

## Funding and support for research students

- 4.1 This chapter examines critical funding and support issues for postgraduate research students, including the length and value of scholarships.

### Period of PhD candidature

- 4.2 Several submissions to the inquiry discussed the length of PhD candidature, which is currently a maximum of four years full-time equivalent study.<sup>1</sup>
- 4.3 Members of the Centre for the Study of Research Training & Impact (SORTI) at the University of Newcastle explained that the Australian PhD candidature is relatively short by international standards, however, international comparisons may be invalid given the different nature of PhD programs.<sup>2</sup>
- 4.4 SORTI has studied PhD completion times extensively and explained that:
- ... it is possible to determine an accurate measure of time to completion for an individual candidate, taking into account full-time and part-time semesters of enrolment and periods of leave or other non-enrolment. This is the only reasonable measure to use when calculating average times to completion by discipline, by university or over time.<sup>3</sup>

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1 DIISR, *submission 50*, p. 4.

2 SORTI, *submission 9*, p. 3.

3 SORTI, *submission 9*, p. 3.

- 4.5 SORTI provided details on a recent project it undertook examining PhD completion times:

Our recent project covering 804 PhD candidates at 8 Australian universities across all discipline areas indicated that the mean candidacy time was a fraction less than 4 years (7.9 semesters) with a range from 3.5 years for Education candidates to a little over 4 years for Engineering candidates.<sup>4</sup>

- 4.6 SORTI added that the reasons for these discipline differences related to age and enrolment patterns of candidates.<sup>5</sup>

- 4.7 SORTI, in its research, also explained:

Longer candidacy times were related to discipline, younger age, being a native English speaker, entering PhD candidature through an honours degree, being enrolled full-time, having held a scholarship, taking leave, having more than one supervisor, having more experienced supervision, having no change in supervision arrangements and having had a problem during candidature. However, many of these relationships were complex rather than simple ... Length of candidature in full-time equivalent terms was not related to the research intensiveness of the university attended and candidate gender.<sup>6</sup>

- 4.8 Curtin University of Technology, quoting a report from Graduate Careers Australia, stated that the national average time for completion of a PhD is 5.4 years.<sup>7</sup>

- 4.9 IRUA, quoting the Group of Eight, stated that the current average completion time for a PhD in Australia is between 4.5 and 5.5 years depending on the discipline.<sup>8</sup>

- 4.10 University of Queensland argued that worldwide reforms of the PhD should be acknowledged and reflected in Australian Government policy. The University explained that PhD programs in many countries have been

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4 SORTI, *submission 9*, p. 3.

5 SORTI, *submission 9*, p. 3.

6 Bourke, S., Holbrook, A. and Lovat, T. (2006) *Relationships of PhD candidate, candidature and examination characteristics with thesis outcomes*. Paper presented at the AARE Annual Conference, Adelaide, 27-30 November.

7 CUT, *submission 18*, p. 2; Graduate Careers Australia, *Postgraduate Destinations 2006 – The Report of the Graduate Destinations Survey*.

8 IRUA, *submission 51*, p. 7; Group of Eight, *Adding to Australia's Capacity: The Role of Research Universities in Innovation*, a submission from the Group of Eight to the Review of the National Innovation System, April 2008.

transformed in ways that would make them unrecognisable by those who gained their own PhDs as recently as 10 years ago. The changes include:

- high quality generic skills training (team-based and applied research, project management, interdisciplinary research, grant writing and management, people management, leadership and financial management etc);
- extended academic coursework to develop disciplinary and interdisciplinary context; and
- period of research/study at another institution or in another country during the PhD.<sup>9</sup>

4.11 University of Queensland added that, in Australia, the limits on funding to students and institutions have constrained these developments. For students and supervisors, there are tensions between:

- the acquisition of generic skills and the dedication to a cutting-edge research project; and
- industry or international experience and the production of an outstanding thesis.<sup>10</sup>

4.12 University of Queensland discussed the duration of a PhD:

In the UK and Australia in the mid-1990s, it was fashionable to assume that the appropriate PhD duration was 3 years. While some successful PhD outcomes [can] be achieved in 3 years, it is not a standard that can be applied to all. When that fashionable assumption became embedded in policy and funding decisions, it had negative effects on the opportunities for:

- pursuing anything other than the thesis itself (preferably on a 'safe' topic);
- appropriate coursework to broaden the disciplinary knowledge of graduates;
- the deep acquisition of generic skills;
- disseminating the results of their work through publications and conferences; and
- gaining industry and/or international experience.<sup>11</sup>

4.13 The University of Queensland explained that a higher degree by research:

... is always subject to the kinds of events that are unforeseeable precisely because the cutting edge of knowledge is where the unpredictable and the unknowable are encountered. It is therefore

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9 UQ, *submission 100*, p. 2.

