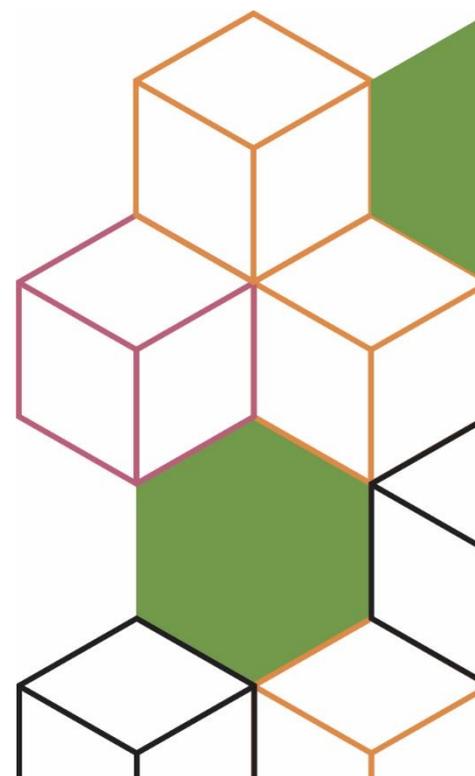


July
2021

Graduate Student
Association

Submission to the Academic Board on Academic Progress Review in Graduate Research Courses Policy

*Prepared by GSA Education (Research)
Officer, Monica Sestito in consultation with
graduate students*



About GSA

The Graduate Student Association (GSA) is the independent representative organisation for all graduate coursework and research students at the University of Melbourne. We are led by 8 GSA Board members, 10 Representative Council members and 20 Faculty Council Members, who are all elected University of Melbourne graduate students. On behalf of over 31,000 constituents, we represent graduate students to the University and wider community, provide student engagement events, activities, and information to the graduate student community, and support 150 affiliated graduate student groups.

GSA's vision is for inclusive, empowered graduate student communities that achieve meaningful and holistic university experiences. Our objectives are to support representation through our policy, advocacy and campaign activities, academic excellence, transition to work, support engaged and healthy community activities, and address organisational sustainability.

Acknowledgements

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Executive summary

This report critically examines a new policy proposed by the Academic Board, from the perspectives of graduate researchers.

The proposed policy, Academic Progress Review in Graduate Research Courses, aims to improve timely completion outcomes in graduate research degrees. While the issue of academic progress has previously been addressed in the general Graduate Research Training Policy, the new policy regards it as a standalone issue. It offers a more exhaustive outline of the responsibilities of graduate research candidates, supervisors, and advisory committees in achieving timely completion, as well as the procedures to follow where candidates run the risk of, or are making, insufficient progress.

This report examines the policy, its supposed purpose, and the context in which it has been formalised. It has been compiled in consultation with select representatives from the graduate researcher cohort who sit on University committees or lead graduate groups. Significantly, several graduate researchers from the general student body also contributed feedback on the policy. Many graduate researchers expressed their disappointment about the untimely and insensitive nature of this policy, which has been drafted in a context where graduate researchers continue to face significant challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As this proposed policy was brought to GSA's attention only two weeks before the deadline for providing feedback, opportunities for detailed engagement with graduate researchers were limited. Unfortunately, graduate researcher representatives were largely unaware of this policy, and of the invitation to provide feedback on it. This suggests that, in contradiction of the Academic Board's claims, extensive, University-wide consultation on this policy has not occurred. The following report should be considered in this context.

Main findings

This report has two main findings. It firstly observes that the proposed policy, in adopting a uniform, rigid framework for what constitutes successful progress in graduate research degrees, does not necessarily assist graduate researchers in completing their research projects. In particular, the proposal for all graduate researchers to undertake formal progress reviews every six months with their advisory committees, risks the risk of deepening the administrative burden faced by this cohort, of encouraging them to produce sub-par work, and of detracting from the time that they could spend with their advisory committees to obtain meaningful feedback. Instituting further compliance procedures imposed by the Academic Board without good-faith consultation with the cohort involved does little to ensure that graduate researchers have the support they need to reach timely completion.

