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**Graduate expectations and experiences:  
Business degrees delivered through vocational and academic partnership**

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**Abstract**

*Non-traditional ways of achieving a business qualification are becoming more common and popular internationally. In this case study from New Zealand, a joint delivery model including full credit between two higher education institutions, a vocational-based polytechnic and a traditional university, shows the strong foundations that can be built to assist a diverse student group moving into higher levels of study.*

*A representative sample of graduates (2009-2014) from the New Zealand Diploma in Business taught at a polytechnic who then progressed to a business or management degree with a partner university were surveyed to gauge student expectations and experiences of both study environments. In particular, the survey focused on how the diploma programme assists the students in transitioning from a vocational based introductory programme to an academic business degree. Graduates' employment outcomes were then compared to their initial enrolment expectations and key contributors to success were identified.*

*The paper describes the findings from the study and discusses the implications for those who are managing and teaching the qualifications at both levels. The overall purpose of the inquiry is to ensure that the quality of the student experience is enhanced and the teaching and learning delivery options offered through this inter-institutional approach are aligned to the needs and expectations of the learners. Of particular interest are the comments from students around both content knowledge and skills generated through their studies that have directly contributed to their current work role and the connection they make between the polytechnic and university experience and their longer term career aspirations. Key skills graduates gained as outcomes of the NZ Diploma in Business qualification were identified relative to their current employment.*

*Other findings discussed include: Maori graduates are less likely to be employed and less likely to continue on to degree studies. Male graduates are less likely to use the diploma skills in their employment. Lower age group students rate the diploma more highly for preparing them for degree studies and in assisting them with completion of their degree than do mature students.*

*Overall the majority of participants were highly satisfied with the learning foundation that they built as a result of transitioning from a diploma programme into a fully-fledged university environment.*

## **Introduction**

A collaborative approach to delivering a business degree by two institutions in different regions was seen as meeting the demands and needs of students incorporating learning through a foundation diploma programme and higher degree level studies.

The New Zealand Diploma in Business level 6 (NZ Dip Bus), delivered by the Bay of Plenty Polytechnic (BOPP), will typically take full-time students two years to complete. The Diploma is made up of New Zealand Qualification Authority (NZQA) curriculum prescriptions delivered nationally by Polytechnics, the first year structured similar to a University business degree.

Bay of Plenty Polytechnic (BOPP) offers the NZ Dip Bus to students as either a face-to-face delivery model or as an online option. One of the major benefits and points of difference for the BOPP NZ Dip Bus students is that they receive guaranteed credit transfer of their diploma courses into the University of Waikato's (UOW) business degrees Bachelor of Management Studies (BMS), Bachelor of Business Analysis (Financial) (BBA(Fin)) and Bachelor of Tourism (B Tour). The guaranteed credit is conditional upon a student receiving a B grade average over all NZ Dip Bus courses.

The proposed research was undertaken to gain evidence of the success or not of the partnership delivery model and to guide future strategic decisions when considering the economic growth of the region.

The aims of this study were to:

- Gain a better understanding of student expectations and perceptions of the NZ Dip Bus/ UOW Business degree pathway jointly delivered by the partnership institutions of BOPP and UOW
- Identify student demographic groups enrolled in the pathway programme to better facilitate enhancement and experiences, and
- Gain an understanding of the Business degree graduate outcomes in relation to student expectations of employment.

While this study is situated firmly within the context of a specific New Zealand institutional partnership and educational programme, it is likely that others in the tertiary or higher education profession will recognise elements of the approach taken, and that the findings from this study may therefore have relevance in wider international settings.

## **Literature review**

### **Vocational academic partnership.**

Tertiary education institutions both in New Zealand and internationally use vocational diploma programmes as a foundation pathway leading to a higher education degree. There are very few pathway

arrangements in place, however, that guarantee a student can receive full credit transfer and therefore complete a degree without being time disadvantaged. Wheelahan (2000) in Moodie (2008: 135) describes unified programmes as either 'customised' where a student is awarded one qualification by incorporating curriculum from both vocational and higher education sectors, 'integrated' where one programme issues two qualifications such as a certificate and bachelor's degree that are delivered concurrently, 'dual-award' which are cross-sector integrated and 'nested' which are integrated but delivered in sequence.

