Defining Quality for Research Training in Australia

Consultation Paper Response

December 2011

Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations

capa

Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations Incorporated

The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) is the national representative body for Australia's 320,000+ postgraduate students

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About CAPA

Founded in 1979, The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) is a membership based non-profit organisation. CAPA's main role is in protecting and promoting the interests and needs of Australia's 320,000+ postgraduate students. According to the Department of Education, Employment, and Workplace Relations, there were 50,000+ Research Students in Australia in 2010.

Introduction

Research education in Australia is critical not only to provide us with future generations of researchers and academic staff, but also in currently providing between 40 and 60% of the nation's research output (NTEU, 2008, p. 4). During a period in which the current Government has demonstrated a commitment to reviewing higher education more broadly, a focused review of best practice in research education is timely and appropriate. CAPA has, for over 30 years, campaigned for improvements to the quality of the research education environment, and provides this submission, in conjunction with our work on the review panel, to aid in defining and measuring quality at a Higher Degree by Research level.

The provision of adequate resources for research training, particularly through policy, physical resources, and funding, in conjunction with a standard for supervision, allows for candidates to high-quality research in a rich and positive manner.

The core of this submission reinforces many of the recommendations put forward by Nigel Palmer in the CAPA submission to the Research Workforce Strategy (Meeting Australia's Research Workforce Needs - Consultation Paper Response, 2010a)

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: That there be minimum quality requirements applied to universities and other research education providers. These should include reporting and compliance and complaint handling procedures, and the requirement for research student representation.

Recommendation 2: That funding provided under the Student Services and Amenities Fee be allocated towards the provision of sustainable, dedicated services and representation specifically for postgraduate students.

Recommendation 3: That implementation of a clear, detailed and publicly-accessible policy on minimum resource standards for research higher degree candidates be a Commonwealth requirement for providers in receipt of Research Training Scheme funding.

Recommendation 4: That application of a minimum resources policy be tied to Research Training Scheme funding.

Recommendation 5: That Commonwealth research initiatives include flexibility and resources to support research candidates directly engaging as equal partners in their fields of research.

Recommendation 6: That an amount of at least $5,000 per annum (CPI indexed) be made directly available to research candidates to help cover costs associated with the production and dissemination of their research.

Recommendation 7: That PhD supervision be held to high standards through the use of performance review, codes of practice, and mechanisms for feedback from HDR students. These elements should be nationally consistent, but should not prescribe day-to-day interactions.

Recommendation 8: That research candidates retain intellectual property rights to their research by default, and that informed consent be required on the part of the candidates in order to modify or waive those rights.

Recommendation 9: That alternative evidence for the measurement of quality of a research environment include performance on the national quality requirements and minimum resources policy, standards for supervision current staff and student make-up, current investment into the field, and feedback from candidates during and upon completion of their candidature.

Recommendation 10: That allocation of Research Training Scheme funding avoid undue reliance on any single measure of institutional performance, including through the ERA.

Recommendation 11: That postgraduate publications be assessed as part of the ERA.

Recommendation 12: That provision of Joint Higher Degrees by Research between Higher Education Providers be supported and encouraged.

Recommendation 13: That flagship programme funding, capped at a maximum proportion of the total Research Training Scheme funding, be used for new and emerging fields of research to better enable multidisciplinary research environments.

Recommendation 14: That the ERA remains flexible and open to change as new fields of research emerge.

Recommendation 15: That the Commercialisation Training Scheme be replaced with a scheme that effectively supports a more diverse range of skills and professional development programmes appropriate to the interests and needs of postgraduates.

Recommendation 16: That any establishment of a broader skills training component be predicated on a review of the length of time associated with a research degree.

Recommendation 17: That generic skills development be done based on individual need, as assessed by the candidate, supervisor, and facility, rather than *en masse*. The programmes should be characterised by quality, flexibility, and choice.

Recommendation 18: That universities provide non-compulsory regular short courses that are well advertised on necessary generic skills

Recommendation 19: That there be explicit training provided for research students to address the important role of teaching in the academic career development.

Recommendation 20: That the stipend rates for all federally-funded Postgraduate Awards be increased by 20%.

Recommendation 21: That the duration of all Commonwealth Awards with stipends for PhD candidates be increased to at least 4 years (full-time equivalent) with the option of an extension of up to an additional 6 months.

Recommendation 22: That arrangements between universities and the Federal Government regarding the Administration of the APA be reviewed, and any undue incentives for institutions to refuse award extensions removed.

Recommendation 23: That there be nationally consistent procedures applied to application for and changes within the APA, regardless of institution.

