Why one degree is no longer enough

By Andrew Stevenson
Sydney Morning Herald

About 32,000 students received an HSC mark this year good enough to have them on their way to university. Most are 18, many of them thinking they’ll have a degree — a passport to a career — and be free of study just after their 21st birthday.

But not if the universities have any say in it.

Learning, once a sprint, is now at least a middle distance race; for some a marathon. Decades ago some students would stumble into university and never want to leave, drifting from one free course to the next under the threat of higher learning and satisfying lifestyle. Now they're staying because they have to, because initial qualifications take longer to obtain and because universities have convinced them that post-graduate qualifications will be essential to their future success.

In 1971, a degree was a significant qualification. Fewer than 5 per cent held a degree; only 23,000 people had postgraduate qualifications.

But a huge chunk, perhaps as many as 40 per cent of those students entering university next year, will study on and on, attaining double degrees, studying an honours year, doing a master’s or backing up for a PhD as they attempt to stay up with, or get a step ahead of, their peers.

Nor is this an Australian phenomenon, the trend is in play across the world: more students finish school, more gain degrees and more feel the need to obtain something better, something to set them apart.

The trend is on in virtually every profession says the deputy vice-chancellor (education) at the University of Sydney, Professor Derrick Armstrong, who says there is a "great demand for higher levels of qualification and training from professional bodies". Many fields of study, including veterinary science, dentistry, medicine and architecture, are moving to make post-graduate qualifications the starting point for the profession. For example, the university has replaced the bachelor of dentistry with a doctor of dental medicine.

"In some disciplines there's an enormous amount of stuff a person needs to know in order to practice," he said. "With the master's they are also higher level learning outcomes so it's not simply learning more. But there is a lot more, too."

Universities are anxious to push the case that master's qualifications offer not just more learning but, crucially, better learning.

A generation ago many people became teachers with a three-year certificate from a college of advanced education.

The benchmark being established by Sydney and Melbourne universities for teaching is now a master's qualification.

The director of the centre for the study of higher education at the University of Melbourne, Richard James, says new graduates are able to operate on a different level. "What you're seeing is recognition that preparing to be an effective teacher in a contemporary classroom requires more training and training of a different kind. This (at Melbourne) is a clinical program and we are training students to take an evidence-based approach to their work in schools," he said.

"We think there's evidence to suggest these teachers, even though they're recent graduates, are bringing new standards into schools."

But there are sceptics. The director of the higher education program at the Grattan Institute, Andrew Norton, is unconvinced at the quality on offer.

"There is widespread anecdotal evidence that it (a master’s) is no more challenging than an honours degree and often no more than undergraduate. It could be even less than undergraduate," he argues.

"Particularly when it comes to a specialisation within a field it's not necessarily more conceptually difficult than the undergraduate work. It's just a different part of it."

But students do pay for the privilege, with the price for higher degrees often double that for an undergraduate. There is also less government support.

"There's definitely money in it for the university in the full-fee market," says Norton, who is critical of the move by some
universities, such as Macquarie, to replace honours years with master’s programs.

"This basically is making more expensive and difficult an option for the students who want to distinguish themselves in the labour market by having something more than a pass degree."

Conferring a mark of distinction on oneself can be part of the motivation, concedes the director of student recruitment at the University of NSW, Shane Griffin. "As more people undertake an undergraduate degree then, to separate themselves out, people will look for higher degrees or to find a way to stand out from the crowd," he says.

The university begins that conversation with students while they are studying for their initial degree.

"A lot of people recognise that having completed an undergraduate degree doesn’t mean they’ve finished studying; that’s the beginning of their journey," Griffin says. "Often for their personal development it’s better that they go out into the workforce and then come back and do a masters or something else in a few years’ time."

Chris Burton, associate dean in the business faculty at the University of Technology, Sydney, sees post-graduate qualifications as a way of setting people free from a set career trajectory.

"From an industry point of view most people see a bachelor degree as the entry degree, where we produce people able to hit the ground running but they probably don’t have the people skills, the experience, the complexity that they will be exposed to at a post-graduate level," she says.

"Some people get to a certain stage and they realise they don’t have the skills to take them to the next step.

"It could be someone with accountancy or an IT degree but if they want to go beyond middle management it’s a requirement they gather other skills and these skills are often about managing people."

Burton’s own progression mirrors the broader trend. She left university the first time with a BA which was still a "considerable qualification", before adding a master’s as she moved into managing arts organisations.

Ultimately, she became more interested in business and did a PhD in management. "It’s about career-building and doing the degree when I felt it was necessary to do that degree," she says.

The figures bear out the value of qualifications even as more people obtain them.

Bureau of Statistics modelling shows the wage premium for a bachelor degree (compared with those who do not complete their HSC) is 73 per cent and adds up to $1 million over a working life. A higher degree trumps it again, increasing the wage premium to 82 per cent.

But there are some who question employers’ enthusiasm for credentials. The head of the Australian Association of Graduate Employers, Paul Russell, is adamant they want better not more.

He says most employers - unless they’re after specific technical or research skills required in a particular industry sector - are increasingly less interested in how many qualifications a university leaver has, and even whether they come with a high distinction or a credit average.

"Once you’re in the door what most employers are doing is recruiting graduates who have a proven ability to work in teams, who have a high level of interpersonal skills and communication skills. And that’s what employers are testing for when they’re running grade through assessment centres," he says.

"It’s all about soft skills. People need to be able to communicate and share knowledge and work together to achieve results.

"Employers talk to from the AAGE from nearly every industry sector would go for a person with a single degree or a double degree over a master’s or a PhD if they had better soft skills.

"The piece of paper gives you entry to the workplace but it then goes on the personnel file in the basement and you are entirely dependent on performance. When is it ever referred to again?"

On the road to find out with no end in sight

Alexandra Clancy’s journey in education began with tears before she first headed into Stanmore Public School in 1988. This week she graduated with an MBA from Charles Sturt University at Bathurst.

Clancy’s arc is typical to that followed by many when they leave school. First came a year of uni, then a year off to travel before returning to graduate.

Her BA from the University of Sydney set Clancy up for a career in human resources but when the job took her into the banking sector she decided she was more interested in finance. That sent her back for the MBA while she continued working full-time with Citigroup.
Clancy, 28, admits to being surprised at how much she's achieved. "When you're going through you just forge on and get it done. Particularly when I was doing the MBA and working full-time, it was challenging but it never seemed too much," she says.

With her undergraduate degree, Clancy says she spent much of her time thinking "how quickly can I get out and go and do what I want to be doing?"

"For me, to go back and study at this level and really appreciate what I was learning, was essential. But there are other people who take their undergraduate degree very seriously and get everything they need out of it," she says. "Personally I think the more education the better."

And it may not even be over now. "I'm not going to think about it right now but I do like the idea of pursuing it to a doctorate level or doing some kind of research-based study. I definitely haven't ruled it out but I would have to look at the timing because it would be a massive commitment."

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