

HDR Stipend Policy Briefing

A Case for Monash to Lead

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Executive Summary

It is widely recognised that HDR stipend rates are too low to provide students with an acceptable standard of living in modern day Australia. Universities Australia, the Group of Eight, the Australian Council of Graduate Research, the Universities Accord, and the Federal Government Department of Industry, Science and Resources have all endorsed an increase to HDR stipends, recognising that current financial support for HDR students is an inadequate living wage.¹ Failing to increase the stipend risks Australia's ability to attract the best and brightest students who contribute to the reputation and impact of our university sector both locally and on a global scale.

As the Go8 argued in their feedback on the draft Higher Education Support Guidelines 2025:

*"While Go8 universities already support PhD students with stipends above the minimum threshold these should be lifted to, at the least, above relevant national minimum wages to reflect the true cost of living and the value of research training."*²

Monash University is a member of Go8. This membership, alongside Monash's own strategic policies, implies that Monash endorses the call for increasing stipends towards a liveable wage. However, benchmarking reveals that Monash is currently ranked second last among the Go8 universities and fourth among Victorian universities for stipend rates, despite reporting a \$309.1 million surplus in its 2025 Annual Report.

Financial pressure is worsening for HDR students, impacting their wellbeing, completion rates, and research quality and productivity. An uncompetitive stipend rate also negatively impacts Monash's ability to attract talented researchers, particularly those from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, which runs counter to Monash's Impact 2030 strategy, EDI Framework 2022-2030, and Research and Enterprise at Scale 2026 – 2028 plan.³

MGA's Recommendation

Monash should raise its stipend to at least the Go8 average of ~\$39,000, and commit to a living wage trajectory over four years, supported by a focused external advocacy strategy to shift Federal Government policy on RTP base rates and tax-free threshold for part-time RTP scholarship holders.

Current RTP Practices

GO8 Universities - 2026 Stipend Rates

Monash University currently offers the second lowest stipend among the Go8 universities at \$37,154 per annum (equivalent of \$18.80 per hour for a 38-hour work week). The gap between Monash and the highest paid stipend among Go8 universities (offered by University of Sydney at \$42,754) is approximately \$5,600 per annum. Reaching the G08 average of ~\$39,000 would require a more modest increase of approximately \$1,850 per annum.ⁱ

Rank	University	Standard HDR Stipend P/A
1	University of Sydney	\$42,754
2	University of Melbourne	\$39,500
3	Australian National University	\$39,069
4	University of New South Wales	\$39,206
5	University of Western Australia	\$38,110
6	University of Queensland	\$37,500
7	Monash University	\$37,154
8	University of Adelaide	\$36,500

Victorian Universities - 2026 Stipend Rates

Among Victorian institutions, Monash University ranks fourth out of Victoria's eight universities, falling behind Federation University (\$40,000), University of Melbourne (\$39,500) and Deakin University (\$37,450). Monash has not kept pace with its more comparable institutions in the state, with both University of Melbourne and Deakin University exceeding Monash's stipend offering by up to \$2,346 per annum. Lagging behind these competitive stipend rates risks Monash's ability to attract the most talented students.

Rank	University	Standard HDR Stipend P/A
1	Federation University	\$40,000
2	University of Melbourne	\$39,500
3	Deakin University	\$37,450
4	Monash University	\$37,154
5	RMIT	\$36,254
6	La Trobe University	\$36,000
7	Victoria University	\$35,707
8	Swinburne University	\$35,500

While Monash ranks seventh compared to their Go8 counterparts and fourth in Victoria, the university is not in a forced position to maintain a low stipend rate. Rather, Monash posted a \$309.1 million surplus in its 2025 Annual Report and has already demonstrated a willingness to invest in staff and student cost-of-living relief by bringing forward the scheduled 3.5% increase to staff pay by eight weeks, introducing free parking opportunities on campus, and sending a \$50 voucher to every Australian-based student. Monash University has also committed to range of other initiatives, including investing \$150 million in upgrading teaching and learning spaces, and \$90 million in enhancing research platforms and infrastructure.⁴ A modest increase in the RTP stipend offering to a relatively small number of students is an achievable and reasonable step for Monash to take in light of these other initiatives.

