Relationship Management in ODL Systems: An approach towards facilitating access and success in learning

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INTRODUCTION

Organizations exist to perform functions towards achievement of its organizational objectives, which are attuned in line with its mission and vision. It attempts to serve its target group of customers through its products and/ or services. The same holds for organizations in the educational sector such as Universities, which provide educational services in terms of offering relevant academic programmes for the student community. The dynamic changes in the macro-environment of the higher education (HE) system today, call for a different approach to the management of HE institutions and universities. Globalisation, technological innovations, new lifestyles patterns resulting in changing learner profiles, and increased number of educational institutions are some of the major aspects impacting the HE system. In a populous and developing country like India where conventional HE system has constraints to meet the gap in gross enrolment ratio, Open and Distance Education serve as the viable alternative to the issue of access and equality in HE.

Open Universities (OUs), established to provide higher education opportunities to all in the society, beyond the conventional constraints of age, time and place, are also influenced by the generic changes in the macro-environment referred above. The need to effectively manage heterogeneous 'distant' learners' and make the best use of advancements in Information and Communication Technologies in Open and Distance Learning (ODL), is essential for the wide acceptance and success of the ODL programmes. However, another important aspect that cannot be ignored is today's customer-driven economy, a result of the globalised- highly competitive environment that we live in. Providing high quality service to the customer is most significant to the organisation's success and even to existence of the organization itself, Further, changing lifestyles in the society and the 'fast life' of today has redefined the concept of customer service and customer satisfaction. These obviously have implications in expectations of the learner (the customer or the target beneficiary of an OU) from his Open University.

RELATIONSHIP MARKETING- THE CONCEPT

Relationship marketing (RM) is a concept which has been widely used in the corporate world. Unlike the traditional transactional approach, Relationship Marketing (RM) considers a strategic long term viewpoint and involves establishing and maintaining continuous relationship with the customers. Relationship Marketing refers to the practice of building long-term fruitful relations with the most important party to its business, namely, the customers. The basic premise is that developing and sustaining long-term satisfying relations with its customers in significant in the process to reach, attract, acquire and retain customers with the company, thus, resulting in a loyal customer base. RM also results in reduction of the customer recruitment cost and advertising and other sales promotion expenses. Thus, Relationship marketing becomes beneficial for the organization that practices it.

With increasing competition resulting in more number of brand choices available to the consumers to choose from, organizations became more customer-driven. Therefore, the focus has gone beyond the marketing functions of the organizations, and RM approach has gradually moved into a more holistic approach, namely Customer Relationship Management (CRM). While both these are centered around the customer, CRM is more broadened in its approach, considers, not only the marketing function where there is direct company-customer interface, but also focuses on the entire functions associated with value creation and delivery chain.

Chaturvedi and Chaturvedi (2005) have stated that CRM is about making the customer the centre of the business and organizing all processes around it, and is about strategies that act as means for making

each customer more valuable to the company. CRM has been defined by Mohammed and Sagadevan (2002) as management process of acquiring customers by understanding their requirements, retaining customers by fulfilling their requirements more than their expectations and attracting new customers through customer specific marketing approaches. The process invites total commitment on part of the entire organisation in evolving and implementing relationship strategies that would be rewarding to all concerned.

RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT AND ODL

Relationships, personal or organizational, develop as a consequence of our interactions; one interaction leading to the next and so on. The degree of strength/ weakness of the relationship is a function of series of former interactions. More meaningful and fruitful are the interactions, more stronger the relationships. Likewise, in the context of ODL, all the learner touch points are potential points for the OU to build excellent relationships with the learner. When an individual becomes a learner, his overall experience with the OU can be conceptualized as a summation of a series of individual learner experiences. Since Open and Distance Education, primarily being a service involves numerous occasions where a distance learner interacts with the OU. Learner-OU interactions could be across various functional departments of the OU (eg. Admissions/ Examinations etc), various levels in the organizational structure of the OU (eg, Headquarter/ Regional Office/ Local Study Centre) and at various points in time. (learner enrolling to attending his convocation and even beyond).

