Student–student mentoring for retention and engagement in distance education

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This article argues that in the drive to develop e-learning initiatives in distance learning, simpler ways of supporting students for retention may be overlooked; for example, the linking of students in the form of mentoring and peer support networks. The article reports on three mentoring projects, in the United Kingdom, Korea and New Zealand, and shows that apparent retention gains of up to 20% with a return on investment of the order of magnitude of several hundred per cent may be possible. Whilst accepting the limitations of these studies, the article argues that there needs to be a clearer understanding of the benefits of such initiatives when deciding to invest time and funding in distance education support. It suggests that there is still much mileage to be made out of mentoring and ‘study dating’.

Keywords: mentoring; peer support; student retention; e-learning; study dating; student support; student engagement; culturally relevant support

Introduction

Whilst distance education is probably the fastest growing area of education internationally, it still suffers one fundamental weakness – the high drop-out rate experienced by its students as compared with the drop-out rate of students in conventional education. The importance of distance student support in overcoming this weakness cannot be overestimated. But what kinds of distance support are most effective? Much recent effort in distance education research has been focused on e-learning developments for use by students, such as learning platforms, blogs, wikis, Elluminate, podcasts, and forums, with increasing interest in using social software (Web 2.0) developments such as Facebook, SecondLife, Twitter, and so on. An informal survey of the distance education literature (Simpson, 2005b) suggests that more than 70% of recently published articles are mainly about e-learning developments.

Yet the evidence, at least until 2005 (Simpson, 2005a), suggested that no great breakthroughs in student retention had yet been achieved through the use of such sophisticated software, and that most student use of e-learning still involves older and simpler developments such as email.

Thus it is important to bear in mind that older forms of student support – such as student–student mentoring – may still have much to offer when it comes to increasing engagement and retention. This article reports on three student–student mentoring
initiatives – in the Open University UK (OU UK), the Korean National Open University (KNOU), and the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand (OPNZ) – and argues that such initiatives need to be revived if distance education is to take student retention seriously.

Mentoring

There is considerable literature on mentoring in distance learning. However, the overwhelming majority of published articles appear to use the term to describe what we can call ‘formal mentoring’ – that is, where a tutor supports a student or group of students in the kinds of ways described by Hawkridge (2003). There seems to be much less literature on the topic of ‘student–student mentoring’ – students supporting each other either in pairs or groups. This kind of mentoring can occur in two ways:

- experienced students helping newer students (referred to as ‘mentoring’ in this report), or
- students on the same course helping each other (referred to as ‘peer support’).

Mentoring and peer support can be important in distance education for two particular reasons – increasing retention and increasing engagement for disadvantaged groups. Whilst there are reports in the literature connecting mentoring and retention (e.g., Brown, 2001), there seem to be very few controlled studies that find clear links between them. This article reports on three examples of the first kind of student–student mentoring – experienced students helping newer students – for retention and engagement in the United Kingdom, South Korea and New Zealand. The results of the first two of these projects suggest that mentoring can increase retention substantially and probably at low cost.

Mentoring for retention – the Open University UK

The OU UK is a distance university in the United Kingdom with around 220,000 students. It has always had an informal policy of encouraging student–student links in the form of peer support between students on the same course, now largely through the use of computer forums, often student-run and organised by the OU UK Student Association (OUSA). OUSA also run an online mentoring scheme, ‘Student Support Links’, where newer students with queries can be directed to a group of experienced volunteer students. However, this latter scheme is more designed to be a one-off response to student questions and is not a mentoring scheme in the sense of an ongoing supportive relationship that can continue for the length of a whole course module or longer. Neither of the OUSA schemes has been formally evaluated for retention effectiveness.

