Education and Employment References Committee

Senate Inquiry into Australian University Graduates: MGA Submission

Highly qualified but not connected: Bridging the gap between graduate study and graduate employment.

JUNE 2026

monash graduate association

About MGA:

The Monash Graduate Association (MGA) is the representative body for all graduate research and coursework students – Graduate Certificate & Diploma, Masters by Coursework or Research and PhD – enrolled at Monash University. We are **an independent, not-for-profit** association **governed by graduate students**, for graduate students. Our executive committee is comprised of elected representatives whose sole agenda is to advocate for needs and issues that affect graduate students. MGA represents **over 30,000 graduate students** across the Victorian campuses of Caulfield, Clayton, Parkville and Peninsula, as well as those studying online.

Executive Summary:

The Monash Graduate Association (MGA) welcomes the invitation and the opportunity to contribute to the Senate Education and Employment References Committee's Inquiry into Australian University Graduates. As the representative body for over 30,000 graduate research and coursework students at Monash University, MGA is uniquely positioned to present empirical, student-centred evidence to inform effective policy responses. This submission draws on data collected across three national postgraduate student surveys conducted between 2024 and 2026. Our evidence reveals that graduate students – those enrolled in Graduate Certificates & Diplomas, Masters by Coursework or Research, and PhDs – face distinctly different employment transition challenges to their undergraduate counterparts and require targeted policy responses.

Key findings include:

- 46% of domestic full-time coursework students work in entirely unrelated positions to their field of study, primarily due to financial necessity (71%), suggesting a lack of accessible, flexible professional opportunities during study.
- 60% of international graduate students are employed in unrelated fields, with 34% unemployed and actively seeking work, reflecting systemic barriers to Australian labour market entry.
- 62% of Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students are employed during candidature predominantly in casual and part-time roles, with many reporting that career planning, industry exposure and internships, and networking support are the least satisfying elements of their graduate experience.
- Financial stress has worsened significantly across all cohorts since 2023, with 88–90% of student renters under rental stress. Financial hardship directly impairs academic engagement, study completion, and employment transition readiness and outcomes.
- Concerns about education quality and value for money are widespread, with outdated course materials, limited industry exposure, and inadequate placement support among the most commonly cited issues.

This submission points to four areas we have identified that require urgent policy attention: (1) the need for flexible professional employment opportunities and pathways during study; (2) reform of Research Training Program internship arrangements; (3) action to address employer bias against HDR-qualified candidates; and (4) stronger structural supports for international graduate students navigating visa and workforce entry barriers.

MGA urges the Committee to consider the four recommendations outlined in this submission, which reflect the diverse needs of a growing and vital cohort of Australian graduate students whose success is essential to Australia's research capability, workforce productivity, and long-term economic competitiveness.

Introduction:

Graduate students – those students engaged in Graduate Certificates & Diplomas, Masters by Coursework or Research, and PhDs – play a vital role in building Australia's research and advanced skills capability across all sectors in the Australian economy. These graduates contribute not only to Australia's research and teaching outputs during their studies but also to long-term innovation and productivity, with many pursuing careers in industry, entrepreneurship, government, non-profit and healthcare. In every potential career trajectory, graduate students apply their specialised knowledge and expertise developed in their studies including research methodology, critical problem solving, analytical reasoning, and specific professional training – capabilities that are increasingly essential in Australia's economy.

Our Aim:

This submission presents data directly representing the voices of Monash University graduate students collected over three surveys between 2024 – 2026. These data were collected using validated measures including the DASS-21 (Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale) and the Melbourne Institute (MI) Financial Wellbeing Scale, and approved by Monash University Research Ethics Committee (MUREC).

Throughout the submission we reference the following studies:

- 2024 National Postgraduate Student Satisfaction Survey (coursework, n=1,153 Monash; HDR, n=699 Monash) (MUREC Project ID: 41520);
- 2025 National Postgraduate Student Survey on Health, Family and Finances (coursework, n=1,282 Monash; HDR, n=1,014 Monash) (MUREC Project ID: 46811);
- 2026 National Postgraduate Student Satisfaction Survey - Preliminary data (coursework, n=1793 Monash; HDR, n=990 Monash) (MUREC Project ID: 51289).[i]

While our analysis remains focused on survey respondents from Monash University, where possible we have included comparison data from other Australian universities.

The data provided in this submission give direct insights to the Terms of Reference for this Inquiry. As necessary, we have situated our data in the broader literature pertaining to graduate student experiences and outcomes, and we have drawn out suggestions on policy reforms based on the research available. However, our primary goal with this submission is to ensure that the Committee is provided highly relevant empirical data from the perspective of graduate research and coursework students, and that the Committee understands the nuances of this diverse group of students who require different policy responses to those that target undergraduate students.

1 | Understanding the graduate student cohort:

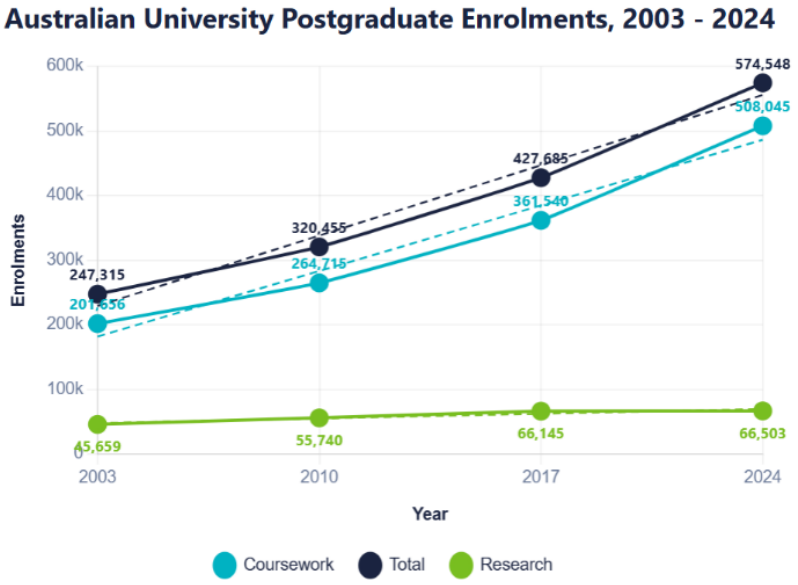
Graduate students face unique experiences and challenges that differ to their undergraduate counterparts. They are often older – with the average age of PhD candidates being approximately 37 years old and approximately 36% of graduate coursework students being over 30 years old – and many already have existing careers, a factor that can be overlooked in graduate employment policy making.[1] However, some graduate students are pursuing career pivots and need support bridging the gap into new industries, while others may have transitioned straight from undergraduate to graduate studies, meaning they may need targeted opportunities to gain professional career exposure. Further, a significant number of graduate students are international students, seeking high quality education and qualifications with many intending to apply these in the Australian labour market. However, international graduate students may face complex student visa working conditions and are subject to increasing

[i] NB: A full analysis of the 2026 Student Satisfaction survey is currently underway. As such we present raw data, with an emphasis on representing qualitative responses.

financial disincentives to transition into the Temporary Graduate Visa (Subclass 485) which allows for post-study employment.[2]

The graduate student cohort is growing, which means we need to ensure their employment outcomes are prioritised alongside undergraduate students. Table 1, presented below, indicates the scale of this growth in graduate level enrolments:

Table 1. Increasing Numbers of Graduate Research and Coursework Students at Australian Universities



(Data Source: DoE, 2003 – 2024 Higher Education Student Data)[3]

It is critical that the Committee pay considerable attention to the cohort of graduate students, given the increasing expectations from employers (as well as government and professional regulators) for qualifications at the Graduate Certificate, Diploma, and Masters level. This is evidenced by the sharp growth in graduate coursework enrolments over the last 20 years, more than doubling from 201,656 in 2003 to 508,045 in 2024, reflecting the reality that the modern labour market often demands graduate qualifications for working in essential industries including in education, healthcare, engineering, law, finance and other professional services.