10 UQ, *submission 100*, p. 2.

11 UQ, *submission 100*, p. 4.

impossible to prescribe the length of time that this will take, although it is possible to describe an expected duration.<sup>12</sup>

- 4.14 The University of Queensland suggested that a four-year PhD would enable:
- Broader training in generic skills;
  - Deep and broad knowledge of the context of the discipline;
  - Excellence of research outcomes; and
  - Appropriate dissemination of research outputs.<sup>13</sup>
- 4.15 The Committee understands that doctoral students in Australia have historically aimed to complete their PhDs in three to three-and-a-half years, as this has been the period typically funded by a scholarship.
- 4.16 The Committee also understands that longer PhD completion times for some candidates may be due to their poor financial circumstances. Typically, this would occur at the end of the scholarship period, necessitating the need to seek part-time employment.
- 4.17 The Committee suggests that, with increased financial support for doctoral students through an increase in the length of the scholarship period, the need to seek part-time employment will be reduced, and the time taken to complete a PhD should be reduced.
- 4.18 However, the Committee is of the opinion that there should be some flexibility in the Research Training Scheme which may allow students to continue their PhD study past the current four year limit.
- 4.19 Therefore the Committee recommends that the Australian PhD candidature period through the Research Training Scheme include the option of a six-month extension.

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### **Recommendation 13**

**The Committee recommends that the Australian Research Training Scheme PhD candidature period include the option of a six-month extension.**

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12 UQ, *submission 100*, p. 4.

13 UQ, *submission 100*, p. 4.

## Scholarships and awards

- 4.20 Many submissions to the inquiry commented on postgraduate research scholarships and awards. The majority of those submissions suggested that scholarship support had declined in the recent past and that drastic measures were needed to support students in the future.
- 4.21 Several issues were raised relating to the Australian Postgraduate Award (APA) including their number, duration, value and indexation.

### The Australian Postgraduate Award

- 4.22 CAPA explained that:

The aims of research stipends in general, and the Australian Postgraduate Award (APA) in particular, are to assist in making research degrees an attractive proposition for talented prospective researchers, and to offer them an adequate means of financial support allowing them to focus on research.<sup>14</sup>

- 4.23 DIISR explained that the objectives of the APA program are to:

- support postgraduate research training in the higher education sector; and
- provide financial support to domestic postgraduate students of exceptional research promise who undertake their higher degree by research at an eligible Australian university.<sup>15</sup>

- 4.24 DIISR further explained that APAs help support the living costs of Australia's best and brightest domestic PhD and Masters by research students during their studies.<sup>16</sup>

- 4.25 CAPA explained that scholarships, particularly APAs, are now inadequate:

The fact is that the APA is no longer fit to meet its aims. It no longer represents a competitive incentive for aspiring researchers, and it is certainly failing us as an adequate means of support, especially for those living and studying in major capital cities. The APA has not kept pace with living costs, and is a poor fit for the reality of what it takes to complete a PhD.<sup>17</sup>

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14 CAPA, submission 90, p. 30.

15 DIISR, *submission 50*, p. 5.

16 DIISR, *submission 50*, p. 5.

17 CAPA, *submission 90*, p. 31.

## Number

4.26 DIISR stated that the APA program provides income support for around 20 per cent of domestic postgraduate research students supported by the government under the RTS (or around 12 per cent of total domestic higher degree by research students).<sup>18</sup>

4.27 According to DIISR, there were 4 985 APA holders in 2006. DIISR added:

There were 1,584 new APAs allocated to universities in 2008. As part of the Education Revolution, the Australian Government has committed to double the number of APAs by 2012. The first allocation of new APAs under this initiative will commence in 2009.<sup>19</sup>

4.28 Many submissions welcomed the Australian Government's announcement in the 2008-09 Federal Budget concerning the doubling of the number of APAs.<sup>20</sup>

4.29 However, CAPA suggested that although the increase in the number of APAs is welcome:

... this increase does not adequately take into account our current needs in sustaining research capacity and research workforce planning for the medium and longer term.<sup>21</sup>

4.30 SUPRA added:

While we welcome the recently announced doubling of APA places it is important to note that only around 25% of research students Australia wide will undertake Research Higher Degrees with such a stipend.<sup>22</sup>

## Duration

4.31 DIISR provided details on the duration of the APA:

APAs are available for a period of two years for a Masters by research student or three years, with a possible extension of six months, for a PhD student.<sup>23</sup>

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18 DIISR, *submission 50*, p. 19.

