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CORRESPONDENCE EDUCATION FOR TEACHERS:
A SURVEY OF TEACHERS STUDYING WITH THE
ADVANCED STUDIES FOR TEACHERS UNIT

*A thesis presented to fulfil the
requirements for the degree in
Master in Education at Massey
University.*

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines reasons for student persistence in and withdrawal from correspondence courses offered by the Department of Education Advanced Studies for Teachers Unit.

The 1979 course members who completed a mailed questionnaire provided demographic, educational and attitudinal data. Student reaction to the A.S.T. Unit programme and Continuing Teacher Education were investigated. Reported advantages and disadvantages of this form of teacher training were analysed and the relationships between demands of work and study commitments were examined.

The findings tended to indicate four variables that contributed to the probability of persistence. They were: (i) prior educational experience; (ii) the amount of support given; (iii) the number of papers taken; and (iv) the present teaching position.

Although factors related to job circumstances and characteristics of teachers caused students to withdraw, many course members withdrew because of reasons that the A.S.T. Unit might have been able to counter. Course members attributed reasons for withdrawal to insufficient communication, a restrictive teaching method and insufficient time to meet assignment dates.

A general conclusion was that A.S.T. course members were seeking a more open form of learning able to provide a freedom of pace and an element of control by the learner over the learning process.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been a growing recognition of the need for increased provision of educational courses which would enable practising teachers to continue their professional study beyond the point provided by the standard teachers college programme.

Admittedly, local, regional and national inservice courses; mostly from one to five days' duration and organised in conjunction with various educational bodies, have been playing a considerable part in providing Continuing Teacher Education. Such courses have constituted an ongoing programme that has permitted the introduction of new strategies in curriculum development and in classroom management. However, by their very nature they cannot accommodate teachers who wish to undertake protracted and intensive specialised study. In the past the main recourse open to such people was university work either internal or extramural - usually towards a degree or diploma.

Following several committees of enquiry, namely *The Continuing Education of Teachers* (1973), *The Certification of Teachers* (1976) and *The Review of Teacher Training* (1979); and overtures from the New Zealand Education Institute, the Department of Education has recently extended its inservice training programme to provide correspondence courses somewhat similar to some university programmes.

The Department's Advanced Studies for Teachers Unit, an out-growth of the Correspondence School, now offers some 98 papers from 20 subject areas. The Department of Education's expressed intention is to expand and develop the A.S.T. Unit and offer a greater range of courses for teachers.

However over the past six years the rate of withdrawal from existing courses has increased to the extent that in 1978, 58 percent of the A.S.T. Diploma in Teaching students withdrew before completion. Clearly, if the A.S.T. Unit's work is to be turned to good (and economical) effect, the smaller the withdrawal rate the better. Equally clearly, any attempt to reduce the rate of withdrawal is likely to be more effective if it is directed at the causes of withdrawal.

With the exception of a small scale study conducted at the end of 1977 by Wagner (the then Supervisor of the Unit) there has been no systematic research carried out that explains the withdrawal phenomenon.

The present study then, attempts to discover why teachers who study at a distance tend to withdraw from Advanced Studies for Teachers Diploma in Teaching courses. In doing so, it sets out to identify:

- (i) what hindered course members in 1979 from completing Diploma in Teaching studies; and

- (ii) what their attitudes towards Continuing Teacher Education were.

A questionnaire was prepared and posted to everyone enrolled in the Unit's Diploma in Teaching courses in 1979. In total 1,054 (80.3 percent) of the 1,312 course members surveyed, completed and returned questionnaires.

The study which was commissioned by the Department of Education is predicated on the assumption that information provided by participants in courses may be useful in improving retention rates. However it is not the purpose of the study to test this thesis - rather it attempts to establish an information base (derived from perceptions of course members) that might be appropriate for doing so.

This report of the study has been arranged in five chapters. The first chapter attempts to inform the reader:

- (i) of the emergence of the A.S.T. Unit;
- (ii) its existing organisation; and
- (iii) the withdrawal problem.

Chapter Two reviews the literature on withdrawal. Chapter Three gives an account of the research procedures used. This is followed by Chapter Four with the results of the survey. To end, Chapter Five reviews the findings and makes some speculations on changes.