I'VE DONE A COURSEWORK MASTERS NOW I'D LIKE TO DO A DOCTORATE: CAN I?

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The Australian National University

Report Author
Margaret Kiley

Project leader
Margaret Kiley

Project team
Jim Cumming
Christine Kertesz
Karen Bell
Michael Tornabene
I've done a coursework masters, now I’d like to do a doctorate: Can I?
Table of Contents

Tables and Figures iv
List of acronyms used v
Acknowledgements vi
Executive summary vii

Chapter 1: Overview 1
  1.1 Background 1
  1.2 Methodology 3

Chapter 2: Current situation 9
  2.1 Student characteristics: DEEWR data 9
  2.2 Student characteristics: POSSE data 12
  2.3 Summary of interviews 13

Chapter 3: Project findings 15
  3.1 Findings from interviews 15
  3.2 Do we know if there is a difference? 16
  3.3 Findings from state-based workshops 17

Chapter 4: Summary and recommendations 23
  4.1 Coursework masters as preparation for PhD: Issues 23
  4.2 Coursework masters as preparation for PhD: Recommendations 24

References 26

Appendix A 28
  State Based Workshops: Acknowledgements

Appendix B 29
  Powerpoint Presentation to State-Based Workshops, May – July 2012

I’ve done a coursework masters, now I’d like to do a doctorate: Can I? iii
I've done a coursework masters, now I’d like to do a doctorate: Can I?
List of acronyms used

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACER</td>
<td>Australian Council for Educational Research</td>
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<tr>
<td>ALTC</td>
<td>Australian Learning and Teaching Council Limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANU</td>
<td>The Australian National University</td>
</tr>
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<td>AQF</td>
<td>Australian Qualifications Framework</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Dean of Graduate Studies</td>
</tr>
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<td>DEEWR</td>
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</tr>
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<td>DIISR</td>
<td>Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research</td>
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<td>Department of Innovation, Industry, Science, Research and Tertiary Education</td>
</tr>
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<td>EARLI</td>
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<td>ECU</td>
<td>Edith Cowan University</td>
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<tr>
<td>Go8</td>
<td>Group of Eight</td>
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<td>HDR</td>
<td>Higher Degree by Research</td>
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<td>Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>JCU</td>
<td>James Cook University</td>
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<td>QPR</td>
<td>Quality in Postgraduate Research</td>
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I've done a coursework masters, now I'd like to do a doctorate: Can I?

Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of Christine Kertesz, project officer; Dr Jim Cumming, project analyst; Michael Tornabene, website developer; and Karen Bell and Karen Sanecki-Jones for their support in the conduct of this study. My sincere thanks to the deans of graduate studies and supervisors and coordinators at the participating universities—Edith Cowan University; James Cook University; Queensland University of Technology; and the University of New South Wales—and to the staff and students of those universities who made their time available for interview. Particular thanks to the project research assistants, Lisa Chirio, Milena Kiatkoski-Kim, Dr Marian Patrick and Zimin Tan, for their assistance in organising and conducting the interviews. Many thanks also to the project’s reference committee for their continuing advice and support: Professor Angela Brew (Macquarie University), Nigel Palmer (The University of Melbourne), and Dr John Willison (The University of Adelaide), as well as to the project evaluator, Dr Rachael Pitt (La Trobe University) for her insightful comments on project processes and findings.
Executive summary

This project, ‘I’ve done a coursework masters, now I’d like to do a doctorate: Can I?’, led by the Australian National University, examined the extent to which a coursework masters that includes a research project provides an effective, supportable entry to a research program in Australia. The study took place against a background of significant increases in numbers of coursework masters students, and decreases in Honours and research masters numbers.

Chapter 2 of this report gives demographic data about the changes which have taken place in the postgraduate student population in Australia over the past 10 years.

The study examined the research capacity of students developed through coursework masters projects and the motivations and experiences of such graduates entering doctoral programs. It also aimed to gain a better understanding of the research education components of coursework masters programs.

Four site universities were used for this project: one Go8 (University of New South Wales), one from the Australian Technology Network (Queensland University of Technology), one from the Innovative Research Universities group (James Cook University), and one from the non-aligned universities (Edith Cowan University).

After obtaining relevant ethics and institutional approvals, four research assistants (RAs)—one at each site—were recruited to conduct the research. They gathered qualitative data about the contemporary coursework masters program experience in Australia from the perspective of each of the four target groups: students, supervisors, coordinators and deans of graduate studies (DoGS). In order to provide a spread of disciplines, information was sought from and regarding students and programs in the Sciences, Humanities, Social Sciences, and Engineering and Information Technology.

Semi-structured interviews conducted by the RAs were digitally recorded, transcribed and subsequently validated with each participant during the period May–December 2011. The RAs also obtained select demographic data for interviewees, i.e. age-group, gender, broad field of study, citizenship and status (full-time or part-time).

In total, 37 students, 20 supervisors, 15 coordinators and four Deans of Graduate Studies were interviewed.

An in-depth analysis of the interview data was conducted at the ANU using NVivo software. In this way, principal categories, themes and issues for each target group were identified.

The study aimed to ‘fill-in’ the gaps in order to suggest ways in which pedagogy and curriculum design might be modified and developed to facilitate: a) an enriched research experience and understanding; and b) effective articulation between coursework masters and further study thereby providing optimum access opportunities and sound preparation for aspiring research students.
A project website has also been established as a source of information about the background to the project and project findings: http://courseworkmasters.anu.edu.au

While initial analysis of the data suggests that Honours 1 equivalence is still the ‘gold standard’ for entry to a PhD (particularly at Go8 universities), there is an identifiable trend towards greater integration of work, education and research used in doctoral entry qualifications, including coursework masters.

The study has found that a range of new models of postgraduate study that reflect greater flexibility in structure and approach are either in operation or foreshadowed at a number of institutions. These include combining existing degree programs (joint Masters/PhD) and designing new programs (four year PhD); ‘packaged student offers’ incorporating flexible doctoral pathways; accredited exit points (e.g. Graduate Diplomas); ‘professional’ and ‘practice’ doctorates; and coursework masters that allow choice part way through for greater or lesser emphasis on the research component.

This study has helped to identify a number of factors that contribute to a successful transition from a coursework masters to a doctorate, including student characteristics, student motivation, and student support. However, further research is needed into the ongoing transformation of postgraduate program practices generally, and research training in particular, to maximise the potential of coursework masters students who have set their sights on a doctoral degree.

