

SUBMISSION TO THE

Education Department Sharper Incentives for Engagement

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SUBMISSION TO THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

SHARPER INCENTIVES FOR ENGAGEMENT: NEW RESEARCH BLOCK GRANT ARRANGEMENTS FOR UNIVERSITIES

The Australian Academy of Technology and Engineering (ATSE)¹ welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Department's new Research Block Grant (RBG) system guidelines for 2017.

As one of the key contributors to the Australian Council of Learned Academies' (ACOLA) Review of Australia's Research Training System² report, ATSE is pleased to see that a number of the report's recommendations are included in the proposed changes to the RBG system. Most of the proposed changes are in line with the Review of Research Training's key findings and recommendations and support a more equitable and transparent system. ATSE is supportive of the proposed RBG arrangements.

The Academy strongly urges the Department of Education to consider all findings and recommendations from the Review of Research Training report and the REA Pilot when making any changes to the research training system. Australia's research training system has been a great strength and is performing well in academic outputs, however ongoing reform and support is needed to ensure it delivers its full potential social, economic and environmental benefits to our nation.

ATSE makes some specific comments on issues below:

Issue 3: A single funding pool

A simplified model of combining the existing six research block grant schemes into the two new schemes, the Research Support Program (RSP) and the Research Training Program (RTP), will result in much needed flexibility in the system. The new system will ensure that no candidate is disadvantaged, as all would be eligible to receive both tuition and stipend support. As candidates from disadvantaged backgrounds would no longer be discouraged by the lack of stipend support, this measure could consequently increase the pool and potentially quality of students applying for a research degree.

Issue 4: Eligibility Criteria

ATSE is in favour of the proposed streamlining of eligibility criteria under the RTP. As was mentioned in the Consultation Paper, the Review of Research Training found that the current regulatory and funding arrangements can disadvantage candidates and potentially make Australian universities less competitive than other overseas institutes. The current system is

¹ ATSE advocates for a future in which technological sciences, engineering and innovation contribute significantly to Australia's social, economic and environmental wellbeing. The Academy is empowered in its mission by some 800 Fellows drawn from industry, academia, research institutes and government, who represent the brightest and the best in technological sciences and engineering in Australia. The Academy provides robust, independent and trusted evidence-based advice on technological issues of national importance. ATSE fosters national and international collaboration and encourages technology transfer for economic, social and environmental benefit.
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² <http://acola.org.au/index.php/projects/securing-australia-s-future/saf13-rts-review>

unnecessarily complicated and restrictive, whereby universities and candidates are limited to the existing Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) definitions and regulatory rules. In contrast, the new proposed funding arrangements will create more flexible entry pathways, which many stakeholders from the Review of Research Training highlighted as a significant issue. The proposed qualification requirements and restrictions for the RTP will enable universities to develop a customised selection process.

We note the consultation paper stated:

“HEPs may take into account previous qualifications in competitive selection processes”

This is an important reform, as universities will be able to develop their own selection processes, which are based on merit. The improved flexibility in the system will enable applicants to be considered on a case-by-case basis and universities would be able to grant awards to high-quality candidates, who may not necessarily have undertaken the traditional Honours entry pathway, but who have a significant amount of other suitable experience and/or qualifications, which have prepared them for undertaking HDR training.

ATSE is also supportive of the proposal to allow candidates to enrol as either full time or part time students. The current rules of needing to enrol full time within the APA (unless the institution approves part time) and IPRS schemes disadvantages many potential and current candidates. The Review of Research Training noted that:

“...part-time stipends are most likely to be taken up by those with parental and caring responsibilities, particularly women, and mature age candidates, people with disabilities, or those with caring responsibilities.”

Thus, allowing candidates to enrol part time will help to alleviate financial and personal barriers and act as an incentive for candidates from under-represented groups to undertake HDR training.

Funding Drivers and Weightings

ATSE is in strong support of the proposal to double weighting for Indigenous HDR student completions. Increasing weighting of completions for Indigenous students would incentivise institutions to make a commitment in ensuring adequate number of Indigenous candidates not only enrol but complete their research degrees. It also recognises the increased resources needed to support Indigenous completions compared with other research candidates.

Noting the current level of inequality for Indigenous HDR students, the Academy suggests that the Department increase Indigenous HDR completion funding by tripling rather than doubling weighting. Tripling weighting was also recommended in the Review of Research Training report.

Furthermore, ATSE encourages the Department to increase stipend support for Indigenous candidates. The Review of Research Training report highlighted that the current stipend amounts are inadequate to cover the living expenses of Indigenous candidates, who often have alleviated financial pressures and responsibilities compared with non-Indigenous candidates.

