STATE TRAINING BOARD
OF VICTORIA

VICTORIAN TAFE ATTRITION RATES STUDY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1986 Survey of Attrition Rates
and Reasons for Withdrawal
from Statewide Vocational Courses

December 1987
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

1986 SURVEY OF ATTRITION RATES
AND
REASONS FOR WITHDRAWAL FROM
STATEWIDE VOCATIONAL COURSES

Bob Bath

Melbourne 1987
FOREWORD

Many people equate withdrawal from a higher education course with failure and believe the withdrawing student must in some way be at fault.

Early research into attrition in higher education was mostly based on these assumptions and therefore sought explanations for attrition in students' personal and background characteristics. Failure in that direction has led researchers to examine the policies and practices of educational institutions and student-institution interactions.

It has been found that some students withdraw because they have achieved a goal other than course completion. However, others withdraw because they are dissatisfied with matters within the institution's control and frequently feel disillusioned, frustrated and a sense of failure. It is important that TAFE has acknowledged this and is committed to find the underlying reasons and develop effective retention strategies.

A longitudinal study is seen as the only methodology able to fully examine the complex interactions between student and institution which lead some to withdraw while others persist.

This project is the first step. It tests recent methodological initiatives in examining students' reasons for withdrawal and investigates attrition rates in sixteen of the major statewide accredited courses across nineteen TAFE colleges, piloting the establishment of a statewide across-stream longitudinal study.
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to establish attrition rates and students' reasons for withdrawal from statewide accredited courses in vocational streams, to establish the implications of the findings for the delivery, development and evaluation of TAFE courses, and to establish a longitudinal study.

A review of the relevant literature revealed that many factors are associated with withdrawal, usually in quite individualised combinations and with varying impact over time. The interaction between student and institution has become the focus for recent research. However, the development of suitable variables has not proceeded very far.

The literature also showed that attrition in some TAFE courses is considerably higher than in universities and CAE's. This may be because TAFE's role involves higher proportions of part-time students and greater access for academically disadvantaged people.

A lack of consistency within and between colleges in recording student withdrawals prevented the accurate measurement of course attrition rates. Individual course attrition rates, as measured, varied from two to forty-two per cent in the first semester of 1986. The average rate across the sixteen courses was eleven per cent. First-year and part-time students generally had higher rates of withdrawal, but not in all courses.

Students identified as having withdrawn were surveyed to establish their reasons. The effective response rate was only twenty per cent and the findings should therefore be treated with caution.

The most common factors influencing respondents' decisions to withdraw included employment-related matters, study difficulties, the course, domestic/social matters and course delivery. It was found that conflicting demands on students' time and difficulty organising time for study were major problems.

The findings show there are implications for course publicity, enrolment counselling, orientation programs, timetabling, study skills development services, teaching methods, curriculum design and staff development programs.

Uniform procedures for identifying and recording student withdrawals should be established in all colleges for local and system-wide planning purposes and this must occur before a longitudinal study can commence.
1. **INTRODUCTION**

This study was commissioned by the TAFE Board of Victoria in consultation with the TAFE National Centre for Research and Development Ltd., and was conducted by the Curriculum and Training Division, Moorabbin College of TAFE, under a designated grant.

Previous research had shown that some TAFE courses suffer high student attrition, especially among part-time students. However, attrition rates had not been systematically investigated on a statewide basis.

Attrition rates are an important indicator of institutional performance and the lack of these statistics had implications regarding TAFE's public accountability. It also hindered the development of policies and strategies for increasing student retention and course completion rates.

The TAFE Board therefore determined that a study be made of attrition rates in statewide accredited vocational courses and of students' reasons for withdrawal from those courses.

This study does not investigate the underlying social and educational conditions which relate to the courses examined. Therefore no conclusions are drawn on whether the levels of attrition observed are satisfactory or otherwise and no recommendations are made in relation to retention strategies for individual courses.

