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Australian postgraduate research students still prefer to ‘stay at home’: reasons and implications

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Work in 1997 on Australian research postgraduate student mobility indicated that most students chose to remain at their current institution to undertake a research degree rather than move elsewhere, and that they were unlikely to seek widely for information. The present study aimed to determine, 7 years later, if there had been changes in student mobility or the way in which students sought information. The results show that student mobility is virtually the same with only 12 per cent of respondents indicating they were planning to accept a scholarship to undertake a research masters or doctorate at a different university in a different State following completion of their previous degree; 18 per cent were moving to a different university but in the same State, and 61 per cent were remaining at the same university. As with the previous study, it was clear that students preferred to seek advice on future study from their existing supervisor or their departmental colleagues, and that accessing information via the Internet and print media was undertaken relatively rarely. These results are discussed within the context of the higher degree by research (HDR) environment in Australia, the likely benefits of student mobility, and possible strategies for emulating the benefits of mobility with these ‘stay at home’ students.

Keywords: doctorate; mobility; PhD; research education scholarships

Background

The research being reported here is a follow up to a study undertaken by Kiley and Austin (2000) in which they examined the mobility of Australian university higher degree by research (HDR) students. Given that the earlier study had involved respondents who were offered a scholarship to undertake a research degree commencing in 1997, we considered it appropriate to repeat the study 7 years later given that there had been considerable development in the area of research education in the intervening period. These include, for example, the national Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (Marsh, 2002); the rapid development and implementation of research training programs (Kiley & Liljegren, 1999; McWilliam & Singh, 2002; Pearson & Brew, 2002); the implementation of the Australian government’s funding program for research awards; and the Research Training Scheme (RTS) (Gordon, 2000; Kemp, 1999; Pearse, 2002). Furthermore, and partly in hindsight, we wanted to develop a robust baseline of data to examine students’ perceptions and mobility prior to the implementation of the Australian Government’s Research Quality Framework. In the present study, given the ubiquity of the World Wide Web, we predicted that there would be:

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- more student movement than previously; and
- an increase in the percentage of students seeking information regarding postgraduate opportunities through the use of the Internet.

Although the number of doctoral holders in the Australian population is not particularly high, with only 7.8 per 1000 of the employed population compared with 20.3 in Germany (Auriol, 2007), the increasing numbers of doctoral candidates enrolling in Australian universities means that the present study has significance in terms of university policies and strategies. Furthermore, the fact that Australia has one of the youngest populations of doctoral holders; that is, 40 per cent under 45 years compared with the United States, which has only 32 per cent (Auriol, 2007), also adds emphasis to the argument that a further study of the Australian 'stay at home' research student is critical.

What is university student mobility?

Traditionally, mobility of students can include the following four types:

1. Movement to another geographic location following secondary schooling to undertake an undergraduate degree;
2. Movement to another geographic location to undertake a component of a degree; for example, *Study Abroad* programs and exchanges;
3. Virtual mobility; that is, mobility provided through the use of the Internet; and
4. Movement to another location to take up a further degree.

With regard to the first type of mobility (i.e. from school to undergraduate study), Blakers et al. (2003) examined undergraduate student mobility, in this case, movement from location of school education to location of university education. They suggest that ease of access to institutions is critical and that the higher the level of access to an appropriate institution, the less likely it is that students will move. In terms of access, 'the largest effects are with respect to access to universities perceived to be the most prestigious' (Blakers et al., 2003, pp. 15–16). Academic ability is also related to the mobility of undergraduates, as Blakers et al. (2003) propose that the top 10 per cent and the bottom 10 per cent of students eligible for scholarships are more likely to move than those in the middle of the cohort. Furthermore, the bottom 10 per cent cohort is more likely to move than the top 10 per cent cohort. In the HDR study being reported here, it is not possible to know conclusively the academic ability of the students who responded. However, given that all respondents were applicants who were being made an offer of an HDR scholarship at an Australian university, we can assume that most would have had a First Class Honours degree (or an Honours 2A result (or equivalent)). This assumption is based on the ranking systems used in Australian universities for HDR scholarships. However, as the results outlined below indicate, access to an appropriate institution appeared to be a strong factor in HDR students' choice.

