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# **COMBINING STATISTICAL, QUALITATIVE AND EVALUATIVE RESEARCH TO DEVELOP A REGIONAL RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION STRATEGY IN LINE WITH INSTITUTIONAL MISSION**

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This paper describes the way in which a regional recruitment and retention strategy can be informed by research at different levels, through combining information from statistical, qualitative and evaluative studies. The case study is the development of a strategy following the move of location of the Open University's London Regional Centre from a suburban area of London (West Hampstead) to a more central location (Camden Town). The decision to move to this area was based on a wish to be located within an area of diversity, in terms of age, income and ethnicity, in line with the mission of the OU UK to reach out to all parts of the community; though our remit is to the whole Greater London area. In addition, Camden Town is extremely well served by public transport, in the form of both underground and overground trains, and buses.

Once settled in Camden Town, our task was to find ways of optimising our presence and also of developing a recruitment and retention strategy, within a context, common to all HE institutions in the UK, of a growing need for cost-effectiveness within constrained resources. We had become immediately aware of the impact of an accessible Centre with a large and welcoming reception area, with materials and PCs with access to our Internet sites. 'Drop-ins' – unheralded visits from students and prospective students – immediately doubled in number and have been steadily increasing over the past year. This was particularly interesting to us in the context of an ever increasing level of E-learning in the University, and a huge growth in the number of students and enquirers using the Open University's Learners Guide on the Web ([www.open.ac.uk/learners-guide](http://www.open.ac.uk/learners-guide)) to obtain guidance, select a course of study ([www.open.ac.uk/courses](http://www.open.ac.uk/courses)), and register for it; and confirmed our experience that prospective students still like to talk to an adviser personally if this option is made available. We had to make plans to deal with this, through a year-round series of Open Wednesdays and Saturdays; visitors at other times, though seen if possible, could be directed to these events, as well as callers into our Website.

In addition to these open sessions at the Regional Centre, we also set up a programme of events in partnership with and at prestigious institutions in London, notably the Science Museum, the National Maritime Museum, the Natural History Museum, Shakespeare's Globe, and two events at a National Trust property, Sutton House to celebrate the annual Adult Learners' Week, and Black History Month.

We also had a range of support strategies to encourage students to develop their learning skills and make informed decisions, such as learning skills workshops; a language support programme; exams support; and course choice meetings. These complemented our on-line resources and telephone and Email support.

There are resource implications for all these events, and it has been important to us to know for the future their real impact, and to look at a range of information to decide how to plan our activities for the coming year. In addition, we wanted to ensure that everything possible was being done to ensure that these prospective students were well supported as they prepared to enter the University. It is notoriously difficult to get really accurate information clearly relating cause and effect, so it is helpful to use a range of research sources to do so. We have employed three main sources:

- Qualitative research using focus groups to identify what factors affected our students and how we could most effectively ensure progress from initial interest to successful study;
- Evaluation of all activities, for example, of our open events to ascertain how many attendees went on to register as students and remained with the course;

- Quantitative data, for example, on ‘hot and cold spots’ within London, that is, where we have more or fewer enquirers who continue on to become students, and how that relates to other statistical data, for example, on overall participation in Higher Education, on ethnic mix, or on income.

Each of these research approaches has its own benefits and limitations. Evaluation is essential to all activities for two main reasons: to ensure that an activity is meeting the needs of its clients in an inevitably changing context in the best possible way, and to ensure cost-effectiveness. Our experience shows that both small ongoing evaluation – sometimes the quick and simple one page asking participants what was good, what was bad, and what change they would like to be made - can be effective and easy to implement. Sometimes a much more thorough-going evaluation is needed, for example, to assess a large service rather than a one-off activity. On the whole, however, in-depth identification of needs is unlikely to be achieved through these processes.

Quantitative research can be extremely helpful in providing insights into trends and indeed revelatory in its impact, in a way that very small scale studies may miss. The impact of diagrammatic results can be powerful. It can, however, be misleading without further investigation; its main benefit is to highlight trends in a neutral fashion, which need further investigation if real understanding is to be achieved and appropriate action taken as a result.

Qualitative research can achieve a depth and subtlety which cannot be seen through statistics alone. However, it can also lead to false conclusions if the study is not scrupulously designed, and even then a sample can turn out to have unanticipated biases. Focus groups can be revelatory but also flawed.

