

# Feature: Postgraduate Education

## Marketisation and the new quality agenda: postgraduate coursework at the crossroads

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### Introduction

Deregulation and competitive market conditions are held by the Minister, Dr Kemp, and some vice-chancellors and commentators, as the only viable policy for addressing the acute resourcing difficulties of Australian universities. The core of the deregulationist argument in respect of students is that higher education confers a significant private benefit. Thus, students should 'invest' in their access to future wealth.<sup>1</sup>

The consequences of marketisation on postgraduate coursework are a salutary reminder of the limitations of deregulation. The 'market' emerged as the primary organisational principle in postgraduate coursework education between 1989 and 1994 under the ALP. Intensified marketisation under the Coalition in the form of the cutting of the bulk of funded places has served to further reduce equity of access and to further undermine the efficacy of both internal quality control measures and the normative setting of educational standards.

In this environment, external quality control measures such as the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AQUA) and the *National Protocol for: The Recognition of Universities, The Accreditation of Courses Offered by Non-University Providers, and the Operations of Overseas Higher Education Providers in Australia* (The National Protocol), are required if students' consumer rights are to be protected. However, even if the latter is achieved, and this is by no means certain, it will do nothing to address equity of access and other national interest considerations.

### Deregulation: background

In the 1988 Federal Budget the Hawke Labor Government introduced the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) for domestic higher education students and permitted universities to charge fees for some domestic postgraduate students. These deregulatory measures were introduced to help fund the expansion and 'reform' of higher education under the rubric of the 'clever country' (Dawkins 1988).

Initially postgraduate fees could only be charged to people already in employment seeking formal award courses for professional upgrading. At this time, they could not be charged to continuing students. In 1991, 1993 and 1994 the rules were progressively relaxed so that by 1994 fee-paying was largely deregulated.<sup>2</sup> There were no maximum or minimum fees, institutions were able to charge fees on courses within funded load and the 20% cap on fee-paying postgraduates within total funded load was removed. The two remaining constraints were:

- fees could not be charged for initial entry vocational qualifications in teaching and nursing and
- funding equivalent of one discounted minimum differential HECS fee was withheld from operating grant for each fee-paying postgraduate within load, if postgraduate load target was not met.<sup>3</sup>

This essentially describes the current situation although from 2000 institutions are not able to enrol fee-paying postgraduates within the quantum of fully funded places.

*This is expected to maximise the number of postgraduate places available to HECS-liable students at the coursework level and will discontinue the cross subsidy for fee-paying places (DETYA, 1999, p. 96).*

## Coalition cuts to funded places for postgraduate coursework

The ALP initially argued that postgraduate fees were primarily a mechanism to help fund expansion of higher education but increasingly the rationale has been framed in terms of deregulation and 'marketisation' (Woolf and Quarmby, 1999). This emphasis was entrenched after the 1996 Federal Budget when the Coalition announced a series of budget cuts to higher education for the triennium 1997 – 1999. Undergraduate funded load was increased however total funded load was reduced. The cuts were explicitly targeted at postgraduate coursework students, as universities were expected to make 'any necessary

- funded places offered on a HECS basis were removed; and
- institutions attempted to market more fee-paying courses to compensate for cuts to operating grant and unfunded wage increases.

However at the same time, the pool of part government funded, part fee-paying places became severely diluted because of the significant cuts in government funding. The net result of this has been increased attempts to supply more postgraduate coursework programs at a time when effective demand from domestic students has diminished due to decreased HECS places and decreased government funding.

### Consequences: Declining domestic numbers

The total number of enrolled postgraduate coursework students has grown each year from 55,242 in 1989 to 102,299 in 1999. This (85%) is significantly higher than undergraduate growth (45%) in the same period. Table 2 shows a total increase in postgraduate coursework EFTSU of 5,011 between 1996 and 1999. This growth, however, masks a bifurcation between international and domestic load with international students increasing by 8,031 EFTSU but domestic students declining by 3,020 EFTSU.<sup>5</sup> Indeed the domestic load in

1999 was only 500 EFTSU higher than in 1994. Similarly, domestic postgraduate coursework commencements peaked in 1996 and declined by 8% between 1996 and 1999 (DETYA, 2000). As table 3 shows, the increase of about 10,000 EFTSU in fee-paying students has not compensated for the actual decline of 13,000 HECS-liable places.

### Consequences: Differential growth and decline between discipline groups

The decline in domestic student load is unevenly distributed through discipline groups. Only two of the eleven disciplinary groups (as defined by DETYA) have experienced growth, the other nine have declined. Combined, these two groups – mathematics and computing science; and administration, business, economics and law – constituted over 50% of domestic load in 1999, up from 38% in 1996. When international students are included, the two groups show significant growth. Engineering and health sciences show a modest increase but the decline in load of the other seven discipline groups remains (See Table 4).

