

EXPLORING OPPORTUNITIES TO BOOST ADULT STUDENTS' GRADUATION -THE REASONS BEHIND THE DELAYS AND DROP-OUTS OF GRADUATION

Päivi Aarreniemi-Jokipelto* and Asta Bäck**

*HAAGA-HELIA School of Vocational Teacher Education

**VTT Technical Research Centre of Finland

ABSTRACT

Drop-outs and delays of graduation is currently a huge problem in adult education. The main reason for the drop-outs and delays is usually stated to be the difficulty of combining studies with family and work. This study was based on interviews where students studying in the bachelor's or master's degree programme were interviewed to find out the main reasons for delays and drop-outs, and to ideate and evaluate various ways of supporting students. There were two main types of reasons for delays and drop-outs: reasons relating to difficulties in combining personal and working life with studies, and problems related to the institution, e.g. challenges related to the theses, teaching methods, and lack of guidance counselling. According to the study, there are several opportunities to boost students' graduation: a named personal guidance counsellor during the studies and for the thesis, regular follow up of studies, individual learning paths counselled by a guidance counsellor, prior competence recognition, flexible methods to study for example by offering E-learning courses.

KEYWORDS

Adult education, drop-out, support, guidance counselling, online tools

1. INTRODUCTION

Adult education is increasingly important because of the quick pace of technical development, changing demands for skills and with the general raise in the level of education. Studying towards a degree while working and often with family responsibilities is demanding. In practice, this leads to long times for studying and dropping out. Student may get some benefit of the courses they take and skills they acquire even without reaching the degree, but overall, it is a problem for all parties involved, the student, the school and the whole society.

Drop-outs and delays of graduation have been studied a lot and there are several frameworks to categorize the factors. First, a framework developed by (Jordan et al., 1994; Watt & Roessingh, 1994) defines three factors for drop-outs; push, pull, or fall out of an institution factors. In push-out factors, an institution is active and the factors include poor academic performance and disciplinary problems. Pull-out factors refer to out-of-institution factors like work or family reasons, or illness. The fall out factor mean that a student does not show significant academic progress and in a way a student just disappears. During several decades the pull factors are depicted as the highest factor for dropout (Doll et. al, 2013). Second, Rumberger & Lim (2008) defined two groups of factors to explain reasons for drop-outs; individual characteristics of students and institutional characters of their families, schools and communities. Solutions, such as more flexibility in schedules (e.g. Johnson et. al, 2009), and prior learning assessment and recognition (e.g. Aarreniemi-Jokipelto, 2014) have been suggested earlier to boost graduation.

In this study we wanted to find out the reasons why adult students studying either in the bachelor's or master's degree programme in business information technology at HAAGA-HELIA University of Applied Sciences have proceeded slowly in their studies or dropped out. The study was aimed at students who had already proceeded long in their studies. We also ideated a number of tools and practices that could be helpful to students to get them to complete their studies, and wanted to get students evaluations of how beneficial these would be from their perspective. We also asked the students to give their own suggestions of ways support graduating.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

2.1 The Method

We chose telephone interviews as the way to gather the information of the students. We made a questionnaire that was filled together with each student during one phone call. Even though this method limited the number of students we could include in the study, it gave us the opportunity to talk to people and get a better picture of their situation and decisions that would have been possible for example by using a web survey.

The questionnaire consisted of seven main points:

1. Motivation for studies
2. Life situation and changes in it
3. Planning and guidance counselling of studies
4. Content and quality of studies
5. Thesis
6. Main reasons for delay or dropping out
7. Feedback on tools and methods for supporting studies and thesis

We interviewed 38 persons who were studying on extended period or had quit their studies during 2013 or later (Table 1). We wanted to interview students who had studied for several periods and gathered credits, both those who had started their thesis and those who had not. There were 12 interviewees (32 % of all) aiming at master's degree, and 26 or 68 % aiming at lower degree. This proportion reflects on the distribution of adult students between higher and degrees. Only two master's degree students (17 %) had dropped out whereas 12 or 46 % of bachelor's degree students had dropped out.

