



# SUPRA Submission: Minimum Resources for Postgraduate Research Students

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## Introduction

SUPRA is glad to participate in the consultation process around the policy for resources for research students. The University is well placed to take this opportunity to implement a policy which will support its goals for developing excellence in research through support for research training. Furthermore, this opportunity allows the University to learn from evidence gathered from other Australian universities, and develop a truly best-practice policy.

A clear and strong policy on resources for postgraduate research students would enhance several of the goals identified in the University's *Strategic Plan 2011-2015*, including:

- Strategy Six – “Develop our capacity to identify and support research excellence”;
- 6(d) – “Apply divisional and University research strategies in the ongoing assessment of our infrastructure needs and priorities”;
- Strategy Nine – “Agree coordinated strategies for identifying, developing and supporting research talent from undergraduate students to research leaders”;
- 9(g) – “Develop a more transparent model for the allocation of income from research students, consistent with the University Economic Model”;
- 10(d) – “Enhance the pathways and support we provide for Indigenous students to access higher education and pursue both academic and professional staff careers”;
- 11(e) – “Ensure appropriate support for the retention and achievement of students from underrepresented groups”;
- Strategy Sixteen – “Refine and apply the new University Economic Model to ensure greater transparency in resource and cost allocation and support strategic decision-making.”

Government funding does not currently meet the full costs of research training. While government processes are currently moving towards funding more of the direct and

indirect costs of research, these focus on research conducted with Australian Competitive Grant funding, and do not address the gaps in funding and costs of research training. The Research Training Scheme (RTS) bifurcates funding allocation by discipline type, and as a result, the provision of resources to research students is highly variable across the University. A policy on the provision of resources is an important step towards correcting the inconsistencies and inequities across faculties and academic units, which negatively affect students' experience of higher degree research programmes and hinder the University's goals of developing research excellence.

The procedures ensuing from the creation of a policy ought to include a timeline for implementation through the University Economic Model and the Campus 2020 Masterplan. A robust plan of implementation will strengthen and cohere the standards of resource provision set out in a policy on resources for postgraduate research students, and allow for the University to plan for the increase in research student load envisioned in the *Strategic Plan 2011-2015*.

The statement distributed at the SEG Research Training Committee meeting, entitled *Support Resources for Postgraduate Research Students* contains a mix of purposes, some of which are at odds with others. In the first instance, the statement reproduces a list of resources from the Postgraduate Handbook to which postgraduate students already have access. In the second, the statement sets targets and aspirational goals for the particular resources to be made available. The statement also sets out guidelines for the provision of the resources available to postgraduate students.

SUPRA is of the opinion that a statement which simply reproduces a list that is available elsewhere is not adequate. Such a statement is also not informed by the goals of the CAPA Minimum Resources campaign, nor SUPRA's *Postgraduate Entitlements Policy*.

CAPA's *Minimum Resources for Postgraduate Study 2010* report states the following:

CAPA's minimum resource statements are informed by the assumption that the provision of adequate resources is vital to the effective delivery of postgraduate programs, and for the production and dissemination of quality research.<sup>1</sup>

SUPRA **recommends** that the policy be divided into five sections, each of which address, respectively:

- (1) minimum enforceable standard resources for postgraduate research students;
- (2) aspirational goals for the provision of resources associated with postgraduate research study and a timeline for the implementation of these goals;
- (3) guidelines for the delivery of adequate resources for postgraduate research study;
- (4) processes for addressing complaints in relation to compliance with the policy; and
- (5) processes for auditing the policy.

### **Summary of Recommendations**

1. THAT the policy be divided into five sections, each of which address, respectively:

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<sup>1</sup> Palmer, Nigel (2010) *Minimum Resources for Postgraduate Study 2010*, Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations, November 2010, p. 1.

