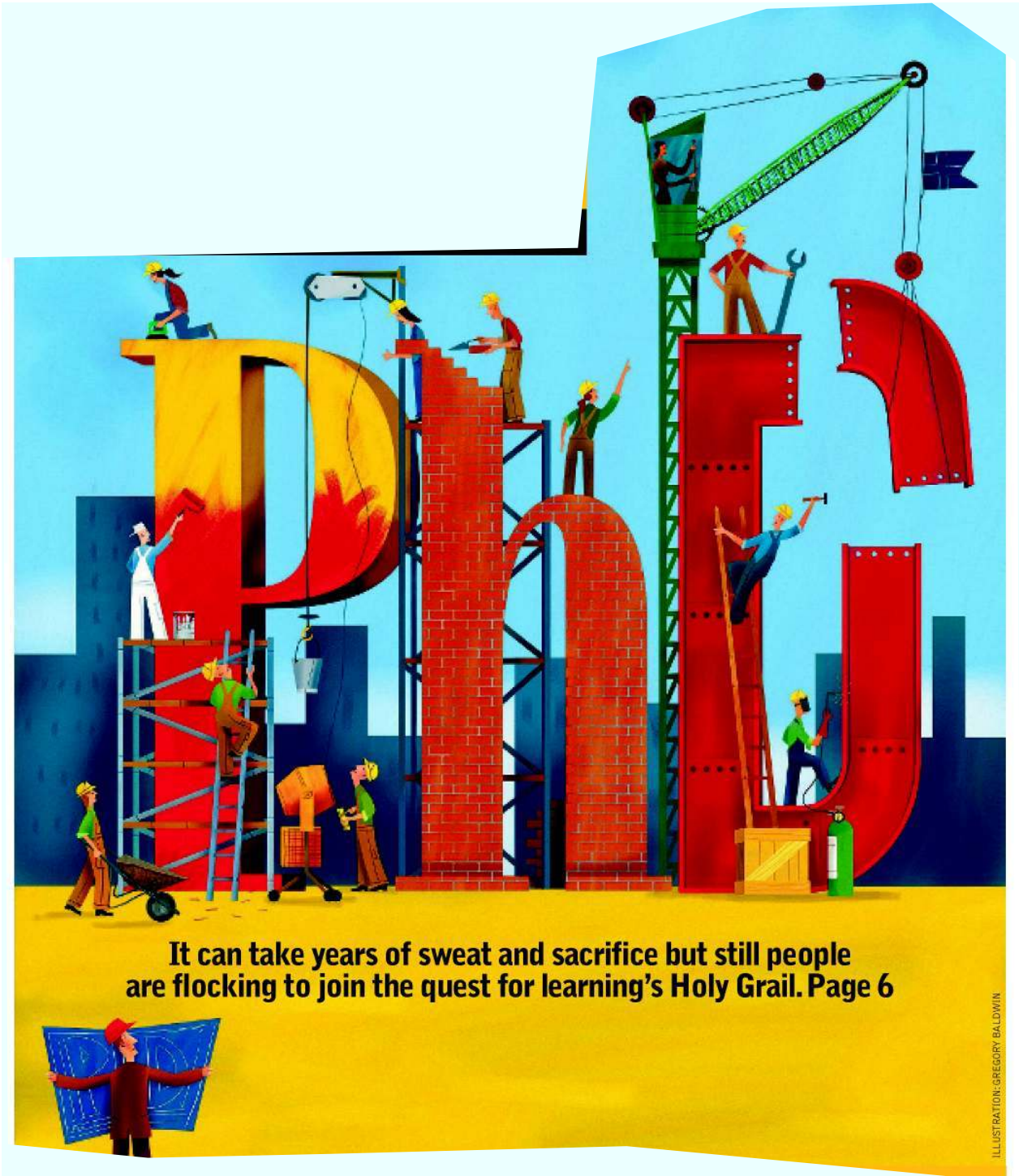




Age
Monday 23/6/2008
Page: 1
Section: Education
Region: Melbourne Circulation: 207,000
Type: Capital City Daily
Size: 2,084.30 sq.cms.
Published: MTWTF-

Brief: SPATHOLOGY
Page 1 of 4



It can take years of sweat and sacrifice but still people are flocking to join the quest for learning's Holy Grail. Page 6

ILLUSTRATION: GREGORY BALDWIN



Gaining a PhD can enhance your job prospects but for many it's not about the money.
By **Claire Halliday.**

What's up, doc?

FOR many students, university is simply a means to an end, a place to gain a qualification that will enable them to enter the real world of work. For others, it can be a holding pattern, a tenuous way to grasp what is left of adolescence and avoid the responsibilities that come with adulthood.

Then there are those for whom tertiary education is a badge of real honour. They're the ones who treat each degree as another stepping stone to the Holy Grail — pursuit of the PhD.

A bit like climbing Mount Everest, the quest to be a doctor of philosophy should not be undertaken lightly. It is a consuming process, one that takes years and may require an almost obsessional focus on a narrow field.