In terms of mobility through short-term *Study Abroad* or exchange programs, Daly and Barker (2005) suggest that, in 2000:

There were an estimated 1.8 million students studying in countries other than their own [however] very few Australian and New Zealand students participate in student exchange programs. (p. 26)

Data from 2005 support this contention:

According to [a] mobility survey of 31 universities in 2005, on average, only 3.7 per cent of Australian undergraduates were away on exchange programmes. Amongst undergraduates who ultimately finished their programs, 8.6 per cent took other often shorter trips, such as study tours or work placements. (Lane, 2006, p. 21)

As a comparison, Australia's Minister for Education, Science and Training at the time reported 'something like 20 per cent of US students receiving a college degree would spend time studying overseas' (Lane, 2006, p. 21).

The corollary of this situation is the brain-drain that can occur when Australian universities attract students from countries in which education systems are developing. Although it might be attractive to individuals and even some countries to send their candidates to a higher education system such as Australia's, concern can arise when those graduates are encouraged to stay on, hence depriving their home country of the capacity-building that is likely to have been the original intention.

A more contemporary notion of university student mobility (i.e. type 3) is that proposed by Silvio (2001), who suggests that:

Virtual mobility can be defined as a representation of physical mobility that takes place in a virtual space, called cyberspace, [which] implies no movement of persons in a geographic space. (p. 3)

Student mobility at the HDR level (the fourth type of mobility listed previously) is defined, generally, as the movement of students from one university to another to undertake a higher degree (see, for example West, 1998). However, in the 1997 study by Kiley and Austin (2000), the types of mobility were expanded to include movement from: (a) one department to another, but within the same university; (b) to another university but within the same State; and (c) movement to a university in a different State. With regard to this type of mobility, the findings of the study by Kiley and Austin (2000) suggest that Australian students planning to undertake a higher degree by research also tend to remain where they undertook their undergraduate degree. Critical issues reported in their study included the finding that 59 per cent of respondents ($n=546$) who had been offered a scholarship for HDR study were planning to stay at the same university where they had undertaken their earlier award. Most were planning to stay in the same department. Furthermore, 42 per cent of all respondents had not explored postgraduate research opportunities at other universities. One of the main sources of information about future courses and opportunities came from students' Honours supervisors or other academics within the department where they were undertaking their award.

Does this lack of mobility, relative to student mobility in other, similar education systems, matter? An early report by the Australian Research Council (ARC) (1992) suggests that there is no conclusive evidence one way or the other that mobility *per se* affects research quality:

The fundamental question is whether mobility, or lack of it, influences the quality of research training. The Working Party concluded that it is not proven that research quality diminishes if mobility is not encouraged – in fact, it has no evidence that the level of mobility in Australia had any adverse effect on the quality of outcomes. (p. 23)

Nevertheless, what is not articulated clearly in the ARC report is that there was no evidence one way or the other because the issue had not yet been examined in any

depth. In studying the mobility of Australian postgraduate research students, Kiley and Austin (2000) argued that there was implicit agreement in the literature that mobility of HDR students is a positive activity, and one to be encouraged. Various reports (see Baker, Robertson & Toguchi, 1996; Pearson & Ford, 1997; Powles, 1995; West, 1998) have suggested that postgraduate mobility in Australia was very low compared with countries such as the USA and the United Kingdom. For example, in the comprehensive study by Nettles and Millett (2006), during which they surveyed 9036 doctoral candidates, they found that over '90 per cent of the doctoral students attended a different institution for their doctoral program from the one they attended for their undergraduate education' (p. 57). Furthermore, most of the authors implied that a low mobility rate is undesirable.

