



The Research Education Experience in 2009

Wednesday 2 December, 2009

A workshop hosted by the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA), with support from the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research (DIISR).

Compiled with the assistance of the staff and office bearers of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) and its affiliated member organisations.

CAPA is the national representative body for Australia's 270,000+ postgraduate students. Incorporated in 1979, CAPA is a membership based non-profit association.

Photography by Joseph Provenzano.

Prepared by Nigel Palmer
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Level 3, Trades Hall, 2 Lygon St, Carlton South, VIC, 3053
(03) 9650 7666 or 0425 823 144
www.capa.edu.au

The views expressed in this report are the views of attendees at the workshop and are not necessarily the views of the Australian Government.

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1 Executive Summary

Overview

The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) hosted a workshop entitled *The Research Education Experience in 2009*, with support from the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research (DIISR), on Wednesday 2 December, 2009.

Discussion Questions provided for the workshop supported vibrant and well-informed discussion during the session.¹ The three main themes that emerged in the course of discussion are outlined below.

Theme One: The research training experience in 2009

The first discussion question invited students to discuss aspects of their research training they were satisfied with, and where they saw room for improvement. Three sub-themes emerged in response: supervision, resources and the importance of collegiality and academic freedom.

With respect to supervision, the centrality of the student-supervisor relationship was emphasised through the workshop. Student comments suggest that supervisors were directly responsible for both the very best and the very worst of what the research training experience has to offer. The importance of mentoring was emphasised, as was the importance of students being able to seek advice and support from outside of the supervisory team.

Views about resources centred around the need for access to adequate resources to support the production and dissemination of research. Students demonstrated clearly formed views about the limitations they experienced in this area, including poorly resourced facilities, inadequate office space and inconsistencies in accessing funds to support research related costs. A perceived lack of transparency in regard to the distribution of research funding within universities also emerged as a concern.

Collegiality featured prominently in responses to the discussion questions. The value of being treated as a colleague, and the experience of being part of an academic community are among the most positive aspects of the research training experience identified through the workshop. The positive influences identified extend broadly across aspects of the research student experience, including the development of career opportunities and prospects for a timely completion.

The importance of academic freedom and the opportunity to pursue genuinely original research also stand out as aspects of the research training experience that are strongly valued by students. It was clear that students held strongly negative views where there is a perceived lack of collegiality or where academic independence was compromised.

¹ The Discussion Questions are included here as Appendix I.

Theme Two: Career pathways

Discussion questions 3 and 4 invited students to discuss their choice to undertake a research degree, and its relevance to their career goals. Two clear sub-themes emerged in response: skills development opportunities associated with research degrees, and the career pathways available to research students.

A broad range of skills development opportunities available to research students was highly valued. This issue was closely linked to their views on the career opportunities available to them.

With respect to career pathways, participants reported that they encountered what could be described as “mixed messages” when it comes to career options for research students. Students also reported a perceived tension between teaching and research in the pursuit of an academic career. They found this unhelpful and difficult to reconcile with their own experience, as many are already actively engaged with both, and believe both are closely related.

Theme Three: Completing a research degree

Discussion questions 2 and 5 invited students to talk about their expected duration of study, and how personal circumstances may have impacted on their research training experience. Responses to these questions centred around the challenges faced in completing a research degree, with two strongly interconnected sub-themes, being the importance of various forms of support in helping with a number of stresses during candidature, including personal circumstances and the time pressures associated with completing a research degree

Support measures such as scholarships were identified as important, and top-up scholarships were seen as particularly valuable in supporting students to focus on research and successfully complete their degree. Flexibility also emerged as a key issue, as students reported having to employ a range of strategies to cope with a number of issues including personal circumstances, lack of resources, the pressure for shorter completion times and the limited duration of scholarship funding.

The risk of isolation, the importance placed on collegiality and the value of access to assistance and advice outside of the supervisory team all featured as important aspects of the research training experience. These issues appeared to be particularly salient for international research students.

With respect to the duration of a research degree, flexibility and support emerged as two important considerations in students’ views on managing available resources and coping with personal circumstances in working towards completion. Both of these factors were identified as having a direct influence on the time taken to complete a research degree (and a research doctorate in particular). Students demonstrated sophisticated views on coping strategies in responding to challenges, and also in regard to factors related to discontinuing a course of study.

Summary

Participants reflected positively on their overall experience as research students. While the workshop highlighted a range of opportunities for improvement, it was clear that there were also many positive aspects to the research training experience.

