

University of New England

Student Intention and Progression Survey

Stage 2, 1999

Centre for Higher Education Management and Policy
September 1999

Acknowledgments

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Contents

Introduction	1
Method	1
Results	2
Gender and Age	2
Location of Home Residence	3
Course of Study	3
Study Mode	4
Academic Performance	4
Reasons for not returning to UNE in 1999	5
University and Course Advice	8
Appendix A: Student Intention and Progression Survey 1998: Executive Summary and Recommendations	10
Appendix B: 1998 Students (Record Form)	15
Appendix C: Telephone Interview Proforma	17
Appendix D: Factors Influencing Students' Decisions to Withdraw from UNE - Overview of Student Comments	19

Tables

Table 1:	All non-continuing students by contact status	2
Table 2:	Year of birth	3
Table 3:	Course of study	3
Table 4:	Mode of study	4
Table 5:	Academic performance measured as a proportion of units passed	5
Table 6:	Moved to another institution	5
Table 7:	ID of new institution	5
Table 8:	Break from studies	7
Table 9:	UNE Teaching/learning	7
Table 10:	Finance	8
Table 11:	Personal factors	8
Table 12:	Satisfaction with university/course advise	9

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Introduction

In December 1998 a survey was conducted at UNE which sought information regarding study intentions of internal undergraduate students for 1999. A particular concern of the survey was to determine the number of students who would not be continuing with their studies at UNE and the reasons for this. Appendix A contains the *Executive Summary and Recommendations* that was prepared on the basis of the survey results. The full report can be downloaded from the Centre's web site: <http://fehps.une.edu/F/r/higher/CHEMP.html>. The results showed that UNE did not have a student retention problem as such. Nonetheless a number of issues were raised as a result of the survey which drew attention to the special problems that UNE's regional location raises for some students. These issues include: travel costs; accommodation costs; separation from family and friends; and a relative paucity of full-time and casual employment opportunities in Armidale compared with metropolitan centres.

On the basis of this initial inquiry it was recommended that an additional study be undertaken which targeted all undergraduate students enrolled internally in 1998 who did not return to study at UNE in 1999. The purpose of this second study was to gain a greater insight from the total population of non-continuing 1999 students about why they left UNE and to target areas for UNE policy/procedure consideration.

Method

This follow-up survey was conducted during July - August 1999. An interview schedule was designed to elicit the required information and contact made with the target population by phone. The Student Database Unit provided listings for the target interviewees. The final number determined eligible for the study was 298. The attached student record form was provided for all students and formed the base line of information for preparing a statistical profile of the target population (Appendix B). The student record form also provided background/contextual information for the telephone interviewer.

Up to three attempts to contact the target by phone were made before it was determined not to proceed further. Of the 298 target population 120 (40.3%) could not be contacted. For the vast majority of these the explanation was that they were no longer at the contact number provided to UNE for record purposes and no forwarding contact number was available.

A proforma was developed for recording the outcomes of the telephone interview. This is provided in Appendix C. The proforma was essentially in two parts - the first designed to establish the reasons for not re-enrolling; the second intended to secure information on satisfaction with advice received regarding which university and course in which to enrol.

Overall the interviews took approximately 2-3 minutes to conduct and all those who participated in the interview were quite happy to do so. The length of the interview was, however, often substantially longer where a parent responded on behalf of the target student. The 178 contacts made provided a very encouraging 60% response rate. Much of the information provided during the telephone interviews confirmed the findings of the Phase 1 study conducted during 1998 (See Appendix A). However, additional concerns were apparent and are suggestive of the need for the University to reconsider some of its policies/procedures regarding the student learning environment and the ways in which prospective students are informed about UNE's course offerings.

The proforma for each interview was coded on completion and the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (version 6.1) was used for the data analysis. All non-continuing students irrespective of whether or not they participated in the telephone interview have data entered from the Student Record form referred to above.

Results

Table 1 shows that contact was successfully made for around 60% of all students who did not re-enrol for further study in 1999.

