Reducing Attrition Rates for Maori Students

By D.F. McKenzie

One study has noted an average of five reasons per student given as causes of student departures.

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ABSTRACT: Attrition statistics for first-year students in many tertiary environments suggest that students face a wide variety of obstacles. Students in developmental education programmes usually have one additional obstacle: They have a history of failure in academic settings. Therefore there are emotional and psychological barriers in addition to academic ones. Those students who come from low socio-economic backgrounds, often linked to membership of a minority ethnic group, face further obstacles again. This paper follows the efforts made in one developmental programme to reduce the dropout rate for such a group of students.

In the multicultural milieu that makes up the landscape of higher education today, many students struggle in the traditional settings of western academe (Hart & Holton, 2001; Padron, 1992; Richardson & Skinner, 1992). Dropout rates are of great concern at postsecondary institutions around the world, and many factors impacting student retention have been investigated (Tinto, 1993). Although research regarding ethnicity and retention in higher education have rendered mixed results, characteristics that may be related to students from minority groups—such as being a first-generation college student (Richardson & Skinner, 1992), having poor academic preparation (Hoyt, 1998; Richardson & Skinner), or failing to be involved in campus social and intellectual life (Tinto, 1993)—have been shown to influence dropout behaviour. If access to higher education is to be truly open to students from all backgrounds and cultures, these students must be retained in order to succeed in their higher education endeavours.

Dropout Behaviour

Research findings when the issue of race as a factor for student dropout is being investigated have shown considerable variation. Some studies (Dirkx & Jha, 1994; Matross & Huesman, 2002; Mohammadi, 1994 ; White, 1971) have found ethnicity to be a significant factor, with attrition rates for Black students to be about 10% higher than for White students. Matross and Huesman (2002) also found much higher dropout rates (20%

greater) for Native Americans than for White students. On the other hand, Lee (1996), Tinto (1993), and Horn and Carroll (1999) found no statistically significant differences, and similarly Hoyt (1998) found similar dropout and success rates for students of colour compared to other ethnic groups.

Such variations are not entirely unexpected. Students depart for a variety of reasons, and there are often a number of reasons that combine to cause a student to drop out. One study has noted an average of five reasons per student given as causes of student departures in a survey (Ogletree, 1992). Although some factors (financial stress, poor grades, and high fees) have been more commonly reported than others (Kent State University, 1993; Ogletree), no single factor could be identified as the reason for a departure. Ogletree notes that such complexity makes it difficult for institutions to plan remedial action. Sydow and Sandel (1996) have reported that their community college still had a high dropout rate even though few students cited financial difficulties as the reason for departure. Tinto (1993) has observed that sometimes when students give financial reasons as the cause for departure, these statements are being used as a socially acceptable excuse to hide other causes. Such findings demonstrate that, although ethnicity may be a factor contributing to student attrition, it does not have to be so. Therefore, it should be possible to provide strategies to ensure that students do have equal opportunities for success.

Hoyt (1998) found that students of colour may experience racism from tutors and other students and may also have feelings of not being accepted as part of the full campus. Since his study also showed that a higher proportion of students of colour entered with low academic preparation, a racist reception resulted in the amplification of their fears. Low academic preparation is a major issue for minority students who are the first generation of tertiary students within a family (Richardson & Skinner, 1992). Researchers found that many first-generation tertiary students have to face ridicule and opposition from peers, who often tell them that their time and money are being wasted. These students

frequently have time management problems as well, often further exacerbated by family needs such as demands to baby-sit younger siblings, and may not have the knowledge and experience to make full use of campus support programmes to overcome initial barriers (Padron, 1992; Richardson & Skinner, 1992).