Recommendation 24: That the Commonwealth Scholarship Guidelines are amended with the effect of removing special income consideration requirements for APA recipients moving between full- and part-time study.

Recommendation 25: That candidates are allowed the option of receiving their scholarship on a part-time basis whether enrolled full time or part time.

Recommendation 26: That the Income Tax Assessment Act (1997) be amended to omit "full-time" in reference to research scholarships in Section 51-10 (table item 2.1A, second column), Section 51-35 (heading), and Section 51-35 as per the Taxation Laws Amendment (Scholarships) Bill 2005 and the Henry Taxation Review.

Recommendation 27: That universities be permitted to re-allocate a portion of the total APA funding towards extension of current APA recipients, up to 10%, through a transparent and accountable scheme. This scheme should, in no way, permit the reduction of an individual's APA.

Recommendation 28: That national-level data collection and reporting on scholarship holding (including "top-ups") be included as a priority for development of the RWS.

Recommendation 29: That restrictions on the working rights of candidates in receipt of an APA be removed.

Recommendation 30: That Masters by Research be retained in its current form, including the possibility for movement between it and the PhD as necessitated through candidature.

Recommendation 31: That selection and admission criteria to research degrees be less prescriptive and reflect the diverse demographic from which the cohort currently draws.

Recommendation 32: That commencements and completions of research candidates from among equity groups be factored into the evaluation of institutional performance on equity measures.

Recommendation 33: That the Commonwealth introduce additional measures to improve research education access and equity, including weighted completion values for equity groups.

Recommendation 34: That the Commonwealth introduce weighted completion values for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander candidates.

DEFINING AND MEASURING QUALITY

Resourcing Research Training

Over the past two decades, CAPA has continually campaigned for institutions to introduce minimum resources policies for its postgraduate students, resulting in the current existence of such policies in 37 of the 39 universities in Australia. The purpose of such policies is to ensure that students are provided with the tools and environment necessary to complete their research.

It is important to note that occasionally resources will differ depending on the field in which the research is undertaken: for example, Engineering and the Sciences are more likely to require laboratory space and machinery to aid in their studies. CAPA believes that indicators for minimum resources should be relevant, institution-wide, and able to be objectively verified, and support the quality of a postgraduate student experience.

CAPA has developed a series of minimum standards, the Statement of Minimum Resources for Postgraduate Study (CAPA, 2004). CAPA has flagged review of both this document and the 2010 Minimum Resources for Postgraduate Study Review (Palmer, 2010b) for early 2012. The resources included are:

A) Quality assurance provisions
   - (i) Reporting and compliance provisions
   - (ii) Complaints handling provisions
   - (iii) Assurance of opportunities for postgraduate participation on relevant university committees

B) Induction and orientation
   - (i) Provision of documents
   - (ii) Induction session
   - (iii) Training and development opportunities

C) Workspace, facilities, and resources for research
   - (i) Assured access to laboratory space
   - (ii) Secure, dedicated postgraduate access
   - (iii) 24-hour access
   - (iv) Tea/Common room access
   - (v) Sole-use desk and chair
   - (vi) Sole-use book shelving
   - (vii) Secure, sole-use filing and storage
   - (viii) Sole-use computer (networked)
   - (ix) Word processing software
   - (x) Statistics package – access
   - (xi) Sole-use email account
   - (xii) IT support
   - (xiii) Access to telephone
   - (xiv) Shared printer access
   - (xv) Shared photocopying facilities

(xvi) Shared fax/scanner access
(xvii) Stationery for research
(xviii) Campus mailing address
(xix) Free document delivery and ILL

D) Direct costs of research
(i) Student-administered funding
(ii) Support for conference attendance

E) Resource standards for part-time, distance, or external research

F) Resource standards for coursework higher degree students with a research component

Consultation Question 1

Should there be national minimum quality requirements for higher degree by research? Should an institution only be eligible for funding schemes in fields where it meets minimum requirements?

An important factor in the measuring of quality is in the Excellence in Research Australia reporting, which reflects the output from the field of research. However, as will be expanded on in a later question, the ERA is unable to assess the full scope of a quality research centre, and input measures, such as the presence and application of a minimum resources policy should also be included for a more holistic view.

