

Department of Education Science and Training

Evaluation of the  
*Knowledge and Innovation*  
Reforms

A submission by the  
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Postgraduate Associations**

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CAPA, the national peak body representing Australia's 226,612 postgraduate students. Of these, 44,209 were studying in postgraduate research degree courses as at the end of 2002 (DEST selected statistics). CAPA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to DEST's review of the *Knowledge and Innovation* reforms. CAPA is uniquely placed to provide feedback on the impact of the reforms on Australia's research effort, particularly its impact on postgraduate researchers.

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### *Recommendations*

#### **Recommendation 1:**

That the term 'Research Training' be replaced by the term 'Research Education' in all DEST material.

#### **Recommendation 2:**

That each institution be required to set aside an appropriate number of RTS places as part-time places, and that these be distributed equitably between departments and study areas.

**Recommendation 3:**

That a funding pool be set aside, or a funding scheme be developed, which allocates extra funds to institutions who can demonstrate excellence in postgraduate research supervision.

**Recommendation 4:**

That DEST ask institutions to show, in their Research and Research Training Management Plans, what mechanisms they use to distribute RTS places and research infrastructure funding. These plans should demonstrate that that institutions *do not* use the RTS or IGS formulae internally.

**Recommendation 5:**

That DEST produce a brief, clear information sheet for distribution to departmental managers and Heads, explaining how research and research education are funded.

**Recommendation 6:**

That the funding and allocation formulae for research education (RTS and IGS) be remodelled to ensure a fairer distribution of RTS places at both metropolitan and regional institutions, and

That the 'completions' element of the RTS formula be removed, and

That the 'publications' element of the formulae be revised to reflect the quality, rather than quantity of publications, and

That the time limits on research education under the RTS and IGS be removed.

**Recommendation 7:**

That time restrictions on postgraduate research be abolished, and that institutions be funded by load on the basis that they demonstrate that they have appropriate review processes and procedures in place to monitor the success of individual postgraduate research projects.

**Recommendation 8**

That IGS grants be targeted at research infrastructure, and that institutions demonstrate that they in fact use the funds for such purposes, including the support of postgraduate research.

**Recommendation 9:**

That RTS places be allocated on the proviso that the host institution demonstrate a minimum standard of facilities and resources is provided to each postgraduate research student, across all study areas offered by the institution.

**Recommendation 10:**

That regional protection for research education be continued for as long as the current RTS and IGS formulae remain in place.

## *Introduction*

The Introduction of the *Knowledge and Innovation* reforms has had a substantial impact on postgraduate students studying at Australian universities. Whilst it is too soon to see this impact reflected in the broad demographic data gathered each year by DEST, our constituent organisations--postgraduate associations and committees based at universities--have provided us with strong anecdotal evidence of these changes. We have also made substantial reference here to evidence gathered from institutions' Research and Research Training Management Plans.

The most profound effects of the *K & I* reforms upon postgraduates have resulted from:

- the limitation of funding for postgraduate research through the RTS and IGS to 4 and 2 years (EFT) respectively for the PhD and Masters by research;
- the focus on completions in the allocation of places through the Research Training Scheme;
- the frequent misunderstanding of the RTS and IGS at a faculty and departmental level, and
- the misuse of the RTS and/or IGS formulae to micro-manage the allocation of funding to faculties, departments and programmes within institutions.

When *K & I* was released, CAPA expressed its concern that the focus on completions would inhibit the quality and equity of postgraduate research, and result in a move away from disciplines which often have longer completion times for research students:

The emphasis on completions may create important distortions. Students with backgrounds which constrain early completion, including some women and Indigenous Students, may be considered too 'risky' by universities. Moreover projects requiring extensive field work, particularly complex equipment or are of a somewhat intractable theoretical nature are less likely to be supported than easily defined, highly focussed projects. This may result in shifts between disciplines, applied science and engineering are more likely to be beneficiaries than fundamental sciences and some social sciences and humanities, but the main shifts are likely to be more fine-grained and reduce scope and modes of research within disciplines. (CAPA, Frankland and Smith, 2000: section 4.3.1)

CAPA has been especially sceptical of the RTS funding mechanism, arguing that it focuses on outcomes (RHD completions; numbers of publications; ability to attract outside funding) which are unrelated to quality (for example satisfaction of research students or quality of research facilities; standing of journals publishing work or number of citations gained by a publication; research innovation).

We welcome this review of the *Knowledge and Innovation* reforms and the opportunity the review offers for the phasing out of practices which are hurting Australia's research effort and the quality of learning of Australia's postgraduate researchers.

