

Re-thinking the Retention of Students in Part-Time Distance Learning

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Introduction

Much of the current retention literature and theory does not accurately reflect or investigate the situation experienced by part-time distance learners. In this paper we review the current body of academic writing in the field, assessing its relevance to the situation experienced by part-time distance learners. We discuss the specific needs of part-time distance learners and the additional challenges that they face compared to full-time and campus based learners. We review existing models for retention (Tinto,1975; Yorke and Longden, 1999) which are predicated upon the full time campus based experience. By embedding the characteristics and challenges for part-time distance learners, we propose a new theoretical model by which to understand and demonstrate the uniqueness of the part-time distance learner's position when engaged in Higher Education.

What is Distance Learning?

“Higher Education has traditionally been conceived as an arrangement whereby students attend particular institutions for the purposes of receiving teaching through immediate contact with the members of academic staff and support in their learning from libraries and other services.” Richardson (2000, page 1).

Many Institutions now offer distance learning options to enhance the flexibility of study and promote wider access to Higher Education Programmes, particularly in light of the Leitch report (2006). Richardson (2000, p1 - 13) notes that distance learners do not physically attend institutions or necessarily

have face to face contact with members of academic staff and that they “engage in learning at a physical distance from their teachers and their institution (and, often, from one another) and typically at a temporal, social and personal distance as well”.

Categorisation of Student Circumstance

Typically, retention initiatives either target:

- a) a particular group or groups of students. Split by either degree cohort, stage of study, or social background for example.
- b) individual students.

Within these two approaches it is important to further analyse the characteristics of the group or individual concerned in order to understand the factors at work and how they are likely to impact upon attrition. Within this paper we will focus on the needs of the individual.

Thomas, et al, (2002, page 51) concur, suggesting that “certain groups of students do face different problems and have needs which require a focused response, this can take the form of specific projects, ..., or the adaptation/development of existing services.” Our experience concurs that by understanding the different categories to which a student belongs profoundly different types of intervention can be found to be appropriate.

Our examination reveals that Distance learners generally exhibit the following characteristics:

- a) Non-traditional
- b) Part-time
- c) Mature

Each of these three categories, when approached from the point of view of statistical analysis and academic research highlight differences in their

responses to learning and the learning environment than full-time and campus based learners.

a) Non-Traditional students

By their very nature part-time distance learners are all “non-traditional students”. The definition of a non-traditional student was clarified by the National Audit Office (2007, page 54) as a student having one of the following characteristics,

- from low participation neighbourhoods (on basis of postcodes);
- with a disability;
- who are mature;
- **studying part time;**
- from households with a low income;
- from socio-economic classifications 4-7 (‘working class’);
- from an ethnic minority
- who are the first in their family to enter higher education.

b) Part-time students

There are substantial numbers of part-time students studying within the Higher Education system within the United Kingdom. The National Audit Office (2007, page 5) list that in 2004-05 50,000 part-time students began the first year of a first degree. In the same year there were 256,000 full-time, first-degree students. Of those original students only 79.6% of part-time students continued to their second year of study with 91.6% of full-time students continuing.

Completion rates for part-time students are very hard to obtain, the National Audit Office (2007, page 5) did not calculate expected completion rates for part-time students because of the “lack of consistent course structure” and the “inherent flexibilities in the patterns of study and time taken to complete a

course” (2007, page 14). This problem of adequately ensuring accuracy of data in respect of part-time students is a common theme in retention research. Mantz Yorke’s study of withdrawal reasons in 1999 struggled to analyse the part-time category citing a “difficulty in determining whether the recipients of surveys had actually left their programmes” (2004, page 20).

However, there are still some useable and interesting statistics available. For instance, to take account of the problem of identifying withdrawn students as opposed to determining that a student is actually following a longer route to completion, the National Audit Office (2007, page 14) did report that 47% of part-time students had completed and 44% of part –time students had left university without completing their studies 6 years after commencing. This leaves a further a 7% of part-time students unaccounted for; the writer presumes either continuing or “lost”.

As well as acknowledging the categorisation of “non-traditional” and “part-time”, we have also incorporated into our modelling on the other common characteristic that matches the majority of our part-time distance learners – Mature.

c) Mature students

In 1999, Yorke undertook a significant study of withdrawal reasons from UK Higher Education Institutions. He reported that mature students withdrawing early from open and distance learning did so for different reasons than younger students. (2004, page 21).

He reported major differences within mature respondents in general:

- one and a half times more likely to make the wrong choice of field of study
- much less likely to be dissatisfied with accommodation
- were much more likely to experience financial difficulty
- suffer from the demands of employment whilst studying

- more likely to have dependants.