The pathway partnership between BOPP and UOW could be defined as a 'hybrid' of both integrated and dual-award programmes being both cross-sector and two qualifications awarded. Collaboration between a vocational polytechnic and an academic university is limited by the learning philosophies and ideologies of the two types of institutions. Negotiating a delivery and credit agreement for the benefit of students is therefore restricted by those institutional differences. For example, there perception that a vocational institution delivers curriculum at a lower standard or level than a university, or that universities do not deliver work-ready graduates. The first year at least of a business degree is general or generic in structure. Beck (1991: 92) was of the opinion that "A general education is neither vocational nor academic. What results from collaboration can draw on both academic cultures. The key word is understanding."

#### **Expectations and employability.**

In a study about the expectations of undergraduate students, Geyde, et al. (2007: 286) found that the main reason students made the choice to study was to 'improve' their prospects of future employment. In other words they viewed their commitment to study as an investment in 'employability'. Kandiko and Mawer (2013) conducted a similar survey of the views of UK tertiary students investigating expectations and perceptions of the 'quality of their learning experience'. They found that students' expectations were clear about wanting the institution to support their career prospects. A recommendation was made that tertiary institutions should have a focus on how to enhance student employability because of the time and money students are investing in their education.

Guenole, Englert and Taylor (2003) concluded that Maori applicants were less likely to be employed than Europeans when organisations placed a "considerable weight on cognitive ability test scores in their selection processes." Jackson and Fisher (2007) found that survey participants gave "less favourable assessments of low merit Maori in comparison to low merit New Zealand European/Pakeha applicants" when viewing curricula vitae. Harris, Tanner and Knouse (1996) suggested that minority groups should be targeted for internships earlier in their academic careers to gain work experience that is relevant and improve their resume.

Brine and Waller (2004) argued that mature students bring background issues or 'baggage' to tertiary studies which is a disadvantage later at the post-graduate employment stage. Morgeson et al. (2008) reviewed twenty-one studies on age discrimination during the employment interview process.

They found that factors other than age also disadvantaged the applicant such as employment fitness and qualifications. Woodfield (2011), when researching UK graduates, found that 'mature' students had an advantage in finding paid employment in particular after degree completion, however at the age of 50, employment opportunities in general diminished.

### **Methodology**

NZ Dip Bus graduates from 2009-2014 were surveyed by email with two follow-up reminders. The surveys were sent to 349 valid email addresses of graduates, and over a two week period, 107 responses were received (30.6% response rate).

A series of questions identifying the demographic characteristics of graduates were asked together with closed and open questions about their Diploma and Degree experiences. The questions were dependent on whether the respondent continued on to enrol with the University of Waikato and complete a business degree or alternatively finished studies after the NZ Dip Bus. Students were also asked to expand on their ratings with key reasons including a comparison of their initial expectations and graduate outcomes.

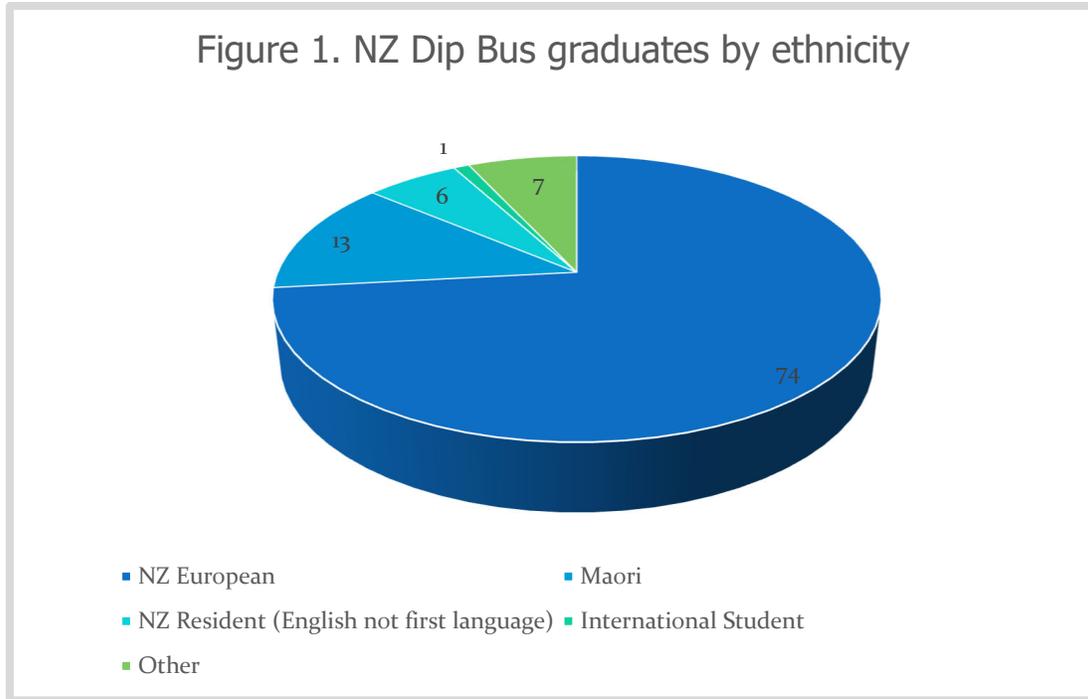
IBM SPSS Statistics was used as an analysis tool for the data including descriptive statistics and correlation in particular identifying relationships between demographic groups, ranking answers and key theme responses.