Instead, broad implications are drawn from the findings and it is intended that these and the recommendations flowing from them will provide

(a) specific suggestions for system-wide strategies;

(b) a starting point for the development of course by course retention strategies at the local provider level; and

(c) useful insights into the substantive and methodological issues relevant to the establishment of a longitudinal study.
2. **AIMS**

The aims of the project were defined by the TAFE Board as:

2.1. Establish attrition rates for statewide programs in all vocational streams (3100, 3200, 3300, 3400, 3500) together with a sample of 4000 programs, particularly post trade programs;

2.2. Link with existing attrition studies in Victoria (Monash and evening high schools in particular);

2.3. Analyse data obtained according to sex, age, delivery mode, location;

2.4. Explain attrition rates in terms of students' reasons for not completing parts of a statewide program;

2.5. Commence a longitudinal study to follow persisters through to course completion; and

2.6. Establish implications of attrition rates for the delivery, development and evaluation of TAFE programs.
3. LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review was conducted with special attention to reports relating to TAFE and concurrent attrition research projects in Victoria.

The review examined definitions of withdrawal and persistence, rates of attrition in higher education, factors related to attrition, the TAFE context, methodological designs and development of variables, and recommendations for future research and retention strategies.

The basic definitions of withdrawal and persistence which Christine Macdonald (1984) suggested for use in TAFE have been adopted (with some minor variations) in recent TAFE studies, and these were regarded as suitable for use in the 1986 pilot study. These, and a more comprehensive set of definitions recommended for use in the longitudinal study, are provided in Appendix 3 to the main report (Vol. 2, Literature Review).

Attrition rates varied considerably between courses in tertiary institutions and, while attrition in some TAFE courses exceeded that in other institutions, there was insufficient information to make any general comparison.

Part-time and first-year students in all institutions showed the highest rates of withdrawal, especially in the first term/semester of a course.

The most common reasons for withdrawal from TAFE courses included:
- employment-related matters;
- dissatisfaction with course content and delivery;
- lack of study skills and motivation;
- conflict between study and family or social life.

Importantly, those who persisted in their courses also identified these factors as sources of difficulty or dissatisfaction.

TAFE's role-set within the tertiary education system includes factors which tend to increase attrition. These include:
- greater access for the academically disadvantaged;
- greater relevance and accessibility of many TAFE courses to people in full-time employment; and
- difficulties with accreditation and curriculum relevance caused by the disparateness of industrial and business training requirements.

The literature did not examine the effects of rapid technological, economic and social change on the expectations placed on TAFE. Two aspects of this could be worth investigating in relation to student attrition:
- TAFE's capacity to keep pace regarding curricula, equipment and teachers' knowledge and skill base; and

- the extent to which job or career insecurity motivates people to try out a new vocational field by commencing a related course.

A number of methodological designs and approaches were noted.

The ex post facto design was chosen for the pilot survey and it was noted that the longitudinal design, which enables controlled analysis of institutional and interactional variables over time, was the only one able to adequately examine the long complex processes leading to many withdrawals.

Student-related variables have generally proved unproductive in explaining attrition. However, examination of study skills, motivation, financial and employment-related matters was recommended.

Institutional variables have been inadequately explored. Counselling, academic advice services, orientation programs, admission procedures, timetable organisation, level and quality of administrative support, curricula and course delivery were recommended for further exploration.

The recent literature suggested that the interaction between student and institution is a critical factor in withdrawal. This is a matter of particular relevance for TAFE because of the predominance of part-time students whose points of interaction with the college are very limited.

There was agreement that future research should explore institutional and interactional factors, in particular those which institutions are able to control and which investigation has shown to be important in attrition.

Macdonald (1984) recommended that TAFE seek to identify factors which encourage students to persist in a course. She especially recommended that variables should be designed from factors affecting the availability of study time for students and their ability to learn at the desired level so they may be correlated with institutional variables impacting on them.