The premise considered is that the outcome of any single interaction or the quality of the interactions as perceived by the learner would be significant in affecting the learners' future propensity to actively pursue the academic programme. Learner's experience of every single 'learner-OU interaction' can be placed on a continuum ranging from 'learner satisfied-motivated-delighted' to a 'learner dissatisfied-demotivated-dissuaded' experience (Figure 1). While a positive and delightful interaction with the OU would be motivating for the learner, an uncaring-indifferent approach would leave the distant learner dissatisfied, dissuaded and even demotivated, apart from creating negative word-of-mouth in the society.

Figure 1: 'Learner-OU Interaction' experience continuum

From the perspective of building fruitful 'learner-OU' relationship, learner-OU interactions can be classified as:

- Learner-originated 'learner-OU' interaction (Type I) - interactions which have originated from learner such as learner's telephonic/ by post/ e-mail query regarding any aspect of his academic programme. For example, could be a learner's query regarding schedule of examination, grievance regarding non-receiving result of the examination he appeared, even be a learner's feedback on quality of any learner support service provided by the OU.

- OU-originated 'learner-OU interaction (Type II) –interactions which have originated from the OU to learner such as communications/ messages sent by OU from time to time via post/ e-mail/ mobile / telephone calls etc. For instance, letters sent by OU to learners informing to remit the annual fee for the next year, telephonic call from OU's study centre informing time schedule of counselling sessions, communication regarding result of term examinations appeared by the

learner etc. On basis of such communications from the OU, the learner will respond/ interact/ react/ comply accordingly.

From the perspective of building excellent learner-OU relationship, every such learner query/ communication (Type I) are learner touch points, which the OU should deal with, in an effective, learner-friendly manner. This requires that the OU responds/ interacts timely with the learner through its personnel (at OU Headquarters/ Regional Office/ Study Centre) by suitable means (telephonic/ e-mail/ postal reply.) It can include automated communications from OU through e-mail/ mobile telephony etc. All interactions/ communications of OU; be it technology-enabled or person-to-person, should focus on customer (learner) satisfaction and learner retention with the system. This would serve instrumental in reducing the disturbing drop-out rate in OUs. Similarly, in case of type II, OU should adopt a learner-centric/ learner-friendly approach in its communications and subsequent interactions that peps up the spirit of being a distant learner and instigates him to the next course of action in his learning.