Issue 6: RTP Length of support

The Academy supports the proposed changes to the length of support for candidates, which would ensure that the length of tuition fees support aligned with living cost support. It is encouraging to see that the Department is seriously considering the Review of Research Training's key finding on program length. Aligning the two programs would alleviate financial stress of candidates and could potentially increase completion rates. The new proposed lengths of support of 3 years plus two additional 6-month extensions for full time Research Doctorate or 2 years plus one 6-month extension for full time Research Masters will significantly help candidates to focus on their degrees throughout the full length of candidature and complete their degrees on time.

Issue 8: RTP Scholarship Policy

ATSE believes that to ensure a high-performing research training system in Australia, institutions must be accountable and transparent. Thus, the Academy is in strong support of requiring institutions to publish a RTP Scholarship policy on their website. As was highlighted in the Review of Research Training, universities have a duty of care to communicate to prospective candidates what they should expect from a research degree at their institution. The information currently available is inadequate. As undertaking a research degree is a substantial commitment, it is vital that candidates are able to make an informed choice.

An area that needs to be included for increasing accountability and transparency of Higher Education Providers is supervision standards. The candidate-supervisor relationship is one of the most important aspects of a research degree. As the Review of Research Training emphasised, institutions should be required to provide adequate training to new and existing supervisors, undertake ongoing monitoring of supervisor performance and have measures in place to deal with underperforming supervisors or conflicts between candidates and supervisors. These protocols and measures should all be displayed clearly online for prospective candidates. The area of supervision standards needs to be specifically included in the RTP Scholarship policy.

Issue 10: Measuring Performance

ATSE supports the proposed changes to data collection through the HESDC. Collecting the additional proposed data will provide more reliable and comprehensive information to determine the performance of the research training system and its value to Australia's social and economic wellbeing. The need for more data was a consistent message from the Review of Research Training.

ATSE however strongly urges the Government to improve longitudinal data collection of research graduates. Longitudinal data on course satisfactions, course completions and career outcomes needs to be collected and reported in a nationally consistent and statistically robust fashion. Career data should be collected at different stages of a graduate's career, such as 5-10 years post-graduation. Longitudinal data will drive performance improvements within institutions and the entire system and will aid prospective candidates to make an informed choice.

Measuring Engagement

ATSE is in favour of the proposed changes to improve measuring engagement through HERDC. The changes are essentially utilising the same model as was proposed in ATSE's *Research Engagement for Australia* (REA) Pilot³. As a result of current practices such as ERA and existing funding allocations, researchers and universities are presently being discouraged from collaborating with industry and other end users, in order to pursue grant funding and high-ranking publications. The aim of the REA was to place a higher value on engagement than there currently is within the research sector. The REA pilot showed that currently available data can be applied into the straightforward REA metric, which provides a direct measure of research engagement.

ATSE strongly encourages the Department to implement the model of the REA for robustly measuring research engagement in a cost-effective manner. The Academy supports the proposal to remove HDR fees for both domestic and overseas students from the HERDC income collection, which aligns with the REA metric.

ATSE recommends that the Department considers including research extension income in the HERDC. This is defined as income derived from activities that are part of an ongoing research program, directly relate to research outputs (journal articles, books etc.) and/or research outcomes (commercialisation, patents etc.), and not currently reported under the HERDC definition of eligible research income. Examples of research extension activities are provided in the [REA pilot full report](#) (on pages 26-27) and would extend to activities such as training on products, software or programs developed from research programs. ATSE suggests that research extension activities be eligible for inclusion in an engagement and impact metric when they can be directly and verifiably linked to research activities that are reported to HERDC and/or ERA returns.

ATSE, together with the ARC, is currently running a national trial of the REA metrics on behalf the Department. One of the aims of the trial is to gain a greater understanding of the quantum of research extension income, the value added to an engagement metric by the collection of this income, and improve our understanding of the administrative load on universities to collect this data. This information will assist the ARC in their deliberations regarding the measurement of research engagement and impact. The trial will also inform the creation of a clear, principles based definition of research extension activities to ensure consistency and administrative efficiency.

ATSE and its Fellows would be pleased to provide any further information, advice or expertise that would assist the Department. For further assistance, please contact Milla Mihailova, ATSE Research and Policy Officer, at milla.mihailova@atse.org.au or 03 9864 0920.

³ <http://www.atse.org.au/content/publications/reports/industry-innovation/research-engagement-for-australia.aspx>