

THE VICTORIA INSTITUTE



Victoria University Student Attrition Report

Comprehensive Analysis and Recommendations

The Victoria Institute

vu.edu.au

CRICOS Provider No. 00124K
CRICOS Provider No. 02475D



VICTORIA UNIVERSITY STUDENT ATTRITION REPORT

COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS &
RECOMMENDATIONS

Final Report

DECEMBER 2013

THE VICTORIA INSTITUTE

Acknowledgements

A/Prof Katie Hughes (project design and oversight)

Donna Wyatt (survey design and administration, data analysis, report writing)

Keshara deSilva (coding, data analysis, report writing)

Dr Alison Baker (coding, data analysis, report writing)

Hendrik Jacobs (report preparation, communication strategy)

Address

Victoria University
City Queen Campus
300 Queen Street
VIC, 3000
Australia

Phone: +61 3 9919 5934

Email: victoria.institute@vu.edu.au

About

The Victoria Institute

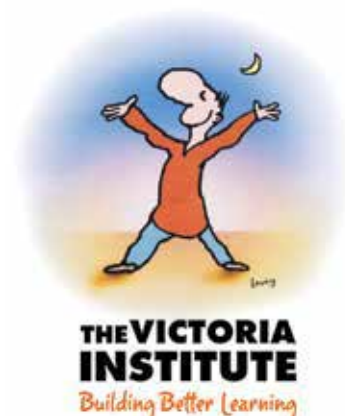
The Victoria Institute is a research institute with a focus on inclusive education. We work with researchers, teachers, communities and policy makers to improve educational experiences and outcomes for all.

Our research aims to build better learning for students from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Institute was founded in 2011 in response to fading sophisticated research into education policy and programming.

Led by Professor Roger Slee (Director), we aim to analyse, evaluate and challenge education practices, curriculum and assessment.

Situated in Melbourne, the Institute forms part of the College of Education at Victoria University.



Contents

Contents	7
Figures	9
Glossary	11
Executive Summary	13
1. Introduction	17
2. Literature Review	19
3. Methodology	27
3.1 Target population	27
3.2 Questionnaire development	28
3.3 Data collection procedures	28
3.4 Data analysis techniques	28
4. Characteristics of the Sample	31
4.1 Demographic Characteristics	31
4.2 Geographic characteristics of study sample	32
5. Findings	37
5.1 Key demographic findings	37
5.2 Primary Reasons for Leaving	39
5.3 Courses	45
5.4 Teaching and Learning	50
5.5 Support Services	58
5.6 Why or why not VU?	62
6. Conclusion	69
7. Recommendations	71
References	73
Appendices	77
Appendix A	77
Appendix B	82

Figures

Figure 01: Attrition rates of domestic students.....	25
Figure 02: Comparison of retention rates	26
Figure 03: SES Comparison.....	32
Figure 04: Distance to campus	32
Figure 05: DEECD regions	33
Figure 06: Campus attended	34
Figure 07: The faculties these students belonged to.....	35
Figure 08: Has anyone in your family ever gone to university or TAFE?	37
Figure 09: First in family students against the overall sample population	38
Figure 10: Language spoken at home against age categories	38
Figure 11: Full-time and part-time employment patterns whilst studying against age categories	39
Figure 12: Main reasons for leaving	40
Figure 13: Offers taken at other institutions.....	40
Figure 14: Main reasons for leaving: Exploring the 'other' category.....	41
Figure 15: Employment as a reason to leave by sector	41
Figure 16: Distance travelled to get to university	42
Figure 17: Personal reasons as a reason for leaving by age and sex	42
Figure 18: Financial reasons by age and SES	43
Figure 19: Financial reasons by sector and sex.....	43
Figure 20: Reasons students leave	45
Figure 21: Did students find courses relevant and interesting by faculty	46
Figure 22: Was the course content boring and repetitive?	46
Figure 23: Were the classes well presented with good supporting materials?	47
Figure 24: Challenging and up-to-date content.....	48
Figure 25: Did teachers use teaching strategies that made classes interesting?.....	50
Figure 26: Teaching strategies that made classes interesting against number of classes attended	51
Figure 27: Availability of teachers when you need assistance.....	52
Figure 28: Evaluations on teachers being available when required for assistance against age categories.....	52
Figure 29: Availability of teachers against number of classes attended.....	53
Figure 30: Did teachers provide you with timely feedback on your work?	54
Figure 31: Timely feedback received against number of classes attended	54
Figure 32: Who was dissatisfied with the timeliness of the feedback?	55
Figure 33: Evaluation on providing timely feedback against age categories.....	55
Figure 34: Why students didn't speak to anyone before they left.....	59
Figure 35: Who did the students speak to before they left?	60
Figure 36: Student evaluation of general staff, teachers and courses at VU.....	63
Figure 37: How likely is it you would recommend VU to a friend?.....	63
Figure 38: Do you think you would like to study at VU again in the future?	64
Figure 39: Do you think you would like to study again in the future?	64
Figure 40: Who is planning to come back to study at TAFE?	65
Figure 41: Reasons for not listing VU as the first preference.....	65
Figure 42: Reasons for taking up offers at other universities	66
Figure 43: Reasons for enrolling at VU.....	67
Figure 44: Those who thought university study was a good option	67
Figure 45: Enrolling at VU seemed like the best way to find a good job	68

Glossary

AQF levels

The Australian National Qualification Framework levels are defined by the relative complexities and depth of achievement required to demonstrate that level of achievement. AQF levels range from level 1 that has the lowest complexity (certificate 1) to level 10 that has the highest complexity (doctoral degree).

ATAR

The Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) is a rank that allows the comparison of students who have completed different combinations of Year 12 exams/final examinations. It is used by institutions (except those in Queensland) to rank and select students for admission to tertiary courses. Other selection criteria may be used together with the ATAR.

Attrition

Attrition is defined in this study as leaving the University by withdrawing or deferring from a course, and not returning the following year.

DEECD regions

In 2011 there were nine regional and metropolitan education regions named by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD). These regions were the Western Metropolitan Region, Northern Metropolitan Region, Southern Metropolitan Region, Eastern Metropolitan Region, Gippsland Region, Hume Region, Barwon South-Western Region, Grampians Region, and the Loddon Mallee Region.

DEEWR

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

Deferred

Students who have received an offer at a university but been given permission to delay the start by six months or 12 months at the start of the course.

DIISRTE

Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research and Tertiary Education.

Dual sector

Institutions that provide both Higher Education and Vocational Education/Further Education training.

FYHE

First Year in Higher Education.

HE

Higher Education.

HECS-Help

Higher Education Contribution Scheme - Australian Government loan program that helps students to pay their student contributions.

LOA

Leave of Absence - a period of time a student is away from study normally granted for either six or 12 months.

SES

Socio-Economic Status

Mature age

Students over the age of 25 years

NESB

Non-English Speaking Background

Non-traditional student

Non-traditional students can be defined as meeting one or a combination of the following factors: mature-age students, first in their family to attend university, coming from a non-English speaking background, students from low SES backgrounds, rural, regional and remote students, Indigenous Australians, off-campus and part time students. (Wylie 2005; Devlin 2010)

P-12

Primary School to Year 12

TAFE

Technical and Further Education

VE/FE

Vocational Education/Further Education

VU

Victoria University

WEBCT

Web Course Tools - online tools used to deliver course material and to share information.

Executive Summary

For several years, rates of student retention have been a major concern for Victoria University (VU). Given the competitive nature of the tertiary sector in Australia, improving retention rates has been a significant focus for universities. A large body of research has been undertaken to explore the various reasons behind a student's decision to leave university, with each university exhibiting a unique pattern of attrition. Rates of retention and attrition often reflect the broader economic context, the specific student cohort that a university attracts, and the courses and services it offers.

To date, VU has undertaken very little comprehensive research into attrition patterns, with Cao and Gabb's report (2006) being the notable exception. It became increasingly clear that VU needed to conduct comprehensive research into the attrition patterns of students and, on the basis of this research, develop focused ways to improve student retention rates. In 2011, the Victoria Institute (then IDEAS) was tasked with undertaking a research project that would provide a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the factors associated with attrition. This research would then form the basis for a series of recommendations to assist the University in improving its retention rates in the future.

Research Purpose and Method

To explore VU's attrition patterns, students were chosen from all three sectors (Higher Education, Vocational Education and Further Education) on the basis that they had formally withdrawn, cancelled, were on leave of absence (LOA) or had deferred in 2011. Evidence suggests that a significant proportion of students who defer and go on LOA do not return to study. The responses of these students were only included in the data if they indicated they would not be returning. A total of 2587 students were contacted by the Student Evaluation Unit to undertake a 15-minute telephone survey. This resulted in a sample group of 585 students.

The questionnaire was designed to collect detailed responses using both a qualitative (i.e. open-ended questions) and quantitative (i.e. Likert scaled responses) approach, in order to cover the following three main areas:

1. Demographic characteristics
2. Students' reasons for leaving the University
3. Evaluation of their university experience:
 - Teaching and learning
 - Student support and services at VU

Key Findings

The following lists of some of the key demographic information that was salient in this study:

- Approximately 28% said none of their family members had attended university or TAFE.
- Approximately 35% were 25 years or above
- Thirty percent of students spoke a language other than English at home
- Fifty-seven percent of students who decided to leave the University were female
- Approximately 24% of the students who left the University lived at a distance of more than 40km from campus, some over 100km.
- Forty-six percent of students over the age of 25 years were working full-time; 12.5% of the younger cohort were working full-time whilst studying.

Reasons for leaving VU

Throughout this study, it became apparent that there is a complex set of reasons behind the decision to leave university. However, a majority of students reported that the primary reason for leaving VU was to take up an offer at another university or TAFE. The distance a student has to travel to a campus and where a course is in their order of preference are also significant retention drivers. In other words, the closer a student lives to a campus and the higher the course is on their list of preferences, the more likely they are to stay at the University.

A number of other primary reasons were cited for leaving VU, including employment opportunities and, personal and/or financial reasons. Students with full-time and part-time work found it difficult to manage both work and study, often due to the inflexibility of class timetables. In this case, financial needs take priority over study and students leave university before completion of their course.

University Experience

In general, students responded positively as to their teaching and learning experience and the support available at VU. However, further analysis revealed that students needed to be made more aware of the support services available at VU, to assist them in their decision-making and to support them when they are experiencing difficulties. A large proportion of the students surveyed (60%) left the University without accessing student services or seeking advice from within the institution.

The study explored students' experience at VU using questions that asked them to reflect on their experience in class, including the content covered and their relationship with teaching staff. Students also responded to questions about the relevance of course content and whether they considered it challenging and up-to-date. They were also asked to assess the standard of the facilities provided in classes, lecture theatres and/or labs. The majority responded positively, however a small proportion of students were quite dissatisfied with their experience at VU.

The use of open-ended questions allowed students to provide feedback on ways that the facilities at VU could be improved. Out of these responses, a frequent comment was that a better use of technology would enhance the study experience, such as improving accessibility and offering online delivery options.

Students' experience of teaching staff was analysed on the basis of questions about the teaching

strategies used, the availability of staff, and the feedback provided to students. To obtain a better measure of students' perception of VU's teaching staff, data was analysed against the number of weeks students were enrolled before leaving VU. The majority of the students who were satisfied with their teaching staff had attended seven or more weeks of classes. Moreover, the students who were dissatisfied with their teaching staff had also attended more than seven weeks of classes. This indicates that these students had attended a significant number of weeks before they decided to leave the University.

Amongst the suggestions that students made in relation to what would assist them in completing their courses successfully, increased flexibility in course delivery and timetabling, and the accessibility of learning support outside teaching hours figured prominently.

A significant finding of the study was that, although the students have already left the University, when asked about their future study plans, most intended to return to study at a later stage. Amongst those who planned to return, the majority said they would prefer to return to study at VU.

The study clearly revealed that the HE journeys of those students who had left VU in 2011 were not linear; it appears that interruptions to studies are inevitable as life's priorities change. This is further validated in a relatively large body of research that examines attrition rates. Similarly, research into course completion has shown that HE students' experiences at university are neither linear nor predictable (Tresman 2002).

The retention of students is a key concern for Victoria University (VU), as is the case for most universities in a competitive environment. While every university has its own unique pattern of attrition, a number of common factors contribute to this pattern, such as the specific nature of the student cohort and the courses and services that a university offers. There are, however, more complex reasons as to why a student decides to leave a course, and how they come to that decision, that are specific to the university in question.

In 2011, The Victoria Institute (then IDEAS) was tasked with undertaking a research project that would provide a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the factors that contribute to attrition at VU. Prior to 2011, VU had undertaken very little comprehensive research into attrition patterns, with Cao and Gabb's report (2006) being the notable exception.

A central component of this research is the production of a set of recommendations, based on the findings of the study, which will assist VU in achieving higher retention rates, concurrently reducing the loss of revenue that attrition represents.

In general, the findings of this report indicate that:

1. For the most part, VU students were positive about their experiences both in and out of the classroom. Despite this positive response, students indicated that they were willing to move to another institution (La Trobe University and RMIT University, in particular).
2. Students were more likely to be retained if they were enrolled in a vocationally-orientated course, with a clear career path following graduation.
3. The distance a student has to travel and where a course was placed in their order of preference are significant retention drivers. In other words, the closer a student lives to a campus and the higher the course was on their list of preferences, the more likely they are to stay at the University.
4. Students have a lack of understanding of the services that are available at VU to assist them in their decision-making or to support them if they are having academic, financial or personal problems. For the most part, students leave without seeking any assistance from the University.
5. Although the students have left their course, many of them intend to return to their studies.

One of the most challenging issues facing many institutions of higher education (HE) is the retention of students. Addressing issues of retention and student success has become a major focus for research and the funding of programs in the tertiary sector. In 2008, the Bradley report foreshadowed significant adjustments to the post-compulsory education sector. Similarly, the changes made to Commonwealth government funding arrangements, through the HE Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), were aimed at improving the participation rates of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Palermo et al. 2012).

In an environment that allows for uncapped student enrolments, the balance between admitting students from a range of target groups, many of whom have not had access to HE before, and ensuring that they complete their qualifications, has posed new challenges in terms of how HE institutions operate. The demographic landscape of HE has altered significantly over the past few decades in Australia, including an increase in the number of international students and a requirement for alternative delivery modes. HE in Australia has gone through a period of rapid reform, including a shift from elite to mass education and the resulting influx of diverse student groups (Bosman, Coiacetto and Dredge, 2011). Based on the DEEWR statistics cited by Norton (2012), the total number of HE enrolments increased from about 30,000 in 1950 to about 1.2 million in 2010, including both international and domestic students. In 1950, one in 267 Australian residents was enrolled in a university, compared to one in 18 in 2010 (Norton 2012). Furthermore, the Australian Government has set ambitious national targets and has invested large sums into programs to improve social inclusion in HE. By 2025, it is hoped that 40% of all 25-34 year-olds will have attained a qualification at bachelor level or above, and that by 2020, 20% of all undergraduates will be from a low socioeconomic background (Edwards 2009).

In Australia, rates of attrition are not experienced equally across HE institutions. For example, universities that are dual sector have a diverse student population (in terms of age, ethnicity, gender, language spoken) and, each year, a significant proportion of students these universities without completing their course. Some of these students transfer to other courses within the same university or to another university; and some leave university altogether (McMillan, 2005).

In past research, a variety of proxy terms have been used to define attrition, such as 'drop-outs', 'discontinuation', 'non-completion' and 'withdrawals'. Most of these terms have a negative connotation, however 'non-completion' does not always operate in this way, as partial completion of a course might lead students to other study pathways or career opportunities. Some non-completing students take up Vocational Educational and Further Education (VE/FE) studies, equipping them with the necessary skills for their career aspirations.

For statistical purposes, however, students who transfer between courses in the same university are counted as non-completers of the course from which they transferred. As is highlighted in some of the past research into attrition (McMillan 2005; Marks 2007), counting these students as non-completers

can negatively impact on a university in terms of efficiency, accountability, resource allocation and student support services (McMillan 2005). Attrition has significant social and economic implications for individual students and society, and costs the university sector many millions of dollars in lost revenue each year. For these reasons, it is imperative that the issues around attrition are addressed in a comprehensive manner.

Research into attrition has identified a number of demographic and contextual factors that are linked to students' decisions to leave university; however, universities need to closely monitor and explore patterns of attrition as a result of the change in student demographics and the growing proportion of non-traditional students. HE institutions need to carry out research in order to evaluate the programs that are currently in place that are aimed at reducing attrition (Wylie 2005; Vaisanen and Rautopuro 2001). As a number of studies (Feldman 1994; Vaisanen and Rautopuro 2001) have highlighted, the HE student population has rapidly diversified in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, language spoken, socioeconomic status (SES) and employment status. There has been a rapid increase in the number of non-traditional students attending HE; these students are generally older, work longer hours, study part-time and have lifestyle and learning needs that are distinct from traditional students. There are also significant social and economic variations within the non-traditional student population, including a range of reasons behind their entering into HE.

One of the key factors in HE attrition is disadvantage, which has been shown to have a significant impact on retention and student success (Gabb, Milne and Cao 2006; Deng, Lu and Cao 2007). In 2011, Gonski's report into P-12 schools funding in Australia found that there are four key factors in student disadvantage: (1) SES; (2) Indigeneity; (3) English language proficiency; and (4) disability (Gonski 2011). The report also concluded that the remoteness of a school's location was a significant predictor of disadvantage. Importantly, Gonski stated that student characteristics and outcomes are not equally correlated and that complex interactions between factors make generalisations difficult (Gonski, 2011). As yet, there is no conclusive evidence to show that extrapolating generalisations in relation to tertiary students is any less difficult.

A closer look: Important factors in the attrition of HE students in Australia

According to research into attrition and course completion, student journeys through HE are neither linear nor predictable. A wide range of factors influences students' decision-making, including socio-demographic characteristics, achievements at school, experiences at university, and external factors, such as employment and financial issues (McMillan 2005). Deng et al. (2007) have highlighted several other factors that can impact on a student's decision to stay and complete his/her studies or leave the university. These factors include:

- obtaining a place in their first preference course and university;
- teaching quality;
- financial resources available to the student;
- levels of parental education;
- languages spoken at home;
- mode of study; and
- credit transfer issues, etc.

The following section reviews of some of the factors that contribute to student attrition rates.

Gender

DIISRTE's HE statistics indicate that females are more likely to complete HE and take less time to complete than their male counterparts. However, longitudinal studies have produced inconsistent results (McMillan 2005; Lamb, Robinson and Davis 2001). Amongst mature age students, male students have a higher rate of completion than females (Vickers, Lamb and Hinkley 2003).

Age

Students over the age of 25 are more likely to be the first in their family to attend HE (James, Krause and Jennings 2010). This study also found that mature age students exhibit a higher sense of purpose about their study; they feel more certain about what course they want to do; and they are ambitious. Mature age students are more likely to be studying part-time and working long hours compared to younger students (James, Krause and Jennings 2010).

