

# THE PSYCHOLOGY FOUNDATION OF AUSTRALIA

(Incorporated in New South Wales)

c/o School of Psychology, University of New South Wales, Sydney 2052, NSW, Australia

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## DEFINING QUALITY FOR RESEARCH TRAINING IN AUSTRALIA: A CONSULTATION PAPER

The Psychology Foundation of Australia welcomes the opportunity to make a written submission to the Department of Innovation, Science and Research on "DEFINING QUALITY FOR RESEARCH TRAINING IN AUSTRALIA: A CONSULTATION PAPER". The Foundation is a grouping of research-oriented university Schools of Psychology that was created to promote high standards in the education of psychologists and a scientific basis for professional practice.

### General Comments:

There are several statements within the Consultation paper suggesting that the Bologna model may be a desirable model for post-graduate training. We do not share this view. Put bluntly **the Bologna model appears to take longer to achieve at best equivalent outcomes** and it seems undesirable to increase the cost of higher education for both students and the Australian tax payer unless there is a clear benefit.

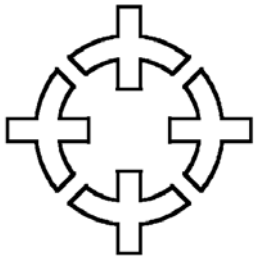
The Bologna model was developed as a result of the attempt to standardise degree structures across the European Union. The point was to facilitate student movement between European countries and recognition of degrees. This is not a major goal for Australian students but could be useful for some if it came at no cost. As far as we are aware, whether or not the Bologna model was the best structure for quality PhD research training was not a major issue.

Providing an initial 3- year generalist undergraduate component does allow for breadth of training but is surely indulgent when funds for the provision of education are limited as it takes longer to obtain a specialist degree under these circumstances. This represents poor value for money from the taxpayers' perspective and adds to the financial burden of students. Indeed, the depth of the undergraduate component is poor, relative to most current degrees in Australia. In Psychology, as in science more generally, there is a need to systematically cover the fundamentals of a discipline which is difficult to achieve within the time constraints resulting from a broad undergraduate degree.

We would also like to highlight the strengths of the Australian 4-year Honours degree as an undergraduate structure that delivers excellent depth, in comparison to the US or Bologna models and at least equivalent to the more focused 3 year UK Honours programmes. By the end of Honours Australian students have a little less breadth than the Bologna or US (where some of that breadth is often of marginal academic merit) models, but more breadth than in the UK. The Honours degree also provides excellent

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research training in the Honours year that is superior to all 3 alternatives discussed above. The structure allows both coursework and research and is therefore an ideal and time-efficient, preparation for both research and professional PG training and we strongly suggest it is retained in its current form.

The Masters component of the Bologna model is too long for pre-PhD research training. We know of no evidence that students who have completed a 2-year Masters degree proceed to produce higher quality PhDs. The 1-year Honours has proven sufficient in this country in the past and the additional coursework used to justify the extra year in the Bologna model is only needed to compensate for the lack of specialist material provided in the generalist UG component. Our 3+ 1 + 3 Honours model therefore appears to be superior to the Bologna model as an efficient way to produce PhD postgraduates.

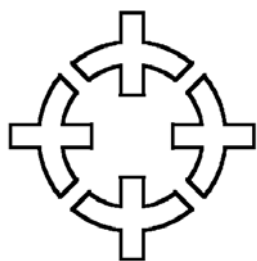
**Lack of student mobility** is another general problem within Australian higher education. The quality of post-graduate training will always be optimised if students are encouraged to seek the best staff and facilities in their chosen field of research. In most cases this will be best satisfied if the student can move to the strongest location. The current Australian system provides minimal support for such mobility and, given the costs associated with education, most students choose to live close to home. This is further encouraged by requiring students to make separate applications for PhD enrolment and APA support to individual institutions. An optimal system would ensure such movement is readily achievable. Such movement may be facilitated by a centralised application process that encourages applicants to consider multiple institutions.

This issue is even more pressing if the availability of postgraduate training is restricted to a sub-set of high performing locations. It will be necessary, in order to ensure national equity of access, to provide financial support to allow strong students to attend locations where post-graduate training is provided.

We would also like to highlight that there are problems of access associated with narrowing the range of locations where post-graduate training is provided. Many mature-age, part-time and lower socio-economic status students are unable to move because of family commitments. A model that both excludes post-graduate training outside of capital cities and fails to provide adequate financial support to relocate will impact heavily on these groups.

