

Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee

INQUIRY INTO ENHANCING VICTORIAN UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE: MGA SUBMISSION

Ensuring graduate research and
coursework students are at the table.

February
2026

About MGA:

The Monash Graduate Association (MGA) is the representative body for all graduate research and coursework students 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 35,000 graduates** across the Victorian campuses of Caulfield, Clayton, Parkville and Peninsula, as well as those studying online.

Executive Summary:

MGA welcomes the opportunity to engage in the important issue of university governance in Victoria. In this submission, we offer recommendations for the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Enhancing Victorian University Governance that reflect the needs and perspectives of graduate students.

Our position is simple: Graduate research and graduate coursework students must have a seat the table alongside undergraduates to contribute to effective university governance and stewardship.

We argue that effective university governance requires the meaningful inclusion of graduate research and coursework students in decision-making and management structures. Graduate students bring invaluable perspectives informed by their dual roles as both advanced learners and contributors to research and teaching activities. Their involvement in governance ensures that policies and strategic decisions reflect and cohere with the realities of those directly engaged in the core academic mission of universities. Without graduate student representation, university councils risk making decisions that overlook the unique challenges, insights and needs of a substantial and important heterogeneous cohort of the university community.

This submission highlights several systemic gaps in current university governance structures across Victoria, particularly the inadequate representation of graduate research and coursework students on university councils and insufficient mechanisms for student input on strategic decisions. We examine how these gaps undermine effective governance and propose practical reforms to strengthen accountability, improve decision-making quality, and ensure universities remain responsive to their core stakeholders – including the 35,000+ graduate students we represent.

Summary Recommendations:

1. Guarantee three student university council positions, with two reserved for each graduate student cohort.
2. Establish a mechanism and appropriate infrastructure or process to enable graduate student representatives to raise issues to the university council agendas.
3. Regular stakeholder feedback processes to ensure councils remain accountable to their communities.

Introduction:

Graduate students play a vital role in building Australia's research and advanced skills capability, both within academia and across the broader economy. These students contribute not only to Australia's research outputs during their studies but also to long-term innovation and productivity across diverse sectors post-graduation. Many pursue careers in industry, entrepreneurship, government and healthcare, where they apply the 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.

Why we need three student seats, not one: undergraduate, graduate coursework, and graduate research students are distinct cohorts

Current university governance frameworks in Victoria typically provide for a single position for student representation on university councils – a structure designed in an era when the student body was predominantly undergraduate and considered relatively homogeneous. This model is no longer fit for purpose. The majority of undergraduate students are learners progressing through structured curricula with a primary relationship to their university as a consumer of educational services. Their governance interests centre on teaching quality, campus amenities, course design, and timetabling. Graduate coursework students share some of these interests, but they are a meaningfully different cohort. They are older – approximately 36% are over 30, compared to just 16% of undergraduates – and are far more likely to be navigating competing responsibilities: paying rent or a mortgage, working part- or full-time, and in many cases supporting families. They have made a deliberate, high-stakes financial investment to return to study, often with specific vocational or career-change goals in mind, and their governance concerns reflect this – centring on employment relevance, course value for money, administrative flexibility, and the responsiveness of institutions to students who cannot simply be full-time learners. Graduate research students, meanwhile, occupy a position that is qualitatively unlike any other student cohort – they are simultaneously students and employees of the university, contributing directly to research, knowledge production and teaching functions. Their governance concerns include issues such as stipend adequacy, supervision quality, research funding allocation, intellectual property, and academic freedom, closely aligning them to early-career academic staff rather than undergraduate students.

The Graduate Student cohort is bigger than ever before:

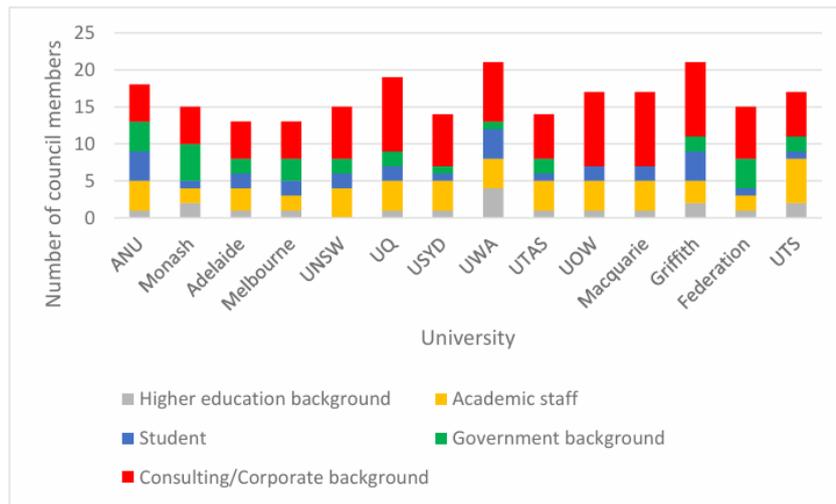
The number of graduate students has also increased significantly, falling out of step with historic governance practices. Over a 20-year period, graduate coursework enrolments have grown sharply, more than doubling from 201,656 in 2003 to 509,045 in 2024. This reflects the reality that the modern labour market often demands postgraduate qualifications for working in essential industries including in education, healthcare, engineering, law, finance and other professional services. Graduate research enrolments have also grown, though at a more modest rate, from 45,659 in 2003 to 66,503 in 2024.

