

# Developing Capacities to Maximize Female Student Retention and Resilience for Success in National Open University of Nigeria

By

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## Abstract

Despite the existence of Directorate of Learner Support Services in National Open University of Nigeria, many students are unaware of the services and/or do not use them. The majority of students who consider leaving the University do not seek help from the Directorate. Female students particularly, fall in this category in National Open University of Nigeria. This substantiates research findings which argue that students who need help the most are the least likely to seek it out. As a matter of ethics, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution has an obligation to take steps toward retention and support of their students to become more engaged and more effective learners, and to build in them resilience. This paper examines ways of developing capacities to expand female student retention and building resilience for their success in National Open University of Nigeria. It combines student survey data, qualitative research with students, and analysis of institutional data to disseminate information. It finds that to maximize female student retention and build resilience for completion of programmes admitted for, student and staff capacities could be developed through engagement nurtured within mainstream activities. This will not only engender a strong sense of belonging but will also build in the female students, confidence and resilience to complete their study. Further, the University Management needs to nurture a culture of belonging and creating the necessary infrastructure to promote female student engagement, retention and success.

**Keywords:** Mainstream, Engagement, Retention, Resilience, Belonging and Monitoring.

## Introduction

The Bologna Process designed to create a European Higher Education Area, in its communiqué of the 2009 Conference of European Ministers in charge of higher education, declares that “Access into higher education should be widened by fostering the potential of students...and by providing adequate conditions for the completion of their studies” European Commission (2009). Tinto’s (2008) position regarding the obligation and social responsibility of higher institution to ensure student success apparently corroborates the declaration issued in the report of the Bologna Process. Tinto argues that access without support is not opportunity. In other words, institutions admitting students must put in place a strategy to retain and support them to completion. Tinto had stated elsewhere that the first principle of effective retention programs and, therefore, assuring student success is “institutional commitment to students” (Tinto, 1993). He observes that: “It is a commitment that springs from the very character of an institution’s educational mission”. Student success, according to Horn (2006), “is more a function of institutional commitment”. While high retention and graduation rates indicate a university’s actualization of its mission, low graduation and high attrition rates not only reveal institutional problems in meeting the needs and expectations of its students, but also depict symbolic challenge in accomplishing institutional goal (Voigt and Hundrieser, 2008).

Retention and graduation rates are of interest not exclusively to accrediting bodies, and education policy makers, but also to students and their families. For several decades, retention experts have claimed that an institution’s ability to demonstrate student success and its ability to attract and admit new students are intertwined (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh and Whitt, 2005). This claim is substantiated by the stance of Randi Levitz and Lee Noel (1998) who maintain that universities have recognized the principle that the success of an institution and that of its students are indivisible. Thus, students’ persisting to completion of their educational goals is a key gauge of student success, and therefore institutional success. In effect, student success statistics are commonly regarded as primary indicators of institutional performance. Researches have confirmed that university campuses with higher retention outcomes are engaging in sound educational practices (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). To ensure high retention outcomes and student success, therefore, institutions of higher education try to engage in sound educational practices using various strategies. These include establishment of Student Support Centre to provide a range of ‘professional services’ designed to attract, admit and retain students in the institution, and develop academic, personal and professional capacities.

National Open University of Nigeria (hereafter N.O.U.N.) is the only single mode higher institution in Nigeria providing open and distance learning (ODL). As part of its commitments to ensure student retention, foster their potential and provide adequate conditions for the completion of their studies, the University, right from re-inception in 2002, established a Directorate of Learner Support Services. However, the number of female students graduated by the university hitherto is disproportionate with the number enrolled since inception. The National Open University of Nigeria currently glories in female students' population of about 290,700 from 2009 to 2022, but has only graduated between 2012 and 2022 a total of seventy-six thousand two hundred and fifty-six female students (76,256) (NOUN, DMIS 2022).

