



Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations Incorporated

Overview of the Federal Government's response to *Building Australia's Research Capacity*

Prepared by Nigel Palmer, September 2009

Building Australia's Research Capacity, the final report from the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation Inquiry into Research Training and Research Workforce Issues in Australian Universities, was tabled in the Federal Parliament in December 2008.

Below is a summary of key points from the Federal Government's response to the report, tabled in Federal Parliament September 2009. Included also are some explanatory remarks in response.

Recommendation 10

*The Committee recommends that the Australian Government introduce a **National Priority Postgraduate Research Scholarship Scheme** that provides competitive stipends to outstanding students in areas of national significance and skills shortage.*

Building Australia's Research Capacity (p.59)

Requires further examination through the research workforce strategy.

Federal Government Response (p.6)

Such a scheme would support a significant boost to research activity in priority areas. Managing this initiative as a separate scheme frames it as a prestigious award, and also helps preserve the integrity of the APA as a broad-based program, recognising excellence across all areas of research.

Recommendation 13

*The Committee recommends that the Australian Research Training Scheme PhD **candidature** period include the option of a **six-month extension**.*

Building Australia's Research Capacity (p.70)

Requires further examination through the research workforce strategy.

Federal Government Response (p.11)

This recommendation recognises the restrictive nature of the current Research Training Scheme (RTS).

Recommendation 14

The Committee recommends that the duration of all federal postgraduate awards with stipends for PhD students be increased to three and a half years (full-time equivalent) with the option of two six-month extensions.

Building Australia's Research Capacity (p.75)

Requires further examination through the research workforce strategy.

Federal Government Response (p.12)

This recommendation recognises the poor fitness for purpose of the current suite of federally funded postgraduate awards.

Recommendation 15

The Committee recommends that the Australian Postgraduate Award stipend value be increased by 50 per cent.

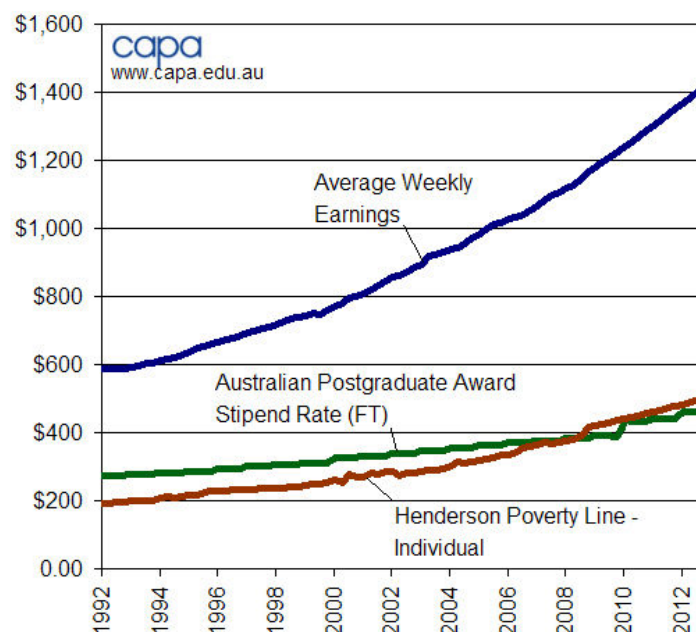
Building Australia's Research Capacity (p.78)

[Partially] actioned.

Federal Government Response (p.8)

CAPA is encouraged that the Federal Government is paying attention to the poor state of the APA award. The 8% upward adjustment announced in the 2009-10 Federal Budget was a very welcome first step.¹

**Australian Postgraduate Award Stipend Rate
with Average Weekly Earnings and Henderson Poverty Line**



Compiled by the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA).

As outlined above, CAPA estimates that by Jan 1st 2010 the adjustment announced in the 2009-10 Federal Budget will take the APA stipend rate back to where it was in August 2008: around \$7 below the poverty line. A further adjustment of at least 20% is needed for the stipend to be funded to an adequate standard.

¹ Australian Government (2009). Powering Ideas: An Innovation Agenda for the 21st Century, Commonwealth of Australia.

Recommendation 17

The Committee recommends that the Australian PhD **candidature period** be nominally extended **beyond thesis submission until the time at which the student is informed that they will be awarded their degree.**

Building Australia's Research Capacity (p.82)

This is a matter for individual universities.

Federal Government Response (p.12)

CAPA commends the Federal Government for referring the matter of efficiencies between research higher degree thesis submission and degree conferral to individual universities. Reform at the institutional level may still require some program adjustments on the part of the Commonwealth, which could easily be addressed as part of the Federal Government's research workforce strategy.

Recommendation 19

*The Committee recommends that the Australian Government work with State Governments to support postgraduate students through the reduction of certain living expenses, in particular, through the provision of concessions for public transport travel. **Access to transport concessions should be made available to all full-time tertiary students, regardless of type of enrolment or the level of course in which they are enrolled.***

Building Australia's Research Capacity (p.86)

This is a matter for State and Territory Governments.

Federal Government Response (p.9)

CAPA welcomes the observation that this recommendation entails responsibilities on the part of State and Territory Governments, however the Federal Government should formally refer this issue to MCEECDYA in the same manner as Recommendation 31.

Recommendation 22

*The Committee recommends that the Research Training Scheme guidelines be amended to **enable higher degree by research students to enrol jointly at two institutions**, with student load and completion credited to both institutions.*

Building Australia's Research Capacity (p.91)

Requires further examination through the research workforce strategy.

Federal Government Response (p.6)

This recommendation entails a simple change that would have a significant positive impact, especially for regional and rural institutions.

