



Tertiary Education Commission
Te Amorangi Mātauranga Matua

**Student Choice and Student Experience:
The Views of Selected New Zealand Tertiary
Students**

November 2009

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1 Introduction

In 2008, over 500,000 students were enrolled in New Zealand's tertiary education system with government investment totalling \$4.6 billion.¹ Given these high levels of participation and investment in tertiary education, it is increasingly important to monitor the quality of tertiary education provision and to gauge the return on investment for both individual students and the government. This view is reflected in current government policy which highlights the need to strengthen quality and accountability in the tertiary education sector.

In order to improve tertiary education and provide for the needs of students, it is important to understand student attitudes and concerns regarding their tertiary education experiences. In an effort to gain greater knowledge of the tertiary sector from the student perspective, a series of focus group interviews were conducted with tertiary students from around the country. Participants were asked a number of questions regarding their experiences and their decision making processes.

The key objectives of this project were:

1. To identify student choice and decision-making processes in tertiary education.
2. To reflect some student attitudes toward their current and past tertiary education experiences.
3. To identify issues and concerns that may affect progress and successful completion within the tertiary education system.

These objectives are closely related to a number of initiatives that are currently in progress at the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC).² In keeping with the direction of the government, and in response to the current economic climate, the TEC has increased its focus on value for money in the tertiary education sector. A major programme of work focused on improving the performance of tertiary education organisations (TEOs) is underway to help achieve this. Key aspects of this initiative include linking funding to performance and the publication of TEO performance information.

It is important that student perceptions regarding good performance of TEOs play a central role in informing decisions about performance at the funding and managerial level. Likewise, where further information about tertiary providers is made public, information should be published in a format that meets the needs of current and prospective students, their families and future employers.

The findings from this project can also be used as a point of reference for a number of other TEC initiatives where the student perspective is particularly important. Examples of such initiatives include ongoing work related to the Youth Guarantee programme and the Performance Based Research Fund.

¹ The Ministry of Education, *Profile and Trends 2008* (124).

² The TEC is responsible for managing the government's investment in tertiary education.

2 Approach and methodology

2.1 Approach and design

Focus group methods were used to collect data about the decision-making, processes and attitudes of tertiary students. A total of 49 focus groups were held involving 419 student participants. Students were selected from a broad range of subject areas; however there was an intentional focus on six specific areas: midwifery, design, trades training, Chinese international students, social work and land-based provision.

Additional information was gathered from participants through a questionnaire which was developed to collect supplementary demographic and experiential information from the participants. A copy of the questionnaire is included in Appendix A.

2.2 Respondent recruitment

The focus group members were recruited on a voluntary basis through student associations and tertiary education organisations

Information about the project was sent to students prior to their participation. Data collected during the study is anonymous and was aggregated in order to prevent identification of individuals.

For more information on the focus group process and analysis please refer to Appendix C.

2.3 Limitations

While the focus group method is useful in identifying and exploring the issues and concerns of a group, the participants in this project represent only a very small proportion of New Zealand's enrolled tertiary students.

The survey sample is not intended to be an accurate representation of the broader student population and for this reason, the views expressed by participants should not be assumed to reflect those of all tertiary students. The focus groups contained a number of biases, the most prominent of which was an over-representation of students from the Institutes of Technology and Polytechnic (ITP) sector. While this group may experience issues that are common to all tertiary students, the tertiary system encompasses a wide range of teaching and learning methods so experiences will inevitably differ between sectors.

Another limitation was the focus on one group of participants (tertiary students). Findings could be enriched by including the views of teaching staff and past and future students to assist in building a more comprehensive understanding of the choice, decision making and educational experience of tertiary education students.

3 Student choice – key findings

The following section describes key drivers of student choice for both field of study and educational provider as well as the major sources of information that are used to inform these decisions.

3.1 Student choice – field of study

Focus group discussions showed that student decisions regarding field of study were influenced by a range of factors. The key factors tended to fall within two broad categories. The first includes a number of value factors concerning the process of study:

- Interest and passion – some students chose their area of study because they had an innate or developed interest in the field through previous learning or life experience. Students also chose certain study areas because of perceived social values and contribution to the wider community.
- Love of learning – some students based their decision on known enjoyment and satisfaction from studying and learning in a specific field.
- Commitment to tertiary education without clear goals – some students were more oriented towards “*getting an overview*”. This was often the case for school leavers who did not know what to study but felt they had no better options than to pursue tertiary education.

Decisions regarding field of study were also influenced by a range of outcomes that participants perceived to be associated with different subject areas. These included:

- Career progression and change – some students were studying in a particular field because they wanted to change their career or further progress in their existing employment field. The choice of study for some individuals was made after experiencing the relevant industry through employment and confirming their interest in the field.
- Employment opportunities – some students mentioned their study choice was mostly due to the potential employment opportunities upon graduation. Students considered that the educational experience gained from their chosen field would benefit them in terms of career progression and job prospects.
- Financial – some decisions were made based on the remuneration expected upon successful completion of a course or the affordability of the tuition cost.
- Lifestyle – the perceived lifestyle and prestige associated with some professions were also contributing factors.

3.2 Student choice – tertiary education organisation

Although students noted a variety of factors that affected their choice of tertiary education provider, two common themes emerged: reputation of the TEO and the specific course/programme of interest, and the physical location of the provider.

Reputation – TEO and course/programme

The perceived reputation of the TEO and the course/programme of interest were commonly mentioned by students as an important reason for choosing their education provider. Many students based their views on the reputation of a provider and course/programme on recommendations and feedback from friends, family, employers and students (current and past).

Recommendations about TEOs tended to centre on perceived quality of teaching and the culture and environment provided by a TEO. Several students stated that their choice of provider was based on hearing good things about the course/programme and tutor/lecturers prior to enrolment. The greatest value tended to be placed on the reputation of teaching staff, often over and above the reputation of the provider.

Students also associated different learning environments with the ITP and university sub-sectors. ITPs were perceived as providing a more practical, hands-on approach to learning, whereas universities were perceived by some to be theoretical and learning focused. The perception that ITPs provided a more employment-focused education had a strong influence on student choice, with one student stating: *“you don’t go to uni to get a job, you go to uni for an education”*.

Location

The physical location of the education provider was a common and important determining factor in TEO choice. For some, particularly those with families and children, the convenience (in terms of travel) was an important factor. Costs and affordability were also major factors for some - for example: *“I can’t afford to study anywhere else”*. On the other hand, some younger students chose their TEO based on the provider location taking them away from their home environment.

The location of TEOs relative to sources of employment was also an important determinant in choice of education provider. Some students were restricted by their employer’s location, as they were engaged in employment (full and part time) while also participating in tertiary education. This view was particularly prominent for those students engaged in education through industry training. Students also saw employment opportunities in the vicinity of TEOs, during and post education, as a significant factor in provider choice.

3.3 Student choice – information

Students used a variety of information sources and advice to support their decision-making process in tertiary education. However, it is interesting to note that information provided by the government such as the Career Services and the Ministry of Education websites were not a major source of information for the focus group participants. The most common sources are described below:

Secondary school

For some students, their educational pathway taken at school led directly into their chosen area of tertiary study. Students also sought the advice and support

of secondary school teachers and career counsellors regarding their transition to tertiary education. Participants noted that some school leavers lacked an awareness of the available tertiary education options and as a result, lacked direction and planning. For some students, tertiary education simply represented an opportunity to leave high school.