Table 1: All non-continuing students by contact status

Contact Status	No.	%
Contactable	178	60
Not Contactable	120	40
Total	298	100

Gender and Age

Almost half (144) of all non-continuing students were male and just over half (154) female – roughly the same male/female proportion as for the total undergraduate student population. Table 2 shows that the bulk of these students were aged 24 or less, with just under a quarter born in 1979. Less than 10% were born prior to 1970.

Table 2: Year of birth

Year Born	No.	%
1974 or earlier	57	19
1975	11	4
1976	33	11
1977	35	12
1978	54	18
1979	72	24
1980	36	12

Location of Home Residence

In regard to residential location, the majority (79.5%) of students had a NSW postcode, with Armidale accounting for a fifth of all students. Queensland accounted for 16.7% of all students, followed by Victoria with 2.4% and South Australia and the Northern Territory with 0.6% respectively.

Course of Study

Table 3 shows the courses in which non-continuing students were enrolled. The Bachelor of Arts (28.2%); Bachelor of Commerce (10.1%); and the Bachelor of Education (8.7%) accounted for 47% of all course enrolments, followed by the Bachelor of Nursing with 7.7% of enrolments.

Table 3: Course of study

Degree	No.	%
BA	84	28
BAGEC	5	2
BAGR	4	1
BALAW	15	5
BAS	2	1
BCOLAW	4	1
BCOMM	30	10
BCOMP	10	3
BEC	1	-
BET	6	2
BFA	3	1

BLANG	9	3
BN	23	8
BNAT	5	2
BRUR	8	3
BSC	22	7
BSCBE	1	-
BSCLAW	5	2
BSOCSO	4	1
BTCH	16	5
BURP	2	1
NATBE	3	1
BENV	1	-
BELAW	2	1
BED	26	9
Other	7	2

Study Mode

Table 4 shows that the majority of non-continuing students were enrolled for full-time study.

Table 4: Mode of study

Mode	No.	%
Full-time	244	82
Part-time	54	18
Total	298	100

Academic Performance

Table 5 below shows the percentage of enrolled units passed by the target population. The 48 missing cases are students who enrolled at the beginning of 1998 but who subsequently withdrew from all units. These students are excluded from the calculation of proportion of units passed.

Of those non-continuing students who actually attempted one or more units, 42% passed half or less. Twenty two percent passed all units for which they were enrolled. How this compares to the average academic performance of all undergraduate internal students needs to be determined.

Table 5: Academic performance measured as a proportion of units passed

Proportion of Units Passed	No.	%
	Missing Cases = 48	
25%	44	18
> 25% 50%	61	24
> 50% 75%	54	22
> 75%	91	36

Reasons for Not Returning to UNE in 1999

A number of different explanations were provided regarding why students who were expected to re-enrol at UNE in 1999 didn't. The explanations are discussed below:

As Table 6 shows, of the students who could be contacted just under half had moved to another institution of higher education.

Table 6: Moved to another institution of higher education

	No.	%
Yes	86	48
No	92	52
Total	178	

Table 7 shows the wide range of institutions at which these students had re-enrolled. The principal ones being: University of Western Sydney; Griffith University; Sydney University; Macquarie University; and the University of Southern Queensland.

Table 7: ID of new institution for students continuing tertiary education elsewhere

Institution	No.	%
ANU	5	6
Macquarie	8	9
Sydney	9	11
Deakin	3	4
USQ	8	9
UWS	11	13

UNSW	2	2
UQ	4	5
Charles Sturt	1	1
UTS	2	2
Wollongong	4	5
Newcastle	4	5
Griffith	10	12
NT	1	1
TAFE	3	4
Southern Cross	2	2
QUT	2	2
Other training	7	8
Total	86	100

Only a small number of students (15 or about 8%) indicated that it had always been their intention to move to another university.

The above results confirm those of the 1998 survey - i.e. a substantial proportion of students who withdraw from UNE do so to attend a higher education institution elsewhere. This finding has a number of policy implications and can be viewed both positively and negatively. On the positive side, UNE can rightly claim that it furthers the educational opportunities of its students, even those who ultimately decide to complete their qualifications elsewhere. It also implies, counter to some recent DETYA observations regarding 'dropout' rates, that students who leave one institution are not necessarily lost to the system.

