



Australia's Research Workforce

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Introduction

The Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association (SUPRA) has a constituency of over 16,000 University of Sydney postgraduate students. We offer a free and professional casework service that attracted more than 500 cases a 2010, and a legal service that offered more than 400 instances of advice and/or cases in the same period. Whilst Higher Degree Research (HDR) student numbers are now less than 25% of the total postgraduate student population, down from over 40% a decade ago, enquiries from HDR students are always over-represented in our case statistics.

It is on the basis of experience gained from our direct service provision for HDR students in one of the nation's research-intensive Universities, and our work representing research student needs on Committees of the University, that we offer comment in responses to issues raised in the Meeting Australia's Research Workforce needs discussion paper. SUPRA thanks the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research (DIISR) for the opportunity to respond to the paper. Below we address matters raised in the Consultation Paper directly relevant to our constituency.

Higher Degree Research (HDR) Programme Structures

One of the best ways to meet changing and growing demand for HDR graduates is to adapt programmes such as the PhD, so that it is both attractive to students, and is structured in a way that addresses their needs. In our view, the current Research Training Scheme (RTS) and Australian Postgraduate Award (APA) funding arrangements do not encourage delivery of flexible degree programmes sensitive to student needs. The strict 4-year funding time limits on the RTS, and the need to demonstrate special circumstances in order to gain permission to be enrolled part time and still receive an APA stipend, are just two areas where overly rigid policy settings have led to undue problems for students. We have no doubt that some candidates have given up on viable degrees as a result of these policy settings.

SUPRA was pleased to see the discussion paper cite Access Economics research in relation to the changing demographic of the postgraduate student population to one where there are “a significant proportion of students now commencing their degrees in the 30-39 year age bracket and above”¹. This change has been occurring over a period of many years. The structure of the PhD has not changed fast enough to meet the changing needs of an older student cohort. It is still structured in a way that assumes someone in their early twenties, unencumbered by significant personal or financial commitments, probably living with family or strongly supported by them and so able to get by on a very low income, has a scholarship, and is able to afford the luxury of full time enrolment. Whilst there are clearly many students who still fit this description, the PhD cohort, and potential cohort, as a whole is not characterised by these features.

If there are to be significant increases in the numbers of students commencing and completing HDR degrees, including the PhD, and for those degrees to be offered in a way that encourages them to persist through the challenges that original research inevitably throws their way, the measures recommended below would assist.

Income support

Data regarding the number of postgraduate scholarship versus non-scholarship HDR students is not nationally aggregated. As such it is difficult to estimate accurate figures for students undertaking their HDR degree without access to income support. The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) has estimated, based on projections, that up to 69 per cent of HDR students are undertaking their candidature without a scholarship².

By way of local comparison, the University of Sydney, as of 2006, has approximately 45% of local HDR students awarded a scholarship. With more Australian Postgraduate Award (APA) and University-funded scholarships coming online since publication of this figure, it is possible that figures have improved. Even so, to have up to 55% of the local HDR population at a research-intensive University without a scholarship to support their studies is unacceptable. There is little prospect that the demand for scholarships will be filled without significant further investment from the Federal Government.

Recommendation 1

That there be significant further investment in increasing the number of Government-funded scholarships, including APAs, with a view to meeting growing and currently unfunded demand

Researchers and students often cite access to income support and appropriate type and level as being amongst the most influential factors in completing HDR candidature³. Adequate income support is critical for ensuring students have access to the variety of

¹ Access Economics, *Australia's Future Research Workforce: Supply, Demand and Influence Factors. Report to the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research (2010)*

² Palmer, Nigel (2009) *Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Social Security and Other Legislations Amendment (Income Support for Students) Bill 2009 and Inquiry into Rural and Regional access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities*. Carlton, Vic, Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) (Available at: www.capa.edu.au/submission/2009/income-support-and-rural-and-regional-access-inquiry), p. 14.

³ Council of Graduate Schools PhD Completion Project (2010), *Promising Practices: Financial Support*. Available at <http://www.phdcompletion.org/promising/financial.asp>. Last accessed 10 August 2010.

opportunities available to them. We note that CAPA has estimated that the APA rate will match the Henderson Poverty Line again as of 2012 (Figure 1). We note that the 2008 *Building Australia's Research Capacity* report recommended a 50% increase in the APA rate. We suggest this would be an appropriate increase to help keep HDR students out of poverty, and focused on their studies.

Recommendation 2

That the APA rate be increased by 50% and indexed annually thereafter

As much as SUPRA would like to see all unmet scholarship demand immediately resolved with new scholarships, we recognise that is a long term aspiration, rather than short- or medium-term goal. As such, we repeat calls we have previously made, for HDR students to be able to access Austudy or Youth Allowance in the event that they have not been awarded a scholarship. We note that all Masters by Coursework degrees will become “approved courses” for Austudy and Youth Allowance purposes as of 1 January 2012, and suggest that would be an appropriate date to also extend eligibility to all HDR students.

