



Adelaide University Postgraduate Students' Association Inc

9 March 2001

Mary O'Kane
Vice-Chancellor
Via Russell Smith
Office of the Vice Chancellor

Dear Professor O'Kane,

Final Report of the Academic Structures Working Party

The Postgraduate Students' Association (PGSA) welcomes this opportunity to comment on the Final Report of the Academic Structures Working Party.

In this brief submission we will address two matters - the question of structural change and the proposal to establish a Graduate School.

Structural Change

The PGSA believes that the proposal to adopt a five Faculty organisational structure is far more workable and manageable than the more radical proposals put forward by the Working Party in earlier papers. Nevertheless, for honours and postgraduate students in a number of departments the proposed restructuring has the potential to involve significant change. In these departments it is crucial that the staff and students are fully consulted about the changes, and provided with reasons for the change, and have their concerns and objections taken into account.

Throughout the consultation process conducted by the Working Party we have sought feedback from postgraduate students and postgraduate departmental representatives. There have been three major concerns expressed by postgraduate and honours students in relation to restructuring. These are listed below:

1. Possible loss of facilities and resources

One of the major concerns of postgraduate and honours students has been the potential impact of any reorganisation on access to facilities and resources. Students are extremely anxious that restructuring would result in diminished resources such as rooms, desks, phones, computers, stationery, and access to photocopiers and equipment. The PGSA seeks a guarantee that any changes to organisational structures will not result in a loss of resources for postgraduate students.

2. Disruptions due to physical relocation

We are also concerned that the physical relocation of departments will result in significant disruptions for the postgraduate students. For postgraduate students affected the loss of time involved in relocating as well as the stress and disruption to thought processes should not be underestimated.

In all cases, where departments have to physically change location, the postgraduate and honours students affected should be guaranteed an appropriate extension of their candidature and scholarships.

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3. Academic Integrity

Finally, postgraduate students are concerned about their department being grouped in a faculty that is academically inappropriate.

We recently received the following feedback from postgraduate students in the Department of Economics. They have a number of objections to the transfer of the Department of Economics to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. Their concerns can be summarised as follows:

1. Students have strong concerns that the proposed move to Humanities and Social Sciences will separate the department from those areas the department has the closest links. They argue that no clear explanation is provided in the final report of the benefits of separating Economics from the schools with which it shares close ties. Economics strongest links are with Commerce, Finance, Law and Psychology, all of which are not located within the proposed Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. Moreover, Economics is not separated from Commerce in most other major Australian universities (for example, ANU, University of Melbourne).
2. They have concerns that the move will adversely impact on the quality of the postgraduate programme. They point out that Economics has greatly improved the quality of the postgraduate programme in recent years, introducing advanced level coursework, a "Teaching Assistant" scheme to assist students with funding, and hiring of staff from overseas with the capability to contribute to the improved graduate programme. They believe that this has greatly enhanced the reputation of the Department's postgraduate courses, and that they now "compare favourably with other top Australian universities and have the potential to compete with many institutions overseas." They argue that these moves have been successful, with several students from overseas, who previously would not have been expected to consider Adelaide, enrolling in the PhD this year. Their concern is that the move to Humanities and Social Sciences will diminish the profile of Department, and thus restrict its capacity to recruit high quality students. They feel that this has the potential to counter many of the improvements that have been undertaken in the programme, as they are "contingent on continuing to attract top quality students from both within Australia and overseas".
3. They argue that Economics can be considered as much a profession as the schools included in the Faculty of Professions, as most graduates (in particular, those who complete honours) move on to work as professional economists.
4. A final concern for the students is the impact of the move on resources for postgraduate students. They are specifically concerned that "should Economics be effectively required to subsidise any of the Schools within the proposed new Faculty [of Humanities and Social Sciences], it would possibly restrict options for current postgraduates in Economics (for example, by limiting funds available to purchase data, etc)."

The PGSA believes that the case of the Department of Economics needs to be reviewed in the re-organisation of the Faculties to ensure that it retains its academic links with Commerce, Law and Management.

In addition, we have received the following feedback from a number of other students on the re-organisation of the Faculty of PALACE.

The postgraduate departmental representative from Architecture has indicated that she does not see any complication posed for postgraduate students in that department.

