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Achievements and Attrition: Investigating an Online Course

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Abstract		**Case Studies**

Research has shown that dropout rates for online courses are significantly higher than those for classroom-based learning. A number of valid reasons have been given for online learners not completing courses but it remains a challenge for online providers to engage, motivate and retain their students. This paper investigates one provider delivering one specific course online by analysing the completion rates of all learners over a period of three years. Learners start at times convenient to them and have a deadline of one month to complete on this open-access course, which is structured and tutor-supported. The course results in an accredited Ofqual-approved qualification, and learners need to deliver a short teaching session via a live Teams or Zoom session, which is evaluated by a qualified teacher. Learners come from a wide range of sectors including beauty, retail, dentistry, life sciences, manufacturing and care. All are in fulltime employment, therefore fall within the category of part-time adult learners, a group that often has high attrition rates due to their daily commitments. Findings from this study show that completion rates for the online course (93.6%) compare favorably with in-person classroom teaching (95%). These findings also show an exceptionally high rate of completions compared with other types of online courses. Tutor support, a structured course design, professional certification and learner aspiration all point towards ways in which learners can be engaged and motivated to achieve.

Keywords: online delivery; attrition rates; adult learners.

1. INTRODUCTION

Online courses are often regarded as second-best to classroom-based tuition. However, more than twenty years ago, there were predictions that online learning would soon become more popular than conventional classroom learning (Horton, 2000; Valentine, 2002) and it was even suggested that traditional learning would completely disappear (Shah & Jain, 2016). These clearly did not take into account the reality of online learning. Although many educational establishments used online learning during lockdowns, there have been mixed reactions to its success. The more negative aspects may partly be due to the lack of preparation on the part of schools and teachers in integrating technology into their normal curriculum, but it also highlights the difficulties in challenging traditional teaching practices.

One of the disadvantages of online learning has been high attrition rates and consequent low completions (Shaikh & Asif, 2022). Dropout rates of online learners compared with in-person learners creates a problem for providers wanting to offer more flexible and accessible courses (Bowden, 2008; Delnoij et al, 2020; Frioriksdottir, 2018; Muljana & Luo, 2019). Online courses are especially beneficial for adult learners, who often have fulltime jobs and family commitments (Wasserman, Sparks & Azimi, 2024). It is therefore important to understand behaviours of adult learners studying online.

As technology continues to evolve and more people are becoming familiar with online education, the expectation is that there may be some improvement in retention rates. Much of the focus of existing studies on attrition and completion has been comparing online courses with classroom-based courses. However, there is little information on comparing retention rates of different kinds of online courses. This paper assesses the completion and attrition rates of 233 students embarking on a one-month online course to gain a regulated initial teacher training qualification. The course is a UK-based qualification relating to the Level 3 Award in Education and Training (AET) and equates to many international Train the Trainer courses. By taking a case study approach, this paper is able to provide real life evidence of working adults pursuing an online course that supports their ongoing development.

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Changing Attitudes

Since learners became more familiar with online learning through the necessity of providing education digitally when access to schools was not possible during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns, there have been a number of studies that show attitudes to digital or remote learning have changed. There may have been an increased willingness to consider online learning although this has not necessarily led to a change in behaviour. A study of 348 mainly teacher education participants by Habok and Nguyen (2024) showed that post-pandemic Hungarian students were more positive about using technology and recognise the benefits although they were also aware of limitations of a fully online course. A meta-analysis of nearly 10,000 students by Liu et al (2022) found that, although there was no significant difference in attitudes towards learning and performance between online and classroom learning, the vast majority of learners did not feel they had improved and were not satisfied with their online learning course. Negative attitudes towards online learning are shown to lead to poor performance outcomes (Baczek et al, 2021; Maqableh & Alia, 2021), and there is much academic evidence that perceptions of online courses being inferior and less valuable than classroom-based courses can result in higher dropout rates (Kauffmann, 2015; Rahmani et al, 2024; Shaikh & Asif, 2022). Much of the literature refers to higher education courses but across all online learning courses attrition rates have been consistently high over the past two decades (Hachey et al, 2023), despite changing attitudes towards the concept of online learning. Perceptions and actions appear to be a mismatch.

Factors Influencing Completion

The success of online learning relies on learners completing their course of study. There are a number of factors that may influence course completion, and the literature indicates there can be social, technological and motivational issues resulting in withdrawals (Bawa et al, 2016). To combat these requires understanding of the type of course, the quality of the learners and the course design and delivery. James et al (2016) also found that age makes a difference, with older learners more likely to persist (Shaikh & Asif, 2022). Shorter online courses are more likely to engage and retain learners (Padilla Rodriguez et al, 2020), as time can be a challenge for many working adults (Bornschlegl & Cashman, 2019; Willging & Johnson, 2004).

