



Equity and postgraduate coursework (PGCW) programs:

Scoping out a new research agenda and
opportunities for changes in policy and
praxis

Liam Phelan
Sally Baker
Keith Harris
Matt Lumb
Belinda Munn



THE UNIVERSITY OF
NEWCASTLE
AUSTRALIA



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Project description:

Policies and research focussed on understanding and achieving equity in higher education have traditionally centred on students' entry, participation and success in undergraduate programs. In contrast, questions of equity and postgraduate coursework (PGCW) have received little attention in higher education. This project identified and explored equity concerns in the context of postgraduate coursework (PGCW) programs. Areas for inquiry included:

1. Enabling initiatives. Should enabling or orientation support be offered to students in PGCW programs? What support might benefit students who are new to tertiary education and other students (such as those returning to study after an extended period away) in their postgraduate learning?
2. Equity group representation. What governance, policy and pedagogical approaches might serve to ensure proportional representation of equity groups in PGCW programs?
3. PGCW programs in the wake of massification of higher education. As educational qualifications become more common they inevitably become devalued. With PGCW programs becoming 'entry level' qualifications for many, how might this be significant for the equity agenda?

Conceptual and/or methodological framework:

This project employed a mixed methods research design, engaging in statistical and interpretive analysis of data collected via two surveys (one to current PGCW students, n = 390; one to staff engaged with PGCW programs, n = 96). In addition to these local data, two comprehensive reviews of international anglophone literature and national policy documents were conducted.

Key findings:

Equity at postgraduate level is an increasingly important consideration in the context of widening participation to tertiary education. Key challenges for PGCW students include juggling study commitments with work and family/ caring responsibilities, developing a sense of belonging to a learning community, and navigating university systems and processes. Many PGCW students want – and benefit from – orientation to university; areas of most interest for postgraduate students are standards, expectations, university systems and online learning environments. Other locally contextualised findings include:

- Around one eighth (13%) of postgraduate students at UON have begun PGCW study without studying at undergraduate level – postgraduate study is therefore their introduction to tertiary education. This finding challenges commonly-held assumptions about what knowledges, experiences and 'skills' PGCW students bring with them to their studies;
- Most postgraduate students surveyed (59%) were first in family to undertake tertiary education; and
- Interestingly, around half (52%) of surveyed staff at UON are also first in family.

Implications for the future:

This research points to three important opportunities for further inquiry:

- Extending beyond the UON experience to develop a better understanding equity challenges in relation to PGCW programs nationally;
- Exploring the policy implications of providing equitable access to PGCW study; and
- Grappling with the methodological challenges of exploring the PGCW-equity nexus.