Organisation and Drop-out Rates in Distance Education: A Preliminary Study of the Fiji Centre of USP’s Extension Services

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The purpose of this paper is two fold: to identify some factors contributing to students’ dropping out of USP Extension Studies courses; and to suggest some administrative improvements that could help to reduce the drop-out rate amongst extension students enrolled through the Fiji Centre.*

Any distance education institution seeks to provide education for a wider community beyond those who are able to attend the institution in person. The distinguishing elements of distance education, and its growing importance, particularly in the provision of post-school education, have been presented elsewhere (see for example Keegan 1980; Holmberg 1982). Such formulations have evolved in the contexts of European cultures and situations where there are many institutions that provide various programmes through the distance mode. They are, nevertheless, readily applicable to our region, where there is a single university, the University of the South Pacific (USP), catering for eleven countries, with a twelfth, the Federated States of Micronesia, also negotiating with the University for access to its services.

Distance education programmes offered by USP have served thousands of students in the eleven countries and have contributed significantly towards bringing about equity in terms of access to tertiary education, particularly in Fiji. Although a large number of students have actually completed courses through Extension Studies, the problem of the drop-out rate is still the most widely discussed issue. About 40 per cent of all extension students from the eleven countries do not complete their courses. This disturbing rate raises a number of questions:

- Is there enough return from such a large investment to justify the use of

* At the University of the South Pacific (USP), the Extension Services section is responsible for the University's distance education programmes. Throughout this paper, the following terms are used interchangeably: extension studies and distance education programmes; and extension students and distant learners.
resources in this way?

- What are the immediate and long term socio-emotional effects (e.g. disappointment, frustration and alienation) on the students who drop out?
- How do the South Pacific countries that support USP view the drop-out problem?
- Are there within the system any 'push out' factors (i.e. organisational factors as distinct from students' personal factors) operating to contribute to the drop-out problem?

Most distant learners are adults who are unwilling or unable to enrol in full time on-campus programmes; most of these students have family and job responsibilities that compete for time required for study. Undertaking courses therefore requires total commitment on their part. But the situation also demands proper management and planning on the part of the distance education institution, to minimise 'push out' factors. This paper looks at planning and organisation in a particular case, and suggests changes that might help to reduce these rates. The more general applicability of many of the points made to other Centres within USP's Extension Services network, as well as to a wider range of distance education programmes, is implicit.

Focus of study

This study will examine only administrative and planning procedures for facilitating distance education. It will not consider the course development aspect of extension studies provision, important though the implications of that sector are for drop-out rates.

As a further limitation, attention will focus only on USP's Fiji Centre and some of its activities designed to facilitate distance teaching in Fiji. From data related to Fiji Centre activities, an attempt will be made to derive explanatory reasons for rates of Fiji extension student success or dropping out.
The Fiji Centre

As part of the University's outreach programme, the Fiji Centre, together with other centres in the region, was established in 1970, when the University was in the early stages of its development. At present there are ten centres including the Fiji Centre. USP's extension centres are not like the study centres that are features of Australian distance education programmes. They are, rather, associated University institutions in the member countries, part of whose function is to act as linking, counselling and guidance centres for extension students. The major activities of the USP Extension Centres include the following.

1. Administration of formal University study programmes in the distance mode, involving:
   - admission/enrolment of extension students;
   - provision of support services to the students;
   - provision of major communication links between students and on-campus staff.

2. Provision of continuing education programmes, not related to degree and diploma courses, for students in their respective countries.

The Fiji Centre, the largest of the extension centres, handles about 2,000 students per semester. In addition, the Centre handles sizeable numbers of students in continuing education classes in various fields. The Centre is currently staffed with a permanent establishment of Director, two lecturers, secretary, assistant accountant, and clerk/typist. There are also temporary clerical staff.

Characteristics of Fiji Centre students

In considering the drop-out rates amongst Fiji extension students, it is relevant to study their background. Their diversity underlines the difficulty of finding a simple solution to their needs.

Age

As Table 1 demonstrates, more than half of the students enrolled through
the Centre in 1986 and 1987 were in the 25-40 age group. This highlights the claim that work and family commitments are major constraints for these students.

