

Preprint

Inkelaar, T and Simpson, O (2015)
"Challenging the 'distance education deficit' through 'motivational emails'" 'E-Learning and the
Future of Distance Education': Open Learning 30, (2) pp. 152-163 | DOI:
10.1080/02680513.2015.1055718

Challenging the 'distance education deficit' through 'motivational emails'

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Abstract

Graduation rates in distance higher education are low compared with full-time higher education - often less than 20% compared with full time UK rates of around 80% - the 'distance education deficit'. In the University of London International Programmes the difference between the face-to-face graduation rate of 61.5% and the distance version at 15.7% is particularly marked.

A previous paper in Open Learning reported evidence that 'proactive motivj f

The UK Open University

The figures for the UK OU are derived from an analysis of students entering in 1997 since it can take up to eleven years for a cohort of students to move through the system. More recent data from the UK OU for 2001 entry students (Open University Student Statistics Team, 2010) suggests that its graduation rate has actually fallen further more recently to around 14%, so that its distance education deficit may actually have increased (Figure 2).

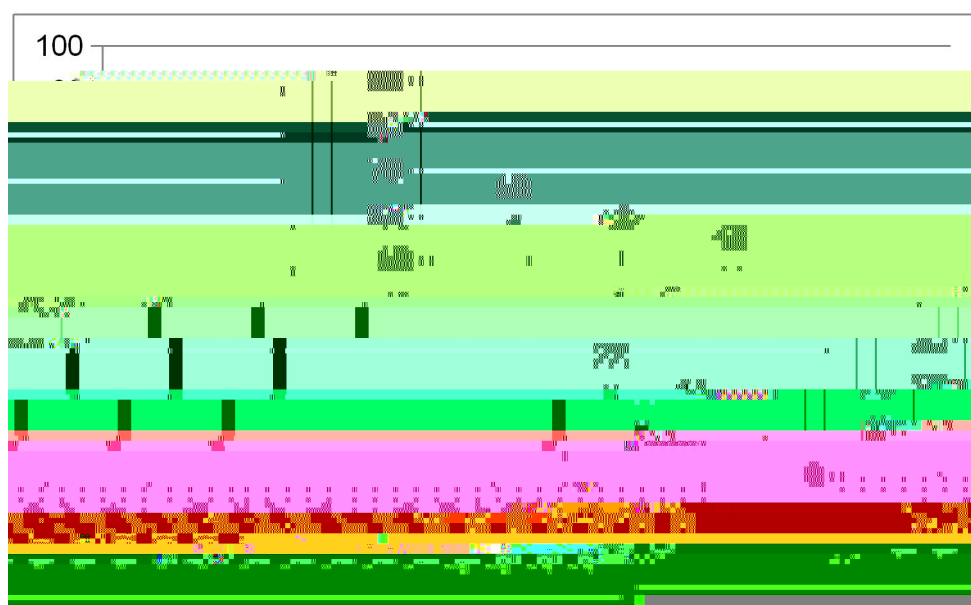


Figure 2 Graduation rates for the UK OU by year of entry

The previous paper suggested that this level of non-graduation does not just represent a large amount of wasted effort and resource on the part of both students and institutions, but may also lead to subsequent harm to the students involved. Bynner (2001) found data for full-time UK students who had dropped out which suggested they may have a higher probability of experiencing depression, unemployment and (for women) higher levels of violence from their partners, than either students who successfully graduated or who never went to university at all. Whilst this might not apply to distance students to the same degree and in some cases depression may be a cause rather than a consequence of dropout, another consequence of dropout for both kinds of student will certainly be increased indebtedness due to having a student loan. Student dropout in distance education is not just an undesirable phenomenon - it is a multi-million dollar and pound problem.

The University of London International Programmes (previously the University of London External System)

The University of London International Programmes has more than 50,000 students studying in 150 programmes in the UK and abroad. Students can study in two modes – at an approved institution face to face, or entirely at a distance. Figure 1 shows the graduation rates on the face to face version and the distance version of the International Programmes, which are 61.5% and 15.7% respectively, a ‘distance education deficit’ of more than 45% points.

The 'Motivational Emails' Project

There could be a number of reasons why the distance education deficit occurs. This paper is not an attempt to evaluate those reasons, but to see if an inexpensive intervention might reduce the deficit.

The project is based on findings from various sources (Visser 1998; Chyung 2001; Case and Elliot 1997; Simpson 2006, Huett *et al.* 2008; Twyford 2007, and others) all of which suggested that retention could be increased by the use of 'motivational messages' delivered in various ways - postcards, letters, phone calls, emails and so on. We decided that the use of email might offer a particularly economical way of delivering such motivational messages in distance education¹.

'Motivational emails'

There are now a large number of w

It isn't possible to give the texts of all the emails - a full list can be found on www.ormondsimpson.com. Figure 3 shows one example 'Finding the time when getting behind' since one of the perennial problems in distance education is students complaining that they have run out of time.

