

# Barriers to Learning

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## ABSTRACT

This paper outlines and discusses the problems and difficulties faced by students undertaking tertiary study, often for the first time.

This requires a wide range of skills, including life skills, time management, study skills and surviving and completing assignments. The state of the tertiary institution has both a direct and indirect impact on the student's performance. This institute state is affected by factors both internal and external to the institution. These factors are considered in this paper in the light of past and current policies of institution, industry and government. The recent TEAC meeting held in Hamilton highlights the range of opinions which will shape tertiary education in the future.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Many students who commence studies at tertiary institutions offering vocational training subjects usually find the transition from secondary school or those more senior students in retraining a difficult hurdle. Each student therefore has

general and specific needs that must be recognised and hopefully resolved.

The reason for writing this paper is to discuss factors that confront students from time to time to slow down or stop their studies. Such factors are examined.

At the beginning of each year a short talk is given by the first author on self-care, how to study, expectations, and sticking to study. Often students have not considered that after paying fees that there may not be sufficient funds to purchase textbooks or even to live on throughout the year. Often technical subjects give rise to their own terms and language. Computer and electronics when combined may use the same name to denote entirely different functions. For example "port", "address", and "cache" mean very different things in hardware and software contexts. Such changes in vocabulary can cause confusion in student minds. In addition, the ability to cook and an awareness of good nutrition is often neglected, particularly those in a flatting situation. Poor eating habits can have an effect on student performance, and a reliance on eating out frequently will have a bad impact on finances.

## 2. OBSERVATIONS

It is important that students be aware of institutional regulations, so that they are able to work within the rules the institution operates under and take advantage of benefits offered by the institution. Therefore, these regulations must be made available in common form and students must be made aware of how to access them. Many students rely on WINZ (or whatever they choose to call themselves at a given time) for financial support while undertaking tertiary study. Therefore, students must be aware of WINZ regulations and how to access them. Also, these regulations are subject to change, which can make survival as a student difficult.

Institutions can address these needs by making resources available to students in a visible way, such as providing resources on site:

- Tertiary Skills Study Centre to address difficulties students may have with developing good study habits and overcoming disabilities.
- Having WINZ on site provides a convenient way for students to deal with their financial matters.
- A peer tutoring programme can allow students to obtain further help with studies, or augment their finances by becoming a peer tutor.

For many, undertaking tertiary study makes them an object of attention, which they may not be used to. Groups and organizations that take notice of students' performance include:

- Parents and other relatives who view the student with hope and admiration
- Friends, who may be either admiring or jealous
- Other students, who may pick up or teach good and bad habits
- NZQA, who grants the qualifications
- Future employers, who may judge students in a cold, harsh light
- Tutors, asking/demanding/pleading that the students work for their place.

All this attention may well make some students uncomfortable.

## 3. DRUGS AND SUICIDE

More than one student has failed to complete a tertiary programme because they found that taking recreational drugs was easier and more rewarding (at least in the short term). The folly of this choice hardly needs to be emphasised further, but the fact that this can and does happen means that tutors must watch for this and be prepared to report suspected drug cases to the appropriate people or agencies.

As well as drugs, suicide is occasionally seen as an option to study. It hardly needs to be said that killing oneself greatly diminishes one's chances of obtaining a qualification. Warning signs may be harder to detect than with drugs, but tutors also need to be aware that such things happen and be willing to report suspected suicide risks. The suicide or death of a friend or relative can also have a devastating effect on a student's performance. The shock can make concentration on study extremely difficult, and many students simply give up in this situation. Again, it is important for tutors and programme managers to be ready to refer students to the appropriate agencies in such cases. Sometimes, the student needs some time to come to terms with the death before continuing with study.

## 4. STUDY PROBLEMS

Many students, particularly those who have been unemployed for some time, may have trouble grasping the importance of things happening at a specified time. This involves:

- Attending class regularly
- Arriving on time for class
- Getting assignments done on time
- Taking tests at a specified time.

Many institutions use a competency-based assessment methodology, which involves allowing students to take resits. While this may be fair in that it gives students a further chance to show they've mastered the material, it can actually encourage poor study habits by allowing students to take the test late, and/or giving them the chance to review other students' work before taking the tests themselves.

Technical fields such as information technology require students to understand technical terms in textbooks, which effectively amounts to learning a

new vocabulary. This can be a problem for people who have been out of school for a while, or were not successful in their earlier schoolwork. Another skill required for tertiary study is how to study for and take tests. Students must learn to master their subject in such a way as to be able to answer questions under pressure. This may be an unfamiliar and certainly unpleasant experience for many. Gaining the skills to manage this environment may require special tutoring, not in the subject itself, but in how to study and manage a test situation.

Of note is the fact that students' expectations have risen with the rise in study fees. In the face of rising costs for students, they may have a poor understanding of the importance of self-study. Somehow the idea that students have to work hard as well as pay money is lost on some people.

To overcome these common problems, a study group is a good strategy to allow a number of students to manage their tertiary study. In a group, students can find their answers by consulting books together, discussion and practise exercises. In many cases this can produce a kind of synergy that makes study stimulating rather than a grind.

