Eager and fast masters

By Eric Wilson
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Barely a year after Charles Sturt University's IT master's degree was launched, school's out for the first batch of students.

The speedy completion by nine of the 361 students was due to the structure of the e-learning distance-education course.

Half of the degree covers industry certifications, such as Microsoft Windows 2000 or Cisco networking qualifications, and students already qualified in these subjects received credit for them.

The academic year was also intensified, with a move from semesters to trimesters, so most students will complete the course within two years.

Only one of the nine has taken part in the official graduation ceremony, but seven will be paraded at Microsoft Tech-ed next week in a bid to raise the course's profile. Those who completed the work by themselves have a different perception of the value of the master's course.

For Richard Cowley, managing director of BoostIT Computer Services, the most important thing about the course was its relevance, with some of the textbooks coming directly from IT vendors such as Cisco. "In terms of relevance, a lot of people use Cisco switches and routers," Cowley says. "So the technology should stay relevant for a few years. We could also take on Windows 2003 as it was released."

"With a normal course, you probably wouldn't get that flexibility."

The chief executive of IT Masters, Martin Hale, says the industry certifications his company helps provide to the university guarantee the relevance of the course.

This could be an important factor behind a dropout rate of only 10.8 per cent a year - much less than the usual 25 per cent and the second-lowest of any university course in Australia.

Cowley rates the course among "the best things I've done".

"Having started an IT company, I did the course to get an edge over my competitors," he says. "It helps me service my customers."

"The main benefit is it gives a wide range of networking material. It's the same price as an MCSE (Microsoft Certified Systems Engineers training) but you are thrown in a master's. And because it's tertiary education, it's a bit easier to finance."

Classmate Cory Sharplin, an IT infrastructure manager working in the public sector, says the university component is now a business requirement in IT, with technical certifications taken for granted.
"The demise of the technology certification means the master's seals you as a professional and gets you out of that arena," Sharplin says.

"A 19-year-old student can get a certification. And the demise of the certification can be seen in the huge decrease in the number of training companies.

"I have 25 certifications, but they are not the main driving force to obtain a professional position."

Scott Anderson, a solutions architect with Suncorp in Brisbane, was the first to qualify as a master of networking and system administration in April.

For him, the course is not so much about industry certification or tertiary qualifications, but broadening the mind.

"In a lot of the foundation areas, it consolidated my existing knowledge," Anderson says. "But there are a lot of aspects I never considered, such as the ethical components.

" It gives you a broader outlook. For me, it opened up a whole realm of issues in all the subjects I did, the forums were well and truly alive. The potential of it is quite enormous."

Sharplin says the course has broadened his outlook by "filling in a lot of gaps" and preparing him for promotion.

"Other people just wanted to complete it - get in and get out - that's what industry certification has done.

"But I have a long-term plan I want to be an architecture team leader. To command that role, you really want to have a substantial understanding of the different fields you're dealing with . . . You also need a passion for it. It's not just a job."

For Anderson it is his first tertiary qualification and "opens up another potential level for career advancement".

Having gained entry on the merits of his previous industry experience, he has been bitten by the higher education bug. At his graduation, Hale says there was talk of Anderson going on to do a doctorate.

"Being a glutton for punishment, I've picked up some subjects in a bachelor of science course, but will probably swap back into a generic IT course in the New Year," Anderson says.

"The biggest thing is the flexible mode of delivery and staff support.

"Unlike the traditional universities, they are well structured for it with online forums and resources and quick response times."

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