

## **Come in spinner! Opportunities and meanings emerging through distance study for professional educators**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reports on emergent meanings, professional dilemmas and the students' need to negotiate workplace commitments while balancing off-campus study with family and personal responsibilities. By examining data from a participant-orientated study, we explore the burning issue of student retention within their complex and evolving contexts. Our research investigates the reasons why students take a break from their study and then resume. As one student explains, "*I actually find this break experience rejuvenating because I am savouring the learning journey. I don't feel obliged to race through the MET [Master of Education Technology]. I want the time to learn in a course and then take the time to apply what I have learned on the job*"

Through the data we observe 'in practice' opportunities and meanings that emerge from these students' contexts, cognisant of the complementary imperatives of retention and progression - typical concerns of educational providers.

Three relevant themes were identified from survey data to be elucidated through focus groups: students' jobs, university administration processes, and personal or life dilemmas. The demands of the job appear to be an important factor why people take a break. University protocols may contribute to, or compromise retention. Personal circumstances, related to family and health issues, might influence students' ability to continue studying. Our students, postgraduates, face the challenge of fine-tuning competing demands. Thrust into novel situations and sometimes unexpectedly caught off balance, students pool their 'war time' stories and share pragmatics - playing the game.

### **Introduction**

University-based retention initiatives are founded upon an understanding of the relationship between institutions and their students. Assimilation and adaptation models of retention vie for attention with many institutional initiatives premised on the assimilation model: counselling services, mentoring, orientation and transition programs. Retention models typically reflect a managerial-orientated view, either integrating the students to institutional norms through an assimilative culture, or, less frequently, adapting institutional infrastructure and policies to better align with student needs (Zepke, Leach, & Prebble, 2006). This dichotomy correlates with earlier

work from the United Kingdom that criticises the lack of a student voice in prominent American models such as Tinto's (Yorke, 1999).

Retention has captured the attention of the higher education sector over many decades (Evans, 2000; Patton, Morelon, Whitehead, & Hossler, 2006; Tagg, 2007; Yorke & Longden, 2004; Zepke et al., 2006). The focus of attention is often financial – institutional costs are in time and service provision. When studying, students weigh up the potential of drawing an income versus temporary loss of earning capacity. Most retention studies focus on undergraduate students, in particular the first-year experience (Yorke & Longden, 2004). If not the first-year experience, the focus often centres on equity issues of under-represented students (McInnis & James, 2004). Research into subsequent terms of study is less common.

The deeper one travels into models of retention, the more complex terms such as retention, persistence and attrition become. Our definition of retention is best captured by Hagedorn's (2005) categories of 'institutional' and 'system' retention. Institutional retention refers to "the proportion of students who remain enrolled at the *same* institution from year to year" (2005, p.98). On the other hand, 'system retention' focuses on student progression, irrespective of the institution in which the student is enrolled. There is a direct relationship between system retention and persistence as explained by Hagedorn, where the latter accommodates "a student who leaves one institution to attend another" (2005, p.98). Yorke and Longden (2004) and Lindsay, Howell & Laws (2005) observed the difficulty of defining a student's progression when the student does not follow the regular enrolment pattern. York and Longden argue that retention is a "supply-side concept ... managerial-orientated, signalling a focus on the effectiveness and efficiency of an institution or a system" (2004, p.5). Attrition is normally understood as the opposite of retention (Adkins & Nitsch, 2005) and generally refers to voluntary withdrawals, rather than failures or exclusions (Evans, 2000). Yorke and Longden (2004, p.37) observe neutral terms such as 'attrition', 'discontinuance', 'withdrawal' and 'non-completion', have replaced the term 'dropout'.

At an undergraduate level, the relevance of the program selected by the student is identified as a significant reason for students dropping their study (Evans, 2000; Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2005; Yorke & Longden, 2004). At a post graduate level, programs normally remain relevant. As lifelong learners, when circumstances change, temporary content-irrelevance tends not to disturb because a bigger picture is in sight. Nevertheless, lessons can be learned from first-year research and applied to postgraduate programs. Principal issues of connection with the institution remain the same during the first term of study and become more individual over subsequent terms (Yorke & Longden, 2004, p.42). Off-campus students do not have the loyalty towards the institution. They do not travel and can therefore study anywhere in the world. The institution has to earn the loyalty of the off-campus students.

