

Stories from the (other) edge: why do existing workers want a diploma qualification?

Mark Doran and Alicia Toohey, Southbank Institute of Technology

Abstract

This presentation will report on a survey that the authors have conducted with two distinct student cohorts at their Queensland vocational education institute: graduates of the diploma and advanced diploma programs designed for existing workers; and people who achieved an AQF 5 or 6 qualification through a skills recognition process. Every semester since 2005, the School of Business at Southbank Institute of Technology (SBIT) has offered a range of 18-week diploma and advanced diploma courses in the evening for people who have extensive workplace experience but who are not yet suitably credentialed. At the same time, the number of AQF 5 and 6 level qualifications conferred by SBIT through the recognition of prior learning process has increased by almost 50% over the last three years. The authors will discuss respondents' answers to questions about their motivation for gaining a diploma or advanced diploma and what value, if any, the qualification has subsequently added to their professional and / or personal lives. By presenting the reflections of existing workers on the benefits or otherwise of gaining a mid-level qualification, the authors hope to contribute to the discussion on relevance of diplomas and advanced diplomas.

Introduction

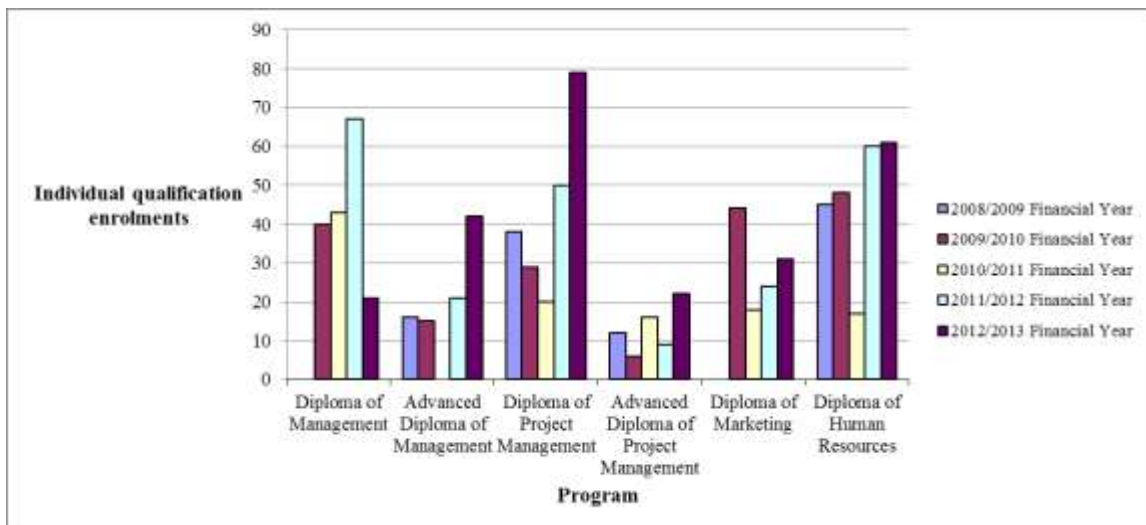
As its title states, this paper is a case study resulting from a short qualitative survey conducted by the authors. It aims to report on the experiences and stories of existing workers who have recently obtained a diploma or advanced diploma from Southbank Institute of Technology (SBIT) in Brisbane. While the analysis of large data sets such as the annual National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) Student Outcomes Survey and the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey give invaluable insights into large trends across the country regarding participation in education and the outcomes that result (Coelli, Tabasso, & Zakirova 2012), this paper has a narrower focus. Its lens is turned on the particular, that is on what existing workers in a specific geographical location say were their motivations for obtaining an Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) 5 or 6 qualification. It is hoped that giving voice to the experiences and opinions of groups of individuals will add some detail and granularity to the broad description of national trends and ultimately enhance our understanding of the diversity of circumstances and motives that play into the bigger picture.

