The Monash Postgraduate Association (MPA) Submission to Monash Graduate Education (MGE) in Response to the Monash Doctoral Program

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1. Introduction

The Monash Postgraduate Association (MPA) represents the 23,000 Monash University postgraduate students, including the ~5,000 higher degree by research students. One of the functions the MPA is to make representations to the University about policy and programs and to lobby for improvements on behalf of students.

The MPA has received regular feedback from students about problems with the accessibility, fairness, relevance and quality of the Monash Doctoral Program. These are very big concerns for students.

The Monash Doctoral Program has been modified several times since its introduction in 2013. The MPA has already made several submissions regarding changes to the program.[1] There are now various regimes depending on the faculty *and* year of commencement with the most common model involving a compulsory 120 hours of professional development training. Organisation of this training is split between the faculty and centrally through Monash Graduate Education (MGE).

This report will outline some of the concerns with the Monash PhD based on feedback received by the MPA from higher degree by research students. It will also make recommendations for improvement that we ask be considered for future development of the PhD program.

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[1] See http://www.mpa.monash.edu.au/representation/secure/downloads2/MIGR-policy-changes.pdf,
http://www.mpa.monash.edu.au/representation/secure/downloads2/MIGR-update.pdf,
http://www.mpa.monash.edu.au/representation/secure/downloads2/coursework-intro-PhD.pdf

2. Professional Development Training

The MPA supports efforts by the University to increase the employability of PhD students. The MPA, however, is concerned with aspects of the compulsory professional development training. The professional development training consists of workshops, lectures and seminars. There is a need that all compulsory aspects of any course, including the Monash Doctoral Program, are accessible, fair, equitable and relevant to all students. The MPA does not believe that the professional development component of the Monash Doctoral Program currently meets all these requirements.

2.1 Issues with accessibility

By making 120 hours of professional development training compulsory, the University is obliged to ensure that all PhD candidates can access appropriate professional development regardless of their campus, attendance mode or location. This is currently not the case.

There are numerous PhD candidates who are unable to access professional development training because of the campus where they are based. In 2016 there were 1259 doctoral students whose enrolment location was other than Clayton or Caulfield.[2] An audit of current professional development training offerings in 2016 has shown that there are very limited offerings outside Clayton. Particularly for the 163 PhD students at Peninsula – there has been and still is no training at Peninsula. There were 472 PhD students in 2016 who were enrolled within research centres such as AMREP, Southbank (Department of Forensic Medicine), and other hospitals. Only a small number of sessions have been offered at the Alfred Hospital.

PhD students who live outside Victoria are also disadvantaged. In 2016, there were 133 Australian based PhD students who lived outside Victoria and 238 enrolled in external mode. These students have limited ability to meet the professional development requirements due to the long commute times required in order to attend the training sessions.

In addition, PhD students who study part-time have great difficulty attending the compulsory training courses. In 2016, there were 1023 part-time PhD students. Many of them work full time, or have children and caring responsibilities during the day; thus, they enrolled themselves as part-time students. Despite this, there has been no professional development training provided outside business hours in 2016.

Having a limited range of professional development opportunities available to non-Caulfield and non-Clayton students is not good enough. The MPA has also received feedback that the video linking of seminars and workshops is sub-optimal. This is because the quality of the video can be highly variable and the experience is largely passive.

If the professional development training is compulsory, *all* students should be able to access relevant and effective professional development.

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[2] See http://www.monash.edu/ups/statistics for data

2.2 Issues with relevance

The MPA understands the University is attempting to improve the employability of its PhD graduates. Many students have expressed gratitude at the offerings and the worth of professional development. However, there has been considerable feedback that much of the professional development is not relevant. If the University mandates that research students must complete the professional development, it is obliged to ensure that all students can access relevant and high quality professional training.

2.3 Inconsistent with the rest of the University's approach

The link between education, degrees and employment is complex. Other parts of the University have approached this issue through a more co-operative and voluntary model. The MPA argues that graduate research training should mirror other approaches where students who engage in activities complete them voluntarily and have their participation recorded. The record can be used to supplement their testamur and be provided to potential employers as a statement of achievement.

2.4 Lack of evidence to support its efficacy

There has been no evidence presented to suggest that Monash's approach to professional development training, particularly the MGE component, has any effect on employment outcomes or employability. The MPA particularly questions the efficacy of the MGE run component because the current Monash Doctoral Program reflects a "one-size-fits-all approach". The ACLOA review, which has been used as a justification for the implementation of compulsory professional development, warns against this. It states: "flexibility is important when considering transferable skills training and a one-size-fits-all approach should be avoided, given the variability between disciplines and the diverse backgrounds and career aspirations of HDR candidates."[3]

2.5 Against adult learning principles

Adult learners want respect and to be seen as capable learners. They should be offered choice and be encouraged to set their own goals. As highly trained adults, research students are in the best position to decide what is relevant to them. By making professional development compulsory, the University is imposing itself as an arbiter of relevance. It is unnecessary, and places students as passive consumers rather than self-motived, active participants in learning. If the professional development material is relevant and worthwhile then the research student should be trusted to seek it out.

2.6 Unnecessarily bureaucratic

Because the professional development component is compulsory, students are unable to graduate until it has been completed. The MPA is very concerned that research students will be told they are unable to graduate because they have not completed an arbitrary number of professional development hours. This would be an extremely sub-optimal outcome.

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[3] See http://www.researchtrainingreview.org.au/

2.7 Reduces time available for research

Research students are enrolled to undertake original research under academic supervision and submit a thesis which examiners declare to be a significant contribution to knowledge and which demonstrates a student's capacity to carry out independent research.[4] This is a big task and the focus of research students. Compulsory professional development training can get in the way, hindering a student's ability to focus on their main duty of research. Research students already submit to a very large assessment. The MPA argues that there is little to no benefit in mandating more compulsory assessment.

2.8 Inadequate Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) provisions

The RPL is meant to enable students who have demonstrable, relevant work experience to gain exemptions, or credit, for the professional development component of the PhD. However, the RPL provisions for the professional development component of the Monash PhD are inadequate. There are several reasons for this. An RPL application must be submitted within three months of course commencement meaning many students miss out on applying or become aware of the ability for an RPL when it is too late to apply. The RPL covers a maximum of 50% of the professional development hours so many PhD students are still required to complete training that is not relevant to them. There is a lack of transparency in how the assessment decisions are being made because there are no guidelines, outcomes or statements about what the RPL is being assessed against. There is also a lack of information about what type of evidence needs to presented. Finally, there is no published appeals or review process.

3. Recommendation

That the professional training component of the Monash PhD is amended from a mandatory to a voluntary component of the Monash PhD.

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[4] https://www.monash.edu/graduate-research/faqs-and-resources/content/chapter-one/1-3