

## **Attrition and retention. The voice of missing students**

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### **Abstract**

This paper addresses the issue of attrition and retention of a minority group in a large multi-ethnic, urban polytechnic located in an area of low socio-economic status. One of the important findings in recent work on attrition and retention has been to note that while there are common factors with regard to cause and alleviation, there is also a significant element of local expression in the configuration of factors.

The purpose of this research has been to gather data from Maori and Pacific Islands students in a Manukau (South Auckland) polytechnic who have left their courses without completing. The focus of the research has been the students' view of the causes of their not continuing and their suggestions of strategies for improvement in the institutional arrangements for participation and support of Maori and Pacific Islands students.

A survey was conducted of Maori and Pacific Islands students who had left their courses after the first two weeks of study but before completion. While issues of contact and reply are endemic to this kind of study, the researcher achieved a return rate and depth of response which was both informative and supportive of the notion that local work can offer considerable insight when considered alongside internationally recognised models such as those of Vincent Tinto.

The findings of this research configures the dual impacts of “internal” institutional factors with regard to creating an engaging environment and the very real “external” effects of social and economic disadvantage in this locality. The findings are presented in a manner that reflects on the applicability of global research in this area to the local situation with Maori and Pacific Islands students. In a tertiary environment that has signalled high priority for the development of strategies to increase participation and success of Maori and Pacific Islands students at the tertiary level, these findings are a valuable contribution.

### **Introduction**

The New Zealand government has recently introduced the Tertiary Education Strategy 2002/07, which is intended as the centerpiece of a series of reforms of the tertiary education sector. This strategy outlines how the tertiary education system will help achieve the governments' vision for a New Zealand knowledge society with its six national goals of economic transformation, social development, Maori development, environmental sustainability, infrastructural development and innovation.

In the strategy, the government acknowledges the need to recognise “the unique position of Maori as Treaty partners and the huge significance that learning and education has for Maori communities” (Min. Ed., 2002). It also recognises the significant and rapidly growing population of Pasifika People<sup>1</sup> in New Zealand and the need for their development to ensure their success.

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<sup>1</sup> The term *Pasifika* refers to people from any Pacific Island (predominantly Samoan, Tongan, Niuean, Fijian, Cook Islands and Tokelauan).

Part of the strategy and the reforms that will follow are thus focused on improving the educational and success status of Maori and Pasifika Peoples. This means increasing the number of Maori and Pasifika Peoples students who participate in tertiary education. The 2003 Tertiary Education Participation Report (Scott, 2003) identified that Maori participation has grown steadily throughout the 1990's, with significant growth in 2002 from 19% to 22%. Pasifika enrolments increased also with participation rates rising from 14% to 15%. Maori students participated in higher numbers at private providers (5.6%), polytechnics (5.5%) and wananga (4.0%) than at universities where participation rates, overall, have fallen since 1994. This information points toward a favorable conclusion that Maori and Pasifika Peoples are participating more in tertiary education, compared to previous years. However, this information does not take into account the number of students who withdraw from tertiary programmes each year, and are included in the statistics despite the fact they did not complete the programme in which they were enrolled.

Tinto (2002) defines four major conditions within tertiary institutions that promote student retention.

- The first is an institutional commitment to increasing student retention, especially among minority groups.
- Secondly, academic and social support needs to be available as a number of students who enter into tertiary study without understanding, or preparation for the workload and the pressures that tertiary study places on their lives external to the institution.
- The third condition is involvement. The more a student is involved in institute life, both academically and socially, the more likely they are to remain a student and go on to graduate.
- Finally, the fourth condition that Tinto identifies that promotes retention is learning. The more valuable the learning experience for a student, the less likely they are to withdraw from programmes prematurely.

These conditions draw a clear picture that shows that a tertiary education institution must do more than simply pass on knowledge to its students.