Project recommendations thus include encouraging universities to implement and expand on strategies and processes articulated by the sector in interviews and at the state-based workshops, such as advice and support for coursework masters students wanting to do a PhD; and training for conveners to enable them to advise students on course selection and possible future pathways. What this might mean for the PhD in terms of entry, curriculum, administration, and the role of Professional Doctorates will be explored in a future Office for Learning and Teaching project, Coursework in Australian PhD programs: What’s happening, why, and future directions? (Dr M. Kiley, lead).
Chapter 1: Overview

1.1 Background

With the substantial increase in enrolments in coursework masters in Australia, and with a growing number of applicants seeking PhD entry and scholarships with qualifications other than Honours, this project examines the extent to which a coursework masters that includes a research project provides an effective, supportable entry to a research program in Australia.

1.1.1 Increase in coursework masters students numbers

According to Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations¹ (DEEWR, 2011) statistics, between 2003 and 2009 there was a 36 per cent increase in coursework masters enrolments (domestic and international) in Australia, from approximately 130,000 to some 176,000 students. Little research has been undertaken on this subject, in Australia or elsewhere, and so this project set out to answer the following questions:

1. What is the variation in coursework masters programs in terms of:
   • Research project requirements?
   • Provision of research training where a research project is required?
   • Extent of supervisor training and support, and the approach to supervision?
   • Extent of research training support for students, e.g. access to research skills programs?

Answers to these questions will assist our understanding of the level of research capacity and understanding these graduates have, whether or not they proceed to a research degree.

2. What are the common practices regarding the acceptance or otherwise by universities of their own or other universities’ masters by coursework research project results for entry into PhD, and more importantly as a criterion for scholarship award?

3. What motivates students to undertake a PhD following a coursework masters program?

With answers to these questions we might then be in a position to suggest appropriate pedagogical and curriculum practices at these levels of Australian university education.

1.1.2 Decrease in research masters students numbers

Enrolments in research masters in Australia decreased significantly (by some 14 per cent) in the period 2003–2009 (DEEWR, 2011). A number of reasons are put forward for this decline, the four most common being:

¹ In December 2011, responsibility for tertiary education was transferred to the new Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education DIISRTE.
I've done a coursework masters, now I'd like to do a doctorate: Can I?

- Increase in the number of coursework masters programs
- Student belief that for one extra year’s work (theoretically at least) they can have a doctorate rather than a masters
- An increased flexibility in entry requirements for doctorates, whereby some universities and particularly some disciplines, are accepting applicants with a research project from a coursework masters rather than Honours or research masters
- The decreasing use of the Masters Qualifier as a prelude to a PhD.

At the same time, there has been a continuing increase in doctoral enrolments — up 26 per cent between 2003 and 2009 (DEEWR, 2011).

1.1.3 The place of Honours

A previous project (2007) led by the ANU, *The role of Honours in contemporary Australian higher education* (see [http://www.aushons.anu.edu.au](http://www.aushons.anu.edu.au)), established three major findings. Firstly, that the Honours year is under considerable pressure from both broadened undergraduate programs and “squeezed” PhD programs. Secondly, that Honours varies substantially in structure and content with discipline and site. Thirdly, that despite these pressures and variations, Honours is still clearly valued—by academic managers, discipline leaders, professional bodies, Honours coordinators and particularly Honours graduates—as the locus of major elements of research training and providing a valued research pathway for both research and professional purposes.

Nevertheless, there has been a declining interest in Honours degrees, with the exception of some disciplines (for example, Physics and History) and in Go8 universities, while at the same time, Australia still has “First Class Honours or equivalence” as standard entry for a PhD.

With our lack of understanding of coursework masters programs and their research components, for many the question is: what is equivalent to Honours and how can that be demonstrated?

1.1.4 Characteristics of the contemporary doctoral population: Theory and research

Research into the practice of research education in Australia has highlighted changes in the doctoral population in terms of gender, age, enrolment status, and mode of attendance, as well as in terms of employment destination (Cullen, Pearson, Saha & Spear, 1994; Neumann, 2002; Pearson, 1999; Pearson & Ford, 1997).

Increasingly, doctoral candidates are older — median age of 35 and a mean of 35 (Pearson, Cumming, Evans, Macauley & Ryland, 2008); undertaking PhDs on a part-time basis for at least some of candidature; and entering PhDs at a growing rate with an entry other than Honours.

A second area of study has focused on the growing links between universities, industry, government and other agencies, as well as the complex working lives of candidates (Barnacle & Usher, 2003; Harman, 2002; Pearson, Evans & Macauley, 2004; Pitt et al, 2008).
Given that the Professional Doctorate exists in Australia, it might have been considered the more normal progression award for coursework masters graduates. Certainly the professional doctorate has gained support in particular disciplines as a learning experience that addressed particular forms of learning, outcomes and outputs related to professional work (see for example Boud & Lee, 2009; Neumann, 2005; Sonneveld, 2009). However, this project had a focus on the entry pathways into a traditional PhD as possible parallel learning opportunities for students that were not the standard Honours and Research Masters.

Coursework masters programs generally do not purport to be preparation for entry to a research degree. In fact, most coursework masters graduates continue in professional employment with no specific thought of a research degree. However, the evidence suggests that some students are using their coursework masters results as a form of PhD entry. In relation to this, it is interesting to note that the recent review of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF, 2011) positions coursework masters as level 9, the same level as a research masters.

This present study set out to examine the research capacity of students developed through coursework masters programs and the motivations and experiences of such graduates entering doctoral programs. While the study has helped to identify a number of factors that contribute to a successful transition from a coursework masters to a doctorate—e.g. student characteristics, student motivation, and student support—further research is needed into the ongoing transformation of postgraduate program practices generally, and research training in particular, to maximise the potential of coursework masters students who have set their sights on a doctoral degree.

1.2 Methodology

1.2.1 Interviews

Four site universities were used for this project: one Go8 (The University of New South Wales), one from the Australian Technology Network (Queensland University of Technology), one from the Innovative Research Universities group (James Cook University), and one from the non-aligned universities (Edith Cowan University).

After obtaining relevant ethics and institutional approvals, four research assistants (RAs)—one at each site—were recruited to conduct the research. They gathered qualitative data about the contemporary coursework masters program experience in Australia from the perspective of each of the four groups: students, supervisors, coordinators and Deans of Graduate Studies. In order to provide a spread of disciplines, information was sought from and regarding students and programs in the Sciences, Humanities, Social Sciences, and Engineering and IT.

In total, 37 candidates, 20 supervisors, 15 coordinators and four Deans of Graduate Studies were interviewed.