ⁱ NB: The Go8 and the State-based comparison tables reflect stipend offerings advertised as of May 2026.

The RTP Stipend Crisis

In 1990, RTP stipends were aligned with the minimum wage -- RTP stipends were \$12,734 per year and minimum wage was \$12,018 per year.⁵ This has drastically shifted over the past 30 years. Today, every Australian university's RTP stipend sits below the 2026 national minimum wage, despite the current maximum set by the Federal Government at \$53,608 per annum. At Monash University, the RTP rate sits almost 30% below the national minimum wage and only approximately 8% above the poverty line, at \$37,154 per annum. With the macroeconomic conditions surrounding HDR students remaining turbulent, it is necessary for Monash to provide greater support through an increased RTP stipend.

Wage	2026 Rate
National Minimum Wage ⁴	~\$52,255 pa \$1,004.90 pw \$26.44 ph
Poverty Line (single adult, incl. housing) ⁵	~\$34,357 pa \$660.72 pw \$17.39 ph
RTP Scholarship (base) ⁶	\$34,315 (base) pa \$660.29 pw \$17.38 ph
RTP Scholarship (maximum) ⁶	\$53,608 (maximum) pa \$1031 pw \$27.13 ph
Monash RTP Stipend	\$37,154 pa \$714.50 pw \$18.80 ph

HDR students have a vital role in the Australian research ecosystem -- as researchers, teaching associates, contributors to university reputation and research outputs. Evidence shows they are essential for the routine operations of universities; according to ABS data, 54% of university sector research is underpinned by the labour of HDR students.⁶ Further research suggests one in three academic publications are underpinned by the work of HDR students.⁷ As such, HDR students contribute to the knowledge economy in ways that benefit universities, industry and the public alike. Yet they are engaging in highly complex work without a stipend that recognises and reflects the value of this. Instead, evidence shows that domestic PhD enrolments are declining,⁸ implying that there is not enough perceived opportunity in undertaking a PhD to attract new students. Not only does this relate to inadequate living wages, but also by tax inequity for part-time students, and limited employment pathways; approximately 60% of HDR students do not find careers in academia due to the erosion of stable continuing employment opportunities across the sector.⁹

Impacts on Monash HDR Students

Monash HDR Enrolment and Funding Snapshot: There are over 5000 HDR students enrolled at Monash University, though not all of these students will be recipients of an RTP stipend. While specific data on the number of individual RTP scholarships awarded by Monash currently is not publicly available data, Monash received \$129,570,919 in RTP block funding from the federal government, the second highest level of funding across all universities, narrowly behind University of Melbourne.¹⁰