Significantly, with part-time mature respondents he found:

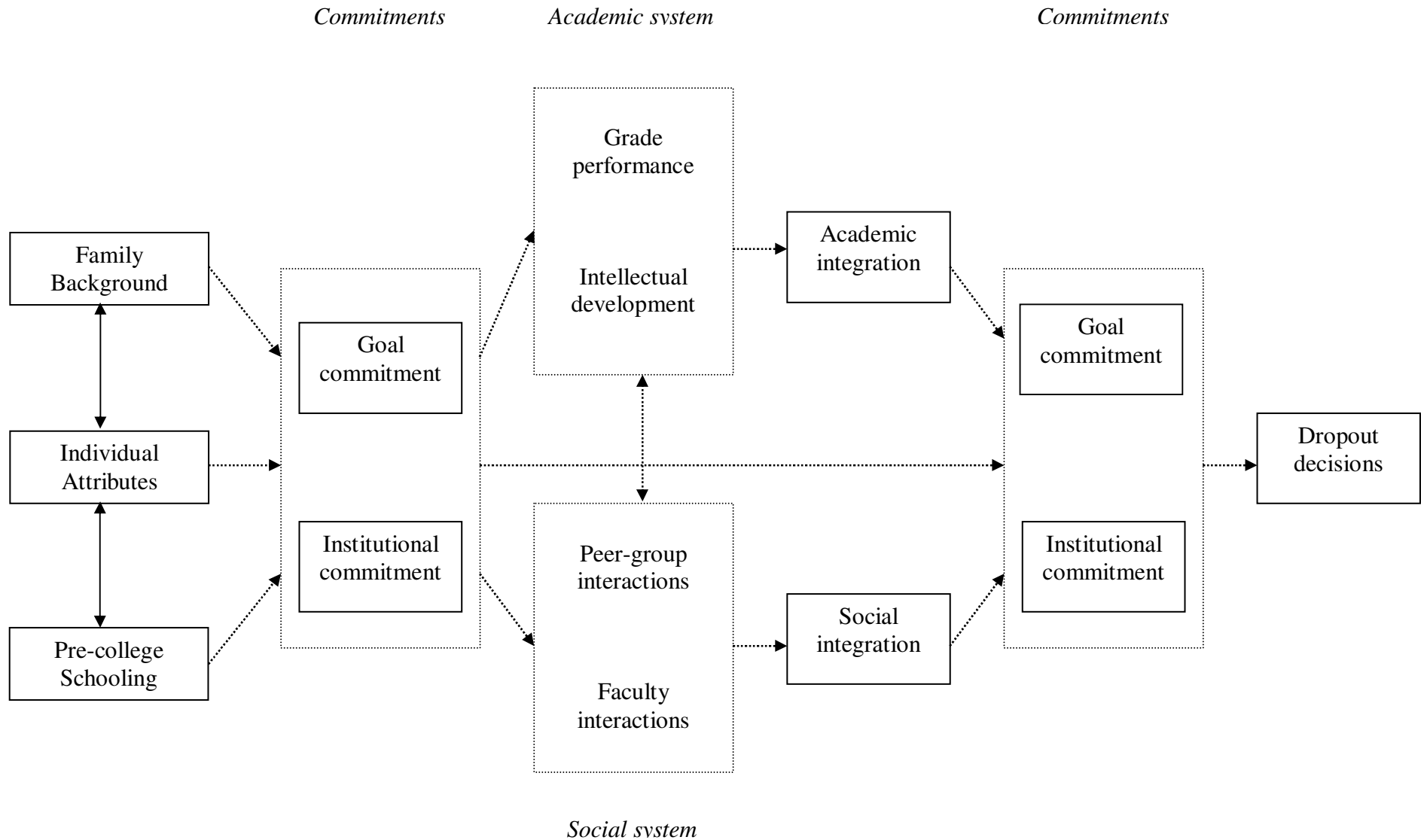
- over 50% of withdrawals influenced by demands of employment whilst studying
- needs of dependants (20-25%)
- weight of workload (20-25%)
- financial difficulty (20-25%)
- programme organisation (20-25%).

Retention Theorists

In 1975 Vincent Tinto devised a model to predict which students were disposed to withdrawal that is quoted widely by academics writing on retention and student progression. Since 1975, with revisions in 1978, 1985 and 1993, Tinto's interactionist student transition model has highlighted the need to differentiate between academic integration and social integration in student persistence.

The model relies upon the assumptions that all students are influenced by a particular set of characteristics including age, sex, race, previous education, social status. These characteristics are believed by Tinto to attribute to the individual's commitment to both the institution they are entering, and to their determination to obtain a degree. These commitments influence the level of integration that a student experiences on both social and academic levels. The extent to which integration has occurred then influences decisions to persist or to drop out of higher education altogether.

Tinto's 1975 conceptual schema for dropout from college (Richardson, 2000, page 126)



Durkheim's theory had previously been applied similarly by Spady in 1971, again cited by Richardson (2000, page 125), to student attrition when it was suggested that when students are deciding whether to continue studying that this was "broadly analogous to the situation of the individual contemplating suicide."