Given the nature of doctoral education, and PhD education in particular, it might be expected that some specific disciplines would be more likely to offer Honours and expect that as the standard entry pathway, for example, Physics and English, whereas others would be less likely, for example, Education and Business. Therefore, the
I've done a coursework masters, now I'd like to do a doctorate: Can I?

interviews with the three groups have been categorized by broad disciplinary field, Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS) and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), with the more specific disciplines noted below the respective tables.

1.2.1.1 Candidate interviews

Across the four site universities the candidates interviewed were all enrolled in a PhD program into which they had gained entry based on their coursework masters award (see Table 1). Approaching the potential candidates varied slightly by site university depending on the structure of the university. However, as a general rule, following discussions with staff in the Graduate School the likely discipline areas in which such candidates would be enrolled were identified. Heads of School of these disciplines were then contacted, seeking their approval to approach candidates and staff and then an email was sent but the Graduate Convener or equivalent to all candidates in that group outlining the project and inviting candidates to agree to be interviewed.

Table 1 Candidates interviewed by broad discipline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>HASS</th>
<th>STEM</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The specific disciplines of the candidates interviewed were numerous including in HASS: Education, Indigenous Studies, Business Management, Visual Arts, Politics, Sociology, and Nursing and in STEM: Marine Biology, Health Science, Ecotourism IT, Engineering and Security Sciences.

Using a semi-structured protocol the questions asked in the interviews of candidates ranged across the following:

- Can I ask you to think back to your coursework masters project:
  1. Were there specific experiences that motivated you to want to undertake a doctorate?
  2. Did you receive any specific training in research e.g. research methods, writing a literature review?
  3. Did you have access to university support services to help you with your research e.g. the Academic Skills Unit? How did they help/not help?
  4. How has any research training you received prepared you for your doctoral study?
  5. Would you suggest to potential doctoral applicants that they should seek entry to a doctorate based on their coursework masters research project?

2 Re the fourth group, the Deans of Graduate Studies, their disciplinary backgrounds were specifically identified in any questioning and were not a consideration in selection

4 I've done a coursework masters, now I’d like to do a doctorate: Can I?
• Now as a doctoral candidate:

1. Is your doctorate as you expected given your coursework research project? If not, what’s different?

2. What particular strengths have you brought to your doctoral study from your previous experiences? Examples?

3. Do you feel you need to undertake any specific research training to help you with your doctoral research? Examples?

4. Do you have any additional comments on the preparation and motivation of candidates who enter with different entry qualifications from the more traditional Honours/research masters?

1.2.1.2 Supervisor Interviews

Interviewees included supervisors who had experience working with doctoral candidates who had entered with a coursework masters award, but they were not the supervisors of the candidates interviewed above as outlined in Table 2.

Table 2 Supervisors interviewed by broad discipline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>HASS</th>
<th>STEM</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

As with the candidates, the supervisor interviewed covered a wide range of specific disciplines including: Aquaculture, Health Sciences, Social Work, Environmental Sciences, Business Management, Education, Engineering, Finance and Social Policy.

Identification of the potential supervisors for interview was again assisted by staff in the Graduate School who were able to suggest the discipline areas in which supervisors might be working with candidates who had enrolled using their coursework masters as an entry qualification. Heads of School of the likely disciplines were then contacted, seeking their approval to approach staff and then a general letter was sent to supervisors by the Graduate Convener or equivalent, inviting them to agree to be interviewed.

The questions posed to the supervisors, in a semi-structured format included the following:

1. Is it common in your field to have doctoral candidates enrol with a coursework masters?

2. How many candidates have you supervised and how many of those have entered with degrees other than Honours/research masters? What are those qualifications?

3. Based on your experience, what do you think motivates coursework masters
I've done a coursework masters, now I'd like to do a doctorate: Can I?

4. Also, from your experience, to what extent have you found their masters research project experiences prepare them for a doctorate?

5. Have you noticed any particular strengths or weaknesses that coursework masters students bring to their doctoral study compared with those with other entry qualifications?

6. Do you do anything specific/additional with regard to research training for those candidates who enter a doctorate with coursework masters?

7. How do you see the issues of research training in your discipline developing over the next five years?

8. Do you have any additional comments on the preparation and motivation of candidates who enter with different entry qualifications from the more traditional Honours/research masters?

1.2.1.3 Convener Interviews

The third group to be interviewed were Conveners of Coursework Masters programs where it was not unusual for graduates to use that award to progress into a PhD (See Table 3). Conveners were identified in a similar manner to supervisors as outlined above.

Table 3 Conveners interviewed by broad discipline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>HASS</th>
<th>STEM</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The HASS numbers included Conveners from Indigenous Studies, Writing Studies, Education, Media and Communication, Creative Industries, Criminology and Design and the STEM disciplines ranged across Aqua and Biological Sciences, Health, and Engineering.

The questions asked of Convenors included:

1. Can you describe your coursework masters and in particular the research project? What % of the total? Is there a research methods course as well?

2. Was the program designed with possible doctoral entry in mind? If so, what were some of the particular considerations in designing the course?

3. Do you have some idea of the motivations on students for undertaking the course?

4. Based on your experience, are there many graduates from the course who go on to a doctorate? Do you think it is anything to do with their coursework project?
5. Also, from your experience, to what extent have you found their masters research project experiences prepare them for a doctorate?

6. Do your coursework students have access to the same university support services as research masters and PhD candidates?

7. How do you see the issues of research training in your discipline developing over the next five years?

8. Do you have any additional comments on the preparation and motivation of candidates who enter with different entry qualifications from the more traditional Honours/research masters?

1.2.1.4 Deans of Graduate Studies Interviews

The Deans of the four participating institutions were interviewed by the project leader and respective RA. Semi-structured interviews conducted by the RAs were digitally recorded, transcribed and subsequently validated with each participant during the period May–December 2011. The RAs also obtained select demographic data for interviewees, i.e. age-group, gender, broad field of study, citizenship and status (full-time or part-time). With each RA, the first round of interviews was undertaken in collaboration with the project leader, Dr Margaret Kiley.

The project analyst then conducted an in-depth analysis of the interview data using NVivo software. In this way, principal categories, themes and issues for each target group were identified.

See Chapters 2.3 and 3.1 for an analysis of the major findings from the interviews.

1.2.2 State based workshops

During the second half of the project (May–July 2012), the project leader presented state based workshops hosted by RMIT, UNSW, ANU, ECU, QUT, JCU and the University of Adelaide to:

• share the findings from the project
• raise interest in the increasing number of candidates entering a PhD through coursework masters
• learn first-hand from those on the ground of the relevant issues that the project needed to consider i.e. a sharing and collecting of data.

Overall, some 126 people from 22 universities were represented, 56 per cent of the total of 39 universities in Australia.

