

1997

Graduate secretaries : the politics of course titles and career choices in a university setting : results of a research project

Kaye Harrold

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Harrold, K. (1997) *Graduate secretaries : the politics of course titles and career choices in a university setting : results of a research project*. Perth, Australia: Edith Cowan University.

This Report is posted at Research Online.

<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks/6921>

Edith Cowan University

Copyright Warning

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study.


The University does not authorize you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site.

You are reminded of the following:

- Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright.
- A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. Where the reproduction of such material is done without attribution of authorship, with false attribution of authorship or the authorship is treated in a derogatory manner, this may be a breach of the author's moral rights contained in Part IX of the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth).
- Courts have the power to impose a wide range of civil and criminal sanctions for infringement of copyright, infringement of moral rights and other offences under the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth). Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.

EDITH COWAN
UNIVERSITY

Results
of
Research Project



*Graduate
Secretaries:
The Politics of
Course Titles
and
Career Choices in
a University
Setting*

651.
374107

HAR

Kaye Harrold

School of Management Information Systems

Faculty of Business



EDITH COWAN
UNIVERSITY

PERTH WESTERN AUSTRALIA

ISBN: 0-7298-0297-3

PD-3151 5.97 250

CHU PONS.

Table of Contents

TABLE OF CONTENTS	1
ABSTRACT	2
RATIONALE FOR THE RESEARCH PROJECT	3
HISTORY OF TERTIARY SECRETARIAL PROGRAMMES	3
THE RESEARCH FOCUS AND METHODOLOGY	5
THE RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION	8
FINDINGS	8
DISCUSSION	9
FOLLOW UP	11
REFERENCES.....	12
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	13

**EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY**



ABSTRACT

Secretaries, typists, stenographers, personal assistants and word processing operators comprise approximately 10% of the female work force in Australia. Add to this the other 'categories' of receptionist and office assistant and the number increases markedly.

Yet 'secretaries' hold no status within the work force, there are fewer career paths, few job descriptions and little opportunity for recognition of the fact that industry and business could not function without their knowledge and skills.

Secretaries with tertiary qualifications have been in the Australian work force since 1972. What career opportunities were open to tertiary qualified secretaries? Did they receive the recognition and status in organisations which traditional secretaries have tried for years to achieve?

RESEARCH PROJECT:

Rationale for the research project

If a man has an office with a desk on which there is a buzzer and if he can press that buzzer and have somebody come dashing in response - then he's an executive.

Elmer Frank Andrews, Address to the
Trade Association, Executives' Forum of
Chicago, 1938.

This research project arose from seventeen years experience focusing on the development, delivery and evaluation of tertiary programmes in secretarial studies, and from five years experience on the Board of Management of the Institute of Professional Secretaries and Administrators (Australia) [IPSA].

Because of the above involvement, two major assumptions were noted regarding the original rationale for establishing graduate programmes in the secretarial field, namely:

1. Graduate status would offer greater career-pathway opportunities for secretaries.
2. Graduate status would assist in altering the traditional management perception of the secretarial role identified by Kanter (1977).


Despite the above assumptions being the underlying premise to the development of tertiary secretarial programmes, no research has been conducted to confirm their accuracy.

Similarly there is a noticeable lack of reference to secretaries in the management literature compared with the proliferation of literature pertaining to women in management and the workforce.

History of tertiary secretarial programmes

As a result of an Act of Parliament, Canberra College of Advanced Education was established in 1969 to specifically provide undergraduate degrees in vocational disciplines. A Bachelor of Arts and a Graduate Diploma in Secretarial Studies were established to provide the Commonwealth Public Service with secretaries who had a "good general knowledge, a broad introduction to business, and a high level of secretarial skills". (Canberra CAE Accreditation)

Other States followed suit, until, by 1987, most states in Australia were offering either an undergraduate or graduate course in Secretarial Studies. The nomenclature of the titles ranged from 'Secretarial Studies' (Canberra and Western Australia) to 'Administrative Studies' (Chisholm and Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology [RMIT] in Victoria). All



courses had similar objectives namely that graduates were trained to enter the workforce as personal secretaries. Although the objectives were similar, the quantity and quality of the traditional skills of shorthand and typing varied from course to course, as did the component and content of general business studies.