The master students had in average 55.4 credit points (60 credit points required + the thesis worth 30 credit points). The bachelor students had in average 160.2 points (195 + 15 credit points required). Typically the students had been present at the university for 10 semesters.

The master's students originated from 6 different starting groups, but half of the interviewed students came from one particular starting group. The bachelor students came from 16 different starting groups or study programs, with the maximum of three respondents from one group.

We both made 19 telephone interviews. We took notes by hand during the discussion and wrote complete notes on computer after the discussion. We divided the analysis of the results so that one of us analysed the reasons for quitting and aspects relating to study planning and guidance counselling, as well as issues relating to the thesis, and the other one looked at the feedback on the proposed tools and methods to support students. After the preliminary analyses, we looked at each other's parts and complemented it with the insights we had gained but that had not been included in the preliminary analysis.

Table 1. The number of interviewees divided into groups based on the degree and whether they had started their thesis

	Extended time (code)	Drop out (code)	Total
Higher degree, thesis ongoing (A1)	7	1	8
Higher degree, no thesis (A2)	3	1	4
Subtotal higher degree	10	2	12
Lower degree, thesis ongoing (B1)	12	5	17
Lower degree, no thesis (B2)	2	7	9
Subtotal lower degree	14	12	26
Total	24	14	38

Table 2. The average number and standard deviation of semesters present and absent and credit for the interviewees

	Semesters present	Semesters absent	Credits	Credits/ active semester
Higher degree (A1+ A2)				
Average	9.5	0.5	55.4	6.0
Standard deviation	2.6	0.8	15.1	1.5
Lower degree (B1+B2)				
Average	10	1.2	160.2	17.0
Standard deviation	3.8	1.8	50.1	4.6

Since the number of interviewees was relatively low, particularly because they needed to be divided into four subgroups based on their situation, we have treated the material as qualitative. The results give information about the aspects that need to be taken into consideration when developing services for adult learners.

3. REASONS FOR DELAYS AND DROP-OUT

Table 3 illustrates the results of the questions related to the reasons for delays and drop-out of studies for the master's degree students. A1 in the table refers to students who are studying their master's degree and had started their theses, and group A2 refers to students who had not yet started their theses.

Table 3. The most important reasons for the delay or dropping out in the group of master's degree students (number of students giving the reason (A1 thesis ongoing; A2 thesis not started))

	Most important	Second in importance	Third in importance
Personal life situation and /or changes in it	-	1 (A1), 1 (A2)	1 (A1)
Combination of work and studies did not work	3 (A1)	-	-
Changes in working situation	1 (A1), 1 (A2)	2 (A1)	-
Interest, motivation ended	1 (A2)	-	1 (A1)
Career changes	1 (A1)	-	-
Problems related to the theses	5 (A1), 1 (A2)	2 (A2)	-
Group work based learning	1 (A2)	-	-

Over half over the group A1 students named problems related to the theses as the most important reason for delay or drop-out in their studies. Some students had faced problems in combining work and studies. If a second or third reason was given, they were related to the personal life situation, changes in working situation, or lack of motivation to study. From the institution point of view problems relating to the theses and combining work and studies are worth investigating more.

When asked, students named several types of problems in the context of theses: lack of a subject, the viewpoint of the thesis was missing, and changes at work. It was common to have problems to find a subject for the thesis. There were many cases where the student had completed the other studies and only the thesis remained. There were also students who had managed to find a subject for their thesis, but then faced problems in the writing process. Two students stated that the viewpoint of their thesis was missing, and they were not able to continue. There were a few students who had changed their working place, and they were forced to change the subject of their theses. Also, a new job often required a lot of effort and energy, which weakened the opportunities for studying. Organisational changes had also caused problems: in one case, the planning of the thesis had to start over with a new boss; in one case, the responsibilities were changed at the workplace and the student was not any more in charge of the area to which the thesis topic was connected. The economically tough times during the recent years have in general put a lot of stress in working places, which has reduced the time and energy on extra activities like studying.

