

***University of South Australia
Students Association***



**Submission to the
Department of Education, Science
and Training Review of *Knowledge
and Innovation***

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Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1: That funding for research education be allocated independently of an institution's number of completions and instead be allocated according to the institution's capacity to provide high-quality research education. This is to be measured according to factors such as its capacity to provide high-quality supervision. In turn, this should be measured by: the value that research degree students themselves place on their interactions with supervisors; the relevance of supervisors' areas of expertise to the students' research projects; the originality and rigor of the resultant research; and supervisors' skills and previous experience in the successful supervision of research degree students.

Recommendation 2: That the time allowed for a full-time student undertaking a doctoral degree be increased to five years; that the time allowed for a full-time student undertaking a masters degree be increased to three years; and that extensions to both these time limits be negotiable on a case-by-case basis, as appropriate to the research in question.

Recommendation 3: That cases for suspension of candidature be assessed on an individual basis. Accordingly, when candidates have good reasons for suspending their candidature, their suspension should not be counted as a separation for their university, so that they are not placed under pressure to continue their candidature when this is not in their best interests.

Responses to Key Consultation Questions

Has the RTS succeeded in encouraging a focus on the quality of student supervision?

While the RTS has succeeded in encouraging a focus on the quality of student supervision at an administrative and managerial level at the University of South Australia (UniSA), it has not been unilaterally successful in encouraging a focus on supervision quality among individual supervisors. This is partly because, as a consequence of the RTS, schools are being encouraged to enroll as many research degree students as possible, in order both to increase the size of the University's load-based RTS funding allocation and to increase its number of potential completions. Consequently, many supervisors' focus is on supervising a large number of research degree students, rather than on ensuring that each student is supervised to the best of his or her abilities. This emphasis on the quantity of research student enrolments is often at odds with an emphasis on the quality of supervision. Supervisors with large numbers of research degree students are less likely to provide each of their students with high quality supervision than supervisors with smaller numbers of research degree students.

Moreover, as a university established in 1991 from an old institute of technology, UniSA has a large proportion of supervisors who do not themselves possess research higher degrees, and therefore sometimes lack the skills, expertise and experience required successfully to supervise research degree students. While the University has initiatives, such as its Supervisor Development Days, that are intended to enhance the quality of research degree supervision, none of these initiatives provides supervisors with the in-depth training required to give them the relevant skills, expertise and experience. The RTS does not provide sufficient leeway to enable UniSA slowly to build its research education capacity by gradually building on its staff members' skills and experience in research education.

The University has a number of policy measures in place to safeguard the quality of research degree supervision. However, none of the current measures enables it to identify and redress poor supervisory practice before that practice adversely affects student progress and thereby impacts negatively on individual research students. The measures that UniSA has introduced to safeguard supervision quality consist largely in aspirational codes of good practice rather than enforceable policies. Moreover, while the University is currently developing a number of management tools to facilitate the recording and monitoring of student/supervisor interactions, the main benefit of these tools lies in their capacity to track large numbers of students and supervisors in relation to administrative milestones, rather than to assess the quality of supervision itself. They allow the quality of supervision to be assessed only in so far as failure to achieve one or more of the relevant milestones in time is indicative of poor supervision. However, in many cases, such indications will be of little use to students, for whom failure to meet one of these milestones may mean that they already face serious barriers to successful completion.

In general, the nature of research student supervision is such that it simply is not possible to develop policies or initiatives at an administrative or managerial level that serve unilaterally to ensure the quality of individual research student supervision. The quality of research degree supervision is best measured by factors such as: the value that research degree students themselves place on their interactions with supervisors; the relevance of supervisors' areas of expertise to the students' research projects; the originality and rigor of the resultant research; and supervisors' skills and previous experience in the successful supervision of research degree students.

The following recent examples of students who came to the Students Association with problems resulting from poor supervision demonstrate the difficulty in addressing issues with the quality of supervision before they adversely affect students' chances of successful completion:

1. When required to resubmit his masters thesis after examination, the student was advised by his supervisor that he was doing well and would pass. He was failed very severely by the examiners, and was not given another opportunity to resubmit.
2. The student's principal and associate supervisors took two months to return a draft of the student's thesis to her with comments. This brought her very near to the end of her candidature date and the student was consequently at serious risk of going overtime.
3. The student's principal and associate supervisors had a communication breakdown, in which the student played no part. Due to no fault of his own, this led to serious delays in his progress.
4. Due to the student's initial supervisor leaving, the student had no supervisor for three months and went overtime as a result. He was not granted an extension of candidature, and was charged the equivalent of HECS fees by the University.