Contingency table analyses were performed to summarise the relationships between demographic variables and responses using chi-squared tests. This enabled the identification of significant associations in particular when considering gender, ethnicity and age.

### **Results**

#### **Demographics.**

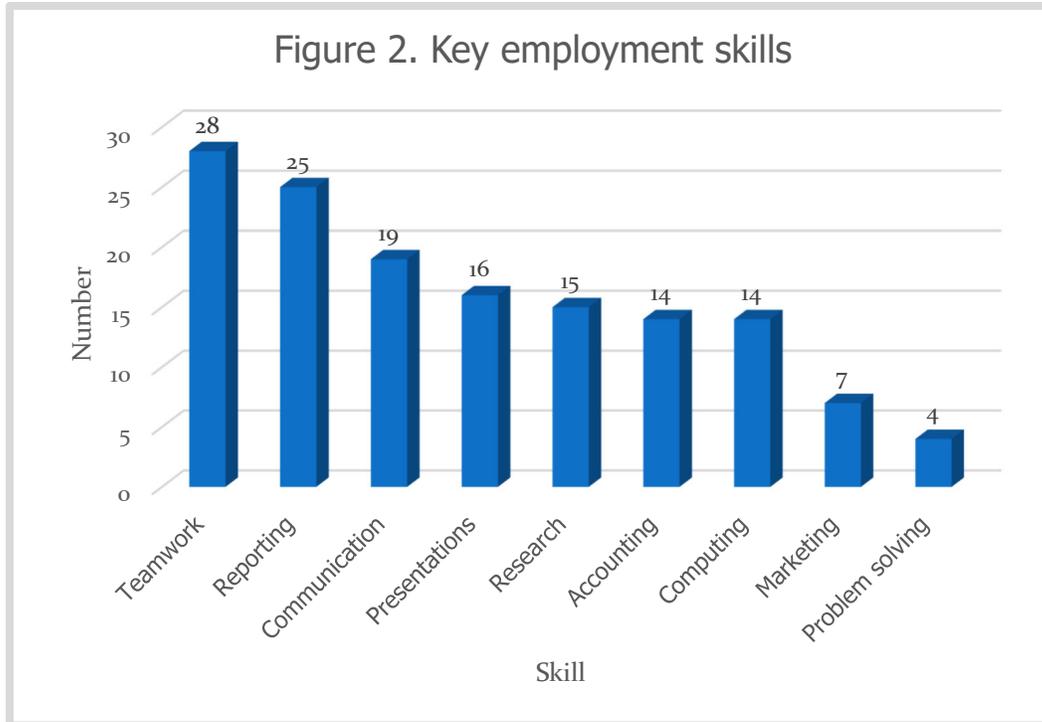
More than two thirds (69.6%) of valid responses (71) were female which is consistent with the gender enrolment data over that period 2009-2014. Also consistent with enrolments was the ages of respondents with more than 60% being 30 years or less at the time of the survey, that is, after they had graduated with either a degree or diploma.



Although the participants in this survey are primarily NZ European, the actual demographics of graduates from the programme include a much larger number of Maori students, comprising around 20% of total graduates.

**Employment Outcomes.**

Graduates were asked whether they were currently in employment with 80% stating yes and 20% currently not employed. Graduates who identified as employed were asked: “Is your current employment related to your NZ Diploma in Business?” In total, 55% of respondents stated yes and 45% no. Graduates were also asked: “Do you use the skills obtained during your NZ Diploma in Business?” Of the 104 students who responded to the question, 75% said yes and 25% no. They were then asked to identify which skills they use in their employment. Key word analysis was used to identify the main themes. Figure 2 represents the key employment skills identified with teamwork, reporting, communication, presentations and research as the most valued by graduates. Accounting and marketing were the most identified subject-specific skills.