Apart from the OUSA Student Support Links scheme there has not been much interest on the part of the OU UK in using mentoring as defined in this article – that is, using experienced students to support new students over entire courses. However, in 1998 (Asbee, Simpson, & Woodall, 1999) a small-scale study was undertaken whose results were encouraging, so a more rigorous study was undertaken in 2001.
The 2001 mentoring process

Detailed descriptions of the mentoring process, the matching procedures, the precautions taken, the briefing materials used and the actual activities of mentors, are presented in Asbee et al. (1999). Only a summary appears here.

Recruitment

A group of around 400 geographically contiguous students were mailed and invited to either have a mentor if they were new students, or to be a mentor if they were experienced (continuing) students. There was an approximately 20% response, of whom about one-half said they would like to participate, with more volunteer mentors than mentees.

Matching

Mentor/mentee matches were made according to the following in priority order:

- course,
- geographical location,
- domestic situation (i.e., children/single parents), and
- gender and/or age according to preferences expressed

By the end of the matching process, nine prospective mentors and 21 prospective mentees were unmatched and 19 mentors (two male, 17 female) were matched with 19 mentees (one male, 18 female) on five courses. Participants were then sent contact details of their matched partner (name and telephone number only).

Briefing

The document Guide to Mentoring was sent to all mentors and mentees. The Guide was short, covering the aim of mentoring, the time it might take, when to make contact, topics to cover and topics to refer on, and what to do if either side decided to end the relationship.

Evaluation

A questionnaire was sent after the end of the year, getting an approximately 60% response rate.

Volunteering

Mentors were first asked why they volunteered to support new students. A common theme was the desire to give something back to the OU UK, to pass on the fruits of experience and to maintain contact with the OU UK, as some mentors had completed their studies or were studying their final courses. The value of peer support is endorsed by those mentors who would have liked a mentor themselves when they were ‘new’:

I think most new students begin their studies very much in the dark. I aimed to provide some reassurance on the ‘big picture’ rather than leave them to sweat it out on their own.
Briefing
Almost all mentors and mentees who responded to the evaluation rated the briefing materials as useful to very useful.

Matching
Age and location were singled out as key factors in the matching process by mentors. Time spent on matching paid off in the majority of cases, with nine out of 10 mentees and 12 out of 13 mentors rating their match as good to very good. Seven out of 10 mentees and nine out of 13 mentors felt that an exact match was important.

Contact
Levels of contact between mentors and mentees ranged from one to more than five separate contacts over the year. All mentees who responded reported making contact with their mentors. For the majority (10 out of 13), contact was by telephone. Email contact and face-to-face meetings were particularly helpful.

Where no contact with the mentor was made, the reasons given were inaccessibility or not wishing to trouble a busy mentor. Positive reasons cited were that students had excellent tutorial and/or peer support from their tutorial group and did not feel a need for a mentor.

For some partnerships, the contact was good initially and then tailed off during the year. This may well have been the pattern for other partnerships: mentors would have been more available and possibly more enthusiastic at year start, before the assignments were due on their own courses.

Topics discussed
Feedback suggested that much of the mentor’s role was in helping the mentee deal with a range of feelings: dealing with a poor result, concern over tutor comments, worry about the next assignment, and confidence boosting. Specific areas discussed were assignments, course choice, examinations, study techniques, note-taking, family circumstances and impact on study, use of course materials, and the tutor’s role. Mentors had read the Guide to Mentoring and recognised the importance of referring students to their tutor when appropriate.

The value of mentoring support
Mentees were asked how well they would have managed during the year without mentoring support. Eight out of 10 said they would have coped, two out of 10 that they would have ‘scraped through just’. Those were a significant group for whom mentoring support was nevertheless a key factor in keeping them on course. In terms of retaining this borderline cohort, it is important not to underestimate the significance of comments such as:

Didn’t use my mentor very often but it was good to know there was someone there if needed.

While in order to assess the impact of mentoring on the retention of new students the focus has inevitably been on mentees, mentors too gained from the experience with comments like:
Telling my mentee to keep going, it’s worth it. I would have liked to have been told this myself!

These feelings of satisfaction at a job well done and the rewards of mentoring are important. They allow continuing students to feel involved in and valued by the OU UK, which helps reinforce positive messages about the OU UK learning experience.