Incompatibility between the student and the institution has been cited frequently as a reason to withdraw (McInnis & James, 2004; Yorke, 1999). Some Australian studies perceive a lack of course relevance, poor performance, difficulties adjusting to the style of teaching at university, personal reasons and life dilemmas to be significant factors (McInnis & James, 2004). The latter may be related to family circumstances, financial constraints and resultant part-time employment or health issues. When

university administration processes are opaque or unsatisfactory, students who are hesitant about continuing their study, may drop rather than 'fight through'.

Mature aged students have a different perspective; retention is in relation to their career aspirations, a financial passport, recognition of professional contributions and achievements. As Adkins and Nitsch conclude, retention of adult learners in online programs "is a persistent and perplexing problem" (2005, p.1680). Retention is now more readily characterised as an aspect of life long learning.

### **Our focus**

This paper is based on postgraduate online programs in the disciplines of online education, lifelong learning and educational technology offered by a regional Australian university. In accord with ethics considerations, we shall refer to this institution as Warratah University. Our research investigates student's experience of their off campus program, how it meshes with their career aspirations, aligns with opportunities and support for learning in their workplace. We want to understand why students make decisions about continuing, suspending or dropping their study. The institutional context should have a bearing, however the question is 'to what extent are institutional actions relevant to our off-campus students' determination to study?' This dilemma has been investigated by Yorke and Longden (2004) who propose that distinguishing between the 'individual reasons' and 'institutional reasons' are best examined within a case study. This is in contrast to large scale surveys that rarely provide insights into the dynamics of decision making (Yorke & Longden, 2004, p.41).

### **Methodology and Conceptual Framework**

Yorke and Longden (2004) developed a diagram to visualise relationships between students and their place of study. It places the student at the centre of decisions whether to persist or leave their study and illustrates the layered set of influences on student departure as a complex set of social and psychological interactions as echoed by Evans (2000). The centre is the start of our participant-orientated research, embedded within a social constructivist framework. When universities adopt an inclusive response to their retention challenges, a case study approach suggests boundaries, actors and focus for the research. Yin (2003) particularly recommends a case study methodology when the "boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 2003, p.13). He elaborates that a critical case study is particularly useful when testing a well formulated theory (Yin, 2003, p.40).

Warratah students who were enrolled in the online masters programs between 2004 and 2006, received an email invitation to participate in our study. Participants included those who had dropped their studies. This critical case study intended to find and identify problems in this specific case. The student perspective was derived from an anonymous online survey (response rate of 44% n=102). At key points in the survey, students were invited to volunteer for subsequent online focus groups. Two months later, nine students participated in the focus groups.

Limitations of self-reporting are recognised, particularly when the researchers are in a privileged position, a propensity to respond in a socially acceptable fashion and provide what are anticipated as appropriate responses. To minimise these issues, pseudonyms were used in the focus groups to minimise the risk of participants

recognising each other. Pseudonyms were randomly created and assigned; first names from one cohort and last names from another. Researcher assigned pseudonyms did have an impact; some participants commented that they initially found it difficult to recognise their own identity upon entering the forums. Nevertheless, by the middle of the three-week focus group sessions, participants were comfortable with their assumed identity.

Survey responses from the open-ended questions were used to develop issues for consideration by the focus groups, which started two months after closure of the survey. The focus group data was examined for comments related to retention; choosing to take a break from study or persisting with study when faced with difficulties, and finally, the stimulus to return to study. Initially posts were marked for themes, then clustered to provide insights into an issue. Analysis was discussed and shared between the researchers revealing ambiguity with subsequent clarification. Illustrative quotations from the focus groups are presented in the following section.

## Findings

Responses to the question of ‘whether or not to continue studying’ were clustered under three categories: to take a break, resume, or persist with study.

### Taking a break

Survey results indicate that employment is a key factor. When a new job requires relocation and higher responsibilities, study may temporarily take a back seat.

Comments by participants illustrate:

*“The first time I took a brake [sic] from study was when I got a job at another institution and had to relocate. I would not have been able to cope with managing relocation of my family, new job and studies. The brake [sic] I'm taking now is again as a result of taking another job with higher responsibilities” - Vasika*

*“I am on a break now because I knew that this was going to be a heavy term at school” - Reed*

While employment provides financial capacity to study, it may force breaks in study.

