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**An Exploration of
the Cantabrian Tertiary
Adult Student Market**

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Abstract

Significant changes have occurred in the mix of students attending tertiary institutions in New Zealand over the last decade. The number of adult students involved in this level of study, in particular, have increased substantially. While there is growing overseas interest in the needs and behaviour of this student market little research appeared to have been conducted of this group of New Zealand students. This study therefore examined adult students in the Canterbury region to establish why they elected to return to study and the problems that they confronted.

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Summary

Increasing numbers of New Zealand adults¹ are electing to return to study in our universities, polytechnics and secondary schools. Universities, in particular, however have typically focused much of their research, promotional activity and core services toward potential students from secondary schools. Changes in employment opportunities and the educational sector, including a predicted levelling out in school-leaver numbers entering tertiary study, have turned university administrators' attention toward encouraging less traditional student groups to campus. This article is based on attempts at Lincoln University, Canterbury to gain a better understanding of adult students who now constitute 29 percent of all first year students on campus.

Personal, in-depth interviews were conducted with mature students at Lincoln and Canterbury Universities, and Christchurch Polytechnic over a 3 month period using a pretested questionnaire. The researchers sought to establish why this group enrolled for tertiary study, the problems they faced and how these were overcome, as well as their knowledge of the financial support they were entitled to. Personal interviews were selected as an appropriate methodology primarily because of the paucity of research in this area in New Zealand, the sensitivity of the issues that were to be explored, and the funding and time restraints placed on the researchers.

Key research findings were that local adult students were motivated to enter study primarily for vocational reasons. Learning or relearning good study habits was the main problem they encountered, particularly for the over 35 year-old group. Lack of money was also a concern. Such problems were mainly overcome by "hard work" and talking to others in a similar situation. Friends, family and acquaintances were important sources of information when trying to decide where to study. More of Canterbury University mature students who were questioned gave proximity to Christchurch city as their main reason for enrolling there than any other reason. Respondents attending Lincoln University gave a variety of reasons for

¹ An adult student is defined as someone returning to post-secondary educational study after being in the work force or away from secondary school for a short period of time. "Mature" is similarly defined.

their choice; the course was unavailable elsewhere, the campus was small and friendly, they had been to Lincoln before or there were no course restrictions.

Respondents from Christchurch Polytechnic mainly stated they enrolled to get a qualification. Further probing revealed respondents thought universities were too big and impersonal, and the polytechnic had the subject they wanted to study. The researchers recommend that this small descriptive study form the basis of more rigorous research.

1. Introduction

The importance of a well educated workforce is common knowledge. At a personal and collective level education has a major impact on, among other things, employability, self-esteem, family violence, the standard of living, and company and national competitiveness.

The number of New Zealanders involved in education and training is low by world standards and is seen as one of the key problems facing this country (Crocombe et al., 1991). An OECD report of education in member countries, in the same year, recorded 25 percent of our adult population had attended senior secondary school classes compared to an OECD average of 35%. Countries such as Germany and Austria, however, had rates of 60 percent or more (Rivers, 1992). The ramifications of these figures to the New Zealand economy are enormous. For example, with so few of our population gaining senior secondary education there are fewer qualified and skilled individuals in the workforce. Some 38 percent of New Zealanders currently hold no formal qualifications whilst less than one third of the Japanese population and less than one quarter of the German population have no qualification (Crocombe et al., 1991).

There has been a major thrust by recent governments to increase New Zealanders' involvement in education and training since these reports were undertaken. In 1992, for example, the Industry Training Act was passed. This set the scene for a government programme to encourage employers, employees, and education and training institutions to participate in the upskilling of workers. It included an advertising strategy to change attitudes and behaviours toward workplace training (Upskill New Zealand), the establishment of ETSA (Educational Training and Support Agency), the dissolution of industry training boards and the formation of ITO's (Industry Training Organisations).

This government effort is partly responsible for the rapid growth recently recorded in tertiary participation levels; almost a doubling since 1985 (Ministry of Education Gazette, Feb., 1994). High levels of unemployment, caused by restructuring and downsizing in New Zealand's public organisations and private companies, the downturn in the world economy and the changing nature of skills required in the workplace have also contributed to this situation. As a result there have also been more adult students enrolling in post-compulsory education and training.