There was general agreement in the recent literature that retention policy should be based on a philosophy of the right to access to recurrent education. Strategies should be devised to impact comprehensively on the student's interaction with the college and should pay special attention to the needs of first-year and part-time students.
4. **RESEARCH DESIGN**

4.1. **Introduction**

The collection of information was designed in three stages:
- Student population characteristics and determination of the study sample;
- Collection of sample enrolment and withdrawal statistics;
- Collection of qualitative data on withdrawal.

4.2. **Student Population Characteristics and Determination of the Study Sample**

IDACH Pty Ltd was contracted to collect statistical data, report on the student population characteristics for statewide programs in all vocational streams (3100, 3200, 3300, 3400 and 3500) and stream 4000 programs and to recommend a study sample. IDACH's report is provided in Appendix 4 to the main report (Vol. 3) and the accompanying tables in Appendix 5 (Vol. 4).

Following that report it was decided to limit the study to only those courses which had (in 1984) enrolments of over 1,000. In this way, from the 442 courses within the target streams (encompassing 82,050 enrolments), seventeen courses were selected encompassing 32,311 enrolments statewide.

For each course, approximately four colleges were selected on the basis of location and type.

The model sample thus constructed included 14,976 from a total population of 32,311 enrolments; forty-six per cent of the total enrolments in the seventeen selected courses.

4.3. **Collection of Sample Enrolment and Withdrawal Statistics**

Each of the 22 selected colleges was provided with procedural notes and reporting forms and requested to provide first-semester enrolment and withdrawal statistics on between two and six nominated courses.

Two colleges (Warrnambool and Swinburne) did not participate and the statistics provided by one college (RMIT) were incomplete and therefore discarded.

The selected course Certificate of Secretarial and Administrative Studies was newly accredited and there were no enrolments in the respondent colleges.
Statistics were therefore collected on sixteen courses across nineteen colleges.

The courses were:

- 21 DBA Cert. of Business Studies (Accounting)
- 21 DEA Cert. of Business Studies (Real Estate)
- 21 ECW Cert. of Technology (Electronics)
- 21 EEA Cert. of Technology (Mech. Engineering)
- 21 KAA Cert. of Catering
- 32 CBA Carpentry and Joinery
- 32 CDA Plumbing and Gasfitting
- 32 ECG Electrical Mechanic
- 32 EFF Fitting and Machining
- 32 KAB Cooking
- 32 KCA Hairdressing
- 42 CAN Fork Lift Operator
- 42 DDG Typewriting
- 42 ECE Basic Electronics
- 42 EJB Electric Arc Welding
- 44 DGE Supervision

The colleges were:

Ballarat College of Mines and Industries
Bendigo College of TAFE
Box Hill College of TAFE
Collingwood College of TAFE
Dandenong College of TAFE
Flagstaff College of TAFE
Footscray College of TAFE
Frankston College of TAFE
Gordon Technical College (Geelong)
Goulburn Valley College of TAFE
Holmesglen College of TAFE
Moorabbin College of TAFE
Newport College of TAFE
Prahran College of TAFE
Preston College of TAFE
Sunraysia College of TAFE
Wangaratta College of TAFE
William Angliss College
Yallourn College of TAFE

Reports (see Appendix 6 to main report) were designed to show the numbers of enrolments and withdrawals and the rates of attrition according to year of study, study mode and sex in the following formats:

- course by college
- stream by college
- field by college
- overall by college
- overall by college type.
4.4. Collection of Qualitative Data on Withdrawal

Students identified during the collation of withdrawal statistics as having withdrawn in first semester, 1986, were selected as the sample for the collection of qualitative data on withdrawal.

Participating colleges mailed questionnaires and covering letters to withdrawers. Reply-paid envelopes for return of questionnaires, addressed to Moorabbin College of TAFE, were also included.

The questionnaire was based on that used by the TAFE National Centre for Research and Development in its concurrent national study of attrition among part-time first-year TAFE students so that the studies would complement each other.

The questionnaire sought information from withdrawers on:
- factors influencing their decision to withdraw;
- aspects of the withdrawal process;
- their reasons for enrolling;
- how they found out about the course;
- aspects of the enrolment process; and
- their personal details.