**Table 1. Domestic Postgraduate Coursework Fee-paying and Funded Places 1996 - 2000 (EFTSU)**

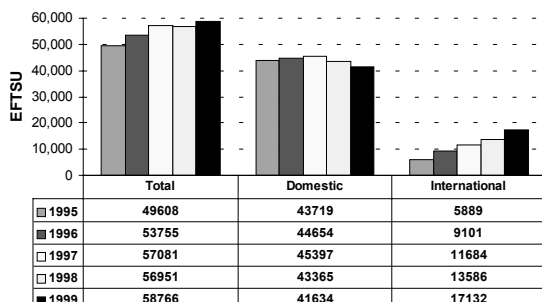
	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
PG C-work Funded	41,315	36,727	22,286	17,572	16,400
PG C-work Fee-paying	12,365	14,908	20,366	23,869	27,027
<b>Total</b>	<b>53,680</b>	<b>51,635</b>	<b>42,652</b>	<b>41,441</b>	<b>43,427</b>
<small>(Source: 1998 to 2000 figures are DETYA data corresponding to Figure V4, page 109 of the <i>Higher Education Report for the 2000 to 2002 Triennium</i>. Figures for 1997 are based on data supplied by DETYA on projected load reductions, the <i>Higher Education Funding Report for the 97-99 Triennium and Selected Higher Education Student Statistics 1997</i>. Figures for 1996 are based on data supplied by DETYA on projected load reductions, the <i>Higher Education Funding Report for the 96-98 Triennium and Selected Higher Education Student Statistics 1996</i>.)</small>					

adjustments at the non-research postgraduate level' (Vanstone, 1996).

As Table 1 shows, the cuts to notional load have been precipitous with imputed funded places cut by 25,000 EFTSU between 1996 – 2000. This is numerically equivalent to a large Australian university being shut down. The cut to notional load does not correspond with actual decline in HECS load (refer Table 3). This is explained by a combination of factors including; DETYA's methodology for calculating reductions in postgraduate places;<sup>4</sup> and universities being permitted to count fee-paying places within funded load (thus the figures in tables 1 and 3 are coming off different bases).

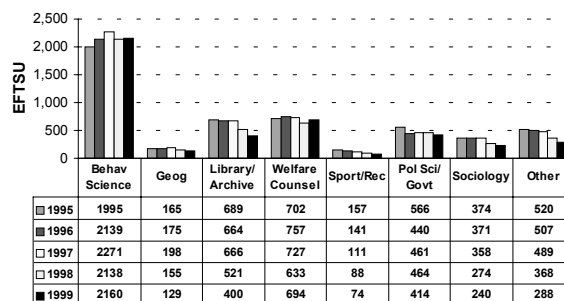
Prior to the massive cuts to postgraduate coursework initiated by Minister Vanstone, the inclusion of fee-paying places within funded load had the effect of reducing the number of HECS-liable places available but underpinned significant growth in places which attracted up-front fees but were still substantially subsidised by the Commonwealth. After the cuts, nearly all postgraduate coursework programs became solely fee-paying because:

**Table 2: Actual Postgraduate Coursework Load (EFTSU): Total, Domestic, and International 1995-99**



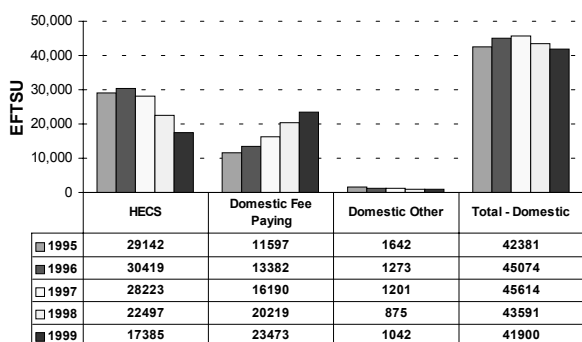
Source: DETYA Selected Higher Education Student Statistics, 1999