Graduate research enrolments have also grown, though more modestly, from 45,659 in 2003 to 66,503 in 2024. Importantly, while graduate research grows, there has been recent acknowledgment that domestic enrolments are in decline relating to concerns that career relevance and financial sacrifices graduate research demands may be perceived as incommensurate with the benefits of having a research Masters or PhD.[4]

The complexity of who is a graduate student makes planning for career transitions policy challenging. However, there are substantial data which highlight critical insights for policy makers to refine the kinds of programs and support offered to graduate students for their career and workforce transitions, which we now present.

2 | The State of the Entry-Level Job Market

It is clear that qualifications from university do not guarantee employment. This is, in part, because the number of people who obtain university degrees has dramatically increased, and many professional jobs require at least an undergraduate degree.[5] To gain greater specialisation, to pursue passion for research and/or to meet increasing demands of the employer and industry, many people pursue further studies after their undergraduate degrees at higher rates than ever before. As highlighted above, graduate enrolments have more than doubled over the last 20

years. This enables individuals to gain a competitive edge in the market, sharpen their academic skills and meet professional standards for certain industries (e.g. health and psychology). The entry-level job market looks different for those students graduating from higher degrees including Graduate Certificates & Diplomas, Masters and PhD to those students in undergraduate degrees. However, within this cohort, data suggests a wide spectrum of study/career alignment and job pathways. For clarity, we highlight three coursework cohorts and a HDR cohort, each requiring thoughtful and tailored policy responses that reflect these distinctions. The following data are drawn from our 2025 Student Survey:

Three Coursework Cohorts:[ii]

1. **Domestic Part-Time (DPT) Students:**

Key finding: 92% report at least some alignment between their work and field of study, and 71% are in industry professional roles. Only 8% report being unemployed and looking for work. These students are likely to be using graduate study to advance their existing careers, with the entry-level job market not necessarily being relevant to their needs. What is of greater priority is the skills taught/skills demanded gap between education and training, which we discuss in greater detail in section 4 of this submission.

2. **Domestic Full-Time (DFT) Students:**

Key finding: 46% report working in entirely unrelated positions, primarily due to financial necessity (cited by 81%). Further, 15.6% are unemployed and looking for work. These figures imply that they may lack the professional networks and work history that align their graduate studies with a specific career journey, and may be more likely to have transitioned directly from undergraduate to further graduate study. For some key industries (e.g. teaching, health), this direct jump between levels of higher education may be a necessity demanded by professional regulations. Entry-level market opportunities may not be currently meeting the needs of this cohort, with a lack of part-time or casual opportunities in professional industries that align with full-time studies, with in-built flexibility for managing complex class, assignment and placement schedules. As a result, DFT graduate students may be more likely to complete their studies without significant industry connections and relevant work experience (particularly for those without placement components), affecting their transition into career-based employment.

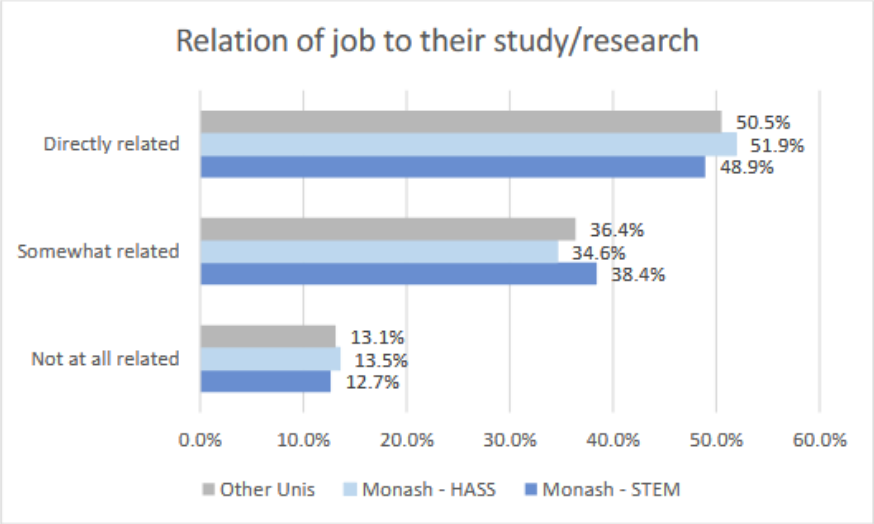
3. **International (INTL) Students**

Key Finding: 60% report working in entirely unrelated positions to their field of study, with a further 34% reporting they are unemployed and actively seeking work (more than double the DFT rate). In addition, 30% of international students report they are uncertain whether to remain in Australia post-graduation, with these numbers expected to increase in 2026 and beyond due to the doubling of the Temporary Graduate Visa (Subclass 485) application fee in March 2026.[6] These insights highlight potential gaps in policy regarding fostering international student navigation and integration into the local labour market, and potentially unclear or inaccessible pathways for career building post-study. Labour market access barriers that international students face during studies directly undermine their employment prospects after graduation. Visa work-hour restrictions alongside a lack of part-time and casual professional roles with in-built flexibility for managing demanding study loads (something which impacts DFT student as well) mean they cannot build Australian work experience, professional networks, or local employer relationships while they study. While some may access internships or placements during their studies, this is not a universally enjoyed opportunity among the significant number of international graduate students studying in Australia. This means a substantial number of highly trained international students graduate and enter the job market with minimal familiarity, reflecting a structural pipeline failure.

[ii] NB: For scale, across Australia universities in 2024 the Department of Education reports DPT at 31%, DFT at 16%, and INTL at 53% of total graduate coursework enrolments. Available from: https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/resources/perturbed-student-enrolments-pivot-table-2024

Higher Degree by Research (HDR):

Key Findings: 62% report being employed (17% full-time; 16% part-time and 29% casual). A further 16% are unemployed and actively seeking work. Around half of HDR students report that their employment aligns directly with their studies. This likely reflects the common roles HDR students are exposed to during their candidature, including teaching associates and research assistants for their supervisors or within their department/faculty. 35 – 38% of HDR students report somewhat related employment to their studies, which could possibly also reflect common teaching and research roles that are less related to their area of expertise, while between 13-14% report being in employment completely unrelated to their studies.



Importantly, our 2025 survey found that students in directly related employment show marginally better outcomes across several measures, including higher financial wellbeing scores, lower depression scores and reduced imposter syndrome levels. Relevant employment opportunities during studies, therefore, are beneficial not just for career transitions, but also for overall psychological and financial wellbeing (something we return to in section 5 of the submission).

Putting the HDR Employment Experience into Context:

For a long time, the pursuit of PhDs was aligned with the academic workforce, rather than industry. However, according to Chen et al. (2024) since the mid-1990s less graduates have successfully transitioned into academic careers.[7] A recent study by Lane et al. (2025) found that modern PhD students, instead, have disparate goals and intentions for their careers, with approximately half of students surveyed sharing their interest in non-academic work opportunities including government and industry.[8] HDR career intentions also shift across disciplines, with a larger share of PhD students from Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (HASS) wanting to pursue a career in academia, than their Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) counterparts.[9] As such, the desire for access to entry-level opportunities post-HDR level study fluctuates across disciplines, revealing an opportunity for targeted policy to foster greater career pathway visibility and strategic planning aligned with student needs. In some cases, greater education and demystifying of where PhDs can be applied in the vast employment landscape may be needed to temper aspirations to meet the realities (as in, the small number of careers in academia compared with the majority of PhD holders transitioning to work outside of universities).