Following chapter 2 of this report which outlines graduate student characteristics and student, supervisor, coordinator and Dean of Graduate Studies’ perspectives on existing coursework masters programs in Australia, chapter 3 outlines the format of the state based workshops, and includes a summary of workshop discussions.

1.2.3 Other: Government links, International links, Website

In addition to the state based workshops, the project leader disseminated project
findings and sought feedback at a number of forums, including: national and international conferences (HERDSA and EARLI 2011; QPR and Professional Doctorate conferences, 2012) and DDoGS meetings in 2011 and 2012. In addition, she made invited presentations to the UNSW Academic Board (2011) and the Education Research Group of Adelaide (ERGA 2011), as well as to government—DIISR—in 2011.

The project has also established a website to disseminate information about the background to the project and project findings: http://courseworkmasters.anu.edu.au
Chapter 2:  Current situation

2.1  Student characteristics: DEEWR data

According to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR, 2011), between 2003 and 2009 there was a 36 per cent increase in coursework masters enrolments (domestic and international) in Australia. As Table 1 outlines this increase occurred over the same time period that Research Masters enrolments decreased.

Table 4 Postgraduate student numbers, Australia, 2003–2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Masters by Coursework</th>
<th>Masters by Research</th>
<th>Doctorate by Coursework</th>
<th>Doctorate by Research</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<td>35875</td>
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<td>41427</td>
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<td>1520</td>
<td>42366</td>
<td>73883</td>
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<td>1465</td>
<td>44292</td>
<td>77862</td>
<td>307973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% change</td>
<td>35.9%</td>
<td>-14.2%</td>
<td>-10.5%</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled from the DEEWR Higher Education Statistics Collection, 2003-09.  

Figure 1 Changes in postgraduate student enrolment, Australia, 2003–2009

Source: Compiled from the DEEWR Higher Education Statistics Collection, 2003-09.  

I’ve done a coursework masters, now I’d like to do a doctorate: Can I?
One significant trend in the period since 2004 has been with female enrolments increasing in coursework masters degrees, compared with a decrease in male enrolments.

**Figure 2 Masters students by gender, Australia, 2004–2009**

Source: Compiled from the DEEWR Higher Education Statistics Collection, 2003-09.  

As Table 5 indicates that by 2009 female students in both a Coursework and Research Masters out numbered male students.

**Table 5 Coursework and Research Masters students by gender 2004-2009**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Masters by Coursework (Male)</th>
<th>Masters by Coursework (Female)</th>
<th>Masters by Research (Male)</th>
<th>Masters by Research (Female)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>76437</td>
<td>63863</td>
<td>4738</td>
<td>4886</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>79305</td>
<td>66994</td>
<td>4542</td>
<td>4706</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>78661</td>
<td>70044</td>
<td>4396</td>
<td>4560</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>78555</td>
<td>74211</td>
<td>4255</td>
<td>4458</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>81990</td>
<td>81161</td>
<td>4062</td>
<td>4276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>86191</td>
<td>89770</td>
<td>4125</td>
<td>4268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>481139</td>
<td>446043</td>
<td>26118</td>
<td>27154</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By contrast, there has been little change in the age of coursework masters students, with the 20–29 age group continuing to dominate as demonstrated in Figure 3.
Figure 3 Coursework masters students by age group, Australia, 2004–2009

Source: Compiled from the DEEWR Higher Education Statistics Collection, 2003-09. 

Table 6 suggests that while Coursework and Research Masters and Coursework and Research Doctorates the 20-29 and 30-39 age groups are the more numerous.

Table 6 Coursework and doctoral candidates by age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Masters by Coursework</th>
<th>Masters by Research</th>
<th>Doctorate by Research</th>
<th>Doctorate by Coursework</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;19</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>105754</td>
<td>3096</td>
<td>16862</td>
<td>417</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>42113</td>
<td>2380</td>
<td>13372</td>
<td>398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>19770</td>
<td>1629</td>
<td>7851</td>
<td>392</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>7131</td>
<td>941</td>
<td>4744</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;60</td>
<td>1045</td>
<td>347</td>
<td>1460</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>175961</td>
<td>8393</td>
<td>44292</td>
<td>1465</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, the data outlined in Table 6 above suggest that:

- the 20–29 age group are likely to be international students
- the 30–39 age group are likely to be domestic students.

Domestic-only coursework masters enrolment has increased about 84 per cent in the period 2000–2010. The same period saw a 14 per cent decrease in research masters and a 26 per cent increase in doctoral enrolments (DEEWR, 2011).
2.2 Student characteristics: POSSE data

The Postgraduate Survey of Student Engagement (POSSE) was piloted in 2009 and implemented by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) in 2010 with a focus on students enrolled in masters and graduate diplomas and degrees by coursework. It is closely linked to the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE). Information is collected from students in their first year and later year (typically, the final year) of study.

Fifteen higher education providers in Australia and New Zealand took part in the 2010 POSSE. A total of 10,014 responses were received (21 per cent) from a total population of 47,614. Response rates varied from 7.9 per cent to 33.5 per cent between institutions. The bulk of respondents were postgraduate students enrolled in masters by coursework degrees (65 per cent) and graduate or postgraduate diplomas (22.8 per cent). However, respondents also included those enrolled in masters by research (4.2 per cent); doctorates by coursework (0.8 per cent); and doctorates by research (0.5 per cent).

The survey item of specific relevance to this project requested respondents to identify whether they had considered pursuing research training, i.e. “In your experience at your institution during the current academic year, about how often have you explored options for doing research related to your study?” The four options available to respondents were ‘Never’, ‘Sometimes’, ‘Often’, or ‘Very Often’.

Figure 4 Masters by coursework students’ interest in conducting research

The 2010 POSSE highlights the extent to which students spend time considering a research degree. About a quarter of all postgraduate coursework students surveyed had never considered a research degree. The proportion who ‘often’ or ‘very often’ made such a consideration is relatively high at 39 per cent. Overall, the responses from the survey population indicated that:

- International students (45 per cent) were more likely to be interested in undertaking a research degree than domestic students (37 per cent)
Older coursework masters students (41 per cent) were more interested in doing research than their younger counterparts (37 per cent).

These data provided useful background for the project’s RAs when they undertook the interviews at the participating universities (ACER, 2011).

2.3 Summary of interviews: Student, supervisor and coordinator perspectives on coursework masters programs

2.3.1 Student perspectives

It emerged from the interviews with students (35 students in total) at the four participating universities (ECU, JCU, QUT, UNSW) that key aspects of students’ backgrounds included workforce participation, a breadth of disciplinary knowledge and experience, and involvement in the practice of research. There was also evidence to suggest that the academic pathway had been relatively convoluted for some students. Generally, students identified themselves as typically resilient, curious and passionate with an ability to demonstrate a highly organised and proactive approach to their studies. Many commented on the extent to which a coursework masters program prepared them for doctoral study. While the majority expressed positive views, some were more circumspect and identified perceived program limitations.