Manukau Institute of Technology (MIT) is situated in Manukau City, the largest and most active multicultural city in New Zealand with a Pasifika Peoples population of 20% and a Maori population of 16%. MIT itself is thus a multicultural tertiary institution, with a wide range of ethnic backgrounds in both the student and staff populations. MIT, anecdotally, has noticed a large withdrawal rate from their programmes by Maori and Pasifika students after the 2 week, formal withdrawal period. Obtaining information about reasons for withdrawal outside of the formal period has become an important focus. This is made even more crucial by the fact that students who leave programmes after this time are ineligible for any fee refund.

MIT is focused on student-centered teaching. The 1996 MIT Charter states that the Institute is committed to being student focused, to valuing the cultural diversity that exists within its community and to providing a comprehensive range of programmes by level, subject and mode of delivery. For these reasons MIT has in place a number of academic, cultural and social support services for students aimed at optimal retention and success. In addition, social events are organized to help students interact with each other in a friendly, non-threatening environment and a diversity of teaching techniques is encouraged. Despite the range of services and support structures, it is

still a belief that Maori and Pasifika students are withdrawing in substantial numbers from MIT programmes and that the reasons for this are largely unknown.

To investigate this a small-scale research project set out to establish reasons for Maori and Pasifika student withdrawal from programmes at Manukau Institute of Technology after the formal withdrawal period.

## **Research Method**

### *Identification of Participants*

Programmes offered at Manukau Institute of Technology (MIT) were used in this study, but excluded all short courses and programmes run by the Maritime School as their function as a department is different to others within the institution.

Maori and Pasifika students enrolled in Semester one, 2003 were identified within each programme and listed by student number, name and ethnicity. These lists were then distributed to each department within the institute and programme leaders and lecturers were asked to identify which students had withdrawn or dropped out from each programme.

Student names were then collated, and a questionnaire was sent to each person. Two weeks after the posting of the questionnaires telephone contact was made with each person in an effort to increase the respondent rate. Contact was made to ensure students had received the questionnaire, to answer any questions about it and to encourage its return. Staff at the MIT Information Centre who had been briefed on the project but who were not part of the research team performed outbound calling.

### *Development of the Questionnaire*

Draft questionnaires were distributed to Maori and Pasifika representatives within MIT for critique. The questionnaire, in its final draft, was then tested in two focus groups with Maori and Pasifika students to ensure the language and content were appropriate.

### *Consent and Confidentiality*

Completion and return of the survey was regarded as participant consent.

The questionnaire carried no identifying information and was therefore returned directly to the research team.

### *Data Analysis*

Qualitative analysis was performed by identifying themes in a hierarchical design

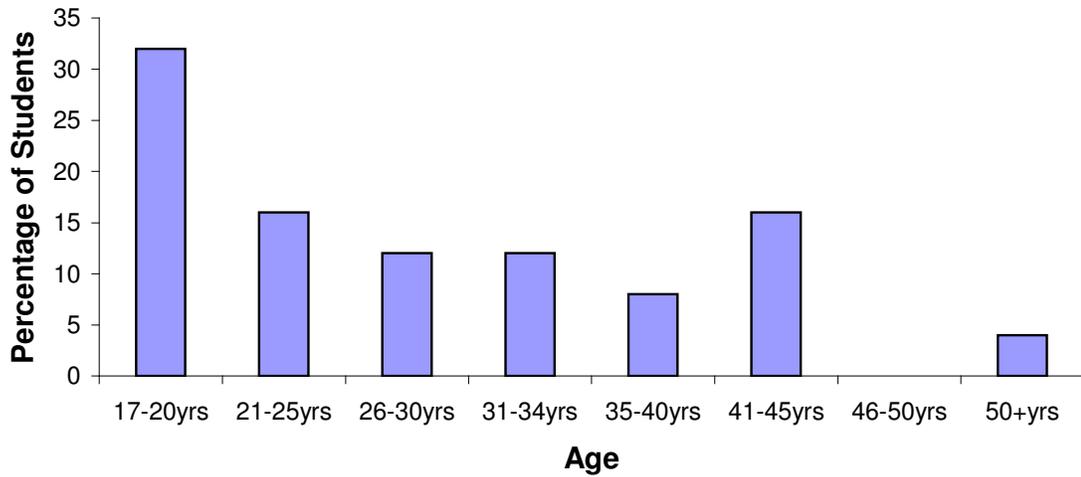
Quantitative analysis using t-tests was completed for the quantitative data using Microsoft Excel.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### *Participants*