Tertiary students – past and present

The advice and recommendations of past and current tertiary students were highly valued sources of information about tertiary education. Some students mentioned that their decisions regarding study were based largely on the suggestions made by other students who had previously undertaken a particular programme or studied at a certain provider. Feedback provided by past and current students was seen as particularly valuable because it came from the student perspective.

Friends and family

Recommendations from friends and family, whether based on personal experiences or not, were often valued by students in helping them make their tertiary education decisions. In some cases suggestions were based on past experiences, for example: “*I was recommended [this TEO] by my parents who came here*”. Other forms of influence such as family expectation and tradition were also mentioned as influential factors by some students.

Careers advisors

Careers advisors were a commonly accessed source of information on tertiary education options. Some students said they were more trusting of advice from independent careers advisors because they did not promote specific programmes or providers. Their ability to explain clear pathways both within tertiary education and from education to employment was deemed particularly valuable.

Some students felt that schools and careers advisors over-emphasised the option of university study and needed to provide more information about other forms of tertiary education. Some of these students mentioned that schools and careers advisors needed to encourage students to participate in the tertiary education suited to their learning style and appropriate to their pathways from secondary school. Many participants undertaking industry and modern apprenticeship training learned about training options through their employer or other students and felt there needed to be better promotion of the full range of available study options.

Employees and employers

The experience and feedback of those already employed in a particular field were highly valued because this advice allowed students to develop an understanding of the requirements of a field or profession before entering it themselves. Students mentioned such exposure was gained through social interaction and service or volunteer experience.

Tertiary Education Organisations

Students noted several sources of information provided by the tertiary education organisation (TEO) which influenced their decisions. In particular, students mentioned that their education choices were based on interaction and communication with programme tutors and lecturers prior to enrolment - for example: “[it was] *the enthusiasm of the tutors at enrolment that sold it*”.

Several students selected their chosen field based on conversations with TEO representatives who talked at their secondary school. Some students said the information presented by the TEO representatives was an important and, at times, the only source of advice for their educational decisions: “[the TEO representative was] *the only one who came to our school so I came here*”. Students mentioned they were aware of the explicit ‘selling’ by TEO representatives, whether it was for specific programmes or for the provider. However, such information was still valued and used to inform judgements.

TEO websites were mentioned by several students as useful and important sources of information. Websites were particularly important for those students with a lack of awareness, or access to, other forms of tertiary education information. For example, for rural students who were remote from the education system, access to TEO websites provided a key starting point to learning about the available options. Additionally, for international students not residing in New Zealand, TEO websites provided an important link to each provider in terms of information and support during their decision-making process.

Advertising and media

Some students mentioned that the advertising campaigns conducted by TEOs were a source that informed their decisions. However, such experiences were not always positive with a small number of students voicing their dissatisfaction that the real product did not match the advertised product: “[the advertiser] *made it look better than it really was*”. Some students mentioned a need for more advertising of available courses/programmes of study as they felt some fields were poorly publicised and that increased advertising might remedy this problem.

4 Student experience – key findings

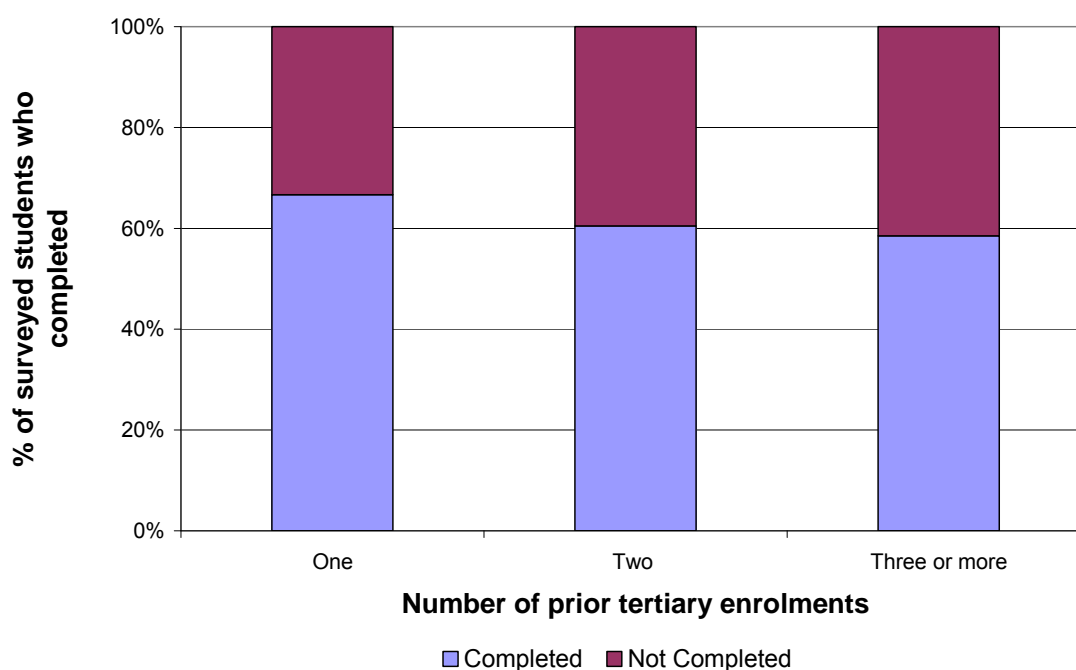
The participants provided information on their tertiary education experience, satisfaction and prior experiences through both the focus group discussions and a questionnaire that was completed individually. The key findings are discussed in the following section.

4.1 Pathway and transitions

In total, over half of the participants (59%) had been previously enrolled in at least one other tertiary qualification prior to the course they were enrolled in at the time of the focus groups (34% had been enrolled in one other tertiary qualification, 16% had been enrolled in two other tertiary qualifications and 7% had been enrolled in three or more other tertiary qualifications).

While the majority of participants had completed their previous tertiary qualifications (Figure 1 below), over a third were not completed. Focus group discussions indicated that difficulties adjusting to tertiary education were a major factor contributing to non-completions. Many participants reported they had made transitions from one provider or programme to another, especially when they were new to tertiary education and were keen to explore different study options. Some students said they changed their qualifications and enrolments having subsequently realised what they really wanted to study. Participants also mentioned the need for more information to be made available on ways students can explore different study options in the early stages of their education. They wanted the opportunity to sample various aspects of tertiary education prior to enrolment in order to be better placed to make a decision about what they wanted to study.

Figure 1: Completion status of other tertiary enrolments



Note: Completion status was self-reported by the participants. Unsuccessful completion, non-completion and yet to be completed were all grouped in the 'not completed' category.

