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The Tutoring Influences in Distance Education at El Oro Province Ecuador

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Abstract: El Oro province undergoes a high rate of student's withdrawal from distance courses offered by the local university. The distance education model gives for granted that the regular teachers are proficient for remote tutoring. This research attempts to reveal the state-of-art of this educative model in a provincial university. The study focused on a quantitative-qualitative explorative approach to determine, whether, if withdrawal is more frequent in introductory courses or not. Among the main causes for withdrawal were found: (1) the naive of learners in high education programs, (2) the inconsistency of the university proposals (academic and administrative) and; (3) the most important, the deficiencies in remote tutoring.

Keywords: *Ecuador, distance education, remote tutoring, students' withdrawal.*

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Introduction

In the last decades, since the starting-up of the convergence between telecommunications and Information Technologies (IT), this fusion made a huge impact on society codes and behaviors. The incorporation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) into educational contexts have triggered substantial changes in the way for doing things: *e.g.* the possibility of distance education that brought a variety of study possibilities and is gaining impetus day after day (Arnaiz, Lopez & Prendes, 2013; Cuadrado, 2011). IT applications focusing on virtual learning have empowered people to undertake remote courses and build-up their own study choices. However, the most important is the fact that distance education appears to be the answer for the democratization of higher education in Latin America (LA) because it can meet the people`s claims to eradicate inequity in work and living opportunities. Deplorably, on the other hand, the predatory corporate act for privatization of the public education ("Education Reforms") that claims inefficiencies in the public systems is a latent threat in LA countries, the corporative education represent a modern ongoing super-colonialism more intrusive than the colonialism experienced in the last two centuries and that controls ICT, frameworks, infrastructure and knowledge networks that can disempower local education modalities (Dourish & Mainwaring, 2012; Mawere & Van Stam, 2015; Van Stam, 2017). Despite these dangers, education policies for high education in LA including Ecuador appear to neglect of virtues of distance education for granting the access to free education for poor young people: single mothers; unskilled workers and persons deprived of a college education. Thus, ICT advances should not become a new means of excluding people with disabilities from education benefits or other discriminatory practices (Samant, Matter & Harniss, 2013). Despite the fact of potential benefits, distance education offered by provincial universities encounter obstacles that include a large number of learners from different backgrounds and insufficient remote instructors. "El Oro" province represents an example of a contrasting reality: a high enrollment besides the existence of a high rate of student withdrawal from distance courses. Distance education at El Oro Ecuador is highly demanded by students due to academic and non-academic reasons, between the non-academic there are the flexibility in calendars and timetables, punctuality to check on family and work duties, not limits for geographic distance compared to physically attending the classrooms, the people aging or physical handicaps and diseases that do not permit the learner's free movement. Among academic reasons are the curricular update, the teaching quality and the university`s prestige. However, despite the apparent advantages of virtual learning, many students who have enrolled in distance courses were not able to complete the classes.

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Theoretical Framework:

Although the introduction of the ICTs is slowly taking place in Ecuadorian education, in the last decade have occurred marked changes, not only in the teaching methods but also the contents and strategies and in the didactic resources that are available to the teachers to perform modern instruction (Cabero, 2006). The World Wide Web (WWW) makes possible structural changes in the learning environments (from physical the attendance to classroom to a simple virtual connection): lecturing beyond the traditional classroom implies a "quantum leap" in the way of teaching and learning. For this reason, ICTs have attracted the attention of universities and its application has spread rapidly distance education can be defined as the use of the internet resources to offer solutions that can improve knowledge and educational services (Rosenberg, 2001). About the Web for learning and teaching, Roberts (2003) recognized the following aspects: 1) the Web can be used as a source of subject information, to promote a sort of interface between the learner's own knowledge and modern information; 2) the Web can be used independently, or by other learners or the teacher, for individual, self-learning; and 3) the Web can be used for group analysis, decision making and dialogue. Virtual learning creates collective classrooms where both learners and instructors, shape their own comprehension spaces. In Ecuador, distance education has been used at a very low scale with high costs, however, recently its practice has been encouraged. Now ICTs are valuable tools for learning and have produced paradigmatic changes in educational practices, such as open access to materials and contents, the coverage of syllabuses and most important the correct curricular accreditation of courses. These changes have deeply affected the structures of educative institutions and the roles of teachers and learners. It can be stated that distance education concerns two huge transitions in educational theories: first of all, there is an information transformation from a teaching approach focused on the learner and its presence in the classroom; and secondly, there is a transference from a paradigm based on printed materials to new channels of technological diffusion, progressively faster, eclectic, oral and visual and, above all, multidirectional (Martel, 2004).