Recommendation 3

That Austudy and Youth Allowance eligibility be extended to HDR students as of 1 January 2012

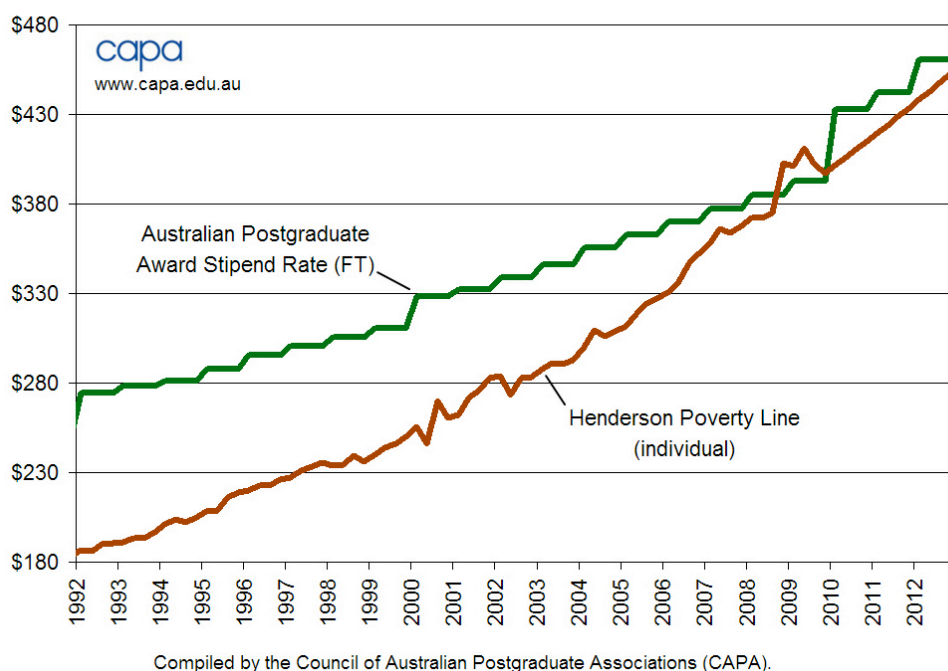


Figure 1 - Weekly Australian Postgraduate Award Stipend Rate with the Henderson Poverty Line (projections to 2012)

Diversity in pathways to research training, and in research training activities

Although only doctoral programmes and masters by research degrees with 2/3 or more research content are currently recognised as HDR degrees, a great deal of variety exists in the research training provided in the tertiary sector. The variety of offerings challenges the apparently neat distinction between postgraduate coursework and postgraduate

research degrees. Clinical and professional doctorate students, and postgraduate coursework students, often undertake significant research within their programmes even though they are not in HDR programmes.

SUPRA is supportive of a University of Sydney initiative to progressively extend the opportunity to undertake research as part of all masters by coursework programmes. It is an important initiative to offer an alternative pathway to HDR study. In Australia, efforts to encourage progression to HDR study have tended to focus on undergraduate honours students; however, students in all of the degrees mentioned above need attention and encouragement. They are already making original contributions to research and innovation, and pursuing research out of a sense of inherent interest and commitment.

Measures to encourage all of these kinds of students into HDR degrees in future, through targeted scholarship programmes and by way of ensuring the new Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) more strongly supports several routes to HDR candidature, should be an important plank of Government policy. We make the point that many capable and mature students are able to demonstrate HDR capacity through these alternative study routes, and should be encouraged to do so.

Recommendation 4

That the Australian Qualifications Framework provides for and encourages a wider diversity of pathways into HDR candidature other than only “First Class Honours or equivalent”

Recommendation 5

That RTS funding be allocated to provide fee-free places for students undertaking research as part of a postgraduate coursework programme, to encourage and support them to qualify for further HDR studies

Recommendation 6

That postgraduate coursework students undertaking research activities be offered waivers of their HECS-HELP and FEE-HELP debts, should they enrol in an HDR programme subsequent to completing their coursework programme.

Teaching ^[S6]

One of the major omissions from the Consultation Paper is reference to academic teaching and the many roles it plays in research training and research careers. Teaching in undergraduate and postgraduate coursework is a formative aspect of educating future researchers and renewing the capacity of Australia’s research workforce. Adequate time, remuneration, and recognition for teaching needs to be afforded to researchers. HDR students need opportunities to begin developing their teaching skills whilst they are still studying.

Despite growing demand from Government and private sectors, significant numbers of HDR graduates continue to be employed in higher education, where they are expected to have some engagement with teaching, mentoring, and supervising students and junior researchers. From the undergraduate stage, effective teaching can support those

students with a strong interest in research, and build awareness of research careers amongst undergraduate and postgraduate coursework students.

The University of Sydney offers some teaching fellowships to postgraduate students, offering them guaranteed teaching and training support through their degrees. There are also individual Faculty programmes that give teacher training to HDR students employed as academic teachers on a casual basis. Increased support from the Commonwealth to allow Universities to offer more of this kind of training during degree programmes would be desirable.