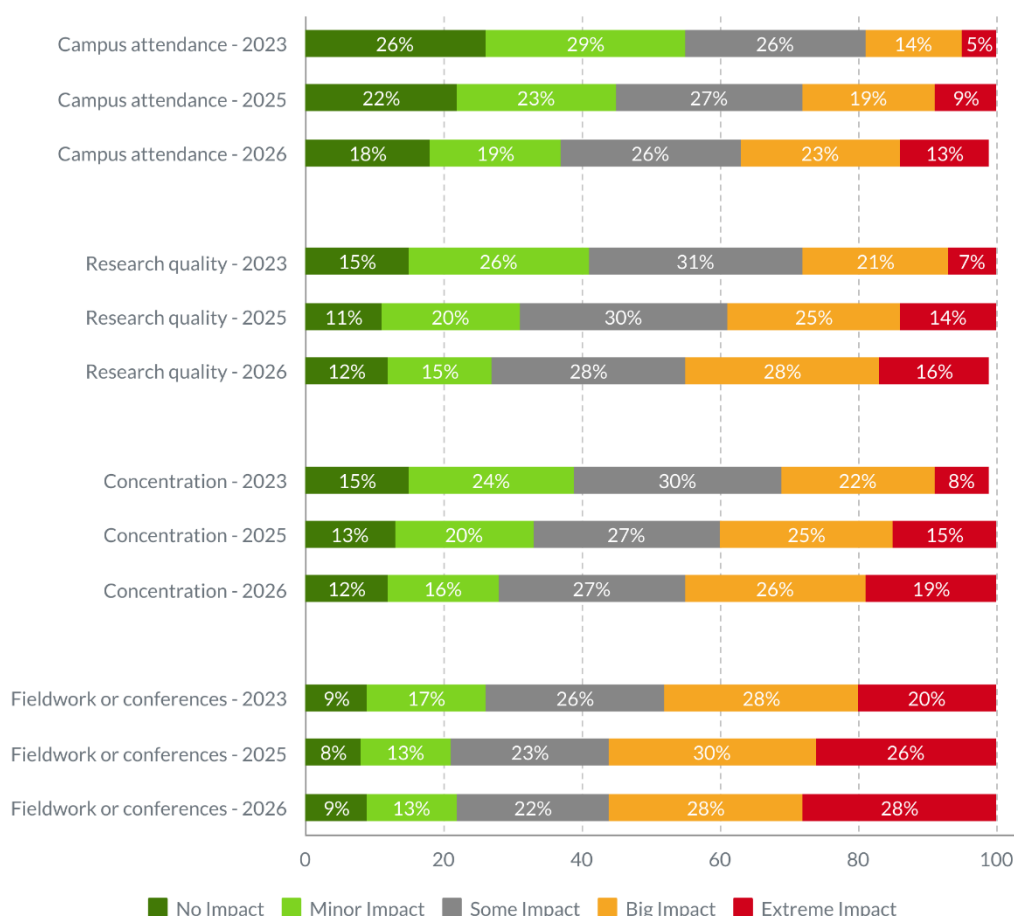
Without action on HDR Stipends to bring them in line with the best practice in the sector, and towards a living wage, Monash University unduly places its HDR students in precarious conditions that are detrimental to both research productivity, but also student mental health and equity.

Financial Stress is Worsening

Data shows that financial stress is pronounced and worsening across the HDR cohort. In MGA's 2023 survey, three in five (60%) HDR students reported they were 'just coping' (42%) or 'having trouble' (18%) financially. By 2025, this had worsened: 'just coping' fell to 40% while 'having trouble' rose to 20%.

Data also reveals that the negative impact financial stress has on research students' ability to attend campus, research quality, ability to concentrate and capacity to engage in fieldwork or conference related activities is worsening over time:

Impact of Financial Stress on Graduate Researchers':



Across all measures, the perceived impact on research due to financial stress has worsened between 2023–2026. Study-related travel has been the most severely affected area over all three years measured, with the proportion reporting extreme impact growing from 20% in 2023 to 28% in 2026. On-campus attendance presents the sharpest change, where the extreme impact rate more than doubled from 5% to 13%, as well as HDR students' ability to concentrate, which climbed from 8% to 19%. The capacity to complete research to a high standard has shown a comparable trend, with extreme impact increasing from 7% to 16%. In 2026, between 37% and 56% of Monash graduate researchers reported to MGA that financial stress had significantly or extremely affected each of these four areas. This data indicates serious areas of concern for research outcomes and student wellbeing, further indicating the need for reform to better support HDR students.

The Real Cost of Research

HDR students are typically expected to work beyond their set hours to progress complex and time sensitive research projects, meaning that they are likely earning even less per hour than the stipend currently represents for a 38 hour work week. MGA's 2026 survey found that nearly one third (31%) of students report they work more than 40 hours a week on their research, up from 28% in 2025.