Our questionnaire also included questions about guidance counselling during the studies and follow-up of the study process. The interviewed students were from several different programs, and there was a lot of variance between programs on whether the student had got a guidance counsellor, whether a guidance counsellor had been active, and whether the studies had been followed-up and assessed by a guidance

counsellor during the study process. It is clear that in cases where the reason for the delay or drop-out has been a problem to find a subject for a thesis, guidance counselling would have been required. It would have been a guidance counsellor's duty together with a student and a working life representative to look for the subject for the thesis. Also, if the problem has been the viewpoint of the thesis, the guidance counsellor would have been able to solve the problem together with a student. In few cases, there had been problems already in the earlier phases of the study process, and students would have needed their studies to be guidance counselled, followed up and assessed. Also, if the working place has changed and the student needs to look for a new topic for the thesis, it is important that a guidance counsellor is available.

To summarize, both during the study and the thesis process each student should have a named guidance counsellor, who is in contact on a regular basis, and whom the students can contact whenever required. Few students stated that they would have needed someone to kick them to proceed in their studies.

Table 4. The most important reasons for the delay or dropping out in the group of bachelor's degree students (number of students giving the reason (B1 thesis ongoing; B2 thesis not started))

	Most important	Second in important	Third important	Forth important
Personal life situation and /or changes in it	6 (B1), 2 (B2)	2 (B1), 1 (B2)	1 (B2)	-
Combination of work and studies did not work	2 (B1), 3 (B2)	4 (B1)	1 (B1), 2 (B2)	1 (B2)
Changes in working situation	3 (B1), 2 (B2)	1 (B1)	-	-
Interest, motivation ended	1 (B1)	2 (B1), 1 (B2)	2 (B1)	-
Career changes		2 (B2)	-	-
Problems related to the theses	5 (B1), 1 (B2)	1 (B1)	1 (B1), 1 (B2)	-
Lack of guidance and counselling during the studies	1 (B1)	1 (B2)	1 (B2)	-
Lack of guidance and counselling during the theses process	-	-	1 (B1)	-
Group work based learning	-	1 (B2)	-	-
Degree does not have value	-	-	1 (B1)	-
Uncertainties in assessment	-	-	1 (B1)	-
Financial aid ended	1 (B2)	-	-	-
Studies is a hobby, no need to proceed fast	1 (B2)	-	-	-

Table 4 presents the reasons for delay and dropping out for bachelor's degree students. In Table 4, B1 refers to students who are studying their bachelor's degree and who have started their thesis and B2 refers to students who have not started their thesis. In group B1, the most important reasons for the delay and drop-out were the following:

- Personal life situation and/or changes in it
- Problems related to theses
- Changes in working situations
- Combination of work and studies did not work

When comparing the groups B1 and B2, the difference is that B2 has not named so many problems related to theses, because they have not yet started their thesis. Otherwise they seem to have faced same kinds of problems as the other group i.e. to study aside with family and work can be challenging. The only how we can solve these kinds of problems are to increase flexibility of studies and to provide different methods to study, and not to give group works as the only study form. Both in the master's and bachelor's degree groups lack of motivation was also stated as a reason for delays and drop-outs. To improve motivation flexibility of studies, meetings with peers and inspiring visiting lecturers from outside of the university was suggested.

As mentioned earlier, the interviews included also questions about guidance counselling during the studies and following up on a study process. When comparing the bachelor's degree groups to the master's degree groups there were much more students in the bachelor's degree group, who have not had a guidance counsellor. Neither students' studies had been followed up and assessed during the studies, which can be assumed to have an effect on the delay or drop-out of the studies.

There seemed to be a kind of "survivor culture" among the interviewees. Some students told about challenges relating to their studies, but still they had not been in contact with a guidance counsellor or the institution, because they felt they need to manage on their own. Few students stated that because we are adult students, we need to manage the studies alone. There were several students who had not had any guidance counselling during their studies. If a student had a guidance counsellor, it did not mean that they had been in contact with her/him when assistance was needed. A student stated that he had bothered a guidance counsellor twice with his study problems. Generally, the threshold to ask for help seemed to be high among many students. Although, there were students whose studies had not been guidance counselled or followed up at all, they did not necessarily mention it as a problem. They just seemed to have accepted the practice that they are alone with their studies. There were several students whose graduation would have benefitted from guidance counselling meetings and regular follow up of studies. Few students stated that they would have needed someone to kick them to be able to proceed faster in their studies. A student suggested help in time management skills to be offered in the beginning of the studies.