If there are few students of a minority ethnic group on campus, then often students are unprepared for the resulting isolation (Richardson & Skinner, 1992). They are more likely to experience low expectations from staff and can find this reflected in low grades. If this discrimination becomes "overbearing," then it can develop into a major reason for dropping out (Richardson & Skinner, 1992). Minority students often have parents who have had poor academic experiences and are not always supportive (Padron, 1992). This is particularly true for those who are first-generation tertiary students. The parents may not appreciate the magnitude of the extra demands upon the time of the student. In some cultures, older daughters are expected to play a major part in household duties and in the care of younger siblings. If both parents work, and/or a parent becomes ill, it can be very difficult for a student to maintain the commitment of time and effort needed for academic study. These students lack what Bourdieu (1993) describes as "cultural capital" in that there is no family history and tradition of movement into higher education. Students from Maori and Pasifika cultures share these characteristics of strong family ties and the related responsibilities, as well as a lack of previous experience with tertiary education by parents or siblings.

This paper follows efforts made in the Developmental Education programme in one New Zealand tertiary institution to reduce the dropout rate for students and for Maori students in particular. The study will examine research on attrition rates, with special attention to work regarding students from minority ethnic groups and students in developmental educational programmes. It will then detail the particular actions taken, both by staff from the School of Foundation Studies and by the wider institution, to address attrition issues. The results of these actions will be presented and suggestions made as to wider implications.

Historic Background

The Maori race is believed to have begun settling New Zealand in or around the 13th Century. Study of the Maori language indicates that the origin of the culture may be from the Cook Islands; it is considered to be a sister language to Tahitian and Rarotongan (Biggs, 1994). The race is of Polynesian origin and shares much with other Pacific peoples in terms of language and culture.

European settlement of New Zealand commenced in the late 18th century and by the late 19th had grown to a stage where conflict (mostly over land) led to a series of land wars. As a result of these, and also because of infectious diseases brought by the new settlers, the Maori population was greatly reduced, and they became a disadvantaged group in their own land. In the last quarter of the 20th century successive governments began taking measures to remedy the injustices of the past. Settlements have been reached with a number of different Maori *iwi* (tribes) involving apologies, cash payments, and the return of some of the confiscated land. Parallel to such settlements are additional measures to improve standards of health and education.

Study Setting

Unitec Institute of Technology is a tertiary institution in Auckland, with a student

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body of about 10,000 fulltime equivalents. The Foundation Studies programme (the New Zealand equivalent of Developmental Education in the United States and of Access Education in the United Kingdom) has been operating since 1994. It commenced with 130 students per year and has experienced steady enrollment growth to reach a turnover of 256 in 2003. Students are admitted for one or two semesters (in roughly equal proportions), with a small number staying longer. Desirably, students leave when they have achieved their goals. The main purpose of the programme is to bridge students with no (or insufficient) qualifications into further study at the tertiary level. In the early years of the programme, bridging into employment was also seen as a goal, but now, although employment is still seen as a positive outcome, it is not the primary objective of the programme.

Student Demographics

Not all Foundation Studies students are full-time in the programme, and there is considerable variation regarding the individual length of stay. Full-time students take different combinations of courses, and a full-time programme may contain three, four, or five courses in any one semester. All students are counted equally in this paper, regardless of length of stay or number of courses taken. Students choose courses, with the advice of tutors, based upon levels already achieved and the programme they wish to enter. All are given a course in academic writing; most take a course in mathematics; and other courses may be in areas such as health education, accounting, design, or sport science. Courses are usually at senior high-school level, although there are some in language and mathematics which cater for a lower level.

The median age of Foundation Studies students varies from 20 to 22 each semester. About one quarter of each intake identify themselves as European, another quarter as Maori, and another quarter as Pasifika. The remainder come from a wide variety of backgrounds, the biggest numbers being Asian or Indian. Interracial marriage is quite common in New Zealand, and many students in the programme identify themselves with more than one cultural background. Students who identified themselves as belonging to Maori and another culture are considered equally in both sets of results.

Studies on student attrition have observed that the reasons for student departure are manifold (Kent State University, 1993; Ogletree, 1992; Tinto, 1993). For this paper, a dropout will be defined as a student who leaves the programme without passing any courses. Thus a dropout does not necessarily mean a negative outcome, since some students are accepted into other programmes despite failing all courses, some leave for employment, and some exhibit stopout behaviour and return to further study after a break. This paper will use dropout behaviour only per the stated definition.