In this submission, we base our comments on the review's terms of reference, paying particular attention to the Consultation Questions raised in the Review Issues Paper which we feel are relevant to the postgraduate research experience. We also raise a number of other points of concern, such as the labelling of postgraduate research as mere research 'training,' and the impact of the RTS on speculative and innovative research. We have structured our submission thematically to reflect the *K & I* policy contexts from which our concerns arise.

## *The Research Training Scheme*

### **1.1 On the very idea of 'research training'**

CAPA has long held that the title 'Research Training' seriously undermines the standing of postgraduates as researchers, as well as of the research they do. Research Higher Degree students *are* researchers, undertaking real research. Postgraduate research is thought to comprise 70% of the research undertaken at Australian universities (ABS, 2000)--a strange state of affairs if postgraduates are not considered 'real' researchers.

CAPA prefers the term 'research education,' a term which recognises that Research Higher Degree students are still learning, but does not denigrate them or their work as mere 'training.' CAPA has had undertakings from DEST in the past to replace the term 'research training' with 'research education,' but we are still awaiting action. We believe that this current review provides a timely opportunity to make this change.

#### **Recommendation 1:**

That the term 'Research Training' be replaced by the term 'Research Education' in all DEST material.

### **1.2 Impact of the RTS on the quality of the research education experience**

Discussions about the RTS, including this review, tend to focus on factors peripheral to the research education experience of the student. Such factors-- completions; length of candidature; aspects of the supervisory relationship; location or subject of the research--are undoubtedly of great importance, yet do not get at the heart of what it is to be a postgraduate research student.

We believe that the implementation of the RTS has caused some profound shifts in the quality of the research education experience for the student. Most of these effects result from the restriction of funding to four years and two years (EFT) for the Doctorate and Masters respectively.

Some of the effects noted by our members include:

- students being discouraged from undertaking risky or speculative research, including feeling there is not scope to explore interesting and unexpected outcomes or applications which can crop up during novel research;
- students feeling that there is not enough time to spend preparing articles for publication, and
- students being discouraged from undertaking sessional teaching and lecturing.

Many of these activities have traditionally played an important role in the postgraduate research education experience, and it is important not to let them slip away through time limitations without considering this role.

Postgraduate research students are the junior colleagues of more experienced academics. Undertaking sessional teaching, and crafting a publication profile, are two very important experiences for the junior academic. Similarly, postgraduate research education should offer an excellent opportunity to undertake risky research, and to explore unexpected outcomes or applications stemming from such research. An academic researcher needs to learn to be curious and creative. These are not traits that are best developed within the limited and limiting timeframe of the RTS.

Please see our Recommendation for section 2, requiring that time limitations on postgraduate research be removed.

#### **1.4 The RTS, part-time study and equity**

As we note in our briefing paper *Implementing the RTS*,<sup>1</sup> in 2001, 66 per cent of non-overseas postgraduate research students were aged over 30, with 28 per cent aged between 30 and 39, and 24 per cent aged between 40 and 49 (DEST, 2002: Table 26). Postgraduate research students have many partners, children, mortgages, debt repayments, employment commitments, and aging parents. Some have disabilities which preclude the possibility of studying full-time. Institutions must not use the RTS to discriminate against students who are unable to study full time.

In *Implementing the RTS*, we note that "several universities have identified the higher attrition rates of part-time and distance education students as having a negative effect on their performance against the RTS indicators. Some indicated a desire to increase the proportion of their HDR students enrolled full-time in order to improve their completion rates." Examples from some institutions' Research and Research Training Management Plans include:

- The University of the Sunshine Coast states that "Part-time enrolments constitute 75% of the University's higher degree research students. The University is cognisant that full-time candidates have better success against targets than part-time candidates ... therefore will encourage full-time enrolment in research higher degrees as a more desirable position" (University of the Sunshine Coast, 2001: 12).
- Charles Sturt University argues that "given the high attrition rates of part-time and DE students, the Pro Vice Chancellor (Research and Graduate Training)

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<sup>1</sup> CAPA and Pearse (2002) *Implementing the Research Training Scheme: The consequences for postgraduate research students*. The report is available from [capa.edu.au](http://capa.edu.au), under 'CAPA Briefing Papers.'

will need to have final approval over the distribution of places between full and part-time students" (Charles Sturt University, 2001: 22).

- Murdoch University has increased the number of scholarships it offers to enable students who would otherwise study part-time to study full-time on the basis of internal surveys showing that the completion rate of full-time students is twice that of part-time students.