2 Background

The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) hosted a workshop entitled *The Research Education Experience in 2009* on Wednesday 2 December, 2009, from 11am to 2pm. The event was hosted with the support of the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research (DIISR).



The workshop involved 37 participants from around Australia, the majority being current higher degree by research (HDR) students. The event was hosted with the aim of assisting the development of the Federal Government's Research Workforce Strategy (RWS) through offering insight into the research training experience from the perspective of current postgraduates.

2.1 Workshop format

The workshop session was hosted by CAPA in the 1888 Building, Melbourne University. The session commenced with a brief introduction on recent policy developments in the research training area. Participants then formed discussion groups led by a team of facilitators. Facilitators led semi-structured group discussions informed by the questions provided by the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research (DIISR). Each group had the opportunity to highlight key points from their discussion during a "report back" session, and the session concluded with a general discussion on the current research education experience, and prospects for improvements in the future.

2.2 Discussion questions

A list of five questions were used to support workshop discussion on the research education experience from the student perspective.² These questions proved effective in supporting vibrant and well-informed discussion during the session. Clear themes emerged from each group in response to the discussion questions. This report outlines points raised during the workshop, grouped around the three main themes that emerged in the course of discussion.

2.3 Participants

Participants were drawn from universities in each State and Territory (except NT). Three quarters of the participants were currently enrolled HDR students, with the remainder being coursework postgraduate students. The coursework postgraduates

² The Discussion Questions are included here as Appendix I.

who participated in the workshop typically had a significant research training component as part of their course, or had an interest in pursuing a research degree.

Many of the participants in the workshop had a detailed knowledge of current issues for HDR students, given the advocacy role many of them play on behalf of their fellow research students on university campuses across Australia.

Overview of participants:

Total participants: 35

Gender

Female: 18

Male: 17

International or Domestic

Domestic: 27

International: 8

Broad level of Course

RHD: 28

CWHD: 7

Participants by State / Territory:

ACT 2

NSW 6

QLD 2

SA 3

TAS 2

VIC 14

WA 6



3 Responses to Discussion Questions



Discussion Questions provided for the workshop proved effective in supporting vibrant and well-informed discussion during the session.³ While the workshop highlighted a range of opportunities for improvement, it was clear that there were also many positive aspects to the research training experience. This section outlines points raised during the workshop, grouped around the main themes that emerged in the course of discussion.

Theme One: The research training experience in 2009

The first discussion question invited students to discuss aspects of their research training they were satisfied with, and where they saw room for improvement. Three sub-themes emerged in response:

- Resources
- Supervision
- The importance of collegiality and academic freedom

Theme Two: Career pathways

Discussion questions 3 and 4 invited students to discuss their choice to undertake a research degree, and its relevance to their career goals. Two clear sub-themes emerged in response:

- Skills development opportunities associated with research degrees
- The career pathways available to research students

Theme Three: Completing a research degree

Discussion questions 2 and 5 invited students to discuss their expected duration of study, and how personal circumstances may have impacted on their research training experience. Responses to these questions centred around the challenges faced in completing a research degree, with the key sub-themes being time pressures associated with completing a research degree, and the importance of various forms of support:

- Duration of study
- Support

A detailed discussion of the issues raised under each theme follows.

³ The Discussion Questions are included here as Appendix I.

3.1 Theme One: The Research Training Experience in 2009

Discussion Question 1:

What aspects of your research training are you satisfied with, and where do you see room for improvement?

3.1.1 Supervision

“Positive aspects included a wonderful relationship with my supervisor – who treated me as a colleague, as an equal, and who understood my questions and was able to give advice.”

Group M

Key issues



Participants frequently highlighted the importance of supervisors, with *collegiality* and *availability* being the two most salient features of the supervisory relationship.

Supervisory contact was identified as a key issue for students. Regular contact with supervisors was identified as a positive factor, with availability for meetings and responsiveness with feedback being the two main positive features identified.

Groups stressed the value of research supervision being in the mentoring and support function, rather than as what might otherwise be more narrowly understood as “teaching” or “training” role. This was supported by the emphasis placed on collegiality, and the value placed on being supported to become part of an academic community. One student cited being regarded as a colleague and as an equal by their supervisor as the most positive aspect of their research training experience.

“Rejection from supervisors, academics, or journals/conferences can also be very disheartening, and a good supervisor must act quickly to make sure their students don’t stall after receiving some particularly pointed criticism.”