Unique Challenges for International Students:

Research shows that international students face disadvantage in the transition to skilled employment in Australia. Primarily, employers prefer candidates that are citizens or permanent residents, as both their time-limited working rights and their lack of local experience are perceived as another cost 'burden' to an employer taking on the investment of training a new staff member.[10] While there is a specific visa pathway for graduates who want to gain

employment experience in the local job market – the Temporary Graduate Visa (Subclass 485) allows 2 – 3[iii] years of approval to work in Australia – evidence suggests that international students face lower employment rates than their domestic counterparts, even in fields with skills shortages (e.g. health and engineering).[11] One issue highlighted by Tran et al. (2023) is that the 485 visa does not extend even if it takes several months to find employment, meaning a student on a two year visa loses precious time on their employability window if they do not immediately transition into work.[12] Instead, and as we found in our research, international students are more likely to be employed in jobs that are beneath their qualification level meaning their high skills are underutilised in the Australian economy.[13] This is reflected in our data, as noted earlier, with 60% of international students reporting that they work in entirely unrelated positions to their field of study, with a further 34% reporting they are unemployed and actively seeking work – the highest among all graduate student groups.

Preliminary data from MGA's 2026 Student Satisfaction survey reveal insights into the barriers that international students experience:

> *"The employment opportunities provided by schools are limited, and most of them are more inclined towards local students rather than international students."*
>
> *"No banks or financial institutions are going to offer me jobs because I am not a citizen of this country neither I have a PR. No banks will offer internships either for the same reason, surprisingly the university does not help in getting interviews for jobs post graduation."*
>
> *"All the internship/part time job opportunity shared by the university so far were open for Australian citizen, NZ Citizen or require a PR status. I don't feel very confident on landing a job after graduating as I see a lack of industry engagement."*
>
> *"The course does a poor job of preparing students for the workforce, particularly for international students. It is heavily focused on the Australian job market, even though many students struggle to secure opportunities both in Australia and in their home countries after graduating. There is limited practical support or tailored guidance for navigating different job markets, which leaves many students unprepared."*

Importantly, the Committee needs to consider the policy levers available to create more sustainable employment pathways for international students to allay employer concerns about their temporary status. Indeed, international students – despite their high standard qualifications from reputable Australian universities – are almost entirely excluded from any government-based public service employment schemes due to residency status.[14] What is overlooked is that many international students, especially those who receive government funded RTP scholarships, are passionate about applying their skills in the Australian economy for the benefit of Australian society. As one graduate research student explains:

> *"It is particularly disheartening for individuals who work in sectors that centre around helping people, as most of us come with the dedication to help the people living here."*

Our society is missing out on the important benefits of a highly trained and motivated group of future workers who are eager to show their value locally.

3| Quality of University Education

Career outcomes for graduate students are influenced directly by the quality of the education system within which they gain their qualifications. Further, research suggests that graduate students expect their universities to provide 'career development support'.[15] It is well understood that universities in Australia have in recent history been subject to reduced government support in terms of funding, and increased emphasis on private market revenue

[iii] NB: The standard visa is 2-3 years, however 4-5 years may be possible for nationals from India, China and Britain. https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/getting-a-visa/visa-listing/temporary-graduate-485/post-higher-education-work#About

streams (e.g. international student fees, industry-funded research and partnerships), as well as the embedding of non-higher education professionals in management roles of significant power (e.g. external industry/consultant members of university councils).[16] Some critics argue that these trends in the organisation and management of higher education providers have eroded the quality of education being delivered through a focus on profit over product.[17] The industry has normalised workforce precarity with the reduction in continuing/permanent employment opportunities for academics and the heavy reliance on casual employment of Masters & PhD students and early career researchers to bolster delivery of teaching and research activities. For example. Belavy et al. (2020) cite that "one-third of research publications" stem from PhD student work.[18] More senior academics – those who are often perceived as responsible for guiding and supporting graduate students into their future careers especially at the PhD level – are increasingly time-poor, with high demands for research output and impact, as well as necessity to bring in funding through extensive and time-consuming highly competitive grant applications with slim chances of success, alongside delivering lecturing and teaching activities and materials. With this context in mind, our data shows that quality concerns are abound for graduate students and are connected to workforce and career preparation.

Evidence from Graduate Coursework Students:

Our 2024 survey on student satisfaction found that more than 40% of graduate coursework students reported feeling that their course did not offer value for money, and that this was a consistent attitude across domestic and international students. Value for money was perceived by survey participants as embodied in content delivery decisions (e.g. online or recorded lectures), contact with academic staff, guided versus self-directed learning and currency of course materials. We present key data regarding value for money (Table 3), consideration of withdrawal (Table 4), and motivating reasons for exit (Table 5) below:

Table 3. Value for Money

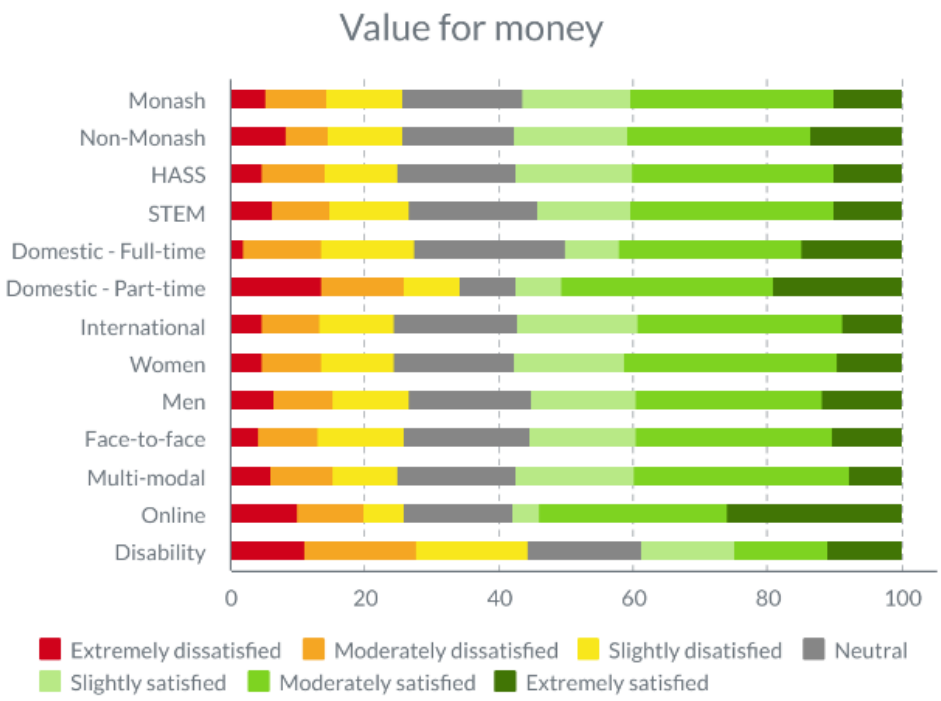
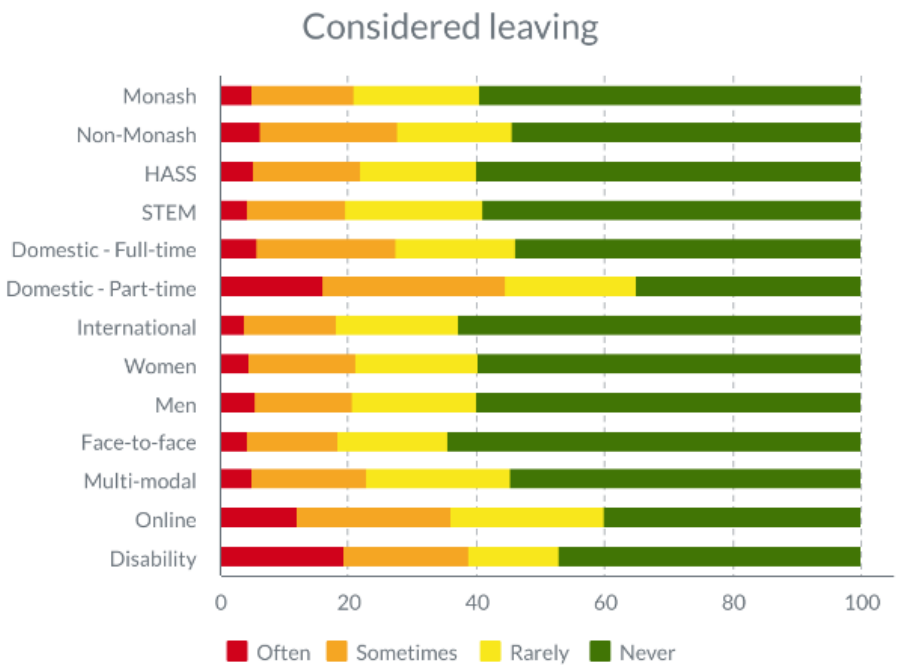
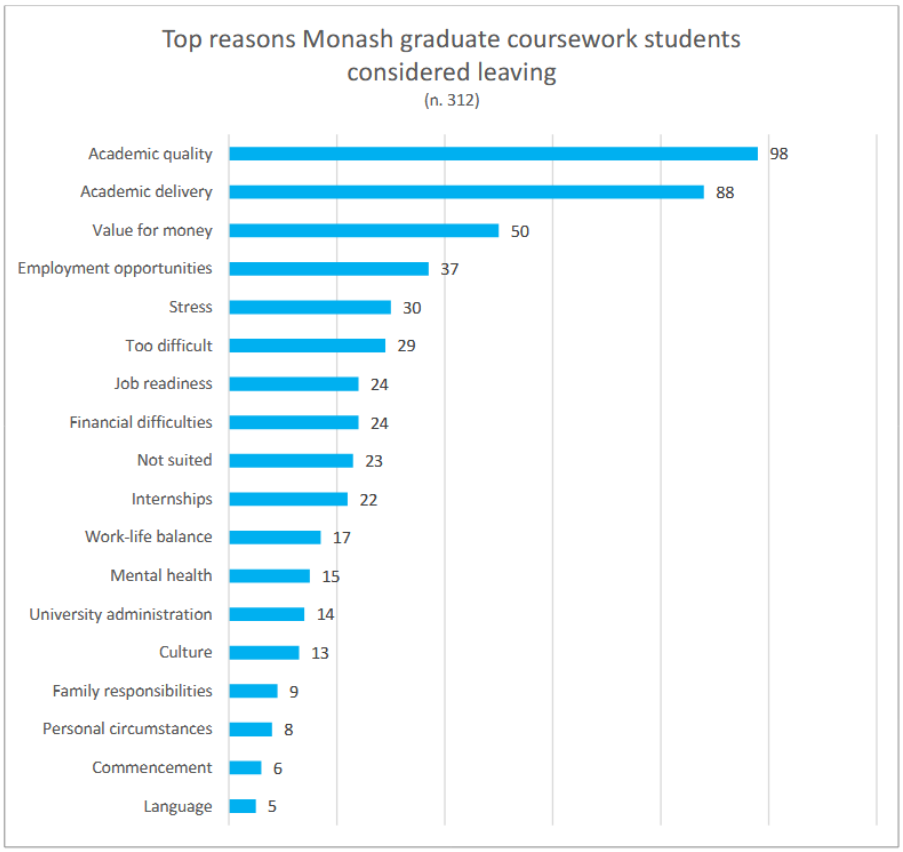