Fan and Lee (2006) carried out a study comparing two similar online courses at the Open University of Hong Kong: one had 91% completion rate and the other had just 46%. In their recommendations on improving retention rates, they suggested four approaches. One was to provide a pre-enrolment seminar setting out the exact requirements and expectations of the course, and then to provide extra support to weaker students once they had enrolled. Tutors should be encouraged to track student attendance and make personal contact with their students, thus building a relationship. There should be short-term achievable targets for learners and small rewards when they meet their target (possibly a letter of appreciation). Finally, any potential barriers should be removed, such as providing language support and ensuring there is a consistent course structure and presentation style. This study was particularly important as it highlighted differences between two online courses and did not attempt to compare online with classroom teaching and learning. Hachey et al (2012) revealed that learners who had never completed an online course before were highly susceptible to dropping out and that prior experience was a key factor in retention.

Human Tutoring

One factor that is consistently put forward as a deterrent to online learners completing their course is lack of interaction with a tutor. MOOCs (Massive Open Online Course) are programmes offered mainly from universities that are a way of opening up quality education online to large numbers who would not normally be able to access such courses. They are often free, although usually participants have to pay for a certificate of completion. Most of these courses provide videos and written materials and they are mainly used by people wanting to develop their knowledge or personal interests. Learner retention is one of the greatest challenges for MOOCs (Brown et al, 2015) and this has been determined as the lack of teacher presence and interaction (Gregori et al, 2018). Academic support has an influence on how learners perceive the usefulness and ease of the online platform and on the engagement of learners (Luo & Li, 2024). Given the need to improve interactions, some MOOCs have now started using artificial intelligence (AI) and chatbots to personalise their offering. A consistent theme in the literature highlights the role of human support in retaining students and enabling completions. Tutor quality and responsiveness are found to be key factors in motivating students (Nguyen, 2024) and even with MOOCs, using volunteers to provide some tutoring, the retention rates were improved by up to 15% (Aleven, 2023). This indicates the importance of involving human support in online courses.

Online learning requires intrinsic motivation as it can be a lonely experience; a study by Eberle and Hobrecht (2021) observed that a regular schedule for teaching and learning was important for students' motivation as this helped to keep them self-regulated. Without direct intervention from teachers, online learners find it difficult to keep on track and to stay engaged and motivated (Chiu, 2022). However, a study by Asanov et al (2023) found that teacher emails, encouragement messages and administrative reminders had no impact on student participation, although the sample was based on high school students and adult learners may respond in different ways. Adult learners highly appreciated the teacher's presence online in the form of feedback or direction, according to van der Stap et al's (2024) research. It is clear that online courses with tutor support are valued and have a role in keeping learners motivated.

Completion Rate Benchmarks

The average completion rates for MOOCs (Table 1) are calculated as ranging from 7% to 10% (Fu et al, 2021; Celik & Cagiltay, 2024), although there will be variations depending

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on the course. There have been different ways of determining completion and dropout rates as some calculate completion as earning a certificate (Jordan, 2015), the number of quizzes completed (Pursel et al, 2016) or the number of days active on a course (Xiong et al, 2015). However, the evidence appears to be on the side of very high attrition rates for MOOCs and other open access courses, despite introducing AI and chatbots or even volunteer mentors. Online learning in standard open access courses are often demonstrated by short in-house CPD offerings from providers which have limited support and automated quizzes for assessment of learning. These again have a low completion rate ranging on average from 10% to 20% (Table 1).

If certification is provided, there is more incentive to complete a course, although existing research tends to focus on certificates or badges offered by MOOCs, which have been found to increase retention (Sherimon et al, 2021). It is difficult to find accurate completion rates for professional certification, which is likely to be due to confidentiality on the part of providers. A website dedicated to online course information has estimated that certification showing professional development can raise retention rates to 30% - 45% (Webber, nd), which shows the impact of a reward (Table 1).

Where online courses provide support and coaching, there is also more chance of higher completion rates. Existing information is very limited and mainly focussed on higher education. A study by Simpson (2004) of students at the UK Open University found that any interventions from tutors needed to be sustained to achieve retention. Tutor autonomy is found to be an important factor as not all tutors are proactive in providing ongoing support, but Arhin and Ekow Laryea (2020) found that increasing tutor support resulted in improving student retention in distance learning courses by 42% (Table 1). Other studies have showed mixed results, but the quality of tutor support is clearly a significant factor. This is especially important for adult learners where content and activities need to be meaningful and where questions are quickly answered, all evidence that tutors are considerate of the limited time their learners have for online learning (van der Stap et al. 2024).