A learner's overall experience with the OU is summation of the series of such individual learner-OU (L-OU) interactions over such period of time till he is with the OU system. (Figure 2) The learner comes in contact with the OU right from when he gets enrolled for a distance learning programme. At that time, his interaction would be with the OU personnel in the Student-Admission Department. Further, learner over the course of time would be engaging in interactions with OU personnel in various departments such as Study Materials Division, Study Centres, Examination Division, Library, examination centre etc.
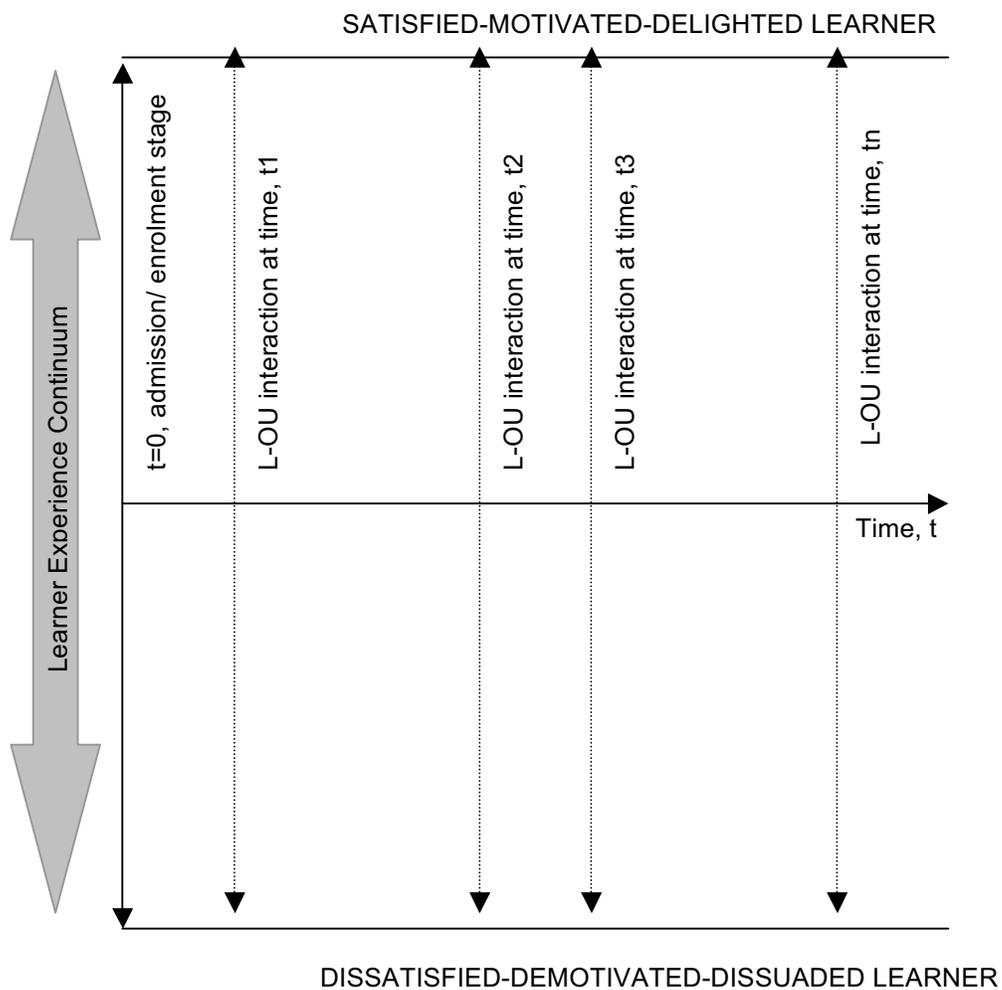

Figure 2: Schema of Learner-OU Interactions

Each learner-OU interaction are strategic occasions for the OU to build meaningful long-term relationships by not only providing a satisfied feeling to the learner after the interaction by adequately, answering their queries/ providing solutions, but should also be encouraging and even delightful to the learner – that the outcome is creation of a strong positive image of the OU in the mind of the learner, apart from serving as a means to motivate him in his learning. Thus, each L-OU interaction should ideally be experienced by the learner as 'a satisfied-motivated-delighted learner experience'. Such experiences would serve as powerful facilitators to learners in successfully completing his degree, thus, addressing the key concern of success rate in OU system.

However, heterogeneity of learners in terms of age, family background, occupation, social status, academic self-concept, need-for achievement etc. are to be recognized. The effect of how every single learner-OU interaction affects the future propensity of the learner to actively pursue his learning is moderated by learner's characteristics such as age, urban or rural, social status, family background, level of academic self-concept, employed or otherwise, stage of academic progress made so far etc. That is; when two learners with contrasting learner characteristics, is subjected to the same learner-OU interaction, the effect on each learner's future propensity to actively pursue the academic programme could be different.

Developing positive and meaning relationships is vital across all learners from the strategic importance of building a good image and acceptance of the OU in the society and for enhancing the success rate of the OU. Thus, it calls for policy-making in building Learner Relationship Management (LRM) practices in the OU. (CRM will have to termed as LRM in ODL context)

IMPLEMENTING LEARNER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT (LRM) IN ODL