The quality assurance requirements that CAPA recommends include provisions for reporting and compliance, complaint handling, support services, and research student representation on the various boards and committees throughout the university as appropriate. As has been noted previously by CAPA:

> *Historically, one of the principal sites of innovation when it comes to research higher degree student support has been postgraduate student associations (or "PSA's"). Many of the postgraduate student support programs currently administered by universities were originally developed by PSA's, including numerous student support, student engagement and skills and professional development programs. In fact, a broad range of improvements have been achieved for postgraduates in areas such as supervision, resources, skills and professional development programs and even various forms of government support, as a direct result of the activities of PSA's and of CAPA as their national representative body, and the benefits have been shared by both research and coursework postgraduates alike.*
>
> *The introduction of the 2005 "VSU" amendments to the Higher Education Support Act (2003) has had a dramatic effect on the quality of, and access to, services and representation for postgraduate students. CAPA's report The Impact of VSU on Postgraduate Students (2007) revealed a significant decline in services and representation for postgraduates. Postgraduates have lost more dedicated services and support as a result of the former Federal Government's student services fee legislation than any other group (DEEWR, 2008).*

(Palmer, 2010a)

Recommendation 1: That there be minimum quality requirements applied to universities and other research education providers. These should include reporting and compliance and complaint handling procedures, and the requirement for research student representation.

Recommendation 2: That funding provided under the Student Services and Amenities Fee be allocated towards the provision of sustainable, dedicated services and representation specifically for postgraduate students.

Consultation Question 2

Should institutions be required to provide a minimum standard of physical resources in order to receive Research Training Scheme funding?

The undertaking of any research, including while undertaking a research degree, requires a quality and supportive working environment. While aspects may differ from discipline to discipline, the core principles of resourcing allow for conditions candidates would expect when working in an office – including appropriate computing hardware and software and support, internet access, and a dedicated working space.

To take an example for the application of a physical resources policy, many universities offer their students a "hot-desking" system, which CAPA and its campus affiliates around Australia have long opposed. Research suggests that hot-desking is bad for collaboration and concentration (Myerson, Bichard, & Erlich, 2010), and anecdotal evidence suggests that students are less likely to attend a campus if they are unsure if they are going to be able to get a desk, even if there are desks available. Student engagement has a significant impact on both completion times and attrition rates, and thus universities that provide spaces are more likely to find candidates working to completion.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that, while some universities have seemingly robust policies, they do not necessarily translate into practice. As with the application of national quality standards, it is the belief of CAPA that universities should have their funding tied not only to the presence of a minimum standard of physical resources policy, but on the application of such a policy across the university.

Furthermore, CAPA believes that some of these principles should be enshrined within the definition of quality in research, as put to TEQSA, to provide a functional level from which all students can base their expectations. In brief:

> *The provision of adequate resources is vital to the effective delivery of postgraduate programs across all modes of study. The adequate resourcing of all postgraduate students is an important factor in supporting the completion of research degrees. In recognition of this, clear and transparent standards for Minimum Resources should be in place for all postgraduates at every higher education institution.*

(Palmer, 2010a)

Recommendation 3:	That implementation of a clear, detailed and publicly-accessible policy on minimum resource standards for research higher degree candidates be a Commonwealth requirement for providers in receipt of Research Training Scheme funding.
Recommendation 4:	That application of a minimum resources policy be tied to Research Training Scheme funding.

Consultation Question 3

Should universities providing research training be required to ensure that students have sufficient access to opportunities such as conference attendance and international study?

The development of all good research is seen to focus around not only working within the group at a university, but nationally and internationally. This can best be achieved through conferences, publications, ability to study externally for a period, the opportunity to gain experience through lecturing, or other facets of the academic career. This is work that would be expected of candidates once in the field, either academically or otherwise, to uphold the principles and philosophies and continue a life-long drive for knowledge.

While universities may work towards providing appropriate levels of research funding to their students and staff, many significantly limit the amount of financial support available as a budget-cutting method. CAPA is opposed to restricting engagement through this method. Many candidates report significant personal funding to supplement meagre contributions from their host university, something which CAPA is currently investigating (CAPA, 2011). Other candidates have provided anecdotal evidence that the rules and amounts for funding are frequently changed or updated, and sometimes without warning. CAPA believes that, to ensure that all students are provided with fulsome opportunities for production and dissemination of their research, some portion of the Research Training Scheme funding should either be earmarked for students, pro rata, and/or that funding should be contingent on consistent and accessible rules on provision.

Standards of available resources, which help alleviate some of the financial pressure of study related costs, vary significantly both across and within universities (and, anecdotally, even within departments). Many universities make a minimum level of funding available to research students for consumables, fieldwork, lab or research costs, or attendance at conferences.

Research students still need to draw significantly on their own funds to support the costs of research. Evidence from Pearson et al. *(2008) indicates research candidates are likely to have spent around $5,000 of their own funds on research related activity within the first 18 months of candidature (Figure 1).*

It is vital to ensure adequate support to enable individuals to be able to successfully complete their degree. The quality of university infrastructure is integral to the culture of the university, and the overall student experience. If universities are unable to provide students with adequate work spaces, equipment, or other basic facilities, the entire campus culture suffers.