To the question ‘Is there anything you would do differently if you mentored again’, mentors’ noted the importance of proactive contact:

… possibly arranging definite future contact dates, as my open-ended ‘call me if you need me approach’ may have inhibited my mentee

Conclusions to the Open University UK project

Mentoring and student retention in the Open University UK

There were 21 new students who requested matching but for whom no matches were found. These students were treated as a control group to compare with the 19 mentored students, on the assumption that all students requesting mentors were likely to share comparable characteristics; in particular, that they were similarly motivated to seek support.

Mentored students had a retention rate of 89% against non-mentored students at 67%, a 22 percentage points advantage (Table 1).

The numbers involved in this one-off trial are far too small to be statistically significant. Nevertheless, they suggest that the exercise may be worth repeating on a larger scale.

Costs

Student–student mentoring is not a zero cost to the institution. Our estimate in this pilot is that the cost of setting up each mentoring pair will have been high – about £35, largely in staff time. However, some of this cost is fixed – briefing materials, mailing costs, and so on, so that the cost of a project involving larger groups of students would be less – perhaps of the order of £20 per pair.

A formula developed by Simpson (2008a) enables researchers to identify the cost to the institution per student retained (CSR) by any specific retention activity:

\[ \text{CSR} = \frac{100P}{n} \]

where \( P \) is the cost per student of the activity and \( n \) (%) is the retention increase due to that specific activity. Applying the retention increase suggested by the data in Table 1, the CSR for this mentoring project was:

\[ \text{CSR} = £(100 \times \frac{35}{22}) = £160 \]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mentee passes</th>
<th>Control group passes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17/19</td>
<td>14/21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>89%</td>
<td>67%</td>
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This value seems large but it compares favourably with the approximately £200 cost per student retained by the Proactive Student Support Project in the OU UK (a pre-course personal motivational telephone call; Simpson, 2008b).

Importantly, both figures are cost-effective for the OU UK (Simpson, 2008a). The OU UK’s grant from the UK Government is related to the numbers of students completing their courses. In addition, there are savings in marketing costs if more students succeed as fewer new students need to be recruited. Simpson estimated the ‘benefit per student retained’ to the OU UK from both these factors to be of the order of £1300 in 2002. Thus the return on investment of investing in a mentoring scheme could be:

$$\frac{1300}{160} \approx 800\%$$

That is, for every £1 invested in the scheme there will be a return to the OU UK of around £8.

Such estimates are, of course, very approximate indeed given the tiny sample involved. But they suggest that investment into student mentoring schemes for the OU UK may be worthwhile on a larger scale. Other institutions will have different funding arrangements but it is still likely that improving retention in a cost-effective manner will reward the institution in both funding and reputational ways.

**Mentoring for retention – the Korean National Open University**

**Mentoring in the Korean National Open University**

The KNOU is a distance education university in South Korea with around 160,000 students. The KNOU mentoring programme began at Kangwon Regional Campus in 2006 and was then developed by the KNOU Institute of Distance Education, and put into operation in three different regions – Kangwon, Pusan, and Jeju – in 2007.

In 2008 the programme was rolled out nationwide and an online system was set up. In 2009, when both online and offline mentoring became possible, the number of participants in the mentoring programme was 9942 (2357 mentors, 7585 mentees) encouraged by a publicity campaign. The results in 2007 and 2008 are shown below.

**Operation of the mentoring programme in 2007**

**Recruitment**

The recruitment of mentors was done mainly through student associations and study groups. Staff of student associations and study group leaders were alerted to the existence of the mentoring system and asked to participate. Mentees were recruited at the orientation for enrolled and new students.

**Matching**

In most regional campuses, the mentors and mentees were matched through the subject first, and then according to location. The initial total number of participants was 1610, the number of mentees being 1348 and of mentors being 262. The results are shown in Table 2.
The mentoring programme in 2008

In 2008 the KNOU mentoring programme was expanded nationwide and the total number of participants was 2649, the number of mentees being 1905 and of mentors being 744. The number of mentees for one mentor varied from two to 17, and the average number of mentees per mentor was three.

