
A Qualitative Study of TAFE Students Exiting from TAFE Programs

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Abstract

Institutional researchers have undertaken many studies of student attrition in the past but mainly focusing on the quantitative dimensions. No doubt it is important for institutions to be aware of their attrition rates and how this may vary by demographic and other variables in order to develop strategies to minimise drop-out rates and thereby reduce downward pressures on income foregone. However, few studies have previously focused on qualitative perceptions of tertiary level students discontinuing their programs (these are individual awards such as Diploma of Building). Collecting detailed qualitative information from students who are exiting their tertiary studies provides the opportunity to obtain valuable information for the purposes of program and student services improvement and a reduction in the incidence of a negative form of student attrition in the future. Accordingly, this article presents the findings of a qualitative research into reasons and associated issues concerning students exiting from Technical and Further Education (TAFE) programs within an inter-sectoral university.

Keywords: TAFE, student, exit, qualitative research.

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This article attempts to examine why students choose to discontinue with their studies. The case study institution is a dual-sector university (with a degree granting component and the TAFE component offering in the main certificate and diploma programs) located in Australia and the study's focus is on the TAFE sector. The research is necessary because of the relatively high attrition rate from TAFE; the TAFE sector generally sustains higher student attrition rate than higher education (degree granting component) due to the former enrolling more part-time students who are often juggling study with work commitments. Until the major causes for non-completion are addressed, the situation of students withdrawing from their programs will continue.

While research into the rate of attrition from universities and TAFEs mainly focuses on the quantitative (rather than the qualitative) aspect of students withdrawing

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from their programs, little of the published literature adequately explores factors that are more intangible.

Recently there has been a government review into funding of TAFE. The reforms to the fee paying structure will offer a benefit for those students undertaking lower qualifications, but will penalise those students undertaking upper-level qualifications who will have to pay a higher costs for their education. In Australia, the funding of public TAFEs has previously relied on centralised and capped funding, and the literature reflects this model. In future, eligible applicants to TAFE institutions will be provided with a government entitlement to increase their skills (Trounson, 2008). This research, which targeted 150 students, is apposite as with higher fees and the associated probable increase in the attrition rates from TAFE institutions, there will be a further loss of income to TAFE institutions at both the local and international student level if students cannot even afford to initially enrol. The public TAFE sector will also find increasing competition from private providers who may take advantage of the opportunity to offer a more financially competitive educational provision. It is important that public educational providers do everything they can to retain their current enrolments until completion.

This article reports on the responses of students who did not complete their programs and focuses on pathways to encourage those students who have withdrawn from education altogether to reconsider returning to study in the future.

Literature Review

The existing knowledge of TAFE attrition draws on many different research methods (refer for instance to Leong & Austin, 2005; McInnis et al., 2000). These include surveying respondents by the use of a paper questionnaire, focus groups and the use of informants; but there is no recent research findings that have used such a large sample as in this study. This research seeks to close the gap in the existing knowledge by identifying the less unquantifiable reasons for withdrawal from study.

This literature review focuses on the most relevant and recent research. Although there have been numerous research papers written on the non-completion of programs by TAFE students prior to 2001 (Bath, 1987; Duball & Baker, 1990; Parkinson, Hayton, & Strachan, 1987; Tinto, 1982) the amount of literature on the subject of the attrition rate of TAFE students has been scant in recent years (Gabb, Milne, & Cao, 2006). The latest research has argued that the quality of teaching, as well as non-institutional influences such as financial disadvantage and socioeconomic background have a significant bearing on whether a student can continue to study. A supportive environment and experienced teachers are also important influences in the motivation of students to continue their programs (Harris et al., 2001).

Recent studies on the causes for withdrawal from TAFE programs have included the link between attrition and the quality of teaching. The research deduces that non-completion rates are influenced by various factors, including whether teachers were well prepared for their lessons, whether students received sufficient feedback and help with their work. Fully on-the-job training, the loss of transferable skills and the poor regulation of quality standards also impacted on the number of final student completion rates (Snell & Hart, 2007; Taafe & Cunningham, 2005).