Juggling this workload alongside additional employment to supplement the unliveable wage of the RTP stipend creates serious risks: it exposes candidates to burnout, poor mental and physical health and retention challenges. As some HDR students told us,

"Too high expectations from people (other than my supervisor) e.g. staff on units I teach into, meaning to complete all the requirements of me I had to work 70 hours per week. Hard to be connected when you're always in the lab, teaching, or marking."

"PhD should be considered a job like in European countries. The work load is more than 40 hours per week, but the scholarship is too low for this amount of work."

Research Productivity and Paid Work

The proportion of Monash HDR students engaged in paid work alongside their research has risen significantly over time:

Candidates supplementing stipend with paid work	2020	2022	2024	2026
Combined proportion in any paid employment (full-time + part-time + casual)	73% domestic 52% international	77% domestic 64% international	80% domestic 43% international	84% domestic 56% international

Despite their engagement in additional paid work, the majority of HDR students have reported an annual income of \$30,000 to \$39,000 per annum or less in 2023 (73%), 2025 (62%) and 2026 (67%). This suggests that wages are not keeping pace with the cost of living. Notably, 80% of respondents in MGA's 2026 survey said they would cut down on additional paid work to concentrate on their research if their RTP stipends were higher. This was a consistent response across both domestic and international students, suggesting that the desire to focus more on research is near universally shared across scholarship holders. These findings imply that stipend increases are likely to result in greater research focus, improving research productivity by removing barriers that impede HDR students' engagement in their work.

Mental Health and Withdrawal Risk

Mental health and financial issues are the top cited reasons for HDR students who have considered withdrawal from their degree. In MGA's 2026 survey, 56% of domestic students and 58% of international students who had considered leaving reported mental health as a primary factor, while 49% of domestic students and 36% of international students reported financial issues as a driving consideration for withdrawal. These findings are consistent with broader research into student financial and mental wellbeing. According to Larcombe et al. (2022), mental health and financial pressure are among the top reasons HDR students consider leaving their degrees.¹¹ Kalenjuk et al. (2024) warn of serious economic costs when promising scholars abandon their studies or academic careers due to institutional disregard for their wellbeing.¹² Further, a recent report from McMahon et al. (2026) found that financial hardship is widespread with one in three students experiencing financial insecurity, and that financial stress is connected to increased withdrawal rates, underperformance in academic work and poor mental health outcomes.^{ii 13}

ⁱⁱ NB: This study reflects experiences of both undergraduate and graduate students.

The Reality of HDR Students Living Below Minimum Wage:

MGA's research has also found that 90% of HDR students who rent are under rental stress. Combined with the reported financial stress affecting research-specific activities documented earlier in this report, these conditions leave many HDR students feeling trapped between their research and study goals and an inability to meet basic costs:

"With the current cost of living, the stipend is really not enough to get by. I sometimes take up additional work to cover life expenses, which impacts the hours I should be spending on studies. Unfortunately, it becomes a vicious cycle which can be psychologically and physically taxing, resulting in burn out."

"Beyond our PhDs, we have rental payments, mortgages, children to support, healthcare needs, vet bills, transportation costs and a need to eat. Every day I am forced to make a decision: "Do I take the train to campus today? Do I buy my medication? Do I take my dog to the vet? Or do I eat dinner?". At the worst moments of my PhD, I have been left with no choice but to eat cereal for dinner ... Please, we are begging the University to increase our stipends before we suffer too much."

"The scholarship is of course too low, leaving little to no money over once housing, groceries, and bills are paid. This means that the only way for me to attend conferences, travel for research and field work, and spend any money on other things is by taking on additional paid work, which always means spending less time working on the thesis."

"This situation has placed me under enormous stress and is affecting my studies. I am confident that I could produce higher-quality research, but the ongoing financial strain has been deeply unsettling and has made it difficult for me to fully concentrate on my academic work."

"Being paid below the minimum wage really tells me that I am not a valued member of society. It tells me that what I am doing is not worthwhile."

