

# The influence of role models on the career aspirations of prospective tertiary students: A regional case study

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## Abstract

In recent years, many Australian universities have had to contend with the challenge of declining student enrolments, often attributed to the nation's growing economy and tight labour market. Career role models can help universities to cultivate interest in specific disciplines and ultimately increase course enrolments in those fields, but only if they satisfy certain criteria. When potential students are presented with an outstanding role model from a relevant field whose accomplishments are perceived to be attainable, they feel positively about the comparison and can gain inspiration and motivation. This article presents a case study of the impact that two outstanding role models had on the career aspirations of prospective digital media students at an Australian regional university.

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## Introduction

In recent years, many Australian universities have had to contend with the challenge of declining student enrolments, often attributed to the nation's growing economy and tight labour market (Healy, 2008; Lane, 2008). The decline has been particularly pronounced in the states of Queensland and Western Australia, where a resources boom has been driving the demand for labour (Illing, 2006; Laurie, 2008; Lebihan, 2008). To illustrate, a report from the Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre (2007) shows that in 1995, 78.6% of Queensland school-leavers applied for tertiary study, but by 2006 that figure had dropped to just 53.2%.

Faced with this difficult situation, universities have stepped up their marketing and promotional activities in an attempt to stand out from their competitors and attract students. Schwartz (2007, p. 29) observes that "universities are now as competitive as any business":

We promote ourselves in print, on radio, in cinemas and on television. You will find us on billboards, the backs of buses and on the sides of taxis. We target potential students with direct mail, with email and with podcasts. We are on Second Life, Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, and we use telemarketing. We bring out our best-looking representatives for open days and campus tours. Each year, the stakes are raised a little higher.

No doubt, this frenzy of marketing activity yields results in the right circumstances. But one has to wonder how effective the traditional ‘features and benefits’ approach to marketing is when a university’s main competitor is not some other university, but a strong job market. At a time when potential students are being “lured by the big money on offer in the mining and building industries” (Weston, 2008, p. 15), perhaps universities would be better served by extolling the benefits of particular careers rather than particular institutions and courses.

Social cognitive career theory suggests that career role models can have both direct and indirect effects on the career choices of others (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). According to Quimby and DeSantis (2006, p. 298), “role models may provide vicarious learning experiences that increase the likelihood of choosing a specific career.. Scherer, Brodzinski, and Wiebe (1991, p. 555) state that “individuals who have observed a model perceived to be a high performer in a specific career or occupational field are more likely to express a preference for entering that career or field than individuals who have observed a model they perceive to be a low performer.”

Can career role models help universities cultivate interest in specific disciplines and ultimately increase course enrolments in those fields? This article presents a case study of the impact that two outstanding role models had on the career aspirations of prospective digital media students at a university in regional Queensland during 2007.

## **Background**

Central Queensland University (CQU) is an Australian multi-campus university that teaches the equivalent of approximately 18,000 full-time students. One-third of CQU’s student load is comprised of domestic students who study through regional campuses in Rockhampton, Mackay, Bundaberg, Gladstone, Emerald and Noosa, and via distance education. The remaining two-thirds of CQU’s student load is primarily comprised of international fee-paying students who are serviced through commercial campuses in Brisbane, the Gold Coast, Melbourne and Sydney, and off-shore delivery sites in Hong Kong, New Zealand, Singapore and Shanghai (Central Queensland University, 2007).

In 2007 the University introduced a new three-year undergraduate degree program—the Bachelor of Digital Innovation (BDI)—at its campuses in Rockhampton, Mackay, Bundaberg, Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and the Gold Coast, and in distance education mode. This new program prepares students for a career in the digital media industries, providing skills in areas such as Web design, 3D modelling and animation, audio and video production, game design and project management. The BDI was introduced as a replacement for the Bachelor of Multimedia Studies (BMmSt)—a program with a similar focus that had attracted large numbers of students between 2000 and 2004. However declining enrolments in 2005 and 2006 highlighted the need for program renewal.

Attracting students into the BDI at CQU’s Mackay campus promised to be a challenge for several reasons. Foremost among these was Central Queensland’s booming regional economy, with its lure of high salaries in industries such as mining and construction. KPMG demographer Bernard Salt has observed that: “Of the 70 largest cities in Australia, if you look at the average income of every person in 2005-2006, the leading town is Mackay ... The average income in Mackay has

increased by 48 per cent over five years. The Australian average in that time was 26 per cent” (Campbell, 2008, p. 12).