We note that any increase in paid teaching opportunities for students should not be with the purpose of supplementing scholarships, or as a replacement for the lack of scholarship income for many students. We recognise the reality that this is what many students need to do to get by, however the teaching work should be more than just an income source. It should be an integrated part of HDR research training and not a means of accelerating the casualisation of the University workforce.

Gender is a significant determinant of the relative access to research and teaching time for both early- and mid-career academics. The report of the University of Queensland Social Research Centre on *Gender Differences in Early Post-PhD Employment in Australian Universities* (2008) indicated that female PhD students were more likely than their male counterparts to receive less support for teaching, and that they were more likely to be engaged in academic teaching than their male counterparts once they were employed.

The Excellence in Research Australia Initiative (ERA) tends to distort incentives in relation to academic teaching due to metrics based mostly on citation analysis. Senator Carr has repeatedly stated that he does not want teaching-only positions or teaching-only Universities⁴. Incentivisation of publication over teaching disadvantages those students without access to income support, as those students are more often reliant on teaching income to meet living costs.

Incentivisation of quality teaching benefits the entire education system, particularly research students who remain in the higher education system longer than their colleagues engaged in coursework.

Recommendation 7

That Government policy encourages and funds teacher training opportunities for HDR students

Minimum Resources

After years of growth within the sector and the proposed growth to come over the next few years with an increased research workforce, it is critical that the Government recognise and act on the changing needs of students. The expansion in the use of computers and the Internet requires each HDR student access to a high-speed Internet connection and up-to-date computer, with software that suits the needs of the student

⁴ NTEU Policy and Research Briefing Note: ERA Implementation, November 2009. Accessed at <http://www.nteu.org.au/resinstitutes/blog/view/blog/tag/research,%20start/4/page/2>

throughout their degree. Each HDR student requires access to a dedicated location for study, which assures access to facilities and, consequently, improves completion rates of students.

CAPA has developed under consultation a *2004 Statement of Minimum Resources for Postgraduate Study* (shortly to be reviewed) that outlines what has been recognised as a series of needs for effective Postgraduate study⁵. SUPRA endorses the CAPA Minimum Resources Statement, and many Universities have adopted some of the measures, though we would like to see full adoption and enforcement of the Minimum Resources to ensure support for all HDR Candidates.

Recommendation 8

That the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) adopt a *Minimum Resources for Postgraduate Students* policy, in accordance with the guidelines set out by the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) policy.

Equity strategies

With the Government seeking increased involvement of students from Lower Socio-Economic areas and Indigenous backgrounds, it is critical that there is support from both the University and the Government for the variety of HDR Candidates this would introduce. Particularly with an older population taking part in HDRs, childcare is imperative, and without adequate support many students are unable to access the learning opportunities that have been afforded to them.

Recommendation 9

That childcare facilities be provided at all universities and be made available to both students and staff.

Recommendation 10

That childcare subsidies and benefits be made available equally to all students.

Along with the need for APAs to match the need for appropriate income support, many from lower socio-economic and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds are unable to access the scholarships due to competitiveness. By granting a separate scholarship for those who fall into these categories, there can be increased involvement of students from these areas.

Recommendation 11

That a new category of HDR scholarships be created which includes equity criteria for their award, in order to diversify the HDR student cohort and provide further support to students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, low socio-economic status, and other underrepresented backgrounds.

⁵ CAPA 2004 Statement of Minimum Resources for Postgraduate Study, Accessed via: <http://www.capa.edu.au/briefing-papers/2004/statement-minimum-resources>

Collegiality and supervision

It is well noted that students perform best when they feel involved and able to access areas of their study. HDR students frequently feel marginalised and sidelined and are not afforded a community environment such as that found in an industrial workplace. SUPRA has been working with the University of Sydney in developing a better research environment, and all Universities would do well to note the same.

Furthermore, one frequent complaint heard at the SUPRA relates to the behaviours and skills of the supervisor for those completing HDRs. As training for being an HDR Supervisor is not mandatory, many do not complete it, which can impact negatively on the relationship between the student and supervisor, and reduces the effectiveness of the research being completed. There has been a noted improvement in completion rates, satisfaction with study, research work environment, and other performance indicators with the effective training of new supervisors and regular revisiting of this training for existing supervisors.

Recommendation 12

That DIISR make funding available in a separate funding line item for mandatory supervision training, to be delivered at all universities.

Research career development

The growth within the HDR sector has not always been matched with a growth in jobs, and some areas of industry are hesitant to take on HDR graduates due to a perceived lack of work experience. Furthermore, many students take part in HDRs so as to move into Academia, but are unsure of the best ways to continue to engage their work with a career in research. Only with effective guidance can a student fully access the potential unlocked for them through completion of an HDR.

Recommendation 13

That dedicated postgraduate career officers be appointed at each university to give support to postgraduate research students in furthering research careers.

Summary of Recommendations

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That there be significant further investment in increasing the number of Government-funded scholarships, including APAs, with a view to meeting growing and currently unfunded demand

Recommendation 2

That the APA rate be increased by 50% and indexed annually thereafter

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