Group B

One group highlighted the importance of transparency in grievance resolution for research students. The value of independent advice, and the importance of being able to access an independent arbiter when conflicts or concerns arise was also discussed. Participants noted they felt research students were more vulnerable to

bullying and intimidation than other student groups, which they described as the “down-side of [the] student-supervisor relationship”.

Supervisor contact was seen as problematic when it was unsupportive, or where supervisors failed to recognise or acknowledge difficulties. Students repeatedly commented about the increasing pressure to finish “on time”, suggesting that the increasing focus on timely completions can put significant pressure on the student-supervisor relationship.

Some participants reported having difficulties in managing changes to supervisory arrangements, such as adding or changing supervisors. This suggests that the administrative framework which supports research supervision is also an important factor for students.

The issue of supervisory “load” was also raised. It was commented that some academics appeared to be supervising more students than they have the capacity to adequately support. A range of views was expressed in response to the idea of potentially limiting the number of students a supervisor could take on, with one group suggesting that supervisory capacity may be best managed through academics taking on different roles as part of a supervisory team, rather than relying solely on the one-on-one supervisory model.

What works well

- Regular contact with supervisors.
- Supervisors who are available for meetings and responsive with feedback.
- Collegial approaches to research supervision.
- Mentoring as opposed to simply “teaching” or “training”.
- Access to independent support and advice.
- Transparency in grievance resolution processes.
- A balanced approach to allocating and managing supervisory resources.

Areas for improvement

- Some supervisors appeared unable to devote adequate time and resources for all of the research students they supervise.
- Research students report feeling isolated, or feeling vulnerable to bullying and intimidation.
- Undue pressure on research degree completion times at the expense of other academic and professional development activities.
- Some administrative frameworks in support of research supervision appear in need of improvement.

3.1.2 Resources

"Minimum resources: no hot-desking!"

Group P

Key issues

Poorly resourced facilities, crowded offices and a shortage of available offices were offered as examples for opportunities for improvement. Cases where crowded offices were also frequently used for undergraduate consultation times were among the examples offered as negative research training experiences.

Support for the costs of doing research was raised as a major issue. Students placed significant value on the financial support that is usually offered by schools or departments to cover the research related costs they incurred. Positive examples included situations where student felt they had adequate resources available to conduct their research, and where there was an open and transparent means for students to be able to access the resources they need.

"One student knew her annual budget for travel and research costs, and was required to budget for it; it was felt that this was good preparation for a research career (particularly in regard to grant proposals)."

Group B

One group also noted the positive benefits of being treated as a colleague when it comes to managing research resources, offering the example where students are able to plan and manage their own research budgets.

"There were complaints about lack of transparency [in regard to research funding]. Some students knew that their schools were given (e.g.) \$7,000 p.a. in research funding, but only \$4,000 of this was actually available to the student; nobody knew where the other \$3,000 went. Other students had no idea how much research funding they had access to, or how to access it."

Group B

From the students' perspective, the issue of funding to support their research related costs was linked to a general perceived lack of transparency when it comes to the allocation and management of research funding. This perceived lack of transparency extended to the allocation and management of infrastructure funding, grant funding and funding tied to research degree completions. Concerns about a perceived lack of transparency in the allocation of research funding were directly linked to students' attempts to ensure access to adequate resources to support their research.

"There was a feeling that students were not trusted with money, and that their research training experience would benefit from experience in managing the financial aspects of a research project."

Group B

What works well

- Adequate infrastructure support for the production of quality research.
- Financial support offered by schools or departments to cover the research related costs.
- Support for student publications and conference presentations.
- An open and transparent means for students to be able to access the resources they need.
- Active student involvement in the planning and management of research resources.

Areas for improvement

- Inconsistent or inadequate financial and infrastructure support for the production and dissemination of quality research.
- Poorly resourced research facilities.
- Crowded offices or a lack of office space.
- A perceived lack of transparency and consistency around the allocation and management of research funding at various levels across the university.

3.1.3 Collegiality and academic freedom

“Positive aspects include a sense of group collegiality with like-minded people.”

Group M

Key issues

Students greatly valued opportunities to feel included as part of an academic community, and identified this as one of the most important aspects of the research training experience. This is closely linked to the value placed on a broader sense of academic collegiality.

“Collegiality is very important – not just with the supervisor, but also with the department and the general academic climate.”