Recruitment

Recruitment of mentoring participants was mainly through the homepage of the university, email, text messaging, and campus events, both online and offline methods, and through student union events and group study. The recruitment of mentees was done at the enrolment period, the entrance ceremony, the orientation for the new students, and the face-to-face tutorials.

Matching

Matching of mentors and mentees was done by the mentoring coordinators at each regional campus. The most important guidelines for matching again were subject and location, and matching was carried out with the help of student unions.

Mentor workshops and mentor gatherings for discussion were held at each regional campus, where mentors were encouraged and briefed. Some regional campuses promoted mentoring activities through mentor councils, newsletters, or offering a public forum for sharing experiences at the end of the programme. The results of the programme are shown in Table 3 (Lee, Hwang, & Kwon, 2009). The first semester enrolment data are omitted from this table.

Mentoring and student retention; does mentoring work in the Korean National Open University?

There are clear and consistent retention increases of between 5% and 14% amongst mentored students at each stage of their studies in KNOU in both 2007 and 2008.
Although this is less than the 22% found in the OU UK study, it is amongst a much larger number of students and thus is likely to be very significant. Many details of this study are not known as it has not been possible to translate the full paper. In particular, the costs of the study are unknown, although they are likely to be less than the OU UK. Benefits are equally unknown as KNOU funding regimes are different from the OU UK. Nevertheless, mentoring in KNOU is clearly successful in retention terms and reinforces the results of the much smaller OU UK study. It may also be a cost-effective method for increasing student retention.

### Mentoring for engagement – the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand

#### Introduction

The OPNZ is a distance education institution with around 30,000 students. It enrolls one of the New Zealand Institutes of Technology and Polytechnic sector’s largest group of Māori (indigenous people of New Zealand) learners (Open Polytechnic, 2007); in 2007 it enrolled 4555 indigenous students.

In 2007 the OPNZ Learning Centre Te Wāhanga Whakapakari Ako developed a mentoring programme with the aim of strengthening the polytechnic’s connection with its Māori learners in order to enhance their engagement and success.

#### Background

The engagement and retention of tertiary students, particularly Māori, is of strategic importance in New Zealand. Whilst there has been growth in the number of Māori enrolling in tertiary education in recent years (Earle, 2008), engagement and retention continue to be problematic. There can be particularly acute issues in the distance learning environment where students often report feelings of isolation, little sense of connection and belonging, and are challenged to maintain engagement in and motivation for learning. However, extensive research (Crosling, Thomas, & Heagney, 2008; Earle, 2007; Gibbs, Regan, & Simpson, 2006/07; Zepke, Leach, & Prebble, 2003) has shown that early, appropriate and regular learning support has a positive and lasting effect on retention and academic and social outcomes.
Against this background, and informed by the recommendations of the OPNZ Māori Advisory Committee, a programme of culturally relevant mentoring support was developed. This programme aimed to encourage and support first-year Māori students to actively engage with their learning and complete their courses successfully. The programme focused on working with students to identify learning needs, provide support and advice in a timely manner, help build a sense of connection and belonging to a community of learners, and increase academic enjoyment and motivation (Gavala & Flett, 2005).

The programme was informed by research showing that enhanced support for Māori students, particularly first-year students, has a positive impact on successful outcomes (Earle, 2007, 2008; Gavala & Flett, 2005). It also took into account research revealing that students’ peers make important contributions to positive outcomes (Glaser, Hall, & Halperin, 2005; Moran & Gonyea, 2003; Zepke et al., 2003). Furthermore, engagement with learning is strengthened when students feel accepted and affirmed, and that they belong (Johnson et al., 2007; Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003) and that, in open and distance learning, contact with students is a key to in-course retention (Simpson, 2000).