(Palmer, 2010a)

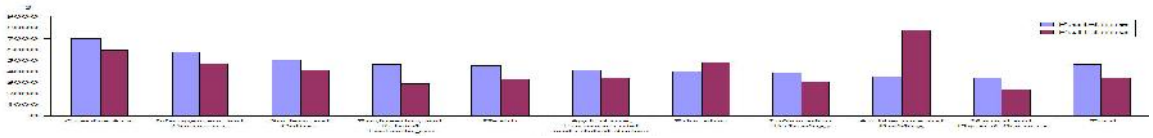

Figure 1 - Private funds provided for doctorate study according to respondents to a 2005 national survey by Broad Field of Study (n = 4,960) (Pearson, Cumming, Evans, Macauley, & Ryland, 2008)

Recommendation 5:	That Commonwealth research initiatives include flexibility and resources to support research candidates directly engaging as equal partners in their fields of research.
Recommendation 6:	That an amount of at least $5,000 per annum (CPI indexed) be made directly available to research candidates to help cover costs associated with the production and dissemination of their research.

Supervision of PhD Candidates

Consultation Question 4

What is the best way of ensuring that PhD supervisors provide high quality support to students? Should requirements be nationally consistent?

At the most basic level of postgraduate research, the relationship between the supervisor and candidate is noted to influence the outcome of the quality of the research. Historically, supervision quality has varied greatly, and many universities are attempting to find methods to address this, such as new supervisor inductions, registers of supervisors, or codes of practice. There is no single standard for what makes a good supervisor as the relationships may vary greatly.

One aspect to consider is the annual review process and its application. While time is often provided for confidential discussion between the panel and the candidate, anecdotal evidence suggests some candidates feel uncomfortable discussing their relationship and particularly fear repercussions if their supervisor is a leader in the field.

To best provide high quality supervision, CAPA recommends that universities adopt annual performance reviews; a code of practice for supervision, including policies which protect the intellectual property and academic freedom of the candidate; and provide mechanisms for student feedback, including at least one location external to the faculty. These aspects should be included within the quality in research protocols and held to be nationally consistent. Any specification on the candidate-supervisor relationship, however, should not prescribe the interactions or requirements on a day-to-day basis.

Recommendation 7:	That PhD supervision be held to high standards through the use of performance review, codes of practice, and mechanisms for feedback from HDR students. These elements should be nationally consistent, but should not prescribe day-to-day interactions.
Recommendation 8:	That research candidates retain intellectual property rights to their research by default, and that informed consent be required on the part of the candidates in order to modify or waive those rights.

Research Environment

The environment under which a postgraduate research candidate works is formed through the resources provided and the quality of the supervision, but is most easily measured by observing the outputs of the facility in which the candidate is working. These are also beneficial in informing prospective students of the environment in which they are moving to work.

Consultation Question 5

Given that positive Excellence in Research Australia (ERA) results provide evidence of a quality research training environment at an institution, should an institution be able to provide alternative evidence of a quality research environment when positive ERA results are absent (for example, in an emerging area of research)? If so, what alternative evidence should be provided?

The development of the Excellence in Research Australia over the past two years has been useful in highlighting a range of ways research is conducted and how these can reflect the quality of a facility within a field of research, where defined. However, the ERA lacks the ability to quickly adjust to new multi-disciplinary fields and has a notable lag time involved. While they form part of the evidence of the standard at an institute, they should be used in conjunction with other aspects, whether ERA results exist for that facility or not.

Proposed alternative evidence would be performance on the national quality requirements and minimum resources policy, standards for supervisor, current staff and student make-up, current investment into the field, and feedback from candidates during and upon completion of their candidature. The concept of a quality research environment is informed not only be the output, but by the environment as a whole, and thus a collection of evidence would best serve the needs for transparency and informing potential students.

The application of the ERA in terms of measurement of performance of a research facility are also concerning for CAPA as these may ultimately result in the application of Research Training Scheme funding on the basis of such a measure:

> *The existing model for allocating awards to institutions, although not perfect, is widely accepted by the majority of stakeholders in research education. Due to the need to ensure continued development of new and emerging areas of research, CAPA strongly recommends against allocating APA's to institutions based solely on ERA performance.*

(Palmer, 2010a)

Furthermore, the ERA only measures the output of persons employed within a university, which has resulted in inconsistency. The inclusion of all postgraduate research within the ERA would better reflect the national output of research, including that from postgraduates. As a critical part of the research workforce in Australia, postgraduates should have their efforts measured and assessed. The current system includes some postgraduates who are under employment at the university, which raises inconsistencies and should only be resolved through full inclusion. In brief: "inclusion of postgraduate publications in the Federal Government's research quality assessment exercise acknowledges the important role postgraduates play in sustaining Australia's

overall research output, and will yield important data on the extent of this contribution." (Palmer, 2010a)

