

Unis cash in on chemist boom

Demand for pharmacy education is outstripping supply, writes **Joanna Mather**.

Four universities have moved to assume a leadership role in pharmacy education as a proliferation of degrees and research indicate a potential graduate glut in metropolitan areas.

Distinguishing themselves as "research-intensive" providers of pharmacy degrees, Monash University and the universities of Queensland, Sydney and South Australia have formed the National Alliance for Pharmacy Education.

Monash University pharmacy dean Bill Charman said there had been "rapid and unbridled" growth in pharmacy degree courses and enrolments in recent years.

"The alliance will provide a collaborative national voice in pharmacy education," he said.

Where Australia once had half-a-dozen pharmacy schools, there are now more than 16.

Members will also develop a wider variety of postgraduate education in line with the expanding role of pharmacists and demand for specialist qualifications.

RMIT University is the latest to begin developing an undergraduate pharmacy degree.

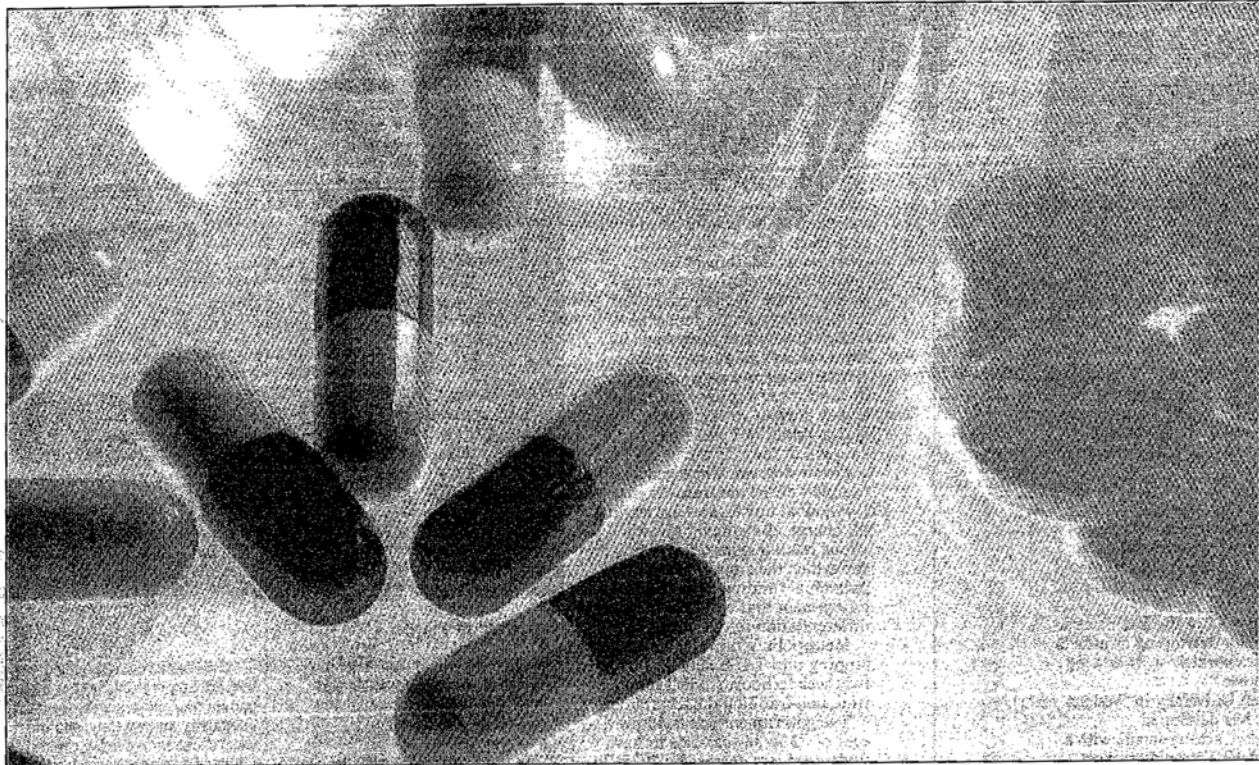
Subject to preliminary approval by the Australian Pharmacy Council, the degree could be offered next year.

The launch comes as a Pharmacy Guild of Australia study forecasts a "sharp oversupply" of pharmacists in coming years. The guild will convene a symposium in August to discuss workforce planning issues.

The research forecasts a scenario in which annual supply of pharmacists grows at a compound rate of 3.2 per cent to 2025, adding 11,237 professionals to the workforce. It predicts supply will outstrip demand, however, with only 7654 new pharmacists needed.

However, shortages of pharmacists still existed in regional areas and the employment market remained strong, guild president Kos Sclavos said.

"Across Australia at the moment there are well over 400 jobs available somewhere," he said.



Too much medicine . . . universities across Australia are introducing pharmacy courses.

Photo: LOUIE DOUVIS

RMIT deputy vice-chancellor (academic) Julianne Reid said the degree would help meet the "growing need for pharmacists" as a result of an ageing and growing population. She said the university was not concerned there would be no jobs for its graduate pharmacists.

"We're planning on a relatively small intake — 40 students as opposed to 200 that Monash takes," Professor Reid said.

She said the new degree would build on the university's existing pharmaceutical sciences course, which prepares graduates not for roles as pharmacists but in behind-the-scenes jobs in areas such as research and clinical trials.

As a result of this combined expertise, "our pharmacy program will be different because we are equipping our graduates with capabilities that are a little bit beyond what you would normally see in a pharmacy school".

The guild's Mr Sclavos said it was important universities were producing graduates with the types of skills and competencies required by the industry.

He said the expanded scope of pharmacy practice had to be incorporated into university teaching.

Backed by government policy, pharmacists are expected to take on greater responsibility for community health issues such as medication management and the treatment of

chronic diseases such as diabetes and obesity to lighten the load on hospitals.

Pharmacy will also come under a new national registration and accreditation scheme from July 1.

It will replace the current system of state-based accreditation and pharmacists will be required to complete continuing education in the same way as other professions such as accounting and law.

University of Sydney pharmacy dean Iqbal Ramzan said every year applications for pharmacy degrees far outstripped the number of places available. This year there were 1200 applications for 220 places, he said.

"It's a very sought-after profession

because it's not only very lucrative but it's also a good profession when you think about lifestyle," Professor Ramzan said. "Sixty-five per cent of our intake are women and it's a profession where you can take some time off and have a family and then come back."

Demand for postgraduate-level courses was also on the rise, Professor Ramzan said.

"As part of the market differentiation people will say if there's going to be a glut of pharmacists, how can I make sure I am the person who gets the job? If you're a specialist in some area, you not only have a better chance of getting the job, but of retaining it."