

# Take the scholarship pathway

With greater pressure from the job market for graduates to achieve higher education, searching the scholarship options is a way to absorb the financial burden, writes DEBORAH FEWSTER.

A decade ago, three years spent researching the mating habits of the velvet worm or demon stingerfish would land your average swot a PhD and a job for life at one of Australia's elite universities.

But times change. As more and more Australians 'upsized' their tertiary qualifications, PhDs have never been more commonplace. Add to this the increasing casualisation of the university workforce and the net effect is that around two-thirds of PhD students will never find full-time employment within the university sector.

It's a big concern, given that job 'marketability' is one of the major factors driving PhD and other postgraduate enrolments in Australia.

In a recent blog surveying the current state of play in higher ed, Richard Nile, professor of Australian Studies at Curtin University and general editor of the *Australian Public Intellectual Network*, described the PhD as a dinosaur that should be overhauled to improve the employment prospects of students.

The response in cyberspace was fast and furious, but dinosaur or not, it seems the PhD will continue to attract local students who want to set themselves apart in a market where a Masters

qualification is almost de rigueur.

With so much emphasis on secondary school as a pathway to TAFE and university, it's hard to believe that for many of our parents and grandparents, higher education was the preserve of an elite few.

So how did we get to the point where an undergrad qualification isn't enough?

One of the reasons is the 'massification' of education. Between 1960 and 1999, Australian universities experienced a five-fold increase in enrolments. This was driven, in part, by a swag of reforms in the early '70s that made education more accessible for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Fast-forward to 2007 and with undergraduate degrees so commonplace – and significant growth in double degrees – a postgraduate qualification is the next logical step for students who want to get a competitive advantage in the labour market.

Another factor driving the growth in postgraduate education is the changing expectations of employers. Businesses and governments want graduates who are 'work ready' and able to dive into the deep end of the 'knowledge economy'.

In this new environment, if you're a student who has completed a generalist

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undergraduate qualification, it suddenly becomes imperative to do some further study that has a more vocational focus.

Higher education becomes less about lifelong learning and more about how you can best position yourself in the employment market.

What degree – or combination of degrees – has the best job prospects? The best starting salary? If I study this qualification at this campus, will it land me a big six law firm or big four accounting firm?

And if you're a student struggling to make it through your first year of a bachelor degree, well how's this for scary? The higher ed landscape is changing so quickly, that industry experts predict that today's graduates can expect to 're-graduate' several times

from high-level postgraduate courses after gaining initial vocational qualifications.

It's a trend that's been happening for some time. Between 1989 and 1994, there was a 122 percent increase in the number of students enrolled in 'higher degrees' in Australia, compared to a 33 percent rise for students in higher education generally. Business and management courses have been one of the areas of greatest growth. At Monash University, for example, 66 per cent of the total postgraduate population is enrolled in the Business and Economics faculty.

qualification that gives them the capacity to live and work anywhere in the world – a passport to global citizenship, if you like. But while students may slog away with dreams of a six-figure banking gig in London or New York, the reality is that postgraduate study requires a lot of sacrifice along the way. Undertaking a higher degree not only requires a huge time commitment, it's also a massive financial undertaking. The cost of a MBA, for example, can reach as high as \$56,000 at some of Australia's most prestigious universities.

Given that most postgraduate students commence higher study after a year or more away from a university environment, they're more likely to have carer responsibilities and other ongoing financial commitments. They're also more likely to be dealing with a greater debt load through course fees.

At Monash University, for example, the average age of PhD and Masters by research students is 34.5 years. For postgraduate coursework students, the average age is 31.3 years. According to Katherine Barnsley of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA), female postgraduate students do it particularly tough.

“They have fewer savings, a greater fee debt, and will enter a workforce where they still earn 15 to 20 per cent less than the male wage.”


Barnsley says they are also more likely to rely on free or subsidised services provided by student associations, which have been 'devastated' by voluntary student unionism.

CAPA has welcomed two key initiatives contained in the 2007-08 Federal Budget – allowing Austudy recipients access to rent assistance and allowing coursework masters students access to Austudy and Youth Allowance.

But it says more action is required.

It is calling for the removal of the assessable income component for all scholarships and bursaries, and for the reduction in the age of independence for Youth Allowance from 25 to 18 years.

In a submission to the 2007 Budget, CAPA also recommended that access to income support be extended to all students studying at postgraduate level, regardless of the nature of the course in which they are enrolled.

It has also reiterated its call for eligibility for Commonwealth supported places to be extended to university students at all levels. 

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