The University is currently developing a research degree management system that is intended to enable the early identification of the kinds of problems experienced in the final three cases. However, early identification alone will not ensure that these problems are addressed adequately. If they are to be addressed successfully, individual schools and divisions will need to have the capacity, in terms of expertise, time and experience, to address the issues once they are identified. Pressures to enroll large numbers of research degree students despite limited resources can only have a negative impact on their ability to address these issues.

The only way of ensuring a focus on the quality of individual student supervision is to shift focus away from the quantity of research degree completions universities produce, and towards real indicators of supervision quality. Consequently, we make the following recommendation:

Recommendation 1: That funding for research education be allocated independently of an institution's number of completions and instead be allocated according to the institution's capacity to provide high-quality research education. This is to be measured according to factors such as its capacity to provide high-quality supervision. In turn, this should be measured by: the value that research degree students themselves place on their interactions with supervisors; the relevance of supervisors' areas of expertise to the students' research projects; the originality and rigor of the resultant research; and supervisors' skills and previous experience in the successful supervision of research degree students.

Should the time allowed for a full-time student undertaking a doctorate be increased from four to five years?

Yes. Limiting the time allowed for full-time doctoral students to four years seriously restricts the nature and scope of possible doctoral research, with the consequence that student choice is inhibited and the diversity of research education is restricted. The limitations on the time allowed to doctoral students also adversely affects the quality of doctoral research, with research projects being chosen on the basis of their suitability for the specified timeframe, rather than on the basis of their potential to make an original and worthwhile contribution to knowledge.

Moreover, basic research and research in the humanities and social sciences, which have longer timeframes and less predictable outcomes, are less likely to fit within the four-year timeframe than applied research and research in the sciences. The emphasis on four-year completions thus encourages research degree enrolments in the applied sciences and discourages enrolments in the humanities, social sciences and pure sciences. This is likely to have significant negative equity implications, given the large numbers of female students who enroll in research degrees in the humanities and social sciences. Consequently, we make the following recommendation:

Recommendation 2: That the time allowed for a full-time student undertaking a doctoral degree be increased to five years; that the time allowed for a full-time student undertaking a masters degree be increased to three years; and that extensions to both these time limits be negotiable on a case-by-case basis, as appropriate to the research in question.

Has there been any impact on granting leave of absence, suspending candidature or allowing students to change from full-time to part-time study?

The RTS has resulted in research degree students at UniSA being discouraged from suspending their candidature, due to a desire to avoid increasing the proportion of separations that do not come from completions. Many students have been advised against suspending their candidature, despite the fact that, in most cases, suspension would have been in the students' own best interests.

The following recent examples of students who came to the Students Association with problems that would best have been dealt with by their suspending candidature demonstrates the seriousness of the issues that lead students to seek suspension and the serious personal hardship that may result if suspension is not granted.

1. The student had a serious crime committed against her, which required her to suspend and subsequently to extend her candidature. This required extensive advocacy on the part of the Students Association in order for the suspension and extension to be approved.
2. The student's children were suffering from very serious illness, which required him temporarily to stop work on his thesis. He was not advised to suspend his candidature or to take leave during this time, and therefore ultimately went overtime. On going overtime, he was charged the equivalent of HECS fees by the University.
3. The student suffered repeated bouts of serious illness, which prevented her from working on her thesis. She was not advised to take leave or to suspend her candidature when sick, and therefore went overtime. She will be charged the equivalent of HECS fees by the University while in overtime, and is also at risk of having her candidature terminated.

In general, students who seek suspension of candidature have good reasons for doing so. When their reasons are good, it does not make sense to penalise the University by counting students who suspend their candidature as separations. Nor does it make sense to penalise students by making it difficult for them to suspend their candidature and thus making them run a serious risk of going overtime. Consequently, we make the following recommendation:

Recommendation 3: That cases for suspension of candidature be assessed on an individual basis. Accordingly, when candidates have good reasons for suspending their candidature, their suspension should not be counted as a separation for their university, so that they are not placed under pressure to continue their candidature when this is not in their best interests.