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Course completion and instructional experience in TAFE

John Polesel

Merryn Davies

Richard Teese

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NCVER Ltd, Level 11, 33 King William St, Adelaide, South Australia 5000
PO Box 8288, Station Arcade SA 5000
ph +61 8 8230 8400 fax +61 8 8212 3436
email ncver@ncver.edu.au
www.ncver.edu.au
ABN 87 007 967 311

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Executive summary

The aim of this study was to find out how students experience technical and further education (TAFE) from the point of view of the learning experience, and what factors influence them to continue or discontinue their studies. The study aimed to test the following two propositions:

- ✧ that the quality of instructional experience is a factor in student retention
- ✧ that many of the student-level reasons for non-completion can be addressed successfully at the institution level by formulating successful instructional and organisational responses.

This study focused on students undertaking training at certificate levels I, II and III in four fields of study—business studies, engineering, hospitality and TAFE multifield, the latter which generally comprises courses to prepare people for study and for employment and includes literacy and numeracy and basic education.

The reason for focusing on this level was that the issue of quality of instruction is crucial for early school leavers and other groups whose experience of formal school-based learning has been less than optimal.

The study is based on a classroom-administered written survey of TAFE students in 2000 and a follow-up telephone survey in 2001. A total of 4915 completed the questionnaire in class. Of these, 1360 students provided contact details. One year later the researchers made telephone contact with 771 students—16.4% of the original sample group of 4915. A total of 25 institutes were involved in this study.

Due to the unrepresentative nature of the original sample (comprising four fields of study only) and subsequent attrition in the follow-up sample, findings cannot be generalised to all TAFE students. However, the study provides a rare opportunity to explore the relationship between quality of instruction and actual outcomes, and to highlight themes and issues which may merit further research and analysis.

The students' diverse use of TAFE and pathways was evident in:

- ✧ the many and varied reasons given by students for undertaking their course
- ✧ the range of educational backgrounds reported by students (from achieved university degrees to non-completion of Year 10)
- ✧ the number of students who had set themselves a staged and extended timetable for completion, reporting comparatively low contact hours per week
- ✧ the significant proportion of students dropping out from their course who expressed an intention of returning to complete their course at some subsequent point.

Like other interview-based studies which tend to show higher completion rates than those based on national databases, this study documents strong rates of progression/completion, with over eight in ten respondents either having completed or still in study. This must be seen in the context of these students having high expectations of their entry-level courses. Over 90% expressed their intention to complete all modules of their course.

Taking sampling constraints into consideration, the data also demonstrated links between TAFE students' instructional experience and their course completion behaviours.

This study shows a strong endorsement by the students of the quality of instructional experience in TAFE, with particular emphasis on relationships with staff and quality of teaching. Overall, students tended to be *most* positive in their praise of their immediate instructional environment—that is, their teachers. They highlighted relationships with teaching staff and respect for their expertise and organisation as significant factors in their instructional experience.

Although students who expressed dissatisfaction with their instructional experience were a minority, they were considerably more likely than their peers to have left their course before completion. Certain measures, such as the reported relationship between student and instructors, worked as a strong predictor of a student's likelihood of dropping out.

Non-completers were significantly less likely to have endorsed the teaching instruction standards at their TAFE institute, to report good relationships with instructors, to point to effective class organisation or to feel their overall satisfaction to be high. Some students were able to clearly articulate their difficulties with their course or dissatisfaction with various aspects of this instructional experience soon after beginning their course. Indicators of unsatisfactory experiences included poor relationships with instructors, a sense of 'struggling' with course content and difficulties in accessing administrative or support services. Dissatisfaction was shown to be associated with poor experiences in earlier learning environments, for example, at school.

In some institutes, dissatisfaction with aspects of the teaching and learning environment seemed to be considerably higher than the norm, and these correlated with higher incidences of non-completion. There may be other factors involved here; for example, at one site, the inclusion of particularly disaffected or highly motivated class groupings. But these data suggest that effectiveness may vary across institutions.

The study recommends progressive diagnostic assessment within courses, together with closer screening of students on enrolment to determine learning needs and strategies to address those needs. These could serve to address some of the factors which influence some students to leave their courses prematurely. In addition, professional development for TAFE staff, with a focus on the strong outcomes currently reported in some institutes, might also address the issue of flexibility in instructional approach demanded by a diverse student body.

Introduction

Background

Course completion in tertiary education is a continuing, controversial issue which is likely to be sharpened as the Commonwealth urges for student-centred funding, greater institutional transparency, greater ease of cross-sectoral movement and improved resource efficiency. Research on non-completion in TAFE has recognised the specifics of the sector by focusing on modules rather than award completion as such. As this study shows, this focus can cloud the understanding of rates of course completion in technical and further education (TAFE). However, even when a definition of completion is agreed, interpreting non-completion remains difficult because too little is known either about the quality of instructional experience of students in TAFE, or about the demands on students themselves of their training and course work. Much more attention has been paid to external motivating factors, such as employer demands for training and the different pressures experienced by students who are often adult full-time workers with family responsibilities.

Yet the more general literature on course completion patterns suggests that positive learning experiences through quality design and teaching practice, an advantageous instructional setting, and a client-sensitive administrative framework have a major bearing on student decision-making. This is of particular relevance to lifelong learning and to the cultivation of the favourable dispositions toward learning and training which characterise desired adult learning patterns. It is ironic that these are amongst the most important dimensions which differentiate TAFE from university—and represent potential major marketing advantages—yet have been poorly researched, including in the critical context of non-completion.

The aim of this study has been to bring together these two key issues—how students experience TAFE in instructional terms and what factors influence them to continue or discontinue their studies.

This approach has the potential to generate very useful data for TAFE institutes and other vocational education and training (VET) providers because of the focus on delivery and a detailed understanding of the client perspective. The emphasis shifts from the negative concept of non-completion *per se* to the positive aspects of study fulfilment through good-quality experience, and allows non-completion to be viewed in the wider context of what TAFE does well for its students. At the same time, it is able to explore links between poor-quality instructional experience and decisions to leave vocational education and training prematurely.

The TAFE sector has clients who come from a range of backgrounds and from a range of socio-economic groups. Its clients also come into VET with a range of prior educational achievements—from those who did not complete Year 10 through to those who have completed university and have professional qualifications.

For these different groups of clients and for key stakeholders, including employers and those who manage the TAFE system, there is a range of outcomes. Outcomes are often measured at the system level with a focus on the efficiency and effectiveness of TAFE. However, there are

also educational, social, community, employment and personal outcomes to be considered in order to give a complete picture of what the TAFE system is contributing to the economic and social life of the nation. The range of aspirations and motivations of people will also influence outcomes for individual client groups when they enter TAFE.

Understanding the patterns of completion and non-completion for different groups is essential if TAFE performance is to be adequately and appropriately assessed. With the exception of some single-institute studies (Hill 1991; Streckfuss & Walters 1990; Duball & Baker 1990; Chan, Waters & Carter 1990), as well as work with statistical modelling (Office of Training and Further Education 1997; NCVER 1998), little research has been done until recently to identify and explain group-based patterns in the data on non-completion. Recent research, in particular that of Foyster, Fai and Shah (2000), or Grant (2002), explores issues of completion and non-completion, and their implications for the VET sector, but finds the exercise constrained due to a lack of statistical data and agreed definitions. On another front, graduate destination studies and client satisfaction surveys have for years given us the graduates' perspectives on their training experience, but for obvious reasons, those of non-completers remain more elusive.

In addition, few studies seeking to explain non-completion have attempted to integrate client perspective data, collected by means of large-scale, multi-site surveys and interviews, with actual patterns of completion and non-completion, in the manner of the best studies from the United Kingdom. Martinez and Munday's 1998 study of 9000 further education sector students and teachers stands out as a prime example.

The study itself

This report is based on a project which seeks to relate student survey and interview data to student destinations data for a sample of TAFE students, with a view to examining the relative influence of factors identified in the literature as influencing non-completion. While the study makes use of a non-representative sample, focusing as it does on four fields of study only, it should be noted that studies which relate survey data from current students to subsequent destinations are very rare and therefore provide the potential for valuable insights. The study does not purport to make statements about the TAFE population generally, but rather exploits this rare opportunity to explore the relationship between quality of instruction and outcomes, and to highlight themes and issues which may merit further research and analysis.

The research also aims to test the following propositions in relation to the sample:

- ✧ that the quality of the instructional experience for students in the VET sector is a factor in retention
- ✧ that many of the student-level reasons for non-completion frequently cited can be addressed successfully at the institutional level, by the formulation of successful instructional and organisational responses.

The study is particularly concerned with the impact that successful practice can have on attitudinal and motivational factors associated with successful outcomes for VET students. Student-level data help attain a student perspective on the benefits of TAFE study, with a focus on course orientation and the quality of teaching and learning.

For early school leavers and other groups whose experience of formal school-based learning has been less than optimal, this issue of quality of instruction is crucial. It is for this reason that the study focuses on entry-level training (certificates I, II and III). Such groups turn to these courses for job skills and for a chance to re-enter education and training.

Documented increases in the level of activity of young people in these Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) categories (particularly certificates I and II), for example, provide further

supporting evidence of this trend. A recent report, based on Victorian data, revealed that gross enrolments in TAFE amongst 15 to 17-year-olds doubled over the six-year period from 1994 to 1999 (Teese 2000). Over two-thirds of this activity is in certificate I and certificate II courses.

This study seeks to establish how students experience TAFE in instructional terms and what factors influence them to continue or discontinue their studies. It pays particular attention to possible connections between individuals' instructional experience in TAFE and their likelihood of seeing their course through to completion. It is based on a two-stage methodology—a classroom-based written survey of TAFE students in 2000 and a follow-up telephone survey in 2001.

Research in the field

Introduction[1]

This chapter examines the existing body of work in the field, focusing on measures of non-completion, definitions of the phenomenon, the extent of the problem, reasons for non-completion and strategies which have been identified to address it.

Internationally, the drive for accountability now makes for stronger emphasis on completion data as a key performance measure in VET.

But VET provision is also becoming increasingly complex generally, characterised by its:

- ✧ broader range of users who are increasingly diverse across fields of age and educational preparedness
- ✧ responsiveness to a broader range of needs, from the pre-vocational and labour market entry, through to reskilling, 'upskilling', applied studies and recreational and personal development studies
- ✧ emphasis on stronger, more responsive and more effective relationships with the labour market.

In an environment where lifelong learning is promoted and encouraged, with increasing emphasis on course transfers, recognition of prior learning, articulation between courses and sectors etc. are our measurements and conventional indicators keeping pace with change? Lifelong learning theory in particular promotes the notion of the individual as embodied educational capital—a continuing work in progress and an individualised portfolio of acquired skills and dispositions. But our modes of measurement tend to be institution-based and dependent on inflexible measures of training use which are unable to reflect student behaviours, such as movement between courses or extended programs of study with significant breaks between modules (both of which would generate misleading 'non-completion' labels).

Stronger credentialling needs have delivered more non-traditional users to vocational education and training and their specific needs and problems require addressing within assessment and reporting frameworks. What are their intentions regarding qualifications? Do their methods of skills acquisition differ from those of 'traditional' linear completers, as in, for example, the modularising of skills acquisition, or in dipping in and out of their courses in stages ('stop out' behaviour in the United States)?

1 This chapter draws on text which was originally written by J. Polesel and R. Teese for a project on tertiary non-completion commissioned by the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA). Substantial extracts were taken from the text and used in the report *Non-completion in vocational education and training and higher education* (McInnis et al. 2000). However, it now includes a larger body of reference material.

A significant body of literature exists which examines the field of university non-completion. The literature relating to non-completion in the VET sector, whether this is in TAFE institutes in Australia or community colleges in the United States or further education colleges in the United Kingdom, forms a much smaller body of work. A number of reasons may be proposed for this lack. The lower standing of technical and further education may be a factor, as may the assumption that many students who enrol do not intend to complete. Or, quite simply, the inherent complexity of training structures can make the collection of accurate and comparable data very difficult, both at the system and institute level.

This report goes some way to addressing themes of non-completion in the TAFE sector in Australia. It examines findings relating to issues of instructional experience, which form the focus of this research study, and attempts to place this study in the context of past research and findings.

Measures of non-completion

Perhaps the most significant difficulty in measuring non-completion relates to the fact that there is no single unit of measurement which can be used for the task. While university studies can refer to non-completion of a course (degree or diploma), course completion is largely irrelevant in the VET sector, as most VET activity in Australia does not lead to a qualification.

'Module load completion rates' (MLCRs) have traditionally been used as a proxy for the measurement of completion rates in the VET sector, even though they measure the proportion of module activity completed, rather than the proportion of students completing actual modules. These statistics, which are reported yearly by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) in its *Annual national report (vocational education and training performance*), are broken down by state/territory and by various population equity sub-groups: gender; location (capital city, other metropolitan, rural, remote); Indigenous; non-English speaking background; born in a non-English speaking country and disability.

A difficulty with this data set is that there may be a lack of consistency between institutes in relation to the manner in which module load completion rates are recorded (NCVER 1998). Cleary and Nicholls (1998) also note a lack of consistency at the institute level in the methods used for collecting module load completion data and the fact that this can result in very crude and insensitive indicators. Studies in the United Kingdom have also found data collection problems, with college-based information systems sometimes showing that students have withdrawn when they are in fact still enrolled (Martinez 1995).

Yet these difficulties do not, in a sense, represent the major problem. While they reflect deficiencies in the process of collecting accurate data on student withdrawals (and therefore make quantification of the problem difficult), they do not even begin to touch upon the issue of the reasons for students withdrawing. Neither existing data sets, nor those under consideration, generate information on the reasons for non-completion. Client satisfaction surveys, which are given in the ANTA report, make use of data collected from graduates only. They are not used with students who have withdrawn.

This leads to two major deficiencies in the data-collection process. Firstly, it excludes an important perspective when assessing the effectiveness of the VET sector—that of non-completers. And secondly, it precludes the possibility of collecting information on the reasons for students withdrawing.

These themes were addressed by Foyster, Fai and Shah (2000) when they canvassed means of calculating actual completion rates in TAFE. Their report addresses the issue of completion directly, attempting to chart a path through incompatible administrative and recording arrangements. Measurement difficulties arise because students are enrolled in 'courses' even

though they may be interested in completing one or two modules only. As their outcomes are recorded in terms of module completion only, course completion details can only be guessed at. As such, researchers have had to make assumptions regarding students' intentions on enrolling.

The report raises several issues of considerable significance including:

- ✧ the extent to which students do not complete
- ✧ the definition of 'completion'
- ✧ the significance of students' motivations in this equation: can partial completion represent, as some researchers are inclined to argue, 'successful' outcomes?

Foyster, Fai and Shah (2000) argue that, in view of the paucity of information on students' intentions on enrolment in a course, further research is needed on students' own needs and demands. They also point out the need for connections between completion rates and instructional experience, students' aptitude, course structures and other variables which would require 'further research using alternative data sources' (Foyster, Fai & Shah 2000, p.33).

It would also seem that little is done in terms of self-monitoring within institutes, and that where this occurs, the data cannot be aggregated across institutions. Where withdrawing students are asked, in rare instances, to complete a form asking for the reasons for withdrawal, the return rate is generally low (Cleary & Nicholls 1998).

Yet, determining the reason why an individual does not complete is crucially important in the VET sector. The need for sensitive measures of non-completion, which ask the reasons for non-completion and which also take account of the desired outcomes, rather than simply measuring module completion, is stressed in much of the literature. Cleary and Nicholls (1998) note that client satisfaction surveys need to be expanded to include students who do not complete, in order to provide a comprehensive client perspective on VET provision.

Other researchers also advise of the need for care in the measurement of outcomes which may have different meanings in the TAFE sector from those in schools or higher education. The diversity of student intake in TAFE, together with the range of qualification offerings at different levels and achievable over different timeframes, makes comparison difficult. When institutions move toward more flexible offerings with credit transfers, recognition of earlier learning and pathways of movement through certificates, measurement of 'completion' becomes simultaneously more contentious, and in some cases less viable. In relation to the recording of completion even within institutions, Shehan recently alerted us to the complexities of recording student progress in the context of articulation and pathways; for example, when pathways consist of different certificate levels. In such circumstances a student may complete a particular level but remain within the course (Shehan 2000).

In the United States, similar problems have been identified. Grubb (1996) has noted that the community college sector has based its performance measurement effort almost exclusively on participation measures, with output measures such as completion rates a rarity. Pucel also (1979) has noted the need for reliable longitudinal data:

> Longitudinal methods become important in the study of the relationships between vocational program practices and student development. It is difficult to examine the relationships between students and programs unless the information is gathered on the same students and programs over time.

Similarly, Mundherk emphasises the 'difference' of the further education sector in America and the inappropriateness of measurement of completion along the lines of that for secondary school or higher education. In arguing that a 'graduation rate' does not work for this sector as a measure of success, he emphasises the importance of arriving at measures which better reflect students'

own intentions. He notes however, that 'data collection for heterogeneous populations with multiple intents is very expensive' (Mundherk 2000).

In the United States at a national level, completion data for certificates in vocational studies is recognised to be unreliable. Although certificates are most closely linked with labour market demands and are promoted in schools, community colleges and universities, it has been argued that 'there is no comprehensive nation-wide system to gather and report data on certificate enrolment and attainment, even for sub-baccalaureate or post-baccalaureate certificate programs operated by public colleges and universities' (Wonacott 1983). This is even more true of private and industry-based providers.

This paucity of information contributes to some of the cloudiness regarding outcomes in vocational education. For this reason, nationally representative longitudinal studies have been undertaken in the United States by research bodies such as the National Center for Education Statistics. These track students through various phases of education, training and labour market participation, developing progressive profiles of outcomes over time. Examples included:

- the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) which studied a cohort of 1988 8th graders every two years until 1993, and then again in 2000
- the Beginning Post-Secondary Students Longitudinal Survey (BPS) which included students of all ages who enrolled in post-secondary education for the first time in either 1989–90 or 1995–96.

Both groups were re-surveyed some years later to establish pathways and outcomes.

Both institutional and aggregated studies provide valuable data on completion and non-completion. At the institutional level they are geared toward monitoring institutional effectiveness, especially in relation to success (or otherwise) in dealing with particular groups of students. Increasingly, however, demands are being made for finer-textured analysis which is able to recognise and accommodate emerging features of post-secondary student populations and their behaviours.

Bailey and Keinzl (1999) for example, have recently examined the implications of the *Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Act 1998*. The act actually prescribes a set of performance indicators designed to promote continuous program improvement in vocational education, with a specific focus on improved accountability. Bailey and Keinzl argue that the conventional linear approach to various staging-posts in post-secondary students' progress—enrolment/access, retention, completion and attainment—is not necessarily the best tool for dealing with contemporary students, their demands on their institutions and their approaches to their learning. They point for example, to various aspects of many students' behaviour—especially in the context of vocational learning—which are only imperfectly reflected using conventional outcomes measurement. These include interrupted attendance, multiple cross-institutional enrolments and a growing use of non-certified training ('competence without credentials').

As such, they urge a more creative use of existing databases, together with the development of data sets which better reflect contemporary student behaviours. A more accurate picture of pathways, for example, requires supplementary information about student objectives when embarking on a qualification, proposed timing of the course, enrolment intensity (numbers of modules or units taken), continuity, credit, transfer data and employment status. It is also argued that data based on individuals are of more assistance in developing accurate student profiles than institutional data which often fail to adequately report students' involvement with other educational providers or transfer information (exit or entry).

This view is supported by researchers such as Adelman (1994) who was able to establish (using longitudinal data sets) that over half of all community college students had attended more than one institution and that in recent years, increasing numbers had used a number of colleges in

attaining their qualifications or course credits. Institution-based data—the Integrated Post-Secondary Education Data System (IPEDS), for example—failed to reflect this behaviour, instead reporting high numbers of 'non-completions'. The 'snapshot' nature of such data, it is argued, gives a much more pessimistic picture of college completion than is actually warranted.

In 2000 an evaluation program was formulated for the National Assessment of Vocational Education. Its brief was to increase accountability in vocational education and especially to document the effect of recent changes in vocational education funding on student participation, progress, outcomes and workforce development. For accountability purposes researchers were keen to explore economic benefits of occupational programs, and to gauge differences in returns by qualification level, field of study, completion status and student sub-groups. Thus key research areas were identified as:

- ✧ enrolment trends
- ✧ reasons for participation
- ✧ importance of degree or course completion
- ✧ labour market returns for completers and non-completers.

Other research issues on behaviours and needs of student populations include:

- ✧ What are emerging post-secondary educational pathways?
- ✧ How efficiently do students progress towards goal completion (as opposed to course completion?)
- ✧ What are persistence patterns?
- ✧ Do students' completion rates or behaviours (for example, the extended completion pattern, taken over a longer period than might be expected) vary according to student characteristics?
- ✧ What are factors contributing to stronger persistence or higher completion rates?
- ✧ How are they affected by differences in goals and pathways?

It is noted that all research questions would require use of institution- and student-based data sets, together with targeted case studies.

Researchers in the United States emphasise that changing pathways and the use of post-secondary education by an increasingly diverse student population complicates assessment, and note that a mapping of new student pathways and clarification of student intentions will be fundamental to any useful assessment of post-secondary education outcomes.

In the United Kingdom in the rare cases where information on withdrawals, as extracted from surveys administered by teachers, is collected, data are often found to underestimate program-related reasons, with students reluctant to criticise teaching or courses in front of their teachers (Martinez 1995). As a solution to this, Barwuah, Green and Lawson (1997) advise the careful selection and training of staff to collect data, in order to overcome problems of perceived lack of confidentiality.

As with recent United States literature, key research themes in the United Kingdom deal with issues involved in adequately and accurately reflecting a sector whose functions and client base are much more diverse than those of either the schools or the higher education sector.

Researchers point to the ever-widening group of further education students, the diversity of their demand—workforce preparation, workforce re-entry, preparation for study, upskilling for current workers and retraining. They emphasise the effect of 'new' learners in the colleges—non-traditional learners who may have had little experience of further education or study. The re-alignment of schools, further education and higher education in changed articulation arrangements and the assumption of responsibility for new learning populations is also a theme

of particular relevance in an expedited flow of students on new pathways between or within the sectors.

Here the focus moves beyond data collection to a more precise concern about students' own objectives. What do they want out of their study; how do they propose to achieve those ends; to what extent are they assisted or impeded by current institutional structures and how do they experience their learning? With better data on student aims and outcomes is it possible to develop a more appropriate pedagogy designed to optimise their objectives? (Green & Lucas 1999).

Finding reliable data on reasons for non-completion among population sub-groups is also difficult. Teasdale and Teasdale (1996) have noted the paucity of information on why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students withdraw from TAFE courses. Schofield and Dryen (1997) note the need for better outcome measures to assess the performance of women in VET.

While module load completion rates are able to be broken down by equity groups, discovering the reasons for differences between groups in non-completion requires further data, additional to that provided by the module load completion rates reporting. Generally, it depends on funded research of the statistical modelling kind. Some examples of this exist (Office of Technical and Further Education 1997; NCVER 1998; Uren 2000), but while studies such as these provide useful information on the performance of various population sub-groups, the fact that they tend to be single-state, 'one-off' projects means that they do not contribute to the analysis of trends over time or provide a national perspective. Neither do they seek the reasons for non-completion.

The fact that these tend to be single-college studies also presents difficulties. Firstly, they usually require funding support of some kind and for this reason are infrequent. Secondly, they do not provide data comparable between institutions or between states. Thirdly, they are usually 'one-off' and do not allow trend analysis. And fourthly, they usually fail to provide longitudinal data. Such research is nearly always *ex post facto* or at best 'cross-sectional' (see Macdonald 1984). The latter kind of study involves collecting data on a range of attitudinal variables while the cohort is still enrolled and then identifying which students have re-enrolled and which ones have withdrawn one year later. The original responses are then compared for the two groups.

In summary, on a national and statewide basis, analysis of rates of non-completion in the VET sector depends on the use of the national measure—module load completion rate. Data on the reasons for non-completion are not collected at this level. Some single-state, statistical modelling studies have been carried out. These provide data on the performance of various population sub-groups, but allow few comparisons to be made over time or nationally. Neither do they collect information on the reasons for non-completion. At the level of the individual institute, various studies examine reasons for non-completion, but these rarely provide data which allow trends over time to be estimated. Nor do they allow consistent comparisons to be made between states or institutions. A further point is that the vast majority of institutions do not have access to the resources necessary to conduct such studies, particularly if they are time-intensive, longitudinal studies.

Ideally, data would be collected nationally and on a yearly basis. They would be longitudinal, allowing the tracking of students through their studies and into their exit destinations, and collecting attitudinal data both during their studies and after exiting their course. The data would be collected in a consistent manner, allowing comparisons between institutes, between states and over time, but it would also allow data relevant to the local context to be collected.

Defining non-completion

The terminology used in the literature on non-completion in the VET sector is neither precise nor consistent. Non-completion, withdrawal, dropout and attrition generally are used interchangeably, even though differences exist between the concepts. In the context of this study, non-completion is perhaps the most satisfactory and comprehensive term, as the term does not imply or assume failure on the student's part nor suggest a more general termination of studies. This is important since it cannot be assumed that non-completion is a negative outcome. Nor does non-completion necessarily signal a termination of studies or 'dropping out', since many students who do not complete actually change course or continue their studies in a different sector or institution. In this context even 'non-completion' is a relative concept, with some students dropping out with the intention, nevertheless, of returning to study when their circumstances allowed.

Non-completion in the VET sector is difficult to measure, both in conceptual terms and in technical terms relating, as we have noted, to quality and availability of data. To begin with, a distinction must be drawn between course completion and module completion. As most VET activity in Australia is at the sub-qualification level, course completion is not a relevant measure of successful outcomes for students who choose to enrol only in one or a number of selected modules and whose primary aim may be to gain skills rather than a qualification. In relation to this point, a Victorian study (Holmesglen College of TAFE 1992) presented some evidence that most students intend to complete their course, rather than simply do a few modules, although further evidence of this assertion could not be found in the literature. This issue is discussed at more length within this report.

Is non-completion a problem?

Reported statistics in the VET sector tend to refer to module completion rather than course completion and most Australian studies examine withdrawal from modules. However, non-completion of modules does not necessarily signify a negative outcome, any more than non-completion of a course does for a student whose goal is a marketable skill rather than a qualification:

> … completion is an institutional artifact … To the student who seeks a job in the field, completing the program becomes irrelevant as soon as a job is available. The categories 'graduate' and 'dropout' lose much of their force when viewed in this light.
>
> (Cohen & Brawer 1996)

Mundhenk refers to 'marketable skills achievers'—those non-completers who manage nevertheless to acquire, in the course of their study, the skills and dispositions they need to operate effectively in the employment market (Mundhenk 2000).

The significance of completion depends on the views of the stakeholders. For an employer, acquired skills may be more important than an assessed qualification, but a funding body, which depends on module completion rates to assess program efficacy and efficiency, will nevertheless view non-assessment as non-completion and consequently as a system failure (Cleary & Nicholls 1998).

Similarly, a student may view a job placement as a successful outcome regardless of whether or not the module or course has been completed, if the primary goal of that enrolment for the student was to provide a pathway into a successful employment outcome. In the United States context, Kerka (1995), in a study of non-completers, questions the concept of 'dropouts' and provides evidence that many leave when they feel their goals have been realised.

Cohen and Brawer (1996) discuss in some detail the positive roles a college program may play for those who do not complete that program. These include: the role of 'employment agency' where the course relays information on job opportunities, which may be taken up by the student before finishing his or her course; the role of career advancement, where the learning of some new skills leads to the student receiving a better job in the company where the student is already employed; and the role of study advancement, where a student transfers to other programs in the same or in a different college. For Cohen and Brawer, the process of the curriculum, with the various possibilities it creates during its duration, seems to be the important thing, rather than the product at the end of the process (the qualification). The authors note that: 'The critics cannot seem to accommodate the fact that for many dropouts the program has succeeded, while for many of its graduates it has failed'.

Moreover, in diploma-level courses, where non-completion is significantly higher than in certificate courses, withdrawal from a course is often an indication of the use of credit transfer arrangements to enter the higher education sector rather than evidence of inability to complete the diploma (Lamb, Long & Malley 1998).