Australian University Enrolments, 2003 - 2024



(Data Source: Department of Education)¹

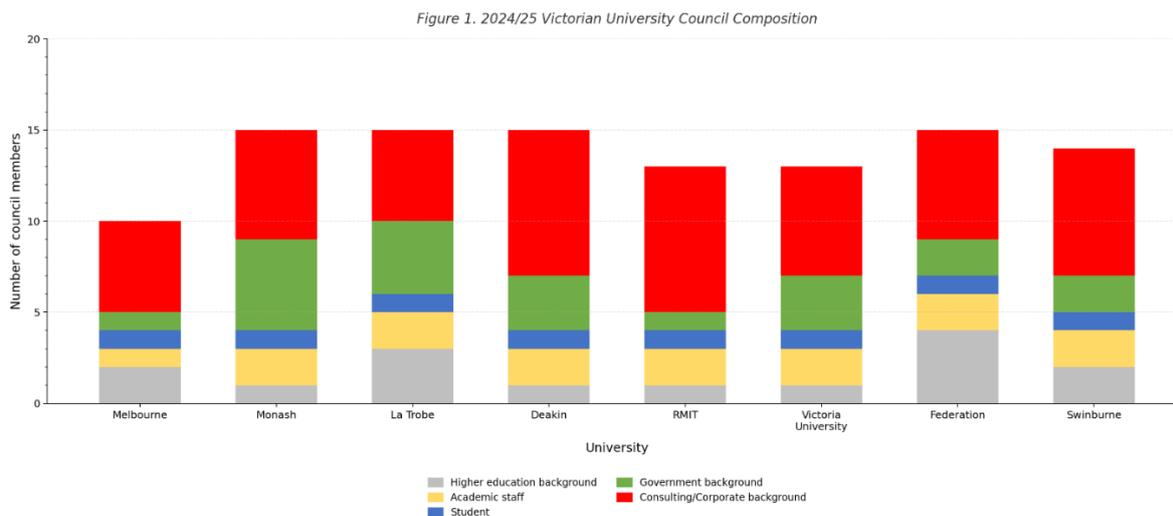
It is time to acknowledge that the student landscape has fundamentally changed in the last 20 years. We must adapt to the new reality, where graduate coursework and research students are a growing and essential cohort in the university ecosystem, with the need for adequate representation in university governance structures. Yet, since the early 2000s, governance reforms have led to the slimming down of university councils, reduction of academic and student representation and the inclusion of a higher concentration of external board council members from business and industry. As a recent submission from Prof. Corinne Cortese to the Inquiry into the Quality of Governance at Australian Higher Education Providers highlights, compositions of university councils at major Australian universities are now overly stacked with non-student and non-academic members, with Victorian universities showing some of the lowest representation of students:



(Data Source: Cortese 2025, 'Figure 1: 2023 University council composition, submission sample')²

Interestingly, Griffith University and Australian National University both demonstrate greater inclusion of students on their university councils: both ANU and Griffith University have one undergraduate student member and one postgraduate student member. At Griffith University, student members are appointed for a two-year term (the shortest term among all council members, whose average is 4 years).³ These universities show some progress towards recognising the importance of increased student representation on university councils to reflect an increasingly heterogeneous student body.

Building on Cortese’s analysis, we looked at the specific compositions of Victoria’s universities, to examine the level of student representation in university governance across the state. The below table provides a breakdown of Victorian university council composition:



We found that unlike some of our interstate counterparts, no Victorian university offers more than the standard in terms of student representation on university council: that standard being only one seat on university council for student representation.

To represent these three distinct cohorts under a single student seat – or even two – collapses these unique perspectives into one homogenous group. A student representative trying to speak simultaneously for a domestic 19-year-old undergraduate who is likely living at home with parents, an international graduate professional studying part-time, and a PhD candidate who is likely in their 30s on a scholarship and, in many cases, living below the poverty line, while casually working as a tutor, cannot meaningfully serve all of them. Effective governance requires that each constituency is able to be properly represented in university stewardship and decision-making.