- (1) minimum enforceable standard resources for postgraduate research students;
  - (2) aspirational goals for the provision of resources associated with postgraduate research study and a timeline for the implementation of these goals;
  - (3) guidelines for the delivery of adequate resources for postgraduate research study;
  - (4) processes for addressing complaints in relation to compliance with the policy; and
  - (5) processes for auditing the policy.
2. THAT this policy includes a definition of 'research student' in the policy.
3. THAT should an exclusive definition of 'research student' be adopted for the purposes of the policy, that students undertaking research who fall outside of that definition ought also to have their needs enumerated in a policy regarding their resource entitlements.
4. THAT either:
  - (a) coursework students be included in the policy, or
  - (b) a separate policy be developed to address the resource needs of postgraduate coursework students.
5. THAT the University conduct another survey of students before finalising a policy. SUPRA also **recommends** that a draft of the policy be released to postgraduate research students for comment before it is finalised.
6. THAT the statement include all the resources specified in the SUPRA *Postgraduate Entitlements Policy*.
7. THAT the University re-name the statement a 'Policy on Resources for Postgraduate Research Students'.
8. THAT the University establish a goal to fund full costs of postgraduate research training, which include fieldwork and conference related travel and expenses.
9. THAT the University commit to ensuring that telecommunications access is available at all of its campuses, and liaise with telecommunications providers, and local and state government authorities, to ensure that telecommunications access is available to all students.
10. THAT the Office of Graduate Studies liaise with Sydney eLearning and the University Information and Communications Technology division, as well as student support units, to establish protocols and procedures for online dissemination of support resources.
11. THAT the University use the *CAPA Model Grievance Procedures* as a basis for developing appropriate complaint-handling procedures.
12. THAT the University make all units of study offering technical skills training, and any other units of study that might support the development of a candidature, freely available to research students. Where students require training or support but that is not provided through a unit of study (e.g.

specialist statistics assistance and support), SUPRA recommends that the University provide the resources for students to access such training or support.

13. THAT the University guarantee that specific resources are available for equity groups, including dedicated autonomous spaces, scholarships, English language support, separate toilet facilities (including gender-neutral toilets), disability accessible spaces, provision of materials in appropriate formats for blind and Deaf students, support networks, and independent representation.
14. SUPRA recommends against the allocation of desk space through a hot-desking system by any part of the University. Reluctance on the part of students to use spaces in which hot-desking systems operate may skew existing assessments of student needs for desk space. SUPRA recommends that a shared desk allocation system, similar to that implemented in the Faculty of Education and Social Work, be implemented in situations where resource constraints limit allocation of dedicated desks to individual students. SUPRA also recommends that these alternative arrangements are noted as preferable alternatives in the policy.
15. THAT the University include a timeline for the implementation of the policy throughout the University, and that its provisions be included in the Campus 2020 Masterplan and University Economic Model.
16. THAT the policy include a timeline for the setting aside of appropriate funds, the construction or refurbishment of building stock, and the procurement of other materials and resources in line with the implementation of the new University Economic Model.
17. THAT the University include an internal procedure for addressing complaints regarding compliance, which includes:
  - capacity for a student to complain to a central University body, independent of a faculty, division, or unit, such as the Office of Graduate Studies;
  - that investigation be conducted promptly, and the central body work with the division, faculty, or unit to resolve complaints; and
  - where appropriate, that SUPRA be consulted in the process of resolving complaints.
18. THAT faculties be required to report regularly to the SEG Research Training Committee on their progress in implementing the policy, and on their provision of resources to research students.

## Research and Coursework Students

While students with a place under the Research Training Scheme are unambiguously considered as research students, there are students whose degree programmes are not funded by the RTS who undertake research as a part of their degree programme. These include students whose research component is not sufficient to meet requirements for award of an APA, as well as those that do. As such, SUPRA **recommends** that this policy include a definition of 'research student' in the policy.

SUPRA is also concerned that if only those students whose place is funded by the RTS are considered research students by the terms of the policy, that many students

contributing to the University's research output will be marginalised and disadvantaged, and thus discouraged from undertaking further research. SUPRA **recommends** that should an exclusive definition of 'research student' be adopted for the purposes of the policy, that students undertaking research who fall outside of that definition ought also to have their needs enumerated in a policy regarding their resource entitlements.