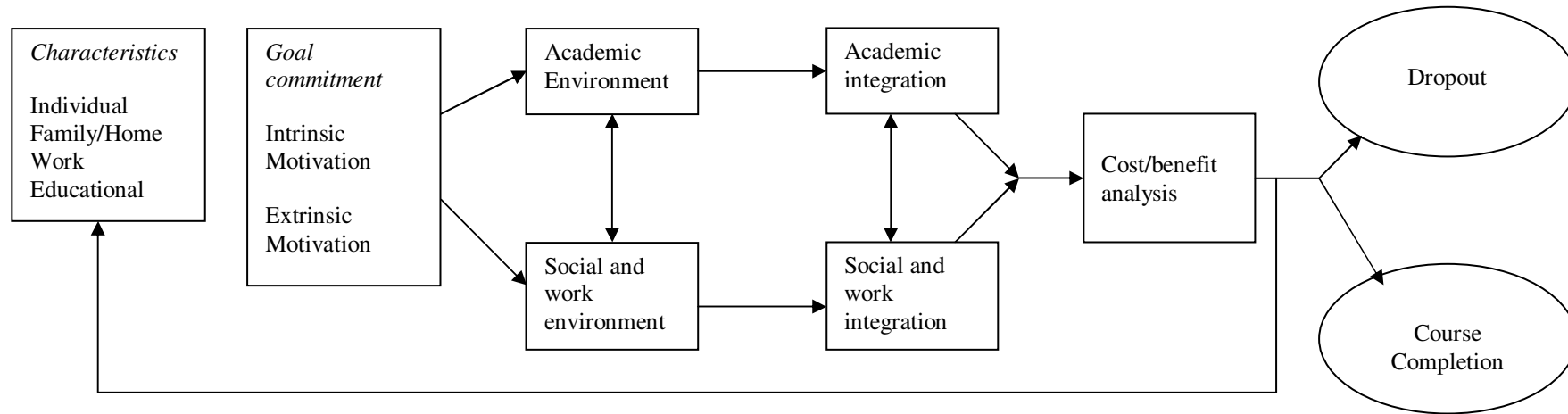
Richardson (2000, page 127) points out that that Tinto's analysis concerns itself with a traditional student and "ignores that fact that students can create their own social networks" whilst making no reference to co-existing networks of family and friends outside of education to which all students belong. Tierney (1992), cited by Barefoot (2004, page 11) concurs, believing Tinto's model to be unrealistic in its expectation that students should have to achieve separation from their families and cultures in order to fit in to "college norms and expectations."

Despite these concerns, Richardson acknowledges that Tinto's model, whilst developed for "a different academic higher education culture and context" was in fact a valuable framework for reviewing retention issues (2006, page 176). The writers concur that Tinto is indeed a valuable starting point when investigating the situation that part-time distance learners find themselves in when engaging in Higher Education.

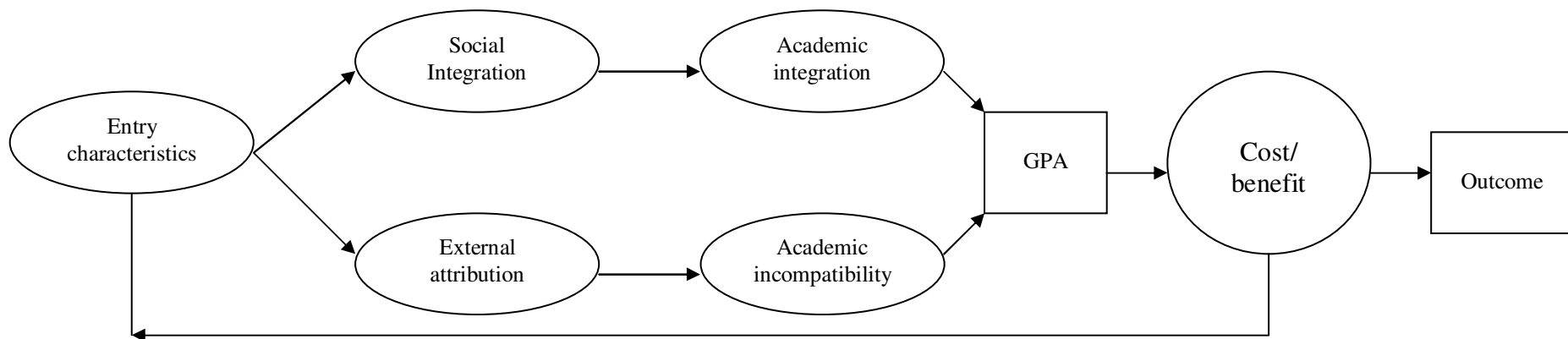
Bean and Metzner (1985), cited by Richardson (2000, page 127) have attempted to modify and improve upon Tinto's model by accommodating the impact of external factors. By suggesting that relationships with friends and family outside of the institution were particularly important in the case of students who were 'non-traditional' and they put forward a different model of student attrition acknowledging this.

In 1989, Kember recognised that previous models of student retention proposed by Spady (1970), Tinto (1975 and 1987) and Bean and Metzner (1985) did not take into account for the unique circumstances of distance learners. Kember identified, (cited by Richardson 2000, pages 129- 133), that a specific model related to distance education was required, proposing that

Kember's 1989 model of student drop-out from distance education (cited by Richardson, 2000, page 130)



Kember's 1995 model of student progress in distance education (cited by Richardson, 2000, page 131)



“academic integration encompassed all of the different facets of course delivery” and that in reality “social integration” actually was controlled by how far students were able to balance the demands of their course with other commitments away outside of study.

Yorke (2004, page 23) describes Kember’s model as having two strands; a positive strand in which integration “gives rise to good academic performance” and a negative strand in which “external attribution leads via academic incompatibility to poor academic performance”.

