

# **WHAT ARE THE DIFFICULTIES FOR STUDENTS WHO DROP OUT OF DISTANCE AND ONLINE LEARNING AND WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP THEM?**

## **CONTEXT**

Supporting learning is more than just "giving a good lecture" and answering students' questions for Distance and Online Learning (DOL). Other factors strongly influence their learning, for example: Are they motivated? Do they have good self-regulation strategies? Do they know how to identify their own needs and find the resources to meet them?

An exploratory study to answer these questions was set up in the context of undergraduate studies in an institution dedicated solely to DOL.

## **MOTIVATION AND DROPOUT**

With the goal of fostering persistence in DOL academic settings, research has been conducted on motivation both from a causal perspective (demotivation as a factor in dropping out) and from an intervention perspective (strategies to foster motivation to encourage persistence) (Botton & Gregory, 2015; Lee & Choi, 2011). Developing these strategies in DOL studies is more than necessary, given that students face many challenges not experienced by students who are physically on campus. For example, DOL students must learn to deal with asynchronous lectures, written discussions, isolation, etc. They must therefore master additional strategies and skills, especially with respect to their virtual environment.

## **SELF-REGULATION STRATEGIES AND DROPPING OUT**

Self-regulation, self-management, or self-discipline strategies (Shaw, Burrus, & Ferguson, 2016) as well as time management skills and procrastination (Lim, 2016) have been studied in relation to dropout in DOL. Yükseltürk, & FethInan (2006) indicate that the top two causes of dropout in distance

education are time management and personal problems. Similarly, Audet (2008), Moore and Kearsley (2012), Huggins (2016), and Bonin (2018) highlight the impact on dropout in studies of DOL students with low mastery of self-regulation strategies.

## **SUPPORT SYSTEMS IN DOL**

Salmon, Houart, and Slosse (2012) note that the first function of the implementation of support systems in universities is to preventively combat failure in the first year; they recommend providing students with tools as early as possible and throughout their studies. But what services are in place in DOL in relation to self-regulation strategies? Some institutions offer students courses on those strategies at the beginning of their training (Roll et al., 2011). Others propose, under the supervision of advisors, students' use of online learning resources aimed at developing metacognitive and methodological skills (Gaeta et al., 2011). Finally, a few personalized and integrated learning support resources have been put online to develop self-regulation strategies for students with difficulties (Sauvé et al., 2020).

## **METHODOLOGY**

This exploratory study was conducted with students enrolled in 19 undergraduate DOL courses. The courses were chosen based on three criteria: (1) inclusion of at least three different disciplinary fields (education, human sciences and languages, and administrative sciences); (2) the number of students per course (from 312 to 900 annual enrollments); and (3) the variability in the course failure rates, ranging from 4.35% to 26.51%, and dropout rates, varying between 4.3% and 26.35% according to registrar data. A total of 3,578 students were solicited over four sessions of study in 2018 and 2019.

Two measuring instruments were used: (1) an online questionnaire to collect data on students' perception of the self-regulatory learning strategies and motivation (56 items) and (2) focus groups on the same topics as the questionnaire.

Various statistical models were used, depending on their purpose in relation to the study questions. All analyses used an alpha of 5% ( $\alpha = .05$ ). Analyses included independent samples t-tests and univariate ANOVA for more than two groups. Chi-square analyses were employed on variables for learning strategies.

## **RESULTS**

Of the 791 students who responded to the questionnaire, 77.9% were female. Similarly, 46.1% of respondents were 25-34 years old, 28.4% were between 35-44 years old, 11.6% were over 45 years old and 13.8% were under 25 years of age. In addition, 71.2% lived in a couple (married or common-law). French was the first language for the vast majority (91.4%) of respondents. Academically, 82.6% of respondents were enrolled in part-time study, while 56.3% were enrolled in a 30-credit certificate program. More than half of the sample (54%) were in their first year of university study.

Analysis results indicate that 13 of the 56 self-regulation and motivation strategies are likely to identify students at risk of dropping out of the institution after two consecutive semesters. In terms of motivation, the more dissatisfied students are with what they are achieving in courses, their academic results, the quality of courses, their decision to study at university, and their place in the academic environment in DOL, the more likely they are to drop out. Students who have difficulty with self-regulation feel that they are not able to carry out their learning activities, do well on exams and assignments, use effective study strategies, make steady progress in their studies, get to work without

particular difficulty, meet deadlines for submitting assignments and work, and manage the stress imposed by university life and other factors.

In terms of support measures offered by the institution, students would like to see actions put in place both at the beginning of their DOL and throughout their studies. In their first year of study, they would like their institution to offer them a virtual initiation session, a course, or a practical guide to help them succeed in their DOL courses.

Throughout their studies, they would like their institution to regularly inform them of the services it offers to support student retention, including activities offered by the student assistance office, psychological support, and resources available through the online system. They expect to be contacted by phone when they are in difficulty, including by student mentors, once a month. Finally, students would participate in activities outside of class to get to know other students and in virtual meetings between students (e.g., chat, videoconference), if these were made available, so that they would feel supported in their learning and thus increase their motivation and perseverance in their studies.

## **CONCLUSION**

Although this study has limitations (only one DOL institution and a small number of students), the results provide an answer to our research questions. Thirteen self-regulatory and motivational strategies lead students to not re-enroll in DOL. The learning supports desired by the students must be available both at the beginning and throughout their studies. Given that non-re-enrolment in two consecutive semesters of study during the student's DOL program is an indicator of dropout, it is recommended that students in difficulty be screened at every semester using a mini-questionnaire on the 13 strategies that identify them as at risk, and that targeted services be offered to these students throughout their studies. Finally, it is important to set up longitudinal (5 to 7 year) and inter-institutional research to evaluate the impact of the learning support resources to students in difficulty on their perseverance in DOL studies.

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