A series of factors motivating students to pursue a doctoral degree was identified including exposure to a stimulating research culture, as well as the desire for career advancement or professional credibility. In particular, key staff members such as a coursework masters project supervisor or program convener motivated the student to continue onto doctoral studies. Supervisors and peers appeared to be the mainstays of student support, with a number expressing mixed views about funding-related issues.

2.3.2 Supervisor perspectives

Interviews with this target group (21 supervisors) revealed that the coursework masters to PhD pathway was regarded generally as the exception rather than the rule—with most having supervised only one or two such candidates. However, there was also evidence of an emerging trend or significant growth in student demand regarding this route. Motivational factors for doctoral study included career opportunities, research interests, improved practice and confidence building. Supervisors expressed a range of contrasting views in relation to student preparedness for doctoral study and research training. Significantly, a diverse range of new models of postgraduate study that reflected greater flexibility in structure and approach were either in operation or foreshadowed at institutional and faculty levels. These findings are outlined in greater detail in the following chapter (3.1).

2.3.3 Coordinator perspectives

Coordinators of PhD programs (18 coordinators) also indicated that a coursework masters to PhD pathway was considered atypical, but noted increased student interest in exploring the possibility of pursuing this route. Most saw career advancement, research interest, inspiration and improved practice as the main drivers behind a
coursework graduate’s decision to pursue a doctorate. Various issues associated with student pathways were discussed including transition platforms and articulation processes. Coordinators also commented on a range of issues including support services, research training, student preparedness for doctoral study and screening. More significantly, they also identified a variety of new models and more flexible approaches in place regarding postgraduate programs and arrangements.

2.3.4 Deans of Graduate Studies’ perspectives

In interviews, Deans of Graduate Studies voiced concern about the Australian higher degree and the Australian graduate being maintained at a high standard. The question of entry qualifications for the Australian PhD, and the related issue of coursework masters as preparation for PhD, are of obvious relevance to this concern.

In addition, the Deans were keen to discuss specific programs that they had instituted to meet the particular needs of their university’s research students.

The findings from the interviews are outlined in greater detail in chapter 3.1.
Chapter 3: Project findings

3.1 Findings from student, supervisor, coordinator and Deans interviews

3.1.1 Common themes and issues

The dominant theme across all groups of interviewees was contemporary practice. Essentially this constituted the range of activities and experiences associated with the planning, implementation and evaluation of coursework masters programs, as well as the many interdependent structural, relational and other arrangements. However, ‘student preparedness’—the demonstrated capacity of a coursework masters graduate to undertake doctoral study effectively—emerged as one of the most significant issues.

The diversity of views expressed across all groups reflects the contentious nature of this issue—especially in terms of a student’s demonstrable skills and expertise. While coordinators advanced an evenly balanced set of positive and negative views, supervisors were slightly more negative, with students being the most positive of all in outlook regarding entering a PhD with a coursework masters. Interestingly, each group identified similar bundles of strengths and weaknesses that characterised students during particular phases of their doctoral journey. Acknowledged student strengths included a diversity of [primarily workplace] experience, maturity and organisational skills. Weaknesses were typically couched in terms of limited research skills and conceptual thinking.

Closely related to the issue of preparedness was ‘research training’. Students expressed positive and negative views about the nature and extent of training they received, with some members from all target groups noting that students did not always manage to take advantage of training opportunities given time, family and other constraints. However it should be noted that only one university in the study offered access to its research training program for doctoral and research masters candidates, to coursework masters students. Supervisors and coordinators tended to focus on the benefits of institutional and faculty training provision—targeted courses, units and workshops—along with the perceived value of [minor] research projects and contextually-based investigations.

3.1.2 Critical reflections

An important consideration in the analysis of the interviews is the composition of the student target group. To a certain extent, this constitutes a biased sample given that each interviewee is currently engaged in doctoral study, or in some instances has even completed a PhD. In other words, they are mainly ‘success stories’ or exemplary cases in the sense that they are making, or have already made a successful transition from a coursework masters to a doctorate. However, there is also evidence that some candidates are currently struggling with their doctoral studies.

Second, a significant finding from this study is the extent to which a number of tertiary faculties and institutions have made—or are currently in the process of making—substantial changes to postgraduate programs, arrangements and procedures.
This finding suggests the need for further research about new postgraduate models in Australia.

Third, the results of this qualitative research can be seen to help address the question advanced in the project title: “I've done a coursework masters, now I'd like to do a doctorate: Can I?” From the comments of the students, supervisors and coordinators recorded and analysed in this report, the answer is a qualified “Yes”. There is clear evidence that a number of coursework graduates have followed this pathway and reached their intended destination successfully. It is less clear however how many other graduates might emulate that journey with a similar degree of success. This study has identified a number of contributing factors to success such as student characteristics, student motivation, and student support. However, further investigation is needed into the ongoing transformation of postgraduate program practices generally, and research training in particular, to maximise the potential of coursework masters students who have set their sights on a doctoral degree.

3.2 Do we know if there is a difference?

When the project leader was in discussion with a director of postgraduate research for a large faculty of arts and social sciences about the project, the director asked:

I wonder if most of those thick files that come across my desk requiring extensions, reporting withdrawals or other problems are mostly candidates entering with a coursework masters?

In order to answer this question, the project provided financial support for a Research Assistant to go through the files of every candidate who had entered a PhD in 2005 to identify their entry qualification. Note that this hard copy approach was necessary as this university, like the majority in the sector, does not record the type of masters qualification used for entry into a PhD.

The data revealed that 36.5 per cent of all candidates in 2005 had entered an Arts or Social Sciences PhD with a coursework masters qualification and 47.3 per cent with Honours (see Table 7).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Entry qualification to PhD</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CW Masters (including overseas students)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>36.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Masters</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honours</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>47.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7 FASS doctoral candidates entry qualifications 2005
Armed with this information the director then checked for attrition rates, completion rates, completion times and any particular reported difficulties and found that of this cohort:

- The attrition rate for Honours entrants was higher than for coursework masters entrants
- Coursework masters entrants drop out earlier in candidature than do Honours
- There was a higher continuing number of candidates who entered with a coursework masters, but that was due in the main to the fact that the majority of the part-time candidates were those who had entered with a coursework masters
- The FTE completion time for coursework masters entrants was less than for Honours entrants.

As the director commented, “Overall coursework masters entrants do as well, if not slightly better than Honours entrants.”