19 DIISR, *submission 50*, p. 6.

20 FASTS, *submission 37*, p. 8; ADBED, *submission 39*, p. 2; AAS, *submission 45*, p. 2; Universities Australia, *submission 82*, p. 12; CAPA, *submission 90*, p. 33.

21 CAPA, *submission 90*, p. 33.

22 SUPRA, *submission 66*, p. 5.

23 DIISR, *submission 50*, p. 5.

4.32 CAPA discussed the duration of the APA and its impact on PhD students:

Under the RTS the candidature time for a research doctorate is four years' full-time equivalent study, and two years' full-time equivalent study for a masters. Currently the APA is funded for Masters degrees to the maximum duration of candidature, however this is not the case for Doctoral studies. This means many PhD students find themselves with no access to any financial support at all during the final and most crucial stages of their degree. Many students overcome this financial hardship by taking on extra paid work, often in the form of casual employment with their institution. It is difficult under these conditions for students to dedicate suitable time to completing their studies.<sup>24</sup>

4.33 The Research School of Physical Sciences and Engineering at Australian National University summarised the need to increase the scholarship duration:

The maximum duration of APA funding is currently 3.5 years. However, as was recognized some years ago with 4 year Commonwealth funding of APAs, a good student working consistently requires on average 4 years to complete a PhD to international standard. If students are unfunded beyond 3.5 years they have [to] take up employment and this leads to extension of the course well beyond 4 years. Consequently, restricting funding to 3.5 years does not reduce the duration of a PhD, but rather has the reverse effect. In addition, it increases the risk of non-completion, which is undesirable for the student, the university and the country. It is recommended that the duration of an Australian Postgraduate award be restored to 4 years.<sup>25</sup>

4.34 Queensland University of Technology stated that, without a sufficient scholarship, the need to find 'extensive part-time work to keep body and soul together is not conducive to quality outcomes and timely completion'.<sup>26</sup>

4.35 University of Sydney commented on the fact that PhDs are completed in around four years, often requiring host institutions to support students once their scholarships have run out:

It is widely accepted that 4 years is sufficient to provide internationally acceptable PhD research training so many students

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24 CAPA, *submission 90*, p. 31.

25 RSPSE-ANU, *submission 49*, pp. 1-2.

26 QUT, *submission 36*, p. 2.

stay for 4 years, thus, institutions endeavour to support the final semester, from internal resources or grant funding, but do so at a cost to other programs.<sup>27</sup>

- 4.36 IRUA explained how difficult it can be for a student once their scholarship has ended:

A student's scholarship funding is often discontinued at the most demanding time of the PhD candidature, when they are focusing on writing up their thesis, placing unhelpful financial stresses on them.<sup>28</sup>

- 4.37 University of Queensland discussed the SORTI study on PhD completions and commented on the particular financial situations for some candidates:

Robust data from a large study conducted by Professor Sid Bourke at the University of Newcastle show that candidates who switch from full-time to part-time take statistically longer to complete than those who are either full-time throughout or part-time throughout. A decision to change from full-time to part-time is almost always a financial one: either a scholarship has run out, or the candidate's financial responsibilities (to a family, for example) can't be met by the scholarship.<sup>29</sup>

- 4.38 University of Queensland commented on the benefits of lengthening the scholarship period:

If research higher degree candidates are funded at an appropriate level for the appropriate duration of their degree, they will be much more likely to:

- complete their degree ON scholarship IN time;
- have a realistic opportunity to acquire appropriate generic skills in a research context; and
- have time to disseminate the outcomes of their research.<sup>30</sup>

- 4.39 Eighteen submissions to the inquiry suggested extending the duration of APAs to three-and-a-half years plus a possible six-month extension.<sup>31</sup>
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27 USyd, *submission 17*, p. 2.

