

Third year student decision making on postgraduate study intentions

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effect of a single semester of study on intentions to undertake postgraduate study. The study was conducted over two years using approximately 120 students enrolled in a third year Behaviour in Organisations university course at a research intensive university. Students demonstrated no statistically significant change in their postgraduate study destination intentions over the period of the semester, despite encouragement from faculty. Students neither changed their preferences for the type of masters course in which they intended to enrol, nor did they change the degree to which they intended to study either a combined masters/PhD or research-only PhD degree. Implications for future research and for developing a better understanding of this under-researched area are discussed.

Keywords: business education, career development, graduate management education, management education, individual development

The decision to embark on a postgraduate degree may be made at many stages: before the start of a student's undergraduate career, during the undergraduate degree, towards the end of the undergraduate degree, or some period of time after the student has graduated. Little appears to have been written about the antecedents to the decision to become a postgraduate research student, yet student decision making influences and processes are of crucial interest to program coordinators as well as deans and heads of department. The majority of literature on postgraduate research students' characteristics and decision-making is post-hoc, after the student has enrolled in a postgraduate research degree (see, for example Neumann, 2003). The respondents in such studies are, rightly and appropriately, the students who went on to become postgraduate research students. There is a scarcity of research, however on the antecedents to the postgraduate study decision. The current study seeks to initiate research in this domain by investigating the postgraduate research intentions of students studying organisational behaviour while the students are still enrolled as undergraduate students.

There is an emerging literature on honours study (see, for example AVCC, 1995; Schatz, Boroujerdi, & Deth, 1987; Shaw, Holbrook, & Scevak, 2006) and a growing research literature on postgraduate research study. The area broadly covers investigations of student characteristics (Carter, Carre, & Bennett, 1993; Humphrey & McCarthy, 1999; Johnson, Lee, & Green, 2000), the learning styles preferences of postgraduate research students (Haggis, 2002; Klein, McCall, Austin, &

Piterman, 2007; Smits et al., 2004; Wu, Griffiths, Wisker, Waller, & Illes, 2001) as well as areas of interest to policy and institutional quality assurance. The latter include completion rates differences between postgraduate research students (Wright & Cochrane, 2000), teaching of the postgraduate program (Breen & Lindsay, 1999; Chapman & Pyvis, 2005; Lindsay, Breen, & Jenkins, 2002; McMichael, 1993; Motteram, 2006; Pearson & Brew, 2002), the university environment and research experience (Barrett & Lally, 2000; Deem & Brehony, 2000; Delamont, Atkinson, & Parry, 1997; McCormack, 2004; Neumann, 1992; Roff & McAleer, 2001) and the dissonance experienced by the postgraduate student (Wisker, Robinson, Trafford, Creighton, & Warnes, 2003). Student-supervisor relations also feature (Bartlett & Mercer, 2000; Gurr, 2001; Harman, 2003; Hockey, 1994, 1995). However, no studies have yet been located on decision making to proceed or otherwise with postgraduate study.

Multiple factors are likely to influence students in many major decisions – such as workforce destination – over the course of their undergraduate degree. It would be reasonable to expect that the passage of time during the undergraduate degree would have strong influence on some students' intentions to progress to a postgraduate research degree. The lectures, discussions with academics, tutors, fellow students, subject matter, tutorial topic materials and other influences of any semester could be expected to influence students in their work and study destinations. A third year undergraduate student has a number of academic options. A student could finish their studies after the third year or where they meet the minimum academic prerequisites, do a fourth or honours year. Such a choice would then provide immediate opportunity to progress directly to a PhD. It is also possible to move from third year undergraduate study to postgraduate coursework study with programs available at postgraduate diploma and masters levels. The current study focuses on those undergraduate students and their progression choices.

Given the number of postgraduate students who anecdotally suggest they did not intend on postgraduate study when they commenced their undergraduate degree, we might assume that students form many of their intentions to progress to a postgraduate degree during the course of their undergraduate degree. At any time throughout a degree, students would be expected to have more or

less of an intention to continue toward a postgraduate research degree. This study examines the postgraduate intentions of third year students undertaking an organisational behaviour course. The study is, however, representative of any undergraduate subject area where there is choice in the postgraduate selection. The study is representative of those subject areas where there is a selection of specialities within a program. For example, the business student who might think about an MBA or a doctorate. If an MBA, then what major should be selected? Human resources? Industrial relations? Change management? Another? The research question posed in this study investigates the influence of the passage of time – one semester – on the postgraduate research intentions of two years of student cohorts in a single discipline.

