

Issues emerging from the PhD Workshop

1. Increase the value of the stipend

The PhD scholarship was worth \$14,260 in 1992 and increases in line with the CPI. It is currently worth \$20,007. Economic pressure makes the scholarship an unattractive proposition for many students. Domestic enrolments are declining and 55% of all students report having 'some involvement' in outside work, presumably as a second source of income to enable them to live.

Many students report putting their own money into their research projects (on average \$2,000 pa). (*Professor Terry Evans, Deakin University, unpublished data from ARC Linkage project which surveyed all doctoral candidates in Australia*). For projects in the art and design sector, the sum can be much greater.

An immediate action for Government to consider is to increase the value of the stipend to that applying to the APA (Industry) award, \$26,140.

2. Review the high cost-low cost funding differential

Universities receive some operating funds from Government for the Research Higher Degree students they train. This compensation is at two levels (2.35:1.0) according to the research field: most science-technology-engineering-medicine (STEM) disciplines are high cost and most humanities-arts-social sciences (HASS) disciplines are low cost. This assumes that STEM students are 2.35 times more expensive to train, presumably because they require access to more expensive equipment, an assumption, we believe, which needs to be reviewed in light of discipline costs since it was first formulated. The RTS funds basic human and physical infrastructure, but not the costs of the research project (consumables, specialist equipment, travel, etc): these are almost always met from other research funds.

In some circumstances STEM students do require access to more expensive equipment, although HASS students may also require access to similarly expensive equipment and specialised workshops (eg in art and design).

More importantly, HASS students tend to work on individual projects that are separate from their supervisor's research and must be mentored individually, whereas STEM students often work on group projects and can share experiences, facilities and even supervision time, as well as being mentored by post-doctoral colleagues. They may require less per capita supervision time than HASS students.

3. Term of PhD

The average time to submission for a full-time PhD student in HASS is 4.48 years, about 2.5 months longer than for other disciplines. (Western & Lawson – derived from Report to DEST on HEIP Project (J5001): *PhD Graduates 5 to 7 Years Out: Employment Outcomes, Job Attributes and the Quality of Research Training*.) The current funded period for a PhD scholarship is three years (with a possible extension of up to 6 months). CHASS recommends that the funded period be extended to 3.5 years, with a further 6 months extension possible on academic grounds. This would align the period of the scholarship with the period for which the university is remunerated.

4. Analysis of industry needs and graduate destinations

How many PhDs are required to fill demand from industry, government and academic positions? What skills do these potential employers want? Is Australia producing enough PhD graduates with the right skills?

New demand for PhD graduates is being created as university staff members reach retirement age, with about 1/5 to 1/3 of current staff expected to retire over the next decade. The average age of university staff is higher than any other trade or profession, except farmers. (Graeme Hugo, University of Adelaide, *Demographics – the need for renewal*, 2008)

Additional demand for highly skilled staff is anticipated from the Commonwealth Public Service and a growing diversity of other employers in the knowledge-intensive innovation economy. International demand for PhD graduates is also strong: Australia competes in an international market where highly skilled people are actively targeted for attractive well-paid positions overseas. A recent survey of Go8 HASS graduates 5-7 years after completion shows that about 40% were working outside the universities. (Western & Lawson op. cit.)

This additional demand is taking place at a time when the number of domestic enrolments in the PhD is going down.

The skills shortage has been recognised in the natural sciences, but to a much lesser extent in the HASS. Studies of future workforce growth and decline show that the greatest growth expected is in the professional-managerial sector, which is where significant numbers of HASS advanced degree holders are found.

There is a need to collect better data on the quantum and diversity of demand, so that Australia can predict and respond to the needs of the future. Any failure to properly fill vacancies in the tertiary sector will have a compound effect, as Australia will not have the capacity to train the next generation of PhDs.

5. International exposure

Australia faces a dual challenge: domestic enrolments in PhDs are falling, and the strong demand for highly qualified workers in knowledge industries across the world.

We acknowledge and welcome the major steps that you have taken recently to 'enhance international engagement' in research. In addition to these steps, consideration might be given to offer more scholarships to international candidates; take administrative steps to encourage them to study in Australia; make it easier for them to afford education for their dependent children and for their spouses to work; to remain in Australia while their theses are being examined; and to remain in Australia to become productive members of our knowledge workforce after graduation if they so choose. The multiplier effects for the Australian economy are very significant.

Australia should have a parallel policy to encourage mobility for our domestic students, to encourage them to spend time in other countries during the course of their PhD studies. Funding for such activity would require the scaling up of existing federal funding programs, which could be supplemented by individual universities. Some Australian universities recognise the value of this international experience, by making funding available eg to enable students to attend conferences and to undertake international fieldwork. International experience is integral to students achieving their full research potential in many disciplines.