

UNSW Postgraduate Council (PGC UNSW)

Response to the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper

Authors: Anthony Sunjaya, Isabelle Greco, Gurpreet Hansra, Haley Stone,
Jack Lodge, Tony Le, Joshua Karras, and Mitchell McBurnie

Executive Summary

The Postgraduate Council at the University of New South Wales (PGC UNSW) represents postgraduate research and coursework students. This response to the Australian Universities Accord (the ‘Accord’) Discussion Paper, provided by the authors on behalf of the UNSW Sydney postgraduate students, highlights for the panel’s consideration concerns and opportunities in three key sections:

1. Living as a Postgraduate Student - Government and University Support

We commence by a discussion of what the Federal and NSW State Governments, working together with universities, can do to alleviate the day-to-day challenges faced by postgraduate students. We call for support for better housing for students, a research stipend that reflects the cost of living, more flexible international students’ visa conditions, including a smoother pathway to remaining in Australia, transport concessions for all students, and gendered violence leave accessible for all postgraduate students.

2. Re-imagining Australian Higher Degrees by Research (HDR) of the Future

The Accord provides a timely opportunity to re-think higher degrees by research (HDRs). We call on the panel to consider how flexibility, internships, and coursework can positively impact HDR programs of the future. We also ask the panel to consider a cap on the number of students a single primary supervisor can have to ensure the quality of these programs and student outcomes.

3. Masters by Coursework in a Changing World

Finally, we consider the unique challenges faced by masters by coursework students. Can the Accord provide a forum where universities can share new approaches to learning, teaching, and assessment in the face of advances in artificial intelligence? We propose elevating work integrated learning (WIL), and removing the visa restrictions which prevent this engagement, as a solution.

1. Living as a Postgraduate Student - University and Government Support

The Accord Discussion Paper Section

3.5.2 Addressing barriers to access

Guiding Questions:

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

Q31 How can the costs of participation, including living expenses, be most effectively alleviated?

1.1 University Accommodation and Housing for Students - University and Government Support

Many students leave the comfort and security of their family home or country to pursue their academic dreams, and it is imperative that these students are provided with an environment in which they can thrive. A safe and suitable physical space is a fundamental aspect of student experience, and universities must take it seriously.

University accommodation is usually the first option for many students who are new to an area, and it is the university’s responsibility to ensure that their accommodation services provide adequate and affordable housing for its students. A recent article published by The Guardian¹ described student accommodation to be an expensive housing option with high median unit rents, even though the units offered are smaller¹.

¹ Cassidy, C. and S. Convery, *University property sell-offs heighten ‘dire’ housing shortage as students return to Australia*, in *The Guardian*. 2023.

Where there are insufficient units available on campus, universities should consider working with governments to provide other types of support. This may be in the form of securing suitable off-campus accommodation options, housing subsidies, bond-free renting, and help with the sourcing of units and application process for students turning to the off-campus housing rental market. International students may not have a rental history and are therefore barely considered amidst hundreds of other applicants just to find a place they can call ‘home’ while being away from their families. Many students, particularly international students, have resorted to dire options such as “hot-bedding”, an act of sharing a bed with others in shifts, as they cannot afford to pay the exorbitant rent prices². These difficulties are exacerbated when a student is bringing a family, as universities often do not have suitable family units.

Universities have invested in their academic rigour, but the same cannot be said for students’ accommodation. It is time for universities to take a holistic approach to student experience and outcomes and prioritise the safety and wellbeing of their students³. Students who are comfortable in their living spaces are more likely to be productive and successful in their studies. In a report published in 2019, experts acknowledge⁴ that “student accommodation plays a vital role in student experience” and provides “a sense of belonging and security” thereby allowing “young people to be able to feel enabled to take on the risks and challenges of higher education”.

A safe and adequate living space is not a luxury but a necessity, and universities must make it their priority to work with governments to find solutions and support better housing outcomes for students in order to attract, retain, and protect students. The universities should also consider providing different accommodation options for postgraduate students who are often mature age students and have different requirements to other student cohorts.

1.2 HDR Stipend - Future Decision-Making Mechanisms

We welcome the recent increases across many of the Group of Eight Universities to the stipend for students completing higher degrees by research (HDR) programs. We are concerned, however, that it took national and international crises, and years of this stipend stagnating below the national poverty line, before such changes, driven largely by student activists, were made. Relying on student activists is particularly fraught for two reasons:

- Firstly, student unionisation has been actively discouraged in previous decades, meaning it is more difficult than ever for students to organise a collective voice for change.
- Secondly, for international students, who form a large part of our HDR cohort, protesting ‘incorrectly’ can lead to visa termination and thus the successful completion of their studies relies upon accepting potentially unfair conditions.