METHOD

Subjects: Subjects were students at a large research intensive university in two consecutive years. The research took place during the first semester of the third year of study in a Behaviour in Organisations course, which was taught by faculty from the organisational psychology program. There were two lecturers in the course and two tutors. Both lecturers had masters and PhD qualifications and the tutors were students in a combined masters/PhD in the first year of the study and masters students in the second year of the study. Both lecturers were keen to find out their students' intentions for and to promote postgraduate study.

Materials: Students were asked to complete a study intentions questionnaire indicating the degree to which they were likely to progress to each of the possible study options. The questionnaire, designed for this project, included the following items:

1. I intend studying a psychology honours program
2. I intend studying a psychology masters program
3. I intend studying a combined masters/PhD program
4. I intend studying a PhD program.

It should be noted that the option of a combined Masters/PhD program is unique in the area of psychology. It has been designed to meet the formal requirements of professional registration by the Psychologists Registration Board and the Australian Psychological Association as well as to provide an opportunity for research.

Given that there are a range of masters degrees in psychology, a further scale was developed for those students who were thinking of or planning to continue to a masters degree. The following items based on the selection offered at that university were used to determine the particular masters degree the students were most attracted to:

5. I intend studying a masters of Clinical Psychology program (or masters/PhD)
6. I intend studying a masters of Counselling Psychology program (or masters/PhD)
7. I intend studying a masters of Forensic Psychology program (or masters/PhD)
8. I intend studying a masters of Organisational Psychology program (or masters/PhD).

The following wording preceded the items: “Although you may not yet have decided on what you will do at the end of this academic year, we are curious to know your current thoughts on the possibilities of continuing study and in particular, any higher study in psychology. That could be immediately or a few years after finishing your current degree. Indeed, some students are already enrolled in an honours degree. On the other hand, some students see the study of psychology as a small part of another degree program and career.” In year one, respondents were asked to rate their agreement with each item using a five point Likert scale from *1 = strongly agree* to *5 = strongly disagree* while in year two, the Likert scale was reversed so that *1 = strongly disagree* and *5 = strongly agree*. The scores for year one respondents were reversed to be consistent with the more appropriate scale direction used in year two. The Likert-agreement to each item design was chosen over a forced choice design where respondents would be asked to “select which of the following are most likely for you” because it was expected that some students would still be unclear about their study destination preferences in their 3rd year. This design enabled students to indicate their degree of intention as a study destination for more than one preference simultaneously.

Institutional ethics approval which would enable tracking of student opinions was obtained. Student confidentiality and anonymity in the research analysis and publication was ensured and students were free to opt out of the study without consequence at any stage. Participation in the study was not a requirement of the course. A questionnaire was distributed during week two of the semester to those students who agreed to participate as volunteers in the research. The questionnaires were

completed outside class time and returned the following week. An identical questionnaire was distributed in week 11 and completed during tutorials.

The study involved a simple, but typical, intervention to ascertain study intentions. The lecturers announced during their lectures, on two occasions each, their areas of specialisation and research interest. The lecturers emphasised their desire to see students progress beyond the undergraduate level on to an honours year or to masters and doctoral levels and made direct informal and unscripted appeals that students might consider continuing through to honours, masters or doctoral level. In both years, the first lecturer made appeals during lectures in weeks 2 and 6, while the second lecturer made appeals in weeks 8 and 11. At all times, both lecturers demonstrated enthusiasm for students to progress to postgraduate research study. The intervention could be considered typical of the type of informal encouragement normal in third year courses in many disciplines within universities.

RESULTS

In year one, there were 100 students enrolled, of whom 96 responded at Time 1 and 70 responded at Time 2. In year two, of the 80 students enrolled, 78 responded at Time 1 and 66 responded at Time 2. Most students supplied their student number on both occasions, enabling any changes in their responses to be tracked over the semester. After removing responses with missing data there were 60 students in year one and 58 students in year two who responded to both Time 1 and Time 2 surveys who included their student number on both occasions. Across the two years, there were 78 (67%) female and 38 (33%) male respondents with an average age of 21.5 years. Respondents came from a range of cultural backgrounds with 61 (52%) respondents born in Australia, 52 (45%) who speak only English at home and 35 (30%) respondents who speak Chinese at home. There were 84 (72%) respondents who were psychology or science students, while 33 (28%) of respondents were from non-psychology programs such as arts, economics or commerce degrees. Descriptive statistics for both the progression intention and masters choice items are given in Table 1.

----- TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE -----

Reliability for the scales was established with the four progression items – intention to continue to honours, any masters, the combined masters/PhD program and the PhD program – generating a Cronbach’s alpha of .85 at Time 1 and .86 at Time 2. The masters choices scale comprising the clinical, counselling, forensic and organisational options generated Cronbach’s alphas of .72 at Time 1 and .73 at Time 2. Table 2 shows the descriptives, correlations and Cronbach’s alphas for both progression intention and masters choices scales.

----- TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE -----

At Time 1, the most popular of the progression intention items was the honours program (3.13), followed by any masters program (2.97) then the combined masters/PhD program (2.57) and least popular of the progression intention items was the PhD (at 2.45). At Time 2, the same sequence was maintained with means of 3.21, 3.03, 2.43 and 2.15 for honours, masters, combined masters/PhD and PhD respectively. These results are shown in Figure 1.

----- FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE -----

The clinical, counselling and forensic masters programs shared similar levels of popularity at Time 1 with means of 2.31, 2.25 and 2.03 respectively while the organisational psychology masters program was the most popular with a mean of 2.83. At Time 2, the means demonstrated a similar pattern at 2.29, 2.30, 1.94 and 2.72 respectively. These results are shown in Figure 2.

----- FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE -----

To determine whether there was any statistical significance in the degree to which students changed their intention to progress to further studies over the period of a single semester, paired samples t-tests were conducted. The tests were conducted on both the progression intention items and the masters choices items. Table 3 shows the results when Time 1 responses were paired with Time 2 responses to the same item for both scales.

----- TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE -----

When the differences between Time 1 and Time 2 progression intention responses were compared, t-tests revealed that none of the changes in progression intentions were statistically significant. When the differences between Time 1 and Time 2 masters choices responses were compared, t-tests revealed that again, none of the changes in masters choices intentions were statistically significant.

DISCUSSION

The results provide insight into how students are planning their academic progress and which postgraduate degree courses are being considered by students. The most popular intended study destination for respondents at Time 1 was to proceed to honours degree (3.13) with less intention to study the masters (2.97), combined degree (2.57) or pure PhD (2.45) progressively. The same pattern was evident at Time 2. With the exception of the PhD, the increasing time commitment required by each degree appears to act as a deterrent to student intentions and the results are therefore not surprising, especially given a skills shortage and strong employment prospects for graduates. It is important to note, however, that the combined masters degree, although longer than the straight PhD, is more popular than the shorter PhD. This may reflect the particularities of the psychology context, where professional registration is enabled by the masters but not automatically available via the PhD.

A single semester had no statistically significant influence on these two cohorts' intentions to progress towards a PhD. It would seem that the intervention of four lecturer appeals to consider postgraduate study does not influence a student's intention to progress to a PhD at this stage in their undergraduate degree. It may be that for those students who do finally progress to a fourth honours year that the decision making influences and timing are different.

Analyses were conducted to determine the difference between the students' intended study destination at Time 1 and their intended study destination at Time 2. In considering intentions to continue at masters level, the most popular program at the start and again at the end of the semester was the organisational program. This is not surprising given the organisational psychology nature of the course the students were studying. The least popular of the masters programs for both groups of

students was the forensic masters degree at both Time 1 and Time 2. The relationship of organisational psychology as most popular and forensic psychology as least popular was maintained at both Time 1 and Time 2. While clinical psychology was slightly more popular than counselling psychology at Time 1, the order of that slight difference was reversed by Time 2 when counselling psychology was slightly more popular than clinical psychology. Other than that change, the relative order of all options was maintained from Time 1 to Time 2.

Further analyses revealed that the level of intention of students' study destinations was mostly maintained from Time 1 to Time 2. There were no statistically significant exceptions. The clinical psychology masters course became less popular from Time 1 (2.31) to Time 2 (2.29), the counselling masters became slightly more popular (2.25 and 2.30), and the forensic masters became slightly less popular (2.03 and 1.94). In a surprising result given the nature of the intervention designed for the study, the organisational psychology masters course was also less popular at Time 2 (2.72) than at Time 1 (2.83). There were no progression intentions or masters programs that showed a statistically significant change in popularity from Time 1 to Time 2. While it is tempting to speculate on the reasons for the direction or extent of the changes in popularity of the courses, the lack of statistical significance of the results prohibits such conjecture.

In considering the research options available to these two groups of third year students it may be important to consider the significance of the honours year. For example, Neumann (2003) and Neumann and Boucher (2004, 2005, 2006, 2007) show that many commencing research masters and doctoral students say that they were influenced by their honours year research experience or their honours supervisor to continue with postgraduate research. Further, Neumann (2003) found that a well established honours program in research intensive departments and faculties was important for the recruitment of doctoral students from within their own undergraduate population. The high reputation of the established university in the current study may have already attracted as undergraduates those students who intend to progress to a postgraduate research degree. Perhaps the vagaries of a single semester are not enough to influence, let alone persuade an undergraduate student to progress if they

have not already strongly considered postgraduate study as a possibility. On the other hand, it may be that the destination intention may be clarified in the honours year rather than the third year.