The graduates were readily accepted into the workforce often with the employment rate of graduates close to 100% (WACAE Statistics), and it was not uncommon for some students to have positions to enter immediately upon, or even before, graduation.

In 1989, the Federal Government began reducing funding to secretarial programmes at the tertiary level. These reductions were often the result of internal political pressure to remove courses no longer deemed appropriate for universities. Despite name changes to Office Management, Office Administration, and Office Systems, in order to counteract critics of undergraduate and graduate programmes in secretarial studies, internal pressure was applied to remove the courses from the newly established universities.

The Victorian courses at Chisholm (now Monash University) and Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) are no longer offered; at NEPEAN, now the University of Western Sydney, the programme has been deleted from Business offerings completely. At the University of Canberra the Bachelor of Arts in Secretarial Studies and the Graduate Diploma in Arts (Secretarial Studies) both have undergone a name change to Office Management and the staff have been absorbed into another department rather than remaining a separate department.

In Western Australia, the Graduate Diploma in Business (Secretarial Studies) at Edith Cowan University survived the 1990 re-accreditation process for the Faculty of Business and the achievement of university designation. However, it underwent a name change to Office Management and a reduction in the original quota of 35 students to 18. In South Australia both an undergraduate and graduate programme are currently in operation.

As a result of the above mentioned changes, this study was designed to reveal whether:

1. Graduate secretaries are viewed as 'simply secretaries' by employers, thus inhibiting career progress;
2. The course content and level of qualification is suitable for employment as secretary;
3. Course coordinators have provided courses that are suitable or unsuitable for the market place.

The findings from this project have value to the institutions that offer such courses, now and in the future planning and marketing of similar tertiary courses. Positive findings from the survey may also be valuable in seeking the reinstatement of funding for tertiary secretarial courses for those institutions whose funding was either entirely cut or severely reduced.

The research focus and methodology

The objectives of this research project were to:

1. Seek evidence on the perceived career paths of graduates of tertiary secretarial courses.
2. Identify the objectives of secretarial courses at the different tertiary institutions at which graduate secretarial programmes were offered.
3. Analyse and compare expectations with aspects of actual career progress of graduates.

Additional related questions were:

1. Are promotional pathways within organisations open to Graduate Secretaries?
2. Do Graduate Secretaries receive recognition in keeping with graduate status?
3. Is high job turnover a feature of career path development or lack of job satisfaction?

The research design embraced three aspects:

1. A quantitative approach that included the impact of perceptions on career progress. The quantitative survey instrument sought information about graduates' work history and work experiences.
2. A qualitative approach designed to verify and clarify career progress and perceptions of organisational career structure. The qualitative section sought to identify how graduates feel about the progress they have made and how employers view them in the workplace. The overall sample of interview subjects was selected from the respondents of the survey who indicated they were willing to be interviewed.
3. A desk search of course accreditation and marketing literature from participating institutions and an interview of current and former course coordinators. The data for the expectations of course coordinators was collected from the accreditation documents and promotional literature produced by each institution.

To determine participating universities, a number of steps were undertaken. The first consideration was given to the type of qualification that was appropriate for the research. This was done by limiting the research to undergraduate degrees and graduate diplomas offered by Colleges of Advanced Education and Institutes of Technology, as these institutions more clearly reflect tertiary qualifications.

Although seven institutions in Australia have offered programmes that produced tertiary qualified secretaries with undergraduate degrees or graduate diplomas, only three institutions were approached. It was known that these institutions had courses that had been in operation the longest



and may therefore have produced the largest number of graduates from the widest coverage of Australian States.

They were: Monash University (formerly Chisholm Institute of Technology) whose course commenced in 1975; University of Canberra (formerly Canberra College of Advanced Education) whose course commenced in 1969 and Edith Cowan University (formerly WA College of Advanced Education) whose course commenced in 1978.