**Table 5: Domestic Postgraduate Coursework Load (EFTSU): Social Studies Disciplines, 1995-99**



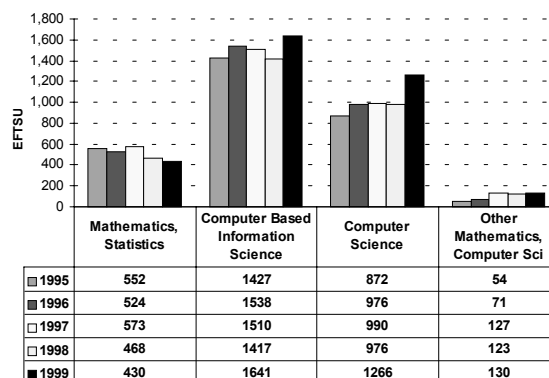
Source: DETYA

**Table 3: Domestic Postgraduate Coursework Load by Payment Category 1995-99 (EFTSU)**



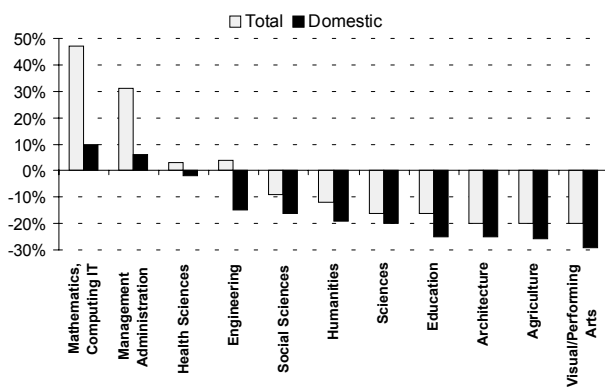
Source: DETYA

**Table 6: Domestic Postgraduate Coursework Load (EFTSU): Mathematics, Computer Science Disciplines 1995-99**



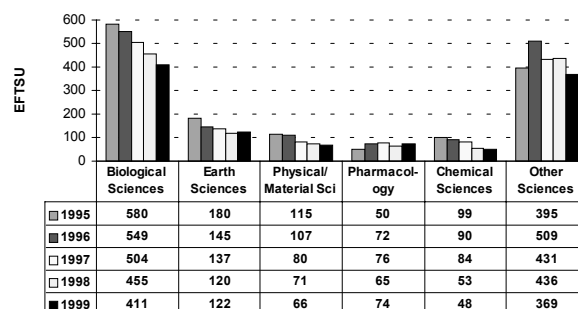
Source: DETYA

**Table 4: Percentage Change in Total and Domestic Postgraduate Coursework Load by Broad Discipline Groups, 1996-99**



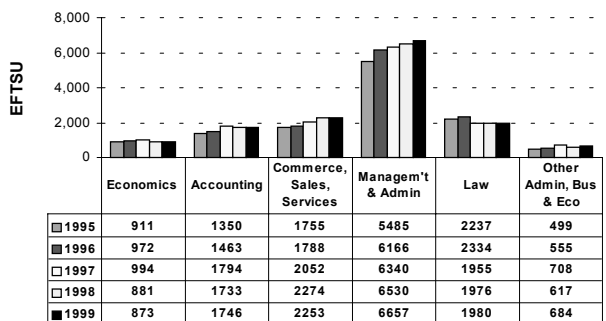
Source: DETYA

**Table 7: Domestic Postgraduate Coursework Load (EFTSU): Science Disciplines 1995-99**



Source: DETYA

**Table 8: Domestic Postgraduate Coursework Load (EFTSU): Economics, Administration, Law Disciplines 1995-99**



Source: DETYA

NB: Justice and Legal Studies counted separately after 1997 but placed in law for consistency in this chart.

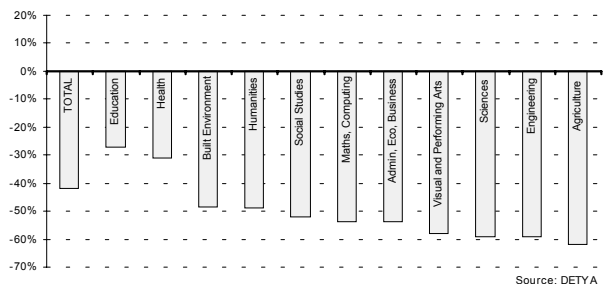
The decline in numbers is also differentiated within disciplinary groups (refer Tables 5, 6, 7 and 8). A number of disciplines including political science and government, welfare counselling, behavioural science, pharmacology and law are proving to be reasonably robust, whereas biological and chemical sciences, library and archive studies, maths and statistics and sociology have experienced quite marked declines.

## Use of HECS places

The cuts to funded places for postgraduates were uneven across the sector and while some universities retained a reasonable number of funded places, others did not. Accordingly there has been some variation in the capacity of universities to provide HECS places. A number have set aside a pool of HECS places as 'equity scholarships' for students with demonstrated need (eg, Sydney, Queensland, James Cook and Deakin). Others have used HECS-places as a bonus for academic organisational units which attract fee-paying students (eg UWA).

It might be expected that some universities would use HECS-liable places to ensure the viability of programs with limited market potential. There is some evidence of this. Sydney University, for instance, allocates HECS places for its Graduate Certificate and Graduate Diploma in Sustainable Agriculture. At a system-wide level, however, there is a correlation between declining HECS places and declining numbers in disciplinary groups with the greatest percent reduction of HECS places (61.5%) being Agriculture. (Refer Table 9. NB: The significantly lower decline in HECS places for Education and Health Sciences are because HECS-liable places are reserved for initial entry qualifications in education and nursing.)

**Table 9: Percentage change in Domestic HECS-liable places by Discipline Group 1996-99**



Source: DETYA

These trends raise fundamental system-wide questions about:

- the breadth and depth of skills;
- knowledge transfer; and
- the efficacy of the marketisation of education.

