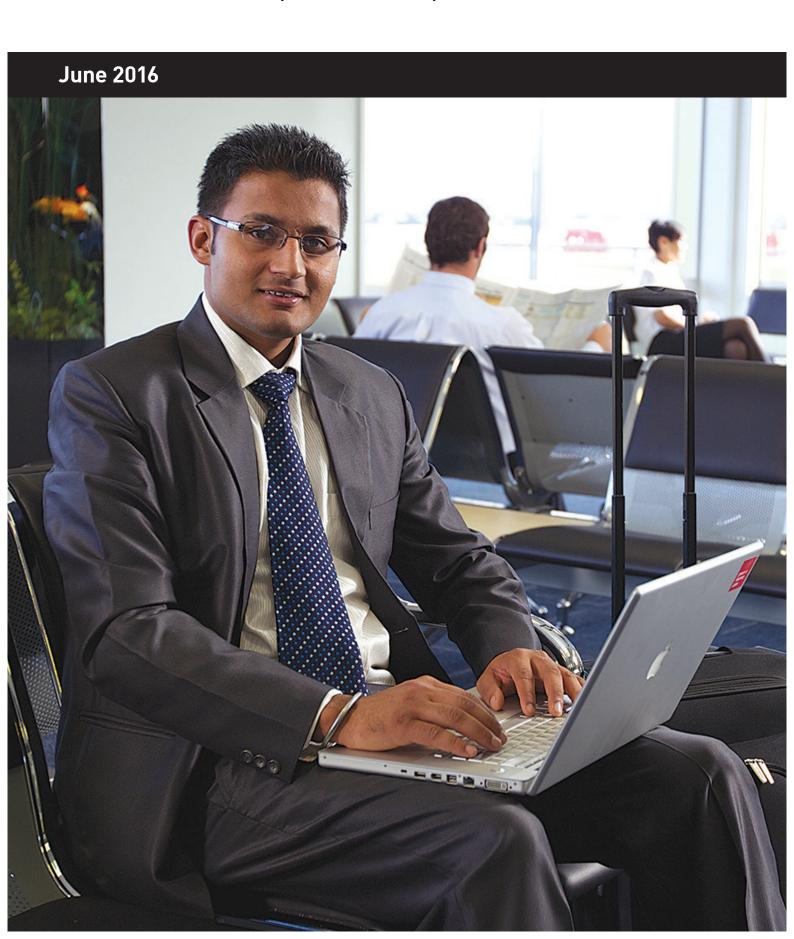# Understanding student attrition in the Graduate Certificate in New Zealand Immigration Advice

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## June 2016

# Understanding student attrition in the Graduate Certificate in New Zealand Immigration Advice

# Final Report

# Catherine de Monchy, Cath Fraser & Lynette Steele

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## 1.0 Executive Summary

The Graduate Certificate in New Zealand Immigration Advice (GCNZIA) was developed after our organisation secured a tender from the New Zealand Government in April 2011.We are the only organisation to offer this qualification which allows graduates to practice, here and overseas, once licenced by the New Zealand Immigration Advisers Authority. The programme is delivered fully online, and is very successful for those students who complete: in 2014, the Registrar of New Zealand Immigration Advisers reported anecdotally that approximately 80% of the graduates are then moving to secure a licence to practice as an immigration adviser.

However, the programme does have a problem with a significant number of enrolled students who drop out, or no-show. Where the withdrawal occurs after the programme has commenced, there is the double impact to the organisation of registering as non-completions, and taking a place which it is then too late to offer to another prospective applicant. Unfortunately, due to a lack of complete alignment between the ProMis and EBS student database systems, it was difficult to access complete data for 2012 and some 2013 students, and complete a full analysis of some of the demographic fields we were interested in.

This research sought to supplement analysis of programme records by canvassing the experiences and perceptions of 32 withdrawn students, identified from student records and selected randomly from an alphabetised list divided into three sections, as a measure to ensure a mix of regions, ethnicities, previous qualifications, first language etc. The purpose was to better understand their reasons for leaving the programme, and to see whether some of these could be addressed with adjustments to programme processes and/or delivery.