In Kember’s model it is the value of their academic performance coupled with how well study fits into the external circumstance of the student that determines persistence. It does provide the best current alignment for predicting the retention of students within a distance learning setting.

In 2006 Liao applied “flow theory” to a group of distance learners as a framework to study the experience of learning. Liao describes “flow” as a “state of feeling, where external factors do not seem to matter ... and the flow state is an intrinsic motivation which can stimulate users to do an activity with inner joy.” (Liao, 2006, page 48). Liao summarises that motivation is often described as either extrinsic; related to outcomes such as promotion or pay, or intrinsic; simply for enjoyment. Chan and Ahern (1999) cited by Liao (2006, page 47) state that when students are “intrinsically motivated to learn, they not only want to learn more, but also achieve more positive results, but a study of distance learners, found results that contradicted usual flow theory. There are four vital components which contribute to flow; skill, challenge, control and interactivity. Liao tells us that according to standard flow theory that “skill and challenge are the most important”, but when applied in a distance learning setting the results revealed that the most important variable is interactivity. (2006, page 54)

In 1989 Moore, cited by Liao (2006, page 54) proposed three types of interaction in distance education as listed below.

1. learner–content interaction – changing a learner’s understanding or perspective by “intellectually interacting with content.” Learners “talk to themselves” about information or ideas in text, or other formats
2. learner–instructor interaction - instructor stimulates or maintains students’ interests, motivating them to learn and clarifying any misunderstandings of the content
3. learner–learner interaction - between learners, individually or in group settings, with or without the real-time presence of an instructor

Liao’s results (2006, page 58) revealed that of the three types of interaction it is the learner–instructor and learner–content interfaces that have the greatest positive effects on flow experience. However, “learner–learner interaction does not show significant influence”.

Liao’s research shows that fostering distance learners’ educational “happiness” cannot be approached in the same manner as for campus learners. Distance learners clearly give merit to different types of interaction than campus learners.

The writers propose that Liao’s research is important in two regards:

Firstly, it highlights that there are implications for the type, frequency and depth of interaction with academic members of staff with distance learners placing greater value upon these interactions. The importance of the role of the academic is therefore changed by increasing its relevance to the learner within the distance learning context and has the potential for an even greater impact, both negative and positive, upon attrition than in the campus based setting.

Secondly, from a pastoral and support perspective Liao's findings pose additional challenges. The assumption that "support" through the student journey is gained not only from university staff but from fellow learners also is challenged.

Yorke and Longdon's work, published in 1999, for The Higher Education Funding Council in which they surveyed the leaving reasons of students entering education in is widely quoted within the context of the United Kingdom's Higher Education System.

After reviewing their data they grouped the reasons that students leave university into 4 general and broad categories:

- Flawed decision making about entering the programme
- Students' experience of programme and the institution generally
- Failure to cope with the demand of the programme
- Events that impact on students' lives outside the institution

Longdon reiterated the proviso that "the decision to leave is rarely a single issue influence" and pointed out that it is very often problems arising in more than one category interacting with each other that leads to the student's withdrawal (2006, page 176).

In 2007, Yorke and Longdon presented interim findings from a repeat of their 1997-1999 investigation (Yorke, 2007) where preliminary analysis revealed that although some of the top reasons for leaving university had changed position slightly in the league table, overall "nothing had changed". Students were still leaving university for the same reasons as ten years previously, despite a commonly held belief that the widening of participation activities over the previous decade would increase drop-out and bring in new "types" of problems related to social class. Yorke and Longdon's findings may yet discredit that assumption and require some institutions to review strategies that target mainly lower socio-economic groups.

Institutional Influences

Longdon (2007) suggests that institutions have a large part to play in addressing the reasons that students leave university concurring with Thomas, et al, (2002, page 3) who identify four specific areas in which the HEI itself can influence student retention. These are:

- Academic practices
- Social Integration
- Student Funding
- Personal Support

Moxley, et al, (2001, page 47) list four properties of institutional commitment to retention:

- The priority the institution places on retention
- The broad scope of the institution assigns to retention
- The important role members of the academic community serve in any retention effort
- The identification of the supports and resources the institution commits to retention.

These two views highlighting which areas institutions should target and how they should show commitment to the retention agenda are generally reflective of common opinion. Each area proposed by Thomas is large in scope and encompasses immense variations of experience dependant upon the institution chosen by the student.

A New Approach?

The unique experience of part-time distance learners are not currently adequately represented in any of the current models. Whilst the writer's believe that Kember provides the closest "fit", the true individuality of a

student's situation is not taken into account. We propose a new way of looking at the factors that stack up to create an at-risk situation for part-time distance learners and at the same time incorporating the generalisations that apply from the research that has already taken place.

Edwards' Retention Scales for Part-Time Distance Learners

"Retention is indeed a very personal matter for a student, and it requires a flexible, comprehensive and supportive approach that fits well with a student's needs". (Moxley, 2001, page 42).

The Edwards' retention scales for part-time learners is a model that allows for the individual nature of students' circumstance whilst linking with published research findings. It allows different weights to be placed upon the retention scales dependant upon the impact or weight that that circumstance has for that particular student. Other retention models do not truly reflect the individual nature of the complex interactions and relationships that occur within a learner's life. In this descriptor of Edwards' model the abbreviation HEI relates to Higher Education Institution.