Table 4. Consideration of Withdrawal



Survey participants revealed a number of reasons for considering withdrawal from their courses. Education quality, delivery, and value for money are among the top three reasons for considering leaving a graduate coursework program, with job readiness also ranking high on the variety of reasons cited by survey participants.

Table 5. Motivating Reasons for Exit



Graduate coursework students who participated in the 2024 survey cited concern regarding elements of education quality including: class sizes, inconsistent assessment and feedback practices, out-dated or "recycled" course material, insufficient time or contact with academic staff, and that most content could be accessed online without paying high fees. Below are some direct testimonies from students reflecting these quality concerns:

> *"Class is too big in size. Lecturers are lacking personal connection with students. Grading system is extremely lacking. Teaching Assistant's marking is different to the grading criteria."*
>
> *"Course materials are recycled, feedback from tutors are often unhelpful, we spend a lot of class time going over things that just end up being uploaded online which makes me feel like we should be more focused on getting feedback or having class discussions instead ... We can all just watch the tutorial videos at home by ourselves."*
>
> *"…this degree does not even guarantee a job role so I am wondering if 100,000 dollars has a good ROI."*
>
> *"Did not really enjoy what I was studying and could not see it being applied to my future career."*
>
> *"It's very frustrating to find your own placements. Finding placement is crucial for my degree but Monash University does not help with it, which makes it impossible to find."*

Interestingly, preliminary data from the 2026 Student Satisfaction survey reveals these concerns persists two years on:

> *"Few teachers use the material from years ago, which I think it might be better to use more recent data in course material."*
>
> *"Big class sizes also mean TAs handle most of [marking and feedback], and often TAs are just as clueless as the prof. on what exactly assignment expectations are and when grades will be out. Profs are using AI and though it is important and good that they are transparent about it, I do not think using AI to make quizzes or exams showcases any less integrity than students using these tools to attempt them."*
>
> *"Old lectures that are out of date I feel impact negatively on my education and ability to have up to date information."*
>
> *"The content is very good quality and engaging, however VERY outdated and recycled from previous courses - needs updating."*
>
> *"A lot of pre-recorded stuff from Covid time rather than having in person guest speakers."*

On what kind of changes or initiatives graduate coursework students envisaged to solve some of these issues affecting education quality and value for money, 2024 survey respondents suggested the following:

> *"I would like more placement opportunities while studying for the degree, ideally paid placements, especially considering the cost of living pressure for some student while studying."*
>
> *"I think there needs to be more give and take when it comes to placement. I was placed a long way away from home, and it had a very considerable impact on me given I already couldn't work to earn an income through that placement period."*
>
> *"I want more help with getting real life work experience, exposure and opportunity."*

2026 survey respondents shared the benefits of greater access to industry and 'real-world' experiences, both in terms of employability but also psychological preparedness:

> *"Overall, I feel that my course is preparing me well for the workforce. The program requires 60 days of professional teaching placements, and the Monash placement team organises suitable early childhood settings for us in advance. So far, I have completed three placements in different types of centres, including long day care and sessional kindergarten. These experiences have helped me understand the differences between settings, such as routines, teaching approaches and centre cultures. Through these placements, I have been able to apply what I learned in class to real teaching situations, observe experienced educators,*

and reflect on my own practice. This has given me valuable practical experience and a clearer understanding of the working environment. Overall, these opportunities have helped me build professional confidence step by step and better prepare me for future employment in early childhood education."

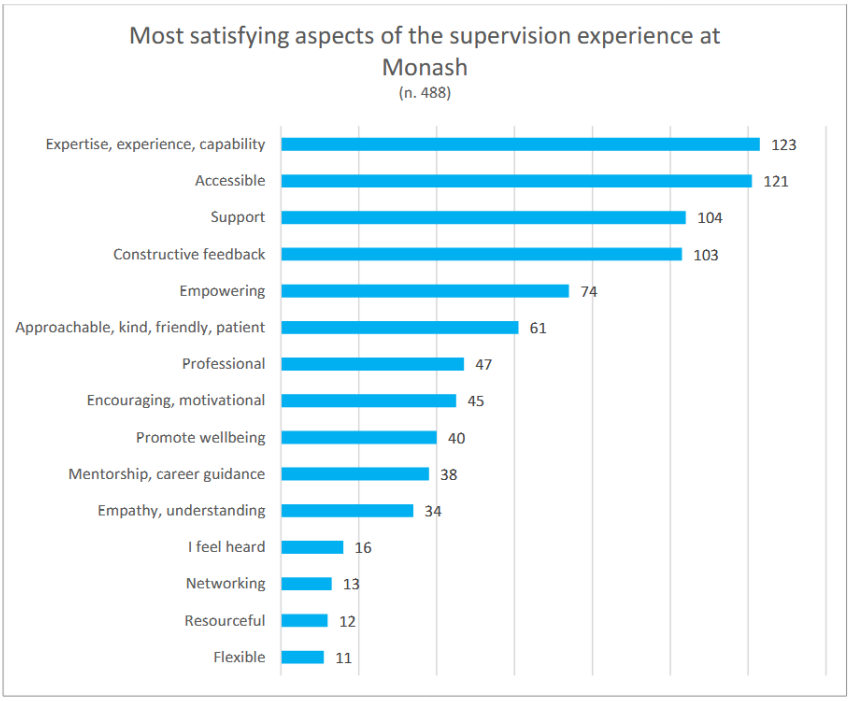
However, not all students in the 2026 survey shared similar sentiments about placement experiences:

"Our placement for this course is very unorganized and very unfair. We do not have enough placement opportunities which is a requirement for our course. We are then tasked with applying for them over the course of our 3rd semester and if within these limited options do not procure a placement by the end of sem, are failed the unit. This system definitely needs a revamp as either we need to have adequate placement options or not be failed for a compulsory aspect the uni team is unable to provide."

Evidence from Graduate Research (HDR) Students:

Education quality considerations for HDR students take a somewhat different approach to coursework students. For those who receive funding or scholarships for their courses, concerns are more about the financial sacrifices of low paid stipends over many years and missed superannuation without employment guarantee at the end of their studies. Further, quality of supervisor and institutional culture and support are paramount to students in the HDR journey. Our 2024 Student Satisfaction survey found that while majority of HDR students were satisfied with the quality of research supervision and support, help with networking and career pathway planning were considered highly important but lacking in satisfaction. In relation to professional development opportunities, survey respondents were largely satisfied with opportunities to develop publishing skills, presenting at conferences and seminars, and research methodology. Importantly, HDR students rated industry exposure as the least satisfying indicator, even though they perceive this as highly important. Further, career planning and grant writing were considered highly important but not meeting expectations in a satisfactory manner. We present key data on indicators of satisfactory supervision (Table 6) and student-reported priorities for professional development (Table 7) below:

Table 6. Indicators of Satisfactory Supervision



Survey respondents indicated significant satisfaction with their supervisor relationships, particularly in regards to the expertise and skills of their supervisors, how accessible and supportive their supervisors were, and the quality of supervisor feedback. However, towards the lower end of satisfaction, survey respondents noted a lacking in

mentorship and career guidance as well as networking support from their supervisors – elements which play a significant role in the career transitions of HDR students. Survey participants testimonies revealed not only a desire for greater emphasis on career planning, but also the influence of structural conditions on the quality and scope of supervision they received:

> *"While my supervisors are focused on my project (which is good), there is no broader vision or discussion re: my future career pathways/goals and aligning my resume in that way, from supervisors."*

> *"Due to the nature of academic work, my supervisors are often burnt out / overworked which impacts the attention they can give to me and timeliness of responses etc. My PhD would benefit if they had better working conditions."*

> *"I think this part comes down to how the University expects supervisors to operate. When they are being paid to teach classes, work on their own research, and continue with editorial roles, rewriting curriculum etc, the candidates fall to the bottom of the list. This is what it is because they only have so much capacity..."*

Cost-of-living and financial pressures were reported as causes for delay in research progress, with one in three HDR students in the 2024 survey citing this as a cause for their research delays. These pressures also contributed to some students contemplating withdrawal from their degrees:

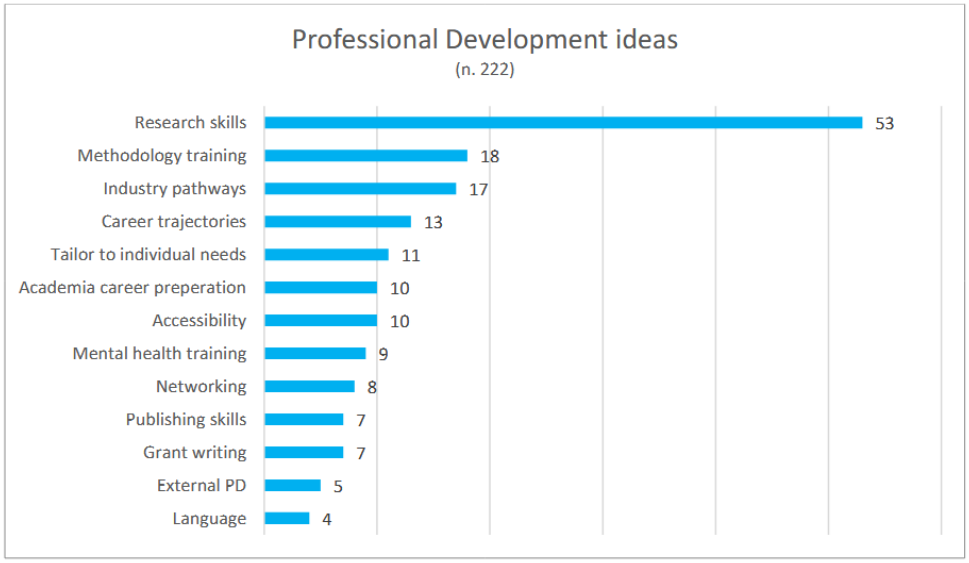
> *"It's hard and there are other opportunities that I could take which could potential[ly] yield higher rewards than this."*

> *"Because of non-rewarding nature of degree. After putting all this effort in, I need to put additional significant efforts for job hunt. Which makes having this degree redundant."*

> *"Unsatisfied with doing a PhD, the career outcomes and financial burden. I've felt many times I would have just been better to have gone into the work force and worked my way up without having wasted time and finances to have completed a PhD."*

HDR survey participants were asked what they wanted to see in terms of professional development opportunities for their degrees, with respondents listing industry pathways and career trajectories as two highly important but underserved areas of professional development (Table 7).

Table 7. HDR Student Priorities for Professional Development



Preliminary data for the 2026 Student Satisfaction survey reveals HDR attitudes towards professional development provided through the university:

> *"Professional development opportunities are valuable, particularly in areas such as teaching, academic writing, and research skills. However, more tailored and discipline-specific support would be beneficial, especially for students working in qualitative research. Opportunities that integrate practical experience, such as teaching and applied research training, are especially helpful for developing confidence and professional identity."*
>
> *"A lot of the HDR courses are very theoretical and does not link to any practical opportunities."*
>
> *"I am currently looking for career related opportunities and platforms but I feel that is bit lacking in campus especially for the PhD students in science/pharmacy/medicine background."*
>
> *"I could see many targeted for academic writing improvement, which has been very helpful. I wish to see other stuff beyond writing, though, maybe to network, find opportunities in industry and academia (like internships, jobs, etc.) to prepare us for after graduation."*
>
> *"The school should provide more opportunities for PhD students, whether it is through on-campus teaching positions or internships in enterprises."*
>
> *"Would be very helpful to have programs that provide industry exposure and post-phd career support for each specific fields of work. For example, specific PDs for me as PhD in Design with my unique background and expertise."*

Older HDR students highlighted the need for consideration of those students with extensive professional backgrounds:

> *"Having more courses for mid-career switchers would be beneficial."*
>
> *"I have experience and past training which was replicated in the options available."*
>
> *"Most PhD students have extensive work experience. Professional development outside of academic skill development isn't useful."*
>
> *"Regarding professional development, I already run my own company so while I do understand the govt insistence on connecting higher education with economic output, I already have all my runs on the board in that regard. My focus is taking it beyond economic output."*
>
> *"…as someone who has worked for over 30 years in my field, there wasn't a lot of purpose in some of that [PD] stuff for me, but I appreciate it might be relevant for someone who has not worked a lot previously."*
>
> *"I never thought that the PD was well thought through. It was targeted at young audiences."*

Structural Conditions and Sector Precarity:

Chronic underinvestment in universities resulting in academic staffing precarity and burn out is a critical contributor to both the quality of higher education as well as the skills and outcomes graduates exit with in relation to their career transitions. Cost cutting measures – e.g. relying on lecture recordings that are several years old – raise questions about value for money in the eyes of graduate students in coursework programs. HDR students express concern about the opportunities to engage in supported career planning and industry exposure. Low income levels contribute to HDR student frustration, prompting consideration of withdrawal, especially when there job pathways post-PhD are unclear. As we have shown, this leads some to question why they would pursue graduate studies delivered in such a manner. Addressing graduate student career outcomes requires a holistic approach which understands and responds to the structural conditions necessary to deliver critical qualifications for future workers.