Currently, existing workers can gain a diploma or advanced diploma at SBIT in two main ways. The School of Business offers six programs delivered in the mode of campus-based semester-long (18 week) evening classes in the following areas: project management; marketing; human resources management; and management. The only

entry requirement is that participants are expected to have approximately 5 years of work experience in the discipline which is verified through an interview process run by the program manager. This short-cycle yet relatively intense delivery mode (often called ‘accelerated’) nonetheless meets the rules of the relevant training packages which, in the event of candidates being able to demonstrate appropriate experience in the field, do not require the underpinning lower level certificate qualifications as entry prerequisites.

Figure 1 below shows that the total enrolment numbers across these six AQF 5 and 6 evening programs have, overall, been trending upwards over the last five financial years, with 894 enrolments in total since 2008/09 and the most popular discipline being project management (TAFE Queensland Institute Student Administration System 2013). Further, the program manager reported low rates of attrition among evening students. Individual programs have experienced variations in popularity over this time but this is attributable to the following reasons. From 2013, the Advanced Diploma of Management has effectively replaced the Diploma of Management in response to demand by senior levels in the industry for the higher AQF qualification. In 2010/11, enrolments in all six programs declined as a result of the global financial crisis when businesses as well as individuals were very nervous about investing in any professional development (Pashen, E 2013, pers. comm., 12 March).

Figure 1 – SBIT Evening (Accelerated) Program Enrolments 2008/09 – 2012/13



A second and increasingly popular method by which existing workers have gained AQF 5 and 6 credentials at SBIT is through the skills recognition process which, in the vocational education and training (VET) sector, has been significantly strengthened since 2009 and the completion of the Commonwealth of Australian Governments’ Recognition of Prior Learning Project (RPL). According to SBIT’s enrolment figures, the percentage of AQF 5 and 6 qualifications conferred wholly or almost wholly through the Recognition of Prior Learning process was 3.7% in 2009; 4.9% in 2010; and 5.5% in 2011. (TAFE Queensland Institute Student Administration System 2013). RPL candidates seeking to formalise their extensive work experience into diplomas and

advanced diplomas came not only from business disciplines but also from a wider range of industries such as community services, children's services, health (nursing and paramedical science), set and scenery construction, hospitality, events, and photoimaging.

In contrast, however, to the growing number of existing workers in the Brisbane metropolitan area seeking to gain diploma and advanced diploma qualifications, there is a reported 'declining importance of the diploma as a labour market entry qualification' (Wheelahan et al. 2012, p.7). This apparent difference in the utility of same level qualifications across distinct student cohorts - students entering the labour market as opposed to those already in it - requires further investigation. To this end, the authors surveyed 22 graduates of SBIT diploma and advanced diploma programs in order to report on the value that these individuals themselves have placed on their mid-level qualification.

Method

Two methods were used to survey diploma and advanced diploma graduates. An online survey instrument was developed and distributed to a subset of 54 individuals from the target alumni. There were 11 responses. Individuals who became diploma or advanced diploma qualified using the RPL process had also been invited by email to be interviewed over the phone. Once again, 11 people agreed to take part. While potential respondents were told the purpose for which the survey results would be used (a paper to be delivered at a national vocational education conference), no incentives were offered to participate in the qualitative study. Both the online and phone interview survey instrument consisted of questions relating to:

- respondent's background (current role; length and type of work experience; level of any prior formal studies completed and / or qualifications gained)
- title of the AQF 5 or 6 qualification obtained
- reason for wanting to get the qualification
- individual's opinion of whether the diploma delivered the outcomes initially sought and why expectations were or were not met.

To supplement this survey, the authors also interviewed the manager of SBIT's evening business programs.