The resources boom and strong demand for labour in the Central Queensland region has drawn potential students away from university study to employment in mining or trades (Healy, 2008; Lane, 2008). The impact can be seen in the declining number of offers for tertiary places made by CQU during QTAC’s January rounds. In January 2004 CQU made 3,266 offers. By January 2008 that figure had dropped to 2,485 offers—a decrease of 24%. As National Union of Students President Angus McFarland explained, “It’s not surprising that a young man or woman who has the option of going to university and studying for four years or going into a trade and getting \$100,000 will make that decision to work” (Weston, 2008, p. 15).

Another factor that had the potential to stifle enrolments in the BDI at CQU’s Mackay campus was the lack of employment opportunities in the digital media industries within the local region. Unlike Brisbane, the Gold Coast, the Sunshine Coast, Cairns and Townsville, the Mackay region is not among the localities identified by the Queensland Government as a hot spot for the creative industries (Department of State Development, 2004). A 2007 audit of Mackay businesses identified only 290 (predominantly small) creative businesses (Root Projects Australia, 2007a, 2007b). Furthermore, as shown in Table 1, many of these businesses belonged to areas outside the digital media industries associated with the BDI.

**Table 1: Number of creative businesses in the Mackay Region**

Source: Root Projects Australia (2007a, p. 6)

<b>Creative industries segment</b>	<b>Number of creative businesses in the Mackay region</b>
Film, television & entertainment software	23
Writing, publishing & print media	12
Music, composition & production	26
Architecture, visual arts & design	99
Advertising, graphic design & marketing	75
Performing arts	55

## **Project**

In an attempt to stimulate interest in careers in the digital media industries, two special events were organised at CQU’s Mackay campus during 2007. Supervisors from two internationally-renowned visual effects and animation companies were invited to the campus to deliver free public presentations about their award-winning work on major films.

These two events were made possible by a grant from the Regional Arts Development Fund (RADF), and in-kind support from both the guest speakers and the University. The RADF is a partnership between the State Government, through Arts Queensland, and local government authorities such as the Mackay City Council. It funds one-off, short term projects that offer professional arts, cultural and heritage opportunities in regional Queensland.

The first special presentation was held on 22nd March 2007 in the Conservatorium of Music Theatre at CQU's Mackay campus. The guest speaker was Bruce Carter, Creative Director from Australia's leading visual effects and animation studio Animal Logic. Bruce spoke about his team's work on the film *Happy Feet*, which had won the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature just a few weeks prior to the presentation.

Animal Logic is a Sydney-based company that produces award-winning design, animation and visual effects for the film, television and advertising industries. Well known films that Animal Logic has worked on include *Happy Feet*, *300*, *Moulin Rouge*, *Babe* and *The Matrix*.

The second special presentation was held on 31st August 2007 in the same venue. On this occasion the guest speaker was Dana Peters, Head of the Creatures Department at New Zealand's leading visual effects and animation studio Weta Digital. Dana spoke about his team's work on the film *King Kong*, which won the Academy Award for Achievement in Visual Effects in 2006.

Based in Wellington, Weta Digital is best known for its Oscar-winning visual effects work on *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy as well as *King Kong*. Other notable Weta Digital projects include *Eragon*, *X-Men: The Last Stand* and *4: Rise of the Silver Surfer*.

## Results

Each special presentation attracted an audience of approximately 200 people. Audience members were encouraged to provide anonymous feedback by completing an evaluation form at the end of each presentation. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, as the following sample comments indicate:

I thought it was very entertaining and made me think heaps more about becoming an animator. (12-year-old male)

Mackay needs more presentations like this for high school students. This specific presentation was very eye-opening to me, a senior student thinking about digital media as a career. (15-year-old female)

Very good. Worth missing *Lost* for. (16-year-old male)

It gave me an insight into what I want to do as my career. It's also great to see such a huge company in such a rural centre. Very much appreciated. (16-year-old female)

Truly inspiring presentation. (21-year-old male)

An exceptional opportunity to see examples from a professional at the top of their field, and the understanding of technical development on a day-to-day, project-to-project basis. (31-year-old female)

At Carter's presentation 50 audience members completed the evaluation form, which equated to a return rate of approximately 25%. Seventy per cent of the respondents were female and 30% were male. Eighty-six per cent of the respondents rated the presentation as very interesting, 4% rated it as moderately interesting, and nobody rated it as boring. Ten per cent did not answer the question.