Of the former students who could be contacted almost 40% indicated that they had not returned to UNE because they were taking a break from study (Table 8).

Table 8: Left UNE to take a break from studies

	No.	%
Yes	70	40
No	84	47
Did not indicate	24	13
Total	178	100

Only a few indicated that they had left because the workload for their course was too heavy. Some had left because of problems with the course itself (about 19%). A handful of non-continuing students cited problems with administrative procedures at UNE as contributing to their departure (Table 9). But there does not appear to be any overwhelming dissatisfaction with the teaching environment.

Table 9: Teaching/learning environment as a factor influencing students' decisions to withdraw from UNE

Factor	No.*	%
Heavy workload	3	2
Course itself	33	19
Administrative procedures	15	8
Infrastructure	4	2
Calibre of other students	2	1
Lecturing staff accessibility	4	2
Distractions from study in accommodation	12	7
Engineering course cancelled**	10	6
Other	10	6

* N = 178

** These were students who were enrolled for a joint degree. Students enrolled solely in engineering were excluded from the target population.

Possibly, somewhat surprisingly, financial difficulties do not appear to play an overwhelming role in students' decision to withdraw. However, a sizeable minority of students, about 25%, indicated that they left because they could not obtain part-time work (Table 10). Of those contactable, travel and accommodation costs appear to have influenced just over 10% of the students' decision to withdraw from UNE.

Table 10: Finance as a factor influencing students' decisions to withdraw from UNE

Factor	No.*	%
No Austerity	15	8
Couldn't get work	43	24
Parent's financial problems	7	4
Travel costs	19	11
Accommodation costs	19	11
Other	16	9

* N = 178

A whole range of personal factors influence students' decision to withdraw from study. But of those former students we were able to contact, no single personal factor seemed to dominate their decision to not continue study at UNE. About 20% of the respondents contributed their leaving UNE to a change in career interests, and about 7% said health problems were an important consideration (Table 11).

Table 11: Personal factors influencing students' decisions to withdraw from UNE

Factor	No.*	%
Career interests changed	36	20
The course was too difficult	9	5
Family problems	9	5
Health problems	12	7
Lost interest	8	4

* N = 178

University and Course Advice Received

At the conclusion of the interview, respondents were asked whether or not they had been happy with the advice received about which university to attend and what course to enrol in. Table 12 shows that just under thirty percent of non-continuing students contacted were dissatisfied with this aspect of their studies. This is another area where the findings clearly have policy implications. Both the University and High Schools should consider how to improve the advice and information provided to potential students. Possibly the University could assist the High Schools in this task through short course training of career advisers.

Table 12: Satisfaction with course advice and institutional information

Satisfaction	No.*	%
Happy with advice received	120	67
Unhappy with advice received	48	27
Did not indicate satisfaction	10	6

* N = 178

Summary transcripts of the actual telephone interviews are provided in Appendix D. These comments give a rich insight into the complexities surrounding the reasons why a number of students have chosen not to continue at UNE for their studies in 1999.

APPENDIX A

STUDENT INTENTION AND PROGRESSION SURVEY 1998: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Executive Summary and Recommendations

This report presents an analysis of the responses of 723 internal undergraduate students who replied to a questionnaire administered in early December 1998. The questionnaire sought information on students' study intentions for 1999. A particular concern of the survey was to identify those students who were discontinuing their studies at UNE in 1999 and the principal reasons for this decision. Of the 723 students who responded to the questionnaire, 93 indicated that they would not be returning to UNE in 1999.

It is well known that a number of considerations influence student retention and attrition rates and that no one factor or consideration dominates. This is true of the University of New England as well where the present survey of 1998 students' study intention for 1999 demonstrates that employment and financial considerations, academic preparedness, course and teaching/learning environment, accommodation and travel, and family responsibilities and personal circumstances are some of the many factors that bear upon the University's ability to retain its students. Indeed, of the factors just listed, only three – employment and finance, accommodation/distance/travel problems, and course and teaching/learning environment (in that order of importance) – rated mention by a significant proportion of students responding to the questionnaire. And even with respect to these three factors, no one factor was identified as being most important by even 50% of the respondents.

