Purpose

To provide a summary of the key themes and trends in postgraduate student life arising from a survey of selected literature.

Background

Postgraduate student enrolments in Australia have grown strongly over recent years in response to the need for people to further develop their skills and capabilities to successfully manage work in the knowledge and innovation economy.

With the shift towards viewing students as clients in an increasingly fee-based higher education sector, the postgraduate experience is a subject of considerable scrutiny. Results from national quality surveys such as the Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ) and Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) provide benchmarks against which universities measure their performance and develop strategies to improve conditions for postgraduate students.¹

This paper should be read in conjunction with Background Reading: Student Life, The Postgraduate Experience, Volume 4, May 2004 at:

Further information on current and emerging trends can be found in Background Reading: Student Life, Volume 3, January 2004. Also available on the link above.

Postgraduate Enrolments

According to figures from the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), the number of postgraduate student enrolments in Australia for 2003 were as follows:

- Total postgraduate enrolments: 247,315 (9.1% increase from 2002)
- Other postgraduate coursework: 70,516 (2.4% increase from 2002)
- Masters by Coursework: 129,504 (15.5% increase from 2002)
- Doctorate by Coursework: 1,636 (9.5% increase from 2002)
- Masters by Research: 9,784 (-3.0% increase from 2002)
- Doctorate by Research: 35,875 (5.4% increase from 2002)

As indicated above, 80% of postgraduate students were enrolled in a coursework program with 20% undertaking a research degree. The biggest increase in student enrolments over the past year was in Masters by Coursework. Enrolments in Masters by Research, on the other hand, showed a decline over this period.

Key Themes

Lack of attention to postgraduate coursework students

Given that postgraduate coursework students comprise 80% of total postgraduates, it has been argued that insufficient attention is paid to the specific needs of this cohort. Although postgraduate coursework students are usually part-time and mature age, their needs are often considered similar to those of full-time undergraduate students.

¹ For example, data on the relative CEQ performance for RMIT postgraduate coursework students can be found in the CEQ Ranking Tables at http://www2.rmit.edu.au/departments/planning/ircu/rcps.php
The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) is driving the push to improve conditions for postgraduate coursework students with its proposal for a minimum standard of services and facilities. It recommends that all universities undertake demographic analysis of their postgraduate coursework cohort in order to better understand their needs (CAPA, 2004).

CAPA have also identified that within this cohort, students from rural and isolated backgrounds and external students face specific issues (CAPA, 2003).

International Postgraduate Student Issues

It has been argued that international postgraduates are unfairly discriminated against by federal government policies relating to the issuing of student visas (certain countries singled out as high risk for non-compliance), high visa costs, compulsory work permits and the inability to work in Australia after graduation (CAPA, 2004).

An issue of particular concern is incorrect information provided by international student recruitment agents (paid by institutions) regarding public education costs for children of international students.

Other feedback suggests that international research students have better completion rates and are generally more satisfied with their experience. It is worth noting that international research student enrolments are growing compared to local research enrolments (due to introduction of RTS).

Research Culture

The lack of a satisfactory research culture for students undertaking postgraduate research has been identified as a major problem at both the national and RMIT level. Only half of research graduates in Australia in 2002 agreed that their institution provided an intellectual environment conducive to their study (PREQ 2002).

RMIT research graduates are similarly dissatisfied, with only 45% responding positively to items concerning intellectual climate (PREQ 2003). The question of whether research ambiance in the department was conducive to research attracted the lowest level of satisfaction in the survey at 34%.

A recent study indicated considerable dissatisfaction amongst research students at RMIT with the quality of the research environment. The study found that the critical factor in determining the quality of the research student experience is the presence of a scholarly community, and that the key to improving the research environment is the level of enthusiasm and commitment of academic staff, and also to a lesser extent, students, toward research (Barnacle, 2002).

Research completions

Since the introduction of performance based funding for research degrees, universities have been forced to focus on improving student completion rates.

A major study by DEST in 2001, prior to the introduction of the Research Training Scheme, showed that completion rates were relatively low for research students, particularly for master’s students. It showed that completion rates were higher for full-time students and for those in the sciences compared to the arts and humanities. Women were more likely to complete a research masters than men, but completion rates for doctorates were the same. Completion rates declined with age (Martin, 2001).

More recent studies show the following factors influence completion rates:

- Proportion of full-time enrolment, notification of a problem during candidature, holding a scholarship, age at commencement and being a native English speaker (Bourke, 2004);
- Student profile, infrastructure support and supervisory arrangements as well as discipline area (Gasson, 2004);
- Quality of supervision, adequacy of work facilities and equipment, personal, family and some gender-related matters (Rennie, 2004).

Key Trends
Some of emerging trends shaping postgraduate student life include:

- More students are combining full-time work and part-time study and are therefore more time conscious
- Students are financing education in new ways (for example, drawing from loans and savings; salary packaging)
- Students expect more value for money
- Students demand a greater respect as fee-paying customers
- Students are expressing the need for a more scholarly environment
- Students are motivated more by career change than the prospect of promotion
- Re-skilling and remaining relevant are the major drivers for postgraduates
- Coursework programs that allow different entry and exit points more in demand
- Greater expectation that prior learning and experience will be recognised
- Students want information and services to be available when they need them (including outside standard hours)
- The ‘extension of adolescence’ and the cost of education is leading to students are living at home longer
- Research students will go to the institution with the leading thinkers in their field.
- Institutions are not always articulating what they expect of postgraduate students
- At the same time, students are increasingly vocal about what they expect of institutions
- For domestic students the reputation of the discipline is not necessarily linked to institutional reputation.
- Institutional assumptions about the postgraduate student profile have not changed with the demographic (i.e., assume most students are in early 20’s)
- Institutional reputation is very important for international students.

References

For the complete listing of references, please refer to Background Reading: Student Life, The Postgraduate Experience, Volume 4, May 2004