A contingency table analysis (SPSS) was conducted to establish whether there were significant relationships between gender and whether respondents use the skills learned during diploma studies in their employment. A significant relationship was found between these two variables,  $X^2$  (DF = 1, n = 91) = 6.528,  $p < 0.05$ , with 83% of female graduates stating yes they use the skills compared to 58% of male graduates. A significant relationship was also found between gender and whether graduates used the knowledge they learned from the diploma,  $X^2$  (DF = 1, n = 91) = 4.197,  $p < 0.05$ , with 86% of female graduates stating yes compared to 68% of male graduates.

An additional question that could be asked in future research is: what types of employment are male NZ Dip Bus graduates finding where they are not using the skills or content knowledge learned during their studies?

An analysis was also conducted to establish whether there were any significant relationships between ethnicity and whether graduates had obtained employment. A significant relationship was found between these two variables,  $X^2$  (DF = 4, n = 100) = 14.776,  $p < 0.05$ , with 89% of New Zealand European graduates being currently employed compared to 46% of Maori graduates.

This raises further questions in particular why are fewer Maori graduates gaining employment and can this outcome be influenced through programme or Bay of Plenty Polytechnic institutional changes?

A significant relationship was also identified between the age of the NZ Dip Bus graduates and whether they use the skills learned in their diploma studies in their employment.  $X^2$  (DF = 2, n = 70) = 8.048,  $p < 0.05$  with 71.4% of graduates 30 years of age or less reported using the skills learned in their diploma studies compared to 57% in the age group 31-40 years. Conversely in the 41+ age group 95.7% of respondents stated yes.

### **Degree pathway.**

In response to the question: "Did you later enrol for a degree programme at the University of Waikato?", 72 NZ Dip Bus graduates or 69.9% stated yes and 9 of the students who stated no continued studies at other Universities both in New Zealand and elsewhere. The students who did not enrol in a degree programme after graduating were asked why. Twenty-six responses to this question were received with 16 of those stating they had gained employment. Time as well as financial constraints had been the main motivation for not continuing on with the degree pathway. The students who did not continue with the degree pathway were asked "What aspects of the Diploma in Business programme provided the most value?" In total 13 students stated that 'generic knowledge' was the main aspect.

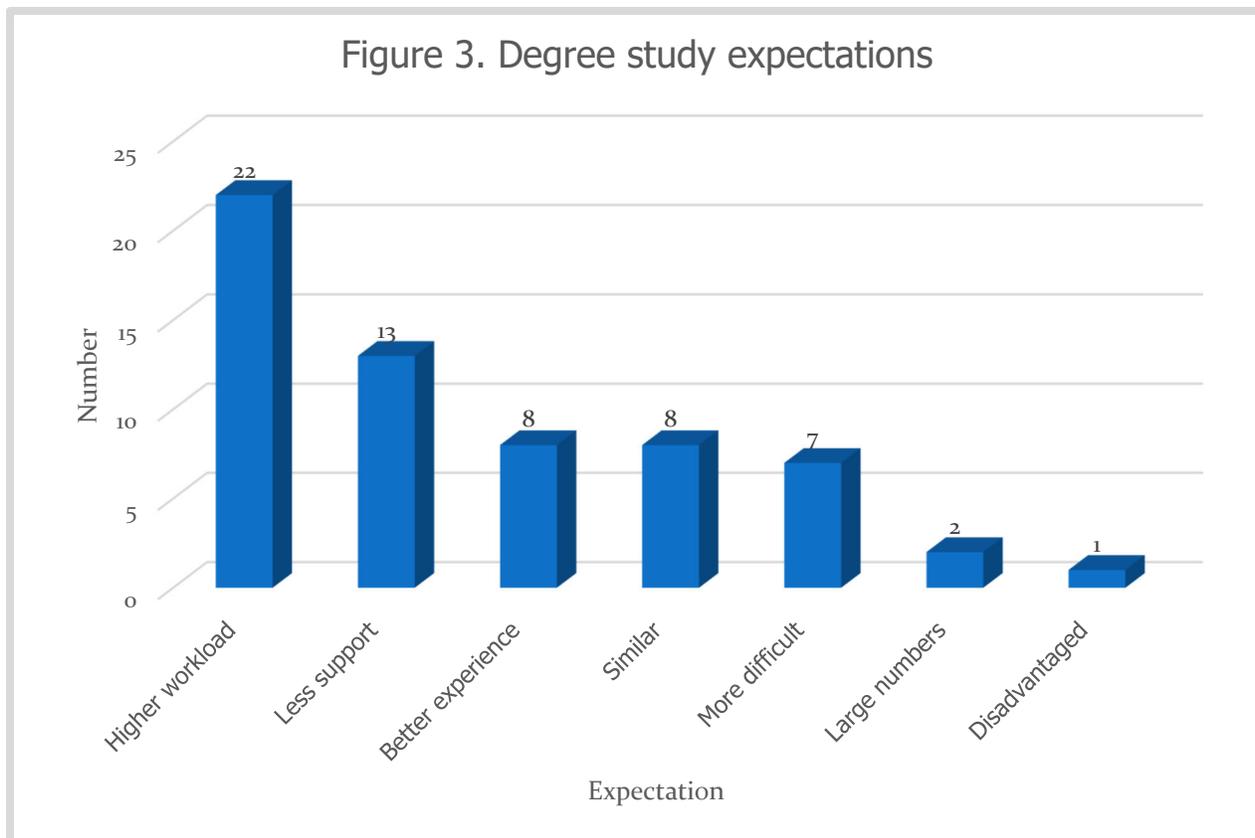
An analysis was also conducted to establish whether there were any significant relationships between ethnicity and whether graduates later enrolled for a degree programme at the University of Waikato. A significant relationship was found between these two variables,  $X^2$  (DF = 4, n = 100) = 8.308,  $p < 0.05$ , with 76% of NZ European graduates later enrolling in a degree compared to 38% of Maori graduates. Of those who did enrol in a degree programme, only 20% of Maori completed their degree compared to 66% of NZ European graduates.

