



**Response to the Evaluation of
Knowledge and Innovation Reforms
Issues Paper**

Swinburne University Postgraduate Association

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Authorised by

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A submission from the Swinburne University Postgraduate Association (SUPA) to the Department of Education Science and Training review of Knowledge and Innovation.

This submission deals primarily with the impact of the RTS on postgraduate research students.

Swinburne University Postgraduate Association (SUPA) is a standing committee of Swinburne Student Union (SSU) and is the recognised voice of the 4500 postgraduate students at Swinburne. SUPA is governed by elected student representatives and is affiliated to the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA).

Swinburne's 486 postgraduate research students are located primarily on the Hawthorn campus, with a smaller number on the Prahran campus. Approximately half our research students are studying part-time. While Lilydale campus now offers full-fee research degrees, not surprisingly, this option has so far been unappealing to prospective students.

As a relatively new university eager to grow, Swinburne initially enrolled too many research students too quickly. In several areas, the supervision depth and experience, policy development, resources and infrastructure support was inadequate. This has resulted in some very long completion times and many non-completions. Out of acknowledgement of its responsibility, Swinburne has been sympathetic in its approach to allowing long-term candidates to complete.

The RTS emphasis on completions has resulted in greater scrutiny of applications for candidature. The university is now very careful in assessing the ability of academic units to support the candidates in terms of research culture, supervision and resources. There is an emphasis on ensuring that new students know their rights and responsibilities.

In recent years, Swinburne's completion rates have improved, but are still well below the leading institutions in this field. If the Commonwealth is serious about improving completion rates, then much greater funding needs to be allocated.

Recommendation: Reward institutions for improvements in the provision of quality supervision and student resources.

Some academic units now scrutinise potential candidates – assessing them for their potential for research and suitability to fit into the current research group. These units appear to have fewer problems with students completing, but it is not known how many (and what groups) are being discouraged from enrolling in the first place. Once in the system however, the Graduate Research School pays particular attention to assisting equity candidates.

Improvements certainly have occurred within the recent few years at Swinburne. However, it would be unwise to draw a correlation with the implementation of RTS.

Although, the recent emphasis on completions has been useful in encouraging acceptance of the need for change, it is likely that as Swinburne's research capacity and experience grew, many of these changes would have been accepted regardless.

The emphasis on completions additionally has resulted in some instances of reprehensible practice. There remains disagreement within the university over what is needed to 'get a student through'.

Unfortunately, a few areas within the university have taken up the 'stick' rather than the 'carrot' as the preferred instrument of encouragement. Some students have become prisoners to their desk and laboratory. Others are being required to provide such comprehensive and frequent reports on their progress that they have no time to apply to their project. Other schools are questioning the suitability of their own students for research degrees and one senior academic actually suggested that psychological testing of prospective students would be a useful tool....Draconian measures to encourage completion will actually have the effect of forcing students to drop out of their degrees, thereby denying the university a reward for completion (SUPA, Response to the Ministerial discussion paper Higher Education at the Crossroads, June 2002, available: <http://www.backingaustraliasfuture.gov.au/submissions/crossroads/pdf/257.pdf>).

RTS, or more particularly the threat of loss of funding, has had a part to play in focusing the university on the quality of supervision. At Swinburne there have been some significant steps towards achieving an improvement in the supervision quality. These steps have included establishing a register of research supervisors, strong incentives for supervisor training, recommendations for maximum supervisory load and improvements in monitoring student progress. These steps are not being implemented without significant resistance from some academic units and individual supervisors. In encouraging change, the threat of losing funding for places under RTS has given the Graduate Research School some leverage to implement change.

The overall quality of research education has improved at Swinburne. However, many still undervalue the development of a research culture. As a small university, Swinburne is ideally placed to foster such a culture and encourage multi-disciplinary communication and collaboration. While there are some examples of this, there are many more examples of resistance. Because such participation can be viewed as wasted time, there remain some supervisors who do not support their students' participation in the wider academic environment.

The RTS is outcome focused. An emphasis on a single outcome fails to reflect the overall quality of the student experience. To ensure they complete within the prescribed time, students will not engage in related academic pursuits such as collaboration on projects and papers, industry experience and teaching. As a result, completing students will be less inclined to pursue an academic career. They may view their time as research students unfavourably, speak ill of their former institution, and be less willing to contribute to the alumni. Research students contribute in many ways to the research and teaching output of

the university. A balance needs to be established between focusing on the research project and others aspects of academic life.

SUPA believes that the RTS prescribed completion times for full-time students of 2 years for a Masters and 4 years for a PhD are much too short. In recognition of the many variables influencing completion times, upper limits should not be determined at the national level. Completion times should be negotiable between the individual student and academic unit. This will vary between disciplines and individual student circumstances.

The RTS counts leave of absence (LOA) as a separation. Swinburne has experienced a dramatic reduction in the number of LOAs being granted. Possibly LOA is now being used more appropriately, but it is also possible that students are being discouraged from taking up this right. The latter explanation will ultimately backfire on the university when students are forced to drop out because external pressures are preventing their study.

Recommendation: Remove completions from any research education funding formula.

The completion timelines under RTS are out of step with the student funding that is available through most living allowance scholarships. The APA for example is only provided for 3 years with a possible extension of 6 months. This leaves students, who are aiming to complete within the 4 years, unfunded for the final 6 months. Predictably, these students must take on employment, necessitating a conversion to part time candidature. This inevitably delays their completion.

More funding is required to increase the availability of living allowance scholarships. If all research students received living allowances, timely completion rates would improve.

Recommendation: Increase the duration and availability of living allowance scholarships.

SUPA believes that the term “research training” is inappropriate.

The emphasis on ‘training’ as a synonym for ‘education’ is a trend that SUPA has significant concerns about. The role of a university is to educate, not just to train a future workforce for industry. Education, to SUPA is (among other things) about the process of becoming wise, through the practice of critical thinking and discussion. It encompasses an ethical overview of the world and as such has immeasurable benefits for our society. Training is related to gaining specific skills to perform a specific task. With regard to the idea of ‘research training’, we believe that the role of research supervision is misunderstood and diminished. Research and research supervision involve both the process of learning specific skills as well as a mentoring, advisory and inspirational function (SUPA, Response to the Ministerial discussion paper Higher Education

at the Crossroads, June 2002, available

<http://www.backingaustraliasfuture.gov.au/submissions/crossroads/pdf/257.pdf>).

Recommendation: Replace the term “research training” with “research education”.

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The principal problem with all reporting mechanisms is that they result in general statements and claims designed to ‘get the university through’ the process rather than an accurate statement of the situation across the university or the quality of those processes that have been implemented.

The more exacting the reporting requirements, the more time tied up in producing the reports. This is time that would be better spent ensuring consistent implementation of reforms across the university.

Recommendation: Increase overall research education and infrastructure funding and guarantee set funding over several years to enable universities to better plan and implement research education.

As a final remark, representatives of SUPA have attended many briefings conducted by DEST on the RTS. The funding formula is clearly complex and confusing for universities, students and DEST administrators alike. This has resulted in many misconceptions regarding the funding process, and in particular how it relates to completions.

Recommendation: Better explain and communicate the funding of research education.