Computer literacy of learners and teachers. Online courses demand from the learner not only to possess his technological tools but also to have key personal qualities such as discipline, motivation, computer skills and autodidactic talent, understood as the ability to achieve learning without the presence of a teacher or other personal support, or classmates. If these elements are not present, the most likely result will be withdrawal from the online courses. Similarly, on the tutor side, inadequate IT skills may contribute to his student`s withdrawal. In order to succeed in both cases, there must exist an interactive and communicative environment where the education can be constructed, applied and evaluated. Otherwise, these attempts would end up being an ordinary mechanism of information delivery. Learners dropout from distance courses is a generalized problem in Ecuadorian universities that offer this study modality and triggers signal alerts (Escanes, Herrero, Merlino & Ayllon, 2014; Hart, 2012). The dropout occurrence may be a social-educative phenomenon that should be approached in a holistic, comprehensive and multidisciplinary way; a single factor can not determine the learner's behavior, it is most likely a combination of personal, circumstantial and institutional factors (Berge & Huang, 2004). Consequently, the online instructors must keep into consideration whether his performance contribute to mitigate the motives that cause the learners to withdrawal from distance courses or not.

The role of remote tutors. A regular teacher can not mandatorily be an online instructor, not matter his pedagogical skills and lecturing experience. The importance of qualified and engaged classroom facilitators is recognized in distance education programs by researchers (MacGregor & Atkinson, 2002; Spencer, 2002; Wang, 2008a). Distance teachers (indistinctly called also tutors) may acquire modern tools to accompany his learners in distance education and technological skills with a wide and solid pedagogic character; in order to gain the category as virtual tutor (Marauri, 2014). The tutor`s computing skills must work to solve space and time barriers; however, his personal qualities such as lack of social and communicative skills; or troubles related to the age differences and antagonist beliefs with his learners could be relevant obstacles (Giner, Muriel & Toledano, 2013; Martinez-Clares, Perez & Martinez, 2016).

In short, the functions of virtual tutors comprise four main areas: (i) Pedagogical: in a virtual environment, the instructor must plan, organize, guide, be a counselor, an evaluator and moderator of the process. The tutor should also be a promoter of group discussions and private conversations with each student, and must be able to elaborate relevant and meaningful didactic materials, as well as to encourage contributions from the rest of the participants; (ii) Social: the tutor should be interpersonally skilled, able to create cooperative and collaborative learning environments, polite and respectful between each other; to raises the learner's motivation and at the same time there must create an inclusive environment for everybody where the cognitive and interactive differences are accepted between all participants of the virtual course community; (iii) Technical: the tutor should have knowledge and skills in the use of technologies to achieve teaching-learning. In addition, he should facilitate the necessary change of paradigm in order to attain the desired impact and; (iv) Administrative: the tutor should establish guidelines and norms of behavior regarding the objectives of the debates, the theoretical and practical routes to lead to the instructive performance. (Fernandez, Mireles & Aguilar, 2010; Valverde, 2010). Additionally, to assign class responsibilities and homework, but most important for the Ecuadorian context the correct evaluation of results and learners' notes. Tutors who are committed to online services must approach their own instruction as co-learners, side by side with their students that share the same virtual situations. Thus, the changes in the dynamic of the teacher-student relationship may lead to a useful

constructivist philosophy. Evans et al. (2007) suggest that a tough approach to distance education involves demanding tutoring strategies (co-learning) to empower the learners for build their own means into personal forms of education.

Methodology

Research Goal

The study focused to obtain views from learners during distance courses offered by the local university. In this context, the research aimed at the analysis of the factors involved in the withdrawal phenomenon and how tutoring can influence it. The researchers anticipated getting understandings to improve the delivery of distance education at El Oro province, Ecuador.

Participants

The study surveyed 1120 learners selected randomly from a total of 3208 students giving a 35% representative sub-population of learners enrolled in introductory, intermediary and advanced courses during the years 2016 and 2017. The questionnaire was distributed to participants via online. Confidentiality was guaranteed throughout the process.

Sample and Data Collection

In the pursuit for explanation models for the analysis of factors that contribute to the dropout from virtual courses, there were applied generic models for traditional education such as sociologic, psychological, organizational, economic and collaboration types. A modification of the procedure by Escanes et al. (2014) was applied for using nonparametric taxonomy of factors that cause the high rates of dropout from distance education. These factors were divided into four large groups:

1. Factors associated with the characteristics of the distance education model: insufficient tutoring and institution technical-administrative failures.

2. External learner factors: characteristics of the learner and his environment determined by his original context such as conflicts between course schedules and home issues (family support and domestic economy).

3. Learners experience in high education: since the basic conceptualization of the education system (autodidactic learning instead of attending classes system): there were expectations incongruences, distance education was perceived as “easier” or “less demanding”; the problems with the new study habits and rhythms.