**Cultural relevance of mentoring support**

The programme was informed by Kaupapa Māori Theory and paid attention to three key factors:

*The notion of *korero* (oral language, talking)*

Māori derives from an oral tradition, and the notion of *korero* makes an important contribution to learning for Māori students. The notion of *korero* helps to build self-determination and self-esteem to allow the student to experience success in their learning. The mentoring programme provided opportunities for discussion, mentoring, support and advice.

*The notion of *tatau tatau* (collectiveness, belonging, community)*

The notion of *tatau tatau* is a learning strategy that promotes Māori achievement in the learning environment. Essentially this is about sharing, trusting, helping and collaboration. The mentoring programme contributed to students’ ‘sense of belonging’ and being part of the learning community. Distance learning can be isolating for all students, but Māori students in particular do not participate well when isolated.

*The notion of whānau (relationships, family)*

The notion of *whānau* is closely associated with the notion of collectiveness. Māori student success depends to a great extent on the relationships they have with the learning environment. The programme was able to facilitate the conditions through which the student and mentor could form a trust relationship. Meaningful relationships are culturally relevant for both the Māori learner and the *whānau* learning environment.
Programme objectives

The programme objectives were therefore as follows:

- to welcome students to the OPNZ learning community and make a positive start to study,
- to help students plan their study and manage assignment tasks,
- to help students identify areas where they needed support and provide that support, and
- to encourage students to contact their tutor or other staff with any concerns.

Mentor selection and training

The mentors, who were not Māori, were selected from the existing pool of trained and experienced mentoring staff and were chosen for their ability to empathise with a diversity of peoples coupled with a mature attitude to cultural differences. Mentors are current tertiary students or recent graduates. They had lived and/or worked with Māori people for part of their lives and had an understanding of Māori culture and kaupapa that helped them to contextualise Māori learning. They had academic qualifications and practical experience in adult learning and social work. Additional training and support was provided by the Kaiārahi Akoranga Māori (OPNZ Learning Adviser Māori) and the mentoring programme coordinator.

Programme structure and duration

The programme offered support to 125 students via the telephone during weekday evenings, when students were most likely to be available, throughout the first semester in 2008. It was a programme of proactive contact with students rather than one that relied on student self-referral. The contact was at times that have been identified as critical points in students’ progress through their courses (Simpson, 2000), with the aim of providing timely and appropriate support to enhance learning and encourage persistence. The mentors provided students with advice, additional study resources and referral to tutors and learning support staff as appropriate.

Simpson (2000) identifies a number of critical points in students’ progress, including: start of the course, before the first assignment, after the first assignment, mid-course, pre-examination, and post-examination. The mentoring programme identified three key contact times that correlated with the following critical points in students’ progress:

- **Start of the course/before first assignment.** Conversation focused on getting started, dealing with course materials, planning study, preparing for and tackling the first assignment.
- **Second assignment/mid-course.** Conversation focused on progress, first assignment results, preparing for and tackling the second assignment, going on/dropping out: options.
- **Pre-examination/final assignment.** Conversation focused on preparing and revising, dealing with examination stress, writing examinations; second assignment results, preparing for and tackling the last assignment.
The mentors worked from a script developed by the Kaiārahi Akoranga Māori and the mentoring programme coordinator. The script provided a guide for conversation rather than a prescription for it. All conversations were recorded in a database, and salient points and issues for referral to tutors and learning support staff identified. Reports were collated and sent to tutors and the Kaiārahi Akoranga Māori after each round of student contact to ensure that all follow-up matters were actioned.

**Programme results**

At the time of the first telephone call, 79% of students were positive about their study and confident that they would complete their course(s). Some students were finding time management a challenge and others were struggling a little with a two/three course workload. Students’ comments included:

I’m finding distance learning a challenge. I’m struggling a little with managing my time; I have two small children and it’s a bit of a juggling act.