The second major finding of this report concerns in the inadequate support for graduate researchers, as outlined in the proposed policy, in situations where they are deemed 'at risk' of making insufficient academic progress. The policy fails to make adequate provisions for graduate researchers when their 'at risk' status relates to compassionate and compelling circumstances. Moreover, it fails to

reference the specific support services (such as Academic Skills and Student Equity and Disability Support) available to assist graduate researchers. Though this exceeds the scope of the proposed policy, it is important to note that such services have faced cuts and restructures in the current phase of the Pandemic Reset Program enforced by University management. In this context, it is indeed concerning that this proposed policy may come into effect while support services have a reduced capacity to assist graduate researchers.

Recommendations for the Academic Board and the University administration

The main recommendations of this report are that the Academic Board should:

1. Adopt a moratorium on any significant changes to policy, particularly those concerning graduate researchers, until stage two of the four-point national strategy on COVID-19 has been reached (at best, at the beginning of 2022).
2. Conduct significant consultation with the graduate researcher cohort and consider their perspectives before establishing or enforcing a standalone policy on academic progress in graduate research degrees.
3. Reconsider its decision to mandate bi-annual, formal progress reviews with the candidate's entire advisory committee.
4. Revise its design of the progress review stages to ensure that candidates are afforded flexibility in engaging with the process when they are facing compassionate or compelling circumstances.
5. Strengthen support services for graduate researchers to encourage their research progress.

Introduction

This paper addresses a new policy proposed by the Academic Board (AB) on Academic Progress Review in Graduate Research Courses. It highlights issues with both the content and purpose of the policy, from the perspectives of graduate researchers. The paper then suggests modifications to the policy that would better demonstrate the University's commitment to equity. More fundamentally, it questions whether a new, exhaustive policy on academic progress is the best way to support graduate researchers, particularly in the context of ongoing challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Background

The briefing for the Academic Progress Review in Graduate Research Courses Policy suggests that work on this policy began 2017, when the AB implemented significant changes to the Graduate Research Training Policy (G RTP).¹ These 2017 changes aimed to improve timely completion in graduate research programs, by introducing a distinction between lapsed candidature and late submission for candidates unable to submit their theses by the maximum course duration. Previously, the G RTP did not stipulate the grounds upon which graduate researchers could apply for lapsed candidature. The introduction of late submission, applicable under strictly defined circumstances, restricted the ability of candidates to submit beyond the maximum course duration. Significantly, the AB's original policy change excluded compassionate grounds as a legitimate basis for obtaining late submission. It also sought to make lapsed candidature obsolete from 1 January 2018, meaning that late submission would be applied retrospectively to graduate researchers who had commenced their projects with the expectation that lapsed candidature was a possibility.

The briefing for the Academic Progress Review in Graduate Research Courses Policy suggests that work on this policy began 2017, when the AB implemented significant changes to the Graduate Research Training Policy (G RTP). These 2017 changes aimed to improve timely completion in graduate research programs, by introducing a distinction between lapsed candidature and late submission for candidates unable to submit their theses by the maximum course duration. Previously, the G RTP did not stipulate the grounds upon which graduate researchers could apply for lapsed candidature. The introduction of late submission, applicable under strictly defined circumstances, restricted the ability of candidates to submit beyond the maximum course duration. Significantly, the AB's original policy change excluded compassionate grounds as a legitimate basis for obtaining late submission. It also sought to make lapsed candidature obsolete from 1 January 2018, meaning that late submission would be applied

¹ To consult the policy briefing, see https://about.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0022/272029/Consultation-paper-Academic-Progress-Review-in-Graduate-Research-Courses.pdf. The current Graduate Research Training Policy is viewable here: <https://policy.unimelb.edu.au/MPF1321>.

retrospectively to graduate researchers who had commenced their projects with the expectation that lapsed candidature was a possibility.

