

Approaches to Employability at Monash

4 April 2018

The Monash Postgraduate Association (MPA) represents over 23,000 Monash University postgraduate students. The MPA is an independent, not-for-profit association governed by the postgraduates for postgraduates. We have many functions, one of which is to make representations to the University about policy and programs and to lobby for improvements on behalf of students.

The MPA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the University's review on approaches to employability at Monash. Employability is a major concern for Monash postgraduate students. Postgraduates make an enormous investment in their education and often seek a return on their investment through post-study employment outcomes.

Employability is a particularly relevant issue for postgraduate coursework students and international students. There can be a close alignment between postgraduate coursework degrees and occupational roles. Postgraduates undertake these courses to increase their employability. For international students, there is often an aim to gain employment in Australia post-study. An exposure to the Australian workplace can be just as valuable as the content of the courses they study.

The link between education and employability is a complex area and covers a range of issues for postgraduate students. This submission will focus on three areas. They are the use of internships as part of degree requirements, the focus of career services at Monash, and the quality of programs designed to improve the employability of Monash students.

1. The use of internships and work placements towards degree requirements

Internships and work placements are becoming an increasingly popular component of Monash courses. For some degrees, such as teaching and nursing, they are well established components of degrees. Postgraduates can derive a range of benefits from work placements and internships. Some of the concerns for the MPA are the risks of exploitation and the assistance that students need in finding an appropriate placement.

Unpaid internships exist in a blurry line between work experience and employment. The risk for exploitation is high. International students are often unfamiliar with their rights in Australia and are particularly vulnerable.¹

The MPA would like Monash to take a more active role in providing information and support to those undertaking internships and work placements. Where an internship or work placement is part of a course, the University should take more responsibility in finding places for students. It is problematic to require students to find their own placements. Often students do not have the necessary knowledge or networks. If a placement is in anyway required for a course, the MPA believes that the University should take responsibility for sourcing and managing arrangements.

2. The level of University career services

The University provides a range of career related services. Monash does well at basic career services such as resume writing. However, there is feedback from postgraduate students that these services should be more targeted to their specific needs. Postgraduate students possess a set of highly specialised skills. For the career related services to be valuable, they need programs adjusted to suit their needs and their area of expertise.

3. The quality of Monash employability programs

Employability is a major concern for postgraduate students. It is also an area that resists facile solutions. For employability programs to be valuable there is a need to target them to the individual needs and situation of the student. The MPA has fielded numerous concerns from postgraduate students about the quality of programs designed to increase employability. For instance, the Monash PhD program mandates that many students complete 120 hours of professional development training. Research students have consistently reported to the MPA the poor quality of these offerings.² The MPA welcomes efforts by the University to increase the effectiveness of its employability offerings and services, but cautions against any intervention that imposes mandatory requirements on students. For postgraduates, the quality of offerings is paramount. Unless it is effective it is not worth doing at all.

¹ Abrahams, N. (2018, March 28). International students at risk of exploitation. *The Australian*.

² More information on these issues is available in the reports *Submission to Monash Graduate Education (MGE) in Response to the Monash Doctoral Program* (March 2017) and *Preliminary data from the Monash Postgraduate Association (MPA) Research Postgraduate Survey* (October 2017) available from <http://mpa.monash.edu.au/publications/index.html>.