

## Wendy Larcombe

When you think of postgraduate study what sort of work do you imagine the student doing — research, coursework or a mixture of both? Do you imagine a lone individual tapping away at their computer on a desk covered with books, notes and photocopied journal articles? Or a white-coated researcher at a lab bench side by side with a select group of peers?

The majority of postgraduate students at the University of Melbourne are now enrolled in coursework programs. In August 2003, for example, there were 4,853 students enrolled in coursework Masters, and an additional 3,599 enrolled in postgrad and graduate diplomas and certificates (of a total postgrad enrolment of 13,086).<sup>1</sup> Postgraduate study is thus increasingly characterised by coursework rather than pure research; and, while the difficulties of research degrees are not to be underestimated, there is growing awareness that coursework study carries a unique set of challenges and issues for postgrad students.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, postgrad coursework students face particular academic-related issues and frustrations that arise from what I'll call their 'status confusion'. Despite the force of their numbers, coursework students often feel that they do not have a recognised and respected identity — that they are not 'full members' of the postgraduate community, or of the academic department in which they are studying. This was confirmed by an investigation of first-year postgrad experiences in 2001 which found that there was a 'perceived hierarchy of postgraduate degrees and students' at the University of Melbourne which had a tendency to 'devalue coursework students by implying that only research students are 'real' postgraduates'.<sup>3</sup>

I experienced this first hand when I returned to Melbourne Uni in 2001 to undertake a Grad Dip Ed, having previously completed a PhD. I learned in no uncertain terms that as a Grad Dip student I was not a 'real' postgrad — I was told as much when I applied for, and was denied, dial-in access to the University computing system and when I enquired about photocopying and printing allowances (same as undergraduate). Most significantly, perhaps, in many of my classes I was sitting alongside first and second year Bachelor of Education students in what were essentially undergraduate subjects. It was a learning experience; but not really of the kind I'd hoped for.

Has the lot of the postgrad coursework student improved since 2001? I'm aware from my current work in the LLSU that access to facilities and resources remains a key discriminator between research and coursework postgrads in many departments. The lack of an effective peer cohort and a coherent institutional identity also remain causes of

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<sup>1</sup> School of Graduate Studies, *Annual Report 2003*, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> These issues are well-documented in UMPA's position paper 'Ensuring quality in postgraduate coursework' (3 April 2003) and the UMPA research paper 'How can we afford all this? An investigation into coursework postgraduate students' experiences of financial barriers at the University of Melbourne' by Rosemary Chang and Hoa Pham (2002).

<sup>3</sup> Kaz Ross, 2001, *First Year Postgraduate Students at the University of Melbourne: a preliminary investigation*, p iii.

student dissatisfaction with postgraduate coursework. Given this, it is welcome indeed that the Academic Board recently adopted the recommendations of a report on Infrastructure Support for Postgraduate Coursework Students.<sup>4</sup> As well as improving coursework students' access to computer facilities and shared work spaces, the report recognizes the need for dedicated departmental 'social/meeting' spaces to help facilitate the 'development of an intellectual community within the postgraduate cohort' (rec 3.2). Of course, space alone will not engender an intellectual community, but 'a room of one's own' is never a bad start.

## **Francesca Bussey**

Coursework students are arguably the most diverse student cohort enrolled at Melbourne uni. This is so not only because of the variety of coursework streams available, but also because coursework students enrol for a range of reasons – for professional development, in order to work towards a Doctorate, or purely out of a desire for intellectual stimulation (and this is just a sample of student motivations!).

This doesn't mean however, that coursework students don't share any common ground. Indeed, one of the characteristics of postgraduate coursework is that students are expected to master course content very quickly, and this can be extremely difficult when juggling work and family commitments – a double act that many coursework postgrads share. Accordingly, there are two major issues that coursework students face - time management and understanding academic expectations.