For example, does Australia benefit from declining numbers of people with postgraduate skills in science and agriculture?

## Consequences: Equity

Deregulation and marketisation have highly detrimental equity consequences. The barrier of up-front fees has meant that Indigenous peoples, isolated and rural students and students from low socio-economic backgrounds are significantly under-represented at postgraduate level.<sup>6</sup> Moreover the only body, apart from postgraduate student associations, that monitored the equity consequences of fee-paying in postgraduate education – the Higher Education Council – has not operated for over two years and was formally wound up this year when NBEET was abolished.

This social engineering is exacerbated by rising 'credentialism' that sees an increasing number of vocations requiring postgraduate qualifications for initial vocational entry and/or progress beyond initial entry (eg. psychology, librarianship, midwifery). If students cannot afford fees or access commercial loans, they cannot get a job in such fields. Thus, many of the most able can no longer enter or progress in an increasing range of fields.<sup>7</sup>

## Consequences: Quality

There are considerable difficulties with gaining adequate information to assess the impact of marketisation on quality of programs, not least of all, the problem of what we might even mean by quality. As our interest is in very broad system-wide trends, we will assume that entry standards, time frames, resources and level of subjects in

courses are crude but relevant measures of the quality of programs.

To highlight some dimensions of the quality issues it is well to consider the disciplinary group of Agriculture and Renewable Resource. Between 1996 and 1999 domestic EFTSU declined by 25% and HECS places declined 61.5% from 330 in 1996 to 127 in 1999. In 2000, there are only 43 HECS places. However, there are over 200 agriculture courses available; a significant increase from the 122 advertised as being on offer in 1996.<sup>8</sup> Given declining student numbers, this would seem to be 'student choice' gone mad.

This proliferation of courses needs to be considered in the context of nested programs with three exit awards - Graduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma and Masters. Moreover, this growth is inflated by the trend away from generic titles to specialised niche degrees (in name if not entirely in content). Sydney University, for instance, offers a Master of Agriculture with eleven named specialisations including agricultural economics and turf management. In 1999, there were eight students in the whole program.

Following discussion with every university offering agriculture and renewable resources programs it is clear that student numbers are in serious decline, except for courses feeding into the wine industry and a number closely associated with major agribusiness concerns.<sup>9</sup> Significant proportions of courses have less than five students; a number of universities reporting courses with just one student.

In the absence of sufficient numbers of fee-paying students, postgraduate courses are only sustainable if departments use undergraduate subjects for part of, or the entire, course. This is a controversial practice. Some academics argue they 'mark harder' and some also set additional work for postgraduate students in undergraduate subjects. Even so, it is difficult to believe that discussions in a subject with twenty students comprising eighteen 2<sup>nd</sup> year and two 4<sup>th</sup> year students will not be conducted at the lower level. We contend that excessive use of undergraduate material is, by definition, 'dumbing down' of postgraduate education and potentially misleading to students seeking to enrol in 'postgraduate' programs.<sup>10</sup> The legal validity of such practices awaits testing in the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission and in relevant State and Territory tribunals.

The position of agriculture highlights one of the fundamental flaws of the deregulatory agenda. Private gain from higher education is highly differentiated between vocations. The differential (and relatively declining) returns on graduate qualifications in a mass education environment means that with the exception of some high demand prestigious degrees, universities cannot charge high fees. While it is plausible that an MBA or IT graduate will receive a significant return on their investment, there is little or no private benefit for teachers, social workers, nurses and

people employed in some scientific, agricultural and technical areas. Yet the higher level skills and insights that good postgraduate programs confer are of considerable public benefit in terms of better teachers, nurses and agriculturalists.

The reliance on market returns on private investment in education has important resource implications. The majority of courses, particularly in economically crucial but numerically declining areas such as agriculture and the natural sciences, have fees set just above the HECS rate. That is, universities are effectively only receiving a marginal funding rate. Thus while fee-paying domestic students are helping cash flow in many academic units there are insufficient 'profits' for significant investment in course quality.

The funding crisis and competitive market pressures have forced universities into other 'dumbing down' practices to increase throughput. These include reducing subject load, lowering entry standards and shortening time frames. Academics and students on university accreditation committees will be very familiar with course duration reductions justified thus:

*The committee noted the pressure on the Faculty to offer a Master by coursework that would be competitive in length with other universities while maintaining quality assurance. (University of Tasmania, 2000)*

Analysis of these practices is problematic. Institutions publish inconsistent information about time frames, entry standards, recognition of prior learning (RPL) policies and fees policies. Moreover, Australian universities are self-accrediting institutions which determine curriculum, teaching methods and assessment. Thus while there are normalising expectations attached to characteristics, entry standards, disciplinary and vocational traditions and lengths of degrees, all of these areas have exhibited increased variance corresponding to increases in the level of marketisation.