Despite these assertions, Grubb (1996) maintains that low completion rates remain a concern, 'especially because they are particularly low for minority students' (1995, p.28) and he argues that we should still be concerned about non-completion because the economic benefits of community colleges are much higher for students who do complete their programs. Grubb questions what he describes as having developed into a 'conventional wisdom'—the belief that dropouts leave because they have attained what they set out to achieve on enrolment. This, he argues, assumes a sophistication among students which we cannot take for granted. Surely not all dropouts enrol knowing exactly what benefits they can expect to get from their course and exactly when and how to maximise these benefits by a strategic withdrawal.

In summary, two distinct points need to be made. On the one hand, non-completion does not always equate with a negative outcome for the student or for the employer of the student. Non-completion may signify the achievement of desired goals, either in the sense that skills have been gained which will benefit the student or the workplace to which the student belongs, or employment outcomes have been realised, or articulation to further or higher studies has been successfully negotiated.

On the other hand, however, non-completion cannot automatically be assumed to be a positive outcome in all cases. On the evidence of some researchers (for example, Grubb 1996), non-completion remains a serious problem, especially for students belonging to disadvantaged groups. For students with a history of interrupted schooling and with few other qualifications, the need for formal accreditation for the purposes of accessing employment or for entering further study is actually intense. Moreover, there is serious doubt whether the data relating to non-completion are of sufficient quality and reliability to allow us to assume termination of study to be positive.

Factors associated with non-completion

Non-completing students in the VET sector give a range of reasons for failing to complete their course or unit. In general, these are divided into three categories, as follows:

- ✧ institute factors
- ✧ course factors
- ✧ personal factors

Much of the literature argues that non-completion is primarily due to personal factors beyond the control of the vocational college. Cohen and Brawer, for example, citing evidence presented

in various American single-college studies of non-completion, argue that: 'The reasons why students drop out are quite varied, but in general, most of them are related to situations beyond the college's control' (1996, p.63).

They further argue that, for most students, no intervening college service could have prevented the withdrawal, although they concede that very early intervention might have helped with a small number of students.

Other researchers, including Oliveira and Rumble (eds 1992) who studied non-completion among distance education students in the United Kingdom, have come to very similar conclusions—'that dropout was caused by a range of factors, some of which have to do with environmental and motivation factors, and not with the quality of the learning experience offered'.

Cohen and Brawer further argue that non-completion, in many cases, reflects the achievement on the part of the student of the educational objective for which they enrolled. They cite studies in the United States (Conklin 1992; Cotnam & Ison 1988) which present evidence of up to three in four students stating that they had dropped out because they had achieved the educational aims they held when they enrolled.

Some Australian studies also present evidence that personal factors are more important than course-related and college-related factors in influencing the decision to drop out. Brown 1989, for example, in a single-college study of withdrawals from a part-time vocational course in fashion, argue that, although no one factor is responsible for student withdrawal from courses, personal and other non-course-related factors in general are the most important. Excessive work demands were nominated by students as the single most important reason, followed by changes in work or in work duties and a range of personal/family factors—pregnancy, holidays, accident and illness.

Hill (1991) in a study of attrition from a first-year TAFE electronics course noted that teachers nominated lack of motivation as the prime reason for non-completion, while the students themselves nominated employment-related reasons, both categories of reasons which fall into the sphere of the personal.

However, at this point a note of caution is advised. The data collection issues raised in this report require us to consider carefully the quality of the data used to draw such conclusions. We know that trend data collected at the national level on reasons for non-completion do not exist in Australia. We know that conclusions about the role different variables play in the process leading to non-completion are based primarily on single-institute studies. This is true also of the American studies cited by Cohen and Brawer.

Methodological problems then come to the fore. Exiting students who are surveyed by their teachers or lecturers are likely to be reluctant to criticise their course or institution, and are especially unlikely to criticise the teaching they have experienced. This has been shown to lead to an under-reporting of course-related factors (Martinez 1995; Kenwright 1996). Response rates are likely to be low and items used are likely to vary considerably from study to study.

Moreover, these *ex post facto* studies, as Macdonald (1984) designates them, have serious weaknesses relating to reliability and validity. It may be that students are not being entirely open and there is some evidence that they may feel the need to rationalise their decision to withdraw. It is not necessarily contended that non-completing students deliberately set out to obscure their actual reasons for their failure to complete, rather that they naturally seek to maintain their self-image as 'agent' by presenting the decision as one of choice rather than circumstance (Bourdieu 1996).

Perhaps most importantly, it is difficult to measure an institutional effect if the institutional dimension (as an independent categorical variable) is missing, as it must be in a single-institute

study. Yet, a number of studies have reported just such an effect (Office of Training and Further Education 1997; NCVER 1998; Kenwright 1996), suggesting that institute-level factors play an important, but largely ignored, role in influencing completion rates.

A further consideration is the interaction between personal and institute and course-related factors. Motivational and attitudinal variables rarely operate in isolation from their institutional context. For example, the factor, 'studying problems', grouped above under the heading of personal reasons, may be as much due to institutional barriers (poor instruction, cultural insensitivity, lack of facilities or resources for special needs students etc.) as to any deficiency at the personal level. Similarly, attendance, timetable problems and language problems, sit uncomfortably in the list of personal factors where many researchers have placed them, given that these are factors over which institutions may exercise some control.

In Hill's (1991) study above, for example, the issue of lack of motivation (nominated by teachers as the main reason for non-completion) is a double-edged one. It may relate as much to deficiencies in instructional methods as to any failure on the student's part. Moreover, the second most popular reason, nominated by teachers and students, was study difficulties. Again, the extent to which these are caused by the student and the extent to which they are caused by the instructional environment are not easy to disentangle.

These are crucial points in the context of the current study which attempts to collect data on course-related factors while students are still in their course and then relate these data to subsequent patterns of progression, transfer, non-completion and entry to the labour market. Moreover, the study attempts to allow students more freedom to comment on the quality of their instruction by means of a survey process instigated by an external research body (with data processed and analysed by that research body), rather than by the lecturer or the institute itself.

Non-completion remains a concern

Grubb (1996) maintains that low completion rates are still a concern, especially for minority students and because the economic benefits of community colleges in the United States are well documented as being much higher for students who complete. He also questions the belief that dropouts leave because they have attained what they set out to achieve on enrolment, as this assumes that all students are able to plan and adopt a sophisticated strategy of maximising benefits by withdrawing when they have achieved what they wanted.

In the United Kingdom, Beddow (1994) found that most withdrawals from adult evening courses were due to personal reasons, but found that institutional expectations of high dropout rates were behind a policy of over-enrolment. Similarly, Cullen (1994) and Wilkinson (1982) showed that non-completion which had been attributed to personal factors among students whose study had initially been interrupted due to illness or other temporary factors, often became permanent as a result of fear of not being able to catch up with their work, or apprehension at not fitting in again.

Australian studies also question the primacy of non-course and non-institute-related factors in influencing non-completion. Streckfusss and Walters (1990), in a study of student attrition among part-time students attending a non-metropolitan TAFE institute, found that most withdrew because of a combination of personal, classroom/course-related and institute-related factors.

However, 'classroom issues' received the highest mean ranking amongst reasons for withdrawal. This category included the quality of instruction and class sizes. This category was followed in rank order by the 'lack of or poor college facilities' and 'personal reasons outside the college context'. Course-related issues, such as inaccurate expectations about the course content and

difficulty fulfilling course assessment requirements, were found to make the least impact on students' decisions to withdraw.

Another study of attrition in a TAFE institute (Duball & Baker 1990) also noted the importance of teaching quality. The study found that dropout respondents recorded significantly lower levels of satisfaction than persisters in two areas of institutional influence, those of student–lecturer relations and curriculum relevance. These less favourable perceptions related to such issues as the suitability of instructional methods, quality of instruction, the lecturer's role in problem-solving and the value of the course in terms of employment purposes. While causal directions could not be established, the findings were sufficiently clear to suggest that such variables as student–lecturer relations and curriculum relevance can play a substantial role in the attrition process and that further research in the area is desirable. This is particularly so, given that one of the strengths of TAFE institutes is their ability to employ practical teaching techniques and make use of work experience opportunities.

Other Australian studies (Dunn 1995; Chan, Waters & Carter 1990) have found that a complex combination of personal, course-related and institute-related factors are responsible for student attrition within a variety of settings which include adult basic education, adult literacy classes, external studies, as well as mainstream vocational TAFE courses. Detailed analytical work has also been carried out by the Office of Technical and Further Education (1997) in Victoria. Using a descriptive statistical approach, this study analysed completion rates in terms of three factors: those associated with the individual; those associated with the module/course; and those associated with the institute.

Amongst the findings of this study were the following: smaller institutes had higher completion rates than larger ones; non-metropolitan institutes had higher rates than metropolitan ones; and industry areas with large amounts of training activity (business and electrical/electronics) had lower rates of module completion than did other industry areas. Completion rates for advanced certificate courses were higher than for associate diploma courses. They were also higher for privately funded training, and for apprentices and trainees, as well as for students who had previously completed adult and community education (ACE) courses. Completion rates also increase with age and are greater for those in full-time employment.

Another study, also commissioned by the Office of Training and Further Education and carried out by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), has attempted to use statistical modelling techniques to identify the influence of various factors on module completion rates (NCVER 1998). Similar findings to the 1997 study were noted, with the most pronounced effects on module load completion rates observed for field of study, stream of study, area of learning, industry, institute and funding source.

One of the strengths of these studies is their examination of the differences in module completion rates between institutes, particularly given that these differences are significant. Neither of these studies, however, sought to link these factors to student-level attitudinal data. Therefore conclusions relating to the role of personal, course-related and institute-related factors, as reported by non-completers, in influencing the differences in completion rates as between different groups cannot be drawn.

A British study (Kenwright 1996), however, has gone some way in the direction of such research. This study of five further education colleges found that, although students usually gave a number of reasons for non-completion, there were large differences between colleges in the relative weight given to any particular reason. For example, the proportion of non-completers who found their course unsuitable ranged from 21% in one college to 46% in another. Similarly, poor teaching was cited as a problem by 5% of non-completers in one setting and 17% in another.

Strategies for addressing non-completion

If the Australian literature relating to non-completion in the VET sector is somewhat sparse, then it must be said that the literature relating to strategies for addressing non-completion is even rarer. It will be noted that, in this section, most of the texts quoted are British.

In the Australian literature, where the issue of strategies is raised, it is usually dealt with in a cursory manner. There are no dedicated texts which list and evaluate strategies for dealing with non-completion in the context of detailed findings of research into non-completion.

This is not the case in the United Kingdom, where the extensive work of Paul Martinez in the field of non-completion in the VET sector stands out as a result of its quality, comprehensiveness and sheer volume. Martinez and Munday (1998) in particular, give a most succinct and comprehensive review of possible strategies for combatting non-completion. Combining statistical modelling techniques which give us the 'where and when of student completion and non-completion' (1998, p.10) with extensive qualitative survey data, the authors build a checklist of strategies for addressing specific factors identified in the authors' research as contributing to non-completion. A summary of these strategies is included in the sections below, although it must be admitted that this summary hardly does justice to the source material.

Prior to a consideration of these strategies for addressing the problem of non-completion, a number of first steps need to be taken (Cleary & Nicholls 1998):

- ✧ The first and foremost is to identify the extent of the problem.
- ✧ The second is to determine why students are leaving.
- ✧ The third is to identify which factors can be influenced and which cannot or should not.

The issue of data collection, discussed elsewhere in this report, becomes a crucial one where reform is planned at the level of individual institutes. Given the differences between institutes in completion rates, accurate, detailed and up-to-date local data are needed in order to identify and target the problems which need to be addressed (Martinez 1995, 1997; Grubb 1996; Teasdale & Teasdale 1996).

Barwuah, Green and Lawson (1997) in the United Kingdom also highlight the importance of systematically collecting accurate and comprehensive data on student destinations. To facilitate the efficient collection and use of data, colleges need to ensure that all staff are clear about their roles in collecting and recording data. Information needs to be accurate, timely and easily accessible to all those who need it, and collaboration with other agencies should be fostered in order to avoid duplication of effort and to increase the overall pool of information.

The problems identified in different institutions and the strategies devised to deal with them will, of course, be somewhat different in each case. Moreover, as Martinez and Munday (1998) emphasise, lists of strategies form only a starting point for more detailed planning. We cannot treat them as blueprints for action since the specific context of each institution will require its own set of responses.

Our analysis of the factors identified in the literature as contributing to non-completion provided a set of three broad categories:

- ✧ institute factors
- ✧ course factors
- ✧ personal factors

These relate closely to the three broad fronts for action described by Martinez (1997) as follows:

- ✧ managerial initiatives

- ✧ curriculum initiatives
- ✧ support initiatives

As such, they are useful as a starting point for formulating responses and are used below as the main headings for an analysis of strategies which might be employed to combat non-completion.

Institute factors

Factors contributing to non-completion in this category are mainly related to facilities and services, and as such, require managerial responses and resources (Martinez 1997; Martinez, Houghton & Krupska 1998; Barwuah, Green & Lawson 1997; Noel 1978; Kenwright 1996).

For Martinez (1997), managerial time, attention and energy are the necessary pre-requisites for the implementation of any successful strategy to reduce non-completion. He argues that these are needed in order to make the issue of non-completion a priority within the institution's overall policy and planning objectives. Kenwright (1996) argues the case for withdrawal procedures being administered by someone other than the student's lecturers since course-related or lecturer-related factors may be implicated in the withdrawal. Kenwright also stresses the need for ongoing data collection from students via surveys of opinions and satisfaction, and better use and dissemination of management information within the college structure, so that all staff are made aware of problem areas and strategies for dealing with them.

In the American context, Noel (1978) also stresses the need for institution-wide structures dedicated to ongoing research into the extent of non-completion problems and to the consideration and dissemination of strategies designed to address the issue of non-completion.

However, in the main, specific strategies at this level are absent from the literature, given that the role of management is largely one of policy-making and guidance, while the actual implementation of strategies occurs at the level of course delivery and support services. For this reason, successful management strategies are mainly limited to staff development, flexibility in resource allocation and awareness raising.

Course factors

Course-related factors may be divided into two main sub-categories—those relating to a mismatch between the student and the course, and those relating to the delivery of the course.

The mismatch between student expectations and the course provided is cited in much of the literature as an important reason for non-completion. It is no surprise then, that one of the most important institutional strategies advocated for reducing non-completion is pre-course counselling. In most case, this involves easier access to detailed and comprehensive course information (Streckfuss & Walters 1990; Martinez, Houghton & Krupska 1998). In some cases, it may involve a complete review of admission procedures, as advocated by Kenwright (1996, 1997).

Munn, MacDonald and Lowden (1992) emphasise that face-to-face contact with an experienced teacher in the pre-course counselling stage can play an important role in preparing students for the demands of their program. Kenwright (1996) notes that parents and teachers should also be targeted for receiving guidance information, given their important role in advising prospective students.

Martinez and Munday (1998) specify a detailed strategy which includes:

- ✧ better course publicity
- ✧ links to schools

- ✧ pre-course briefings
- ✧ 'taster sessions'
- ✧ guidance
- ✧ presentation of course overviews
- ✧ clear entry criteria
- ✧ initial diagnostic procedures
- ✧ the use of current students to disseminate information.

It should be noted that all of these strategies are applicable in the Australian context. It is wise, however, to note McGivney's (1996) assertion that there are tensions between the need to provide accurate information and impartial advice on the one hand, and the pressure to achieve student enrolment targets on the other. Without management support for a policy of effective pre-course counselling, inappropriate enrolment will continue, with associated high levels of non-completion.

For factors related to course delivery, teaching strategies form the core of the responses described. Martinez, Houghton and Krupska (1998) identify a range of curriculum responses to non-completion. These approaches include:

- ✧ awareness raising among teachers
- ✧ rolling programs of teacher education and induction
- ✧ courses to develop specialist skills
- ✧ tutor development programs
- ✧ peer observation, feedback, mentoring and coaching
- ✧ professional support and leadership from curriculum managers
- ✧ systematic teacher development programs to address local priorities
- ✧ action research so that teachers can improve their practice in a supportive and collegial research environment.

Martinez and Munday (1998) advocate a system of monitoring, review and planning, which replicates a classical action research model. Within this system, monitoring of student needs and difficulties is linked to an ongoing review of teaching and assessment responses which will address these needs and difficulties.

The tailoring of course offerings to student needs is particularly an issue for disadvantaged students. Dunn (1995) advises flexibility in program delivery as a key to improving completion rates. Students with special needs are often in need of flexible assessment procedures, sympathetic teaching styles and a greater flexibility in attendance and course completion timelines. For Aboriginal students, such flexibility is often the difference between completion and non-completion.

Woodley (1987), in a report on adult non-completion in the United Kingdom, stresses the need to take account of the prior learning experiences of students which might affect their preparedness to cope with their course, as well as of the professional and personal circumstances which might disrupt their studies.

Ducker (1982) provides an additional perspective on the strategy of a responsive curriculum, suggesting a technique involving the use of self-report inventories for students. These are subsequently used by teachers to develop more responsive instructional methods.

Related to the issue of improving the quality of the instructional experience is the quality of staff–student interaction. McGivney (1996) notes that large proportions of non-completing students leave without informing their lecturers. A number of strategies are suggested for improving the quality of this experience.

Munn, MacDonald and Lowden (1992) advocate shared staff–student coffee breaks and encouraging students to arrive early for classes and stay late to promote informal interaction. They also suggest that lecturers give contact telephone numbers to encourage students to maintain communication, and furthermore, that they contact students who miss lectures.

Cullen (1994) calls for greater sensitivity in dealing with female students in particular, who often need to skip classes or leave early due to ongoing or unexpected childcare difficulties. She also advocates respectful acknowledgement of the issues and problems faced by adult learners, especially those who are non-traditional users of tertiary education, in order to build respect and trust between staff and students.

Personal factors

Personal factors are often cited in the literature as being, by definition, beyond the possibility of an institutional response. Yet, as we have noted, difficulties with course progression are often a result of a complex set of factors involving both the student and the institution. It is no surprise to find a set of responses which include counselling, childcare support, referral to specialist help and financial support, included among Martinez and Munday's responses to the personal factors which contribute to non-completion. It is also not surprising that there are wide differences between institutions in the quality of the support they offer (McGivney 1996).

Nevertheless, the need for institutional responses to these personal factors has been well recognised at the college level. A study conducted by Barwuah, Green and Lawson (1997) in the United Kingdom showed that colleges recognise that identifying and responding to students' additional support needs is crucial to improving student retention and achievement, particularly in the area of English as second language (ESL) learners. The study argues that, in order to meet additional student needs, a shift of responsibility is needed from specialist to mainstream staff. All staff need to be aware of students' additional support needs and be able to address these through their mainstream teaching. The staff development implications of such a shift would be considerable.

Kenwright (1997) also emphasises the need to review guidance procedures and to provide support mechanisms, such as counselling, welfare and financial advice and childcare centres. Kenwright (1996) and McGivney (1996) also give some prominence to the issue of financial advice and assistance, with Kenwright suggesting that students be given the opportunity to learn about personal financial management. Streckfuss and Walters (1990) also identify counselling services as the key to preventing non-completion.

Elsewhere, Kenwright (1996) argues for the development of a set of risk factors to be used in targeting support and advice to 'high-risk' students, a review of admission and guidance procedures, the provision of financial advice, establishment of 'retention improvement teams' to draw up individual strategies suited to students and their courses, and the development of strategies to improve student attendance. Kenwright also stresses the importance of responding quickly to poor attendance.

Dunn (1995) identifies early and ongoing counselling as a key strategy for improving student retention. It is also observed that attrition rates are often higher among women, and thus it is recommended that the twin issues of family support and childcare provision also be given high priority in such strategies. Finally, research on past school experiences and staff training and professional development are necessary to ensure the efficiency of any given student retention strategy.

Early intervention also plays an important role in the development of support initiatives. The early identification of target groups or individuals at risk and the quick implementation of adequate support strategies mean that those most in need may not have left by the time a response is forthcoming (Kenwright 1996). Part-time students are among the most vulnerable groups in this area (McGivney 1996). In the VET sector particularly, where enrolment may involve one module only or, at longest, a two-year course, rapid response is very important.

Tinto's (1975) work on social and academic integration emphasises the need for students to feel a part of the culture of the institution, particularly in the early stages of a course, when they are most vulnerable to dropping out. Mentoring, peer support and improved induction strategies, such as group admissions and orientation courses, are listed as possible means for better integration into the cultural life of the institution by McGivney (1996).

Mentoring and peer support are also nominated by Martinez and Munday (1998) and Bond (1998) as key strategies to address alienation and early problems settling in for VET students. Kenwright (1996) advocates mentoring by trained volunteer veteran students. Significant work has been carried out on the role of mentoring among university students, but relatively few examples are available in the VET literature, Bond's work in Western Australia being one of the exceptions.

Conclusion

Research in Australia and overseas has highlighted the complexities involved in measuring rates of completion in vocational education and training. These complexities may be attributed in large part to the structure of the qualifications involved, and to the nature of the student populations enrolled in these courses. But the growing recognition of the significance of VET to economic health, together with increased imperatives toward accountability, have placed VET under stronger scrutiny than before. Accordingly, researchers have been active in attempting to elicit accurate estimates of completion rates, in seeking reasons for students' failure to complete, and identifying strategies to address non-completion.

Some studies have explored relationships between instructional experience and students' completion rates in TAFE. Their findings tend to be tentative but are helpful. In the context of a sample study of entry-level TAFE students in four fields of study, this study attempts to develop these themes and to explore the connections between students' perceived quality of instruction and their subsequent outcomes.

Methodology

This research is focused on a national longitudinal study of commencing entry-level TAFE students. It is organised around students' experience of learning in TAFE and their subsequent outcomes. Most specifically, it investigates whether connections may be established between students' instructional experience in TAFE and their likelihood of completing their courses.

No other study of instructional quality and non-completion on the scale of this research has been carried out in Australia. Most studies which examine non-completion and instructional quality are single-institute studies. Drawing on a national sample of entry-level TAFE students and making use of longitudinal data collection which commences when students are actually still engaged in their course, this research gives us a strong foundation of attitudinal data from which to work. It differs from other studies, where *ex post facto* techniques (asking about reasons for completion or non-completion after the event) result in limited reliability and generalisability.

To this end, this research into connections between instructional experience and course completion involved:

- ✧ a survey of nearly 5000 entry-level students during the course of their instruction in June 2000 (most within the first several months of enrolment)
- ✧ re-contact and interviewing of students in the next calendar year to identify the different outcomes, for example, course completion, course continuation, discontinuation, transfer etc.

Groups of students were selected by their institutions for participation in the initial survey on the basis of their enrolment in specific certificate levels (certificate I through to certificate III). Although attempts were made to achieve representation roughly comparable to that of the TAFE population overall, the research was dependent on the groups provided to us by participating institutions. Representation by state or territory is displayed in table 1.

Each student in the sample filled out an extensive self-complete survey instrument in class time in June 2000 under the supervision of his or her teachers or supervisors. This generated an achieved sample of 4915 completed surveys from the targeted groups. The structure of the sample by Australian Qualifications Framework level and field of study is reported in table 2.

These surveys explored, among other things, students' reasons for undertaking study, their intentions regarding completion, their experiences to that point regarding the TAFE instructional environment and background demographic information. Consent was sought at the time of the initial survey for students' continued involvement in the research later in, or after completion of their study. A copy of the survey instrument administered in June 2000 is provided in the appendix.

Final numbers of returns from the mid-2000 exercise are shown in table 1.

Table 1: Mid-2000 returns

State or territory	Number
South Australia	430
New South Wales	1792
Victoria	430
Western Australia	1274
Queensland	266
Northern Territory	113
Tasmania	80

Table 2: Certificate level by field of study

	Business	Engineering	Hospitality	Multifield
Certificate I	48	204	112	409
Certificate II	275	116	410	334
Certificate III	482	1075	1102	197
Total	**805**	**1395**	**1624**	**940**

A breakdown of the cohort by Australian Qualifications Framework level shows that certificate III students are the largest group, with 2856 students (making up 59.9% of the total cohort), followed by 1135 enrolled in certificate II courses (23.8%) and 773 enrolled in certificate I (16.2%).

A breakdown by state is reported in tables 3 and 4. This shows that the largest numbers were achieved in New South Wales, Western Australia and Victoria, and that all states returned surveys for each field of study.

Table 3: Field of study by state

	NSW	SA	WA	TAS/NT	QLD	VIC
VET multifield	248	144	311	25	40	172
Business admin. eco.	175	63	187	34	173	173
Services hospitality	825	101	333	108	26	231
Engineering surveying	501	103	393	19	23	356
State totals	**1749**	**411**	**1224**	**186**	**262**	**932**

Re-contact

In March 2001, all students in the sample who volunteered re-contact details were contacted again by telephone and surveyed for data regarding course completion and current study and labour force destinations. The follow-up contact also sought information on reasons for further study or for withdrawing from study. Re-contact details were provided by 1360 students—27.6% of the initial sample. Of this group, a sample of 771 individuals was achieved and interviewed. Results from those interviews enabled a link between earlier data on perceptions of the instructional experience and subsequent completion/non-completion data.

Survey instruments

Two survey instruments were used in the development of the longitudinal database.

The first was administered to TAFE students in classroom conditions in June 2000. This computer-scannable instrument was developed after extensive consultation with institutions, VET research bodies and other researchers. It paid particularly close attention to questions of definition, especially regarding qualifications, courses and completion. The survey dealt with many aspects of students' learning experiences in TAFE and canvassed a range of relevant background details. Such details included nature and duration of the student's course, his/her intention to complete, his/her age and gender, prior educational and training achievement, reasons for undertaking course, and current employment status. A copy of this survey instrument is provided in the appendix.

Unlike the first instrument, the second involved a phone survey. As noted, 1360 students (27.6% of the initial sample) consented to participate in follow-up interviews. They were re-contacted and surveyed by phone in March 2001 to establish their completion status and work and study destinations some nine months after the first contact. This allowed the development of a longitudinal file of some 771 achieved cases, linking those students' initial intentions and attitudes to their course with their outcomes, attitudes and intentions some nine months on. The follow-up sample represents 16.4% of the original sample. A copy of the phone survey instrument is provided in the appendix.

Follow-up group—summary

While the achieved follow-up group (surveyed by phone in March 2001) reflects the general structure and constituency of the initial sample group, table 4 illustrates the extent to which divergence has occurred. These features should be borne in mind in evaluation of aggregated material.

Table 4: Survey samples by state, mid-2000 and March 2001

	2000		2001	
	No.	%	No.	%
South Australia	430	**8.7**	95	**12.3**
New South Wales	1792	**36.5**	257	**33.3**
Victoria	960	**19.5**	131	**17.0**
Western Australia	1274	**25.9**	203	**26.3**
Queensland	266	**5.4**	61	**7.7**
Northern Territory	113	**2.3**	20	**2.6**
Tasmania	80	**1.6**	4	**.5**

Survey samples, mid-2000 and March 2001

Gender

The initial sample yielded a slightly higher proportion of male respondents.

Table 5: Initial sample—gender

2000	Male	Female
Number	2536	2241
Percentage	53.1	46.9

Note: 138 respondents failed to identify gender.

The follow-up group, however, comprised a higher proportion of females.

Table 6: Follow-up sample—gender

2001	Male	Female
Number	327	42.5
Percentage	42.5	57.3

Qualification level

Participating institutions administered the questionnaire to groups of students enrolled in courses ranging from certificate I through to certificate III.

A number of students (190) initially failed to identify their course level, and another 72 reported themselves to be enrolled in other types of courses; for example, short courses or single module units. These students have been grouped as 'other'. A breakdown of numbers of enrolments within the sample is given below.

Although proportions of students enrolled at particular qualifications are broadly comparable within the sample, the composition of student populations within the qualification does vary. Note however, the slight differences in overall percentages enrolled at each qualification level in the initial sample and follow-up.

Effectively, more female students than male responded positively to requests for re-contact. Researchers were able to make phone contact with 19.7% of female survey participants who had been enrolled in certificate III the previous year, compared with only 11.7% of male participants who had been enrolled at that level. They were able to speak to 21.4% of women who had been enrolled in certificate I, compared with only 13% of male certificate I students who had undertaken the initial survey.