There are considerations for program coordinators considering recruitment of postgraduate students. Simple interventions of lecturers' moderate but enthusiastic references during lectures to postgraduate program study had little effect on the students and may even have reduced the students' intentions to progress to clinical and the organisational psychology masters degrees programs. Clearly, the expected result of increasing students' intentions to progress to postgraduate study, whether coursework or by research, was not successful in this study. Other interventions may be more successful. These could include using existing postgraduate students to make the appeals during the course. Interventions could also be more targeted and extend beyond the course lecturers to utilising departmental strategies to encourage continuation with postgraduate study. The latter would involve a more formal, considered approach to future recruitment. The current study did not include an educative component where the various postgraduate options could be detailed, entry requirements could be clarified or individual options could be discussed.

The lack of statistical significance should not be seen as a deterrent, however, to the academic who makes broad informal appeals to their students to consider postgraduate study. The intervention in this study, like any intervention, is likely to have had an effect even if the results were not measurable as statistically significant. Early anecdotal evidence of one of the authors discussing the non-statistically significant results with student participants is a stark reminder of the individual student-centred perspective. The response that their study intentions had indeed changed while doing the course and hearing the lecturers' comments. They said they had decided to continue to do honours if they could, whereas at the start of the course they had been planning to pull out without honours. The authors were reminded that the interventions had been influential in those individual students' lives. A small change in response to our scale – say, from honours to masters – represents an enormous impact on an individual student. Any interventions, including typical or minimalist interventions to encourage postgraduate study, may be influential in a student's life.

There are limitations in the research to be highlighted. First, the respondents were from two single cohorts of students selected due to their choice of a single organisational psychology subject, so generalisation of the results would be improved if a wider range of students were recruited or if different disciplines had participated in the study. It may also be that some students were considering postgraduate study in a discipline other than psychology. This could be controlled for through a modification in the questionnaire to capture study intentions more broadly than the current discipline. Second, respondents were attending and therefore influenced by a range of lectures, tutorials, work and social experiences throughout the semester – none of which were captured or controlled for in the current study. Thus, students could have been dissuaded, rather than persuaded, to progress to postgraduate research study by the lecturers or their tutors. A wider study that controlled for the lecturing and tutoring personnel could overcome that limit. Third, it could be argued that the manner of the questionnaire may be improved by forcing students to choose a single preference at each of Time 1 and Time 2. However, given that students may be influenced by and considering a variety of options for future work and study, the flexibility of indicating more than one possible intention, rather than forcing only one choice, was considered most realistic for this study. Finally, students were competing for honours places that would allow progression through to masters or PhD studies. It is possible that the uncertainty associated with whether an honours and therefore later a masters or PhD place would be available to the individual student may have limited some students' speculation on postgraduate studies.

The study raises many issues for future research. Given the use of student identification numbers, it may be possible to continue this research to track decision making as the student respondents progress through to postgraduate research degree choice. The relationship between the level of the respondent students' success at their studies may be a factor that could be determined when student assessment results are available. It is likely to be informative also to see the study repeated during the fourth or honours year for this cohort. Such extensions are already planned for this project, as well as the addition of different management disciplines. In including further disciplines, consideration is being given to the extent to which there is an expanding postgraduate student base

such as psychology and in order not to unreasonably raise expectations, an institutional desire and capacity to increase postgraduate numbers. The extension of this study has also been broadened to include first year students in order to build the longitudinal component into understanding postgraduate study decision making. Future developments may also involve a closer examination of the success of postgraduate student recruitment methods such as directly approaching the top scoring or keen students, asking for referrals from other academics and responding to direct student queries for supervision.

In conclusion, the results of the current study suggest that individual academics who hint or gently suggest during an undergraduate lecture that postgraduate study is a viable option are not likely to significantly influence their students to consider a postgraduate degree. It appears that moderate references to postgraduate programs neither influences students to progress towards those degrees nor changes students' preferences towards the type of masters degree they may be intending to study. This research breaks new ground by investigating undergraduate students' postgraduate study aspirations. As a result of this study, we know that this student body is not easily persuaded into postgraduate study in a typical semester. Further research is required to determine those times when students are most receptive to appeals for the possibility of postgraduate study and the way those appeals are best made to students.