4. TOOLS AND PRACTICES FOR SUPPORTING STUDIES

Our questionnaire included a list of 11 ideas relating to how adult learners could be helped to reach their studying goals. The students were asked to evaluate the ideas on a four level scale: very beneficial, somewhat beneficial, no benefit, and detrimental. Many respondents also gave additional points of view regarding the ideas. The students were also given the opportunity to make their own suggestions as to what would be helpful to them.

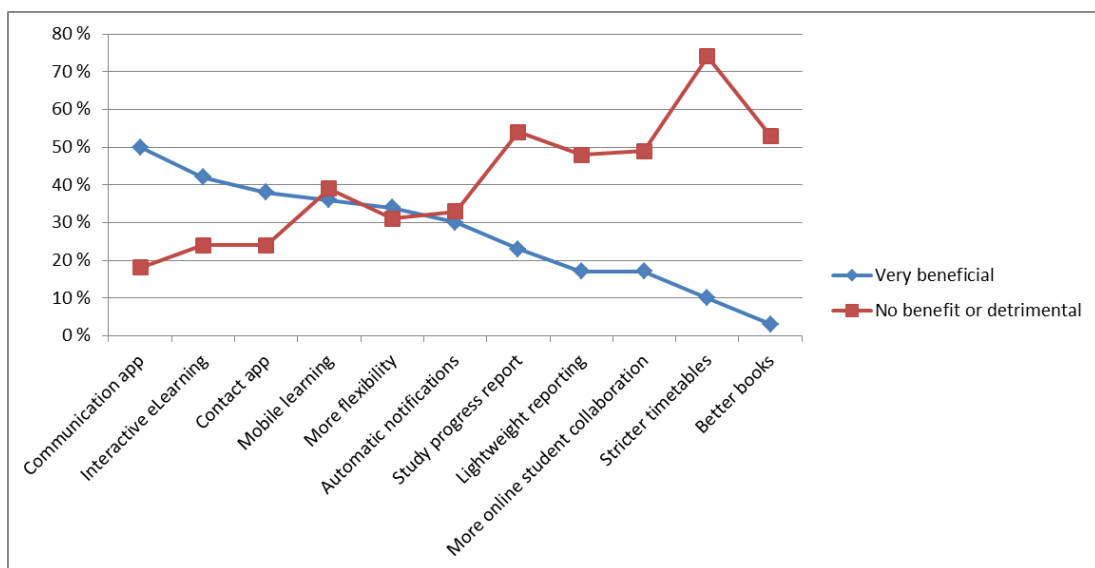


Figure 1. The percentage of respondents who evaluated the proposed tools as very beneficial, or as have no or detrimental impact on their study progress. The rest of the respondents gave the rating somewhat beneficial, but this is not shown in the figure

The most highly rated idea was the communication app: an application that would make it possible for the student, the supervisor at the workplace and the guidance counsellor at the university to communicate and stay up to date with the progress of the work. Following viewpoints were presented:

- If the app would help that problems become acknowledged early, then this would be good.
- It would be good if there is something that would force the three parties come together and talk about the thesis.

The following two, a bit more critical viewpoints were also made:

- Adult learners do not need something like this.

Something like Dropbox would be enough – there the guidance counsellor would immediately see the new version of the work and could comment directly into the text.

The Contact app was a related idea: the idea included various ways of easily getting in touch with the guidance counsellor such as chat and the opportunity to book a meeting time from a list of available meeting times. Many of those who did not regard the application as useful were of the opinion that email is enough. Some respondents pointed out that they mostly study during evenings and weekends and wondered whether the guidance counsellor could be available at such times.

More interactive eLearning material that would make it possible for the students to study at their own pace and when they have time, was regarded as very beneficial by 42 % of the respondents, the second highest rating. Following three viewpoints were given in connection to eLearning:

- Computer languages would be very suitable for eLearning.
- Particularly good for those who live further away from the school.
- The most central and critical courses need to be taught face-to-face, but eLearning should be good for the rest. It would be good to be able to complete courses when one suddenly gets time for the studies

One student had been inspired to start studying after having participated in an excellent eLearning course at her work place, and had been disappointed as there had not been such eLearning courses at all.