While SUPRA acknowledges that the Office of Graduate Studies has only research students within its remit, the policy would nevertheless be a University policy, and requires broader implementation across University-wide initiatives in order to be successful at achieving the goals set out in the Strategic Plan. SUPRA's *Postgraduate Entitlements Policy* is addressed at the provision of resources for all postgraduate students, both research and coursework, as SUPRA is of the opinion that all postgraduate study requires adequate resourcing.

The need for minimum standards for coursework postgraduates is now becoming particularly acute, given the increasing variability in the quality and standards of coursework postgraduate program delivery and support across the Australian higher education sector.<sup>2</sup>

SUPRA **recommends** that either (a) coursework students be included in the policy, or (b) a separate policy be developed to address the resource needs of postgraduate coursework students.

## Minimum Standard Resources

SUPRA recognises that the indirect costs of research training are not explicitly provided for through funding through the Research Training Scheme. However, this funding is provided for universities to "improve the responsiveness of HEPs [Higher Education Providers] to the needs of their research students"<sup>3</sup>.

SUPRA's *Postgraduate Entitlements Policy* was put together on the basis of a dedicated survey conducted in 2006 and 2007, to which some 900 responses were received. It is a robust, evidence-based policy that reflects the needs of research students. SUPRA strongly **recommends** that the University conduct another survey of students before finalising a policy. SUPRA also **recommends** that a draft of the policy be released to postgraduate research students for comment before it is finalised. This is particularly important for the inclusion of the needs of rural and remote students, and those students undertaking field research, which the statement identifies as a cohort needing particular attention.

### Additional Resources not mentioned in the Policy

A number of resources for postgraduate students, provided for in other universities' policies, according to the *Minimum Resources for Postgraduate Study 2010* by CAPA, are not mentioned in the *Support Resources for Postgraduate Research Students* statement. These include:

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 35.

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<http://www.innovation.gov.au/RESEARCH/RESEARCHBLOCKGRANTS/Pages/ResearchTrainingScheme.aspx>

- Fieldwork funding;
- Accommodations for research animals, equipment and materials;
- Telecommunications access for students at rural and remote campuses;
- Audio-visual equipment, including teleconferencing facilities and recording equipment;
- Support services, including legal services;
- Grievance procedures;
- Representation and advocacy through an independent, democratic, and adequately funded student organisation;
- Specific training in technical skills required for conducting research;
- Specific resources for equity groups including dedicated autonomous spaces, scholarships, English language support, separate toilet facilities (including gender-neutral toilets), disability accessible spaces, provision of materials in appropriate formats for blind and Deaf students, support networks, and independent representation.

Although PRSS funding is currently available to cover some fieldwork costs, its provision is highly variable and often the direct costs of research are not met by PRSS funding. While the Federal Government is progressively addressing the full costs of research through other processes, these have not included assessments of the costs of research training. SUPRA **recommends** that the University establish a goal to fund full costs of postgraduate research training, which include fieldwork and conference-related travel and expenses.

Students from rural campuses have informed SUPRA that they lack adequate telecommunications access. They particularly require mobile telephone facilities which would enable communication across distances in cases where students may be isolated and in need of assistance. SUPRA recommends that the University commit to ensuring that telecommunications access is available at all of its campuses, and liaise with telecommunications providers, and local and state government authorities, to ensure that telecommunications access is available to all students.

Furthermore, students studying at rural campuses have requested that support resources, such as careers seminars, be made available via teleconferencing and online in audio-visual formats. Such options would enhance the accessibility of these materials and resources for all students, increasing the reach of these resources. SUPRA recommends that the Office of Graduate Studies liaise with Sydney eLearning and the University Information and Communications Technology division, as well as student support units, to establish protocols and procedures for online dissemination of support resources.