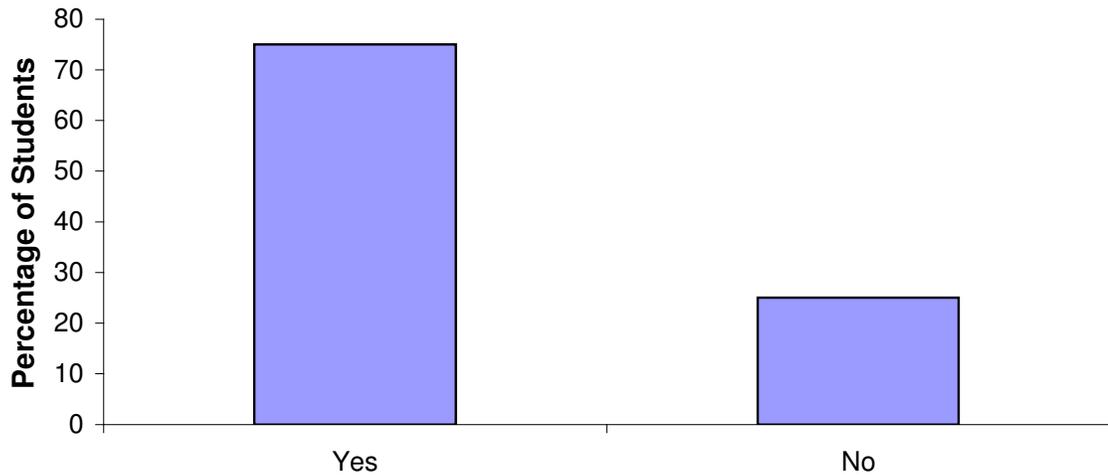
1931 students of either Maori or Pasifika origin were identified for the programmes within MIT that were included in the study. Of those students, 297 (15.4%) were identified as having stopped coming to classes and were sent questionnaires. A response rate of 9% was disappointing with 32 questionnaires returned of which only 27 were viable. In response to this poor return rate, a second round of postings was initiated with no further questionnaires returned.

The largest age group of Maori and Pasifika students who stopped attending classes was in the youngest age bracket of 17-20 years of age (See Figure 1) but there were no significant differences between the numbers of students in each age group.



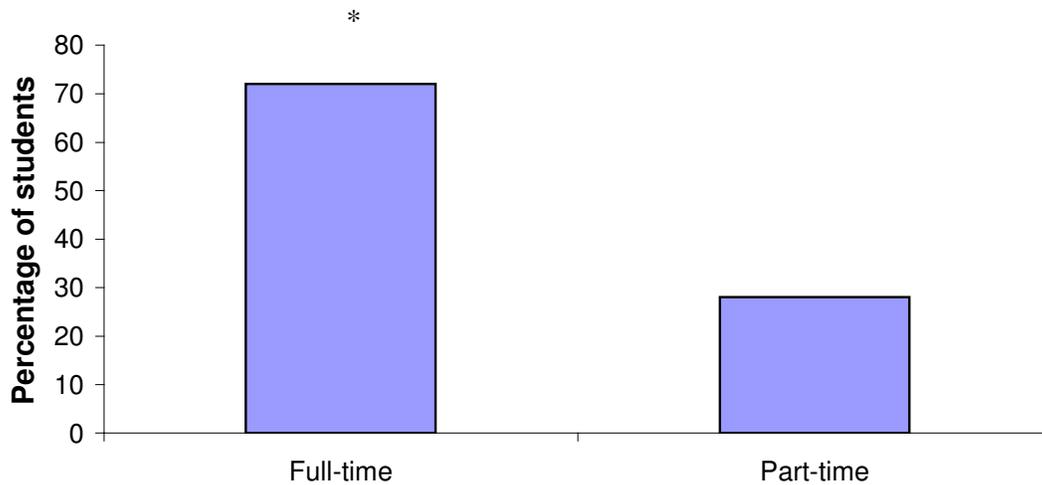
(Figure 1: Age of Maori and Pasifika students who departed from MIT programmes during semester 1, 2003)