One suggestion made at the State-based workshops regarding the success of the coursework masters entrants related to their age, that is, those who entered with a coursework masters will be older, thereby more mature, than those entering with Honours. This may well be the case, particularly as the results from the sample university do indicate that there are substantially more candidates who had entered with a coursework masters were part-time and so working or with family commitments, compared with the ‘others’ who were more likely to be full-time.

However, given that the data for this specific part of the study came from the HASS disciplines we know from other data (Larkins, 2012; Pearson, Cumming, Evans, Macauley, & Ryland, 2008) that the median age of doctoral candidates in Australia is 31, and the mean 35, with the HASS disciplines including some of the older cohorts, for example Society & Culture Mean 37.26, Management & Commerce Mean 38.31, and Education with a Mean of 45.15, (min 21, and max 81).

As noted elsewhere, most universities do not record the type of Masters that a candidate used for entry and so it is not an easy matter to do a more extensive analysis of entry compared with age without either painstaking search of individual candidate files, or wait until universities further develop their databases.

### 3.3 Findings from state-based workshops

During the second half of the project (May–July 2012), the project leader presented state based workshops hosted by RMIT, UNSW, ANU, ECU, QUT, JCU and the University of Adelaide to share the findings from the project and to invite sector views. The workshops were coordinated by the Project Officer at the ANU in conjunction with key personnel in each of the host universities. The project acknowledges the assistance of these contacts in each of the universities (see Appendix A for details).
The number of participants at the workshops varied as shown in Table 8, but overall 22 universities were represented, 56 per cent of the total of 39 universities in Australia.

### 3.3.1 Workshop format

Each workshop commenced with an introduction to the project and then the main findings (see Appendix B for a copy of the presentation). Following a break, participants were invited to discuss in groups the following issues:

**Curriculum e.g.**
- Flexible pathways, alignment and articulation
- Inclusion of research methods courses and research projects in all/some programs?
- The role of Professional Doctorates?
- Exit strategies (especially with the new AQF)?
- What about the emerging practice of including formal coursework in the PhD?
- Other?

**Pedagogy and supervisor development e.g.**
- Should coursework masters supervisors of research projects have some form of development?
- Is supervision at this level the same as at the Honours level? The Doctoral level?
- Other?

**Support for coursework masters students e.g.**
- When doing a research project, should they be able to access all the support available to higher degree by research students?

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A preliminary workshop was held at The University of Adelaide for the Education Research Group of Adelaide (ERGA) to trial the workshop format. The details of this preliminary workshop are included in the reporting of the state based workshops.

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I’ve done a coursework masters, now I’d like to do a doctorate: Can I?
I've done a coursework masters, now I'd like to do a doctorate: Can I?

Other? Administration e.g.
What does this mean for policies on entry requirements/scholarships?
How could a school cover the required amount of supervision?
What about funding for research projects?
Other?

Selection e.g.
What is First Class Honours equivalence in coursework masters?
How does professional experience contribute?
What are employers thinking?
Other?

3.3.2 Sector views: Comments of workshop participants

Following the discussions, groups were asked to share their main findings as well as to have someone in each group who kept notes. These comments and notes have been collated and presented below. The issues raised are critical in appreciating the implications of the overall project findings, that is, that there is a steadily increasing number of students seeking entry into an Australian PhD program based on coursework masters qualifications. It was of particular interest that in every group the most common discussion centred on selection, even though it was not the first item on the list of issues. As a result it is presented first here and then with the remaining discussion points in the order they were presented to participants.

Selection / Entry requirements for PhD

Selection seemed to be the issue that concerned most groups, along with the issues that arise from it:

Honours
- Questions around whether immediate past Honours is still the major route to a higher degree by research (HDR)
- The currency of the Honours degree is important i.e. how recent is it?
- What does Honours represent – the capacity to do independent research? Motivation? Maturity? Time management? But some argued there is not enough time in an Honours year to get substantial research experience
- There is a serious problem in getting Honours theses marked in time for the APA scholarship rounds
- Many of the issues raised about Honours had already been canvassed in the previous ALTC project, Honours in Australian Higher Education, see http://www.aushons.anu.edu.au/

Coursework masters as qualification for entry to PhD
- What is Honours 1 equivalence in a coursework masters?: A distinction average and “chunky” research project? There were a number of descriptions of a project
that would be acceptable including: a double project, equivalent in length to Honours in that discipline, and research of a suitable sophistication. It is suggested that the final decision will need to rest with the disciplines, as it does with Honours

- Equivalence could include: publications, research experience, academic record, proposal, professional experience
- What is the role of professional experience? (It is an indicator of time management, motivation, maturity, communication skills, perseverance—‘soft skills’ which are important)
- There were issues around whether the entry qualification is in the discipline of the PhD. If people have a small body of content knowledge then this should be a disqualifier or require additional study.

Role of publications
- How might quality publications be given weight?

Curriculum
- The role and increasing influence of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) and of the Tertiary Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) with regard to curriculum design and structure was a common theme in the workshops
- How to build a suitable research component into a coursework masters? For example, early enough to allow students to take decisions about possible future pathways
- Should research methods course/s be integrated into coursework masters core units?
- How to compare a coursework masters research thesis with an Honours thesis in terms of depth, content and assessment methods? Should the coursework masters research component be externally (or partially externally) assessed? Should it be assessed in a similar way to Honours where there are two assessors and a moderator able to intervene if there is more than a 10 point variation in marks?
- There are differences in scoring between disciplines even in the same university: how to deal with this? i.e. achieve consistency across disciplines and universities even though there is not necessarily consistency with Honours
- There is a great variety of coursework masters degrees (e.g., 12 month, 18 month, 24 month). The new AQF was discussed with regard to how it might influence change in this plethora of programs particularly with the clear statement regarding prior discipline knowledge as a key factor in determining length of program. It seems from the AQF that disciplinary knowledge is important, however it was argued in one workshop that a university focus on this may be an artificial emphasis in response to the AQF
- New models / flexible pathways (e.g. Wollongong 4 year PhD, Macquarie University 3+2+3 and UNSW packaged offers) have a lot to offer.
I've done a coursework masters, now I'd like to do a doctorate: Can I?

Pedagogy and supervisor development

- Qualifications of coursework masters supervisors: It was suggested that they should at least have a research masters and be research active. “It’s okay to supervise masters without a PhD but supervisors without a PhD may feel uncomfortable advising students to go on to PhD”

- Appropriate training is particularly important if a student is thinking of progressing, or might be encouraged to progress to a PhD

- It was generally agreed that if staff are going to supervise research projects that are equated with Honours then they should have some training/development akin to the programs available for HDR and Honours supervisors

- Workshop participants including some doctoral candidates reported that they would have appreciated advice from conveners about course selection and possible future pathways.