A total of 942 questionnaires were posted to persons identified as withdrawers and 188 were returned in time for data processing - a response rate of twenty per cent. However, seventy-six of these were from people not included in the study's definition of withdrawers.

Only 112 returned questionnaires, therefore, were usable in the analysis.
5. FINDINGS

5.1. Results of Quantitative Survey on Attrition Rates

Usable statistical data on enrolments and withdrawals was received from nineteen colleges covering sixteen courses. Because there was not a consistent system between colleges for identifying withdrawals, the attrition rates arrived at should only be regarded as indicative.

From a total of 9,816 enrolments, 1,068 students were identified as having withdrawn - an overall attrition rate of eleven per cent. This varied course by course, from two per cent for Carpentry and Joinery to forty-two per cent for Electric Arc Welding.

Overall, the rate of attrition among males was twelve per cent compared with nine per cent among females. However, in those colleges where both male and female students were represented in the study, the female attrition rate tended to be higher than that of males. In the Supervision Certificate course and courses in the building field, the female attrition rate was much higher than males, respectively twenty-nine against fifteen per cent and fifteen against three per cent.

The attrition rate for first-year students was more than double that of subsequent-year students - sixteen per cent compared with seven per cent. Again, this varied considerably course by course, with some showing higher attrition among subsequent-year students.

Stream classification was closely linked to course attrition rates. The stream attrition rates were:

- 33.4%: 3222 IV - Skill: Complete Other Skills;
- 24.1%: 3000 IV - Unclassified; *
- 17.6%: 3300 IV - Trade Technician/Supervisory;
- 10.8%: 3400 IV - Paraprofessional/Technician;
- 7.7%: 3100 IV - Operatives;
- 3.7%: 3212 IV - Skill: Complete Trade Course.

While attrition among part-time students was expected to be much higher than for full-time students, this was only the case in three of the courses looked at. This may have been because it was easier to

* 'Stream 3000 IV - Unclassified' comprised the following courses which were still not classified at the time the model sample was established:
  Certificate of Business Studies (Accounting), and
  Certificate of Business Studies (Real Estate).
identify withdrawal among full-time students. By mode of delivery, attrition rates were:

- 16.1% : external;
- 10.9% : part-time;
- 10.5% : full-time;
- 5.8% : multi-modal.

Field of study did not appear to influence attrition rates.

Attrition rates were found to vary according to college type, but the differences may have been due to the particular courses sampled by each college. The attrition rates by college type were:

- 14.5% : country colleges;
- 14.3% : metropolitan multipurpose colleges;
- 6.8% : metropolitan single purpose colleges;
- 6.8% : provincial colleges.

5.2. Results of Qualitative Survey on Withdrawal

Respondents' Characteristics

Seventy per cent of respondents to the survey questionnaire were part-time students. Two-thirds were in the first year of their course.

Thirty-two per cent of respondents were females, whereas they made up only twenty-seven per cent of withdrawers in the quantitative survey.

Seventy-two per cent of respondents were in full-time employment while studying and seven per cent part-time. Forty-eight per cent were enrolled in courses obviously relevant to their employment and twenty-eight per cent in courses obviously not relevant.

While respondents ranged in age from sixteen to seventy-four years, twenty per cent were either eighteen or nineteen and one-third were thirty years or older.

Fifty-eight per cent had previously completed Year 10 or 11 and thirty per cent Year 12. Only four per cent had completed less than ten years schooling.

Eighty-four per cent of respondents were born in Australia and two per cent of these were Aborigines or Torres Strait Islanders.
Commencement of Course

The most common reasons for enrolment were vocational. Widening of career options, training for a specific job, and help in a current job were each stated as 'very important' by half the respondents.

'To obtain personal satisfaction' or 'to satisfy an interest' were also common reasons for enrolment, with one-third giving each as 'very important' in their decision to enrol.

Pre-enrolment sources of information about courses varied. The source most commonly regarded as 'important' or 'very important' was TAFE information services and publications (forty-three per cent). However, approximately one-third each reported that their own experience or that of someone they knew, their employer's or a fellow employee's advice were 'important' or 'very important' sources.