Group P

Many students commented on the importance of social activities with colleagues, along with departmental seminars and other activities that support group collegiality and a sense of being among like-minded colleagues.

“Positive aspects include regular seminars on what other people are working on. Social interaction is beneficial both in terms of social contact and in terms of research development.”

Group M

The converse of the collegial experience is perhaps best captured by the comment from one student that the most negative aspect of their research training experience was “being treated like a two year old in spite of [their] life experience”. Negative experiences also extended to situations where supervisors and senior academics were perceived as discouraging (particularly mature age) students from establishing themselves in academic networks, and from positioning themselves for an academic career.

“Positive aspects include the intellectual freedom to explore my topic, and the opportunity for blue-sky research.”

Group M

The freedom to conduct original research featured prominently as a crucial aspect of the research training experience. Opportunities to undertake “blue sky” research were particularly valued, along with the intellectual freedom that accompanies a genuine spirit of original inquiry. Academic freedom, for example the freedom to choose one’s own research topic, was seen as very valuable, both in terms of supporting a positive student experience and sustaining the enterprise of the pursuit of original research. One group suggested that students would also benefit from more opportunities to connect their research with the “outside world”.

“Strengths include the freedom to explore ideas, and to work on genuinely original research.”

Group J

Academic freedom was raised as an important factor during discussion in the workshop. Restrictions on intellectual freedom, or cases where students are unable to choose their own research topics, were both viewed negatively.

What works well

- Building a sense of collegiality among students and staff.
- Including students as part of the research community.
- Peer activities and support.
- Freedom for students to pursue their own research interests, and opportunities for “blue sky” research.
- Regular research seminars, both for students to present their work and for exposure to the work of others.
- A range of opportunities for social interaction.

Areas for improvement

- Lack of clarity or awareness in development and oversight of research projects.
- Lack of consistency in inclusive practices and access to peer activities and support.
- Need for more opportunities to address the risk of personal, professional and academic isolation among research students.
- insufficient opportunities for research students to mix with colleagues from other disciplines.
- A need for more opportunities to communicate and interact with the “outside world” on research topics.
- Restrictions on intellectual freedom, or cases where students are unable to pursue their own research topics.

3.2 Theme Two: Career Pathways

Discussion Question 3:

What prompted you to undertake a PhD or Research Masters?

Discussion Question 4:

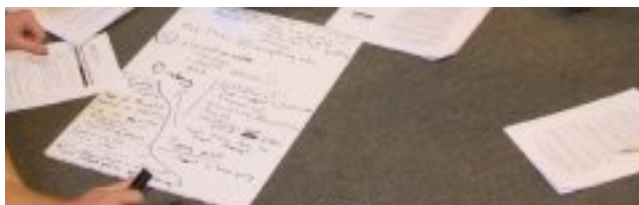
How is your research training assisting you in achieving your career goals?

3.2.1 Skills

“Group members felt that research training teaches modes of creative and analytical thought that will be useful in almost any job.”

Group B

Key issues



The development of research related skills was raised by participants a number of times. One group highlighted the importance of the analytical and structured approach to solving problems developed in the course of a research degree as being the most valuable. A student indicated they felt that the mix of teaching and research skills they had developed was also valuable.

“Skills development seminars are important and helpful when run well. Access to stats training is vital – at more than one point during degree program.”

Group J

Support for the development of “generic” skills was raised several times, with well resourced and well managed skills development programs viewed very positively. Support for skills development however appeared to be variable across different institutions. It was also commented that while some universities offered research students high quality skills development programs, others seemed to offer none at all.

Students offered a range of comments indicating the importance of the development of a broad range of academic skills, specifically those helpful in planning and managing an academic career. Examples touched on a broad range of areas, including support for writing research proposals and experience in preparing and managing research budgets. One group observed that while there were often good resources available for the development of generic or research related skills, very little seemed to be available to support students in building academic careers.

A range of ideas to help support research students to building academic career qualifications was discussed, including teaching qualifications and additional coursework opportunities.

“Opportunities for improvement could include more opportunities for people to clarify career options through career workshops, and perhaps also focused coursework (this issue was controversial within our group).”

Group M

Comments suggest that arriving at a “one size fits all” model in this area however would be difficult, given the diversity of strengths candidates bring to a research degree, and the different skills and professional development needs they would therefore have.

