

## University of Melbourne

### RECOGNITION OF PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

#### Entry to Graduate Programs through Recognition of Professional Experience

#### 1. Background

The University of Melbourne currently has no consistent policy on Recognition of Professional Experience (RPE) as an entry pathway into its postgraduate courses. Courses in the VCA often have a clause in their selection requirements that allows selection to applicants without an undergraduate degree but extensive (usually a minimum of five years) professional experience. Apart from this, when faculties wish to select someone who does not have a degree or a degree in a required cognate area, they must apply to the President of the Academic Board to waive the selection requirements on a case-by-case basis.

The number of such waivers each year is not large. However, this may well be because potential applicants simply think that it is not worth applying because they do not meet the entry requirements. A pool of potentially very able applicants, in fact, may be excluding themselves because they assume the University would be unsympathetic to an irregular application. If there were a published University Policy on entry through Recognition of Professional Experience, it would signal that such a pathway was possible, while at the same time setting clear guidelines on what level of experience was required, and what documentation of the professional experience was needed to enable selection to take place.

#### 2. Principles

The principles on which a proposal for entry into a postgraduate program through RPE must rest are:

- a. (The basic guiding principle for selection in University of Melbourne) “the University is to select only students likely to succeed in its courses”;
- b. There must be clear evidence that the professional experience is relevant;
- c. There must be clear evidence that the experience is at a level that would demonstrate understanding comparable (although perhaps different in nature) to that gained in an undergraduate degree.

#### 3. Equivalence of professional and academic achievement

Experience in itself is not knowledge or skills: at best it is a space in which the acquisition of knowledge or skills can occur. It is thus not satisfactory simply to designate a period of “relevant professional or work experience” as equivalent to the entry requirement, although length is likely to be one major factor taken into consideration for entry.

It is perhaps best to consider what attributes one would expect of a graduate that would serve her/him in further study that a person without an undergraduate degree would need to demonstrate.

#### Discipline Knowledge and Skills

This is particularly relevant where a cognate undergraduate degree is required for entry. In such cases, the postgraduate study assumes that any person undertaking the program will have acquired a certain body of knowledge and/or skills and certain theoretical frameworks, and without them failure is almost certain.

#### Capacity for Learning

Getting through an undergraduate degree is a statement about the student’s capacity to learn within a structured academic environment. It shows the ability to take in new information and perspectives and demonstrate understanding of them in assessment tasks.

### **Capacity for Theoretical and Critical Reflection**

Graduates (ideally) recognise that phenomena can only be understood within particular theoretical frameworks, and that the ability to abstract and generalise from experience and practice is necessary for creating new understanding. They also (ideally) recognise that frameworks and facts can be misleading, and so are able to take a reasoned critical stance on any materials presented to them.

### **Literacy, Numeracy and Computing Skills**

Any graduate is assumed to be a literate person who will be able to meet the demands of academic reading and writing. They will understand (not always consciously) that there are particular writing demands in various subject areas, and they will be able to work towards meeting those demands. They will be experienced in producing substantial texts that summarise and evaluate information and argue a position. They will also have the numeracy and computing skills required for producing work in their particular field so that they can undertake the study and produce assignments without needing extensive support in areas where skills are normally assumed.

### **Research Skills (for those entering research degrees)**

Graduates entering research degrees (unless the degrees have a substantial research methodology component as part of coursework before undertaking a thesis) already have an understanding of how to define an area of investigation, review a body of relevant literature in terms of its contribution to the topic being investigated, knowledge of a range of relevant research methodologies, an awareness of research ethics, capacity to design a research methodology that will reveal what is to be investigated, and the ability to analyse the data produced and see its implications

## **4. Demonstrated features of professional experience**

Applicants without an undergraduate degree would need to present a case that demonstrated their capacities at graduate level in the above areas. The particular features that might need to be addressed for any particular course might be different, but the professional experience would need to be marked by:

- a. substantial length  
For a person to be given credit for professional experience equivalent to an undergraduate degree, the experience will have been extensive. The VCA courses, as mentioned above, require at least five years. This would seem to be the minimum.
- b. continual advancement and high achievement  
The applicant must have shown the capacity to advance constantly in their career, and achieve even to a point that is unexpected for a person without a degree. They will normally hold a position that requires the kind of skills we would expect a graduate to have or be producing work at a level expected of a graduate.
- c. relevance  
Even with courses in which the entry requirement is “any undergraduate degree”, the applicant will need to show that their professional experience has some close connection with the award being applied for. The relevant practical experience will thus compensate for any lack of familiarity in dealing with abstract conceptualisation in the area. For courses in which a particular degree is a prerequisite, the relevance criterion must be very stringently and specifically applied.
- d. continual learning  
The applicant will have shown her/himself interested in continual self-improvement by undertaking non-degree study to expand their knowledge and skills. They will have outstanding success in any courses they have taken, particularly where there is graded assessment. In cases where there is a particular degree required for entry, the knowledge gained from these courses will be explicitly mapped against the expectations of prerequisite knowledge.
- e. high competence in producing documents

The applicant will have demonstrated competence in producing complex analytical reports, papers or other documents, using their literacy, numeracy and computing skills as required. This may be demonstrated either in documents produced in the course of their professional work, or in assignments produced while undertaking courses. In some cases, applicants will be asked to produce a substantial piece of writing as part of the application process. This may be required to be done under examination conditions. This may not be as relevant for some areas where the assessment is largely practical (e.g. in some areas of the Arts), but even there, some demonstration of literacy competence will be required.

f. capacity to undertake research (*for those entering research degrees*)

The applicant will have had substantial responsibility for major research projects, covering all phases of design, implementation and writing-up.

## 5. Processes for selection

The Selection Panel must determine whether there are any specific criteria for entry that must be demonstrated in the professional experience (e.g. specific discipline knowledge, specific research skills) in addition to what evidence is required in the particular cases for meeting the generic skills. These must be communicated to potential students.

It is the student's responsibility to present a case.

Normally the student must provide:

- a C.V. detailing the experience on which they are mounting their case;
- a covering letter, making the case on how their background prepares them to undertake the course for which they are applying, particularly in terms of their existing discipline knowledge and/or skills, their success in previous study and their communication skills;
- samples of relevant documents they have produced, and/or a folio of work if that is appropriate;
- evidence of any study they have undertaken;
- names of at least two confidential referees.

Each application must be considered on its merits by the full Selection Panel. Referees must be contacted. The applicant might be called in for interview, or for an examination as determined by the Selection Panel.

Panels may recommend that an applicant undertake the first subject or subjects through CAP as a way of demonstrating their capacity to undertake the course. In these cases, a clear level of achievement necessary for subsequently being permitted to enrol in the course must be set. It should also be clear whether the CAP subject is purely a condition of entry or if the student will subsequently be given credit for the subject in the course. Care must be taken that the student is not treated inequitably by setting the bar higher than for enrolled students (e.g. it would be unacceptable to expect a student applying for admission through RPE to achieve H2As in two CAP subjects, if those already enrolled in the course only had to achieve a pass in these subjects).

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