

The University of Adelaide

Faculty of Arts

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# **Attrition and New Entry Pathways: Factors Contributing Toward Attrition for Students Entering an Australian University through New VET Entry Pathways**

This thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
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by

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## Abstract

In response to the review of Australian higher education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008), several Australian universities have established entry pathways with the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector as a way of providing access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The university in this investigation is one such case where around 200 individual VET pathways have been developed.

This study assesses the effect of a number of factors including previously untested factors, namely, program peer group sizes and various student network sizes associated with these new entry pathways on student attrition and retention at an Australian selective university. Secondary quantitative data from university and admission centre records and primary quantitative data from a structured survey are collected for 140 VET pathway entrants. Semi-structured interviews with 10 of the VET entrants provide additional qualitative data for the investigation. The quantitative analysis considers several multivariate and multilevel path models to examine the effects on student attrition and retention of variables obtained from both secondary and primary quantitative data collections. A qualitative thematic analysis of the interview transcripts is used to support the quantitative findings and to provide additional nuanced information on the issue. The results further an understanding of why students in non-traditional entry pathways drop out of, or conversely, remain at university. In particular, the number of VET peers in a program is shown to moderate the effects of academic performance and social integration on student attrition and retention. Student network sizes are also important in influencing student attrition by means of indirect effects operating through various mediating variables.

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Alessandro Lovat

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