Support for coursework masters students

- It was agreed at all workshops that coursework masters students should have the same access to resources as HDR students; also perhaps PhD preparation mentoring. However, the resource implications of this were recognised, particularly as currently in most cases coursework students do not have the same access to support for their research as do their HDR peers

- Peers are important, for example, having graduate coursework students in with research students so they can see how others are working and can better assess their own ability to do a PhD.

Administration

- Ramifications for scholarships compared with Research Training Scheme (RTS) eligibility: these are two different things and need to be considered and for many it is important not just to be eligible to do a PhD but to be scholarship competitive

- A Master of Philosophy (MPhil) (6 months coursework, 12 months research) which would be scholarship competitive was suggested. Students must complete the MPhil before progressing to a PhD. Students from same or ‘cognate’ fields can gain entry—the College/discipline determines what is ‘cognate’

- An alternative of interest was the recently announced Master of Research (MRes) at Macquarie University

- One of the issues raised was that of how to grow domestic PhD numbers.

Other

There were a number of issues raised under ‘Other’. One comment related to the significant recent increase in the number of women doing a coursework masters, which has coincided with a decrease in the number of male enrolments. One participant noted that ‘anything that women are doing that men stop doing (like a coursework masters) will lose status and maybe become pointless.’

The ramifications for overseas students were also discussed. Most overseas candidates
enter a PhD with a coursework masters but usually overseas coursework masters degrees have a significant research component.

A general comment was made during the discussions about the relevance of research to the workplace and the community.
Chapter 4: Summary and recommendations

The interviews with students, supervisors and coordinators, as well as the views of the sector as expressed at the state workshops highlighted a number of important issues relevant to a consideration of a coursework masters degree as preparation for a PhD in Australia.

4.1 Coursework masters as preparation for PhD in Australia: Issues

4.1.1 Influence of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)

The role and increasing influence of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) and of the Tertiary Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) with regard to curriculum design and structure was identified as of major interest to the sector. The recent review of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF, 2011) positions coursework masters as level 9, the same level as a research masters. At present, there is a plethora of coursework masters programs in Australia, of varying duration and with differing research components. There has been a clear statement from the AQF regarding prior discipline knowledge as a key factor in determining length of program. The need for standardisation of programs both within and between institutions was articulated strongly by the sector.

4.1.2 Focus on selection

There is a steadily increasing number of students seeking entry into an Australian PhD program based on coursework masters qualifications. It was apparent in interviews with supervisors and in the discussions at state-based workshops that the issue of most concern in universities in relation to PhD entry is that of selection of candidates, and the considerations that arise from that.

4.1.3 Significance of entry qualifications e.g. Honours

Honours 1 still appears to be the ‘gold standard’ for entry to a PhD (particularly at Go8 universities) in Australia. The determination of Honours 1 equivalence for PhD entry, particularly in relation to a coursework masters qualification, is complex. The view from the sector was that equivalence should include publications, research experience, academic record, proposal, and professional experience.

A related and important issue is that of scholarship competitiveness: for many it is important not just to be eligible to do a PhD but also to be scholarship competitive.

4.1.4 Research methods

The importance of research methods training for PhD candidates, and in particular, the place of research methods training in a coursework masters degree, were commented on in interviews and at the workshops. It was suggested that in coursework masters degrees, research methods courses should be placed early on in the program so that students can at that early stage experience research and thus be able to make informed decisions about possible future pathways. The sector in general
recommended such training for all graduate students (as well as greater training and support for supervisors of coursework masters students doing a research project, see chapter 3.3.2 above and chapter 4.1.6.), although the resource implications of research training for all graduate students were noted. The increasing incidence of Graduate Certificates and Graduate Diplomas in Research Methods as a prerequisite for PhD candidates without prior research experience was noted; flexible pathways, some of which are already underway e.g. at UNSW, are recommended.

4.1.5 Importance of ‘chunky’ project

A number of workshop participants commented on the importance of a coursework masters research project being sufficiently ‘chunky’ to be able to:

- determine Honours 1 equivalence, i.e. to determine student potential to do a PhD
- create the opportunity for students to become more experienced in research, i.e. to determine student readiness to do a PhD.

Students doing a substantial coursework masters research project brings up the related issues of the need for appropriate supervision, and appropriate assessment. These are matters to be addressed—they may need to rest with the disciplines, as they do with Honours.

4.1.6 Qualifications of supervisors

There was a perception in the sector that a supervisor of a coursework masters with a research component should at least have a research masters qualification and be ‘research active’.

4.1.7 Ability to offer diverging programs

As noted elsewhere, a significant finding from this study is the extent to which a number of faculties and institutions in Australia have already made—or are currently in the process of making—substantial changes to postgraduate programs, arrangements and procedures. Universities have been moving towards increased flexibility for postgraduate students in terms both of entry and choice of courses.

4.2 Coursework masters as preparation for PhD in Australia: Recommendations

4.2.1 Flexible pathways

There has been in recent years an identifiable trend towards a greater integration of work, education and research in university higher degrees.

Strategies include:

- Combining existing degree programs (e.g. joint Masters/PhD) and designing new programs (e.g. four year PhD)
- ‘Packaged student offers’, incorporating flexible doctoral pathways
- Accredited exit points (e.g. Graduate Diploma)
• ‘Professional’ and ‘practice’ doctorates
• Coursework masters that allows choice part way through to be either more or less research training intensive.

4.2.2 Supervisor development

There was a strong feeling in the sector that if staff are to supervise coursework masters research projects that are equated with Honours, then they should have access to training, development and support programs akin to those available to HDR supervisors. Part of this support could relate to advice to potential PhD candidates within their own cohort.

On the other side of the equation, in the interviews at participating universities, many PhD supervisors lamented the lack of research skills—especially methodologies—in masters by coursework graduates. Generally, they were seen to require more time and energy in terms of assistance and support, compared for example, with research masters graduates. Supervisor workload is therefore a further issue that needs to be monitored, as well as the adequate provision of research methods programs and research projects in coursework masters.

4.2.3 Role of coordinators

Coordinator comments in interviews related principally to the issues of student support; research training; student preparedness for doctoral study, and screening of candidates. While many noted recent positive developments in support for HDR students, e.g. learning advisors, writing workshops, online and specialist support, they also commented on the lack of such support for coursework masters students, and the problems this may create for these students, and for their supervisors, if they go on to do a PhD.