At Peters' presentation 24 audience members completed the evaluation form, which equated to a return rate of approximately 12%. Forty-two per cent of the respondents were female and 58% were male. Ninety-two per cent of the respondents rated the presentation as very interesting, 8% rated it as moderately interesting, and nobody rated it as boring.

Opportunities for networking were provided at the conclusion of each presentation. Free food, drinks and live entertainment in the foyer of the Conservatorium Theatre encouraged audience members to stay to socialise. Many people took the opportunity to converse with the guest speakers and CQU lecturers, and to obtain information about the BDI program.

The special presentations achieved their aim of raising public awareness of careers in digital media industries such as animation and visual effects. The impact of the presentations was evident in the significant increase in the number of applications that were made in late 2007 to enrol in the BDI at the Mackay campus.

As shown in Table 2, in November 2006 the number of first-preference applications that were made through QTAC for the Mackay offerings of the BDI and the BMmSt came to a total of 6. In November 2007, when the BMmSt was no longer available, the number of first-preference QTAC applications for the Mackay offering of the BDI was 18—a 200% increase over the previous year.

**Table 2: QTAC first-preference applications for the BDI and BMmSt at the Mackay, Rockhampton and Bundaberg campuses in 2006 and 2007.**

Campus	QTAC first-preference applications for the BDI and BMmSt at 23-11-06	QTAC first-preference applications for the BDI at 23-11-07 *	Percentage change
Mackay	6	18	+200%
Rockhampton	12	9	-25%
Bundaberg	6	7	+16%

\* BMmSt no longer available in 2007

The link between the special presentations and the increase in BDI enrolments in Mackay is further strengthened by comparing the 2006 and 2007 QTAC application figures for the BDI at the Mackay, Rockhampton and Bundaberg campuses (Table 2). Rockhampton applications decreased by 3 and Bundaberg applications increased by 1 during the period of interest. These are relatively minor fluctuations compared with the increase of 12 applications at the Mackay campus.

The Rockhampton and Bundaberg campuses are suitable sites for comparison with the Mackay campus because they are located in the same Central Queensland region, they target a similar student demographic, and they have experienced the same difficulties in attracting new students in recent years. The only differences in BDI-specific promotional activities that were conducted at the three campuses during 2007 were the special presentations in Mackay.

My personal experience provides further evidence of the link between the presentations and the increase in BDI enrolments. Being both a lecturer in digital media and the organiser of the special presentations, I was in a position to meet seven of the individuals who attended the presentations and subsequently applied to enrol in the BDI at the Mackay campus. During my concluding remarks at the end of each presentation I invited audience members to contact me if they wanted

information about the BDI, and several people did that, either in person, by phone or by e-mail.

## Discussion

The two guest speakers who participated in this project are examples of what Lockwood and Kunda (1997) refer to as “superstar role models.” Both speakers had impressive career histories and held senior positions at organisations that were internationally recognised as leaders in their field.

Carter has enjoyed a successful career as a designer, director and creative director in Europe, New Zealand and Australia. He joined Animal Logic as Creative Director in 1997 at the beginning of a period of strong growth for the company.

Peters has been in the computer graphics industry for more than ten years, working on feature films, high-end television commercials and other projects. He joined Weta Digital in 2000 as a Technical Director on *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the first of four of the company’s productions to receive Academy Awards for Achievement in Visual Effects.

Social comparison research indicates that superstar role models can have a variety of influences on the way others view themselves (Wood, 1996). Sometimes superstars are inspiring and motivating, sometimes they are demoralising and deflating, and sometimes they have no apparent influence. Lockwood and Kunda (1997) have demonstrated that the impact of superstars on the self-views of others depends on two factors: their perceived relevance, and the perceived attainability of their success.

## Relevance

Gibson (2004, p. 150) describes role models as “a special case of upward social comparison, in which individuals observe and compare themselves with superior others in order to self-evaluate, self-enhance, or seek information.” Such comparisons will most likely be drawn when the role model is considered to be personally relevant. A superstar with no perceived relevance is unlikely to exert any influence on one’s self-view. To illustrate, a non-athlete may watch the outstanding performance of an Olympic champion without experiencing any change in self-concept.

Age and gender are examples of areas in which people may screen potential role models for similarity or relevance, but a key area is the role model’s domain of excellence. Lockwood and Kunda (1997, p. 93) explain:

... in our view, domain self-relevance, like psychological closeness, can serve to increase the correspondence between the self and the star. When a superstar excels at one’s own domain of interest, this increases the similarity between oneself and the superstar and, thereby, the likelihood that one will draw an analogy between oneself and the star.