This study is positioned within the domain of retaining N.O.U.N. female students for successful completion of their programs. It examines ways through which capacities could be developed to maximize female student retention and building their resilience for success in National Open University of Nigeria. Improving female student retention and developing their resilience for success in N.O.U.N. may mean that female students will use this as a factor in their choice of the institution. The following questions therefore become necessary: In which area/s could the functionality, efficacy, cost effectivity, accessibility and flexibility of education provided by N.O.U.N. be better appreciated if the population of graduated female students is incommensurate with the population enrolled? What factors are responsible for N.O.U.N. female students' attrition? Are N.O.U.N. female students fully aware of the services of the Directorate of Learner Support Services and do avail themselves of/with its opportunities to exploit its benefits? How might capacities be developed to improve female student retention, and build resilience in them for graduation in N.O.U.N.? How might the University Management nurture a culture of belonging to promote female student engagement, resilience, retention and success?

Discussion is based on Tinto's (1993) student integration model, which identifies academic and social integration, institutional and goal commitment as key variables contributing to students' decisions about withdrawing. This is complemented by Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement, which found that student persistence is often related to levels of student activity and contact with the institution and peers. Both of the models essentially, put student engagement and belonging at the heart of improving student retention, resilience and success. Their efficacy has been confirmed by many reports, including *Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education...* (Thomas, 2012).

### **Student Retention and Success in Higher Education**

Scholars of higher education defined the term 'retention' based on their own theoretical perspective. According to Levitz (2001) 'retention' refers to successful completion of students' academic goals of degree attainment. Tinto (1993) asserts that it is students meeting of clearly defined educational goals. Noel and Levitz (1985) view 'retention' as the by-product of student success and satisfaction. Astin (1984) in his own delineation of the term emphasizes 'engagement' and 'belonging'. He posits that 'retention' is the degree of direct involvement of students in the academic and social life of their institutions. Bean's postulate on the construct of 'retention' aligns to a very large extent with Astin's. Bean argues that 'retention' denotes students' successful academic and social integration into the college community (Bean, 1980).

Retention related activities often focus on providing a campus environment where students can achieve their goals of completing academic programs. It is the outcome of how many students remained enrolled from first semester to the last in a particular program. Graduation is therefore the outcome of how many students within a set complete and/or graduate from an institution. Hagedorn (2005) suggested that retention is an institutional-level measure of success. In the study of retention, there is a thin line between returning and non-returning students. However, Jeff Hoyt and Bradley Winn (2003) asserted that there exist several distinct sub-populations of students who do not stay to graduation. These sub-populations have been categorized into drop-outs, stop-outs, opt-outs, and transfer-outs.

Tinto (1993) defined 'Drop-outs' as: "previously enrolled students who do not complete their intended degree program". 'Stop-outs' refer to students who begin with a plan of study, however, for some reason, withdraw and leave for a period of time, and then re-enrol in order to complete their degrees (Hoyt and Winn, 2003). 'Opt-outs' are students who leave their respective institutions because they have achieved their particular goal. Their goal may not necessarily have been to complete a degree program (Bonham and Luckie, 1993). 'Transfer-outs' refers to students who embark upon their educational careers in one institution and, then, before they obtain their degree, leave and enrol in another university (Bonham and Luckie, 1993). Biswas and Mythili (2006) have identified reasons why students drop-out from Open and Distance Learning system as:

1. Lack of time due to family or work commitments.
2. Lack of academic support.
3. Loss of interest.

Chyung (1998) and others observed that learners in ODL who dropped out often did so because they were:

- a) Displeased with the learning environment.

b) Discrepancy between their professional/personal interests and course structure.

To prevent students from falling into these sub-populations who do not stay to graduation, different universities put in place various mechanisms.

#### **Mechanism for Female Student Resilience, Retention and Success in National Open University of Nigeria**

As a means of increasing the number of graduates, traditional and open and distance learning universities have developed programs specifically designed to improve retention rates through orientations and students support services. Nonetheless, student retention rates in open and distance learning system have always been. This seems to have been recognized as part of the consequences of the difficulties of the distance learning environment and open entry (Simpson, 2004).