Your family and social lives are likely to shrivel up, to say nothing of your short-term career and work prospects. And there's always a danger that when friends gather and your name is brought up, someone will reflect: "Gone a bit potty, I'm afraid."

But such costs are not much of

a deterrent. Melbourne University reports that its PhD numbers have increased by 37% over the past five year. The university now has more than 3500 PhD students on its books. Monash University has about 2600.

Fiona Zammit, general manager of Monash Research Graduate School, says the greatest proportion of these are in medicine (781), followed by arts (393), business and economics (310), information technology (227), science (252) and engineering (198).

Most Monash PhD students are women (54%), Ms Zammit says, and 59.5% are full-time, 32.5% part-time, with the remainder studying externally. Their average age is 35.

Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, 34, admits to a somewhat checkered history of university study, starting at Canberra's ANU in 1992. Since then she has travelled, partied, worked a hodge-podge of jobs — everything from managing a goth clothes shop in Fitzroy to working in public libraries — but is now pursuing a PhD in cinema studies at La Trobe University.

"I made a decision to follow my

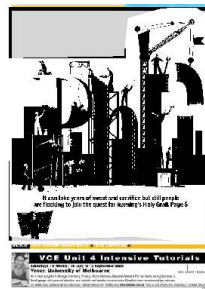
passion, not my pocket, as I have seen so many people in my life do the opposite and live to really regret it," she says.

As with her MA, the PhD she started in January looks at sexual violence. While her MA focused on representations of rape in films, her PhD looks at what she calls "the symbolic force" of snuff films.

"I focus particularly on violent horror and exploitation films to see what it tells us about what we find morally permissible — and unacceptable — in relation to depictions of sexual violence such as rape-revenge films and snuff films, as a broader community," she says.

To some, the subject of Heller-Nicholas' thesis might seem narrow. But in the world of PhDs, what strikes the average observer as exotic, obscure research is merely commonplace. Sometimes, though, such work is hailed as the definitive examination of a particular subject and studied by academics around the world.

Consider some recent examples:



■ Another La Trobe doctoral student, Jacqueline Burgess, used her PhD to identify odour molecules associated with the brown stomach worm in sheep — a discovery that could help stop serious production losses in Australian livestock.

■ For Jim Chambliss, a former lawyer, the theme of his doctorate was prompted by a brain injury he suffered in 1989, which caused epilepsy. He discovered a talent for sculpting he'd never previously realised. Now he is pursuing his PhD through Melbourne University's school of creative art and its school of physiology — the first joint PhD project to be undertaken between these faculties. His subject: Sparks of creativity — the influence of epilepsies on art.

■ At La Trobe, zoology student, Shannon Simpson, recently won the Scholander Prize, the highest award for PhD or postdoctoral research in comparative physiology from the American Physiological Society, and a Journal of Experimental Biology travelling fellowship.

Her research into lung structure and function in the fat-tailed dunnart, a small nocturnal insect-eating marsupial that, as the research she was involved in discovered, does not take its first breath until about four days after birth — the only example of a mammal that does not rely on its lungs for gas exchange.

Helen Lee is postgraduate convenor of sociology and anthropology at La Trobe's school of social sciences. She says that, while the pursuit of the PhD used to be limited to the academic elite, it is now open to anyone "with the ability to do the work involved" and is often more orientated towards employment status than reinforcing class status.

But it comes at a cost.

"If you are lucky enough to get a scholarship you will be hovering on the poverty line and will probably need to supplement that with some work (limited by the conditions of the scholarship). If you don't have a scholarship and want to study full-time it means trying to do enough part-time work to survive while leaving enough time for the thesis work," Dr Lee says.

"Doing a PhD can be a period of intense focus and there will be times, particularly in the final stages of writing, when family life and social life suffer so the student can get that work done."

The results, she believes, are worth it.

A PhD undoubtedly makes people more employable in their chosen field. In many areas of employment there is now such fierce competition that a PhD has become necessary to be competitive. Employers recognise that someone with a PhD is not only an expert in the area they have studied but they have acquired a whole range of highly valued skills such as time management, critical thinking, research skills and writing skills."

It's not something to be undertaken lightly, Dr Lee says. In the social sciences, for example, the aim is to produce a body of work of up to 100,000 words. "For most students it becomes all-consuming for a few years of their lives," she says.

For Shane Erickson, 28, the decision to pursue a PhD came as the result of research experience in the final year of his masters degree in speech pathology at La Trobe in 2005. Even though his first university experience dated back to a bachelor of arts in journalism at RMIT in 2000, Mr Erickson signed up again in 2006 and, with his PhD studies only half complete, is yet to fully extricate himself from university life.

It's a step towards a career path he hadn't previously imagined.

"I'd previously not considered research as a career direction, however my project fostered in me a keen interest in advancing the profession through innovation," he says.