Our experience is that each of these modes of research can provide a check and balance for the others. This is what we have hoped to achieve through our use of this mix of approaches.

An important example of qualitative research was carried out under the auspices of a major retention project within The Open University UK in 2001. Although London has consistently had a lower retention figure than any other UK region, we could not easily identify any particular pattern of performance that might explain the phenomenon or link it directly with London. The major part of the project used focus groups to try to discover whether students’ own qualitative perceptions of the experience of studying in London might reveal any significant factors suggesting that the conditions of urban life make successful study more difficult for students in The Open University UK. The summary below is drawn from the report on the project carried out and written by my colleagues Margaret Johnson (Assistant Director, Teaching, Guidance and Learning Development), Rosemary Mayes (Assistant Director, Student Services and External Development) and Brenda Stevenson (Student Services Manager, Advice and Support). (1)

A random sample of 200 students was selected. Selection criteria included gender, previous educational qualifications, and location. 4 focus groups were held, involving the 25% of the initial selection who had agreed to attend, of whom 90% actually participated. A standard format and topic guide was used for each group. The main study difficulties identified by students in all the focus groups fell into three categories:

- 1) **Those that suggested a clear link to London living conditions.** In this category three specific factors emerged strongly from all the groups, all to a greater or lesser extent related to work:
  - travelling time and conditions in London
  - long and often unsocial working hours
  - a high level of competitive pressure experienced at work.
- 2) **Those where a London link was arguable but less clear.** Issues in this category included problems relating to support from the Region, such as tutorial arrangements and relationships with tutors, and the difficulties often encountered by students trying to contact either tutors or the Regional Centre by telephone.

- 3) **Those potentially common to all Open University students.** This area covered the difficulties associated with the general support provided by the University and such matters as the structure of the academic year, specific course issues, and the whole range of individual personal problems that can arise.

Many of the difficulties of OU study identified by the students taking part in the focus groups were such as might be experienced by any OU student anywhere. There were, however, some factors, in addition to these and other common ones, that a substantial number of the focus group participants linked to the conditions of living and working in London. The most frequently mentioned of these were the amounts of time spent on travelling in London, even for relatively short distances, and, for those employed outside the home, long working hours and competitive pressure experienced at work. While none of these conditions individually are unique to London students, it could be argued that they affect more London students more consistently. Several of the focus group participants spoke of coping with all three in combination and the words 'pace' and 'pressure' were used in this context.

These factors were also clearly seen as exacerbating others that might be common to all. So for example, the respondents who spoke of difficulties arising from the organisation of courses, such as the use of highly integrated multi-media components, found these more of a problem because of the length and physical constraints of their daily journeys on public transport.

Long hours of work and exhausting journeys have a knock-on effect on study patterns, leading, for some, to weekends and holidays having to be devoted to OU work and perhaps adding to the conflict between social and study demands and the strain mentioned on personal relationships. The few students who had understanding and supportive employers saw it as making a real difference and were very appreciative.

Accommodation and mobility patterns were also seen by some as a significant London factor: more frequent moves, more rented accommodation and, especially among younger people, more shared occupancy of houses and flats added to the difficulties of establishing stable study arrangements.

Open University UK courses are normally tutored by Associate Lecturers – discipline specialist teachers who work on part-time contracts for the University. Comments on the level and quality of Associate Lecturer and tutorial support provided by the Region included some very positive ones where tutors were felt to have been both accessible and helpful. However, there was also quite a lot of dissatisfaction, but it is difficult to determine the extent to which this might relate to London specifically.

However, links were again made between tutorial attendance and the difficulties of time, work and travel; the phrase 'struggling to get to a tutorial' was used in this context. The knowledge too that London tutors lead lives subject to the same pressures and difficulties made some of the respondents unwilling to 'bother' them in the evenings or at weekends thus perhaps cutting themselves off from some of the support that they might have called on.

For some students, a high level of on-line tuition or study was a difficulty. Students who spent the entire day working at a computer were reluctant to go home and log on again after a tiring journey, and were unable to use that journey to study if their course was mainly on-line.

In conclusion then, the focus groups suggested a set of factors that, working together to the extent found in the daily life of Londoners, may be significantly contributing to the London region's poor retention performance, but also gave us valuable information about the needs of our students in London and the factors we must take into account in planning activities and support for them.