Findings and discussion

The demographics of the 22 respondents can be described as follows:

- Ten are female and 12 male;
- The majority are in the 25 to 44 age bracket (20) and two in the 45 to 64 bracket;

- The majority (17) has been in the workforce for more than 10 years: eleven have been working between 10 to 20 years; six have been working longer than 20 years; and only five have been working 5 to 10 years;
- All but one reported that they were currently employed. Respondents work in a broad range of industries including human resources, project management, information technology, call centres, community services, education, music, nursing, and event management. Two participants are self-employed and six identified their positions as being at management level;
- Nineteen of the 22 respondents had previously gained formal qualifications beyond secondary school, the majority of which (14) were AQF 3, 4 or 5 qualifications issued by the VET sector. Three had higher education qualifications and two respondents did not provide details on this question. The high level of prior engagement in education in this survey cohort aligns with the research of Coelli, Tabasso and Zakirova (2012, p. 9) who found that more educated individuals in the over 25 age group were much more likely to enrol in formal education than people with very little prior education;
- Among those respondents who had studied on campus in a classroom setting, the qualifications gained in order of popularity were as follows: Diploma of Project Management (6); Diploma of Human Resource Management (4); Diploma of Management (4); and the Advanced Diploma of Management (2). The total number of qualifications obtained is greater than the number of respondents as one program combines the Advanced Diploma of Management with the Diploma of Project Management thereby allowing students to obtain two qualifications concurrently.
- The qualifications in the RPL group are also presented here in order of popularity: Advanced Diploma of Community Sector Management (2); Diploma of Hospitality (2); Diploma of Events (2); Diploma of Community Services Work (1); Diploma of Family Intake and Support Work (1); Diploma of Nursing (1); Diploma of Clothing Production (1); and Diploma of Music (1).

Figure 2 below summarises the reasons selected by each of the 22 respondents for wanting to gain an AQF 5 or 6 qualification. The survey allowed people to choose multiple reasons from a given list. Once again the motivations are presented in descending order of popularity with differences according to gender and delivery mode also presented.

Figure 2 - Motivations for seeking a diploma or advanced diploma qualification

	Accelerated programs			RPL			Grand Total
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	
Motivation to gain a diploma/advanced diploma							
To advance career in the same industry or business	5	3	8	2	5	7	15
For personal satisfaction	6	-	6	2	1	3	9
To gain an increase in income	5	1	6	1	1	2	8
To do further studies at university	3	-	3	2	2	4	7
To improve job security	5	-	5	-	-	0	5
To move to a different industry or business	2	1	3	1	1	2	5
To get a qualification required by employer	1	-	1	-	1	1	2
Other	2	-	2	-	-	0	2
To get a qualification required by regulation or law	-	-	0	-	-	0	0

For the respondents of this survey, the main reason cited for gaining a qualification was in order to advance in the industry or business in which they were currently employed, and the popularity of this reason was strong for both men and women. This is similar to the findings of Coelli, Tabasso and Zakirova (2012, p. 9) who state ‘Both genders were like to report that the aim of the education was to acquire extra skills for the current job...’. In contrast, however, the diploma or advanced diploma was perceived less by both genders as a mechanism for moving to a different job or industry. Other motivations that rated quite highly were personal satisfaction and to improve income. In fact, for the males in this group, personal satisfaction and the quest for a salary increase were much more motivating than for the females.

Satisfaction levels with the outcomes that the diploma and advanced diploma delivered to graduates were high with 19 out of the 22 respondents (86.4%) saying that the qualifications provided them with what they had wanted. Where respondents of the online survey wrote further comments on this point, they gave positive feedback on the classroom based delivery mode which they felt was effectively targeted to the needs of existing workers in terms of duration, content, and lecturer expertise.

‘Excellent concepts - Accelerated programs. It just teaches you what content you need to know not content irrelevant to a person who has already been in the workforce.’

‘The staff are very professional and their experience that has been passed on to me is what allowed me to achieve my goals.’

‘Excellent program and excellent deliverer (lecturer’s name).