Recommendation 9:	That alternative evidence for the measurement of quality of a research environment include performance on the national quality requirements and minimum resources policy, standards for supervision, current staff and student make-up, current investment into the field, and feedback from candidates during and upon completion of their candidature.
Recommendation 10:	That allocation of Research Training Scheme funding avoid undue reliance on any single measure of institutional performance, including through the ERA.
Recommendation 11:	That postgraduate publications be assessed as part of the ERA.

Consultation Question 6

If an institution is unable to provide robust evidence of a quality research environment, should it be able to submit evidence of arrangements, such as partnering arrangements with another institution, that effectively compensate for its inability to provide a quality research environment without such arrangements?

The development of the Principles on Joint Higher Degrees by Research between Australian Higher Education Providers (DIISR, 2011) has provided a basis from which a series of developments for providing a quality research environment can be drawn. While it may not suit every situation, particularly in the new and emerging research fields, it ultimately permits for improvement to current standards and provision of a quality environment for all candidates. Furthermore, "It is important to emphasise the value of supporting innovation and research in regional and rural universities, and highlight that there are a range of simple strategies that can be employed to support this." (Palmer, 2010a).

Recommendation 12:	That provision of Joint Higher Degrees by Research between Higher Education Providers be supported and encouraged

Consultation Question 7

Should government do more to enable research training in multidisciplinary environments? What barriers are there and how might they be overcome?

Diversity within research is a necessity in the evolution of knowledge. This is particularly highlighted in the research of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander candidates who use a variety of methodologies and disciplines to investigate their topics, as noted in CAPA's recent submission on the issue (Nowakowski *et al.*, 2011). The increasing interconnectivity between the once disparate disciplinary silos on a campus, and the resistance to inter-faculty learning, has seen emerging research environments that bridge between the disciplines.

To best aid in the development of multidisciplinary research environments, one proposal would be to use a flagship funding, where new and emerging fields are presented with additional funding for the first few years of their existence to aid in initial research and hiring, up to 15% of

the total Research Training Scheme funding. This would allow and promote new development, and would not favour any one institution over another.

Barriers that currently exist within the development of multidisciplinary research include that papers may only be coded for a single field in the ERA, meaning that evolution of the ERA must be swift to respond to changing fields. Some other barriers, including recalcitrant supervisors and misdirected funding, are beyond the remit of the government to control while permitting universities to maintain their autonomy.

Recommendation 13:	That flagship programme funding, capped at a maximum proportion of the total Research Training Scheme funding, be used for new and emerging fields of research to better enable multidisciplinary research environments.
Recommendation 14:	That the ERA remains flexible and open to change as new fields of research emerge.

Broader Skills Training

Consultation Question 8

Should Australian higher degrees by research include broader skills training? If so, should this be through compulsory coursework or through some other mechanism?

The current industry market is demanding more highly skilled graduates, qualified in a range of areas seen as beyond the remit of traditional research training. Whilst "generic skills" are currently widely discussed and a definition for what they are exactly is sought, it is generally considered by CAPA that the current research programme is isolating and hurried. The push for timely completions has significantly reduced the interactions of many candidates outside of their immediate research group, and the drive to get through as soon as possible leaves many feeling stressed.

Should a broader skills training be integrated into the current research programme, it must be considered that this will extend the time to complete a research output of the same quality as at present. Thus, either the current requirements for successful completion need to be reduced, which CAPA does not support, or the period for a timely completion needs to be extended. The average current completion time is beyond the four year mark, and financial impetus to research institutes only creates a negative environment and culture.

In developing a programme for broader skills training, it must also be considered the variety of previous experiences the students will have had. The data on enrolments from DIISR has shown that 50% of students are aged between 30 and 50, and students in the HASS fields are older and have longer workplace experience than those in the STEM fields (DEEWR, 2011). Furthermore, the National Research Student Survey (NRSS) shows that the majority of students come from full-time work, mostly related to the field of study (Edwards, Bexley, & Richardson, 2010). Consequently, provision of a broad-brush approach, one-size-fits-all model is likely to be unpopular and unnecessary.

The development of a personal plan in the first six months of starting a research degree would better allow for the student, supervisor, and facility to review the current skill set of the candidate and identify courses or aspects for further study, particularly as the subject matter is better understood. This could also be tied with a general compulsory induction course of a few hours, with proposed common skills courses on offer advertised.