CAPA is concerned that the limitations some institutions are placing on part time enrolment is undermining the equity of postgraduate research. For example, we have received a complaint about one student suffering Chronic Fatigue Syndrome who was not allowed to convert to part time candidature, with the requirements of the RTS being given as the reason.<sup>2</sup>

One of our constituent organisations described how similar discrimination was instituted at his university:

...statistics taken out on those 'failing to complete' (measured over a period of years) indicated that part-timers (a fair proportion of ... HDRs) were more likely to fit into this category. As a consequence of this revelation staff on the committee contemplated whether/how they could exclude part-time applicants. I should point out that there was no policy suggested, but the message leaving the room was that staff would not consider part-time applicants.<sup>3</sup>

Such stories are particularly disturbing when institutions are being secretive about their actions, making the problem much harder to track and confront.

#### **Recommendation 2:**

That each institution be required to set aside an appropriate number of RTS places as part-time places, and that these be distributed equitably between departments and study areas.

### **1.5 Impact of the RTS on the quality of student supervision**

One of the positive outcomes of the RTS has been the way in which it has focused universities' attention on barriers to completion. Ineffectual supervision can be one such barrier. While we applaud the initiatives undertaken by many universities to improve supervision with the aim of raising completions and shortening completion times, we are less happy with the incentive which has driven these initiatives.

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<sup>2</sup> Private communication with CAPA. Confidential details can be provided upon request.

<sup>3</sup> Correspondence received by CAPA. Confidential details can be provided upon request.

The RTS has been effective at reforming supervision not because it directly punishes institutions with bad practices, but because it punishes them indirectly through their students. A student whose candidature is prolonged through the lack of professionalism of the supervisor will still lose their RTS funding at 4 years (EFT PhD) or 2 years (EFT Masters). The student may lose access to their library, and/or no longer be insured while at the university. This places the student under enormous added pressure at the critical final stage of their candidature, and may encourage attrition. Recognising this, many universities have acted to improve supervision practices. However, we would prefer to see a scheme which attacks bad supervision at the source (the supervisor and institution), rather than through placing added pressure on the student.

Universities' have taken different approaches to improving the supervisory relationship, including training and professional development workshops for supervisors, establishing systems of supervisor registration, and formal recognition of the workload involved in supervision.

Specific examples of such practices include:<sup>4</sup>

- Victoria University launched a "supervisory practice initiative" in 2000 where each Faculty held two or more workshops which were advertised as compulsory for all supervisors (Victoria University of Technology, 2001: 9).
- The University of Western Sydney introduced a Supervisor Training Program which is compulsory across the university. University policy states that "staff cannot supervise unless they are registered, formally approved by the UWS Research Committee to undertake supervision, and also partake of regular development programs relating to the supervisory process / experience" (University of Western Sydney, 2001: 6).
- Supervisor registers. Universities with registers include RMIT, the University of Western Sydney, the University of Tasmania, the University of South Australia, Central Queensland University, and Victoria University of Technology. Registration may be approved by the faculty or by the university's equivalent of a Research Higher Degree committee. At Victoria University, supervisors may be removed from the register "in exceptional circumstances" (Victoria University of Technology, 2001: 10).
- Macquarie University policy recognises supervision as real work, directing that "a supervisory load of 6.0 equivalent full-time HDR candidates is about equivalent to a full-time staff teaching load" (Macquarie University, 2001: 17).

However, anecdotal evidence from HDR students at universities around Australia suggests that it is not uncommon for supervisors to be supervising more than six full time HDR candidates, in addition to their teaching, research and administration commitments, nor is it uncommon for this work not to be included in the supervisor's 'official' workload.

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<sup>4</sup> CAPA and Pearse, 2003

We recognise that poor supervision exacerbates longer completion times and student attrition. We do not, however, believe that punishing students who take longer to complete, or give up altogether, as a result of poor supervision is an appropriate way to address supervisory problems. We advocate the removal of limitations to candidature and suggest that DEST reward institutions with best practice supervisory arrangements, rather than punish the students of institutions with poor practices.

**Recommendation 3:**

That a funding pool be set aside, or a funding scheme be developed, which allocates extra funds to institutions who can demonstrate excellence in postgraduate research supervision.

### 1.6 Quality research environments & areas of excellence

Traditionally, HDR students were allocated a place on the basis of the student's excellence, rather than the department's or faculty's. Merit based selection ensures that Australia's 'best and brightest' can undertake the research which most excites them. However, in response to *Knowledge and Innovation*, some universities have adjusted their selection criteria to place more emphasis on increasing the concentration of HDR students in areas perceived by the institution to be research strengths. For example:<sup>5</sup>

- The University of Western Sydney has set a target of 80% of all commencing HDR load to be allocated to areas of research strength by 2003 (University of Western Sydney, 2001: 13).
- At Southern Cross University, "from July 2001, any RTS funded higher degree research candidates will be accepted only where their thesis topic is compatible with an approved area of research strength, or an approved developing area of research strength, or they are supervised by a supervisor with a national or international reputation in the proposed area of study. Thus, in future there will be even more focussing of RTS-funded candidates into areas of research strength" (Southern Cross University, 2001: 4).
- At The University of Adelaide, the student's supervisor selection is also a criterion for the allocation of research places. The university states that "until now, research places have been awarded solely on the basis of a student's performance. ... the University is reviewing this practice and in the future, the allocation of research places will also take into account a supervisor's ability to support research students and the past performance of the supervisor" (The University of Adelaide, 2001: 17).

