

Adelaide University Postgraduate Students' Association

Submission to the

Review of the Advisory Centre on University Education

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29 June 2001

The Postgraduate Students' Association (PGSA) represents the 3,500 postgraduate and honours students enrolled at the University of Adelaide. We welcome this opportunity to provide a submission to the Review of the Advisory Centre on University Education (ACUE).

The ACUE currently performs a number of key roles relevant to the University's teaching and learning plan and its strategic plan. These roles include the provision of intensive language and learning assistance for students, the provision of learning and research skill development for students, professional development for staff, and quality assurance in the areas of teaching, learning and postgraduate supervision. In our view, it is vital that these roles be strengthened and enhanced.

Term of Reference 1. What type of educational development unit(s) will most effectively assist the University in achieving the goals identified in the Strategic Plan and the University Learning and Teaching Plan?

The Learning and Teaching Plan has been developed in recognition of the growing diversity of needs and backgrounds of the student population. This population includes international students from an enormous variety of linguistic, cultural and educational experiences, as well as domestic students from non-English speaking backgrounds, lower socio-economic backgrounds and other educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. The provision of Language and Learning support is vital, and at times critical, for the academic success of many students from these backgrounds

The diversity of needs and backgrounds of undergraduate students is reflected in the postgraduate student population. Students are undertaking postgraduate coursework and research with a range of educational experiences and preparations. For these students there is the added pressure of undertaking an academic program at the postgraduate level coupled with government demands for students to complete qualifications in minimum time and to obtain more employment related skills during their postgraduate education. As a result, there is greater pressure on the University to provide language and learning support for postgraduate students in the form of intensive support, bridging programs, and skill development workshops (literature reviews, thesis writing, research skills).

It must be recognised that the quality of teaching and postgraduate supervision at this University varies enormously. All academic staff, whether newly appointed and more experienced, need to be more consistently involved in staff development. The diverse student population adds to challenges for teaching of coursework and the supervision of honours and postgraduate students. Academic staff need to have a greater awareness of the educational and cultural experiences of students, and the manner in which this experience interacts with the learning and teaching process. In addition, there are demands from Government, the wider public, and students, for more accountability and quality assurance in the areas of teaching and learning.

The Learning and Teaching Plan articulates a number of key goals for the University that create additional challenges for staff and students. These goals include:

- Promoting greater opportunities for student centred learning;
- An increased emphasis on the application of IT to learning and teaching materials;
- The development of high quality and participatory evaluation for teaching and learning;
- Assisting students to develop lifelong learning skills and attitudes;
- Ensuring that students have an international focus to their education.

For instance, the introduction of information technology skills and technologies into academic programs requires far more than simply setting assessment tasks that involve these technologies and the downloading of teaching materials on the web. Students require educational programs to learn these skills so that they can utilise these technologies in their studies and research. There also needs to be a safety net in place for students who do not acquire these skills in their courses or specialised programs. Furthermore, teaching staff will require assistance with the integration of these technologies in curricula and university teaching.

The same can be said of the proposed shift to student centred and life-long learning. This transformation will require the University to provide developmental support in the areas of curricula, pedagogy as well as the provision of learning programs and intensive support for students. Without such a commitment, a move to student centred learning will be ad hoc and has the potential to leave certain groups of students behind. If students are not provided with programs and support so they can acquire the necessary skills they run the risk of failure of reduced academic success in a student centred learning environment.

The growth in numbers of international students and the pressure to internationalise the curriculum also requires staff to be more sensitive and aware of inter-cultural issues. In addition, there is strong pressure on universities from the Federal Government to provide higher degree students with the skills to complete more quickly and to graduate with more employment related skills.

In considering the development needs of students and staff in light of the goals set in the Learning and Teaching plan, and in light of the current pressures on higher degree research, the PGSA has concluded that the University needs to continue and enhance the following services.

1. Intensive Language and Learning support and assistance for individual students;
2. Bridging and skill development programs for students – including programs to develop skills in the use of IT and those necessary for research and problem-based learning;
3. Pedagogical and curriculum development support programs for academic staff;
4. Inter-cultural and diversity training for academic staff;
5. Evaluation and review of teaching and postgraduate supervision.

Term of Reference 2. Is the current structure and administration location of the ACUE, combining student and staff services, the most effective and efficient model for learning and teaching support in the University as a whole?