First preference of course

Krause et al. (2005, 17) indicate that 'students who do not receive their first course preference are likely to experience some frustration and dissatisfaction'. Similarly, students who are enrolled in their first preference course are less likely to change course compared to those who are enrolled in a course other than their first preference (McMillan 2005). A study conducted by the Queensland Studies Authority on the experience of first-year tertiary students showed that only 9% of those who were enrolled in their first preference course indicated they didn't want to continue their course. In comparison, 39% of those who were not enrolled in their first preference indicated that they wanted to change courses (Deng et al. 2007).

Languages spoken

Students from non-English speaking backgrounds are less likely to leave university compared to students from English speaking backgrounds (McMillan 2005; Deng et al. 2007). For example, McMillan's Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (LSAY) (2005) showed that the attrition rate for students from an English speaking background was 16%, while the rate for those from a non-English speaking background was only 7%.

Socioeconomic background

Some research has suggested that students from low SES backgrounds are slightly less likely to complete HE compared to those from high SES backgrounds (Vickers et al. 2003). In contrast, other research has found that there were no significant differences between the completion rates of students from low or high SES backgrounds (Marks 2007).

Geographical location

McMillan (2005) states that some studies have found that there is no significant difference between the completion rates of rural and urban students. However other studies have found non-significant results between the completion rates of rural and urban students (Lamb et al. 2001). McMillan (2005) points out that a number of these studies have concluded that categorising rural students as disadvantaged is a better indicator of attrition than the distance required to travel to university.

HE experience

Students from low SES backgrounds are more likely to be the first in their family to attend HE. Frequently, these students do not have access to the social and cultural capital that is required to navigate HE processes and bureaucracy, nor to the advice that can link them to support services and resources (James et al. 2010). Gabb, Milne and Cao (2006) noted that students who are the first in their families to attend university have lower Grade Point Averages (GPA), when compared to other students, and are more likely to withdraw from their courses. Several researchers have found that the student's field of study is also associated with attrition. Students who are studying humanities, creative arts, society and culture will often have higher rates of attrition compared to medicine, dentistry, veterinary science and law (McMillan 2005). This could be attributed to the stronger sense of vocational outcome in students who are pursuing the latter courses.

Quality of teaching

A study conducted by Callan (2005) indicates that the most common reason students do not complete a VE/FE qualification is the poor quality of teaching, with staff lacking adequate industry expertise in their field. Additionally, James et al. (2010) highlight that students are often dissatisfied with their teacher's feedback on student performance. Students believe that teachers do not provide them with adequate or constructive feedback, which would assist them in progressing academically (James et al. 2010). In the LSAY study, students cite teaching quality as one of the most common reasons for changing institutions (McMillan 2005). Nevertheless, mature age students are more likely to have a positive attitude towards teaching quality than school-leavers (James et al. 2010).

Identifying those student cohorts at the highest risk of leaving HE is critical in ensuring that support and early intervention can be provided in targeted ways. While most of the research reveals that students leave for a variety of reasons, Willcoxson et al. (2011, 27) found that attrition factors are 'generally university-specific', reflecting student characteristics and related to an institution's culture. Significantly, this research also determined that institutions have 'individual attrition profiles' (Willcoxson et al. 2011, 20) and that countering attrition across different years and semesters requires a whole-of-institution response. Thus, it is crucial that universities monitor their retention and attrition rates and tailor support programs and resources to their specific context and student population. This report is designed to provide a deeper insight into the complex factors that contribute to attrition at particular junctures in a student's HE experience.

First Year in HE

Studies into the first year experience (FYE) (Milne and Gabb 2007; James et al. 2010) have focused on factors that are important to a diverse group of students across cohorts, semesters and/or years (Willcoxson et al. 2011). These studies are part of a global body of research that aims to understand students' experience of the first year of study. Much of the research documents aspects of the transition into HE that are likely to relate to attrition, such as students' expectations about their workload and courses, and about university life and culture in general. The factors that contribute to attrition are broadly characterised as 'institutional', 'attitudinal' and 'pedagogical', with retention and success at university directly correlated with the early onset of institutional connection.

Methodology

Most of the research into attrition has involved the collection of quantitative data, via hard copy or

online questionnaires, followed by a limited number of qualitative interviews based on an evaluation of the responses to the questionnaires (McMillan 2005; Wilcoxson et al. 2011). While this method of data collection might be suitable for generalising across institutions, formulation of an ‘individual attrition profile’ requires a greater understanding of and response to VU’s attrition landscape, its distinctive student cohort/s, and of the manifold interactions between student characteristics, external pressures and university culture. A detailed attrition profile will enable VU to facilitate an appropriate response to attrition and retention, and to build new and/or expand existing support frameworks to target potentially at-risk cohorts.

Strategies for retention: From models to programs

Richardson and Skinner (1990) identified a three-stage model for institutions to use to improve their retention progress as they adapt to the increase in student diversity. Taylor and Bedford (2004) suggest way that this model can be applied to the diversity experienced in the Australian HE sector. These stages are briefly outlined below:

Stage 1 – concentrates on recruitment, financial aid, admission and timetabling, where the emphasis is on reducing barriers to HE.

Stage 2 – emphasises the transition to HE, and outreach, mentoring, advice and support services, assisting students in adjusting to the HE environment and in achieving their academic and personal goals.

Stage 3 – involves designing the curriculum in a way that addresses student needs, and altering the learning environment on the basis of student assessments of the provision of learning assistance and curriculum content, and adjusting teaching practices accordingly.

Each of these stages highlights the importance of improving the quality of the university experience to increase student retention rates. Staff need to be willing to act as the drivers of students’ progress through the university to the point of completion (Taylor and Bedford 2004; Richardson and Skinner 1990; Crosling, Thomas and Heagney 2007).

In 2009, RMIT University’s Survey Services Centre (SCS) interviewed 195 TAFE leavers and, on the basis of this research, isolated six key reasons as to why these students discontinued their studies.: employment, ill-health, financial or personal reasons, program quality, changes in study choice and other reasons. In contrast to Willcoxson et al. (2011), RMIT’s research found that the reasons for attrition were predominantly outside the domain of the University, however things such as timetabling, study/work balance, study modes, enrolment processes and the accessibility of teaching staff were contributing factors.

In addition to providing a number of attrition profiles, RMIT University’s research also identified strategic institutional responses, the likelihood of a return to study, and student perceptions of program quality. While the research did not fully contextualise student responses within demographic profiles, the responses to the interviews facilitated the production of a set of practical recommendations for institutions to improve student retention. These included:

- Focus on high-risk groups
- Timetabling and flexibility in study options
- Streamline enrolment and related processes
- Enhance academic integration of students and
- Enhance student induction (p. 26)

Both national and international research into attrition has consistently revealed the correlation between socio-demographic factors, retention and student success. Willcoxson et al.'s (2011) 'individual attrition profile' is of particular significance for VU, given the University's high proportion of low SES, Non English Speaking Background (NESB) and disadvantaged students. This, combined with the shift to a competitive funding model and reductions in vocational education funding, means that supporting and recognising students at risk of attrition is more important than ever. A report released by the Australian Government (2009, 14; 2008, 42) noted that:

Once students from disadvantaged backgrounds have entered university the likelihood of them completing their course of study is broadly similar to that of the general HE population. Often, however, they require higher levels of support to succeed, including financial assistance and greater academic support, mentoring and counselling services.

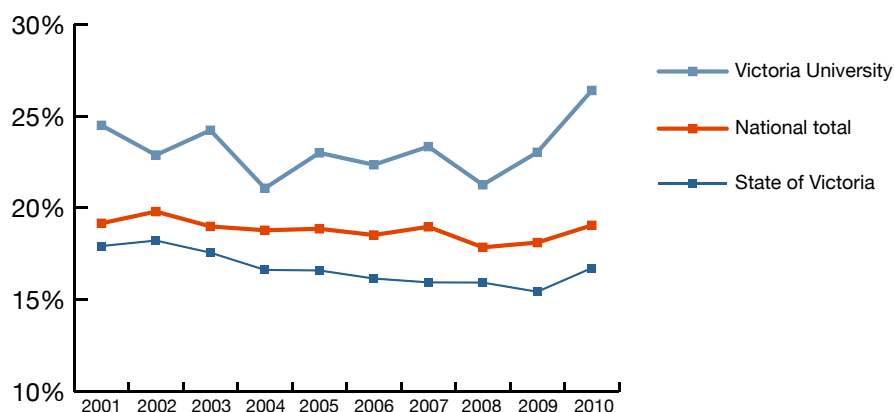
In order to develop an attrition profile specific to VU, this current report builds on the research undertaken by Willcoxson et al. (2011) and RMIT University. Identifying the reasons behind attrition, and contextualising these within specific demographics, means that VU can better target its resources to assist students to complete their courses. This report provides several recommendations as to how the University can improve its services to students, in terms of teaching, the quality and scope of its courses and the provision of adequate student support.

Attrition and Retention at VU

VU's attrition rate is relatively high compared with that of other universities. In 2009, for example, the aggregate attrition rate for HE undergraduate students was 19%, down from 22% in 2005. Low SES and low SES/NESB students had attrition rates of 18% and 23% (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR] 2009). Indigenous students' attrition rates across the sector were 76%, and students with a disability had an attrition rate of 75% (DEEWR 2009).

In 2010, VU had a participation rate of 22.1% of low SES students (Victoria University 2011). In 2009, for example, VU's attrition rate for domestic and international students was 23% and 11% respectively (Department of Industry 2011). In terms of revenue, these rates of attrition amount to between \$10 million and \$14 million in lost income to the university (Adams, Banks, David and Dickson 2010). As Deng et al. (2007) point out, universities with higher rates of attrition are impacted in three significant ways: "they lose potential student tuition fees, gain a relatively smaller proportion of teaching and learning funds, and receive a poor ranking compared to other universities" (2007, 15).

Figure 01 Attrition rates of domestic students

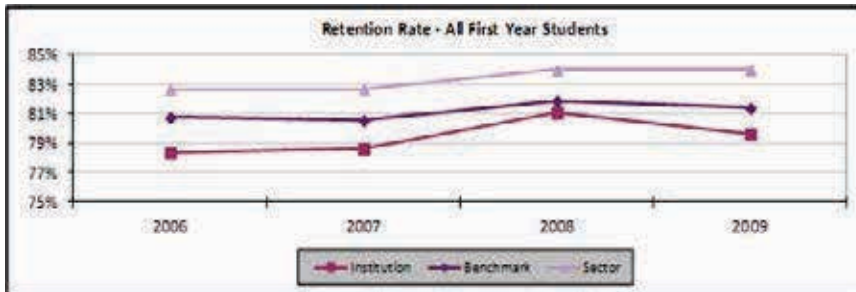


Source: Department of Industry 2011, Attrition Success Retention Rate

Notes: Attrition rate is based on a match process using the student ID numbers. This gives a 'crude' attrition rate, which identifies students that either do not complete a course or are not retained the following year at the same provider.

Figure 2 indicates that VU was below both the benchmark and the sector between 2006-2009 in terms of retention of all first year students.

Figure 02 Comparison of retention rates



VU has undertaken or is currently running a number of programs that support students in the transition to tertiary study. For example, the 'Flag and Follow' project utilised student demographic profiles to track at-risk students and provide targeted support and/or early intervention. The 'Starfish Early Alert' system used data from Blackboard to identify at-risk students and alert both the students and relevant staff. The 'Student Link Project' contacted students at risk and offered them strong and consistent support. These programs (and others) emphasise the efficacy and value of tracking student progress, of identifying students who are struggling at an early stage, and the importance of supporting those students who are struggling. However, in order to capture a whole-of-university approach to retention, a greater understanding of institutional and broad at-risk profiles is required in order to facilitate an appropriate response across the University.

3.1 Target population

Drawing information from the University's student records, the participants for this study were selected on the basis of their enrolment in the first year of a course. This does not mean, however, that they were necessarily first-year students. In attrition and retention literature, 'first-year' tends to refer to the first year a student is enrolled at an institution.

At VU, however, the term can also mean the first year a student is enrolled in a particular course. As a result, the dataset contains students who were enrolled for the first time in a course in which they had never enrolled before. In general, this portion of the dataset referred to students moving from VE to HE, which as the data indicated, is a significant transition point for students.

The transition between educational sectors (from school to university or TAFE, between TAFE and university, for example) is a significant juncture for students. A number of students experience a 'lack of fit' at this time, which then leads to a lack of engagement with the course and with the institution. It was for this reason that the study's sample was limited to students in the first year of a course.

Participants were selected on the basis that they had formally withdrawn, cancelled, were on leave of absence (LOA) or had deferred in 2011. Students who were on LOA or deferred formed part of the dataset because there is evidence that suggests that a significant number of these students do not return to study. These students they were subsequently interviewed only if they responded in the negative to the question, 'Do you plan to return to study at VU in 2012?' These students' transcripts were then checked in VUSIS after the census date in semester 1, 2012, in order to confirm that they had not re-enrolled.

Students were selected from all three sectors — VE, FE and HE — and from all six faculties that were operating at that time. All courses, from AQF Level 1 to 7, were included. Both part-time and full-time students were included, as were domestic and international students.

In total, 2587 student names were forwarded to the Student Evaluations Unit for contacting. These included:

- 1295 withdrawals
- 923 deferrals
- 251 LOAs and
- 92 cancellations.

Twenty-six students had a combination of two or more of the above.

The sample does not fully reflect the target group, as students who had deferred or taken LOA did not necessarily leave the University. These students were included in the sample because significant numbers of deferred students do not return to study, or do not return to the University from which they have taken leave of absence.

Only one student whose enrolment was cancelled agreed to be interviewed and this student had also withdrawn from another course.

3.2 Questionnaire development

A Qualtrics online survey was developed (see Appendix B) with both quantitative and qualitative questions. Qualtrics is one of the leading web-based survey tools, and it is widely used by researchers around the world. Qualtrics also allows for easy data analysis and extraction.

The questionnaire was structured to collect data about the students' reasons for leaving via the use of open-ended questions. Information about the students' experiences inside and outside the classroom was collected using forced response questions on Likert scales.

The three discrete sections of the survey were as follows:

1. Background/demographic questions;
2. Reasons for leaving; and
3. An evaluation of the university experience.

3.3 Data collection procedures

A team of six staff from the Student Evaluations Unit collected the data from August to November 2011.

Each student in the target population (N=2587) was telephoned¹ during the hours of 5pm to 8pm and asked whether they were willing to undertake a phone interview of 15 minutes duration. When a call was not answered a message was left, indicating that the staff member would call again at another time. Following three unsuccessful attempts at making contact, the student was removed from the target group.

This process yielded a sample of 585 ex-students. Using the online Qualtrics survey, the interview data was collected and stored for analysis.

3.4 Data analysis techniques

Quantitative

The survey data was transferred into SPSS for analysis and subsequently cleaned to ensure there were no outliers or errors. Initial analysis of the data used descriptive and frequency techniques to establish demographic data and assess the reasons as to why students left the University.

1. For the most part, mobile phone numbers were used. These proved to be remarkably stable points of contact.

In addition, cross-tabulation analysis was used to examine the relationship between key demographic data (i.e. sex, age and employment) and specific reasons for leaving the University. While not presented in the report, an analysis of means was conducted to explore intergroup differences in attitude towards teaching and courses (for example, between faculties or socioeconomic groups). Significant differences were not found between groups in any of these analyses. A limitation of the rating scale that was used in this questionnaire — ‘all the time’; ‘some of the time’; ‘occasionally’; ‘hardly ever’ and ‘never’ — is that the meaning of each of categories is subjective to some degree. For example, in certain contexts it is difficult to differentiate between the intended meaning of ‘some of the time’ and ‘occasionally’.

Qualitative

Survey data included open-ended responses for the majority of items in the questionnaire where students responses were noted by the interviewer. Open-ended responses were compiled and imported into NVivo for qualitative analysis. Responses for each item were coded and subsequently analysed into groupings or themes.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

4

4.1 Demographic Characteristics

Refer to Appendix A for a summary of the target and the sample group demographic data.

Enrolment status

The vast majority of the students who completed the survey (73%) were classified as 'withdrawn'. Approximately 24% of the students who left VU were classified as having deferred and 3% took a leave of absence.

In total, 2587 student names were forwarded to the Student Evaluations Unit for contacting. These included 1295 withdrawals (including 20 who withdrew with fees owing), 923 deferrals, 251 leaves of absence and 92 cancellations. Twenty-six students had a combination of two or more of the above.

Sex

In the study sample, 56.4% identified as female and 43.6% as male. These percentages approximately reflect the commencing student undergraduate profile at VU, which is 50.2% female and 49.8% males.

Age

Participants in the study sample ranged from 17 to over 60 years of age. The median age category was 20 to 25 years, which age group made up 28% of the total sample. The majority of students (40%) were in the 15 to 19 year old category, revealing that the majority of students who left VU were 'traditional' students. Traditional students are those aged 21 and younger, and who are most likely to have followed an linear path through the education system (Bye, Pushkar and Conway 2007). Approximately 31% of the study sample was classified as mature age students over the age of 25 (Krause et al. 2005; Tones, Fraser, Elder and White 2009).

SES

The students who had left VU were asked to categorise their socioeconomic status (SES) into 'high,' 'medium,' 'low' or 'not known'. The majority of students in the sample claimed they were in the middle SES band (50.6%) followed by high SES (25.0%) and low SES (23.4%). These percentages are consistent with VU's overall student enrolments, where 21.25% of students are in the lowest SES band and 24.87% in the highest. Small percentages of students in both the population group (total number of leavers) and the sample were from overseas or had unknown SES bands (2.1% and 1.0%, respectively).

Figure 03 SES Comparison

Study sample

High SES 25%	Medium SES 51%	Low SES 23%
-----------------	-------------------	----------------

Total number of leavers

High SES 24%	Medium SES 52%	Low SES 23%
-----------------	-------------------	----------------

VU Profile

High SES 25%	Medium SES 54%	Low SES 21%
-----------------	-------------------	----------------

Language spoken

The majority of students listed English as the language spoken at home (70%); the next most frequently spoken languages at home were Arabic (3%), Vietnamese (2.5%) and Cantonese (2%). In the study sample over 48 languages other than English were spoken at home.

Domestic/International student status

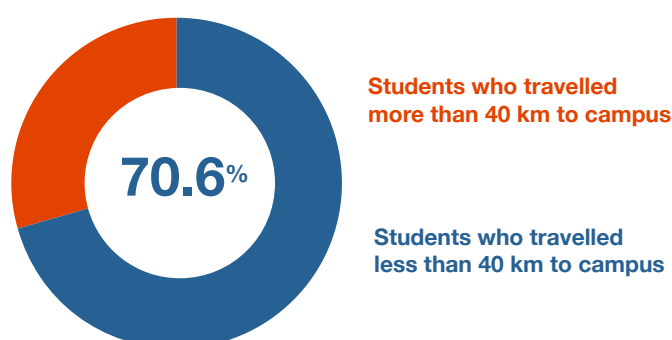
The majority of students in the study sample were domestic students (98.3%). The small response rate from international students was predominantly related to the difficulty in contacting students.