Fundamental to the optional generic skills discussion is where one party wishes to undertake skills training (for example, the candidate), and another party (for example, the supervisor), refuses. It should be possible for a third party, external to the research group, to provide feedback as to the value of the course, and it should be encouraged for students who genuinely need the broadening of skills.

Part of the skilling of research candidates is in the development of teaching attributes. As part of the development of the research workforce, the use of lecturing and tutoring for skill-development requires adequate reflection on the previous training of the candidate. While universities are frequently unsure of the extent of teaching work undertaken by research

candidates, and the measures to find such take-up are challenging due to the nature of casual work, indications suggest that teaching is both a desire and a financial need for candidates (Edwards, Bexley, & Richardson, 2010). Further investigation by ACER through the NRSS suggests that most students who undertake teaching work either have no formal training in university teaching, or are unaware of its provision and only 9.4% of respondents identified compulsory training in this field (Edwards, Bexley, & Richardson, 2010, pp. 68, 71). This is despite more than 50% of universities identifying teaching experience as either "Important" or "Very Important" in appointment of recent HDR graduates into academic positions (Edwards, Bexley, & Richardson, 2010, p. 81).

Recommendation 15:	That the Commercialisation Training Scheme be replaced with a scheme that effectively supports a more diverse range of skills and professional development programmes appropriate to the interests and needs of postgraduates.
Recommendation 16:	That any establishment of a broader skills training component be predicated on a review of the length of time associated with a research degree.
Recommendation 17:	That generic skills development be done based on individual need, as assessed by the candidate, supervisor, and facility, rather than *en masse*. The programmes should be characterised by quality, flexibility, and choice.
Recommendation 18:	That universities provide non-compulsory regular short courses that are well advertised on necessary generic skills
Recommendation 19:	That there be explicit training provided for research students to address the important role of teaching in the academic career development.

OTHER QUALITY CONSIDERATIONS

Australian Postgraduate Award

Consultation Question 9

Should the rules associated with the Australian Postgraduate Award scholarships be amended or increased in flexibility? If so, in what ways?

The view of CAPA as to potential modifications to the APA extends to a range of measures to better ensure access and opportunities for all persons, regardless of location or mode of study. These include the following aspects:

It is widely recognised that the APA is insufficient in length and quantity for the PhD, particularly as it does not include the totality of study with the majority of candidates completing beyond three years. As has previously been submitted:

> *CAPA is encouraged that the Federal Government is currently paying attention to the poor state of the APA award, and the 8% upward adjustment announced in the 2009-10 Federal Budget was a very welcome first step. For the award to be able to meet its aims however, an upward adjustment in the APA stipend rate of at least 20% is needed if the award is to remain above the Henderson Poverty Line, and be funded to an adequate standard. [...]*
>
> *PhD students have four years to complete their degree, and evidence shows that this roughly equates with average candidature time to completion for a quality PhD (Bourke, Holbrook, & Lovat, 2006). This means that under the current arrangements many PhD students find themselves without access to financial support 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. The mismatch between APA duration and PhD candidature therefore jeopardises the goal of achieving timely completions. The duration of three years plus limited extension for full-time doctoral students underestimates the time required to complete a quality PhD.*

(Palmer, 2010a)

The ability for students to transfer between part-time and full-time candidature and to extend the APA by 6 months will depend on limitations set by each institute, and can vary widely. There should be a nationally consistent approach to funding for the APA, such that no student is disadvantaged due to local administration.

> *The option of a six month extension is a standard part of the scheme, however many students are disappointed to find they are denied in their application for the*

remainder of their APA funding, even where they meet the criteria provided in the Commonwealth Scholarship Guidelines. The many students who need at least three and a half years to complete their degree often find that their university declines their application for the final 6 months of their APA, or agrees to funding only a fraction of that amount.

It appears that the way APA's are allocated to universities currently creates an incentive to "short change" students on their entitlement. Since the mid 2000's students have found it increasingly difficult to access the additional 6 months of APA funding allocated to them by the Federal Government.

(Palmer, 2010a)

Further evidence notes that the number of part-time enrolments for Higher Degree by Research students is significantly above common public perception (Figure 2). These themes caused a wider discussion in early 2011 with the proposal that postgraduate research conducted part time should not be funded, which CAPA fundamentally opposes (Trounson, 2011; Jonas & Nowakowski, 2011).