28 IRUA, *submission 51*, p. 8.

29 UQ, *submission 100*, p. 5.

30 UQ, *submission 100*, p. 5.

31 UWS, *submission 10*, p. 3; SCU, *submission 12*, p. 3; CUT, *submission 18*, p. 4; JCU, *submission 22*, p. 6; UNSW, *submission 31*, p. 8; QUT, *submission 36*, p. 2; Murdoch, *submission 38*, p. 2; ADBED, *submission 39*, p. 3; CHASS, *submission 47*, p. 3; IRUA, *submission 51*, p. 8; ATN, *submission 54*, p. 2; Group of Eight, *submission 55*, p. 2; DDoGS, *submission 72*, p. 5; Deakin, *submission 73*, p. 2; USC, *submission 74*, p. 1; Griffith, *submission 80*, p. 3; AINSE, *submission 94*, p. 5; UWA, *submission 96*, p. 6.



- 4.40 Twelve submissions to the inquiry suggested extending the duration of APAs to four years thereby matching the duration of the Research Training Scheme place.<sup>32</sup>
- 4.41 Three submissions to the inquiry suggested extending the duration of APAs to four years with the possibility of a six-month extension.<sup>33</sup>
- 4.42 An additional four submissions suggested that current scholarship support levels are inadequate; however they did not suggest any particular increases in scholarship duration.<sup>34</sup>
- 4.43 The Committee agrees that extending the APA scholarship to four years would align the period of the scholarship with the Research Training Scheme period.
- 4.44 The Committee is of the opinion that three-and-a-half years should be the absolute minimum duration for a scholarship. The Committee is also supportive of extensions to scholarships, and suggests that two six-month extensions should be sufficient to get the majority of students through to the end of their studies.
- 4.45 Therefore, the Committee recommends that the duration of all Commonwealth-funded scholarships for PhD candidates be extended to a minimum of three-and-a half years, full-time equivalent, and include the option of two six-month extensions.

#### **Recommendation 14**

**The Committee recommends that the duration of all federal postgraduate awards with stipends for PhD students be increased to three and a half years (full-time equivalent) with the option of two six-month extensions.**

32 ATSE, *submission 6*, p. 6; SORTI, *submission 9*, p. 2; USyd, *submission 17*, p. 2; UniSA, *submission 32*, p. 5; WEHIMR, *submission 34*, p. 3; FASTS, *submission 37*, p. 8; La Trobe, *submission 48*, p. 3; RSPSE-ANU, *submission 49*, p. 1; NTEU, *submission 53*, p. 20; NTEU-UQ, *submission 59*, p. 5; SUPRA, *submission 66*, p. 7; UQ, *submission 100*, p. 5.

33 UOW, *submission 25*, p. 2; AARE, *submission 64*, p. 6; CAPA, *submission 90*, p. 32.

34 ANU, *submission 23*, p. 3; ASM, *submission 29*, p. 3; UniMelb, *submission 56*, p. 1; ARCCE, *submission 87*, p. 10;

## Value

4.46 DIISR provided details on the value of the APA:

In 2008, a full-time APA is worth \$20,007 (tax-free). A part-time APA is \$10,710 and, although tax liable, is adjusted to take taxation into account.<sup>35</sup>

4.47 Many submissions to the inquiry stated that this stipend is too low.

4.48 Queensland University of Technology stated:

The value of the APA and like scholarships is uncompetitive in the marketplace for talent, and it is inadequate to support the kind of fulltime commitment to research required of trainees.<sup>36</sup>

4.49 CAPA discussed the decline in value of the APA over time:

The APA has been below the poverty line for individuals with dependents for many years. Based on the average annual increase in seasonally adjusted household income, projections indicate the standard rate for the APA will fall below the poverty line for single individuals for the first time by the end of 2008.<sup>37</sup>

4.50 CAPA added:

If the award is to be able to meet its aims, an upward adjustment in the APA stipend rate is urgently needed. The same holds for all other Commonwealth funded awards, including part time APAs, APAIs and the IPRS.<sup>38</sup>

4.51 There was considerable variation in the increases in the value of the stipend recommended in submissions to the inquiry.

4.52 Five submissions to the inquiry argued for a 25 per cent increase in the APA stipend.<sup>39</sup>

4.53 Significantly, 21 submissions to the inquiry argued for a 30 per cent increase in the APA stipend.<sup>40</sup> Importantly, some of those submissions

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35 DIISR, *submission 50*, p. 5.