What works well

- The broad range of advanced skills development opportunities available through research degrees.
- Availability of quality research skills development programs and resources.
- Opportunities to develop a broad range of academic “career skills”.
- Opportunities to gain experience through both teaching and research.
- Flexibility and choice in skills development opportunities.

Areas for improvement

- Inconsistent or inadequate research skills development programs or resources.
- Need for greater opportunities and support for the development of academic “career skills”.
- Need for flexibility and diversity in research skills development opportunities (in recognition of the skills students bring to their research, and the diversity of skills development needs among research students).

3.2.2 Career options

“Individuals have multiple reasons for beginning a PhD and the quality of their experience, networks and contacts will help them determine their career goals and decide on whether to continue in an academic environment.”

Group M

Key issues

“Good experiences in terms of stimulating scholarly environment and exposure to cutting edge research has led (one of our group) to comment on overall positive feelings about future academic career. However they acknowledge that they need further skill development and training (in, for example, teaching) to take on an academic career.”

Group M

In responding to the Discussion Questions, students made positive references to career development opportunities through research degrees, including through teaching, research and through opportunities to work with industry in their field of expertise. Flexibility in the development of career pathways, and opportunities to develop and explore a broad range of career options were both viewed positively by students.

“Students who were interested in research careers felt that the best supervisors acted as career mentors, encouraging students to get involved with teaching (with adequate remuneration, of course), and in particular with course development and lecturing rather than just tutorials and lab demonstration. Good supervisors may also get late-term PhD students involved in supervising newer students, an arrangement which is viewed as beneficial for all.”

Group B

One group suggested that students rarely commence a PhD with a single career goal in mind, and highlighted the importance of opportunities to develop and explore career opportunities during the degree.

Another group commented that the careers information available for research students was inadequate, and that there was very much a “fend for yourself” ethos around career options for research students.

Comments suggested that many research students felt that the only academic career development opportunities available to them were through sessional teaching. Students observed that this was incongruous with the amount of attention paid to promoting “research active” academic careers.

“Opportunities for improvement could include additional exit pathways, for example certificate and masters qualifications for coursework components in research degree programs, and opportunities to earn teaching qualifications.”

Group M

Students also expressed concerns about the research training environment and career options for research students at institutions that may be deemed not to be “research intensive”.

It was felt there was a false dichotomy for academic career options between teaching and research. The separation often inferred between research and teaching was seen to be unhelpful and unproductive, and students believed that there should be greater recognition of their inter-reliance.

“Nobody in the group felt that they were well-supported for [either teaching or research] career paths.”

Group B

It became clear in discussion that many students felt tremendous expectations upon them to perform both as teachers and as researchers. It was noted that teaching experience was generally recognised as important in the development of an academic career. One group noted that while support for postgraduates as researchers was variable, support for postgraduates as teachers often appeared to be non-existent outside of basic orientation programs for sessional staff.

“Some students felt that they were being well prepared for the job-hunting and CV-building skills that would be required for an academic career, but students looking at industry careers were not well supported. Interestingly, other students in the group had precisely the opposite experience; the experience varied between universities and even between departments at the same university.”

Group B

In comparing individual experiences, one group observed that for some students there appeared to be a lot of emphasis and support for academic careers, while for others the same seemed to hold for a career with industry.

What works well

- Opportunities to develop and explore a broad range of career opportunities through research degrees.
- Flexibility and scope for the development of career opportunities in teaching, research or with industry.

Areas for improvement

- Need for improved career planning support opportunities.
- Need for improved support for career planning for both academic careers and careers with industry.
- Perceived narrowing of academic career development opportunities.
- Teaching experience seen as under-valued.

3.3 Theme Three: Completing a Research Degree

Discussion Question2:

From your perspective, how have your personal circumstances impacted on your research training experience?

Discussion Question2:

How long do you anticipate you will take, from enrolment, to complete your PhD or research Masters?

3.3.1 Duration of study

“Caring for parents will likely extend the candidature of one member of our group. This is a problem because her university pressures candidates to finish in three years. One group member estimated that their candidature would take five years. They had coped with this by going part time to extend candidature and by taking on part time work. Another group member suggested that their degree would take five years in total but coped by going part-time and also planned to work when their scholarship ran out. One other focus group participant estimated that their degree would take four to four and a half years and was concerned about supporting themselves on their savings when the scholarship ran out. Another group member estimated their candidature would take eight years. Financial support during candidature was a significant problem.”

