

Inquiry into Research Training and Research Workforce Issues in Australian Universities

Submission from Victoria University

Introduction

Victoria University welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to this review.

Victoria University is a dual sector university that educates students from vocational and further education through to masters and Ph D. The institution's dual sector nature, its focus on applied research and its position as a University with a high representation of students from non-English speaking and low socio-economic backgrounds, gives Victoria University a unique perspective on the issues surrounding research training and workforces issues.

The University would like to make comment on the following:

- Stipend levels
- Improving the diversity of the student and research body
- Future labour force needs
- Supporting academics with knowledge dissemination
- Research students and Knowledge Dissemination
- Research and Research Training in the Vocational Education Sector
- Postdoctoral Supports
- Internationalising Australian Research
- Attracting International Researchers
- Visa Flexibility

Stipend Levels

Victoria University applauds the Government's intention to increase the number of Australian Postgraduate Awards (APAs). This move recognises the important part played by postgraduate students in research and innovation, and the pending shortage of academics and researchers as current generations retire. However, the University considers that it is not only the number of APAs that should be increased, but also the level of the stipend offered to students.

A decline in domestic enrolments of higher degree by research (HDR) students suggests that the current level of \$20,007 is too low to entice students to undertake postgraduate research degrees. While the level of the stipend has increased with CPI, it has fallen considerably relative to average weekly earnings (it was equivalent to about 47 per cent but is now 35 per cent). A majority of students (55 per cent¹) have reported undertaking some level of 'outside work' to supplement their income. Data from the Student Finances Survey² reinforces this.

The low level of postgraduate stipends is a significant disincentive to full time higher degree study particularly for older more experienced graduates, those with families and those with professional or employment options. These are often students who are in areas where academic skill shortages are most pressing. In addition, the Government should take action to increase funding to universities to enable them to cover the costs associated with supervision of postgraduate students since this has

¹ 2008 *The PhD in the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*, Council for Humanities Arts and Social Sciences, March 2008

² *Student Finances Survey*, Universities Australia, April 2008.



failed to keep up with the growing costs of support, supervision and facilities for postgraduate students to universities.

The low stipend level is particularly pertinent to Victoria University. As mentioned elsewhere, the University's student body has a large number of students from a low socio-economic background. The disadvantage they face means that many students who might be eligible to go on to higher degrees do not do so, since current stipend levels are simply not sufficient or attractive enough to make higher research degrees a feasible option.

The raising of postgraduate stipend levels will also improve the rate of timely completion of research degrees. At Victoria University we have observed many students on inadequate stipends who take on part-time and sometimes full-time work to enable them to stay afloat financially. The extra demands of external employment affects the time available for research, impacting on completion timelines and delaying the conclusion and dissemination of important research. This suggests that increased stipend levels would have a direct, tangible benefit in terms of improving the 'efficiency' of higher research degree completion times and therefore Australia's competitiveness in international research.

In addition to raising the level of stipends, Victoria University recommends that further supports and incentives could be supplied to enable and encourage the take up postgraduate degrees. The Government should exempt all scholarships from inclusion as assessable income for the purposes of Centrelink and similar benefits. The Government should also consider discipline specific needs and develop appropriate supports and incentives.

A More Diverse and Representative Student and Research Body

Victoria University's student body consists of many students who are the first in their family to attend University. Many of these students are from non-English speaking backgrounds, their share of the student body rising from 25.9 per cent in 2001 to 34.1 per cent in 2004. The University also has the highest proportion of students from a low socio-economic background in terms of access and participation in Victoria with, in 2005 23.8 per cent of commencing VU students from a low socio-economic background, and 25 per cent of commencing students who are under 25 years of age.

Many students from disadvantaged backgrounds face financial and other hardships which make them view postgraduate as an unattainable 'pipedream'.

Victoria University considers that government policies should address this representative imbalance. Initiatives should be undertaken to make student body at postgraduate level and the research profile of academics should be more closely aligned to the general population. While there are many initiatives to remove barriers at the undergraduate level, at the research and postgraduate level more should be done.

The most immediate measure would be to increase the stipend levels available to students. In addition, the government should consider measures that recognise individual hardship that would make additional supports available to students who face severe difficulties (an example could be rent supports in addition to the stipend). Government initiatives could also be developed to encourage greater participation from groups that are currently underrepresented. The programs could be similar to those that have existed to attract women.

Improving the student mix would also have benefits of a less altruistic nature. The diversity would bring new perspectives and thought processes that would facilitate innovation and improve research outcomes.

Victoria University currently has a number of initiatives aimed at improving the student mix and addressing social equity. However, as a single institution, the scope for activity is limited. As such,

government should act to improve equitable outcomes for research participation. The programs should be directly aimed at postgraduate research students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Meeting Future Academic Labour Needs

Within the next decade, between 20 to 33 per cent of academic staff are expected to retire.³ The average age of academic staff is higher than for any other trade or profession, save farmers.