Following individual phone interviews (Appendix), anonymous transcripts were prepared by the three researchers, and results collated in a spreadsheet. There was a slightly higher rate of withdrawal for students with second-language English (56%) than for native English speakers, but no other key demographic trends were noted. The most significant finding from the interviews was the point at which the withdrawal occurred: 67% had not even entered the Moodle site, meaning that there had been no opportunity to even begin engagement with teaching material. Three main explanations for withdrawal were time constraints, a change in circumstances, and information and technical difficulties.

Recommendations from the project, which are likely to be equally relevant to the new Graduate Diploma programme which replaced the GCNZIA in 2016, include:

- A continued approach of the personal phone call by the tutor to all prospective students, first trialled successfully in the second semester of 2015. This explains the delivery approach and expectations of the students in more detail, and offers the chance for a conversation about realistic time requirements and availability. In many cases, the phone call also leads students to move to part time, rather than full time, study: a much better option for both parties than withdrawing/losing a student due to the workload.
- Development of YouTube videos for the WBoPP website which students can be directed to, to enhance their understanding of interactive online study, the course and its demands, and offer some coping strategies. The first video would showcase what an interactive online learning session looks like; the second would have clips of successful students talking about the challenges that arose for them balancing work/life and study demands, and how they got through

- Continued monitoring of withdrawal patterns, and a repeat of this research in two years' time to assess changing patterns in student success and completion, now that the programme is longer and is appended by a period of provisional licensing

Outputs from the research include a presentation of the research rationale and process at the 2015 NTLT conference, with a follow up presentation and paper planned for the 2016 event to close the loop and present final data and conclusions.

## 2.0 Introduction

### 2.1 Background

The Graduate Certificate in New Zealand Immigration Advice (GCNZIA) has in many ways been a flagship programme for the Bay of Plenty Polytechnic, as a brand new qualification, developed in close partnership with the industry body, the Immigration Advisers Authority (IAA). The development of the programme was fast paced, as both the structure/content and delivery methodology were being worked on simultaneously. The first and subsequent offerings of the programme were fully subscribed, with a considerable waiting list. From 60 full-time and 30 part-time students the Graduate Certificate produced 47 graduates in December 2012; others completed the following semester. With their numbers and new enrolments, by the end of Semester One 2013, there were a further 63 graduates.

However, in recent semesters, this promising start has showed some decline. Data from 2014 indicate 102 students enrolled in the full time programme in Feb 2014. By early March this number had dropped to 74, resulting in 64 graduates in June 2014. In July 2014 we enrolled 84 students in the full time programme. Within one month this number had dropped to 54, resulting in 38 graduates in December 2014. In semester 1, 2014, 24 students of the 28 who withdrew in total, dropped out of the programme during the first two weeks.

To some extent, the reduction in graduates was an agreement with the IAA to limit numbers, so that intake numbers were already lower than the first semester in 2014, however, the continued level of early withdrawal was a concern, resulting as it does in a refund of tuition fees, and reflecting badly on the programme's overall success and credibility. We speculated that a 60 credit programme possibly attracted many who saw it as an easy opportunity to a career, but were not prepared for intensive study. In order to test this possibility, the team developed the research proposal to investigate causes of withdrawal and review strategies to ameliorate these where possible.

The trend of early withdrawal continued in the first semester of 2015, although a change in admission strategy mid-year saw some improvement in retention statistics. Also in 2015, development started on the one-year Graduate Diploma in New Zealand Immigration Advice (GDNZIA), which commenced in 2016 to replace the GCNZIA. While this means that direct comparisons with previous cohorts cannot be made, it is nonetheless likely that many of the same issues will exist for the new qualification, given that student attrition has been identified as a significant issue in online study worldwide (http://www.studentretention.com.au).

### 2.2 Summary of the Literature

The project design was informed by an overview of relevant literature relating to issues of persistence and retention, student engagement and motivation. One widely discussed and highly pertinent issue is that while there are common factors that contribute to student withdrawals in

both online and face to face courses, retention in online courses is much lower than that in face to face courses (Patterson & McFadden, 2009; Finnegan, Morris & Lee, 2009; Poellhuber, Chomienne & Karsenti, 2008).