There was an even mix of male (44%) and female (48%) students in the sample. The majority of students had English as their first language (See Figure 2) indicating that having English as a second language is probably not a contributing a factor in decisions to stop attending classes.



(Figure 2: English as first language for Maori and Pasifika students who departed from MIT programmes in semester1, 2003)

There were significantly more students studying in full-time programmes at MIT (see Figure 3), who departed, than part-time programmes. This suggests that the full-time workload may be a substantial factor in departure decisions. Further research into the success of Maori and Pasifika students in part-time programmes compared to full-time programmes is needed. This will then show if part-time programme options should be recommended in preference to full time programmes to Maori and Pasifika students who reveal reservations about the workload, time commitments and other issues that may lead to early departure.



(Figure 3: Full-time versus part-time study status of Maori and Pasifika students who departed from MIT during semester 1, 2003)

\* Significantly different from part-time ( $p < 0.05$ )

There were no clear differences in the time of departure by students from programmes at MIT (see Table 2).

(Table 2: Table showing number of Maori and Pasifika students who departed from MIT programmes during semester 1, 2003)

Week of Semester	Students who departed (%)
2 – 6	22
7 – 10	11
11 – 14	18.5
15 - 18	22

#### *Qualitative Data*

Two primary themes were identified to explain reasons why Maori and Pasifika students stopped attending classes. Those themes were related to a) internal, institutional factors, that is, issues pertaining to timetabling, teaching quality, support networks and general organization of the institution, and b) external, personal factors such as financial difficulties, childcare problems and lack of transport. Secondary themes and one tertiary theme were also identified.

Linked to the internal, institutional theme were the secondary negative, positive and peer related factors. Students commented on the negative factors about the institution that influenced their decision to depart as well as peer group difficulties that made them feel alienated and eventually led to their departure. Interestingly, some students

made both positive and negative comments about the institution, bringing about the tertiary theme that indicated contradictory factors that influenced departure. Linked to the external, personal theme were three secondary themes: 1) negative personal factors, 2) positive personal factors, and 3) movement out of the local area forcing students to transfer to a closer institution. (Table 3)

**(Table 3: Quantitative Analysis Themes Identified)**

Primary Themes	Secondary Themes	Tertiary Themes
Internal (Institutional) Factors	Negative Factors	Contradictory positive and negative factors
	Positive Factors	
	Peer Related Factors	
External (Personal) Factors	Positive Factors	
	Negative Factors	
	Moved out of Area	

Internal, institutional factors were indicated by 66% of students as reasons for cessation of attendance. This finding was similar for students who identified external, personal factors as reasons for attendance cessation (62%), with 11% stating both internal and external reasons. The secondary themes that arose from the internal factors were related to negative institutional behaviour towards Maori and Pasifika students and issues relating to the student peer group.

Negative institutional behavior was identified by 72% of students, who indicated internal factors, as a reason for departure. Comments such as ‘Islander students don’t get as much help from tutors’ was common alongside general comments about the lack of support for Maori and Pasifika students from staff and the institution as a whole. Despite this, 61% of students did make some form of positive comment about their time spent at MIT, and 33% actually made both positive and negative comments at various points in the questionnaire, and this contradictory factor was included as a tertiary theme.

Peer group problems also arose as an area where Maori and Pasifika students found problems while studying. A small proportion of students (27%) noted that negative peer group factors influenced their decision to leave MIT. Comments such as ‘Other class members gave me a hard time’ and ‘...need activities available to help everyone get along’ were made.