At the time, GSA campaigned against these policy changes, which students widely regarded as inequitable and counterproductive to the AB's stated purpose of improving timely completions in graduate research degrees. In a petition on the policy promoted by GSA, which garnered more than one thousand signatures, GSA called for the AB to consider the equity issues raised by their proposed policy change.² In response to this public pressure, the AB decided to revoke the retrospective application of late submission, modifying the policy to ensure that it would only apply to students confirmed in their research degrees on or after 1 January 2018. It also introduced compassionate grounds as a legitimate basis for late submission.

The new Academic Progress Policy is framed as a continuation of the 2017 attempt to improve timely completion in graduate research degrees. Like its policy predecessor, the new policy raises similar issues regarding the institution of timely completion as the sole metric by which success in graduate research is measured and carried out. The question of how long it should take to complete graduate research degrees has been contested for many decades, with institutional interests and funding bodies playing an increasing role in determining the policy decisions of universities in this regard.³ In the Australian tertiary landscape, for instance, timely completion numbers currently account for fifty per cent of the formula used to determine government funding of the national graduate research funding scheme (the Research Training Program).⁴ In this context, timely completion is not primarily about graduate researchers' completing a quality research project, but is instead a measure of institutional success and financial viability. The Academic Progress Policy belongs to a broader tendency that makes of graduate research a key performance indicator of, and gateway to funding for, Australian universities.

In the current climate, the AB's decision to institute a policy that further formalises key performance indicators of graduate researchers, and the corrective processes to be followed if they are not met, misses the mark. Graduate researchers continue to face ongoing personal and professional challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵ These acute challenges, documented in a report by GSA, include difficulties in data collection, reduced accessibility of peer and supervisory support, and mental health issues exacerbated or created by the pandemic. Moreover, the support mechanisms adopted by the University to mitigate these challenges have sometimes had the inverse effect.⁶ In this context, the Academic Progress Policy

² A copy of the petition, accompanied by a statement from GSA President at the time, is available here: https://educationdocbox.com/College_Life/66543817-4-60-lapsed-candidature-is-only-available-to-candidates-who-were-enrolled-in-their.html.

³ For a detailed overview of this tendency, see <https://www.nteu.org.au/article/Change-and-continuity-in-Australian-doctoral-education%3A-PhD-completion-rates-and-times-%282005-2018%29-%28AUR-62-02%29-22291>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See <https://gsa.unimelb.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/20210315-Graduate-researchers-survey-report-final.pdf>.

⁶ Ibid.

risks further diminishing the trust that graduate researchers have in the university's intention and capacity to support them in their research journeys. This report's analysis of the proposed policy cannot be understood in isolation from the contours of the pandemic-impacted present that graduate researchers continue to negotiate.

Key issues

This section overviews the main issues with the Academic Progress Policy, as informed and identified by feedback that GSA solicited from graduate researcher representatives in select committees through which the University is governed, as well as from elected student leaders on graduate groups. Their feedback, with consent, has been incorporated into what follows.

Troubling assumptions

The policy appears to be governed by two troubling assumptions: firstly, that graduate research degrees universally proceed in a linear fashion, with milestones measured and measurable on such a basis; and secondly, that all graduate researchers are liable to make insufficient progress in their research, on their own accord.

Regarding the first assumption and its problematic nature, one student's feedback is particularly insightful:

I have written up and dumped two whole major projects during the course of my PhD. I have not met any milestones I said I'd meet in my first major progress review meeting – because my project fundamentally changed! But nonetheless I have made a lot of progress and nearly have a completed PhD thesis....progress [can be] made without relying on 'milestones' and an 'academic progress plan.'

This student's testimony is an important reminder that research is by its very nature an iterative process, which proceeds in ebbs and flows, not incrementally. This is not antithetical to a candidate's progress; on the contrary, it is the measure by which progress, at least from the perspective of graduate researchers, is meaningfully understood. Yet, the proposed policy seeks to impose a rigid framework of progress that is fundamentally at odds with the graduate research journey.