Many students who are at risk of dropping out, for example those who are working full-time, older, married or living with children, are more likely than others to take online courses, but also more likely to withdraw due to external circumstances (Leach and Zepke, 2011).

Various studies cited here suggest that factors which contribute to student withdrawals in online courses fall under three main categories: student related reasons (academic background, work and life experience, skills, psychological attributes), course related reasons (course design, institutional support, tutor interaction), and environmental reasons (work demands, external support, family responsibilities) (Clay, Rowland & Packard, 2008; Lee & Choi, 201).

Many authors acknowledge Tinto's framework for integration into the educational system which suggests that external and internal factors to the institution contribute to student persistence in education. Some of the solutions suggested in these discussions which we may wish to investigate further include pre-entry diagnostic screening, orientation and ongoing support at critical points (Clay et al., 2008; Hunte, 2012; Minaar, 2013; Nichols, 2010; Tung, 2012).

Most of the literature focussed on suggestions as to how student engagement might be sustained, and how students could be encouraged to overcome academic, cultural and environmental challenges to complete a qualification – and the researchers had assumed the challenges for the GCNZIA students would be very similar. In point of fact, as will be discussed further in the *Findings* section, a significant proportion of our attrition has occurred before students could be engaged – prior to the start of classes, or in the first ten days of semester.

**2.3 Research Purpose**

The overarching research question for this project was "What can we do to reduce student attrition in the online GCNZIA?"

Project aims included:

- To analyse students' reasons for withdrawal from the programme
- To analyse student geo-demographic profiles and look for patterns among withdrawn students
- To identify successful strategies for supporting retention in online programmes from the literature – both international and New Zealand
- To canvass student opinion about how BoPP might have provided additional support or alternative strategies designed to engage and retain students
- To provide useful information to inform future decision-making about programme design and delivery for GDNZIA and other BoPP online programmes.

# 3.0 Methodology

1. **Data in BOPP database (EBS)**
   We had access to BOPP data in the EBS student database. This database was new in 2013, and has limited data for students in semester 1, 2013 and no data for 2012

students. Some historical data has been sourced from the older ProMis database, but not all data fields of interest could be matched.

2. **Literature review of retention strategies.**

   We have reviewed a number of recent studies in the area of online student retention. As stated above, most of these focus on maintaining relationships with students who are in the programme, whereas our largest at-risk period for losing students is occurring before the relationship has established.

3. **Interviews with students**

   One on one phone interviews with 30 withdrawn students were undertaken by the research team. These involved semi-structured interviews allowing for both quantitative and qualitative responses. We started the interviews with some basic background questions enabling each student to present a picture of who they were as an individual – we were interested in their country of origin and country of schooling, education and career progression, languages of home life and schooling, work commitments, family commitments. We focused in on their expectations of the online programme, participation and activity completion, reasons why they perceived their studies were unsuccessful, focusing questions to help clarify institutional and personal contributing factors (for us, external and internal factors), and any feedback they could provide on how we might have done better in supporting them to success.


## 4.0 Findings & Discussion

### 4.1 Data analysis from BOPP database

As data has been retrieved from the EBS database, it has become apparent that data entry has not been sufficiently accurate to enable us to make meaningful analysis of geo-demographic trends. Coding errors are quite common, also duplication and incorrect input at programme, semester and/ or course level. In addition, some students no-show from one or two semesters and then eventually succeed at a later date, but we don't have a search mechanism to find and eliminate these from the data set of all enrolments from the beginning of the programme. The collection of evidence on students' educational and work histories has been patchy, and so the majority of our understanding of the causes of student attrition derives from our interview data.

Overall, due to these data entry errors we can't fully resolve, our best estimate is that there were 120 no-shows during the seven semesters this research project has observed (July 2012 – November 2015). During the same time, we estimate 780 students enrolled. The overall attrition rate, based on these figures, sits at approximately 15% though this varies across semesters from 3% to 28%. The results exclude students who were engaged and continued beyond the ten day refund window but who subsequently failed due to assessment results.