To rectify these issues, we ask that the panel considers how future decisions regarding the stipend are made:

- Could the lower bound for the stipend be related explicitly to the minimum wage and/or the poverty line to ensure that all HDR students, who are highly qualified, intelligent, and working incredibly hard, at least have a livable wage? Note that the current amount given to universities from the Australian government is only \$29,863 (per student per annum)⁴?
- Could the upper bound of the stipend be indexed along with the lower bound so as to not penalise candidates who have achieved significant scholarships or sponsorships?
- How can the stipend be more reactive and adjusted to respond to the changes in the economic climate so that students are not left, literally, starving when prices rapidly increase?

² Morris, A., C. Hastings, and G. Ramia, *Thousands of students are ‘hot-bedding’ in Australia*, in *Even before the pandemic added to their financial stresses, a survey of 7000 international students living in Sydney and Melbourne found that 3%, or more than 200 students, were renting beds that are available to them for only certain hours*. 2021.

³ Worsley, J.D., P. Harrison, and R. Corcoran, *The role of accommodation environments in student mental health and wellbeing*. BMC Public Health, 2021. **21**(1): p. 1-15.

⁴ Australian Government Department of Education. *Research Training Program*. 2023; Available from: <https://www.education.gov.au/research-block-grants/research-training-program>.

- Would treating HDR students as staff be more appropriate, affording them the protection of a union and an enterprise agreement which in turn brings fairer leave provisions and a minimum wage?

1.3 International Student Visas - Flexibility, Conditions, Partners, Pathways to Residency

The international student visa conditions and processing continue to pose significant restrictions on postgraduate students studying in Australia. Many domestic students take for granted the ability to leave their studies for a period of time when required to manage their mental health, support their family, become more financially secure, or take up a work opportunity. As a result, domestic students are better able to manage their lives, whilst also progressing their careers. However, this flexibility is not afforded to international students who are required to leave Australia if they temporarily cease their studies. Can we rethink these requirements to enable all students to best manage their own personal and professional journeys?

The partners of international students who are associated with the international student visas also face significant restrictions, making life difficult for families travelling to Australia. Not only is family housing in short supply, but the working hours of the entire group are heavily restricted, making affording private housing a significant challenge. If we wish to continue to attract lifelong learners at all stages of their careers to Australia, we must ensure their families can live sustainably in Australia whilst they are studying.

Further to these issues is the pathway to continued or permanent residency in Australia following a degree. International students seeking graduate visas or permanent residency are subject to onerous checks on everything from their English skills to their travel history despite having, firstly, satisfied these checks to obtain the student visa they used to study in Australia, and secondly, just obtained an Australian degree, frequently involving a significant thesis composed in English. Streamlining this process would not only support international students and better recognise the value that international graduates have in Australia but it would also continue to make Australia an attractive place for international students to study.

1.4 Transport Concessions for International Students in NSW

We would like to appeal for the panel to consider awarding transport concessions to international students in New South Wales (NSW). Currently most states in Australia, except for NSW, provide transport concessions to international students⁵. It is important to recognise that not all international students come from wealthy families. In fact, many belong to lower middle-income working-class families who have saved for years to widen their opportunities via a higher quality education outside their countries⁶.

Transport costs may appear to be a minor issue, but for students on a budget, it can have a significant impact on other areas of their lives. For example, some students are unable to travel to work due to insufficient funds on their OPAL card before the next pay cycle. Others have resorted to excluding themselves from social activities, which can ultimately have an adverse effect on their mental health⁷.

1.5 Domestic/Gendered Violence Leave for Postgraduate Students - National Standards

There is currently minimal support available to students who are victim-survivors of gendered violence. The University of New South Wales' policy provides only 60 days of extended paid sick leave for postgraduate students which is inconsistent with the staff leave policies and falls short of meeting the needs of victim-survivors who require more time to recover from the trauma they have experienced^{8,9}.

⁵ Australian Government, *Transport*, in *Transport options available in Australia include buses, trains, trams and ferries, while you can also drive yourself*. 2023: Australian Government.

⁶ Alexander, K., *The racist transport law ripping off international students*, in *The Sydney Morning Herald*. 2016.

⁷ Aryal, R., *International students call for end to 'transport discrimination'*, in *SBS Nepali* 2018.

⁸ Sydney, U. *Program Leave*. 2023; Available from:

<https://www.student.unsw.edu.au/program-leave>.