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We address the consultation questions in order below.

### **Q.1. Should there be national minimum quality requirements for higher degrees by research? Should an institution only be eligible for funding schemes in fields where it meets minimum requirements? (page 15)**

It seems reasonable that in order to train HDR students an institution should be required to show that it has both the infrastructure and appropriately qualified staff to provide such training. At the least, this would suggest a PhD level of training for those supervising PhDs but it also likely to be the case that supervision will be of higher quality in those institutions demonstrably delivering high quality research outputs. The ERA provides one general mechanism for making such choices and a reasonable goal should be that PhD students are trained in locations that meet world standards. This criterion should be applied at the discipline/FoR level, although additional institutional-level infrastructure criteria may also be necessary. There may, of course, be individuals in locations ranked at a lower level by the ERA that personally operate at higher levels. Institutions should be able to make a case to allow supervision by those individuals provided the appropriate infrastructure is available to support the PhD candidate.

### **Q.2. Should institutions be required to provide a minimum standard of physical resources in order to receive Research Training Scheme funding? (page 16)**

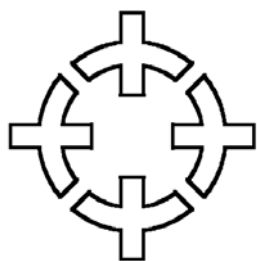
The variation in resources required for research across disciplines is substantial, presenting a challenge when specifying minimum requirements. However, we do agree that students need to be provided with the space and tools required to carry out a research degree. This will include computing provisions and a secure desk if necessary but the specific requirements are likely to vary making it hard to produce a generic list that is of value. The expectation should be that institutions provide the necessary facilities to complete the degree in good time under normal circumstances.

### **Q.3 Should universities providing research training be required to ensure that students have sufficient access to opportunities such as conference attendance and international study? (page 16)**

The ability to conduct world standard research requires interaction with the international research community. Providing travel to international meetings allows students to present and evaluate the quality of their research work and also to make connections with potential international collaborators, employers and citers of their work. All successful research careers require such links and facilitating their development during training is a very valuable contribution to that training we therefore strongly

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recommend the provision of travel support to students and suggest that during their candidature they should be funded for both a presentation at one national and one international conference as a minimum. Such support should normally be contingent on the student presenting their work at the conference to provide a focus for meaningful interaction.

### **Q.4. What is the best way of ensuring that PhD supervisors provide high quality support to students? Should requirements be nationally consistent? (page 17)**

Defining the characteristics of the interaction between staff and student that will lead to high quality supervision is problematic. There are many relationship variables that it would not be possible to constrain but which are probably central to a good outcome. However, some benchmarks are able to be specified. It is unlikely that supervisors will provide good supervision if they are not themselves actively producing high quality research output. They should meet some definition of research active.

Perhaps the next most important variable is available time to discuss issues with the student. To ensure quality it is therefore important to place a reasonable cap on the number of simultaneous supervisions, and the additional workload carried by the supervisor. Both of these have grown enormously in the last 15-20 years. Large research groups may be able to adequately supervise extra students but overall quality usually declines when large numbers are supervised simultaneously.

Consistency of expectation for the quality of supervision should be national but the actual requirements, such as the number of supervisions that can be maintained must vary with the individual as it will change with research experience, topic being supervised, and supporting infrastructure. This is best managed locally.

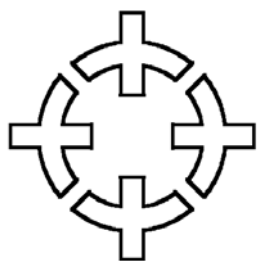
### **Q.5. Given that positive Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) results provide evidence of a quality research training environment at an institution, should an institution be able to provide alternative evidence of a quality research environment when positive ERA results are absent (for example in an emerging area of research). If so what alternative evidence should be provided? (page 18)**

In principle this is a reasonable suggestion but the emphasis should be on the quality of research performance and we would expect exceptions from the ERA evaluations to be rare once that system is bedded in. There may be local groups within institutions that meet world standards when the overall institution does not. In that case it should be possible to allow a special case to be made for the specific group but using the same criteria as monitored for the ERA.

One concern of adopting too narrow a definition of eligible institution is that more established universities tend to score higher, on average, in the ERA and these

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universities are mostly located in large cities. The provision of trained graduates outside of the cities may be restricted if most students train within the cities.