These outcomes highlight some methodological issues concerning longitudinal studies generally: particular groups (for example, women, older students, those with higher educational qualifications) are more likely to agree to be included in follow-up work. Researchers also find they are more likely to be able to make effective contact with individuals who are in stable accommodation arrangements, factors which again disproportionately favour those with secure and stable long-term living arrangements.

Issues of follow-up are of particular significance in this outcomes-focused survey where the time lapse between initial contact and re-contact was not great—around nine months. As a rule, it would be expected that students most likely to have completed their course within this timeframe would be those undertaking certificates I or II. Yet this group was not well-represented in the initial survey and therefore the generally poor responses to the issue of re-contact caused numbers to drop significantly. It might be hoped that future research along these lines might address issues of follow-up more forcefully to achieve, within the sample, a stronger retention of students enrolled in base-level certificates. Some strategies to boost longitudinal participation might include links between participation and follow-up services (such as assistance with employment or training placements), or nominal payments for participation.

Table 7: Certificate levels by gender, 2000 and 2001 samples

	Male		Female		Persons	
	No.	% share of certificate	No.	% share of certificate	No.	% within sample
Certificate I 2000	410	53.9	350	46.1	760	15.9
Certificate I follow-up	**54**	**41.9**	**75**	**58.1**	**129**	**16.7**
Certificate II	468	40.4	689	59.5	1157	24.2
Certificate II follow-up	**78**	**37.5**	**130**	**62.5**	**208**	**27.1**
Certificate III	1658	57.9	1202	42.0	2860	59.8
Certificate III follow-up	**195**	**45.1**	**237**	**54.9**	**432**	**56.1**

Field of study

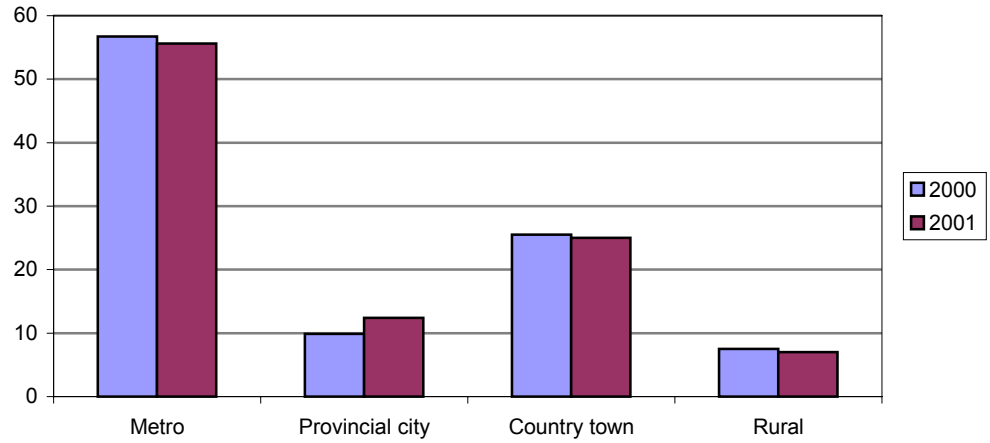
The follow-up sample comprised somewhat higher proportions of students from the business and multifield areas of study, while engineering dropped its share of the sample from over 29% to 22%.

Table 8: Field of study, 2000 and 2001 samples

	2000		2001	
	No.	%	No.	%
Business	804	**16.9**	167	**22.1**
Engineering	1395	**29.3**	166	**22.0**
Hospitality	1624	**34.1**	242	**32.0**
VET multifield	940	**19.7**	181	**23.9**

Regional location

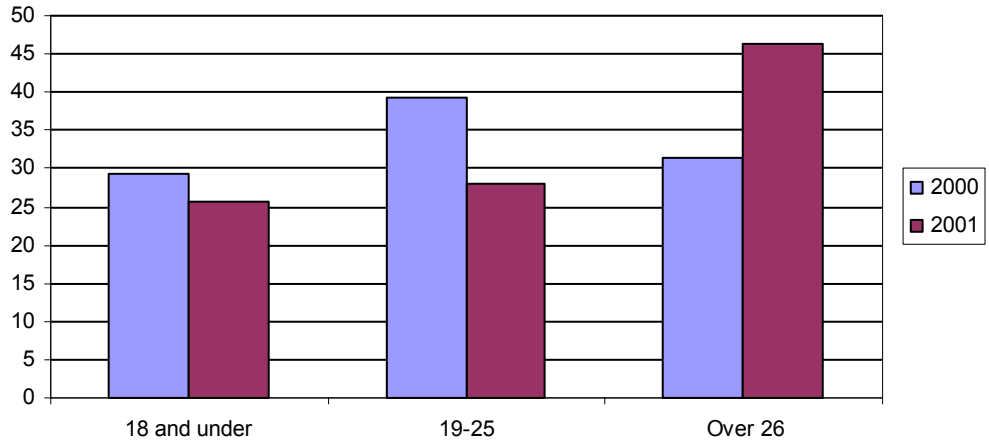
Figure 1: Regional location, sample populations, percentage



Proportions of students from different locations varied minimally across the two surveys. In both, the initial survey and the follow-up, around 56% of the sample were drawn from metropolitan areas.

Age

Figure 2: Age profiles, survey population, percentage

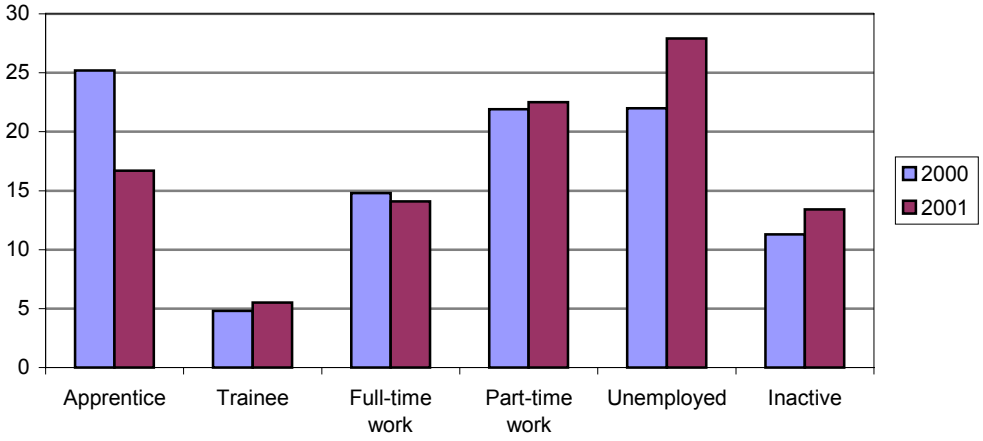


Some differences are observable between the initial contact group and those who could later be followed up through a phone survey. The achieved follow-up sample was older than the initial sample population, with over 46% giving their ages as over 27, compared with less than a third (30%) of the initial group. Put another way, only 53% of the re-contact group were 26 or younger, compared with over 68% of the initial sample.

Employment status

Higher proportions of older students in the follow-up sample may account for some slight discrepancies between the employment profiles of the two groups (as reported at June 2000). The initial sample reported around 25% engaged in apprenticeships with a further 4.8% involved in traineeships. Just 16.7% of the follow-up group were apprentices, with 5.5% engaged in traineeships. A higher proportion of the follow-up sample was unemployed at the time of the first survey (30%).

Figure 3: Employment status in June 2000, initial and follow-up samples, percentage



Overall, the survey populations are sufficiently comparable to allow use of data generated by responses from the initial survey population. On this basis, the findings on students' responses to questions on instructional experience and course satisfaction, generated at the time of undertaking their course and reported in the chapter following, provide a strong background to subsequent outcomes. In the second to last chapter, however, the connections between that instructional experience and non-completion are investigated. There, the re-contact group has been weighted to reflect enrolment rates at these qualification levels in TAFEs nationally. The weighting has been based on enrolment rates as reported by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER 2000), and has allowed the development of a predictive aspect in the project.

Completion, intentions and attitudes: Methodological implications

Certain methodological issues needed to be addressed within the course of the project. Among the most important questions confronting researchers in this project were those of definition and intent. Completion in VET is anything but a straightforward issue. Aggregated statistical databases, for example, may fail to capture the range of ways in which students undertake training. Given that their abilities to trace individual students' pathways and outcomes are limited, these databases may well overstate the extent of non-completion among students. And given the policy imperatives for enhanced flexibility of access and provision in TAFE, completion itself may be a sliding concept, dependent on individuals' own demands of their courses.

For this reason the research group was most concerned to establish what students wanted and expected of their courses. It is relevant here that our information about students' reasons for study tends to be scant. Knowledge of aspects of students' *behaviour* may be good; for example, who completes or does not complete a qualification for which they are enrolled can be readily determined. However, we are much less well informed about students' actual intentions regarding their course. What are their reasons for undertaking training? Do they intend to complete or do they only want to take some units or modules? We need to better understand intentions if we are to draw any useful inferences about completion and non-completion.

Given the difficulties encountered by TAFE researchers and practitioners in defining completion to general satisfaction (Cleary & Nicholls 1998; Foyster, Fai & Shah 2000), the research group recognised that a project which relied heavily on self-reporting strategies would need to be undertaken within well-signposted definitional boundaries. Completion and non-completion are central to the project and it was recognised that any definitions used would need to work equally well for students, researchers, TAFE practitioners and policy-makers. Accordingly, extensive consultation was undertaken with research authorities and VET providers to:

- ✧ assure an appropriate sample group
- ✧ to arrive at strong and agreed-on definitions of course and module completion.

To ensure the strongest accounts of each student's study and completion status over time, the research group sought information in the initial contact concerning:

- ✧ qualification details—initial course enrolment (certificate I through to certificate III, Q1a[2])
- ✧ clarification of qualification details—name of the course (allowing for field of study allocation, Q1b)

[2] These refer to question numbers in student questionnaire (see appendix)

- ✧ study or training timeframe, making use of:
  - intention to complete (fully or partial, Q4)
  - date of commencement of course (month and year, Q2)
  - reported length of course (Q3).

Collection of these details at the outset of the survey process served a double purpose. First, it provided the research group with key data necessary to validate students' own claims regarding their enrolments. In the initial consultations with participating TAFEs we sought the involvement of students enrolled in entry-level certificates in the business, hospitality, engineering or VET multifield fields of study. Students undertaking single-module study or non-award training were specifically excluded from the study's focus. At the outset of the survey, students were asked a range of questions highlighting their *qualification* rather than individual modules. They were asked, for example, about date of commencement of their *course*, the expected duration of the course and their intention to complete. To emphasise this focus on Australian Qualifications Framework status, for example, an early question on completion (Q4) reminded students of this focus:

> Your training/course consists of a number of modules, completion of which leads to a qualification. Is it your intention to complete:
>
> - ✧ All the modules
> - ✧ Some of the modules
> - ✧ None of the modules? (all modules or just some?).

Second, collection of these details at the outset provided students themselves with a context for their subsequent responses regarding instructional experience. The instrument itself emphasised qualification and course rather than module, and the questions on instructional experience invited students to respond on the basis of their course 'overall'.

These questions provided the base data for analysis for this stage of the survey and for follow-up contacts. First, they provided information about students' participation and their intentions regarding their attendance at TAFE. Second, they established whether individual students regarded themselves as undertaking a full qualification or a module or group of modules only. Finally, they afforded data on expected completion times, allowing the research group to measure differences between anticipated and actual completion rates.

For the purposes of this paper, question 4 posed a crucial question, seeking to elicit one of the most basic intentions of students regarding the course in which they are enrolled—have they enrolled with the intention of completing their course, or do they expect more limited participation?

As indicated, 4915 entry-level TAFE students from six states and the Northern Territory participated in this initial survey. Although enrolled in a diverse range of courses, most had been enrolled in their course for less than six months. Over 91% of students surveyed expressed the intention to 'complete' their full course. Around 8.6% felt that they wanted to complete 'some modules only'. Only 0.2% intended to complete no modules at all.

The smaller re-contact group—the 771 students who participated in phone interviews in March 2001—reflected this emphasis. Although it has been shown that this re-contact group diverged in some respects from the initial sample, their intentions regarding completion are almost identical. Just over 90% of this group wished to complete their full qualification when first contacted in June 2000; 9.7% wanted to undertake 'some modules only' and only 0.1% had no interest in completing any modules. In other words, over nine out of ten students surveyed when undertaking their course in June 2000 expressed their intention to *complete* their qualification.

Despite this apparent unanimity, it is clear that not all groups within the sample regarded completion in the same light. At the qualification level, for example, it is apparent that an intention to complete rises as the qualification level rises: of those qualification levels surveyed, students enrolled at the certificate I level were least likely to say that they intended to complete all of their course.

Figure 4: Intention to complete, June 2000, percentage

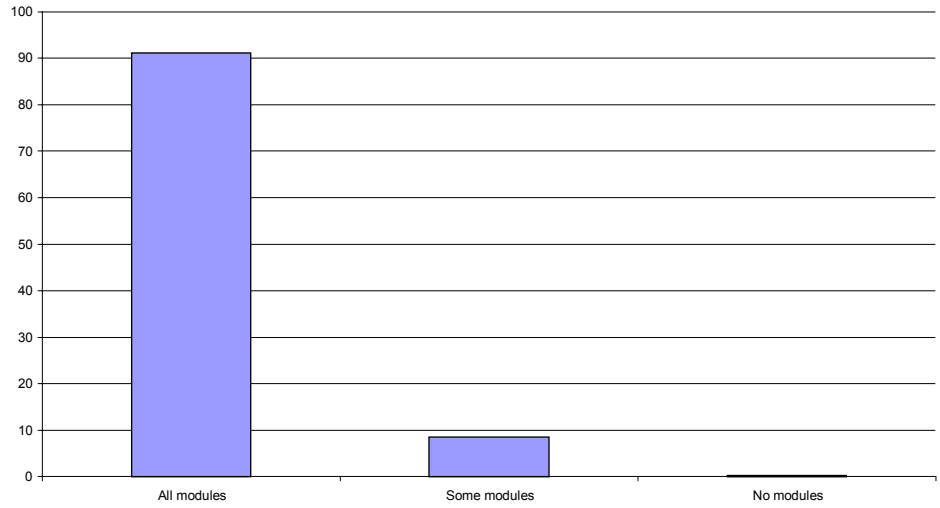
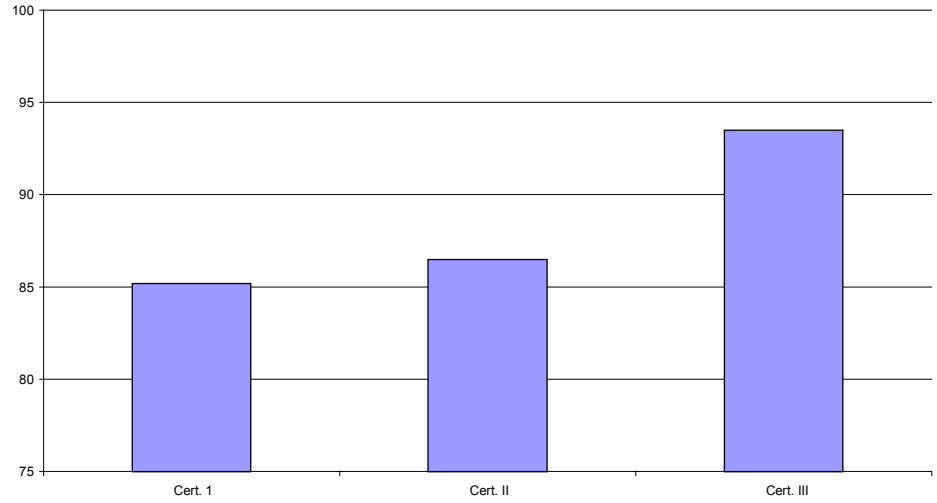


Figure 5: Intention to complete all modules, AQF levels I–III, percentage



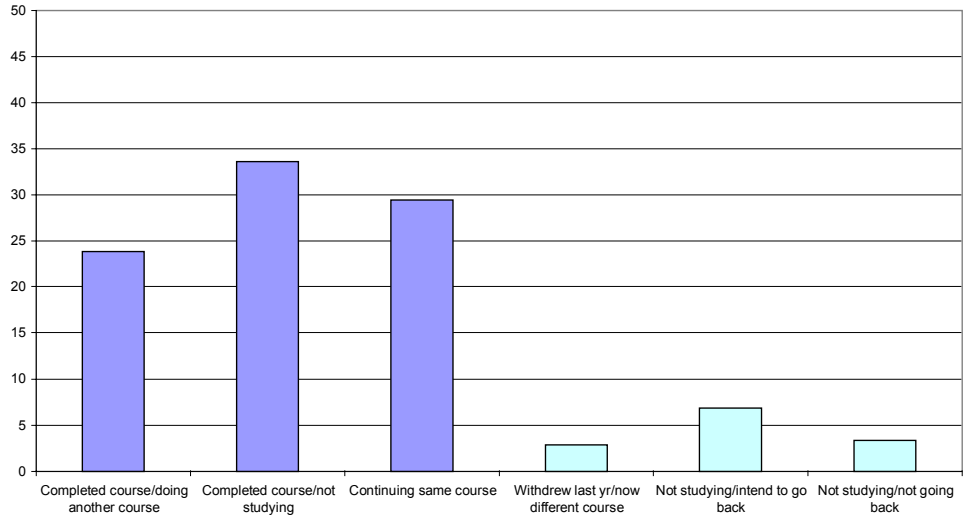
Lower level certificates (certificates I and II) saw lower proportions of students intending to complete their full course, with women less likely than men to envisage full completion. Even so, it should be recognised that the difference is one of degree, and that even for these certificates, more than 85% of all students intended to complete their qualification fully. Certificate III students (including trade certificate students) intended higher levels of completion, with over 95% of male students expecting to complete fully.

It must be expected, however, that completion holds different values for different groups, and that a group which might value completion of one particular qualification may not be so convinced of the value of completing another of a different, perhaps lesser value. TAFE is a broad organisation; it provides courses from basic entry-level qualifications through to advanced

diplomas and its students range from early school leavers through to those with post-graduate qualifications. They can be undertaking their courses with different ends in mind—for personal development, for basic learning skills, for specific skills needed in their work, or for skills which will allow them to get a job, through to qualifications which will assist in advancing a career. Although they may be enrolled in the same course and may share a classroom and teacher or trainer, they are often at different points on their educational and vocational pathways and completion may not have the same value for all.

Intention is an important aspect in analysis or interpretation of subsequent course outcomes. In the follow-up interviews conducted in March 2001, for example, students were first invited to identify their current status in relation to the course which they had been undertaking in 2000. Had they satisfactorily completed, were they still continuing or had they withdrawn from their course without completion? Their response to this question effectively declared their course outcome, and follow-up questions allowed for substantial cross-checking that their response had indeed been accurate and appropriate.

Figure 6: Completion and non-completion, March 2001, percentage



It is appropriate to deal with these issues of definition and validation at some length as our respondents reported lower rates of non-completion than are commonly reported in TAFE. Only 11.5% of our respondents reported leaving their course without completing. These findings, however, reflect those of researchers in other recent work based on students' self-reporting of completion status (for example, Grant 2002). Some factors may be suggested to account for this discrepancy between students' self-reporting and aggregated institutional data and may include the distorting effect of module-based rather than student-based reporting, the 'snapshot' nature of much statistical reporting on completions and non-completions, students' own difficulties in appropriately distinguishing between completion and non-completion, or a tendency in educational research, especially longitudinal studies, to over-sample students most likely to experience success in their courses. These are all possibilities.

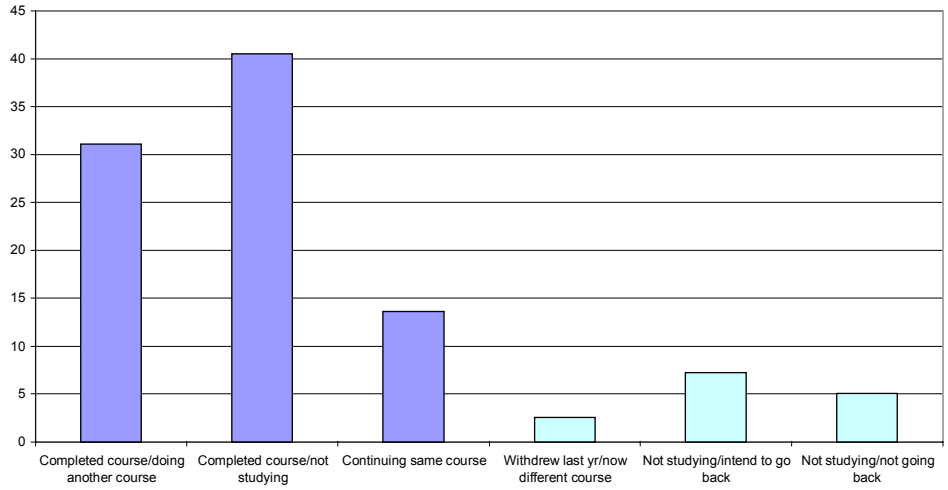
In this study, however, we were able to undertake some validation checks of students' self-reporting of their 'completed' status. Students were asked, for example, whether they had completed and enrolled in another course, or whether they had completed and were no longer in study. Those who had completed and commenced another course nominated the title and level of that qualification. In almost all cases they proved to be studying at a higher level than the course in which they had been enrolled in the previous year. These students did not, incidentally, regard themselves as having 'withdrawn, now enrolled in another course', another option within

the completion/non-completion menu. On balance, their self-reporting of completion status is strongly supported by structures within the instrument.

Similarly, and highly significantly for this project, students' reports of various forms of non-completion appear relatively uncontentious. While there may be some doubt over students' possible tendencies to put a positive spin on completion outcomes and to declare a 'satisfactory' completion, we can be reasonably sure that if a student describes him/herself as having withdrawn from a course before completion s/he is not stretching the facts. Accordingly, our limited group of non-completers, holds up strongly—these are people who for various reasons have left the course in which they were enrolled in June 2000 without completing.

The relatively high level of students 'continuing' in their course is attributable primarily to the numbers of students undertaking courses at the certificate III level, whose duration of study often extended into the 2001 year. Their proportions tend to depress 'completion' rates. It is instructive therefore to look at completion rates for the more limited group of students whose courses were due for completion before the time of the re-contact—March 2001. Their achieved completion rates are significantly higher. Almost 71.5% claim to have successfully completed. Another 14% are still continuing with their study, indicating perhaps a more extended timeframe than initially anticipated. But non-completion rates are not significantly higher than those of the overall re-contact group—14.8% compared with 11.5%.

Figure 7: Outcomes for students expecting to complete course by March 2001, percentage



Much of the project analysis focuses on comparisons between completers and non-completers. It is important to the project to allocate these categories appropriately. The fact that distinctions can usefully be made does suggest that the groups have been appropriately allocated. Additional research could possibly develop criteria and categories further, however, most particularly in developing a stronger and more definitive set of 'completed' categories. But for the purposes of this research the groupings provide a solid base from which to work.

Instructional experience and course evaluation

Treatment of the data

As part of the written questionnaire used for this study, students were asked to rate their learning experiences and study environment to indicate the benefits of their course/training and to evaluate the overall quality of their course/training.

In very simple terms, the level of satisfaction of these students with TAFE falls as level of Australian Qualifications Framework rises.

All students

Our cohort has responded in terms which strongly affirmed of the quality of their TAFE experience. Of particular note is the students' response to their instructors (see figure 8). Nearly 86% of all students indicated that their instructors' knowledge of the subject is excellent or above average, and just under eight in ten said the same of their instructors' commitment. Over 70% of the cohort reported that their instructors' ability to relate to students, to explain things clearly and their organisation and preparation, are excellent or above average. Only on the issue of understanding the assessment methods used was there a rating under 70%.

Of the students who did not give an excellent or above average rating on these items, most chose 'average' as their rating of them. Importantly, no more than 4% of respondents assigned a below average or poor rating to any of these items relating to the quality of their instructors' work.

Students are also overwhelmingly positive about the overall quality of their course/training. Figure 9 further highlights the students' satisfaction with the teaching and instruction they receive. On nearly all of a wide variety of indicators, more than 80% of students report a positive view of their training. More than nine in ten students agreed or strongly agreed that they have a good relationship with their instructors, and just under nine in ten reported that they receive adequate instruction from their instructors, that training materials are well presented, that teaching sessions are well organised and that they are informed about assessment.

Over eight in ten students report that they have access to instructors when required, that the instruction they receive is well balanced, that it allows for differences in student background and skills, that it includes a variety of strategies and that it maintains students' interest and motivation. The two items receiving the lowest support are 'class time is sufficient to cover topics' and 'I receive useful feedback on my learning', but the first of these still receives support from nearly eight in ten students and the second is well over 70%.

Given the trend which sees levels of satisfaction with TAFE rising as level of AQF falls (Centre for Post-Compulsory Education and Training 2000), it is not surprising then that the overall levels of endorsement displayed by this group of certificate I, II and III students are very high.

Figure 8: Teaching and instruction (AQF I, II, III) (% rating teaching and instruction as excellent or above average)

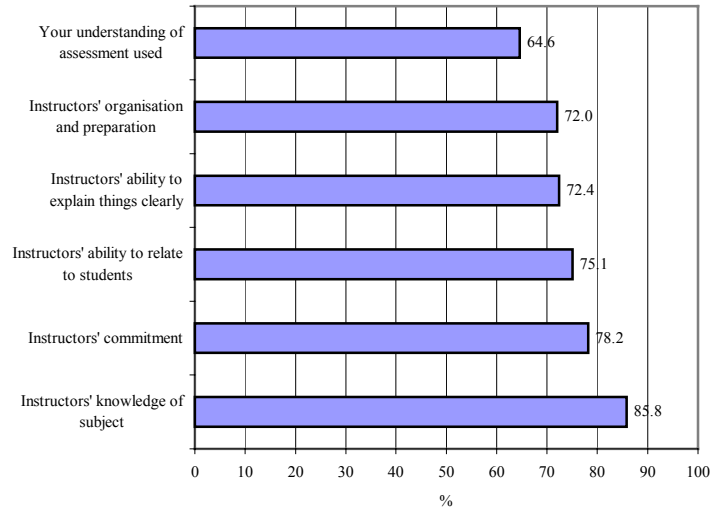
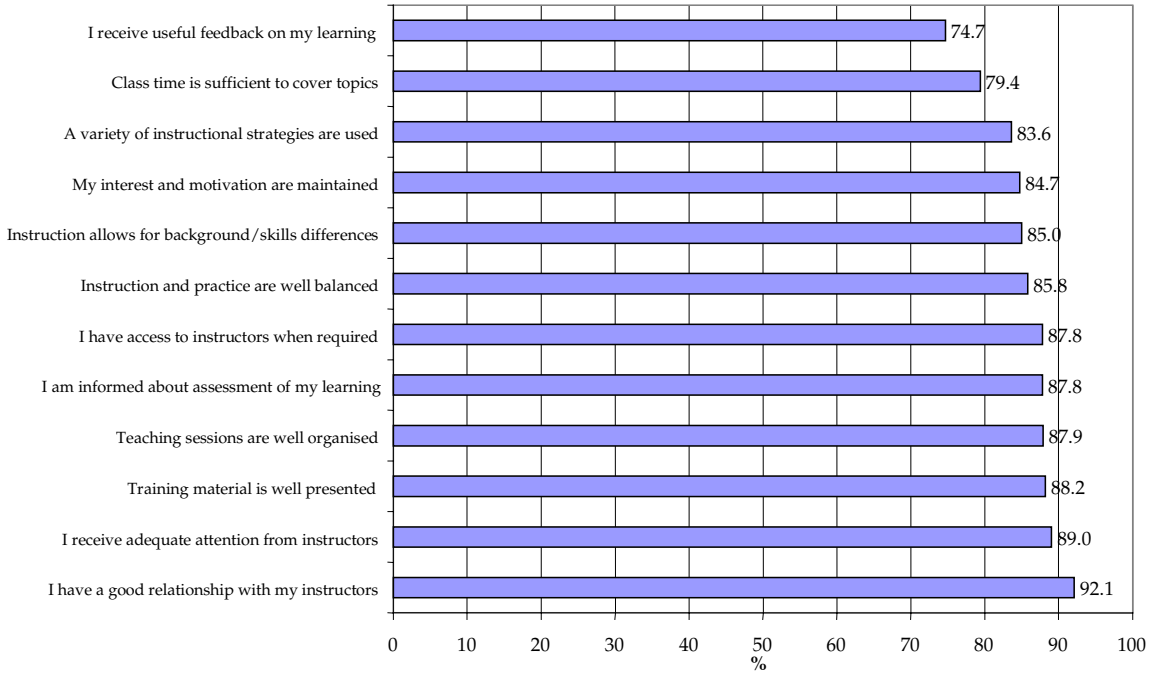
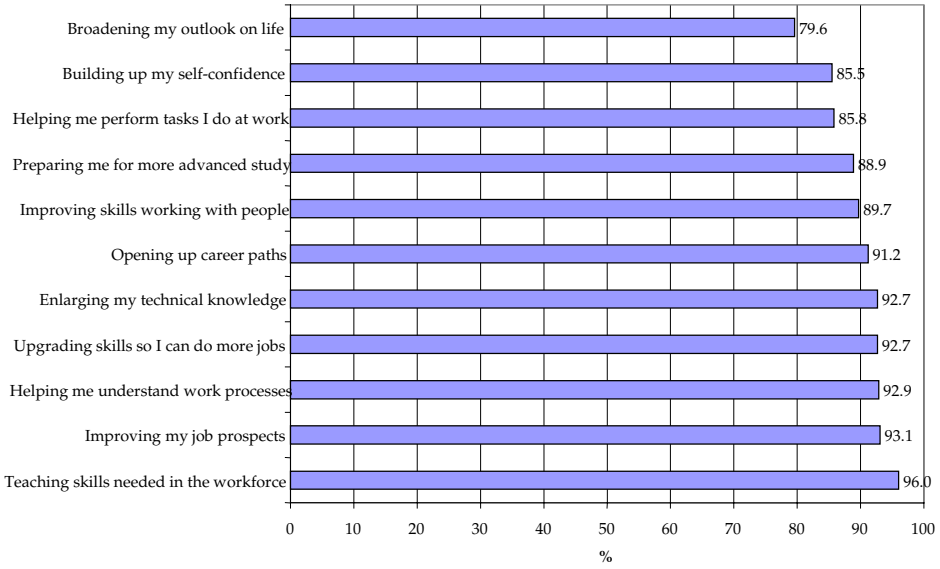


Figure 9: Quality of course (% strongly agreeing and agreeing that …)



The positive views expressed by this sample of students with regard to their training may also be seen in their perceptions of the benefits of their course, particularly in how these relate to current and future employment (see figure 10). Over 90% of all students stated that their course/training is teaching them skills needed in the workforce, helping them to understand work processes, improving their job prospects, upgrading their skills so they can do more jobs, enlarging their technical knowledge and opening up career paths. Just under 90% of the respondents believed that their course was preparing them for more advanced study and helping them perform tasks they do at work.