A PhD student in Law has suggested that the Schools of Law, Architecture, Commerce and Management should be located in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. He argues that this will enable these professions to act more sensitively to the social contexts in which they operate. Furthermore, he argues that it will strengthen the links between social science disciplines and professional disciplines (for example, politics and law).

The Graduate School Proposal

We note that the Working Party has recommended the establishment of a Graduate School, and has given in principle support for Graduate School in a distinct physical location. The PGSA supports this recommendation. We believe that a definite time line must be placed on providing the Graduate School with a physical location. In our view for a Graduate School to be an effective and vital element of the University, it must have a physical location, a mission and purpose, facilities, and funding and authority to ensure high quality postgraduate education at the University of Adelaide. We do not support a 'virtual' School or cosmetic measures such as the re-labelling of Graduate Studies and the Board of Research Education and Development.

Our vision for a Graduate School was contained in an earlier submission to the Academic Structures Working Party. We would like to summarise and refine this vision here.

1. The Graduate School should have a mission to elevate the standard and quality of postgraduate education at the University. The Graduate School will develop, promote and facilitate these standards through policy development, quality assurance, the coordination of staff and student development, and the provision of resources and services.
2. Postgraduate students should be located in departments and schools to ensure close contact with supervisors, lecturers, experimental laboratories and classes. The role of the Graduate School is to promote, facilitate and ensure compliance with consistent and high standards of teaching, supervision and course delivery.
3. It should be located in its own building or in a clearly defined location. This will enable the Graduate School/Centre to house administrative and support services for postgraduate students, providing a 'one-stop-shop' for postgraduate enquiries and support. The co-location of such services will enable the Graduate School to develop a strong relationship with postgraduate students and provide better coordination of services. The Graduate School/Centre will then become a focus for postgraduate students with inquiries or in need of support. Services that could be located in such a centre could include Graduate Studies, scholarship administration, postgraduate recruitment and enrolment, and relevant study, research and professional skills support and training, and the PGSA.
4. It should act as a centre for excellence in supervision and postgraduate teaching. The Research Training Scheme has imposed more stringent requirements for higher degree research student completions, and it is incumbent on the University to provide appropriate staff development for supervisors and lecturers of postgraduate courses and awards.
5. The Graduate School/Centre should be responsible for the coordination and provision of career development and professional, research and study skills programs for postgraduate students. This is a crucial role given the Federal Government's focus on improved completion times and improved professional and career orientated skills. The Graduate School/Centre could act as the venue for these programs, and coordinate the training expertise in Professional and Continuing Education, the ACUE and the training section of IT services.
6. It should have sufficient resources to address gaps in the provision of departmental resources and facilities for postgraduate students. There are a number of models for achieving this. Take for example computer facilities, the Graduate School could provide its own computer suites (as is the case at the University of Melbourne Graduate Centre) or it could have a pool of computers that it can allocate to postgraduates and/or departments in need. In the area of office space, it could adopt the approach of the University of Queensland, by giving the Graduate School control over an allocation of offices that are designated to postgraduate students. Alternatively, it could follow Melbourne University's approach and include facilities within the Graduate Centre specifically for students without office facilities.
7. A key role of Graduate School/Centre should be to assist and support multi-disciplinary postgraduate scholarship. It would also be in a position to promote a more dynamic postgraduate culture at the University through conferences and seminars, and public forums.
8. In sum, the Graduate School/Centre should be both the symbolic and practical representation of the University's commitment to postgraduate education. It will provide considerable support for existing students through improved services, training, staff development, resources, policy initiatives and quality assurance. Of equal importance, it will communicate to potential postgraduates, the community and other universities within Australia and overseas, the University's strong commitment to high quality postgraduate education. It will be a highly visible and tangible benefit the University can use to promote its postgraduate research and courses.

There are three major questions that need to be resolved in moving towards the establishment of the Graduate School.