Lincoln University in Canterbury, one of the newer New Zealand universities, witnessed an almost 50 percent increase in student numbers between 1984-1993 (Martin,1987; Infolink, June, 1994). Enrolments, however, have gradually slowed to just over 9 percent in 1993. Other New Zealand universities are experiencing similar patterns, forcing university administrators to plan more carefully for the future in an increasingly dynamic and competitive environment. This has meant greater attention to less traditional student groups and new ways of meeting their needs. This study is the result of this change in the mix of university students and the slowing of enrolment by the traditional student body.

2. Study Impetus

A considerable change in the mix of students has been observed at Lincoln University in the past decade. Traditionally most students were young, male and New Zealanders (78% of enrolments in 1981). In 1993, however, 39 percent of the student population were women, 12 percent international students (Infolink, Feb.,1994) and, in 1994, 29 percent were 25 years of age or older. This shift toward an older student population on campus is also evident in national tertiary statistics. Despite this trend, however, no New Zealand research was found that explored why this group entered university, how they selected an institution and if they encountered any special problems.

3. Overseas Research

'Motivation for study' was an area commonly addressed by researchers in the United Kingdom and the United States. Lowden et al. (1990) found three key reasons that influenced university attendance; desire for knowledge, qualifications for a career, and interest in a topic. Other researchers (Munn and McDonald, 1988) drew similar conclusions, however, there were conflicting opinions as to whether any of these was a prime motivator. None of the studies however defined terminology. Had this been addressed perhaps a better understanding of adults reasons for returning to study may have emerged.

Some researchers noted gender influenced 'motivation to study'. Young (1980) found males gave vocational reasons for attending university more frequently than females. Women said opportunities for meeting new people and 'being more informed' encouraged them to study. Munn and McDonald (1988) and the Leceister Advisory Council for Adult and Continuing

Education (ACACE,1982) had similar findings. The history and circumstances of respondents in all three studies however was largely overlooked so no firm conclusions can be drawn on the impact of gender on decision to study.

Munn and MacDonald (1988) found age influenced course selection. People over 55 years of age were least interested in vocationally-related subjects. Desire for knowledge was the prime motivator. With retirement so close it is unsurprising this group had fewer altruistic and vocational reasons for tertiary study.

Several models have been proposed to explain adult participation in tertiary education. Spandard (1990) reviewed models by Millar and Catolano. The former suggested unemployment, level of education, influence of family and friends, financial situation and other factors create a push-pull affect on decision to study. The greater the forces propelling a person toward study the more likely they are to enrol, and vice-versa. Factors, in other words, are consciously or subconsciously weighed against each other, a total arrived at and the decision to study made. Millar's model was extended by Catolano (ibid). It was suggested adults' confront many decisions in their life-time and further education is simply ranked in terms of personal priority and lifecycle effects. This proposed framework was linked to Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the concept of opportunity cost (Spandard, 1990). Barriers to study have also been described by Lowden et al. (1990) as psychological, and situational or external. Psychological barriers relate to attitudes and perceptions. Domestic commitments and financial barriers are external or situational factors. Similar to the Millar (op.cit.) push-pull effect, if barriers are too strong a person elects not to study.

ACACE (1982) found adults had entrenched attitudes toward education. These were believed to be formed early in life. Negative experiences and perceptions about study held at a younger age were more likely to result in a decision not to study, or even consider study in later life. Although not discussed by these studies, overcoming negative internal beliefs is likely to be a first step in encouraging further education. Targeting group leaders, role models and innovators (Rogers, 1983) would seem an appropriate path for educators to initially take when attempting to reach potential adult students. External barriers would then need to be addressed.

Munn and MacDonald (1988) observed that most respondents who did not enrol in tertiary study said they were not interested or couldn't find the time required, when questioned about

post-secondary education and training. This finding has parallels to the push-pull model discussed by Spandard (1990) and fits these researchers suggestion that internal barriers have to drop before external barriers can be overcome.

External or situational barriers that were recorded included course costs (ACACE, 1982) and institutional actions (op.cit.). The latter was explained as institutions that overlooked part-time students needs, particularly in relation to timetabling of courses. Lowden et al. (1990) also found women considered their domestic situation as a barrier to study more frequently than men.

These exploratory overseas studies shed some light on the motivators and perceived barriers to study faced by adult students. They are, however, not directly applicable to the New Zealand environment, and, furthermore, are outdated and sometimes pose as many questions as they seek to answer. If local universities wish to encourage adults to return to study then further research is needed to build on the work already discussed, particularly in a New Zealand context.