It is understandable that the AB, for the reasons discussed above, is obliged to implement policies concerning timely completion. However, there is no guarantee that this proposed policy will achieve the desired result of increased timely completion. On the contrary, it may have the opposite effect. One graduate researcher expressed concern that, in "forcing researchers to commit words to paper before they've actually done deep research," the policy risks detracting from their progress in the long term. Comments from another graduate researcher are similarly insightful:

Timely completion is a University policy aimed at securing research funding from the Federal Government. We all know that. Quality isn't relevant to the stat[istics] of timely

completion. But it is relevant to students, and so it actually is relevant to timely completion, because as students, we have to feel that what we're doing matters in order to keep doing it.

Without accounting for the needs and motivations of graduate researchers in conducting their projects, the University-mandated imperative of timely completion may disincentivise graduate researchers made to feel that they are, as one student memorably puts it, “on the conveyor belt of a PhD factory.”

It's also worth noting that the University administration, in developing their COVID-19 support policies for graduate researchers, maintained that a uniform approach to the graduate researcher cohort was untenable and counterproductive. This was justified on the grounds that graduate researchers and their circumstances are heterogenous, and so must also be support offered to them. If this logic is to be something other than a justification for penny pinching in the face of the pandemic, then it should be maintained in the context of academic progress in graduate research degrees.

The second assumption behind the Academic Progress Policy is that all graduate researchers are liable to make insufficient progress. This is the basis upon which the proposed policy mandates formal progress reviews between the candidate and their advisory committees every six months.⁷ This is a significant change from the existing policy on academic progress outlined in the GRTP, which states that, except for full-time masters candidates, post-confirmation candidates “must attend academic progress reviews at least annually.”⁸ While additional opportunities for feedback from supervisors and the advisory committee at large are always welcome, formal progress reviews exceed this purpose. They are official assessments made by the advisory committee on the candidate's progress, with the results recorded on their academic record. Assessments of insufficient progress see the candidate acquire an ‘at risk’ status. This then precipitates a new administrative process of setting milestones that the candidate must achieve, usually within three months, to have the ‘at risk’ status removed. If, as the GRTP advises, candidates are meeting at least monthly with their supervisors to discuss their progress, and the supervisor notices no issue with the candidate's progress,⁹ then mandating bi-annual formal progress reviews only adds an unnecessary administrative process. Instead of “dealing with real cases of concern [with] a well thought out approach,” as one graduate researcher comments, the proposed policy adopts a universal approach, as if all students in this cohort risk making insufficient progress.

These two troubling assumptions inform the specific issues identified in the APRP, as outlined below.

⁷ See sections 4.3, 4.4 (e), and 5.1 – 5.8 of the proposed policy: https://about.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/272026/Academic-Progress-Review-in-Graduate-Research-Courses-Policy-3-June-2021.pdf

⁸ See section 5.23 of the GRTP: <https://policy.unimelb.edu.au/MPF1321#section-5.13>

⁹ See section 5.10 of the GRTP. Ibid.

Specific issues

1. Institution of obligatory bi-annual formal progress reviews

Section 4.3 stipulates that “advisory committees must formally review candidates’ academic progress on a six-monthly basis.” As mentioned above, there is a strong potential that mandating such bi-annually reviews will serve less to assist graduate researchers in the fulfillment of their projects, than it will to institute an additional administrative burden upon both graduate researchers and their advisory committee, one that functions above all as an obligatory compliance procedure. One graduate researcher who provided their feedback explained this succinctly:

I can understand a 6-month review cycle being useful where a candidate has not been meeting monthly milestones, but it seems a bit onerous when progress has been satisfactory and the candidate is confirmed. I think the default should be review committee meetings every 12 months, unless a supervisor specifically red flags that milestones aren't being met.

The “onerous” nature of administrative processes was something referenced by another graduate researcher, who admitted that “making sure I am complying with administrative requirements can be one of the most nerve-wracking parts of the PhD, honestly.” This sentiment is concerning on multiple grounds. On the one hand, it indicates a lack of support felt by graduate researchers in effectively negotiating the already cumbersome administrative responsibilities that are a part of graduate research; on the other, it presages the strong likelihood that increased obligatory formal progress reviews will only exacerbate this administrative burden and actually detract from the candidate’s capacity to focus on what should be their priority: their research project.