Other research provides the evidence that the TAFE sector continues to attract students from the lower socioeconomic groups. These educationally disadvantaged students may be from regional areas or remote and indigenous communities, and they are further disadvantaged if their already meagre financial support is further reduced, ‘. . . it should also be noted that many of these support services have become inadequately funded in recent years’ (TAFE Directors Australia, 2008, p. 12). Additional difficulties experienced by those from a disadvantaged background are exacerbated if they fail to realise their ambition of gaining a job from studying a TAFE program (Fernbach, 2007).

A further reason for discontinuance of study may be due to the fact that a large percentage of TAFE students are studying on a part-time basis. ‘The cost structure favours full-time study when the vast majority of TAFE students study part-time.’ (Kronemann, 2008). However, the recent government approved Tuition Assurance Scheme for TAFE Directors Australia, will provide Fee Help loans to students from 2009. At present, TAFE institutes have a student population of 1.5 million at enrolment. Private providers and industry accept a further 500,000 enrolments. The student demographic is changing with more mature age workers (age 24–44 years) taking up apprenticeships and traineeships (‘Student Loans Widen Skills’, 2008). Together with the skill programs changing and the uptake of community, clerical and sales programs, there is the prospect that students may find the transition from study to work easier to attain. Time will tell whether a shift in choice of programs, together with assistance from loans will improve retention rates in TAFEs. (‘Student Loans Widen Skills’, 2008).

Other recent observations for withdrawal from study cited social integration, disengagement and motivation as reasons, but these three factors are less evident in the recent literature (Taafe & Cunningham, 2005; Wylie, 2005). However, it may be that these reasons for non-completion may be less visible in the literature, due to the exiting student attributing a completely different explanation for withdrawal. This may be to enhance their self-esteem (Taafe & Cunningham), or assuage their embarrassment in admitting the true cause (e.g., difficulty in making friends or distracted by more appealing pursuits, such as computer games, playing sport).

Methodology

The questionnaire development for the TAFE student exit survey included the following considerations:

- The questionnaire is qualitative.
- The questions were piloted by consulting in person with an exiting university student (from another institution), as well as university staff. Our aim was to check that the questions would capture the information that we were intending to communicate with the students, and would further provide us with responses from the students that would inform us. It was important to use questions that the students felt comfortable with in discussing sometimes private and personal issues associated with the reasons for them leaving the TAFE sector before the end of the program.
- Our test sample of 150 (out of a total data set of 1,120) was to ensure that we obtained a meaningful set of results. We wanted to identify the major trends in the reasons for students voluntarily discontinuing their program. The choice of

who to ring was random, but we had to ensure those chosen had an operating telephone number and we did not include those based overseas.

- We looked for maturity and sensitivity in the survey administrators employed. It was important that they had intuitive skills in gauging how to lead the conversation, as well as in responding appropriately.
- We interviewed the respondents by telephone to obtain the strong qualitative data we required; as people provide more information when talking than in the written word.

Call Centre Implementation

We conducted a qualitative survey of 150 TAFE students, who had not completed their studies, in Semester 1, 2008 (subsequently called TAFE Exit respondents) around 140 of these students provided responses that were able to be used for subsequent analysis. The study considered all certificates and diploma programs where students had enrolled for Semester 1, 2008 but had subsequently discontinued their enrolment. We ran a call centre over a 2-week period, 18 weeks after the beginning of the first semester, February 11, 2008. The call centre ran for nine days from June 25, 2008 until July 10, 2008. We had a list of names and telephone numbers of students, which were cross-referenced to an Access database.

One of the limitations of the present research is that it did not consider any demographic and related variables in the study. The reasons for this include:

- The explorative nature of the research.
- The major focus of the research is qualitative rather than quantitative.

