

AN OVERVIEW OF THE AUSTRALIAN SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Students at Australian universities undertake a bachelor's degree of 3 to 6 years' duration. Many students opt for double degrees, that is law and humanities, humanities and commerce, science and engineering or similar. The average period of study to obtain a bachelor's degree is 4 – 5 years after which the student generally joins the workforce full-time.

Masters qualifications are generally undertaken later in life, after a few years' professional experience, if they are undertaken at all. Unlike in some parts of Europe, a masters is not considered essential for employment. The quality and depth of the bachelors' degrees, particularly double degrees, is considered sufficient to gain employment. Doctorates are rare, except in the case of people who want to build a career in research.

University undergraduate studies are funded, in part, by the Australian Government, and in part, by a contribution from the student. Each university is allocated a number of undergraduate Commonwealth Supported Places – that is, student places which are heavily subsidised by the Australian Government.

To give you some examples of the level of subsidisation for each course:

<i>Discipline</i>	<i>Annual government contribution</i>	<i>Annual student contribution</i>
Medicine	\$AUD18,227 (€1.000)	up to \$AUD8,499 (€1.100)
Engineering	\$AUD14,363 (€0.600)	up to \$AUD7,260 (€0.350)
Nursing	\$AUD11,280 (€0.800)	up to \$AUD4,077 (€0.440)
Law	\$AUD1,674 (€0.000)	up to \$AUD8,499 (€1.100)

2008 figures

These amounts do not represent the exact cost of tuition in each discipline. In practice, many universities cross-subsidise courses.

This system, introduced by the Labor Government in 1989, ensures the ongoing financial viability of the higher education system which has grown from an elite system to a mass education system in the last 30 years. It also recognises the personal benefit which students obtain from their studies, and the correlated expectation that they should contribute to the cost of their education. The introduction of this system

has gradually resulted in fewer students dropping out of university studies, as the decision to go to university and incur fees means students take the decision to study more seriously than when it was free.

The maximum level of the student contribution is set by the Australian Government. It is set at a level which, surveys tell us, does not discourage students from entering university. The rates used to be uniform, meaning, for instance a student would pay the same for a teaching degree wherever it was undertaken. However, the Liberal-National (Centre Right) Government changed this in 2005 to enable universities to set the level of student contribution up to a defined and uniform maximum. It was intended that this measure would introduce some price differentiation reflecting the difference in quality between courses and universities.

Most importantly, no student is required to pay up front fees. Students who are successful in obtaining a Commonwealth Supported Place (entry is very competitive and is based on marks received in State wide exams during the final year at secondary school) are able either to:

- pay their contributions up front/at the start of studies (for which they get a small discount) or
- pay them when they start to receive an income greater than \$AUD41,595 (€25.000) per annum.

In the latter case, when they reach the threshold salary they start to pay back their debt through the taxation system through a small payment each fortnight. If a graduate never reaches that level of salary, the graduate never pays the debt back.

The average debt is slightly more than \$11,000 (€6.000) at the completion of studies although that is likely to increase slightly over the next decade due to the recent increase in Student Contribution rates. It takes a student, on average, 10 years to repay their university debt. However, as there is no interest applied to the debt, students do not rush to repay it.

The University of Melbourne and the Melbourne Model

The University of Melbourne's *Melbourne Model* introduced a new approach to qualifications. The new approach was based in part, upon the Bologna process, adopting a *licence-master-doctorat model*.

Licence/undergraduate study

Under the Melbourne Model, all undergraduate students will undertake a generalist degree in arts, biomedicine, science, commerce or environment before moving onto professional masters in subjects such as architecture, accounting, law, physiotherapy, etc.

In the undergraduate study, all students will undertake a major sequence, that is one or two subjects in the first year, three subjects in the second year and four in third year – the equivalent of approximately one third of an undergraduate program. Other subjects from outside the core program will be studied alongside the major at each year level and are designed to expand student thinking in new ways into new areas.

This change was adopted in part as a result of consultation with employers who argued that while graduates require a profound understanding of their discipline, they must appreciate the broader context in which their skills are employed and be ready to apply their knowledge in an increasingly wide range of situations.

Students will also be expected to undertake some of their study abroad during their undergraduate study, to study a foreign language, engage in online projects with students from an overseas partner university or contribute to joint international research initiatives.

Master/graduate professional entry course

After completion of their bachelors level study, students are expected to go on to a masters (also called a graduate professional entry course), to ensure they have sufficient professional skills to gain employment.

Masters courses will be of two to three years duration, and are offered presently in:

- Applied Commerce (Accounting)
- Architecture
- Construction Management
- Forest Ecosystem Science
- Landscape Architecture
- Law - Juris Doctor
- Music Therapy
- Nursing Science
- Property
- Psychology
- Social Work
- Teaching
- Urban Planning

This list will grow over time as all professional faculties move to the new model.

In this way, the University is “normalising” the masters qualification, that is, making it, if not compulsory, then at least presumed, to obtain an entry-level professional qualification. This contrasts with current practice whereby graduates generally do not do a masters, or if one is done, it is done after 2 – 10 years work experience.

While this system would seem quite normal to a European, the new approach to tuition adopted by the University of Melbourne is radical in Australia. It is designed to increase excellence in teaching and research through a significant increase in the university's revenue, and in doing so, push the University to the top of Australian rankings and to enable it to compete with the best universities in the world.

The new model will "normalise", or "massify" the undertaking of a masters degree, and will be more consistent with both the European LMD system and the United States' system of generalist college degrees and professional postgraduate study.

While the changes involve some increase in fees for some students, study at the University will remain accessible, equitable and affordable. Through the availability of generous government loans, students are able to defer the repayment of their studies until their salary is sufficiently high to make moderate fortnightly repayments.

Importantly, it is also a huge step in the diversification of the Australian higher education system. For too long, Australia's 38 universities have been subject to a 'one size fits all' model. Despite the Australian Government's constant call for greater diversity in the sector, no university, apart from Melbourne University, has had the courage to undertake major structural reform. For this reason, the Australian Government was very willing to assist the University of Melbourne in the adoption of the *Melbourne Model*.