

# **Review of the research training and research workforce issues in Australian universities**

## **Submission from Australian Catholic University**

Australian Catholic University welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the review of research training and research workforce issues in Australia. Research training is a major part of our activities as a University and this area represents a critical and valuable resource for Australia. Research higher degree students are the lifeblood of any university, being a vitalising force within a university and providing a new cohort of researchers who, in most cases, spend their careers in other institutions upon graduating. Universities have a special responsibility to ensure that the research training that they provide is of the highest quality, that research topics address contemporary issues in anticipation of future national and international needs, and that graduates are well prepared to contribute to the good of the national community. In addition, it is clear from demographic studies that Australian universities will need to recruit unprecedented numbers of well-qualified academic staff in order to replace staff who will retire within the next decade.

Research higher degree students are valuable members of the university community and contribute to the success of the university through publications and other scholarly means of dissemination. A University is a unique institution, drawing upon a rich history over centuries, in which teaching, research and community engagement are the primary activities. These areas interact in numerous ways, and the balance between them in specific disciplines may be subtly different. Nevertheless, no other institution strives to fulfil these multiple obligations to society. It is critically important that these activities are viewed as central to the definition of a university, and that research continues to be a defining characteristic of an Australian university. It is therefore also critical that research training, through higher degree programs, is viewed as a core function of Australian universities and that the training is maintained at the highest level of quality for which this country has a deserved international reputation. Australia's international standing as a nation at the forefront of innovation and science across a wide range of fields is a valuable reputation which needs to be protected.

In this submission, a number of areas which warrant attention will be highlighted. These issues fall into several key areas: (1) distribution of RTS places and the level of funding and support provided per student; (2) preparation of students for a broader range of career options; (3) the international competitiveness of the research world; (4) maintenance of standards through entry and examination processes.

### **(1) Distribution of RTS places and the level of funding and support provided per student**

A critical issue is the number of RTS places which are available throughout the sector. A significant increase is needed in order to: (1) ensure that suitable well-qualified graduates have the opportunity to attain higher level qualifications in research and therefore make their maximal contribution to the research effort of the

country; and (2) to develop the potential workforce which needs to be replaced in the University sector.

The Federal Government has announced recently that it will double the number of scholarships by 2012, and this move is certainly welcomed. However, the monetary value of scholarships provided by the Commonwealth has not kept pace with salaries in areas of employment which are attractive to graduates. The scholarship also needs to be competitive in an increasingly international market for the best students. The value of the stipend for scholarship holders needs to be increased in order to ensure that talented people carry on their education to the PhD level. Ideally, a more realistic period of scholarship needs to be provided which would mean extending the duration of the scholarship (and the RTS place) to four years.

## **(2) Preparation of students for a broader range of career options**

There has been an encouraging shift in universities towards the inclusion of more coursework into research higher degrees, particularly focussing on the generic skills required for research. Nevertheless, there is a tension between the need to provide more generic skills education, the requirement to complete degrees in a timely manner, and the preservation of a certain “standard” at least with respect to the quantity and complexity of research presented in the thesis. Most universities continue to expect students to complete theses in a traditional format, although, once again, there has been some departure from this approach in recent years in some universities. There is a strong case for the encouragement of theses to be submitted in a form which corresponds better to the format required for publication. Arguments in favour of this approach include: (1) more immediate transfer into publications which disseminate the research findings; and (2) training, under supervision, in a skill which is required in the academic and research workplace. This step would be likely to lead to a greater overall level of productivity in the sector and a return of the real value on the investment which has been made in the research. Admittedly, this approach is not without its problems. For example, if this approach is to be adopted more widely, examiners need to be educated about the expectations which are inherent in this format.

## **(3) The international context of the research world**

Australia has been proportionately more successful in attracting international enrolments than any other country. The one area in which this is demonstrably not the case is in international research higher degree enrolments. Only a small percentage of international enrolments are in research degrees. It is critical that this issue be addressed so that, like other OECD countries, we draw upon the world’s best talent, and not limit ourselves to the cohort within Australia. Inevitably, in a world of increasing mobility, Australia will lose some very gifted people to other countries. We need to be sufficiently competitive, at the very least, to attract similar numbers to undertake research higher degrees in Australia. Of course, there are other reasons for adopting this approach such as the benefits that arise from drawing on a broader range of educational and cultural backgrounds and the links which are formed with other countries and institutions as a result of transmigration.

An issue which needs further attention concerns the process for international off-shore enrolments. Perhaps the ideal way in which such off-shore arrangements can be made is through formal agreements with collaborating universities in other countries. This approach would also have the advantage of bringing experienced research teams together across nations, thus adding to Australia's capacity to undertake certain types of research or to perform the research with a broader skill base. For this system to be successful, some funding would need to be provided to assist with communication and travel costs. An extension of the scholarship program to cover these students would also be desirable. Such scholarships could provide travel and a stipend for a period of time when the international student spends a period of time at the Australian participating university.

#### **(4) Maintenance of standards through entry and examination processes**

There are several issues in regard to standards which need to be addressed. I will focus on two matters which are of concern. One is the assurance of quality of entrants to PhD programs. The other is the examination process. There may be some benefit in exploring the introduction of a national postgraduate entry examination system, adapted for different disciplines, and perhaps even developed by a consortium of Universities which might agree on a common set of principles and procedures. Although all universities have processes which involve various performance hurdles of various kinds and annual progress reviews, these processes are not without their weaknesses. In a system in which litigation is a constant threat, one wonders whether problems are always identified sufficiently early for them to be acted upon. Weaker students who are admitted to PhD programs are a drain on the already stretched resources of universities. Although many of these students are detected at some point, that point may be a considerable way into the candidature before steps are taken to enable the student to discontinue. Perhaps a pilot project could be funded to explore the costs and benefits of a standard entry system, or at least one which may be open to universities to become involved in if they wish to participate.

A second issue of concern is the examination process. A major problem is the shortage of experienced examiners who are able to put aside other demands and review theses in a timely manner. The pool of examiners needs to be expanded, but there is a widespread belief, not unfounded in my view, that examiners without previous experience of the process are more likely to produce results which are inconsistent with other examiners. As many universities move from requiring three examiners to requiring two examiners, this problem becomes more serious. There would be some benefit to be gained from a national examiners training scheme in order to increase consistency in the process and to enable new examiners to be added to their programs.