To the counterpoint that six-monthly progress reviews should be welcomed because they offer further opportunities for feedback from the advisory committee, the comments of another graduate researcher suggest that in practice this opportunity is limited:

One major problem in my school right now is that, presumably due to the increased workload that the current review system has afforded for secondary supervisors and chairs, it's common for students to report that panel members clearly haven't even read the materials submitted [for the formal academic progress review].

The issue of insurmountable workloads faced by academic staff would merit a report of its own. In this discussion, the issue is significant because it throws light on the reality that additional formal reviews, instituted universally and without consideration of academic workloads, risk becoming a mere compliance process to complete, rather than a meaningful opportunity for feedback entered into in good faith by candidates, supervisors, and chairs of advisory committees. Moreover, these additional reviews risk detracting from the time that advisory committees have for assisting their students.

2. Inadequate consideration of compelling and compassionate circumstances and accompanying support services

The Academic Progress Policy is designed so that advisory committees have the responsibility to intervene before a graduate researcher makes unsatisfactory progress.¹⁰ This intervention involves the advisory committee sending an email to the graduate researcher, advising that they have been deemed as 'at risk' of making unsatisfactory progress, and inviting them to attend a formal meeting with their advisory committee. Ideally, this meeting will lead to the creation of a progress plan for the next three months (or the part-time equivalent) of the student's candidature, and, if fulfilled, the candidate will return to good academic standing.

The best outcome, for graduate researchers, advisory committees, and the University administration alike, would be to prevent a candidate from receiving a formal notice of unsatisfactory progress. Unfortunately, the Academic Progress Policy appears ill-equipped to facilitate this desired outcome. This is because it does not sufficiently address the specific services available to support graduate researchers. Section 5.11 (b) stipulates that candidates 'at risk' "may seek advice and support from the Student Union Advocacy Service (SUAS) or other support service." The "other support service[s]" available to the student are not explicated, nor are the means by which a candidate can seek the support of SUAS. Section 5.14 (c) states that advisory committees must inform candidates of "assistance available from support services including academic skills support or counselling," without, again, providing any further detail on such services and their current capacity.¹¹

The very services from which 'at risk' students should turn to for support, such as the Academic Skills team, have faced job cuts and restructuring as a part of the Pandemic Reset Program adopted by University of Melbourne management.¹² Graduate researchers with disabilities, chronic illnesses, and mental health issues have also provided feedback that Student Equity and Disability Support (SEDS) has been unable to assist them with academic adjustments.¹³ As such, graduate researchers may encounter difficulty in accessing support services at the time they need them to the most. Addressing this broader issue cannot be achieved within the limited scope of the Academic Progress Policy. Nevertheless, it calls into question what it means to "support candidates to succeed," the policy's stated aim, if the services designed to assist them in times of personal or professional hardship

¹⁰ The flowchart accompanying this policy visually manifests the stages of adjudicating academic progress, the first of which involves 'at risk' assessments made by the advisory committee. See https://about.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0014/272030/GR-Academic-Progress-Flow-chart-01062021.pdf

¹¹ See https://about.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/272026/Academic-Progress-Review-in-Graduate-Research-Courses-Policy-3-June-2021.pdf

¹² In May 2021, GSA published a report on these cuts to Academic Skills and their detrimental impact upon students. See <https://gsa.unimelb.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/20210428-Academic-Skills-Submission-v4.pdf>. Professor Graham Schaffer provides an inciteful analysis of the Pandemic Reset Program and the questionable financial outlook upon which it has been deemed necessary: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nx6aiSIT3Dw>.

¹³ This is a deeply concerning issue that GSA is currently investigating.

are underfunded and understaffed. As one graduate researcher emphatically states, at all times, though particularly when facing hardship, “we want to feel as if we are dealing with people that care about our intellectual development and well being.”

