

## RESEARCH TRAINING IMPLEMENTATION WORKING GROUP



**Senator the Hon Simon Birmingham**  
**Minister for Education and Training**  
**Parliament House**  
**CANBERRA ACT 2600**

Dear Minister

As Chair of the Research Training Implementation Working Group, I am pleased to present you with the *Research Training Implementation Plan* (the Plan) which aims to improve performance across key aspects of Australia's research training system.

Australia continues to derive economic, social and environmental benefits from a research system that is world class in many respects. However, as the Australian Council of Learned Academies' (ACOLA) *Review of Australia's Research Training System* (the Review) concluded, there is scope to improve higher degree by research (HDR) training practices and increase the skills, knowledge and abilities of our future workforce.

The Plan has been developed by a working group and sets out specific and actionable measures to improve HDR training and its interaction with the Australian industry sector (in response to Recommendation 1 of the Review), which has been defined broadly to include all research end users, consistent with the definition used in the Review. The working group included senior representatives from universities, industry bodies, the medical research sector, government and the postgraduate student council.

The Australian Government has already put in place a number of initiatives addressing the recommendations of the Review which are detailed in the Plan, including changes to research block grant arrangements, the introduction of a National Research Internships Program and improvements to data reporting. In conjunction with these initiatives, there are a number of areas where additional action by the university and industry sectors is required to address the findings of the Review. The Plan aims to clearly identify the stakeholders with responsibility for taking forward each action as well as the timeframes for delivery. The working group also considers that the priorities and directions outlined in the Plan may be useful for informing future policy and funding decisions for Australia's research training system.

Actions have been grouped under five Priority Issues:

1. Pathways to HDR training
2. Industry-university collaboration, including placements
3. Equity, including Indigenous participation
4. Quality of the HDR training system
5. Data and evidence to better monitor HDR system performance.

An Implementation Plan Summary providing a high level overview of each Priority Issue and associated actions is enclosed along with the detailed Plan.

In terms of Priority Issue 1, the working group has reaffirmed the need to ensure the system is flexible in supporting a range of HDR training pathways, to support students from diverse backgrounds, and prepare candidates for HDR training. The working group considers that the current system allows for a considerable degree of flexibility and has not identified any evidence that current regulatory arrangements are preventing particular pathways. However, there are concerns that existing constraints on funding for postgraduate places may create a disincentive for universities to develop new pathways, even where they may lead to better outcomes for some students. Within these constraints there is limited scope for further flexibility. The Plan provides for the Department of Education and Training (DET) to monitor and model the development and uptake of new pathways, including the growth of Master of Research programs supported under the Research Training Program (RTP), which may impact on resources available for PhD places. As part of this work, further action may need to be considered to ensure the system continues to be sufficiently flexible, balanced and sustainable in the longer term. As such, the Plan also calls for DET to draw on this work to review the use of RTP funding in supporting HDR pathways.

Under Priority Issue 2, the working group considered the range of activities underway to foster greater industry-university collaboration as part of HDR training. To further support these directions, the Plan recommends that university and industry peak bodies focus on promoting the availability and uptake of internships. It also recommends DET build on existing data collections and processes to establish baseline data on HDR internships and other types of industry collaboration, including the National Research Internship Program. DET, together with the Department of Industry, Innovation and Science, should develop and make available templates to inform the development of intellectual property arrangements involving HDR Students in collaborative research activities.

Priority Issue 3 focuses on strategies to improve equity. The actions aim to improve HDR training outcomes for Indigenous students, students from low socio-economic backgrounds and regional/remote areas, as well as women studying in particular disciplines. Under the Plan, it is recommended that DET lead work to further analyse evidence about barriers to HDR training and approaches which support students' successful completion. This would involve working with relevant bodies to monitor universities' Indigenous strategies and models of best practice and exploring the establishment of an Indigenous PhD forum. In addition, the Plan proposes that DET monitor and analyse access to part-time scholarships by equity groups and publish the outcomes. The working group also emphasised the importance of DET continuing to monitor developments in the Australian Taxation Office Review of Advice on Scholarships and to provide input to any future review of the treatment of part-time scholarships, given the equity implications for Indigenous students and other disadvantaged groups.

The Plan includes several actions to address Priority Issue 4 to enhance the quality of the HDR training system. To improve the benchmarking of Australian research training against international comparators, it is recommended that DET explore opportunities to expand the scope of the Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire. The Australian Council of Graduate Research (ACGR) has undertaken to develop a set of guidelines that define the key principles of skills development to improve employers' familiarity with the skills acquired through research training. The guidelines will inform the development of clear statements of graduate capabilities. The ACGR will develop guidelines to support assessment of transferable skills attained during candidature. Further, the ACGR will refresh the *Good Practice Principles for Research Supervision* to strengthen the focus on the development of students' skills and attributes, and equipping HDR students with employability skills and experience.

Finally, improved data collection under Priority Issue 5 is critical to better monitor and evaluate the performance of the research training system. The actions outlined in the Plan, including the development of a methodology to undertake cohort studies and guidelines on best practice for universities in tracking HDR students, will inform new students of likely career paths, allow monitoring and reporting of student progress throughout HDR studies, and inform interventions that will improve completion rates and outcomes for research graduates.

The working group proposes that DET monitor implementation of the Plan. Stakeholders would be approached regularly to provide updates on the delivery of actions and outcomes and DET would prepare and publish six-monthly progress reports on its website.

I would like to thank the members of the working group for their contributions to the development of the Plan. I would also like to thank DET for their work and the support they have provided to the working group and me in undertaking this important task.

Thank you for the opportunity to chair the working group. I believe that our work has delivered a Plan that will support enhancements to Australia's research training system and facilitate further interactions between our university system and its end users.

Yours sincerely



**Professor Robyn Owens**

Chair, Research Training Implementation Working Group

25 August 2017