The questionnaire was sent to 1300 graduates [Canberra 730 (56%), Monash 400 (31%), Edith Cowan 170 (13%)]. An overall response rate of 30% was received from a total of 393 respondents. The breakdown of responses from participating universities was Canberra 221, (30%); Monash 119, (30%); Edith Cowan 53, (31%).

The response rate was higher than expected and very interesting because in the years 1969 to 1975, Canberra was the only place at which a tertiary course in secretarial studies could be studied. Students from other states and territories received Commonwealth scholarships to travel to Canberra for this unique programme.

Following the introduction of courses in other states, the scholarships were no longer available. The uniqueness of this arrangement means that Canberra's graduates were transient, returning to their home state upon graduation.

The other interesting feature of this response rate is that the respondents were almost exclusively female and traditionally women change their name upon marriage making them difficult to trace once this occurs.

Analysis of the data collected from both the survey and the focus interviews builds a profile of a graduate secretary as typically being a person who is currently

- In full-time work

- In a management position

- In a national/international company

- Earning in excess of \$30,000 per year

- Is aged 20-39 years of age

- Is achievement oriented.

The qualitative data confirmed that the respondents perceived

- secretarial positions as holding low status and low pay;

- secretarial positions as having little opportunity for promotion and career progression;

- employers as not recognising a tertiary secretarial qualification;

- the qualification as not being accorded the same status as other tertiary qualifications.

An analysis of the literature outlining the Graduate Diploma in Professional Accounting and the Graduate Diploma in Business (Secretarial Studies) both offered by the Western Australian College of Advanced Education [WACAE] (now Edith Cowan University) revealed similarities in both course structure and course content.

Both courses had a structure of eight units with Accounting focusing on specialist numerical skills and Secretarial Studies focusing on the managerial aspects of business. Both courses contained overlap in content in the following areas:

1. Understanding of end-user computing and the role computers play in an information society.
2. Working knowledge of management information systems.
3. Systems analysis and design.

The courses also shared common core units in Information Systems and Accounting. (WACAE 1990 handbook and re-accreditation document.)

An analysis of the Bachelor of Arts in Secretarial Studies from Canberra College of Advanced Education (CCAEC) and the Bachelor of Business degree (Accounting) (WACAE) also identified similarities in structure and content. Both courses had a common core of foundation units in accounting, economics, management, law, business English and information systems.

In addition, the Bachelor of Business in Accounting contained a ten unit accounting major specialisation and a four or six unit minor specialisation. The Bachelor of Arts in Secretarial Studies contained an eight unit specialisation in secretarial studies and a six unit specialisation in some supporting area of business such as accounting, law, administration, or information systems. (WACAE 1985 handbook, CCAEC Re-accreditation document 1985, CCAEC Handbook 1985.)

This analysis suggests that all programmes are clearly designed to address the specialist areas of business as well as providing a breadth of generic business skills and knowledge, thus making graduates from these courses a homogenous group.

The research findings and discussion

Findings

The findings of this research conclude that tertiary qualifications in secretarial studies have not been beneficial in career progress. However, the qualification was seen by graduates to be extremely successful in the attainment of first positions. From there, graduates tended to either take positions with different titles than 'secretary', do further study in some other field, or, sadly, deny the secretarial qualification and seek positions using their experience and other qualifications.

Graduates surveyed in this project found their career progression hampered by two factors:

1. The lack of opportunities in the secretarial profession; and,
2. Trying to combine career progression with motherhood.

It seems that secretarial work allows flexibility to move in and out of the work force during the period of child raising, provided career progression is not the goal.

The research also showed that, although the respondents are graduates of a tertiary institution, their perception of the role of the secretary conforms to that of the traditional secretary. In the Focus Interviews, respondents referred to the perceived expectation that, as secretary, they would conform to the expectations set by management. As management has its own (mostly male) set of values and beliefs this confirms Merton's (1946) self-fulfilling prophecy that states that stereotyping tends to mould both the perceiver and the perceived thus perpetuating the cycle of self-fulfilling prophecy.

The perception of the title 'secretarial' is such that holders of qualifications with this title are treated as traditional secretaries rather than graduates with one, and sometimes two, tertiary qualifications.