Less than half the respondents recalled being informed of the location and use of careers advice, personal counselling and study skills advice services when they enrolled.

Withdrawal

Most respondents withdrew without advising the college. A little over one-third of respondents told their teacher of their decision to withdraw. About the same proportion advised the college administration verbally and eighteen per cent did so in writing.

Only eighteen per cent of respondents were encouraged by a staff-member to continue their studies.

Although a large majority of respondents had spoken to a family member or friend about their decision to withdraw, only thirty per cent had spoken to a teacher. Importantly, only five per cent had spoken with a personal counsellor, five per cent with a careers advisor, and a mere two per cent with a study skills counsellor.

Only ten per cent of respondents were contacted by a member of the college staff about their withdrawal.

Seventy-two per cent of respondents stated they intended to return to tertiary study in the future.
Reasons for Withdrawal

Respondents were asked to indicate how important each of twelve major factors was in their withdrawal decision. Under each factor was a list of more detailed items and, for each factor influencing them, they were asked to indicate how important each item was in the decision to withdraw.

Conflicting demands on students' time and difficulty in organising study time emerged as the most important issue. Although the fifteen most commonly reported items spanned six factors, eleven of them were directly related to this issue of time.

Twenty-two per cent of respondents reported only one factor as the reason for withdrawal, but over half were influenced by at least three factors and one-third reported they were influenced by five or more.

Few respondents withdrew for the same sets of reasons, but two-thirds were influenced by employment related matters, nearly half by study difficulties, and more than one-third each by the course, domestic or social matters, and teaching style or learning aids. Travel or distance from college influenced a quarter, and one-fifth each were influenced by college procedures or facilities, the achievement of a personal goal and health problems.

Males and females reported generally similar reasons for withdrawal but some differences were observed. Males were influenced more than females by employment related matters and study difficulties, while females were more often influenced than males by domestic or social matters, the course and college facilities and procedures.

5.3. Implications of Findings

Quantitative Findings

The lack of procedures in most colleges for identifying withdrawers means that attrition rates, important indicators of institutional performance, are not routinely available. This places limitations on policy and planning processes at both the Board and provider college level.

Uniform identification and recording procedures must be established in colleges before a longitudinal study can commence, and a consultative project to determine a suitable system has commenced. The report on that project will be available in 1988.
Because there were inconsistencies between colleges in the method of identifying withdrawers, the attrition rates arrived at in this study must be regarded only as indicative of the extent of attrition in the first semester.

It is apparent that substantial attrition occurs in some statewide accredited vocational courses while in others (e.g. apprenticeship courses) it is very low. There is strong differentiation according to stream classification. However, it will only be possible to identify 'problem' courses with certainty when all colleges provide attrition statistics on all courses.

Attrition rates in some courses vary considerably between colleges and the implications will therefore also vary between colleges. However, a statewide longitudinal study should provide detailed information on the factors involved in withdrawal, and colleges, on determining the relative mix of factors applying locally, would be able to use this information to develop their own retention strategies for individual courses.

Qualitative Findings

Conflicting time demands clearly cause stress for most students and there are opportunities to address this through enrolment counselling, orientation programs, alternative timetabling, teaching methods, study skills development services and curricula.

Other commonly reported study difficulties included organisation, note-taking, preparation for tests and assignments, deficiencies in background knowledge and/or skills, and unfamiliarity with terms used by teachers. Enrolment counselling should seek to identify these problems and ensure that appropriate assistance is negotiated between the student and the college. Bridging assistance and alternative study options should be available and teaching methods may need to take more account of individuals' prerequisite deficiencies.

Dissatisfaction with course content and organisation has course by course implications for curriculum design, teaching methods, course publicity and enrolment counselling.

