



**INQUIRY INTO RESEARCH TRAINING AND RESEARCH WORKFORCE
ISSUES IN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES CONVENED BY THE
HOUSE STANDING COMMITTEE ON INDUSTRY, SCIENCE AND
INNOVATION –**

**Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association (SUPRA)
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The Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association (SUPRA) welcomes this opportunity to comment on and make recommendations to the Federal Government on the significant issue of research training and research workforce issues in Australian universities.

SUPRA is integral to policy development within the University of Sydney and provides significant support and advocacy for postgraduate students at all campuses of the University. Our services include a professionally staffed advice and advocacy service, a community legal service, a computer and resource/conference room and an outreach and events programme, all of which has only continued because of the support of the University post the introduction of the so-called Voluntary Student Unionism legislation. SUPRA plays an active role within the University by raising awareness of issues related to postgraduate study and the factors which can affect a student's ability to complete their degree on time.

In addition, SUPRA continuously contributes to debates and policy development within the peak body, the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) so as to raise public awareness and understanding of the postgraduate student experience, which increasingly involves issues of balance between study and factors such as paid work, domestic work and the type of one's candidature.

For this submission we limit our comments to two key areas in which we have the most direct expertise.

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The contribution of research training programs to Australia's competitiveness in the areas of science, research and innovation & The effectiveness of current Commonwealth research training schemes:

Flaws in the current Research Training Scheme (RTS) that discourage innovative and risky research initiatives are significant and inexcusable. The literature is in general agreement that postgraduate research students contribute a significant amount of the research output within Australian Higher Education. Estimates of the quantity of student research output as a percentage of total research output range from 35%-70%. Yet RTS scheme is highly conservative in its current form insofar as it is not supportive of students who undertake innovative, cutting-edge and adventurous research within their projects. It's vital to ongoing research innovation in *all* fields that any improvements to the RTS redress a range of problems within current guidelines that in effect incentivise conservative research. Some of the major issues SUPRA has identified are outlined below.

- i) *Completion Definitions:* We note that at present master's degree candidates are given two years full-time candidature to complete their degrees and doctoral candidates are allowed four years. In both cases the performance indicator part of funding formulas weights 50% of calculations to completion of the degree. This manner of structuring funding has some significant flaws. It counts 'completions' at the point of submission of a doctoral or master's thesis and before the work is examined or subsequently revised or re-examined. It has the potential to encourage a culture that puts an emphasis on just getting a thesis done to a standard that is prima facie able to be examined, whereas in the interests of innovation the emphasis should be on creating funding models that encourage aspiration to increase quality. Such a move would also encourage universities to take action to cut thesis examination times, which are in our experience overly long.
- ii) *Length of Candidature:* The four years allocated to doctoral candidates to complete is manifestly inadequate. The Council for Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences notes that the average completion time for a humanities PhD is 4.48 years. SUPRA suspects that the actual figure could be higher if one were to take into account students who suspend during their candidature but who continue to work on their research projects without support and resources from their universities. at play There is clearly a range of factors here including a general paucity of scholarship availability in the humanities as compared to areas where industry and other funding of scholarships more significantly augment numbers of APAs. There is also the issue (addressed below) of the need to increase levels of scholarship and other income support for students. However, it seems unlikely that even the *average* doctoral completion rates in different parts of the higher education sector will be below four years in the foreseeable future and SUPRA considers it desirable that additional flexibility be built into the system to allow longer periods of funding.
- iii) *Flexibility in Allocation of Commonwealth Supported Places:* There is insufficient capacity within RTS for students who fail to complete a course of study and wish to recommence a research degree to receive a full allocation of commonwealth support

unless they interrupt their studies for a period of at least three years. In the case of a student whose innovative project simply does not work, they may be penalised severely and may find themselves unable to complete their masters or doctoral studies. There must be capacity within RTS or its successor for students to be re-allocated with full allowances should they re-commence candidature in this kind of circumstance without penalising those student with an enforced hiatus. It would also be desirable for there to be capacity for extending the length of available commonwealth support where a student continues in the same candidature, but because of circumstances beyond their control (including both personal and research-related issues) is not able to complete within specified time frames. No such capacity for extension exists under current guidelines which is a significant failure of the RTS as it currently stands.

