of such phenomenon. Survey method was used in this study so as to describe the current status of risk behaviours and early warning signals among NOUN students.

Population and sample
The population for the study included all registered students in the National Open University of Nigeria as of December, 2009 which was 54,168. The breakdown of the figure showed that 4,158 students registered for the 2003/2004 session, while 17,523 registered for the 2005/2006 session. Also, 19,637 and 12,850 students registered for the 2007/2008 and 2008/2009 session.

Sample and sampling technique
The sample of 1,440 registered students was stratified and randomly selected from 18 study centres in the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria. A total of 1,500 questionnaires were distributed to students of the 18 stratified randomly selected centres (three study centres in each zone) from the six geopolitical zones, but 1,440 were returned and filled correctly. The sample population consists of 935 male and 605 female. The choice of 1,440 sample size for the study was based on the population of students in the stratified randomly selected three centres in each of the six geopolitical zones with the average population of 1,494 students.

Research instrument
A self designed 15 items questionnaire was used for the study. In the questionnaire, students were asked to indicate behaviours that are or are not applicable to them. Before use, the questionnaire was distributed to experts in order for them to carry out a test on it and the pilot test was used to measure the face validity and reliability of the content. The test- retest technique with the interval of two weeks was used to determine the reliability of the questionnaire. Reliability coefficient of 0.78 was obtained using spearman rho.

Administration of questionnaire
The copies of the questionnaire were administered on the samples as from 12th to 28th July, 2010 by the student counsellors who served as research assistances. The assistances were instructed to administer the questionnaire and collect them back from the samples within two weeks. By 30th of July, 1,440 questionnaires were returned to the researcher by the research assistances for analysis.

Plan for data analysis
Since the scale of measurement for the study was nominal, Chi square statistics via SPSS version 16 and percentile were used to analyze the data.

Null hypotheses
Fifteen null hypotheses were formulated and tested:

Ho1: Registering for one semester and not registering for other semesters is not a risk behaviour among significant number of NOUN students.
Ho2: Isolating oneself from the tutorial facilitator and other support staff at the study centre is not a risk behaviour among significant number of NOUN students.
Ho3: Failing to complete and submit tutor marked assignment is not a risk behaviour among significant number of NOUN students.
Ho4: Registered for all the courses but failed to turn up for examination is not a risk behaviour among significant number of NOUN students.
Ho5: Registered but did not collect study materials are not risk behaviour among significant number of NOUN students.
Ho6: Matriculated but did not complete the registration process is not a significant risk behaviour among NOUN students.
Ho7: Registered for facilitation but consistently absent from group facilitation is not a risk behaviour among significant number of NOUN students.
Ho8: Not belonging to any learning facilitation group, study circle, tutorial group or peer tutoring is not a risk behaviour among significant number of NOUN students.
Ho9: Cannot be reached or communicated with is not a risk behaviour among significant number of NOUN students.
Ho10: Being frustrated by not getting timely/no feedback of examinations/tutor marked assignments results and nor prompt/no responses to enquiries is not a risk behaviour among significant number of NOUN students.
Ho11: Unable to combine learning with other responsibilities is not a risk behaviour among significant number of NOUN students.
Ho12: Being constrained by finance to register for a person’s core courses is not a risk behaviour among significant number of NOUN students.
Ho13: Unable to comprehend while reading or studying course material is not a risk behaviour among significant number of NOUN students.
Ho14: Not getting the needed assistance from support staff, one’s family, friends and other social support net is not a behaviour among significant number of NOUN students.
Hos: Discrepancy between a person's professional/personal interest and course structure is not a behaviour among significant number of NOUN students.

Review of related literature

The success of any academic programme in open and distance learning depends largely on two main factors; thereby improving the quality of student learning packages and the effectiveness and efficacy of support services (Garison, 1987; Bernard and Amundsen, 1989; Thompson, 1997). Student success on the one hand is the overall positive certification of students' years of attending school that may lead him or her to securing a gainful employment in the society. Viewing from an academic perspective, Dean and Camp (1998) identified student success to include maintaining of academic success, graduating and the application of academically learnt skills to real life experiences. Student success may also be described as when a student reaches his or her set goals or fulfils an aspiration. Student success may include academic achievement and the attainment of skills competence and right attitude that would enable him or her to solve real life problems. The core aim of academic success, according to Cocodia et al. (2003) is to further develop each student’s intellectual and academic competence. Attrition in education, on the other hand means the gradual reduction of student population due to failure and dropout. Student attrition is an important impending factor that always decelerates human capital formation for national development.