⁹ UNSW Sydney. *Flexible Working & Leave*. UNSW's generous working and leave options factor in and honour all aspects of our lives. 2023; Available from: <https://www.jobs.unsw.edu.au/lifestyle-benefits/flexible-working-leave>.

It is imperative that universities recognise that every victim-survivor's experience is different and there is no one-size fit all approach. In particular, not all trauma or issues with gendered violence can be easily assigned a medical certificate to access the 60 days of leave (e.g. time required to physically leave an abusive situation) meaning that for many no paid leave is available^{8,9}.

The process for how universities in Australia support victim-survivors of domestic and gendered violence should be unified. The portals in which the individuals report these offenses and the process of making a complaint can often be convoluted and burdensome on the reporter. Whilst we welcome the work UNSW is currently undertaking to improve these procedures, we believe there would be benefit in establishing national standards so that no student is left behind. We ask that universities assign designated case workers to offer specialised support to students who are victim-survivors of domestic or gender-based violence.

We particularly call for support when gendered violence is intertwined with supervisory or staff bullying, as current complaints are generally dealt with at the School level. As a result, the student must raise the complaint with someone deeply related to their academic progression and the perpetrator must be reprimanded by a colleague, and frequently, collaborator. We believe that the possibility of third-party intervention in these situations and restorative justice approaches would be beneficial to all involved and would ease the current burden on victim-survivors who are frequently struggling to navigate a challenging and professionally fraught reporting system along with their own physiological and emotional response.

2. Re-imagining Australian HDRs of the Future

The Accord Discussion Paper Sections:

- 3.1 Quality teaching delivering quality learning
- 3.2.4 Collaboration with industry
- 3.2.5 Lifelong learning
- 3.4.5 Research workforce
- 3.7.2 Research Quality

Guiding Questions: Q8, Q15, Q16, Q27, Q41

Q8 What reforms are needed to promote a quality learning environment and to ensure graduates are entering the labour market with the skills and knowledge they need?

Q15 What changes are needed to grow a culture of lifelong learning in Australia?

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

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?

Q41 How should research quality be prioritised and supported most effectively over the next decade?

The UNSW PGC believes that the Accord represents a timely opportunity to re-think what an Australian higher degree by research (HDR) means. We highlight two key opportunities for change and growth:

1. The importance of flexibility within HDR programs to facilitate connections with industry and government, alongside opportunities for additional training and career development, and
2. Improvements in the student-supervisor relationship, including equity and student-supervisor ratios.

2.1 HDR Students' Career Development and Connections with Government and Industry

Ultimately, HDR programs provide an opportunity to learn invaluable research, project management and communication skills, all the while developing extensive disciplinary knowledge. Whilst we are incredibly grateful for the opportunities afforded to us within our degrees, we see engagement beyond the academic community as an important part of our journey that we are not yet able to capitalise upon.

Working with industry and government not only presents a unique opportunity for HDR students to create positive impacts with their research and develop their careers, but also gives industry and government the opportunity to capitalise on an exceptionally skilled workforce. Currently, however, it is difficult to integrate such opportunities into HDR programs without compromising one's degree progress, scholarship, and/or visa. We hence call upon the panel to consider the following questions:

- How can universities and government work together to make industry and government internships viable and accessible for all HDR students?
- How can we recognise the value of time spent in industry and government within HDR programs rather than in addition to such programs?

We would like to also highlight the importance of providing career development skills and opportunities in general within HDR programs. Regardless of what HDR students desire from their career, be it a purely academic pathway or a direct transition to industry, career development skills are crucial. From writing an academic job application to translating research skills, these competencies are not developed accidentally, and we implore the government to make them part of every HDR program.

We also ask that the government support **all** these pathways, including fundamental research. A lack of immediate application of research does not devalue the research itself nor the person performing it.

2.2 Coursework in HDR Programs

The importance of these additional skills becomes more relevant when we remember that HDRs are training programs. To this end we ask the panel to consider carefully the competing needs for time bound and brief HDR programs with the need to leave with deep disciplinary knowledge that can be best acquired by coursework. Currently at UNSW coursework must be finished if it is started, but it is not generally recognised as additional value to a thesis.

- Is there an opportunity to, in the theme of flexibility, better recognise the value of coursework and the in-depth knowledge gained in HDR programs?
- Whilst not impeaching the progression of HDR students who are intent on focusing solely upon their research, can we provide opportunities for structured and unstructured learning to develop more proficient researchers?