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<sup>5</sup> CAPA and Pearse, 2003: ibid

The desire to concentrate students in areas of research strength is also reflected in institutional scholarship programmes. For example:<sup>6</sup>

- The University of Newcastle has signalled, "the transfer of research scholarship allocation from one based entirely on the academic merit of the applicant to one based on a mixture of academic merit of the applicant and the research and research training performance on the research group. The research and research training performance component will increase in 2003. (The University of Newcastle, 2001: 16).
- At James Cook University, eligibility for university research scholarships will be restricted to "areas of research strength or outstanding individual achievement" (James Cook University, 2001: 9).
- At Monash University, "the allocation of scholarships to faculties will be based upon a formula which mirrors that of the RTS" (Monash University, 2001: 4). As a result, the university predicts that "faculties which formerly may have received a substantial allocation on the basis of high HDR load, may receive a reduced quota especially if completion rates are poor" (ibid., 13).

The trend towards focusing scholarships and funding in areas nominated by universities as research strengths is of concern to CAPA. Excellent departments and even faculties are disappearing at the stroke of a pen, limiting student choice. Further, a student's choice of study area is generally determined long before they apply for an RTS place, and their choice of institution is as likely to be determined by proximity to the location of work and family as anything else. We are also concerned that students are rarely made aware before applying for a place that their area is, or is not, a 'research strength' of the university, and are therefore unable to make an informed choice.

The RTS, especially when used to micro-manage funds within institutions, punishes research-poor areas, depriving them of the funds necessary to become excellent. Thus, while the formula may well create pockets of research wealth, it does little to ensure that individual research students have adequate infrastructure support, or to direct students to such areas. Problems such as these are only exacerbated by the designation of 'priority areas'--Nano and Bio-materials, Genome/Phenome Research, Complex/Intelligent Systems and Photon Science and Technology--for the additional ARC funding provided through *Backing Australia's Ability*.

Artificial stimulation of often arbitrarily determined areas of research strength means that the students in those areas are rewarded with scholarships and funding for facilities. In turn, excellent students from other areas miss out. We advocate a system which provides for student choice, and allows students who win an RTS place through their own merit to study in the area which most excites them, and to be assured of financial support and adequate infrastructure. We are happy that areas designated research strengths are well supported--but we

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<sup>6</sup> CAPA and Pearse, 2003: ibid

are disappointed that this is at the expense of other, often equally deserving, study areas.

If concentrating scholarships and funding in areas of research strength means that other students of merit will not be supported in the research which most excites them, we do not see how such a state of affairs is beneficial to the Australian research effort.

### **1.7 The RTS as a micro management tool**

Evan Arthur, Head of the Innovation branch of the Higher Education Group at DEST, has stated publicly at both the Quality in Postgraduate Research Conference in Adelaide in 2002, and the Melbourne consultation afternoon run for this current review, that the RTS was never meant to be implemented within institutions to distribute funds or places to faculties and departments. Despite such warning, a number of universities are using the RTS, or a similar formula, as an internal funding mechanism.<sup>7</sup>

- At the University of Tasmania, "of the \$12.6m allocated to the university in 2001 to support research training via the RTS, some \$8.1M was allocated directly to Schools and Institutes/Centres on the basis of performance using the RTS index" (University of Tasmania, 2001: 5).
- At James Cook University, "the current proposal is to allocate 90% of commencing load to faculties in proportion to their completions over the previous two years ... The remaining 10% of the commencing load will be allocated centrally to provide for strategic initiatives, compensate for any inter-faculty imbalance in the central scholarship allocation process, and ensure some central control over the quality of applicants" (James Cook University, 2001: 16).
- At Monash University, "the distribution of funded HDR places in accordance with the RTS formula components will be phased in from the 2002 intake. It is anticipated that this will lead to a shift of research training places from areas performing poorly in terms of key indicators of research income, refereed publications and higher degree completion" (Monash University, 2001: 12)
- At The University of Adelaide "fewer places will be allocated to areas of the University where there are low completion rates" (The University of Adelaide, 2001: 10).