In a number of other tertiary institutions, the staff development unit and language and learning support service are two distinct and separate units. The advantage of such an approach is that allows for a greater integration and coordination of general and academic staff development.

There are a number of weaknesses or problems that may arise due to the separation of staff development and student development. Firstly, it removes the nexus and the linkages between teaching and learning and between the programs designed to enhance the teaching capabilities of staff and those designed to develop the learning abilities of students. Secondly, staff development may be conceived or constructed in a fairly narrow human resources model. Pedagogical and curriculum issues run the risk of being marginalised within a service focused on staff induction and staff knowledge of policies and procedures. Secondly, a language and learning service then runs the risk of being constructed solely as a remedial support service and the experience and research of staff may not be incorporated or linked to the enhancement of teaching practice and postgraduate supervision.

By integrating both roles the current structure of the ACUE has overcome these problems. There are nonetheless a number of improvements to the ACUE that would improve its effectiveness as a provider of learning and teaching support. These are outlined below and under term of reference three.

The PGSA believes that a significant number of students and staff of the University are not fully aware of the services provided by the ACUE. In our view the current location of the ACUE is a major contributing factor to the low profile of the Unit. The current location of the ACUE is a major concern because it is tucked away in a low traffic area and very few people know where it is or how to find it. A Unit of such importance needs to be located in an accessible and high traffic area such as near the Plaza or Cloisters.

There are a number of other measures the University and the Unit can undertake to improve student and staff awareness of its services and programs. One way forward could be to run more workshops for academic and general staff on what support services provide such as the one organised by the Manager of Central Student Services earlier this year. Once members of staff are more aware of the ACUE's services they are more likely to refer students to the Unit.

The Unit might consider a name change so that more students are aware of the Unit's role as a provider of language and learning support. An improved website that is well publicised in student diaries, posters etc would also improve the profile of the Unit. At present the ACUE website does not fare well in comparison with many other university websites ie the UniSA Learning Connection which has all sorts of downloadable leaflets/factsheets. This information could consist of literacy hints, thesis formatting, style sheets, and fact-sheets explaining different types of referencing systems. While a helpful website is an invaluable marketing and learning tool in these competitive times, we would stress that on-line material should in no way substitute for appropriate staffing levels in the Unit. On-line information is a good supplement but cannot act as a substitute for the quality of interaction available in workshops and one to one appointments.

Term of Reference 3. In evaluating the learning and teaching support services required by the University, such as the Mathematics Learning Centre, and those services provided by the ACUE, provide advice on any qualitative and quantitative changes necessary for the future development of this area.

As indicated above, the University is under pressure from the Federal Government to reduce completion times. The University has identified that it needs to improve support for research higher degree students in the following areas:

- Research methodologies;
- Library Skills;
- Communication skills -report/thesis writing and oral presentations;
- Computing/word processing;
- Project and time management.¹

From our contact with postgraduate students we are also aware of demand from higher degree students for more support in writing literature reviews and research proposals. In addition, there is a strong demand from students in a range of fields for statistical support services to assist with the design of surveys and questionnaires, data analysis and the use of software such as SPSS and Nudist.

At the moment there are a number of areas within the University that provide workshops and programs that would assist the University to fill these training and development requirements:

- The ACUE currently provides workshops on thesis writing,
- Continuing and Professional Education provide, on a fee paying basis, programs in communication skills and project management, and
- Central IT Services provides some computer training for staff that has been made available to higher degree students on occasions where places are not been filled.

In our view these programs and workshops could be brought together and expanded to provide a comprehensive research skills program to support the existing structured programs offered by departments. In doing this it is crucial that the program be carefully integrated with the research and discipline requirements of schools and departments, and is offered free of charge to ensure that all students can benefit from them. Given the experience of the ACUE in providing the Integrated Bridging Program (IBP) for international research students, we believe that should have a strong role in the development and organisation of such a program.

¹ D Liljegren, *Research Education at Adelaide University*, Report by the Convenor of the Doctoral Education Working Party, June 2001.

Last year the IBP was restructured and is no longer provided to international postgraduate coursework students, except for those students sponsored by AusAID or enrolled in the Graduate School of Management. International postgraduate coursework students face many of the same difficulties as international research students. They need to acquire the specific language skills (written and oral) required for postgraduate study in their departments. They also require an induction to the academic and cultural conventions relevant to their field of study, and to postgraduate education in general. In the interests of equity we recommend that the IBP be expanded to include postgraduate coursework students. The importance of this kind of support for international postgraduate students cannot be underestimated in light of the fact that the University is the only Go8 University not to secure an AusAID contract. Attached as Appendix A is the PGSA's submission in relation to last year's restructuring of the Integrated Bridging Program.