NOTE

This paper is an extension of a paper on the first cohort results which was presented at the Quality in Postgraduate Research conference in Adelaide in April, 2008. This paper develops that earlier paper by including a second year of data.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1: Item descriptives

	N	Mean		Std. Deviation	Variance
		Statistic	S.E.		
Progression items					
T1 Honours	117	3.13	.144	1.56	2.42
T2 Honours	117	3.21	.136	1.47	2.15
T1 Any Mstrs	117	2.97	.130	1.40	1.97
T2 Any Mstrs	117	3.03	.120	1.30	1.69
T1 Mstr/PhD	117	2.57	.110	1.19	1.42
T2 Mstr/PhD	117	2.43	.096	1.04	1.07
T1 PhD	116	2.45	.115	1.24	1.54
T2 PhD	117	2.15	.090	.98	.95
Masters choice items					
T1 Clinical	117	2.31	.109	1.18	1.39
T2 Clinical	117	2.29	.102	1.11	1.23
T1 Counselling	117	2.25	.096	1.04	1.09
T2 Counselling	117	2.30	.095	1.03	1.06
T1 Forensic	116	2.03	.089	.96	.91
T2 Forensic	117	1.94	.078	.84	.71
T1 Organisational	117	2.83	.121	1.31	1.71
T2 Organisational	117	2.72	.105	1.14	1.29

Table 2: Scale descriptives, correlations and Cronbach alphas

	Mean	SD	N	1	2	3	4
1. T1 Progression	2.80	1.11	116	(.85)			
2. T2 Progression	2.36	.83	116	.723**	(.86)		
3. T1 MstsChoices	2.78	1.02	117	.816**	.674**	(.72)	
4. T2 MstsChoices	2.31	.77	117	.601**	.721**	.731**	(.73)

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3: Scale changes over semester using paired sample test

	T1-T2 Paired differences					t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	SD	Std Error Mean	95% confidence interval				
				Upper	Lower			
Progression intentions								
Pair 1 Honours	-.09	1.06	.10	-.28	.11	-.88	116	0.38
Pair 2 Mstrs	-.06	1.02	.09	-.25	.13	-.64	116	0.53
Pair 3 Mstr/PhD	.15	1.04	.10	-.05	.34	1.51	116	0.14
Pair 4 PhD	.03	1.07	.10	-.17	.22	.26	115	0.79
Masters choices								
Pair 5 Clinical	.02	.89	.08	-.15	.18	.21	116	0.84
Pair 6 Counselling	-.05	1.00	.09	-.24	.13	-.55	116	0.58
Pair 7 Forensic	.08	.84	.08	-.08	.23	1.00	115	0.32
Pair 8 Org	.11	.95	.09	-.06	.28	1.27	116	0.21

Figure 1: Progression intention items at Time 1 and Time 2

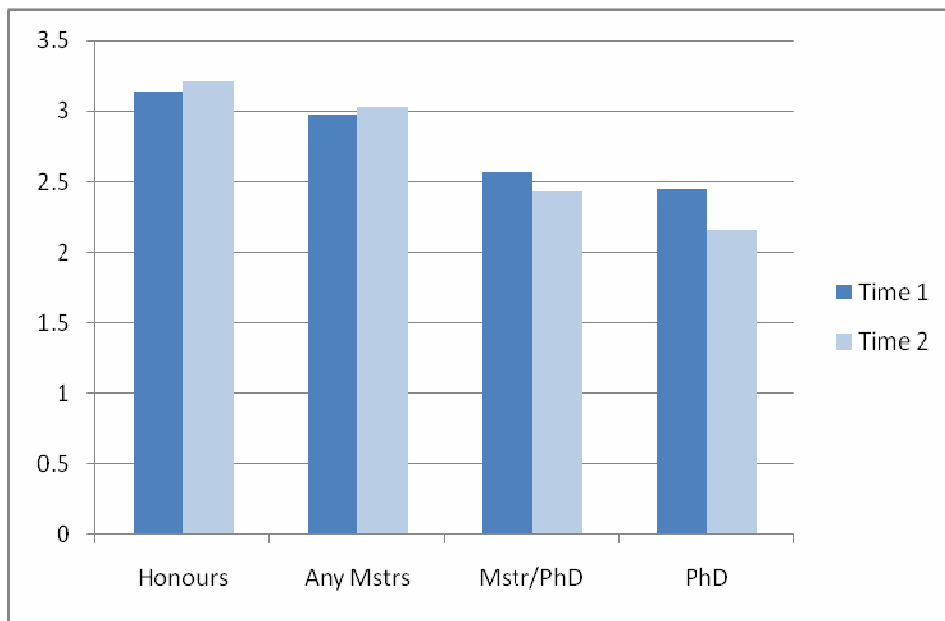


Figure 2:-Masters choices items at Time 1 and Time 2