When considering that 46% of Maori graduates are not employed and only 38% later enrolled in a degree programme, additional research questions outside of the scope of this report need to be considered: why are Maori graduates not being employed and why are Maori graduates not continuing on with further degree studies?

An analysis of the age of graduates and whether they later enrolled in the UOW degree programme was undertaken. A significant relationship was established,  $X^2$  (DF = 2, n = 71) = 6.007,  $p < 0.05$ , with 77% of graduates 30 years of age or less later enrolling in a UOW degree programme compared to 69% of graduates 31-40 years of age and 50% in the 41+ age group. We could infer from this relationship that graduate respondents in older age groups are less likely to enrol in a business degree following successful completion of the NZ Dip Bus.

### **Expectations.**

Students who went onto to study in the business degree programmes (n=72) were then asked about their expectations of future studies with the University of Waikato.



The majority of students (42) believed that the business degree programme would have a higher workload, less support, or would be a more difficult learning environment after graduating with their NZ Diploma in Business (refer figure 3).

Ninety-seven percent of the students who responded to this question stated that the NZ Dip Bus pathway assisted them in the transition to study at the University of Waikato. When asked to expand on their answer as to how the diploma assisted or inhibited their degree studies, 43 students identified 'foundation knowledge' as the characteristic of the diploma that most helped them transition.

Students were asked to rate the diploma from 1 to 5 (1 being 'not at all helpful' and 5 being 'very helpful' in preparing them for study at the University of Waikato.

The mean response was 4.18 corresponding to an overall rating of 83.6%. 59 of 67 students (88%) rated the Diploma as either 'helpful' or 'very helpful' and no students rated the Diploma as 'not at all helpful'. When asked to give a reason for their rating, being a 'strong foundation' was cited by (26) students with 'strong support' (11) and the 'not enough preparation' (7) as the most common negative reason for their rating.

An analysis of the age of graduates and their rating of the diploma as preparation for University studies was taken. A significant relationship was found,  $X^2$  (DF = 6, n = 66) = 19.883,  $p < 0.05$ , with 93.5%

of graduate students aged 30 years or less stating the diploma was 'helpful' or 'very helpful' in preparing them for University studies compared to 75% in the age group 31 +.

Reasons for not graduating included 'still to complete', 'studying other qualifications' and 'work opportunities'.

### **Perceptions of value.**

Students were asked to rate from 1 to 5 (1 being not at all valuable and 5 being very valuable) "how valuable was the NZ Diploma in Business/University of Waikato pathway in assisting you in completing your degree?" 41 students responded to the question with the mean response as 4.1 corresponding to an overall rating of 83.4%.