These student testimonies highlight the harsh conditions experienced while pursuing graduate research. While Monash cannot control the broader macroeconomic circumstances which are affecting cost-of-living, there are levers available to the university that can offer meaningful respite for HDR students.

Growing Pressure across the sector:

The call for an increase to RTP stipends and broader reform to this program is not unique to MGA or to Monash HDR students. It is echoed across the sector, with momentum building for radical change:

Universities Accord: Calls for substantial increase in the RTP minimum stipend and tax-free status for part-time students. Does not propose a specific figure.

Universities Australia/Australian Council of Graduate Research: Calls for a base rate of \$36,000 per annum to be provided by the Federal Government, with stipend indexing to meet cost-of-living. An expanded pool of funding to maintain student numbers while increasing stipends, extending government funded parental leave eligibility to include HDR students, and tax-free status for part-time students.

Group of Eight (Go8): Calls for RTP scholarship minimum to be lifted to, at least, above the national minimum wage, and tax-free status for part-time students.

Strategic Examination of Research and Development (SERD): Calls for a stipend increase to \$50,000 for ~1,000 PhD students working in areas of national priority.

Alignment with Monash Strategic Policies:

Raising the RTP Stipend directly aligns with Monash's current strategic frameworks:

Impact 2030: This strategy explicitly commits the university to growing scholarships supported both by Monash and externally, meaning that increasing RTP stipends is a significant action towards fulfilling this strategic commitment. Talent attraction and retention is also a key element of the Impact 2030 strategy, with Monash committed to "enhancing our capacity to attract, develop and retain the very best talent in the world." As we have demonstrated, without the increase to a liveable wage for RTP stipend holders, Monash risks failing to attract and retain talented researchers. Further, commitments to inclusivity measures, with an emphasis on access to and success in studies for students of socioeconomically disadvantaged groups will not be achievable for those students who would be unable to survive on an RTP stipend without having a broader financial safety net through family or independent wealth. In other words, RTP stipends offered by Monash currently may be contributing to a structural barrier for low SES background students -- including students living with a disability, gender diverse students, and refugee students -- from being able to engage meaningfully in HDR programs. As McMahon et al. (2026) argue, particular individuals experience sharp financial inadequacy, "...with international students, Indigenous students, students living with a disability, and those living alone being disproportionately affected."¹⁴

Research and Enterprise at Scale 2026-2028: Monash explicitly acknowledges the competition it faces in attracting talent in a globally competitive market in this policy document. Specifically, initiative 1.2 argues for "increased student satisfaction" and "increased rate of timely submissions" as essential success indicators for graduate research. As we have argued, raising the RTP stipend to a liveable wage would ease financial pressure on research students, allowing them the space and energy to thrive in their research instead of having to divide their attention between research and survival employment. This would also reduce the reported stress and burnout that is well documented across the literature on HDR students, supporting better mental health and wellbeing, and reducing the risk of research delays or withdrawal. Ultimately, financial security is an important element of wellbeing, and Monash explicitly commits to "enhanced student experience, including ... strengthened wellbeing and career support." The document also names HDR pipeline development for Indigenous researchers as a priority. However, a below-subsistence stipend is a structural barrier that disproportionately affects candidates from disadvantaged backgrounds, directly contradicting this goal.

EDI Framework 2022-2030: Monash's EDI Framework recognises that "we do not all start from the same place" and that "we must acknowledge imbalances and make adjustments accordingly." The current RTP stipend inaccurately reflects these points, by treating all recipients the same despite the different advantages and disadvantages among HDR students -- especially in the cost-of-living context of Melbourne where some students may have family and wealth, while others may have no networks of supports or personal resources to fall back on. Goal four of the EDI Framework calls for "dismantling barriers through structural change", something which our call to raise the RTP Stipend answers. Inadequate stipend support is precisely the kind of structural barrier that Monash ought to be removing in its commitment to EDI.

Key Point: Inaction to address the gap between HDR stipends and cost of living risks increasing exclusion and loss of talented future academics due to poor conditions and structural barriers unnecessarily maintained by Monash University.