2.3 HDR Supervisor-Student Equity and Ratios

Flexibility in the structure of HDR programs can extend also to flexibility and a shift in the supervisor-student relationship. For students outside of the 'typical' candidate profile, for example, neurodivergent students, students with parental and/or caring responsibilities, and culturally and linguistically diverse students, a supervisor who is willing to be flexible and understanding can facilitate a smooth HDR program. Conversely, a supervisor unwilling to compromise can lock brilliant students away from the skills they will need in their careers to best contribute to Australia. We hence ask the panel to consider how we can ensure equity is an integral part of HDR programs, rather than an often-forgotten footnote.

One suggestion we make on this front is to consider a mandate on the primary supervisor - student ratio. Being a primary or joint primary supervisor of a student requires a significant time investment on the part of the supervisor if they are to give the student the support and time they deserve to thrive as a researcher. We simply cannot expect an academic to successfully support more than four students whilst still maintaining their own research and teaching load. We hence call on the panel to mandate an upper limit on this ratio across all universities.

3. Masters by Coursework in a Changing World

The Accord Discussion Paper Sections:

- 3.1 Quality teaching delivering quality learning
- 3.2.4 Collaboration with industry
- 3.2.5 Lifelong learning
- 3.5.2 Addressing barriers to access
- 3.7.3 Academic Integrity

Guiding Questions: Q8, Q13, Q14, Q15, Q16, Q30, Q42

- Q8** What reforms are needed to promote a quality learning environment and to ensure graduates are entering the labour market with the skills and knowledge they need?
- Q13** How could an Accord support cooperation between providers, accreditation bodies, government and industry to ensure graduates have relevant skills for the workforce?
- Q14** How should placement arrangements and work-integrated learning in higher education change in the decades ahead?
- Q15** What changes are needed to grow a culture of lifelong learning in Australia?
- Q16** What practical barriers are inhibiting lifelong learning, and how can they be fixed?
- Q30** How can governments, institutions and employers assist students, widen opportunities and remove barriers to higher education?
- Q42** What settings are needed to ensure academic integrity, and how can new technologies and innovative assessment practices be leveraged to improve academic integrity?

3.1 AI and ChatGPT - Can Work Integrated Learning (WIL) Help?

As new technologies like ChatGPT continue to transform our workplaces and learning environments, we believe it is time for a simultaneous transformation in the way we approach learning, teaching, and assessment rather than a focus on punitive deterrents. With the ability to upload essay questions to AI software and receive excellent responses, it is important that we re-evaluate our learning and teaching strategies and assessment methods to ensure that coursework masters degrees remain valuable and respected.

We need to assess students' skills and knowledge in a way that reflects their abilities to solve real-world problems and apply knowledge to new and unfamiliar situations, rather than regurgitate information that AI can produce just as easily. It is also important to encourage students to use AI to support their learning rather than replace it.

We understand that no single university, school, or course has all the necessary tools and ideas to address this issue. However, we urge the panel to advocate for an establishment of a platform for universities nationwide to collaborate and consider how to foster the best skills for tomorrow.

One solution we see is to elevate the importance of work-integrated learning (WIL), which already exists in many forms and provides unique opportunities both at UNSW and beyond. By working with industry partners, students can apply their theoretical knowledge in real-world situations and gain valuable experience that benefits both them and their employers. We don't want to diminish the importance of theoretical and academic courses, but we would like to see more opportunities for students to apply what they learn in meaningful ways. Furthermore, we believe WIL will enable workplaces to see stronger synergy between their employees' study and business outcomes and hence will be more inclined to support postgraduate study and life-long learning.

3.2 International Student Visa Cap on Working Hours Impact on WIL

We note one final barrier to life-long learning which impacts postgraduate students in particular: the requirement upon international students with a student visa to work no more than 48 hours per fortnight starting in July 2023¹⁰.

¹⁰ Australian Government Department of Home Affairs. *Work restrictions for student visa holders*. From 1 July, work restrictions for student visa holders will be re-introduced. 2023; Available from: <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/getting-a-visa/visa-listing/student-500/temporary-relaxation-of-working-hours-for-student-visa-holders>.

Such a requirement limits students from engaging to their upmost with industry during their degree (e.g. through summer internships) as many of these opportunities are full time. Even if offered part time, they would provide the most benefit to the students when engaged with on a full-time basis. We call on the panel to rectify this arbitrary and unjustified restriction.

Thank you for your consideration of our submission on behalf of UNSW postgraduate students.

PGC UNSW

pgc@arc.unsw.edu.au

Anthony Sunjaya

pgc.president@arc.unsw.edu.au

Isabelle Greco

i.greco@unsw.edu.au