'Other postgraduate' courses, notably the Graduate Diploma, have been most affected by declining numbers, however in our view, the degree most affected by reduction of standards is the Masters by coursework. System-wide evidence for this can be inferred by comparing the duration and characteristics of degrees as identified by the NBEET's Higher Education Council (HEC) in 1989 and current AQF descriptors.

## Shifting sands: NBEET (1989) – AQF (1998)

In 1989 a working party of NBEET's Higher Education Council made recommendations seeking to arrive at national consistency of nomenclature and length of post-secondary qualifications based on standard practices. The NBEET recommendations for the Masters reflect funding models and standard practice to a much greater extent

than the Australian Council of Tertiary Awards (ACTA) guidelines. However, for reasons that remain unexplained, their recommendations for postgraduate qualifications, notably the Masters, were not accepted in the subsequent NBEET (1990) report and higher degree national standards continued to reflect the short duration of previous guidelines.

## Duration of degrees

The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) supersedes guidelines for the various Australian post-compulsory academic awards contained in its predecessors the Register of Australian Tertiary Education (RATE) and the Australian Council on Tertiary Awards (ACTA).

However, the guidelines for the Masters and Doctorate awards have, for many years, failed to reflect actual funding periods and normal course duration. Thus, ACTA (1989) and AQF (1998) give the 'normal' duration of doctorates as three years when actual average completion times and funding periods significantly exceed this. Similarly, the Masters by Research was and is currently funded for three years, not one year as in AQF (1998).

The one-year research Masters appears in the ACTA 1986 guidelines. ACTA guidelines were designed to ensure that qualifications in the former Colleges of Advanced Education (CAEs) were comparable with universities. The ACTA 1986 guidelines for Masters degree by thesis state:

*Because each candidature is individual and specific, the Council would not wish to be unduly specific about the duration of study. The Council considers that two (2) years might be a normal time for completion of a master's degree by thesis but would accept that the minimum time for completion could be one calendar year from the date of registration. The degree would be awarded in this time only if there were exceptional circumstances relating to the candidate's academic and/or professional background. (ACTA, 1986)*

This is clearly a *minimum* rather than a typical or average duration. It also appears to show that the shift in national guidelines for research Masters, mediated by the NBEET work on course length in 1989–1990, is a shift from a *minimum* (ACTA) to an *implied nominal* duration. The NBEET final report (1990, p. 13) recommends 'a research master at one calendar year ... following a four-year first degree'. This NBEET position is simply replicated in the subsequent RATE and AQF guidelines, neither of which carried out their own specific research on course length.<sup>11</sup>

The history of course duration in national guidelines for the Masters by coursework appears to follow a similar pattern with the added complication of coursework Masters taking in a one-year preparatory phase in most versions of the standards. Thus, in effect both coursework and the research Masters appear to coalesce around the one-year duration post four-year honours or equivalent. It is argued here that for most of the time of the operation of

these national standards the duration for both the coursework and the research masters has been understated in the national standards. However, with the advent of full marketisation the standards for postgraduate coursework have come to represent more like a maximum for many course designers<sup>12</sup>. Thus, the difference between NBEET (1989) and the current AQF descriptors can be seen as a defacto measure of changes in average practice.

## Characteristics of the Masters

There are significant differences between the NBEET (1989) and AQF descriptors (refer to Table 10):

- The Masters Degree, like the Doctorate, is a Higher Degree. NBEET requires honours or equivalent for entry as does the AQF for Masters by research (Conventionally students require a distinction or 2A to progress to HDR). However, the AQF allows entry from a pass bachelor into a Masters by coursework. This was primarily to allow for Masters preparatory programs and credit for Graduate Diplomas. However, the lack of a clear honours equivalent guideline has lead to confusion in course design and articulation.
- Higher degrees are supposed to be conducted at a higher level than Graduate Diplomas. NBEET describe then current practice of a 4+1.5 or 4+2 year model for the Masters. The AQF describe a 3+2 year model for Masters by Coursework, however this is more accurately described as 3+1+1. By allowing entry at a lower level for Masters by coursework, the AQF implicitly allows study at a lower level to form part of the higher degree, a practice that NBEET did not accept.
- The NBEET descriptors are careful to make no distinction between mode of attainment (research or coursework) as they recognise the Masters as a particular level of degree. The AQF however, allows different entry standards and typical completion times between coursework and research degrees.<sup>13</sup>

The contention here is that the differences between the NBEET (1989) discussion document and AQF descriptors throw light on the 'dumbing down' of the Masters by coursework degree. Its status *as a higher degree* has been diminished and time frames reduced by 0.5 - 1 year (EFT) in the decade since the introduction of full-fees (in practice, the reduction is often greater, see endnote 14).