On similar grounds, it is concerning that the Academic Progress Policy excludes from its purview graduate researchers who are facing compelling or compassionate circumstances. At every stage of the academic progress review trajectory, no provision is made for extensions or flexibility when graduate researchers can demonstrate that research-related circumstances beyond their control, or significant personal circumstances, prevent them from meeting typical progress requirements. If candidates are afforded the opportunity to apply for lapsed candidature or late submission under compassionate or compelling circumstances, then it is unclear why the same opportunity cannot be afforded and enshrined into policy regarding milestones throughout their candidature. The current context of graduate researcher makes this need to flexibility in research progress even more pressing. As one student explains,

Given the uncertainty of the COVID-19 environment, with ongoing lockdowns being a reality, research timelines are and will continue to be impacted (e.g. delays in shipment of research equipment, travel bans to research sites, communication with collaborators (who may be hospitalised with COVID-19 overseas), delays in participant recruitment, in addition to personal challenges faced by candidates (and supervisors) - these are just some examples). These factors are unfortunately beyond the control of candidates. The timing and content of the draft policy do not seem to align with the current 2021 environment.

The Academic Progress Policy, as it stands, appears totally at odds with climate in which graduate researchers are conducting their work.

3. Inequitable appeal processes

The Academic Progress Policy contains several issues regarding equitable access to appeals. Alarmingly, at various points, it decrees that academic committees – be they ‘at risk’ interventions, unsatisfactory progress meetings, or ‘show cause’ meetings – can make decisions in the first instance in a candidate’s absence.¹⁴ It enables graduate researchers to be promoted to a higher, more serious stage of the academic review process, simply for failing to respond to related correspondence within a short timeframe.¹⁵ Similarly, it revokes from graduate researchers the right to appeal decisions of the Course Academic Progress Committee (CAPC) to the Academic Board, if they have been unable to respond to correspondence in a timely fashion.¹⁶ This system may be in place for all students already, but it is cause for concern nonetheless.

¹⁴ Key sections are 4.16, 5.13, 5.29, 5.47. See https://about.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/272026/Academic-Progress-Review-in-Graduate-Research-Courses-Policy-3-June-2021.pdf

¹⁵ See section 5.23. Ibid.

¹⁶ See section 5.58. Ibid.

The Academic Progress Policy also contains unclear guidelines regarding the relationship between previous unsatisfactory progress determinations and the issuing of 'show cause' notices leading to the termination of a student's enrolment. Section 5.50 of the policy states that, "a CAPC may only terminate a candidate's enrolment where it can be demonstrated that the candidate has previously been issued with unsatisfactory progress notices in accordance with this policy." Without explicating the parameters beyond which graduate researchers can have their enrolment terminated, the policy leaves open the possibility that students can be ejected from their course after having received only one notice of unsatisfactory progress. It also leaves open the possibility that students can be ejected in a context where they have not responded to correspondence on time and have had their academic standing shift automatically from 'at risk' to 'unsatisfactory progress,' to the 'show cause' stage.

4. Composition and organisation of CAPC meeting

The Academic Progress Policy allows for CAPC meetings to occur in the absence of a candidate's principle supervisor. Section 4.14 stipulates that the meeting can proceed "if the principal supervisor or the chair of the advisory committee is in attendance."¹⁷ Principal supervisors shoulder the greatest responsibility for supporting candidates throughout their research journey. Because they, unlike co-supervisors and advisory chairs, are required to meet at least monthly with candidates, they are better placed than other members of the advisory committee to understand the candidate's project and progress. For this reason, it is concerning to consider that CAPC meetings could proceed in absence of a principal supervisor, provided the committee chair attends. There may be circumstances in which it is legitimate for the principal supervisor not to attend a CAPC meeting (where, for instance, there are supervisory issues and the candidate or advisory chair recommends the main supervisor not to attend). However, such circumstances should perhaps be regarded as the exception rather than the rule.

There are two further issues regarding the organisation of CAPC, as enshrined in the Academic Progress Policy. Firstly, no provision is made for students and, conversely, CAPC members, to be informed of each other's identities in order to prevent a conflict of interest. Providing this information too far in advance of the CAPC meeting does risk creating additional challenges, but such challenges do not outweigh the importance of ensuring the candidates have the best opportunity for their case to be heard without prejudice. Secondly, the Academic Progress Policy makes no provision for students to indicate their availability for a CAPC, in the event that the chosen time does not suit them for compassionate or compelling reasons.