4.2 Geographic characteristics of study sample

Distance to campus

Distance to campus was measured from the students' semester address. Google Maps was used to calculate distance using the shortest vehicle distance measure. The majority of students in the sample (70.6%) travelled 40 kilometres or less to campus.

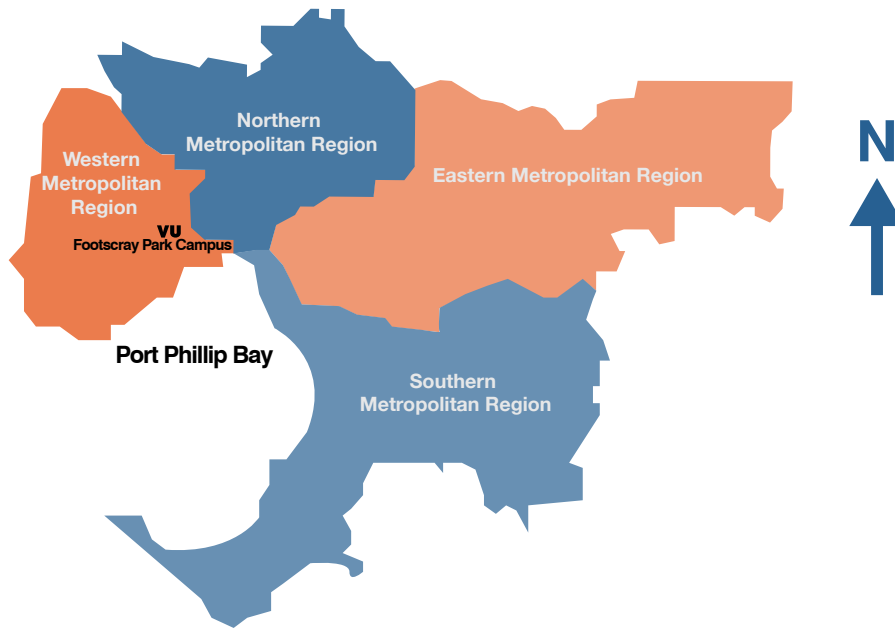
Figure 04 Distance to campus



DEECD regions

At the time of data collection, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) had isolated nine education regions, covering rural, regional and metropolitan areas of Victoria (see Figure 2). A majority of students who left VU were from the Western Metropolitan Region (35.8%). From the sample, the next three largest proportions of students came from the Southern Metro Region (21.4%), Northern Metro Region (19.8%) and the Eastern Metro Region (10.8%). Students from the western regions of Loddon Mallee, Grampians, Hume, Gippsland and Barwon South collectively constituted 9.5% of the sample.

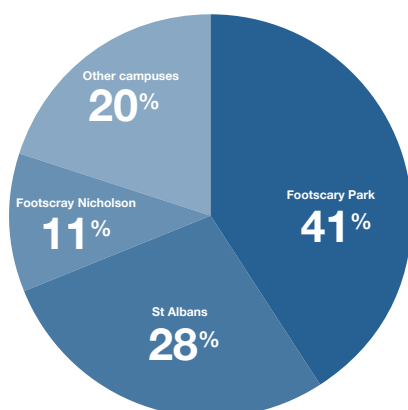
Figure 05 DEECD regions



Campus attended

The vast majority of students who left VU (38.9%) were enrolled at the Footscray Park campus. Approximately 27.3% of students attended St Albans campus, whilst 11% attended Footscray Nicholson. These percentages are consistent with overall university enrolments. Footscray Park campus has the most enrolments every year, accounting for 22.3% of the overall enrolments in 2011. St Albans campus had the next highest enrolment rate (15%), followed by Footscray Nicholson campus at 12.5%.

Figure 06 Campus attended



Other campuses include: Werribee, City Flinders, Newport, City King, City Queen and Sunshine

Sector

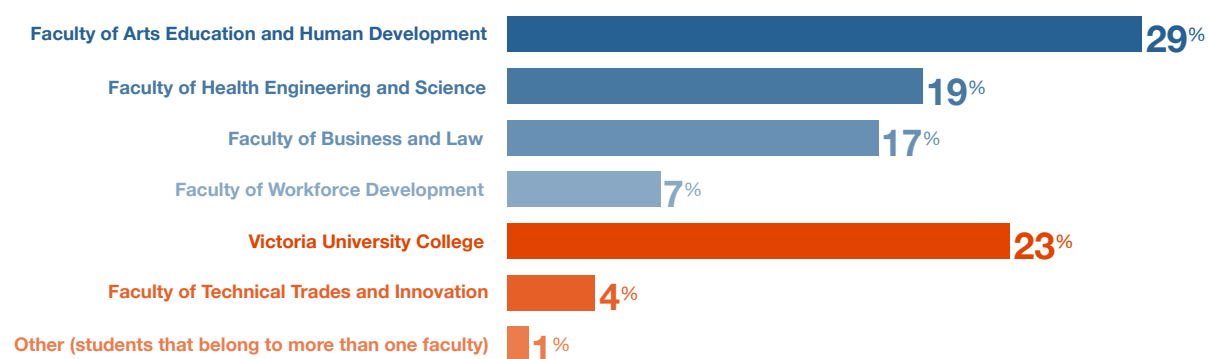
A significant number of students in both the target group (72.9%) and sample (65.3%) were HE students enrolled in an undergraduate course. VE/FE students constituted 26.8% and 34.4%, respectively. A very small number of students were enrolled in both HE and VE/FE (0.3% in both groups).

Faculty

The majority of the students who left VU were from the Faculty of Arts, Education and Human Development (FAEHD) (29%). The next highest rates of attrition occurred in the Faculty of Health Engineering and Science (HES) (19%) and the Faculty of Business and Law (FOBL) (17%). According to VU's overall HE enrolment statistics in 2011, the majority of students were enrolled in the Faculty of Business and Law (50.3%), followed by the Faculty of Arts, Education and Human Development (28.2%), and finally the Faculty of Health, Engineering and Science (20.8%). As can be seen, there is a significant difference between the enrolment and attrition rates of the three faculties cited above. Despite the fact that there are more enrolments in FOBL, a greater proportion of students who are enrolled in FAEHD and HES tend to leave the University without completing.

Amongst the VE/FE attrition rates, the Faculty of Workforce Development (FWD) reported the highest rate of students leaving the University (23%), followed by the Faculty of Technical Trades and Innovation (7%) and VU College (4%). These statistics also align with the overall 2011 enrolment rates in VE/FE. Some students were enrolled in courses that fell between two areas: for example, FAEHD & FOBL (two HE faculties) or FHES & FWD (an HE and VE/FE faculty).

Figure 07 The faculties these students belonged to



*Other students that belong to more than one faculty.

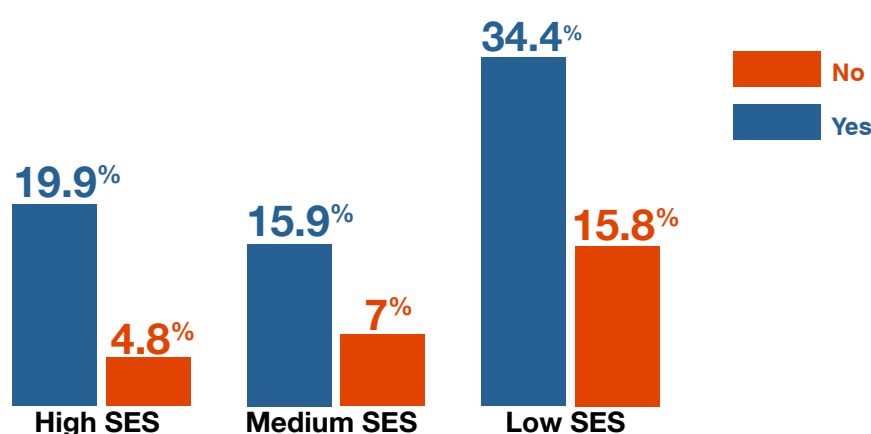
5.1 Key demographic findings

Among the general demographical information that was collected from the sample, a few questions were aimed at exploring factors that may have influenced a student's decision to leave university or their reasons for not perceiving university study as a priority in their lives. Some of these factors included the educational background of the student's family, the language/s spoken at home, employment patterns and hours of employment, all of which have been highlighted as significant issues in prior research. The following sections provide a breakdown of some of these key findings.

5.1.1 First in Family

Of those who answered the question — 'Has anyone in your family ever gone to university or TAFE before?' — approximately 28% said that none of their family members had attended a university or TAFE. Out of the above 28%, 25% were from a low SES, 57% from a medium SES, and 17% from a high SES. Given that the largest proportion of the sample was from a medium SES and the smallest proportion was from a low SES, this statistic is significant.

Figure 08 Has anyone in your family ever gone to university or TAFE?



Compared to the younger cohort, mature aged students are more likely to come from a family where no one else has been to university. Of the students aged between 15-24 that answered the above question, 26% said that none of their family members had attended a university or TAFE. From the students 25 years and above who answered the question, 31% said that none of their family members had been to either university or TAFE. As approximately 65% of the whole sample was below 25 years and only 35% was above, these results are quite significant.

Figure 09 First in family students against the overall sample population

15 - 24 years old



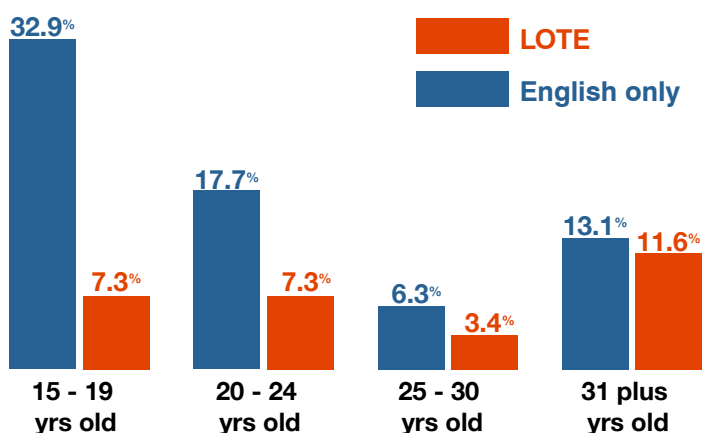
25 + years old



Prior research has isolated the language spoken at home as a key predictor of attrition. Of the overall sample of students who answered the question as to what language was spoken at home, 30% said that they spoke a language other than English. These results are in line with past research, which shows that those who speak another language at home are less likely to leave university than those who speak only English at home. Interestingly, one of the students who spoke only English at home stated that English language issues was one of the main reasons for leaving VU.

Mature age students who speak another language at home are more likely to leave university than their younger cohort. Of the students aged 25 and above who answered this question, 44% said that they spoke another language at home. Of those under the age of 25, only 22% said that they spoke another language at home.

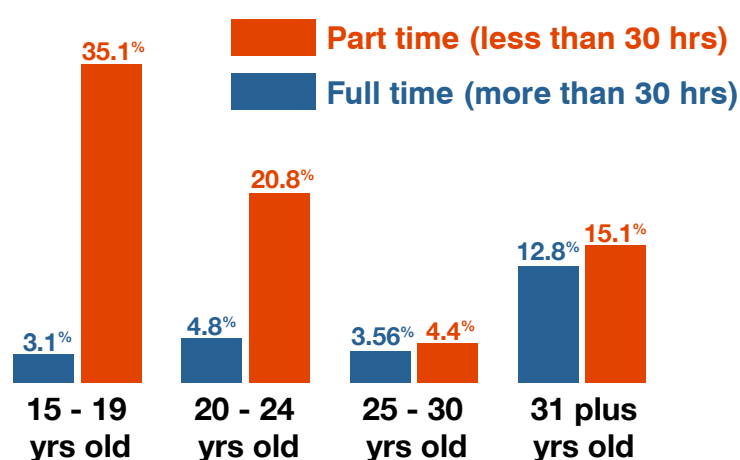
Figure 10 Language spoken at home against age categories



5.1.2 Full-time and part-time employment patterns

The sample of students was asked if they were working full-time or part-time during their studies. Of those who answered the question, more mature age students over the age of 25 years said that they were working full-time as compared to their younger counterparts. Of the mature age students who answered this question, 46% said they were working full-time. On the other hand, only 12.5% below the age of 25 said they were working full-time. While this implies that younger students are more likely to be working part-time, a large proportion (60%) of students opted out of this question.

Figure 11 Full-time and part-time employment patterns whilst studying against age categories



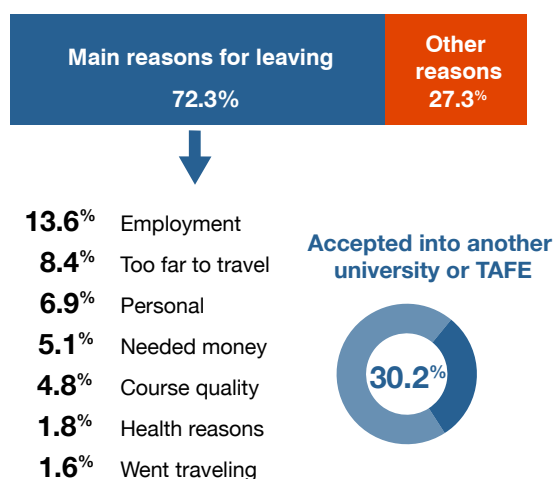
The above findings indicate that mature age students are at a higher risk of leaving HE than younger students. This suggests that a more nuanced approach to student support programs is required; one that specifically targets the needs of students from different age groups.

5.2 Primary Reasons for Leaving

In this section we present the results from the section of the survey that asked students to pick from 10 categories.

As shown in the figure below, the most common reason students left VU was acceptance into another university or TAFE (30%). The second most common reason selected was 'other', making up 27% of the total sample.

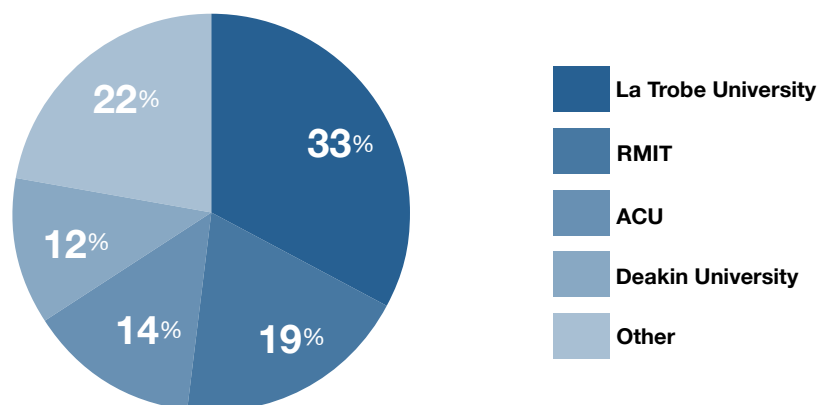
Figure 12 Main reasons for leaving



5.2.1 Accepted into another university

The largest proportion of students who took up offers at another university moved to La Trobe (33%), with RMIT (19%) as the second most popular institution for students who relocated.

Figure 13 Offers taken at other institutions



5.2.2 Other

The second largest proportion of students indicated 'other' than the top 10 reasons listed as the main influence on their decision to leave VU. In terms of the objectives of this study, it was important to examine what was included in the category of 'other'. If students noted 'other' as their reason for leaving, the questionnaire prompted them to indicate, in their own words, what those other reasons were. Some of these responses are illustrated in the diagram below. .

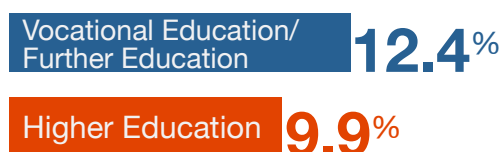
Figure 14 Main reasons for leaving: Exploring the ‘other’ category



5.2.3 Employment

Approximately 14% of students indicated that their primary reason for leaving was related to employment. This was sometimes as a result of a promotion within their current workplace or due to an offer of a new job. VE/FE students were slightly more likely to cite employment as their main reason for leaving than those enrolled in HE: 12.4% of VE/FE students compared to 9.9% of HE respondents.

Figure 15 Employment as a reason to leave by sector



Some students indicated that taking up employment was more consistent with their learning style, particularly in relation to hands-on learning. Others indicated that their place of employment was prepared to provide them with training opportunities while they were working.

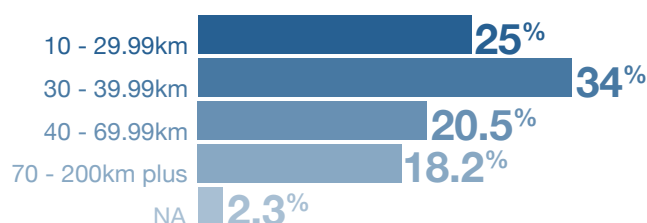
Students who cited employment as their primary reason for leaving were more likely to include distance to travel as an additional reason for leaving. Acceptance into another university or TAFE was the next most likely additional reason cited by students who listed employment as their primary reason. Flexible modes of delivery at other universities and TAFEs attracted some of the students who were already working or who found it difficult to study and work full-time.

5.2.4 Too Far to Travel

Approximately 8% of students cited distance to travel as their primary reason for leaving. Interestingly, this category was also one of the key secondary reasons for students deciding to leave. All students in the sample travelled an average of 30 to 40km to their home campus. Of those who cited distance as their main reason for leaving, the majority (59%) travelled more than 30km to campus.

Students who resided in the DEECD region of Southern Metro Region² were most likely to cite travel as their primary reason for leaving, with those in the Eastern Metro Region also likely to leave for this reason. Interestingly, a few students from the Western and Northern Metro Regions also indicated that distance to travel was their primary reason for leaving.