Mobile learning was described in the following way: learning material that is split into small units that can easily be studied on smartphone or tablet during small breaks or when commuting. This idea raised mixed reactions and even strong emotions among the respondents. 36 % thought it would be very beneficial to them. For example, it was seen as a potential platform for small weekly assignments. The same percentage did not see any potential benefit; one respondent even regarded it as detrimental. Those who did not regard this as a good idea expressed following views:

- I do not want to use a device all the time; time in a bus is good for recovering and incubating.
- Is a smartphone a real tool for learning?
- To learn, I need to concentrate properly, which is impossible during small breaks.
- Smartphone is good for checking facts, but not suitable for real studying and learning.

Automatic notifications sent to the student's mobile were another idea that raised mixed opinions: 30 % regarded it as very beneficial, and 31 % as not beneficial or detrimental. Those who did not see any benefit motivated their answers with

- Adult learners do not need a “nanny”.
- Adults need to learn to plan and manage their timetables by themselves. Automatic notifications just teach students to rely on others the wrong way.

The importance of time management came up in various ways during the interviews, as well as the importance of being able to find all the necessary information of courses and events easily in one place. Offering time table information so that people can easily integrate this information to their preferred calendars and time management apps in beneficial.

Study progress report, meaning better and clearer information of how one's studies are progressing in comparison to one's personal study plan, lightweight reporting in the form of a weekly “smiley” from the student to the guidance counsellor indicating how the thesis is progressing, and more online student collaboration were regarded as very beneficial by around 20 % of the respondent. About half of the respondents found these ideas as having no benefit or even being detrimental.

The idea of lightweight reporting raised most mixed opinions. A slightly surprising finding is that all students who thought this would be a very beneficial feature were aiming at the bachelor's degree, where the thesis is smaller than in master's degree. Two respondents, both of them aiming at the master's degree found the idea detrimental. Many criticized the proposed weekly rhythm. It was suggested that the rhythm should

be defined individually depending on the phase of the work, or the reporting should be made less frequently, for example, once a month.

Online student collaboration and communication was not regarded as very beneficial, particularly when making the thesis. Two respondents emphasized the role of the guidance counsellor in online environments: without a guidance counsellor leading the discussions, the discussions tend to remain very shallow and do not contribute to learning.

More flexibility in studies was regarded as very beneficial by 34 %. Many commented that the studies are already very flexible and did not see many realistic opportunities for changes in this area.

Stricter timetables and deadlines were seen as the most detrimental idea with 39 % expressing that opinion. The combination of working and studying and often also with a family with under aged children makes it difficult and even impossible to follow strict timetables, and would only lead to quitting. Keeping track of individually agreed timetables and deadlines and making an effort to meet them was however seen as important, and this would support completing the studies.

The least beneficial idea was better paper based learning materials such as books and handouts. The students were afraid of the costs and accessibility of books, and therefore preferred getting the study material in electronic format, such as PDF files. These are also easy to keep as a reference library for later.

The students were also asked to make their own suggestions of tools and practices that would be beneficial to them and following ideas were shared:

- Ease of use in accessing school information systems so that small hurdles would not lead to quitting
- Comprehensive information of courses and registration to courses online
- Clear course descriptions so that it is easy to evaluate if the course topic and level are suitable
- Clear information of what to do when one wants to start the thesis, and what to do when it is completed
- Study groups of 3 to 4 students with related thesis topics could meet and comment each other's work also without advising teachers
- Support to buying a personal computer that would fit the school requirements
- Personal messages from the guidance counsellor to keep up motivation and to indicate that the student has not been forgotten
- Live online lectures