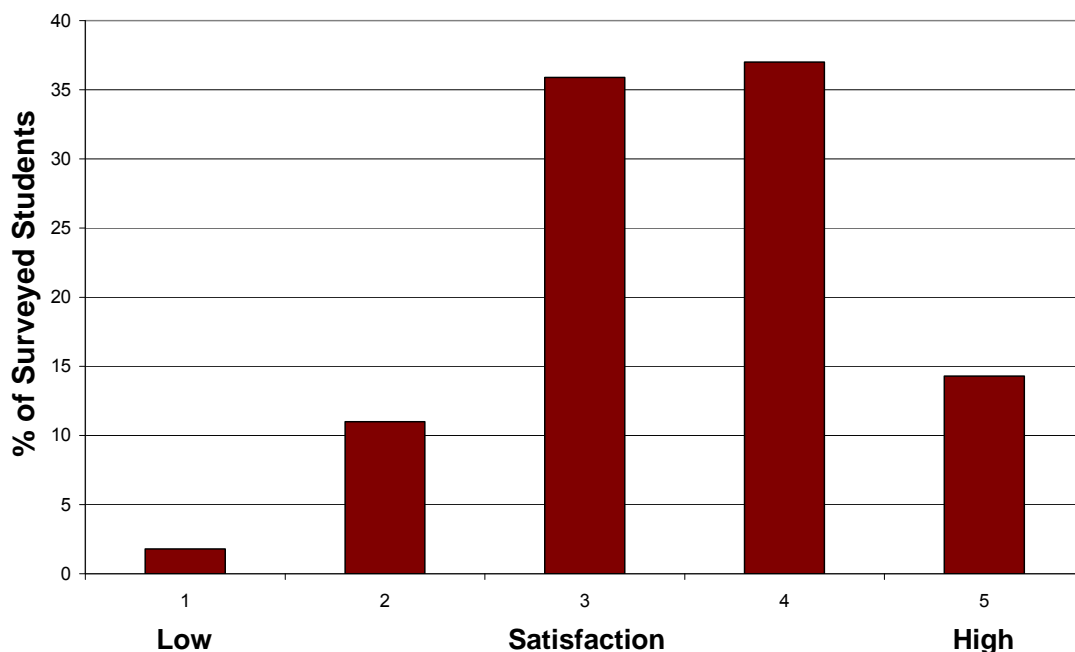
4.2 Student satisfaction

Participants were asked to rate how satisfied they were toward their enrolled organisations in three areas: overall quality of service provision, evaluative and complaints processes, and treatment of students. Findings from the satisfaction measures are described in the following section.

Quality of service provision

Overall, students were satisfied with the quality of the service at their TEO. On a scale running from 1 (not satisfied at all) to 5 (very satisfied) the median response was 4. Just 13% of respondents were not satisfied with service provision (responses of 1 or 2), while 51% reported high levels of satisfaction (responses of 4 or 5).³

Figure 2: Student satisfaction with overall quality of service provision



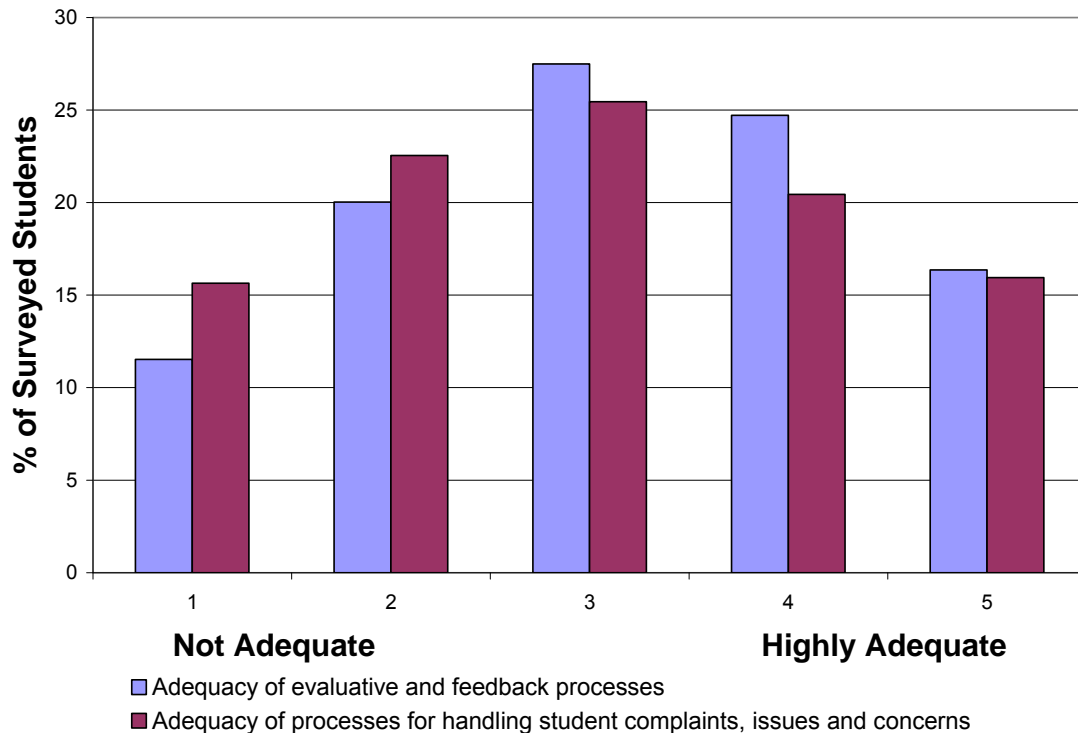
Evaluative and complaints processes

Students were asked to rate their satisfaction regarding the evaluative and feedback processes at their TEO on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high). 41% of respondents were satisfied with these processes (a rating of 4 or 5), whereas 31.5% found the processes to be inadequate (a rating of 1 or 2). The median response was 3.

³ Students were asked a further two questions about service provision: “Before enrolling at this institution, what quality of service did you expect?” and “How does the service you receive at your institution, compare to what you expected?” The results from these survey questions showed that students had high expectations and that these expectations were generally exceeded. However, if expectations were exceeded, it is likely that the overall satisfaction scores shown in figure two would be much higher. As a result, it seems likely that these survey questions were worded in a way that produced misleading responses.

When asked about the handling of complaints, issues and concerns at their provider, the median response was also 3. 36% of respondents were satisfied (a score of 4 or 5), whereas 38% were not (a score of 1 or 2).