In the current tertiary environment, a variety of situations may interfere with study:

- Students may be older, with work and/or family commitments that can easily interfere with study.
- Others arrive from overseas, in which case cultural barriers and homesickness may interfere with study.
- Still others come from a dysfunctional background where problems such as family strife, court appearances or periodic detention may make study quite difficult.

In such cases remedial classwork can help. This may take the form of extra class time, meetings with the tutor, peer tutoring, or referral to another department such as the Tertiary Skills Study Centre or TESOL for remedial learning. Interestingly, such information does not trigger large-scale discussion but is clearly listened to and given due weight, given of course the purse size at the time.

## 5. COMPUTERS

Students these days tend to use a computer to do their assignments, whether it be a programming assignment or a written report or paper. This is a good thing, if only because it makes a written work easier to produce, and the result is generally more readable than a work written by hand. As a result, most students have the idea that they need to have a computer at home. This can lead to several problems. First and most simply, a student who does not own a computer, or at least is not connected to the Internet, can feel psychologically at a disadvantage. To enable such students to participate in today's wired environment, polytechnics should ensure that a student computer lab is available for student use, particularly during off hours. (However, in this case security becomes an issue; both security of the physical site and security of the student's work.) Because of the wide availability and low cost of computers, and because financial aid is available, many students purchase a computer for their tertiary study. This provides the advantages discussed above, but leads to new problems:

- Loss of data. If a file is accidentally deleted or corrupted due to a hardware problem, or the disk containing work is lost or damaged, many hours or even days of student work can be wiped out in an instant.
- Down time. If a computer fails to function or is stolen, the advantage to having a computer evaporates. Further, repairing or replacing a computer adds extra strain on a student's finances.
- Distraction. In addition to being a useful tool, a computer can also be a dreadful time-waster and have a damaging effect on tertiary study. Games, surfing the web, and even simply installing and configuring a system or software can waste valuable sleep and study time and degrade a student's performance.

Interestingly, these same problems can apply to tutors as well, which in turn has a negative effect on student learning. Language and Cultural barriers Obviously, to impart knowledge through written or oral means requires a common language between teacher and student. The problem of language barriers is well known, and much has been written in the literature. Most institutions offer English language courses for overseas students who are not fluent speakers of English.

More subtle is the much-discussed cultural barrier. Learning in a polytechnic happens within a particular cultural context—a fact that is not immediately obvious to people who belong to that culture. Particularly pertinent is the problem that the tangata whenua have in coming to terms with the Western cultural context in which most polytechnic learning in IT occurs. Maori students (as well as other Polynesians) study better in a group situation. One Technician's Certificate class in recent years had a high proportion of Maori and Islander students in it. The first author encouraged students in the class to work together, and they did. The result was that the class—many of whom were school leavers with little or no previous educational experience—did very well, and several members went on to finish with the BIT degree.

## 6. INDICATORS

Any of these issues may prevent a student from successfully completing a tertiary programme. Fortunately, there are certain indicators that can show that a student is having difficulty:

- failure to complete work
- poor academic results
- inattention
- inability to stay awake in class
- poor attendance.

One of the roles of a teacher therefore is to be alert for these indicators and investigate the reasons behind them. In such cases, the programme manager should be made aware of the situation as they may be better prepared to deal with any problems and refer the troubled student to the appropriate agency for help if necessary.

## 7. BOB: A CASE STUDY

As an example of how barriers can be overcome, take the example of Bob Waka. Bob (not his real name), had left school at fourteen and went into a labourer's job for many years, followed by a job as an orderly in a mental hospital. When in his thirties, he decided he wanted "an enjoyable job with opportunities", so he decided to get more education. He chose information technology as a topic, as he enjoyed computer games. He joined up with TWP's Technician's Certificate course, and by chance was

one of the class mentioned above that studied in a group.

Bob, like others in the class, found the work quite hard, but managed the load by working in groups as suggested by his tutor. This, along with support from whanau and financial support from his student loan, enabled him to continue. Bob finished his Tech Cert after two years, and along with several others in his class he decided to move into TWP's BIT degree programme. This proved to be a bigger challenge, but Bob used the study skills he'd learned on the certificate programme and continued to study in groups to eventually finish and "wear the hat", as that group called graduating with a degree. Bob was subsequently used in TWP publicity posters after having landed a good job with Turners and Growers as a network engineer.

## 8. CONCLUSIONS

All of the barriers we've mentioned have been observed by one or the other of the authors in our respective careers. Some barriers arise because of lack of academic skills and experience, while others are financially based. Still others happen because of social pressures from friends and family. For each problem, we've suggested one or more ways of dealing with the problem at a personal or institutional level.

Tertiary study is hard work. Students face challenges that may never have been faced by their teachers in their day, or at least may have been forgotten. However, by being aware of the barriers that students can face, and making students aware of techniques and resources they need, these barriers can be overcome.

Our case study, Bob, is an example of how these barriers can be overcome. A student can come from a background of little or no achievement to a degree through hard work and a desire to learn, provided they are supported by whanau, teaching staff, and