The main aim of establishing an Open and Distance Learning Institution all over the world is to provide an individual access to education and lifelong learning in order to remain productive and competitive in the development process. Thus, the mission of the National Open University of Nigeria is to make education accessible, flexible, learner centred, functional cost-effective and provide support services which adds life-long value to quality education for all who seek knowledge. Students drop out is therefore an ablation of the missions of most open universities all over the world and the main aim of providing access to university education. It becomes pertinent to note that the opportunity cost of dropout students includes loss of study time, payment of fees and related costs and public fund invested by an institution, and for these reasons, it becomes imperative for Open and Distance Learning Institutions to identity risk behaviours that are likely to result into dropping out if not detected early enough and if proactive measures are not taken to checkmate it. From a pragmatic point of view, student retention is seen as a mark of quality institution (White and Mosely, 1995).

There are some factors influencing attrition/withdrawal of students that seems to be beyond the control of universities such as race (ethnic orientation) age, gender and socio-economic statuses (Cooke et al., 1995). There are many ways in which the universities would be able to prevent it if sufficient information is available to understand it more. Biswas and Mythili (2006) identified six categories of why students dropout from ODL:

1. Lack of time due to family commitments.
2. Lack of time due to work commitment.
3. Lengthy and difficult course content.
4. Lack of academic support.
5. Loss of interest.
6. The course content not relevant to the present career courses they were studying.

Chyung et al. (1998) found that distance learners who dropped out often did so because they were:

a) Dissatisfied with the courses content.
b) Learning environment.
c) Discrepancy between their professional/personal interests and course structure.

Social and personal adjustment problems have been seen as one of the major reasons why students dropped out of their programmes. This is mostly due to conflicting of their studies and other commitments in their working or family lives (Cullen, 1994). This particularly becomes a problem if the student has experienced any change in any personal or work-related circumstances after commencing their course (Smith, 1987). Cullen (1994) posited that another potential problem that can cause students to give up can occur if they are overwhelmed by a feeling of inadequacy and distress when they are faced with the new demands of their studies.

Financial problems also play a major part in contributing to students dropping out of their programmes (Cullen, 1994; Young, 1994; Fan and Chan, 1997). Cooke et al. (1995) suggested that students with internal locus of control, that is, those who attribute their success and failure to internal factors such as effort, are more likely to influence circumstances and persevere than those who attribute their success and failures to external factors beyond their control, while Fan and Chan (1997) found a slight tendency for females to be more persevering in their studies than their male counterpart.

Cullen (1994) reported that women were more likely to be affected by those outside pressure. A less commonly documented issue, which nonetheless is highly relevant to student attrition is that some students have been found to drop out simply because they have accomplished their own educational goals from the course, thus have attained whatever they set themselves to attain, and have no need to continue. From the literature reviewed previously, the following factors identified as possible risk factors responsible for students dropping out of ODL programmes are age, gender, socio-economic status, quality of student learning packages, difficulty experienced in combining work and family life with study, rejoining academic after a long break and lack of confidence. Also, among factors identified include lengthy and difficult course content, loss of interest, ineffective and inefficiency of support services, poor learning environment, discrepancy between their profession/personal interest and course structure, social and personal adjustment problems, feeling of inadequacy and distress when faced with the new demands of their studies and financial problems. The questionnaire items used for this research were derivable from this literature.

This paper is meant to equip the counsellors with the necessary knowledge and skills that will enable them work towards reducing the student attrition, which are mostly caused by conflicts between job, school, personal life and other factors.

THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

The paper looks at fifteen (15) risk behaviours and warning signals behaviours among NOUN students, with the possibility of identifying the ones that are significantly applicable to the majority of them and also reviews their bio-data information. The results of the research findings are as follows:

The bio data of the sampled population in this research reveal the following characteristics:

i) The sample population consisted of 835 (58%) male and 605 (42%) female.

ii) A total of 430 (29%) persons from the samples were students of School of Arts and Social Sciences, 270 (19%) persons were from School of Business and Human Resource Management, 110 (8%) and 330 (23%) of the samples were from School of Education and 300 (21%)
came from School of Science and Technology.

iii) A total of 310 (22%) persons from the sampled population were between the age bracket of 20 and 29 years old, 660 (46%) were between the age bracket of 30 and 39, 460 (32%) were between 40 and 49 years, while 60 (4%) fell between 50 and 59 age bracket.

iv) The average age of the samples was 37 years, 2 months and 36 days.

v) The unmarried sampled population constituted 30%, while 70% of the samples were married.

vi) The unemployed sampled population constituted 12% of the total sampled population, while employees (government, private and self employees) constituted the remaining 88%.

The bio data of the sampled population indicated that majority of the students were adults with family and work commitments and are likely to have feelings of inadequacy and distress when faced with the new demands of their studies. The mentioned characteristics of the sample population are likely to influence their rate of dropout if not properly managed. Figure 2 represents the risk behaviour for dropping out among the NOUN students. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, the purple colour indicated that over 1000 samples out of the total 1,440 samples registered for their programmes, but did not collect study materials.