Developmental Education

Students in developmental programmes, such as the Foundation Studies programme at Unitec, have often been in a position of disadvantage as part of a larger institution. Hart and Holton (2001) assert that a bridging programme is sometimes viewed as a form of charity, and that programmes that combine an intensive pastoral care with academic studies often are against the entrenched ideology of individualism, which may be especially strong in European educational models. Those of this opinion would consider that such programmes are best left to those who are personally inclined to lend a helping hand to the underprivileged.

Staff in developmental programmes can feel personally responsible for student failure (Dirkx & Jha, 1994). Although there are some advantages in developmental programmes in that class sizes are usually small and tutors

are able to get to know students better than in large-scale lecture situations, tutors are likely to feel a greater sense of loss for each dropout.

Students in Adult Basic Education programmes may not necessarily have completion as the primary objective (Dirkx & Jha, 1994), and personal sense of accomplishment is sometimes enough. Dirkx and Jha see this as one of the main reasons for the high rate of noncompletion. Any strategy for reducing attrition, therefore, will need to take student goals into account as well as the many other factors involved.

Strategies from Research for Lowering Attrition

In response to student feedback regarding the sense of being overawed by the size of a campus, some institutions have developed a system of "scaling down" to provide the students with places to meet and study together (Richardson & Skinner, 1992). Such centres also provide a way of building peer support networks. This needs to be carefully monitored (Richardson & Skinner, 1992), since sometimes there can be cases of mutual reinforcement of low expectations between peers. It is all too easy for a cycle of low expectation–low achievement–lower expectation to develop. The student may consequently drop out with all of the prior negative experiences in education being reinforced, and the student being convinced that he or she is simply incapable of tertiary study.

Several studies (Baxter, 2001; Padron, 1992; Richardson & Skinner, 1992) comment that the provision of bridging courses has been one of the most effective ways of supporting minority students. Smaller class sizes in such programmes can help in forming the support networks. Minority students (particularly first generation) usually require more academic and personal guidance than do other students (Padron, 1992). Therefore, bridging programmes need to be working with potential higher education students to provide them with the skills and confidence they need to succeed (Baxter, 2001).

Other strategies include attempts to personalise the enrollment procedures, so that the students feel more welcomed and to try to enroll minority students in clusters so as to enable them to have several classes in common (Padron, 1992). Big impersonal classes and a less than friendly environment play significant roles in causing dropout (Abbott-Chapman, Hughes, & Wyld, 1992).

Strategies for Change 1997 - 2000

From the initial years attrition rates have been a cause for concern to staff on the Foun-

dation Studies programme, and this concern deepened as dropout rates climbed steadily year by year. Staff consoled themselves with the idea that this rise was inevitable because of two changes to the nature of the programme.

1. Initially there were a number of courses that were academically undemanding, and most students were able to pass these without much effort. As these courses were replaced, students who chose not to exert themselves found the programme more difficult, and higher dropout rates ensued.
2. In the early years the School of Foundation Studies accepted a number of second-language students (mostly of Chinese descent) who were professionals who had migrated to New Zealand. These students were usually mature, well educated, and confident in an academic environment. They came to the Foundation Studies programme to improve their standard of written and oral English. By 1997 the

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programme had stopped accepting such students and was concentrating on a more clearly defined target group: students who had left school without qualifications. One effect of this shift was to replace older, more mature students with younger ones who were often less sure about their commitment to further study.

Such ideas helped to mask the true level of dropout rates. Staff were aware of the high dropout rate for Maori students. By 1997 this had risen to an unacceptable 46%, and the gap between these students and the overall dropout rate had increased alarmingly (see
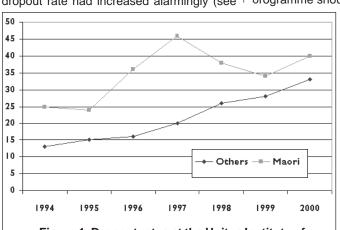
Figure 1. Dropout rates at the Unitec Institute of Technology from 1994 through 1997.

