

Nature of the PhD

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1. Background

- (1) This discussion paper was prepared by a Working Party of the Committee for Graduate Studies following a request from the Academic Board. The Working Party's brief was to review the nature of the PhD in the University at this time, with some emphasis on the various pressures for it to be completed within four years. The Working Party sought comments from Deans and subsequently circulated a draft of this paper to faculties. It asked what was the potential effect of determining the desirable maximum period of full time equivalent candidature as four years and whether there were disparities between the expectations of a PhD within particular faculties and the University's minimum requirements.
- (2) The responses received by the Working Party and reinforced by discussion indicated both some common themes across the University and some diversity in respect to what was or should be achievable. While the draft of this discussion paper and its recommendations received substantial support from around the University some modifications have been included to meet particular concerns. The Working Party was initially hampered by a lack of reliable data. This has now been addressed by the publication of cohort studies of research students commencing in the years 1987 to 1994. These studies will be published annually and the next edition will take account of enhancements suggested by members of the Working Party. The percentage of completions in particular times is muddled by what are, in some faculties, quite high numbers of discontinuations. More analysis of this group will be undertaken.
- (3) There was general agreement that the PhD constituted supervised research training and should be seen as an apprenticeship in research and scholarship, and a training in research project management and in problem solving. Training in research should be given an emphasis which made it clearly important and complementary to the need for the generation of original material. Successful candidates should have acquired the skill base that would allow them to be effective, independent workers in their field.
- (4) In an international arena, cognisance has to be taken of the fact that the expectation that a PhD will take 4 to 5 years is not competitively attractive with countries like the UK where 3 to 4 years is the norm.
- (5) The data now available shows that within the Sciences and Engineering it seems that this training could be achieved within a project having a time scale allowing for completion normally within no more than four years. Achieving this sort of time frame did require attention to the scope of the project and effective supervision throughout the candidature. There was an inherent danger in incremental additions to the size of past theses produced and

supervisors should be alert to this danger. Within Arts a four to five year norm was seen as more usual, especially when the particular needs of anthropology and archaeology and theses based on material which had to be worked on in overseas archives were taken into account, where there was a significantly high proportion of longer candidatures.

- (6) The diversity of the nature of candidates undertaking PhDs within the University requires recognition. On the one hand students in the Sciences proceeding straight through from high school, through an Honours degree to a PhD on the way to a Post Doctoral Fellowship might well be expected to complete on a full-time basis within 3 to 3.5 years. On the other hand students returning to the University to undertake a PhD, on a part-time basis, after professional experience in, say, Education or the Health Sciences (and with continuing professional commitments) or with child care responsibilities should be regarded differently as should members of the academic staff undertaking PhD study concurrently with their teaching duties. In all cases the importance of well structured and disciplined research proposals cannot be overemphasised. There are also those students who transfer to part-time candidature after three years to complete their thesis while undertaking other activities.
- (7) The average time taken to complete a PhD in the University of Sydney has been falling in recent years and excessively long candidatures are for the most part gone. (This may be a direct result of increasing emphasis on good supervision and of greater faculty scrutiny. Alternatively it may derive from financial constraints on postgraduate students as scholarships cut out and HECS payments cut in.) In some areas, where longer candidatures had been tolerated, there have been attempts to limit the scope of what is expected in a thesis and to bring more structure and review into the early stages of formulating the research program. While most PhDs should be achievable within four years, reducing the formal maximum period of time might only result in evasion and the devotion of excessive amounts of time to administrative regulation.
- (8) There is a clear need for the University to collect and analyse reliable data. Faculties, too, should be aware that extended candidatures impact on the numbers of new candidatures that can be taken on. This has an overall impact on numbers of completions and hence completion rates. These are used as part of the formula for the allocation of APAs to the University and are included in Performance Indicators used for allocation of research funds to the University and within the University for allocation to faculties.
- (9) The Working Party believes that the way forward should be by encouraging better practices and asking faculties to set reasonable percentage-based targets for reduced lengths of candidature and then for faculties to monitor performance on a department by department basis, reporting back to the Committee for Graduate Studies annually. The occasional slow candidatures or candidatures extended by experimental mishap should be accommodated within these faculty and departmental targets. The Committee should be looking to see these broad faculty targets converging within the University. At the same time every effort should continue to be made to reduce the length of the examination processes. Faculties and departments should also examine written material to ensure that expectations of a PhD were not over-inflated.
- (10) Care should be taken with selection of models so as not to encourage production of ever more substantial theses. Candidates should not be expected to do 5 years work in 4 years. Realistic time schedules should be

set from the commencement of candidatures. The quality of the product and the research training aspect should be emphasised.

- (11) It is sometimes claimed that delays in PhD candidatures can be attributable to the needs of research teams to produce and publish as much as possible. Faculties might explore ways of funding PhD students for a limited time beyond their submission to maximise research output. They might utilise the availability of such funding to attract good students.

2. Recommendations adopted by the Board

- (1) Detailed analyses of PhD completion times should be undertaken and provided by the Planning Support Office to faculties and departments, the Committee for Graduate Studies and the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research) on a regular basis.
- (2) Faculties should establish and monitor continuous improvement targets for completion times that result in most (at least 50% of) completions (at submission date) being under 4 years by the year 1997. The Committee does not expect these targets will be identical across faculties but will monitor progress towards the achievement of those targets.
- (3) No formal change should be made to the current degree regulations with respect to maximum lengths of candidature. However faculties must take steps to ensure that thesis topics are such that they can be handled within target timelines.
- (4) Examiners' report forms and the letter of invitation to examiners should make it clear that the examiner is being asked to assess a thesis produced in an environment where, while the quality of the thesis is the prime consideration, full-time candidates are encouraged to produce their thesis within four years, and the project is regarded as supervised training in research.