36 QUT, *submission 36*, p. 2.

37 CAPA, *submission 90*, pp. 32-33.

38 CAPA, *submission 90*, p. 33.

39 ECU, *submission 20*, p. 4; RSPSE-ANU, *submission 49*, p. 2; ATN, *submission 54*, p. 5; RMIT University, *submission 63*, p. 3; Research Australia, *submission 70*, p. 11.

40 SCU, *submission 12*, p. 3; JCU, *submission 22*, p. 5; UOW, *submission 25*, p. 1; UNSW, *submission 31*, p. 10; QUT, *submission 36*, p. 3; FASTS, *submission 37*, p. 8; ADBED, *submission 39*, p. 4; CHASS, *submission 47*, p. 2; La Trobe, *submission 48*, p. 3; Professors Rubinstein, Hall, Dunsmuir and Broadbridge, *submission 52*, p. 5; NTEU, *submission 53*, p. 18; NTEU-UQ,

were from key representative bodies such as Universities Australia, the Council of Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies, and the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations.

- 4.54 Two submissions argued for a 35 per cent increase in the APA stipend<sup>41</sup>, while seven submissions argued for a 50 per cent increase<sup>42</sup>, one submission argued for a 75 per cent increase<sup>43</sup>, and one submission argued for a 100 per cent increase.<sup>44</sup>
- 4.55 The Australian Council of Deans of Agriculture (ACDA) recommended that the stipend level be raised to at least graduate employment salary levels, equivalent to an increase of 70-120 per cent, and the tax-free status abandoned.<sup>45</sup>
- 4.56 RMIT University, in addition to suggesting an increase in the stipend of 25 per cent, also suggested that:
- ... targeted APAs attract an increase in the stipend of at least \$10,000 per year over current levels, and more likely \$20,000 per year, to provide the incentives for students not only to choose research training instead of immediate employment but also to engage in research that aligns specifically with national needs.<sup>46</sup>
- 4.57 Eighteen submissions expressed concerns regarding the inadequacy of the current APA scholarship stipend, with many submissions suggesting an urgent need for the stipend to be increased. However, these submissions were silent on how much the increase should be.<sup>47</sup>

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*submission 59, p. 5; AARE, submission 64, p. 6; DDoGS, submission 72, p. 5; Deakin, submission 73, p. 2; USC, submission 74, p. 1; Griffith, submission 80, p. 3; Universities Australia, submission 82, p. 12; CAPA, submission 90, p. 33; UWA, submission 96, p. 6; UQ, submission 100, p. 5.*

41 SORTI, *submission 9, p. 3; UniSA, submission 32, p. 7.*

42 USQ, *submission 11, p. 1; USyd, submission 17, p. 1; WEHIMR, submission 34, p. 3; Murdoch, submission 38, p. 3; IRUA, submission 51, p. 7; SUPRA, submission 66, p. 7; Flinders, submission 78, p. 2.*

43 Dr Steve Madden, *submission 60, p. 5;*

44 Mr David Packham OAM, *submission 5, p. 2.*

45 ACDA, *submission 57, p. 1.*

46 RMIT University, *submission 63, p. 3.*

47 ACED, *submission 7, p. 2; UWS, submission 10, p. 3; ACDS, submission 13, p. 2; VU, submission 15, p. 1; Professor Judy Searle et al., submission 16, p. 3; CUT, submission 18, p. 2; ANU, submission 23, p. 3; ASM, submission 29, p. 3; Group of Eight, submission 55, p. 2; UniMelb, submission 56, p. 4; AAH, submission 61, p. 16; IPRA-TICHR, submission 81, p. 2; Queensland Government, submission 85, p. 4; ARCCE, submission 87, pp. 12-13; MDANZ, submission 89, p. 2; SUT, submission 91, p. 3; ACU, submission 97, p. 2; Minister for Defence Science and Personnel, submission 105, p. 4.*

- 4.58 Monash University suggested the introduction of a special scholarship that would allow part-time postgraduate research students in their late 30s and early 40s with families and mortgages to switch from part-time without scholarship to full-time for up to two years with scholarship support of \$35,000 per annum. Monash University further explained that these special scholarships could be reserved for particular areas of shortage where it is important that suitably qualified people are fast-tracked into the workforce.<sup>48</sup>
- 4.59 The Committee agrees that an increase in scholarship stipend value is urgently needed, and recommends that the Australian Postgraduate Award stipend be increased by 50 per cent.