Selective cohort-based online programmes have a higher rate of success in retention and completions. All learners will start and progress together as a group and entry is based on prior qualifications or employer sponsorship. The format of these courses is highly structured and will include deadlines, live classes, and significant tutor interaction. Completion rates can be similar to in-person programmes, reaching 85% to 90% (Table 1), due to the structured support and the level of commitment.

Table 1 Benchmarking Completion Rates

Course Type	Typical Completion Rate
MOOCs (self-paced, no support)	7% – 10% (Celik & Cagiltay, 2024)
Standard open-access online courses	10%–20% (Webber, nd)
Certification / professional online	30%–45% (Webber, nd)
Supported / coached online courses	42% (Arhin et al, 2020)
Selective cohort-based online programmes	85%–90%

3. METHODOLOGY

The sample used was from archival data of learners at MKLC on a Level 3 Award in Education and Training (AET) qualification, an initial teacher education course often equated to Train the Trainer. This dataset consisted of 233 students who had started the online course since 2022. The course was designed to be completed within one month and individual learners could start at any time and work through at their own pace. If learners had not completed within their one-month deadline, they had the option of paying for an extension. Each learner was allocated a tutor, whose role was to guide them through the course and assess their online submissions. All learners were adults over the age of 19 and were working fulltime in a wide variety of different industries, including beauty, life sciences, care, dentistry, retail and manufacturing. No prior experience of teaching was needed. The course was fully online with tutors marking assignments and giving online feedback, usually within 24 hours, while learners then had to deliver a short, structured teaching session to at least two students in front of a qualified observer. This teaching session was delivered live using Zoom or Teams. Successful completion of the course resulted in an accredited and regulated (Ofqual) qualification.

Data were analysed by the date learners were given access to the online course and the date they successfully achieved the qualification. Those who did not complete within the deadline were highlighted as completions if they had extended the course dates and achieved. Further completions were those who had asked to be placed on hold due to unforeseen circumstances and then resumed their course at a later date. Learners who had not achieved were regarded as withdrawals.

Ethical approvals were not required for this study as the sources were archival, and dates were solely used for clarification of learner completions and withdrawals. Dates were not specified, therefore no learners could be identified by the dates they enrolled, withdrew or completed on the course.

4. RESULTS

The results show that of the 233 learners on the course, 211 completed within their given one-month deadline (see Table 2). All these completions resulted in certification. Five

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learners applied for extensions to their course to give extra time for them to complete. Two asked to be placed on hold due to extenuating circumstances and came back some weeks later to complete their course. A total of 15 students did not complete and withdrew from the programme.

Table 2 AET Course Completions

Status	Number of Students
Completed within deadline	211
Not completed	15
Extended beyond 1 month	5
Completed late	2

In terms of percentages, total completions including those extended beyond one month (2.15%) and late completions (0.85%), came to 93.6%, with on-time completions at 90.6% (see Figure 1). There was a 6.4% attrition rate. Compared to benchmarks, this is an exceptionally high rate of successful completions and aligns closely with strong face-to-face classroom-based courses as can be seen in Figure 2.