#### Sample quotes:

- *“I asked to work as part-timer to have more time for my studies and my request was accepted ... however my breaks, (after each course) was merely due to financial reasons ... I could not afford it, but now after travelling to another country and accepting another job there, I can do it without breaks” - Gwynn*
- *“Mortgage rates. Taking a semester off to earn a full time wage allows me to pay off the new kitchen” - Bethany*

Sometimes the university contributes to students’ breaks from their studies. Restricted course selection can be the trigger for taking a break. The impact on students is disruptive, Reed elaborates:

*“Another ... reason I took the break this term is because none of the courses I wanted or had mapped out for my MET were offered in the semester... I didn't*

*want to take any old one [course] just to get through. I am enjoying the experience so much I want to be sure it is a valid and authentic experience for my teaching career”.*

Not only does employment interfere, personal circumstances intervene as well.

*“[I took] three months off during [a course] to care for my terminally ill sister-in-law and then support my husband and family following her death (as well as get my own head in a space where I could focus on my study again)” - Carmel*

*“Chronic tiredness of a mother running a home with two small children and an almost-full-time job; balancing my community volunteer roles with everything else; training to get fitter and healthier means time away from the study desk” - Bethany*

*“The state of my marriage, employment redundancy, and resulting financial issues were very strong personal issues which affected my enrolment and intermittent participation in the study program” - Toni*

*“I was tired last term and needed to take some time to take care of details in family life that were falling behind...like balancing my bank book!!” - Reed*

*“The first break – I planned it because I thought I would be busy at work with a particularly large project... This break ..., I was just exhausted and had such a “yuck” experience with my last course that I just couldn’t [sic] another straight away” - Bethany*

A variety of other issues can intrude upon ongoing study. Reed comments on a need for a holiday to stimulate and rejuvenate.

*“...discover how fast I had become unfit. So thank goodness for the break so that I can move my focus to myself and body so that as my brain is growing the rest of me doesn't completely fall a part, limb by limb!!! As my husband says it doesn't make sense to be achieving high distinction all the time with your brain and not give the rest of your body time to achieve that as well!!”*

Workplace holidays provide opportunities to take a break:

**Sample quotes:**

- *“Time intensive and often stressful. I needed periodic long-term breaks and the summer was the best time to decompress” - James*
- *“I was going to be travelling while school was off for the summer” - Reed*

Family and peer support is important, but not always available. Gwynn relates her story:

*“I was never able to convince my husband back there at my home country, (one of the oriental countries with "oriental" mentality) to take the courses without a break.... His reasoning: home, kids, family are your priorities and beside work... you won't have enough time to concentrate on your studies... I never dared to tell my mother (65) in law that I am studying online... for her it is just enough that my husbands allows my ambition to work, my sister in law, a very*

*influential person in the family (48) was not so happy to hear the news about my enrolment and initial success in the first two courses but she did not comment with more than ... I just hope you will be able to balance, good luck, you have always been a fighter. I avoid to open the issue totally in front of my husband's family... they do not appreciate it at this stage, seeing only the burden, financial and work-wise. No one at all is a long-life learner”.*

Whereas Gwynn's work colleagues are key motivators:

*“I am not joking, in order to further encourage me the websites editor – chief (top manager) used to call me (Dr., PhD holder) and I am now known by this title... he always said... this is what I can do to further encourage you... you'll never lose your motivations as long as everyone is reminding you of your goal. ☺”*

... and her children similarly demonstrate enthusiasm:

*“My kids now say, why striving to finish your Masters you are already a “DR”. ☺ “*

### **Resuming after a break**

Reasons for resuming study may relate to personal or work issues. Some employers are very supportive and encourage employees to continue their studies.

*“Although my previous job could not support me financially their very positive [sic] attitude towards my studies motivated me so much ... whenever I had to take a break, my manager would tell me: no excuse to go back fresh and enthusiastic to studies ...” - Gwynn*

Relevance of study to the workplace and financial contribution to study can be critical.

*“I was partly motivated to return to study because there was a push from management to increase online delivery to our students - namely 30% of all delivery to be online by end 2007. I also qualified for a 75% fee sponsorship through my employer which was also helpful” - Janette*

Promotion can encourage students to resume:

*“However if I wish to move further on with my career I do need to have a master's degree to be eligible to apply for promotions” - Reed*

Arguably a virtual learning community fosters a greater sense of connection as students meet others they already know in their 'new' class. The virtual class influences personal motivation, choice of courses in a particular semester and an intention to resume studies.

