



## Additional Input into the ACOLA Review of Research Training

Australian Council of Graduate Research Inc

28 November 2015

Dear John, Helene and Mark

Thank you very much for consulting directly with the Australian Council of Graduate Research at our conference last week in Canberra. Our members very much appreciated the opportunity to hear, reflect and comment on your preliminary findings and we trust that the input you received from this session was helpful.

Over the rest of our two day conference, several of the themes that you identified were revisited and soundly debated in other sessions. This helped the Council crystalize its position and ensure there was broad consensus from its members. We therefore offer the following additional feedback specifically on the first two themes that were discussed during your stakeholder engagement session in the hope it may further assist with your deliberations.

### Theme 1: The Person

1. Whilst we concur that the inclusion of coursework and industry engagement elements may (and in many universities already do) enhance HDR program delivery and outcomes, ACGR believes that **institutional autonomy in the provision of programs enables our universities to best meet the needs of our diverse cohorts**. We already have a high quality but diverse research training system. Setting specific coursework, dissertation and industry placement requirements for every degree would be retrograde and compromise this autonomy.
2. Enabling a master entry pathway is supported but should not be mandated. It is critical that we **retain flexibility of entry points and program delivery for graduate research**. We believe that the capacity to offer an honors pathway, which remains viable and useful in certain disciplines, should be retained at the discretion of individual universities.
3. The findings and approach to skills development assume that all higher degree by research candidates enter directly from undergraduate and postgraduate coursework degrees. Compulsory training in soft and transferable skills is not appropriate given that a large proportion of candidates enter HDR with significant work experience and skills. **Formalising the requirement for training skills analysis on admission would be more helpful than mandating skills training and assessment** for candidates who already have highly developed transferable skill sets. We furthermore note that introduction of "off the shelf" training frameworks such as that developed by Vitae are not appropriate for uniform application across



Australia. Experiences of individual institutions with such frameworks are highly variable and investment should be focused on producing simpler frameworks that are more widely applicable in Australia.

4. **We do, however, strongly endorse development of soft and transferrable skills and the provision of research methodology training.** We note the importance of quantitative analysis skills but also would like to emphasize that qualitative research practice and skill development should not be devalued or jeopardized in this finding.
5. Finally members expressed concern at the lack of recognition of the importance of maintaining our capacity to attract and service the research training needs of international candidates. This is considered critical to the future of graduate research in Australia. Our international graduate research cohort not only injects fee income and significant research outputs into our system, they also add diversity and a vital global perspective to our research training ecosystem. Admission pathways and program content should not discount the needs of our international candidates. **We encourage the panel to be cognisant of the needs of foreign governments that sponsor large numbers of candidates, in many cases these are academics in their home universities and research training for academic careers is the priority over other transferable skills and industry readiness.**

## Theme 2: The Nation

1. ACGR recognises the current low levels of collaboration between industry and universities and acknowledges that cultural change is required to address this issue. Collaboration is a two sided process and there is a danger in assuming that the solution rests primarily within universities. While it may be beyond the remit of this Review, ACGR believes that much work is required to change the attitude and behaviour of industry. The university sector can do more to promote the skills and potential of research graduates but **a strong communication strategy and government incentives are needed to encourage industries to engage with universities** to the extent that this occurs in other OECD countries.
2. ACGR supports the need for and value in quantifying the level of research training collaboration and engagement with industry and understands that target setting or block grant funding will incentivize increases in this engagement. **It is essential that definitions of both industry and engagement be transparent, consistent and broadly agreed.** During a roundtable discussion of this matter during our conference a question about whether a particular example of a candidate and their project could be defined as industry engagement elicited quite contrary responses from representatives from the Departments of Education and Industry, Innovation and Science and different perspectives from the university and business sectors. Baseline data cannot be sought or targets set until this definitional work has been broadly consulted and agreed.



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3. ACGR endorses the concept of short term Industry Engagement Scholarships and suggests that the **JRE Cadetship funding could be re-purposed to be used more flexibly to support this type of industry engagement.**

ACGR eagerly awaits the findings of your Review of Research Training and is committed to supporting the Panel and its investigation in anyway that we can. We hope that the panel finds this additional feedback from ACGR constructive and behalf of the Council, I or other members of the Executive would be pleased to discuss this submission, any other matters or preliminary findings with you at any time leading up to the delivery of your report.

Best regards

Laura Poole-Warren  
Convenor, Australian Council of Graduate Research