Table 1  Fiji Centre enrolments 1986 — 1987, by age groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>% Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16-24</td>
<td>1,301</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-40</td>
<td>2,693</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-64</td>
<td>494</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4,488</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Extension Studies Office, USP Extension Services, Suva.

Marital Status

About 60 per cent of the students enrolled through the Centre are married, but it is not possible to find from the enrolment data how many have children.

Categories of students

1 Island students
   These students reside in the outer Fiji Islands such as the Lau and Lomaiviti groups and Taveuni. Most of them are primary and secondary school teachers working towards in-service certificates, diplomas or degrees in education.

2 Students from outside major urban centres in Viti Levu and Vanua Levu
   These students do not have easy and regular access to facilities in the urban centres and often experience communication problems.

2 Students from major urban centres in Viti Levu and Vanua Levu
   About 50 per cent of the students enrolled through the Centre are from major urban centres. They usually have access to library facilities, and
to extension tutorials conducted by local tutors. Suva students are able to participate in satellite tutorials, although these are designed primarily for students in the other island countries of the USP region.

4 Full-time on-campus students
Some full-time on-campus students (from both Fiji and other island countries) are also enrolled for extension courses through the Centre. Usually these students take an overload course through extension, with the approval of their respective Heads of School.

5 Part-time on-campus students
These are usually students from the Suva, Nausori and Navua areas who are taking one or two courses on-campus and others through extension. They are still part-time students in terms of the number of courses they take, but it must be noted that these part-time students are also in full-time employment as teachers, accountants, administrators, bank officers, etc.

Courses serviced by Fiji Centre

There are four categories of courses offered by Extension Services through Fiji Centre. The numbers enrolled in the various categories are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Categories of courses and numbers enrolled 1986 — 1987

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>% age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preliminary</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundation</td>
<td>449</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational</td>
<td>808</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>3,141</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4,488</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source Extension Studies Office, USP Extension Services, Suva.
preliminary courses were, until 1988, equivalent to the New Zealand University Entrance, Foundation courses to the Fiji Form 7 examinations. These Foundation courses are pre-degree science and social science programmes that provide the basis for science and arts degrees respectively and various certificates and diplomas. Vocational courses, for people already working and with some experience in a particular field, lead to vocational certificates and diplomas and can be completed through the extension mode. Science courses are not offered in the vocational category. Degree courses available include most courses at the 100 level in education and social sciences. Though it is not yet possible to complete a first degree by extension, the number of 200 and 300 level courses on offer is now being increased.

Organisation and Administration of Extension Studies

Courses

As noted, this paper does not look at the problems of the development and technical production of distance study courses. Its main concern is to look at the administrative and organisational principles that come into play once these course materials are ready, the point at which the Fiji Centre takes up its role.

The distribution of course materials

For USP’s Extension Services, as for distance education generally, the prompt and punctual distribution of course materials is vital. From Fiji Centre, the course materials are mailed to all students outside Viti Levu and to those Viti Levu students who do not come personally to enrol but send their enrolment forms to the Centre. For students in the major Viti Levu centres (Sigatoka, Nadi, Lautoka, Ba, Tavua, Rakiraki and Tailevu), enrolment dates are set in advance, and staff from the Centre distribute complete sets of materials at the time of enrolment. For Suva, Nausori and Navua students, enrolment is done at the Fiji Centre and students collect all materials when they enrol.

Students who enrol by mail are at times disadvantaged in that they receive their course materials late. Every semester at least 1 per cent of Fiji Centre students drop out because the materials were received too late for them
either to complete and submit their assignments before the required date or to complete the suggested schedule of study units. On the other side of the coin, according to Fiji Centre records, 99 per cent of students do receive their course materials on time, because the enrolments are finished one month before the actual start of semester. (Of course, there are also some students who enrol late, though still before the official beginning of semester.) Nevertheless, the fact is that students do drop out, and the way in which the materials are distributed may well be a contributory factor.

Holmberg suggests a useful way of distributing course materials (1981, 100). He proposes that a student should be provided at the outset with only a few (for instance two or three) units for each course he/she enrols in. Thereafter, a new unit should be sent with each assignment as it is returned with corrections and comments. This enables the timely delivery of constructive tutor comments to the students. Also it may help students to submit assignments punctually, since they will only receive the next set of units after completion of the assignments based on the first set.

