Executive Summary

Research degree candidature is an unconventional student experience. There are few hurdle requirements and only one major assessment ‘task’: the thesis or project. Twice yearly progress reporting is the only formal record of academic progress which a candidate receives throughout their research degree.

Progress reports play an important role in decisions to extend or terminate candidature and in the management of student complaints. Ostensibly the progress reporting system performs yet another role: as a mechanism for candidates to report on their research experience, ask for equipment or training and tell us about any problems they are encountering.

As a consequence, of these multiple and conflicting demands, it is common to discover that these documents are not a truthful representation of student progress and not effective in the resolution of complaints. This situation is further complicated by the fact that progress reporting is not carried out consistently across RMIT. Significant numbers of candidates have not had a progress report in the last year and many opportunities to use candidate feedback to improve the quality of the research degree experience at RMIT are being lost.

This report has been commissioned to inform the design of a new, online progress reporting system at RMIT. For the online system to be successful, a fuller picture of the present problems and complications around progress reporting was necessary. This report reviews the current situation, reports on the views from the student, supervisor and administrators, compares RMIT to other universities and makes a set of recommendations for revision to policy and changed procedures.

Specific Issues

Two reports in recent years¹, have identified the following with the current progress reporting system at RMIT:

- **Purpose**: progress reports do not have a clearly defined role in the pedagogy of research degree candidature, or in the administration of complaints.
- **Process**: There is no unified university process for progress reports. Different forms and processes are used at SEH, BUS and individual schools in DSC.
- **Communication**: processes for submitting and dealing with reports are sometimes not clearly understood, even within the schools which use them, nor are they always adequately communicated to students and supervisors. There is a natural reluctance to put information in writing if the destination of and access to the final document is unclear.
- **Timing**: Progress reports are due every six months for part time and full time students. Some students have additional reporting requirements to outside bodies and scholarship providers which mean that some are reporting on progress up to 6 times a year.

¹ “Progress reporting process: trial at the school of economics, finance and marketing, 2009” and “RMIT University School of Graduate Research: Process Inventory, 2010”
• **Data quality:** It is very difficult to keep track of the due date of each progress report and ensure reminders are sent for overdue reports. A substantial number of progress reports are outstanding each year. Data entry timeliness and quality vary greatly throughout the various schools and colleges.

• **Cost:** Since most systems are paper based, there is a risk of duplication, losing documents and inaccuracies as well as double handling and the maintenance of multiple databases. Each time there is a change of staff in key administration and academic positions there is a need to provide training and time to master use of complex and idiosyncratic systems.

• **Lack of feedback to stakeholders:** Issues raised in progress reports are not necessarily attended to or addressed by the schools and colleges resulting in a lack of confidence in the system. There is a lack of clear process of using the progress reports to yield usable data for candidature management at a school level.

• **Alignment** Not all progress reporting procedures within the various schools conform to the RMIT policy on academic progress. For instance, there are no specially trained academic advisers for research students. Most of the time this responsibility falls to the HDR co-ordinator, who may not have sufficient time in their work plan or sufficient counselling expertise to adequately perform this role.

• **Privacy and access:** Not all progress reports processes allow the confidential recording of information and the privacy guidelines around this data and its storage is unclear.

**Recommendations**

These issues can be addressed through the implementation of a more consistent and transparent progress review process. This new process should aim, as far as possible, to decouple the complaints resolution process from the assessment of student progress. To that end, the following recommendations are made:

1. Reporting should be **meaningful** within the research degree curriculum. To this end, reporting should be reduced to once a year (EFTSL) and linked to three distinct ‘milestones’ of candidature: confirmation (9 - 12 months EFSL), mid point review (20-24 months) and completion (6 months prior to submission).

2. These milestone reviews should be seen as a minimum requirement for monitoring of candidature and should be supplemented with regular 6 monthly ‘desk reviews’ by the supervisor(s). The milestone reviews involve public presentation of the work and should have a formal paperwork process to be determined by the college. It will be the supervisor(s) responsibility to initiate desk reviews and keep appropriate records, which could be subject to an audit at a later stage.