Figure 1). The graph shows the percentage of students (Maori and others) who left the programme without passing any courses.

Staff on the Foundation Studies programme agreed that changes had to be made to reverse this trend. The school began the process of countering the alarming rise in attrition rates towards the end of 1997, when a staff planning day put forward suggestions. Two major initiatives, one from the School of Foundation Studies and one from the wider institution, had significant implications for the programme.
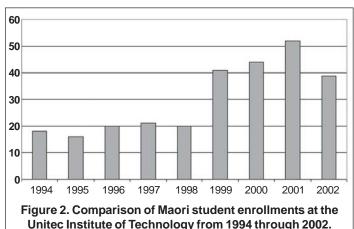
Maori Staff in Foundation Studies

Since the philosophy of the School of Foundation Studies began with the premise that students of all races should be able to succeed, it followed that an environment that did not supply sufficient visible and accessible support could contribute to the higher dropout rate for Maori students. There was, in 1997, 1 Maori tutor among the 10 staff on the programme, so the next full-time appointee was targeted to be another Maori. The two staff were given classrooms inside the Unitec School of Puukenga, a school that was the centre for the study of Maori language and culture. Whenever possible, Maori students were scheduled to have at least one of these tutors for at least one of their courses. This was not possible in every case, but it was managed for most Maori students. This strategy was in accordance with the research of Padron (1992) in trying to cluster Maori students for mutual support. One of the rooms in Puukenga also became a homeroom for Maori students who could use it as a place for study as well as academic and social interaction.

Later in 1998 these staff were also asked to actively promote the programme and recruit potential students in the West Auckland area. The proportion of Maori in the general population in this region is about 15%, so it seemed logical that a bridging education programme should be able to attract at least this large a figure. The tutors visited local *marae*, centres for different Maori groups, and also unemployment centres. The effectiveness of this promotion can be seen in Figure 2, which shows the subsequent growth in numbers. Maori enrollments doubled in 1999 and have remained at an increased level. In 2001 a third Maori tutor was appointed when one of the two earlier appointees dropped to a 0.5 position.

Figure 2. Comparison of Maori student enrollments at the Unitec Institute of Technology from 1994 through 2002.

Maia

In 1997 a group of Maori tutors at Unitec approached Senior Management with a proposal to set up an administrative centre with the purpose of giving support to Maori students on campus. Unitec had, as part of its mission statement, the goal of attracting and supporting significant numbers of Maori students, as the west of Auckland has a significant proportion of Maori people in the region.

A centre was established late in 1998, called Maia. A small establishment staff of 3 (increased to 5 by 2002) had studied the 1993 report of Davies and Nicholl that included the following factors as militating against the success of Maori students:

- poor academic pretertiary preparation, because of a school background not having provided them with the necessary skills;
- poor cultural pretertiary preparation, because the culture of mainstream educational institutions is that of the dominant pakeha (European) culture; and
- feelings of absolute alienation in an environment which, on the whole, reflects the values and norms of the dominant pakeha culture.

The mission statement for the new centre is "Maia provides quality holistic support for Maori students and staff and promotes educational and employment opportunities available at Unitec to schools, Maori organisations and iwi (tribal groups)" (Maia, 2000).

For students at Unitec, and for Foundation Studies students in particular, the centre is an agency to provide a "one stop shop" for support. Maia has provided:

- academic support,
- pastoral guidance,
- cultural support, and
- a commitment to quality in all of these.

Maia does not keep record of the programmes of the students who use its facilities, but, from the frequent communication between it and the School of Foundation Studies, it has become clear that Foundation students use it extensively. In 2002, about 400 students went to Maia for 1:1 support. It is interesting to note that about 15% of these were non-Maori, who are always welcomed there (Maia, 2002). Figure 3 shows the changes to the dropout rates in the following years (1998 – 2000).