¹⁷ Ibid. Emphasis added.

5. Lack of support for students forced to discontinue or transfer their research programs

As it stands, the Academic Progress Policy does not account for the services and support that the University of Melbourne will offer a candidate if they are forced or advised to unenrol. Moreover, it does not specify that the University will uphold financial promises previously made to candidates. For instance, due to the impact of COVID-19, some graduate researchers have been forced to commence their candidatures remotely. For those without a pre-existing Australian bank account (which, by law, must be set up by individuals physically present on Australian territory), this means that they have been unable to receive their stipend. If an individual from this cohort of graduate researchers withdraws from their studies due to insufficient academic progress, this policy provides no assurance that they will be paid the scholarship funds accumulated throughout their remote candidature.

Recommendations

1. The Academic Board should **adopt a moratorium on any significant changes to policy**, particularly those concerning graduate researchers, until stage two of the four-point national strategy on COVID-19 has been reached. At best, this will be at the beginning of 2022.
2. In the interim, the Academic Board should **conduct significant consultation with the graduate researcher cohort** and supervisors and consider their perspectives before establishing or enforcing a standalone policy on academic progress in graduate research degrees. Though the briefing for the Academic Progress Policy asserts that “university-wide consultation” informed such a policy, the feedback received by GSA suggests otherwise.
3. The Academic Board should **reconsider its decision to mandate bi-annual, formal progress reviews** with a candidate’s entire advisory committee, for the various reasons discussed in this paper. These official, bi-annual progress review meetings, with the significant administrative burden they entail, should be held on a case-by-case basis. This basis may include a supervisor noticing progress issues in their regular (at least monthly) meetings with their candidate, or, conversely, a candidate feeling unsupported by their supervisor in the development of their research project.
4. The Academic Board should **revise its design of the progress review stages to ensure that candidates are afforded flexibility** in engaging with the process when they are facing compassionate or compelling circumstances. This may include allowing for greater leniency around

timeframes within which correspondence is due and the timeframe of academic progress plans.

5. The Academic Board should revise its design of the progress review stages to ensure that formal progress review meetings (including six-monthly advisory meetings or CAPC meetings) cannot be held in a candidate's absence unless there are several instances of non-contact without explanation. They should also preclude a candidate from progressing to a higher stage of the review process, simply for issues regarding correspondence.
 6. The Academic Board should **embed references to appropriate support services** offered by the University of Melbourne in policies concerning academic progress in graduate research degrees.
 7. The Academic Board should **strengthen support services for graduate researchers** to encourage their research progress. Strengthening these services may entail increasing their funding and ensuring that they are equipped to support graduate researchers. These services should be improved before a standalone academic progress policy for graduate researchers can be implemented.
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Appendix: testimonies from graduate researchers