Weights:

Weights represent circumstances and characteristics that are known to affect retention of students. The inclusion of weights is supported by the academic theory and research presented within this piece of work.

Weight Placement:

Weights are placed on the scale in one of three positions: Fixed, HEI and Student.

Weights placed in the Fixed position represent challenges and circumstances that neither the student nor the HEI have any control over. They represent

factors that are either pre-destined and which cannot be changed or are unlikely to be changed such as a student being mature or part-time. They also represent things that are under the control of external forces such as poor health or employment workload.

Weights placed in the HEI position are representational of things that can be influenced by the Higher Education Institution.

Examples of possible weights in HEI position:

- Academic support - incorporating study skills,
- Quality of the first year experience
- Interaction –opportunities offered by the HEI, assignment feedback, frequency of contact
- Pastoral support – support from both academic and special support services

Weights in the Student position are representational of things that can be controlled and changed by the student:

Examples of possible weights in HEI position:

- Course choice.
- Take-up – the extent to which the student takes-up the services offered by the HEI.
- Motivation

Education attainment:

The position of the weight that represents past student educational attainment could be argued to belong in either the Fixed position or the Student position. The writers do not believe that at the point of entry to Higher Education that a student's previous educational attainment is something that they are in control of, despite the fact that it could be argued that all students could attempt to raise their educational attainment prior to entry to Higher Education. The

writer believes that the most appropriate place on the scale for this weight is in the Fixed position, because at the point of entry this is a pre-determined factor.

Bespoke Weights:

The model also allows for bespoke weights that account for factors that may only be relevant to one particular student.

Equal and Unequal balance:

When the impact of the combined weights on the HEI and Student side of the scale is equal to or greater than the weights on the Fixed side of the scale the student's performance will rest within the Continuation area of the model.

When the weight is unequal to the advantage of the Fixed side of the scales then the student will slip into the area of either reduced performance or withdrawal.

Continuation Area:

It is worthy of note that this area is much larger than the area that represents Reduced Performance and Withdrawal. This represents the fact that students continue with their studies in less than ideal circumstances. A student's opportunity for success does not have to be perfect for them to be able to achieve academic credit and advancement. The student may be awarded a degree of lesser or higher class as a result of the factors represented.

Point of no return.

There is always a point at which any amount of intervention, support and encouragement will not change a withdrawal outcome. Establishing when this point is reached has benefit for the student, practitioner and institution.

Reduced Performance:

Before a student reaches the point of no return there is a period in which reduced performance occurs. This could be evidence by a lowering of grades or a reduction in contact with the university. . This may give an “early warning” to the possibility that a student may be at risk of withdrawal. It is important to recognise that within the Edwards’ model the student at this point will still be continuing.

This period of reduced performance cannot be measured by a particular grade, for example you cannot say whenever a student gets a C- they are at risk of withdrawal. For a student who normally gets B’s then this may be a reduction in performance, for a student who normally gets C+’s this may just be an normal academic variation which does not indicate a true reduction in performance.

Retention opportunity: It is worthy of note that the size of the “retention opportunity” contracts as the scale slips towards the “point of no return”. As students have more “weights” on the continuation side of the scales there is greater opportunity to retain them.

Fixed Size Weights:

Some weights are of a fixed size because they are unlikely to change or cannot be changed. For example, the fact that a student is “Mature” cannot be changed either by circumstance or by intervention from either the institution or student.

Changeable Size Weights:

Some weights are capable of changing size dramatically. These are weights that are susceptible to outside influence; either caused by the institution, by the student or by something beyond the control of either.

An example of a weight that could easily change in size would be “motivation”. If a student’s motivation is reduced for whatever reason then the size of weight on the scale is also reduced and with it the level of impact the motivation has upon the balance in the scales. The weight would not move from its position on the scale as it is still a factor controlled by the student. Similarly, if a student’s motivation were suddenly increased then the weight would increase in size, thereby exerting more influence on the continuation side of the scales.

Worked Examples

Edwards’ Retention Scales for Part-time Distance Learners – Student Retained:

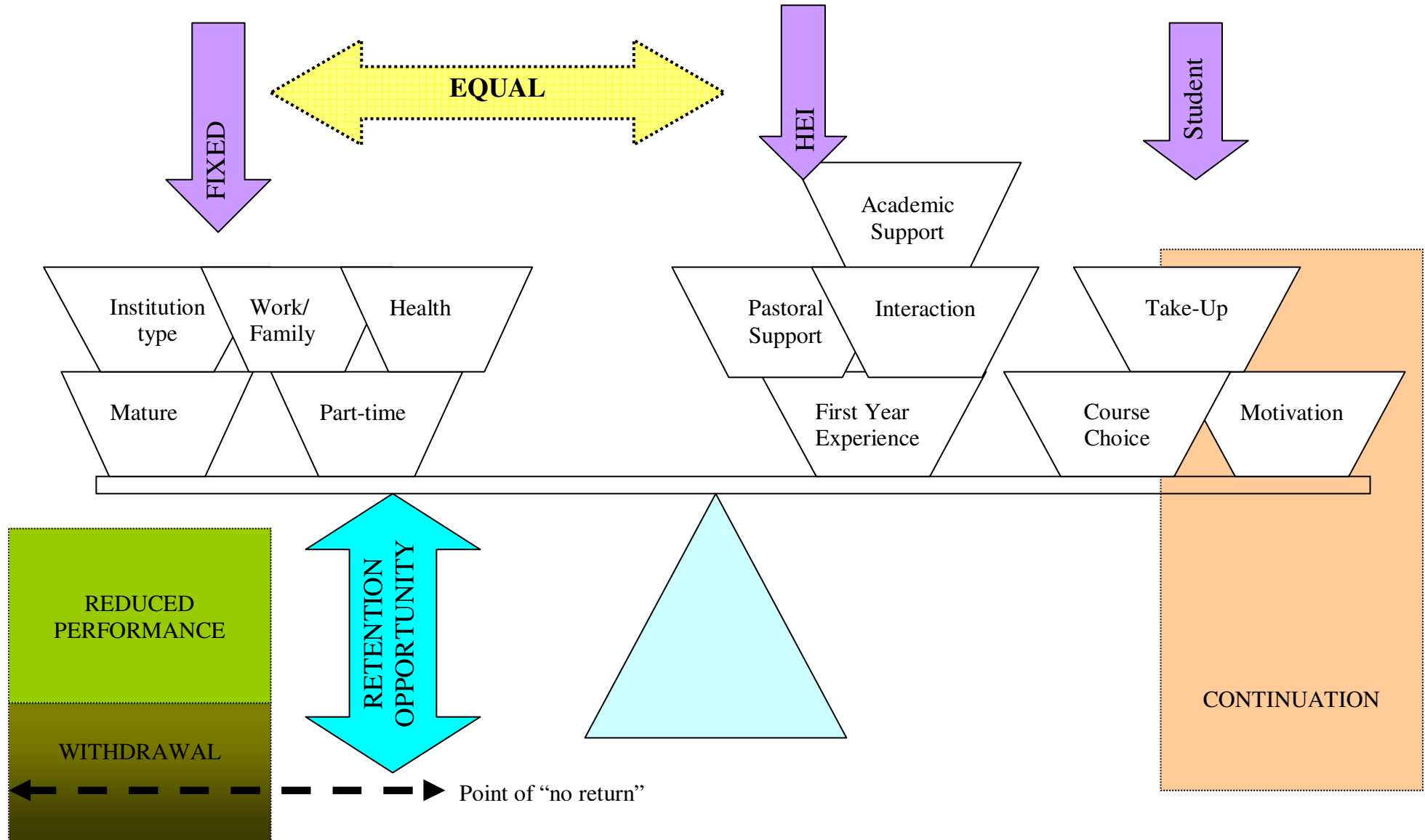
In this example the student’s scales are balanced. The size of retention opportunity is large and continuation is assured.

Edwards’ Retention Scales for Part-time Distance Learners – Reduction in Performance

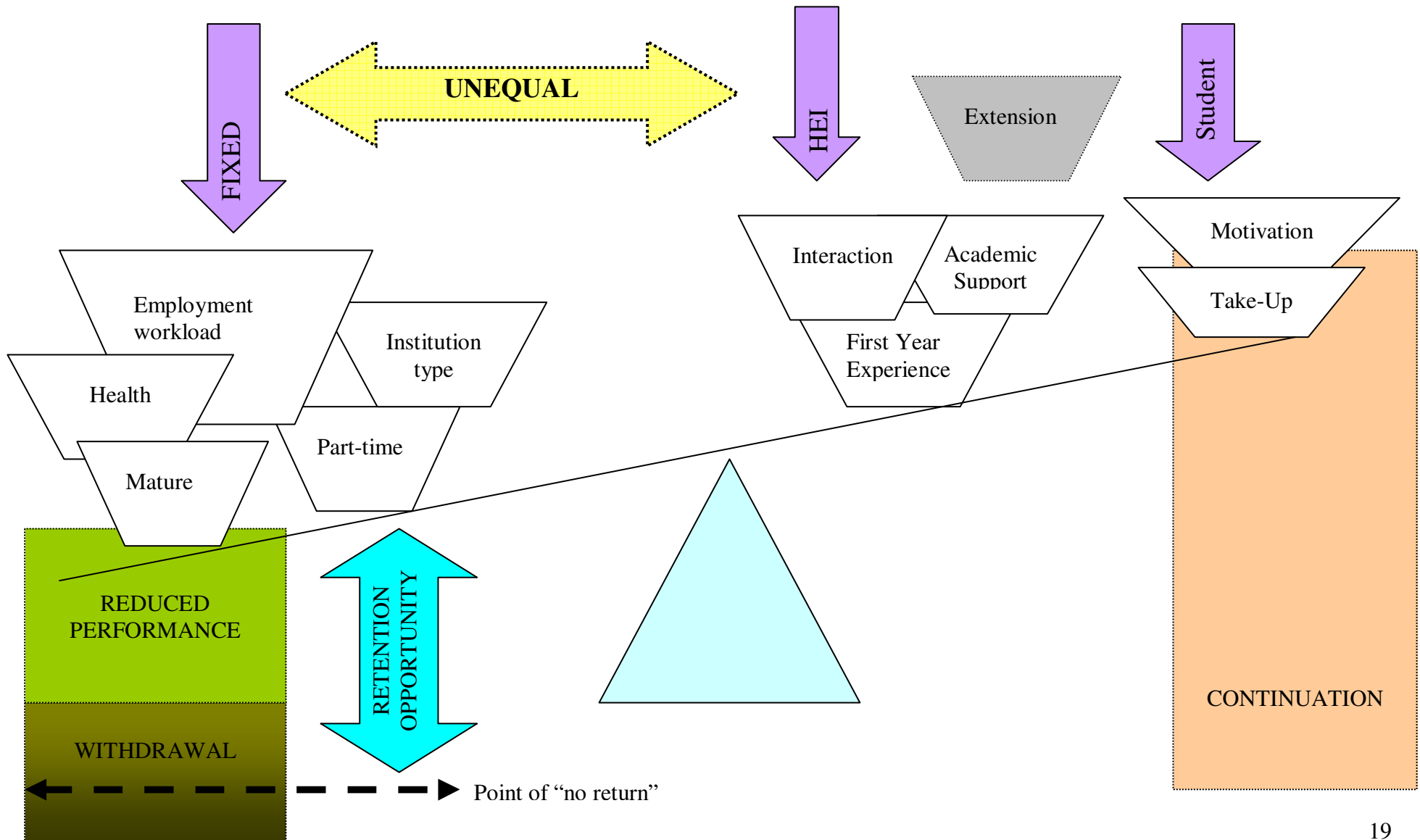
In this example it is possible to see the impact of an increased workload from the student’s employer, coupled with a reduction in the student’s motivation and take-up of assistance from the university has led to a unequal balance in the Edwards’ scales. The student’s position has slipped into the “reduced performance” range with slight reduction in the retention opportunity range.