This coupled with the falling postgraduate degree participation rates suggests that the replacement rate for academic staff seems unlikely to be met. It is further compounded when subtracting the number of postgraduate research students who do not intend to pursue academic careers but instead will fill demand from industry, government and elsewhere.

Only by raising the level of research students will future university labour force needs be met.

However, there are a number of hurdles to achieving this:

- Firstly, salaries and conditions for academics are not very attractive in relative terms. This is particularly so at the entry levels A and B. In addition, with ongoing academic positions often lacking, and casual positions abundant, the academy offers relatively little in terms of job security.
- New academics often face a high teaching load, and are given insufficient opportunities to continue their research. Funded research is often not adequately funded, reducing the attractiveness of academic careers.
- There are few postdoctoral opportunities for early career researchers, which affects the number of early career research who follow careers into the academy. Postdoctoral appointment salaries are also currently at a relatively low level to make them an attractive option.
- Employment arrangements for academics are dichotomised into either highly casualised, sessional work or full-time tenured. There are not enough flexible employment options in between to cater for women, parents, carers, and older people.

To address these issues, policy and programs should be developed that will make an academic career competitive with alternatives. The increasingly difficult financial hardship faced by HDR students (mentioned elsewhere) will only be less appealing if future academic employment prospects continue to diminish in absolute and relative terms.

Supporting the Academic's Role in Knowledge Dissemination

The important role played by academics as agents of innovation and knowledge dissemination has long been recognised. Similarly, it is understood that innovation and knowledge dissemination is about collaboration.

In a world where (innovative) technology has simplified and in some cases enabled information sharing, collaboration, research linkages and the resulting innovation still depends very much upon the intentions of those sharing.

However, the increasing focus on publishing in quality academic journals is a contradiction in terms of promoting greater research linkages and dissemination of knowledge into industry. There are few incentives for academics in a crowded work schedule to make an extra effort to develop linkages and transfer knowledge. Falling levels of funding and the deterioration of staff-student ratios over the past decade have worked to ensure that there is insufficient research support, time and infrastructure for academics in universities to pursue research and linkages with industry.

³ 2008 *The PhD in the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*, Council for Humanities Arts and Social Sciences, March 2008

However, Government policy may also be acting against collaboration, knowledge transfer and innovation. . The introduction of the *Excellence for Research in Australia* (ERA) initiative in place of the RQF is a case in point. The ERA aims to assess excellence in research using standard metrics (i.e. largely publications, journal impact factors and citations and to restrict the additional work for universities). Importantly, the ERA has excluded any measure of impact. This shuts out an entire mechanism for knowledge transfer, and by doing so, focuses knowledge transfer to particular types (academic journals). This type of policy, coupled with already difficult work environments acts against knowledge transfer.

Government policy should therefore create incentives for academics to forge linkages and transfer knowledge to industry, the community and elsewhere. Part of this is certainly related to greater funding that would improve staff-student ratios and other similar issues. In addition, government should also remove any disincentives to such activity that might be present within current programs. Any future government initiatives should also be aware of the potential to stifle this kind of knowledge transfer activity and be designed to minimise or negate any potential disincentives.

Supporting Research Students with Knowledge Dissemination

Much knowledge transfer that takes place within the university sector is to and through its students. The process of teaching and training, imparting new ideas, outcomes of research and current thinking, has by far the largest direct reach and impact.

However, a significant amount of the knowledge that is created in the University sector is actually generated by students themselves, specifically higher degree by research students.

To date, measures such as the *Excellence for Research in Australia* initiative consider research excellence and the dissemination from the perspective of the experienced academic. However, the research efforts of HDR students have had relatively little focus.

There is real potential afforded by the high quality research undertaken by university research training and education programs and the actual contribution that some research students have made to knowledge. However, more could be done to capitalise on this vast resource. Programs should be developed aimed at specifically disseminating student research, and to support research students in their dissemination and publishing endeavours.

In addition, initiatives that would facilitate student activities to disseminate the outcomes of the research to industry and the community should also be developed.

Research and Research Training in the Vocational Education Sector

Victoria University is a multi sector University that offers qualifications across the entire Australia Qualifications Framework spectrum.

The Vocational Education sector is an important sector in terms of:

- It is the education sector that applies research outcomes, knowledge and ideas and trains students who directly use this knowledge in their trades and professions;
- The sector is engaged in knowledge transfer on a much larger scale than the Higher Education sector (in terms of student numbers);
- The skills shortage currently experienced in the Australian economy is in segments where the Vocational sector has a large share of responsibility for education.

Clearly the sector is important, yet when considering research and research training; the focus is more often than not solely on the Higher Education sector.

Victoria University considers that programs should be developed that address this imbalance and recognise the role and potential of the Vocational Education sector in research and research training.