MGA Calls on Monash University to raise the RTP Stipend to a liveable wage.

The evidence is clear, RTP stipends are not liveable wages and the risk of losing talented research students is at an all-time high. We need the RTP stipend to be raised to a liveable wage. This call comes from both students and from across the higher education sector. Now, it is time for Monash to lead. MGA proposes the following actions to achieve this:

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS:

1	RTP stipends are immediately raised to the Go8 average of ~\$39,000 pa
2	Monash develops and commits to a living wage trajectory over four years
3	Monash engages proactively in public advocacy to influence the Federal Government to shift its policy on RTP scholarship holders including: I. Advocating for tax free status to be extended to part-time students II. Advocating for Federal funding to ensure a minimum wage for RTP stipend recipients

MGA strongly advocates for HDR students to be supported appropriately with a stipend that keeps up with the rising cost of living pressures in Australia. Adjusting HDR stipends will better enable students to focus on their research, improve quality of outputs and strengthen the overall standing of Monash University through its graduate research community.

- ¹ Australian Council of Graduate Research and Universities Australia, '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; Australian Government, 'Australian Universities Accord – Final Report', *Australian Government*, (2024): Accessed 1 December, 2025: <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/final-report>; 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>; Group of Eight Australia. "Go8 feedback on draft Higher Education Support Guidelines 2025". (2025). Accessed 10 June, 2026. <https://go8.edu.au/go8-feedback-on-draft-higher-education-support-guidelines-2025>.
- ² Group of Eight Australia. "Go8 feedback on draft Higher Education Support Guidelines 2025".
- ³ Monash University, "Monash University Strategic Plan – Impact 2030", (2021): Accessed 2 December, 2025: https://www.monash.edu/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/2680389/Strategic-Plan_Impact-2030_Sept-2025.pdf; Monash University, "Monash University Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Framework 2022-2030", (2022): Accessed 10 November, 2025: https://www.monash.edu/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/3225358/EDI-Framework-Booklet.pdf; Monash University, "Research and Enterprise at Scale – 2026-2028", (2026): Accessed 19 May, 2026: <https://www.monash.edu/enterprise-intelligence-and-insights/planning/university-planning/documents/DVCRE-Research-and-Enterprise-Plan.pdf>.
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- ⁵ Monash Graduate Association, "Monash HDR Stipend Report 2022", (2022): Available on request.
- ⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Research and Experimental Development, Higher Education Organisations, Australia", (2026), Accessed 20 June, 2026: <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/industry/technology-and-innovation/research-and-experimental-development-higher-education-organisations-australia/latest-release#data-download>
- ⁷ 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>.
- ⁸ Australian Council of Graduate Research and Universities Australia, 'Investing in PhD Candidates in Australia'.
- ⁹ Mewburn, Inger, Will J. Grant, Hanna Suominen, and Stephanie Kizimchuk. "A Machine Learning Analysis of the Non-Academic Employment Opportunities for Ph.D. Graduates in Australia." *Higher Education Policy* 33, no. 4 (2020): 799–813. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-018-0098-4>.
- ¹⁰ Department of Education, "Research Block Grants", *Australian Government*, (2026): Accessed 22 June, 2026: <https://www.education.gov.au/research-block-grants>
- ¹¹ Larcombe, Wendy, Tracii Ryan, and Chi Baik. "What Makes PhD Researchers Think Seriously about Discontinuing? An Exploration of Risk Factors and Risk Profiles." *Higher Education Research & Development* 41/7 (2022): 2215–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2021.2013169>.
- ¹² Kalenjuk, Elvira, Jessica Coventry, Jimena de Mello Heredia, et al. *Rethinking Doctoral Wellbeing: A Relational Approach to the Mental Health Crisis in Academia*. (2024). <https://doi.org/10.26180/27707283.v3>.
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- ¹⁴ McMahon et al. "Towards a financially inclusive higher education system – Small Grants Research Program final report." P. 33.