By the time of the second phone call, 55% of students had completed their first assignment. Seventeen per cent had decided to transfer their course enrolment to semester two and 14% had withdrawn. Some students were finding distance study difficult; the isolation and lack of regular contact with teaching staff was particularly challenging. Students said:

I’m struggling at the moment because I am doing two other papers. I work full time and study through to 1.00 am in the morning. I feel quite disconnected with distance study.

At the time of the third phone call, the majority of students who were contacted were cautiously optimistic and making good progress with examination revision. They reported:

I am really pleased with my results. I have worked hard all semester and I work full-time too; time management is the key. I have been working hard for the exam which is in two weeks.

By the end of the semester, 60% of students had successfully completed their course(s) or were still studying. Nineteen per cent of students had formally withdrawn from their studies.

**Programme evaluation**

Students were surveyed by telephone – 91 students (73%) participated. They were asked to respond to a number of statements and to rate how important to their learning each of those statements were (rating scale of one to five: 1 = not important and 5 = very important).

**Belonging**

Almost all (98%) of the students who were surveyed stated strongly that belonging to a learning group – the notion of *tatau tatau* – was important to them, rating it as very important (5 on the scale). Students said:
Studying by yourself is very lonely so getting a phone call from the mentor made me feel a part of a group.

**Motivation**

Mentors helped motivate 92% of the students to keep going with their studies. All of these students rated the importance of this as 4–5 on the scale. Students’ comments included:

> I like the personal contact and it came out of the blue. A great motivator and it showed me the Polytechnic cares about me as a student.

**Study skills**

Many students (90%) agreed that mentors helped them with their study skills, and the majority gave this a rating of 4–5 in terms of importance to their learning. Students said things like:

> I found the phone calls a good way to talk through any difficulties and was given some really good tools and techniques to help me with my study.

**Workload**

Many students were new to the distance learning environment and/or were returning to study after a long break. Eighty-seven per cent of them stated that the mentoring supporters had helped them with strategies to manage workload. Students rated it as 4–5, and their comments included:

> I have found study hard because it’s been a long time since I did anything like this, but I have had great encouragement from [mentor].

**Study goals**

The majority of students (86%) considered that mentors helped them to achieve their study goals and rated this help as 4–5 in importance. One student said:

> It’s hard working full-time and trying to fit other stuff around study, but I found it great just to talk with someone as it helped me to get back on track again and reminded me about what I was studying for.

Those students (14%) who rated this factor as being less influential (scale 1–2) were very focused on what they wanted to achieve and had very clear goals for that. These included: upskilling for the workplace, financial gain and higher qualifications.

**Communication with tutor**

Approximately one-half of the students considered that the mentor was helpful in acting as a broker between them and their tutor. They said that this was important to them (rating 4–5) because they were too *whakama* (shy) to talk to a person in ‘authority’. Their mentor was able to talk them into contacting their tutor because they said
it would help them with their studies. After contacting their tutor for the first time, students had the confidence to do so again. The other half of the students said that the mentor had not helped them to contact their tutor. These students were confident and able to contact their tutor when and if required.

**Personal problems**
A small number of students said that talking to a mentor helped them with personal problems. The majority (96%) did not consider this factor as important to their learning because they had extended whānau (family) and friends to whom they could talk or access to other agencies.

Three students who had withdrawn from study took part in the survey. They all said that contact with the mentor had had no positive influence on their learning because trying to fit study around work, family and social commitments was just too difficult to manage. Despite this, all these students acknowledged that the feeling of belonging to a learning group/community was very important to their learning.

**Conclusions to the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand mentoring programme**
The first-year Māori students who participated in the mentoring programme valued the opportunity to have regular contact with knowledgeable mentors in addition to their tutors. They found the contact encouraging and motivational; it enabled them to deal more effectively with the demands of study and to feel part of a learning community. This contact, which occurred at key decision-making points in students’ progress through their courses, assisted in the identification of issues that might have been a barrier to successful completion and provided opportunities to resolve these in a timely manner.