**Q.6. If an institution is unable to provide robust evidence of a quality research environment, should it be able to submit evidence of arrangements, such as partnering arrangements with another institution, that effectively compensate for its inability to provide a quality research environment without such arrangements? (page 18)**

This should only be allowed if the partner institution takes primary responsibility for the supervision and provision of infrastructure to support the research. Such a requirement ensures the stronger institution has a real commitment to the research enterprise in a way that provides security for the student.

**Q.7. Should government do more to enable research training in multidisciplinary environments? What barriers are there and how might they be overcome? (page 18)**

Psychology, as one of the hub sciences, is very frequently involved in multi-disciplinary work and environments. This does not present an insurmountable challenge provided local university rules fairly distribute both infrastructure funding across the partners and fairly attribute the research outcomes. Again local rules need to ensure this occurs but flexibility is important to ensure a fair outcome and national prescriptions are unlikely to ensure flexibility.

**Q.8. Should Australian higher degrees by research include broader skills training? If so, should this be through compulsory coursework or through some other mechanism? (page 20)**

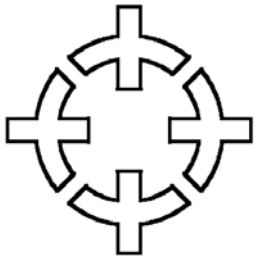
In principle this could be useful but the specific skills of most benefit will probably vary a great deal from discipline to discipline and, indeed student to student. Generically the development of communication skills is likely to be of value and could be achieved, e.g. by requiring regular presentations by students in seminar and conference settings. This is readily justified but serious development of 'broader skills' will take considerable time and that could interfere with research, thus lengthening the time to completion and making research an even less attractive path to follow, given current salary structures for research positions.

If coursework was made compulsory it would therefore be necessary to increase the duration of PhD funding to 4 years, as is currently being considered by a number of

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universities. This possibility further highlights the lack of desirability of enforcing the Bologna model. If an additional year of training is added to the current system it may be better to be linked with the PhD. Alternatively, there may be an argument for a flexible funding model in which the additional year's support can either precede the PhD to enhance the strength of preparation, or be included in the PhD itself to support enhanced specialist skills.

### **Q.9. Should the rules associated with Australian Postgraduate Award scholarships be amended or increased in flexibility? If so, in what ways? (page 22)**

Students choosing to complete a PhD are making a choice that is expensive. They could enter the workforce prior to this point and frequently the salaries available in research positions are low compared to professional settings. This provides a strong disincentive for the best and brightest to engage in the training required to generate the new ideas Australia's prosperity will be built on. Scholarships should provide a sufficiently comfortable level of support so that students can accommodate and feed themselves comfortably at the best location for their training, which may frequently be inter-state. Most postgraduate students need to work with the current levels of support and most end their university careers in debt. Scholarships should aim to avoid this situation and minimise the cost to students of choosing the advanced level of study that few are capable of and the country needs.

### **Q.10. What is the role of the research Masters degree in the Australian research training system? Is its decline a cause for concern? (page 22)**

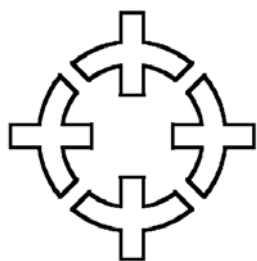
The research Masters is rarely used in schools of Psychology. Other disciplines do employ the degree more extensively and we see no compelling reason to change access to it if it serves their needs. The aim ought to be to allow enough flexibility in postgraduate training models so that any discipline/profession can tailor an efficient path to an effective career. This does not require that a degree is a popular choice when averaged over all disciplines, only that it meets the training needs of the specific discipline.

### **Q.11. Given the trend towards more diverse entry pathways for higher degree by research, how prescriptive should overlying principles be? How should institutional arrangements for student selection and admission be measured? (page 23)**

The aim here should be to allow students with demonstrated ability to engage in higher degree training. Flexibility is warranted in making this assessment provided the attainment of the degree ultimately requires the same benchmark level of performance. Rarely will student convincingly demonstrate suitability without the completion of an

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Honours degree. More frequently they may have completed earlier training in a different discipline and then appropriate bridging courses that allow them to gain necessary pre-requisite skills should be provided. They should not be encouraged (nor allowed) to enter a programme without the necessary pre-requisite skills.

We thank you for the opportunity to make this submission.

Winthrop Professor David Badcock

President

28 November 2011

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