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Intersectionality and Student Success in Online Learning: A Case Study of Attrition Rates and Antecedents in an Online MBA Programme

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Abstract

Literature on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991), including applications to education contexts (Keller et al., 2023; Prior et al., 2025), highlights the nuanced, high-dimensional nature of inequality. However, theorisations of student success in online and postgraduate education (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Rovai, 2003), whilst highlighting the relevance of demographic factors, provide limited insight into how demographic intersections shape exposure to known attrition antecedents, and impact student persistence. Thus, potentially masking students' lived realities of privilege and adversity. To address this, the present research conducts a sequential mixed methods case study of student success in a single global online Master of Business Administration programme. Utilising Multilevel Analysis of Individual Heterogeneity and Discriminatory Accuracy (MAIHDA) modelling (Evans et al., 2024a; Evans et al., 2024b) and one-to-one interviews, the present study explores how the intersections of gender, ethnicity, disability status, country of residence, and age at enrolment, influence students' degree outcomes and learning experiences. Whilst qualitative data collection is ongoing, preliminary quantitative analyses have shown that students' ($n = 14,267$) probabilities of exiting their studies with an adverse outcome range from 47.9% - 89.1% depending on intersectional group membership (with data from 01/01/2014 – 08/04/2024), conveying considerable intersectional patterning in student outcomes. Given these results, the present study seeks to propose a reconceptualisation of the prevailing model of student attrition in online education, Rovai's (2003) Composite Persistence Model, to explicitly highlight the role of intersectional demographic backgrounds in shaping students' exposure to attrition antecedents in an online environment and their ultimate persistence decisions.

Keywords: Composite Persistence Model; E-Learning; Equality in Education; MAIHDA; Widening Participation