



## **Submission to the Australian Universities Accord Panel discussion paper April 2023 Monash Graduate Association Inc**

The Monash Graduate Association (MGA) is an independent, incorporated, not-for-profit body representing 28,000 graduate coursework and graduate research students enrolled at Monash University. The MGA runs social activities, a free and confidential advocacy service, welfare assistance and academic workshops. The organisation conducts research into the experiences of the graduate student body to inform its services.

More information about the activities of the MGA can be found here:  
<https://mga.monash.edu>

The MGA welcomes the opportunity to participate in the Australian Universities Accord Panel discussions. The following comments are informed by internal research and advocacy casework, conducted by the Monash Graduate Association staff.

### **Q16 What practical barriers are inhibiting lifelong learning, and how can they be fixed?**

Graduate coursework degrees are an obvious pathway to enhancing and changing careers, but the cost presents a barrier to lifelong learning, especially when students are likely to be starting with a HECS debt from their undergraduate degrees.

**Lowering and standardising fees across graduate coursework degrees** within each university would eliminate the imperative on low income students to choose a course just because it is the only one they can afford.

### **Q25 How should Australia leverage its research capacity overall and use it more effectively to develop new capabilities and solve wicked problems?**

#### The PhD components

PhD students make a significant contribution to Australia's research output. Universities need to continue to invest in basic research to provide the baseline education for responding to new advances in technology. If students aren't skilled in the basics, they

don't have the depth of understanding to know how to apply their research and almost certainly will not be in a position to innovate.

The PhD is so restrictive now that experimental research is almost impossible. Many HDR students are required to complete compulsory coursework units, compulsory professional development hours, an internship and produce a PhD thesis in under 3.5 years. With the cost of living at an all-time high, there is also the time spent working to earn money to supplement their scholarships. Placing this much pressure on students means PhD research projects must be confined to a small, contained piece of research that will provide a predictable successful outcome in 2.5 years. Such an environment leads to a lack of discovery and innovation.

**Provide more funded time for PhD students to do their research.**

For example, **extend scholarship funding to four years** to account for the additional time required to complete all the compulsory components that have been added to a PhD in recent years. Review compulsory components to identify those that should instead be optional, such as **professional development training**, which should allow HDR students to tailor their training to suit their individual situations, and take into account prior work and industry experience. Compulsory professional training fails to recognise the diversity of the graduate student cohort, and is a disincentive to those coming to a PhD from a professional background.

Cross-faculty research is critical to solving complex problems, but doesn't always work very well for PhD students as their progress can often be held hostage to administrative structures within universities which keep faculties in silos. Review faculty structures

International research partnerships

Universities are increasing the number of joint PhD degrees they run with international institutions, which provides a good opportunity to form collaborations and develop new capabilities. However, sometimes these student cohorts fall between the two participating institutions; they are deemed ineligible for the support normally provided to PhD students by each institution, with the result that joint PhD participants do not receive adequate support from either institution. When problems arise students can be bounced back and forth between institutions with each claiming the other institution is responsible for resolving the situation. **Clarity needs to be provided around: where the responsibilities of each institution sit; and the forms of support students will receive from each institution**, including financial, health and independent advocacy. Differences between a standard PhD program and a joint PhD program should be made clear to prospective students prior to enrolment.

Q27 How can we improve research training in Australia including improving pathways for researchers to gain experience and develop high-impact careers in government and industry?

#### Intellectual Property (IP)

Many universities have swung too far in the area of ownership of IP; from a starting position some years ago of acknowledging that students owned their own IP, to now essentially claiming all IP produced by every PhD student. This discourages potential students from industry who might come to their degrees with an idea and some background IP. When they find out that using their background IP in their PhDs will result in the university claiming ownership of the results, they look elsewhere. **Where students and supervisors have collaborated, the resulting IP should be treated in the same way that any IP resulting from a collaboration of academics from different institutions would be treated.** Students are not employees of universities and do not enjoy the benefits of employees so universities have no right to make blanket claims on student IP.

Similarly, when setting up opportunities to gain experience in industry settings through industry internships and collaborative research, IP ownership issues as discussed above should first be addressed.

**PhD industry internships need to be simplified and clarified.** At the moment, it is not clear what an internship looks like, and students are more likely to take up an industry offer as a paid part-time position than to spend the time and effort working out how to set it up as an internship.