Interestingly, this figure is almost identical to that being reported from some overseas studies. A current symposium hosted by Australia's Student Success and Retention organisation states: "…high enrolment rates come with high drop out rates – the national average attrition rate for first year students reached 14.84percent in 2013, highest since 2005" (http://www.studentretention.com.au). The solutions offered as a drawcard to those attending include learning analytics, early intervention and innovative teaching methods – the first two of which are relevant to this study, and discussed later in the report.

**4.2 Data analysis from the interviews**

Of 32 interviews completed, we interviewed 19 students who had initially enrolled as full-time students, and 13 students who had enrolled as part-time students.

Preliminary data analysis demonstrates a higher rate of no-show for applicants with second-language English (56%), compared with first-language English (34%, and 10% of respondents with unknown origin or schooling). Overall, enrolment data indicate second language applicants comprise 51-57% typically, so our findings indicate fewer withdrawals of students whose first language is English. We don't have sufficient information to understand whether language difficulties, learning style or other factors may contribute to this trend, but since 72% of the second-language students identified time as the single reason for withdrawing from study, it raises the potential for further research to consider whether these students may not be able to work comfortably in English language at the speed required to "fit" programme expectations.

When we looked at academic achievement prior to enrolment, we found 44% of those who failed to progress had entered the programme with a recognised bachelor degree or higher, compared with 34% entering under special admission criteria (and 22% unknown). By comparison, special admission enrolments comprise between 15-23% of total enrolments in any semester, weighted average 19%. This indicates a considerably higher likelihood of dropping out of the programme for students who do not hold a recognised bachelor degree or higher.

**4.3 Explanations for withdrawals**

Students' interview responses were coded to identify whether external or internal factors contributed to their failure to progress in the programme. Of those interviewed, 18 did not engage with the study material in Moodle; change of circumstances or re-evaluation of time availability resulted in 67% of those applicants deciding to no-show before any retention strategy could have been implemented.

A clear outcome relating to time was apparent, significantly the time constraints on study when family and work needs have to be prioritised. Out of the 32 interviews undertaken, 18 respondents indicated lack of time as a primary or sole factor in their decision not to continue their studies, and of those an equal number were full-time and part-time.

Change in circumstances was also a key external factor in students' decision to terminate their studies; 10 respondents indicated this contributed to their decision not to continue, of which all but one were enrolled full-time.

There were a variety of other reasons provided by individual respondents, including difficulty gaining information prior to the start of semester, technical difficulties (either personal ability or infrastructure limitations), student loan delay, and one respondent who mistakenly thought he needed to move to Tauranga to study and his family did not support the move.

A literature review focusing on retention strategies indicates widespread concern and ongoing research in this area, a topic of relevance to institutions worldwide as the prevalence of online learning continues to expand. What we have found interesting though, is that the focus is predominantly on retaining students who are engaged. One of the predominant issues faced by the GCNZIA was students who failed to engage. As was identified above, many of those interviewed barely entered Moodle, if at all, so strategies to retain those students would have had little relevance.

**4.4 Managing attrition**

An original objective had been to ask students to consider how the organisation might have provided additional support or alternative strategies to assist them to stay the course, and complete the qualification. However, as we discovered, most withdrawals cited external rather than internal issues which led to their decision not to continue, so that this line of questioning was not relevant. For the participants who did offer a contribution, the general thread was 'more communication'. This response aligned with an initiative already started, during the research period.

In July 2015 almost every applicant for the full-time programme received a phone call from Catherine, checking on the personal circumstances of that individual, and seeking assurance the applicant understood the time expectation for full time study. As a result of this strategy, a number of applicants changed their enrolment to part-time prior to accepting the learner agreement, and shortly after enrolment a further three transferred to part-time enrolment. Attrition in Semester 2, for the full time class, was 13%, so no significant reduction compared to the average across seven semesters, but much improved on the two semesters prior, when the full-time classes experienced 25% and 28% attrition.

At the time this project was proposed (Feb, 2015), we were concerned this high attrition rate may continue unless meaningful intervention strategies were identified and implemented. It certainly appears that the phone call to check students' perceptions and expectations of the course is a useful strategy, albeit one which is time-consuming and labour-intensive for the teaching staff.