Figure 3: Adequacy of evaluative and complaints processes



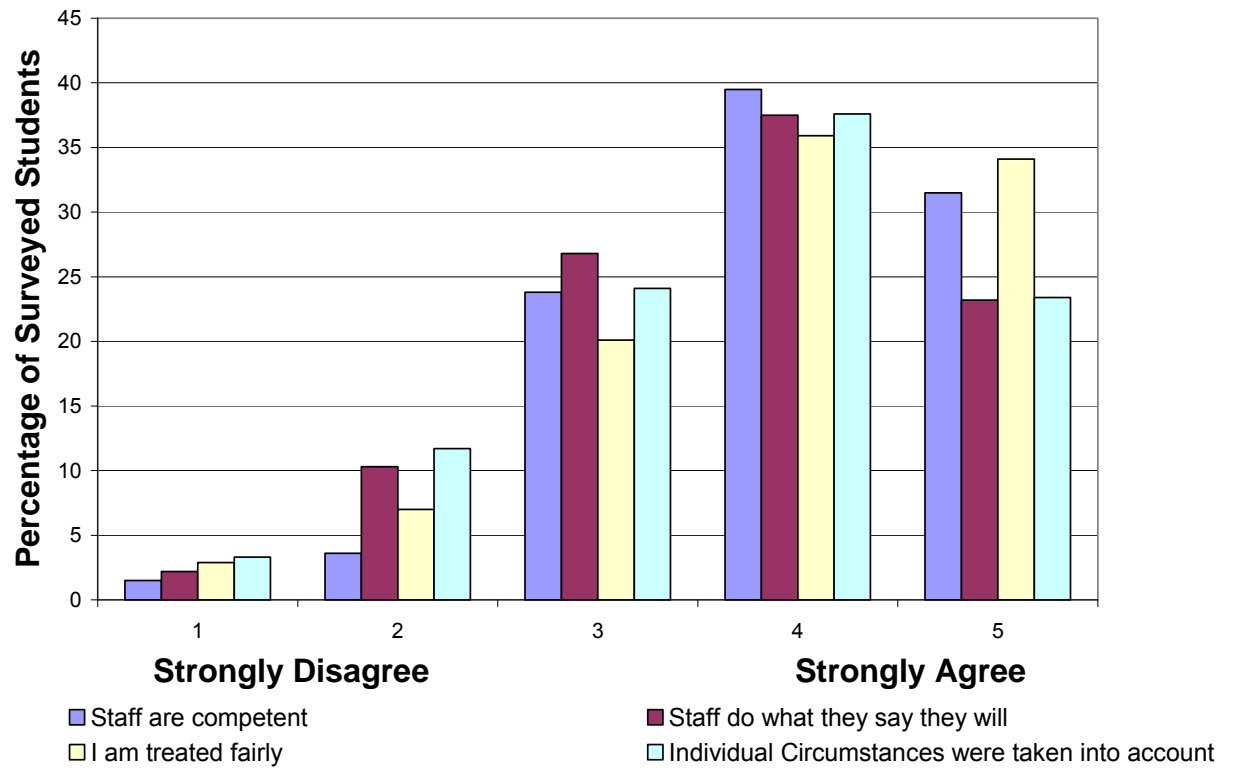
4.2 Treatment

Participants were also asked a series of questions regarding their treatment and the staff at their TEO. Participants responded to statements on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Overall, the majority of students reported that the staff at their TEO were competent in service provision with a median score of 4. Just over 70% responded that staff were competent (a rating of 4 or 5) while 5% responded that staff were not competent (a rating of 1 or 2). When asked whether they agreed with the statement “staff do what they say they do”, the median response was 4, with 61% of responses in agreement (a score of 4 or 5) while 12.5% disagreed (a score of 1 or 2).

Likewise, most students felt they were treated fairly by their provider, with a median response of 4. 70% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that they were treated fairly (a score of 4 or 5) while 10% disagreed or strongly disagreed (a score of 1 or 2). When students were asked whether they felt their individual circumstances were taken into account when interacting with their education provider, the median score was again 4. 61% were in agreement (4 or 5), while 15% felt their circumstances were not taken into account (1 or 2).

Figure 4: Student perception of TEO staff and overall treatment



5 Student issues and concerns – key findings

Focus group discussions revealed some common student concerns which were perceived to impact on educational experience and learning outcomes. The following section presents the key findings from the individual student focus groups.

5.1 Quality of provision

Overall, students considered the quality of the education they were provided with to be an important issue. They associated quality provision with four main areas: the teaching ability of tutors and lecturers, programme quality, resources and facilities, and the overall provision environment.

Teaching quality

Although students came from different fields of study, their description of the qualities demonstrated by good teaching staff were generally consistent. These common qualities were:

- experienced in the area taught – the teaching staff should have ‘real world’ experience in the field they teach and the ability to demonstrate this in their teaching
- experienced as a teacher – have the relevant skills for applying and teaching their subject well
- expert communication skills – have an ability to present information with clarity, especially when it came to what was expected from assessments
- interested and interesting – able to engage with students and present learning material in an interesting manner
- connected with students – is encouraging and promotes positive learning environments so students felt able to seek out support and guidance
- organised – deliver well-constructed lessons that are planned and easy to follow
- helpful – able to give hands-on help to students to assist with their learning.

The major concern that participants raised with regard to teaching quality stemmed from class sizes and the amount of contact time with teachers. Some students felt their class sizes were too large and that this resulted in them spending much of their time teaching themselves rather than being taught. Many of these participants felt they were able to learn more through independent study, but felt frustrated that they were paying to be taught and not receiving much instruction.

Participants saw smaller classes as being most conducive to learning because they allowed for greater interaction between students and the teacher. Further discussion around what worked in the classroom led students to identify a number of successful classroom methods for learning. These were: discussion-based rather than lectured classes; presentation of real-

world and practical examples (case-based learning); and combining theory with practice – using current and relevant research.

Almost all participants believed that some form of compulsory teacher training would be beneficial to teaching staff and consequently to the students. Some participants were also concerned by the perceived importance placed on research rather than teaching by some lecturers. Student statements included: *“research is more important than teaching for some [lecturers]”*; *“they might be good researchers but [that] does not necessarily mean they are good teachers”*.

Course/programme quality

Quality of course/programme content was commonly cited as an important measure of quality provision. Overall, students were satisfied with the quality of their course content, however, some concerns were raised regarding course design and relevance.

Design: There was some debate, especially within the health disciplines, about course design. Those students who knew what they wanted out of their chosen course were more interested in specialised content to accelerate their learning outcomes, while students who had less understanding wanted broader content that provided an overview and sound foundation upon which further education or specialisation could be built.

Relevance: Many participants were concerned about the relevance of their course content. Students wanted content that provided a well-rounded education, preparing them with relevant skills and knowledge needed for the workforce and industry. Many students were concerned that there was insufficient connection between course content and industry needs. Greater involvement from the relevant industry groups and businesses in content design, as well as the inclusion of work experience components within programmes, were suggested measures to ensure content relevance and sufficient exposure to the industry. Those students who had already participated in work experience placements were supportive of the process stating it gave them a real taste of the industry. Many felt they learned more in a short work experience placement than in the entire duration of their course.

Resources and facilities

The resources and facilities provided by tertiary education providers to support student learning were also considered to contribute to the quality of provision. Participants noted the importance of study support facilities such as the library, computers, training rooms and accommodation.

Overall, students believed the providers should supply sufficient resources to allow them to engage in their enrolled programmes and course content effectively. While most of the students believed such needs were met, some felt that programmes were under-resourced in either physical or teaching resources. Some students noted that if a TEO was not going to supply all the required resources, then a list of additional costs should be supplied during enrolment so that extra costs could be budgeted for.

One key concern raised in the focus groups was resource demands associated with new technology. Across various fields of study, there are a growing number of programme components being delivered online.⁴ Focus group discussions showed that students were concerned with the overall quality of this form of delivery. Many participants considered that the unsupported use of online resources did not suit their learning style or needs, and preferred the interaction with staff and peers provided by more traditional teaching techniques. This view was particularly prominent among older students who tended to be less likely to have had any prior experience with online learning. Regardless of their age, almost all students wanted to choose the delivery mode suited to their learning style.

Environment

Students considered the culture of their chosen provider and the overall campus environment to be important factors which impacted on their learning. Students felt that by contributing to the cost of their tertiary education, they were essentially buying the whole learning experience. Hence there were more factors that influenced this environment than the immediate learning context, such as: culture of the education provider, social environment and the appearance of the campus.