The sample size is relatively small and even if one was to collect the demographic variables, the number in each cell will be relatively small and subject to stochastic variations.

Survey Results

Survey Participation

Table 1 compares the survey participation by portfolio (an organisational group comprising schools and faculties) with the actual 2007 student population distribution. Overall, the survey sample is relatively close to the population distribution suggesting an adequate representation by the sample of TAFE Exit respondents in terms of broad academic discipline areas covered by the survey. This provides a degree of confidence in the survey sample.

Table 1

Comparison of Survey sample and Total Population

Portfolio	Survey Frequency	Survey %	Population Frequency	Population %
Business	36	25.9	5498	25.4
Design & Social Context	58	41.7	8878	40.9
Science, Engineering & Technology	45	32.4	7306	33.7
Total	139	100	21682	100

Overview of Reasons for Student Withdrawal from Studies

As previously stated, the questionnaire sought the main reason for discontinuing the TAFE program classified into five major categories including employment; ill-health, financial or personal; program quality; changes in study choice; and other reasons. The categories and indeed the questionnaire was developed and checked with senior staff during late May/early June, prior to its piloting during June and implementation in July 2008. Table 2 provides the distribution of results revealing that changes in study choice (29.5%) constituted the major reasons for TAFE program discontinuation, followed by employment (21.6%), other (21.6%), ill-health, financial and personal factors (20.9%) and student concerns with the quality of the program (6.5%).

Table 2

Reasons for Student Withdrawal

Reason for Program Withdrawal	Frequency	Survey %
Employment	30	21.6
Ill-health, financial or personal	29	20.9
Program Quality	9	6.5
Changes in study choice	41	29.5
Other reasons	30	21.6
Total	139	100

Each of the five broad reasons for TAFE program withdrawal, together with associated institutional issues, is considered in turn below. In the main these are qualitative perceptions but some are in the form of categorical variables that can be subject to tabulations and related analysis.

Each of the above matters is considered in turn below.

Employment

Table 3 provides an indication of the relevance of the program in finding work.

Table 3

Usefulness of Program to Find Employment

Usefulness	Frequency	Percentage
Not at all	9	30.0
To some degree	7	23.3
Useful	9	30.0
Very useful	5	16.7
Total	30	100

Managing the Demands of Working and Studying

A number of students did not avail themselves of the opportunity to discuss managing the demands of working and studying at the same time with university staff. Some of the comments made in this regard include 'No. Did not know who to talk to'; 'no I didn't. I had made up my mind soon after I was offered the job and am happy with my decision'; 'No (hadn't spoken to any one) . . . made the decision because work was not flexible. Mentioned (to unknown) that it (the classes) would be too early . . . some

students had expressed the same thing, but many were teachers who finished at 4 (pm) so it wasn't an issue (for them)'; 'No. Didn't think I could talk to anyone as class times could not be changed'.

In other cases students did muster the courage to talk to either our staff or their friends or family about balancing the demands of work and study with comments such as 'Yes (I spoke to) people at the university . . . Program coordinator'; '(spoke to) friends and family but not staff'; 'No (didn't speak to staff) but I talked with my boyfriend'; 'Yes. I had spoken to my Coordinator at the time—basically the workload that I have I wouldn't have been able to work full-time . . . the really long option of part-time would have taken 4–5 years (to complete) which wasn't an option for me'; 'Talked to program co-ordinator . . . said he could turn up twice a week instead of full-week because of work commitments. Second year demanded more. (The university) needs to be more flexible. Said that they would assess him at work but (this) never eventuated'; 'Yes spoke to me teachers but could not come to any negotiation'.

At least some of the above comments suggest perhaps greater flexibility on the part of staff to create the necessary flexibility in terms of curriculum delivery. While others indicate a need for staff to be trained to deal with the matter in such a manner so as to produce a positive outcome for students trying to juggle the demands of full-time work with studies.