Figure 10: Benefits of course (% strongly agreeing and agreeing)



The respondents were also positive about perceived benefits of their training which might be described as more social or personal in their nature. Approximately eight in ten respondents agreed that their training/course is broadening their outlook on life; 86% agreed it is building their self-confidence and nine in ten agreed it is improving their ability to work with people. This is a heartening finding, given the role we expect TAFE to play in building the social skills and confidence of early school leavers and other disaffected groups returning to study and the workforce. Students' views on the quality of their study environment, physical resources and access to study were somewhat less positive (see figure 11). Nevertheless, they are still quite high, with ratings of excellent and above average, higher than 60% for all items (and over 70% for one). However, they are somewhat lower than those accorded to their instructors.

Figure 12 shows that more than seven in ten students feel that access to the library is excellent or above average. Convenience of class venue, access to equipment, quality of equipment, the range of courses available and convenience of class time received excellent or above average levels of approval in the range of mid-to-high 60s.

Aspects of students' training not related to the actual process of course delivery and instruction received the lowest levels of endorsement. These include such aspects as general administration and the information available to students regarding the choice of a course (see figure 11). Just over five in ten of our respondents rated these services as excellent or above average. However, the areas in which the respondents are least positive are those relating to information about careers and student counselling services. These two items attracted an excellent or above average rating from only 46.5% and 43.6% respectively of students in our survey.

Figure 11: Administration and support (% rating administration and support excellent or above average)

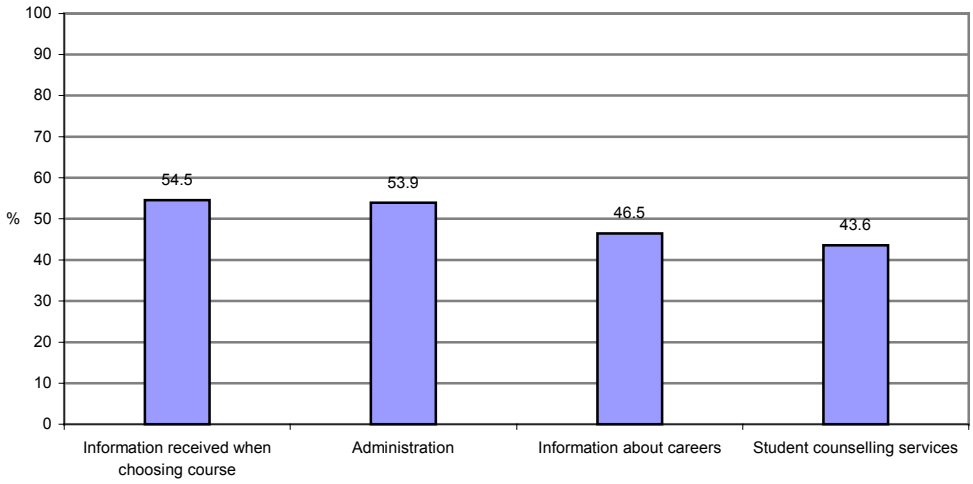
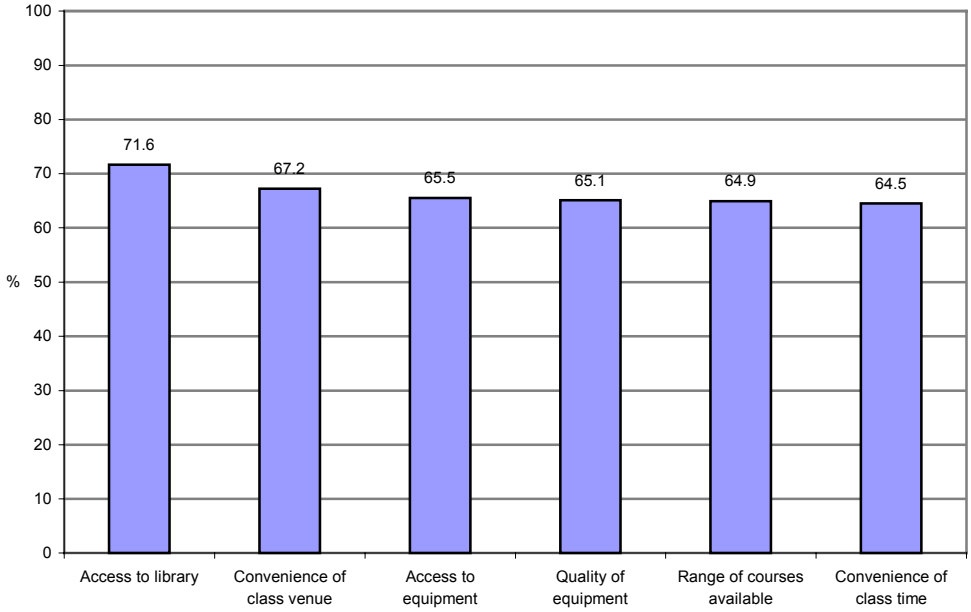


Figure 12: Equipment, resources and access (% rating equipment and resources excellent or above average)



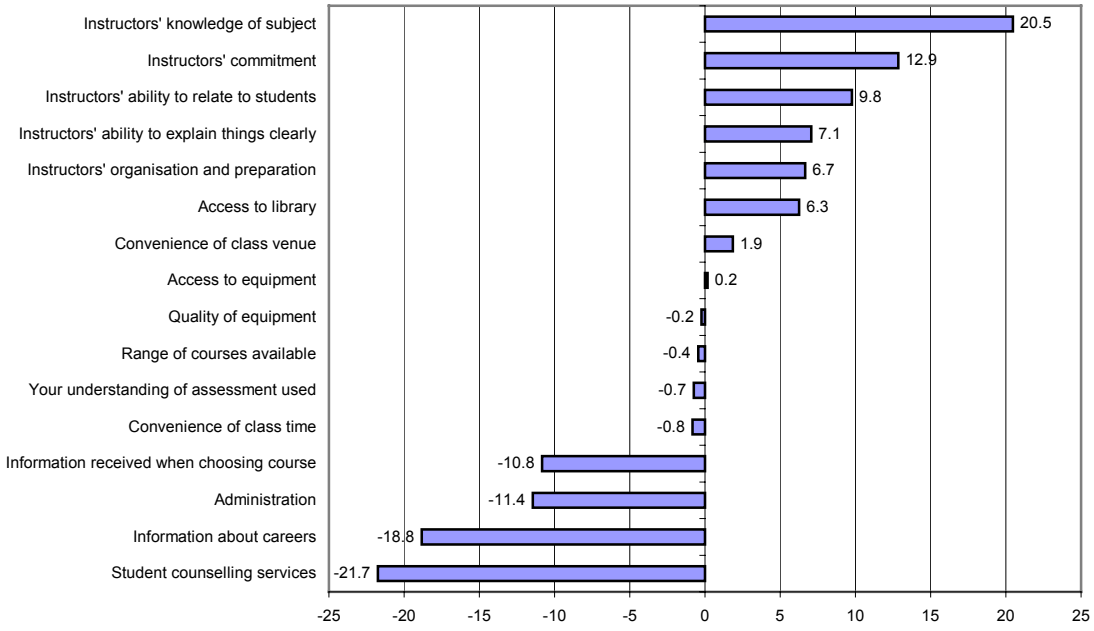
Using a measure which relates students' views of various aspects of their training to a mean level of response, the areas in which students are relatively more or less satisfied become clearer. Figure 13 illustrates the extent to which aspects of course delivery and administration deviate from the mean percentage of students assigning an excellent or above average rating to these items overall, the mean being 65.3%.

This figure makes it clear that items relating to teaching and instruction (including subject knowledge, commitment, teaching skills and organisational skills) are grouped together among those items receiving the highest proportions of excellent and above average responses.

The items relating to equipment, physical resources and delivery make up a distinct 'middle' category, clustering around the mean level of positive responses. These include access to equipment, quality of equipment and the range of course available.

Well below the mean fall those items which relate to course information, careers information, student counselling and administration. The single item which falls furthest below the mean level of excellent and above average responses is student counselling services.

Figure 13: Perceptions of course delivery (% deviations from mean—65.34%)



Male and female

Overall, the female TAFE students in the study were more positive than male TAFE students about most aspects of their instructional experience and its expected benefits. Figure 14, which focuses on teaching and instruction, highlights this. Proportionally fewer male than female respondents in this survey rate the quality of their instructors as excellent across all the indicators in the chart. The item which displays the largest gender difference relates to perceptions of teacher commitment, with females almost 12 percentage points more likely to rate this as excellent than are their male peers.

Figure 15 also highlights some differences in the opinions of male and female TAFE students. Once again, when responding to questions relating to the benefits of their course/training, female students are generally more positive than male students. These differences are particularly strong in the social and personal area (broadening their outlook on life, building up of self-confidence and improving their people skills), but they also extend to most of the more vocationally oriented benefits of training.

Figure 14: Teaching and instruction, by gender (% rating as excellent)

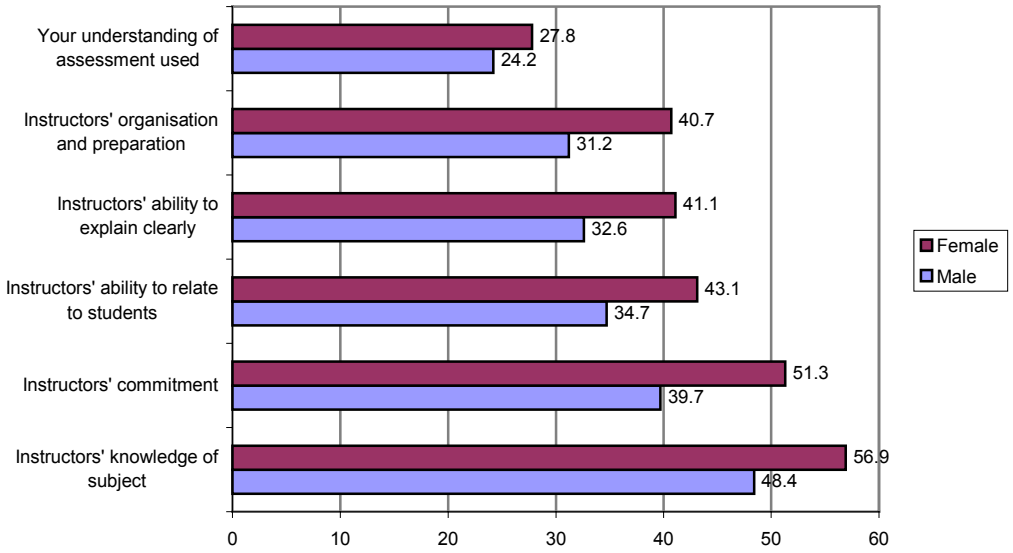
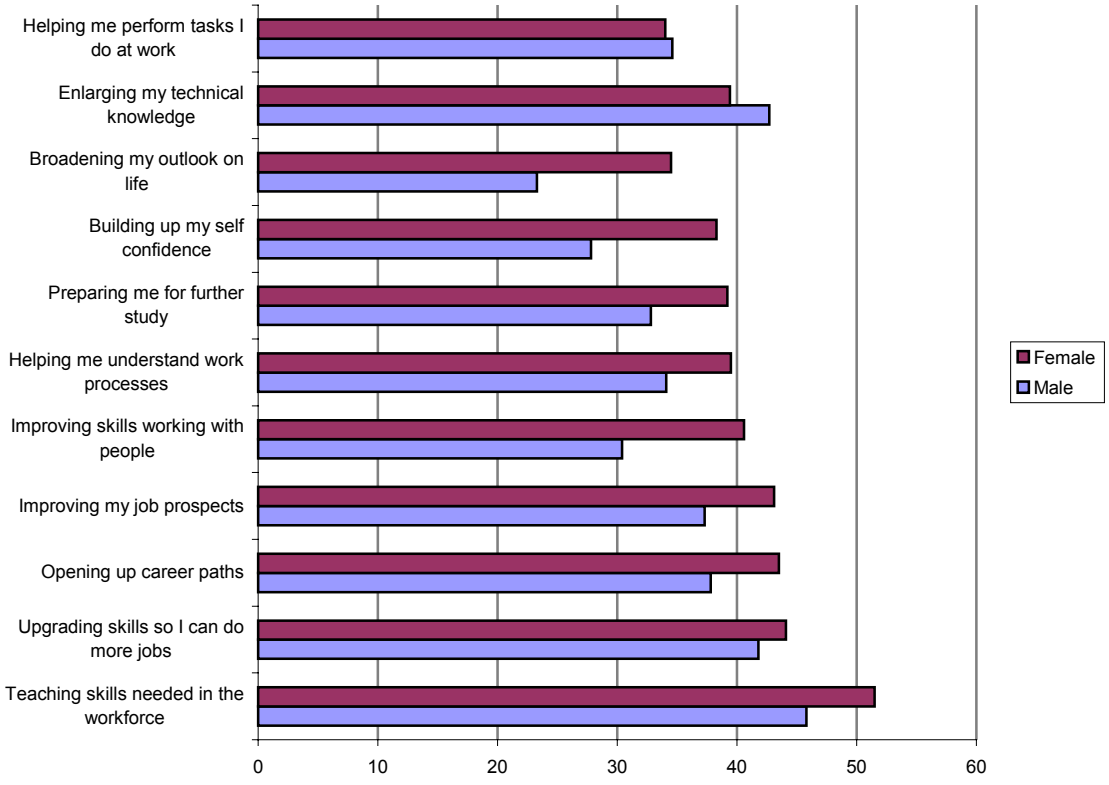


Figure 15: Benefits of course, by gender (% strongly agreeing)



The only two items in which male students are more positive relate to the specific requirements of an existing job—upgrading their skills and helping them perform tasks they do at work. This would tend to suggest that male students may be more likely to evaluate the benefits of their course in terms of its effect on their existing job, although it can be seen that this does not hold true for all items relating to the benefits of their training.

Summary

The entry-level students in our study were strongly appreciative of the overall quality of their instructional experience.

The quality of teaching attracted strongest endorsement, with over 86% regarding their instructors' knowledge of their subject as above average or excellent, and just under eight in ten making the same assessment of instructors' levels of commitment.

The respondents were also overwhelmingly positive about the actual quality of their course. Significantly, over 92% agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed a good relationship with their instructors.

Areas where students were less inclined to express endorsement included the availability of time to adequately cover subject matter, and the provision of appropriate and useful feedback by teaching staff.

In relation to broader benefits, the respondents also reported positively about training outcomes which might be described as social or personal, referring particularly to development of self-confidence and self-esteem, acquisition of a 'broader outlook' on life and the development of career and study pathways.

Students' views on the quality of their study environments were somewhat less positive. Access to good resources, convenient class venues and timetabling, and good-quality equipment were not reported as consistently as high-quality teaching arrangements. Between six and seven out of ten students however, regarded these aspects of provision as strongly in evidence in their course.

Areas where quality of provision appeared least often endorsed were those involving support—advice about courses, general administration or student counselling services. These, however, are areas which are accessed differently by students: not all have occasion to make use of counsellors or even advisory services. For those who do need the services, however, they may well be of great importance.

School and TAFE—the relationship

Measures of the quality of the schooling experience and the TAFE experience

This chapter examines the issue of how the schooling experience affects TAFE students as learners. It makes use of measures constructed from the average responses to particular items or sets of items, rather than simply using the proportion of respondents nominating a particular category of response (for example, excellent or strongly agree).

A measure of the perceived quality of the student's schooling experience has been constructed using responses to the items 'I have happy memories of school', 'I got on well with my teachers', 'I felt that making an extra effort at school was worthwhile' and 'I feel that I coped well academically at school'. Students within one standard deviation of the combined mean of the average responses were placed in the medium category, while students over one standard deviation above the mean were placed in the high category, and students over one standard deviation below the mean were placed in the low category.

Measures of the quality of the TAFE experience are more detailed and relate to a large number of survey items. In the first section, measures of mean responses to items relating to:

- ✧ teaching and instruction
- ✧ equipment, resources and access
- ✧ administration and support have been used.

In the second, measures of the perceived benefits of TAFE training are analysed. And in the third, measures of progress and learning styles are incorporated into the discussion.

Overall, an underlying pattern of satisfaction rising as Australian Qualifications Framework level falls is evident. Students at the lower certificate levels tended to be relatively more satisfied with most aspects of their training experience than were students at the higher levels (Centre for Post-Compulsory Education and Training 2000). This may be because the students in our study located in the higher Australian Qualifications Framework levels are more discriminating, have higher expectations, and have more demands placed on them. Consequently, their reported experience of TAFE is less positive. However, this is a theme which requires further research and exploration.

Learning experience and study environment

It was noted in the previous chapter that TAFE students show the highest levels of endorsement for those aspects of their training directly related to the learning experience, that is, their instructors' commitment, knowledge and skills (both personal and teaching). Equipment and resources receive lower levels of positive endorsement, and administration and support services

receive the lowest. These patterns are evident in figure 16, which reports on the mean responses of certificate I level students to these items.

What is also evident is the influence of the students' school learning experiences. Those students who report the lowest levels of quality of learning experience at school (the low category) are, in general, the group most likely to report the poorest levels of endorsement for their TAFE training. This is the case across all three categories of the learning and study environment of TAFE.

The group with an average level of endorsement of their school learning experience (medium) shows the next highest level of endorsement of their TAFE environment. This is certainly the case in the first two TAFE learning measures (instruction and resources), while in administration and support, the level of endorsement is almost identical to that of the lowest group.

The group with the most positive experience of schooling (high) is, on the other hand, consistently the most positive in its endorsement of the instructional and learning environment at TAFE, across all three measures.

We might expect students in this AQF level I category, whom we know to have a history of early leaving, to be highly susceptible to the effects of a negative school experience. It becomes evident from figures 16 and 17, however, that the negative effects of schooling are not confined to this group but are also felt by certificate I and certificate II students.

Figure 16: Perceptions of TAFE by quality of schooling experience (AQF level I)

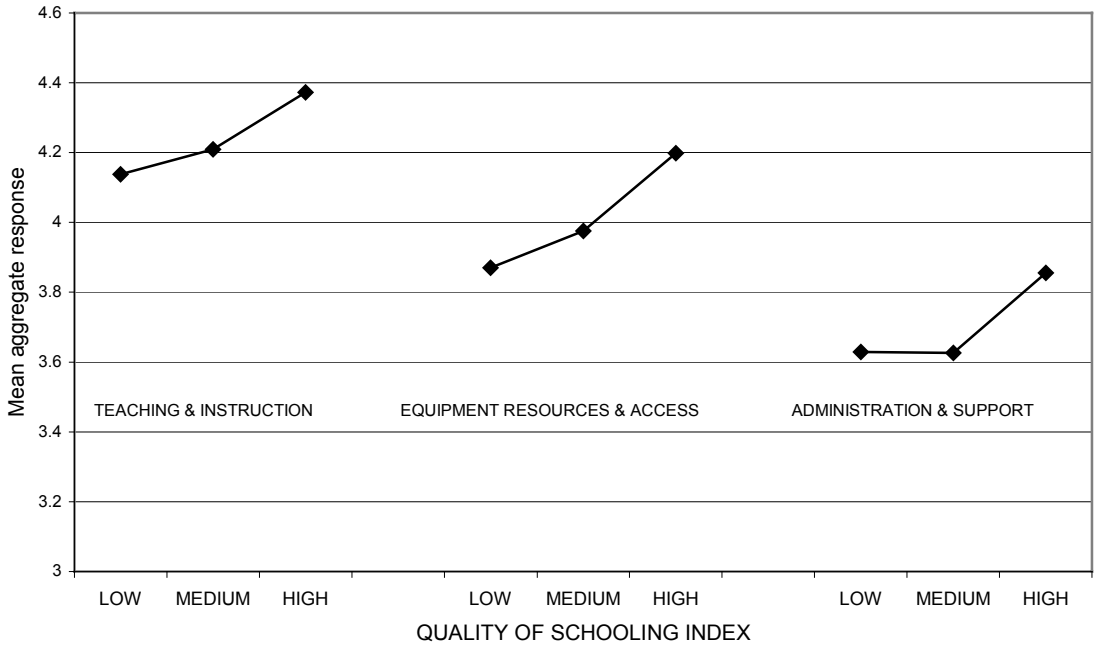


Figure 17: Perceptions of TAFE by quality of schooling experience (AQF levels II and III)

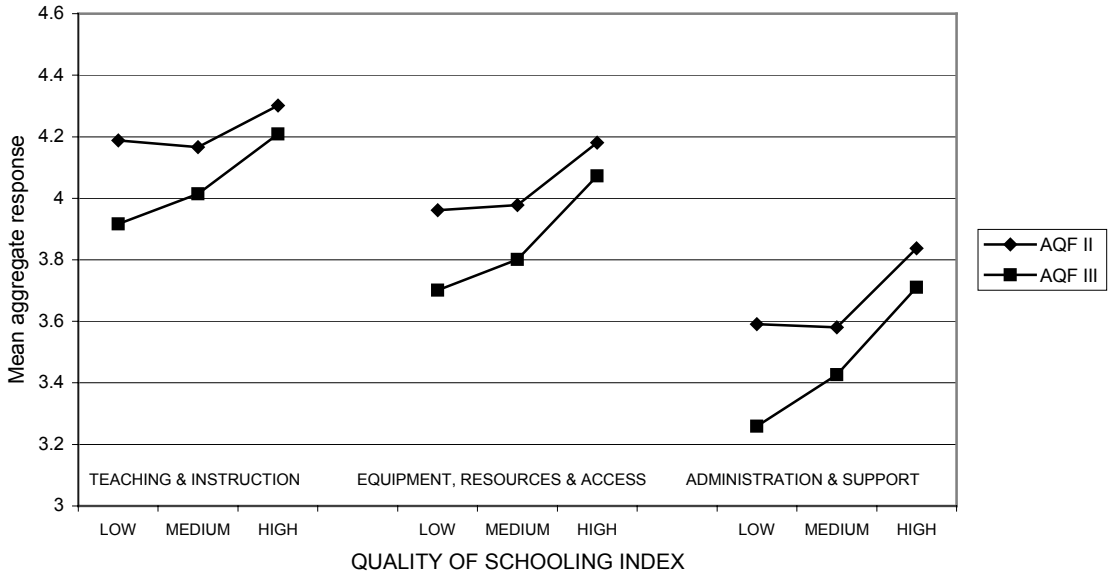


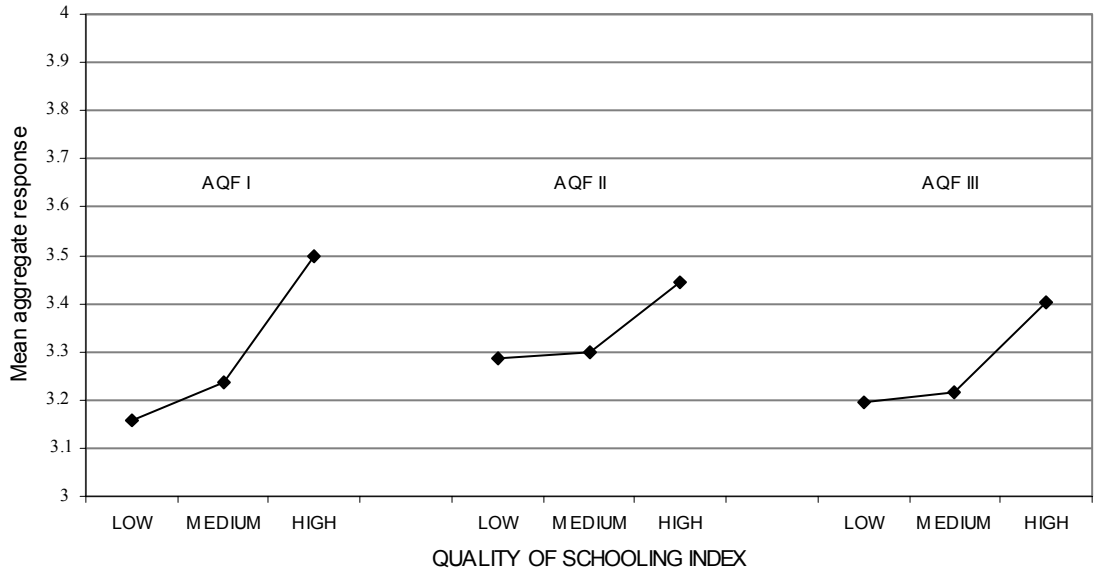
Figure 17, which reports on the AQF level II and AQF level III students, shows how the pattern is similar for these groups, although the overall means fall as Australian Qualifications Framework level rises. At certificate II level, students classified as low or medium on the quality of schooling index were not greatly differentiated in their levels of satisfaction with TAFE, but there is a strong increase in satisfaction as we move up to the group with high levels of satisfaction with school. Among certificate III students, a linear pattern re-asserted itself strongly. As the students' self-reported level of satisfaction with school rises, so does their satisfaction with aspects of their TAFE experience—teaching and instruction, equipment, resources and access and administration and support.

What these patterns demonstrate is that, although this sample of TAFE students as an undifferentiated group shows high levels of satisfaction with most aspects of their instruction and their learning environment, their reported experience is highly dependent on the quality of their learning experience while at school. A positive experience at school translates to a positive one in TAFE. This would seem to point to the importance of the role of schools in preparing students for a range of post-schooling outcomes. It also suggests that TAFE may need to cater for a range of students (both early school leavers and older students), including those for whom school has been characterised by low academic achievement and poor relationships with teachers.

Perceived benefits of training

In order to determine whether the quality of the schooling experience also impacts on how students perceive the benefits they expect to receive from their training, an index of benefits was constructed using such items as: 'My training is opening up career paths', 'My training is teaching me workplace skills', 'My training is improving my skills in working with people' etc.