Many of the audience members at each of the special presentations had an interest in digital media that would have encouraged them to view the guest speaker’s domain as personally relevant. At Carter’s presentation 40% of the audience members who completed an evaluation form indicated that they were thinking

about pursuing a career in digital media, and 20% were already working in a job related to digital media. At Peters' presentation 58% of the audience members who completed an evaluation form indicated that they were thinking about pursuing a career in digital media, and 21% were already working in a job related to digital media.

### ***Attainability of success***

When superstar role models are perceived to be personally relevant by others, they may exert either a positive or negative influence. The direction of their influence depends on the perceived attainability of their success. Individuals will be inspired and motivated by a superstar if they believe that they can attain comparable success, but will be demoralised and deflated if they believe that they cannot (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997).

One's current abilities are not a limiting factor when assessing the attainability of a role model's success. In this kind of assessment, possible future selves—how individuals think about their potential and their future—are probably more influential than current self-views, given that one's current abilities will inevitably be inferior to those of the outstanding role model (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Did audience members at the special presentations view the success of the guest speakers as attainable? When contemplating this question, it is important to recognise that the guest speakers were not the only role models featured at those events. Rather than focus attention on themselves, the presenters stressed the importance of teamwork in their industry and made frequent references to the achievements of their colleagues, even showing video clips of their work.

In his current position, Carter manages and mentors a team of digital artists working across both film and television projects. Similarly, Peters is responsible for recruiting, training and supervising a team of artists who rig virtual 3D puppets for animation and provide muscle, skin and cloth simulations. These digital artists, although not physically present, would have been among the role models with whom audience members identified.

The fact that the artists had no direct contact with the audience did not preclude them from being role models. Wood (1996, p. 522) states that people do "not require direct, personal contact with a specific other person" in order to make social comparisons, and "the social information may be summary in nature rather than about specific instances." Similarly Gibson (2004, p. 139) states that "identification and social comparison should not be assumed to require interaction." He uses the term "distant role models" to describe those who are observed by individuals rarely or through intervening media rather than through direct contact (Gibson p. 148).

Many of the artists who Carter and Peters referred to were graduates of digital media programs like the BDI, many were Australian or New Zealand citizens, and many were of a similar age to people who attended the special presentations. In an interview prior to his presentation, Carter said that the average age of Animal Logic's employees was 26 (Philpott, 2007). The average age of the audience members who completed an evaluation form was 30.

Certainly some audience members viewed the artists' success as attainable, and saw the BDI as a potential stepping-stone to that success. Discussions with a sample of seven individuals who attended the special presentations and

subsequently applied to enrol in the BDI at the Mackay campus confirmed that this was the case.

## Conclusion

This case study has demonstrated the impact that role models can have on the self-views and career aspirations of others, and how those aspirations may translate into action. Other studies have examined the impact of role models on people's self-perceptions by providing participants with a description of a fictitious person of outstanding accomplishment, and then surveying the participants about their own abilities and prospects (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997, 1999). But Gibson (2004, p. 150) identifies a problem with such 'laboratory-based methods':

What is missing from these studies, however, is field research in which individuals' perceptions of their actual role models are used ... More work should be done in the field which includes perceptions of actual models used as upward comparisons to help delineate the conditions under which organizational models can be inspiring to individuals.

This case study has gone some way toward satisfying the need for field research that Gibson identified. The project presented audiences with actual role models of outstanding accomplishment, and gave those role models time to deliver presentations that could potentially inspire and motivate individuals who had an interest in digital media. Instead of surveying the audience members about their self-views after the presentations, the impact of the project was assessed by examining a more tangible result—the number of applications for the digital media program that sponsored the events. When applications for the BDI program at the Mackay campus were compared with corresponding applications at similar campuses and applications from the preceding year, it appeared likely that the presentations had a significant impact. Further evidence of this impact could be seen in the evaluation forms that audience members completed immediately after the special presentations, and by identifying individuals who attended the presentations and later applied to enrol in the BDI at the Mackay campus.

The outcome of this project supports the findings of Lockwood and Kunda's laboratory-based research. When individuals are presented with an outstanding role model from a relevant field whose accomplishments are perceived to be attainable, they feel positively about the comparison and can gain inspiration and motivation. As Australian universities grapple with the challenge of declining enrolments, they may wish to consider the value of discipline-specific role models as a means of inspiring and motivating potential students.

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