



UNSW
Postgraduate Board

Evaluation of the reforms introduced in *Knowledge and Innovation: A Policy statement on Research and Research Training.*

A submission by the Postgraduate Board of The University of New South Wales

Presented by Henning Hummervoll, Convenor Postgraduate Board.

**Prepared on behalf of the Postgraduate Board
by Francine Finnane.**

**Postgraduate Board
The University of New South Wales
Level 1 East Wing Quadrangle Building
UNSW Kensington N 2052
P: 02 9385 6714
F: 02 9385 6721**

**For queries regarding this submission please
Contact Henning Hummervoll
M: 0421 723 079
E: convenor@pgb.unsw.edu.au**

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Introduction

The Postgraduate Board of The University of New South Wales is the representative association of the 14,754 postgraduate students of The University of New South Wales. Of these students 2,574 are engaged in a Doctorate (2036) or Masters Research(538).¹ The Postgraduate Board is taking the opportunity to respond to the evaluation of the reforms introduced through the white paper Knowledge and Innovation in particular the introduction of the Research Training Scheme. It is concerned however that the timing of the evaluation is premature: The RTS was not fully implemented until 2002 when the range of funding mechanisms – separations, total research income, publications – was implemented.² The full impact of RTS on issues of quality of research, the implications for equity and the effectiveness and relevance of the RTS formulae cannot be adequately determined because of the consequent lack of data. This is not a sound basis on which to evaluate the effectiveness or otherwise of the scheme. The PGB is also concerned that the evaluation is occurring independent of the changes to higher education introduced by the Federal Government in its May 2003 Budget. This consideration of research as separate from teaching and learning represents a piecemeal approach to the sustainability of the future of higher education with strong implications for the drift to a two-tier higher education system.

Quality and Change to 5 Year Limit.

The PGB welcomes the impact of the RTS on stimulating strategies to enhance the quality of postgraduate research through better supervision and the development of research culture. At UNSW the Office of Research Training has been established to provide university support and information to postgraduate research students and supervisors can access training through a wide range of workshops conducted by Staff Development. Additionally Faculties and Schools are providing greater support to postgraduates through a range of orientation and induction programs for postgraduates. These are welcome developments.

However anecdotal reports demonstrates the level of concern as to the effect of RTS on increasing pressure on students to complete. One student reported that the range of comparative sources she was using in her dissertation was revised down from six to one with the need to complete being cited in her review. Another student reported she had been advised to curtail her collegial activities (representation on committees and participation in Faculty forums) to meet her completion date.³ Such instances may be due to misunderstanding on the part of supervisors and review panel members of the detail of RTS revealing the difficulty of translating complex formulae in the real environment of supervision and doctoral research. Possibly the stipulated four years creates a pressure inadequate to a realistic time frame for doctoral students. Additionally it negates the potential outcomes for the generation of knowledge of individual research projects. UNSW's preparedness to fund the fifth year of a doctoral student's candidature indicates five years would be a better time frame for doctoral completion. This would automatically increase completions while maintaining a cap on the length of time required for completions.

Recommendation 1:

The PGB recommends to the review of Knowledge and Innovation in particular reference to the RTS that the completion period for Doctorate research be extended to five years and the completion period for Masters research be extended to three years.

¹ UNSW 2002 Statistics Book p52 June 2003

² DETYA Research Training Scheme Guidelines p7

³ Personal communication with PGB

Equity

While academic merit is critical to undertaking postgraduate research the RTS with its emphasis on completions has implications for equity issues. Equity is one of the government's stated principles in the *Our Universities: Backing Australia's Future*. It states "...clear directives on equity programmes and performance-based reward are needed to ensure that there are no barriers to access to higher education..."⁴ Yet in the current guidelines to the RTS equity is granted no leverage. It is left to the discretion of the universities to "...determine their student admissions and the internal allocation of HDR places..."⁵ Aspiring undergraduates will find the support systems they require to undertake a higher degree vary and are available only at the discretion of individual universities, faculties and schools.

In particular the PGB is concerned with the equity issues for women and part-timers in postgraduate research. Postgraduate education occurs at a later time in students' lives with "... 66% of doctoral candidates...30 or over; 34%...40 or over; the average age is about 36..."⁶ This period may involve establishing permanent relationships, having children, buying houses, or divorce. This life experience impacts significantly on women whose careers traditionally become fragmented once they have children. Women continue to be the prime carers "and are more likely than their partners to organise their work around child care responsibilities..."⁷. After divorce it is the mother who is more likely to have a child under five living with them than the father.⁸ This carries with it obvious implications for women's ability to pursue and/or complete their postgraduate research.

Financial responsibilities also impacts on men and women alike who in meeting these responsibilities may be obliged to go part-time. Part-time postgraduates holding down a full-time job are necessarily under great time pressure and this impacts on their ability to complete in the required time posing them as "high-risk" candidates in relation to completion. The consequence of their part-time status also changes the nature of their relationship with the university: Part-time students work in greater isolation and find it harder to engage in the university/faculty/school research culture and with their peers.

Recommendation 2:

The PGB recommends a mechanism is implemented within the RTS to reward universities for equity initiatives and outcomes and that such initiatives and outcomes are reported as part of the annual Research and Research Training Management Report to DEST.

⁴ Commonwealth of Australia, *Our Universities; Backing Australia's Future*, May 2003 p 34

⁵ DETYA *Research Training Scheme Guidelines* 2001 p5

⁶ Smith, Bradley, *The Challenge of Making Ends Meet in Postgraduate Research Training* p25 in Kiley, M and Mullins, G (eds) *Quality in Postgraduate Research: Making Ends Meet*, Proceedings of the 2000 Quality in Postgraduate Research Conference Adelaide.

⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Australian Social Trends, Family and Community - Family functioning: Balancing family and work*, found at www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/

⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Australian Social Trends, Family and Community - Living arrangements: Changing families*, found at www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats



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