Ill-Health, Financial and Personal Factors

Some students discontinued their program for health reasons including 'high blood pressure and arthritis'; 'due to mental health reasons I was forced into hospital care'; 'when I got really sick I could not manage (my studies) any more'; 'I had glandular fever'; and 'recovering from car accident'. Other students sustained personal or other family factors that impacted on their capacity to continue their studies including '(I had) home and family commitments'; 'left the program since mum is ill in Perth'; 'family commitments . . . my husband being unwell (and) this is an ongoing situation'; 'there were family issues (that the student does not wish to disclose)'; and 'left due to family duties . . . husband is overseas and so she had to look after a child'. For other students, financial factors were paramount in bringing about their departure from studies including '(the student) had to pay upfront fees. . . \$1000 per subject and withdrew'; and 'had financial trouble and couldn't balance work and study'.

Help Requested from Staff member Prior to Departure

Students withdrawing from the TAFE program due to ill-health, financial or other personal factors were requested to indicate whether they had sought any assistance from their teacher or other staff prior to their departure. Some students had requested assistance from the university's staff prior to departure including 'Did speak to someone. . . yes they were helpful . . . told her to stay enrolled and the program may change . . . moved from a certificate to a diploma . . . but decided to drop program because of family commitments'; and 'I did speak to the program coordinator and at first I needed certain information for my situation . . . it (exemptions) did not materialise'. In another case although the student had spoken to their program coordinator, due to staffing changes and instability in class organisation, perhaps the outcome was not as positive for that student; in particular some of the statements include 'Yes I spoke to the program coordinator . . . he was great initially and I was

quite looking forward to the program although as time went on many classes were cancelled without prior warning which meant that student attendance was affected. Fairly early in the program the coordinator left . . . past this time it really went downhill’.

Program Quality

As previously stated the absolute number (9) of TAFE departures due to concerns regarding program quality was relatively low. This is a positive finding indicating that it did not contribute in any major way to student withdrawal. Nevertheless, given the relatively small numbers involved in this category of reason for student attrition, the analysis below should be regarded as being indicative only.

Usefulness of Program Content

Table 4 provides students perception of the usefulness of the program content for the relatively small number of students withdrawing from the program due to program quality. The following observations are made on this data:

- Given the relatively small number of responses in each of the cells of the table, clearly they would be subject to relatively large chance variations.
- Nevertheless, nearly 89% of such students found the program content of at least some use to them.

Table 4

Usefulness of Program Content

Usefulness	Frequency	Percentage
Not at all	1	11.1
To some degree	4	44.4
Useful	0	0
Very useful	4	44.4
Total	9	99.9*

*Due to rounding of numbers

Enthusiasm about Learning

Respondents were requested to share how enthusiastic they felt about learning when they first started their program. Again, noting the limitations of the relatively small absolute number of responses falling into this category, Table 5 provides the distribution of the enthusiasm on a 4-point scale. It suggests that all the respondents were either enthusiastic or very enthusiastic about the learning at the commencement of their studies. The challenge for our TAFE teachers is to maintain this level of enthusiasm throughout the program of the students’ studies.

Table 5*Enthusiasm about Learning*

Enthusiasm	Frequency	Percentage
Not at all	0	0
To some degree	0	0
Enthusiastic	2	22.2
Very Enthusiastic	7	77.8
Total	9	100

Reasonableness of Time Required for Assessment Completion

Respondents' opinions were also sought on whether the time demands for completing assessment tasks were reasonable. The majority of students responding to this item were satisfied with the time required for assessment completion.

Appropriate Feedback on Learning

Respondents were requested to indicate whether their teachers provided them with appropriate feedback about their learning on a four point scale. Table 6 summarises the outcome. It suggests that two thirds of the responding students received either 'quite a lot' or 'very much' feedback.

