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**DROP OUT FROM  
WANGANUI REGIONAL  
COMMUNITY POLYTECHNIC  
1992-1993**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Educational Administration,  
Massey University

**Christine Elizabeth Coutts**

**1995**

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## ABSTRACT

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In New Zealand recent changes in legislation have increased both the autonomy and accountability of the tertiary education sector. As a consequence, polytechnics have become painfully aware of the cost of student drop out from programmes both to their credibility as quality education providers and to their coffers.

The case study of student drop out from Wanganui Regional Community Polytechnic (WRCP) was undertaken in response to administrators' concerns that, as a small, recently established polytechnic, costs associated with the loss of students might threaten its economic viability. WRCP administrators feared an increase in the rate of drop out as changes to the funding of tertiary study created increased financial pressures for students.

The case study employed a range of techniques, including a survey of archived information and student questionnaires, augmented by the perceptions gained from informal discussions with staff to ascertain the extent and nature of drop out.

Analysis of data collected over a two year period (1992-1993) at WRCP revealed a pattern of drop out in terms of student characteristics, style and timing of withdrawal. Overall it showed that there was little to discriminate between the characteristics of leavers and those who persisted on a course.

The two main theoretical conceptualisations of drop out, the 'integration' and 'investment' theories, were found to share the assumption that drop out is the consequence of 'cost/benefit' analysis. However, despite increased fees and reduced allowances for many students, few cited financial reasons for withdrawal. An analysis of students' self-reported reasons for leaving indicated that finances are but one of many factors which affect a students determination of the costs and benefits of continued attendance. Many reasons given were outside the control of the Polytechnic. However, three Polytechnic academic schools were consistent in their reporting of high drop out numbers, suggesting the need for further research into programme related reasons for withdrawal in these areas. These findings were consistent with recent models, which portray drop out as a complex process influenced by a multitude of factors, including student background and characteristics on entry, environmental changes and institutional factors.

From these findings some strategies to enhance the 'fit' of students and hence improve their retention are suggested. Continued monitoring and further research of a more phenomenological nature are recommended in order to gain a greater understanding of student drop out.

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## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

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The following definitions of various types of student leaving behaviour have evolved a common currency in the literature and will be used in this study to mean:

- **drop out** refers to any student who leaves the programme of study for which they were enrolled in a given year. This term includes both those who formally indicate their intention to leave as well as those lost by way of attrition.
- **attrition** describes the process whereby an enrolled student ceases to attend classes and fails to respond to follow up procedures initiated by the institution. Such students may simply stop coming after quite regular attendance, or more often they 'peter out', missing lectures and getting behind with assignments before finally disappearing altogether; very rarely do students announce that they are withdrawing and explain why (after Smith, 1987).
- **withdrawal** describes the process by which a student (the withdrawer) who had enrolled subsequently informs the institution that s/he no longer wishes to continue studying.
- **failure** describes the process by which the student who had enrolled is prevented from continuing studies by the institution because of failure to satisfy regulations, such as not meeting the standards necessary for minimum rate of progression. (Also referred to as push out or exclusion - after Abbott-Chapman et al, 1992.)
- **wastage** refers to students who finally enrolled but who did not gain a course credit, ie who did not complete the course successfully, either through withdrawing before taking the assessments or by failing the assessment. Implicit in the use of this term is the financial focus of the institution's administration.
- **discontinuation** is the process whereby students do not return to progress from one year to another in a multi-level programme.
- **stop outs** are students who are taking a break from study (stopping out), but intending to return - this term differentiates between permanent decisions to withdraw from a programme and temporary breaks in study (after Abbott-Chapman et al, 1992).
- **persisters** are students who attend the programme they have enrolled in over the entire year or for the entire duration in the case of shorter courses. The persistence or retention rate compares the number of students completing the year with the initial number enrolled.
- **wavering persisters** is a term used to describe persisters who indicate they had thought of withdrawing or changing programmes, though for some reason they do not make the 'break' (after West et al, 1987).
- **transfer** - movement to another institution to continue studies
- **drop down** is said to occur when students lessen their study load, reducing the total number of units they are enrolled for, or dropping from a full-time study commitment to part-time.

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