As with Higher Education, the Vocational sector has also experienced qualification upgrade, with the average level of qualification held by practitioners increasing in the sector. However, unlike the Higher Education sector, there are limited scholarship incentives to pursue further study or research and improve qualification levels. Similarly, there is little opportunity or incentive to become involved in research activities.

Finally, unlike Higher Education, the sector operates within the purview of the state governments. The different jurisdiction and funding sources makes collaboration between the sectors difficult, which impacts on the ability of Vocational Education practitioners to become engaged in the research community.

As such, Victoria University considers that the following should occur:

- The government should develop scholarship incentives to enable Vocational Education staff to improve their skills set and increase their level of qualification;
- Government research programs should also be developed that are aimed at increasing the level of research participation in the Vocational Education sector; and
- The Government should work with the states to overcome any barriers to participation in research. This should include consideration of agreements that may present hindrances or lack incentives to participate in research.

Postdoctoral (Early Career Researchers)

Victoria University's Postdoctoral Research Fellowship Scheme is a new initiative to build its research and to support outstanding early career researchers seeking to commence an academic/research career. The scheme focuses on outstanding early career researchers who would normally be within 5 years of completing their Doctoral qualification.

The Scheme provides appointments of three years duration, and in 2008, up to 10 Research Fellowships will be supported in 2008. The scheme also provides a minimum start-up grant of \$12,000 to successful applicants.

Schemes such as this highlight the important role played by postdoctoral students (postdocs) in the research and academic community. Yet there is little consideration of this from government, particularly in terms of financial supports and programs explicitly aimed at their retention and training. Indeed, the scheme developed by Victoria University is supported and funded internally. The successful outcomes from this and other similar programs, limited as they are from reliance on smaller internal funding sources, could be made dramatically larger by greater government funding and recognition of the important role played by postdocs that would increase the number of postdoc appointments.

As such, Victoria University considers that the Government should give explicit recognition of the important role played by postdocs in the research and academic community by increasing the number of postdoc places and appointments. Postdoc fellowships, programs and funding sources should recognise their importance, and funding should include the costs associated with their relative inexperience and hence training. Consideration should be given to these postdoctoral fellowships being allocated on the same basis as scholarships aimed at doctoral (PhD) students.

Finally, initiatives should also be developed to encourage mid-careers researchers. It is encouraging to see the Australian Research Council launch their Future Fellowships programs. While this is a good start, more needs to and should be done.

Internationalising Australian Research

Current policy settings effectively promote 'isolationist' research, and do little to support academic work that could be conducted collaboratively with partners abroad. Schemes such as the Australia Research Council International Linkage are aimed at encouraging greater international exposure and collaboration, but more schemes of a similar nature are needed for Australia to be internationally competitive. Importantly, these extra schemes should be designed for and targeted towards the different segments of the research community, such as postgraduate students, early career researchers and more experienced academics, and where possible should also encourage collaboration between these different segments.

As a starting point, Government policy could support greater international linkages by immediately expanding the Endeavour Awards to promote greater domestic research student participation at other universities abroad.

Government programs should therefore be developed that encourage and promote the idea of knowledge transfer for both HDR students and academic staff by providing incentives to, and support for, collaboration and travel to universities beyond Australia.

Attracting International Researchers

Administrative barriers such as the visa protocols (outlined below) can make study and research options in Australia prohibitive and unattractive for many overseas students and researchers. However, the barriers also extend to limited or non-existent support for many researchers and students who would otherwise consider study and research activities in Australia.

It is well accepted that a vibrant research culture depends very much on the exchange and sharing of ideas, thoughts and processes. International students and researchers enable Australia to tap into a new and diverse pool of talent that would also have the corollary of expanding Australia's own talent pool.

Current support programs are essentially aimed at domestic students and researchers. However, given the potential benefits to Australia, in terms of matters such as economic efficiency and innovation, government programs should be developed that explicitly attract and facilitate high calibre students and researchers to participate in research in Australia.

International Visa Flexibility

International collaboration and research is not merely about Australian students and researchers travelling abroad, but also involves researchers from abroad attending and taking part in research at Australian institutions.

As mentioned, the benefits of collaboration are well understood, but onerous and inflexible visa provisions affect the ability of many international researchers or HDR students to take up positions or study in Australia.

Current visa requirements require international students to return to their home countries in cases of illness. They must also return to their home nations in cases where personal leave means they will be away from their studies for more than four weeks. The result of these provisions has seen completion timelines 'blow-outs' and has caused unnecessary financial hardship for many students.

The visa requirements have proven to be a disincentive for many international research students who are considering a higher degree by research in Australia. This has implications not only for research competitiveness, but also for Australia's export performance.

These two cases suggest that a review of the visa requirements is required. As such, Victoria University recommends such a review, and in particular, would support any changes to current visa provisions that would enable students to increase the time permitted to remain resident in Australia while on sick leave or compassionate leave.