4 | Skills Employers are looking for

Employers have, in recent times, been prone to complaints about the quality of graduates with 'suitable' skills to meet the needs of the job market.[19] As a consequence of policy efforts over several decades to increase participation in higher education, the number of graduates has increased and this has resulted in, as some argue, an oversupply that affects the perceived value and benefits of university degrees for long-term career sustainability and growth.[20]

Skills Mismatch and Underutilisation:

Data was collected in the Graduate Outcomes Survey 2024 regarding graduate coursework and research students' perceptions of whether and why their skills were underutilised in their employment. The study found that for graduate coursework students, they worked in roles below their skill level largely because they had taken employment in 'entry-level job/career stepping stone' positions. For graduate research students, it was due to a lack of 'suitable jobs' in their areas of expertise.[21] It is important to interrogate this potential disconnect between the skills that graduate students possess and employer understanding of what these specialised cohorts have to offer.

The Committee will need to engage extensively with employers to gain a thorough understanding of the skills they seek and identify the gaps between these and what skills universities are developing in graduate coursework and research students. It is possible that this gap may be overestimated, and instead reflect a necessary project of increased communication and understanding across these stakeholders about the meaning and application of different skills gained in coursework and research, and applied in industry and practice. MGA can offer some insights from the experiences of graduate students, as well as evidence from the literature on the higher education to workforce pipeline. An important consideration is ensuring any discord that may exist between graduate readiness and employer expectations is bridged effectively to enable students to succeed in thriving careers. Without such efforts there is potential for poor employment experiences, as noted by Orr et al. (2023), including higher risk of stress, burnout and retention challenges.[22]

Preliminary data from the 2026 Student Satisfaction survey highlights concerns from the perspective of students about relevant skills being taught for employability. For example, one student suggested that the software they are trained on in their Architecture course does not align with the software used in most firms:

> *"The Architecture course is lacking in teaching vital software programs needed in the workforce. This is a repeat complaint I've heard almost every week for my entire degree."*

Further students express concern that the content in the classroom does not match the reality of their industry:

> *"Most of the theoretical and practical exercises are completely irrelevant and even contradict what I've learnt on placement."*
>
> *"Some courses have not kept pace with the times, failing to track the latest changes in global markets, and still rely on outdated knowledge."*
>
> *"It's one of a kind course but for 120,000 I am not getting the to learn the programming language that is mostly used in industry i.e. python."*

For others, including older graduate students, the career focussed support available from universities seems out of touch with their professional journey:

> *"As a mature age graduate student who has been working professionally for over 25 years, I'm finding the 'job readiness' offerings unsuitable for me - and nothing I'm concerned about revisiting."*
>
> *"The units relating to employment are great, but definitely geared towards first time graduates (non mature age students). I wonder if perhaps there is a way to build a kind of second unit for those who have lots of work experience. It feels writing a CV for a person with lots of work experience might be wasted effort."*

PhD Stigma and Employer Bias:

For HDR students, some stereotypes or negative bias may affect their workplace transitions. Evidence suggests that employers do not specifically seek out PhD-level qualifications, with one study revealing 80% of industry employers did not use this term in their job postings for roles requiring highly specialised research skills.[23] It is possible that the indirect consequence of employers not explicitly seeking PhD qualified candidates may be a perception that these qualifications are either lacking utility or that they make candidates overqualified and unsuitable for 'regular' (non-academic) workplaces. However, as we know, the majority of these candidates will ultimately work in roles outside of academia.

HDR students in the 2026 survey reported felt stigma towards them from employers:

> *"There should be special Job placements for PhD Students (both in industry and academics). Industry says we are overqualified for the job position. It's not fair."*

While others reported feeling inadequately prepared beyond developing highly specialised research skills:

> *"I wish there were more opportunities or resources for graduate students (especially those whose degree is research-based) to engage in work or industry experience. Something like internships or professional placements. I feel at a disadvantage in some respects because my academic skills are high, but I have had less of an opportunity to build practical ones and experience."*

Research Training Program (RTP) Internships:

Recent efforts to address the workforce alienation experienced by HDR students is the integration of the RTP internship arrangements for HDR students. However, this program – intended to connect research students with industry – has been criticised for its restrictive criteria that graduate students find limiting in their career planning.[24] The program mandates internships must be within the first 18 months of a students' candidature, however this first 18 months may not be an ideal time as most students are still orienting themselves with their research projects, getting through their confirmation milestones, and building base HDR skills necessary to support in-depth and complex research projects. Rather, MGA believes graduate research students need funded opportunities to participate in internships towards the end of their studies, acting as a bridge into the workforce.

Employers may perceive HDRs as over-qualified, however these graduate students are clearly highly important for Australia's future research, innovation and productivity. The 2025 'Ambitious Australia: Strategic Examination of Research and Development' final report from the Department of Industry Science and Resources, argues that Australia needs to invest in new models for PhD programs to address the decline in domestic PhD enrolments which affect the skilled workforce pipeline. Recommendation 12a calls for:

> "Universities, in partnership with industry, be supported to design and deliver inclusive research training programs with a strong industry focus. Universities be encouraged to deliver entrepreneurial research training programs."[25]

The report also acknowledges the importance of appropriately targeted stipends to encourage prospective students to enrol and complete PhDs, with Recommendation 12b noting:

> "Increase the attractiveness of PhD programs for Australian students by lifting the stipend rates in fields aligned with the National Innovation Pillars and making part-time research scholarships tax free."[26]

In light of this, it appears critical that the Committee examine the perceptions of employers regarding PhD-level qualifications, specifically looking to whether there is any bias or stigma towards PhD job applicants and whether employers identify the range of applicable skills that are developed in PhD-level study to a wide variety of roles. This is particularly important, given that majority of PhD candidates go on to employment outside of academia.

GenAI and Evolving Skills Needs:

Our current understanding of skills and talent required for the employment market is also shifting in relation to the advent of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) in the workplace and its effect on higher education. Evidence

shows that employers express appreciation of 'in-depth knowledge, research capabilities, and the ability to synthesize knowledge' in doctoral-level workers,[27] yet rapid changes regarding the technology available to analyse and synthesise masses of complex information will change this. The question facing the Committee, and Australia broadly, is what skills do we need our graduates to develop in a GenAI-enabled workforce? This question is further complicated by the differing points of view across disciplines and industry regarding what skills matter for employment and, also, different interpretations of the meaning and expectations of skills outlined.[28] In this way, the challenge for preparing graduate students with employer ready skills is not just one overshadowed by GenAI, but also one in which the same skills may take on different meanings across the employment landscape.