An analysis of the age of graduates and their rating of the value of the diploma in assisting them with the completion of the degree was undertaken. A significant relationship was established,  $X^2$  (DF = 8, n = 41) = 15.403,  $p < 0.05$ , with 93.1% of students in the age group 30 years or less stating that the diploma was 'valuable' or 'very valuable' in assisting them with completion of the degree compared to 66.7% of graduates 31 years of age or more. A further research question outside the scope of this report could be: why was the diploma rated lower by students in higher age groups in assisting them with completion of their degree?

Of the 42 students who responded to the question "What was the name of your qualification?" 18 had completed a BMS or Bachelor of Management Studies and 18 a BBA (Fin) or Bachelor of Business Analysis (Financial).

Of the students who had completed a degree, 83% completed in Tauranga. 98% indicated they would recommend this study location to future NZ Diploma in Business students. The main reasons indicated that they 'can stay in Tauranga' and the 'supportive staff'.

Students who completed a degree were asked "Are you now employed in a role related to your degree qualification?" Forty students responded, of whom 25 or 62.5% stated yes and 15 or 37.5% no. Thirty-two students expanded on their answer by explaining how this outcome matched their expectations when they first enrolled. The comment themes were 'exceeded' (7), 'matched' (19) and 'not matched' (6).

### **Discussion**

Graduates surveyed place a high value on the pathway programme that the two institutions have developed. The partnership represents a unique 'hybrid' type delivery model which works considering that a vocational Polytechnic and an academic University have different philosophies and ideas on educational delivery. One of the main barriers, and also the reasons for a successful outcome, is that staff teach across the pathway at all levels. Staff who teach on the diploma also teach across the degree at the higher levels by facilitating the classes in a partnership with university lecturers.

Additionally, at the management level heads of departments see the partnership as beneficial to both institutions and students.

Another reason for success is that the pathway package offered by both institutions is seamless to the students whereby their programmes are aligned and a study plan is available for both qualifications. In total, 76% of NZ European graduates continued on to enrol in the degree programme with the University compared to Maori 38%. The New Zealand Tertiary Education Commission (Tertiary Education Strategy 2010-2015) states “The priority is more Pasifika learners achieving at level 4 and above, particularly in work-related qualifications and bachelor degrees and higher.” The reasons for significantly fewer Maori or Pasifika diploma graduates enrolling in the degree programme requires additional research. Graduates confirmed that their expectations of transitioning from the diploma to the degree programme would mean a higher workload and less support. However, graduates overwhelmingly agreed (97%) that the Diploma as a foundation assisted them in that transition.

Student employability is a key focus of the NZ Dip Bus programme at undergraduate level. Kinash, Crane and Schulz (2014) concluded that strategies such as work placements and internships are the most significant to enhance a student’s employability. Internships, cadetships, graduate recruitment and student job search form a major part of the NZ Dip Bus programme and the student culture. An example of this focus is the formalised cadet scheme between BOPP and the Port of Tauranga whereby students are employed on a part-time basis whilst studying full-time. A high percentage of NZ European graduates (89%) identified as employed compared to Maori graduates (46%). This is a concern and requires additional research outside the scope of this report. Additionally, male graduates compared to female were more likely to be employed in jobs where their study skills were not utilised.

Most recent studies support that the ‘soft’ skills identified by graduates in this survey such as communication, teamwork and reporting, are more important to employers than the content knowledge acquired during their studies (Azim et.al 2010; Magogwe et.al 2014; Sultana 2014). Ray and Stallard (1994) analysed the perceptions of Human Resource managers when selecting new business graduates identifying in order of importance: communication, listening, problem-solving and interpersonal skills. Interestingly teamwork was chosen by graduates as the most valuable skill acquired through their studies for employment.

### **Recommended research questions**

1. What types of employment are male graduates obtaining in comparison to female?
2. Why are fewer Maori graduates finding employment?
3. Why are fewer Maori graduates continuing with degree studies?

### **Conclusions**

The pathway package offered by the two institutions, a vocational polytechnic and an academic university, is considered by graduates to be highly successful for both employment outcomes and as a

seamless model for obtaining two qualifications. The success can be attributed to both the structure of the model and the staff from both institutions that work closely together to deliver the programme. Students expected that the transition from a diploma to a degree would be difficult but identified that the diploma as a foundation assisted them greatly in that transition. The 'soft' skills that graduates obtained during their studies were regarded as the most important for their current employment.

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