The second research tool we use is that of internal evaluation of all activities, embedded in the work of the teams which organised them. This has enabled us to evaluate the cost-effectiveness of each activity, to make improvements, and to reduce costs where possible. The example I will give is that of an evaluation of our Open Wednesday drop-in sessions. This was carried out by my colleague Trixie Carey, Senior Student Services Assistant, Courses and Enrolment. (2)

At these drop-in sessions, attendees registered on arrival and provided either an Open University Personal Identifier, if they had already contacted us, or a postcode. Many who attended wanted to look at brochures, materials or our Website (we have 3 PCs with access to our Internet sites available in our reception area) and did not register on the day, but were given relevant help at the session. In addition some students withdrew from unsuitable courses after talking to an adviser. Some sessions were nearer to final enrolment dates than others; there were inevitably higher registration figures at and after those events.

Using Management Information from the University's database, the evaluation followed up all attendees who had already formally enquired, 7 months after the course start date, and found that 57% of them were still actively studying at this stage – 237 out of 418 potential students. This conversion rate from enquiry to active studentship so far into the course is exceptionally good. In addition, evaluation questionnaires were sent or handed to all 418 students, and there were a number of suggestions for improvements: for example, more materials were requested, and more advisers were needed to reduce the waiting time (an average of 18 minutes – a result of the much greater than expected attendance which has continue to grow steadily from an average of 45 to - since this evaluation - 95 at the last meeting).

Finally, we have recently been looking at some initial London-related findings of a mapping project funded by the University's Widening Participation programme. The project is based on data maps which show participation down to local polling districts, in comparison with population data sets. We have been exploring the potential use of mapping in marketing, planning and partnership activities. My colleague Dr Judy Stone, working with the London Regional Collaboration and Partnerships Team, has analysed the data for us. (3). Some interim, fairly tentative indications are that enquiries to the Open University UK per 1000 are fairly consistent across all parts of the city; and that 0.5% of the population in London is registering for an Open University course. This is surprisingly even regardless of the degree of deprivation of the area. However, at the very local level we were able to identify some 'cold spots', where we have fewer enrolments, and the areas where we have the highest numbers of enrolments from young students and those from ethnic minorities. We are still considering the use we can make of this information and how we can refine it.

So what impact have these three examples of different kinds of research had on our strategies for recruitment and retention? Very briefly, it has shown us that, despite the increasing use of the University's Websites for advice and information, we do need to continue to capitalise on our excellent location, since, given the problems of travel in London, students and enquirers find it convenient to get to. However, once they have arrived, the service needs to be fully geared to their needs, with appropriate materials and fast access to an adviser, and this may require a shift in our priorities for use of staff time. We still have work to do in achieving the right balance between Web based, telephone, Email and face-to-face advice and guidance.

The advice given also has to provide a realistic indication of the workload involved in studying with the Open University and guidance on strategies for managing time and studying efficiently, and these have to be reinforced by the provision of learning support once enquirers become students, which we also have to prioritise. An important recent initiative is a Web-based resource for OU students ([www.open.ac.uk/learning](http://www.open.ac.uk/learning)), to help them get the most out of their studies, with links to the Learners Guide and other Websites. It includes advice on getting started, study strategies, planning studies, personal and career development, and moving on.

We also have to help our Associate Lecturers, through focused staff development, make the best use of their time, understand the importance of their role in student retention, and make strategic interventions (for example, with a welcoming introductory letter) when it makes most difference to students. This includes guidance on the use of on-line conferencing, tuition and Email, which has raised a number of questions recently about the impact of these media on student support.

Finally we hope to find out where Londoners (especially those we want to attract because of their low participation in higher education) aren't becoming Open University students, why this is so, and what we can do about it.

There is no single source of research which can provide all the answers. However, there are clear indications that a combination of qualitative, evaluative and statistical research (especially if carried out by active practitioners, as in all my examples, who are able to draw the most relevant insights from the research outcomes), can help to put together a practical and effective strategy for recruitment and retention. In this case study, we have taken advantage of a large scale University-wide project to find high level information about trends in London. We have been able to set this alongside our small qualitative Retention project and our own evaluations of regional activities, but inevitably our lack of control over the larger project has resulted in a less integrated set of overall data. Our hope is that in future we may be able to design an overarching project, ideally year on year, combining these three approaches, in such a way that they interlink and are fully complementary.

### **References:**

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