4. The Study

Within the confines of a 10 week period over the university summer holidays, and a small grant, some of the issues raised by earlier overseas studies were explored.

In-depth personal interviews at Lincoln University, Canterbury University and Christchurch Polytechnic were selected as the most appropriate methodology. The potentially sensitive nature of the questions, the lack of prior New Zealand research in this area and the likelihood that such a cognitively-based study would require researcher probing tended to suggest this technique would be preferable. Studies by Bateson (1985) and Bitner et al. (1985) support this decision. Traditional surveys were believed less than satisfactory to investigate intangible products. The complexities inherent in service situations, and decisions regarding them, were improved by techniques that would capture more abstract processes (Shostack, 1977). Education, as a professional service, is inherently intangible, difficult to trial pre-purchase and is often low in experience qualities. This Shostack (ibid) argued means techniques that are less rigid and objective may be more appropriate to determine such things as perceptions and attitudes. The Privacy Act was also a consideration; the study was

funded for only a limited period during the Christmas vacation when most students were not on campus. Contact with adult students was therefore reliant on availability.

In total 60 older students were interviewed. The interviewer initially approached all students entering a designated area at each campus, regardless of gender. From this initial group those who were enrolled at one of the three institutions, could be identified as adult students and were taking courses available at Lincoln University (the research sponsor) were asked to complete interviewer-led questionnaires. Questions covered five main areas; respondent characteristics, reasons for studying, problems associated with returning to study, awareness of the availability of financial assistance and selection of a tertiary institution.

5. Research Results

More men than women were surveyed (70% compared to 30%). The researchers were aware of this bias but wanted to confine the sample to those who were taking subjects available at Lincoln University. Thirty per cent of all respondents were under 26 years of age and nearly 42 percent were between the ages of 26 and 30. Over 90 percent had school certificate, 77 percent university entrance, 61 percent had bursary, 32 percent a degree qualification and 12 percent some other type of qualification. The latter was commonly found to be a business studies course offered at Christchurch Polytechnic. Over 85 percent of students were enrolled full-time; 37 percent at Lincoln University, 35 percent at the University of Canterbury and the remainder at Christchurch Polytechnic. These adults were studying a total of 17 courses, the majority commerce-related (58%).

'Improve my job prospects' was the reason 40 percent gave for electing to study, being unemployed and a need for a career change influenced 19 percent and 11 percent respectively. Vocational reasons for study thus motivated 70 percent of the sample. Very few gave personal interest as a reason for studying (7%) and there was no obvious gender affect. Age however did appear to influence motivation to study. In the under 26 age group 'improving job prospects' was commonly cited (59%), as it was by 38 percent of the 26-30 year age group. Unemployment was the motivator for 50 percent of the 31-35 year olds and 25 percent of those over 36 years of age. In the latter group 38 percent also believed it would help their job search.

Learning how to study again and financial worries were identified as the main problems respondents encountered (49% and 24%), regardless of gender and age. Other reasons provided were 'difficulties with supervisor', problems with child-care and lack of confidence.

Hard work helped 25 percent of respondents deal with their problems. Talking to others was also a common tactic (27%) as was talking to others in a similar situation and "joining student support groups". Gender and age did not appear to be significant variables.

Findings about adult students understanding of the financial assistance available to them from government are inconclusive. Sixty-eight percent had concerns about their financial situation, 88 percent believed they clearly understood what they were entitled to from government, however, 38 percent thought government assistance schemes applied only to school leavers. It would appear there is some confusion as to what financial assistance mature students are entitled to.

Reasons the sample gave for considering, selecting or rejecting an institution were interesting. Only two respondents (5%) currently at Lincoln or Canterbury universities said they had considered enrolling at Christchurch Polytechnic. One third of all those interviewed said they wished to enrol for a degree so the polytechnic was not suitable, a further 11 percent stated it did not offer the course they required. Other reasons were varied. It also seems that a third of those who enrolled at Christchurch Polytechnic had not seriously considered the universities. Comments included 'too impersonal', 'too big', and 'courses unsuitable'.

Almost 65 percent of those who enrolled at Canterbury University did so primarily for its proximity to their home, a further 15 percent because of the subjects they offered. Some 27 percent of Lincoln and polytechnic students had thought about attending Canterbury University; 18 percent because it was less distance for them to travel and 27 percent because of the courses it offered. Nearly 35 percent, however, rejected Canterbury because they "didn't want to go to such a large a university" or because it wasn't a serious consideration.

