



ACGR Response to the New Research Block Grant Requirements Consultation Paper

The Australian Council of Graduate Research welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this consultation on the changes to the data reporting required for the new Research Block Grant regime. As those with primary institutional responsibility for the management of research training programs and outcomes within each of the Australian universities, we are acutely aware of the practical implications of any changes to data collection and reporting requirements so preempt our responses to the issues raised in this paper with a strong recommendation that early advice and adequate implementation timeframes will be critical to the successful roll out of new reporting requirements. A staged approach to implementation would be preferable, particularly in respect to the industry engagement metrics as both system development and data collection requirements will be significant for most universities.

We now provide the following commentary in relation to Issues 2 – 5.

Issue 2 - Improved measurement of the research training system

ACGR supports moves to improve HEIMS data collection in order to shine a brighter and more accurate light on HDR completion timeframes. The Council agrees that measure of both time and effort committed to HDR candidature are required in order to fully understand the effectiveness of the research training system and the return on investment for all stakeholders (government as funders, universities as suppliers and candidates as consumers).

We make the following comments in response to each of the proposed changes:

Change 1 (elapsed time) – create a new HEIMS element to collect an HDR student's thesis submission date (YYYYMM).

Supported. A more specific submission date would allow more accurate assessment of elapsed time. A survey of ACGR members indicated that 100% of respondents currently record submission date and 92% could report elapsed calendar days from commencement.



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Change 2 (elapsed time) – create a new HEIMS element, or modify the existing completions element 415, to capture completion year and month (YYYYMM)

Supported. All universities that responded to the ACGR data collection survey indicated that they collect the date of completion of all course requirements.

We would prefer a new HEIMS element for higher degree research completion month and year reporting. Using existing elements would mean that additional data would also have to be reported for coursework students, substantially increasing workload in submitting and managing revisions to that data.

Change 3 (effort) – retain the current HEIMS element 339 or create a new HEIMS element to report either EFTSL or cumulative EFTSL in relation to a HDR course of study

ACGR is fully supportive of new metrics that will accurately and consistently measure and report on the effort committed by candidates and institutions to undertake a higher degree by research. A HDR specific HEIMS element which quantifies the total EFTSL is logical and all but one of the respondents to our data collection survey indicated that they currently store, or could calculate, this figure for each candidate. There are, however, two areas of procedural inconsistency that could jeopardize the comparability of this data across the sector and must be addressed.

- 1- There are differential processes in place across Australian universities in respect to those candidates who need to undertake significant revisions or rewriting of their thesis as a consequence of their examiners' reports. Whilst these are not large proportions of candidates, some universities re-enrol candidates whilst these changes are being made, thus adding to total consumed EFTSL and others do not. Should universities be required to change their policies and processes in order to establish a national standard for calculation of EFTSL consumed for major revisions, significant consultation and lead time for implementation would be crucial.
- 2- Although progress management and support for timely completions continues to improve, there are still some (domestic) candidates who do not complete within the allowable duration for RTP funding (ie 3-4 years depending on institutional policies for PhD and 2 years for Research Masters). Some universities discontinue the enrolment and withdraw access to supervision and resources at the end of the maximum allowable period of candidature. The candidate may continue working independently on their thesis and, should they produce an examinable output

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within a set period, may be readmitted for the purpose of examination of their work (after having made appropriate disclosure statements). The supervised candidature EFTSL is therefore capped at 4 years for PhD (or whatever is the particular institution's limit). Other institutions continue candidate's enrolments under a different funding arrangement (ie charging fees). Given that the clock continues ticking but this is not RTP funded candidature in this instance, clarity would be required around the reporting of this period of candidature.

Responding directly to the question from a technical point of view, we support retaining the current HEIMS element to report EFTSL per period. With CHESSN available, cumulative EFTSL can be calculated per unique individual by the Dept. Managing the reporting EFTSL consumed in another institution prior to the student transferring to a different institution also needs to be considered. This might best be managed by the Department combining data based on CHESSN.

Change 4 (candidacy time) – create a new HEIMS element to report gaps during a HDR such as leave or suspensions.

This recommendation is procedurally problematic and could potentially generate quite misleading data. Unless carefully managed with clear definitions for a large variety of different categories, and consistent policy and practice frameworks in place across all universities, the resultant data will not be useful in identifying candidates at risk.