A broad framework of LRM in ODL environment is presented in Figure 3. Building excellent long-term relations with learners requires providing quality and timely service continuously to them. We need to disintegrate the entire range of learner support functions/ services that the OU does. These can be broadly grouped into core services such as Admission-related services, Academic Support Services, Examination-related services and other learner Support services. These core services, as existing in the OU, will have to be reoriented to develop learner-OU relationships. Implementing LRM practices in these core areas can be by making best use of technology (technology-enabled LRM practices) such as interim automated reply (e-mail/ mobile sms) to learner followed by quick solutions to their problems/ queries. It also requires orienting and training OU personnel at all levels (OU headquarters/ Regional Office/ Study Centre) to become professional service-oriented employees. Due to heterogeneous characteristics of learners and in-built flexibility of OU, there is a need to customise relationships with learners depending on learner's information/ support service requirements. In order to strengthen the relationship paradigm, core services should be ideally enriched with extra benefits to learners. Eg. hosting a web conference/ webinar on 'role of media in empowering the youth' and offering invitation to learners of media studies/ journalism.
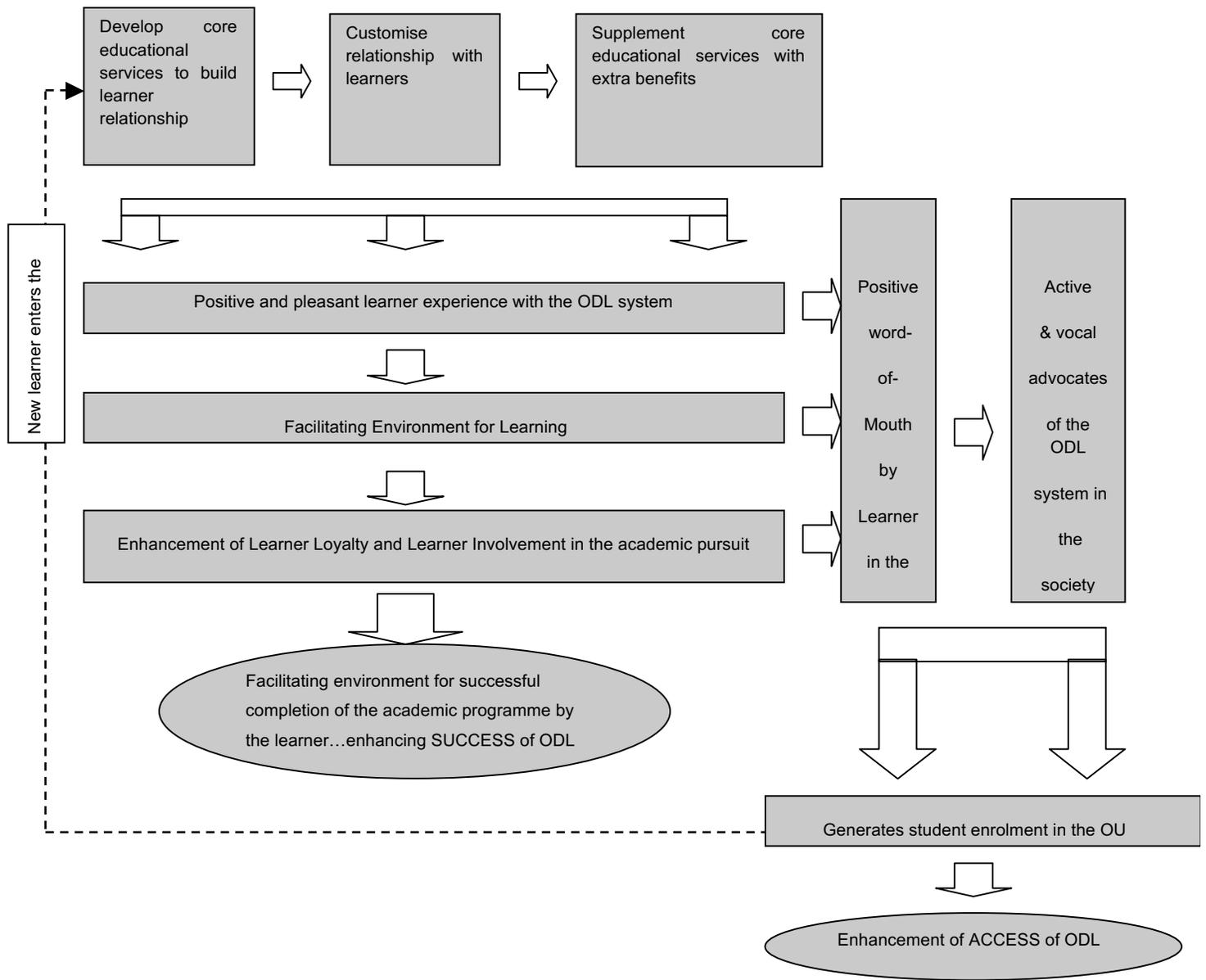
Figure 3: LRM framework in ODL environment