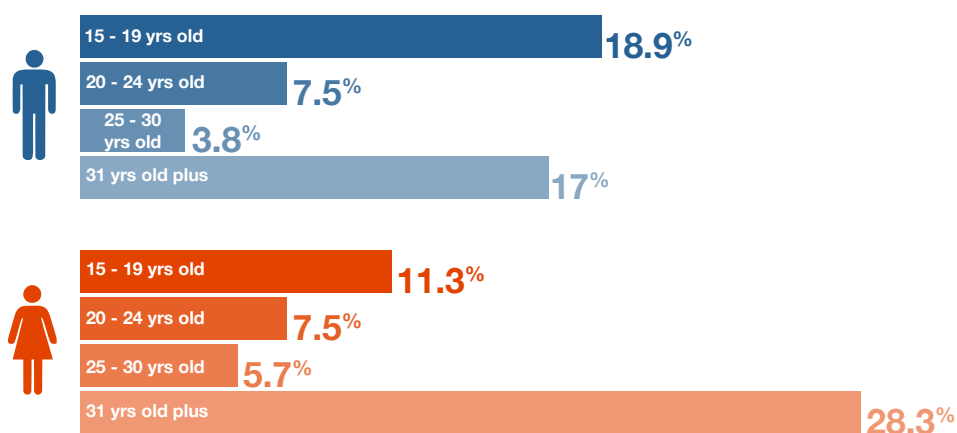
Figure 16 Distance travelled to get to university



5.2.5 Personal

The 'personal reasons' category covered family issues, including caring for others, family problems and commitments, and issues relating to pregnancy. Males and females were equally likely to cite personal reasons (see Figure 17), although a disproportionate number of women in the 31 plus age group left due to personal reasons when compared to the other sex and age categories.

Figure 17 Personal reasons as a reason for leaving by age and sex



2. This region includes Local Government Areas (LGAs) such as Frankston, Mount Eliza, Dromana, Carrum Downs, Caulfield, Chelsea and Cheltenham.

5.2.6 Financial Need

6.2% of students cited ‘financial need’ as their reason for leaving. This included issues such as childcare costs, change of employment mode (e.g. full-time to part-time) to accommodate study commitments, and course fees. Additionally, students who have previously studied at or above the current AQF level do not receive HECS and VET Fee Help, which creates financial difficulties for some students.

Low SES students were more likely to cite financial reasons as their main reason for leaving, with high SES students the least likely. Older students were more likely to leave for financial reasons (see Figure 18) as were VE/FE students. This was true for both males and females (see Figure 19).

Figure 18 Financial reasons by age and SES

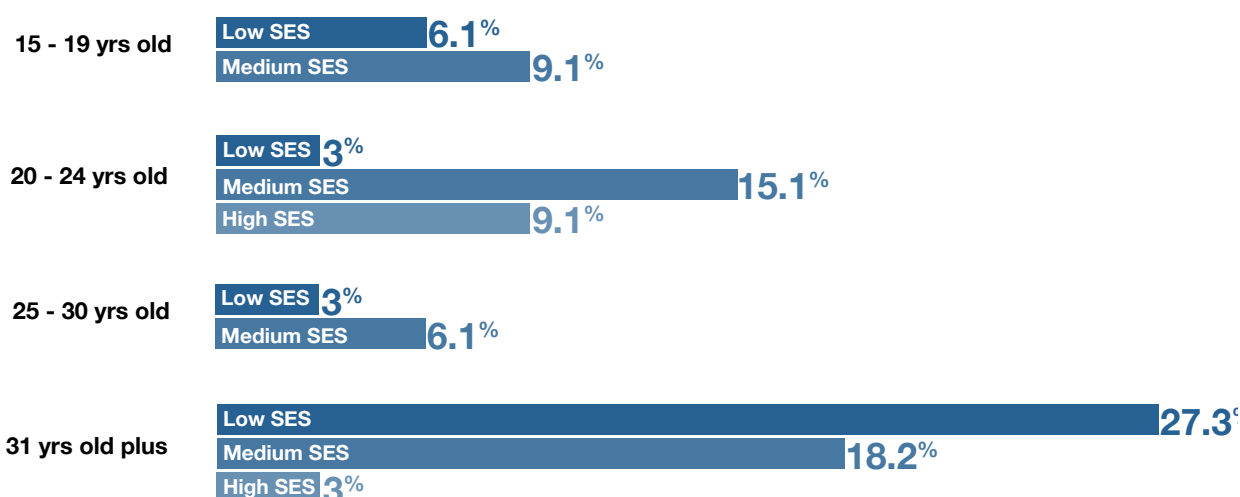
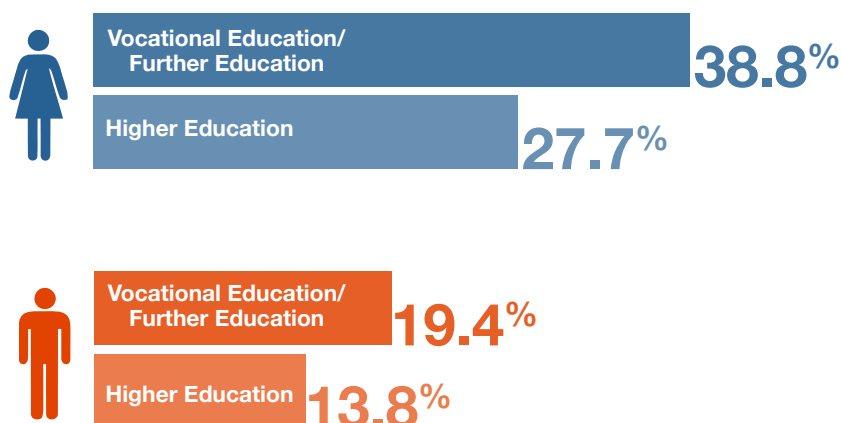


Figure 19 Financial reasons by sector and sex



5.2.7 Course Quality

From the sample, 3.8% of students indicated that they left because of poor course quality. In many cases this category acts as a proxy for students' course expectations, credit transfer issues and institutional/administrative concerns, such as a frequent change of classrooms or class sizes. Some students were concerned about course organisation, a lack of support, the level of their qualification (either too difficult or too easy), and poor equipment. Interestingly, while most students stressed a lack of organisation, one respondent noted that classes were focused too heavily on discipline at the expense of course content.

5.2.8 Health Reasons

Approximately 2% of students left VU due to health reasons. Amongst these students, the majority were female at 63% and the remaining 36% were male. An analysis of health reasons against age category showed no significant difference, with younger students just as likely to cite health as a main reason for leaving university as mature age students. Health conditions included physical disability, mental health issues, hearing impairment and diabetes, and other long-term illnesses.

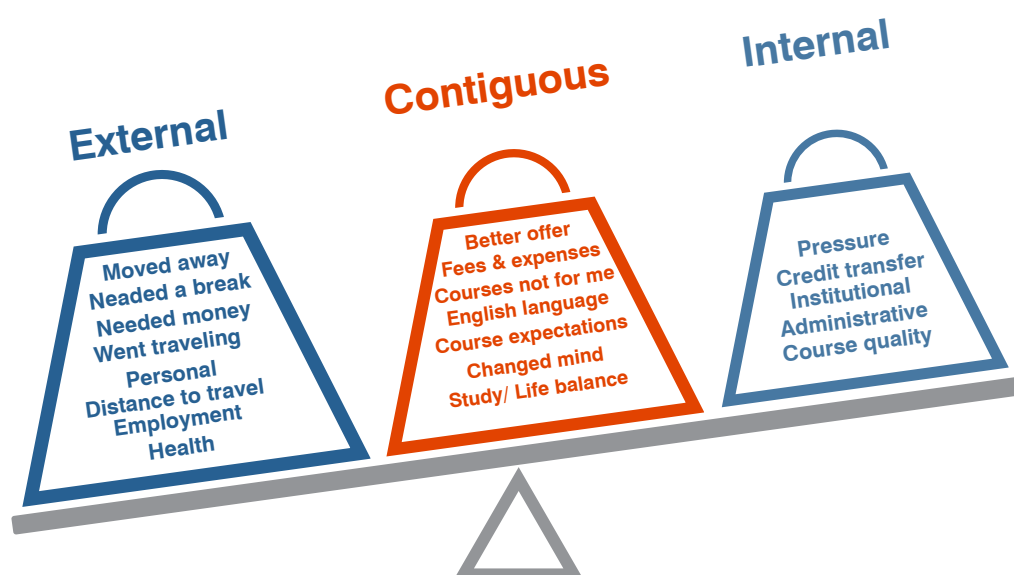
5.2.9 Wanted to take time off

Approximately 5% of students indicated that they wanted to take time off before commencing or continuing their studies. Some students indicated that they wanted to take a gap year after completing secondary school; others indicated that they wanted to take time off to pursue work opportunities or to consider what they wanted to do in the future. Some indicated that they were offered employment during their gap year; others indicated that they were not currently motivated to study but would consider studying in the future. A significant minority of these students took time off to travel. Not surprisingly, the results indicated that younger students are more likely to leave because they want to take time off. Most of these younger students are in the HE sector.

5.2.10 Summary of the reasons students cite for leaving

A number of the key reasons for students leaving VU are identified and reviewed above. These reasons can be summarised within three categories: 'internal', 'external' and 'contiguous'. Internal reasons are those that are associated with the institution (for example, course quality). External reasons are the varying and individual circumstances that the University has little control over, such as employment or health. Contiguous reasons are those that are caused by either the institution or by individual circumstances, and that can cause difficulties when added to internal or external reasons (although they are a discrete category unto themselves).

Figure 20 Reasons students leave



The survey used several open and closed ended questions to gain further insight into the reasons behind students' decision to leave VU. These questions sought to discover what went wrong for the students and identify ways that the institution can provide more nuanced and stronger support in the future. Some of the essential areas explored were students' experiences in class and of the available support services. The following section examines these areas in detail through an analysis of students' ratings of VU's courses, teaching and student services. The section also analyses the qualitative data that was gathered through the use of open-ended questions.

5.3 Courses

5.3.1 Classes and content

Participants who attended classes were asked to rate their experience of the classes and courses at VU. Data was collected as to how students felt about the relevance of their classes and courses. Students were also asked to evaluate their classes and courses on the basis of how interesting, well presented and challenging they found them. The majority of responses were rated on a six-point Likert scale ranging from 'never' to 'all of the time'. Participants were also prompted to expand on their experiences after each question via an open-ended response. As indicated by the quantitative survey responses, students' experiences of courses were generally positive, regardless of the faculty.

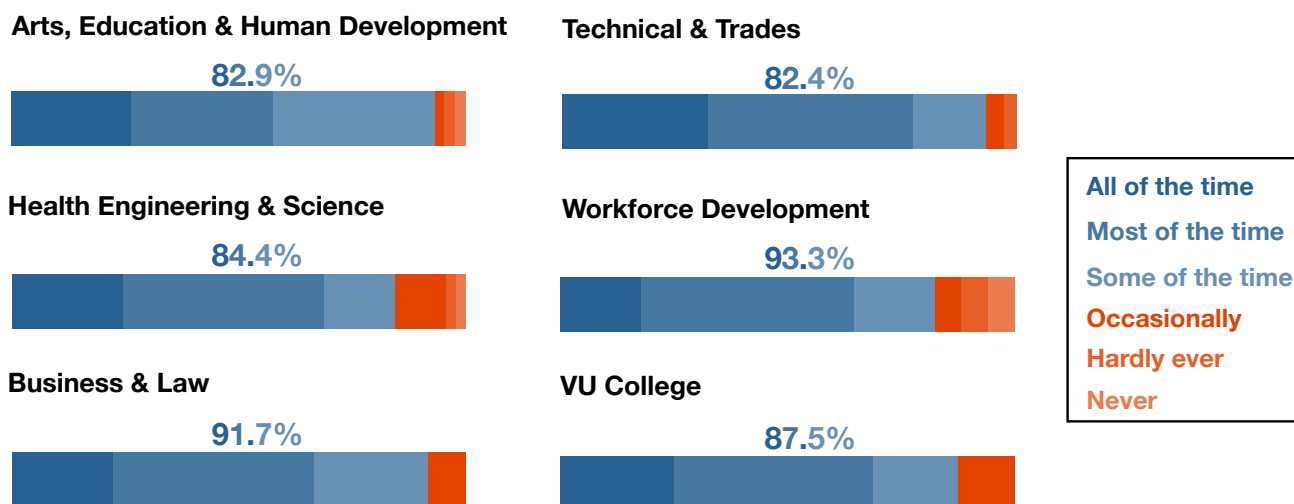
5.3.2 Was the course content relevant and interesting?

Students in the sample were asked to rate their experiences of courses regarding their relevance and level of interest. Most of the students who left VU said that their course was relevant and interesting most or all of the time (62%). About 30% of the study sample stated that courses

were relevant and interesting some of the time or occasionally. A smaller proportion (3%) said that courses were never or hardly ever relevant or interesting.

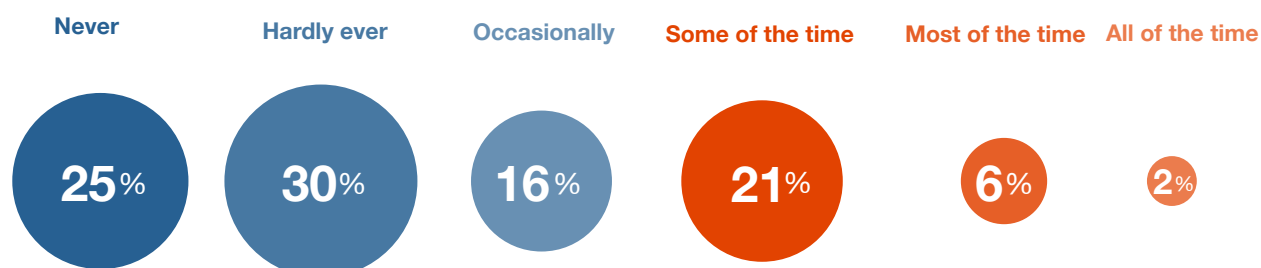
Results were consistent across faculties in terms of students' experience of course relevancy and level of interest.

Figure 21 Did students find courses relevant and interesting by faculty



Participants were also asked if courses were 'boring and repetitive'. Overall, student responses were positive, in that they felt that courses were 'never' or 'hardly ever' boring and repetitive (55% combined total). These findings support the responses to the previous questions, indicating that students' experiences are generally positive in terms of courses being interesting, relevant and not repetitive and boring. In both cases, however, a large proportion of students (30% and 37% respectively) felt that courses were not necessarily consistent. In order to gain a more detailed understanding of students' feelings about courses we examined the qualitative data.

Figure 22 Was the course content boring and repetitive?



A few students reported that classes were boring because too much time was taken up with review of content, or for other reasons there was too much overlap (as a result of previous work experience in the field of the degree, for example). At the same time, however, there was a substantial amount of feedback that indicated students appreciated a review of material at the start of each class:

The classes were boring for me as I had already done the units. I have been working as a nurse for six years now.

Female, Bachelor of Nursing, aged 26 years

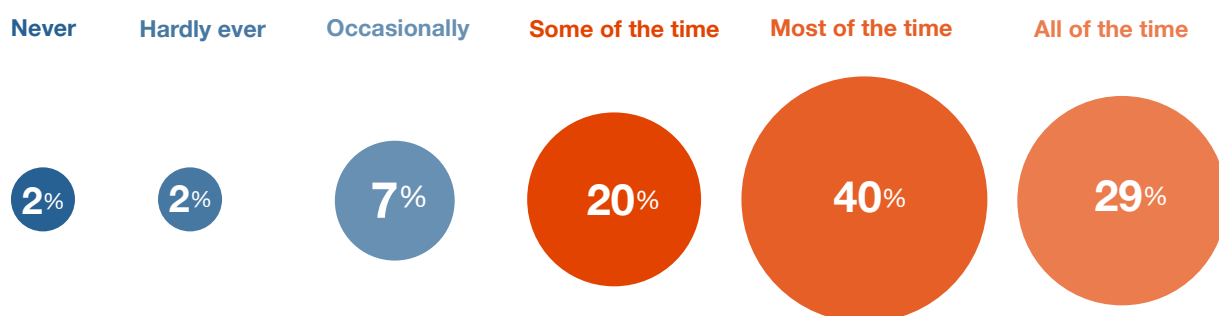
... VU should be more organized in the classes and teaching. Lecturers and tutors should communicate (e.g. the topic covered was not told clearly and they went through it again). It was just not what I expected. I would like something more organised and challenging.

Female, Cert IV in Training and Assessment, aged 45 years

5.3.3 Class presentation and supporting materials

Students who had left VU were quite positive when asked to rate the presentation of classes and the quality of supporting materials. The majority of leavers (40%) said that most of the time classes were well presented with good supporting materials; approximately one third of the study sample thought this was true 'all of the time.' On the other hand, one third of respondents were less positive, rating their experience of class presentation and supporting materials as good only 'some of the time' or less frequently.

Figure 23 Were the classes well presented with good supporting materials?

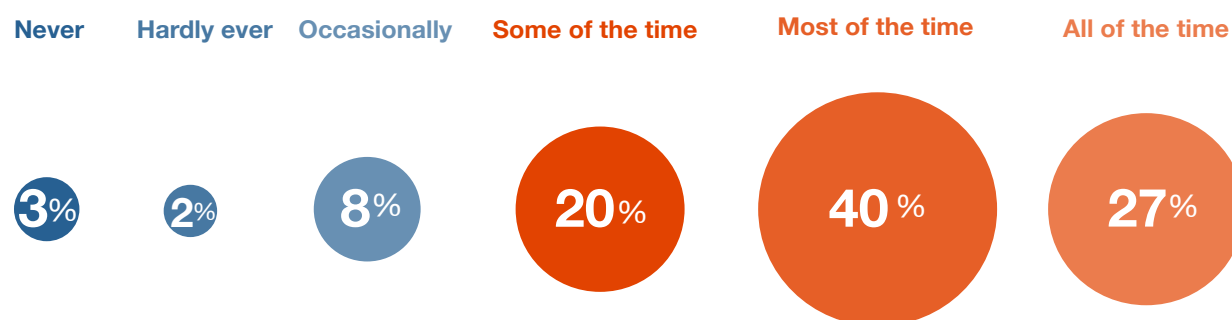


A number of the participants who responded to the open-ended questions regarding VU's courses, commented specifically on classes, supporting materials and learning tools. While much of the feedback was positive, a few participants commented that courses could be better organised in terms of the techniques used to communicate with students outside the classroom (i.e. WEB CT³).

3. Web Communications Tool - online tool used to deliver course material and to share information.

Students suggested that more resources and materials should be online, so that they could manage their courses and content from a centralised point. A few students commented on issues regarding access to technology, such as the need for higher quality cameras in video courses. Other students identified a need for more visual learning aids, while at the same time maintaining class discussion and interaction (for example, not relying solely on PowerPoint slides).

Figure 24 Challenging and up-to-date content



Survey participants were asked to rate their courses in terms of how challenging they found them and, in their opinion, how up-to-date the content. While most of the sample found their courses challenging and up-to-date all or most of the time (67%), the other third felt this was the case only some of the time or less frequently. As was noted in the responses to the question about repetition of content, some students expressed a need for more time to be allocated to covering topics in depth, rather than attempting to cover more content.

Some units were rushed into, and the content should be more detailed even if the course has to be extended by 1-2 months

Female, Cert. III in General Education for Adults, aged 43 years

A number of students from the study sample commented that their course work was too challenging; however, some participants felt that the content was not challenging enough. For example, a few students thought that classes were too heavily reliant on material in the textbook and that an increased utilisation of the lecturer's knowledge would have been a positive addition.