Recommendation 23

*The Committee recommends that the Commonwealth Scholarship Guidelines be amended to give award recipients **greater flexibility in undertaking all or part of a higher degree by research on a part-time basis.***

Building Australia's Research Capacity (p.92)

Requires further examination.

Federal Government Response (p.12)

This very welcome recommendation recognises that the current arrangements are a poor fit for the reality of the RHD student cohort, and the challenges they face in undertaking a research degree.

Recommendation 27

*The Committee recommends a **doubling in the annual number of IPRS awards** to accommodate a greater number of international students.*

Building Australia's Research Capacity (p.100)

Requires further examination through the research workforce strategy.

Federal Government Response (p.10)

This recommendation recognises the need to expand upon what is currently a small but very important scheme.

Recommendation 30

*The Committee recommends that **international student visa policies** relating to higher degree by research programs be amended to allow greater flexibility for further research and employment.*

Building Australia's Research Capacity (p.103)

Supported in principle.

Federal Government Response (p.17)

A Review of visa arrangements for postgraduates by DIAC is greatly welcome.

Recommendation 31

*The Committee recommends that the Australian Government work with the States to ensure that **the dependents of all international higher degree by research students enrolled at Australian universities are subject to the same fee levels as local students at government primary and secondary schools.***

Building Australia's Research Capacity (p.104)

To be referred to Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA)

Federal Government Response (p.11)

This recommendation recognizes that many international postgraduates studying in Australia also support dependents. Improvements in this area fall under State Government responsibilities, and CAPA welcomes the Commonwealth referring this matter to MCEECDYA.

Recommendation 34

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government implement a **postdoctoral fellowship scheme targeted at early-career researchers** who are up to five years out from PhD completion.

Building Australia's Research Capacity (p.111)

Supported.

Federal Government Response (p.19)

The Super Science Fellowships announced in the 2009-10 Federal Budget were a good start in addressing the need for a postdoctoral fellowship scheme targeted at early career researchers who are up to 5 years out from PhD completion. The need for a well-resourced broad-based scheme however is obvious, and the matter deserves further attention as part of the Federal Government's Research Workforce Strategy.

Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government **fund the full cost of each higher degree by research program** at Australian universities through the Research Training Scheme and within all national competitive grant funding programs. This funding should take into account:

- the removal of the high-cost/low-cost funding differential that currently exists between research disciplines, subject to interim arrangements to ensure that no discipline is disadvantaged;
- **the travel and accommodation needs of students for research collaboration, regardless of geographic location; and**
- **the provision and maintenance of a minimum standard of supervision and resources.**

Building Australia's Research Capacity (p.37)

Not supported.

Federal Government Response (p.14)

Although this recommendation was not supported, CAPA welcomes the undertaking by government to examine a range of options to ensure the quality of the research training environment, including through appropriate minimum standards.

Recommendation 9

*The Committee recommends that the Australian Government attach additional funds to research training scheme places that are secured by minority and under-represented students. This funding is for universities to provide the **additional necessary assistance for minority and under-represented students throughout their candidature.***

Building Australia's Research Capacity (p.56)

The Australian Government supports equality of opportunity in higher education.

Federal Government Response (p.17)

Mitigating attrition is at least as important as ensuring enough students from under-represented groups commence a research degree. "Pipeline" issues are important, but equity measures are wasted where students fall at the last hurdle.

Despite not directly endorsing this recommendation, CAPA is optimistic that the Federal Government will address practical measures in support of under-represented groups in research as part of its Research Workforce Strategy.

Recommendation 18

*The Committee recommends that **access to Youth Allowance, Austudy or Abstudy be extended to all students enrolled in a higher degree by research, noting that:***

- access to those schemes does not determine eligibility;
- candidates in receipt of a scholarship or other source of income above a determined assessment threshold would be ineligible; and
- access to those schemes should be regarded as secondary to access to a scholarship or award with an adequate living stipend.

Building Australia's Research Capacity (p.85)

Not supported.

Federal Government Response (p.8)

The failure of the Federal Government to endorse this recommendation is disappointing. It will leave approximately 22,000 postgraduates ineligible to apply for any form of income support at all.

Recommendation 20

*The Committee recommends that **postgraduate research scholarships be exempt from assessable income for taxation, including part-time awards.***

Building Australia's Research Capacity (p.89)

Not supported.

Federal Government Response (p.9)

It is disappointing that the Government has chosen not to support this recommendation outright. The matter is however being referred to the Taxation Review Panel, where CAPA is optimistic that the concerns raised by the Government can be easily addressed.

Recommendation 26

*The Committee recommends that the Australian Government develop and implement **appropriate measures to encourage the recruitment of Indigenous, regional and rural Australians to higher degrees by research.***

Building Australia's Research Capacity (p.96)

The Australian Government supports equality of opportunity in higher education.

Federal Government Response (p.17)

CAPA welcomes the Federal Government's support for equality of opportunity in higher education, and the undertaking to review of the effectiveness of measures to improve the participation of indigenous students in higher education, in consultation with the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council. More direct measures are required to support participation and retention of particular groups in research degrees however, beyond simply ensuring a greater "pipeline" effect when it comes to commencing research candidates (see also Recommendation 9).

References:

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- Australian Government (2009). Powering Ideas: An Innovation Agenda for the 21st Century, Commonwealth of Australia.
 - Carr Senator the Hon. Kim - Minister for Innovation Industry Science and Research (2009). Australian Government Response to Committee report: "Building Australia's Research Capacity". House of Representatives, Parliament of Australia.
 - House of Representatives Committee on Industry Science and Innovation (2008). Building Australia's Research Capacity (Final report of the House of Representatives Inquiry into Research Training and Research Workforce Issues in Australian Universities). Canberra, ACT, Parliament of Australia.