Preliminary data from the 2026 Student Satisfaction survey reveals the pace at which GenAI is being adopted for graduate coursework and research students. Among survey participants in graduate coursework programs, 74% use AI for either all or some assignments, while a minority of 8% report never using it. Reasons for using AI including for brainstorming, generating ideas and solving problems (68%), and for editing and proof reading (50%). Students describe varying degrees of interest in AI:

> *"AI is everywhere, when you google search, grammarly etc. I think it's unavoidable and it's more about understanding how to effectively integrate it into the ways of working."*
>
> *"In some of my assignments, it is required that we put a prompt into AI and analyse it. I don't like doing this, but in order to get my degree, I have no choice."*
>
> *"Sometimes I will google a theory/concept/etc we have been learning about [in] class and read the Google AI Overview of said theory/concept to sort of clarify that I am understanding the broad strokes of the material etc. "*
>
> *"I do not use AI, except if I am attempting to search for something, and cannot find it the conventional way."*

Among HDR Survey respondents, similar patterns are evident in AI use: 78% of HDR students report using AI in their research either daily or several times a week, meanwhile 0% report never using AI in their research. The most popular reasons for using AI in HDR research include brainstorming, generating ideas, and problem solving (54%) and drafting, editing or proofreading content (54%). There were a variety of beliefs and attitudes regarding the use of AI in HDR level research:

> *"I avoid AI as much as possible. When I've experimented with it I've found it to take longer to generate useful results than it would take to do it myself - and the cognitive degeneration introduced by using it regularly is concerning. It worries me that Monash advocates so strongly for its use."*
>
> *"AI raises a lot of privacy concerns to me so I use it mostly for vibe coding, and looking up synonyms while writing."*
>
> *"Only for transcribing interviews and I use Good tape which is located in Europe where they have greater regulation than Aus or US. They don't train AI using the transcripts. Regardless, I would like to see a lot more work (and recommendations from the university) on how to use AI for transcribing research interviews while maintaining privacy of participants."*
>
> *"I've used it to ask questions I feel a bit silly asking just yet, like how to define search terms for different databases."*

Importantly, majority of HDR students (65%) report being either self-taught (51%) or taught externally (14%) in how to use AI, while 31% of student respondents report being trained in AI use by the university and 10% directly from their supervisors, while some report both being trained by both. This indicates a potential training gap for the Committee to consider in designing future policy responses around preparing graduates with skills for the workforce.

5 | Economic, Social and Psychological Effects

It is difficult to decouple graduate students' employment transitions from the lived experiences of their enrolment and studies affected by cost-of-living, mental health and wellbeing, sense of purpose and motivation, as well as hostile structural conditions (e.g. for international students). Graduate students' experiences of positive outcomes after completing their studies are, indeed, affected by a number of factors that occur during their enrolment. We posit a chain of influence that can shape the economic, social and psychological wellbeing of graduate students:

The Graduate Student Financial Stress Chain:

Financial stress → academic engagement barriers → delayed or incomplete study → poor employment outcomes → psychological harm

Preliminary Data from the 2026 Student Satisfaction Survey:

Employment outlook coupled with both internal and external pressures such as mental health and cost-of-living leave graduate students feeling bleak about their employability prospects post-study:

> *"There is no guidance on how to enter the workforce, I finish in less than 2 months and I don't have any clue on how to get a job, only constantly being told that it takes forever to get a job which has left me feeling so lost and honestly worsening my depression."*

> *"There are very few internship opportunities provided by the school. Internships for IT students are too difficult and the competition is extremely fierce. The school's courses are not enough to guide me to the point where I can work. … Tuition fees go up every year and have already exceeded the budget I set when I first applied to Monash University. With the cost of living constantly rising, I find myself worrying about my finances while I study and having to juggle part-time work on the side, which is incredibly exhausting."*

Students report that the challenge of balancing demanding study loads with work, which affects their studies negatively and complicates their mental health and wellbeing:

> *"I have looked for information and support in terms of enter the workforce, employment, internships and others job opportunities with my faculty, however I have not received any answer, which is disappointing, I actually need a new job. I am mentally broken because my current job is very physical and my academic performance has been impacted. Please, I need a help."*

> *"The placements are so difficult to navigate I consistently have to miss work to be able to meet uni and placement activities - we are told we should attend class and then placements are scheduled on the same days as class meaning we have to attend class and do extra PD hours to make up for missing those classes. It's exhausting."*

Social isolation, demanding schedules and a lack of guidance leaves students feeling underprepared for transitioning into the job market:

> *"I have missed out on countless experiences on campus due to placement hours and an altered timetable. I have been left in the dark about how to get a job after finishing at monash or how to continue my studies into a PhD if that was something I was interested in doing. I feel lost and hopeless and like I have wasted money due to these experiences."*

Beyond these direct testimonies, evidence shows that financial and mental health and wellbeing outcomes are strained in the graduate coursework and research student experience. Using the Melbourne Institute's Financial Wellbeing Scale to better understand the financial realities of students' lives and wellbeing, we measured how secure, free, safe and in control individuals feel, in addition to how much they earn. Respondents were categorised

into four groups: “doing great,” “getting by,” “just coping,” and “having trouble,” providing nuanced insights into the psychological and economic wellbeing of graduate students:

Graduate Coursework Students:

	Monash 2023	Monash 2025	National 2025
Doing great	8.1%	3.8%	6.4%
Getting by	41.3%	37.0%	29.1%
Just coping	40.1%	40.7%	41.4%
Having trouble	10.5%	18.5%	23.2%

Graduate Research Students:

	Monash 2023	Monash 2025	National 2025
Doing great	7.9%	3.4%	3.2%
Getting by	31.5%	36.0%	41.3%
Just coping	42.6%	40.3%	42.1%
Having trouble	18.0%	20.3%	13.5%

Both graduate research and graduate coursework students report substantial financial wellbeing pressure, with a majority of Monash graduate students (60.6% of research students and 59.2% of coursework students) ‘just coping’ or ‘having trouble’ financially. Similar trends are noted for graduate students from other universities with 55.6% of graduate research students and 64.6% of graduate coursework students reporting that they are also ‘just coping’ or ‘having trouble’.

Housing is also significant issue. Among graduate coursework students who rent, 88% are under rental stress with 53% spending more than half their income on rent. For graduate research students, 90% of renters report being under rental stress, with 47% spending more than half their income on rent. These conditions affect graduate students’ ability to invest in volunteer work and unpaid placements to build their resumes, locking some students out of their desired career pathways due to financial pressure. Graduate students who lack family financial support, partner income, or prior savings face systematically higher withdrawal risk, posing concern for equity in higher education.

Equity Concerns: Who Can Afford to Wait for the Right Job?

Importantly, financial circumstances during graduate studies can shape the decisions and options available at the time of transition to employment. There are some who can afford to wait for the right job due to their financial position or access to support networks, while many may lack this luxury and end up in employment that underutilises their qualifications or is not aligned with their training.

For those graduates who seek careers within academia, concern persists regarding lack of stability and consistency in work available to graduate and early career researchers. This reflects broader system design, which relies heavily on short term contract work as opposed to continuing positions that offer positive and upward career mobility.[29] These folds into the quality issues highlighted earlier in the report, where insecure staffing and precarity directly impact the quality of education and the resources afforded to developing robust educational programmes that effectively connect with the needs of the employer market.

6 | Policy Recommendations:

With the issues foregrounded in this submission, alongside substantial empirical evidence directly from graduate coursework and research students, we have drawn out four recommendations for the Committee, and urge for their prioritisation:

1. **Access to Flexible Professional Employment During Studies**
   A significant proportion of graduate students – particularly domestic full-time, international, and HDR students – are employed in roles entirely unrelated to their field of study due to the absence of flexible, part-time or casual professional opportunities compatible with graduate-level study schedules. The Committee should prioritise discovery into growing the availability of career-relevant, flexible employment opportunities for graduate students across key industries that are accessible to both domestic and international students.
2. **Reform RTP Internship Arrangement for HDRs**
   The current RTP internship framework, which requires internships to occur within the first 18 months of candidature, is misaligned with the realities of HDR study. MGA recommends introducing a funded internship window in the post-submission phase, when students have developed their research expertise and are actively preparing to enter the workforce but are awaiting their degree conferral. This reform would create a meaningful bridge between candidature and employment, strengthening the career value of HDR study.
3. **Mitigate Employer Bias**
   Evidence indicates that HDR graduates face perceptions of being overqualified or ill-suited to roles outside academia, despite the majority pursuing non-academic careers. The Committee should allocate resources to better understand the nature and extent of this bias in the Australian labour market and develop initiatives that build employer awareness of the broad applied value of research-level skills. This is essential to ensuring HDR graduates can access employment commensurate with their qualifications and Australia's investment in their training.
4. **Address Visa/Workforce Discord**
   International graduate students face compounding structural barriers to Australian employment, including visa work-hour restrictions during study, employer reluctance to hire candidates with limited post-study work rights, and exclusion from government employment pathways. Greater alignment is needed between Australia's international student visa settings and the goal of retaining skilled international graduates in the local labour market, alongside incentives to encourage employers to invest in this cohort with confidence. Without action, Australia risks continuing to train highly qualified international graduates while failing to benefit from their skills in the economy.