Facilitating Access and Success in learning - Role of LRM and PRM

Developing and implementing LRM practices fosters a healthy learner-OU relationship, resulting in pleasant and positive learner experience, which act as facilitator in the academic endeavours of the learner. It also brings about greater learner loyalty and involvement with the OU.

Two aspects of prime importance to an OU are its access and success. Access refers to reach of the OU in terms of providing access to higher education to all, beyond constraints of time and place. Success refers to successful completion of academic programmes by the learners. LRM would provide an environment to the learner that facilitate successful completion of the academic programme (figure 3) – thereby, enhancing success (rate) of OUs. Similarly, the positive learner experience and learner loyalty

gets translated into positive word-of-mouth and sharing of experiences by learners with his social environment (comprising of family/ friends/ co-workers etc). Ideally, if the learner has experienced high levels of learner satisfaction, he may even turn into active and vocal advocates of the ODL system (and the OU in particular). Thus, the very learners (both existing and passed out) would serve as promoters of the OU programmes. Thus, RM has a vital role in promoting access and success in learning. in OUs.

While considering success rate (percentage of learners successfully completing their degree), broadly there are two kinds of factors:
- OU-Controllable (factors or aspects of the OU system that can be managed by the OU in order to facilitate growth of the success rate) and
- OU-Uncontrollable factors. (OU has no role to manage learner-centric factors such as learner's personal responsibilities/ job compulsions which may slow down/ cause learner drop-out)

What can be ensured by the OU is that OU itself will not act as a deterrent to active learning, instead function as a strong facilitator for the learner to actively pursue and successfully complete the degree. LRM plays a vital role in this context.

Partner Relationship Management (PRM)

OUs, especially in India, work in partnership with various educational institutions/ colleges to deliver its academic programmes at various geographic locations. From the perspective of Supply Chain management, it is essential to manage a superior value chain in the OU that delivers high quality service to learners. Hence, Partner Relationship Management is also crucial. These partnering institutions many times serve as the main learner-OU interface. Thus, essential to develop LRM practices at partner level as well, so that their personnel provide quality service to learners and augment the OU's efforts in building fruitful long-term learner relationships learners. This calls for orienting and training personnel of partnering institutions as well. OU needs to engage in relationship building practices with its partners to build long-term meaningful relationships with them. These relationships developed should work towards strengthening their associations towards the final objective of enhancing access and success of the OU.

Benefits of Learner Relationship Management

OUs are established with basic objective of building a knowledge society by providing educational opportunities for lifelong learning to all sections of society. Therefore, it has a societal objective unlike the corporate world where the concept of customer relationship management has been accepted and practiced. Yet the Relationship Management concept can deliver benefits to ODL system. LRM provides a win-win platform, to both, OU and learners. Some prominent benefits are:

- ✓ Provide avenues for interaction with the learner
- ✓ Foster pleasant, positive learner experience
- ✓ Facilitate learner involvement
- ✓ Minimize isolation and 'OU-at a distance' feeling among learners
- ✓ Enhance feeling of studentship/ belonging towards the OU
- ✓ Constant and timely communication serves as instruments to reinforcement and motivate learner
- ✓ Facilitate developing learner mindset for actively pursuing and successfully completing the academic programme
- ✓ Minimize student grievances
- ✓ Positive learner word-of-mouth help build healthy image of ODL in society
- ✓ Learners take roles from mere participants to being vocal advocates of ODL system in general and of the OU in particular.
- ✓ Helps build a strong and loyal alumni base in society that would in turn serve to enhance access and success of the OU.