Group M

Key issues

Students commented that judgements about the time taken to complete a research degree were difficult, as many of them move between full and part time study. One group suggested that completing a doctorate could take anywhere from 3.5 to 8 years. Students viewed candidature (and scholarship) time as a resource to be carefully managed in support of completing a degree. Students emphasised the importance of understanding that candidature time (the full-time equivalent of the duration of time enrolled) and elapsed time (calendar years from commencement to completion) are quite separate for research students, especially given the large number of research students who go part time at some point during their degree.

“The group identified the “D-Day effect” as the major factor affecting completion times. For most students, D-Day is the date scholarships run out; for international students, visas impose another D-Day. Before this day, things run fairly smoothly, but when a student runs past D-Day they must start working full-time to earn a living (or worse, an international candidate who must return home) they can quickly find his or her research progress stalled, and completion times can blow out a long way from there.

...This problem is compounded for students who change supervisors or topics, and must start again nearly from scratch with a much shorter timeline. Matching scholarships to candidature is an obvious avenue for alleviating the “D-Day effect”.

Group B

The need to be able to move between full and part time study emerged as a consistent area of focus. Flexibility in this area was identified as important in managing time to completion and was seen as very beneficial where students are challenged with managing complex research projects, or when the subject matter does not conform to the 3-3.5 year timeframe (such as experiments or field work that take place over an extended period of time). A number of students also highlighted carer responsibilities as a significant factor among the challenges they faced.



One group observed that it was common practice to move to part time study in order to extend the candidature period long enough to complete the research, and that a realistic duration for completing a research doctorate should be 5 years.

Flexibility was also seen as beneficial in assisting students in coping with challenging personal circumstances that inevitably arise.

The need for greater flexibility to be able to move between full and part time study was highlighted as a particular issue for international research students, who are also constrained by visa conditions.

“Health difficulties or family bereavement can make it difficult for international students to be enrolled continuously. Student visas should have greater flexibility for enrolment to allow for things like interrupted study.”

Group M

Withdrawal from a degree program appears to be something that is often considered by research candidates at some time during their degree. Supervisory and financial problems featured among pressures which lead students to consider abandoning their degree.

“It is hard to imagine a PhD student who never considers withdrawing at some point in their 3-4 (5-10) year candidature. For most, these thoughts are temporary, but for others, they are not. The decision to stay on or leave came down to where students reached their tipping point between reasons to stay and reasons to go. The supervisor-student relationship obviously plays a massive role.”

Isolation was identified as a central factor in considering withdrawing from a research degree. This was particularly important for international research students, who often leave family behind due to financial pressures or visa constraints. Isolation was identified by one group as a “tipping point” factor in withdrawing from study where “for some people [it adds] up to too much”.

“Another “bad” aspect was supervisors sometimes taking the position that thesis writing is the only constructive use of a PhD student’s time. While a strong focus on writing and completion is necessary, it was felt that students should also be encouraged to teach, present at conferences, and participate in extracurricular activities during their candidature.”

Another issue identified was “the pervasive idea that the thesis is everything,” and that an ever-increasing focus on a timely completion often comes as the expense of opportunities for teaching, publishing and presenting at conferences. At least one group observed that in their experience these activities were actively discouraged.

What works well

- Flexibility to be able to make the most efficient use time and available resources in completing a research degree.

Areas for improvement

- Significant resources are consumed by students coping with expectations around unrealistic completion times.
- Greater flexibility needed for students to be able to manage their candidature efficiently and effectively (e.g. for scholarship holders to be able to move between full and part time study).
- Greater flexibility needed in visa conditions for international research students.
- A better “fit” needed between scholarship guidelines and the reality of what it takes to complete a research degree.

3.3.2 Support

"...if you don't have a scholarship it's really hard, if you do have a scholarship it's really hard."

Student comments as part of summary discussion.

Key issues

"Some students noted that they were receiving top-up scholarships (many universities are starting to give across-the-board APA top-ups) and generous funding for travel and research costs, and this was appreciated."

Group B

One group listed "top-up" scholarships offered by some universities as among the most beneficial aspects they had identified, emphasising that that these had a significant positive effect.

"...it was felt that support from family, friends, supervisors and university administrations was crucial to get all students through the tougher patches of a PhD."

Group B

Financial pressures featured among reasons for withdrawing from a research degree program. While students certainly welcomed scholarships, many still found it difficult to stay on top of their financial commitments and still focus on their research.