Pastoral Care at Foundation Studies

Staff in Foundation Studies could take some pleasure in the closure of the gap between Maori students and the overall dropout rate, but it was evident that the overall rate was still too high and was still climbing to unacceptable levels. At a meeting in 2000, staff came to the conclusion that the way to reduce the dropout rate was to follow the examples of the ways in which potential Maori dropouts had been assisted. The staff of Foundation Studies set out an intensive pastoral care programme. This operated as follows.

- Staff filled in a return each week, listing all students whose attendance and/or attitude to study was giving cause for concern.
- These students were mentioned at a weekly staff meeting, and all the tutors for each student would discuss whether the problem was a single course issue, or a whole programme issue.
- If it was a single course issue, a decision was reached as to which tutor would discuss the matter with the student; if it was a whole program issue, a staff member would be designated to do a follow-up with the student.
- Where possible, the staff member chosen would be from the same ethnic background as the student: Maori staff with Maori student, Pasifika staff with Pasifika student, Asian staff with Asian student, and European staff with European student.
- Sometimes a tutor would volunteer because he or she had established a very good rapport with the student.
- The follow-up would involve contacting the student—through a friend, by phone, or via meeting—to discuss the problems and possible ways to turn around the student's difficulties.
- The staff member would report back the following week and the progress of the student monitored.
- All actions were recorded in a pastoral care log kept and maintained by the Programme leader.

Although this system was time-consuming and required increased pastoral work for all staff, the School of Foundation Studies was mindful of Padron's (1992) comment that minority students needed extra academic and personal guidance. The changes to dropout rates can be seen in Figure 4 (see page 18).
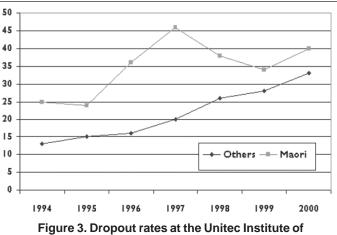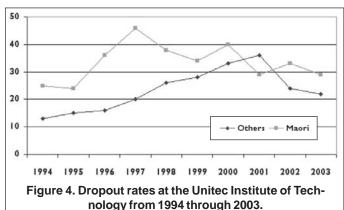

Figure 3. Dropout rates at the Unitec Institute of Technology from 1994 through 2000.

Conclusions

Tinto (1993) and White (1971), citing numerous studies on attrition, have provided a benchmark figure of 30% as being a common dropout rate for first-year students. Tinto notes that 2-year colleges have a higher dropout rate than 4-year institutions, so it would be reasonable to compare bridging educational programmes with the former. Tinto has remarked upon the difficulty in determining any single indicator of dropout tendency when an individual is involved. Some students rise over many obstacles to persist and succeed, whereas others will dropout when faced with similar problems. Risk factors, of which being in an ethnic minority group is one, may indicate a greater likelihood of failure, but such failure is not certain.

Figure 4. Dropout rates at the Unitec Institute of Technology from 1994 through 2003.

The staff of the School of Foundation Studies believe that the actions taken have been instrumental in reversing the disturbing trend in dropout rates and also have succeeded to some extent in enabling Maori students to have access/failure rates similar to other students. There is, of course, no guarantee that practices at Unitec will be as useful in other settings. As Baxter (2001) notes, studies indicate that strategies that work well for minority ethnic school children in one setting are not always the most effective for increasing participation in a different setting. However, the proactive approach to pastoral care and robust support network provided by Foundation Studies may be contributing to positive results as reflected in retention increases.

If it is possible to counter the lack of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1993) in minority ethnic students by a concerted, proactive, and multipronged approach to academic and pastoral support, then it may be possible to build the proverbial "level playing field" to enable these students to study on an equitable footing with their fellow students. This study, along with others (Ogletree, 1992; Tinto, 1993), has shown that there is no single magic wand. Despite all the efforts of Foundation Studies staff and other agencies, about 25% of students in the programme still drop out. What can be done is to constantly strive to reduce this number to the lowest dropout rate possible.

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