Adults enrolled at Lincoln said the friendliness and size of campus attracted them, or they had been there before (38%). Twenty-four per cent said it was the only institution to offer the course they wanted and 19 percent said because it had no course restrictions. Over half of those interviewed at Canterbury University and Christchurch Polytechnic had thought of

studying at Lincoln because of the subjects offered and 21 percent initially found its size attractive. Lincoln was finally rejected by 54 percent of this group because of the perceived distance to travel. Others rejected it because they believed it was still a horticultural and agricultural college (19%).

A number of operational problems surfaced during the study, however, that are likely to have biased results or influenced the validity of the research. The time frame of the study, over the Christmas holidays, resulted in a less than representative sample of adult Cantabrian tertiary students being selected. Respondents were more likely to be more dedicated students, more senior students or those with personal circumstances that required their presence on campus during this traditional summer study break. Furthermore, the sample was over-represented by males (70%). The researchers were aware of this problem, however, interviews were required to be conducted only with those adults studying subjects offered by Lincoln, the study sponsor. In relation to statistical validity, while 60 respondents may be considered a very small sample and the margin of error quite high, the researchers were more intent on confirming or disconfirming the results of similar overseas studies in a New Zealand situation whilst at the same time laying the foundation for more quantifiable research in the near future. This was seen as exploratory research.

6. Discussion and Recommendations

Despite limitations, primarily caused by sample size, selection, and the timeframe of the study, some interesting results emerged from this descriptive study that warrant further investigation. Vocational opportunity was the key motivator for many respondents, particularly younger adults. Sample bias however is likely to have occurred as only students enrolled in subjects offered by Lincoln University were interviewed. Lincoln has a strong commerce and agricultural base therefore adults taking arts-related courses, for example, were omitted. Any future study should not only be larger and during the university year, it should also include a representative random sample of a greater number of tertiary adult students within the Canterbury region regardless of their subject choice. Vocation, in such circumstances, may not then be such a significant indicator.

Broadening the scope of the sample could also establish if gender influenced motivation to study, the study problems that were encountered, and institutional preference. A male bias in the sample, created by control of subjects elected by respondents, revealed no significant

results. Earlier overseas studies did identify a gender effect, with men being more likely to stress vocation as a reason to study than women (ACACE, 1982). Almost a decade has passed however since many of these studies were undertaken and it is likely that women's attitudes to study have changed substantially as more women have entered the workforce since this time.

Relearning good study skills was commonly identified as a problem by respondents and was dealt with by hard work and support networks. Exactly how older students study and whether study skills workshops and other interventions lower barriers to study and reduce anxiety is important to establish. Adult students' preference for advice and support should also be understood. There are induction programmes and adult student associations in some New Zealand tertiary institutions however in times of educational resource constraints effective allocation of funds is vital. Financial worries were also frequently mentioned by respondents. There appeared to be some confusion however about what government assistance this group was entitled to. Clarification could lower barriers to study and see more enrolling in tertiary programmes.

Local adult students in the sample seemed to fall into two broad groups; those for whom polytechnic was not a study option and those for whom university was not considered. Whether these findings would be repeated in a larger study is unclear. Any further research in the area should consider psychographical factors, and internal barriers and perceptions to study to explain study choice. Some studies have already been done in New Zealand to examine tertiary study and the traditional student straight from secondary school. Their attitudes toward education, the impact of parents' perceptions, parental educational level and occupational status are all believed to have a significant impact on attitudes toward education (Holland et al., 1990). This research, the Spandard (1990) model review and the ACACE (1982) studies should form the backdrop to a more in-depth investigation to early attitudes and perceptions toward gaining post-compulsory qualifications.

Lastly, responses revealed adult students rejected some institutions on the basis of misconceptions about their subject offerings and elected others by attributes not directly attributable to the institutions, that is, by default. These latter points raise interesting challenges for institutional marketers.

The size of this group within the general tertiary student population has increased

significantly in recent years and the trend is predicted to continue. Researchers in New Zealand however have been slow to provide insights into adult students characteristics, behaviours, problems and perceptions. The findings and suggestions presented in this research project, while limited, will hopefully encourage further work in this area.

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