The evidence we present in this submission confirms that graduate research and graduate coursework students are categorically different populations from undergraduates, with different financial ecosystems, institutional relationships, professional and personal responsibilities, and strategic priorities. Treating them as a single cohort, or lumping them together with undergraduate representation positions on councils, would replicate exactly the kind of governance failure this Inquiry is seeking to address.

MGA therefore calls for **three dedicated student seats on university councils**: one for undergraduate students, one for graduate coursework students, and one for graduate research students. This structure reflects the reality of who is in our universities today, and ensures that the full breadth of the student experience informs institutional decision-making and stewardship.

Why we need dedicated seats for both graduate coursework and research students:

Graduate students face unique experiences and challenges that differ to their undergraduate counterparts as well as within the broad group of “Graduate Student”. More than half of graduate research students (59%) are aged 30 and above, rising to 67% among domestic students. Whereas, approximately 36% of graduate coursework students are over 30 years old.⁴ Importantly, age is not the only indicator which makes these students distinct from each other. Graduate research and coursework students have fundamentally different experiences, perspectives and needs as *advanced students*:

1. **Graduate research students** are typically engaged in independent scholarly work, often on scholarship, navigating supervisor relationships, milestone requirements, and career pathways into academia or research industries. These students are also frequently employees of the university in research and teaching roles.
2. **Graduate coursework students** are more likely to be working professionals who study part-time or international students balancing full-time study with casual employment, motivated by vocational or career-change goals, and facing different pressures around cost, flexibility, and employment relevance.

MGA's research demonstrates these differences. Our 2025 *National Postgraduate Survey on Health, Family and Finances* found notable variation between these two cohorts with graduate research students reporting their primary concerns about stipend adequacy, supervisor relationships, career guidance, and research training quality. Meanwhile, graduate coursework students reporting concerns about administrative responsiveness, teaching quality, and course relevance to industry needs. These issues require different advocacy priorities and different knowledge to represent well at the university governance level.

Demographic Differences:

Of our 2025 survey participants, graduate research students were more likely to be domestic (44% international, 56% domestic), with majority returning to study after a minimum 1-5 years study break (69%), and funded primarily through scholarships — 80% are current scholarship recipients, with an additional 5% having previously held a scholarship. Graduate coursework students were almost the inverse: comprised of 80% international and 20% domestic, two fifths were continuing straight out of previous studies (40%), with the remaining concentrated in the 1-5 year period (45%) post undergraduate degree. Graduate coursework students reported variable sources of fee funding connected to citizenship and study load status. Domestic students largely self-funded their courses (88% of full-time and 84% of part-time students paying fees out of their own pocket). In contrast, international graduate coursework students reported relying heavily on family support to pay their course fees, with 88% receiving family contributions and nearly three-fifths (59%) having their families pay all course fees. These patterns show that **graduate research and coursework students are different populations** with different financial ecosystems, life stages, citizenship circumstances, and institutional bonds.

Our research has also found that while financial stress is severe in both cohorts, its origins and academic consequences diverge. Graduate research students' primary financial concern is stipend inadequacy — 90% of those who rent are under rental stress, and financial stress affects research-specific activities like conference travel and fieldwork (56% reporting extreme/major impact). The median reported income is only \$30,000–\$39,999 mirroring the typical research stipend. Graduate research students described feeling trapped between university restrictions on additional work and an inability to meet basic costs.

On the other hand, graduate coursework students face different financial complexities. They are often paying customers, looking to advance professionally and obtain industry-ready skills. Full-time domestic graduate coursework students reported a median income of \$20,000 - \$29,000, meanwhile almost half of international coursework students (49%) reported earning under \$10,000 annually. Further, according to our data using the Melbourne Institute's Financial Wellbeing Scales, the proportion of graduate coursework students "having trouble" financially has surged from 11% in 2023 to 19% in 2025 — a steeper increase than research students (18% to 20%). The academic consequences also differ between the two enrolment types: for coursework students, financial stress most severely impacts course completion ability (39% of domestic full-time and 33% of international students reporting extreme/big impact) and campus attendance (35% and 31% respectively). For research students, lack of access to resources for research-related activities and travel limits their progression.

The Bottom Line: One representative cannot adequately capture the needs of all graduate students alongside undergraduates.

These different problems require different policy and governance responses: on the one hand, graduate research students need institutional advocacy for better research support and funding; on the other hand, graduate coursework

students may require emergency bursaries, housing affordability partnerships, scholarship diversification, and transparent cost guidance for students making high-stakes international study decisions.