*I was beginning to think the whole thing was a big mistake. Everything seemed to be suffering; I didn't have any time for my family and I was missing deadlines at work. Now I have a series of planners that I constantly refer to and this has helped me control the situation. I'm getting better marks, too!*

*Beth, Postgraduate Diploma in Arts Management*

The most important thing when you study, particularly when you study intensively, is to maintain control. In order to achieve this, you need to be able to develop a balanced working week that includes leisure as well as study, work and family commitments. Key to this is time management. Now, many of you will already be used to putting systems in place to manage time – effective work and home schedules generally require this – but now is the time to really make use of this skill. Think about a variety of levels of planning (long, medium and short term), assess and reevaluate constantly and don't be afraid to change a schedule if it isn't working for you. Even if you are new to it, getting together a time management plan will help you control the demand of postgraduate study.

*The last time I did any study was twenty years ago and that was in the arts. At first I wasn't sure what my lecturers and tutors wanted from me and I still find that I have to catch up on some knowledge. But I've learned not to be embarrassed by this and*

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<sup>4</sup> See the University of Melbourne Academic Programs Committee Report to Academic Board (25 November 2004), <http://cgi.unimelb.edu.au/abp/archive/2004/pdf/0410C01.pdf>

*have factored catch-up time into my schedule. And boy, do I pester my lecturers for help and advice!*

*Brian, Masters of e-commerce*

Many postgraduate students find themselves entering an unfamiliar discipline after some time away from study. This can be daunting, yet it is important to recognise that you are not alone. Remember that you are ‘learning’, not yet ‘learned’ – you are on a curve that is leading towards mastery of a subject, not beginning with it. So, talk with your lecturers and tutors; clarify expectations of each other and discuss ways you can work together most effectively. Work with staff to put in place catch-up strategies if need be and familiarise yourself with the discipline you are now working in – think about how articles are written (abstract or executive summary?), build a glossary of terms and make full use of the services available to you (for example, academic writing courses through SGS). Remember too, the lessons you learned at an undergraduate level: use your course outlines to establish content boundaries, conceptual frameworks, skill requirements and so on.

*At first I felt like I was in a tornado! But I learned to manage situations with good planning and I always asked for help – from student services and my lecturers and tutors. This made the whole experience less stressful and I actually enjoyed large parts of it!*

*Sascha, Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Ethics*

Postgraduate study is a swift and challenging process for coursework students, with a demanding schedule that requires a flexible and deft approach. So, if you are just starting a coursework program, or even if you are in the middle of one, reflect on the lessons of past students and past studies, use all available strategies and services that may suit your needs, and be creative and pragmatic in planning your postgraduate experience.

## **Anthony McCosker**

### **Confronting the Minor Thesis**

One of the biggest obstacles many coursework postgraduate students have to face is the minor research project and thesis. As just one component of an often overwhelming learning experience, students can find the research and writing involved in a minor thesis an insurmountable hurdle. The whole process is new: from having a supervisor, to doing actual research or academic inquiry, and then having to write a sustained piece of work that could be anything from 12,000 to 35,000 words. By the end of a short period of time you have to learn how to frame a question or hypothesis, design and undertake some form of qualitative or quantitative research, and then write a title and contents page, an abstract, and a series of integrated chapters that include a strong introduction, a review of the literature, and an effective discussion or conclusion with extensive referencing. This is far from easy.

Two of the most significant aspects of this process are supervision and writing. Bear in mind, however, the importance of critical and creative thinking, project management and planning, reading, research and analysis to completing a minor thesis successfully.

Supervision is one of the significant concessions of a minor thesis. It offers one-on-one contact, direct feedback and discussion, and individual and critical attention to your work. Beyond this, however, expectations about the role of a supervisor are often hazy and there are also a variety of styles and approaches taken by supervisors. Some are more hands on, and others may be difficult to pin down, which can cause difficulties in arranging meetings and in turn affect the progress of the research or writing.

According to Rowena Murray, a supervisor is like a good waiter: ‘a good waiter in a good restaurant is around enough to help you when you need things, but leaves you alone enough to enjoy yourself’ (Murray 1998: cited in Marshall 2003: 105). Developing a healthy working relationship early on can help in getting the scope and aims of your research project right. Clear communication throughout the project can help in getting useful feedback, or keeping the research process on track. Primarily, however, the purpose of a minor thesis is to facilitate a ‘discovery’ approach to learning, and so your supervisor will only really be there for support, feedback and advice, and most likely hold back on giving specific direction.