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### **Recommendation 15**

**The Committee recommends that the Australian Postgraduate Award stipend value be increased by 50 per cent.**

### **Indexation**

- 4.60 DIISR stated that APA funding had increased marginally per annum due to indexation, and also a small annual increase to the base funding from 2006 as an outcome of the previous Government's *Backing Australia's Future* package.<sup>49</sup>
- 4.61 DIISR explained that the full-time APA stipend rate is fixed by the Australian Government through guidelines and indexed by the Higher Education Indexation Factor, which is about two per cent per annum.<sup>50</sup>
- 4.62 However, CAPA stated that the APA stipend rates have failed to keep pace with average weekly earnings.<sup>51</sup>
- 4.63 ACDA summarised data from the Australian Taxation Office and the Australian Bureau of Statistics, describing the relative increase in value of the APA stipend in relation to the equivalent taxable income, average weekly earnings for males and the consumer price index (CPI):

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48 Monash, *submission 76*, p. 4.

49 DIISR, *submission 50*, p. 6.

50 DIISR, *submission 50*, pp. 19-20.

51 CAPA, *submission 90*, p. 32.

Until about 2001, there was a 1:1 relationship between stipend and equivalent taxable income but recent changes to the tax scales have reduced the value of the tax-free status. The data show that stipends have not maintained parity with the CPI, were that to be used as the measure of relativity. Most starkly however is the discrepancy between stipend and average weekly earnings which has substantially diverged from scholarship relativity. Australian average weekly earnings since 1994 have increased by about 75% compared to only 37% for stipends in Australian postgraduate awards.<sup>52</sup>

- 4.64 Nine submissions to the inquiry, including those from key representative bodies such as the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations and the Council of Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies, suggested that scholarship stipends should be subject to an appropriate indexation mechanism, to ensure that the value of those stipends keeps pace with inflation and the cost of living.<sup>53</sup>
- 4.65 The Committee agrees that the value of scholarship stipends should keep pace with inflation.

### **Recommendation 16**

**The Committee recommends that the APA stipend be fully indexed with CPI.**

### **Post-submission candidature**

- 4.66 Several submissions to the inquiry discussed the need for consideration for PhD students' needs at the end of their studies, in particular, the period between the submission of a thesis and the awarding of a PhD degree.
- 4.67 SUPRA explained that:

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52 ACDA, *submission 57*, p. 2.

53 IRUA, *submission 51*, p. 8; NTEU, *submission 53*, p. 5; JCU, *submission 22*, p. 5; Murdoch, *submission 38*, p. 2; DDoGS, *submission 72*, p. 5; Deakin, *submission 73*, p. 3; CAPA, *submission 90*, p. 33; UQ, *submission 100*, p. 6; USC, *submission 74*, p. 1.

Currently, one is considered to have completed a degree when the thesis is submitted yet candidature in practice does not end until the degree is conferred.<sup>54</sup>

4.68 University of Wollongong discussed this issue at length:

Much of the Australian research output in terms of publications, discoveries, patents and technology transfer arises from the research work of HDR students. Yet, our ability to ensure that this output is made generally available is inhibited by the counterproductive practise of de-enrolling an HDR student as soon as they submit their thesis. This results in students entering a “no-man’s-land” while waiting for examiners’ deliberations on their work; they typically must find paid work to survive and thus cannot devote time to the preparation of publications or presentations of their findings. Their effective removal from the academic community occurs at a time when they need that engagement most. This is particularly problematic for international students whose visas terminate with their enrolment.<sup>55</sup>

4.69 James Cook University also commented on the situation PhD students face upon thesis submission:

I find it very anomalous that a student who finishes their PhD within the tenure of their scholarship has to immediately surrender their scholarship and cannot use it to support themselves during the interregnum of the examination period, which typically takes several months.<sup>56</sup>

4.70 James Cook University suggested that an extension of candidature and scholarship would be of great benefit to the PhD student and their research output:

I think that it would be reasonable, if the time of scholarships were extended – or even if it were not, but preferably if it were – that a student be allowed to retain their scholarship during the examination period in the expectation that they would use that to complete the publication of their papers from their thesis. There are huge advantages in this: they are used to being poor and you are prolonging it just a bit, they will have a head of steam because they have just completed the writing process, they are really on top of it, the literature is current et cetera. And the minute they go to

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54 SUPRA, *transcript of evidence 5 August 2008*, p. 24.