Best practice general grievance procedures also ought to be guaranteed to students through the policy. Although these procedures need not be specified, the entitlements of students to natural justice, confidentiality, non-victimisation, timely resolution, and access to avenues of appeal ought to be guaranteed in this policy. The *CAPA Model Grievance Procedures*<sup>4</sup> outline basic requirements for best-practice grievance handling procedures. SUPRA understands that Deputy Vice-Chancellor Brewer is conducting a project to address the co-ordination of these procedures, and advocate for the inclusion of robust procedures amongst the resources guaranteed to postgraduate research students. A process inviting submissions on grievance ought to be included in the

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<sup>4</sup> Available at: <http://www.capa.edu.au/briefingpaper/2008/capa-survey-and-model-grievance-procedures>

process of implementation of such procedures. SUPRA recommends that the University use the *CAPA Model Grievance Procedures* as a basis for developing appropriate grievance procedures.

Student access to representation is being addressed through consultation between the Office of Graduate Studies and SUPRA through a separate process, and we ask that the University await the outcome of this process for SUPRA's final recommendations.

Currently, research students who need training in specific skills or software applications for conducting their research must enrol in units of study, sometimes offered outside their faculty of enrolment. Students who do not have a RTS-funded place – i.e. students enrolled in professional doctoral degrees or other degrees in which research is a component of their programme – are currently required to pay full fees for these units of study. SUPRA **recommends** that the University make all units of study offering technical and any other units of study that might support the development of a candidature, freely available to research students. Where students require training or support but that is not provided through a unit of study (egg. specialist statistics assistance and support), SUPRA recommends that the University provide the resources for students to access such training or support.

Resources for equity groups – which SUPRA currently identifies as Indigenous, Women, International, Queer and Disabled students, however research students may feel that other equity groups ought to be supported by the University – are important for the diversity and ongoing dynamism of the higher education system. SUPRA and the University of Sydney Union (USU) provide representation and support networks for all postgraduate students, and the USU provides some dedicated autonomous spaces (a Women's Room, a Queer Space, and an International Student Lounge). The University ought to guarantee that these spaces are inclusive of postgraduate students, and that these resources are recognised by the University as a basic necessity of a socially inclusive higher education system. Furthermore, the University needs to ensure the health and safety of intersex, sex and/or gender diverse students by providing gender-neutral toilet facilities, and accessible toilet facilities for students with disabilities. SUPRA has also become aware of difficulties in obtaining learning materials in appropriate formats for blind and Deaf students, and recommends that the University guarantee the provision of learning materials in appropriate formats for blind and Deaf students.

This opportunity also allows the University to co-ordinate support efforts with other initiatives within the University, including the implementation of changes to Indigenous education. The specific support resources for Indigenous research students, particularly scholarships, research funding, and research support, would be useful to list in the policy, in consultation with the future Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous Strategy and Services). Inclusion of such standard resources in policy would certainly enhance goal 10 (d) in the Strategic Plan (“Enhance the pathways and support we provide for Indigenous students to access higher education and pursue both academic and professional staff careers”).

## **Aspirational Goals**

While SUPRA believes that the resources listed in its *Postgraduate Entitlements Policy* are basic requirements for an adequate study environment, and this position is informed by

research on the requirements of postgraduate students, SUPRA recognises that not all of these resources are currently available for the University to provide to students. However, SUPRA believes that a statement of minimum entitlements ought to be presented as an aspirational goal by the University, for any future building stock to incorporate the needs of postgraduate research students, and any refurbishment of current stocks to incorporate these resources.

The current draft of the statement includes aspirational language about 'ideal' resources. SUPRA notes the verbal indication given at the November 2 meeting of the SEG Research Training Committee that the Office of General Counsel had recommended against the use of the 'minimum resources' terminology for legal reasons. Our understanding is that that University is concerned about the prospects of legal action should one or more terms of the policy not be met.