When it comes to writing up the minor thesis you are left, on the whole, to your own devices. Furthermore, there is an expectation that the form of the written thesis will adhere to the academic style and conventions of the discipline, and this is one of the most difficult issues to deal with. With a minor thesis you have little time to develop the level of proficiency with the terminology, vocabulary, concepts, theory and conventions of structure and argumentation common to your field of study. This can cause a sudden drop in writing confidence and ability even for those who had previously done well with essays, reports or other shorter writing tasks.

Writing skills need to be developed alongside your research and enough time must be left for re-drafting, editing for structure, clarity and coherence – even more so than for essays and other shorter writing tasks. This means writing early on and working toward understanding the conventions and style of academic writing in your discipline, and building confidence in using the terminology and language of the discipline. And as with your relationship with your supervisor, the writing process is something that you can build skills in throughout a postgraduate degree.

### **References:**

Murray, R. (1998) *Research Supervision*, Centre for Academic Practice, Stathclyde.

Marshall, S. (2003) 'Supervising Projects and Dissertations' in Fry, H., Ketteridge, S., Marshall, S. *A Handbook for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: Enhancing Academic Practice*, Kogan Page, London. pp. 105-120.

## **Chi Baik**

### **TIPS FOR INTERNATIONAL POSTGRADUATE COURSEWORK STUDENTS**

Postgraduate study is extremely demanding for any student, but international students face the added challenge of having to adjust to a new environment and academic culture – not to mention having to study in a second language. Getting off to a good start is essential so here are some tips to help you make the most of your limited time.

#### **1. Develop a network and get involved in university life.**

Attend faculty welcomes and orientation programs, and participate in departmental postgraduate seminars as well as the events run by UMPA and SGS. This is a good way to learn more about the new academic culture and it's also a great way to meet other postgraduate students who are in similar situations as you.

#### **2. Find out about the expectations and requirements of your course.**

Do you know the types of assessment tasks you will have to complete? Different assessment tasks have different requirements in terms of structure, style and presentation and it is very important that you find out what is expected. Keep in mind that there are cultural differences in assessment and you may find that the expectations of academic work in your department are quite different to what you have experienced in the past. For example, a good essay in Korea or Malaysia is quite different to what is considered to be good academic essay in Australia.

#### **3. Understand your academic strengths and weaknesses.**

Once you know what is expected of you, think about whether you have the necessary knowledge and skills to complete the tasks well. If you are moving across disciplines – for example, from a B. Science to a Grad Dip. in Arts Management, you may find that you have some gaps in your knowledge and you will probably have to do some extra reading. I suggest that you go to the library and find a textbook on the subject or ask your lecturer to recommend a primer.

You may also find that there are different writing and learning skills requirements in your new course. If this is the case, enroll in a short course or workshop series run by the SGS and the LLSU.

#### **4. If English is not your first language, have a language development plan.**

The English language demands of postgraduate study are high and you will have to work on developing your language skills. Bear in mind that this is a long process and you cannot expect to improve your English language skills in a few weeks or by going to a few

workshops. You need to have a semester-long plan that includes regular periods of self-study and practice.

Think about the areas that you need to develop. If you are studying in a new discipline, then you should spend some time on a regular basis (perhaps 20 minutes per night) learning subject-specific terminology and building your vocabulary. Do you need to improve your grammar or writing skills? It's not always easy to assess your own language needs, so if you need help in making a language development plan, then make an appointment at the LLSU to see a language adviser.

### **5. Be active in asking questions and seek help early.**

If you have questions about the content of your subjects, make sure you ask your lecturer. If you don't feel comfortable raising questions in class, find out when your lecturer is available to see students and make an appointment or send him/her an email.

Also, find out about the types of services available at the university and seek help early. For example, if you feel that you need help with your writing skills, don't wait until your assignment is due or until you get your assignment back, go to the LLSU and seek help early.