Despite the complex and multi-dimensional nature of student retention, the University is committed to creating an educational and organisational environment that maximises its ability to retain its students up to the time of successful course completion. And in this respect, the University's performance appears exemplary at the national level. A 1998 DETYA national analysis of university performance reports that 'the retention rate at the University of New England is three per cent *higher* than might be expected, given its student mix (p. 39).¹ This finding is based on the characteristics of the overall student body which consists of about three-quarters external students.

While it does not appear that UNE's overall performance with respect to student retention is grounds for concern, the University's regional location may present particular problems for internal 'on-campus' students, which are not experienced by their metropolitan colleagues. Such problems include: cost of travel, difficulties in obtaining suitable accommodation, separation from family and friends, and relative lack of full-time and casual employment opportunities.

As stated above, a multiplicity of factors and circumstances influence students' decision to withdraw from study, many of which are far beyond the University's control or power to influence. For example, accident, health problems, a death in the family, and other such circumstances are always going to impact on some students

¹ *The Characteristics and Performance of Higher Education Institutions*, Canberra, AGPS, 1998.

and it is unreasonable for any university to expect a one-hundred per cent retention rate. What is important from an institutional perspective is to attempt to identify areas in which remedial action might help further improve the retention rate. The responses to the questionnaire do point towards a limited number of areas where University action might be considered, particularly with respect to employment and finance; accommodation/distance/travel problems; and course and teaching/learning environment.

In first considering the course and teaching/learning environment, of those students who indicated that they intended to withdraw from UNE study in 1999, between one-quarter and one-third indicated that teaching/learning related factors (such as lack of interest in the course, dissatisfaction with the teaching of the course; lack of course relevance to future career plans) were of importance in influencing their decision. Also, though a minority, about one-fifth of the withdrawing respondents seem to have found inflexible administrative arrangements and uncaring/uninterested administrative staff factors that played an important part in their decision. Rigid departmental rules about timetables, course structure and attendance were mentioned in some of the comments as well. Even though the teaching/learning environment does not appear to be a problem for the majority of respondents, the University must be committed to the continual improvement of its teaching quality and possibly here more attention could be paid to course relevance to future career plans and course related administrative procedures.

Recommendation 1: That it be considered how to better incorporate principles concerning course relevance to future career plans with the policies and structures intended to support UNE's teaching quality.

Recommendation 2: That Faculties and Schools consider their current course related administrative practices and procedures with the intent to maximise student flexibility and openness.

Although 'academic preparedness' did not emerge as particularly important with respect to the students' decision to withdraw from study at UNE, respondents identified inadequate counselling prior to entry and unsatisfactory study skills as of some importance. Such factors may contribute to decisions to withdraw, although they are not sufficient to prompt withdrawal in itself. Nonetheless, there may be a need for more prominently advertised and up to date study skills workshops and more adequate information provided during Orientation Week.

Recommendation 3: The University continue its efforts in providing and extensively advertising study skills workshops and other related activities.

Recommendation 4: The University explore how to better prepare students for living in Armidale through providing more pertinent information to school councillors and during Orientation Week.

Another important 'academic' related aspect of the findings is that a substantially larger proportion of discontinuing students relative to continuing students indicated that UNE was not their first choice; 52% and 75% respectively. This finding should also be viewed in the light that well over one-half (about 59%) of withdrawing

students intend in 1999 to continue study at another university. Thus, it appears that UNE is effectively a 'feeder' institution for other universities with respect to a substantial number of withdrawing students. It also can be surmised that a proportion of students enrol at UNE with the intention at the beginning of transferring to another university before graduation.

In that UNE may be a 'stepping-stone' for some students to higher educational opportunities elsewhere is not necessarily detrimental to the University's interests or reputation and is certainly consistent with government policy regarding student mobility. However, the ramifications of this situation deserve much fuller investigation. Further consideration of the problem might explore the formalisation of the 'feeder' arrangement with specific other universities and the financial implications of such action. At the very least, the University may wish to consider how to more closely monitor the course satisfaction of students for whom UNE was not the first choice of enrolment.

