

# A strategy for reaching students and increasing their motivation



## Introduction

Government policy has placed renewed emphasis on students completing courses, by changing the way tertiary institutions are funded. The paper examines the proactive motivation of students prior to the course and the problems we encountered.

The paper begins with a description of the learning environment of the computer concepts course and goes on to discuss the theoretical framework we used, based on Tinto's retention model and on Seidman's revised retention formula. The institutional and technical constraints encountered are described proposed strategies for dealing with them are described along with a list of recommendations for future action.

## Learning environment

Bulk email was used to motivate and integrate students socially and academically with their peers and the institution prior to the course. Our students show a strong preference for bulk email.

Method	Total	Semester 2	Semester 3
Weekly bulk email	3.83 (80)	3.84 (48)	3.81 (32)
Interaction with tutors	3.60 (67)	3.74 (38)	3.41 (29)
Discussion forum	3.29 (76)	3.47 (43)	3.05 (33)
Interaction with students	2.65 (54)	2.76 (34)	2.48 (20)

Table 1: Student preferences for the method of communication

Approach is compatible with Chickering & Gamson (1987) good practice in undergraduate education:

- encouraging contact and cooperation between students and faculty
- communicating high expectations.

## Institutional and technical constraints

There is no institutional email address. Many students use Internet based email such as Hotmail or Yahoo, which has limited storage. Students who used this mailbox infrequently, found that their mailbox was filled with spam or junk email and were consequently unable to receive our bulk email, which was then returned to us. Up to 31% of the class in one case may not have a working email address (20% on average for the courses in the New Zealand Diploma in Business).

## Proposed Strategies

### Faculty

Faculty members sent out an initial bulk email prior to the start of the course.

Students whose emails were returned to us often had no home email listed. The students were connected to the rest of the class by moving the work email into the home email field in the database. The remaining students were telephoned to determine where the problem lay. This combination of actions reduced the rogue emails to 4%. It was found to be impossible to reduce this percentage further either by phone or letter contact. It was thought that this percentage represented students who had little intention of actually studying, or people intending to shortly withdraw or transfer to a different course, for a variety of reasons.

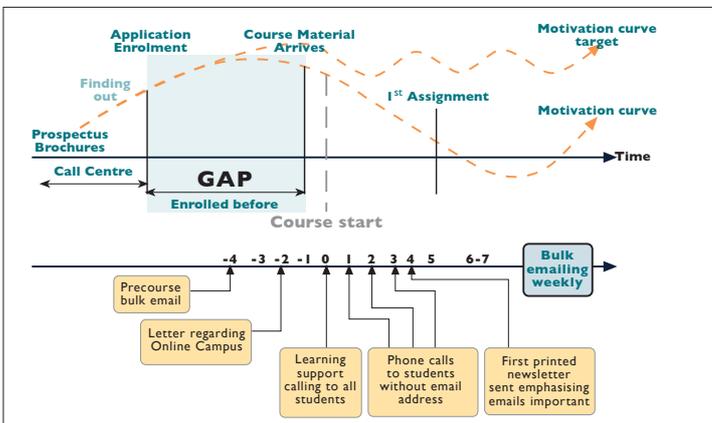


Figure 1 – Motivation curve, the Gap and proactive and reactive contact (faculty and learning support group)

### Learning support

Following a script, the learning support team perform a series of checks regarding course material, email, and provide advice for those who have not yet got an email account. They also determine if the students are familiar with the operation of our online forum, providing advice where necessary.

## Theoretical framework

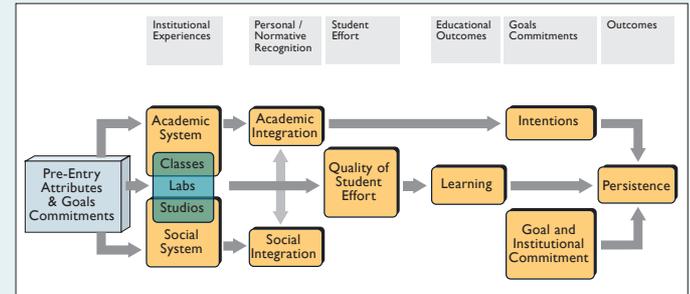


Figure 2 – Tinto's model of institutional departure (adapted from Tinto (1993))

$$RET = EId + (E + I + C) PaC + (Inst + T) RaC + ExtSupp$$

RET = Retention  
EId = Early Identification of vulnerable students  
E + I + C = Early, Intensive and Continuous  
PaC = Proactive Contact  
Inst + T = Institutional + Tutor  
RaC = Reactive Contact  
ExtSupp = External Support

Figure 3 – Seidman's revised retention formula (Seidman, 1996; Simpson, 2003)

Proactive contact by the lecturer, with reactive action where problems are found, by both lecturer and the outbound call centre, were key to resolving the problem of uncontactability. This combination of proactive and reactive contact set up the students to receive regular bulk emails throughout the course.

As a part of the orientation process we contacted students using various communication channels such as weekly bulk emails, phone calls, both from lecturers and the outbound call centre, before the course started to help them:

- interact with peers
- familiarise themselves with the learning environment
- learn about The Open Polytechnic's academic standard
- fix any technical problem that may arise

These early contacts are in the line with Tinto's model of social and institutional integration and our expectation is they will increase student motivation. It is hypothesised that student motivation rises in anticipation from the first time they hear about the course until the course material arrives (motivation curve on Figure 1). The "Gap" is the period of time between the student enrolling on a course and receiving the course material.

The intended result of our proactive intervention is to provide extrinsic motivation and guidance as the student begins each weekend, the time when most of our students study. This theoretical curve is shown as "motivation curve target". While we may not achieve this with all students equally, it is intended that this will result in an overall increase in student retention.

## Recommendations and actions

- 1 Study material should be sent earlier or the first few modules of the course may be posted on the public website for the course. Also provides potential students with a preview of the course.
- 2 Must consider the balance of student and lecturer workload with the need to motivate the students. Students will be involved in studying and lecturers in marking earlier courses.
- 3 Generic orientation and induction programmes organised by the learning support team are delivered in the first few weeks of the semester by means of a roadshow. This is the optimum time as before this students are likely to be focusing on examinations for previous courses.
- 4 Academic counselling and pre-enrolment advice to continue to be delivered via the Degree and Diploma Coordinators and the Learning Support team.
- 5 Students attending Learning Support workshops should be given ample opportunity to meet with others in their region in order to establish social networks.
- 6 Virtual regional study teams should be supported via the Online Campus forums, both during courses and between courses.
- 7 The learning support team and peer support in regional and other peer support teams enable us to establish 24/7 support.

## References

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