3. Desk reviews could involve the use of study plan templates which assist the candidate and supervisors to do needs analysis, skills audits and keep track of ongoing professional development activities in the form of a portfolio, which can be presented at the milestone review presentation. Candidates should be responsible for keeping their portfolio up to date and pursuing the activities they agree to. Supervisors should be responsible for keeping appropriate, up to date records on the progress of candidature in a secure, on campus location, which could be produced in the case of a grievance process or at the request of the school or college. These records should include times and dates of all meetings and desk reviews as well as brief notes about what was discussed.
4. Milestone Reviews should, wherever possible, take the form of a presentation of the research in progress to an appropriate disciplinary audience, either inside or outside the school. Such presentations afford an opportunity for the candidate to seek feedback on the work in progress and for other students to learn about research within the school. Wherever possible, milestone reviews should take place within existing school and college research events, or an ongoing seminar series. Appropriate technology should be used to enable students who are overseas or off campus to present their work or review presentations which have taken place.

5. A supervisory panel should oversee the student milestone review presentation and meet with the candidate afterwards to discuss progress in a more intimate setting and do any appropriate paperwork. Supervisors should ensure the outcomes of the review are appropriately recorded and lodged with the school. Candidates should take responsibility for notifying the school of any impediment to completion of a milestone in advance and for applying for an extension where necessary.

6. The milestone review should be a formal hurdle requirement, which allows for the possibility of the student being placed ‘at risk’ if it is not satisfactorily completed. Once the ‘At risk’ process has been followed, the student may be reinstated to full candidature, be downgraded to a masters degree or excluded from the program.

7. At any point in the candidature, supervisors should be able to issue the student with a notice of unsatisfactory progress. This notice will trigger the current RMIT Procedures for the management of unsatisfactory academic progress (‘at risk’). At the conclusion of this process, the student will be assessed as part of their normal progress review cycle and either be taken off ‘at risk’ or excluded from the program.

8. Documentation of milestone reviews should not permit dependencies. No part of the reporting which accompanies the milestones should be confidential to the parties involved in making it, but access to the report as a whole should be restricted to those involved in candidature management. Procedures and guidelines for dissemination of the reports to outside parties should be developed separately.

9. Supervisors and students should be provided with discipline specific, but simple rubrics for assessing progress. These rubrics should form the integral part of the progress report. These should set out expectations for quality and be appropriately gauged to the stage of candidature the student is at (at present the only document of this kind is the ‘guidelines to examiners’). These rubrics would set out the expected levels of achievement in areas such as writing, reading, analysis, project work and so on and assist students to see what area(s) need further development. Such rubrics will allow students to engage in guided reflection on their progress and help supervisors to provide more detailed feedback to students and give a more nuanced appraisal of progress. The rubric should incorporate a scoring mechanism that makes the designation of ‘unsatisfactory’ vs ‘satisfactory’ progress a more straightforward task, but - to avoid this becoming a ‘tick box exercise’ supervisors should be required to provide written evidence for their assessment that is specific and actionable.
10. Students should be given the **opportunity to give anonymous feedback about supervisor, school and university performance** through interim feedback surveys attached to the progress review cycle. The SGR should take responsibility for overseeing the processing and dissemination of the surveys in accordance with the Student Feedback Policy at RMIT.

11. Schools must have **clear mechanisms for identifying and acting on issues** which are affecting student progress and to ‘close the loop’ so that students and staff are aware that concerns are being listened to and problems are being addressed. The most effective way to do this would be to introduce a ‘request for support’ form which students could submit to the school when they are experiencing difficulty with their research. All requests for support should be recorded and, if possible addressed locally; if local action cannot be taken, the report should be passed to the college office. These forms represent valuable information; issues and actions arising from these requests for support should be summarised and reported to the college office on a yearly basis where they can be appropriately communicated to academic staff and to students.

12. Students should have the opportunity to **discuss issues related to academic progress and supervisory relationships separately and confidentially**. These discussions should be treated in the first instance as workplace disputes and should be managed by an appropriate trained academic advisor. It would be preferable for this advisor to be located within the College so that the student can be satisfied that they are at ‘arms length’ from the school in which they are located. Not all complaints will need to be escalated to a formal grievance process, but any discussions or mediations arising should be fully documented and actions noted. Students should have the option to take matters to the Dean of the School of Graduate Research if they are not satisfied with the response at the College level.

13. Some **anomalies in the current system** need to be clarified, specifically the passing of progress reports to the new supervisory team in the event of a change in supervision, the authority to issue a final ‘grade’ and the timing of the progress report in relation to LOA.

14. If an online system is implemented, as far as is practicable, the **format of milestone review reports should be customisable** around a core set of ‘minimal data’. Schools should be responsible for designing (and redesigning) any additional widgets for their own internal use. All data should be stored and managed centrally.