Governance decisions and prioritisation directly affects graduate students' experiences and outcomes

Many of the issues that graduate research and coursework students face can be fuelled by university decision making and prioritisation. These include inadequate stipend levels that fail to keep pace with cost-of-living pressures; limited access to professional development opportunities and career support tailored to graduate student needs; insufficient mental health and wellbeing services designed for the unique pressures of postgraduate study; unclear pathways for raising concerns about supervision quality or workplace conditions; and a lack of transparency in decisions affecting research funding allocation, course offerings, and campus infrastructure priorities. Additionally, graduate students often experience precarious employment conditions when engaged in teaching or research assistant roles, with limited job security and inadequate compensation for their contributions to the university's teaching and research outputs, including well-documented incidences of wage theft.

Quick Research Facts (MGA 2025 National Survey):

- Only 37% of students satisfied with career guidance and with many students describing concerns about financial sustainability, employment relevance and professional development opportunities.
- 54% of domestic and international graduate research students report inadequate meaningful contact with university administrative staff.
- 33% of Monash students experience moderate to extremely severe symptoms of depression, with 38% reporting these levels of depression from other universities (with similar trends observed for symptoms of anxiety – 35% and 33% respectively).⁵

Quick Coursework Facts (MGA 2025 National Survey):

- 42-46% report inadequate administrative staff contact.
- Majority of domestic part-time students (61%) and approximately half of domestic full-time students (52%) have considered leaving their course.
- 39% of Monash students report moderate to extremely severe anxiety symptoms compared to 33% elsewhere.⁶

Behind these issues are the lived realities of graduate students, which are often overlooked at the systems-management level. However, ensuring students' voices are heard and their experiences are taken seriously is of utmost importance to restore trust in university governance. The following testimonies, drawn from our 2025 National Survey, illustrate the direct cost of governance decisions made without adequate graduate student input. These are not exceptional cases, rather they reflect patterns documented across our survey sample:

"The current stipend rate is abysmal and does not sufficiently meet the cost of living. On top of that, the University instructs us that we are not allowed to take on more than 1 day of additional work outside of our PhD. Any more and we face consequences from the University ... To add to this, the university tells us that we need to travel and present our research at conferences to disseminate our research, but does not give us the support to do so. We are expected to pay out of pocket for \$4,000 flights plus accommodation, without a sustainable salary. 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?" (Graduate Research Student)

"I have found the level of engagement from teaching staff to be extremely limited. Communication is often poor, with discussion posts and emails frequently going unanswered, which at times makes me question the value of attending

when self-directed research seems more productive. Additionally, the course content lacks depth and critical insight, and the Moodle platform is disorganised and difficult to navigate, which further impacts the learning experience. The presence of additional fees at Monash adds to the overall frustration, especially given the already high course costs.”
(Graduate Coursework Student)

“We are 30, 40, 50, 60 year old, and many of us have mortgages and families we need to provide for. We are operating at a postdoc level, and work just as hard, if not harder, than some senior academic staff. We are supposed to be the future of academia, but the burnout and financial insecurity we experience during our PhDs encourages us to leave academia and never look back.” (Graduate Research Student)

Despite the fact that many of the challenges facing graduate students, such as broader cost-of-living pressures, stem from factors beyond institutional control, universities make deliberate governance choices that significantly affect student wellbeing and success. Decisions about resource allocation, support service provision, stipend policies, employment conditions for student workers, and infrastructure investment are all within the university’s sphere of influence. When these decisions are made without graduate student input, they often fail to address the realities of graduate student life, perpetuating systemic issues that could be mitigated through more inclusive and informed governance practices. Addressing the issues we have highlighted requires deliberate structural reform. MGA makes the following recommendations to the Inquiry to strengthen graduate student representation and improve the accountability of university governance in Victoria.

Recommendations:

1. Guarantee three student university council positions, with two reserved for each graduate student cohort.

Graduate students are well-placed to serve as university council members. PhD candidates, for example, typically enrol for four or more years and can serve terms exceeding the standard two-year cycle, providing greater continuity than undergraduate representatives. Graduate coursework students often come with professional expertise that enhance their contribution to university councils as both students and professionals with industry ties. Critically, graduate coursework and research students constitute distinct cohorts with different needs, and both deserve dedicated representation at university decision-making levels. We recommend one reserved position for each cohort, in addition to one place for undergraduate students.

2. Establish a mechanism and appropriate infrastructure or process to enable graduate student representatives to raise issues to the university council agendas.

