

UMPA Position Paper

Management of RHD Students

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Background

The School of Graduate Studies (SGS) was established in the early 1990s in recognition of the need for a hub for PhD students. At PBC at Mt Eliza in June 2007, the decision was made to retain the SGS as the newly named School of Graduate Research (SGR), and to broaden its scope to include all RHD students. University Council on the 10th of September 2007 voted to rename the SGS as the SGR and to maintain its current role as the research hub. (See Attachment 6 of University Council papers from 10/9/07, which states, “7. That SGR will have a student hub catering for research higher degree students.”)

In the time since its establishment, the SGR has provided research students with: consistency in the application of policy; development of policies and processes that are in line with international best practice; efficient, expert candidature management; professional development for and oversight of supervisors; and a broad range of generic academic skills support. If the University of Melbourne needs a best practice example of a student hub/learning hub, it need look no further than its own backyard. The SGR *is* and *has been for 13 years* an RHD student hub.

The RHD cohort: a student perspective

RHD students typically have very little contact with the University generally or even their faculty outside of their schools or departments, unless they happen to be in a single-department faculty (eg ABP, Music, Law). Their sense of academic connectedness comes almost entirely from working closely with a supervisor or research team, fellow students in their department, or via extra-curricular connections through organisations such as the University of Melbourne Postgraduate Association (UMPA). In their administrative dealings with the University, they want consistency, quality and efficiency. Clearly nobody would argue that RHD students should access core transactional services from a supervisor, peer or student organisation, where the cohort experience is occurring. Yet there seems to be a suggestion by some that academic connectedness may be one argument for shifting RHD transactions to the faculties – a space in which RHD students in multi-department faculties would otherwise have little or no contact, and one which has historically not had notable success in satisfying students.

The 2005 Quality of Administrative and Support Services for Students survey (QASSS) found above average RHD student satisfaction with SGR services (4.03 for SGR v. 3.79 for all faculty services) and even higher satisfaction with the competence and expertise of SGR staff (4.12). In terms of the student perspective, they are clearly

satisfied with this aspect of their Melbourne Experience. Many faculty offices (particularly the larger faculties) scored much more poorly in student satisfaction. While we recognise that any movement to the BCG recommendations in student services entails a great deal of change at the faculty level, which is clearly intended to improve service delivery at that level, UMPA does not support moving RHD student service delivery into the faculties or new graduate schools.

Recommendations

It seems that there is some dissatisfaction amongst some faculties in not having administrative control of their RHD students. Some of the arguments of which UMPA is aware include concerns about double handling of documents and lack of access to key information about students (such as the amount of leave taken to date). The new Student System is surely intended to offer access to more services online to avoid the situation of students walking between three or four buildings to get signatures on forms, which would occur whether transactions are housed in a faculty/graduate school (away from supervisors and heads of departments anyway) or the SGR. It is surely also intended to allow appropriate levels of access to information needed by appropriate staff at a departmental, faculty, or University level. If these problems are not to be solved by the Student System Project, UMPA does not believe that abandoning a currently well-functioning system in the SGR is an appropriate solution.

The final point to be made about retaining transactional services within the SGR is a reminder that the PhD and the new MPhil are University degrees. In that regard, it is essential that they are overseen by a body without vested interest in the students' faculties, and where parity across faculties can be ensured. Housing transactions in faculties seems doomed to lead the University back to uneven handling of matters of academic process, including dispute resolution.

UMPA therefore recommends:

1. That the SGR remain the central administrative body for all RHD students, recognised as the RHD student hub/learning hub.
2. That as many transactions as practicable be automated online through the new Student System, offering appropriate levels of access to departments, the SGR and other areas as needed.