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Commentary:

Improving student retention and success: Realising the (im)possible

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Student retention, dropout, stop-out and attrition have always been on the research agenda of educational researchers, policy makers and institutional management teams (Braxton, 2000). Since the early theoretical and empirical models on student success (e.g., Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1972), research into factors impacting on student success and retention has not significantly changed student success and retention patterns. In 2006, Vincent Tinto wrote that "...most institutions have not yet been able to translate what we know about student retention into forms of action that have led to substantial gains in student persistence and graduation. ... Leaving is not the mirror image of staying. Knowing why students leave does not tell us, at least not directly, why students persist" (Tinto 2006, pp. 5-6).

It is one thing to be able to theorise student retention and success, and/or to establish correlation between single or a combination of factors to positively impact on student attrition rates, and it is quite a different scenario to fully understand the complexities of students' learning journeys in the nexus between their individual loci of control, socio-economic circumstances, prior learning experiences and self-efficacy, on the one hand, the impact of institutional character and culture, disciplinary contexts, as well as institutional efficiencies and responsiveness. Making understanding and predicting the success of students' learning journeys more difficult, is the fact that *both* students

and institutions are impacted upon by macro-societal factors/events, outside their control. Examples of such events include the Covid-19 pandemic that severely impacted on both institutional efficiency and responsiveness, as well as on students' self-efficacy and resources, which may already have been under duress. Should a student suddenly be confronted by losing his/her job, or getting sick, it impacts adversely on his/her chances of dropping or stopping out. Examples of macro-societal factors that impact on *institutions'* efficacy and responsiveness, include, inter alia, changes in government funding, skills' shortage in specific disciplinary areas, etc.

Student retention or retention are therefore much more than 'just' the effort of students, and/or the responsiveness of institutions, but emerge from a range of (often) mutually constitutive factors (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011).

It is also important to acknowledge that though student success and retention in (open) distance learning institutions share a number of characteristics with the broader higher education field, the very nature of open and distance education changes how students learn, and the various factors that impact on both students and institutions (Kember, 2009; Simpson, 2006). It is general knowledge that student retention and success in open distance learning contexts is lower than in residential institutions and, understanding and addressing student dropout and attrition in open distance learning contexts is, most probably, even more complex due to, inter alia, different admission requirements, greater flexibility and traditionally a mature student population who have different aspirations and obligations than traditional face-to-face students (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011). Due to the reality that open, distance learning delivery is a *unique* form of educational delivery with distinct characteristics and a unique mandate (Peters, 2013), we therefore cannot and should not compare student success in public open distance learning contexts with for example, residential and/or private education. The unique mandate of open, distance learning has been described by Otto Peters as having the "humanitarian task of providing access for *all* learners, with special focus on those disadvantaged by distance, by precarious economic conditions, by belonging to discriminated minorities, or by being

disabled" (Peters, 2010, p. 32). How does one compare this humanitarian mandate with the admission requirements and costs of, for example, public and private higher education? Woodley (2004) therefore suggests that we should stop pathologizing student drop-out and attrition in open, distance learning contexts.

Despite the unique character, admission requirements, and student profile, open, distance learning institutions have a moral and fiduciary duty to care for (Prinsloo, 2015, 2019). Due to open, distance learning's unique mandate to reach the unreached and the marginalised, open, distance learning institutions have an even bigger responsibility to ensure access *with* success. We simply cannot justify providing access to thousands of students if we do not optimally support these students, knowing that their success is correlated to our operational efficiencies, the appropriateness of our pedagogies, and responsiveness of our support.

While the use of technology has always been part and parcel of ameliorating the impact of the transactional distance between students and the delivering institution (Moore, 2013), the increasing digitalisation and datafication of higher education in general (Williamson, Bayne & Shay, 2020), and open distance learning in particular, especially on the African continent, opens up a number of opportunities but also challenges (e.g., Prinsloo, 2020, Prinsloo & Kaliisa, 2022a, 2022b). Learning analytics emerged in 2011 as a distinct research focus and practice and refers to the measurement, collection, analysis, and use of students' digital data in service of understanding their learning and the contexts in which their learning occurs (Siemens, 2013).

Despite the fact that internet penetration on the African continent is, in general, much lower than in the rest of the world, there is ample evidence that an increasing number of individuals will have access to the internet, with its affordances and risks. In Nigeria, for example, is currently at 38%, and by 2027, expected to grow to about 60% (Sasu, 2022). As higher education and open, distance learning institutions prepare graduates for an increasingly digital and datafied world, it is foreseen that online learning will become part and parcel of all African

higher and open, distance education. As such African open, distance learning institutions will increasingly have access to not only more student data, but also greater varieties, nuances, granularity, and velocity of student data (Prinsloo & Kaliisa, 2022a).

Traditionally, open, distance learning institutions measured students' academic progress in formative and summative assessment opportunities. Feedback to students on these assessments allowed students to make informed decisions regarding how to proceed. For much of students' learning, the very nature of distance education resulted that teachers often felt that they were 'teaching blind' or 'teaching in the dark', while students may also have felt that they are not exactly sure they will be sufficiently prepared for the final, summative assessment. Students were therefore, often, 'feeling their way' through courses, relying on teacher feedback, additional support (formal and informal), as well as peer and family support.

As open distance learning institutions on the African continent move to digitally supported, internet supported, internet-depended and fully online educational delivery, the opportunity to have a better sense of students' engagement with course materials and progress through the course becomes a huge opportunity not to be missed. While collection student data has always been part of education, whether in the form of registration data, assessments, engagement, surveys, and interpersonal interaction, blended and online environments provide institutions with more insight into students' learning behaviour and learning patterns. As such, institutions now have the opportunity to identify students who may be falling behind much earlier than before and intervene appropriately and ethically (Prinsloo & Slade, 2016).

There are, however, a number of caveats that we should consider as African higher and open, distance learning ventures into collecting, analysing and use of student data for the purpose of understanding students learning and the contexts in which their learning occurs:

- Very few African higher and open, distance learning institutions may have robust digital infrastructures, analytical skills and a holistic understanding of understanding and using student digital data. As such, institutions are vulnerable and

open for exploitation by commercial and Edtech venture enterprises offering one-stop solutions (Prinsloo 2020; Prinsloo & Kaliisa 2022a, 2022b).

- Digitising and datafying operations and specifically teaching and learning needs a critical and context-appropriate policy environment providing guidance to data collection, analysis, and use (Slade & Prinsloo, 2013).
- Students' learning journeys comprise much more than the data we are able to collect, analyse and use – and as such, the findings from learning analytics should always be treated as pointing institutions to better understand and predict student learning. As learning analytics focus on improving students' learning, learning analytics has to find ways to involve students in the interpretation and use of their data. Institutions are but custodians of their data and should be transparent regarding what data are collected, for what purposes and who will have access to the data under what circumstances.
- A lot of student data that African higher and open, distance learning institutions have about students are still analogue and as institutions move increasingly blended and online, we have to find ways to combine analogue and digital data to improve students' learning.

Recently, the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) embarked on an institutional journey to embrace the potential of learning analytics in order to improve students' learning. It is a courageous and visionary project that will be the first last scale adoption of learning analytics in an open, distance learning context on the African continent. As most of the theorisation and operationalisation of learning analytics have, up to now, taken place in the Global North, the adoption and institutionalisation of learning analytics by NOUN will contribute not only to student success at NOUN, but also to contribute to the learning analytics as research field and practice. At the end, however, the final criterion will be to what extent the adoption and institutionalisation of learning analytics at NOUN impact positively on teaching and learning, as well as student retention and success rates.

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