Although traditional secretaries are seen by employers to be essential in a support capacity (Kanter 1977, Pringle 1986, IPSA 1986), the secretary's and the manager's careers are seen to be in parallel with no transferability. In other words, at no point in their career is it possible for a secretary to 'transfer' into a management structure and follow a career path within management.

The profile of a tertiary qualified secretary may therefore be seen as somebody who has succeeded in career progression in spite of, rather than because of, the qualification taken for a particular career. The secretarial qualification is seen as excellent for obtaining a first position but from then on is seen as a hindrance to career progression outside the secretarial profession.

Like Vella (1984) this research concludes that graduate secretaries are ambitious and have used their secretarial training as 'stepping stones' to higher positions. The research project also concludes that graduate

secretaries respond well in the workplace to appropriate feedback; work well with colleagues; and have a sense of accomplishment from work that they find fascinating. Yet as graduates they are unable to reach full potential unless they leave the secretarial profession and retrain in some other area.

The research also shows the graduate secretary to be somebody who is frustrated at the lack of recognition of skill, knowledge and qualification gained in the secretarial profession. As a result, ambition has been directed towards moving out of the secretarial profession and, in some instances, denying it altogether. That ambition has seen graduate secretaries succeed in areas other than their original qualification.

The conclusive finding from the research is therefore, that *it is not the content, duration, or level of the course necessarily, but the **title** of the course that has been seen by employers as 'not graduate' and therefore not worthy of recognition or consideration.*

Significantly then, a work or course title can describe the functions and activities of the position or it can mask them for another purpose. The work or course title should be a symbol of recognition that enhances self-esteem - it should reflect ACTUAL activities rather than be a response to the ego needs of others.


The title "secretary" traps the holder into a stereotyped role of subservience that denies qualifications, ability, function, career potential, and sometimes even previous experience.

The sociological impact of why women in general, and secretaries in particular, make the career choices they appear to make, and why employers fail to recognise the increased marginal product of tertiary qualified secretaries is of significant importance to institutions that offer such courses.

Discussion

As a point of provocation, the author asks the question "what would the reader expect in terms of promotion potential, earning capacity and career path progress 10 to 20 year's after graduating with an undergraduate degree AND a graduate diploma"?

An examination of Labour Market Theories (Becker, 1971; Braverman, 1974; Carey, 1990; Miller, 1984; Moir, 1979; Doeringer & Piore, 1997; Sicherman & Galor, 1990; Arrow, 1972/3; Power, 1975; Norris, 1989) and in particular Human Capital Theory assumes a direct causal relationship between education, productivity and wages. It assumes that workers, in this case secretaries, have a variety of choices in their life time regarding the type of education in which they invest. It assumes also, that the kind of position and wages they receive as a result of their investment are a direct result of the education and on-the-job training they receive when in the workforce.



The main consequence of this voluntary human capital investment for tertiary qualified secretaries is that it places graduates in the lower end of income distribution during the investment period, which in the case of secretarial graduates is a period for three and sometimes four years.

It does not take into account however, other market forces such as managers who are influenced by institutions (public policies such as equal employment opportunity legislation, affirmative action programmes, and pay equity arrangements; or ideology (beliefs about the value of women's work, the place of women in the home or workplace) and their power to act in the employment and pay-setting arena.

In addition, human capital theory fails to consider the socialisation processes for secretaries described by Game and Pringle (1986), and by Kanter (1977). For example, it assumes that women have been in control of the choices surrounding their own education.

The impact of these forces on secretarial promotions and career paths both in the past and in current times could be a major influence on the rate of return of investment for secretarial graduates. A question to be examined is whether they rise up the income hierarchy at a later date as the returns to their investment accrue.

Of particular interest to this research is the application of the labour market hypotheses in the recruitment of secretaries with a tertiary qualification. In recruitment, the specialist skills of shorthand and typing are deemed essential by management for the position of secretary, no matter whether the secretary is considered to be a stenographer, executive secretary or personal assistant (IPSA 1986).

