

Problem solving and Decision Making

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Executive Summary

I work at an educational consulting firm called LONDON EDUCATION LTD. As a consultant, one of the issues that I face quite often is students dropping out of their enrolled courses. Post-pandemic, such instances have increased dramatically with the schools opening up their premises. It is a rather complex workplace problem. When a student drops out, they lose both the time and money and time invested into the initiative so far. For the university, it means that they won't get the fees they were expecting for the seat occupied by the student. For my company, it means that we won't get the commission that we were expecting to receive from the university for the student. In this project, I set out to understand the issue in-depth and identify ways in which I, as a consultant, can contribute to reducing the drop-out.

I employed a number of problem-solving and decision-making tools such as Fishbone Diagram, Eisenhower Matrix, and Mind map. These tools aided me greatly in providing a structure to my thoughts. I also constantly collected feedback on the project from the stakeholders namely my supervisor, students, and universities that my company works with. Such collaboration has made my project rich with useful data that helped me pin down the issue at hand. Overall, what I found is that the best way for me to reduce the student drop-out is to design a robust student onboarding program for students.

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1. Introduction

Paul Bolon (2022) published in recent research that in 2020/21 there are 2.66 million students at UK higher institutions. These students are studying either full-time or part-time at one of the 164 universities registered in the UK (Clark, 2022). With so many options, many of these students require the assistance of educational consultants who help them choose the most suitable courses and universities. The consultants also assist them throughout the entire application process.

I started my career at London Education Ltd as an education consultant. I love my job as it lets me help other people achieve their dreams and ambitions. However, as I often observed, a lot of students start a university with indomitable enthusiasm only to drop out within a few months. Currently, the universities have commodified educational services with students assuming the role of consumers, academics the role of entrepreneur, and academic institutions as 'marketer' (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2009). So, I believe that my job as an educational consultant is to find out the root cause of it and take steps to reduce student dropout. This is more important than ever as recruitment of non-EU students by British universities are booming owing to Brexit (Mayhew, 2022).

2. Scope & Methodology

This project will explore ways to bring student drop-out rates under control. As an employee of London Education Ltd, however, I will only investigate the issues faced by my company which is by no means reflective of the industry as a whole. My company is located in London with most of the students living in the same city. I will base my research on interviews with them. Besides, I supplemented my primary research with secondary research conducted on a larger population to account for issues not surfaced by the primary research. Lastly, I consulted with other stakeholders of the project to gather as much as useful data as possible.

There are many complex issues faced by my company. However, for the sake of this project, I am primarily concerned to solve the issue pertaining to student dropouts from the educational institutions that my organization works with. Notably, London Education Ltd only works with British universities such as Anglia Ruskin University, London Metropolitan University, University of Solent, Arden University, and Coventry University etc.

3. Impact of the project

Last year, one of the institutions that I place the greatest number of students experienced a 40% drop-out rate. To put things into perspective, it's almost twice as much as the previous year.

When a student drops out, they lose both the time and money and time invested into the initiative so far. For the university, it means that they won't get the fees they were expecting for the seat occupied by the student. For my company, it means that we won't get the commission that we were expecting to receive from the university for the student.

So, the project will likely increase the value of all three parties mentioned above by cutting the wastage trickled down by the dropping out of students.

4. Decision-making technique to identify the most appropriate option

A goal to decrease student dropout will inevitably entail behavioral and mental change. Health and Health (2010) claimed that such changes are inherently hard. To make it happen, their work suggested outlining clear goals and benefits to ensure clarity, providing inherent motivation, and focusing on the environment. Health and Health (2013) also suggested to always consider the opportunity cost of actions before making any decision. Knapp & Zeratsky (2021) highlighted the importance of pilot testing any idea and has provided a solid outline of the process involved. These guidelines were the north star for this project.

The steps that I took to resolve the complex issue of student dropouts, however, are more reflective of the logical and ordered steps outlined by Mindtools (2009). I used their steps as a guide and tailored the seven steps to suit the project need as outlined in the subsequent sections.

4.1. Step 1: Problem analysis

There is a myriad of reasons of student dropouts. So, to address the problem, it is important to analyze the different causes of the problem. To do so, I have used the Ishikawa or Fishbone Diagram (Ishikawa, 1989). Mario (2017) potently describes it as a graphical tool to recognize the intricate interplay of different causes for a particular event or issue. However, to understand the problem in detail and populate the diagram, I conducted informational interviews with my students who dropped out from their studies previously. My findings are summarized in the figure below:

CLASSIFICATION OF CAUSES OF STUDENT DROPOUT

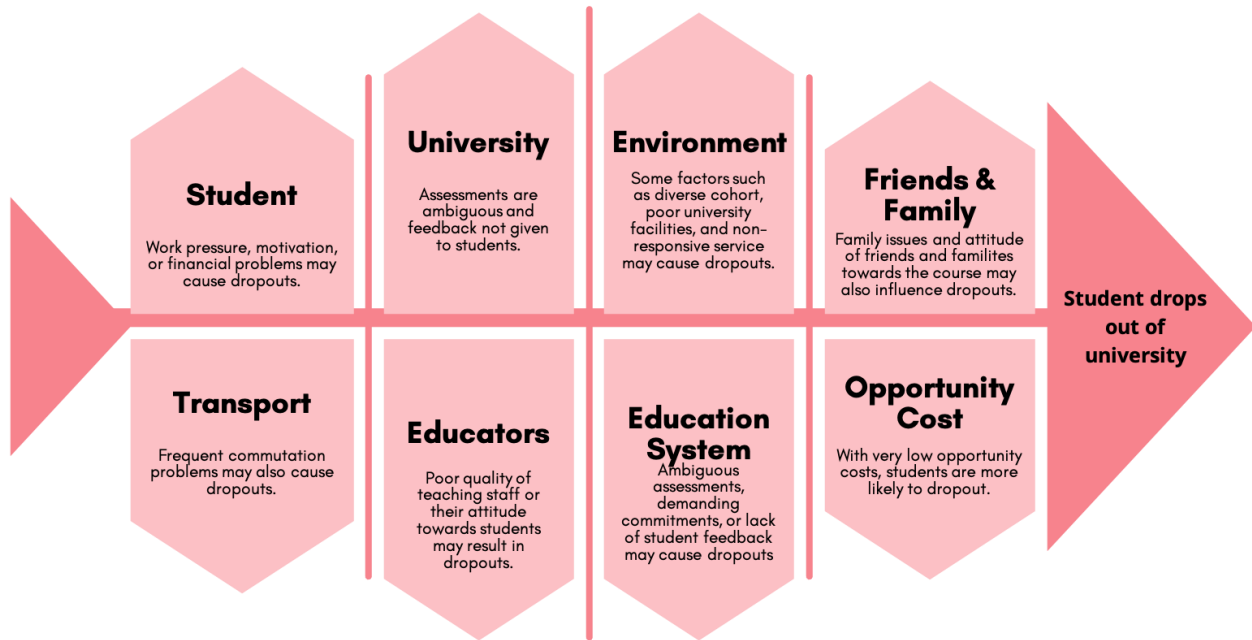


Figure 1: Classification of causes of student dropout

As evident, I classified the primary causes of student dropouts into eight categories. Each of these categories were considered to produce solutions in later steps of the decision-making process.

4.2. Step 2: Creating a congenial environment

To create a constructive environment for the project to succeed, I knew that I had to discuss about my project to my supervisor. So, I communicated with my supervisor beforehand and sought his approval to conduct primary interview with ex-students of the company. He was quite supportive of the project and expressed his interest in helping me out with the project.

4.3. Step 3: Generating a range of solutions

The next logical step was to brainstorm a range of solutions that we may undertake to reduce the student dropouts. In this step, I sought the assistance of my supervisor and all the ideas were outlined in a nice visual mental map as shown below:

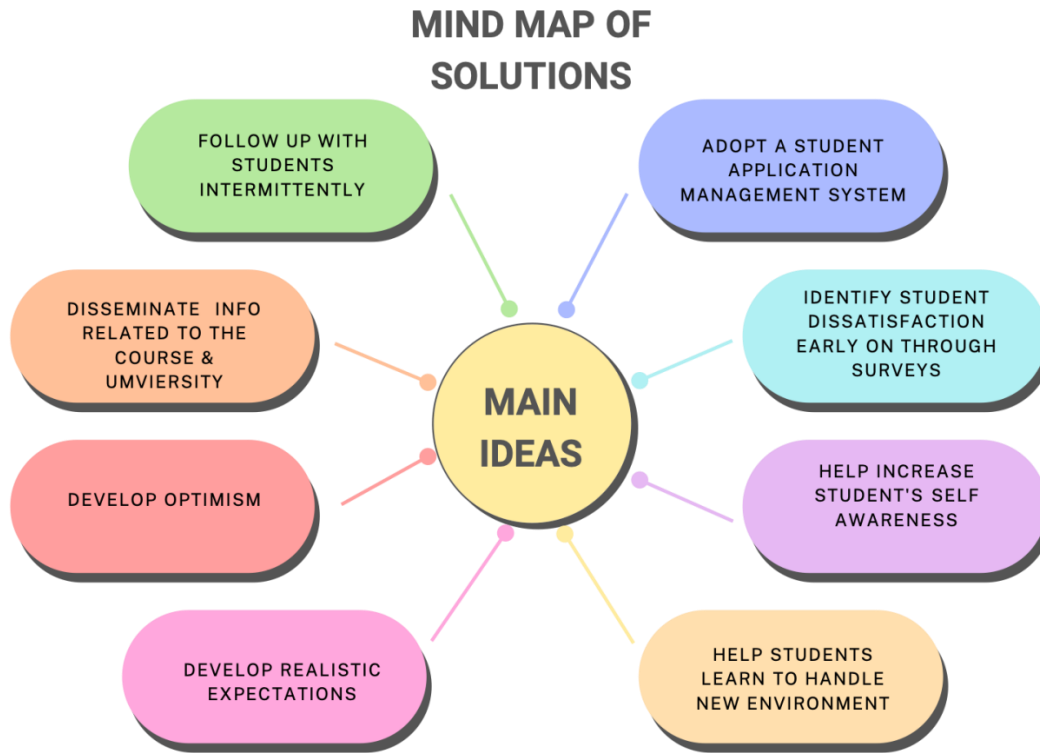


Figure 2: Brainstormed solutions

4.4. Step 4: Exploring and prioritizing the solutions

Given the time and resource constraints, it is not feasible to pursue all the solutions. Thus, it became important to prioritize the solutions for which I used a modified Eisenhower Matrix. Asana ([2021](#)) defines the Eisenhower Matrix as a prudent task management tool to help prioritize and organize tasks by urgency and importance. However, for this project, some of the solutions that we came up with were much difficult to implement than others. So, I used importance and difficulty which also could reflect as PMI to implement as the two prioritization metrics as shown below:

	Not difficult	Difficult
Important	Do <i>Do it now</i> • Develop realistic expectations • Develop optimism • Disseminate info related to the course & university	Decide <i>Schedule a time to do it</i> • Follow up with students intermittently
Unimportant	Delegate <i>Who can do it for you</i> • Identify student dissatisfaction early on through surveys • Help students learn to handle new environment	Delete <i>Eliminate it</i> • Adopt student application management system • Help increase student's self-awareness

Figure 3: Prioritization of options using Eisenhower Matrix

4.5. Step 5: Selecting the best solution

Next, I discussed with my supervisor about how we could address the all three solutions that should be addressed right now. The solution that we both agreed is to develop a robust student onboarding program for each of the institutions that we work with.

Jenkins, Lahr, and Pellegrino (2020) have laid out a number of problems with the conventional onboarding process of students. Although they have stressed the importance of institutions to address the issue, implementing such changes are beyond our reach. Since dropouts impact our business as educational consultants too, we could develop a structured program to develop realistic expectations and optimism of students, alongside disseminating information related to the course and the university.

4.6. Step 6: Planning for implementing the solution.

To implement the solution, I consulted the research on structured onboarding program conducted by Andrea Garcia (2020) of the University of San Diego. The researcher highlighted the importance of having a well thought out onboarding program that is comprised of the most crucial information to avoid overload. On the other hand, Laverick (2018) found that a great onboarding experience served to “bridge the gap” among the inbound learners from diverse backgrounds. He found that students benefitted from each other more when they were all on the same level as the condition formed a breeding ground for community learning. Pajarillo & Korn (2021) of the Adelphi University found that student onboarding experience also facilitates and enhances learning. Particularly, they found that the students considered the information related to the available resources and academic services to pursue a course to be most useful. Lastly, as all the academic assessments are required to be produced in English language, there were suggestions that pointed out that students (Pajarillo & Korn, 2021) had greater academic success and satisfaction when they reviewed the general rules of grammar prior to commencing their academic program.

Based on the research findings, we narrowed down the onboarding program onto the following modules:

Modules	Module Content
Module 1	General information about the University
Module 2	General information about the course
Module 3	Available university facilities
Module 4	Available academic services and support
Module 5	Review of English grammar
Module 6	Tips for academic success
Module 7	Realistic benefits of completing the course
Module 8	Available continued support from LONDON EDUCATION LTD

Figure 4: Module plan for the onboarding program

We also noted that we need to create a separate onboarding program for each of the institutions that we worked with, although some of the module contents will overlap.

4.7. Step 7: Communicating the plan to stakeholders

The next phase was to communicate the plan to the stakeholders and seek their assistance in developing the program. For this project, three main stakeholders were the students, universities, and the management of LONDON EDUCATION LTD. Before communicating I pointed out the resources that I require from each of the stakeholders as outlined below:

Stakeholders	Required resources
Universities	- University info - Course details - Post-graduation placement information - Suggestions for improvement
Management of LONDON EDUCATION LTD	- Time to work on the project - Constructive Feedback - Access to company information - Suggestions for improvement
Students	- Feedback of the pilot study - Suggestions for improvement

Figure 5: Required resources from stakeholders

Then I communicated my plan to the stakeholders and sought their assistance with the required resources.

5. Monitoring and reviewing implementation plan

Collecting feedback on the pilot study will help me assess the quality of the program. However, the pilot study will consist of only 10 students which is a very small group. So, it's important to continue collecting feedback on the onboarding program on a continued basis. Thus, I decided to append a course completion survey at the end of the onboarding program to collect student feedback. However, it may be noted that, students will not realize the full benefits of the program until much later into their academic programs. So, as pointed out by Schmatz & Wolf (2015), I plan to conduct a Net Promoter Score style survey of the students 6 months into their

respective programs. This simple survey will ask students whether the onboarding program helped them getting started with the course and assess their likelihood to complete the enrolled program.

Conclusion

For an educational consultant like myself, student dropout is like a nightmare. We consult with the students for long hours before placing them in a program. It makes us proud to place the students into their dream programs, while student drop out signals our incompetence to find the right match between the students and the educational institutions. I hope that successful implementation of the project will curtail the dropout rates over the long term.

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