Coordinators were also concerned that there should be rigorous vetting of or filtering processes for potential PhD candidates, and commented on the need to maintain the quality of the PhD. They also pointed to the substantial changes to postgraduate programs, arrangements and procedures which have taken place reasonably rapidly in Australian higher education institutions.

Given the significant role of conveners, it seems appropriate that support and development could be provided for them to highlight issues related to course design, timing and content as well as student advising.

4.2.4 Data collection: PhD entry qualifications

The project team has identified a gap in data collection at most universities in Australia (not just the site universities), and that is the lack of specific data on candidate qualifications entering a doctorate. For example, most universities do not record whether the candidate entered with a coursework or research masters and the project has sought other ways of collecting these important data (see e.g. chapter 3.2). As a result of this, one general recommendation from the project would be to encourage Australian universities to collect more specific data about entry qualifications of PhD candidates and relate to successful outcomes.
References


Appendix A

State Based Workshops: Acknowledgements

The project acknowledges with thanks the assistance and participation of the following people in the state based workshops:

RMIT
Professor Denise Cuthbert, Dean, School of Graduate Research
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Professor Laura Poole-Warren, Dean of Graduate Research
Dr Shona Blair, Student Liaison Manager, Graduate Research School

ANU
Professor Marnie Hughes-Warrington, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic)
Professor Elizabeth Deane, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Learning, Teaching & Students) and Director, CHELT
Chris Kertesz, Project officer, CHELT

ECU
Professor Joe Luca, Dean, Graduate Research School
Heather Williams, Student Support Officer, Graduate Research School

QUT
Professor Paul Burnett, Dean of Research and Research Training
Susan Gasson, Manager, Research Students Centre

JCU
Professor Helene Marsh, Dean of Graduate Research Studies
Shannon Hogan, Executive Assistant, Office of the Dean of Graduate Research Studies

UniofAdelaide
Dr John Willison, School of Education, The University of Adelaide
Andrew Craig, ERGA Administration Officer and Research Coordinator, The University of Adelaide
I’ve done a Coursework Masters, now I want to do a Doctorate: Can I?

Margaret Kiley
The Australian National University

C/w Masters data

- From 2003-2009 a 36% increase in C/w Masters enrolments—domestic and international (14% decrease in RM and 26% increase in doctoral enrolments) (DEEWR, 2011)

- Domestic-only has increased about 84% from 2000-2010 (DEEWR, 2011)
Significance in Australia

- Tuition for domestic students
  - Undergraduate degrees partially funded by Govt and by student
  - Postgraduate coursework degrees fully funded by student (employer) not the Govt
  - Research degrees (must be ≥66% research) fully funded by the Govt through the Research Training Scheme

Traditional pathways to doctorate

- First class Honours degree (an additional year of research training & research at the undergraduate level)
- Research Masters/MPhil
- Project looked at a pathway gaining more traction: the coursework masters
- What does this mean for doctoral entry?
- What can we learn from Prof Docs?
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C/w Masters Data

Data suggest that:
– 20-29 age are likely to be international students
– 30-39 age are likely to be domestic students
– International students (45%) are more likely to be interested in undertaking a research degree than domestic students (37%)
– Female enrolments have increased significantly since 2004 whereas male enrolments decreased

National Research Student Survey
(Edwards, Bexley & Richardson, 2011)

• In the year prior to commencing a doctorate
  – 56% of respondents had been employed
    (45% FT, 9.5% PT/Casual)
  – Almost 21% had been undertaking Honours
  – 16% C/w postgraduate study

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As Palmer (2011) suggests

“Among other things this suggests that the number of research candidates with prior coursework postgraduate qualifications is substantially higher than that [16%] and these would in many cases have informed selection decisions for admission to the research degree, if not be the principal basis for admission” (p.3)

HDR (PhD and Prof Doc) data

- Mean age at commencement 33 years
- 40% undertaking doctorate part-time (increased by 10% in 2010)
- Given these data what might this mean for doctoral entry?
- What can we learn from Prof Docs?
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Introduction of coursework in PhD

- Formal award coursework being introduced into the PhD in various Australian universities
- Rate of interest increasing rapidly
- Wide range of curriculum, still in flux
- What might all this mean for doctoral entry? And
- What can we learn from Prof Docs?

Research Design

- Across four universities interviews with
  - 35 PhD students who entered with C/w Masters
  - 21 supervisors of candidates who entered with C/w Masters
  - 18 conveners of C/w Masters programs where graduates are known to go onto a PhD
  - four Deans of Graduate Studies
Initial Findings from interviews

- Students generally positive about C/w Masters as preparation for PhD; supervisors less positive
- Supervisor and coordinator view was that C/w Masters as pathway to PhD was (still) exception rather than rule
- Trend to greater integration of work, education and research

Initial Findings from interviews cont.

- Increasing diversity (across universities and disciplines)
  - Program types, other than conventional programs
  - Candidate selection
  - Student support
  - Future directions
Program types

• Move in universities to increased flexibility for PG students in terms of entry and choice of courses
  • Strategies include:
  • combining existing degree programs (eg joint Masters/PhD) and designing new programs (eg four year PhD)

Program types cont.

• ‘Packaged student offers’, incorporating flexible doctoral pathways
  • Accredited exit points (eg Graduate Diplomas)
  • ‘Professional’ and ‘Practice’ doctorates
• C/w Masters that allows choice part way through:
  – More research intensive or more c/w
Candidate selection

• H1 equivalence still the gold standard
  – Substantial C/w M project at HD plus overall good grades
  – International Masters generally considered to have sufficient research component
  – Majority of PhD students with C/w Masters background are international students
  – Other characteristics of HDR students: high achieving and mature age

Candidate selection cont.

• Declining interest in Honours degrees in some disciplines (except in Go8s)
• International students + Visas make two year Masters attractive
Student and supervisor support

- Not all universities allowed access to research support for C/w Masters students
- Peer and supervisor support identified as most important for student completion
- Recent positive developments in support: eg learning advisors; writing workshops; online and specialist support

Student and supervisor support cont.

- P/T students tend not to avail themselves of support services
- Most universities don’t require ‘qualified’ supervisors
What does this mean for doctoral pathways?

• Flexibility?
• Curriculum?
• Student selection?
• Supervisor development?
• Exit strategies?

Preliminary Conclusion

• Variation by university and discipline
• Evidence to suggest that:
  -- courses with high numbers of international C/w masters students and/or
  -- older domestic students from the professions have identified a C/w masters as a pathway to a PhD.
• What might this mean for PhD:
Questions

- What can the Prof Doc experience and curriculum offer to the issue of different entry AND the introduction of coursework into the Australian PhD?

- What might these developments mean for the Prof Doc in Australia?

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