

# Assessing the long-term value of tertiary education in New Zealand

The Graduate Longitudinal Study New Zealand claims to be the most comprehensive study of a country's university graduates the world has ever seen. By surveying graduates over a ten-year period, the study seeks to assess the ongoing impact of a tertiary education on their lives. **Karen Tustin** reports.

**T**he Graduate Longitudinal Study New Zealand (GLSNZ) aims to understand the value of a New Zealand tertiary education by exploring how graduates fare in the years following university. A relatively small number of studies globally have sought to map the long-term outcomes of a nation's university graduates through time. The breadth and depth of data in the GLSNZ, in contrast, provide an unparalleled opportunity to study, in detail, graduates' life-course pathways in the first decade after leaving university – a particularly salient and important career establishment period.

## Research overview

The first wave of data collection for the GLSNZ was completed in 2011 – henceforth referred to as the Baseline Survey. A randomly-selected sub-sample – taken from all potential 2011 graduands (students about to receive their degrees) from each of New Zealand's eight universities – were invited to take part in an online survey about their university experiences and future plans. The sample was selected to be representative of the approximately 35,000 students who completed their degrees at New Zealand universities during 2011, in terms of age, sex, ethnicity, domain of study, course load, level of study, mode of study, and student citizenship status.

Participants completed a comprehensive online questionnaire between July and December 2011. The Baseline Survey captured a broad range of information including: demographics; university expectations, experience, and satisfaction; employment plans and career aspirations; academic beliefs/attitudes; current financial circumstances; physical health, disability, and functional impairment; health risk behaviours; emotional wellbeing; personality type; social support/social integration; and community involvement.

Recruitment for the baseline cohort sample was successful. Although there was 72% participation in some form, conservative criteria were applied for ultimate inclusion in the sample, requiring participants to have completed what was a comparatively lengthy survey (400+ questions taking an average of 36.2 minutes to complete). These criteria yielded a founding cohort of 8,719 final-year students (25% of all 2011 graduates). This sample will now be re-assessed at two, five, and ten years post-completion, using the same core set of measures at each survey wave in order to examine intra-individual change across time.

## Demographic characteristics of the GLSNZ cohort

The GLSNZ sample reflects the heterogeneity of graduating students from New Zealand universities at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century.

Just over 62% of the GLSNZ cohort were female and most were aged under 30 years (70.7%). With regard to ethnicity, 61% self-reported New Zealand European ethnicity, 7.2% Māori, 11.3% Chinese, 5.3% Indian, and 3.5% Pasifika. A significant minority (21.6%) selected other

ethnicities, reflecting considerable ethnic diversity among New Zealand university graduates.

With respect to degree level, 59% of the sample were studying for undergraduate degrees, 13% were completing masters-level study, and 5% were doctoral graduates. The most common study domain was humanities/arts/social sciences (25.3%), closely followed by sciences/engineering (20.3%), and commerce (20%). Over one third of the sample was studying part-time, with one in nine completing their study via extramural/distance learning courses. Approximately one in nine respondents were international students, of whom 21.1% were doctoral-level students.<sup>1</sup>

## Selected findings from the Baseline Survey

**University experiences and career aspirations** The three most frequently endorsed reasons respondents gave for choosing their particular university were: the relevance of the courses offered to their career goals (70.1%), the academic reputation of the university (47.2%), and the location of the university (44.7%). The three most frequently endorsed reasons for choosing a field of study were: a strong interest in the topic/field (77.1%), wanting to pursue a career in the topic/field (71.4%), and to increase earning potential (34.5%).

More than three quarters of the sample thought their study programme had been worth the investment (time, cost, effort) and that their university experience had lived up to their expectations. Approximately 60% of graduands said they wish to retain links with their university (via alumni associations, for example), with slightly more (70%) keen to maintain the social connections formed during their student days. Importantly, approximately three quarters of the graduands evaluated their overall experience at university very positively, with four out of five reporting they would recommend their university to others.

The respondents were asked to rate the university factors that they thought were most important for making graduates more employable. Those deemed most important were: ensuring a good fit between skills taught and professional practice needs; critical thinking and analysis, transferability of skills, and creative/innovative thinking; and high skill levels of staff, both in terms of practical experience and knowledge as well as research knowledge and expertise. In terms of perceptions about the future benefits of a university education, the most frequently endorsed items were (in order): personal development, obtaining employment, and career development.

