

# **A Qualitative Study of TAFE Students Exit 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, not many studies have focused in the past on qualitative perceptions of tertiary level students discontinuing their programs. 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 paper presents the findings of a qualitative research into reasons and associated issues concerning students exiting from TAFE programs within an inter-sectoral University.

## **Introduction**

This paper attempts to examine why students choose to no longer continue with their studies. The case study institution is a dual-sector university 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. Until the major causes for non-completion are addressed, the situation of students withdrawing from their courses will continue.

While research into the rate of attrition from universities and TAFE's mainly focuses on the quantitative, (rather than the qualitative) aspect of students withdrawing from their courses, little of the published literature adequately explores factors that are more intangible.

Recently there has been a review by the government 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 prior to the present time, the funding of public TAFEs has 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 one hundred and fifty 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 prove to 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 paper reports on the responses of students who did not complete their courses 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. 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 courses by TAFE students prior to 2001, there has been much less over the last few years. The latest research has argued that the quality of teaching, as well as non-institutional influences such as financial disadvantage and socio-economic background have a significant bearing on whether a student can continue to study.

Recent studies on the causes for withdrawal from TAFE courses 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 & Darryn, 2007; Taafe & Cunningham 2005).

Other research provides the evidence that the TAFE sector continues to attract students from the lower socio-economic groups. These educationally disadvantaged students may be from regional areas, remote and indigenous communities, who 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). 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 course (Fair Go, Newsletter of the Equity Research Centre, 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 fulltime study when the vast majority of TAFE students study part-time." (The Australian TAFE Teacher, Winter 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 (age 24-44) workers taking up apprenticeships and traineeships (TAFE Directors Australian Media Release, 16 September 2008). Together with the skill courses changing and the uptake of community, clerical and sales courses, 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

courses, together with assistance from loans will improve retention rates in TAFEs. (TAFE Directors Australian Media Release, 16 September 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, e.g. computer games, playing sport.

### **3. 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 course.
- 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 course. 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; around 140 of these students provided responses that were capable of use and subsequent analysis. We ran a call centre over a two-week period, eighteen weeks after the beginning of the first semester; 11 February 2008. The call centre ran for nine days from 25 June 2008 until 10 July 2008. We had a list of names and telephone numbers of students, which were cross referenced to an Access Database.

## Survey Results

### Survey Participation

Table 1 compares the survey participation by Portfolio 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; course 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 which 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**

<b>Usefulness</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
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 the matter with staff of the University about managing the demands of working and studying at the same time. 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...Course 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 course 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. Whilst 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.

### **III-Health, Financial & 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 course may change...moved from a certificate to a diploma...but decided to drop course because of family commitments”; and “I did speak to the course 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 course 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 course 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 effected. Fairly early in the course the coordinator left...past this time it really went down hill”.

### **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 four 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**

<b>Usefulness</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
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 6 provides the distribution of the enthusiasm on a four 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 course of the students' studies.

**Table 6: Enthusiasm about Learning**

<b>Enthusiasm</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
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' opinion was 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 7 summarises the outcome. It suggests that two thirds of the responding students received either "quite a lot" or "very much" feedback.

**Table 7: Appropriate Feedback on Learning**

<b>Feedback</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
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 at the university. One of the major themes emerging from the stated reasons for departure from the university TAFE is the student's acceptance in degree level programs. 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 course 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 course coordinator decided to go back to my old program”; “I changed my course 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 course”; “I found the (the university) course too general about the health of food...I’m now studying at ACNM Nutritional Medicine”; “The (the university) course was too Business (orientated)...I was looking for a more creative course...have now changed to Swinburne”; “Because the university does not offer pre-apprenticeship electrical courses...did not want to do Accounting anymore...boring...now studying at the university”; “The university course was not what I was after...now studying pre-apprenticeship joinery course 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 university to encourage them to continue in their the university tafe Program. Of the 40 persons who responded to this question, the majority (63%) suggested that nothing could be done by the university 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 at the university, 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 8 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 8: Usefulness of THE UNIVERSITY TAFE Program Content**

<b>Usefulness</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
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 course as a prerequisite to starting the Bachelor course”; “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 course (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 9 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 9: Student Expectations Met**

<b>Expectations Met?</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
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 everyday...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 course I had already done...no one got back to me after emailing and calling"; "(The course was) just a bit different to what I expected"; "(I) became disinterested in the course...realised it was not what I had thought"; "lack of interest...didn't like the course"; "the course clashed with a Masters course I was taking at the time"; "I found the subdivision subjects not in my field...that's why I left the course"; "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 VET 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 VET 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 VET sector.

One issue that needs addressing is the amount of TAFE fees. Perhaps the institution can maximise the loans option 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 course 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 VET 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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