Figure 18: Perceived benefits of training by quality of schooling experience



Once again, a strong relationship appears between the quality of the students' experience at school and their perceptions of their current training (see figure 18). As the quality of the school experience rises, so does their perception that they are receiving this range of benefits from their training. This pattern is evident at each certificate level, and is particularly strong at AQF level I.

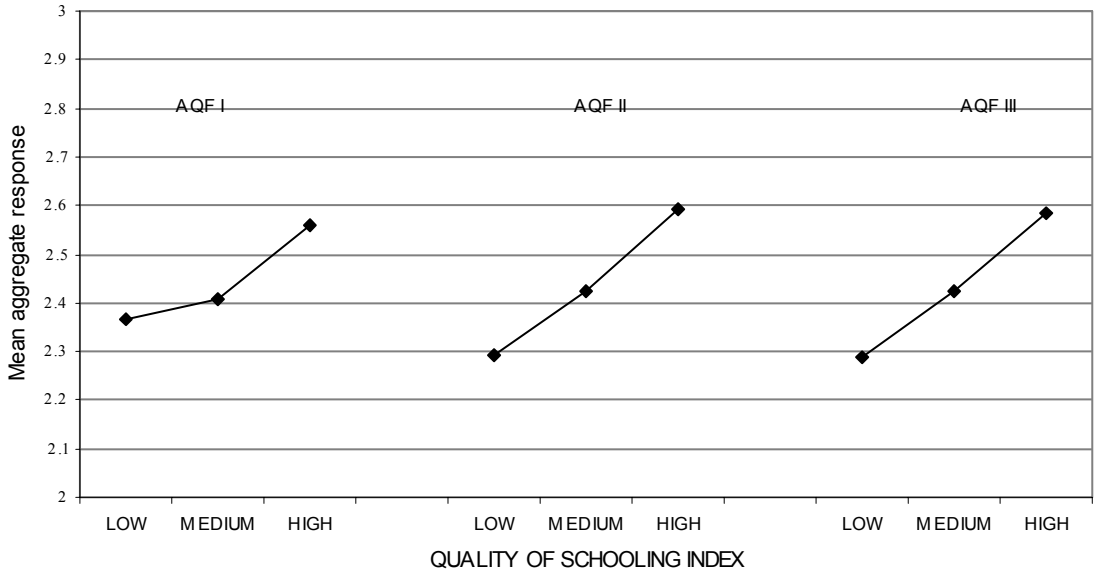
It prompts the question as to why the schooling experience should have such a strong effect on how students perceive the benefits they are receiving from their course. Certainly, perceptions of instructional quality, course delivery and administration and support are likely to be tainted by a negative experience at school, and TAFE as an educational institution emulates many of the processes and functions of a school. It might be hoped that students' perceptions of the training benefits of TAFE, particularly their impact on job skills and career prospects, would be impervious to the effects of the school experience. That this is not so indicates that TAFE may still have some way to go in redressing the negative effects of schooling for that group of students who are most disaffected with their experience in school.

Perceptions of progress and learning styles

We might expect, following our examination of patterns of perceptions of the quality of training and its benefits, that these students' reported patterns of coping at TAFE would also be affected by the quality of their schooling experience. This in fact is the case.

Figure 19 shows that, at each Australian Qualifications Framework level, the mean response to an item asking students to rate their level of progress in their current course rises as the reported quality of their schooling experience rises. In each case, the group made up of students with the most positive perceptions of school reports the highest mean levels of coping, while the group made up of students with the poorest perceptions of school report the lowest average levels of coping.

Figure 19: Coping at TAFE by quality of schooling experience

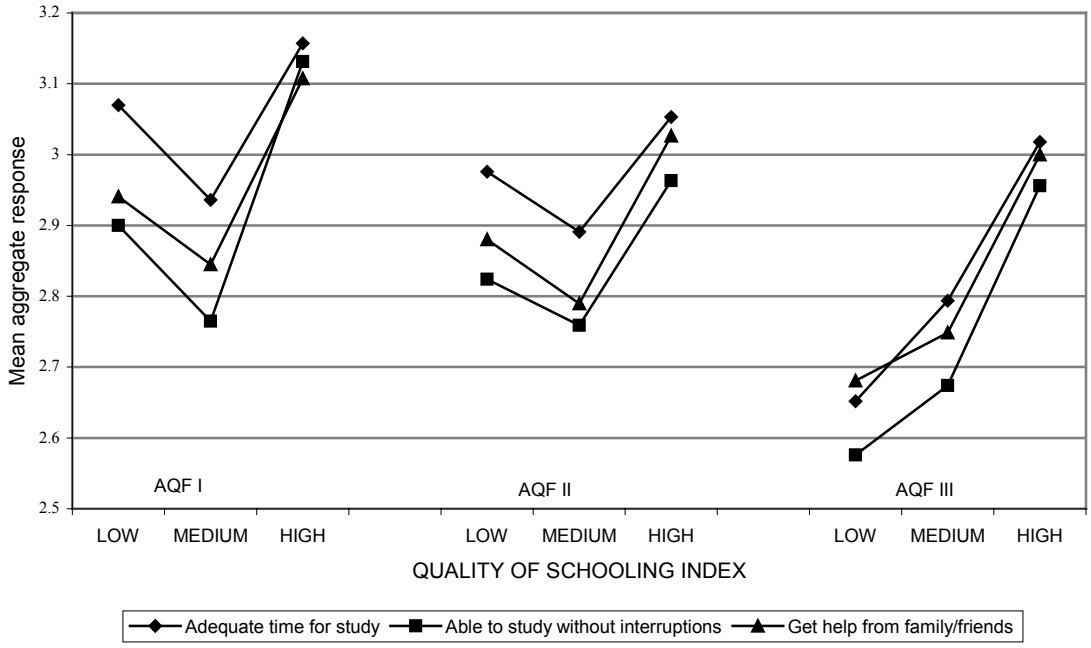


Again, this is not unsurprising, given the previous discussion. However, it is not unreasonable to hope that TAFE training would be playing a role in moderating the effects of a poor schooling environment. At the time of the first survey this outcome was of course unclear. But longitudinal data generated by the telephone survey in March 2001 focused on outcomes rather than attitudes, and provided some evidence on whether the gap between those students whose experience of school has been poor and those whose experience has been good, could be closed—or at least narrowed. And as the two chapters which follow indicate, this group of students proved significantly more likely to leave their course prematurely.

At this point, however, we can turn to the students' perceptions of factors which may assist or hinder them in their study efforts, for these give us some insight into why these differences in attitude may exist. Figure 20 provides some clues about why the students with the most positive view of their schooling may also be displaying the most positive attitudes towards their TAFE training.

This figure reports the students' mean levels of agreement with the propositions that they have adequate time for study, that they are able to study without constant interruptions, and that they can get help with their course from family and friends. On all these measures and at every level of the Australian Qualifications Framework, the group with the most positive experience of schooling (the 'high' category) has the highest mean levels of agreement. This group is the most likely to be able to get support from family and friends, is the least likely to be studying in an environment which provides many interruptions, and is most likely to have adequate time to study.

Figure 20: Study support by quality of schooling experience



These are significant advantages, which are likely to date back to the students' time at school and may reflect a more stable home and family background and fewer pressures to spend time servicing other needs (for example, working and looking after children or other dependents).

At AQF III level, these advantages seem to increase in direct proportion to increases in the level of quality of reported school experience. At the two lower Australian Qualifications Framework levels, the pattern is a little more complex. While the group of students for whom school has been most positive ('high') are most likely to have these advantages, the two lower groups show a reversal in the pattern we might expect. Students reporting the most negative experience of school are more likely to have adequate time to study, support from friends and family, and few interruptions than those in the medium level of quality of school experience.

This may be influenced by a number of factors. Firstly, there are more female students in AQF levels I and II than at AQF level III, and it is likely that the demands placed on them by home pressures would impact on the quality of their study environment and the time afforded for it. Secondly, there are more early leavers at these levels and it may be that even those groups whose experience of school places them in the 'medium' category have had a difficult and frustrating school career. It may be that the quality of schooling index becomes insufficiently discriminating at its lower levels as a result of these factors.

Summary

The effects of the quality of the schooling experience may be strongly felt in various aspects of the students' experience in TAFE. These may be summarised as follows:

- ✧ The higher the quality of the students' schooling experience, the more positive their perceptions of teaching and instruction in TAFE.
- ✧ The higher the quality of the students' schooling experience, the more positive their perceptions of equipment, resources and access in TAFE.

- ✧ The higher the quality of the students' schooling experience, the more positive their perceptions of administration and support in TAFE.
- ✧ The higher the quality of the students' schooling experience, the more positive their perceptions of the benefits they are gaining from their TAFE training.
- ✧ The higher the quality of the students' schooling experience, the more likely they are to report that they are making good progress in their TAFE course.
- ✧ The higher the quality of the students' schooling experience, the more positive their perception of teaching and instruction in TAFE.
- ✧ Students with the most positive experience of school are the group most likely to report that they have adequate time to study, support from family and friends and few interruptions in their study time.

The follow-up sample—certificates I, II and III

In order to gauge the destinations of entry-level TAFE students one year on from the time of the first data collection, an extensive telephone survey of students who had been surveyed during 2000 was conducted in March 2001. Efforts have been made throughout to disaggregate the data where appropriate, and modelling which tests connections between course satisfaction and completion rates has been weighted to reflect national student populations at these levels. However, as discussed in the chapter on methodology, the fact that the re-contact group has been in many ways, self-selected means that there is a possibility that they may diverge from the initial sample on a range of measures. Our reporting then is not intended to provide findings generalisable to the entire TAFE population but rather to point to themes and issues which may invite further investigation. Certainly the follow-up group, who are proportionately older, and more likely to be female than the initial population, does respond more positively on some measures than those who did not agree to a re-contact. This can be seen when we examine quality of course summaries for the two groups (see figure 21).

Both groups agree on their broad hierarchy of values. Both, for example, mention their relationship with instructors and attention from instructors as the strongest features of their learning environment and they are similarly inclined to doubt in part, the value and quality of their feedback on learning. Most discrepancy may be located in propositions such as 'My interest and motivation is maintained' or in reporting of particular teaching styles.

Our 'volunteers' in the re-contact group emerge as more highly motivated and enthusiastic than the norm. Useful follow-up research might involve the development of a methodology aimed to boost the involvement of the less highly motivated and cooperative students.

Students within the follow-up sample varied in other ways. As already mentioned, TAFE caters for a broad group of students with widely varying educational backgrounds, ages and experience. For example, certain groups within the sample come to TAFE directly or almost directly from school, with or without completing their secondary education. Figure 22 demonstrates the proportions of students who might be classified as recent school leavers.

Over one-third (35%) of the re-contact sample left school in 1998, 1999 or earlier in 2000. Another 9.5% left in the two years before that. Over 55% reported their most recent experience of school to have been in 1995 or earlier, compared with only 45% of the initial sample. Thus the re-contact group comprises a majority of older students whose experience of school has not been recent.

Figure 21: Attitudes to course—re-contact group and original sample, percentage

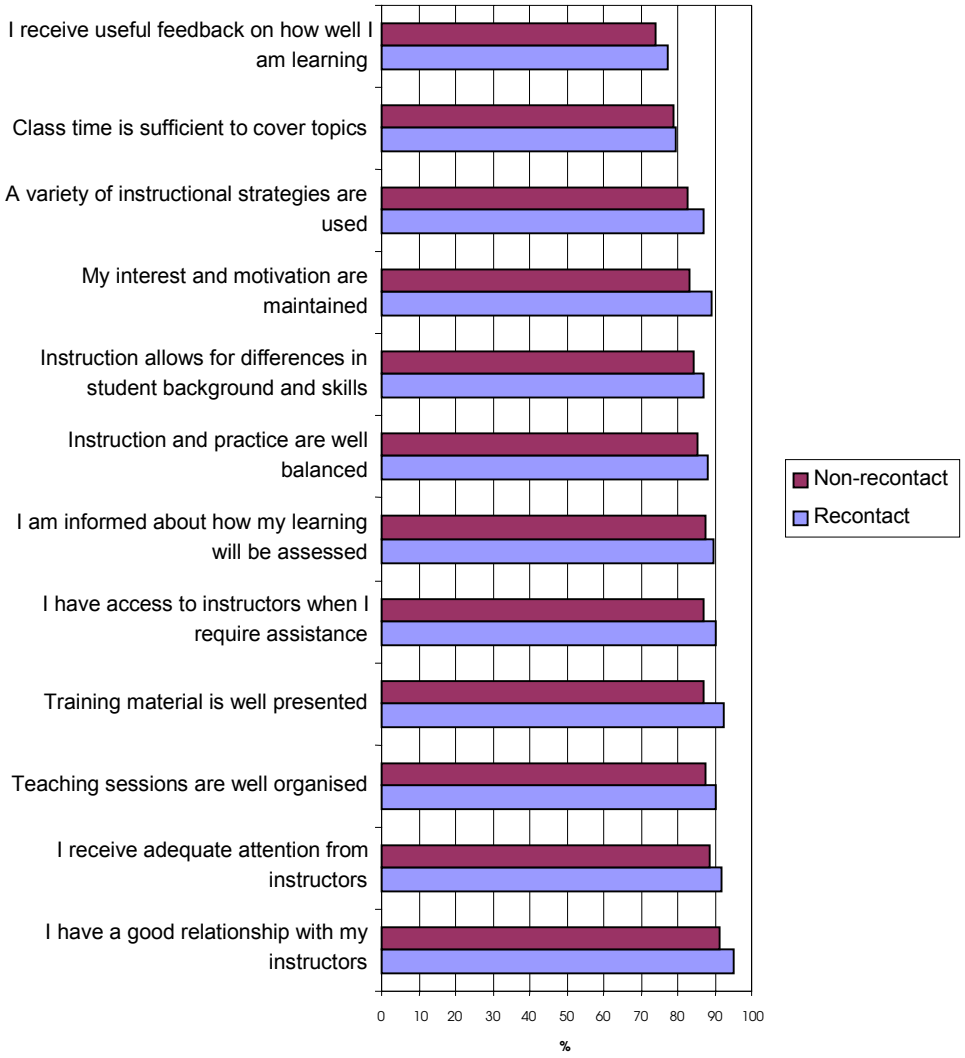
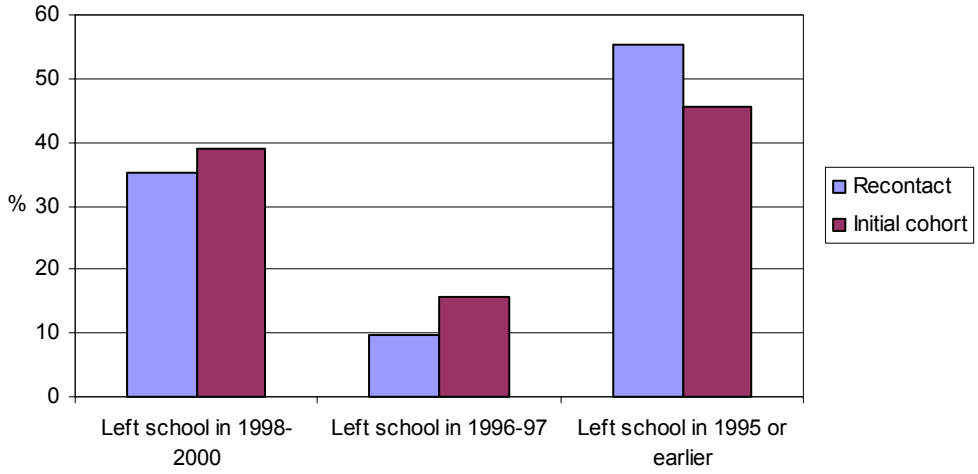


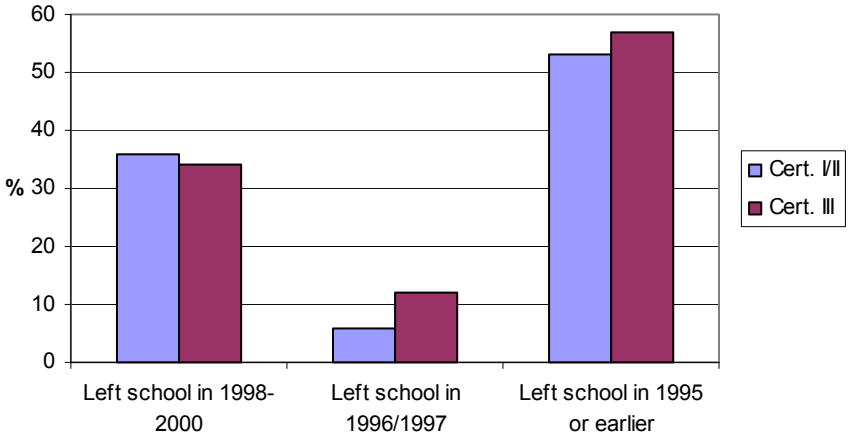
Figure 22: School leavers and others—initial survey cohort and re-contact group, percentage



Recent school experience differs slightly by certificate level for the follow-up group. Over 36% of those in certificate I and II could be classified as recent school leavers, compared with 34% of those in certificate III. Those who are several years out from school (3 to 5 years) were considerably less likely to be enrolled in TAFE. This group made up only 6% of enrolments in

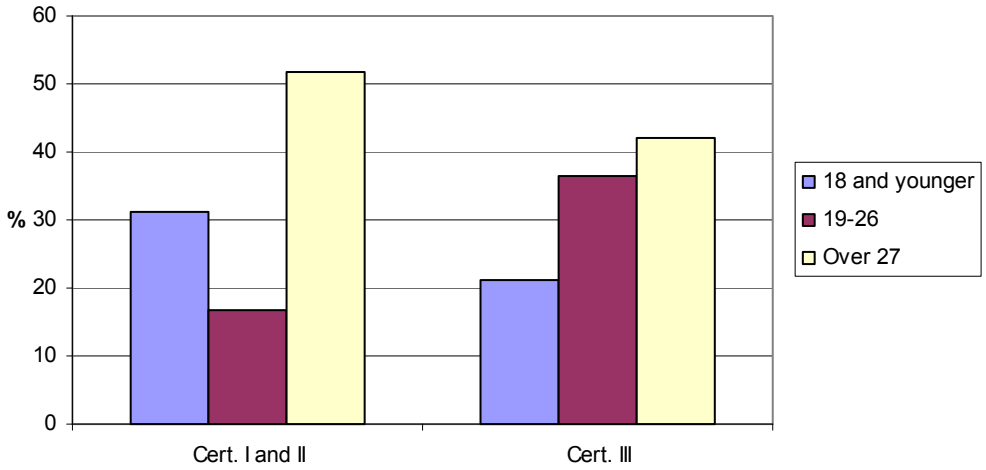
certificates I and II and 12% in certificate III. Fifty-three per cent of certificate I or II enrolments had left school in 1995 or earlier, as had over 57% of certificate III enrolments.

Figure 23: Most recent contact with school, by certificate level, percentage



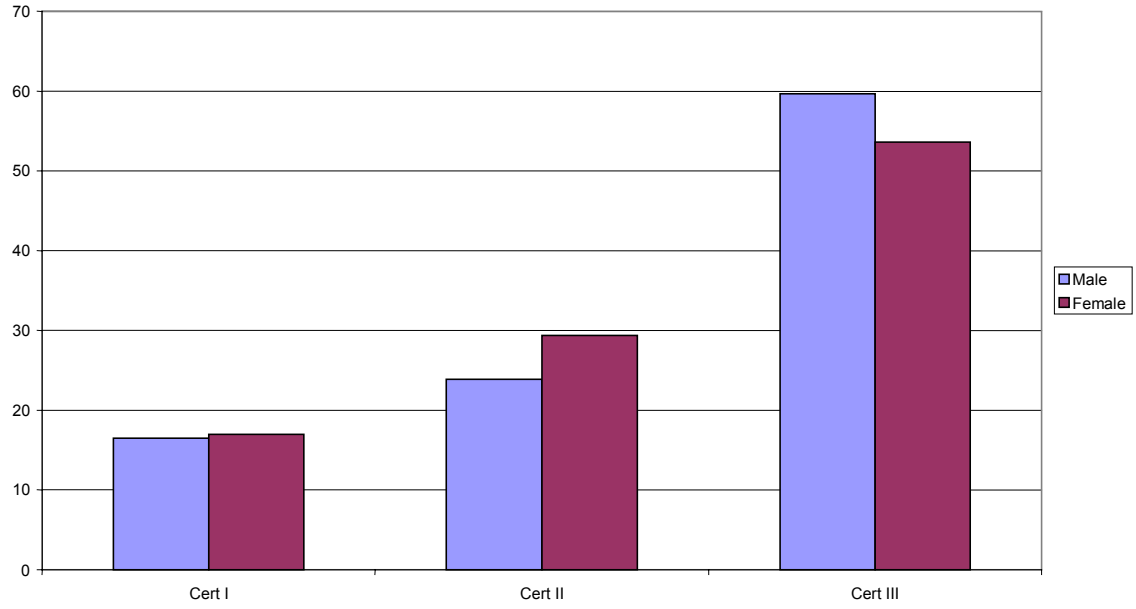
As we might expect from figure 23, older students predominate in the sample (46%), as they do in TAFE populations overall. But we have already seen (figure 22), over a quarter of the re-contact sample surveyed were 18 years or younger at the time of the first contact in mid-2000. Another 28% were aged between 19 and 26 years of age at the time of the first survey. Over half the re-contact group then, were under 26 at the time of the initial survey in 2000. This age breakdown also varies by certificate level.

Figure 24: Age distribution within certificates, percentage



Younger people (18 years and younger) make up a higher proportion of the sample of certificate I and II students (around 32%) than they do of certificate III students (21.3%). Older students—those over 27—nevertheless make up the bulk of the certificate I and II enrolments. They also comprise 42% of the certificate III enrolments. It can be shown then, that the sample comprises several quite distinct populations. They include younger people who tend to cluster in lower-level certificates, older students engaged in lower-level certificate study, older students enrolled in certificate III courses and early-to-mid 'twenty-somethings' who are considerably more likely to be enrolled in certificate III courses than they are to be in lower-level certificates.

Figure 25: Course enrolment by gender, percentage

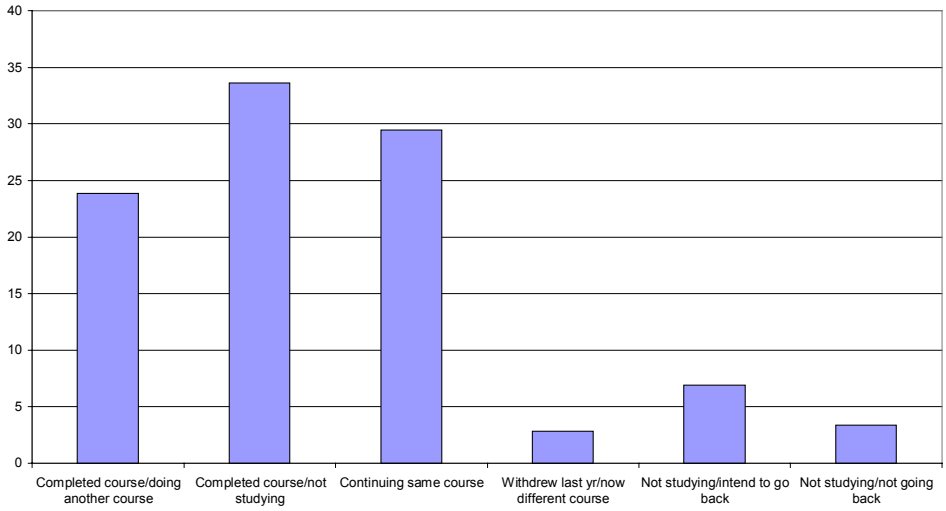


Enrolment in particular certificates also differs along gender lines. Although comparable proportions of males and females were enrolled at the certificate I level, in the sample female students were more likely than males to be enrolled in certificate II courses. Around 60% of males in the sample were enrolled in certificate III courses, compared with 53.5% of female students.

Completion and non-completion

One year out from their initial contact, the bulk of students involved in the re-contact exercise (57.5%) had successfully made their way through their course (combining the two categories of completers—those still studying in a different course and those not presently studying). Nearly 30% reported themselves to be continuing in the same course, and around 12% had left their initial course without successfully completing (non-completers).

Figure 26: Current study status, percentage



Several observations may be made here. The first is that the majority of the survey group (56%) continue to be engaged in some form of study (combining all those still in study) and over four in ten of those who completed their last year's course have gone on to further study, most at levels higher than their qualifications in 2000.

A sizeable group of completers (33.5% of the sample overall) have completed their original course and have elected not to continue in study at this point. Finally, the proportions of students reporting failure to complete are comparatively low—12.2% of the group overall (including those no longer in their initial course and those no longer studying at all).

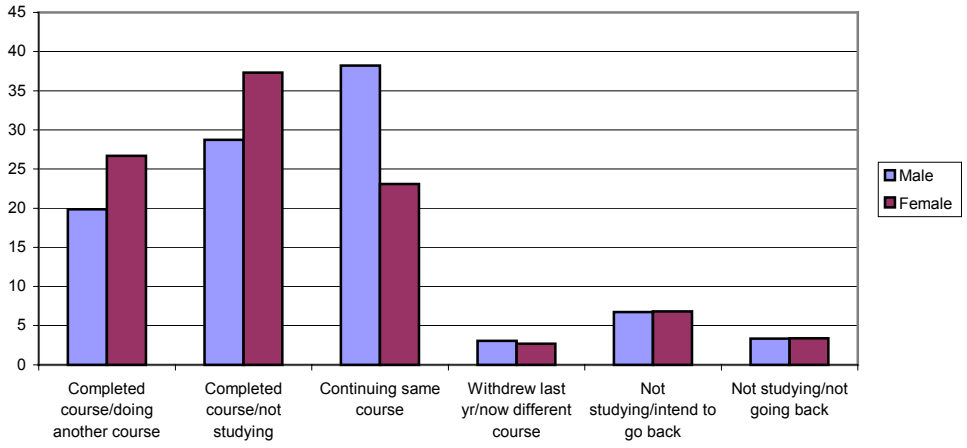
This picture does warrant development. Male and female students recorded different patterns of completion and use of their qualifications, and different outcomes can also be identified according to levels of certificate undertaken.

Figure 27 shows that higher proportions of female students, for example, claimed to have successfully completed their courses—nearly two-thirds of all female students compared with less than half of males (combining the two categories of completers). Of those who did complete, over four in ten of males and females who did complete reported themselves to be involved in further study at the time of the survey. Female completers were more likely, however, to elect *not* to undertake more study at this point.

This picture of rapid throughput for female students is complemented by data on their limited numbers remaining in the same course. Just over 23% of female students, compared with over 38% of males, claimed to be still in the course in which they were enrolled in the first semester, 2000.

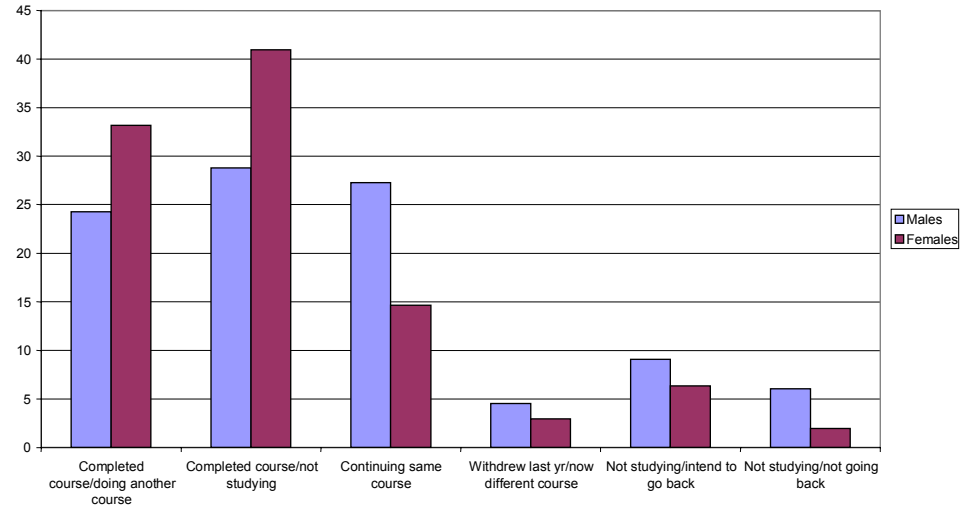
Males were marginally more likely to report interruptions to their study, or decisions to change course or withdraw altogether.

