

SUBMISSION BY

The Research School of Physical Sciences and Engineering

at the

AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

to the

**Inquiry into Research Training and Research Workforce Issues
in Australian Universities**

30 May 2008

This document presents the submission to the Inquiry into Research Training and Research Workforce Issues in Australian universities on behalf of the Research School of Physical Sciences and Engineering (RSPHysSE) at the Australian National University (ANU). Please note that this document represents the views of the School and not necessarily those of the ANU.

We address in particular the important role of research training in addressing national skills needs in areas of science and technology.

1. **Duration of Australian Postgraduate Award.** 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.

2. **Value of an Australian Postgraduate Award.** The Award currently has a value of ~\$20,000 which has not kept pace with remuneration increases in other sectors of the economy. Starting salaries for some students in the Physical Sciences now exceed \$70,000 p.a. which makes undertaking a Ph.D financially unattractive. Students on the APA scholarships are experiencing financial difficulties and often supplement their stipend by undertaking paid employment, which reduces the time they need to commit to their studies. This extends the completion time even further, and again increases the risk of non-completion. *It is recommended that the value of an APA be increased to at least \$25,000 per annum.*
3. **International Students - 1.** It should be recognized that as well as contributing to research productivity during their postgraduate studies, many International students after receiving their PhD remain in this country and enhance our productivity. They are clearly working in skills areas of interest to Australia. They have already received their undergraduate education funded by other governments, and there are clear parallels between attracting postgraduate students and other skilled worker schemes. To address shortages in the PhD-trained skills areas, we propose funding international students who are attracted from overseas in a similar way to the support given to Australian and New Zealand students through RTS funding. Other Government schemes have been opened up to equal international competition including APA Industry scholarships and ARC Fellowships, and we believe that the same principle should be applied to Commonwealth-funded APAs. We propose that overseas students apply for *Skilled International Student Status*, and in this way Australia can select the areas of expertise considered by Government as desirable for the country. *It is recommended a Skilled International Student scheme be adopted.*
4. **International Students – 2.** International postgraduate students enhance the standard of research in Australia and yet their numbers are currently very small (~20% of total postgraduate completions). Furthermore, despite the budget announcement to eventually double the number of APA scholarships for Australian and New Zealand students, our experience in the Physical Sciences is that there is not a large enough pool of high quality Australian and New Zealand students available to take up these additional awards. However, there *is* considerable high quality unmet demand from international students. It is therefore desirable that APAs can be transferred to a international students as there are already a large number of exceedingly well qualified applicants. *It is proposed that APA awards be transferable to IPRS awards.*