The project evaluated the impact of stuttering and its successful treatment on adolescents and their families. "While the results of this project were significant enough to warrant presentation at the Speech Pathology Australia annual conference it was also the experience of working with worldwide leaders in the field that was of great benefit," he says.

"As my PhD scholarship is offered through the Australian Stuttering Research Centre I'm again able to work in a team environment with an organisation that is responsible for developing leading evidence-based treatment programs for both adults and children who stutter."

The idea is to develop a treatment program designed to be accessed via the internet — one that will allow users to be treated at home, at their own pace and at times that suit them without the need for a clinician.

"While such a program is going

to require a lot of self-motivation, self-direction and self-evaluation, it can help even a small percentage of the stuttering population, who may wait for years to access treatment, then I think that will be a truly significant finding," he says.

When not at university, Mr Erickson works as a private practitioner, specialising in stuttering, and has no doubt that his extended tertiary studies will help his standing as a specialist.

"However, this was not the motivation behind my decision to commence a PhD," he says. "I have a keen interest in entering academia with a joint focus on teaching and research and I feel that this PhD will significantly improve my chances of obtaining employment at the university. Already, my involvement at the university has meant that I have obtained part-time teaching work in both the undergraduate and masters streams."

As for sacrifices, Mr Erickson doesn't believe he has had to make too many.

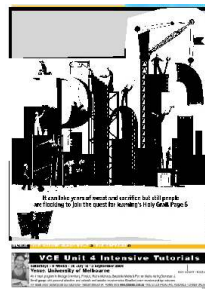
"Being young, I don't have a lot of financial responsibilities, such as a family to provide for, or a house to pay off, so I can live fairly comfortably on a combination of the scholarship and the part-time work I complete. Also, as I started the PhD before becoming firmly entrenched within an organisation, I did not have to leave a position that took a long time to earn," he says.

"Instead, the PhD may actually provide a springboard to begin my career, rather than requiring sacrifices."

Susan Block, a postgraduate coordinator at La Trobe's School of Human Communication Sciences, says people are driven to pursue PhDs for various reasons.

"Obviously, some people want to have a career teaching or researching in academia and they need a PhD for that," Dr Block says. "Some people are tired of their current work situation and want to do something different by expanding their knowledge."

With rising competition in the workplace — combined with the fact that universities are actively trying to attract high-calibre students with scholarships, facilities and support — many students choose to stay at school longer, Dr Block says, with more undertaking double degrees or



PhDs to give themselves an edge.

The financial strain of avoiding traditional career paths can prove challenging. Dr Block says that many PhD students find it difficult to balance the demands of daily life, especially if they have dependents.

To ensure that the sacrifices are not futile, Dr Block advises students to pick a thesis topic they genuinely enjoy — because they will be working on it for several years.

“Also, I think students need to understand that, as their work proceeds, that their topic may change focus a little. Thus, they should not be wedded to one specific topic necessarily, but realise that, as their research proceeds, they may want or need to make changes in what they are doing.”

Perseverance, she says, can have rewards.

“I have seen the work of PhD students (in various universities) change clinical practice,” says Dr Block, who describes PhD students as “very motivated, eager to learn, relatively independent thinkers” who thrive on the pursuit of knowledge.

Ralph Hampson, 48 is studying for

his PhD at the University of Melbourne after a 10-year break from tertiary studies and a career as a social worker.

Mr Hampson worked for the human services department and was responsible for examining the design of nursing homes and hostels for the elderly. And so the idea for his thesis, on how the design of such buildings affects the elderly, was born.

“As I come to the end of the PhD it is an interesting time,” Hampson says. “I have learnt about research methods, which has really helped me in my part-time teaching roles at the University of Melbourne and Monash University, but I have also learnt about self-doubt, self-motivation and the importance of passion.

“When I started the PhD I thought I wanted to be an academic but now I am not so sure, and the PhD has opened doors for me in consulting work and perhaps further research.

The pleasure of the journey was interviewing the residents of the facilities, and what I learned from that was that inside every 85-year-old there is an 18-year-old dying to be seen, and yet life in an institution stops most of us from seeing this potential. Age

is not linear — it is layered — is my conclusion.”

With the journey towards his PhD taking seven years, Mr Hampson says his studies have become a big part of his family’s life.

“My 17-year-old son and 15-year-old daughter wonder why I did it, if it isn’t going to mean a whole lot more money, and I tell them because there is more than just money — there is the joy of wondering about the world — and this is what the PhD has allowed me to do.

“But the financial cost is enormous and I recently worked out that in terms of lost income it has been in the vicinity of \$350,000 but I hope to be able to recoup this in consultancy work in the future. My partner Rebecca has had to put up with a lot, and earn the full-time income to support the work.”

Despite the sacrifices, Mr Hampson feels sure it has been worthwhile, with his pursuit of a PhD more about helping others than just himself. “I hope that my research will help us to build better aged-care facilities.”

A PhD undoubtedly makes people more employable... (it) has become necessary to be competitive.