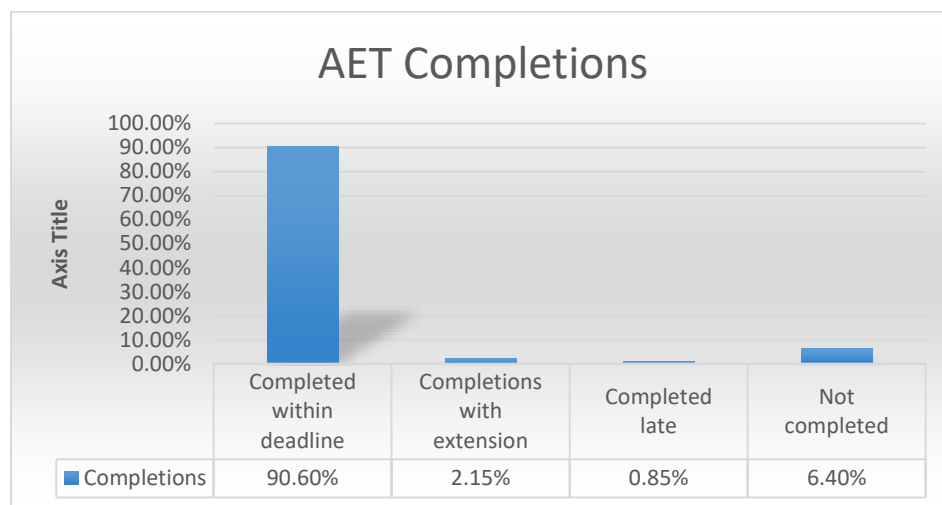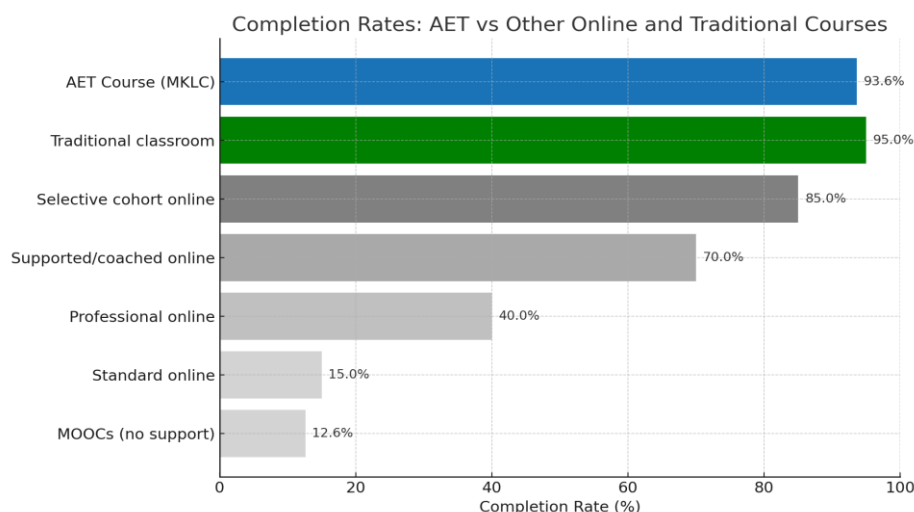**Figure 1 Course Completion Status**

Figure 2 shows a comparison of performance of the AET and completion rates with traditional classroom courses and other types of online courses. The retention or completion rates may differ according to how they are assessed but they generally indicate a successful course completion.

Figure 2 Benchmark comparisons

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The highest completion rates are for traditional classroom-based courses at 95%. For the online courses, the average completion rate is 85% for a selective cohort, where all learners attend an online course together and are usually employer-sponsored. The AET has 93.6% completions, which is higher than a selective cohort. Supported online courses have a 70% completion rate, which is where it was anticipated the AET course would be placed.

5. DISCUSSION

The AET course is fully online, open-access, and targeted at part-time adult learners in full-time employment. Learners enrol and start at their own convenience and this particular course is time-bound as it has a one-month deadline from access being given to the online platform. There are no live classes, but tutors are allocated to individual learners and there is also additional support provided where needed. It is this strong support system that appears to be key to the high completion rates. Whereas open access and flexible courses usually have a higher dropout risk (Table 1), the tutor feedback and encouragement on the AET course keep learners motivated and engaged. The regular and rapid feedback from tutors shows that sustained interventions from tutors are important for retention (Simpson, 2004). Such ongoing communication reduces feelings of isolation when working through a course as an individual, and which have been found to be the limitations of MOOCs (Gregori et al, 2015).

The professional certification for the AET course is also clearly beneficial, although this is difficult to quantify as there is little information available on achievement rates for online courses offering accredited qualifications. Webber (nd) does offer some estimates but it is more likely that the structured format of the AET course keeps learners on track as they are able to chart their own progress throughout. Eberle and Hobrecht (2021) found that regular schedules helped with self-regulation, which is important for adult learners who have so many other distractions. In addition, the one-month deadline provides learners with a target they feel is achievable, which Fan and Lee (2006) recommended for retaining online learners.

It is also important to understand the aspirations of the learners. When learners have a personal interest in a subject and it aligns with their professional need, there is clearly more motivation to succeed. The AET course is interesting because learners are developing skills that will enable them to teach their own skills and knowledge to others. They therefore have the interest in their own subject plus a professional need to learn how to teach effectively. Although the AET attracts part-time adult learners, where attrition rates are traditionally high (Brown, 2020), the eventual reward of gaining a valuable skill that will boost their future career is clearly giving the AET learners the motivation to complete the course.

6. CONCLUSION

While there are high attrition rates associated with online courses, the AET course at MKLC has not followed this pattern and its completion rates are very close to courses delivered in classrooms. This illustrates that the mode of delivery, whether classroom or online, does not solely determine completion rates. The quality of the learner support, the course design, and the flexibility provided are key factors in retaining students in online programmes and offer an effective approach for adult learning. As this is a case study of one provider and one course, it cannot be generalised but understanding ways of delivery that can retain online learners is important for all learning providers.

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