While roughly 50% of domestic research students are enrolled part time, enrolment status is less of a static category for postgraduates than many may assume. Combined with other factors, evidence from Pearson et al. *(2008) suggests that many candidates actively use changes in enrolment status to assist them in successfully completing their degree.*

Despite the significant under-funding of stipend rates, under the current conditions of award candidates cannot go part time for financial reasons, and scholarship holders must conform to a very narrow set of conditions in order to be able to go part time. Recipients may transfer to a part time APA if they are able to meet the Student Eligibility Requirements under the APA Guidelines. Currently those conditions are largely limited to being able to demonstrate extenuating carer responsibilities, or require proof of a serious medical condition.

The need to be able to move between full and part time study emerged as a consistent theme in the Research Training Experience workshop hosted by CAPA (2009). Flexibility in this area was seen as very beneficial, particularly where students are challenged with managing complex research projects, or when the subject matter does not conform to the standard 3-3.5 year timeframe (for example experiments or field work that take place over an extended period of time).

(Palmer, 2010a)

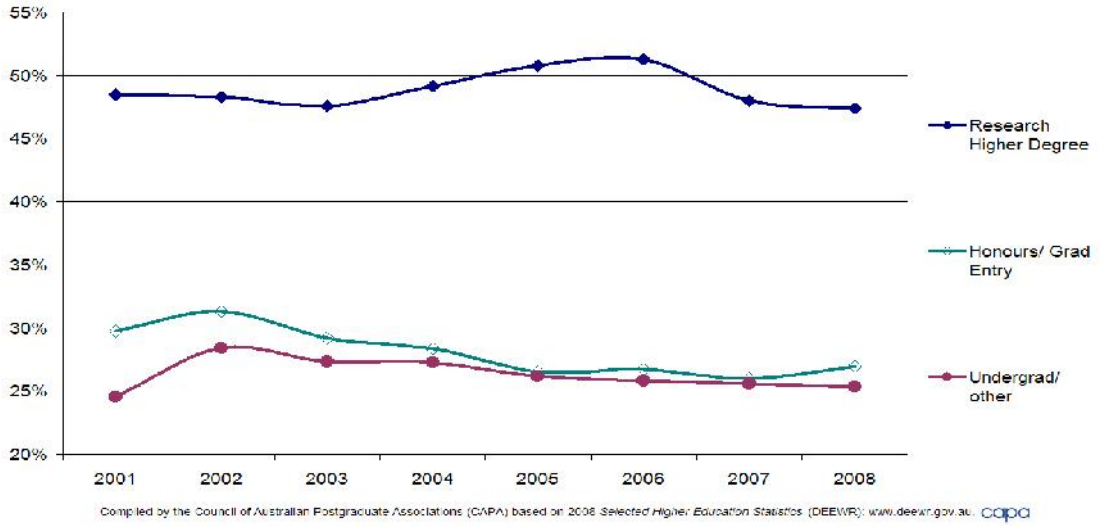

Figure 2 - Proportion of Domestic Enrolments Part Time by Selected Level of Course 2001-2008 (Palmer, 2010a)

One of the key recommendations of the Henry Tax Review (Australia's Future Tax System, 2010) was for the removal of taxation an all income support and supplementary payments, and despite this repeatedly being presented, little movement on removing taxation on the part-time award of the APA is evident. Campaigning around this issue has been extensive and lengthy, as has previously been noted within the CAPA RWS submission (Palmer, 2010a, pp. 14-15)

Where the university is provided with the ability to reduce the number of APAs and re-allocate funding towards existing students, CAPA is broadly in support. However, there must be a limitation on the reduction in number, there should be no candidate who receives a lesser amount as a result of this, and the process must be accountable and transparent, without prejudice. It is proposed that no more than 10% of APA funding could be used in such a manner.

Similarly, while CAPA acknowledges that autonomy allows universities to allocate APAs to areas they deem appropriate, the standards for application are opaque, and particularly the values applied to previous work does not favour those coming from externally. Again, a nationally consistent approach for provision of an APA around some factors would aid in equity of allocation.

Due to the low financial level of the APA, there should be no restrictions on external work undertaken, particularly if that work is complimentary to the research being undertaken. It is recognised that limitations were put in place as a full-time research degree is equivalent to full-time employment; however, the range of situations from which candidates come and the nature of sessional and casual work, particularly in academia, requires variations over a year.

Recommendation 20:	That the stipend rates for all federally-funded Postgraduate Awards be increased by 20%.
Recommendation 21:	That the duration of all Commonwealth Awards with stipends for PhD candidates be increased to at least 4 years (full-time equivalent) with the option of an extension of up to an additional 6 months.