In relation to the learning environment, some students - international and domestic - expressed concern over the volume of international students in some programmes within their institutions. From the domestic student perspective, the primary concern was that high numbers of international students in classes were drawing resources away from the tertiary experience they felt they had paid for: *“No-one is getting a New Zealand tertiary education experience when most of the classes are full of international students”*. This concern was reinforced by international students who felt it was difficult to achieve a real *“Kiwi”* educational experience due to the lack of interaction with local students. Some participants mentioned that a limit should be placed on international student intakes in order to ensure a *“balanced”* learning environment that met the needs of all students.

5.2 Student loans and allowances

Over two thirds of participants borrowed from the New Zealand student loan scheme to finance their tertiary studies. Issues regarding student loans and allowances were common topics of discussion in most focus groups.

In some cases, there was a lack of understanding (especially among younger students) about the financial implications of having a student loan. Many students borrowed from the student loan scheme to pay for their studies, but were not aware of their current level of debt. Students said it was easy to qualify and obtain a student loan, but paying it off would be difficult. Some students had little awareness of the repercussions of borrowing during their studies because *“all they had to do was tick the box”* at the time of their

⁴ Some programmes used a mixture of online and traditional delivery, while others were presented entirely online.

enrolment.⁵ The implications of “*borrowing blindly*” was a major concern for some students especially after they realised the amount of time required to repay their loans. For many, the full understanding of their student loan debt only occurred after they completed their programme of study.

Most students were dissatisfied by the restrictions on student allowance eligibility. Participants were also concerned that some students were able to exploit loopholes in the system to overcome these restrictions – for example, the use of family trusts to apparently “*get around*” parent income thresholds. Additionally, some students cited difficulties in providing the necessary documents to support their student allowance application and many perceived it to be an excessive and duplicative process.

The amount of student loans and allowances allocated per student was also questioned. Some students mentioned that the amount allocated for course-related costs was insufficient for their course. This problem was particularly apparent for those students studying fields such as design which required self-supplied work materials and equipment. The relationship between the level of allowances and current living costs was also raised. While the level of allowance depends on the circumstances of the individual student, the majority of participants did not believe the amount reflected the current cost of living for a tertiary student. Many students said they had to undertake paid work because the student allowance received was not enough. However, there was some debate regarding the value of working while being on a student allowance, as income earned could potentially reduce the allowance received.

Another common issue regarding student allowances and loans was that of support and communication. Many students were not aware of who they could approach or contact for support and guidance in relation to their loans and allowances. Students were able to name relevant agencies such as the Inland Revenue Department, Work and Income New Zealand, Study Link and individual TEO providers but there was confusion as to the responsibilities of each. In some cases, this resulted in duplicated correspondence and a general lack of understanding as to the status of students’ applications. Additionally, many students were concerned by the long delay between applying for and receiving the student allowance as they found it difficult to support themselves during this time.

Participants also wanted more information on the refund processes for fees paid. There were some instances where students only became aware of the full fees charged on courses they had withdrawn from after receiving their student loan balances. Some students blamed this perceived lack of clarity about the fees refund process for being charged full course fees after withdrawing from courses.

⁵ In reality, the process of borrowing from the student loan scheme is far more in depth than simply “ticking the box” at the time of enrolment. It involves an application process and signing a contract with the government. Hence, this statement represents a common perception of the process rather than an accurate depiction.

5.3 Cost and value for money

There was some concern, particularly among international students, about the cost of tertiary education in New Zealand. In most cases, however, students tended to be more dissatisfied with the lack of customer focus provided by their institutions. Participants made comparisons between the service received from education organisations and private commercial organisations to show that even when students were paying for their education, they did not believe they were being treated as consumers in the commercial sense. Students said that tertiary providers needed to value students more and display greater awareness of their concerns in order to improve their customer focus.

Participants also discussed tuition fees in relation to the approximate salary they believed they would be able to earn upon completing their qualification. Most participants had the view that it would be difficult to get well-paid jobs and many expected to be paid no more than a minimum wage. When they compared the salary they expected to the cost of their course, both in fees and course-related costs, they thought that the costs were too high and that it would be difficult to pay back their student loans.

Participants were also asked whether they felt they (and the government) were getting value for their investment in tertiary education. Despite the concerns regarding students' ability to get well-paid jobs after completing a qualification, most participants considered they were getting good value for money. This was based on the assumption that having completed their qualification, they would have both the theoretical and practical skills to go straight into a job. Hence, students felt they were getting good value for money in terms of improving their ability to get a job. However, as outlined above, participants also believed that the salaries for graduate jobs do not accurately reflect the cost of tertiary education.

There was some disagreement among participants about whether the government was getting good value for the money they invested in tertiary education. Participants primarily associated government value for money with quality teaching staff. For example, some students stated that teaching staff were *“really good”* or *“good value”*. Additionally, students perceived government investment as an investment in the future workforce. Participants involved in land-based industry training mentioned that the government was getting value for money because those students were being trained in an area where there was a shortage of skilled workers.

5.4 Practicum and work placement

Practicum or placements constitute a significant part of some courses, particularly in the later years of most health disciplines. Students considered that practical learning experiences gained through placements were of great importance to their success within both their programme and the industry. Students said placements provided an opportunity to learn practical skills, increase confidence, learn to work under pressure and deal with different people. This view was reinforced by calls from participants for greater availability of placement opportunities in a wide range of areas.

Some participants mentioned the need for better moderation and monitoring of the practical components within programmes, to ensure quality and consistency in learning. Many participants thought there were inconsistencies in the learning outcomes of their programmes. The educational experiences of the students were largely dependent on what they encountered during their practicum and the teachings of their supervisors. Some students considered themselves lucky to have had a good experience, as they believed some fellow students were dissatisfied with their placement experience. Many believed that a good or bad placement was usually determined by the relationship with, or quality of, the supervisor.

Focus group participants discussed the characteristics required of a good supervisor. A good supervisor was described as compatible with the student, available and accessible, understanding (has been in the student's position before), positive and supportive, maintains professional standards (such as confidentiality) and is able to maintain focus on the learning objectives of the placement.

5.5 Assessment and marking

Across all of the focus groups, a significant number of participants expressed concerns over internal assessment methods. They mentioned that marking criteria were not always transparent or readily available. Another concern was perceived inconsistencies in the grading of assessments and exams across teaching staff, programmes, schools and departments, and providers. Students noted the need for greater moderation and clarity on grading outcomes. Some participants also believed that grading was influenced by personal biases held by their assessor.

Overall, students wanted more constructive feedback on their assessments. They felt they would learn more from their mistakes if they were able to see what it was they were doing wrong. There was a preference for the use of evaluative feedback rather than a mark or percentage score.

There were some students who felt that high grades were given out too lightly, meaning those students who were genuinely working hard in an effort to receive good grades were not rewarded accordingly. Similar concerns were raised at the qualification level with some students discussing the apparent ease in obtaining and passing qualifications. This was thought to cheapen the qualification and the learning process.

5.6 Feedback mechanisms and complaints procedures

Feedback mechanisms and complaints processes are avenues of communication between a provider and their students. Although students were aware of some forms of feedback and complaints processes at their education provider (for example - course/programme/tutor evaluation forms), almost none knew how the information they provided would be used or who it was used by.