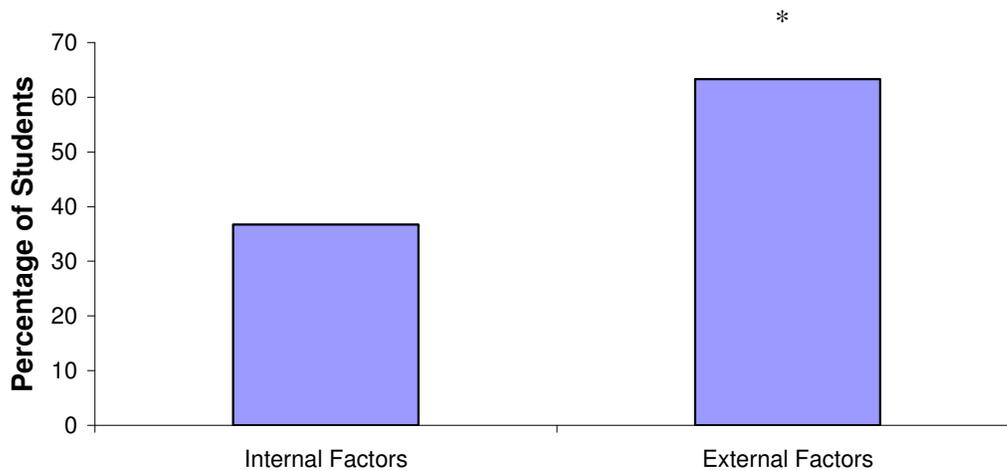
As mentioned previously, 62% of students indicated external, personal factors that influenced their decision to stop attending classes. Two students departed for positive reasons in that they gained employment in a job that they were seeking. The remaining students however, had a variety of personal issues that halted their study, ranging from transport difficulties, childcare problems to financial constraints and medical conditions.

Three students moved out of the MIT area and therefore transferred their studies to an institution closer to their homes.

### *Quantitative Data*

Students were asked to select their two main reasons for departure from a fixed list. Reasons were categorised into either internal, institutional reasons (such things as ‘did not like tutors’, ‘did not enjoy programme’ and ‘felt left out during classes’) or

external, personal reasons (such as ‘childcare problems’, ‘financial difficulties’ and ‘illness’). There were significantly more external reasons identified for departing courses early, compared to internal reasons ( $p < 0.05$ ) (See Figure 4). This finding is interesting when compared to the findings found within the qualitative data where there were relatively equal numbers of internal and external factors acknowledged.



**(Figure 4: Maori and Pasifika student reasons for deciding to stop attending classes at MIT during semester 1, 2003)**

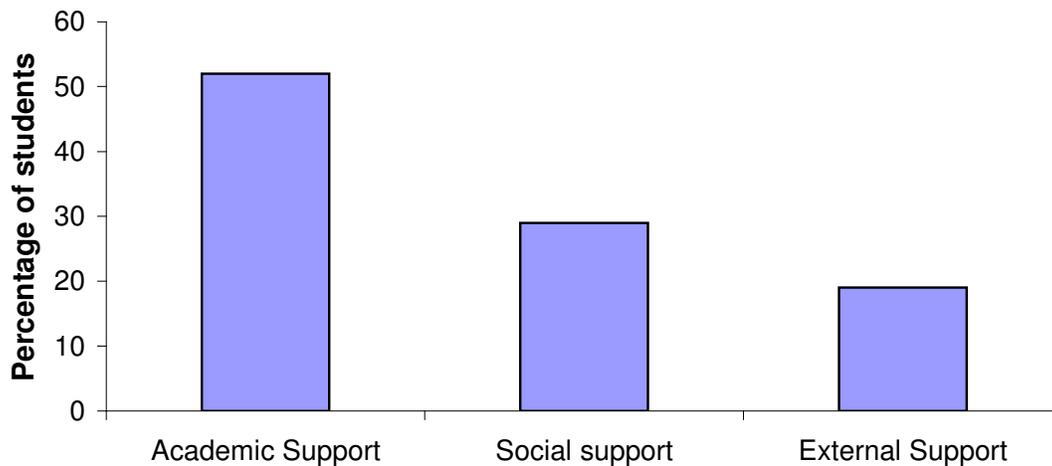
**\* Significantly different from internal factors ( $p < 0.05$ )**