There were some subjects that weren't quite so good. A lot of the slides were straight from the book and lecturers didn't add anything of their own knowledge. A lot was exactly from the book and very little original content.

Female, Bachelor of Law/Bachelor of Arts, aged 19 years

The framework was boring. Lecturer and tutor were not helpful. It was hard to catch up with classes ...

Female, Bachelor of Nursing, aged 19 years

5.3.4 Mode of delivery not flexible

The qualitative data showed that students who were already working full-time or part-time preferred a more flexible mode of delivery, either via online studies or evening classes. 3.4% of the students expressed concerns about a lack of flexibility in timetabling, a lack of online study options, and that evening classes weren't offered for those who worked during the day. Some of these students were already enrolled in new courses that provided flexible delivery or were more responsive to the needs of students in employment. This issue, of a lack of flexibility in course delivery options, could be exacerbated further when a student has to travel a fair distance to university. Significantly, some students who were familiar with online study or had been to universities with more flexible course delivery options did not find it favourable to stay at VU.

Below are some of the responses to the questions about course flexibility at VU:

The course wasn't flexible enough, I found an online course.

Female, Cert. IV in Liberal Arts, aged 47 years

I studied online previously to studying at VU and preferred that learning method as it was easier to work and study simultaneously.

Female, Bachelor of Education, aged 29 years

Was studying at TAFE and I transferred to VU because it was easy but the course was not flexible. More flexible delivery, part-time, online delivery options should be available for students who work, evening classes or online.

Female, Bachelor of Business, aged 25 years

There should be more information at enrolment or before enrolment about what the course entails and how many contact hours would be required to ensure that everyone knows what to expect before actually starting their course.

Female, Bachelor of Midwifery, aged 19

There should be more info/access to sporting teams and activities. I was unable to participate in activities as there is no contact person to call if students were to participate in sports matches/activities organised by VU.

Male, Bachelor of Health Science, aged 24 years

Trying to get information about what the courses and subjects are actually about was difficult to find over the internet and calling the university itself didn't actually help that much either.

Female, Bachelor of Creative Arts Industries, aged 29 years

5.3.5 Technology and Communication

The general feedback from students on questions about technology and communication indicate that there needs to be a better use of technology at VU. While this feedback included comments about online modes of delivery, participants also noted that they often encountered issues around communication of feedback and class information. Several participants suggested utilising SMS as a way of imparting information, such as class cancellations or news from the University. Responses also indicated that students had a difficult time accessing information

about course content and details, such as timetables or the expected workload.

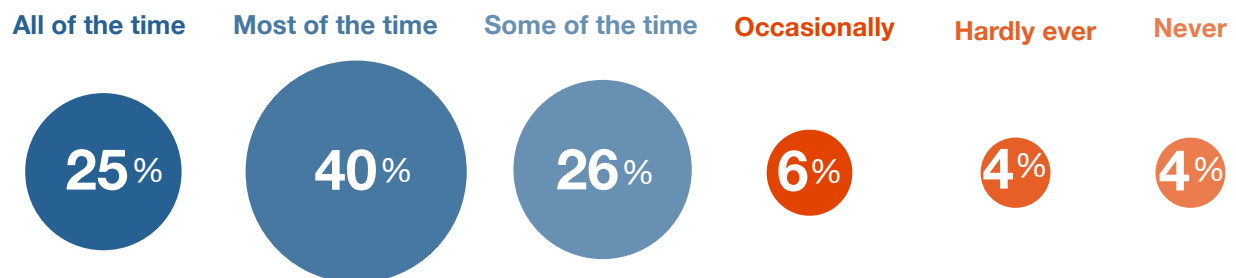
5.4 Teaching and Learning

The survey questions on teaching and learning were designed to reveal student perceptions of three major areas: i) teaching strategies; ii) timeliness of feedback; and iii) teacher availability when assistance was required. Responses were collected using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Three questions on teaching were presented with the responses measured on a six-point Likert scale, ranging from 'all of the time' through to 'never'.

The overwhelming majority of respondents said that they were quite pleased with their experience at VU. They said that teachers utilised strategies that made classes interesting and stimulating; teachers were available when students needed assistance; and teachers provided students with timely feedback. It is interesting to note that most of the participants who responded to these questions had attended 10 or more classes before they left the University, which implies that their assessment of teaching practices and classroom dynamics was relatively well-informed.

The following section analyses the responses to the four major questions about students' experience of teaching practices at VU. The first question was designed to explore how teachers made classes challenging and interesting for students and what strategies were used.

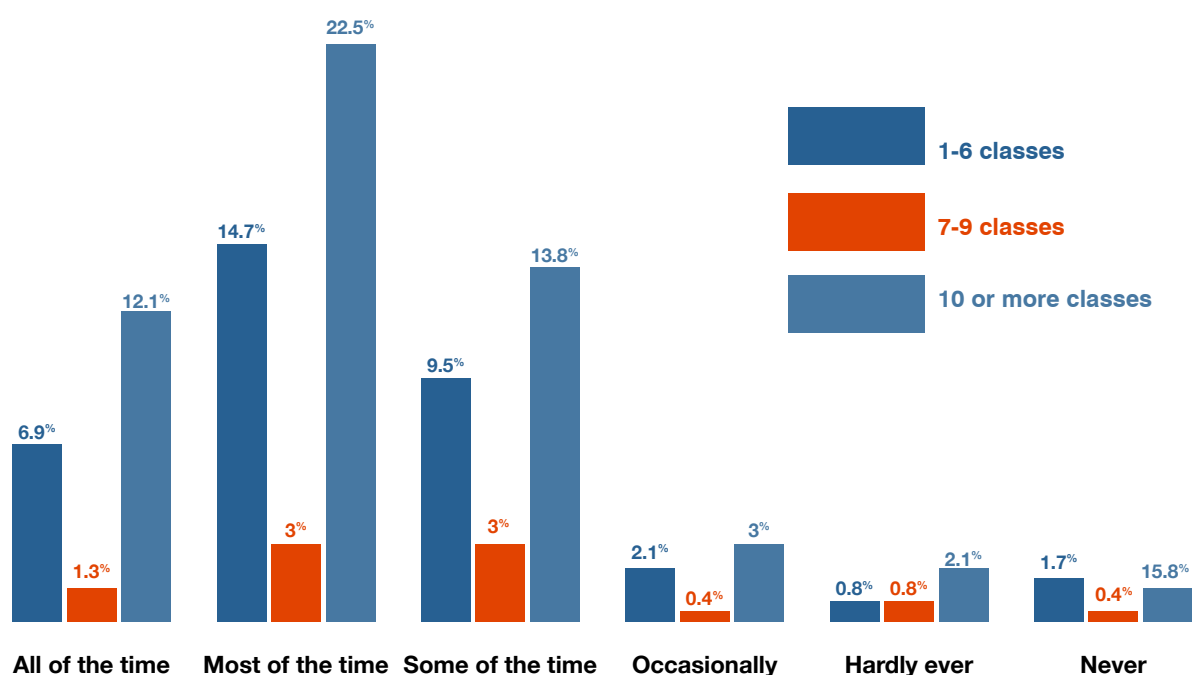
Figure 25 Did teachers use teaching strategies that made classes interesting?



As can be seen, the majority indicated that the teaching strategies used at VU made classes interesting, with 63% responding with 'all of the time' or 'most of the time'.

The graph below shows that a majority of students were satisfied with their teachers and classes, with a very small percentage expressing dissatisfaction with the response of 'hardly ever' or 'never'.

Figure 26 Teaching strategies that made classes interesting against number of classes attended



Of those participants who responded to this question, approximately 7.5% were not satisfied with the teaching strategies and rated classes as ‘hardly ever’ or ‘never’ interesting. The final question of the survey was designed to determine students’ overall thoughts as to their study experience at VU and to capture recommendations for the University from a student’s perspective. A comparison was conducted between the responses to this question and the ratings of teacher quality. Predictably, the students who were very dissatisfied with teaching and classes made recommendations for improving teaching practices and class content. Below are two of the responses that were used in the qualitative data analysis:

Teaching staff should be more helpful and approachable. Poor equipment - didn’t work, including projectors. Rooms were frequently changed. Nobody knew where classes were. Teachers weren’t sure what homework and reading to assign to students.

Female, Bachelor of Education, aged 22 years

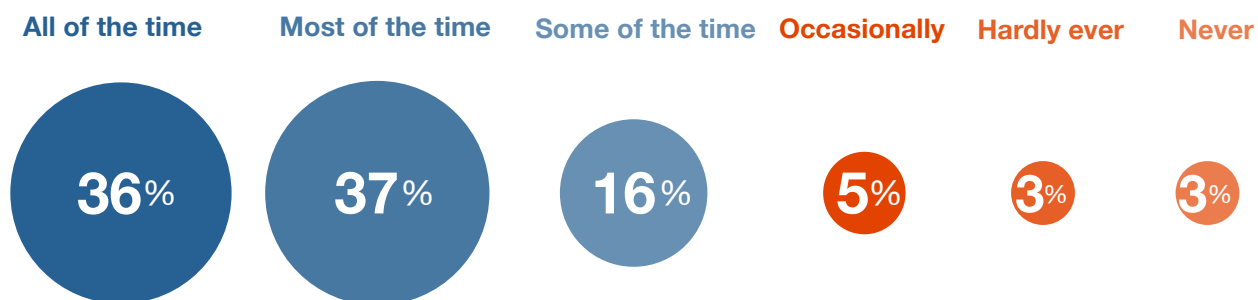
Fix up your teaching. Don’t treat all students the same. Recognise differences in students. I felt like it was get your money in and then after that nothing.

Female, Bachelor of Business, aged 46 years

5.4.1 Availability of Staff

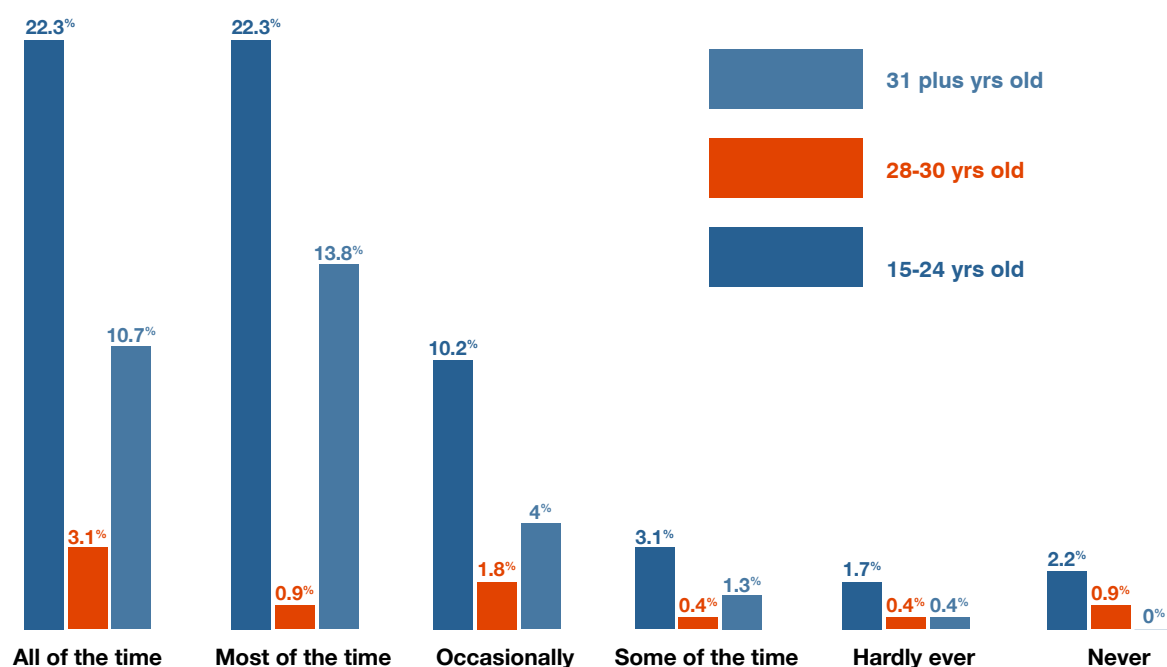
Another crucial element in improving students’ academic experience is the accessibility of staff when students require assistance, whether this is during or outside class hours, or in terms of teachers responding to student requests for assistance in a timely manner. The second question that was rated by participants related to the availability of teachers and their consultation times.

Figure 27 Availability of teachers when you need assistance



The ratings indicate that the students who left VU were satisfied with the assistance they received from their teachers. Nevertheless, 6% rated teachers as ‘hardly ever’ or ‘never’ available when they required assistance. A series of open-ended questions that asked students to provide general feedback about teachers and the support they received highlighted a number of recommendations for teaching staff as to how to make the student experience more positive. A common response in the qualitative data was that teachers needed to be more supportive and responsive to student requirements. This response is extrapolated in greater detail later in this report.

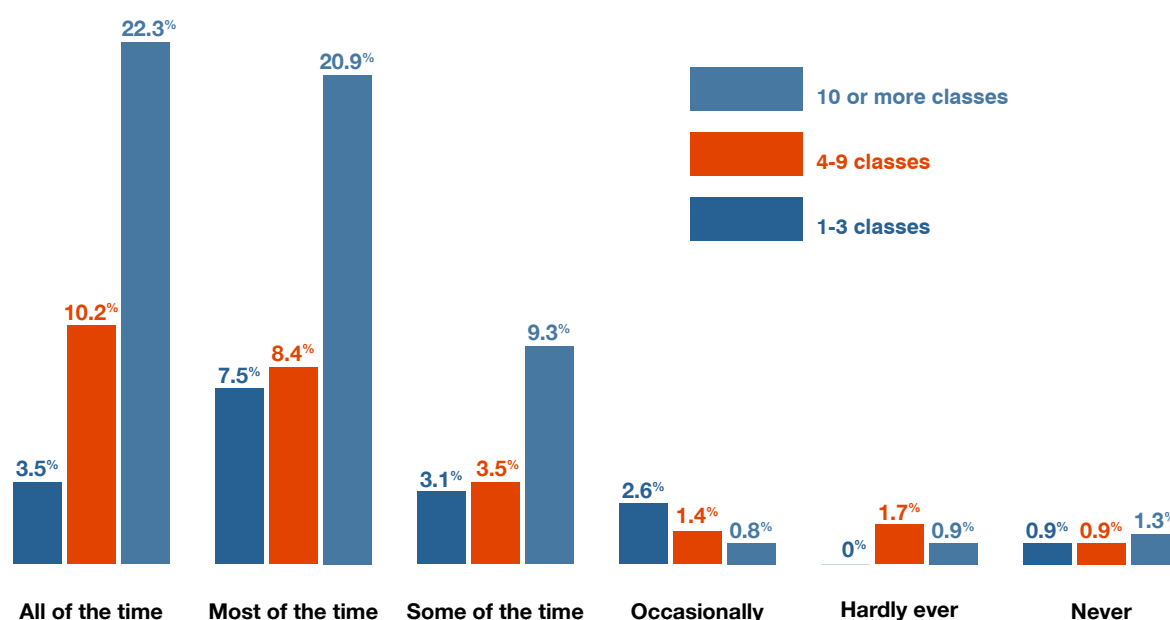
Figure 28 Evaluations on teachers being available when required for assistance against age categories



As can be seen in the graph above, students who were aged 31 and above were quite satisfied with the availability of teachers when they required assistance. The majority of students who said teachers are 'never' or 'hardly available' when they required assistance were school-leavers (aged 15-19). Of the students who responded to this question, the majority were between the ages of 15-24 (62%), while only 35% were mature age students over 25. Proportionately, however, 75% of the mature age students who responded were quite positive about the assistance they received from the teaching staff, saying that teachers were available 'all of the time' and 'most of the time', whereas only 72% of the younger cohort rated this question positively. This is consistent with previous research, which found that mature age students tended to seek advice from teaching staff and also tended to have a positive attitude towards their study experience (Krause et al. 2005).

It is of note that the largest proportion of students who were satisfied with staff availability when they needed assistance had attended 10 or more classes before leaving the University. However, of those participants who were dissatisfied and used the ratings of 'hardly ever' or 'never', the majority had attended seven or more classes. Although only a small percentage of students expressed dissatisfaction, it is interesting to note that these students attended the University for a significant number of weeks before leaving.

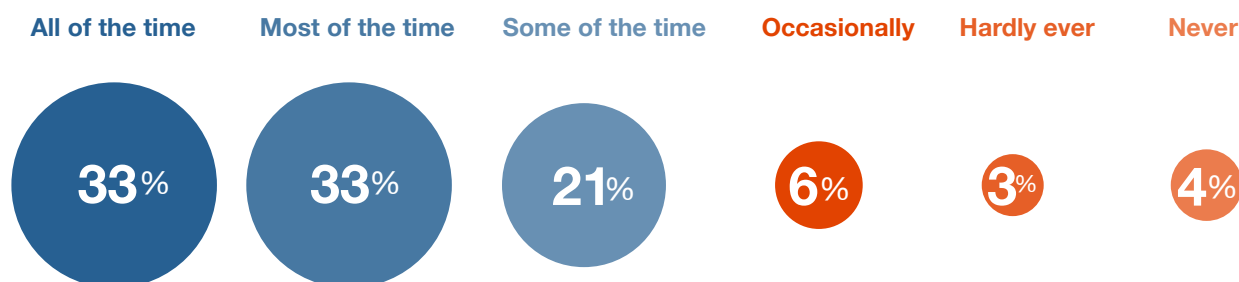
Figure 29 Availability of teachers against number of classes attended



5.4.2 Providing timely feedback

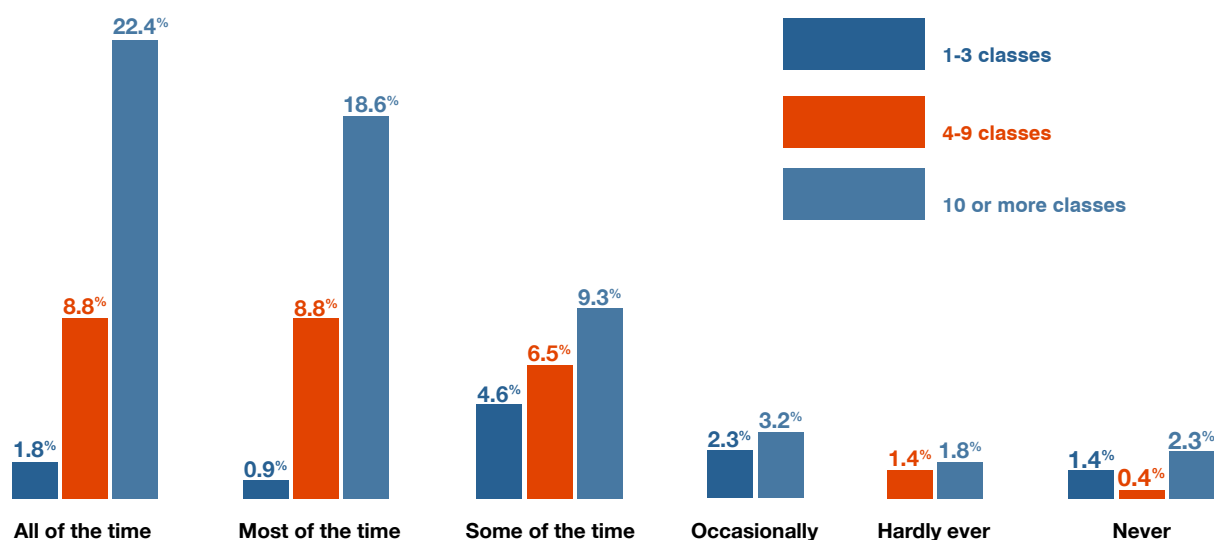
Another issue that is tied to the quality of teaching is the provision of timely and adequate feedback on students' work. The last question that students had to rate in terms of teaching practices at VU was designed to explore this aspect of teaching practices.