The comparison also highlights the inconsistencies that confront students and employers in practice. For example, Monash University advertise a 2 year full time equivalent (FTE) Masters of Business, 1 year (FTE) Masters of Business (International Business) and a 6 month (FTE) Masters of Marketing.<sup>14</sup> Analysis of postgraduate guides suggests that programs of this short duration at the higher degree level have become the norm across the sector where they are embedded in a nested structure which gives full or

**Table 10: Masters Degree - NBEET (1989) and AQF (1998) descriptors**

	<b>Award</b>	<b>Normal Entry Standards</b>	<b>Maximum Funding Period/Typical duration (EFT)</b>
<b>'89</b>	Masters Degree (In same or allied field)	Satisfactory completion of an honours degree or an acceptable 8 semester higher degree program, together with a demonstrated potential in study and/or professional practice.	3 semesters (Coursework) 1.5 Calender years (research)
	Masters Degree (in different field from first degree) (eg. MBA, MEd following a BA or BSc )	Satisfactory completion of an honours degree or an acceptable 8 semester higher degree program, together with a demonstrated potential in study and/or professional practice.	4 semesters (Coursework) 2 Calender years (Research)
<b>'98</b>	Masters Degree (AQF 1998)	Candidates typically hold an honours Bachelor degree, a qualifying year of study or equivalent and are expected to demonstrate potential to undertake work at this level. In some circumstances relevant prior work can be recognized, particularly where high-level performance in graduate studies or relevant professional practice has been undertaken. The Masters degree by coursework is normally entered into after a period of employment and has a professional orientation, allowing entry from a pass Bachelor Degree	2 years (Coursework) 1 year (research)

(Source: Higher Education Council (1989) *Course Length and Nomenclature: A Discussion Paper*, National Board of Employment, Education and Training, p. 5, Australian Qualifications Framework (1998), *Implementation Handbook*, 2nd Edition, Carlton: AQFAB, pp. 55-6)

significant credit in the Masters for study in lower level postgraduate programs. Given such variation in duration for the same qualification what exactly do students think they are 'buying'? What do employers think they are getting when they employ someone with a Masters?

The AQF Advisory Board is currently reviewing its guidelines for the degree and all postgraduate awards. They may well update and clarify the Masters guidelines and the entry paths to the Masters. However, in an increasingly global market for higher education will even excellent AQF guidelines be enough to ensure the integrity of the awards Australian students are studying for?

## A new regulatory regime?

In the new global higher education environment, market forces rather than government funding models and pedagogic norms are the guiding force in the establishment of course; length, quality, entry level and content. Increased external regulation is then required if the currency of course awards are to retain their value. This is currently

evident in the Australian market for postgraduate courses. Here students have already been recast as consumers and are expected to pay large up-front fees if they want to study. Yet, there is little to assure them that the most basic descriptor of what they are purchasing – the title of the course award – has integrity. Recent developments such as the National Protocol and the AUQA may address this problem, but only if significant steps are taken to assure regulatory consistency.

The Ministerial Council for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) produced the National Protocol to deal with<sup>15</sup>:

- Criteria and processes for recognition of Australian Universities;
- Operation of overseas higher education institutions in Australia;
- Accreditation of higher education courses to be offered by non-self accrediting institutions;

- Delivery arrangements for higher education institutions involving other organisations;
- Endorsement of courses for overseas students. (National Protocol for Higher Education Approval Process, 1.7).

The Protocol refers to the AQF where it states that:

- an institution [university] which meets agreed national criteria, and is authorised under legislation, will be listed on the AQF register of bodies which are authorised to issue qualifications (2.23);
- the awards covered by higher education legislation and processes should be those defined as higher education in the AQF (4.9); and
- the course design and content should satisfy the requirements set in the Australian Qualifications Framework for the award level (4.22).

However, the States, Territories and the Commonwealth are currently free to ignore the AQF. This means that neither the AQF nor the Protocol, as they now stand, can provide a fully effective national standard for the measurement of the adequacy of educational awards in universities and Vocational Education and Training (VET). Thus, the Commonwealth admitted the Norfolk Island based Greenwich University to the status of university without it being entered onto the 'register of AQF bodies that are authorised to issue qualifications'.<sup>16</sup> To do so now would contravene the intent of the protocol but not the law. This loophole needs to be removed to prevent the possibility of a jurisdiction deliberately exploiting lowering of recognition standards.