Institutions often see external factors that cause early withdrawal by students from programmes as factors that cannot be controlled. Tinto’s model (Tinto, 1975), on the surface, seems to support this notion. There is no mention of institutional responsibility for external factors, in an effort to aid retention. However, despite the fact that the model does not emphasise external factors, Tinto does acknowledge their importance and an institutes’ accountability with respect to such factors. Additionally other researchers have found that Tinto’s Student Integration Model is useful when exploring some external factors (Braxton, 1988; Nora, 1987). This means that all institutions have a responsibility to their students to advise and support them through issues that affect their lives outside of study. A student who has few personal pressures is probably a student who has a greater chance at success and this factor may convey to their institution, ensuring higher retention.

The need for support structures for academic, social as well as personal aspects of tertiary life was identified. Academic support mechanisms indicated by students as being necessary included ‘more one-on-one time with tutors’ and ‘help with English writing and speaking skills’ while social support proposals included ‘more social activities on campus’ and ‘access to Maori / Pasifika support networks within MIT’. There were no significant differences between the numbers of students who identified social versus academic support structures as the most important, suggesting that they are equally important. Some students did identify the need for support with issues that were personal in nature such as ‘financial assistance’ and ‘access to counseling services’. However, again there were no significant differences between the number

of students who thought this factor was most important compared to the academic and social (See figure 5).

MIT, at the time of this study, already had in place a number of academic and social support structures that were perceived to be lacking by Maori and Pasifika students in this research. It is perhaps then an issue of advertising these support networks in the most appropriate places and in a culturally acceptable manner that needs to be addressed. However, it is acknowledged that the support networks may not function effectively, despite their availability, and thus investigation of their processes may also be needed to aid Maori and Pasifika success within MIT.



**(Figure 5: Areas where MIT can provide support for Maori and Pasifika students to ensure they can achieve their educational goals)**

#### *Response Rate*

This study is limited by its response rate. Mail-out questionnaires are notorious for their low return rate and other methods of collecting this type of information are needed. Additionally, the student group targeted in this study may have harbored feelings of ill ease toward the institution either because of the perceived negative conduct, or due to embarrassment for not completing their course. Both these reasons may have meant they ignored the questionnaire entirely. It may have been more appropriate to use focus groups facilitated by a member of the Maori and/or Pasifika staff at MIT to encourage feedback in a safe environment

#### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to determine reasons that explained why Maori and Pasifika students departed from courses at MIT before completion of that course. Conclusions should be viewed with caution due to a low response rate and sample size.

- Students who departed early could not be distinguished by age, gender, or having English as a second language but they were more likely to be full-time

students. Further research into the success of Maori and Pasifika students in part-time compared to fulltime programmes at MIT is thus recommended.

- Reasons for departure were associated with both internal, institutional behaviours as well as external, personal causes. The external causes proved to be significantly more provoking in decisions to leave and included factors such as illness (students' own or a family members), financial struggle, transport difficulties and childcare problems. Internal factors that provoked leaving were also identified (e.g. 'felt left out during class' and 'did not like tutor') but these reasons seemed to be less important.
- Students identified some positive aspects about MIT as a tertiary institution despite linking negative institutional behaviour with their decision to depart. This contradictory position, which was identified as a theme in this study, deserves further exploration to explain its significance or lack thereof.
- The need for support networks in academic, social and personal areas was also acknowledged. MIT has in place a number of support networks for students that perhaps need to be advertised better. In addition some departments have set up their own specific Maori and Pasifika support groups to aid students within that department but this trend needs to be encouraged across all teaching departments to ensure all Maori and Pasifika students have a point of contact in times of need.

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