On average, participants considered the student feedback/evaluation processes at their tertiary institution to be "*somewhat satisfactory*". The

primary concern raised by students was the perceived lack of transparency regarding the outcomes of feedback mechanisms. This resulted in many students considering the various feedback processes to be “*useless*” or feeling that their feedback was “*not taken seriously*” due to “[a lack of] *feedback on the feedback*”.

Participants said they would be more interested and motivated to participate in feedback and evaluation if they could see that the results were used to enhance and improve their education environment. They recommended systems that would be “*compulsory*” and “*online*”, where current and future students could see the statistics and results from the feedback given. Participants said feedback and evaluation results should be readily available to allow future students to access this information when making enrolment decisions.

Participants also felt students should be given more assurance and information on the confidentiality of processes. The timing of the feedback and evaluation forms was also considered important. Participants had a preference for course evaluations midway through courses to allow for feedback to be acted on prior to the completion of their course.

Many students were apprehensive about the formal complaint process within their provider with some stating they would not feel safe making a complaint to the provider in relation to their education. Some participants expressed fears of academic reprisal or other negative consequences as a result of making a complaint. Greater visibility of any process and support for it were considered important for students throughout the process.

5.7 Student support and pastoral care

Student support and pastoral care were major issues for students. While recent improvements were acknowledged by some, it was suggested that more could be done: “*some help is available but lots of students don’t know about it*”.

Students referred to a need for a variety of support both within and outside of the education environment. While more learning support was considered important by some, most desired greater planning and transitional support to assist them in progressing into employment or further education.

For students who had little understanding of their educational pathway or what they wanted to do after study, there was an explicit request for greater institutional support in both educational planning – to ensure they were able to complete the desired qualification; and employment planning – to have the right skills and knowledge to gain employment in their desired field.

6 Conclusions

6.1 Student choice

Although a range of variables influenced participant choices regarding which field of study to enter, they tended to fall within two broad categories: value factors and outcome factors. Value-based factors included enjoyment of learning and doing tasks that were inherently satisfying for the individual, while outcome factors included career prospects and progression, employment and financial benefit. A smaller number of participants reported that they had chosen to enter tertiary education without clear goals or direction.

When asked about their choice of provider, reputation was cited by many students as an important factor in their decision. Students' perception of reputation was primarily based on advice from friends and family regarding the quality of teaching staff and, to a lesser extent, the culture and environment of a provider.

Although there is a variety of existing information currently available to inform future and current students about tertiary education, the major sources used by the students in this study were friends and family, tertiary students, employers and employees, high school teachers, TEOs, careers advisors and TEO advertising. With regard to the latter source, some participants voiced dissatisfaction that the actual product was not consistent with what was advertised. In contrast, one of the most valued sources of student information was the suggestions and advice from past and current students. This indicates there is an inherent value in the first hand experience of past and current students for future education consumers.

The focus group discussions showed that many students fell into one of two very broad types of tertiary information users: those with a specific career in mind and those who simply knew they wanted to participate in tertiary education. The former wanted information that gave detailed direction on what they should study to achieve their desired career outcome. Students who were less sure of their future aspirations wanted an education that provided a sound foundation which they could further build on once they had developed a greater understanding of their future career goals. Around 30% of students who had previously enrolled in a tertiary qualification (prior to their enrolment at the time of the focus groups) had not completed the qualification. Many of these students attributed this to uncertainty about their chosen field of study and many enrolled in a different qualification having subsequently realised what they really wanted to study.

While students mentioned the use of various sources of information and avenues of support, they wanted more information to be readily available in areas including: refund processes for fees paid and timeframes for approval of refunds, educational planning and the transition from the tertiary education system to employment.

6.2 Student satisfaction

In general, students had a positive perception of the service provided by their TEOs, however a small proportion were not satisfied. Likewise, participants were generally positive when asked questions about staff competency and how students were treated. Participants were not as positive when asked about the adequacy of evaluative and feedback processes and processes for handling student complaints, issues and concerns. In both cases, over 30% of participants responded that these services were not adequate. Discussions revealed that the primary concern with existing student evaluation mechanisms is a lack of information about how feedback is acted on. When considering the adequacy of complaints processes, most concerns stemmed from the perception that students might face reprisals if they were to register a complaint. Participants noted that providers needed to make more assurances that complaints would be dealt with fairly.

6.3 Student issues and concerns

Exploration of student experiences revealed a number of common issues that impact on student learning. The presence of quality teaching staff was seen to have a significant influence on individual learning outcomes and the overall experience gained from tertiary education.

Many were concerned about class sizes and the lack of contact with teaching staff. When discussing course quality, students emphasised the need for programmes that were designed to be relevant and to prepare them with the skills and knowledge needed for employment.

A significant number of participants expressed concerns over assessment methods. Cited issues included unclear marking criteria, perceived personal bias, a perception that good grades were given out too lightly, a lack of constructive feedback and perceived inconsistencies across staff, programmes, schools, departments and providers. There was also concern, especially by those in the health disciplines, about the increasing use of online education. Students wanted the ability to choose their preferred method of learning. Furthermore, both international and domestic students were concerned by the number of international students in some courses.

Student loans and allowances were another major source of concern for many participants. Over two thirds were borrowing from the government's student loan system. Students found it easy to take on a student loan but believed it would be difficult to pay off. Many stated they had not fully considered the financial implications of taking on student loan debt at the time of enrolment. Many participants were also concerned about the cost of their qualification relative to their earning potential after graduating. Despite these concerns, most individuals considered they were getting good value for money at their TEO.

6.4 Conclusion

The student focus group project highlighted the importance and value of seeking student perspectives about individual learning outcomes. Although

individual learning experiences were unique and varied, there were common concerns and experiences arising from the shared role of being a student. While findings revealed a variety of issues that impacted on student experience, the major concerns originated from specific issues associated with the quality of education provided and, more specifically, with the quality of teaching. A stronger customer-focused approach was desired by students in their interaction with education providers.

This report notes some preliminary views about student choice and experiences in tertiary education. There are limitations to this research and further research is required in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the issues identified. Broadly speaking, participants were happy with their tertiary education experiences, however some important areas of concern were raised. In order to manage the tertiary system in a way that fosters successful student outcomes, it is important that engagement with students continues to ensure that their perspective is at the forefront of major managerial and funding decisions.

7 Appendices

7.1 Appendix A – Focus group documentation

6.1.1 Information sheet

6.1.2 Consent form

6.1.3 Student focus groups participant questionnaire

7.2 Appendix B – Question topics

7.3 Appendix C – Focus group process, analysis and sampling

7.1.1 Information sheet



Tertiary Education Commission
Te Amorangi Mātauranga Matua

The Needs, Interests and Concerns of Today's Students

One of the roles of the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) is to support tertiary education organisations to better understand and respond to the needs of stakeholders, including students. This study aims to help the TEC Stakeholder Engagement Manager for students, Raewyn Idoine, to better understand students' needs, interests and concerns.

There is at present little information available on students' needs, from the perspectives of students themselves. Less than a quarter of tertiary students have representation through a student association to voice students' needs. These students are primarily in the university, and institute of technology and polytechnic sectors. This means that the voices of some students in the sector are missing. To fill gaps in our understanding of student needs, focus groups are being conducted.

Why be involved?