4. Private individual factors: Insufficient motivation and predilection to class guided learning and age interpersonal barriers leading to discouraging aspects.

Analyzing of Data

A quantitative-qualitative approach was adopted in the data gathering from interviews and questionnaires to students of Machala Technical University (UTMach). The survey to learners comprised the following questions:

1. Why did you choose Distance Education as a learning alternative? (Select only one option)

a) Institution’s distance ___

b) Economic factors ___

c) Physical disability ___

d) Workloads ___

e) Family duties ___

f) Curriculum updating ___

g) Teaching quality ___

h) University’s accreditation ___

2. In the course level did you enroll?

Introductory ___ Intermediate ___ Advanced ___

3. Did you complete the course? Yes ___ No___

4. If your answer was NO Please answer: why did you withdraw from the course?

(mark 3 reasons)

Lack of tutoring support ___

Lack of technological support ___

Delayed response to queries and/

or technical problems ___

Lack of course organization ___

Lack of time to complete the online tasks ___

Little time flexibility ___

Little curricular flexibility ___

Little family support ___

Economic problems ___

My expectations were not satisfied ___

I did not understand the instructions for the virtual activities ___

The virtual learning style did not fit my study habits ___

The virtual tutoring system did not fit my study habits ___

I failed several tests ___

I lost my motivation in the virtual course ___

4. Did you receive tutoring support during the course?

Always ___ Sometimes ___ Never ___

Statistics

The data gathered from the survey were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative data analysis served to calculate descriptive statistics and made used to create tables and figures. Nonparametric comparisons were used to prove significant differences. Selected learners (n=1120) were interviewed for interpretation of the tutoring influences, thereafter, the data obtained was computed for a *Chi-square* independence test.

Results

A list of factors that contribute to withdrawal from distance courses where summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Factors that contribute to withdrawal in distance education.

Factors	Number	%
Characteristics of the educative model		
Insufficient tutoring and technological support	418	54.1
Delayed response to queries and/or technological problems	432	55.9
Institutional technical and administrative failures.	260	33.6
Little curricular flexibility	47	6.1
External learner factors		
Insufficient time accomplish the assignments	55	7.1
Living routine inflexibility	45	5.8
Learners experience in high education		
Fails to meet the expectations	70	9.1
Misunderstanding the instructions for the activities	113	14.6
Unable to adapt to the virtual tutorial	399	51.6
Poor academic results – Unsuccessful exams notes	145	18.8
Lack of an adequate organization and/or study method	145	18.8
Private individual factors		
Motivation losing for distance courses	98	12.7

Elaborated by authors; Source interviews

Hermeneutic and documentary analysis was applied to describe the context of higher education at El Oro Province. It was demonstrated that “generic models” did not suit entirely the prototypical distance education. Concerning interviews and questionnaires, the data show that learners from introductory courses have as high 75% of withdrawal followed by intermediate and advanced courses with lower withdrawal percentages.

Table 2. Students withdrawal from distance education according to course level.

Course level	n=ind	Retention	%	Dropouts	%
Introductory	597	153	25.6	444	74.4
Intermediate	322	112	34.8	210	65.2
Advanced	201	82	40.8	119	59.2
Total	1120	347	31.0	773	69.0

Elaborated by authors; Source interviews

Table 2 shows only 31% of students of the total enrollment population completed the virtual courses successfully and the withdrawal percentages were lower in advanced courses (58.2%). According to the views of 1120 learners, there were deficiencies in the tutoring work; only a few of 27% of the students interviewed considered that they have had the necessary virtual support, compared to 40% who never received support.

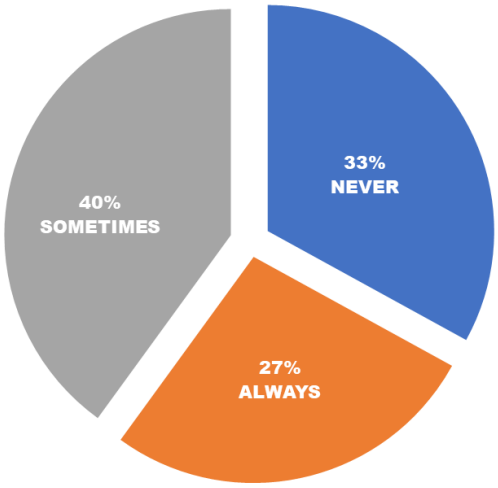

Figure 1. The tutoring support during distance courses according to students interviews.
(Elaborated by authors; Source interviews)

The *Chi Squared Test* (Table 3) shows that learners were not satisfied with the remote tutoring.

Table 3. Chi-square Independence Test. Distance education tutoring influences.