Figure 27: Current study status by gender, percentage



Although significant differences can be teased out at this level of analysis, it is helpful to disaggregate the cohort by certificate level for a fuller understanding of outcomes, study behaviour and completion rates.

Figure 28: Current study status, certificates I and II only, percentage

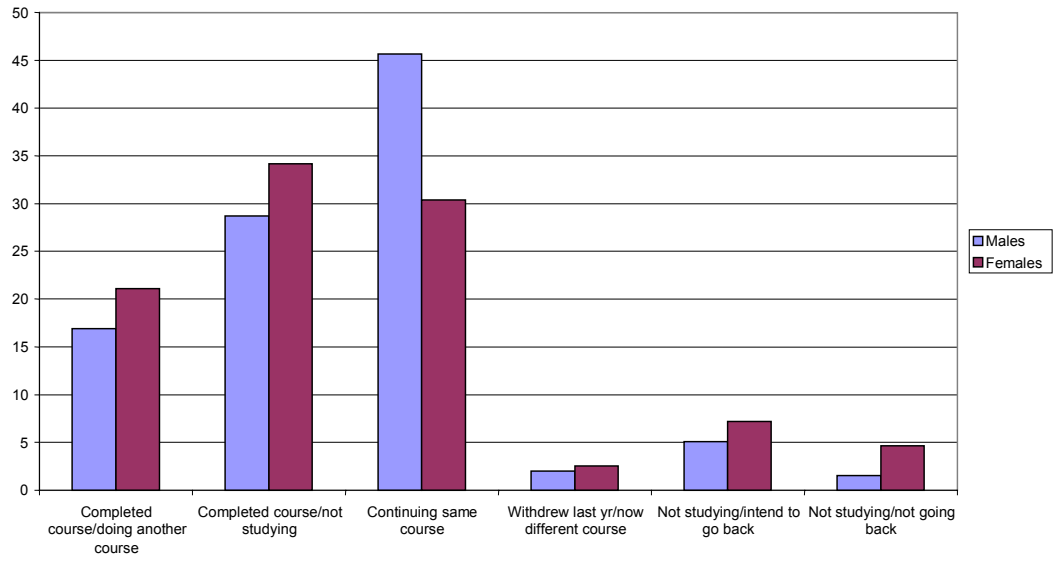


Given shorter course duration overall, we would expect a strong proportion of certificates I and II students to have already completed their courses. This expectation is fulfilled—nearly three-quarters of females and over 53% of males had completed their initial courses by the time of the follow-up survey in March 2001 (combining the two categories of completers in figure 29). One-third of all female students and nearly a quarter of all males in this cohort had completed their initial course and enrolled in another. Over 40% of females and 29% of males, on the other hand, reported that they had not followed up this successful outcome with further study.

For certificate I and II students, males were considerably more likely than females to report themselves to be still in the same course. Although certificates I and II are not usually lengthy, 27% of males had not yet completed their courses at this level, compared with only 14% of women undertaking the certificates. Males were also more likely to report a range of 'non-successful' outcomes, such as course transfers and withdrawals (with or without an intention to return to study at some point). This factor is discussed at more length in the following chapter.

Certificate III students present a somewhat different picture.

Figure 29: Current study status, certificate III only, percentage



Given the longer duration of these certificates, it is not surprising that a larger proportion of this group remains in the same course—46% of males and 30% of females. Even so, over 45% of males and 55% of females reported having completed their course by March 2001.

Female students were more likely to have completed, but within the completers' group, similar proportions of male and female completers (around four in ten) opted for further study pathways.

In contrast to the outcomes reported for certificates I and II students, it was found that female students were more likely to report problematic outcomes across a range of measures; for example, course transfers, withdrawals and failure to complete.

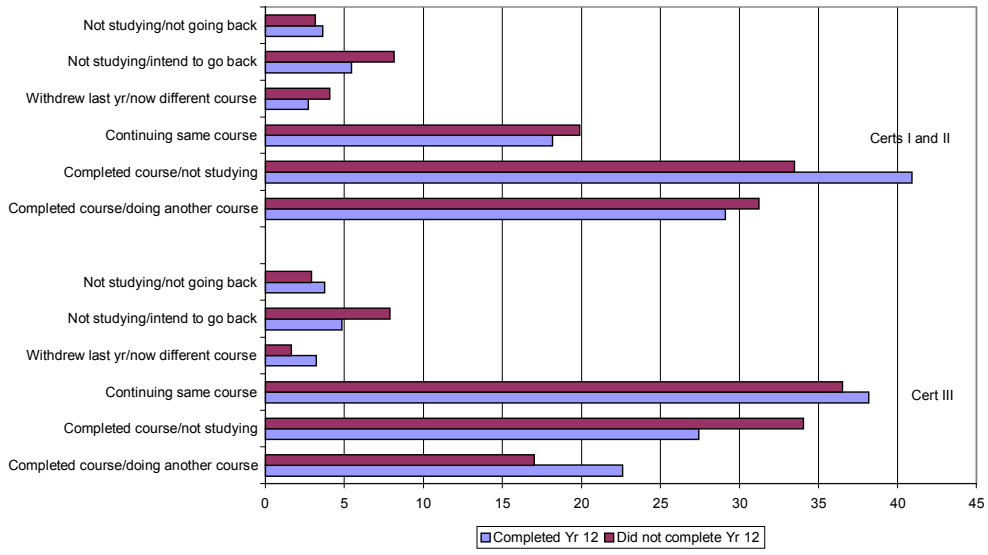
Factors affecting completion

Success in undertaking and completing a course of study will be influenced by a range of factors, including academic confidence and ability, income support and appropriate institutional and personal support frameworks.

Highest levels of schooling

In general terms, educational background provides a good guide to education and training participation patterns and pace of achievement. At lower certificate levels, students without Year 12 were somewhat more likely to drop out, to be continuing in the same course, or to report themselves to be undertaking another form of study after completion. At the certificate III level, students without Year 12 were again more likely to drop out and if they had completed, are more likely not to opt for any further study.

Figure 30: Completion rates by highest level of schooling, percentage



Of the re-contact sample, 62.5% of students who had completed Year 12 were undertaking a certificate III qualification. This compared with 52.2% of those who had not reached Year 12 enrolled at the certificate III level. The bulk of the students with strongest schooling experience could be found in the certificate III group.

Table 9: Year 12 completion rates by certificate

	Completed Year 12	Did not complete Year 12
Certificate I	10.8% (32)	20.8% (96)
Certificate II	26.4% (78)	27.1% (125)
Certificate III	62.8% (186)	52.2% (241)

In the case of the certificate III respondents, higher levels of school experience were linked to a stronger take-up of further education pathways. Students who had completed Year 12 were more likely, for example, to have moved through their certificate already and more likely to have followed up their initial course with further study.

However, for lower certificate levels the picture is more complex. A considerable proportion of Year 12 completers in the sample (37%) did go into lower certificate levels, despite the fact that these are comparatively low-level qualifications. Although these students' completion rates were high (71.6% reported that they had successfully completed their course, compared with 64.7% of students who had not completed secondary school), they were less likely than their less qualified peers to treat their certificate as a study pathway. Over 41% of this group claim to have completed and to be no longer studying, compared with a third of those who had left school before reaching Year 12, and compared with just over 27% of the school completers who had undertaken a certificate III.

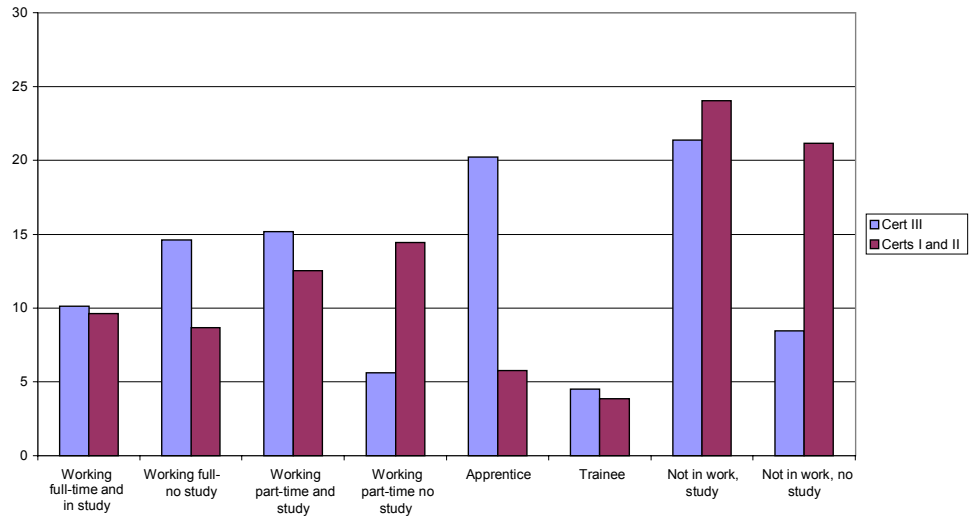
These students were more likely than others to express disaffection with study in their completion behaviours. They were less likely to follow through with more study, less likely to transfer to a different course if they did withdraw, and more likely to express an intention of 'not going back' into a course they had left.

It may be suggested that these students have used their strategically chosen courses to make their way into specifically targeted employment areas. But employment pathways do not work well for this group either. Compared with Year 12 completers who had undertaken a certificate III, those who studied at the certificate I or II level were less likely to be employed full-time, more likely to find themselves in part-time work, less likely to be engaged in employment-based training and significantly more likely to be outside paid work.

Possibly more 'able' than less qualified students (they complete their courses more quickly, for example), they nevertheless display a problematic profile. Over four in ten (43%) of Year 12 completers in our study who were enrolled at certificate I or II levels in 2000 were out of paid work in 2001, compared with a third of those enrolled at the certificate III level.

On the basis of this sample study, it has to be asked why higher-level school students are undertaking certificates at this level and whether in fact they are unconfident learners, given the comparability of some outcomes with students with much lower levels of schooling background. Could it be argued that some are 'under-aspiring' in their choice of course? If this is the case, to what extent should the institution attempt to intervene in 'matching' students to courses which better reflect their own educational skills?

Figure 31: Employment destinations by certificate level, Year 12 completers, percentage



Completion by field of study

As discussed, around 12% of the group as a whole (and around 18.5% of those who were no longer enrolled in their original courses) reported that they had failed to successfully complete their course. Such respondents could be classified under three key headings: those who had withdrawn to undertake another course; those who were no longer studying but intended to complete at some point; and those who were no longer studying and had no intention of returning.

However, within the four key fields of study, students were inclined to record different rates of completions and other outcomes. Although variation between three fields of study were slight, business students proved most likely to record non-completion. Hospitality students on the other hand, were least likely to report a failure to complete. Students in business courses and in VET multifield were most likely to be in 'strategic remission'—not studying now, but entertaining ideas of returning at some point.

Table 10: Non-completion by field of study, percentage

	Business	Engineering	Hospitality	VET m/field
	%	%	%	%
Withdrew, studying different course	1.8	3.6	1.7	5.0
Not studying, going back	9.0	4.8	5.4	8.3
Not studying, not going back	4.8	3.6	2.9	1.7
Total	**15.6**	**12.0**	**10.0**	**15.0**

Within these courses, different groups reported different success rates. Women in VET multifield and in engineering fields, for example, reported a higher failure to complete their nominated course. Those in the area of hospitality, however, reported much more positive outcomes—only 6% were outside study without achieving a satisfactory outcome in their initial course, compared with 15.2% of males in the same field.

Table 11: Non-completion by field of study and gender, percentage

	Business %		Engineering %		Hospitality %		VET m/field %	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Withdrew, studying different course	0.0	2.2	3.3	5.5	4.3	0.0	2.0	6.2
Not studying, going back	6.6	8.8	4.7	5.5	8.7	3.0	7.8	8.6
Not studying, not going back	10.0	3.7	3.4	5.5	2.2	3.0	0.0	2.3
Total	**16.6**	**14.7**	**11.4**	**16.5**	**15.2**	**6.0**	**9.8**	**17.1**

Conclusion

Age, gender, previous levels of schooling and qualification levels all help to distinguish between students who complete their courses and those who do not. But are there specific factors, other than these specific personal identifiers which students bring with them to their studies which might help us identify students at risk of withdrawing? It is argued in the following chapter that certain aspects of students' involvement or interaction with their institution—factors associated with instructional experience—may be shown to play a role here.

Summary

Differences in the re-contact sample and students who chose not to participate in the second phase of the study were not strong. The re-contact group proved slightly more favourably disposed overall to their course, but relativities of responses remained consistent. Thus, while are our findings cannot be generalised to the TAFE population as a whole, some important issues emerge for consideration or further investigation.

- ✧ Nearly 58% of the group had completed their course by the time of the second contact. Another 30% reported themselves to be still continuing their course. Only around 12% had left their initial course without completing.
- ✧ Female students were more likely to have completed than males—nearly two-thirds of females, compared with less than half of males. Female students were less likely, however, to report taking on any further study after completion.
- ✧ Discrepancies were strongest among students undertaking certificates I and II. Nearly three-quarters of female students had completed in this category. Only 53% of their male peers, however, reported completion. Males were more likely, on the other hand, to have dropped out from these courses.
- ✧ For certificate III students, women were still somewhat more likely than men to have completed, but were also more likely than men to have left their course before completion.
- ✧ Educational background—and perhaps therefore confidence—seems to play a role. Those who had failed to complete secondary school reported higher rates of dropping out before completion and reported significantly lower completion rates. That is, if they did not drop out, they tended to remain in their courses longer.
- ✧ Business students were most likely to drop out prematurely and hospitality students least likely. For hospitality students, a gender difference may be observed. Males within this group were more likely to drop out (15.2%) than females (6%). Women in VET multifield and engineering, however, fared much less well.

Instructional experience and non-completion

Recent research has identified a range of factors which may be said to place students at higher risk of dropping out of vocational education and training. Local and international research has now helped to develop a composite picture of the 'at risk' student, conventionally those without adequate employment or income support, or with limited study and independent learning skills. Much of this research is based on statistical database analysis (enrolments and completions) or on *post hoc* scrutiny of non-completers' reasons for withdrawing from their courses. As such, the literature to date has focused primarily on students' own characteristics (the vulnerability of particular demographic groups) and on the largely external factors which precipitated premature withdrawal (employment imperatives, family pressures and so on).

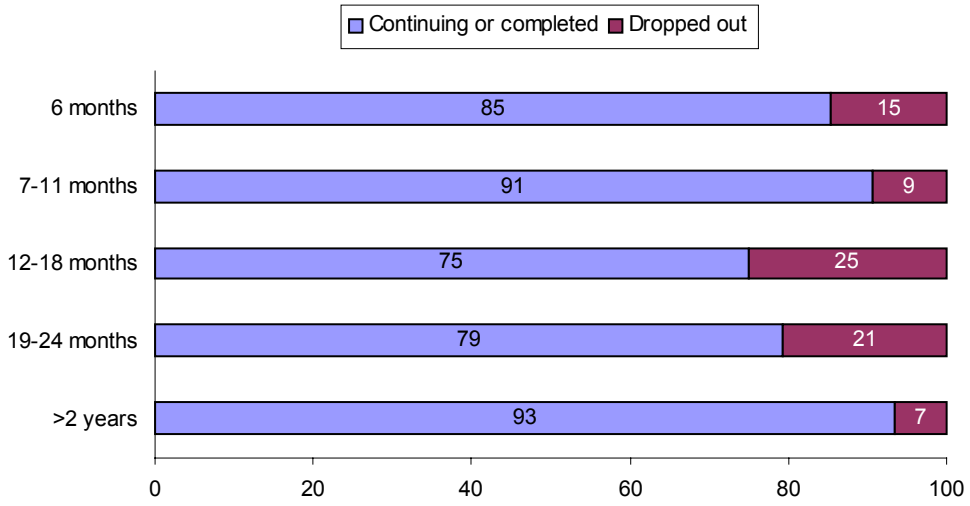
But to what extent are students' own study *experiences* a guide to eventual completion outcomes? As discussed, one of the strongest features of this research is its collection of a range of data on intentions and course experience at a point when the student is actually still engaged in study, rather than after the event (or *post hoc*). Can we use what students are telling us about their experience of their TAFEs—their instructors, classroom resources, instructional experiences and administrative and support arrangements—as guides both in identifying which students may not complete and as explanations of that failure to complete?

Structural issues

The results of this survey support research findings which make connections between TAFE completion rates and certain structural features of the courses themselves, for example, length of course or type of provision. Foyster, Fai and Shah (2000), for example, noted the relationship between dropping out and length of study, with students undertaking longer courses regarded as more likely to fail to complete. One could speculate about underlying causes here—does the longer course offer the student more opportunity to amass the skills sought (so that completion is not necessarily an issue), or are the demands of such sustained study prohibitive for many post-compulsory learners?

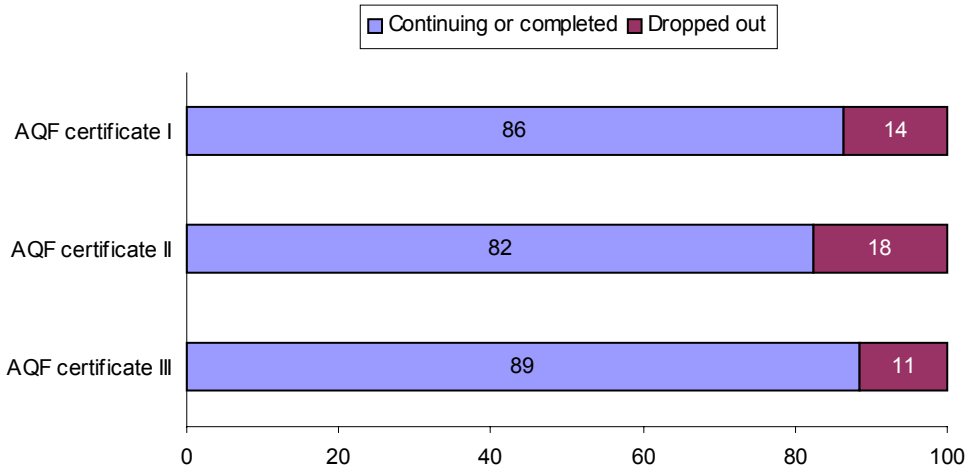
Whatever the underlying rationales, our own study tended to reinforce such findings, with students in 12 to 24-month courses most likely to report themselves to have dropped out. It should be noted here that only a small proportion of those in courses over two years have recorded themselves as having 'dropped out' as yet; this status may change as they advance in their course.

Figure 32: Dropping out or completion by length of study, percentage



But this link with length of course did not necessarily mean that lower-level certificates saw highest completion rates. In this study, as shown in figure 33, highest proportions of dropout were recorded at the certificate II level. Here it should be repeated that high proportions of those undertaking certificate III were still enrolled in their course and that dropout rates may well rise over the full duration of the course.

Figure 33: Dropout and continuation, by certificate level, percentage

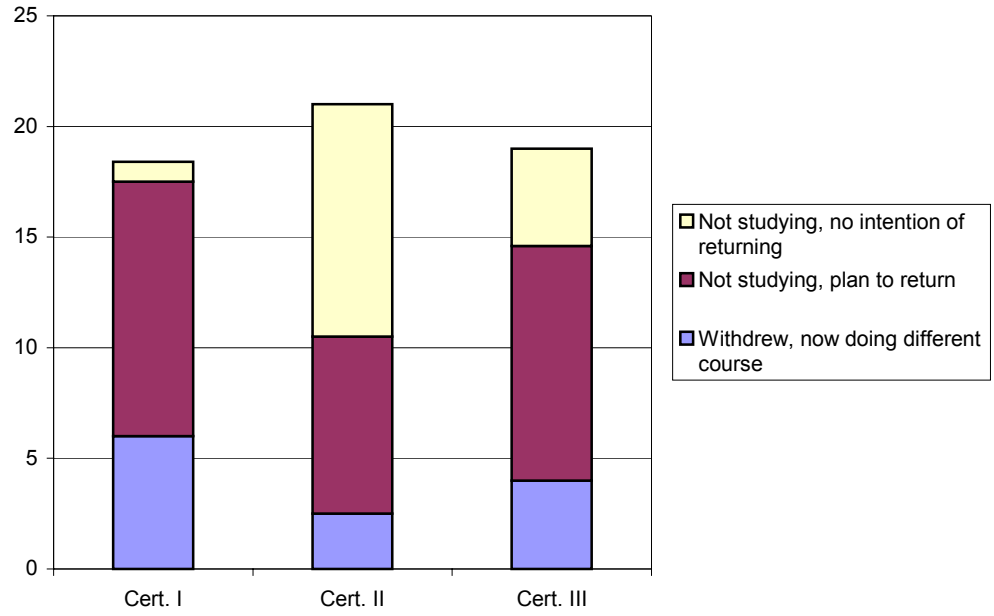


While the certificate II students in the sample saw higher rates of non-completion than other qualification levels, their actual categories of non-completion also varied. In figure 34 non-completion rates have been calculated from a base which excludes all students currently continuing in their course. This draws only on students who have now left their initial course—with a completion or not. As such, the rate of non-completions is somewhat inflated.

Here different non-completion behaviours across different qualification levels are shown. Although certificates I and II are often regarded as similar in demands made of students, the profiles of these non-completers vary significantly. Students who leave their certificate I course before attaining a qualification are more likely than those in other certificates examined to have moved into another study area. They are also more likely to express an intention of returning to study when circumstances permit. Less than 1% from this level describe themselves as 'not studying and not going back'. Students in certificate II on the other hand, are less likely to have

moved into another area of study, less likely to express an intention of returning when circumstances permit, and much more likely to describe themselves as 'not studying and not going back'.

Figure 34: Proportion of non-completers by AQF level, percentage



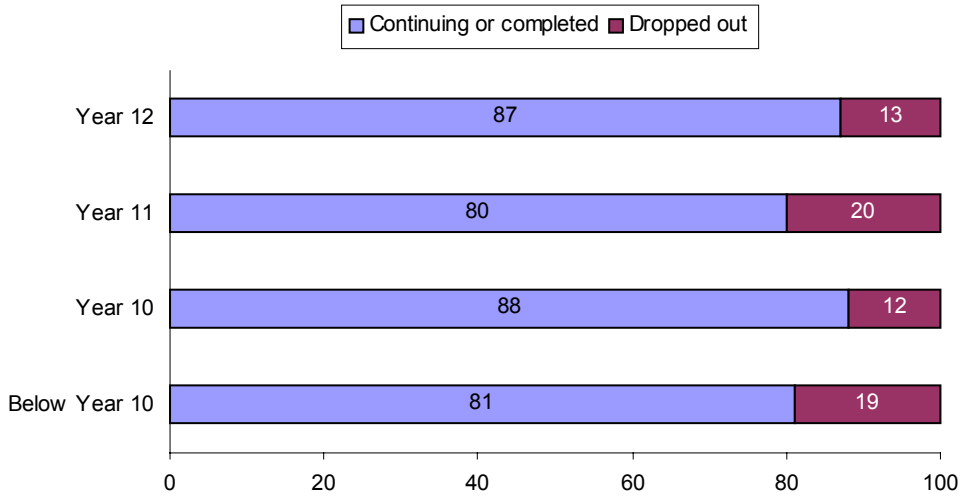
Demographic factors

Similarly, certain student-based qualities may be linked strongly with non-completion. Local and overseas studies tend to highlight groups 'at risk' of non-completion, focusing for example, on gender, age, language background and employment status.

Again, this study has tended to affirm that some groups could be regarded as more likely to withdraw from their course before completion. Males were slightly more likely than females to withdraw from their course, as were very young students (under 18). Students with a background in a language other than English were less likely to drop out than those of English speaking background. Levels of school attainment can also be linked with TAFE completion rates. Completion rates among students with Year 11 qualification only, or with less schooling than Year 10 level, were lower than among students who had completed either Year 10 *or* Year 12.

This finding is not straightforward, as students with different levels of ability or educational confidence are naturally inclined to enter courses which match their abilities. However, there is a possibility that Year 11 leavers, especially those who have had difficulties with demands of the senior school curriculum, may yet be tempted or even encouraged to sign up for TAFE courses for which they lack full educational preparation. This may account for comparatively high dropout rates. While programs do exist to make up educational shortfalls for Year 10 leavers, those students with some senior school background are not necessarily recognised as requiring comparable support. The fact that their withdrawal from school is halfway through the senior school certificate may also indicate an 'unplanned' or impulsive exit, or one associated with failure or an inability to cope. Such students may require a higher level of support than is currently made available.

Figure 35: Dropout and continuation, by school attainment, percentage



Similarly, students whose secondary education experience falls short of Year 10 are a group who may well need considerable support in engaging with TAFE.

Alignment with course satisfaction

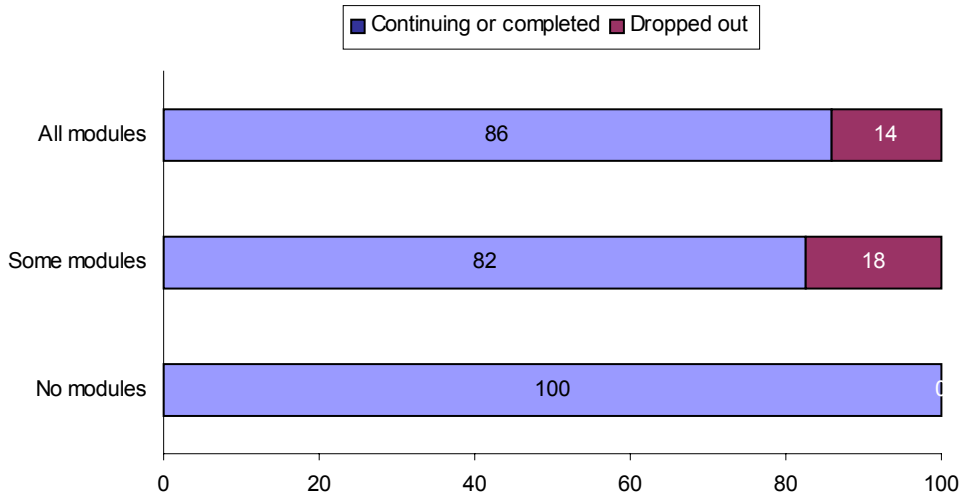
This project was designed to elicit some measure of the effect of students' experience and satisfaction with their course on completion levels. While it is clear that certain structural or personal factors have some bearing on students' propensity to drop out, generally there are fewer data available on the effects of the learning experience itself. This project examined students' own intentions regarding completion and the role played by TAFE teachers and the learning environment generally in providing a learning context which 'holds' students. Identification of factors which could be shown to affect students' decisions to remain or withdraw was of particular interest.

On this basis, certain distinctions can be made between respondents in our sample who completed or continued, and those who dropped out. Students who subsequently dropped out of their course tended to respond differently to continuing or completing students on a range of measures. Their initial intentions regarding completion differed somewhat, as did their reasons for undertaking their qualification. Their personal views on study varied, indicating lower levels of confidence, different learning styles, and greater hurdles to overcome in meeting the demands of study. Finally, they reported themselves to be less satisfied with their courses overall, most specifically with teaching and instruction, class organisation and relationships with instructors.

Intentions

Not all students enrolled in their course with the intention of completing. Around 90% of the sample indicated that they wanted to complete their full course, with almost all others expressing an intention to 'complete some modules only'. Fewer than 1% intended to complete 'no modules' at all.

Figure 36: Dropout and continuation by planned module completion, percentage



It is not surprising that those who wanted to complete 'some modules only' dropped out at a higher rate than those who planned to complete all modules. What may be surprising is that the dropout rate is not higher than it is from this group—with 18% reporting themselves as having withdrawn from their courses, compared with 14% of those who had intended to fully complete. This may relate to terminology, where 'satisfactory' completion may mean different things to different individuals. Students who intended to complete *all* elements of their qualification, for example, would be less inclined to describe anything less than full completion as 'satisfactory'. One who had only ever intended completion of *some* units, on the other hand, might conceivably regard partial completion as a 'satisfactory' completion.