Labour market segmentation theory gives little explanation as to how the various groups in the equation come to occupy their labour market positions. Like dual labour market theory, labour market segmentation theory sheds little light on why some jobs are stereotyped male and others female. For example, the stereotyped occupation of secretary is difficult to categorise.

If the different criteria for the primary and secondary sectors of the market, as described by Doeringer and Piore (1971), are correct then the traditional secretaries' highly specialised, task-specific, skills of shorthand and typing fit the primary sector. However their career prospects are fraught with low wages, lack of mobility, and lack of unionisation that are specifically secondary criteria.

Sicherman and Galor (1990) hold that occupations are related to each other by the transferability of skills giving individuals intrafirm and interfirm mobility to maximise expected lifetime income. For graduate secretaries as well as traditional secretaries, it seems only interfirm mobility is possible. For graduate secretaries in particular, career mobility as a secretary was restrictive rather than enhancing of career path progress and income earning potential.

Follow up

Recent research by Heather Maguire (1996) at the University of Southern Queensland showed that *"although secretarial work still displays many of the characteristics of 'ghetto' occupations, professional secretaries are undertaking a large number of management-type tasks"* Maguire's study was designed to provide an accurate assessment of the status of secretarial work in Australia and New Zealand and found that, across all industries, the secretarial profession was indeed a female 'ghetto' occupation.

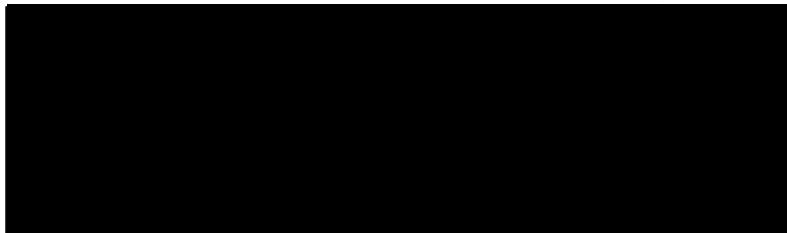
Although the sample from Maguire's study was taken from the Professional Secretarial Associations in Australia and New Zealand, of which a percentage of members would hold tertiary secretarial qualifications, the findings support and compound the problems outlined for graduate secretaries. Both research findings confirm that the factors restricting opportunities and rewards for secretarial workers, whether graduate or non-graduate, are based on deeply entrenched perceptions of a highly feminised occupation and not on recognition of skills, experience and qualifications.

The implications in the 1990's are twofold:

1. Organisations, by reinforcing the stereotyped perception of secretarial work outlined by Maguire (1996), Pringle (1988), Game and Pringle (1986), Burn (1985 1984 1982), Golding (1986) and Kanter (1977), and others, are denying positions to well suited and well qualified women (and men).
2. Tertiary institutions, in providing such courses should ensure that the courses they offer receive the status and recognition expected by the graduates.

The demise and changes to courses with the title 'Secretarial Studies' occurred in the period 1988-1991. Since that time South Australia, Canberra and Western Australia have been conferring degrees with a variety of new titles. The structure of the courses remains basically the same with content changes reflecting only changes in technology.

It will soon be time to examine the career progress of these graduates and compare their perceptions and progress with those of this study.