Conversely, the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) rejected a formulaic approach to the allocation of research places, basing its internal allocations on a number of factors including the need to recognise outstanding individual

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<sup>7</sup> CAPA and Pearse, 2002: ibid

researchers, support emerging areas of strength and maintain the capacities of faculties. (University of Technology, Sydney, 2001: 10) Similarly, Robyn Barnacle identifies Curtin University and the University of South Australia as examples of good practice in promoting research diversity, on the basis of their more appropriate method of distributing funding: "Curtin University and The University of South Australia have attempted to distribute research funding equitably, in an effort to support diversity, by not applying DEST's formula verbatim across the University." (Barnacle, 2002: 37)

It is vital that DEST act to ensure that institutions do not use the RTS or IGS formulae to distribute funding and RTS places.

Australian data show that students in the Social Sciences, Education and the Humanities have longer completion times and higher attrition rates than those in the Natural Sciences (Latona and Brown, 2001: 4), while DEST's own analysis of postgraduate completion rates predicts the probability of completion as being higher in the fields of Health, Veterinary Science, Science, Engineering and Agriculture and lower in the fields of Architecture, Law, Arts, Humanities and Social Science, Education and Business (although the methodology involved in this analysis has been criticised in the sector). (Martin, Maclachlan and Karmel, 2001: 8)

A strong future for Australia's Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences research will rely on institutions ensuring that they do not mimic DEST's formulae at the university level. Already, the University of Tasmania, which uses the RTS as an internal allocation mechanism, has planned a "reduction in the number of places available in the Arts and increases in the places available in Information Technology." (University of Tasmania, 2001: 9)

We suggest that Research and Research Training Management Plans, which we discuss further below, would be a useful tool for ensuring that institutions do not use the national funding formulae for internal allocation.

With this in mind, we recommend:

**Recommendation 4:**

That DEST ask institutions to show, in their Research and Research Training Management Plans, what mechanisms they use to distribute RTS places and research infrastructure funding. These plans should demonstrate that that institutions *do not* use the RTS or IGS formulae internally.

## 1.8 The RTS formula

### *Complexity of the RTS formula*

While the RTS formula is somewhat complex, we believe that many of the problems we discuss here spring from a misunderstanding of its purpose. As we

mention above, many institutions use a simulacrum of the RTS and/or the IGS formulae to distribute funding internally. We believe this to be an inappropriate and destructive practice.

Further, the way the formulae are applied is frequently misunderstood at a department and faculty level. We often hear that departmental committees discussing the RTS have very mistaken beliefs about the way the formulae work. Misunderstandings often include:

- the belief that, if a student does not complete, the university will have received no funding for the student;
- the belief that the university will receive no funding should the student not complete within the set time-frames, or
- the belief that the university does not receive *any* funding for the student *until* they complete.

Even heads of department have expressed beliefs like these to our members. When these beliefs are informing the way students are selected, supervised, and supported, it is easy to see how destructive such misconceptions can be. We have heard of departmental committees discussing how they can avoid enrolling women with children, no doubt based on similar beliefs.

**Recommendation 5:**

That DEST produce a brief, clear information sheet for distribution to departmental managers and Heads, explaining how research and research education are funded.

*Should the separations pool mechanism be retained?*

We are concerned by research education places being allocated in a way which depletes the capacity for research in regional institutions, and rewards institutions who already have a strong research profile. As we note in section 4 of this submission, regional institutions lost 800 HRD places with the introduction of the RTS. We believe places should be awarded in a way which strengthens the breadth and diversity of Australian research in both regional and metropolitan institutions. Students should be able to study at the university of their choice, and not simply funnelled into a few older institutions.

As we discuss elsewhere, we oppose the inclusion of 'completions' within the RTS mechanism, as it creates discrimination against groups of students (women, students with disabilities) who are seen as 'more risky.' Places should be allocated to students on the basis of their demonstrated ability, not on the basis of unfounded prejudice.

We would also like to see a revision of the 'publications' section of the weighting. We agree that publication is an important part of the research effort, however the current system rewards any publication, including publication in low quality journals. Academic staff are spending an increasing amount of time trying to make up publication numbers, rather than take part in publications of quality. We suggest that citations, or journal quality, may be a better measure for this index.

*What alternative approaches could be adopted to fund research training?*

As we state in the following section, we believe that research education should be funded on load, for a duration of time appropriate to each project and student, on the basis of regular assessments by the department or centre through which the student is enrolled.

Allocation of places to institutions should be targeted in such a way that a broad offering of disciplines is available at both regional and metropolitan institutions.

**Recommendation 6:**

That the funding and allocation formulae for research education (RTS and IGS) be remodelled to ensure a fairer distribution of RTS places at both metropolitan and regional institutions, and

That the 'completions' element of the RTS formula be removed. and

That the 'publications' element of the formulae be revised to reflect the quality, rather than quantity of publications, and

That the time limits on research education under the RTS and IGS be removed.