Table 6*Appropriate Feedback on Learning*

Feedback	Frequency	Percentage
Not at all	0	0
To some degree	3	33.3
Quite a lot	4	44.4
Very Much	2	22.2
Total	9	99.9*

*Due to rounding of numbers

Changes in Study Choice

Students departing the university due to changes in the study choice were probed during the telephone interview about associated factors. These matters are considered below.

Reason for Decision to Transfer to another Institution

Students were requested to share their reason(s) for departure to another institution or program from their previously enrolled TAFE studies. One of the major themes emerging from the stated reasons for departure from the TAFE program was the student's acceptance into a degree level program. Examples include: '(I moved because of) study choice . . . liked the idea of university more because the qualification was better . . . hours of TAFE were too long, especially compared to university . . . now at Victoria University'; '(I moved to) Deakin University because I got accepted into architecture after a year and half at the university'; '(I moved to) degree, leading on to work that I want; I feel that the degree has more to offer at the university'.

Other students had transferred to either specified or unspecified TAFE programs. Examples along these lines include: ‘(I am) doing another TAFE program at Victoria University . . . it is closer to my home . . . I applied and then got out straight away and the studies are more relevant . . . studying Diploma in Tourism Operations’; ‘I enrolled in a new program but after speaking to my program coordinator decided to go back to my old program’; ‘I changed my program because I decided to do hospitality . . . I believed at that time that the only place to do Hospitality (Hotel Management) was at a private college . . . I was convinced by my sister who does that program’; ‘I found the (the university) program too general about the health of food . . . I’m now studying at ACNM Nutritional Medicine’; ‘The (the university) program was too Business (orientated) . . . I was looking for a more creative program . . . have now changed to Swinburne’; ‘Because the university does not offer pre-apprenticeship electrical programs . . . did not want to do Accounting anymore . . . boring . . . now studying at the university’; ‘The university program was not what I was after . . . now studying pre-apprenticeship joinery program at another institution’.

Anything to Encourage Continuation at the university

Students who had departed due to changes in study choice were asked to indicate whether anything could have been done by the institution to encourage them to continue in their TAFE Program. Of the 40 persons who responded to this question, the majority (63%) suggested that nothing could be done by the institution to retain them, with 32% suggesting that there were potential actions that could have assisted and 5% felt that if they could have transferred to an appropriate degree program within the institution, those students would have been retained by the university as a whole (although not within their TAFE program).

Usefulness of Program at the university

Respondents were requested to indicate how useful they found the TAFE program at the university during the time they were studying that program. Table 7 reveals that 68.5% of the respondents regarded the program as being useful or very useful to them with another nearly 29% finding the program useful to some degree. Indeed only one student (just under 3%) of the respondents did not find the program of any use to them.

Table 7

Usefulness of the TAFE Program Content

Usefulness	Frequency	Percentage
Not at all	1	2.6
To some degree	11	28.9
Usefulness	18	47.4
Very Useful	8	21.1
Total	38	100

Expectations at Program Enrolment

Given the inter-sectoral nature of the university, it is not surprising that some of the students expected possible links/progression between the two sectors of the university. The related comments include: ‘I expected to complete the two year program as a prerequisite to starting the Bachelor program’; ‘I thought it (the program) was going to be reflective of the Bachelor degree that the university offers’; ‘I wanted to

increase confidence for (my) current program (Bachelor of Art, Photography) in Grammar etc.’; and ‘thought it (the program) might help me to go onto university’.

Meeting of Expectations and Possible Improvements

The students were also requested to indicate whether their expectations were met. Table 8 shows the distribution of responses suggesting that in around 47% of cases the university did meet their expectations fully, in around 21% of responses they were partially met with approximately 32% indicating that their expectations were not met.

Table 8

Student Expectations Met

Expectations Met?	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	18	47.4
No	12	31.6
Partially	8	21.0
Total	38	100

Other Factors in Student Attrition

Students were requested to provide more details about why they decided not to finish their university program under the residual ‘other’ category. The main themes emerging are considered below.