It is critical that student representation in university governance does not become performative and tokenistic inclusion. As the Expert Council on University Governance noted, staff representatives frequently reported difficulty accessing channels to list agenda items or add information to meeting records, with a “sense that the papers and discussions are carefully structured to move the agenda of senior management”.⁷ These power imbalances are likely even more pronounced for student representatives. We strongly recommend that fairer, more equitable policies be established to ensure student representatives (as well as staff) have a genuine pathway to contribute to council priorities and focus. As part of this, it is critical that universities invest in appropriate professional development for student representatives to be able to effectively participate on council. We further suggest that all council members receive professional development and training focussed on understanding student experience.

3. Regular stakeholder feedback processes to ensure councils remain accountable to their communities.

University councils rarely have structured processes for receiving feedback from their core stakeholders. Annual stakeholder reviews would allow students, staff, and the broader community to assess council performance, identify areas for improvement, and verify that decisions have adequately considered their perspectives. For

graduate students specifically, this provides a formal channel to hold councils accountable for decisions affecting research training, student support, and academic quality.

Alignment with the Universities Accord and Expert Council on University Governance:

As the Australian Universities Accord final report highlights, “education, research, innovation and society-wide partnerships are vital for Australia’s economic prosperity democratic cohesion and environmental sustainability.”⁸ The Accord goes further, explicitly recommending that universities strengthen student and staff participation in governance as a foundation for institutional accountability and long-term performance. Yet as we have shown, the current governance structures in Victorian universities fall well short of this standard with their failure to provide enough dedicated representation for the graduate students, even though graduate students are heavily relied upon to sustain these institutions. The Expert Council on University Governance similarly identified meaningful stakeholder participation, including by students, as a core principle of effective governance. MGA’s recommendations in this submission are directly responsive to both the Accord’s vision and the Expert Council’s principles: dedicated graduate student seats (in addition to undergraduate representation) and structured input mechanisms are practical reforms that will enhance Victorian university governance.

Conclusion:

Lumping graduate research and graduate coursework students together with undergraduate students into one homogenous group misunderstands the diversity of the graduate experience. Continuing to treat these student cohorts as one student body risks replicating exactly the kind of top-down, one-size-fits-all governance structure that has resulted in the need for a critical examination of university governance. Instead, we have argued that it is crucial to ensure there is appropriate representation of graduate research and graduate coursework students alongside undergraduates in university governance structures. If adopted, the recommendations we have outlined will foster a culture of greater accountability, transparency and inclusivity in our universities, ensuring that decisions are informed by the perspectives of those most directly engaged in the core purpose of our universities – study, research and teaching. This is within the national interest, as well-operated and productive universities underpin the Australian economy, drive innovation, advance social progress, and contribute to our democratic institutions. The quality of university governance directly affects our capacity to train the next generation of researchers, educators, and professionals, making these reforms not merely administrative improvements but investments in Australia's future prosperity and social cohesion.

We are part of the fabric of our universities. We can offer greater understanding of the issues and risks facing graduate students, as well as unique perspectives which can positively refine governance practices to support universities in delivering high quality education and research outcomes. That is why we need three positions on university council to reflect the three distinct student cohorts in our modern universities.

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¹ 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>

² Cortese, C. (2025). 'University Councils: Composition, Consultancies, and Corporatisation. A submission to the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee Inquiry into the Quality of Governance at Australian Higher Education Providers', *Quality of governance at Australian higher education providers Submission 75*. Available from: https://ro.uow.edu.au/articles/report/University_Councils_Composition_Consultancies_and_Corporatisation/29631956?file=56502446

³ Griffith University, (2025). 'Council Handbook', Available from: https://www.griffith.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0026/1234475/Council-Handbook.pdf

⁴ Department of Education (DoE), (2024). '2024 Section 2 – All students', *Australian Government*. Available from: <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/resources/2024-section-2-all-students>

⁵ Edwards, R, (2025). 'Graduate Research at Monash: Student Experiences, Challenges and Opportunities for Enhancement', *Monash Graduate Association*: Melbourne. Available from: <https://mga.monash.edu/pageassets/voice/reports-feedback/Graduate-Research-at-Monash-Student-Experiences-Challenges-and-Opportunities-for-Enhancement-Report.pdf>

⁶ Edwards, R, (2025). 'Graduate Coursework at Monash: Student Experiences, Challenges and Opportunities for Enhancement', *Monash Graduate Association*: Melbourne.

⁷ Cilento, M. Burrow, S, and Cowley, B, (2025). 'Final Report and Principles of the Expert Council on University Governance', Available from: <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/expert-council-university-governance-final-report-and-principles>

⁸ Ibid.