## *2 Time-limited candidature under the RTS and IGS*

One of the most unfortunate effects of the *Knowledge and Innovation* reforms is the way that they have encouraged universities to discriminate against students who may take longer to complete. Women, students with disabilities, and student wishing to study in a speculative area, are now 'risks.'

We have mentioned above some examples of students wishing to study part time being dissuaded, or simply not allowed, as they are sometimes seen as a 'bad risk' for completion. Similarly, students who may take longer than four or two years will not be accommodated as research load under the Institutional Grants Scheme.

A constituent told us of a supervisor who was just not interested in taking on a student who was going to be 'high maintenance':

There has been one case that I have personally been involved in where a PhD candidate was told by his Supervisor that he did not want

to supervise him any more because he was a high maintenance student and he really was not interested in someone like that.<sup>8</sup>

*Knowledge and Innovation* manufactured the notion of this crisis of wastage in postgraduate research education, arguing that "there is an unacceptable wastage of ...resources associated with long completion times and low completion rates for research degree students." (Kemp, 1999a: 2) In the same vein, Michael Gallagher's 2000 paper for DETYA, "New directions in Australian research and research training policy - Some questions for researchers" raised the spectre of "laggard graduates" and "leisure learners" undermining the "throughput efficiency" of our universities. (Gallagher, 2000: 6) Such fears underlay the imposition of 4 and 2 year time limits (EFT) on PhD and Masters students for load funding under the IGS, and the focus on completions in the RTS allocation formula (which we discuss above). We contend that the time-limits actually create a situation in which it is even less likely that students will complete, and that the fears on which both the time limitations and the completions emphasis are based were unfounded.

#### *Dodgy data*

The idea of 'unacceptable wastage' stemmed from the discussion 'Green Paper' which preceded *Knowledge and Innovation*, and was based on the claim that the "attrition rate for higher degree research courses, at 34 per cent, was considerably higher than for either undergraduate study or for postgraduate coursework programmes." (Kemp, 1999b: 32) At the time, CAPA and other bodies disputed the validity of the research underlying this claim, demonstrating that the data did not include students who:

- had discontinued study because they had:
  - changed university;
  - moved overseas (often following their research projects);
  - taken up full-time employment (these students are often the most successful research students);
- had suspended their studies for a range of reasons – these students are not formally enrolled, are not a drain on the public purse and are most likely to complete their studies or move into one of the above categories;
- were continuing study on a part-time basis – students often do this due to lack of income support and/or pressure of other commitments (often related to their research project) or because they are employed full-time, also Pearson and Ford note the propensity of research students to change mode of study

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<sup>8</sup> Correspondence received by CAPA. Confidential details can be provided upon request.

during candidature, often without being recorded in the official statistics;  
(Pearson and Ford, 1997)

- were awaiting examination results;
- were making corrections to their thesis subject to examiners' directions – only a small number of research degrees are passed with no changes to be made. (CAPA, 1999: 18)

Contrary to the claims made in *K & I*, a 1996 DEETYA/ARC report, *The Australian Postgraduate Research Award Scheme: An Evaluation of the 1990 Cohort*, demonstrated that the probability of a PhD student completing was 83.4% (DEETYA/ARC 1996: 58).

Nor were students really taking an exceptionally long time to complete. A study by the Australian National University found an average completion time of 4.5 years for a PhD, while a survey conducted by the Council of Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies found a mean corrected completion time of 3.78 years. (CAPA 1999, *ibid*) These figures hardly support the 'crisis of wastage' claimed at the time by the Department.

We have still not seen evidence of a proper study by DEST to verify the claim of wastage in postgraduate research, and we believe that the 4 and 2 year time limits (EFT PhD and Masters) need to be rethought.

#### *Time limited candidature as a deterrent to completion*

Aside from our scepticism about the usefulness of the DEST research on which claims of wastage have been made, we do not agree that imposing unrealistic time limits on postgraduate research is an appropriate way to increase 'throughput efficiency.' The current time limits create a system in which a worthy and hard-working student undertaking excellent research, who needs to take longer than the set time (perhaps because of equipment failure, the need to prepare for and attend an important conference, or the discovery of an unexpected and exciting outcome of their research), would lose their candidature right when they are most in need of support. Quite simply, the time limits *lessen the likelihood of completion*.

A CAPA constituent organisation provided us with evidence that limiting candidature inhibits completion:

[A departmental committee found that] the number of non-completing P/Ts (part time students) far exceeded the numbers of P/T enrolments. In questioning how this was possible it became most likely that the contingent that they were identifying were students who had full scholarships, these had run out and the students then

swapped to P/T and eventually disappeared off the scene without completing...<sup>9</sup>

Running out of candidature can mean losing access to library services; ceasing to be insured while on campus or using university equipment; inability to access labs, IT and writing-up facilities, or loss of access to a supervisor and other support staff--continued access to the supervisor may only be through an act of kindness. These are not the circumstances in which we should be putting students who are often very close to completion at the 4 or 2 year stage--well, not if we actually want them to complete!