55 UOW, *submission 25*, p. 2.

56 JCU, *transcript of evidence 19 August 2008*, p. 17.

another job, their employer's priorities will inevitably be different and they will be consumed.<sup>57</sup>

4.71 University of Wollongong suggested that doctoral students:

... remain nominally enrolled for a period of 6 months after submission of their thesis and that APA and APA-I awards automatically extend past submission of the thesis to completion of the thesis when the period is within the 4.5 year limit.<sup>58</sup>

4.72 SUPRA recommended that the definition of completion of postgraduate degrees be extended to the time at which a student is informed that they will be awarded their degree. SUPRA also recommended that the length of the APA should be changed to match this extension of candidature:

We would like to see that the awards be extended to match that definition of candidature, that it reaches until conferral of degree rather than submission, given that there is a substantial amount of work demanded from postgraduate students between first submission of a thesis and actual conferral of a degree.<sup>59</sup>

4.73 SUPRA sought to clarify exactly what the extension period should be:

On the issue of conferral versus submission, probably we need clarification. When we say conferral what we mean is when someone says 'Here's your letter, you've passed your PhD,' not necessarily when someone makes you lift your hat [at a graduation ceremony] and gives you your PhD. Even we say you can call yourself doctor once you have got your letter even though you have not got your degree. That is the point that we would like it rather than the point where you go to the office and get the stamp saying, 'Yes, we have four copies of your thesis'.<sup>60</sup>

4.74 The Committee is fully supportive of the need to extend doctoral student enrolment past thesis submission to the point when students are informed that they will be awarded a degree.

4.75 The Committee sees this time as an ideal opportunity for doctoral students to publish papers from their research, apply for post-doctoral grants and complete generic skills training that will assist in preparing them for the research workforce.

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57 JCU, *transcript of evidence 19 August 2008*, p. 22.

58 UOW, *submission 25*, p. 2.

59 SUPRA, *transcript of evidence 5 August 2008*, p. 24.

60 SUPRA, *transcript of evidence 5 August 2008*, p. 35.

- 4.76 The Committee is also of the opinion that doctoral students should continue to receive income support during this extended period, through any unexpended portion of their original award, including any unused extensions.
- 4.77 The Committee is confident that the majority of doctoral students receiving stipends will be able to complete their studies with adequate income support, given that the Committee has recommended that doctoral students should be eligible for stipends of three-and-a-half years plus two six-month extensions.

### **Recommendation 17**

**The Committee recommends that the Australian PhD candidature period be nominally extended beyond thesis submission until the time at which the student is informed that they will be awarded their degree.**

## **Additional income support**

- 4.78 CAPA explained that access to income support is the most critical factor in supporting participation in higher education, explaining that it is:
- a deciding factor for those considering pursuing a higher degree;
  - an enabling factor in supporting adequate student engagement, allowing students to get the most out of their experience in higher education;
  - a critical factor in supporting the quality of the contribution higher degree candidates are able to make through research; and
  - a major factor in mitigating student attrition.<sup>61</sup>
- 4.79 SUPRA submitted that student poverty is one of the most pressing issues facing postgraduate research students, suggesting that:
- ... the mounting pressure of ongoing poverty for students who have committed 7 or 8 or more years of their lives to becoming qualified researchers can be too much for many students to bear.<sup>62</sup>

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61 CAPA, *submission 90.1*, p. 7.



4.80 SUPRA recommended that Austudy and Youth Allowance provisions should be extended to include all postgraduate research students, and that the rates of assistance need to increase steeply. SUPRA discussed an example:

For the many students who live in and around the main Camperdown campus of the University of Sydney, the problem of the paucity of their income support combined with an extremely tight rental market and inflationary pressures on transport and household goods has made it exceedingly difficult to make ends meet.<sup>63</sup>

4.81 SUPRA stated that it is often confronted with postgraduate research students struggling to manage significant rental expenditure. SUPRA explained that it has previously discussed many ways to deal with these issues, including having a loading added to the scholarships of postgraduate research students studying in high cost areas, but acknowledged difficulties with determining eligibility criteria.<sup>64</sup>

4.82 SUPRA explained that a solution that would effectively support students with higher living costs would be to extend Centrelink's Rent Assistance scheme to postgraduate research students in receipt of an APA or similar scholarship (as well those students receiving Austudy or Youth Allowance, if that was to be implemented). Health Care Card eligibility was also proposed.<sup>65</sup>