This alternative could prove expensive for a distance teaching unit such as the Fiji Centre. But the cost, however important a consideration, should perhaps not be used to excuse the delivery of less-than-the-best services to distant students. At the same time, such a system would be a difficult but not impossible exercise for the Fiji Centre, with its 1,500-2,000 students per semester. Nor would its introduction necessarily reduce drop-out numbers, since there are other factors also operating to lead students to give up study. Nevertheless, the strongest reason for considering the possibility, even on a trial basis, is not that it may reduce drop-out rates, but that it may be a positive help to students.

The present system of distribution is counterproductive for many students: they become discouraged at the outset when they see all the reading materials and assignments in bulk, and frustrated by having a pre-decided schedule of dates for progress through units and assignments, one that pays no attention to individual students’ needs. The alternative here suggested of staggered dispatch of materials would ameliorate these problems.

One hundred students (two from each of the fifty courses offered by the Centre in the second semester of 1987) were asked in November 1987 whether they thought they would prefer to receive all the course materials
at the commencement of the course, or to have the dispatch of units staggered. Of the 100 students, 60 live in the Suva/Nausori area. Fifty of these people favoured the idea of staggered distribution and none did not favour it, though ten were undecided. Of the 40 interviewees resident outside the Suva/Nausori area, none were undecided: twenty favoured and twenty did not favour a system of this kind.

This is, of course, only a small, and not necessarily representative, sample of the 1,500-2,000 students enrolling through the Centre, but the results suggest the desirability of at least a trial of staggered distribution. One possibility would be a trial of the system with Fiji Centre students from outside Suva/Nausori who have access to regular mail services. Such an exercise would at least suggest the potential usefulness in terms of improving student success rates and reducing drop-out rates.

Organisationally, a system of record keeping for staggered distribution would be relatively easy to set up with the help of the computer. For the Centre, the starting point would be a list of all courses offered in a particular semester. For each course the following would need to be prepared:

- an inventory of the materials, unit by unit, and the number of assignments per unit;
- a schedule, worked out bearing in mind the duration of the semester, and the ease of contacting students and getting materials to them;
- the development of a computer record for each student of all information (number of units in the course, number of assignments, receipt and return of students' assignments), stored and monitored individually.

Two-way communication

Holmberg looks at the purposes of two-way communication in distance education as follows:

- to support students' motivation and interest by contact with an encouraging tutor and counsellor;
- to support and facilitate student learning by having students apply the knowledge and skills acquired as well as by tutors' comments,
explanations and suggestions;
- assessing students' progress in order to provide them with an instrument by means of which they can judge their educational situation and needs and by means of which marks can be awarded (1981, 83).

Effective two-way communication is an essential part of distance education. It may take many forms and use various media. For Fiji students, the Fiji Centre looks after the organisation and planning of effective two-way communication.

One of the important communicational aspects, for Fiji students as for others, is the submission and return of marked assignments with comments and suggestions for improving future course work. Generally, the tutors are encouraged to use this feedback to build rapport with their extension students, especially those with learning difficulties or low motivation. The other important communicational aspect is that of counselling.

Submission and return of assignments and the keeping of records

Short turn-around time for assignments is very important for effective feedback from tutors and course co-ordinators. Roberts identifies three components of assignment feedback that are likely to have an influence on student performance:
- submission density, or the number of assignments a students is required to submit during a given study time;
- turn-around time, or the time it takes for an assignment to get back to a student;
- feedback effectiveness, or the extent to which course tutors provide comments that are seen by students as helpful (1987).

In his study, Roberts did not find a correlation between the drop-out rate and the delay in returning of assignments. Nevertheless, he believed that submission density and turn-around time do affect student performance and the drop-out rate.

The system used by Extension Services for the handling of assignments is
intended to ensure the proper recording and dispatch of assignments and correct entry of marks and grades. Fiji Centre students must post or hand deliver their assignments to the Centre, from where they are sent to Extension Services headquarters for forwarding to course co-ordinators. Marked assignments follow in reverse the same circuitous route back to the student.

Figure 1 Movement of assignments
The Fiji Centre assignment box is cleared each morning and the assignments recorded on the computer, before being sent to the Extension Services dispatch unit, where receipt is recorded manually. Special messengers then deliver assignments to course co-ordinators.

