

The rise of the postgraduate degree

By Sharon Green
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The past few years have seen a rapid rise in postgraduate enrolments across Australia and it is becoming a more common qualification to have. But what factors are influencing this trend?

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, there were more than 984,000 students enrolled in a higher education course in 2006, showing a 3% increase in enrolments from the previous year. Of this figure, 28% of higher education students were enrolled in higher degree and other postgraduate courses. The increase in postgraduate enrolments begs to ask whether a bachelor degree will be deemed a sufficient qualification for the fu-

ture professional workforce.

University of Melbourne Provost, Professor John Dewar, has seen first-hand an increase in postgraduate enrolments at his institution. But this is because of a conscious university-wide strategy, he says. "The institution decided to shift a lot of our professional degrees from undergraduate to postgraduate level."

Prof. Dewar believes there are three main factors driving the recent influx of postgraduate enrolments: to acquire a professional qualification or admission not acquired in an undergraduate degree; to improve knowledge and skills that might assist them in the workforce; and for people interested in moving into a research career.

The Global Financial Crisis also played a role in encouraging many people to take on postgraduate study as they evaluated their career direction and looked to refresh their skill set, notes Prof. Dewar. "There's often a correlation between the economic cycle and people's interest in higher education. People will invest in higher education when there is a downturn. . . to make sure they are as best placed as they can be for when the cycle turns up again."

Manager for Academic Programs Delivery at the Australian College of Applied Psychology (ACAP), Ms Elizabeth Day, says ACAP has seen a lot of recent growth in enrolments particularly among people in the older age demographic (30s to 50s).

Ms Day says this growth is likely due to expansion across the industry and therefore employment is expected to increase significantly as a result. "Recent catastrophes have created a demand for case workers and counsellors to help out. There's also a greater visibility of the industry – people are increasingly aware of it as a source of support and there's less uncertainty around it."

Ms Day says counselling and psychotherapy professionals need to have at least a bachelor degree if not a postgraduate degree nowadays because the industry has become more professionalised and regulated. "Our population is an increasingly educated population. And counselling and psychotherapy draw on quite solid, philosophical foundations. It's an important blend of practical application – that seems to be a



University of Melbourne Provost Professor, John Dewar

Photo: University of Melbourne



Photo: On Location Photography Victoria University

Professor Helen Borland "Professionals need to think about ways to differentiate themselves in the employment market"

need in many people."

Executive Director of Marketing and Communications at RMIT, Mr Cratis Hippocrates, has seen an increase in postgraduate enrolments among those who have already been in the workforce for a period of time but are now looking to climb the management and promotional chain. "It's an area of not only perceived growth but actual growth. We're seeing more and more people who recognise pretty quickly that they need to up-skill themselves in a particular area."

"As people become more educated then the advent of things like masters degrees will become more commonplace" says Mr Hippocrates. He believes the appeal of obtaining a postgraduate qualification lies in the ability to offer niche skills and dive deeper into an area at a professional level.

"Employers love young people who can walk in the door and from day one contribute."

For others, the decision has been prompted by those who are increasingly looking for ways to differentiate themselves in the employment market. Director of the Victoria University Office for Post Graduate Research, Professor Helen Borland, says professionals are always asking themselves "What do I need to stand out from the crowd?" and often a postgraduate degree appears to be the answer. "A generalist undergraduate degree doesn't always give you professional preparation, so a masters level qualification [for example] allows you to develop your skills in that professional area."

Prof. Borland says the workplace is becoming more complex, with more advanced skills and a level of sophistica-

tion prerequisites for the job. She also believes for a strong workforce in the future, we'll need more workers who are competent in innovation. "This is where the higher level of education is quite important [because] the kind of skill set you'll need will be quite different."

Employers will expect their workers to have initiative, the ability to work through solutions and problem solve, as well as present a higher order of thinking and planning, says Prof. Borland. "Education is what enables you to change and transform the way you do things . . . to progress in a particular workplace a postgraduate qualification seems to give you that edge."

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