References

- ARROW, Kenneth J. (1973). 'The Theory of Discrimination' in *Discrimination in Labor Markets*. Ed. O. Ashenfelter and A Rees, pp 3-33, Princeton University Press, NJ.
- ARROW, Kenneth, J. (1972). 'Models of Job Discrimination', in *Racial Discrimination in Economic Life*. Ed. A Pascal, pp 83-102, Lexington, Mass.
- AUSTRALIAN BUREAU OF STATISTICS (1993) *Women in Australia*, ABS Cat #4113.0 September.
- AUSTRALIAN Bureau of Statistics, *Australian Labor Force Statistics*, Canberra 1988.
- BECKER, G S. (1971) *The Economics of Discrimination*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- BRAVERMAN, H., (1974), *Labor and Monopoly Capital, the Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, New York and London, Monthly Review Press, pp 293-358.
- BYRNE, Ros - (1985) 'Secretaries and Power' in M Sawyer (ed) *Program for Change: Affirmative Action in Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- BYRNE, Ros, (1982) 'Occupation - Secretary: an Historical Perspective', paper given to a seminar *Secretarial Education: A New Direction* at Chisholm Institute of Technology.
- BYRNE, Ros.- (1984) '*Powerless or Empowered? Secretarial Workers and Career Development Training*' ANZAAZ 1984.
- Canberra College of Advanced Education Handbook 1985.
- Canberra College of Advanced Education, Department of Secretarial Studies and Systems Accreditation Documentation 1985.
- CAREY, Max. (1990) 'Occupational Tenure, Employer Tenure and Occupational Mobility' in *Occupational Outlook Quarterly*, Vol 34:2 pp54-60.
- DOERINGER, P B, and Piore, M N, (1971) *Internal Labour Markets and Manpower Analysis*, D C Heath and Co, Lexington.
- FIORE, M., (1971), 'The Secretarial Role in Transition', in *Supervisory Management*, November, p 22.
- GAME A, & PRINGLE, R (1986) 'Beyond Gender at Work: Secretaries' in N Grieve and A Burns (eds) *Australian Women : New Feminist Perspectives*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.
- GOLDING, Judith. 'Some Problems in the Concept of Secretary', in *International Studies of Management and Organisation*, Vol 16, No. 1, Spring 1986, pp 94-111.
- HERZBERG, F., MAUSNER, B., SNYDERMAN, B. (1959) *The Motivation to Work*, John Wiley, New York quoted in Stoner et al, (1994) *Management*, Prentice Hall, Australia.

INSTITUTE OF PROFESSIONAL SECRETARIES (AUSTRALIA) [1987] *Report on Secretaries, Managers and Technology - Interaction in the Workplace*, Chadwick Martin Consultants, Perth.

KANTER, Rosabeth Moss, (1977) *Men and Women of the Corporation*, Basic Books Inc, New York.

MAGUIRE, Heather (1996) 'Just a Sec! A Comparative Study of the Changing Role of Secretarial Staff in Australia and New Zealand', published in conference proceedings, ANZAM '96 *Diversity & Change Challenges for Management into the 21st Century*, Volume 1.

MERTON, R K, and KENDALL, P L. (1946) 'The focused interview' in *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol 51, 541-557.

MILLER, P W, (1984) 'The Rate of Return to Education', in Chapman, B. Isaac J E. and Niland, J R. *Australian Labour Economics : Readings*, 3rd edition, McMillan.

MOIR, H. & SELBY-SMITH, (1979) J M. 'Industrial segregation in the Australian labour market', in *Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol 21, No3.

NORRIS, Keith, (1989) *The Economics of Australian Labour Markets*, 2nd ed, Longman, Cheshire, Sydney.

PHELPS, E S. (1972) 'The statistical theory of racism and sexism', in *American Economic Review*, Vol 62, No4, pp 659-61.

POWER, M. (1975) 'Women's work is never done - by men: a socioeconomic model of sex typing in occupations', in *Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol 17, No. 3, p227.

PRINGLE, R (1988) *Secretaries Talk : Sexuality, Power and Work*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

SICHERMAN, N. GALOR, O. (1990) 'A Theory of Career Mobility' in *Journal of Political Economy*, Vol 98:1.

VELLA, K, (1984) *Tertiary Qualified Secretaries and Secretarial Work*, Masters Thesis, Monash University.

Western Australian College of Advanced Education Handbook 1990 and 1985.

Western Australian College of Advanced Education, Faculty of Business Accreditation Documentation 1990.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

1. This publication is based on my recently completed Masters Thesis as D K Broom entitled: Graduate Secretaries: A comparison of the perceived career progress of graduates and the impact of relative graduates in university environment.
2. Thanks to my Supervisor Professor Alma Whiteley from Curtin University of Technology for her academic guidance and encouragement.

Thanks to the graduate secretaries for their interest in the research, and their commitment and loyalty to the courses they studied. I commend them for their outstanding career success despite the restrictions of the title of their qualification.