### *Change to a 5 year limit?*

The Review Issues Paper asks if the time allowed for a full time doctorate should be increased from four to five years. While such a change would be an improvement on the current situation, we caution that it would be a very simplistic solution to the problems outlined above.

Each student is different, and each research project is different. The key problem with current arrangements is that they attempt a 'one size fits all' solution to a complex set of problems. *We believe that postgraduate research projects should be funded for a length of time appropriate to the project and the student.*

Such funding should also include scholarships, which should support the living costs of the holder until the research project is complete. Currently, APA / APAI scholarships, and most university scholarships, run out before the maximum candidature has been expended, leaving students looking for employment in the critical final stages of their research. Again, this hinders completion, and may even lead to a non-completion.

All institutions regularly review the work of postgraduate researchers, usually annually, and such reviews should be an adequate to see that someone does not keep working on a project for longer than is appropriate. If a student is not progressing, and there is no good reason why they are not progressing, their project should cease to be funded. If a student is progressing well, and their research is thought to be of an acceptable standard, they should be funded to completion--regardless of how long that takes.

However, it is important that the annual reviews of students' work be of a uniformly high standard, and that they are confidential. One constituent organisation reports to us the concerns of a student with an on-line system of review:

Annual Reviews will be conducted on-line this year at the Induction held by Research Services in August. My concern is that the information provided in any online survey can be accessed by a

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<sup>9</sup> Correspondence received by CAPA. Confidential details can be provided upon request.

Manager if they so desire. I have heard of one instance where a Manager accessed what was supposed to be a confidential on-line survey completed by a staff member, and then proceeded to chastise the staff member because of what the person said about the manager's abilities. One would hope that this is an isolated event, but how can we be sure? Students already have concerns that they can be identified from their Annual Review papers, and are therefore keeping their comments relatively innocuous.<sup>10</sup>

It is hard to imagine how an on-line review could provide an adequate picture of how a student was going with their project. Such reviews are an opportunity for both the student and the department to assess progress, and need to involve serious and candid discussion.

We suggest that the Research and Research Training Management Plans may be a useful device for monitoring the way institutions oversee the progress of the RTS students.

**Recommendation 7:**

That time restrictions on postgraduate research be abolished (including those on scholarships), and that institutions be funded by load on the basis that they demonstrate that they have appropriate review processes and procedures in place to monitor the success of individual postgraduate research projects.

### *3 The need for a minimum standard of infrastructure support for postgraduate research*

Postgraduate researchers carry out 70% of the research undertaken at Australian universities, (ABS, 2000; and Siddle, 1997) yet the research infrastructure needs of postgraduates are generally supplied on an ad hoc basis. CAPA recognises that postgraduate research load carries a 30% weighting in the IGS funding formula, but we do not believe that such a mechanism is sufficient to ensure each postgraduate researcher has access to adequate infrastructure. The goals of the RTS show that government is concerned that postgraduate researchers complete their degrees in a timely manner, yet the lack of commitment to funding postgraduate research infrastructure undermines this goal. Postgraduate researchers are often caught between a rock and a hard place--forced to complete their research in a very tight time-frame, but without the facilities to do so.

For these reasons, CAPA advocates a minimum standard of research infrastructure for postgraduate researchers, which we set out below. (Drawn from

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<sup>10</sup> Correspondence received by CAPA. Confidential details can be provided upon request.

CAPA, 1997) We want the Evaluation Team to note that the provision of facilities and infrastructure to the standards set out here is an extremely rare occurrence. We hope the Evaluation Team will also agree that these requirements are by no means gratuitous.

Each postgraduate researcher should be provided with:

- an office of no less than 4 square meters in floor space which is secure, ventilated, heated, cooled, lit to ASA standards, and located proximate to toilets and other amenities;
- an ergonomically sound chair and desk, desk space to be no less than 0.5 sqm;
- a lockable four draw filing cabinet;
- a telephone;
- a personal computer, with access to e-mail and the internet; and
- sufficient laboratory space, equipment, materials and facilities to complete the program of research.

These facilities should be accessible 24 hours a day for the duration of the research and writing-up component of the candidature and if revision is required after thesis examination. Where a student is studying off-campus, such that they relinquish access to office facilities as described above, they shall be provided with adequate telecommunications facilities in their off-campus study location, with the cost to be carried by the institution.