4.83 Victoria University stated that the Australian Government should consider measures that recognise individual hardship and make additional support available to postgraduate research students who face severe difficulties, and suggested that rent support could be one such measure.<sup>66</sup>

4.84 CAPA explained that only an extraordinarily low number of postgraduate research students are currently eligible for Austudy or Youth Allowance. CAPA provided an example:

Students in receipt of Youth Allowance who are under 21 may apply to receive income support while undertaking a research higher degree. This provision would have affected only 28 PhD

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62 SUPRA, *submission 66*, p. 5.

63 SUPRA, *submission 66*, p. 5.

64 SUPRA, *submission 66*, p. 5.

65 SUPRA, *submission 66*, p. 5; SUPRA, *transcript of evidence 5 August 2008*, p. 24.

66 VU, *submission 15*, p. 2.

students and 19 research masters students under the age of 21 enrolled in 2006.<sup>67</sup>

4.85 CAPA explained that several recent legislative reforms have extended eligibility for Youth Allowance and Austudy to certain students, however, those provisions are very limited, failing to address the genuine need clearly identified for postgraduate research students:

... only students in approved courses are eligible to apply for income support ... 920 masters students in approved courses would be eligible for income support in 2008, increasing to approximately 1,470 in 2010. There were 74,248 domestic masters by coursework students enrolled in 2006.<sup>68</sup>

4.86 CAPA summarised various data sources, suggesting that there are approximately 20 000 postgraduates (or 59 per cent) attempting a research higher degree without access to any form of student income at all.<sup>69</sup>

4.87 CAPA recommended that access to Youth Allowance, Abstudy or Austudy be extended to all students enrolled in a tertiary degree, regardless of the nature of the course in which they are enrolled.<sup>70</sup>

4.88 The Committee is very concerned that the majority of Australian postgraduate students are beginning their courses of study at a serious disadvantage through the lack of income support.

4.89 The Committee is of the opinion that access to the Youth Allowance, Austudy or Abstudy schemes should be extended to all students enrolled in a tertiary degree. The Committee notes that candidates in receipt of a scholarship or other source of income above a determined assessment threshold would be ineligible, and access to those schemes should be regarded as secondary to access to a scholarship or award with an adequate living stipend.

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67 CAPA, *submission 90.1*, p. 5.

68 CAPA, *submission 90.1*, pp. 5-6.

69 CAPA, *submission 90.1*, p. 7.

70 CAPA, *submission 90.1*, p. 7.

## Recommendation 18

**The Committee recommends that access to Youth Allowance, Austudy or Abstudy be extended to all students enrolled in a higher degree by research, noting that:**

- **access to those schemes does not determine eligibility;**
- **candidates in receipt of a scholarship or other source of income above a determined assessment threshold would be ineligible; and**
- **access to those schemes should be regarded as secondary to access to a scholarship or award with an adequate living stipend.**

4.90 CAPA, in its supplementary submission to the inquiry, highlighted the uneven nature by which state governments support postgraduate research students through access to transport concessions.<sup>71</sup>

4.91 CAPA provided a table summarising state provision of transport concession to various student groups:

- South Australia, Northern Territory and Western Australia provide concessions to all tertiary students, including international students;
- New South Wales provides concessions to undergraduate students and postgraduate students with scholarships;
- Queensland and Victoria provide concessions to undergraduate students only; and
- Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory provide no concessions to tertiary students.<sup>72</sup>

4.92 Murdoch University also called for the introduction of transport concessions, particularly for international PhD students.<sup>73</sup>

4.93 The Committee considers it absurd that there is such considerable variation in access to transport concession between the states.

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71 CAPA, *submission 90.1*, p. 11.

72 CAPA, *submission 90.1*, p. 11.

73 Murdoch, *submission 38*, p. 4.

- 4.94 The Committee recommends that the Australian Government work with State Governments to support postgraduate research students through the reduction of certain living expenses, in particular, public transport travel.

### **Recommendation 19**

**The Committee recommends that the Australian Government work with State Governments to support postgraduate students through the reduction of certain living expenses, in particular, through the provision of concessions for public transport travel. Access to transport concessions should be made available to all full-time tertiary students, regardless of type of enrolment or the level of course in which they are enrolled.**