This possible blurring of terminology is acknowledged as a major hazard in self-reporting of completion status and must be addressed in subsequent survey work. It is a problem which has been noted by other researchers—notably Grant (2002). But the problem is most keenly felt in relation to the 'completers' category. It has little direct bearing on the usefulness of the category of non-completers. These remain the group self-described as not satisfactory—those who have prematurely withdrawn from their course for a range of reasons. We have no reason to believe that this group has been 'polluted' by students who have actually completed. Although comparisons of completers and non-completers must therefore be made with some caution—given the possibilities of some slippage of non-completers into the completers category—we can be quite confident of the integrity of the non-completers group. It is possible however, that it may be slightly understated.

Attitudes to study

Given these methodological constraints, what do the survey data tell us about ways in which students' instructional experience impacts on completion outcomes?

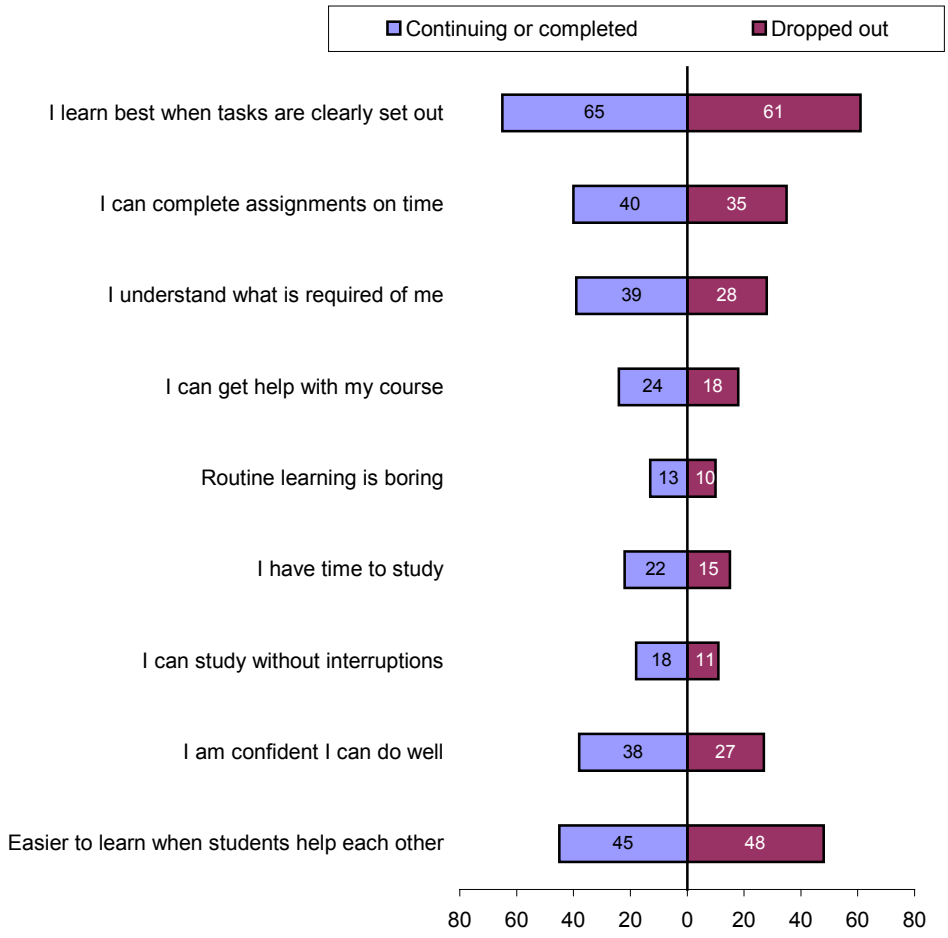
The initial survey instrument sought students' perceptions on the demands of their course and how they felt they were meeting those demands. As the survey was undertaken around June 2000 and as most students had commenced their course in that year, it was assumed that students had been given time to make some informed judgments about these issues.

When asked their views on study, students who later dropped out responded differently from other students on a range of measures. They were less likely to report that they were able to

complete assignments on time, less likely to feel that they understood what was required of them, less likely to say that they could get help with their course, and less likely to feel that they had the time to study or that they could do this without interruption. In effect, they expressed lower confidence in their ability to deal with their study requirements.

Students who later dropped out were also less likely to report independent learning qualities and more likely to express a preference for more cooperative styles of learning ('easier to learn when students help each other').

Figure 37: Dropout and continuation, by views on study (percentage strongly agreeing)



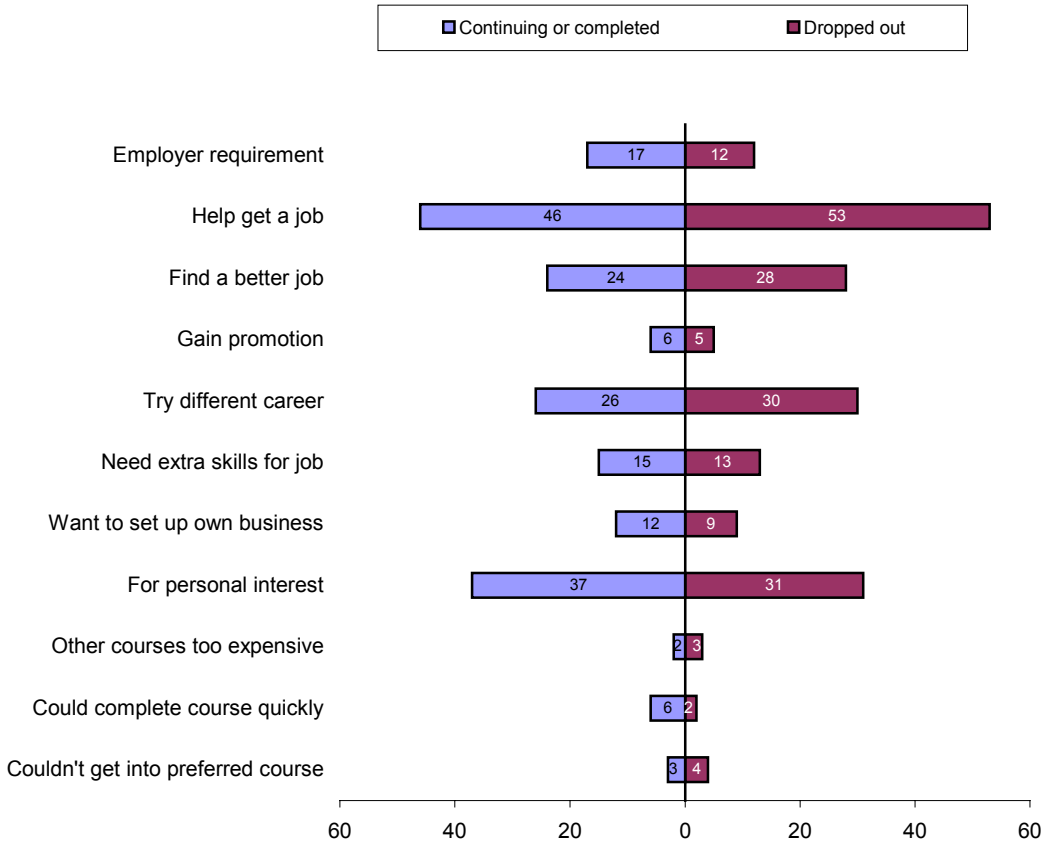
These measures may reflect qualities of individual students as learners. They seem to show that certain students whose learning skills are undeveloped, whose confidence is shaky and whose understanding of course requirements is not strong, are at higher risk of dropping out. Students who reported significant external barriers to study, such as little time or support, and study conditions marred by interruptions, also seemed to be at higher risk of non-completion.

These students do not necessarily desire to leave their course prematurely. On the contrary, it has been shown that most have enrolled with the intention of completing and that their need for a qualification (in the absence of school completion or relevant vocational experience) may be strong (Centre for Post-Compulsory Education and Training 2000).

Reasons for study

People are motivated to enter TAFE for a range of different reasons, related to individual vocational, intellectual or personal development needs, and those reasons will invariably affect a student's attachment to his or her course. When immediate employment outcomes are the aim, as with students who undertake a course to 'get a job', the objective may well be met when that initial motivation is satisfied. Perhaps we should not be surprised that significantly more of those respondents in our study who dropped out than those who completed or remained in their courses, gave as a primary reason for study the need 'to get a job'. Those who dropped out were also more likely than completers or those continuing their course to give as their rationale the desire to find a better job or to try a different career.

Figure 38: Dropout and continuation, by reason for study, percentage



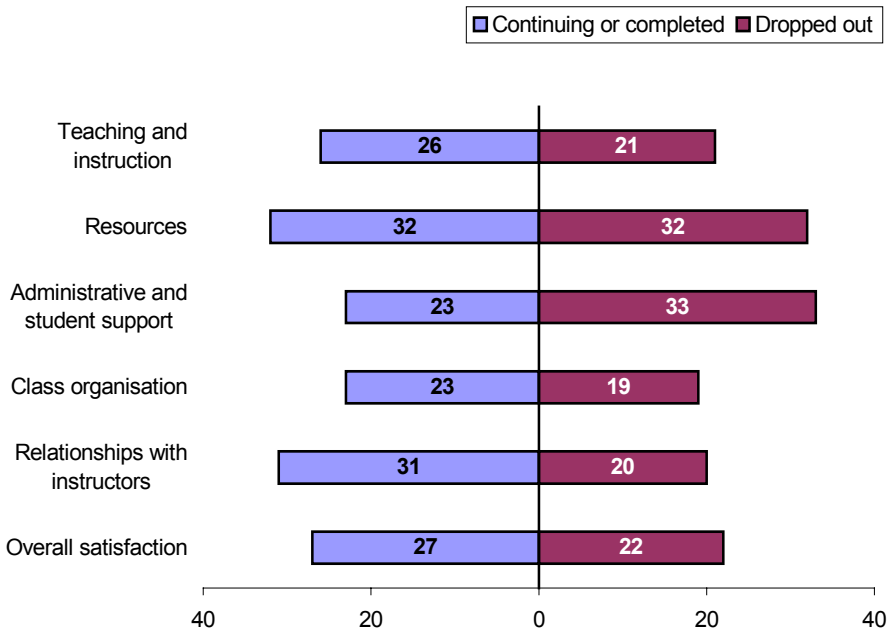
Course experience

This project set out to establish whether links might be made between students' instructional experience at TAFE and completion outcomes among this sample of TAFE students. Making allowance for other factors where effects can be discerned—structural and individual—it does appear that aspects of the student experience may have some bearing on students' likelihood of leaving before completion.

Figure 39 indicates the possible contribution made by quality of course experience to subsequent decisions to drop out. Students who later dropped out of their course reported less positively

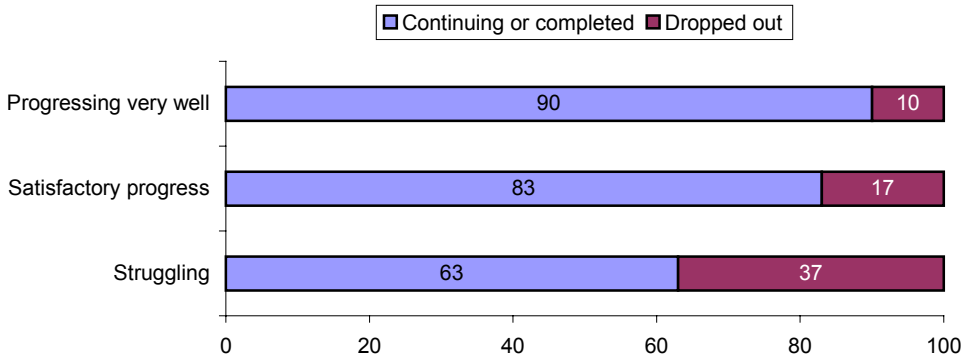
than did others on a range of satisfaction measures when initially surveyed. They were less likely to express initial satisfaction with teaching and instruction, less likely to report favourably on class organisation, and significantly less likely to report good relationships with their instructors. They were more likely, on the other hand, to report positively on administrative and student support, possibly because they had already had more contact with this area than other students.

Figure 39: Dropout and continuation, by quality of course experience, percentage



It is evident that those within the survey who would later drop out were already signalling some doubts and reservations. Not only did they score lower than 'stayers' on most salient aspects of the learning experience, they registered higher than subsequent completers on reporting significant barriers to study; for example, not having time or space to work, low confidence levels, limited belief in their ability to achieve, and difficulty in understanding what was required in their course. Nearly four in ten of those who subsequently left their course reported themselves to be 'struggling' at that point, compared with one in ten of those who reported themselves as 'progressing very well'.

Figure 40: Dropout and continuation, by course progress, percentage



It must be remembered that the bulk of these students were initially surveyed within five months of commencing their course. It may be that a similar brief 'stocktake' of students some months

after the commencement of a course may identify those who would benefit from particular and targeted support or attention. Such support may include initiation of stronger interactions with instructors and other staff, direction to support services within the institution, or development of links with mentors.

Table 12: Predicted probabilities of dropping out 2000–2001, by selected background characteristics (probabilities expressed as percentages)[1]

	Likelihood of dropping out	Net increase or decrease
Control group[2]	11 [3]	
Type of qualification		
Certificate I	8	-3
Certificate III	10	-2
Field of study		
Engineering & surveying`	12	1
Hospitality & services	10	-1
Multifield	10	-1
Age		
19–26	8	-4
26+	12	0
Sex		
Female	9	-3
Language background		
Other than English	5 [3]	-7
Educational attainment		
Year 11	14	3
Year 10	8	-4
Below Year 10	10	-1
Work status		
Unemployed	31 [3]	20
Part-time work	20 [3]	9
Other	14	2
Progress in course		
Struggling or satisfactory only	21 [3]	9
Course satisfaction (low)		
Teaching and instruction	12	1
Administration and student support	6 [3]	-6
Resources	14	3
Class organisation	7	-4
Relationships with instructors	22 [3]	10
Views on study (negative)		
Usually understand what is required in class	12	1
I have adequate time to study	16 [3]	6

Notes: [1] Predicted probabilities derived from logistic regression analysis.

[2] The control group comprises male students 18 years of age or younger, from English speaking backgrounds, undertaking TAFE certificate II courses in business, working full-time, coping very well with their course work, satisfied with their courses, hold positive views on study, and left school having completed Year 12.

[3] Significant at $p<0.05$.

To tease out these issues and to allocate some comparative value to particular background characteristics the research team has modelled the probability of dropping out over the course of the survey (2000–2001) using a range of background characteristics. The 'control' group comprised male students of 18 years of age or younger, of English speaking background and enrolled in TAFE certificate II business courses. Already engaged in full-time work, this group

reported coping very well with course work, were satisfied with their courses, held positive views about study and had left school having completed Year 12. The file was weighted to reflect national distribution of qualification levels and predicted probabilities were derived from logistic regression analysis.

On the basis of this analysis, a range of factors emerged as significant in 'predicting' the likelihood of completing or dropping out among students in our sample.

- ✧ Students whose language background comprised a language other than English were significantly more likely to be continuing or to have completed their course. Reported dropout rates for this group were very low.
- ✧ Unemployed students or those in part-time work at the time of the first survey were significantly more likely to have dropped out.
- ✧ Students who described themselves as 'struggling' or only satisfactory at the time of the initial survey were significantly more likely to have dropped out.
- ✧ Students reporting low satisfaction regarding relationships with instructors were significantly more likely to drop out and some connection—although less significant—may be made between low satisfaction with teaching and instruction and with resources generally. No connections were made between quality of administration and support services or class organisation with completion rates.
- ✧ Students whose understanding of what was required of them in their studies was lower, or who had difficulties in achieving an appropriate study environment, were also at greater risk of dropping out, in the case of the latter, significantly so.

Between-institution differences

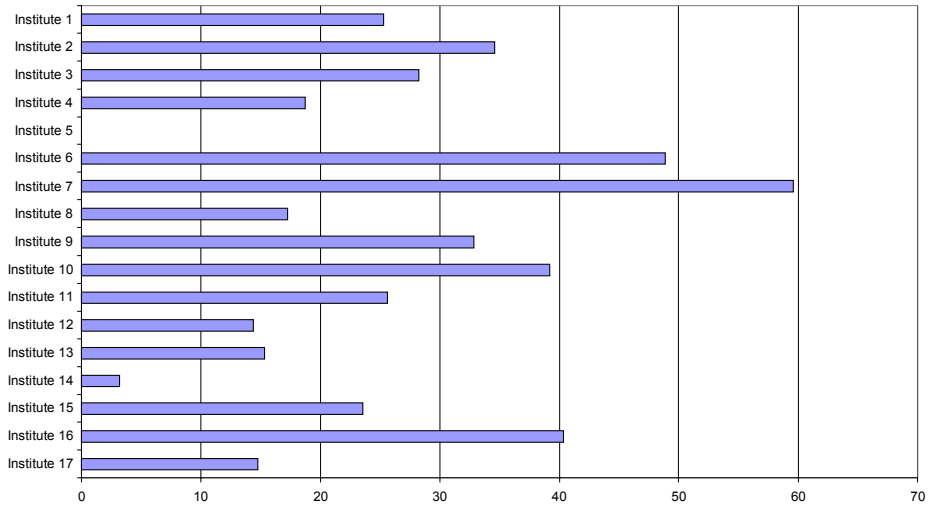
The study design for this project specifically limited the range of students studied to those undertaking entry-level courses (certificates I through to III) in the areas of business, hospitality, engineering and VET multifield. Students from over 25 institutes participated in the project. These results cannot therefore be generalised to all students in these TAFE institutes. However, given the limits placed on the project in confining collection to entry-level students from a circumscribed group of fields of study, we can expect these students' experiences to be broadly comparable. To what extent, then, can we identify institutional factors as possibly contributing to distinctions in students' experience of their learning?

In June 2000, the survey group sought students' views on a range of measures of instructional experience. They were asked, for example, to rate their course on its general quality of instruction, on the quality of students' relationships with instructors, and on the quality of administration and support. For the purposes of the forthcoming analysis we have confined reporting to 17 institutes for which student numbers were sufficiently robust. We have not controlled for social factors or intake and do not identify individual institutes by name.

Considerable differences were reported from TAFE to TAFE. On the question of quality of instruction, for example, strong variations in perceptions were reported. In one instance no student affirmed the quality of their course to be anything but 'above average' or 'excellent', while at the other end of the spectrum, 60% of students in another institute regarded their course quality as 'average' to 'poor'.

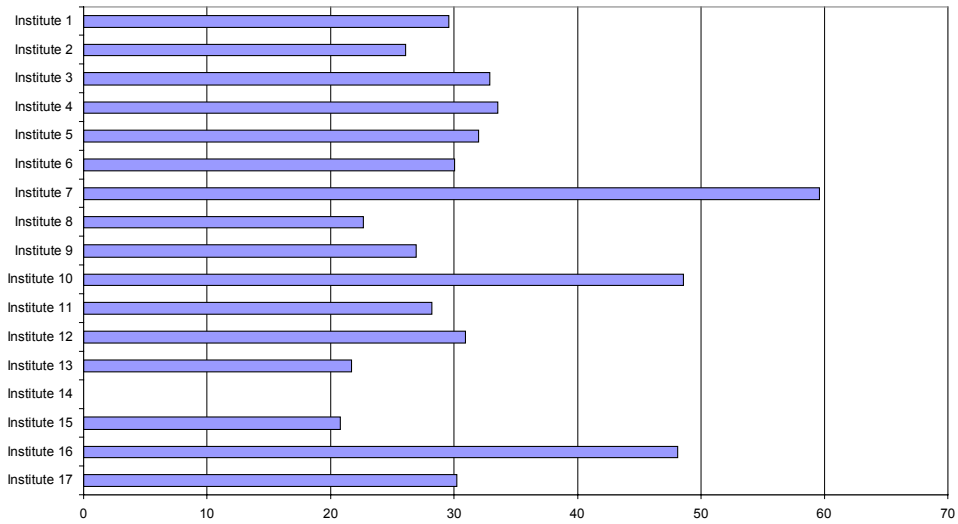
Figure 41 shows the degree of divergence on this measure and sets out an institute-based presentation of students' negative perceptions of quality of instruction within their course.

Figure 41: Negative views of quality of instruction by institute, percentage



There are many possible explanations for these differences between institutions, differences which may relate to the specific types of courses under consideration or demographic differences in student profile. Nevertheless, considerable differences are evident in the students' reporting of the quality of their experience from institute to institute. Students from seven TAFE institutes report higher levels of dissatisfaction with their instructional environment than the average in TAFEs overall. This suggests that variation in quality of instruction may be an important factor in any analysis of students' experience in the TAFE sector. While these findings cannot be used to pinpoint or diagnose issues of quality at any of the participating institutions, they point to the broader need to examine the importance of institute-related factors in the provision of high-quality learning experiences for TAFE students.

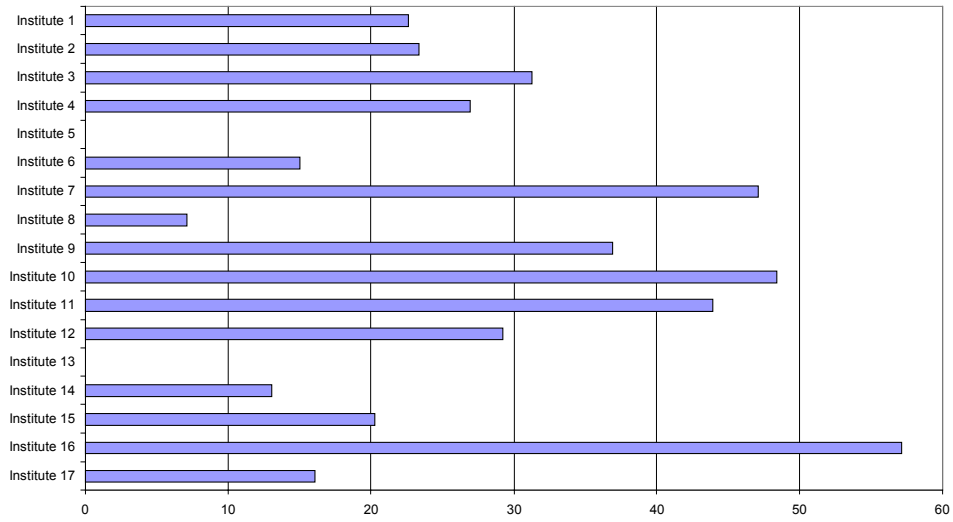
Figure 42: Negative views of quality of relationship with instructors by institute, percentage



For example, when asked to rate the quality of their relationship with their instructors (figure 42), students in six of the 17 TAFEs responded more negatively than the mean. In one case 60% of students ranked their instructors' ability to relate to students as only average to poor, compared with students at institute 14, where no student responded negatively on this measure.

Similar distinctions may be found in areas of perceptions of administrative and support services (figure 43). Not all students share the same views of institutional efficiency in this area, and although many are positive, students in some institutions share considerable reservations about their institute's efforts in these areas. While some institutes receive high levels of endorsement here, nearly 60% of students sampled from institute 16 believed their TAFE's quality of administration and student support to be only poor to average, with nearly 50% of those from institute 7 and institute 10 sharing comparable views. Other institutes however received strong endorsement, with no students regarding administrative or support services in anything but a positive light.

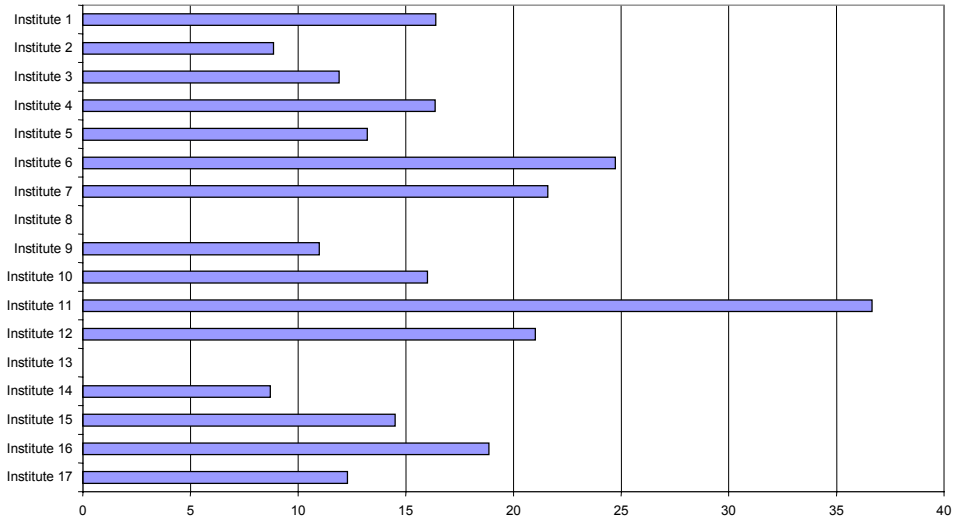
Figure 43: Negative perceptions of quality of administration and instructional support by institute, percentage



These three measures, covering instructional experience generally, quality of relationships with instructors particularly, and non-instructional (administrative and support) factors, show considerable variation. While these students are doing the same courses at the same qualification levels with the same nationally prescribed criteria for their qualifications, they do not seem to be subject to the same experiences. Certain institutes—institutes 7, 10 and 16—score above the mean on all three measures of dissatisfaction with instructional experience. Others, such as institutes 3, 4 and 12, report above the mean for two of the three factors. Others—institutes 1, 5, 8, 13, 14, 15 and 17—return scores below the mean on all three measures, indicating strong levels of satisfaction in these institutions.

But can links be made between these reported perceptions and subsequent rates of non-completion? At the descriptive level there does appear to be a connection. Figure 44 shows that students from institutes which report most highly on dissatisfaction are more likely than others to leave their course before completion. Apart from institute 1 (with 16% reported non-completions, above but very close to the average of 15%), all institutes with higher-than-average rates of dropout reported higher-than-average levels of dissatisfaction with one or more measures of instructional experience. Conversely, students from institutes where instructional experience was ranked very highly reported subsequent dropout rates below the overall mean.

Figure 44: Dropout rates by institute, percentage



If we take a dropout rate of 15% as a mean for these institutes, connections between non-completion and course satisfaction may be extrapolated. Those institutes which scored above the mean on all measures of dissatisfaction registered higher-than-average rates of subsequent dropout.

These findings raise particular issues for TAFE administrators and teachers. When links between dissatisfaction with course quality and dropout behaviour are suggested—as is the case here—we are forced to re-examine some of our more comfortable assumptions about students' completion behaviours. It is possible that these students are not necessarily leaving prematurely for positive or external reasons, even if they later rationalise their decision in terms of employment demands, family pressures, or other reasons without direct bearing on the nature of the course itself. Rather, it is possible that their experience has not been positive enough to hold them in the course; they may, as a result, have subsequently modified their demands or their aspirations.

There is a need for further work to explore some of these connections.

Summary

On the basis of this sample study, a range of factors is proposed as possibly playing a role in developing a rationale for students' completion and non-completion behaviours.

To begin, some structural features emerge as likely candidates. Length of course can be shown to play a possible role. Students in courses of 12–24 months were more likely to report themselves as having dropped out. Similarly, certificate II students appeared less likely to complete than those enrolled at other qualification levels.

Demographic analysis of our data indicated that the groups more likely to drop out included:

- ✧ males
- ✧ very young students
- ✧ English speakers (by comparison with students from non-English speaking backgrounds)

- ✧ the unemployed, or those in part-time work
- ✧ those with Year 11 completion only, or with less than Year 10 qualifications.

Similarly, the learners' own history and personal characteristics were found to affect their learning experience and outcomes. Students whose learning skills were less developed, whose confidence was shaky, who were uncertain where to get help and whose understanding of course requirements was not strong, seemed to be at higher risk of dropping out.

Students who reported significant external barriers to study, such as little time or support, and poor study conditions, also seemed to be at higher risk of non-completion.

Motivation may also play a role. Students who embarked on a course with distinct and extrinsic motivations such as 'getting a job', finding a better job or 'trying a different career', were somewhat more likely to leave their course prematurely.

To these qualities—structural, demographic, external and motivation—should be added instructional experience.

Students who later dropped out of their course tended to report less favourably than others on the quality of their teaching and instruction, their class organisation, their relationship with their instructors, administrative and support arrangements and overall satisfaction.

Nearly 40% of those in the follow-up group who reported themselves as 'struggling' in the initial survey had dropped out by the point of re-contact.