Figure 30 Did teachers provide you with timely feedback on your work?



The overwhelming majority of respondents were satisfied with the feedback they received, with 66% saying that teachers provided them with timely feedback 'all the time' and 'most of the time'. On the other hand, 7% said they 'hardly ever' or 'never' received timely feedback on their work. The following graph ranges students' ratings in terms of timely feedback against the number of classes attended before leaving VU.

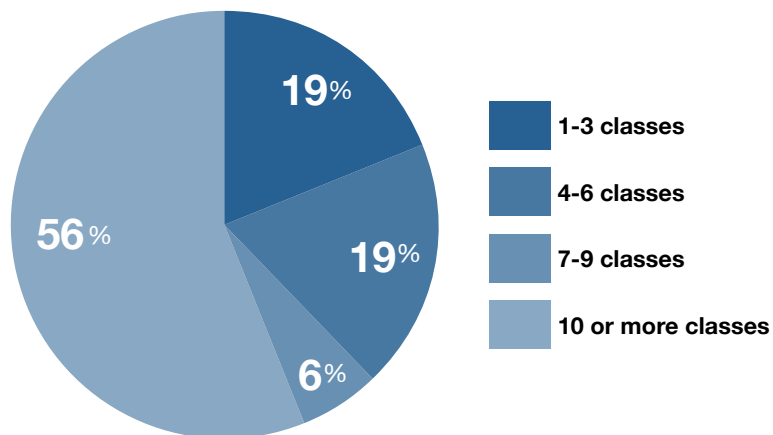
Figure 31 Timely feedback received against number of classes attended



The majority of students who attended at least 10 classes were satisfied with the timeliness of the feedback they received. Nevertheless, of those students who were dissatisfied, 56% had attended 10 or more classes before they left (see figure below). Only a small proportion of

students from the categories '1-3 weeks' and '4-6 weeks' responded to this question. This can be explained by the fact that these students left the University before the assessment period, and therefore did not have time to receive feedback.

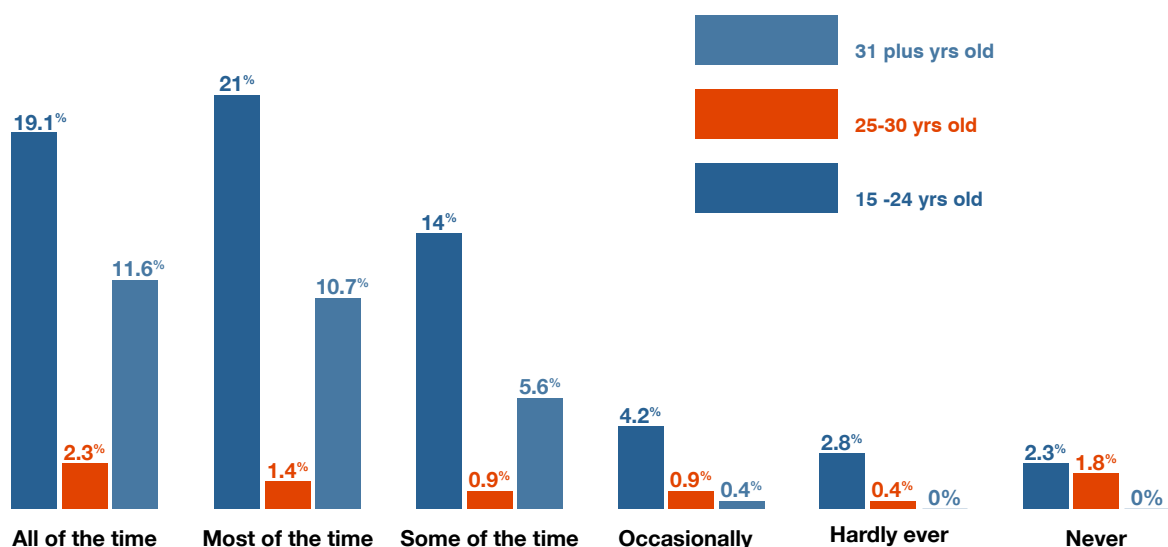
Figure 32 Who was dissatisfied with the timeliness of the feedback?



Given that a majority of the students who were dissatisfied with the timeliness of feedback had attended a significant number of classes before leaving, the issue of timely feedback would seem to require further attention in order to improve the University's performance in this area.

An analysis of the age variance in student attitude towards the timeliness of teachers' feedback showed that students over the age of 31 were generally satisfied with the timeliness of the feedback in comparison with the younger cohort.

Figure 33 Evaluation on providing timely feedback against age categories



Students over the age of 31 were generally positive about the timeliness of the feedback they received. A small proportion of the younger students said they ‘hardly ever’ and ‘never’ received timely feedback, however no students over the age of 31 responded with ‘hardly ever’ or ‘never’ to this question. A majority (72%) of the mature age students over the age of 25 said that they received timely feedback ‘all the time’ or ‘most of the time’, in comparison to 64% of the younger cohort. These figures are significant, as the majority of students who responded to this question were less than 25 years of age.

The next question was open-ended, and was designed to explore students’ classroom experiences of teachers and teaching strategies. The advantage of open-ended questions is the ability to capture the responses of students in their own words, providing greater insight into aspects of teaching and classroom dynamics than multiple choice or scaled questions..

Students were asked:

- Is there anything else you would like to say about the classes and teaching at VU?

While responses to the scaled questions on teaching were generally positive, analysis of the qualitative data revealed a number of common themes and reflected a fairly negative experience. A selection of the responses that were used in the qualitative data analysis about classes and teaching at VU is listed below.

... it was hard to contact teachers ... and didn't learn much in class either.

Female, Bachelor of Nursing, aged 36 years

I didn't like the course and think that everything was just bad in terms of teaching. I waited too long for teachers to get back to me and don't feel like I learned anything.

Male, Diploma of Information Technology, aged 20 years

Teachers weren't sure what homework and reading to assign to students.

Female, Bachelor of Education, aged 22 years

Of the students who responded to the above question, approximately 18% expressed negative feelings about their experiences of the class-room and/or of teaching strategies at VU. A number of common themes emerged in these responses, including:

Teachers are not very helpful

I tried talking to the coordinator who did not really take care of my issue as he was too busy.

Female, Bachelor of Arts, aged 42 years

Contact needs to be better with teachers.

Male, Bachelor of Business, aged 19 years

Lecturers and tutors were not helpful.

Female, Bachelor of Nursing, aged 19 years

Teachers are not organised for class

... and I found the lecturers disorganised. A lecturer left for one hour and didn't come back.

Female, Bachelor of Psychological Studies/Business, aged 25 years

I went to class and there was no teacher and everything was really disorganised. So I didn't complete the course.

Male, Diploma of Engineering Technology, aged 30 years

Poor equipment

Poor equipment - didn't work, including projectors.

Female, Bachelor of Education, aged 22 years

There was broken equipment - drafting tables.

Male, Advanced Diploma of Engineering Technology, aged 22 years

Negative attitudes of teachers in class

I felt excluded more from the staff than the students, i.e. staff member acted racist in front of a whole class of students by stating student was stupid, using a negative tone. This was due to being late to class.

Female, Bachelor of Arts, aged 19 years

While a significant proportion of students rated classroom teaching strategies positively, the qualitative data revealed that a majority of the students who responded to the open-ended question had one or more negative experiences with teachers and/or teaching strategies while they were studying at VU. When compared to the quantitative data, however, this does not appear to have influenced students' overall perception of the quality of teaching quality.

Again, it is significant that 73% of the students who had negative experiences at VU in terms of teachers and teaching strategies had attended at least 10 weeks of classes before leaving the University.

A number of respondents raised issues about teacher support, alongside broader concerns centering on classroom culture. Students repeatedly used the word 'unhelpful' to describe teachers, which can be read as a proxy term for 'unsupportive'. The provision of adequate support was viewed in terms of assistance with academic or classroom activities or with integration into the University. Those respondents who felt supported by their teachers also spoke highly of those teachers and of their teaching strategies and expertise.

[although] we were going over old material ... I found the lecturer was good...

Male, Diploma of Financial Services, aged 66 years

The teachers themselves were fantastic at the Sunshine campus.

Male, Advanced Diploma of Engineering Technology, aged 22 years

5.5 Support Services

A number of questions were designed to investigate whether students sought advice or explored other options at VU before deciding to leave. The responses to these questions not only provide an insight into the mindset of students before they leave but into their perception of the support services available at VU.

It is interesting to note that only 37% of the students interviewed had spoken to someone about leaving VU. A small proportion (3%) of students chose not to answer this question.

Given the significant proportion (60%) of students who did not speak to anyone before leaving the University, this cohort was specifically questioned as to their reasons for not seeking either internal or external support. An analysis was carried out on the responses to the options that were provided to students as reasons for not seeking support prior to leaving. A selection of responses is listed below:

I had already made up my mind to leave .

It was an easy decision to make.

Female, Bachelor of Health Science, aged 39 years

I got health issues unexpectedly...

Female, Bachelor of Business, aged 36 years

I didn't think anyone would be able to help .

I found the teachers were not organised...

Female, Bachelor of Nursing, aged 55 years

... the reality is you can't change the problems ... the problems weren't ones that could be fixed immediately.

Female, Bachelor of Business, aged 19 years

I didn't know who to go to.

I didn't know I could speak to anyone — I just filled in a form when I got the letter.

Female, Bachelor of Science, aged 19 years

It was too hard to find the information and the people to talk to.

Male, Bachelor of Business 47 years

... went to orientation day but there was no one there, went to student lounge but no one was around ... no teaching or admin staff.

Female, Bachelor of Business, aged 46 years

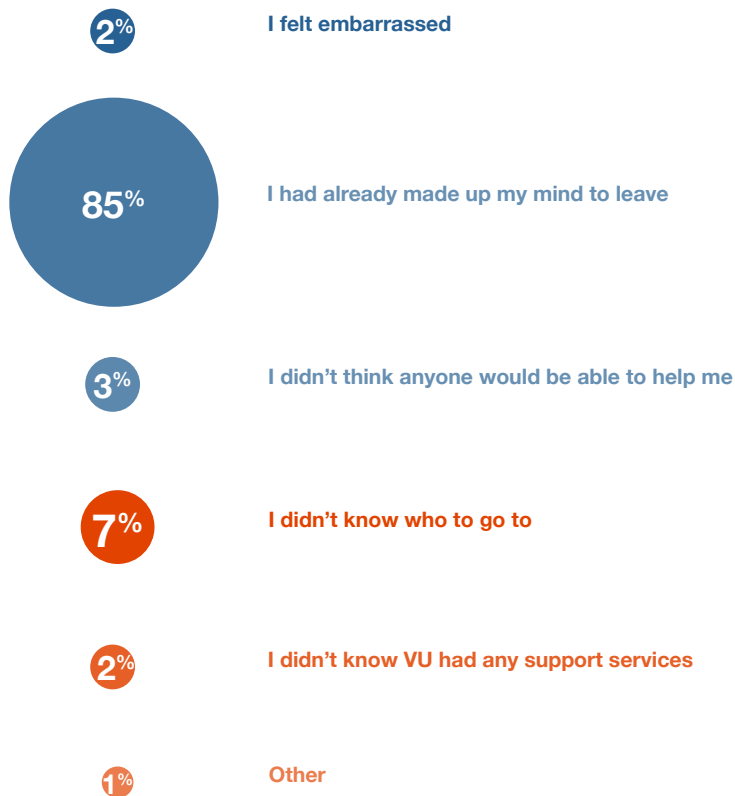
- I didn't know VU had support services

(There were no further comments from students who selected this option)

- I felt embarrassed

(There were no further comments from students who selected this option)

Figure 34 Why students didn't speak to anyone before they left



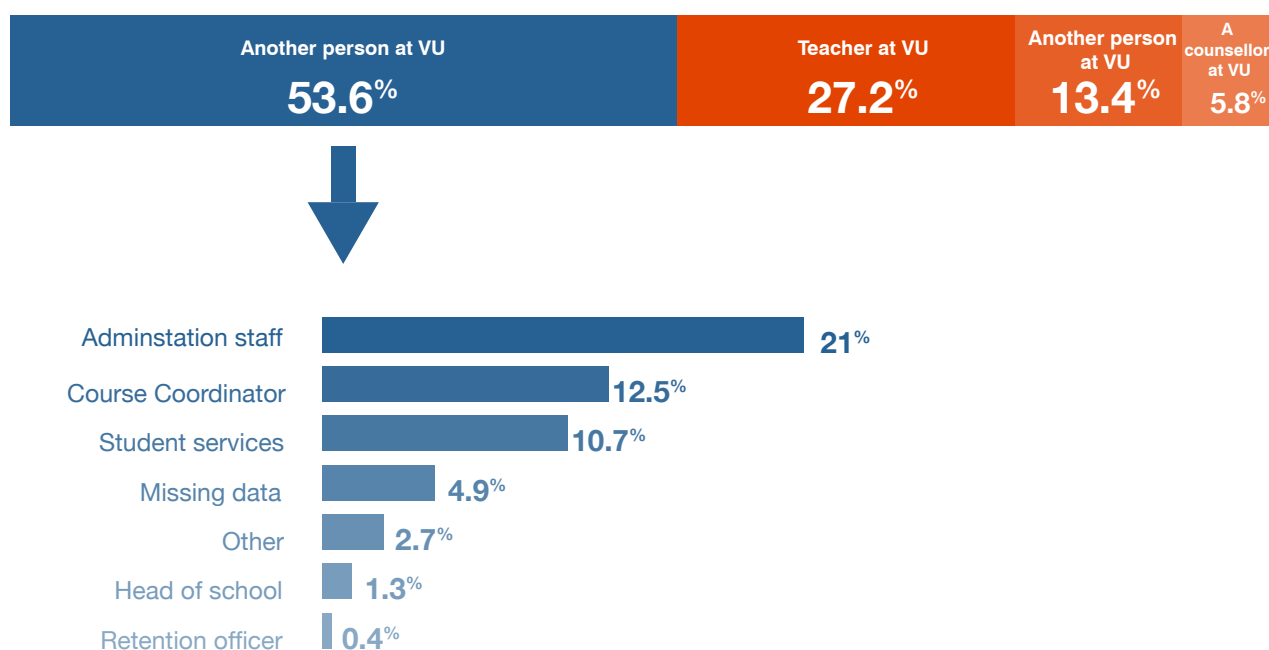
The most frequent reason students gave for not seeking support was that they had already made up their mind to leave. Remarkably, a number of students weren't aware that VU had student support services that provided career counselling, course support and/or financial help. Some students thought that no one would be able to help them, and others were too embarrassed to talk about it. This implies that there is a broad lack of awareness about the assistance available to students, or that there is lack of a culture of seeking assistance on a general scale. On the other hand, the following response suggests that some students couldn't access the assistance they needed, which contributed to their decision to leave the University without seeking advice.

I sought advice but was transferred from one department to the other, not knowing where to go and I left without getting help.

Female, Bachelor of Nursing, aged 24 years

Participants were also asked who they spoke to before leaving the University. Approximately 37% of students said they spoke to someone before making the decision to leave VU (i.e. internal or external). The graph below shows that the largest proportion of these students spoke to someone at VU other than their teachers; almost 30% spoke to their teachers, while only 4.5% of students sought advice from career counsellors.

Figure 35 Who did the students speak to before they left?



In relation to the above question, it was important to examine the category of ‘another person at VU’, particularly as it represented nearly 54% of the responses to the question. To gain some insight into where students went for assistance, the category was broken down into sub-categories (see above graph). Administrative staff were classified as Faculty as opposed to student service centre staff.

Not surprisingly, the vast majority of students surveyed approached their faculty or school office for assistance in relation to their course or classes. As such, it is clear that faculty and school staff members need to be well equipped with information about the support services available at VU. When approached by students seeking advice about course completion, these staff should be fully informed about the support options available to students, such as career counsellors, retention officers and course coordinators.

As the students who were interviewed had already left VU, the next question focused on what advice the students were given before they left. Qualitative data analyses revealed that the majority of students were advised to fill out withdrawal forms, or apply for leave of absence or deferral. It is unclear whether other options were discussed with the students before they decided to withdraw from their course; however, some students said that they were advised to reduce their study load or transfer into another course of interest before they filled out the withdrawal form.

She said I should think about studying another course that could improve my English.

Female, Cert. III in Children’s Services, aged 38 years

They advised me to defer university for the year and to take up small courses and to gain personal experiences prior to enrolling as a mature age student.

Male, Bachelor of Applied Science, aged 19 years

This section of the survey was extremely useful in terms of understanding student awareness of the services available at VU and the ways the University might support students in making an informed decision about their future. An increased awareness of the reasons why students slip through the cracks can assist the University in creating a culture where students (particularly new students) feel comfortable about seeking help and accessing the support that they need.

5.5.1 Concerns as a new student

A number of the students who were surveyed said that they had difficulty understanding the system at the University, specifically those students who entered directly from high school, TAFE or who enrolled as mature age students. These same concerns were revealed in the responses to the open-ended questions used in the qualitative data analysis.

Student responses expressed a variety of concerns, including confusion about enrolment procedures and course commencement dates, anxiety about the transition from TAFE to HE, a lack of knowledge about the available support services, and feelings of isolation, particularly from mature aged students. A number of students stated that experiencing unhelpful teaching and administrative staff in the first few weeks of their course made the transition to the University more difficult.

I found [the] content and uni life overwhelming. Thought teachers could have been more responsive to my needs. Socialising in [my] course was difficult due to [the] age difference.

Male, Bachelor of Nursing, aged 31 years

I moved to Melbourne, my enrolment forms were lost and I enrolled in the wrong course the second time around. I was told to wait and come back later ... then a fee of \$600 was applied because of the late enrolment ...