They were frustrated by not getting timely/no feedback of examinations/tutor marked assignments results, nor prompt/no responses to enquiries, not belonging to any learning facilitation group, study circle, tutorial group or peer tutoring and did not get the needed assistance.
Table 1. The number and percentage of students who indicated whether the risk behaviours were applicable to them or not in each of the fifteen hypothesis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/N</th>
<th>Risk factor for dropping out</th>
<th>Applicable to me</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Not applicable to me</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>You registered for the first semester but did not register for the second.</td>
<td>518</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>922</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>You isolate yourself from facilitators and staff of the study centre.</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1181</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>You failed to complete and submit your TMAs.</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1282</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>You registered for all the courses and failed to turn up for examination.</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1238</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>You registered but did not collect study materials.</td>
<td>1065</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>You matriculated but did not complete the registration process.</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1253</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>You registered for facilitation but you are consistently absent from group facilitation.</td>
<td>331</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1109</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>You do not belong to any learning facilitation group, study circle, tutorial group or peer tutoring.</td>
<td>1051</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>389</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>You cannot be reached or communicated with.</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1152</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>You are frustrated by not getting timely/no feedback of examinations/TMAs results and or prompt/no responses to enquiries.</td>
<td>1152</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>You are unable to combine learning with other responsibilities.</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1253</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>You are constrained by finance to register for your core courses.</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1282</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>You are unable to comprehend while readings or studying your course material.</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1195</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>You are not getting the needed assistance from your family, friends and other social support net.</td>
<td>1267</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>You have a persistent feeling that you might not realize your dreams with the current programme you are undergoing.</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1238</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

from the support staff, the family, friends and other social support net. Table 1 shows the number and percentage of students who indicated whether the risk behaviours were applicable or not to them in each of the fifteen (15) hypotheses. As shown in hypotheses 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13 and 15, over 64% of the students in each of the hypotheses indicated that the risk behaviours of dropping out did not applied to them, while in hypotheses 5, 8, 10 and 14, over 73% indicated otherwise. With the result, the researcher deemed it necessary to apply Chi square statistics only to risk behaviours (hypotheses 5, 8, 10 and 11) that where applicable to significant numbers of students. Table 2 shows the percentile of students who indicated that risk behaviours and early warning signals were applicable to them.

Hypotheses 5, 8, 10 and 14 were found to be significant risk behaviours and early warning signals among NOUN students that dropped out of ODL. These are: 76% of the sampled students registered but did not collect study materials; 73% of the sampled students did not belong to any learning facilitation group, study circle, tutorial group or peer tutoring; 80% of the sampled students were frustrated by not getting timely/no feedback of examinations/tutor marked assignments results and nor prompt/no responses to enquiries and 85% of the sampled students were not getting the needed assistance from NOUN support staff, their family, friends and other social support net.
Table 2. Percentile of students who indicated risk behaviours and early warning signals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypotheses</th>
<th>Applicable (%)</th>
<th>Not applicable (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesis 5</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesis 8</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesis 10</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesis 14</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DISCUSSION

Ho5: Hypothesis 5 stated that the students, who registered for courses but did not collect their study materials is not a risk behaviour among significant number of NOUN students that is rejected. The Chi square result showed that there was a significant difference between students who registered for courses but did not collect study materials and those who collected study materials. 74% of the sample indicated that they registered for their courses but the course materials were not available for collection. The implications of this is that many of the students could be discouraged, de-motivated and could easily drop out of their programmes if they are unable to collect the appropriate study material or on time. This is in line with Garison (1987), Bernard and Amundsen (1989) and Thompson (1997) propositions that the success of any programme depends largely on two main factors: improving the quality of student learning packages and improving the effectiveness and efficacy of support services.

Ho8: Hypothesis 8 stated that students not belonging to any learning facilitation group, study circle, tutorial group or peer tutoring do not constitute a risk behaviour among significant number of NOUN students, was rejected. This portrays difficulty in communication, a scenario whereby a student is isolated from other students or his or her tutorial facilitators or the institution and is unable to belong to any of the facilitation groups or study circles, or tutorial groups or peer tutoring. His or her isolation might be due to either family or work commitment or lack of academic support. This is incongruence with McNickle (2004) observation that learners need regular contact especially at the initial stages of their learning. This could be an email to see how they are going or some communication/contact. According to her, this contact has many benefits including maintaining motivation, reducing frustration and clarifying issues and queries.

Ho10: Hypothesis 10, which stated that students are frustrated by not getting timely/no feedback of examinations/tutor marked assignments results and nor prompt/no responses to enquiries is not a risk behaviour among significant number of NOUN students, was rejected. This is in line with McNickles (2004) revelation, that the research undertaken in 2001 found that the essential areas of learner expectations were regular contact with teachers/tutors, quick response from teachers/tutors and regular support for learning. If these expectations are not met, students at risk are vulnerable to dropping out of their programmes.