**The near future** With regard to the near future (the next two years), three quarters of the sample expected to pursue their career, with a number of this group also intending to work in jobs to ensure income. Almost half (45.1%) anticipated undertaking further study during this period.

The breadth and depth of data provide an unparalleled opportunity to study, in detail, graduates' pathways in the first decade after leaving university – a particularly salient and important career establishment period.

The majority of participants (82.6%) planned to work in New Zealand, with a significant proportion also planning to work overseas (37.2%), and some intending to do both. The most common fields in which they planned to seek employment were (in order): education and training, health care and medical, and science and technology. Note that the real transfer into these fields will not be known until at least the two-year follow-up survey. In terms of what the graduands were looking for in a career or job, the most commonly endorsed attributes were (in order): job satisfaction, financial security, and the 'opportunity to apply knowledge and skills' along with 'a good work/life balance'.

In the more distant future (where participants would like to be in ten years' time), the most frequently endorsed items were (in order): in full-time employment, establishing their career further, and partnered/married.

**Financial circumstances** Only 40% of the respondents were not employed, either full or part-time, when they were studying. The majority who were employed worked part-time (58%), averaging approximately two days' work per week. Among those employed, the work was related to the course of study only about 50% of the time, although students who worked full-time while studying reported that the work was highly related to their field of study.

The total income received by the students was relatively low overall, with the median at NZ\$10,001 to NZ\$15,000; range = zero (8.2%) to NZ\$150,001+ (0.8%). The median value of participants' assets was NZ\$10,001 to NZ\$15,000; range = zero (2.3%) to NZ\$500,001+ (6.8%). Approximately four out of five respondents had taken out a student loan – the median loan was NZ\$20,001 to NZ\$25,000; range = zero (9.0%) to NZ\$100,001+ (0.5%). The participants had very low levels of debt other than a student loan, with the median at NZ\$0 to NZ\$5,000; range = zero (49.4%) to NZ\$100,001+ (10.9%).<sup>2</sup>

Most of the students indicated that they were able to afford basic necessities, such as accommodation, food, and clothing. Approximately 12% of the sample reported not having enough money for these necessities, however.

**Health, behaviour, and personality type** The majority of respondents (85%) described their overall physical health as good or better. 10% reported smoking at least one cigarette/month in the past year. Almost 12% of the graduands drank no alcohol at the time of the

survey, 18% drank at least once per week, with 6.5% drinking alcohol at least four times per week.

In terms of emotional wellbeing, the sample scores were normally distributed and comparable with other student surveys, with (as expected) a minority reporting low levels of wellbeing. A similar picture emerged for personality type, with normally-distributed data allowing strong tests of the association between these factors and a range of long-term outcomes over the course of the study.

**Community engagement** Local community involvement (in many forms), initiative, and altruism were clearly valued and evident among this group of graduands, with a premium placed on multiculturalism and tolerance of different lifestyles.

## Where to from here?

At present, the GLSNZ team are working on several interconnected projects examining the data from the Baseline Survey wave. These will include examinations of: barriers and supports to the completion of university qualifications; community participation; Māori and Pasifika students' university experiences; the economic picture of New Zealand students; gender and the 'glass ceiling effect'; overseas students and export industry value to NZ; and the health and emotional wellbeing of students (focusing on alcohol use and correlates).

Over the ten-year course of the GLSNZ and beyond, this research will provide critical information to both universities and government policymakers, who are seeking robust information on the cost-effectiveness of their significant financial investment in university education and how this is contributing to the social and economic goals of individual graduates and New Zealand society as a whole. ■

- 1 All final-year international PhD students were invited to take part in the study. As a result of this oversampling, 21% (n = 212) of the international student sub-sample were PhD students. In contrast, 2.9% (n = 223) of the domestic student sub-sample were PhD students.
- 2 These financial circumstances may show slightly elevated levels of net worth and debt than one would expect from a student cohort. Restricting the analyses to the 'typical student' scenario (i.e. full-time students aged under 30) retracts the range of income/assets as well as debts.

Dr Karen Tustin is a Research Fellow at the National Centre for Lifecourse Research, University of Otago, New Zealand.  
[www.glsnz.org.nz](http://www.glsnz.org.nz)

The full Baseline Report can be found at  
[www.glsnz.org.nz/files/GLSNZ-Baseline-Report.pdf](http://www.glsnz.org.nz/files/GLSNZ-Baseline-Report.pdf)