Term of Reference 4. How can the ACUE best implement strategies and practices that impact positively on the teaching role of academics and the quality of the student learning experience?

Supervision is known to be a critical factor in the successful and timely completion of higher degree students.² Given the current concerns within the University about the need to improve higher degree completion rates, we strongly recommend that the University provide stronger incentives to ensure that supervisors attend staff development programs to improve their supervision.

We also recommend that all staff supervising international students should be required to attend 'Supervising international students workshops'. Ideally these workshops could be run in conjunction with the Graduate Centre, the PGSA, OSA, and the International Office and could focus on cultural awareness, anti-racism information, and alerting supervisors to potential challenges that they may face, and of the support networks available for both staff and international postgraduate students. The provision of such courses would be a good marketing tool to attract international students and would improve the University's chance of regaining the AusAID contract, which it lost recently.

The ACUE offers courses for new supervisors, yet there are many experienced supervisors with significant supervision loads who have never attended any professional development programs designed to improve their supervision practice. Perhaps the Unit should offer courses such as 'refresher' workshops for 'old hands'. Such courses could be couched in positive terms such as 'supervising students in the new millennium' or 'with new technology' or 'assisting your students with developing literature reviews and research proposals.' The skills learnt in an international student supervision course would of course also help 'old hands' with innovative supervision practices with local students.

As one of the premier universities in Australia, Adelaide University needs to be seen to be showing the way forward, and not continually playing catch-up. Innovation in the ACUE unit, in particular in relation to supervision would substantially increase higher degree completion rates and improve our national and international profile.

Term of Reference 5. On a performance basis, is the ACUE currently providing optimum value to the University? What would be the most appropriate goals and staffing structure of the ACUE to provide for the future needs of the University? What should be its core operational elements?

The ACUE provides a very professional intensive language and learning support for postgraduate students, particularly international students. It also provides a useful group of workshops on thesis writing and academic skills. As outlined above we believe that the thesis writing workshops could be expanded to form a comprehensive program for postgraduate research students. We also commend the ACUE for its attention to training and support for postgraduate supervisors. Again, as we have discussed earlier, we believe that these programs need to be enhanced and strengthened to provide scope for inter-cultural training, and to ensure that more experienced supervisors are involved.

² Seagram B, Gould J and Pyke S (1998) 'An investigation of gender and other variables on time to completion of doctoral degrees', *Research in Higher Education* Vol. 39 No. 3, pp.319-335.

In terms of the staffing structure in the ACUE, we believe it is essential that there are sufficient levels of staff to maintain and improve the availability of staff for one-to-one support for students. Currently, the University is considering the creation of a Graduate School/Centre. Part of the objectives of a Graduate School would be to coordinate or organise skill development programs for postgraduate students such as literature reviews, thesis formatting, publishing and so on. Ideally, when the proposed Graduate Centre is established, several specialised staff from the unit should have offices in the Graduate Centre. These staff, specialising in postgraduate services, should provide developmental workshops and one-on-one assistance for postgraduate students.

Term of Reference 6. What role should the ACUE have in assisting the University in the area of quality assurance?

For the University's quality assurance processes to be effective, there need to be a close relationship between the evaluation of the educational process and those mechanisms and programs that improve teaching, learning and postgraduate supervision. There also need to be a Unit that has the expertise and experience in evaluating teaching and postgraduate supervision, and in analysing the results. The ACUE is responsible for the analysis of the Student Evaluation of Teaching and has a strong research profile in the area of postgraduate supervision. For these reasons we believe that the ACUE should retain a significant role in the University's quality assurance processes.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the PGSA would like to re-iterate our comments under Term of Reference 1. In our view it is extremely important that the University continue and strengthen the following services:

- Intensive Language and Learning support and assistance for individual students;
- Bridging and skill development programs for students – including programs to develop skills in the use of IT and those necessary for research and problem-based learning;
- Teaching and curriculum development support programs for academic staff;
- Inter-cultural and diversity training for academic staff;
- Evaluation and review of teaching and postgraduate supervision.

Finally, the effectiveness of the ACUE would be improved by locating the Unit in a more accessible location in the University, increased promotion of the services, an improved website, and closer collaboration between the Unit and other providers of educational support.