Neumann (2002) argues that research student mobility is a good thing in that it contributes to diversity which, in turn, supports long-term development:

As in biological systems, lack of diversity is more likely to reduce capacity to cope with change. Importantly, diversity is a generator of opportunity – as the saying goes 'necessity is the mother of invention' – but invention works best if it has a broad base from which to draw. (p. 168)

Neumann (2002) argues further that:

From an educational and learning perspective, too, the ability to see issues from a number of perspectives is vital. Different knowledge stances, operating through the broad spectrum of knowledge domains with their respective research approaches, generate such diversity. In addition to the various knowledge fields themselves are the people within those fields. The intermingling of characteristics such as gender, age, social background and life experiences, with the different knowledge domains, brings about diversity in complex though, as yet, poorly understood ways. These social and epistemological elements produce diversity over the long term. (p. 169)

There is a dilemma when one appreciates that there are benefits for students working in large concentrations of research interest; for example, a stronger peer group, and access to more and better equipment (Neumann, 2002). The data from the 1999 cohort of research students suggest that existing policies and practices are bringing about research concentrations:

Although all 36 universities in the NUS [National Unified System] now enroll doctoral students, more than half of all PhD completions are concentrated in just six of the Group of Eight [research intensive] universities, and 65 per cent in nine universities. (p. 172)

These findings support data cited in this paper. However, such concentrations might militate against diversity. For example:

A review of mathematics was concerned that most mathematics PhDs undertake doctorates in the same institution as their undergraduate study, a tendency quite different from practices overseas, and [one] seen as stifling breadth of experience. (NBEET/ARC (1996) as cited by Neumann (2002), p. 171).

The present study focuses specifically on developing a greater understanding of postgraduate perceptions, the factors that lead students to stay where they are or to move between institutions, and what forces are likely to influence these issues in the future.

Method

As with the earlier study (Kiley & Austin, 2000), a sample of universities by geographic location and university type was contacted and those universities invited

to participate in the project. Table 1 outlines the types of universities involved in the 1997 study and those surveyed in 2004. Note that all five of the original universities took part in the present study, with the addition of three new ones. The additional universities had been carefully selected to maximise Australian State and regional coverage. The final sample represents all mainland States and the Australian Capital Territory, and includes three universities classified as regional.

Each university's Scholarships Office was sent multiple copies of the survey, which differed only marginally from the earlier survey. (See http://www.anu.edu.au/cedam/staff/mobility_survey.pdf for a copy of the survey instrument.) When an applicant was sent an offer of a scholarship, a copy of the survey and a confidential pre-paid envelope addressed to the researchers (not the university making the offer) was included.

The data were entered into a spreadsheet for later analysis, using the statistical package SPSS (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). So that the participating institutions could use the data for their own purposes, following the completion of the data input, each participating university was sent its own results compared with the combined data for all eight universities.

Results

Perhaps the most significant finding of the second study was the high degree of similarity of the results with those from the earlier study. Furthermore, where there were small-scale changes, the data indicated less mobility in the later study than in the earlier one, which ran counter to the researchers' expectation. However, the use of the Internet for seeking information had increased, as predicted. Of particular note is the addition of the three new universities, which accounted for 16 per cent of the overall responses. Despite this addition, the results are still overwhelmingly similar to the earlier study.

The results for student movement (Table 2) show that a slightly higher percentage of respondents in 2004 compared with 1997 were planning to stay in the same university and same department in which they undertook their previous degree. Even when students were moving, only 12 per cent were moving interstate; the others were planning to move to a nearby university in the same State, usually in

Table 1. Responses by university for 2004 and 1997.

	2004		1997	
	Number	% of total	Number	% of total
Research intensive (large)	101	25	288	53
Research intensive (small 1)	99	25	71	13
Research intensive (small 2)	77	19	106	19
1960s (metropolitan 1)	35	9	44	8
1960s (metropolitan 2)	27	7	37	7
1960s (regional)	30	8	0	0
Ex-college of advanced education (regional)	18	5	0	0
Ex-college of advanced education (metropolitan)	11	3	0	0
Total	398	100	546	100

Table 2. Reported movement of students for 2004 and 1997.