Recommendation 5: The University consider how to more closely monitor the course satisfaction of students for whom UNE was not the first choice of enrolment.

Of the variety of factors and circumstances students could have chosen as influential to their decision to withdraw from study at UNE, accommodation/distance/travel were rated second in importance. With respect to accommodation per se, a number of respondents in their general comments praised the UNE Residential College system and suggested that it should be better publicised. Nonetheless, close to one-third of the discontinuing student respondents indicated that 'too many distractions from study in college accommodation' was an important reason for withdrawing from study at UNE.

Recommendation 6: Heads of College review the management of extra curricular college activities and the maintenance of an appropriate study environment.

Other important factors apparently influencing students to withdraw from UNE studies are the inability to travel or phone home as often as they would have liked and travel expenses. Many internal students travel substantial distances in order to study in Armidale, and those resident in college must vacate their rooms during vacation periods, adding further to travel and/or accommodation expenses. The University has in the past explored the possibility of additional travel concessions for its students, without success. Nonetheless, it may be appropriate to consider further initiatives in this area.

Recommendation 7: Consideration be given to how best assist students who must vacate college accommodation during vacation periods.

Recommendation 8: Relevant transport agencies and government authorities be approached with respect to further travel concessions for UNE students travelling between Armidale and their home residence.

The most important set of factors and circumstances associated with student retention appear to be employment and finance related. These problems are particularly acute for a regional university for a number of reasons. The high cost of travel and

relocation, as already discussed, and the lack of a large number of part-time and casual employment opportunities, to mention but two examples.

For all students responding to this survey (continuing and discontinuing alike) it appears that the majority remain dependent on traditional sources of financial support: Youth Allowance and parental support. Given the extra financial burden incurred through study at a regional university, rules governing access to the Youth Allowance might be amended to take into account the location where students intended to study. Also, tax concessions for parents supporting students at regional universities might be an appropriate policy option.

Recommendation 9: Relevant government authorities be approached with respect to revising the rules on access to the Youth Allowance to take into account the regional location of the university.

Recommendation 10: Relevant government authorities be approached with respect to providing parents supporting students at a regional university with a tax concession.

There has been a good deal of anecdotal evidence that lack of sufficient part-time and casual employment opportunities in Armidale has influenced students' decision to withdraw from study at UNE. The evidence presented in this report suggests that improving opportunities for both part-time and casual employment would impact on between one-quarter and one-third of students. Though such action would by no means solve all of the problems associated with improving student retention, it would appear that more local employment opportunities might go a long way towards improving the material circumstances of a substantial minority of students. Over forty per cent of the students who indicated that they would discontinue study in 1999 gave the 'constant worry about having enough money to get by from week to week' as an important reason for their withdrawing from study at UNE.

Recommendation 11: That the University work with local employers and employer associations, such as the Armidale Chamber of Commerce, with a view to improving the part-time and casual employment opportunities available to students.

Student withdrawal from university study is a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon. Hopefully, this report provides a better understanding of this phenomenon with respect to UNE on-campus students. Further investigations of student retention will be conducted later in 1999 by the Centre for Higher Education Management and Policy. The next stage of the study will attempt to explore in much more detail the factors and circumstances influencing students' decision to withdraw through interviews with students not proceeding with their studies at UNE in 1999.

APPENDIX B

1998 STUDENT RECORD FORM

APPENDIX C

TELEPHONE INTERVIEW PROFORMA

(1 page only, download as separate pdf file)
see web page

APPENDIX D

FACTORS INFLUENCING STUDENTS' DECISIONS TO WITHDRAW FROM UNE - OVERVIEW OF STUDENT COMMENTS

Telephone interviews with students who did not continue with their studies at UNE in 1999

The comments students provided as to why they left UNE are rich in detail, but do not lend themselves to easy categorisation. As is the case with most studies of student retention, withdrawal from the university is based on a multiplicity of factors, with no single dominant explanation. Below are a number of observations one can draw from the comments. But it must be stressed that none are statistically representative of the withdrawing student population.