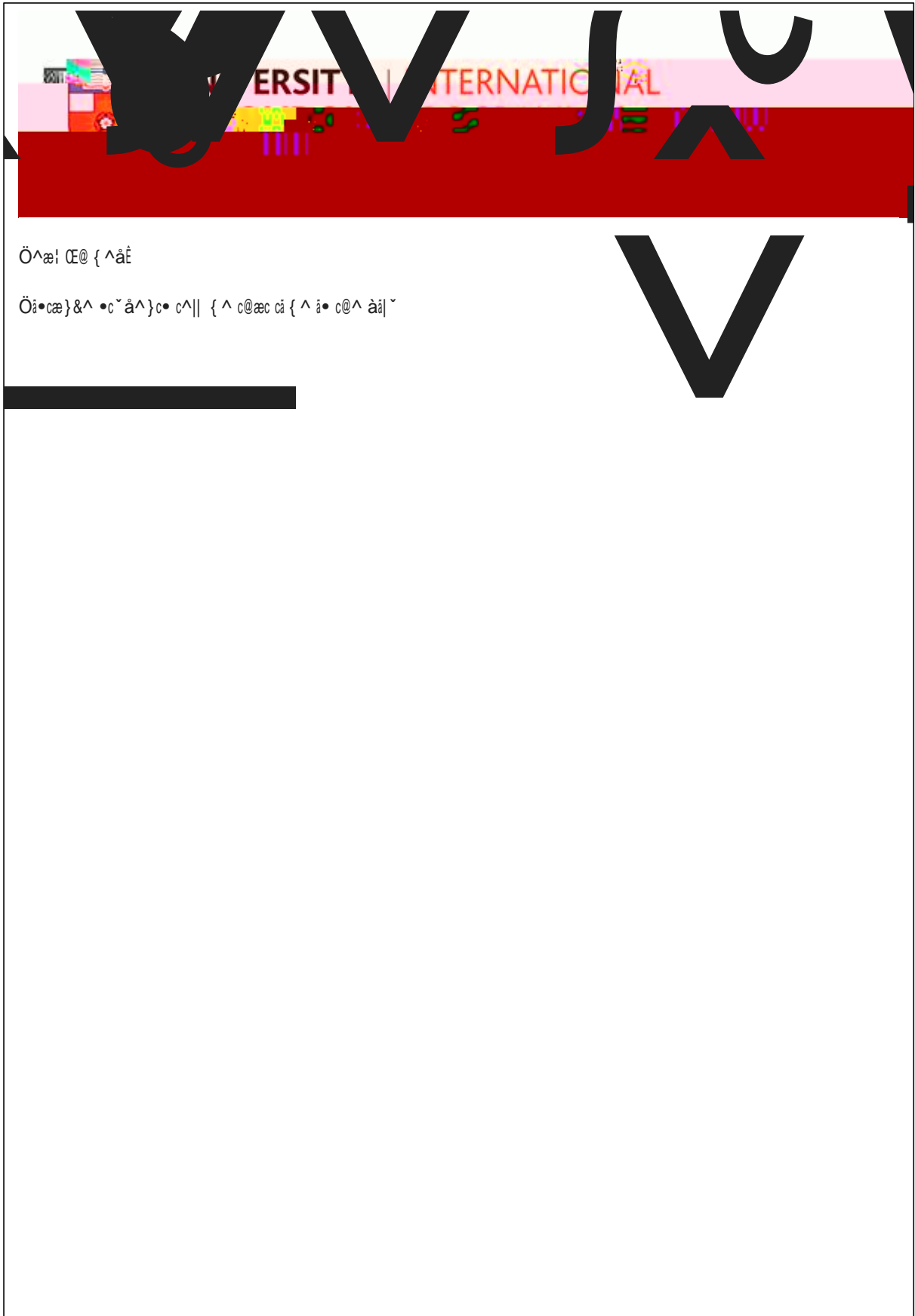
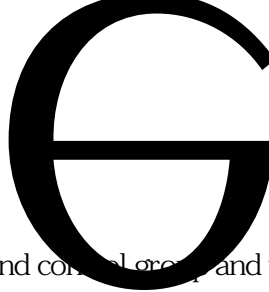


Figure 3 'Motivational' email - 'Finding the time'



Methodology and practical aspects

Students were randomly divided into an experimental and control group, and the motivational emails were sent to the experimental group. We were

A simple review of all emails sent by participants to the study.tips@london.ac.uk mailbox included in the final large-scale study suggests the emails were generally well received. Of 52 received from participants in direct reference to the tips, 30 (58%) contained positive comments relating to the project. No emails contained any negative references to any aspect of the project.

Comment

Obviously 2.3% is not a substantial increase in retention. Such a difference could have arisen by chance. If that was the case then perhaps a repeat of the project using a more sophisticated approach as outlined in the section 'Taking the Project forward' is needed.

Nevertheless there are a number of reasons to be interested in the result:

The use of an experimental and control group may give this result a more substantial validity than studies which report the results of questionnaires or make historical comparisons

The effect is the result of quite a small intervention

It suggests the possibility that more and larger scale interventions might produce greater

2b

Taking the project forward

There are a number of ways of taking the project forward. The emails could be modified in the following ways

Interactivity via feedback

The emails could be made more interactive by adding in links to short online questionnaires which allow students to respond

Conclusion

Our conclusion is that it may be

References

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