Our survey results show that a number of institutions do not currently monitor total days of leave nor collect the varying reasons for leave of absence. Without these definitions and differentiation between candidature/progress related and personal leave (which is often difficult to determine) there is the potential to discriminate against those with child rearing and carer's responsibilities or other circumstances not related to the research training program. Even with appropriate definitions and interpretations this requirement would require modifications to system & business process and will be a considerable resource burden for universities.

ACGR proposes that the EFTSL measures of effort collected via the aforementioned metrics is a more accurate and reliable measure of the effectiveness of the program delivery.

In respect to gathering data and understanding how periods of leave impact on the likelihood of success for HDR candidates, we suggest that a well-funded and resourced



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research project which surveys particular institutions or individuals would provide richer data.

Issue 3: Industry Engagement for HDR Students

ACGR has clearly demonstrated its commitment to understanding and measuring the levels of industry engagement by HDR candidates through our commissioning of the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne to undertake a significant research project on our behalf. The pilot stage is complete and national results are expected by the end of this year. This project will increase our understanding of the range of types of engagement that are undertaken by candidates and the levels of participation in each.

The Council is encouraged by the scope of the proposed definition of industry engagement for HDR students included in the discussion paper but would like to further broaden it to include graduate research projects that actively engage industries in the collection or supply of data or other forms of support. It is also important to check the alignment of these definitions with other work in the field (including the ACGR project and the ARC Engagement and Impact Assessment Pilot) and advice arising from the Research Training Working Group that has been established to implement the recommendations of the ACOLA Review.

Even with these definitional issues addressed, the Council is particularly concerned by the proposal to quantify engagement by the collection of time spent by individual students on any of these forms of industry engagement. A majority of the HDR industry engagement (other than formal internships which may be quite unrelated to the candidate's research) should be an integral part of the research project and candidature. The separation of time spent on the project and time spent with industry would therefore be artificial.

Technically current candidature management processes and student systems are not designed to or capable of recording hours of engagement. No respondents to ACGR Data Collection survey currently quantify the EFTSL of industry engagement, and most have incomplete records of the types of engagement that is undertaken.

The recording of total time spent in industry engagement activities would be resource intensive, inaccurate and, without a differentiation between the various types of



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activities, would not add greatly to the understanding of inputs and outcomes of industry engagement by candidates.

As an alternative ACGR proposes that once clear definitions of the various forms of industry engagement are available, levels of engagement should be measured simply by flagging on each candidate record their participation/engagement in each applicable type. Even this type of recording will take a significant amount of time and system modification to achieve and is unlikely to be achievable for the reporting on 2017 performance in 2018.

Issue 4 – Field of Research Reporting

ACGR accepts the importance of understanding the fields of research within which our research candidates are being trained and many institutions have pre-emptively commenced collecting FoR data for individual candidates. Our survey indicates that around half of the respondents already have the capacity to report at 4 or 6 digit FoR levels. System changes and data collection will take time, however, there is general support for the introduction of FoR reporting.

Setting the reporting at 4 digit level is preferred, noting that more may already be compliant and it will still meet all of the benefits outlined in the discussion paper (other than NHMRC comparability).

ACGR also agrees that an additional element for recording up to two optional fields would recognise and support the interdisciplinary/industry engaged research that candidates are encouraged to pursue. The majority of those currently collecting FoR for candidates also have this capacity. Noting that these FoR's may shift as the research proposal and outputs develop throughout candidature, it is also important that the "point in time" be determined for this metric. We suggest that FoR(s) be reported at the time of submission for examination.

Issue 5 – Collecting compliance data

The department proposes to collect the following data in relation to annual expenditure for the RTP

Total HEP RTP expenditure	Total domestic students	Total overseas students
RTP Fees offsets	\$	\$



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RTP Stipends	\$	\$
RTP Allowances	\$	\$
Total for all types of support	\$	\$

Given that the information will be required to be audited the department proposes that this information be collected through a new note in annual financial statements.

Response:

Recognising the need to account for the limits on expenditure on international candidates, ACGR is generally supportive of such a simple accountability regime but defers to responses from individual institutions and/or finance managers on the specifics of this inclusion in annual financial statements.

For further information about this submission please contact

Fiona Zammit, Executive Officer, Australian Council of Graduate Research

exec@acgr.edu.au