At this point if the “early warning” that the scale gives is acted upon by the student and by the HEI then the position is recoverable. For example, the HEI could increase the level of academic support offered or (as indicated by the dotted weight) assist the student by offering an extension to the deadline for a piece of assessed work.

Edwards' Retention Scales for Part-time Distance Learners – Student Retained



Edwards' Retention Scales for Part-time Distance Learners – Reduction in Performance

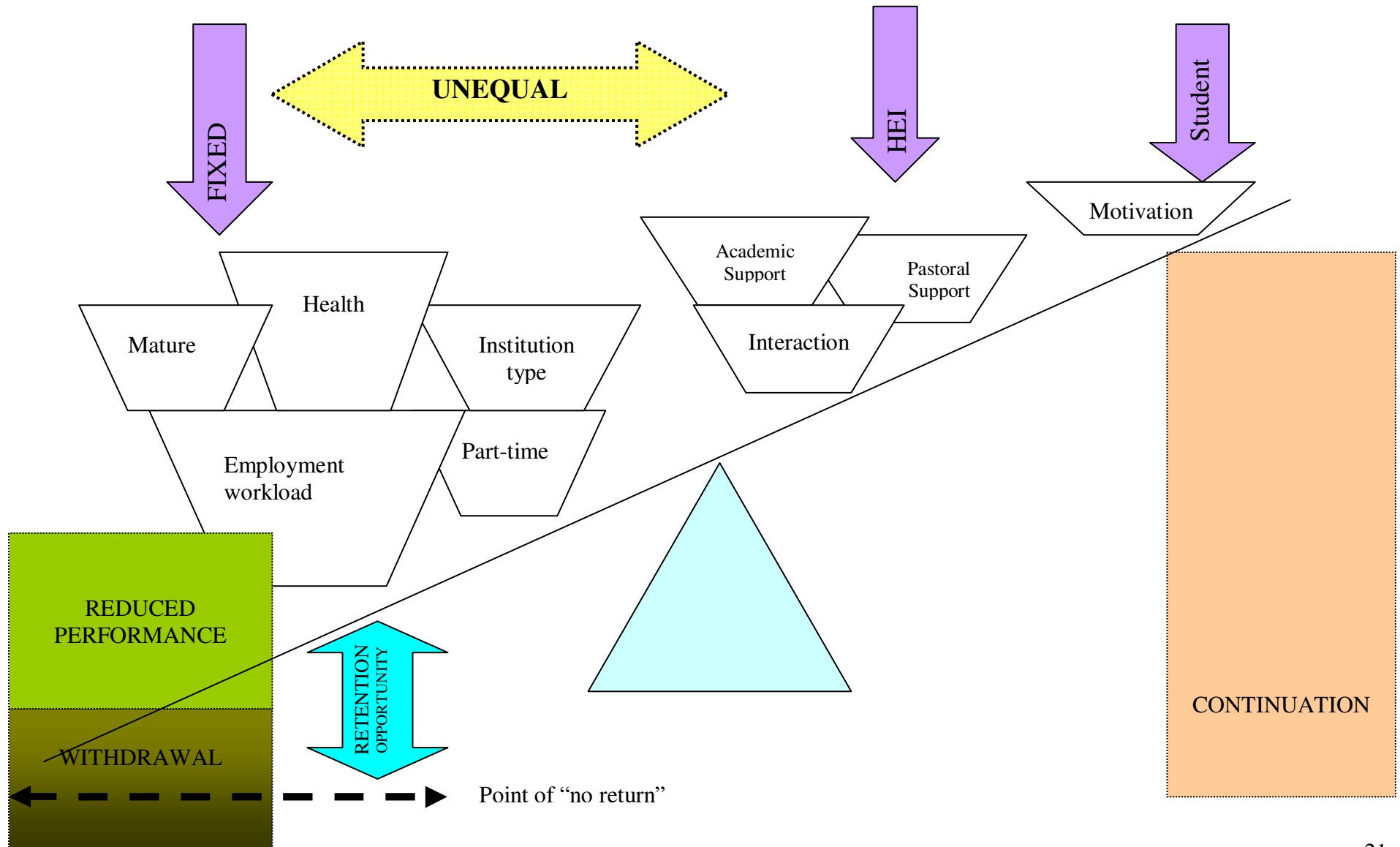


Edwards' Retention Scales for Part-time Distance Learners – Risk of Withdrawal

In this example the student is at risk of imminent withdrawal. The two sides of Edwards' scales are unequal with much more impact being felt on the fixed side pushing the student firmly into the withdrawal range. The combination of increasing health problems (represented by a increase in size of the health weight) and increased employment workload has led to the imbalance. In this example the retention opportunity is much reduced in size. The student has not yet reached the point of no return but is very close and immediate action is required.

A student in this circumstance may not be in a position to continue study at this point. In this situation it may be possible to “save” the student from withdrawal by offering intercalation (official suspension of study until a later date) as a way of preventing the scales from reaching the point of no return until a date at which the student's health improves or employment workload reduces. Appropriate and timely intercalation offers and opportunity for the student to re-engage successfully later.

Edwards' Retention Scales for Part-time Distance Learners – Risk of Withdrawal



Recommendations to improve retention

Moxley (2001, page 42) declares that “The educational institution’s endorsement of and commitment to retention is vital to the success of any effort to keep students in higher education. The institution of higher education cannot merely pay lip service to the importance of retention.” Retention is indeed a challenge for institutions, but requires a thought-out and evidence based response.

We suggest that the following interventions may be of particular use in the distance learning environment. These recommendations take into account the differences that have been highlighted in this work between distance learners studying on a part-time basis and other categories of learners and that these differences should be acknowledged at Institutional level to ensure parity of student experience. By combining the findings of Yorke and Longdon, Liao, Kember and Thomas the writers have found that learners possessing the general characteristics of part-time distance learners have different influences and causes of attrition than other learners.

Recommended Approaches for Part-Time Distance Learners

1. The retention of part-time distance learners should have their own institutional policy developed. Add-ons to strategies designed for full-time learners may contradict the needs of these students. Management may not see the value in developing a separate strategy, however, effort and resources can easily be wasted by incorrectly assuming that what works for campus based full time learners will commute into the distance learning environment.