- *This policy is just another example of University management pushing hard deadlines and bureaucratic pressures on candidates, while doing very little to identify or mitigate the university's role in creating the conditions for a candidate to be 'at risk.' It lays out in great detail the hurdles and procedures a candidate must endure to be deemed 'satisfactory,' but fails to address the ways in which myriad aspects of the university experience at present are likely to be the key barrier to a student fulfilling the requirements of the policy. These include the lack of support services, limited access to extensions, complications with leave applications, and scholarship restrictions. Ultimately this policy appears to be drafted to streamline processes for reprimand and box ticking on management's end, while creating further problems and pressures for research candidates.*
- *This policy will create even more of a division between the university's idea of an outcome of the PhD (you completed a degree) and the reasons that we do it (intellectual curiosity, intellectual development, an unlikely but still possible career). Timely completion is a University policy aimed at securing research funding from the Federal Government. We all know that. Quality isn't relevant to the stats of timely completion. But it is relevant to students, and so it is relevant to timely completion, because as students, we have to feel that what we're doing matters in order to keep doing it. More administrative structure will not make us feel that what we are doing matters. Becoming part of an intellectual community, developing personal relationships with faculty and other students, feeling involved in our place of work and study - these are things that help us feel that what we're doing matters. The policy does not adequately help us in these ways.*
- *This [policy] stinks of trying to weed out students for monetary purposes rather than helping the student. It sounds like the University only wants to spend its money and resources on doctoral students who it can guarantee will graduate within strict time and financial frameworks, rather than encouraging researchers to fulfil their promise. Shame on the University for this.*
- *The burden of proof lies with the Board to show that their policy will produce the stated goal, rather than simply saying that it will achieve the goal because it will achieve the goal. Where is the research that suggests the policy will succeed? What is the work that has been done to create the policy? And relatedly, how can the Board show that this 'consultation' is being done meaningfully and in good faith?*
- *Lack of progress can be out of your control - I'm waiting for some linked data back from the Department of Health that they have been promising that they'll send me 'in 2-3 weeks' for many months now (to be fair, they are busy). I started this process 2 years ago. I literally created a second empirical project at the start of this year because I was worried I would not get the data back in time, and that's looking even more and more like a real possibility. For students whose data is similarly dependent on outside*

bodies - what are we supposed to do when reporting 'progress'? Because I can't do anything but send them reminder emails every fortnight. If I hadn't done other things to ensure 'progress', would I have been put 'at-risk'?

- *If the goal is to protect students, then there is an unsatisfactory link between an administrative flag of 'at risk' and steps taken in the real world to address that risk. Bureaucratising the process by which 'at risk' students are identified and helped will not help students: we want to feel as if we are dealing with people that care about our intellectual development and wellbeing, and we often do feel like this, but standardising the process by which these decisions are made removes agency (decisions are made about us, not with us) and that makes people feel shit, and feeling shit isn't conducive to good work. Good work is necessary for timely completion.*
- *A "ONE WAY APPROACH TO SUCCESS" model is a one-way approach to pushing graduate researchers to possible personal and academic failures. There are several surveys and statistical analyses on PhD mental health and wellbeing issues, and most of them present surprising data about how much graduate researchers are struggling. Furthermore, in a COVID-19 era, while knowing enough about how lockdown, isolation, health issues/stress can affect researchers, it is concerning that the University wants to adopt a one-size-fits-all way to successfully completing a PhD program.*
- *If they are going to implement a further burden on students in terms of more progress review meetings, then they need to remove the administrative burden from students as much as possible - i.e., they need to send out VERY CLEAR reminder emails to both the student as well as all members of the advisory committee and supervisors. Even better would be personalised follow-up from admin in the department to make sure students are complying with administrative requirements - if they're going to place further burden on students, then admin staff should be supporting them (and their supervisors) with keeping track of all this.*
- *Adopting a policy of identifying and 'helping' 'at risk' students has been categorically refuted in other pedagogical contexts. Research in the secondary school context suggests that labelling students as 'at risk' or similar is a great way to produce student disengagement. It has also been shown to be complicit with racist and sexist paradigms that exclude some students. How is the policy written to prevent this from happening?*
- *If the University administration really wanted to support graduate researchers to 'succeed' they would not be implementing a policy like this, a policy that mandates more punitive measures to be imposed on us the minute we face an obstacle in the progress of our projects; if they wanted to support us, the administration would instead properly fund all graduate researchers' projects; they would increase employment opportunities so that we truly have the opportunity to complete the academic apprenticeship that a PhD purportedly entails; they would restructure academic workloads to ensure that supervision is a meaningful component, and not an administrative appendage to be squeezed in wherever possible; they would allow greater leniency in extensions and paid leave, particularly for those with caring responsibilities and particularly in a*

context of a global pandemic; they would fund the support services that all students, including graduate researchers, need to fulfil their promise, especially in the face of adversity. And this is just the beginning. This policy is the latest example of the University administration prioritising their own profitability over what should be the core functions of a university: teaching, learning and research. It's time they stop paying lip service to supporting students and put their money where their mouth is.