Many of these suggestions deal with getting information easily. The time that the students can devote to studies and familiarise with the school is very limited so being getting information and up-to-date with all matters at school is more difficult than to fulltime students. Tiny hurdles can lead to bigger motivational problems leading to delays and even dropping out.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Before the research, the reasons for delays and drop-outs of studies were assumed to be mainly beyond the control of the institution i.e. difficulties to combine studies with work and family. However, according to our research, there are several ways for the institution to boost graduation by changing its own action. Over half of the students who were studying their master's degree and several bachelor's degree students had faced problems related to making the theses. The mandatory requirement of the master's level to link the student's working place to the theses had caused challenges and delays. According to the interviewees, a possibility to start the theses already at the beginning of the studies would have benefitted them. It would have given time to plan and gain ideas from the studies. On the other hand, many had started to plan their thesis early, but then, changes at the working place had ruined the planned thesis. There was also a request to receive assistance from the institution at the beginning of a theses process, i.e. a guidance counsellor of the institution to negotiate about theses with a student's employer together with a student, a guidance counsellor to assist in choosing the topic of a thesis, and to assist choosing the viewpoint of a thesis. This type of guidance counselling needs to be in person. Assistance from a guidance counsellor would also have been needed regarding research methods and the structure of the thesis. There were students who had dropped-out due to the unsolved problems in making their theses.

According to the interviewees, it is common that prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) is not utilized consistently in the programmes. Some students told that they had participated in courses on topics where they already knew everything, because it was less work than passing it by showing prior competences. The experience of the students was that the requirements and practises for PLAR varied from course to course making it hard and unpractical to use. This had partly reduced motivation and delayed graduation.

Another mentioned reason for delays and drop-outs was the teaching methods of the studies. All the students were adult students, and some of them stated that mandatory group works had delayed their studies, even causing dropping out. A student stated that she had tried to negotiate a tailored way to pass a course, but not succeeded, which had resulted as a drop-out. She stated that she could have been able to study the subject tailored, but was unable to participate to several group meetings. Therefore, according to the interviewees flexible teaching and learning methods can also boost graduation. Generally in the research PLAR was stated to motivate students, but it also to enable shortening the studies. In this case it could have boosted the students' graduation in the programmes. Also, individualized learning paths and flexible learning methods would speed up graduation. In some cases, students would have expected a stronger role from the lecturer to make sure that the students were really learning the topic.

Yasmin (2013) has aimed at finding ways of predicting the student categories that are at higher risk of leaving open and distance learning courses prematurely. According to the study, students who are married employed, or over 25 years old are most likely to drop out from the course. However, he suggests not excluding or discouraging those students at higher risk from taking distance education courses. Rather, the at-risk students should be leveraged for developing and refining policies and processes that effectively serve these students. In the study conducted at HAAGA-HELIA the students were adults and employed students, which were noticed to be the at-risk students already before the study. We agree with Dr Yasmin that the institution should develop new processes and polices to serve these students. In practise this means flexible teaching methods, providing different paths to be followed to gain the competences defined in the curriculum, but also constant and in person guidance counselling.

A study conducted by Street (2010) attempted to find factors influencing a student's decision to drop-out or persist in higher education distance learning. According to the literature review, several common themes have emerged across the research including significant external factors such as course factors and support, person factors such as self-efficacy and autonomy, and academic factors such as time and study management. Street has divided course factors into relevance and design. In our study personal factors were not studied, but it was noticed that the students are a heterogeneous group with different needs and requests relating to the teaching and learning. According to our research, external and course factors have huge importance. Instructional design choices were seen crucial from students' persistence of continuing studies. Also, course factors: support and guidance counselling were crucial factors from continuing studies point of view.

E-learning tools to study, guidance and follow up of studies can benefit students' graduation, but the tools cannot replace a personal guidance counsellor. Interactive eLearning materials that would make it possible for the student to study at their own pace and when they have time were regarded as beneficial by interviewees. In addition to that, mobile solutions can benefit some of the students in their studies, but there was also a group of students which felt that mobile solutions are totally appropriate for them. We can see that the adult students are a very heterogeneous group, and their needs and preferences vary a lot. This means that more individual learning paths with alternative ways of carrying out their studies should be available. When developing the study offer for adult students, the time efficiency and independence of time and location should be given high priority. However, keeping up the motivation needs human contacts, personal guidance counselling, peer student meetings and flexible teaching methods. E-learning can be utilized to provide efficient learning possibilities, but also to utilize interaction with guidance counsellor and peer students.

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