Another respondent pointed out that having a diploma level qualification was an indication to employers of a person’s willingness to undertake professional development which was especially useful in a tight labour market where competitors for the same job might well have higher level qualifications.

A possible downside of this strongly utilitarian delivery method was, however, noted by two respondents. One said he was reporting the concerns of several other classmates and regretted the fact that there was too little emphasis on or orientation to the resources and strategies that learning at a tertiary institution normally requires. Presumably, for this person, the intense focus on delivering the program in the shortest time frame possible was at the expense of developing broader and more general educational outcomes. A second respondent referred to their classroom experiences where fellow classmates did not in fact seem to have the prerequisite amount of extensive work experience needed to enter the accelerated program and this hindered the pace at which learning and discussion was able to take place in the group.

Respondents from the RPL cohort equally reported positive outcomes from gaining an AQF 5 or 6 qualification through the skills recognition process. In particular, many commented on the transformative benefits that a one-on-one interaction with a skills assessor provided: it created an environment in which the candidate could develop both the motivation and discipline to reflect on professional practice. It also engendered satisfaction and confidence from being able to transform extensive work experience into a portable nationally recognised qualification that opened up both professional and further education possibilities.

However, two respondents said that the qualifications did not provide the outcomes hoped for which were to get a job or move to a position in a different industry or business. One expressed some frustration that while they may now be qualified, they still

do not appear to have the relevant experience required by potential employers. Though this survey sample is small, these comments align with the findings of Wheelahan et al. (2012) whose analysis of 2009 Australian Bureau of Statistics data and student or graduate interviews indicate that, with the exception of regulated occupations with strong occupational pathways (e.g. nursing), the diploma is losing currency as an entry level qualification.

Conclusions

While further qualitative research into how existing workers in other jurisdictions are using AQF 5 and 6 qualifications would be useful in identifying trends, the results of this small qualitative and geographically specific study indicate that mid-level AQF qualifications do in fact have different utility for different student cohorts. For the subject of this paper, existing workers in the Brisbane metropolitan area, AQF 5 and 6 qualifications have a high level of currency. Furthermore, this popularity has been sustained over several years as evidenced by continuing high enrolment numbers coupled with low attrition rates. The utility of diplomas for school leavers or those seeking to enter the workforce, however, may well be quite different.

In this survey, existing workers stated that the principal motivation for wanting to obtain a diploma or advanced diploma was because it would allow them to advance in their current industry or business. No doubt additional income, another highly ranked motivation among respondents, might be assumed as a further outcome resulting from career advancement. The authors contend that the attractiveness of AQF 5 or 6 qualifications among existing workers has been facilitated by delivery modes that are particularly suited to highly experienced workers. That is, both the accelerated evening programs and the RPL process are seen by this group as effective, timely yet robust mechanisms by which they can convert their extensive vocational experience of at least 10 years into a qualification that will be widely recognised and valued by employers, industry, colleagues and universities. Finally, as one of the respondent's comments and the research of Karmel and Lu (2012) suggest, a diploma or advanced diploma obtained in approximately one semester is a more attractive and cheaper alternative to undertaking a higher education degree, particularly where existing workers wish to demonstrate a commitment to ongoing learning.

If this is the case, there are implications for registered training organisations (RTOs) and how they can meet the professional development needs of this cohort of potential students. AQF 5 and 6 qualifications can be made accessible to existing workers not yet appropriately credentialed in the area in which they are employed by first recognising their defining characteristic (extensive levels of practitioner knowledge and skills), and then developing delivery modes that are versatile, timely and targeted. From a VET workforce development and marketing perspective, this may mean that RTOs need to develop and promote their educators not only as effective industry-current classroom lecturers but also as specialist skills assessors. However, this study also points to possible disadvantages of focussing primarily on the pragmatic; it appears that RTOs should not overlook the wrap-around services that go to make up a holistic educational

experience such as support for developing effective learning strategies in a technological age, and employment or career guidance services that are available beyond traditional business hours.

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