*“I really enjoyed the interaction with lecturers and other students during the time I was undertaking the PG Cert and missed that stimulation” - Carmel*

*“You know that is one of the reasons, I am looking for an online COP [community of practice] that would help me with my feeling that I am not the only one "out there" with an ambition to study...” - Gwynn*

Frequently the decision to resume study is informed by a number of considerations rather than a single critical issue. Bethany summarises:

- “What has encouraged me to go back to study next semester?  
- personal drive to complete this thing that I have started.  
- increased earning power once I am qualified  
- the thought of a family holiday in Queensland when I graduate!”*

Vasika elaborates on the nexus of motivators to return to her study:

*“My personal interest in technology and education and working as a lecturer in a tertiary institution were the main stimuli for me to return and complete my post graduate certificate... Now I'm considering going back to complete my Masters but change the major... The main reason for change of major and return to studies is my new job and the areas of responsibilities I have in terms of staff professional development.”*

### **Persisting**

Mostly students continue with their study having weighed up the pros and cons of taking a break. Their preference is to continue without a break.

Several students have been fortunate to have their employer's support during these decision making times. Support is often in the form of time, payment of fees or the employer reassuring students of the relevance of their studies.

#### **Sample quotes:**

- *“... the institution was very supporting, paying my fees and providing me with time for study. Also as most of what I was studying applied directly to my work context, I was able to spend additional time at work on my studies, over and above the time allocated” - Carmel*
- *“My employer is totally flexible in giving me room to reduce my teaching load - either by requesting to move half time or by requesting a study leave. My role on the leadership team has been to share current literature and help guide our organisation's long term plan” - Reed*
- *“Main constraints were related to my workload that varied from semester to semester but I was able to negotiate a reasonable solution with my manager” - Vasika*
- *“I continued because of the support, flexibility, and variety of learning environments available through the online system. There has been so little hassle both study and administration side of things. People wanted to help rather than put obstacles in the way” - Toni*
- *“... As my study progressed I was able to contribute substantially to the development of online learning within our institution and could see the benefits for students and staff” - Carmel*

The family is a pillar of support and a key factor in decision-making about continuation of study.

*“Still I am grateful that he allows me to do it...a privelege [sic] not all women in my country enjoy ... Now having travelled to more relaxing circumstances, kids now bit older, no committments [sic] towards the extended family ... had no problem comming [sic] to an agreement to do the studies without any breaks” - Gwynn*

*“- long family history of continuing education  
- husband is also doing a masters (but not by distance) so we feel each others pain.  
- my kids offering to help with my ‘homework’... ”  
- everyone in the family has at least an undergraduate degree... going to university was a rite of passage. One of my earliest memories was making a welcome home banner for my brother returning from medical school. My mum graduated at 65 with a degree in feminist studies” - Bethany*

Unsurprisingly, ambition and personal drive lie behind the motivation to continue without a break.

*“I will hopefully begin my research very soon, I will try to keep all the excitement for myself and hopefully be able to announce my success at the end, which they will THEN very much admire and appreciate.... but till then, I have to be a self motivating person looking for intrinsic motivations and let my eager towards learning drive me” - Gwynn*

*“... increased earning power once I am qualified” - Bethany*

## **Discussions and Implications**

Our data illustrates how students' decision-making around continuing study is complex, with interrelated factors; they face the challenge of fine-tuning competing demands. We will discuss the interrelatedness of decision-making dynamics, and consider the use of institutional infrastructure developed to support students, and indirectly increase student retention. The implications of these findings will be examined in the context of what it means for contemporary universities with their highly mobile postgraduate lifelong learners.

### **Family responsibilities**

Changes to family structure impact on student progression. This is clearly illustrated by Gwynn who notes that moving away from her extended family, has a significant impact on her husband's expectations of her commitment to the family versus commitment to her study. Bethany remarks upon the “chronic tiredness” of a new mother. As families grow, financial decisions must be juggled; as Bethany muses, will it be an extension, renovation to the house or will it be another term of study? Children becoming more independent provide opportunities for parents to study as illustrated by Gwynn. Toni notes the stability and state of her marriage underpin intermittent study patterns. Carmel comments upon a generational issue faced by mature aged students responding to long-term illness, by caring for extended family members.

Enthusiasm for and commitment to ongoing study may permeate a family. Bethany describes the positive impact of being in a family with a history of commitment to continuing education. This extends to her current family as she mentions sharing the pain as she and her partner study simultaneously.