Students whose understanding of what was required of them was lower, or who had difficulties in accessing an appropriate study environment, were also at risk of dropping out.

Levels of satisfaction and completion rates also seemed to vary between institutions. Connections were found between course dissatisfaction, particularly in relation to specific areas, and subsequent non-completion. Where an institution registered higher than the norm on one or more measures of dissatisfaction—on the relationship with instructors or quality of instruction generally—then dropout rates tended also to be higher than the norm. Quality of administrative arrangements and support services presented an interesting measure. They were arguably of more significance to students already experiencing pressure and difficulties with such services and seemed to signal a heightened risk of non-completion.

Conclusions

The findings

This study shows a strong and broadly based endorsement by the students of the quality of instructional experience in TAFE, with particularly strong emphasis on relationships with staff and quality of teaching. The study also highlights the diversity of the TAFE student body, reflecting the broad reach of the TAFE mission itself. Although the survey sample was confined to entry-level certificate students only, this project dealt with students of different ages, backgrounds, educational histories and employment status. Their diverse expectations of training reflect the range of roles which TAFE plays today.

This research also sought to examine concepts of completion in vocational training, and has done this in the context of the institution of TAFE itself, without seeking to impose expectations of 'completion' which derive from other settings. Course completion has long stood as a fundamental measure of institutional effectiveness and its durability as a key performance indicator in the schools and higher education sectors can be seen in a continuing focus on retention rates and efficient completion timetables. But the TAFE sector, more 'porous' and often more flexible than other educational settings such as school or university, has responded to changing training demands from both industry and students with structures which seek to accommodate the diverse needs of its broad student body. Current course provision can allow significant levels of customising of courses to meet students' needs and developing demands. In this context, 'completion' itself is a concept open to re-definition, and this study has highlighted the range of students' involvement in entry-level courses in TAFE.

Diversity of use and pathways was evident, for example, in:

- ✧ the diverse reasons offered by students for undertaking their course
- ✧ the range of educational backgrounds reported by students (from achieved university degrees to non-completion of Year 10)
- ✧ the students who had set themselves a staged and extended timetable for completion, reporting comparatively low contact hours per week
- ✧ the significant proportion of those students dropping out from their course who expressed an intention of returning to their course to complete at some subsequent point. For such students, interrupted sequences of study were not necessarily regarded as inimical to longer term successful outcomes.

These examples challenge our linear definitions of 'completion' but are only imperfectly reflected in current institutional statistical collection. Although pathways development represents one of the primary tenets of TAFE policy, with articulation between courses and certificate levels encouraged through the agency of credit transfer and recognition of prior learning, such pathways may effectively leave an untidy tangle of assumed 'non-completions' in their wake. Similarly, the very flexibility of TAFE, which may allow students to structure their study programs around family and work demands, withdrawing from study when other pressures build

up and returning as circumstances permit, again boosts the proportion of students whose temporary withdrawal from study is registered as non-completion.

Tensions between the porousness and flexibility of the actual system, and the narrowness of the range of measurement of completion outcomes, are highlighted in researchers' difficulties with current measurement practices. Foyster, Fai and Shah (2000), for example, felt that current VET completion measurement practices failed to reflect the actual level of learning (and satisfied objectives) delivered by the sector in Australia. In more recent research, Grant (2002) identified a range of issues which serve as barriers to accurate completion measurement, with specific attention paid to the problems involved in the use of self-reported completion status. Similarly, researchers in the United States note that non-completion levels may be significantly overstated through dependence on institution-based (rather than student-based) measurement which fails to take into account interrupted learning and transfers between institutions and between courses (Adelman 1994; Bailey & Keinzl 1999).

As outlined in the methodology, the research group acknowledged difficulties in determining completion status, even in instances of direct contact with students and past students. The three categories of non-completion employed in the study represent those who were 'clearly in' the category. They included those who, at the point of re-contact, had withdrawn from their course to undertake another; those who had withdrawn from their course but intended to return at some point; and those who had withdrawn with no intention of returning. These individuals had not completed their course and were no longer enrolled in the course they had been undertaking at the time of the first contact survey. Even within this group, however, there were nuances of non-completion. The largest group of non-completers, for example, tended to regard themselves as likely to return to their studies at some point, while another group, while remaining in study, had changed their study focus.

Although the limited timeframe of the study circumscribed completion outcomes somewhat (as some 30% of the achieved follow-up sample described themselves as still 'continuing' in the course they commenced in 2000), the project nevertheless provided a much-needed record of students' own aspirations, intentions, understandings and needs regarding completion. Over 90% of the sample when initially contacted, for example, expressed an intention to complete their course. Less than 10% indicated that they intended to complete 'some modules only'.

The research material also raised questions about how to define 'satisfactory' course outcomes. Such questions reflect concerns of other researchers in the area in recent years. In their exploration of student flows in TAFE, for example, Foyster, Fai and Shah (2000) highlighted what could be regarded as higher levels of 'satisfactory' completion in VET than previously assumed. For many students, they pointed out, failure to complete a full qualification is not accompanied by any evidence of module failure. Such students, it was argued, may well have achieved their intended study outcomes, that is, particular skills acquisition, participation in particular modules.

Recent research has also submitted that satisfactory completion rates in TAFE may be higher than some aggregated databases might suggest. Foyster, Fai and Shah (2000), for example, working from national databases, reported that only 23% of course enrolments in 1994 resulted in a course completion by 1996. More recently it was reported that, in 2000, 58.4% of VET clients had successfully completed all modules in their course (NCVER 2000).

However, work with students or graduates tends to elicit claims of higher completion rates. Interview-based work by Grant in 2000, for example, found self-reported completion rates of around 65% (Grant 2002).

This study documented similarly strong completion rates, although the sample nature of the study and the level of sample attrition made this finding difficult to verify. When continuing students were excluded from the cohort, reported completion rates of the follow-up group of

771 students were over 81%, with another 10% not in study and without a completion intending to return to their course at a later date. These were higher rates of completion than might have been expected from alternative aggregated data sources.

This study also differed from earlier work in the interpretation it applied to the notion of completion. Initial data collected from these students probed their intentions extensively regarding completion. Over 90% expressed their intention to complete all modules of their course. Their 'successful' completion must be viewed in the context of that intention.

The nature of the follow-up data collection (by phone survey) precluded the exploration of a range of further reasons for premature leaving (including transfer or mobility), and accordingly, it was impossible to assess the role of such factors or indeed the extent of transfer between institutions in these cases. Anecdotal advice from TAFEs themselves attest to high levels of mobility among some student populations and attendant difficulties in maintaining continuing contacts with students. In turn, this would affect some students' ultimate chances for completion. Development of a methodology for tracking such students would be a most worthwhile extension of this initial research.

However, taking sampling constraints into consideration, the data demonstrated some links between TAFE students' instructional experience and their course completion behaviours. As with completers, non-completers overall had been very favourable about their courses when initially surveyed, and in general, the reasons they cited for non-completion when surveyed some nine months later were concentrated on externalities—work and family pressures, personal issues and so on. Even when given the opportunity, they were loath to comment adversely on their courses. But there were some groups of students whose negative experiences within their courses could be shown to be linked with a failure to complete. Those who had reported difficulties in meeting academic requirements in their course and those who experienced a lack of rapport or contact with their instructors, for example, were markedly less likely to complete their courses than those reporting greater confidence in their ability to cope or satisfaction with support arrangements within their course.

Completers and non-completers tended to rate some aspects of their instructional experience differently. Approximately one-third of completers and non-completers alike believed resources at their TAFE to be of a very high quality, and non-completers were even more likely than completers to rate administrative and student support services highly. But non-completers were significantly less likely to have endorsed the teaching instruction standards at their TAFE, to report good relationships with instructors, to point to effective class organisation, or to feel their overall satisfaction to be high.

Students' experiences and outcomes also varied across institutions. The variation across institutes in quality of experience, as reported by students in the survey undertaken in 2001, seemed to be related to variation in rates of non-completion. These findings warrant further investigation.

Summary

Over the course of this study three themes have emerged as pivotal.

First is the exploration of the issue of non-completion in TAFE. How may it be defined, how is it regarded by students and what is its meaning in the context of current TAFE learning culture? It would seem, for example, that the TAFE students in our study had high expectations of their entry-level courses. Although their reasons for undertaking their courses may have differed, around nine in ten of the entry-level students surveyed expressed a clear intention to complete their qualification. Accordingly, the apparently high completion rates for the respondents in our sample might indicate that most students were strongly 'on track' in achieving their study goals.

But using the same logic, it may be argued that many of those who failed to complete have not lived up to their own initial expectations.

Second, it is gratifying that students' reported experiences of their courses were generally so positive. Current research has highlighted the high regard in which students hold TAFE pedagogy. This study tends to affirm such findings. When questioned in 2000 about aspects of their instructional experience, most students responded extremely favourably on a range of measures of instructional experience—from pedagogical factors to administrative arrangements and resourcing issues.

Overall, students tended to be *most* positive in their praise of their immediate instructional environment, that is, their teachers. They highlighted relationships with teaching staff and respect for their expertise and organisation as significant factors in framing their overall account of their instructional experience.

Not all students, of course, registered this level of approval. Those who expressed dissatisfaction with their instructional experience when surveyed during their course were a minority. But they were a particular minority. As the discussion in previous chapters shows, they were considerably more likely than their peers to have subsequently left their course before completion. It should be noted that links between a less-than-positive instructional experience and premature leaving were quite strong for the respondents in this study. Certain measures, such as the reported relationship between student and instructors, worked as a strong predictor of a student's likelihood of dropping out. But not all measures seemed to work so well. Dissatisfaction with resourcing, or with administrative arrangements, for example, was not so strongly connected with dropout behaviour in this way.

Causality connections in these contexts are difficult to make. As the discussion shows, many factors are involved in a student's decision to leave and clearly not all relate to course experience or the quality of support provided by the institution. The range of external factors involved in students' reported decisions to leave—employment aspects, family matters, illness and so on—tends often to be out of the institution's control. But the analyses presented in this study suggest a range of propositions which may be of relevance to institutions:

- ✧ Most respondents who failed to complete had nevertheless expressed a desire to complete when initially surveyed.
- ✧ At the time of the initial survey, a group of students were already able to clearly articulate their difficulties with their course or dissatisfaction with various aspects of this instructional experience, including academic progress. Indicators of unsatisfactory experiences included poor relationships with instructors, a sense of 'struggling' with course content and difficulties in accessing administrative or support services.
- ✧ Dissatisfaction was shown to be associated with poor experiences in earlier learning environments; that is, many students, particularly at the entry levels of training, brought a comparatively high level of learning need to their courses.
- ✧ A follow-up survey showed this group to be considerably more likely than those reporting stronger satisfaction levels to have left their course before completion.
- ✧ The data suggest that the connections between instructional experience and completion rates show up strongly at the individual institutional level. In some institutes, dissatisfaction with aspects of the teaching and learning environment seemed to be considerably higher than the norm and these correlated with higher incidences of non-completion. There may be other factors involved here: the inclusion of particularly disaffected or highly motivated class groupings at any site could skew the sample somewhat. But these data suggest that different institutions, while ostensibly providing the same services and programs, may be actually delivering quite different experiences and outcomes to their students. In other words, effectiveness may vary across institutions.

Findings here do suggest that certain strategies may be available to TAFE institutes to enhance and supplement their instructional environments and thus assist students who may otherwise be at risk of dropping out. Aspects of this study tend to support models of non-completers developed in other research—often younger, male, unemployed and with some background of learning difficulties. But it may be that the instructional environment itself can play a role in holding students. Factors cited as negatives by some, particularly difficulties in relating to instructors, in accessing feedback on learning, or in approaching or making use of support services, would be of particular concern to students already struggling.

Progressive diagnostic assessment within courses, together with closer screening of students on enrolment in relation to aspects of learning needs and strategies to address those needs, could serve to address some of the factors which lead some students to leave their courses prematurely. In addition, professional development for TAFE staff, with a focus on the strong outcomes currently reported in some institutes, might also address the issue of flexibility in instructional approach demanded by a diverse student body.

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Appendix: Survey instruments

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Centre for Post-Compulsory Education and Training

RMIT UNIVERSITY

Vocational Education & Training
Student Questionnaire

CONFIDENTIAL

This questionnaire is about your experience as a student in Vocational Education & Training, your past work and study, and your plans for the future. Your answers to the questions in this survey are important as they will be used to help improve Vocational Education & Training courses for present and future students.

All respondents should answer the very last question which seeks your agreement to be recontacted in the future. If you do not agree we will not attempt to make contact with you.

Mark your answers by filling in the responses as shown:

Use black/blue pen or pencil.
Do NOT use a red or felt-tip pen.
Indicate your answer by filling in or writing in the box provided.
Erase or white-out errors completely.

Examples ☐ ☐ ☐ ■ ☐

1	9	7	8

PART 1 YOUR PRESENT STUDY

1(a). Which of the following best describes the qualification for which you are now studying?

- ☐ Diploma
- ☐ Associate Diploma
- ☐ Certificate - trade
- ☐ Certificate III
- ☐ Certificate II
- ☐ Certificate I
- ☐ Other *(please specify)*

1(b). What is the name of your training/course?

OFFICE USE ONLY 04 ☐ 06 ☐ 11 ☐ 12 ☐

2. When did you start your present training/course?

☐☐ Month

☐☐☐☐ Year

3. What is the length of your current training/course?

- ☐ 6 months or less
- ☐ 7 - 11 months
- ☐ 12 - 18 months
- ☐ 19 - 24 months
- ☐ Longer than two years

4. Your training/course consists of a number of modules, completion of which leads to a qualification. Is it your intention to complete:

- ☐ All the modules
- ☐ Some of the modules
- ☐ None of the modules

5. How many hours per week do you usually attend classes for your present training/course?

- ☐ 1-5
- ☐ 6-10
- ☐ 11-15
- ☐ 16-20
- ☐ more than 20

6(a). How is the training/course delivered? (Choose the answer which best describes how MOST of it is delivered.)

Please mark ONE box only

- ☐ In a classroom (no work placement)
- ☐ In a classroom (with work placement)
- ☐ In your workplace
- ☐ Group or individual project work
- ☐ By correspondence
- ☐ Online learning
- ☐ Other

6(b). Which of the modes of delivery would best suit your needs?

Please mark ONE box only

- ☐ In a classroom (no work placement)
- ☐ In a classroom (with work placement)
- ☐ In your workplace
- ☐ Group or individual project work
- ☐ By correspondence
- ☐ Online learning
- ☐ Other

7. Learning experiences and study environment may vary from module to module within your training/course. *Please rate your study experience as a whole by giving your opinion on each of the following:*

Please mark ONE box for each statement

Teaching and instruction	*Excellent*	*Above Average*	*Average*	*Below Average*	*Poor*
Instructors' knowledge of subject content	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Instructors' ability to relate to students	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Instructors' ability to explain things clearly	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Your understanding of assessment methods used	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Instructors' organisation and preparation	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Instructors' commitment	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Equipment, resources and access					
The quality of equipment provided for you to practise your skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Access to equipment necessary for you to practise your skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Access to library and learning resources	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The convenience of class venue	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The convenience of class time	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Range of courses available	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Administration and information					
The information you received when choosing your training/course	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Administration - handling of enquiries, enrolment, payment	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Student support services					
The information about careers and jobs available to you	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Student counselling services	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

8. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the benefits of your training/course?

Please mark ONE box for each statement

The training/course that I am doing is:	*Strongly Agree*	*Agree*	*Disagree*	*Strongly Disagree*
teaching me skills that are needed in the workplace	☐	☐	☐	☐
helping me understand work processes	☐	☐	☐	☐
building up my self-confidence as a person	☐	☐	☐	☐
improving my skills in working with people	☐	☐	☐	☐
enlarging my technical knowledge	☐	☐	☐	☐
preparing me for more advanced study	☐	☐	☐	☐
opening up career paths	☐	☐	☐	☐
upgrading my skills so that I can do more jobs	☐	☐	☐	☐
broadening my outlook on life	☐	☐	☐	☐
improving my job prospects	☐	☐	☐	☐
helping me perform tasks I do at work	☐	☐	☐	☐

9. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the overall quality of your training/course?

Please mark ONE box for each statement

Class organisation	*Strongly Agree*	*Agree*	*Disagree*	*Strongly Disagree*
Teaching sessions are well structured	☐	☐	☐	☐
Training material is well presented	☐	☐	☐	☐
Class time is sufficient to cover topics	☐	☐	☐	☐
Instruction and practice are well balanced	☐	☐	☐	☐
Student focus				
My interest and motivation are maintained	☐	☐	☐	☐
A variety of instructional strategies are used	☐	☐	☐	☐
Instruction allows for differences in student background and skills	☐	☐	☐	☐
Feedback on student learning				
I am informed about how my learning will be assessed	☐	☐	☐	☐
I receive useful feedback on how well I am learning	☐	☐	☐	☐
Relationships				
I receive adequate attention from instructors	☐	☐	☐	☐
I have a good relationship with my instructors	☐	☐	☐	☐
I have access to instructors when I require assistance	☐	☐	☐	☐

10(a). Please give an overall assessment of your progress in your course so far.

Please mark ONE box only

- ☐ I am coping very well with the work
- ☐ I am making satisfactory progress
- ☐ I am struggling

10(b). Are the following statements true or false?

Please mark ONE box for each statement

	True	*False*	*Not Applicable*
My training/course requires me to attend more than one Institute	☐	☐	☐
My training/course requires me to attend more than one campus	☐	☐	☐
Having to travel between Institutes or campuses is a problem for me	☐	☐	☐

11. How much do you agree or disagree with the following?

	Strongly Agree	*Agree*	*Disagree*	*Strongly Disagree*
I learn best when all tasks are clearly set out by the instructor	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am usually able to complete my assignments on time	☐	☐	☐	☐
I usually understand what I am required to do in my course	☐	☐	☐	☐
I can get help with my course from friends or family	☐	☐	☐	☐
I find routine learning a bit of a bore	☐	☐	☐	☐
I have adequate time to study	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am able to study without constant interruptions	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am confident that I can do well	☐	☐	☐	☐
It is easier to learn when students can help each other with tasks	☐	☐	☐	☐

The next two questions are about work placements. A work placement is a period of training in the work place where students gain experience and learn job skills on which they are assessed.

12(a). Is work placement a component of your training?

☐ Yes ⟶ *Please go to Question 12(b).* ☐ No ⟶ *Go to Q13.*

12(b). Please rate your work placement by giving your opinion on each of the following:

Please mark ONE box for each statement

Did your work placement:	*Yes*	*No*	*Unsure*
relate well to the content of your course	☐	☐	☐
introduce new skills and knowledge	☐	☐	☐
increase your motivation	☐	☐	☐
help you think about careers	☐	☐	☐
help you plan your course	☐	☐	☐
improve your knowledge of work environments	☐	☐	☐
result in a job offer from your employer	☐	☐	☐

12(c). Are you an apprentice? ☐ Yes ⟶ *Please go to Q12(e).* ☐ No ⟶ *Please go to Q13.*

12(d). Are you a trainee? ☐ Yes ⟶ *Please go to Q12(e).* ☐ No ⟶ *Please go to Q13.*

12(e). The following items relate to your training as an apprentice or trainee. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following:

	Strongly Agree	*Agree*	*Disagree*	*Strongly Disagree*
I am getting useful on-the-job training	☐	☐	☐	☐
I get on well with my work colleagues	☐	☐	☐	☐
The people at work take an interest in my learning	☐	☐	☐	☐
My work is usually interesting	☐	☐	☐	☐
My work place has a good atmosphere	☐	☐	☐	☐
I get on well with my employer/supervisor	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel part of a team at work	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel that my skills are useful in this job	☐	☐	☐	☐
At the end of my training, I am confident of finding work in my field	☐	☐	☐	☐

13. When you enrolled in your present training/course, did you receive any recognition for prior learning such as subject exemptions or course credits?

☐ No
☐ Yes, for study I had done at a TAFE Institute
☐ Yes, for study I had done at a TAFE division of a university
☐ Yes, for study I had done at a registered private provider
☐ Yes, for study I had done at an Adult and Community Education provider
☐ Yes, for study at University
☐ Yes, for assessed skills and experience
☐ Yes, for study elsewhere
☐ Yes, for VET in Schools units

14. Did you have to move from your usual address to do your present training/course?

☐ Yes ☐ No

PART 2 BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

Students differ in their experience of school and post-school study. Understanding differences requires knowing something about who students are, e.g., age, gender, migration experience, family background, languages, whether they have some form of disability and the like. To help us relate training to the needs of different students, please answer the following questions on background factors, such as prior education and languages spoken at home. The information requested below is strictly confidential and is to be used only to investigate potential links between study experience and student characteristics.

15. Year of birth

☐☐☐☐

16. Sex

☐ Male
☐ Female

17. Is your home in:

☐ Metro capital or suburbs
☐ Provincial city
☐ Country town
☐ Rural area

18. Postcode

☐☐☐☐

19. Language most often spoken at home

☐ English
☐ Italian
☐ Greek
☐ Croatian
☐ Maltese
☐ Spanish
☐ German
☐ French
☐ Cantonese
☐ Mandarin
☐ Other Chinese
☐ Serbian
☐ Latvian
☐ Vietnamese
☐ Turkish
☐ Macedonian
☐ Timorese
☐ Indian (any)
☐ Indonesian
☐ Khmer
☐ Arabic
☐ Arabic (Lebanon)
☐ Polish
☐ an Aboriginal Language
☐ A Pacific Island language
☐ Other Language
(specify)

20. Country of Birth

☐ Australia ☐ Overseas

21. Are you an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?

☐ Yes ☐ No

22(a). Do you consider yourself to have a permanent and significant disability?

☐ Yes
↓
Please complete Question 22(b) before proceeding to Q23.

☐ No → Go to Q23. Omit Q22(b).

22(b). Do you have any of the following conditions?

Mark as many boxes as appropriate

☐ Visual disability
☐ Hearing disability
☐ Physical disability
☐ Intellectual disability
☐ Chronic illness
☐ Other disability

23. As a guide to occupational changes over generations, please describe the main occupation of your parents or guardians. If retired, indicate the main occupations before retirement.

	Father/Guardian	*Mother/Guardian*
Small business	☐	☐
Farmer	☐	☐
Skilled trades	☐	☐
Manual worker	☐	☐
Professions	☐	☐
Senior manager	☐	☐
Middle-level manager	☐	☐
Clerical, administrative worker	☐	☐
Salesperson	☐	☐
Home duties	☐	☐
Other *(please specify)* Father/Guardian	☐	
Mother/Guardian		☐

24. As a guide to changes in education levels over family generations, please describe the education levels of your parents or guardians.

	Father/Guardian	*Mother/Guardian*
Completed primary or junior secondary school	☐	☐
Finished secondary school	☐	☐
Completed a trade certificate or technicians' certificate	☐	☐
Attempted a Degree or Diploma at university, teachers' college or Tech. Institute	☐	☐
Completed a Degree or Diploma at university, teachers' college or Tech. Institute	☐	☐

PART 3 STUDY, SCHOOL, WORK

25. As a guide to how people are supporting themselves while they study, are you:
Mark as many boxes as appropriate

- ☐ Receiving Austudy/Abstudy
- ☐ Doing an apprenticeship
- ☐ Doing a traineeship
- ☐ Receiving a pension or benefits
- ☐ On a scholarship/cadetship
- ☐ Working full-time or part-time
- ☐ Self-employed
- ☐ Receiving support from family
- ☐ Other

26. What were your reasons for doing your present course?
Mark as many boxes as appropriate

- ☒ Employer required me to do it
- ☒ To help get a job
- ☒ To find a better job
- ☐ To gain a promotion
- ☐ To try a different career
- ☐ I needed extra skills for my current job
- ☐ I wanted to set up my own business
- ☐ For personal interest
- ☐ Other courses were too expensive
- ☐ I was given credit for previous study
- ☐ I could complete the course quickly
- ☐ I could not get into my preferred course

27(a). What was the highest level of secondary schooling you attempted or completed before starting your present training/course?

	Attempted	*Completed*
Year 12	☐	☐
Year 11	☐	☐
Year 10	☐	☐
Below Year 10	☐	☐

27(b). In what year did you attempt or complete the highest level of schooling indicated above?

☐☐☐☐

28. Thinking back over your time at school, how much do you agree with the following:

Mark ONE box for each statement

	Strongly Agree	*Agree*	*Disagree*	*Strongly Disagree*
I have happy memories of school	☐	☐	☐	☐
I got on well with my teachers	☐	☐	☐	☐
I felt that making extra effort at school was worthwhile	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel that I coped well academically at school	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel that my school subjects prepared me well for this course	☐	☐	☐	☐

29. Which of the following best describes when you started your present training/course?

- ☐ While still enrolled at secondary school
- ☐ Within 12 months of leaving secondary school
- ☐ More than 12 months after leaving secondary school

30. Since leaving secondary school, which of the following educational qualifications or trade certificates did you attempt or complete <u>BEFORE starting your present training/course</u>?

Mark as many boxes as appropriate

	Attempted	*Completed*
Bachelor's degree (or higher)	☐	☐
Advanced diploma	☐	☐
Diploma	☐	☐
Associate Diploma	☐	☐
Advanced certificate - post trade	☐	☐
Advanced certificate - other	☐	☐
Certificate - trade	☐	☐
Certificate IV	☐	☐
Certificate III	☐	☐
Certificate II	☐	☐
Certificate I	☐	☐
Statement of attainment	☐	☐
Certificate of Competency/Proficiency	☐	☐
One or more single modules	☐	☐
Other	☐	☐
None	☐	☐

31. Did you do any study, leading to an educational qualification or trade certificate, <u>during the six months BEFORE starting your present course</u>?

- ☐ Yes, at secondary school
- ☐ Yes, at a TAFE Institute
- ☐ Yes, at a TAFE division of a university
- ☐ Yes, at an Adult and Community Education Provider
- ☐ Yes, at a university
- ☐ Yes, at another training provider (including your employer)
- ☐ Yes, studying elsewhere
- ☐ No

32. During the six months BEFORE starting your present training/course, did you have a full-time, part-time or casual job of any kind (including an apprenticeship, etc.) that lasted for two weeks or more?

- ☐ Yes, worked for payment or profit → *Please go to Q34.*
- ☐ Yes, but on leave from main job → *Please go to Q34.*
- ☐ Yes, unpaid work in a family business → *Please go to Q34.*
- ☐ Yes, other unpaid work → *Please go to Q34.*
- ☐ No, did not have a job → *Please go to Q33.*

33. Did you actively look for work during the six months before starting your present training/course?

- ☐ Yes, I looked for full-time work → *Please go to Q35.*
- ☐ Yes, I looked for part-time work → *Please go to Q35.*
- ☐ No, I did not look for work → *Please go to Q35.*

34(a). Turning to your employment situation NOW, are you:

Please mark ONE box only

- ☐ Currently working full-time
- ☐ Working part-time or as a casual
- ☐ Self-employed
- ☐ Working in a family business (not for wages)
- ☐ On leave from main job
- ☐ Doing voluntary work
- ☐ Not working, but looking for work
- ☐ Not working and not looking for work

34(b). If you are in paid employment what support does your business/employer provide for your studies?

- ☐ Paid fees
- ☐ Paid time off work
- ☐ Unpaid time off work
- ☐ Other support
- ☐ No support
- ☐ Not applicable

35. If you are in paid employment, is the employer/business you now have the same as the one you had before your training/course? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not applicable

36. If you are in paid employment, is the work you do related to the training/course you are doing? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not applicable

PART 4 PLANS FOR THE FUTURE FURTHER CONTACT

37. What are your plans for next semester?

- ☐ Continue in my present course
- ☐ Do a different course at TAFE
- ☐ Go to university
- ☐ Go to a business or other private college
- ☐ Enter the defence forces, fire services or police
- ☐ Work full-time, no further training
- ☐ Work full-time, part-time training
- ☐ Apprenticeship
- ☐ Traineeship
- ☐ Defer

We would like to contact you again in the future to ask how your plans are working out.

38. Do you agree to be contacted again?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, please provide your name and telephone number.

Surname | First Name | Initial

Telephone Number

This ends the questionnaire. Thank you for your help.

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research is Australia's primary research and development organisation in the field of vocational education and training.

NCVER undertakes and manages research programs and monitors the performance of Australia's training system.

NCVER provides a range of information aimed at improving the quality of training at all levels.

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