We want you to tell us about your needs, interests and concerns in tertiary education, based on your experiences. This might include what has helped you, or what has hindered you, in completing your tertiary studies. This is an important opportunity for you to have your voice heard.

It is important to note that the focus group is to find information only, and the researchers will not be able to take direct action on any concerns that you raise. They may however be able to guide you to the right place to follow up any concerns.

What happens to information shared?

Your information will be treated in confidence, and neither your name, institution, nor any other identifying information will be reported in the study findings. While the project is happening, information will be locked in a filing cabinet and only the researchers in the study will have access. Once the project is finished, all tapes and written information will be temporarily archived according to statutory requirements, then destroyed.

In agreeing to take part in this study, it is important that you understand:

- The group discussion will be audio-taped.
- Involvement in the study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time if you wish to.
- Your information will be used for the research and information of this study only.
- All information will be treated as confidential to the researchers.
- The researchers will take extra care to ensure that your name, institution, or any other information detail that would identify you, will **not** appear in any reported information.

Who should I contact if I have any questions?

This research is being carried out by TEC researchers. If you have any questions or concerns about the research, or if you need more information, please feel free to contact either:

Janet Grice, TEC, PO Box 27 048 Wellington.

Telephone (04) 462 5237, or 027 385 2320, or email janet.grice@tec.govt.nz

Karen Price, New Zealand Union of Students' Associations (NZUSA)

Telephone (04) 473 2391, or email research@students.org.nz



7.1.2 Consent form

The Needs, Interests and Concerns of Today's Students

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

I have read the Information Sheet concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:-

1. My participation in the project is entirely voluntary;
2. I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without any disadvantage;
3. I understand that the focus group will be audio-taped;
4. Personal identifying information [*audio-tapes*] will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project but any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which they will be destroyed;
5. The results of the project may be published. Every attempt will be made to preserve my anonymity.

I agree to take part in this project.

.....
Signature of participant

.....
Date

7.1.3 Student focus group participant questionnaire

1. Gender: (Please tick) MALE FEMALE 2. Age: _____
3. Are you a New Zealand Citizen? YES NO
- If NO**
- a. what is your country of citizenship? _____
- b. Do you have New Zealand residency? YES NO
- c. Are you NZ Domestic Student OR Full Fee Paying International Student
4. Which ethnic group do you belong to? (Mark the space or spaces which apply to you)
- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> NZ European/European/Pakeha | <input type="checkbox"/> Maori |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Samoan | <input type="checkbox"/> Cook Island Maori |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tongan | <input type="checkbox"/> Niuean |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Chinese | <input type="checkbox"/> Indian |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other – Please specify: _____ | |
5. Do you have any disability or handicap that is long-term (lasting 6 months or more)?
 YES NO
6. Name of last secondary school attended? _____ Last Year _____
7. What is your highest **secondary school qualification**? _____
8. What type of tertiary education are you currently enrolled in?
(Please tick as many as you need)
- University
 - Institute of Technology/ Polytechnic
 - Wananga
 - Private Training Establishment
 - Industry Training Organisation
 - Government Training Establishment
 - Other _____
9. Are you currently enrolled as a full time or part time student? Full time Part time
10. How are you studying?
- You attend scheduled teaching sessions at your tertiary institution
 - You are enrolled to study by correspondence or distance
 - Other - please state _____
11. What is the name of your current course/qualification? _____
12. As well as studying, are you currently employed? YES NO
- If YES, are you employed Full time Part time
- Please indicate your occupation _____

13. Is this your **first** tertiary enrolment? YES NO

If NO, please specify the names of *ALL* other tertiary qualification(s)/course(s) you have been enrolled in:

a. Institution _____ Name of course _____
Completed YES NO Year Studied _____

b. Institution _____ Name of course _____
Completed YES NO Year Studied _____

14. How are you currently financing your current tertiary education?
(Please tick as many as you need)

- NZ student loan
- Family & Friends
- Personal savings
- Working
- Free course (no fees to pay)
- Other - please state _____

15. At your **current** tertiary education institution, what types of student feedback are you **aware** of? (Please tick as many as you need)

- Course/Paper/Subject evaluation
- Teacher/Lecturer/Assessor evaluations
- Student Satisfaction Survey
- First Impressions Survey
- Formal complaints process
- Class/student representative system
- One-on-one with tutor
- Other - Please state: _____

16. Overall, how satisfied are you with the student feedback/evaluation processes at your tertiary institution?
Please circle the number that best represents you view

Not satisfied at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very satisfied

17. How adequately do you feel student issues, complaints, concerns, feedback at your Tertiary institution are currently being dealt with? *Please circle the number that best represents you view*

Not adequate at all 1 2 3 4 5 Completely adequate

18. Thinking about the tertiary education that you are enrolled in, please circle the relevant number to answer the following questions:

▪ How satisfied are you with the overall quality of service provision?
Not satisfied at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very satisfied

▪ Before enrolling at this institution, what quality of service did you expect?
Not satisfied at all 1 2 3 4 5 Very satisfied

▪ How does the service you receive at your institution, compare to what you expected?
Much worse than I expected 1 2 3 4 5 Much better than I expected

19. Thinking about the service you receive at your institution, please circle the relevant number to indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:

- Staff are competent
Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

- Staff do what they say they do
Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

- I am treated fairly
Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

- I feel my individual circumstances are taken into account
Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

7.2 Appendix B – Question topics

Warm up questions: background information

- Ask participants where they are enrolled to study, what they are studying, and the reason they chose their enrolled institution and method of study.

Topics raised in the focus group without any prompting

- Quality of teaching and learning
- Assessment
- Course content/design and relevance
- Course and programme regulation
- Moderation across programmes
- Student feedback mechanisms
- Pastoral care
- Cost of study – base fees vs student allowance; extra costs

Additional topics that may be discussed during the focus group which may need some prompting

- Proposed compression of the midwifery qualification
- Advice and guidance by the provider while studying
- Effect of academic research
- National and local qualifications
- Government getting value for money
- International students
- Transitions – effective information
- Working while studying

7.3 Appendix C – Focus group process, analysis and sampling

Process

The focus groups were administered by two researchers – a facilitator and a note taker. Participants were provided with information regarding the research project, consent process, confidentiality protocols and contact details of the researchers. The focus group sessions were audio-taped. Participants were also asked to complete an anonymous paper-based survey at the start of the focus group.⁶ The 19-item survey included demographic questions and questions relating to the participants' tertiary education experience.

Each focus group commenced with students giving information about their current enrolment. The facilitator then asked the participants to talk about their current and past experiences in the tertiary education system. A series of question-topics were used as a guide to encourage participants to discuss and explore ideas and thoughts they had on the topics researched. The question-topics were devised from commonly raised issues expressed by representative student groups. The issues and topics that formed the basis of the question-topics were tested and revised through a series of preliminary focus groups with enrolled tertiary students.⁷

The researchers involved were trained to use a consistent approach in facilitating the focus groups to minimise inter-facilitator variability. The question-topics were used across all focus groups to guide the conversation in order to direct each focus group to the same topics and generate the same level of detail in each of the focus groups.

Data processing and analysis

All data collected from the participants are coded to remove identifiable information for analysis purposes. Focus group recordings and consent forms are securely stored. Notes from the sessions were scanned into PDF documents and also stored securely.