	2004	1997
	Percentage of total	
Given your last degree, are you enrolling/planning to enrol to do your postgraduate study in:		
The same department and same university	54	52
The same university but different department	7	7
A different university but in same State	18	41
A different university in a different State	12	

the same city. Therefore, in 2004 nearly 80 per cent of respondents were staying in the same State in which they had undertaken their previous degree and only 12 per cent planned to move to a different State. The remaining 8 per cent were respondents who had undertaken their earlier degree outside Australia. The only variation in this response related to one of the regional universities, which is a multi-campus institution covering a wide geographical area. The relatively low numbers ($n=18$) could indicate that the statistics are not particularly reliable; however, approximately 40 per cent of respondents was staying at the same university and approximately 40 per cent was moving to a different State.

Demographic information

The main field of study of respondents in 2004 (shown in Table 3) indicates a slight drop over 1997 in the percentage of students applying for HDR scholarships in the Humanities and a slight increase in Health Sciences and Social Sciences.

In line with overall trends in Australian higher education, the percentage of respondents enrolling in a research masters award had dropped from 22 per cent in 1997 to 8 per cent in 2004, with a concomitant increase in PhD enrolments, from 79 per cent (1997) to 90 per cent (2004). Not surprisingly, these results were reflected in the figures related to the respondents' previous degree with 12 per cent stating that their previous degree was a Masters by Research in 1997 and only 7 per cent having a Masters by Research as their previous degree in 2004. Of the 2004 respondents, 75

Table 3. Responses by field of study for 2004 and 1997.

	2004	1997
	Percentage of total	
Science	27	30
Health Science	19	12
Social Science	18	12
Humanities	17	22
Engineering & Technology	11	10
Maths Science	4	6
Law	2	2
Agriculture	2	4
Built Environment	1	1

per cent were applying for a research degree with a Bachelor (Honours) as their previous award, a figure that is similar to the 1997 study (76 per cent).

Again, reflecting overall national trends, there was a slight increase in the proportion of female students responding (Table 4) and a slight increase in the overall age of scholarship applicants. There was also a slight change in the percentage of students who had applied for a higher degree immediately after their previous award.

Exploration of opportunities

When asked whether they had explored postgraduate study opportunities elsewhere, 54 per cent of respondents reported that they had (a similar result to 1997; i.e. 58 per cent). When asked how they had approached the task of exploring such opportunities, there was (as in 1997) an overwhelming emphasis on talking and communicating with individuals rather than accessing information from the media. For example, the most significant sources of information that led students to making decisions came from talking with their Honours supervisor; a potential supervisor, who could have also been their Honours supervisor; or other academic staff; followed by the Internet.

In contrast to the aforementioned sources of information, only 37 per cent of the respondents who explored postgraduate opportunities elsewhere *regularly* used the standard media; for example, local, State, national papers or discipline-specific journals, *with the aim of learning more about postgraduate opportunities prior to applying for a research degree position*. This was exactly the same as in the 1997 study.

Why students chose to move or not to move elsewhere

Certainly the most significant reason that students gave for *moving to another university* was that they saw such a move as a means of broadening their experience. The second reason given by students was the thought that there were better opportunities at another university compared with their original one. These results are also similar to those obtained in 1997.

Table 4. Gender, age and previous award for 2004 and 1997.

	2004	1997
	Percentage of total	
Gender		
Female	59	55
Male	42	45
Age		
20–24 years	43	48
25–30 years	26	26
>30 years	31	26
Year of previous degree		
Previous year	56	60
2 years earlier	15	15
3 years earlier	10	7

The main reason that students gave in 2004 for *not moving to another university* to undertake a higher degree was that *they were satisfied with their supervisor*. Again, this result is very similar to that for 1997. The second reason given, but by substantially fewer students, was the same as 1997; that is, family ties and commitments.