As this was not a research project, as such, there are no clear conclusions to be drawn about retention or costs. However, the findings suggest that mentoring can be very successful in reaching out to students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds.

**Overall conclusions**
What do these three studies tell us about the value of mentoring in distance education? They suggest in different ways that mentoring can work in increasing retention in distance education, that schemes can be cost-effective, and that they can be helpful in encouraging the engagement of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, it is always important not to over-hype the findings about mentoring from such studies. In particular there are a number of questions that might be asked of these projects:

(1) **Students can link up with each other via computer conferences and forums – why bother with a mentoring scheme?**
The mentoring relationship is different from the peer relationships of computer forums as they involve relationships between experienced and novice students. Such relationships might arise in a computer forum but are probably rare.

In addition, communication in forums is usually in groups. Some less-confident students clearly do not feel at home in forums and might benefit more from one-to-one mentoring support.
Students who volunteer to be mentored are likely to be those who are generally more committed to their studies so that mentoring is more likely to help already better-motivated students than those more at risk. After all, in both the UK and Korean projects, the volunteer rate of mentees was quite small.

This is a particularly pertinent criticism of mentoring. Of course, such criticism applies to many distance learning offerings that require students to respond, but that does not make it easier to answer. If you wish to make a real difference to retention in distance learning then it will be necessary to be proactive in reaching students (Simpson, 2004). ‘We must’, as Bean and Bogdan (2001, p. 81) note, ‘reach the quiet student’. There may be ways in which it might be more possible to do so by using the power and relative anonymity of the Internet – see ‘Find a Study Friend’ below.

Although the cost could be reduced to some extent by involving more students, it still remains an expensive project, particularly in staff time.

This is a pertinent criticism and again there might be ways in which using the Internet might help – again see ‘Find a Study Friend’ below.

Will enough volunteer mentors come forward?

Whilst enough mentors came forward in both the UK and Korean projects, it may be difficult to find enough if projects are to be substantially expanded. There may be a need to reward mentors in some way through certification, although payments may not be necessary. It remains to be seen what would happen in different distance educational systems.

‘Find a Study Friend’

Considerations such as these above suggested to one of the authors (Simpson) that different ways of linking students together might be worth investigating. Together with another OU UK colleague (V.M. Goodwin) he obtained institutional funding to set up a website based on ‘dating software’ called ‘Find a Study Friend’ – see Figure 1 for a picture of the front page of the site.

This website would allow students to enter some basic data about themselves and the kind of ‘Study Friend’ they would like. The software would then provide the student with a set of matches from which they could choose one with whom to make contact, initially by email. They could then follow up that email contact by telephone or face-to-face contact.

The purpose was initially to link up students in peer support pairs with the subsequent aim of extending the programme to provide mentor partnerships through tweaking the site. It was hoped that the relative anonymity and ease of use of such ‘mentoring’ software would make it more popular and far less labour-intensive than the methods used in this study.

In the event, the software was written but has not yet been placed on the OU UK’s website, perhaps partly because of the existence of the OUSA schemes mentioned above, and because much OU UK online effort is going into the provision of forums, podcasts, blogs and wikis, and so on.

In the long run, this may well not be the best investment for student success. Recent evidence suggests that full-time students, at least, are unimpressed by the use of such systems for teaching, feeling that they wish to preserve their social software for socialising (Joint Information Systems Committee, 2007). Distance students with
their characteristic and chronic lack of time will always need to measure the ‘learning richness’ of a medium against the learning time they need to use that medium. So far the jury is out on how far many of these systems are learning rich enough to repay the learning time invested in them.

Where to go from here?
The results of these projects suggest that mentoring may be both well regarded by students and have a distinct retention effect, which is cost-effective from an institutional perspective. Whether using ‘study dating’ software on the Internet would have been even more effective on a much larger scale remains to be seen. Anyone interested in the potential for such a system is invited to contact the corresponding author.

Notes
1. See http://www.open.ac.uk/ousa/.

References


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