Following each session, individual researchers completed summary forms to record the main themes noted in each session. The focus group tapes, notes and summary forms were analysed using the inductive thematic approach to identify common themes across the groups. Analysis of each focus group was carried out by at least two researchers to ensure all information was captured and to minimise discrepancies in interpretation.

Sample

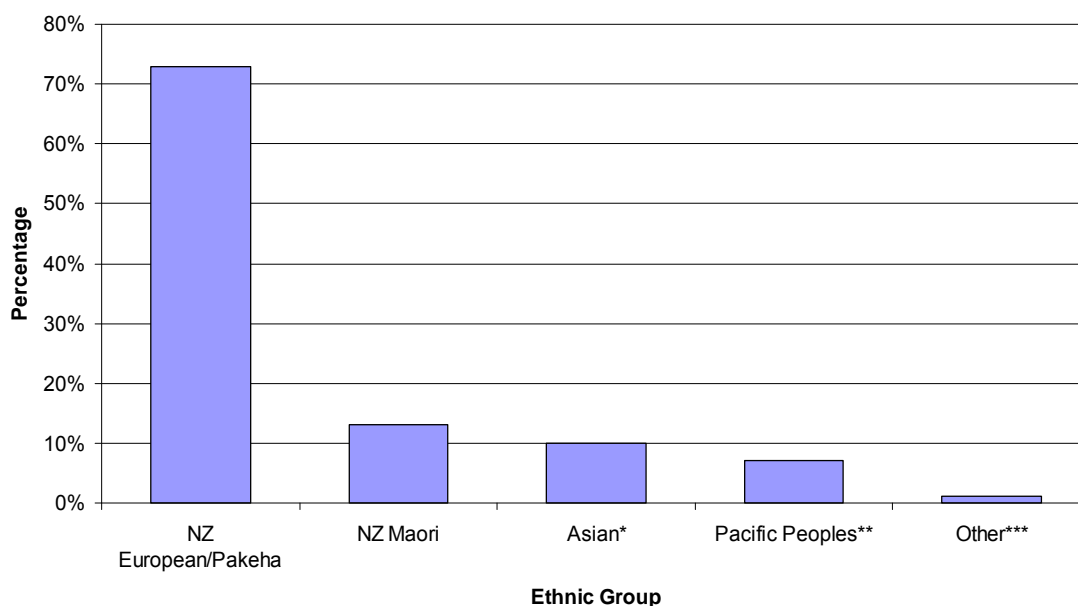
A series of 49 focus groups were conducted from November 2007 to September 2008 with student groups in various parts of the country including Wellington, Christchurch, Dunedin, Palmerston North, Rotorua, Nelson, Auckland region, Central south island and Waikato region.

⁶ A copy of the information sheet, consent form and survey can be found in Appendix A.

⁷ A copy of the question-topics can be found in Appendix B.

A total of 419 students participated in the focus groups, 52% of who were male and 48% female. Age breakdown of the participants showed 23% were within the 15 to 19 year age group, 45% identified themselves to be in the 20 to 25 year age group and 32% were over the age of 25 years. Self-identified ethnicity showed the majority of the participants identified themselves to be of NZ European/ Pakeha ethnicity (73%), 13% identified themselves as NZ Maori, 10% identified with Asian, 7% Pacific Peoples and 1% were grouped in Other (see Figure below).

Figure 5: Self-identified ethnicity of the participants



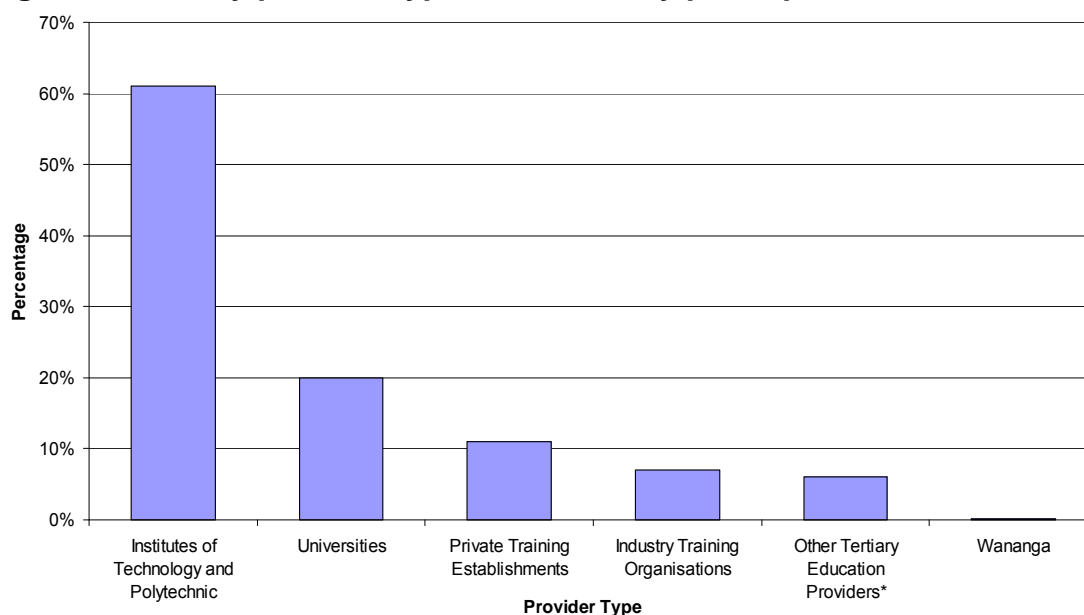
Note

1. The sum of the percentages may not total 100% as participants were asked to indicate all ethnicities they identified with
2. The Asian ethnic group includes Chinese, Indian, Thai, Korean and Malaysian
3. The Pacific Peoples ethnic group includes Samoan, Cook Island Maori, Tongan, Niuean, Melanesia and Tahitian.
4. The Other ethnic group includes South African, African, American, Brazilian, and Croatian.

All of the participants were enrolled in study at a tertiary education organisation when they participated in the focus groups. Over half were enrolled in institutes of technology and polytechnics, while the others were studying at universities, private training establishments, industry training organisations, other tertiary education providers and wānanga (see figure 6 below).

Participants' enrolment information showed the majority were in full-time study (86%), while 14% were engaged in part-time study. Responses to study mode showed almost all of the participants were studying intramurally (95%) and a small proportion engaged in extramural study (6%) with courses delivered off campus or via mixed-mode delivery.

Figure 6: Tertiary provider type enrolled in by participants



Note:

1. The sum of the percentages may not total 100% as participants can be enrolled in more than one tertiary provider.
2. Other Tertiary Education Providers included Modern Apprenticeships, TOPS, Youth Training and On-job training

Participants were asked how they were financing their current education. Table 1 below shows the methods used and their frequency. The most common source of finance used for funding tertiary study was the government student loan scheme. Loans from family and friends, personal savings and working while studying were other commonly reported sources of finances.

Table 1: Method of funding tertiary study

Financial source	Proportion
NZ student loan	60%
Family and friends	22%
Personal savings	20%
Working	22%
Free course	12%
Other	10%

Note:

1. The proportions do not total 100% as the question allowed for multiple responses.
2. Other included employer pays, bank loans, scholarships and WINZ Training Incentive Allowance.

