A destination with many pathways
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A destination with many pathways

The journey through postgraduate land is no longer a straight line, writes Mardi Chapman

RAPID growth in the popularity of coursework masters programs over the past decade might suggest a gradual erosion of interest in the premier higher degree, the PhD.

Could talented candidates be diverted from a PhD by a neatly packaged masters program, or do the different styles of learning appeal to different segments of the postgraduate student market?

While there is plenty of choice for potential students, there is also convergence as some coursework masters include research components and some PhDs include coursework.

Dr Margaret Kiley, from the Australian National University’s Centre for Educational Development & Academic Methods, says the well-trodden path from an undergraduate degree with an honours year to a PhD is now just one of many options.

She is interested in the varied pathways to a contemporary PhD and the contribution that each pathway makes to a PhD candidate’s success.

“There is no doubt that the traditional honours program is still strongly supported and in some disciplines there is still the notion that you need to have a good first-class honours degree to do a PhD,” Kiley says.

“However, students come to the realisation that they want to do a PhD and have the ability to do a PhD at various stages. Across all disciplines and institutions, the average age of completion of a PhD is 37 years.” These days the choice for graduates is less likely to be between going on to a masters degree and a PhD as many graduates have already collected a masters qualification before deciding to go on to a PhD.

Kiley says women make up a substantial proportion of the burgeoning coursework masters cohort, and while the international students among them are typically young, domestic students tend to be older.

“Domestic students tend to bring work experience, life experience and maturity, often after a break from study.”

She says while many students initially choose a coursework masters to refocus or upgrade specific job-related skills, their motivation and goals can often change along the way.

“Suddenly, they realise they are more interested in learning than they thought, they are a better student than they thought, or they have a terrific lecturer who inspires them.” Kiley has just embarked on a project to identify the characteristics of coursework masters programs that can help future PhD students.

“Some research projects within coursework masters can be substantial,” she says.

“Also, if staff are alert to changes in students’ motivations, they can recommend particular choices or combinations of courses that enable research training.”

She says many students who return to study after a period in the workforce already have highly developed research and writing skills from their professional experience that hold them in good stead for higher degrees.

One postgraduate option that is currently languishing is the research masters.

Often suggested as a starter option for potential PhD candidates, it suffers when people abandon it for a PhD after just one year after proving to themselves or others that they have the requisite skills to aim higher.

Kiley says another factor influencing international students in their choice of degree is that they are more.
likely to be offered a home government scholarship for a PhD than a masters.

“The Australian higher education system has interesting and complex pathways which vary by discipline and institution,” she says.

“Students don’t necessarily study in a straight line or even in the same area any more – there is quite a lot of creativity and variation, which makes it very exciting.”

DR Greg Buckman has studied at three universities for reasons ranging from vocational to purely recreational. The motivation behind his PhD, awarded recently by the Australian National University, was a healthy combination of passion and purpose.

When Buckman signed up for a commerce degree in the late 1970s, it was an entirely pragmatic decision for a Commonwealth Bank employee. Years later, while working as the national finance manager for the Australian Greens, he completed a degree in fine arts, purely for the enjoyment and distraction of it.

He has also published several books – two titles on economic globalisation, a history of the Tasmanian wilderness battles, and guide books to Tasmania.

When it came to postgraduate education, the trigger came in 2006 when climate change reached public consciousness with the film An Inconvenient Truth.

“I was working with Senator Christine Milne on an energy report which sparked my interest in climate change and renewable energy. It was a very exciting time then as it is now with the recent clean energy future announcement. “Because I was in my 40s and hadn’t done an honours year, it was suggested that I do a research masters to test the waters. So I did one year then renegotiated it to become a PhD.

“I treated it like a full-time job, basically Monday to Friday nine to five, finishing it in three years. Like a lot of older students, you have less time to muck around and are therefore very focused.”

He is now working in energy policy for the ACT government and developing ambitious targets on renewable energy and greenhouse gas reduction.

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