Towards the end of the survey, students were asked if they could think of anything VU could have done better while they were studying. Out of the range of responses that were given, 4% of students said their overall experience at VU was good and that they left due to external reasons. However some of the common issues that emerged were a lack of adequate information, miscommunication and enrolment issues. Two percent of students who answered the above question experienced a lack of information and miscommunication, including not being able to access adequate course and enrolment information from staff members or from the VU website. Additionally, 2% of students had an unfavourable experience during enrolment, suggesting that the process needed to be improved so it was less complicated for students.

Enrolment was a bit confusing and stressful as everything had to be done in person and a lot of people there gave you different answers.

Female, Bachelor of Education, aged 23 years

5.6 Why or why not VU?

5.6.1 Overall thoughts about VU

Information about students' expectations of VU before they began their course and their experiences once they had started was collected via closed and open-ended questions throughout the interview.

One such question put to students was: 'Are you able to tell us if your time at VU was what you expected it to be'. Answers were provided on a scale of 1 to 4, as follows:

1. 'About what I expected it to be'
2. 'A bit different from what I expected'
3. 'Completely different'
4. 'Not applicable'

A majority of respondents said the question was 'not applicable', based on their limited experience at VU. Nevertheless, approximately 25% of students indicated that their time at VU was 'about what they expected it to be' and 7% thought it was 'completely different' to their expectations. In relation to the latter response, the students were asked a number of open-ended questions, to clarify whether 'completely different' signified a positive or negative experience.

Of those students who said that their experience at VU was 'completely different' to what they expected, only a small proportion said this was a positive experience, with the majority saying that VU didn't live up to their expectations. Some of the responses that were captured in the qualitative data analysis are set out below:

Very unhappy with correspondence structure ... no direction, very confusing and found advertising on website false.

Male, Bachelor of Health Science, aged 34 years

I thought that university would be interesting especially for first year students but there was no interaction between students and lecturers and tutorials were not helpful. No knowledge gained.

Female, Bachelor of Business, aged 19 years

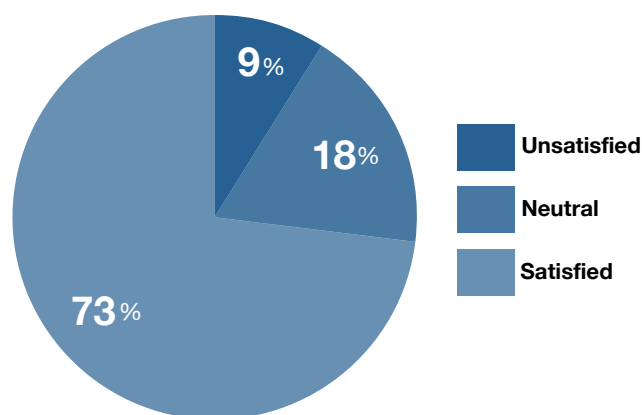
The teachers and facilities, when compared to other universities, were a lot worse than I expected.

Female, Bachelor of Business, aged 26 years

The qualitative data analysis also revealed that some of the basic requirements of an education provider — such as positive teacher/student interaction and organised courses and classes — were lacking in the eyes of some of the students who left VU. This data highlights the critical importance of teacher competency and the provision of opportunities for teacher/student engagement in improving student retention rates.

Students were asked to rate their satisfaction with the general staff, teachers and courses offered at VU on a scale of 1-7, where 1 was 'very dissatisfied' and 7 was 'very satisfied'.

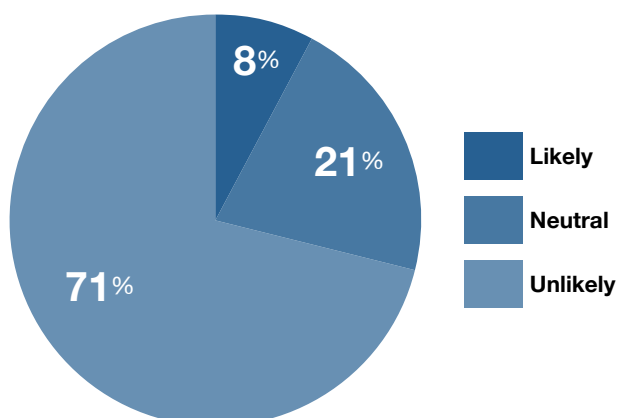
Figure 36 Student evaluation of general staff, teachers and courses at VU



The vast majority of students were satisfied with the general staff, teachers and courses at VU, even though they had decided to leave the University. This result is in line with the responses to the prior question about the quality of teaching and courses at VU. Nevertheless, 9% of respondents were 'somewhat dissatisfied', 'dissatisfied' and 'very dissatisfied'. These mixed results indicate that, despite the overall positive ratings, there are still some issues that need to be addressed in relation to teaching and courses at VU.

The majority of students who responded to the next question — 'How likely is it you would recommend VU to a friend?' — indicated they would be 'somewhat likely', 'likely' or 'very likely' to recommend VU to someone else.

Figure 37 How likely is it you would recommend VU to a friend?



Students were then asked if they had any intention of studying in the future and, if so, where were they likely to study. Although some respondents expressed a degree of dissatisfaction with

the teachers, courses and support services at VU, the majority stated that they were satisfied with their experience at VU. This suggests that a majority of those students who have left VU would be likely to return, which is supported by the data represented in Figure 38.

Figure 38 Do you think you would like to study at VU again in the future?

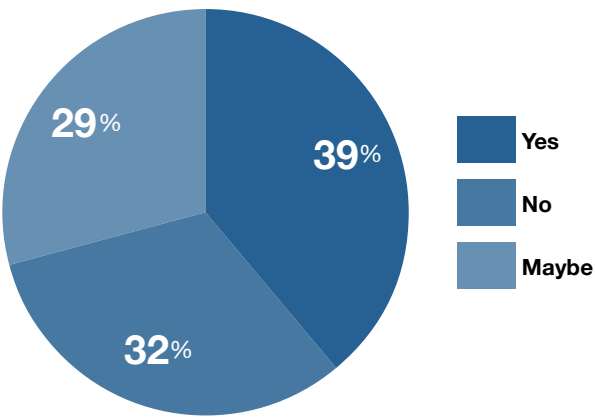
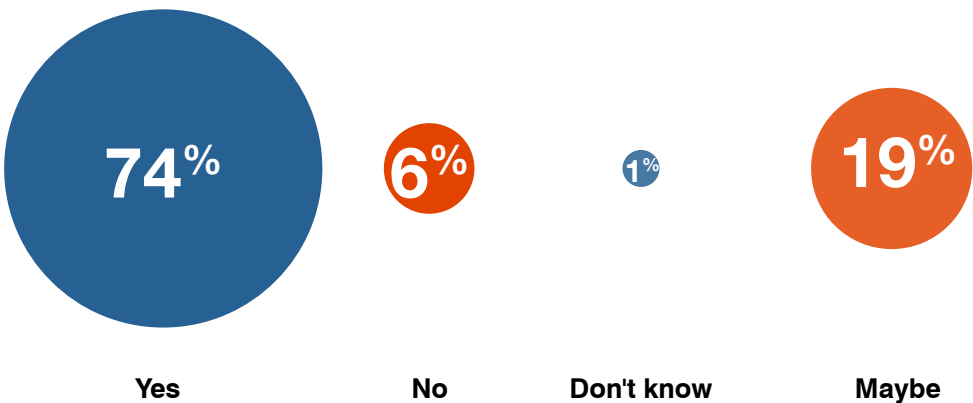


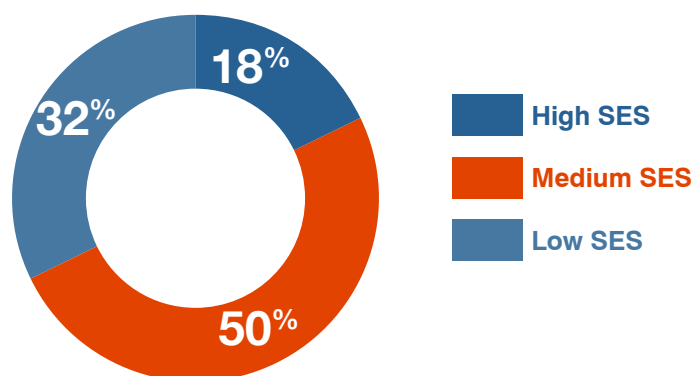
Figure 39 Do you think you would like to study again in the future?



Most of the students surveyed said that they intended to return to study in the future, suggesting that maintaining communication with these students would be beneficial for the University. Not only could this form the basis for a targeted marketing strategy, it would also show these students that they are still a part of the VU community.

Using cross-analysis, those students who wanted to return to study were asked about their prospective courses, revealing that the majority of the students who indicated a VE/FE or TAFE level course were from a low and medium SES. Given that the second largest group of students that participated in this study were from a high SES, this data is potentially useful in understanding the motivations underlying the desire to study between SES groups.

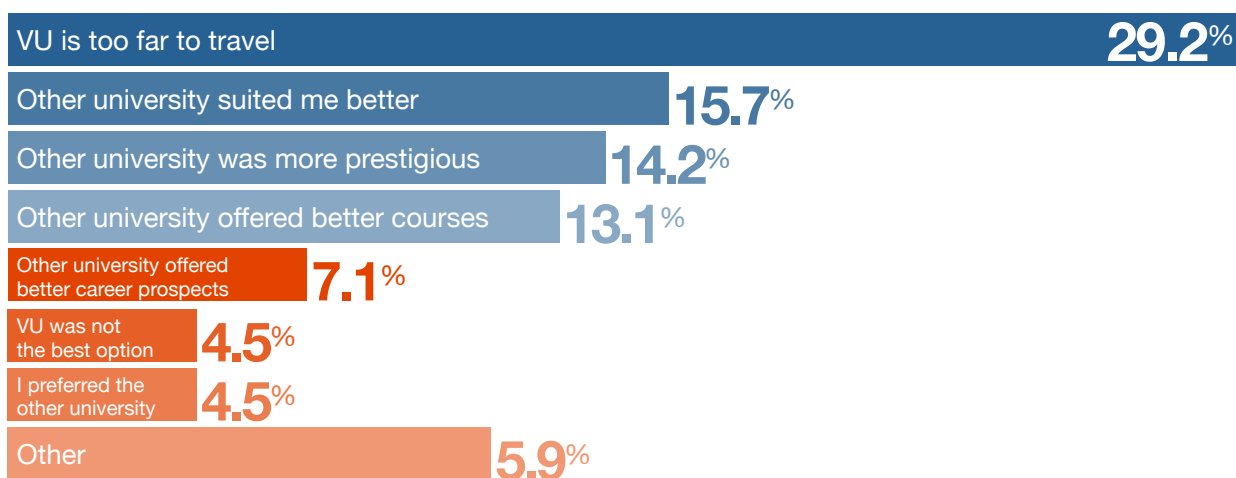
Figure 40 Who is planning to come back to study at TAFE?



Reason for not listing VU as the first preference

The survey posed questions that were designed to understand students' perception of VU at the time of listing their preferences and during the application process. The following graph highlights some of the reasons given as to why students did not list VU as their first preference.

Figure 41 Reasons for not listing VU as the first preference.

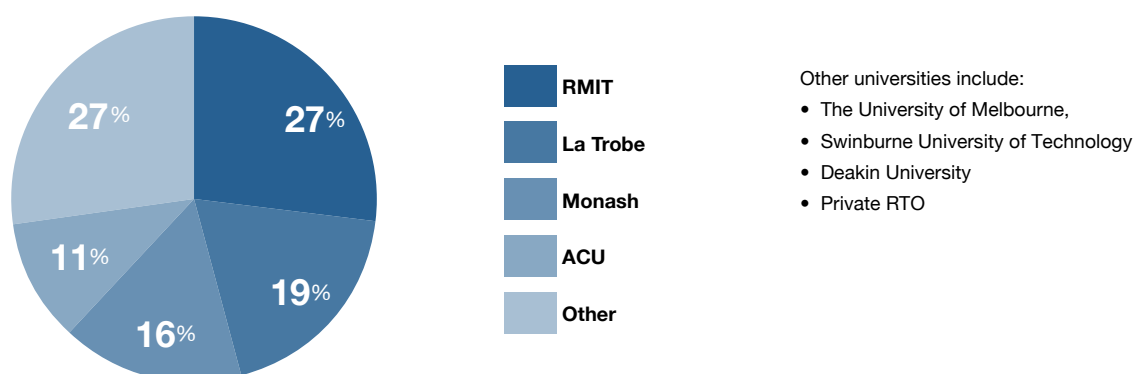


It is significant that there is a consistent trend of student concerns about the geographical location of VU. A large proportion of students did not list VU as their first preference primarily due to its physical distance from their home.

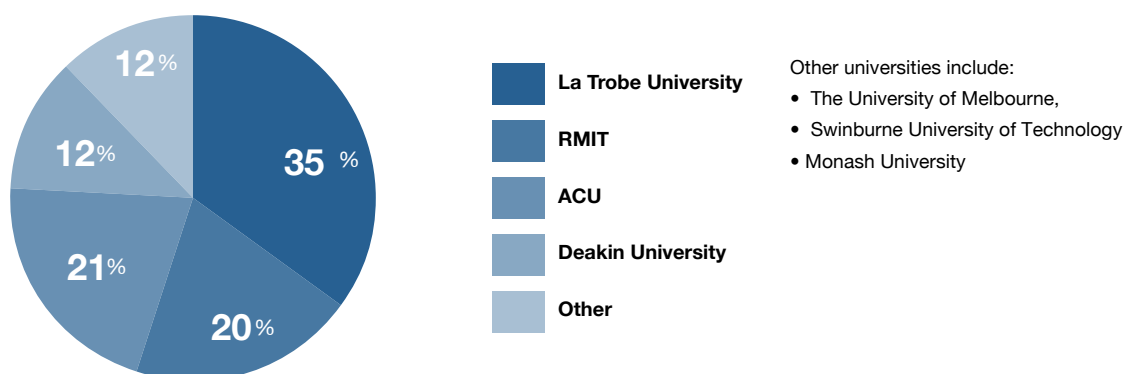
The next most common reason cited by students for not listing VU as their first preference was that another university suited them better. This is in line with the results gathered from the first question of the survey, where acceptance into another university was one of the main reasons cited for leaving VU. The following pie charts demonstrate some of the reasons students don't list VU as their first preference. A significant proportion of students take up offers at other universities after enrolling at VU, predominantly at RMIT and La Trobe.

Figure 42 Reasons for taking up offers at other universities

Institutions that were listed as first preference due to its prestige compared to VU



Institutions that were listed as first preference as they offer better courses compared to VU

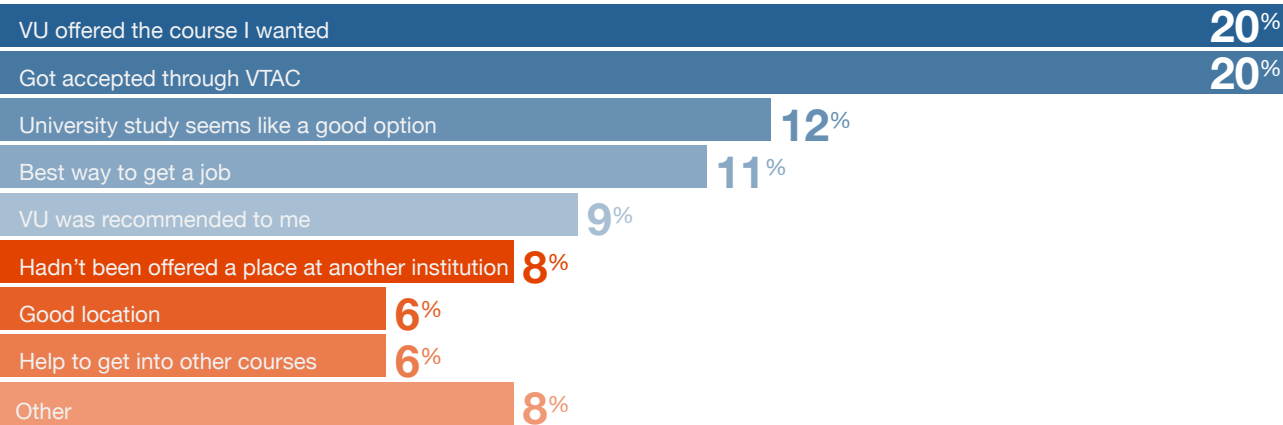


A small proportion of students were unaware of VU at the time of course selection. This is worth noting, as all these students indicated that they were living within the Melbourne Metropolitan Region.

Reasons for enrolling at VU

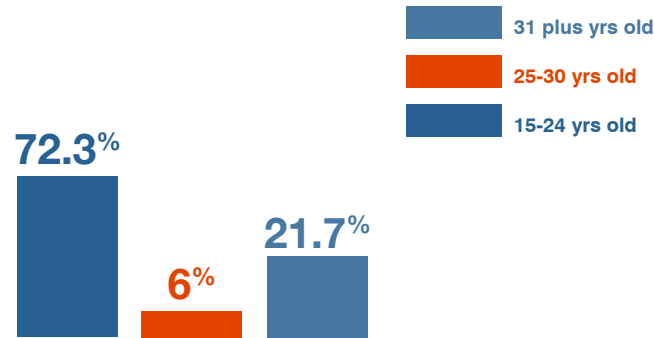
One of the main objectives of the survey was to attempt to understand why students enrolled at VU in the first place, before their circumstances changed and they left the University. The information that was collected gives an indication of how VU is perceived by potential students and by those who enrol at VU. It also provides an insight into ways that VU can work towards ensuring that student expectations are met and retention rates are improved.

Figure 43 Reasons for enrolling at VU



A significant number of respondents said that VU catered for their needs by offering the course that they wanted. Those who thought university was a good option and wanted to give it a try enrolled without any specific purpose, which could explain VU’s attrition rate, in line with other research findings. Of those who thought university seems like a good option, the majority were aged between 15 and 19 and were predominantly school leavers. On the contrary, mature age students generally tended to have a purpose for enrolling at a university.

Figure 44 Those who thought university study was a good option



A cross-analysis of those participants who thought tertiary education was the best way to get a job revealed that VE/FE students were more likely to state this as a reason for enrolling at VU compared to HE students.

Figure 45 Enrolling at VU seemed like the best way to find a good job



The analysis of reasons for enrolling at VU revealed that 6% of respondents thought that enrolling in a course at VU would allow them to transfer into other courses, both internally and externally. For statistical purposes, these students are counted as withdrawn from the University. As such, the merit of facilitating ease of transfer between courses or across universities is not taken into consideration in this survey.

Student attrition rates have been an ongoing concern for VU for some time. In the contemporary tertiary environment, which is highly competitive, retaining students has become even more critical. This study found that, alongside the common reasons for attrition cited in the literature, Victoria University has its own 'individual attrition profile' (Wilcoxson et al. 2011). Therefore, the results of this study should be used to improve the support provided by the University, assisting students in the completion of their courses.

Meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse student population can be challenging, however this study provides insight into the specific reasons that students leave VU and incorporates student suggestions on ways the University can improve the experience of HE.

Overall, the study found that the demographics of students in higher education are changing, with more non-traditional students entering university. The particular needs of this diverse group of students have to be understood in order for the University to provide them with the appropriate support.

Analysis of the data drawn from the survey indicates that a complex set of factors contributes to the decision to leave higher education. These reasons vary across demographical characteristics, such as age, gender, SES, language spoken at home, amongst others. Increasingly, a greater proportion of students are working full-time while they are studying, making it difficult to achieve a work/study/life balance.

While there are a number of reasons for attrition that the University has minimal or no control over, there are others that can be focused on to enhance the student experience at VU. The latter includes focusing on the quality of the teaching, learning and support services available to students. Although it was found that students were generally quite positive about their experiences at VU, a majority of those surveyed took up offers at other institutions.

Amongst those who were not currently studying, a large majority said that they planned to return to study, emphasising that HE journeys are unpredictable (Tresman 2002). VU would benefit from maintaining contact with these students, encouraging them to return to VU and complete their courses or enrol in a new course at a time that is appropriate on an individual basis.

Of particular concern is the finding that a significant number of respondents did not seek help before leaving the University, with many unaware of the support services available to them. Any programs directed at improving attrition rates at VU should be comprehensive in scope, while at the same time addressing the specific needs of the cohorts it has been shown are most likely to withdraw.

Participants in the survey proposed a number of suggestions for improving the experience of studying at VU. As a majority of students are employed, the flexible delivery of courses and flexible timetabling

were the most common suggestions. Non-traditional students highlighted the need for improved support services, study assistance and the ability to access facilities outside of class hours.

As a dual sector university serving the Western Metropolitan Region offering its students a wide range of opportunities, VU has a responsibility to the community to improve its services and reach its strategic goals, achieving the status of a great university in the 21st century. Part of this responsibility is to offer its students the support they need to excel.

1. Develop an understanding that student retention is the business of all academic and TAFE teaching and general staff. This would include the provision of training to ensure the development of a student-focused model that recognises the need to engage in proactive learner-centered initiatives and activities.
2. Develop a 'help-seeking' culture within the University where students are explicitly made aware of the support available, through student support services, academic staff, dedicated VU College retention staff and administrative staff.
3. Develop the University's understanding and usage of e-learning in order to provide students with greater flexibility – particularly for those students who travel over 10kms to study.
4. Review existing materials for commencing students; draw upon existing resources from other Australian institutions; and develop new resources that are coordinated, evidence-based and scholarly, ensuring whole-of-staff collaboration.
5. Introduce a comprehensive professional development program for administrative staff to ensure quality client-focused service.
6. Ensure the broad availability of accurate attrition data by semester and student type. As part of this data suite, ensure that an exit survey is developed and implemented, and that the results are evaluated and disseminated. It might be useful to consider Course Experience Surveys and Exit Surveys in tandem.
7. Review all student pastoral and academic support within the context of first year at university best practice. This should include support for Pathways students and others who come to the University through non-standard entry.
8. Develop a contemporary e-newspaper that could be sent to prospective students, enrolled students, students who have temporarily suspended their studies, and alumni.
9. Review all facets of student communications to ensure efficient delivery of timely, need-to-know-now information.
10. Establish a dedicated sub-committee of the Teaching and Learning Committee to be chaired by the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic and Students), with representation from all Colleges, including the VUC Retention Manager with decision-making powers, so that this Committee becomes the focus for the provision of a comprehensive set of retention policies, strategies, processes and targets for TAFE, undergraduate and postgraduate students. This committee should review comprehensive attrition data on a semester-by-semester basis and have the authority to provide advice to course coordinators and program managers whose data demonstrates high attrition rates.

REFERENCES

Adams, T., M. Banks, D. Davis, and J. Dickson 2010. The Hobsons retention project: Context and factor analysis report. Melbourne: Tony Adams and Associates.

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008. Education Across Australia.
<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Chapter6002008> [Cat. No. 4101.0 date accessed?]

Bosman, C., E. Coiacetto, and D. Dredge 2011. The shifting ground of Australian Higher Education through the lens of reflexive modernisation: compromising the quality of planning education? *Australian Planner* 48(2): 72-83.

Bye, D., D. Pushkar, and M. Conway 2007. Motivation, interest, and positive affect in traditional and nontraditional undergraduate students. *Adult Education Quarterly* 57(2): 141-158.

Callan, V. 2005. Why do students leave? Leaving vocational education and training with no recorded achievement. NCVER.
<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1566.html>

Cao, Z. and R. Gabb 2006. Student attrition at a new generation university. Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) Conference, in Adelaide, Australia.

Crosling, G., L. Thomas, and M. Heagney 2007. Improving student retention in higher education: the role of teaching and learning. Routledge.

Deng, X., Z. Lu, and Z. Cao 2007. Attrition patterns in a diversified student body: A case study. *The Journal of the Education Research Group Adelaide* 1(1): 15-25.

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2008. Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report.
<http://www.innovation.gov.au/highereducation/ResourcesAndPublications/ReviewOfAustralianHigherEducation/Pages/ReviewOfAustralianHigherEducationReport.aspx>

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2009. HE statistics student participation and achievement.
<http://www.innovation.gov.au/HigherEducation/HigherEducationStatistics/StatisticsPublications/Pages/Students2009FullYear.aspx>

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2009. Transforming Australia's HE System.
http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Documents/PDF/Additional%20Report%20%20Transforming%20Aus%20Higher%20ED_webaw.pdf

Department of Industry 2011. Attrition Success Retention Rate.
<http://www.innovation.gov.au/highereducation/HigherEducationStatistics/Pages/Library%20Card/Publications/11Appendix4AttritionSuccessRetentionRate.aspx>

Devlin, M. 2010. Non-traditional student achievement: Theory, policy and practice in Australian higher education. Paper presented at the FYHE 2010: Aspiration, Access, Achievement: Proceedings of the 13th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference 2010, in Adelaide.

Edwards, D. 2009. Forecasting university enrolment and completion numbers for Victoria.

Department of IIRD. <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/research/forecastunienrol.pdf>

- Feldman, K. 1994. What matters in college? Four critical years revisited. *Journal of Higher Education* 65(5): 615-622.
- Gabb, R., L. Milne, L., and Z. Cao 2006. Understanding attrition and improving transition. A Review of Recent Literature, Post-Compulsory Education Centre.
- Gonski, D. 2011. Review of funding for schooling final report December 2011. Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. <http://foi.deewr.gov.au/node/30439/>
- James, R., K. Krause, K. and C. Jennings 2010. The first year experience in Australian universities: Findings from 1994 to 2009. Centre for the Study of HE, The University of Melbourne.
http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/research/experience/docs/FYE_Report_1994_to_2009.pdf
- Krause, K. , R. Hartley, R. James, and C. McInnis 2005. The first year experience in Australian universities: Findings from a decade of national studies. Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne: Melbourne.
- Lamb, S., L. Robinson, and M. Davies 2001. Youth Allowance and participation in education, training and work: Results from the third wave of the Youth Allowance Longitudinal Survey. Report prepared for the Youth and Students Branch, Department of Family and Community Services. Melbourne: Australian Council for Education Research.
- Marks, G. 2007 . Completing university: characteristics and outcomes of completing and non-completing students. LSAY Research Reports: 51.
- McMillan, J., Course change and attrition from higher education (2005). LSAY Research Reports. Longitudinal surveys of Australian youth research report ; n.39
http://research.acer.edu.au/lsay_research/43.
- Milne, L., and R. Gabb 2007. Transition into higher education at Victoria University: a student view. Postcompulsory Education Centre. Victoria University: Melbourne.
- Norton, A. 2012. Mapping Australian higher education. Grattan Institute: Melbourne.
- Palermo, J., D. Marr, J. Oriol, J. Arthur, and D. Johnston 2012. Tracking student success: Using an action learning approach to better understand the how, what, where and why. *Journal of Institutional Research* 17(1): 39-50.
- Richardson Jr, R.C., and E.F. Skinner 1990. Achieving Quality and Diversity: Universities in a Multicultural Society. ERIC: New York.
- RMIT 2009. TAFE Exit Study: Report, https://www.google.com.au/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CC0QFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fmams.rmit.edu.au%2Fbhkmw8zbufmj.doc&ei=nuCnUrT9I8iXrAf14DQDQ&usg=AFQjCNFSyQh7iaCweZO4UtY2gBoTdmPt3Q&sig2=qTRWiVi_ZqRWn7au8BMzGw&bv m=bv.57799294,d.bmk
- Taylor, J.A., and T. Bedford 2004. Staff perceptions of factors related to non-completion in Higher Education. *Studies in Higher Education* 29(3): 375- 394
- Tones, M., J. Fraser, J., R. Elder, and K.M. White 2009. Supporting mature-aged students from a low socioeconomic background. *Higher Education* 58(4): 505-529.
- Vaisanen, P., and J. Rautopuro 2001. Non-traditional students at university. A follow-up study of young and adult students' orientations, satisfaction, and learning outcomes. Paper presented at the European Conference on Educational Research, in Lille, France.
- Vickers, M., s. Lamb, S., and J. Hinkley 2003. Student workers in high school and beyond: the effects of part-time employment on participation in education, training and work. LSAY Research Reports: 34.

Victoria University 2011. 2011 Annual Report.

<https://www.vu.edu.au/sites/default/files/mcd/pdfs/VU%202011%20Annual%20Report%20web.pdf>

Willcoxson, L., M. Manning, R. Hibbins, S. Joy, J. Thomas, A. Girardi, B. Leask, T. Sidoryn, J. Cotter, M. Kavanagh, D. Troedson, and B. Lynch 2011. The whole of university experience: retention, attrition, learning and personal support interventions during undergraduate business studies. Project Report. Australian Learning and Teaching Council: Sydney

Wylie, J. R. 2005. Non-traditional student attrition in higher education: A theoretical model of separation, disengagement then dropout. SELF Research Centre. University of Western Sydney: Australia.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Comparison of target and sample demographic data.

	ENTIRE GROUP (‘TARGET GROUP’)		PARTICIPANT GROUP (‘SAMPLE’)		VU PROFILE ¹
	Number	% of TARGET GROUP	Number	% of SAMPLE	VU profile
Enrolment status					
Withdrawn (inc withdrawn fees owing)	1295	50.1%	427	73%	
Deferred	923	35.7%	141	24.1%	
Leave of absence	251	9.7%	15	2.6%	
Cancelled	92	3.6%	0	0%	
Enrolment combinations ²	26	1.0%	2	0.3%	
Sex					
Male	1132	43.8%	255	43.6%	49.8%*
Female	1455	56.2%	330	56.4%	50.2%*
Age (mean & median)	24.08 (mean); 20 (med)		25.4 (mean); 21 (med)		21 (med)
17-19	1140	44.1%	236	40.3%	30.58%
20-24	685	26.5%	147	25.1%	46.24%
25-29	255	9.9%	57	9.7%	11.06%
30+	507	19.6%	145	24.8%	23.18%
SES					
High	613	23.7%	146	25.0%	24.87%
Medium	1337	51.7%	296	50.6%	53.88%
Low	583	22.5%	137	23.4%	21.25%
Overseas or unknown	54	2.1%	6	1.0%	NA
ATAR (mean & median)	59.17 (mean); 59.4 (med)		58.74 (mean); 59.05 (med)		
No ATAR recorded ³	1011	39.1%	236	40.3%	
1-29.99	59	2.3%	14	2.4%	
30-39.99	95	3.7%	21	3.6%	

40-49.99	189	7.3%	41	7.0%	
50-59.99	477	18.4%	108	18.5%	
60-69.99	434	16.8%	100	17.1%	
70-79.99	184	7.1%	40	6.8%	
80-89.99	96	3.7%	17	2.9%	
90+	42	1.6%	8	1.4%	
Campus distance (mean & median)	39.7k (mean) ; 25k (med)		36km (mean); 23km (med)		
No distance calculated ⁴	210	8.2%	31	5.3%	
0-9.99km	466	18.0%	116	19.8%	
10-19.99km	533	20.6%	108	18.5%	
20-29.99km	470	18.2%	92	15.7%	
30-39.99km	288	11.1%	97	16.6%	
40-49.99km	145	5.6%	35	6.0%	
50-59.99km	142	5.5%	37	6.3%	
60-69.99km	67	2.6%	16	2.7%	
70-99.99km	102	3.9%	19	3.2%	
100-149.99km	55	2.1%	12	2.1%	
150-199.99km	36	1.4%	8	1.4%	
200+km	72	2.8%	14	2.4%	
DEECD region					
Barwon Southwest	79	3.1%	18	3.1%	
Eastern metropolitan	300	11.6%	63	10.8%	
Gippsland	49	1.9%	5	0.9%	
Grampians	36	1.4%	8	1.4%	
Hume	48	1.9%	9	1.5%	
Loddon Mallee	66	2.6%	15	2.6%	
Northern metropolitan	497	19.2%	116	19.8%	
Southern metropolitan	496	19.2%	125	21.4%	
Western metropolitan	871	33.7%	209	35.8%	
Other ⁵	144	5.6%	17	2.9%	
Language spoken at home					
English	1829	70.7%	410	70.1%	55.4%*
Non-English	758	29.3%	175	29.9%	43.8%*
Campus					
City Flinders	164	6.3%	32	5.6%	8.6%*
City King	42	1.6%	9	1.6%	3.6%*

City Queen	90	3.5%	8	1.4%	2.5%*
Footscray Nicholson	246	9.5%	64	10.9%	12.5%*
Footscray Park	1082	41.8%	228	38.9%	22.3%*
Melton	3	0.1%	1	0.2%	0.7%*
Newport	48	1.9%	18	3.1%	6.0%*
St Albans	655	25.3%	160	27.3%	15.2%*
Sunshine	28	1.1%	8	1.4%	9.2%*
Werribee	110	4.3%	34	5.9%	7.2%*
Industry/workplace	29	1.1%	3	0.5%	11.7%*
Offshore	22	0.8%	0	0%	
Flex-ed	18	0.7%	7	1.2%	
Internet (Australia)	24	0.9%	5	0.9%	0.5%*
Other ⁶	26	1.0%	7	1.2%	
Domestic / International ⁷					
Domestic	2505	96.8%	575	98.3%	93.3%*
International	82	3.2%	10	1.7%	6.6%*
Sector					
HE	1885	72.9%	382	65.3%	40.0%*
HE and TAFE ⁸	9	0.3%	2	0.3%	
TAFE	693	26.8%	201	34.4%	60.0%*
Faculty					
AEHD	816	31.5%	169	28.9%	12.7%*
Business & Law	544	21.0%	98	16.8%	18.8%*
Health, Engineering & Science	513	19.8%	113	19.3%	8.2%*
Workforce Development	485	18.7%	137	23.4%	23.3%*
Technical & Trades Innovation	131	5.1%	38	6.5%	24.6%*
VU College	63	2.4%	22	3.8%	17%*
Cross-faculty enrolments ⁹	35	1.5%	8	1.4%	

FOOTNOTES

1. Refers to VU domestic undergraduate students
2. Refers to students who had multiple enrolment statuses eg. Withdrawn from one course and deferred from another.
3. No ATAR recorded includes those who did not provided ATARs, students without ATARs and international students
4. Distance is not calculated for, internet, flexed, industry and dual campus students. Distances for overseas and interstate students were used only when a Victorian semester address was provided.
5. Includes interstate and overseas where semester address not provided.
6. Includes, Sydney ECA and dual / multi-campus.
7. Domestic includes Australian and NZ citizens, permanent residents and permanent humanitarian visa students.
8. Refers to students who were enrolled in courses in TAFE and HE before withdrawing, taking LOA, deferring or having enrolment cancelled, or students who were co-enrolled (ie. in a dual award).
9. Refers to students who were enrolled in cross-faculty courses eg. Enrolled in VU College preparation course and Workforce Development diploma course.

Appendix B

Attrition Survey

1. Can you tell me approximately how many classes you attended before you left?
2. Can you tell me the MAIN reason you did not continue studying with VU?
 - Can you tell me a bit more about that?
3. You said that [xxx] was your MAIN reason for leaving - were there any other reasons?
4. Thinking about the classes you attended, can you tell me if the content you covered was:
 - Relevant and interesting
 - Well presented with good supporting materials
 - Challenging and up-to-date
 - Boring and repetitive
5. And thinking about the teachers who taught you, did they:
 - Use teaching strategies that made the classes interesting
 - Make themselves available when you needed assistance
 - Provide you with timely feedback on your work
6. Is there anything else you would like to say about the classes and teaching at VU?
7. Before you left VU, did you speak with anyone about leaving?
 - Would you be able to tell me who you spoke to?
 - And what did they advise you?
 - Are you able to tell me why you didn't speak to anyone?
8. Were you working while you were studying or enrolled at VU?
 - And were you working full-time or part-time?
 - Do you know approximately how many hours you were working each week?
 - And how did you find working and studying at the same time?
9. Can you tell me why you enrolled at VU?
10. And could you tell me who recommended VU to you?
11. Was VU your first preference of University?

- Would you mind telling me who your first preference was?
 - Can you tell me why you didn't put VU down as your first preference?
 - Has anyone in your family ever gone to university or TAFE before?
 - And can you tell me which family member that was?
12. Before enrolling at VU, had you ever studied at University or TAFE before?
- Would you mind telling me what course you studied?
13. Did you live away from the family home while you studied at VU?
- Who did you live with while you were studying at VU?
 - And was living away from the family home a factor in your decision to leave?
14. Are you able to tell me if your time at VU was what you expected it to be?
- And could you tell me a bit about that please?
15. Can you tell me the MAIN reason you did not continue?
16. Are you studying at the moment?
- Could you tell me where you're currently studying?
 - And what course are you studying?
 - Do you think you'd like to study again in the future?
 - Which institution do you think you'd like to study at?
 - And what course do you think you might like to study?
17. On a scale of 1 to 7 where 1 is very dissatisfied and 7 is very satisfied, how satisfied were you with the general staff, teachers and courses offered at VU?
18. On a scale of 1 to 7 where 1 is very unlikely, and 7 is very likely, how likely would you be to recommend VU to your friends?
19. Do you think you would be likely to study at VU again in the future?
20. Just one final question. Can you think of anything we could have done better either while you were studying here or during your initial enrolment or contact with us?

Well that's all the questions we have for you.

I want to thank you again for taking the time to complete our survey.

As I mentioned earlier, your name will now go into the draw to win an iPad. The draw will take place in December and if you're lucky enough to win, we'll be in touch.

Is there anything else you would like to ask me about this survey?