In response to issues raised around question 2, broader family commitments featured prominently in discussion on the impact of personal circumstances on the research training experience.

"Unsurprisingly, financial hardship was cited as a frequent reason for considering withdrawal."

Group B

A number of students commented on the value of broader support measures, including access to information and advice on the challenges faced by research students. While many indicated they had a very positive working relationship with their supervisor, students also greatly valued opportunities for support and advice from sources outside of their supervisory team.

One group commented that knowing the "roadmap" as a research student was important, and suggested that better access to experienced advice and support would help many students. The group reported that research students at some universities had access to a range of useful guides and other resources, while others seemed to get nothing at all.

Group discussion highlighted the importance of student orientation and induction programs. One group suggested that while orientation programs were important, a "rolling induction", where research students were able to access relevant and helpful information and advice over time, would also be beneficial.

“The high cost of failure is definitely a factor in students’ decision to withdraw from study. It’s not just a lost topic or semester – there’s many years of invested effort at stake.”

Group P

One group highlighted the high stakes for research students when things go wrong. They made the point that while coursework students may lose a topic or semester’s worth of time and effort when difficulties arise, research students risk sacrificing many years of time and effort if they encounter problems from which they cannot recover. The risk that research data, publication rights or research subject matter may be compromised also contributes to what was described as the high cost of failure.

One group highlighted the importance of transparency in grievance resolution for research students as part of a suite of broader support measures for students. The value of independent advice, and the possible role of an independent arbiter was also discussed, including the value of being able to have recourse to an independent ombudsman.

Distance was also highlighted as a challenge, both for students who were externally enrolled, and for students who were required to travel or relocate in order to pursue their research. One group noted the importance of building international research collaborations, noting the particular challenges that presents.

What works well

- Additional financial support (i.e. “top-ups”) to supplement APA and equivalent scholarships.
- Funding for travel and research related costs.
- Support from supervisors and other university staff as well as that from family and friends in helping students through the tougher patches of a research degree.
- Advice and support specifically tailored for research students.
- Guides and other materials which assist in offering a “roadmap” for research students.

Areas for improvement

- Completion times are often compromised by inadequate support measures.
- Lack of access to support measures continues to be a key factor in research degree completions.
- Lack of access to ongoing postgrad information and support needed.
- Lack of access to independent support and advice, and to an independent arbiter when questions or concerns arise.

4 Conclusion

Overall, participants in the workshop reflected a strong desire to be regarded as fully-fledged members of the academic community, with a passionate commitment to succeed in their chosen field of research. While the workshop participants suggested that from their perspective their career opportunities were uncertain or unclear, they demonstrated an approach to their research training experience that was itself both innovative and collegial, an approach that bodes well for the future of the teaching and research workforce in Australia.

Appendices

Appendix I Research Education Experience Discussion Points

Workshop discussion points, as circulated to all participants, appear below.

1. What aspects of your research training are you satisfied with, and where do you see room for improvement?
 - Name the three things you are most happy with.
 - Name the three areas where you would most like to see improvement.

Note: You might like to consider issues such as access to resources and infrastructure, intellectual environment, accessibility of supervisor or supervisors, opportunities to present or publish your work and engage with experts in your area, or access to relevant information about the research degree process.

2. From your perspective, how have your personal circumstances impacted on your research training experience?
 - What has been most helpful in helping you to accommodate your personal circumstances?
 - What improvements, if any, could your institution make in this area?

Note: Personal circumstances include for example family responsibilities, geographic location, the need to work, health, gender or cultural issues.

3. What prompted you to undertake a PhD or Research Masters?
 - If for career reasons, what career do you intend to go into?
 - Is a postgraduate research qualification a requirement for your intended career? If not, how do you think it will help you in your intended career?
 - Do you anticipate working as an active researcher?
4. How is your research training assisting you in achieving your career goals?
 - What aspects of your research training are the most helpful in preparing you for your career?
 - Where do you think improvements could be made?
 - What strategies do you intend to use to make the transition into your career of choice?
 - Do you feel that you have access to enough information about available careers, employers etc?
5. How long do you anticipate you will take, from enrolment, to complete your PhD or research Masters?
 - Do you anticipate any difficulties completing within the time allowed? If so, how do you intend to overcome this problem? (eg suspend, defer, go part time)
 - Have you ever considered, or are you currently considering, withdrawing from your degree?
 - If so, what were your reasons for wanting to withdraw?
 - If you have now decided to complete, what made you change your mind?