Sixty-two per cent of respondents *did not explore scholarship opportunities* at universities other than 'their own' (compared with 42 per cent in 1997), and over 50 per cent of these students was intending to accept a scholarship from 'their own' university once offered. With 89 per cent of respondents from 1997 intending to accept a scholarship from their own university, this is one of the few areas of variations across the two studies. The main reasons given by the 2004 respondents for making their decisions were satisfaction with their supervisor, followed by the view that their own university offered them better opportunities than elsewhere. Nevertheless, this brings into question how this decision was made given that a large proportion (46 per cent) had not accessed information on any other university.

Approximately 24 per cent of respondents was intending to accept a scholarship at a university *other than the one where they undertook their previous study*. For these respondents the main reason was that it was the university at which they really wanted to study. The second reason, but of considerably less importance, was that they were urged to accept the offer by their supervisor; these results are very similar to those in 1997.

Discussion

These results, particularly when compared with the findings of the 1997 study, indicate much about Australian postgraduate research students. For example, we know that they will generally choose to remain with what they know rather than move elsewhere. We also know that they prefer to seek advice from people with whom they have been working (e.g. their Honours supervisor) rather than through the media, whether online or not. However, the whole question of student mobility at the postgraduate research level raises a number of fundamental issues about the nature of Australian universities and their student cohorts. For example:

- Given that the current higher education system in Australia is designed so that most universities offer a wide range of disciplines in both metropolitan and regional areas, why would an Australian student choose to move elsewhere?
- Given that the financial situation is generally worse for those students who move compared with those who stay where they are, why would a student choose to move?
- Given that a student has already developed a (potential) relationship with a supervisor and has a cohort of colleagues for support, why would a student choose to move to a location where she/he is unknown and the situation is unknown?

In the light of these issues, a further, more fundamental, question arises: Does postgraduate student mobility matter? This is not necessarily a simple question and the answer for Australian students may be both 'yes' and 'no'. Although these, and similar questions, apply to the current climate in Australian higher education, three major developments are likely to change the *status quo* and will affect the mobility of research candidates in the future.

First, recent political developments in Australia suggest that there will be a growing differentiation and niching of Australian universities (Group of Eight, 2007). The maintenance of the phenomenon that 'each university can be all things to all students', which has characterised Australian universities since the 1980s, is likely to change over the next few years. Furthermore, since the change in the federal government in November 2007, the future direction of the previous government's program for assessing research quality and impact is unclear. Suffice to say, it is apparent that some form of assessment of research quality will be in place, and that such a system could have significant impact upon research education in the near future. To what extent HDR candidates and their research will directly influence a university's/department's/research group's 'quality' is unclear. However, it is possible that we could see increased mobility of excellent students, or even the increased 'poaching' of students by the research-intensive universities, in particular by the Go8 universities and between universities within the Go8, as has already happened with top research academics.

Second, the changing face of Australian doctoral education is a significant factor to be considered. As Pearson (2005) suggests, it is timely that doctoral education be rethought in light of significant developments at the local and international levels and because of global interactions. These developments include structural matters, such as the Bologna Declaration (European Ministers of Education, 1999) and cultural/intellectual issues, such as the globalised nature of knowledge. What is particularly pertinent to the present study is that one of the main motivations underpinning the Bologna Agreement was the desire to enhance the mobility of university students across Europe. Hence, Australian higher education potentially faces a major dilemma. The data presented here indicate that Australian research candidates prefer to undertake their research degree where they undertook their earlier degree(s), but with the anticipated differentiation of universities in the near future this may not be sustainable. However, given the globalised nature of knowledge it is critical that Australia's research students experience a research education that equips them to operate effectively in such an environment.