SUPRA suggests that this concern is misplaced. Not only is the University already subject to the risk of legal action over inadequate resource provision, due to stipulations in federal legislation associated with the provision of RTS funding, but watering down the requirements specified in the policy would not ameliorate that risk. SUPRA suggests that the University would be better placed to address risks associated with legal action by instead implementing and enforcing a robust policy through ensuring clear, appropriate minimum standards, supported by procedures of enforcement including reporting requirements, complaints-handling, timelines for implementation, and procedures to assist with meeting the requirements of the policy. SUPRA suggests that building such processes into the policy would require far fewer resources than any envisaged legal action, and would serve both students and the University better in addressing the aims of the policy.

Noting the existing aspirational language within the statement, SUPRA recommends that the statement include all the resources specified in the SUPRA *Postgraduate Entitlements Policy*, and include a timeline for implementation for these resources.

SUPRA **recommends** that the University re-name the statement a 'Policy on Resources for Postgraduate Research Students'.

### **Timeline for Implementation**

SUPRA **recommends** that the University include a timeline for the implementation of the policy throughout the University, and that its provisions be included in the Campus 2020 Masterplan and the University Economic Model. Without such a provision within the policy, the aspirations expressed in the policy are not likely to be implemented in a transparent or coherent fashion. The requirement to adhere to a timeline for implementation provides students with accountability from the University with regard to the distribution of funds which are dedicated to resources for research students. Furthermore, the inclusion of a timeline gives weight to the aspirational goals mentioned in the policy, rather than rendering them a fantasy only.

The University Economic Model will be implemented through accretion over the five years of the 2011-2015 Strategic Plan. SUPRA **recommends** that the policy include a timeline for the setting aside of appropriate funds, the construction or refurbishment of building stock, and the procurement of other materials and resources in line with the implementation of the new University Economic Model.

## Guidelines for Resource Provision

Due to the aspirational nature of many of the resources required for provision within the policy, guidelines for the provision of resources that do not meet the minimum standards set by the policy ought to be included in the policy. At a minimum, faculties ought to make a report regarding the resources available to research students available publically, and outline the efforts they are undertaking to meet the goals set out in the policy.

Guidelines for the provision of resources in ways that are not recommended by the policy, but which are nevertheless utilised within the University, ought to also be included in the policy.

SUPRA recommends against the allocation of desk space through a hot-desking system by any part of the University. Reluctance on the part of students to use spaces in which hot-desking systems operate may skew existing assessments of student needs for desk space. SUPRA **recommends** that a shared desk allocation system, similar to that implemented in the Faculty of Education and Social Work, be implemented in situations where resource constraints limit allocation of dedicated desks to individual students. SUPRA also recommends that these alternative arrangements be noted as preferable alternatives in the policy.

The section of the statement currently entitled 'Responsible Use of Resources' only addresses the responsibilities of students. Given that this singles students out for their use of resources, SUPRA recommends that guidelines for responsibilities also apply to the University in reporting and implementation of the policy.

SUPRA **recommends** that the University include an internal procedure for addressing complaints regarding compliance, which includes:

- capacity for a student to complain to a central University body, independent of a faculty, division, or unit, such as the Office of Graduate Studies;
- that investigation be conducted promptly, and the central body work with the division, faculty, or unit to resolve complaints; and
- where appropriate, that SUPRA be consulted in the process of resolving complaints.

SUPRA **recommends** that faculties be required to report regularly to the SEG Research Training Committee on their progress in implementing the policy, and on their provision of resources to research students. Aspects of this reporting is done through the Academic Board reviews of faculties, however, dedicated reporting about resource provision is important to ensure that implementation occurs in line with overall infrastructure plans for the University.

## Conclusion

SUPRA is glad to have been included in the consultation process for the finalisation of a policy on resources for postgraduate research students, and has made a number of recommendations which are fairly simple and straight-forward to implement. Implementation of SUPRA's recommendations will make for a comprehensive and effective policy which will meet the ongoing resource needs of the University's research training programme.