- iv) *Infrastructure and Minimum Resource Policy Issues:* While the commonwealth departmental guidelines rightly require Universities to have in place codes of conduct for supervision of research students, these codes and the efforts made by the University of Sydney to support and improve quality supervision have not been supported by a commensurately robust federal commitment to minimum resources and infrastructure. To its credit and after several years of lobbying from SUPRA involving surveying hundreds of students and producing a highly consultative Minimum Resources Policy, the University of Sydney is close to agreeing to a minimum set of resource standards for students. The standards have been developed with reference to local issues at the University, but had their starting point in the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations policy (available on their web site www.capa.edu.au). In SUPRA's view the implementation of policies across the entire sector should be made compulsory so that no student is left without basic and minimum infrastructure. Such an initiative must be supported by increased funding commitments from the Commonwealth to ensure that Universities are able to meet requirements.

Recommendations:

- **THAT the definition of completions be altered so that the date of completion is the date of award of the research degree.**
- **THAT RTS support for Commonwealth Supported doctoral places be returned to five years full time and two and half years for research masters.**
- **THAT increased flexibility be built into RTS to allow students to re-commence candidature or receive extended RTS support.**
- **THAT measures be introduced to require and fully fund a requirement for each institution to have a minimum resources policy based on CAPA's model policy (available at www.capa.edu.au).**

Adequacy of training and support (including income support) available to research graduates in Australia:

At present there are some significant and largely unaddressed social justice challenges in making research higher education more accessible. In many cases these challenges severely inhibit the possibility of capable students entering higher level research study, or they prevent students from completing that study. Some of the issues of concern to SUPRA are as follows.

- i) Student poverty:* Both Universities Australia and the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) have drawn attention to the need for greater financial support for postgraduates students. The 2006 Student Finances Survey found that: 38.3% of higher degree by research (HDR) students had insufficient savings as back up in the event of serious financial difficulty; 45.9% of HDR students used up savings in order to continue their studies; 22.6% of HDR students had some form of loan, with a mean debt level of \$7,340. SUPRA believes that if this data was investigated further through other measures of financial difficulty such as number of times a postgraduate student has to seek an extension to pay their utilities bills or an analysis of the credit card debt of postgraduates (e.g. what percentage of the credit card debt is related to normal cost-of-living expenses such as food, haircuts, children's school expenses and so on) the depth of financial difficulty faced by many postgraduates could be even more acute than even these reports identify. Further the APA currently is not appropriately indexed and fails to keep pace with increases to cost of living and inflation. It is essential that the APA be indexed adequately to above the rate of inflation.
- ii) Outdated Research Candidature Model:* Financial difficulties are exacerbated by an outdated candidature model that assumes students are young and healthy recently graduated undergraduates, unencumbered by family or other life commitments and challenges. These assumptions are simply not borne out by the statistics (available on the DEEWR website) or SUPRA's casework experience. Most postgraduate students are struggling to cope with a system that assumes the possibility of three to four years of intensive full-time study without interruptions by external pressures. It should, for example, be much easier than it is under current guidelines to arrange part-time candidature at Universities with a matching part-time APA (or similar scholarship – noting that many scholarships use the APA conditions as standard) stipend. Part-time stipends should not be tax liable (as they currently are) as opposed to tax-free full-time stipends. The stipend rate needs to be higher and recognise that living on a wage that will shortly fall below the individual Henderson poverty line is not viable in and of itself. This becomes more inadequate for the majority students who are not young and healthy and single, indeed it could be argued that many of those students are already living below the poverty line. Maternity leave provisions, sick leave, and suspension provisions should all be increased and

APAs should be more easily portable to other Universities in a broader range of circumstances than is currently the case.