This meticulous system achieves its aim of ensuring accurate records of receipt and marks. But it does so at the expense of the students. For them, the delay in feedback is disheartening, and possibly educationally harmful if misinformation and misunderstandings are not being corrected quickly enough.

Since both records and students must receive consideration, the priority should be to find a system of record keeping that both causes no delay once the assignment is received and facilitates the communication process so that the learning period is not unduly prolonged. If students were helped in this way to succeed, a reduction of the drop-out rate is likely.

The causes of delay in the present system of moving assignments relate both to the system itself and to the functioning of USP's internal mail service. The system itself could be refined if the actual assignments passed directly to and from the Centre and the course co-ordinators, and photocopied of the Assignment Return forms and reports were all that Extension Services headquarters handled. Under the present system, special messengers deliver assignments from Extension Services to course co-ordinators. But if receipt were recorded at the Centre before 10.00 a.m. each day and the assignments hand delivered directly from the Centre to the course co-ordinators on the same day, and marked assignments were in turn hand delivered from co-ordinators directly to the Centre, much time could be saved in the process of putting students and teachers in touch with one another. The present priority given to record keeping actually impedes this vital communication.

Counselling

In any distance education programme, effective counselling is vital. Many students who enrol through the Fiji Centre do not have the benefit of proper counselling both before and during the course of study. This is an important contributory factor to the drop-out rate.
Areas in which students should be counselled include both the selection of courses appropriate to their needs, and the development of good work habits (such as continuous, not sporadic, work; punctual submission of assignments; participation in peer group tutorials, satellite sessions, etc. organised in their locality; and how to communicate with teaching staff if they are having difficulties).

**Intervention counselling** could be provided during the progress of the course. This is very important as students normally drop out from a course if they find it difficult, or are stuck with a particular unit, or lose contact with the distance teaching personnel. When students feel that they are cared for, and that there are opportunities to discuss their problems, it motivates them, and some students who would otherwise drop out from the course may be assisted.

Counselling may even take the simple form of keeping in touch with the students by sending encouraging letters to those who have not sent assignments for a period or who have otherwise deviated from the plan of study. Such letters both express concern and ask pertinent questions about their progress and about difficulties faced in distance learning (Holmberg 1982, 41-42).

**Follow-up counselling** is equally important. Since the Centre is faced with large numbers, more sensible planning and organisation become necessary. Since manual monitoring of the progress of all students is not possible, the use of computer is appropriate and should be explored, as already suggested with reference to staggering the dispatch of units.

Follow-up counselling has to take the form of some personal contact with students. Though a standard letter with some common problems identified could be sent, inappropriate comments could be struck out and additional comments specific to the individual case inserted. Each week, a list should be compiled from the computer to find out the students who have not handed in their assignments on time, and a letter sent to them. Such letters should be concerned and supportive, not censorious.

**Conclusion**

Many factors affect drop-out rates in distance education and it would not
be possible to discuss all of them here. An attempt, however, has been made to examine areas of the planning and organisation of operations in a distance education unit such as the Fiji Centre, with the overall aim of facilitating distance teaching in order to reduce the number of drop-outs. Further research is, of course, still needed to quantify some of the problems related to drop-outs, and to identify and analyse the factors leading to withdrawal from courses.

Holmberg's observation (1981, 102) needs stressing: the organisation and administrative aspects of education are not the same everywhere. They vary, as indeed they must vary, according to the cultural and sociological context in which the distance teaching is provided. This is another general principle whose implications for the USP region need to be more systematically examined. But as a starting point, the following improvements in the administration of distance education, along the lines of those suggested by Holmberg, need to be aimed for if there is to be any significant reduction in drop-out rates and improvement in the efficiency of distance teachings:

- expeditious and courteous treatment of all letters; quick delivery of course material, information circulars, student inquiries, etc.; and proper reception of students calling in person or by telephone at the USP Centre;
- follow-up reminders to students who are falling behind in the submission of assignments during the semester;
- short turn-around times for assignments, and prompt response to letters applying for information or assistance;
- streamlining of the students' record system and data storage, to provide relevant information as quickly as possible.

References


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