OVERVIEW OF THE MAIN OUTCOMES OF THE STUDENT INTERVIEWS

Reasons why students left UNE or deferred enrolment

- for financial reasons;
- to do more practical courses such as those offered by TAFE;
- because academia was not for them;
- the course was cancelled;
- could not find enough work to support themselves;
- because they were restless and unfocussed career wise;
- health problems;
- family responsibilities;
- the standard of the course;
- changed career plans;
- preferred Sydney student lifestyle;
- Armidale life was too isolated and its size too restrictive;
- career interests changed;
- unable to cope with accommodation situation;
- parents refused to continue to provide financial support;
- the social side of university life overtook the academic purpose for some students;
- student lost interest in the course;

- aspects of the course were not what the student really wanted to do;
- because of the distance from home;
- the cultural/community adjustment was too great;
- health reasons;
- lack of finances or the ability to get work to support themselves;
- using UNE as a stepping stone to tertiary education elsewhere.
- to be able to live more economically at home;
- because they were homesick;
- to enrol in a course at another university which was more specific to their needs;
- not enough academic challenge from class mates;
- for language or cultural support;
- because of travel costs;
- to extend their careers through other pathways;
- to build up their financial resources;
- unable to adjust to not having a proper income;
- to cope with family crisis situations.

Some Parental Views and Expectations identified

- the university does not seem to be taking enough responsibility to ensure that the transition from a school culture to that of a university culture occurs;
- there is a burn out factor for students going straight from high school to university. Some students need a year off to catch their breath;
- parental investment needs to be worthwhile;
- although students want to be independent many in their first year are very naïve;
- some students are timid about seeking advice or explanation;
- the university has a responsibility to help in this adjustment and to see that first year students do not waste their time;
- if possible students need to visit the university before they enrol;
- UNE has very special advantages for rural students;
- some courses offered by UNE failed to meet parents' expectations;
- the university should supervise the first year students more carefully;
- most parents were very appreciative of the opportunities that UNE had given to their sons and daughters.

Colleges and other related student issues

- emphasis should be more on the academic values of the university;
- more responsibility should be taken by the Colleges to encourage and monitor the academic progress of students in their care;
- the role of the College Master should be considered in terms of whether it should be managerial or academic;
- more rigorous follow up of the academic achievements of all students particularly those in the colleges;
- challenge the colleges to balance the social and academic activities;
- students need access to tutors when they are in need of academic direction;

- students should be referred for guidance to student counselling if they are not seeking needed support;
- the living conditions in the colleges need to be more conducive to study.

Students assessment of UNE

- many found the teaching/learning environment very supportive;
- more information needs to be given about course availability and course career pathways;
- students need to research possibilities on the web;
- students who had the opportunity to compare their opportunities at UNE with another university appreciated the facilities and support at UNE.

UNE needs to have an entrepreneurial approach promote the following:

- on-campus College accommodation for students;
- tutorial links between academics and students in the Colleges;
- course transfer and double degree options;
- special academic strengths of the university;
- the excellent library support;
- the campus and town proximity;
- the regular campus to town transport;
- ready availability of campus and city accommodation;
- train, bus and air transport accessibility to Brisbane, Sydney and the Coast;
- safe student car parking facilities;
- excellent sporting facilities;
- the excellent computing support available in this university;
- the opportunity for students to be recognised as individuals;
- more positive advertisement to lift the students image.

Need to have greater communication between the high schools and UNE regarding the university

- career options through well publicised course structures;
- individual career course counselling;
- follow up of course choices made by students so that they are aware of where their choices may lead them;
- more open day or web information and career advertising.

Special opportunities that some students believed UNE presented

- the chance to go to university;
- the chance in a small student community to make the transition from school to university life;
- to establish cross discipline friendships;
- to sort out their career preferences;
- to develop socially by being independent for the first time.

Most students were very happy with the personal support and academic support that they were given while at UNE. They enjoyed the individual opportunities they had due to the size and attitude of the academic and student community. Some students chose UNE purely on their academic school scores. Other students were influenced by their own research regarding course possibilities located on the web; by previous student recommendations; or chose UNE because of its distance from home.