2. Whilst it is tempting to do so, do not attempt to recreate a “university social life at a distance” or attempt to replicate the “classroom”.

This type of interaction has been shown by research not to be something which distance learning students desire or hold as important.

3. Do prioritise a structured Personal tutor system that starts pre-entry and follows through the course of study where possible.

The National Audit Office has found that personal tutor systems when run properly assist in retaining students. Any personal tutor system must have the support of and be given high priority and status by management.

It needs to be recognised that just because a member of staff is a good lecturer or researcher that they will also be a good personal tutor. Personal tutors must be trained, and given time to undertake the role. In universities today the writers acknowledge that it may not be deemed by management an appropriate use of academic time to engage staff in pastoral support. Whilst the writer agrees that for full-time campus based learners that support services staff can provide a cheaper and often more specialist service than academics, in the distance learning environment the physical barriers of distance and student employment make this option non-viable.

4. Pre-Entry and Induction support incorporating the option for bespoke guidance should be provided for part-time distance learners. This can be time-consuming but without it many mature learners who are returning to study after a long break or for the first time may experience extreme anxiety (Yorke, Thomas and Moxley). Robust handbooks can aid in this process. Academic provision of one-to-one service in terms of induction may also allow staff to help mature students avoid the pitfall of wrong course choice that was highlighted by Yorke and Longdon as being a major factor in mature student withdrawal.

5. Wherever possible students should not work more than 24 hours a week. This takes into account the government recommendation for maximum working when studying. It is clear that working restricts the achievement potential of learners and employers should be encouraged to grant study leave that is both in a meaningful quantity and on a regular and on-going basis. It can be argued that by permitting learners study leave that employers can maximise the benefit gained to their business. Again, the writer acknowledges that this recommendation may be hard, if not impossible to achieve, however that does not take away from the benefit that implementing it would have for part-time distance learning students.
6. Providing alternative opt-out-points and other ways of leaving the door open for learners who cannot study at a particular time. The use of extensions to course work and intercalation are invaluable in allowing student to “balance” their study as in the Edwards’ Retention Scales model. As well as ensuring the facility is available for students and academics to employ when required, these options should also be advertised from pre-entry to reduce anxiety about inflexibility of commitment when entering study.

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