In NOUN, the situation is not different due to flexibility of the learning mode. Students are allowed to stop-out: They are allowed to register this semester and next semester; they might disappear only to appear in another semester. This explains why though the population of female students enrolled in the Open University since 2009 has up to now risen beyond 290,700, but the number of active students changes from semester to semester. The flexibility of the learning mode is part of the reasons why female students stop-out, hence the disproportionate number of graduated female students with the number enrolled. Other sub-populations of female students who may not stay to graduation in NOUN include 'drop-outs', opt-outs and transfer-outs. Some of the female students, especially married ones drop out due to lack of time due to family or work commitments.

NOUN offers a variety of programs to assist in increasing student retention and graduation rates. The University's website directs students to many of the institution's services, which include those provided by the Directorate of Learner Support Services (DLSS). While not all of the services are directly related to increasing student retention and graduation rates, they are ultimately related to academic success. The focus of the DLSS is to help learners maximise the gains, hence it is poised to helping learners go through their education with the most minimal difficulties, and to supporting all categories of learners. It is committed to getting students develop a sense of belonging to the university, cultivating a sense of direction and becoming self-motivated to pursue their study.

To achieve these goals, the Directorate created Human Capacity Development Unit to enhance student capacity. The Unit is charged with the responsibility of helping students to develop their capacities towards success and graduation (<http://nou.edu.ng/page/dls>). Unfortunately, many students do not exploit these services. Majority of students, who consider 'leaving' the University do not seek help from the Directorate. This has grossly affected N.O.U.N. female students' graduation rates since 2012 as shown below:

#### **Enrolment and Graduation of Female Students between 2009 and 2022**

Year	Enrolment	Year	Graduation
2009	4359	2009	-
2010	2839	2010	-
2011	21922	2011	-
2012	15003	2012	1225
2013	32714	2013	2211
2014	47935	2014	2952
2015	35090	2015	5324
2016	22347	2016	6187
2017	19318	2017	9838
2018	18241	2018	8580
2019	21008	2019	12343
2020	15891	2020	4472
2021	21933	2021	10182

2022	12100	2022	12942
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>290,700</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>76,256</b>

(Data Source: Directorate of Management Information System, National Open University of Nigeria 2022).

The analysis above does not only reveal, the University's challenge in meeting the needs and expectations of its female students, but also in accomplishing the University's goal. Therefore, to retain large population of female students with resilience for completion of their studies, capacities could be developed through engagement nurtured within mainstream activities.

### **Developing Capacities to Maximize Female Student Retention and Resilience for Success in National Open University of Nigeria**

Student retention experts, including Tinto and Astin have theorized student engagement and belonging to improve retention and success of students in universities. Tinto identifies academic and social integration, institutional and goal commitment as important variables contributing to students' decisions about leaving a university. Astin similarly, recognizes the role of student involvement and confirms that student's persistence is often related to levels of student activity and contact with the institution and peers.

It is difficult to know which students are likely to withdraw on the basis of their entry characteristics alone; mainstream approach reaches all students, especially those who may be thinking about withdrawing. Through engagement nourished within mainstream activities, student capacities could be developed to improve female students' persistence, progression and graduation rates. 'Mainstream' principle suggests that approaches to improve student retention and success in university, should be embedded into mainstream provision to ensure all students participate and benefit from them (Tatum and Rasool, 1996). This will improve the retention of some students and contribute to maximising the success of all students. Particular attention should be focused on female students who opt out, with additional support provided if necessary. The principle of 'monitoring' states that the extent and quality of students' engagement should be monitored, and where there is evidence of low levels of engagement, follow-up action be taken.

At the level of individual, 'belonging' recognises students' subjective feelings of connectedness to the institution. This involves feeling that one belongs in a social milieu (Vallerand, 1997: 300). It refers to the extent to which students feel personally accepted, included, and supported by others in the school environment (Goodenow, 1993a: 80). It is often characterised by regular contact and the perception that interpersonal relationships have stability and affective concern (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Therefore, interpersonal relations between female students, and between students and staff, are indispensable for satisfying the need of N.O.U.N. female students to create in them a sense of belonging to the University.

