Brain power

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Most occupations struggle with stereotypes: accountants are dull, librarians wear twinsets, nurses are either Florence Nightingales or cruel martinets. For those undertaking research higher degrees (master by thesis or doctoral degrees), the stereotypes suggest that males are 21 and wear spectacles and lab coats; the females are over-earnest bluestockings. But as with accountants, librarians and nurses, these stereotypes are a million miles off the reality. Today's students undertaking research degrees are just as likely to be middle-aged with families and responsible jobs — or spunks like Adam Spencer, a PhD student in maths.

The point to be made here is that the old idea of who did research degrees, and the kind of work they did for their theses, are completely off the mark. So what is the situation really like and what are the opportunities for people thinking they would like to do further study?

As a professional you have two broad educational pathways for expanding your qualifications and horizons. Firstly, there's the coursework avenue, which opens up possibilities to extend the professional side of your capabilities. So a coursework masters in the library and information field, or education, or business, gives an edge in the direct practice of a profession. If your interest is, however, in a more general expansion of your intellectual capacity, a research masters or doctoral degree is the more appropriate way to go.

Research degrees are focused not so much on extending professional knowledge as on developing your capacity to think quickly, carry out sustained research, deal with theory, and contribute to the knowledge base in a discipline or field. It's true that sometimes the benefits from a research degree seem intangible. However, many companies are now turning away from graduates with what some would see as narrow, professionally based qualifications to recruiting graduates who can demonstrate their capacity for independent critical thinking. This is evident in the focus of regular recruiting campaigns at universities across Australia.

Leading companies come looking for the high flyers and the most talented graduates. In this case they are not particularly interested in the discipline of the graduate, as it's more about intellectual capacity. Which is, of course, where graduates of research degrees stand out. The best possible evidence on brain power and capacity to sustain a project comes from the completion of a research degree. The thesis that is produced is benchmarked internationally for quality through the external examination process, so employers understand well that research degree graduates are the cream of the crop and will contribute as leaders and innovators in their organisations.

And while all of that might sound scary in terms of demands on an individual student, it's important to recognise that the vehicle for achieving these high levels of intellectual development can be very down-to-earth and practical. Certainly there are opportunities for those who have a bent for the abstract or theoretical, say, in historical research or philosophising about our discipline. But increasingly, research degree students are undertaking projects that are situated in their workplaces. In some cases the students are specifically employed to undertake an industry project — this is very common in science and technology fields. More often the project is based on a real-life situation, initiated by the student in their own professional workplace. So a librarian might undertake a project to establish, deliver and evaluate a specific program or service mixing both theory and application of the theory. The outcome of the implementation would be analysed with the factoring of what was learnt into the final product or service. A budding writer might develop a play for children situating it in a critical theoretical framework. Or a web designer might draw on the theoretical literature on how people 'read' websites before developing a site, testing its use and reflecting on the outcomes in terms of the theory.

These are just a few examples to illustrate that a research degree nowadays does not have to be a lonely or isolating experience where the student works with a narrow focus at a distance from the so-called 'real' world. The trend to doing research projects situated outside the academy comes from the recognition that contributions to the knowledge base and development of individual capacities are not the monopoly of universities. Collaborative efforts that allow the student to link theory and its application in practice are strongly encouraged by most universities, as the effectiveness of these approaches is well recognised.

A final word about the benefits of completing a research degree. One of the best parts of my job as dean of the University Graduate School is meeting students graduating with research degrees. They walk a few inches off the ground because they realise just what they have achieved through the effort of completing a thesis. They know they have stretched their brain pretty well to its limit and now have a foundation for research and critical thinking that sets them apart as highly talented individuals.

So if you want to stretch *your* brain, take a look at doing a research degree. It's a very worthwhile endeavour.   ∎

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