One of the major themes emerging relates to student family or personal factors. Examples along these lines include: ‘My father was dying, so I had to take a lot of time off and I have a very busy work situation’ — clearly in this case the family and employment factors interacted to produce the attrition outcome; ‘family commitments . . . the hours of my wife’s employment changed . . . so that meant that I finished early . . . it meant she was later and there was no one to look after my little girl’; ‘I am taking a break overseas’; ‘I was an hour away and had to travel every day . . . I would have liked to have lived in Melbourne, if I could afford it’; ‘my grandfather died so I lost all motivation to study’; ‘(I) can’t afford the daily (transport) ticket to the university in the city’; and ‘(My) main reason . . . 7 months old baby and travelling time’.

Some students appear to lack certain skills or sufficient prior studies including ‘(I) left because was not up to Maths and Physics’; ‘It was very difficult for me to study . . . my English language was not fluent’; ‘the main reason throughout my whole school life . . . (is that) I always struggled with my work . . . struggled with grasping information and understanding it . . .’; and ‘the university didn’t think that I was suitable to do Year 12 at the university’.

Other students departed for various learning/preferences or related factors, including: ‘Tried to get credit for the program I had already done . . . no one got back to me after emailing and calling’; ‘(The program was) just a bit different to what I expected’; ‘(I) became disinterested in the program . . . realised it was not what I had thought’; ‘lack of interest . . . didn’t like the program’; ‘the program clashed with a Masters program I was taking at the time’; ‘I found the subdivision subjects not in my field . . . that’s why I left the program’; ‘I thought it was something I wanted to do, but

after doing a few classes I didn't like it'; and 'it was different to what I expected . . . it was more about producing garments and I'm interested in designing garments'.

Conclusion

A significant finding of the study is that the majority of TAFE departing students exit for extra-institutional reasons. Clearly employment, ill-health, financial, personal and changes in study choice are related to the students themselves and collectively they account for the majority of the exiting students. Many of the 'other reasons' are in fact a combination of these factors and are also, in the main, outside the direct control of the university.

The other important finding of this study is that although the term 'student attrition' has acquired negative connotations historically, this is not necessarily so in the context of this university's TAFE sector. In particular, a number of students had acquired enough knowledge and skills to find a job, met their own study objectives and moved on to the world of work. Doesn't this constitute a success story? Similarly, there are other students who have used their TAFE studies to enter the higher education sector at either the same institution or other universities, the case studies considered in this project. Again they have achieved their personal goals and moved onto another, personally more desired phase of their lives and the TAFE sector has made the necessary contribution to their academic development. Clearly such student outcomes are very positive in nature from the individual student's perspective and also reflect favourably on the university's TAFE sector.

One issue that needs addressing is the payment options for TAFE fees. Perhaps the institution can maximise the loan choices for students so that they need not pay anything upfront or at worst a very small amount so that it does not act as a barrier for entry and retention within the TAFE programs.

A small proportion of students found it difficult to manage work and program attendance/study pressures and left their university program due to employment reasons. Although mainly the underlying factors are extraneous to the university, perhaps some advice from staff may help to retain the student. Student options may include decreasing their study load and completing the program over a longer period; studying via the distance education mode or indeed online learning and the like. Other students could be granted a period of leave of absence and they could return to studies once their employment workload becomes more manageable.

Changes in study choice contributed to almost 30% of the student attrition from the TAFE sector. A number of these students left to enter degree programs at other universities. Given that the institution is an inter-sectoral university, it ought to maximise the retention of these students within the greater institution via credit transfer and articulation arrangements between the TAFE and Higher Educator sectors. Greater awareness by students and the TAFE teachers, in this regard may prove useful in adopting the strategy of enhanced articulation and credit transfer to its higher education.

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