- iii) *Inadequacy of Income Support:* Student Poverty is one of the most pressing issues facing all postgraduate students. 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. It is well past time to extend Austudy and Youth Allowance provisions to include all postgraduate students. In the case of these Centrelink benefits and also in the case of the APA, rates of assistance need to increase steeply. 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. There is no question of living a luxurious lifestyle as the previous minister insensitively claimed in relation to Austudy and Youth Allowance rates. 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.
- iv) *Housing Costs in Metropolitan Centres:* As student representatives on an inner city campus in one of Australia's most expensive cities we are often confronted with students struggling to manage significant rental expenditure. We have discussed many ways to deal with these issues including having a loading added to the scholarships of students studying in high cost areas to take account of excessive outlay on housing. Whilst this may benefit many students we can see the difficulties with determining eligibility criteria. Further this is complicated many students since enrolled in a particular institution may in fact conduct research in locations quite separate from the main campuses. One solution to this problem would be to extend Centrelink's Rent Assistance scheme to postgraduate students in receipt of APA or similar scholarships as well as Austudy or Youth Allowance. If such a measure were to be introduced it would effectively support students with higher living costs and supplement their stipends whilst avoiding some of the inequities identified above.
- v) *Child Care:* In the area of supporting parents who are attempting to study recent Commonwealth initiatives to increase availability and affordability of Childcare are welcome. However it remains the case that cost and availability are still prohibitive for many students who have dependents and are trying to live on a stipend alone. While services are available on campus the level of subsidy of services has decreased as a direct result of the introduction of so-called Voluntary Student Unionism legislation. Also, the need to keep centres self-sustaining has led to a focus on childcare places that cater for full-time staff (a noble end in itself), without sufficient resources being directed to the more flexible modes of childcare delivery that many students require. For example there are no occasional childcare services at the University of Sydney main campus. Notwithstanding that waiting lists are excessively long and demand for places cannot be met. This is no doubt the case at

many other Universities around the country. Any intervention by the government in this area would be welcomed by students.

- vi) *Impact of Voluntary Student Unionism:* We have already noted that subsidies available to students for childcare have been one casualty of the introduction of VSU. However the provision of independent student run, welfare and advocacy services is endangered around the country. On many campuses there has been a significant reduction in staff available to assist students on wide range of matters, and it is only through the hard work of successive SUPRA councils and the generous support of the University of Sydney that free, independent, casework and legal assistance is widely available to the postgraduate student population. It is essential that the government address the issue of supporting independent student services to prevent further reduction in the amount and quality of independent advice, advocacy, representation and support available to all students on Australian campuses.
- vii) *Health Care:* On the current stipends and incomes received by many postgraduate students private health insurance and care is an unaffordable luxury, however for some research students low income Health Care Cards have helped to defray medical expenses. At different points over the past several years APA stipends have dropped below the low-income threshold to receive a Health Care Card from Centrelink. Whilst the stipends should never have been allowed to fall so low relative to cost of living, in SUPRA's experience once those students became eligible for the card it proved to be of significant benefit. It helped to make prescription medications more affordable, and allowed access to services such as local cost dental care facilities, and other benefits from state and local government. It would be desirable that APA and similar scholarship holders be provided with a Health Care Card from Centrelink as a matter of course and a benefit of their stipend.
- viii) *Students from Equity Groups:* Recently at the University of Sydney two indigenous research students were awarded Fulbright scholarships to assist with their ongoing studies. This is a significant achievement of which both the University and those students should be proud. Overall participation in research higher education, however, from Indigenous students and other equity groups is low and not proportionate with participation in undergraduate higher education. In SUPRA's view increasing the flexibility in the research higher education system in line with our comments above will have a positive impact on access and equity. It is essential that there is an increased focus on recruitment and retention of students from equity backgrounds. It will also be necessary to develop and implement programs that encourage those students to enter and remain part of the higher education system.

Recommendations:

- **THAT the stipend rate for Australian Postgraduate Awards (APAs) be increased by 50%.**
- **THAT the APA be appropriately indexed.**
- **THAT APAs continue to be administered by Universities.**
- **THAT the duration of all APAs be increased to at least 4 years (full-time equivalent) to match the term of candidature.**
- **THAT all scholarships and awards be exempted from assessable income for taxation and income support purposes (including part-time awards), along with amending Commonwealth scholarship guidelines to give recipients greater flexibility in going part-time.**
- **THAT APAs return to being transferable between universities.**
- **THAT Austudy and Youth Allowance be made available to all postgraduate students.**
- **THAT APAs include and/or increase relocation allowances.**
- **THAT All APA holders be eligible for rent assistance.**
- **THAT eligibility for Health Care Cards be expanded so to include APA and scholarship holders.**
- **THAT Every student undertaking a RHD receive an APA.**
- **THAT the VSU legislation be rescinded and that secure funding be reinstated for all student organisations.**
- **THAT additional funding be made available to increase the participation of designated equity groups.**