Ho14: Not getting the needed assistance from support staff, one's family, friends and other social support net is not a risk behaviour among significant number of NOUN students that was rejected. As cited by McNicle (2004), studies undertaken by researchers such as Brookfield (1984), Candy (1999), Mitchel and Bluer (1997), Warner et al. (1998), vanStavaren et al. (1999) and McNickle (1999) have all shown the necessity and benefit of intervention strategies and support for learners to achieve the maximum opportunity for success. The open and distance education possesses three basic characteristic that makes a distant learner susceptible to dropping out if support services are not provided. These are:

2. Characteristics of the open and distance learning.
3. Characteristics of the learning process.

The characteristics of the open and distance learners include:

(a) A distance learner is a part time learner and learning is a secondary activity. This makes the re-entry into academics, problematic.
(b) A distance learner is a member of many institutions most of which (for example, work, family, etc) take precedence over the institution which provides his or her courses.
(c) A distance learner is isolated, in a remote place, as contact with the university is infrequent and often takes place across a distance.
(d) A distance learner may not find contact with fellow students easily.
(e) The open and distance learner may lack confidence in the learning process without guidance from the counsellor (Koul, 2005).
(f) Distance learners are adults who are with busy lives, family and work commitments. They may have little or no time for learning.

Characteristics of the institution

Some problems of a distance learner may emanate from
the nature of an open and distance institution:

i) Remoteness: Even an institution like National Open University of Nigeria which develops study centres network of services across the country is still having its centres hundreds of kilometres away from some of its learners. Another problem of a distance learner, especially in Nigeria is the difficulty in communication between the learner and the tutorial facilitators, or the learner and other students or him or her and the institution, especially in remote rural areas. In Nigeria, effective communication is often hampered by poor road network, lack or erratic electricity supply, lack of phone links, lack of internet facility, delays and problems in the delivery of course materials through postal and courier services.

ii) Complexity of an institution or the bureaucratic system in an institution like the National Open University of Nigeria that produces course materials of different kinds and delivers them to learners. Also, this institution provides support services, in that there is a complete bureaucratic system of administration. Such systems can be very effective in dealing with large numbers of learners but it is accompanied with great challenges of adjustment to it for individual distance learners.

Characteristics of the learning process

In the National Open University, which is a single mode, a learner must develop an effective set of appropriate learning strategies or study skills. Some learners may already possess these skills while some others may need help. The process of acquiring such skills may be difficult for those who have previous history of educational failure. Counselling may be an effective process, for such learners coming to terms with their previous failure (Ignou, 2001). In realisation of the importance of counselling in open and distance education, Keasley (1978: 49) opined that without the continuous interpersonal interactions and feedback found in the traditional classroom, the learner in open and distance education can find himself or herself unfocused on the lesson, unaware of his or her progress, and less motivated than the learner in conventional institution. He further observed that distance learners typically needed a lot of counselling and guidance in order to complete a programme.

COUNSELLING STRATEGIES TO BE ADOPTED BY COUNSELLORS TO AVERT STUDENTS DROPPING OUT OF NOUN

Wickramaratne (2001) reveals that the review of relevant literature has shown that counselling services, extended to the distance learner, stand out as one of the best and appropriate way, among the different modes of intervention, in enhancing the capacity of students to develop themselves and also to overcome barriers that they may encounter in the process of successful completion of programmes. Students must be painstakingly trained and tutored to acquire appropriate learning skills and habits they would apply on their own, anytime, and anywhere to enable them learn. Hence, counselling services is academic and non-academic in content and execution. Academic counselling tends to relate to specific and cognitive issues (for example, all course and course-based topics, specific course study difficulties and examination), while non-academic counselling tends to relate to general and effective issues (for example, course choice, general difficulties and examination anxiety, etc).

The two other possible classifications of counselling are developmental and problem solving counselling in nature. In order to assist students who are at risk of dropping out, the counsellors are expected to adopt the following strategies among others:

1. Fish them out, establish and maintain early, regular and constant communication with students at risk of dropping out.
2. Show more interest in the affairs of the students who are at risk.
3. Counsel students who are at risk on how to manage their time and resources.
4. Counsel/teach students who are at risk on stress management skills, for example relaxation, time-out, etc, through workshops, clinics and seminars.
5. Make references to some cases of students who were at risk that you have handled in your previous reports.
6. Adopt required referrals for students who are at risk of dropping out of their programmes.

Conclusion

This paper focused on identifying the risk behaviours and early warning signals for dropout students in Nigeria with particular reference to National Open University of Nigeria. Four variables were identified as risk behaviours and warning signals among significant number of NOUN students. The relevant related literature was reviewed, and the counselling intervention strategies used to checkmate the dropping out of students from open and distance learning were proffered.

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