The States and Territories also commonly ignore the AQF. These jurisdictions have the legal power to grant self-accrediting status to universities or to directly accredit courses. The AQF has proved to be no guarantee of consistency between the States and Territories and the example of the Masters is yet again pertinent. For example, the AQF was amended to accommodate the issuance of postgraduate qualifications by VET providers. Yet, the States and Territories are divided on the validity of this practice. Some States will accredit VET postgraduate courses (eg. SA, Vic and NSW) while others will not (eg. Qld). In 1999, when VET provision of Graduate Certificates and Graduate Diplomas was included in the AQF the AQF Advisory Board stated that they have:

*always preferred to include emerging programs under the current generic titles rather than moving to a separate qualifications for each sector where there are equivalent outcomes.* (Campus Review, 2000, p. 7)

However, in what sense do VET and higher education provide 'equivalent outcomes' at the postgraduate level? Not only does the AQF now encompass VET qualifications all the way to postgraduate level, some jurisdictions have allowed the introduction of VET degrees when a VET

diploma of similar standard and duration is currently included in the AQF (eg. ACT). VET studies are beginning to make up significant portions of the Masters degree under some nested program arrangements in multi-sectorial institutions. The VET Masters is then not far away. These developments make a mockery of the nexus between research and teaching which is supposed to underpin university learning and in particular higher degrees.

Furthermore, as we have already indicated considerable variation exists between the standards applied to the Masters degrees by universities. At the very least, this raises a question about the regime of compliance to AQF standards by self-accrediting institutions. The States and Territories have been willing to allow self-accrediting institutions to be 'innovative' in course length and description, for example, the establishment of micro length Masters. Recently, the private arm of the University of Melbourne established a full fee-paying *Juris Doctor*, a course with no postgraduate component what so ever.

Variation between jurisdictions and between self-accrediting providers may well encourage Australian and international providers with the laxest standards to seek accreditation in the jurisdiction most likely to accredit them. In a competitive market, this process will undermine jurisdictions and institutions that seek to set standards, at a higher level. This is particularly so where the sphere of the provider's operations extend beyond the borders of a State or Territory jurisdiction. Universities and other higher education providers now operate extensively in national and international education markets via distance delivery and a variety of other arrangements.

This problem is acknowledged to a limited extent in the Protocol, which states at 4.4 that:

*The awards protected under the relevant legislation differ from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, and there is no common position on what awards should be protected... Some award levels including diploma, graduate certificate and graduate diploma may be accredited under both higher education and vocational education legislation. This lack of uniformity in award titles protected, and agreement on what constitutes higher education, causes some difficulties in cross-jurisdictional accreditation processes.* (National Protocol for higher education Approval Process, 4.4)

The establishment of the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), announced by Minister Kemp in December 1999, perhaps offers more hope to those who wish to see some basis of objective measurement and maintenance of standards applied nationally (and internationally) to the issuing of higher education qualifications in Australia.

As described in its Constitution, the AUQA is a company jointly owned by the States, Territories and Commonwealth. The objectives of AUQA are:



1. to arrange and manage a system of periodic audits of quality assurance arrangements relating to the activities of Australian Universities, other Self Accrediting Institutions and State and Territory higher education accreditation bodies;
2. to monitor, review, analyse and provide public reports on quality assurance arrangements in self accrediting institutions on processes and producers of State and Territory accreditation authorities, and on the impact of those processes on the quality of programs;
3. to report on the criteria for the accreditation of new universities and non-university higher education courses as a result of information obtained during the audit of institutions and State and Territory accreditation processes; and
4. to report on the relative standards of the Australian higher education system and its quality assurance processes, including their international standing, as a result of information obtained during the audit process. (*Constitution*, Australian Universities Quality Agency, 1.5)

If the AUQA observes the Protocol, this leaves the AQF the role of setting the standards for Australia's higher education academic awards. However, the AQFAB can not enforce national standards on the States and Territories. In effect, this leaves the accrediting bodies to set essential benchmarks by which they are then to be assessed by the AUQA. This vicious circle must be addressed if the quality of postgraduate coursework and Australian education awards in general, are to be assured. Therefore if the AUQA is to meet its objectives, particularly 3 and 4, the agency will need to have access to a process whereby States, Territories and institutions must comply with a nationally agreed qualifications framework and these standards must be set according to objective criteria.

In the end this will depend upon the will of the States and Territories to set up a process where they agree to abide by standards established by an external body which is jointly controlled by the jurisdictions. This would simply require giving the AQF and the AUQA sufficient legislative underpinning and funding. Such a structure need not be more expensive than the current multiplicity of State, Territory, Commonwealth and national co-ordinating bodies and should be more efficient and effective in its operations. The Commonwealth as the main Government funding agency of university education and the player with the greatest ability to influence VET and other education policy on a national basis could have considerable influence on this process as might a determined collective of States and Territories.

## Conclusion

Our broad overview of some consequences of marketisation in postgraduate education is a salutary lesson about

further marketisation and deregulation of higher education. Key issues such as how Australia benefits from declining numbers of students in general and declining numbers in strategic areas such as biological sciences and agriculture in particular must be addressed. Marketisation allows access only to those who can pay high up-front fees and creates strong 'dumbing down' incentives. There is also evidence that the quality of programs has been diminished in the past decade. In our view, postgraduate coursework is at a crossroads. Recent joint Commonwealth, State and Territory initiatives do not go far enough. They will not be successful unless the AQF and its relations with accreditation bodies ensure commonly agreed and legislated standards across all jurisdictions. Unless there are significant efforts to address all of these issues the prospect for the quality of postgraduate education and the breadth and depth of knowledge and skills in this country, is bleak.