Dissatisfaction with teacher-student communication was also common and this was underlined by how few students spoke with or notified teachers about withdrawing and, particularly, how few (10%) were contacted by a teacher about their withdrawal.
Staff development programs on communication skills and the special needs of part-time students may be necessary. Regular class discussion on the pressures of study, the course, teaching methods, and the relative benefits of withdrawal and persistence could enhance communication between teachers and students and provide informal support to those students considering withdrawal.

The adequacy of teaching aids, equipment, library facilities and access to equipment should be reviewed regularly. A wide range of college facilities and services were also sources of dissatisfaction contributing to withdrawal, especially car-parking, temperature control in class rooms and inflexibility of timetables.

Enrolment counselling should include attention to problems posed by remoteness from college, and special arrangements for students affected by remoteness should be considered regarding assignments and access to tools and equipment, as these were high impact influences on the decisions to withdraw of some six per cent of respondents.

Although twenty-one per cent of respondents reported that achievement of a personal goal was 'important' or 'very important' in their decision to withdraw, the less tangible items listed under this factor were reported most frequently (e.g. proved to myself I could succeed; broadened my career options). Concrete achievements were reported by some respondents, however, (e.g. study helped me get a job; helped me meet employer's requirements; helped me get a promotion; helped me get a pay rise; helped me gain entrance to another course). At least eleven per cent, and perhaps as many as nineteen per cent, of respondents withdrew for reasons which included tangible and positive personal achievements.
6. RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1. TAFE Board

6.1.1. That staff development programs be developed and implemented so that staff are equipped to:

(a) provide effective enrolment counselling, with particular attention to:
   - prospective study loads and potential time demand conflicts, and
   - the enrollee's level of study skills and prerequisite knowledge and competencies;

(b) provide study skills (particularly time management) advice and training;

(c) provide orientation programs relevant to the needs of part-time students in full-time employment;

(d) provide individualised bridging assistance to students deficient in prerequisite knowledge and competencies; and

(e) counsel students and facilitate classroom discussion on matters causing student dissatisfaction and other difficulties with their study.

6.1.2. That study skills literature (with special emphasis on time management) be developed for dissemination to students, with particular attention to the pressures on part-time students in full-time employment.

6.1.3. That curricula include components on study skills and time management in the initial stages of courses.

6.1.4. That curriculum design and review processes include broad consultation with students and needs analysis of students' requirements, including part-time students.

6.1.5. That the TAFE Board's Course Table File be reviewed to ensure that all courses are correctly classified under the new stream classification system.

6.1.6. That TAFE providers be required to provide statistical reports to the TAFE Board not only on student enrolments but also on student withdrawals, and that the method of recording student withdrawals be according to standard procedures developed in consultation with TAFE providers.
6.1.7. That the TAFENET student records system include information on date of withdrawal and stage of course reached.

6.1.8. That computer assisted and computer managed instruction (CAI and CMI) packages be developed for use in courses wherever possible.

6.2. TAFE Providers

6.2.1. That sufficient staff be trained and rostered for enrolment counselling duties.

6.2.2. That teaching staff be trained in study skills and time management advice and training techniques, and be trained to counsel students and facilitate class discussion on matters causing dissatisfaction and other difficulties with study.

6.2.3. That orientation programs be developed and implemented with special attention to the needs of part-time students in full-time employment.

6.2.4. That individualised bridging assistance be negotiated and provided where appropriate to students with deficiencies in prerequisite knowledge and competencies.

6.2.5. That alternative class times be provided throughout the academic year and/or that lessons/lectures be recorded, so that students unable to attend any class are not automatically disadvantaged.

6.2.6. That computer assisted and computer managed instruction (CAI and CMI) packages be made available where possible, so that students have greater flexibility in their personal timetables.

6.2.7. That teachers regularly invite their students to discuss their progress and any difficulties (including non-academic problems) which may be interfering with their progress, and that appropriate counselling be given to assist students in any decision regarding withdrawal or subject deferral.

6.2.8. That colleges regularly review the adequacy of teaching aids, equipment and access of students to equipment, with particular attention to the access needs of students travelling long distances to college or facing other excessive time demands.
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