Third, Australia's ageing academic workforce suggests that universities need to not only develop more research graduates than before to replace the 25 per cent of academics who are expected to depart the sector in the next 10 years (Hugo, 2005a; 2005b), but to actively attract research students from overseas who, on completion, will not only be permitted to remain in the country in academic positions, but also be actively encouraged to do so. In 2004–05 Australia had a net loss of permanent academics moving into and/or out of Australia. As Hugo (2005a) says, 'Australian universities over the next decade will be faced by their largest recruitment task for three decades' (p. 341).

And, finally, although there is little in the way of empirical evidence that mobility is itself a good thing for HDR candidates (see Australian Research Council, 1992), there is substantial anecdotal information that suggests students who experience more than one research environment (usually in different universities) during their higher degrees are more likely to have a broader perspective of their general discipline, a richer set of life experiences, and an extended professional network. Such a view was supported by the Australian Minister for Education, the Hon. Julie Bishop, who commented:

Universities say Australian students are missing out on great opportunities that would help to prepare them for the increasingly global job market. Thousands of students from

overseas are keen to study on exchange in Australia, but few institutions here can reciprocate the demand. (as cited by Rout, 2007, p. 21)

Hence, if Australia wants research students to have an approach to knowledge creation and research that prepares them well to operate within a globalised environment, while at the same time recognising that, in the short term, they are likely not to move in substantial numbers, there are several potential strategies that could be adopted, which are outlined below.

Australian universities could look to increase the numbers of students engaged in jointly badged awards (for example) *cotuelles*, which involve the joint enrolment of research candidates in designated programs in both a European and an Australian university. *Cotuelle* arrangements currently exist in only small numbers in Australian universities, but as a means of offering these students a rewarding research experience in their local and an overseas university, they have much to offer. In a similar vein, specific exchange systems within Australian universities could be fostered further. Such programs require funding to allow students to spend three to six months working with research colleagues in another Australian university during candidature. The feedback is generally very positive from those who have engaged in such exchanges as candidates, or as the supervisors of such candidates.

Another area in which increased funding could assist in developing greater mobility of research candidates is in internationally networked research projects. Such projects involving Australian and international research colleagues could incorporate doctoral candidates as an integral part. As part of these projects, movement, albeit short term, between groups could be enhanced substantially. In line with such networking is further encouragement of multi-disciplinary research teams that provide increased opportunities for research students to benefit from the diversity argued by Neumann (2002). A small step in this direction, providing short-term visits and multi-disciplinarity for postgraduates, is being offered through some Australian Research Council Research Networks. However, it is unclear whether this scheme is likely to continue after the first round of 2004–09.

Nerad (2006) reports an interesting model of mobility that is being funded by the US government, whereby a university in Australia and one in the USA are bringing together '[a] group of thirty doctoral students [who] will take part in an international leadership workshop' (pp. 11–12). Fifteen research candidates from each of the two universities, with dissertations in common fields, will learn about, and experience, what culturally and globally sensitive leadership means.

Although the provision of scholarships specifically designed to encourage students to move to another city might assist in student mobility, parallel with this, universities would need to develop, and widely advertise, support programs (e.g. housing, transport, and pastoral care) that are designed to assist students when they are attracted to move to another institution, particularly those from interstate and overseas.

Given how prospective HDR students currently access relevant information, it seems eminently sensible that universities should ensure Honours convenors and supervisors are fully informed of all research options that the university has to offer, given that the data suggest that these people are the main source of information for students. Such information could include exchange opportunities with students in similar groups interstate and overseas.

However, a word of caution is offered by El-Khawas, DePietro-Jurand and Holm-Nielsen (1998), who suggest that the greater the mobility the greater the need

for sound quality assurance processes to ensure that the student experience is a positive and rewarding one.

Conclusion

Although it appears that Australian students can still be classified as ‘stay at home’, we argue that, if universities believe experiencing learning and research in more than one institution is desirable then, instead of bemoaning their students’ low mobility, there are alternative strategies available to provide benefits and a broadened experience. However, a degree of leadership and cooperation by both government and universities is required to enable research students to spend time in other institutions while undertaking their research degree.

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