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## Endnotes

1 See, for example, West 1998; Kemp 2000; Norton 2000.

2 The instability of the changes to fee-paying between 1989 - 1994 were exacerbated by a high turnover of Education Ministers (Dawkins, Baldwin, Beazley and Crean) and were criticised by the AVCC 1997; Heagney and Stead 1994; and West 1998. In addition, as Woolf and Quarmby (1999, p. 26) point out, the guidelines are set by the Minister and are not a 'disallowable instrument'. ie. changes to guidelines are not required to be tabled in parliament thus are not able to be disallowed by either House.

3 There is no corresponding 'reward' for over-enrolments as per the undergraduate marginal funding scheme introduced in 1998.

4 DETYA used an averaged RFM to calculate notional load reductions.

5 The EFTSU in tables 3 - 9 do not correspond to individual students or courses. These tables were compiled from data supplied by DETYA to CAPA giving discipline by level of course by HECS status. Thus, a student doing a Graduate Diploma in agricultural economics may do three agriculture subjects, three economics subjects, one statistics subject and one administration subject. In the data, this student would show as 0.375 EFTSU in Agriculture, 0.375 EFTSU in Economics and so forth. Thus while the data is internally consistent and valuable in showing trends, they do not capture the increasingly cross-disciplinary nature of higher education.

6 The serious flaws in the current equity framework and the detrimental consequences of up-front fee-paying for targeted equity groups have been well covered elsewhere (eg HEC, 1996, 1998; Anderson et al, 1997, 2000; Woolf and Quamby, 1999).

7 An additional barrier is that the ATO will only accept education expenses for study directly related to assessable income. Thus, students studying in different fields with a view to changing their vocation are discriminated against. As most people will now have 4 - 5 occupations in their working life, this tax law is out of step with the increasing mobility and flexibility of the labour force.

8 Based on Ashenden and Milligan (1995, 1999), plus searches of individual university's websites.

9 While outside our concerns here, this raises a significant problem whereby the 'market' is creating a bifurcation between courses geared at agribusiness and the declining viability of courses that offer different approaches.

10 In its 10th report, the HEC (1996), foreshadowed a detailed examination of substitution of undergraduate for postgraduate programs, but did not proceed with this.

11 Information on the early ACTA guidelines and its precursors was kindly provided by Judith Forsyth of AQFAB and has been paraphrased in this section.

12 Which, unlike the final recommendations of the NBEET (1990) process, represent a normative indicator.

13 These time frames bear little correlation to current practices in research degrees but are more reflective of norms in the case of coursework. This suggests that in recent times, market pressures and the ballooning development of new programs in discipline areas with little or no history of postgraduate education may have led course designers to have greater recourse to the letter of the AQF guidelines in the case of the Masters by coursework.

14 The diminution of the Masters as a Higher Degree is well illustrated by Monash's Master of Marketing. This degree is advertised as a one semester (0.5 year) program in *The Good Universities Guide: Postgraduate and Career Upgrade 2000* (Ashenden and Milligan 1999, p. 183) and the *AVCC Postgraduate Directory* (AVCC & GCCA, 1999; p. 119). In the *AVCC Postgraduate Directory* the pre-requisite for this course is stated as "an honours degree (at credit average or better) in the discipline or the Graduate Diploma in Marketing or an equivalent qualification" (p. 119). This information is contradicted by Monash who state that "the Masters of Marketing comprises 12 subjects and ... requires 1.5 years of full time study post an undergraduate degree for its completion, rather than 6 months". (Russe 1 2000)

According to Monash's 2000 handbook, students who have satisfactorily completed the Graduate Diploma in Marketing can get credit of up to six subjects in the Masters. This conflates a 4<sup>th</sup> year equivalent with up to half of the Masters course. This is a significant gloss, as up to half of this higher degree course is not conducted at a higher degree level. Furthermore, it is not clear whether entry into the Masters via the Graduate Diploma is at a level of "an honours (at credit average or better)".

15 The draft protocol was agreed in April 2000. However, as of November 2000, no State or Territory has prepared legislation to give effect to the protocols.

We want to emphasise that incorporating study at a lower level into the Masters is a practice by no means confined to Monash, nor does it breach AQF guidelines. All universities have 'nested' programs by which Graduate Certificates and Graduate Diplomas articulate (with credit) into Masters programs. Indeed Monash has stricter guidelines than most universities by not permitting credit from Graduate Diplomas to exceed more than 50% of the Masters. Other institutions with a similar course structure are effectively offering 6 months (EFT) Masters programs if they accept full credit for the Graduate Diploma.

16 Norfolk Island is an Australian external territory and thus comes under Commonwealth jurisdiction.