Each student should also have unfettered, though not necessarily sole, access to:

- photocopying facilities, this should include an account for photocopying within university libraries;
- information technology support and departmental technical support;
- a fax;
- postage and courier;
- an on campus mailing address;
- stationery;
- binding and other services required to produce copies of the thesis;
- funds to cover expenses arising from field work, experiments, data collection and conference attendance;
- tea room;
- wash room; and
- full library services including Australian and overseas interlibrary loans and prompt access to subject librarians and other library staff.

Access to these services should reflect the needs of on and off campus students and full and part-time students and should in all relevant instances be provided on a 24 hour basis for the entire year excluding public holidays. All costs associated with the conduct of the research, including the funding of the above, should be met by the university or cooperative research centre.

A set of national minimum standards for postgraduate research infrastructure would mean that universities could no longer enrol more research students than they have facilities to cater for. Even in Group of Eight institutions it is not uncommon to see departments whose postgraduate student to computer ratio would be put to shame by a government funded primary school.

**Recommendation 8**

That IGS grants be targeted at research infrastructure, and that institutions demonstrate that they in fact use the funds for such purposes, including the support of postgraduate research.

**Recommendation 9:**

That RTS places be allocated on the proviso that the host institution demonstrate a minimum standard of facilities and resources is provided to each postgraduate research student, across all study areas offered by the institution.

#### **4. *Regional Support Package***

The introduction of the Research Training Scheme reduced the number of research places nationally from 24,980 in 2000 to 21,644 in 2001 (EFTSU). Regional universities were hit particularly hard by these reductions, for example, the University of Ballarat lost 41 per cent of its research places, while the University of Southern Queensland and Edith Cowan University both lost 46 per cent of places.<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that while regional institutions lost 800 Higher Degree Research (HDR) places, the whole Group of Eight, with a substantially larger base of research places, lost only 663 HDR places.

If the regional protection component of the RTS is removed next year, it is inevitable that more RTS places at regional institutions will be lost. Unhindered, the Research Training Scheme would concentrate research studies in a few metropolitan locations, resulting in increasing numbers of regional researchers leaving their local communities to pursue their research.

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<sup>11</sup> See CAPA (2001) *Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the capacity of public universities to meet Australia's higher education needs*, Table 2.

Regional universities have not just suffered through the introduction of the RTS. Since 1996, support for postgraduate studies in regional universities has been slashed by the equivalent of an entire regional university. This reduction comprises:

- reductions made to postgraduate coursework places under the Vanstone cuts to operating grants (1997-1999) of 3905 places,
- cuts to Higher Degree Research (HDR) places as part of the 'Gap places' element of the research White Paper of 800 places, and
- subsequent cuts to postgraduate coursework places made as part of cuts to operating grants post-1999. (CAPA, 2001)

## Cuts to postgraduate places in regional universities

INSTITUTION	Postgraduate coursework places 1997–9	PG coursework cut shifted to UG load since 1999	HDR Places 2001 Cuts
Charles Sturt University	-510	0	-11
Southern Cross University	0	-240	-15
The University of New England	-265	-220	-43
The University of Newcastle	-320	-305	-50
University of Wollongong	-360	0	-6
Deakin University	-705	0	-224
La Trobe University	-710	0	-177
University of Ballarat	-20	-115	-31
Central Queensland University	-255	0	-4
James Cook University	-215	-170	-76
University of Southern Queensland	-30	-335	-69
University of Tasmania	-425	-45	-81
Northern Territory University	-90	-75	-13
<b>Total</b>	<b>-3,905</b>	<b>-1,505</b>	<b>-800</b>

Sources: DEETYA data provided to CAPA; and DETYA, 2001: 153–154

We are concerned that the demise of the Regional Support Package in 2004 will further undermine research at regional universities, and for this reason do not advocate the removal of the measures provided through the package.

The current 5% cap on 'winnings' under the RTS also goes some way towards slowing the demise of regional research education--however we do wish it to be understood that the cap is merely a slowing mechanism.

Under the RTS, and even with the 5% cap, regional institutions will be disadvantaged. This should be enough of a reason to urgently reform the RTS. Until that time the cap and the support package must remain in place.

**Recommendation 10:**

That regional protection for research education be continued for as long as the current RTS and IGS formulae remain in place.

### *Conclusion*

CAPA has been concerned about the *Knowledge and Innovation* reforms of research education since they were proposed in 1999. We believe that many of the concerns we held then have been born out. In particular, we believe that the reforms have caused:

- speculative research to be discouraged at the postgraduate level;
- students to drop out once their RTS place expires;
- discrimination against students who need to study part-time, and
- discrimination against disadvantaged students.

We ask the Evaluation Team to consider the proposals we make here, and to make the changes necessary to ensure a better future for Australian research and research education, and for an improvement in the quality of the educational experiences of postgraduate researchers.

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