1. Should postgraduate coursework students be included in the Graduate School?

The PGSA believes that coursework students should be included in the Graduate School. Our reasons are summarised below:

- (a) **Common features of postgraduate awards.** All postgraduate qualifications require a student to have completed a first degree. In particular, there are significant areas of commonality shared by postgraduate coursework and research higher degree programs. Many coursework masters programs require an entry standard of an honours degree of IIA or better, which is equivalent to the entry requirements of higher degree research programs. Many coursework Masters degrees require a research component and thesis.
- (b) **Moves to introduce coursework into doctoral awards.** The introduction of professional doctorates with coursework content, and pressures from government moves to include specialised training (and possibly coursework) in the PhD has tended to reduce the distinction between a research only doctorate and other postgraduate programs. It should be noted in Europe and North America, many PhD programs include advance coursework.
- (c) **Lack of policies and quality assurance.** The PGSA receives quite a number of complaints each year about the quality of the content and delivery of coursework degrees. It is compounded by the lack of policy regulation and specific quality assurance for postgraduate coursework awards. As a general rule the University tends to focus on undergraduate awards or higher degree research degrees, and postgraduate coursework students fall between the gaps. A Graduate School with a focus on coursework students would be able to address this gap in policy and quality control.

2. Should postgraduate students be located in a Graduate School?

Forums such as Academic Board and feedback we have received from postgraduate students indicates that some staff and postgraduate students are concerned that a Graduate School would involve re-locating postgraduate students out of departments and into the Graduate School/Centre. They fear that this would diminish the relationship between students their supervisors and departments.

The PGSA would not support such a move. As outlined above, in our vision the Graduate School/Centre would provide a centre for support, assistance and training for postgraduate students, supervisors and lecturers of postgraduate courses. In our view, it makes no sense for postgraduate students to be separated from their departments and supervisors. It would diminish the level of contact between students and staff and isolate students from the academic culture of departments. In the case of students in experimental sciences, locating students in the Graduate School/Centre would separate their office facilities from their experiments. It is also our understanding that in most graduate schools in North America and at other universities in Australia the majority of postgraduates are located in the Faculties.

The only situation where it may be appropriate to house postgraduate students in a Graduate School/Centre would be in the event that no space or facilities were available in department. The PGSA is aware of students in such circumstances, and we believe they would welcome space on campus to work. Such an arrangement would be considerably less isolating than working from home.

The Academic Structures Working Party in its Discussion Paper points out that in establishing a Graduate School that "[c]are would need to be taken not to damage the relationship between research students and their departments and supervisors ...". This suggests a general consensus about the need to preserve this relationship. The PGSA recommends that the University during the implementation of the Working Party's Final Report, makes a clear and categorical statement on how the relationship between postgraduate students and their departments and supervisors will be preserved and fostered under the Graduate School model. We believe that this would address many of the concerns and reservations about a Graduate School.

3 How will a Graduate School be funded?

In any restructuring concerns arise about the impact of new proposals on the funding of existing areas and programmes. The PGSA does not support the diversion of funding from teaching and research towards the creation of a Graduate School.

Our view is that the creation of a Graduate School represents a major strategic opportunity for the University to address its weaknesses and enhance its strengths in the area of postgraduate education. For this reason we believe the Graduate School should be funded from the Vice-Chancellor's Strategic Initiatives Fund.

Conclusion

1. The PGSA recommends that in the re-organisation of the Faculty structure guarantees be put in place to ensure that:
 - The restructuring does not result in any reduction in the provision of support, resources and facilities for honours and postgraduate students.
 - In cases where the organisational change results in the relocation of departments or schools, students are adequately compensated for any loss of time in their studies and research through extensions to candidature and scholarships.
 - Extensive consultation occur in those departments affected by the restructuring to ensure staff and students are fully aware of the reasons for the restructuring, and have the opportunity to canvass problems and difficulties that may arise.
2. In light of the feedback we have received from postgraduate students in the Department of Economics we recommend that the location of this Department be reconsidered as part of the re-organisation so that Economics retains its links to Commerce, Law, and Management.
3. The PGSA supports the recommendation to establish a Graduate School, on the condition that the Graduate School:
 - Has a physical location, a mission and purpose, facilities, and funding and authority to ensure high quality postgraduate education at the University of Adelaide;
 - Includes coursework postgraduate students; and
 - Does not diminish relationship between students and their supervisors and departments
4. The PGSA President should be included in the Implementation Committee's discussion regarding the Graduate School Proposal. In addition to the SAUA President. Such discussions should be a formal part of the Implementation Committee's agenda, and the PGSA given formal notice of upcoming meeting(s). If the Implementation Committee approves the Graduate School, the PGSA expects to a member of the Scoping Committee.

The PGSA would be more than happy to meet with you to discuss this submission.

Yours sincerely,

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PGSA President