Tutor's support	Dropouts	%	Course finishers	%	Total
Always or sometimes	371	48.0	304	87.6	675
Never	402	52.0	43	12.4	445
Total	773		347		1120

Note. X^2 =156,9 p=0,0

Discussion

The "generic models" did not suit entirely the distance education model of UTMach since its application revealed intractable obstacles from the basic conception of the educational system such as the academic and structural bases of the courses, tutor-learner relationship mediated by technological support and the synchronic conception that overcomes space and time limitations. The distance education model most likely has not been properly implanted as in other countries generic models were applied correctly (National Institute of Education in Singapore) in other aspects of ICT integration: based on pedagogical, social and technological components. The results of the Singapore study indicated that the pedagogical design of the learning environment was correct, flexible, easy to access and navigate (Wang, 2008b). The principal motives for choosing remote courses by learners were non-academics reflexing a complex socio-economic home context, those represented the higher withdrawal percentages. The few numbers of learners that made their choices based in academic factors most likely gained good results from the remote courses.

The introductory courses with high demand seemed not to meet the expectations of inexperienced learners and unfamiliar with autodidactic learning. Which results incongruously due to the fact that introductory courses should be the entrance pathway to the advanced remote course. It seems that inexperience brings naive learners to erroneous judgments such as distance courses are easier and less demanding than traditional courses. It was evident that study habits required for remote courses require a high level of cognitive independence.

Other key factors that had a relevant impact on the learner's withdrawal from intermediary distance courses were related to lack of tutoring support. At this point, it is necessary that virtual instructors to know the learner´s aptitudes,

his preferred learning way and rhythm, as well as his main difficulties, etc. The learners' appreciations of "sometimes" have support by tutors seems to be insufficient and most likely a discouraging factor. Although withdrawal from distance education is a multifactor phenomenon, it appears that the lack of support by the remote tutors is the most significant cause for withdrawal. Based on their involvement in the virtual class Serdyukov (2015) for online tutoring suggested a mediator who is on a par (co-learner) with students, artfully engaging and interacting but without direct management (reasonably active) is preferable to the other two types (a leader - excessively active or a facilitator - reactive/passive). Thus the apparent insufficient tutoring influences on learners' withdrawal can be matched by unsatisfied high student expectations by learners (particularly the naive ones).

As a result, the expected benefits of distance education that include courses flexibility and learning, choices, quality teaching by remote experts, better curriculum marketability still are to come. Barbour (2015) mentioned effective rural distance education designed to provide rural students with courses that are difficult to offer due to low levels of student enrollment and lack of specialized teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. For effective tutoring the teaching performance must be enhanced through IT and pedagogical training. Unfortunately, in higher education institutions with small online course the administrative and technical support will offer less support for instructors and require faculty members and teachers to do more work (a waste of time, a known claim among Ecuadorian teachers) and acquire additional competency skills to mediate the online learning. In Ecuador there are few studies regarding remote teaching and their training requirements for online teaching, the views from learners pointed to this direction for improving the remote courses and probably diminishing withdrawal rates. Since the establishment of the UTMach, the administrative systems have been subject to relevant changes, in terms of pedagogical practices. Similarly, in other countries, administrative bodies have not been doing enough to revolutionize learning and teaching in Universities. Consequently, the universal vision, and mission of high education can not be fulfilled (Livingstone, 2015). Something that remains to be diagnosed properly in UTMach is the student satisfaction: referring to the learners perceptions of the extent to which their learning experiences were helpful and enjoyable, student satisfaction is a critical indicator of instructional quality and related to cognitive learning outcomes (Kuo, Walker, Belland, Schroder, & Kuo, 2014). Another important missing factor could be the lack of student interest and loss of motivation. No learned wants to do a task he may view as worthless. Neither does he want to do an activity, if he believes that he has no chance of succeeding (Lorenzo, 2004).

Conclusion

In conclusion, distance education in El Oro Province Ecuador seems to encounter various impairments: the introductory formation courses were the highly demanded, however, also had a greater dropout percentage and; the main factors with significant incidence on withdrawal were those related to the learners' inexperience and the characteristics of virtual education. It seemed that if the tutoring support is insufficient, the student motivation disappeared leading to withdraw from the virtual courses. However, distance education can not be seen as the simple interaction between learner, computer and software. It must consider integral enhancements of curriculum development, teaching quality and administration function. The three main components appear to be failures in the UTmach. As the research also revealed the occurrences of administrative-academic fails to supervise the requirements for the student's enrolment in virtual courses. These preliminary findings, on the withdrawal causes in distance education must be taken into consideration by politicians, educative authorities and university administrators in order to design pertinent strategies to boost the pedagogical fulfillment, technical proficiency, social and administrative qualities required by virtual teachers. The institutional amendments of these circumstances most contribute to reduce or eradicate the high rate of student's withdrawal at El Oro Province, Ecuador.

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