### **Personal issues**

Personal issues are often close to the heart of students' decisions to continue study or to take a break. The choice is often unexpected as situations emerge quickly catching students off balance. Students associate mental and physical well being with their capacity to continuing studying. Bethany explains that getting fitter and healthier requires time away from study. Reed elaborates ... as her brain grows, she needs to ensure the rest of her body does not fall apart, limb by limb. Simple exhaustion and an unsatisfactory experience with the most recent course, can be a stimulus to take a break as Bethany describes it... couldn't face another course straight away. Carmel highlights the vacuum felt at the end of her program; an absence of mental stimulation was the catalyst for transferring from Certificate to Masters study.

Gwynn explains the importance of a learning community; evidence that she was not the only one out there with the ambition to study. Carmel echoes the importance of interaction with the lecturers and other students. Gwynn elaborates how personal drive motivates her... and Bethany extends this, commenting on the attraction of a trip to Australia for the graduation ceremony.

One's financial status can be critical to study patterns; Toni and Vasika explain how financial issues affected their enrolment. Bethany's incentive to continue study was anticipating how her earning power would be increased once she was qualified. Reed jokes that she needed to look after personal matters, such as balancing her bank account. Toni describes the financial compromise so often associated with a change to one's marital status.

### **Cultural considerations**

Family reaction to the 'student role' can vary from being undermining to very supportive. Gwynn is erudite and specific in her description of her multiple roles as daughter-in-law, sister-in-law, wife and mother; how these roles have contesting priorities fighting against being a student. To the contrary, Bethany shares the insights of being part of a supportive family - her kids help complete her homework.

The culture of the workplace may motivate students to study through reducing work load (Reed), paying fees and study leave (Carmel). Furthermore, the attitude of staff (as Gwynn describes), has an impact on study. Her interpretation was although her employer was unable to provide more tangible support, her manager's enthusiasm for her success was a powerful stimulant for study.

Institutions infrastructure and systems occasionally have an impact on students' choice. When Warratah temporary withdraw course offers, studies are sometimes disrupted particularly when students are keen on a mapped study plan. Reed explains her decision to take a break instead of completing her program with "any old course". On the other hand, the flexibility and variety of learning environments available may facilitate continued study as Toni outlines. Furthermore she observes that at Warratah people want to help, a contrast to some other universities where she felt obstacles were placed in her path.

### **Employment considerations**

Employment provides financial capacity to study, motivation to continue through promotional systems; it changes focus of specialisation as workplace needs evolve and impedes study through heavy workload.

Our students often use their study to validate a recent move into a new profession or to smooth the pathway for change. New responsibilities accompany this professional refocus. As Vasika explains, courses that were previously marginally relevant, may become central. Similarly, when workplace strategic initiatives change, students can find their study focus moves to align with the new direction. Occasionally, as Janette describes, workplaces sponsor study to support these initiatives. Reed and Carmel also mention the alignment between their study and institutional initiatives. This is realised as an opportunity for them to contribute to the organisation's direction setting. Informally students also use workplace challenges to guide course selection. Using the challenges creates tight alignment between study and work, effectively providing more hours for study (Carmel and Reed).

Relocation can initially disrupt study as Vasika illustrates, and sometimes requires a resettling-in period for the family. Study frequently takes a back seat in these circumstances. Many of our students are highly mobile and online study particularly suits them. They can continue with their award irrespective of their location. The impact of relocation may be as little as forewarning the class of no Internet contact for a few days.

Promotion is a catalyst for continuing study. In some circumstances, a Masters degree is a prerequisite for promotion (Reed). A heavier workload may accompany promotion, thereby temporarily diverting attention from study. This diversion is not restricted to promotion; Toni points to varying participation during slow and busy times at work, and Reed mentions that anticipation of a heavy term is a trigger to suspend study.

### **Connections**

The following table (Table 1) provides an overview of the interconnectedness of issues that have an impact on students' decisions to take a break from their study or persist; and how these issues may trigger a resumption of study.

Study patterns of this cohort illustrate Hagedorn's concept of 'system' retention where student progress rarely follows a regularly-paced study plan.

### **Implications**

It is timely to recall that a data collection methodology reliant upon self-reporting potentially lacks objectivity, and allows for psychological self-defence in reporting actions and outcomes. The results from our focus groups paralleled indicators in the survey. It was not apparent that student perspectives changed in the two months between the data collection periods. This suggests a consistency of self-reporting. Generalisation of findings is not the object of this study (Evans, 2000, p.6; Zepke et al., 2006). Instead we aim to provide a better understanding of student decisions to drop, continue, or resume study in a particular context; and to propose meaningful interpretations for the educational provider.