# 5.0 Conclusion & recommendations

In relation to the key research question, we found that intervention strategies prior to enrolment would be most useful in reducing attrition in the GCNZIA. We have identified lack of time as the dominant and predictable cause of failure to progress, particularly for students enrolling full-time. Many students seem to become aware that their time bank does not support the demands of study at the moment they enter the online learning forum. The researchers support more diverse communication strategies aimed at applicants who have been approved to enrol but who have not yet completed enrolment.

Historically, students have received a "first day letter" explaining the anticipated time commitment for their proposed enrolment, however this passive communication method appears not to have been meeting students' needs. A more active strategy, such as a phone call to each applicant prior to enrolment appears – from a one semester trial – to have value.

In addition, we could create YouTube videos for the WBoPP website which students can be directed to, to enhance their understanding of the course and its demands, and offer some coping strategies. Videos could demonstrate the online learning environment students will meet when semester begins, introduce the way learning activities will be presented and how assessment demands fit into the semester. The researchers believe these resources should incorporate stories from past students about how they have managed their time and achieved success.

Our final recommendation is to continue to monitor attrition data and repeat the study in two years. There is the potential for the new qualification to attract a different kind of student – the regulatory

requirements to enter the industry now demand a far greater investment of student time and effort, and this may mean applicants think more carefully before taking the step to enrol.

Preliminary results for this project were presented at the National Tertiary Learning and Teaching Conference 2015, and we propose to present the final report and findings at the 2016 conference, as well as submit an article for publication in the peer reviewed proceedings.

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## 7.0 Appendix

**Student attrition study - interview questions**          **Interview candidate**   _____

## INTRO STATEMENT

Hello, my name is _____ and I'm calling from the BoPP. Our records indicate you enrolled in the GCNZIA but did not complete the qualification – is that right? The immigration team is undertaking a research project about the reasons why students have dropped out of the immigration programme – so we can help future students complete the course and succeed with their study better. You don't have to talk to us about this, but if you did have 10 minutes for a quick chat, it would be really helpful? There are 20 questions in all – is now a good time to ask you these, or would it be more convenient if I call back at a later time?

**DEMOGRAPHICS**

| QUESTIONS |
|---|
| Do you come from an English language background? <br><br> *Country? What is your native language? What language did your family mainly use at home?* |
| If you are an EL 2nd language student, did you have an IELTS score? <br><br> *Or what did you provide to meet the EL criteria? E.g. interviewed, or schooled in English?* |
| Who paid the fees for your study? <br><br> How were your fees funded?  (*Student loan, employer, self*) |

**BEFORE STUDY**

| QUESTIONS |
|---|
| Were you working at the time you applied and enrolled? <br><br> Full-time work? |
| Did you have children at home or other family responsibilities at that time? |
| Did you have additional responsibilities and commitments at that time? |
| Had you previously studied at a university or polytechnic? <br><br> *Tease out - in NZ? Overseas - which country, what sort of qual? Special admission?* |
| Had you ever studied online before? |
| What expectations did you have of the programme? <br><br> *Time involved / level of study / course structure / ease of fitting into daily life* |

**DURING STUDY**

| QUESTIONS |
|---|
| Did you enter Moodle and attempt the learning activities, or did you withdraw before the classes started? |
| How did the reality of the study requirements compare to your expectations?<br><br>Do you think you were well informed? |
| How did you feel about your own expectation of the time commitment / what you could achieve?<br><br>Realistic? |
| Can you tell me about why you decided not to pursue the GC? |
| Was there anything about the study material or study environment that made you decide to withdraw? |

**AFTER WITHDRAWING**

| QUESTIONS |
|---|
| Is there anything particularly good or bad about the programme you want to comment on? |
| Do you still have an interest in working in the immigration industry? |
| Are you intending to try again to complete the immigration qualification? |
| Have you since studied at tertiary level, either face-to-face or online?<br>*What programme? What differences were there compared to GC?* |
| Is there anything we could have done better to help, or support you to remain in the programme? |
| What advice would you give to others considering enrolling in the Grad Cert? |