Implementing LRM practices is essential for an OU as it is dealing with heterogeneous adult learners. Further, LRM is more crucial to ensure quality in ODL, as in case of other service organizations. From a strategic viewpoint, it works towards enhancement of success rate of the OU and indirectly also works through its satisfied learner base in enhancing access of the OU in the society. Thus, attempts to fulfill the social objective of the OU, namely to provide opportunities to higher education to all. LRM and PRM practices results in greater synergy to fulfill objectives of OUs, especially for a large OU (like IGNOU) by the active support and commitment from partner organizations and the society (represented by the very learners of the OU, belonging to various sectors/ sections of society)

STRATEGY TO BUILD LEARNER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

In the context of the OU, in order to built-in LRM as a corporate philosophy, broadly six key aspects need to be delivered on. These would characterize the quality of service offered by the OU and be instrumental in building positive-satisfying learner experience that would foster development of excellent Learner-OU relationships. These can be listed as:

Corporate Image building	Dependability/ reliability of service	Receptiveness/ responsiveness	Instilling confidence/ assuring	Empathizing/ relating with the learner	Technology factor
- communicating a corporate message that the OU is learner-service oriented - Engaging in corporate social responsibility activities in realm of education Eg. hosting free career-counselling workshops/ seminars - Developing employees with a professional approach, evolve employee codes of conduct & dress codes.	- providing usual core learner services on time as committed - quick processing of specific learner requests effectively, at the first request from the learner -zeroing-in on student grievance rates - Maintaining error free learner database (admissions/ evaluation) - Employees to possess up-to-date knowledge of new developments of OU & have service-oriented attitude	- OU employees timely responding to every learner communication/ query - OU employees' readiness to help learners	- OU employees motivating & instilling confidence in learners - Assuring/ reinforcing the academic pursuits of learners - Polite and , learner-friendly behaviour by employees	- Giving a patient listening ear to every learner who approaches the OU - Considering the best interest of learner at all times - Genuinely attuned to comprehend learner's needs, problems and anxieties - Adopting learner-suitable means to provide services at all times such as IVRS query handling , suitable timings of classes/ exams - Sharing success stories of past successful learners with current learners	- making the best use of technology not only for pedagogy but for learner support/ service also - Judicious mix of technological and non-technological support systems to attend learner problems.

Challenges to LRM implementation

Certain aspects to be considered in implementing LRM practices:

- LRM solutions designed should fit with the OU architecture
- Analyzing existing modes of communicating with the learners to implement LRM practices, estimate time and cost involved in technology-enabled LRM practices
- Orienting and training employees at all levels including personnel of OU-partners to LRM philosophy
- For a large open university (IGNOU), with large number of learners, selective approach to implementing LRM practices can be considered; Eg. first level- implementing for bachelor's degree students, second stage - for Master's degree students.
- Ideally LRM practices should be a continuous-ongoing activity and over time, should be an integral part of the OU philosophy reflecting in all its activities. Till such time, there is a need to monitor LRM implementation and practices in the OU. It requires mechanisms such as conducting random learner interviews, collecting e-mails feedbacks, interim assessment of learners' spirit to complete their academic programme , whether OU-controllable reasons working as deterrents to active learning etc.

LRM needs to be imbibed as an OU philosophy right from the security personnel (whom the learners first meet when they visit an OU office) to the highest authority in the OU. It should permeate to all functional departments of the OU.

CONCLUSION

As an organization, OUs need to strategically intervene and develop practices that foster and facilitate access and success in learning. Ideally, OU itself should serve as a strong facilitator to enhance access and success rate. Learner Relationship Management practices has a lot to offer in this context and provides a win-win platform to all stakeholders.

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