**Table 1: Overview of connectedness of issues that have an impact on students' decisions to take a break from their study or persist**

Factors	Choosing to take a break	Resuming study after taking a break	Persisting with study
Family responsibilities	Children, parents, in-laws		Family history of study success
	Changing nature of family, marriage	Children older	Reduced commitment to extended family
	Housing, renovations, extensions, mortgage		Partner studying, so feel each others pain
	Tiredness associated with having young children		
	Emotional stress related to terminally ill relatives		
Personal issues	Health (mental and physical)	Mental stimulation (learning communities)	Learning communities
	Financial incapacity (changed marital status)	Anticipation of increase income	Sufficient income to continue studying
		Personal ambition, drive	Personal ambition, drive.
Cultural considerations	Workplace	Supportive, nature of the job	Employer support (pay fees, reducing workload)
	Family and Sociological (cultural expectations of mothers' responsibilities)		
	Warratah system (restrict course selection)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mode of delivery</li> <li>• flexibility of program choices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enjoy the mode,</li> <li>• Peer support in course choice for semester</li> <li>• helpful Warratah staff</li> </ul>
Employment considerations	Relocation		
	Promotion, higher responsibilities	Anticipation of promotion	
	Changing professions	New job, new responsibilities	Relevance of content to job
	Heavy workload		
	Using work strategic initiatives	With strategic initiatives, came funding incentives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using work challenges to guide course selection,</li> <li>• more hours for study because study is related to work priorities</li> <li>• Subsidising fees</li> </ul>

Dropping studies may not be as negative as year-to-year studies of retention and program completion statistics suggest (Maori, 2007). Lindsay et al. (2005) cite studies reporting institutional variation of off-campus student retention. The variation suggests that a better understanding of the relationship between the institution and its students can be of mutual benefit. One suggestion is that lifelong learning changes the character of cohorts (Maori, 2007; McInnis & James, 2004; Zepke et al., 2006). An

increasing number of professions now have postgraduate awards for 'initial education'. As individuals move between careers, the pace of study may be gradual with planned career transitions. Coupled with professional mobility, movement in and out of an institutions' profile may be fostered by government policies encouraging 'credit transfer' between educational institutions (Evans, 2000; McInnis & James, 2004). Smooth and clear pathways for students returning to study are recommended (Hagedorn, 2005; Maori, 2007, p.373).

Whilst progression is ultimately an individual decision, institutional systems and course design for off-campus study may influence a student's decision whether to continue with their current institution. Our study reveals how peer connection may motivate continued study and the online system itself provides continuity irrespective of geographical location. The most frequently mentioned systems having an impact on study are scheduling of courses and alerting students to critical dates such as the commencement of the semester, dates to pay fees and to enrol or drop courses. Notably little mention is made of student support services. Interpretation of an absence of comment remains conjecture at this time. At one end of the continuum silence may be indicative of a smooth-running system where student support is seamlessly integrated into the learning environment. At the opposite end of the continuum, absence of comment may be indicative of an un-used system, irrelevant to the needs of online postgraduate students.

The student community itself is important. Learning communities that cease with the conclusion of a unit of study are valued but fall-short of participating in a wider, ongoing community.

Yoke & Longden's (2004) model suggests, students' sociological context is significant. With geographically dispersed cohorts the challenge for higher education institutions such as Warratah, is to understand these contexts sufficiently, and how their students engage with those contexts. Many of our English-language speaking students who are resident in non-English speaking countries can be characterised as expatriates. They enthuse about travel with employment opportunities that suggest transience and a deeper connection with their home culture.

## **Conclusion**

Adult learners juggle competing demands as career aspirations, family commitments and workplace needs evolve. Workplaces offer affordances (opportunities) to individuals such as inducements for career progression. On the other hand, individual agency shapes how students respond to these affordances. Family responsibilities are a primary consideration for our students and the flexibility of pace and lengthy program completion times suit their pattern of study.

Lifelong learning and 'system retention' are useful lenses through which to interpret progression and retention statistics for institutions located in an educational system that encourages transience between institutions. Our study suggests that different metrics be used when interpreting standard institutional data measuring student progression and completion. Exemption and transfer data may clarify the profile of student study and suggests greater prominence of institutional re-entry pathways.

It is the postgraduate students' perspectives and needs that drive their decision of whether to continue studying or taking a break. Nevertheless the relationship between the institution and student may be personal and powerful. Reed conveys this "[Warratah] has been very influential in my life, job, family for the last two years, there is no doubt!"

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