Recommendation 22:	That arrangements between universities and the Federal Government regarding the Administration of the APA be reviewed, and any undue incentives for institutions to refuse award extensions removed.
Recommendation 23:	That there be nationally consistent procedures applied to application for and changes within the APA, regardless of institution.
Recommendation 24:	That the Commonwealth Scholarship Guidelines are amended with the effect of removing special income consideration requirements for APA recipients moving between full- and part-time study.
Recommendation 25:	Those candidates are allowed the option of receiving their scholarship on a part-time basis whether enrolled full time or part time.
Recommendation 26:	That the Income Tax Assessment Act (1997) be amended to omit "full-time" in reference to research scholarships in Section 51-10 (table item 2.1A, second column), Section 51-35 (heading), and Section 51-35 as per the Taxation Laws Amendment (Scholarships) Bill 2005 and the Henry Taxation Review.
Recommendation 27:	That universities be permitted to re-allocate a portion of the total APA funding towards extension of current APA recipients, up to 10%, through a transparent and accountable scheme. This scheme should, in no way, permit the reduction of an individual's APA.
Recommendation 28:	That national-level data collection and reporting on scholarship holding (including "top-ups") be included as a priority for development of the RWS.
Recommendation 29:	That restrictions on the working rights of candidates in receipt of an APA be removed.

Masters by Research

Consultation Question 10

What is the role of the research masters degree in the Australian research training system? Is its decline a cause for concern?

The changing route through higher education has resulted in a decline of the Masters by Research, but it is the opinion of CAPA that such a change should not be a significant matter for concern. The Masters by Research provides a rigorous program of research education in its own right, as well as both an alternative entry and exit point for the PhD, and that its retention is important.

As an entry point, the Masters by Research allows for new undertakings to be developed and explored, particularly in well-understood fields, such that they may uncover novel elements which can be expanded further into a PhD in future, either by the current candidate or future candidates. The shorter timeframe also means that some candidates who are unable to invest in the full PhD programme are provided with a method to develop research skills.

Part of the area for concern for any PhD candidate is that their work is simultaneously being investigated by others in the field, or that a change within their circumstances will occur over the period of time. This may vary from personal issues through to the changes in the facility at which they are working. The retention of the Masters by Research would continue to allow an early exit-point for PhD candidates where completion would become problematic.

Recommendation 30:	That Masters by Research be retained in its current form, including the possibility for movement between it and the PhD as necessitated through candidature.

Selection and Admission

Consultation Question 11

Given the trend towards more diverse entry pathways for higher degrees by research, how prescriptive should overlying principles be? How should institutional arrangement for student selection and admission be measured?

It is already well noted that the majority of research candidates are older and come from a workplace experience prior to commencing their studies (Edwards, Bexley, & Richardson, 2010). The issue with prescription of application is that this diversity means what were traditionally considered non-standard candidates are more likely to be overlooked as they don't "fit the mould" for selection, and this restricts the potential for take-up. This especially impacts on candidates from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, women, and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Thus, it is proposed that selection and admission should provide some broader principles, such as recommendation from the supervisor and prior experience. This would also reflect the various stages at which different fields of research are more likely to be undertaken, with a stronger focus on previous experience in teaching, for example, compared to ongoing examples of research in the science and engineering fields. It is critical that the diversity of the demographic be considered within the section and admission criteria (Jonas & Nowakowski, 2011).

As noted, equity within admissions for institutions should also play a role within the selection of candidates.

> *Many universities offer research scholarships specifically for members of the DEEWR-defined equity groups, and provide quality programs and resources in support of Indigenous candidate recruitment, retention and successful completion. A review of higher education offers the opportunity for the Commonwealth to explore additional incentives for institutions to improve their performance in research education access and equity.*
>
> *Australia should give serious consideration to adopting a weighted completions scheme comparable to that employed in New Zealand to promote equity in research higher degrees. Institutions should be encouraged to take on candidates from under-represented groups, as opposed to the current arrangements which have the effect of framing them as a potential "risk".*
>
> *Indigenous research higher degree completions should count for at least double the funding from the Commonwealth (as they do in New Zealand). A good institutional track record in supporting successful completions from under-represented groups not only has the potential for developing capacity and expertise in supporting such candidates, but, on a weighted completions model, would also bring the financial rewards sufficient to cover the costs of investing in innovative support measures (which in turn would attract more candidates, and so on).*

(Palmer, 2010a)

Recommendation 31:	That selection and admission criteria to research degrees be less prescriptive and reflect the diverse demographic from which the cohort currently draws.
Recommendation 32:	That commencements and completions of research candidates from among equity groups be factored into the evaluation of institutional performance on equity measures.
Recommendation 33:	That the Commonwealth introduce additional measures to improve research education access and equity, including weighted completion values for equity groups.
Recommendation 34:	That the Commonwealth introduce weighted completion values for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander candidates.

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