#### Annual state-wide conference

Facilitate industry connections with research and coursework graduate students through an annual state-wide conference bringing industry and universities together to share research and research applications, curriculum and pedagogy, with a view to:

- providing graduate students opportunities to intern, work and eventually establish careers within industry; and
- providing universities with information about graduate course content and research projects relevant to industry needs.

Universities are huge, complex organisations; sometimes the biggest barrier for small industries wanting to work with universities is knowing with whom to speak.

Q28 What is needed to increase the number of people from under-represented groups applying to and prepared for higher education, both from school and from other pathways?

#### Parents and carers

Many graduate students are also carers, and may require universities to provide special arrangements in order to ensure their educational experience is equitable. Some university and government policies do not recognise students with carer responsibilities as having

special needs so they are often excluded from measures put in place to support other specific student groups.

For example, carers may need to take up a part-time scholarship because of their carer duties. The government regulations governing the number of paid days of leave *over the duration of a PhD candidature (not annually)*, discriminates by providing 60 days to full-time candidates and only 30 days to part-time candidates, despite both having completed the same length degree at the end of their respective candidatures of 4 (full-time) or 8 (part-time) years.

Facilities are another area of discrimination. Some university lecture theatre seats cannot accommodate pregnant women. Some universities have a lack of approved breastfeeding facilities. Where once universities provided on-campus occasional childcare, most of these services have been closed down and/or outsourced to contractors who run them as a profit-making business rather than a critical support service. Some graduate students need occasional care as opposed to being locked into a minimum number of days in a child-care centre. **The lack of support for parents and carers, who are often women, is a barrier to those wishing to pursue further education.**

Q29 What changes in provider practices and offerings are necessary to ensure all potential students can succeed in their chosen area of study?

#### Mental health problems

Address (in a meaningful way) the growing number of mental health problems among HDR students. Mental health problems contribute to non-completions and extend completion times. **This includes addressing student finances, quality of supervision, poor cultures in some departments** and the problems associated with laboratory settings (high pressure, soft money, internal competitiveness and unpleasant supervisors) that negatively affect students.

#### More money

**Scholarships need to be lifted to at least the minimum wage** to allow students to live with some dignity. It is not possible to survive in Australia on \$30,000- \$35,000 per year. **Remove the scholarship condition that restricts the amount of income students can earn while in receipt of a scholarship.** At the very least, increase it to allow for an additional external income equivalent to 100% of the scholarship amount.

#### Value of international student scholarships

A government-applied **minimum value required on the level of scholarships provided to international HDR students by their home countries** in order to be accepted by an Australian university, would ensure that international students are not placed in the situation where their home government scholarship is inadequate to support them living in Australia. That minimum level should be the equivalent of an RTP stipend.

#### More time

Refer to the comments under Q25.

Q30 How can governments, institutions and employers assist students, widen opportunities and remove barriers to higher education?

Provide more scholarships.

Provide more part-time scholarships.

**Make part-time scholarships non-taxable where the recipient is a part-time student and is not holding a full-time job.** Graduate students choose to study part-time for a number of reasons including having carer responsibilities, having a disability or having cultural responsibilities. Equity groups are over-represented in the part-time cohort, especially women, low SES and Indigenous. Having to pay tax on a part-time scholarship deters and disadvantages a number of equity groups from pursuing further education.

Improve university policies and procedures in relation to areas such as carers and disability so that procedures set out more explicitly what forms of assistance are available students, especially to HDR students who require more tailored support. Universities tend to have well developed equity support for undergraduates but less so for graduate students.

Better fund and develop university support services for areas such as carers, disability and careers.

Q39 What reforms are needed to ensure that all students have a quality student experience?

#### The role of graduate student associations

Better financial and operational support for independent graduate student associations to operate within universities. Graduate student bodies are run in conjunction with their own professional staff, and are internally focussed on providing tailored services and running graduate-specific facilities. They run independent advocacy services and other targeted services that are developed in response to graduate student demand, and play an important role in representation, research, provision of feedback and improving the student experience. When properly supported by their institutions, a graduate student association is a very valuable asset, contributing significantly to the university's revenue through their role in improving retention via successful advocacy casework.

Instead of the trend within universities to replace these independent services with services run by university staff, graduate student associations (and universities) would benefit from **the SSAF guidelines being amended to allow for a minimum of 50% of the graduate SSAF collected by their university to be allocated directly to the graduate student association** (where such a body exists). This would address the issue where graduate SSAF is often subsumed by the larger undergraduate student bodies, and graduate students miss out on the tailored support services that would genuinely improve their university experiences.