Conclusion:

Graduate students represent one of Australia's most important yet consistently overlooked cohorts in higher education policy. They are a heterogenous group: they are early-career professionals seeking advancement, professionals seeking career pivots, emerging researchers, and international students often with dreams of applying their training and expertise in the community as a way of giving back. They are often older, more financially pressured, and carry greater personal and professional stakes than the archetypal undergraduate student.

The evidence presented in this submission, drawn from graduate students surveyed between 2024 and 2026, makes clear that the current infrastructure supporting graduate employment transitions is inadequate for this diverse cohort. Graduate students are completing high-quality, often expensive qualifications without adequate industry exposure, flexible employment pathways, career mentorship, or practical guidance for workforce entry. For many, this results not only in employment outcomes that underutilise their skills and qualifications, but also in financial hardship, poor mental health, and a sense of futility about the purpose of their studies. The structural conditions underpinning this problem, including chronic underinvestment in universities, workforce precarity in academic staffing, inflexible visa arrangements, and employer unfamiliarity with HDR-level qualifications, require sustained and coordinated policy responses that bridge universities and employers together.

MGA urges the Committee to treat graduate student employment outcomes as a distinct policy priority, supported by dedicated programs, data collection, and accountability mechanisms. The four recommendations outlined in this submission provide a starting point. Investing in the employment futures of graduate students is imperative for Australia. This advanced knowledge, research capability, highly skilled and diverse workforce will help us to meet the challenges of the decades ahead for our society.

MGA thanks the Committee for the opportunity to contribute and remains available to provide further evidence or briefings as required.

Dr. Nina Roxburgh

On behalf of the Monash Graduate Association

https://mga.monash.edu/

This submission was prepared by Dr. Nina Roxburgh and Dr. Ryan Edwards. For further information, please contact Dr. Nina Roxburgh via nina.roxburgh3@monash.edu.

[1] Chen, Li'An, Inger Mewburn, and Hanna Suominen. "Australian Doctoral Employability: A Systematic Review of Challenges and Opportunities." *Higher Education Research & Development* 43, no. 2 (2024): 298–314. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2023.2240715.

[2] Monash Graduate Association (MGA). "Policy Briefing: Temporary Graduate Visa Subclass 485", *Monash Graduate Association.* (2026): Accessed 22 May, 2026: https://mga.monash.edu/pageassets/policy-campaigns/current-campaigns/temporary-graduate-visa-subclass-485-fee-increase/MGA-Temporary-Graduate-Visa-Subclass-485-Policy-Briefing-March-2026.pdf

[3] Department of Education (DoE), (2025). '2003 – 2024 Higher Education Student Data', *Australian Government*. Available from: https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/student-data

[4] Australian Council of Graduate Research, 'Investing in PhD Candidates in Australia: How PhD Candidates are crucial to Australia's research and innovation landscape' *Australian Council of Graduate Research and Universities Australia,* (2024): Accessed 25 May, 2026: https://www.acgr.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Investing-in-PHD-Candidates-in-Australia_FINAL.pdf

[5] Small, Lynlea, Ruth McPhail, and Amie Shaw. "Graduate Employability: The Higher Education Landscape in Australia." *Higher Education Research & Development* 41, no. 3 (2022): 919–33. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2021.1877623.

[6] Monash Graduate Association (MGA). "Policy Briefing: Temporary Graduate Visa Subclass 485".

[7] Chen et al. (2024): 299.

[8] Lane, Murray, Karen Dooley, Karen Cavu, and Esa Jaatinen. "Aspiration versus Outcome: The Career Intentions of PhD Students in an Australian University." *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education*, ahead of print, September 23, 2025. https://doi.org/10.1108/SGPE-12-2024-0125.

[9] Lane et al. (2025): 10.

[10] Tran, Ly Thi, George Tan, Huyen Bui, and Mark Rahimi. "International Graduates on Temporary Post-Graduation Visas in Australia: Employment Experiences and Outcomes." *Population, Space and Place* 29, no. 1 (2023): e2602. https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2602.

[11] Tran et al. (2023): 3.

[12] Tran et al. (2023): 10.

[13] Edwards, R. *Graduate Research at Monash: Student Experiences, Challenges and Opportunities for Enhancement*. Monash Graduate Association, (2025). Graduate-Research-at-Monash-Student-Experiences-Challenges-and-Opportunities-for-Enhancement-Report.pdf; Edwards, R. *Graduate Coursework at Monash: Student Experiences, Challenges and Opportunities for Enhancement*. Monash Graduate Association, (2025). Graduate-Coursework-at-Monash-Student-Experiences-Challenges-and-Opportunities-for-Enhancement-Report.pdf. Tran et al. (2023): 3.

[14] Tran et al. (2023): 3.

[15] Chen et al. (2024): 307.

16 Kenny, John. "Effectiveness in Higher Education: What Lessons Can Be Learned after 40 Years of Neoliberal Reform?" Policy Reviews in Higher Education 9, no. 2 (2025): 220–39. https://doi.org/10.1080/23322969.2025.2493125; Forsyth, Hannah. A History of the Modern Australian University. NewSouth Publishing, 2014.

[17] Littleton, Eliza. "Public Attitudes on Issues in Higher Education" *The Australia Institute: Centre for Future Work* (2023): Accessed online 15 December, 2025. https://futurework.org.au/report/public-attitudes-on-issues-in-higher-education/

[18] Belavy, Daniel L., Patrick J. Owen, and Patricia M. Livingston. "Do Successful PhD Outcomes Reflect the Research Environment Rather than Academic Ability?" *PLOS ONE* 15, no. 8 (2020): e0236327. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0236327.

[19] Small et al. (2022).

[20] Small et al. (2022): 928.

[21] Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT). 2024 Graduate Outcomes Survey: National Report September 2025 – Short-term Graduate Outcomes in Australia'. Accessed 25 May, 2026: https://www.qilt.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2024-gos-national-report.pdf?sfvrsn=9f40f76_2.

[22] Orr, Poppy, Loch Forsyth, Catherine Caballero, Caroline Rosenberg, and Arlene Walker. "A Systematic Review of Australian Higher Education Students' and Graduates' Work Readiness." *Higher Education Research & Development* 42, no. 7 (2023): 1714–31. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2023.2192465.

[23] Chen et al. (2024): 307.

[24] Group of Eight Australia. "Go8 response to 'Growing industry internship for research PhD Students through the Research Training Program". (2021). Accessed 18 May, 2026. https://go8.edu.au/go8-response-to-growing-industry-internships-for-research-phd-students-through-the-research-training-program

[25] Department of Industry Science and Resources. "Ambitious Australia: Strategic Examination of R&D Final Report" *Australian Government.* December (2025): Accessed 25 May, 2026: https://www.industry.gov.au/publications/ambitious-australia-strategic-examination-research-and-development-final-report

[26] Department of Industry Science and Resources (2025): 14.

[27] Chen et al. (2024): 303.

[28] Chen et al. (2024): 305.

[29] Lane et al. (2025): 12.