Students' engagement is the time and effort they devote to activities that are practically linked to desired outcomes of university education and what the university does to induce students to participate in these activities (Kuh, 2009: 683). Chickering and Gamson (1987) summarised the evidence of student engagement into seven effective practices in undergraduate learning. These include student-staff contact, active learning, prompt feedback, time on task, high expectations, respect for diverse learning styles and co-operation among students. These practices, if developed, improved, encouraged and fostered among female students of N.O.U.N. would enhance their persistence, resilience, progression and graduation rates.

Krause (2011) argues that learning occurs within and beyond the formal curriculum; that it involves developing connections within the university as well as building on prior learning, along with learning that takes place in the workplace and community settings. Social engagement has also been found to create a sense of belonging and to offer informal support through interaction with friends and peers. Female students could be engaged at different levels, from engagement in their own learning to engagement in pastoral and professional development services.

The majority of female students who consider leaving do not make use of the University's support and professional services. There is some evidence that services situated in the academic sphere are used the most (Bentley and Allen, 2006; Dodgson and Bolam, 2002; Eaton and Bean, 1995). Specific services in the case of N.O.U.N. should include: financial advice, careers information, guidance, and disability services to build resilience for female students' retention and success.

### **Engagement in and beyond Academic Sphere**

Pre-entry and induction activities should particularly facilitate female students to build social relationships with members of staff, and engage them with information that will enable them assess whether the course is relevant to their current interests and future aspirations. Thomas (2002) and Wilcox, Winn, and Fyvie-Gauld (2005) have pointed to the importance of academic and social engagements, as the role of friendship can be appreciated by

students when they face difficulties. The academic sphere can play a central role in facilitating female students to develop these friendships, especially for those who spend less time on campus because they live at home and/or have work and family commitments. Technology could also be used to facilitate social networking between female students and staff to meet, engage and interact.

### **Developing the Capacity of Female Students to Engage**

The capacity of students to engage and staff to offer an engaging experience must be developed, thus a partnership approach in which everyone is responsible for improving female student belonging, resilience, retention and success is required. This suggests that N.O.U.N. should work with female students to develop their capacity to engage effectively in their university education experience. This entails developing students' knowledge and understanding about the benefits of engaging across the different institutional spheres, and expanding their skills to do so. Female students need to be educated about the value of widespread engagement in their higher education experience, and encouraged and facilitated to engage in appropriate opportunities, and given the necessary skills. The University should provide mechanisms to recognise and reward staff who excel at positively engaging female students.

### **University Management and Coordination**

The University should take responsibility for nurturing a culture of belonging and creating the necessary infrastructure to promote female student engagement, resilience, retention and success. This includes:

- building female students' engagement, retention and success into the corporate mission and plan, and aligning the University policies towards this priority;
- providing leadership that explicitly values female student engagement throughout the whole university and across the student life cycle;
- the development of a coordinated, evidence-informed strategy, underpinned by the monitoring of programmes and of female students' behaviour and with explicit indicators of their success.

### **Conclusion**

The paper examined ways, strategies and mechanisms through which capacities could be developed to improve female student resilience, retention and success in National Open University of Nigeria. The paper advocates a mainstream approach to improving the resilience, retention and success of the female students, to enable them maximise their success. This could be boosted by paying attention to the ways in which female students integrate, through a range of engagement indicators. Whatever strategies are employed to boost their engagement, must be situated within the academic domain. To improve female students' resilience, retention and success in National Open University of Nigeria, the following could be explored:

- Identification of and response to female students at risk of leaving.
- Improving the communication and relationship of female student with staff.
- Helping female students make more informed decisions about their course.
- Improving social integration.
- Fostering motivation and helping female students understand how the programme can help achieve their future goals.
- Encouraging female students' active engagement with the curriculum.
- Ensuring there is good communication and access to additional female student support.
- Monitoring female students' engagement.
- Staff accountability for female student resilience, retention and success in their areas.

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