

Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA)

2020-21 Pre-Budget Submission

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of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA)
and its affiliated member organisations.

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**Foreword**

The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) is the peak body representing the interests of the over 400,000 postgraduate students in Australia. We represent coursework and research, as well as domestic and international, postgraduate students. We are comprised of 28 university and campus based postgraduate associations, as well as the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduate Association (NATSIPA).

CAPA carries out its mission through policy, research, and activism, communicating the interests and issues of postgraduate students to higher education stakeholders as well as Federal and State Governments, Opposition parties, and minor parties. We welcome the opportunity to contribute our perspective on the Government’s upcoming 2020/21 Budget.

In this submission, we make the following recommendations to be considered for the 2020/21 budget:

Recommendation one: That income support be expanded to domestic students of all postgraduate coursework degrees, subject to means testing of the student.

Recommendation two: That all domestic Higher Degree by Research students be paid a stipend for the duration of their research degree.

Recommendation three: That the Government amends the Commonwealth Scholarships Guidelines to establish paid family violence leave, and provides an additional $491,000 to universities to fund a family violence leave scheme for recipients of Research Training Program stipends.

Recommendation four: That the Government implements a maximum costs for tuition fees of postgraduate coursework degrees for domestic students, such that the maximum is comparable with current costs of student contributions towards undergraduate degrees.

Recommendation five: That the Government provides ongoing adequate funding for university teaching and research.

Recommendation six: That the Commonwealth Government implements legislation requiring at least 50% of Student Services and Amenities Fees be received by independent student associations.

Recommendation seven: That the Australian Government adopts the Australian Productivity Commission’s draft recommendation to “undertake trials allowing up to 20 sessions of individual or group therapy in total over a year for consumers whose clinical condition requires more than the current 10 sessions” within the next two years.

Recommendation eight: That the Australian Government amend the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015 to require higher education providers to have an effective mental health and wellbeing strategy

Recommendation nine: That the Australian Government create a $5 million fund to assist higher education providers to develop these strategies and new programs to improve mental health on their campuses.

**Means-tested Austudy for postgraduate students**

Centrelink study payments (Youth Allowance, Austudy, and Abstudy) are a universal entitlement for domestic undergraduate students, subject to means-testing. Despite the increasing importance of postgraduate study to beginning a career, there is no universal access to study payments for low-income domestic postgraduate students.

Most domestic postgraduate students cannot access study payments, even if they have no income. Currently, a limited and patchwork income support system is in place, where domestic postgraduate coursework students may be eligible for study payments only if their course is listed as the minimum, fastest, or only pathway to gain an entry-level qualification for their profession (Australian Government, Department of Social Services, 2018). Only 28% of courses at public universities are approved for income support (Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations, 2018). Research students are not eligible for any Centrelink study payments, with some students attaining competitive stipends; an issue which we discuss in the next section. According to a survey conducted by Universities Australia, 18.2% of domestic postgraduate coursework students reported receiving a study-related Centrelink payment, and 7.2% reported receiving another Centrelink payment (Universities Australia 2018). This indicates that many postgraduate coursework students are receiving an unemployment allowance, despite being engaged in full-time study. Students in this position are required to undertake job-seeker activities, even though they would be unable to work full-time due to their studies, making these activities largely a waste of time and resources.

A major recommendation of the 2008 Review of Australian Higher Education (known as the Bradley Review) was to reform the income support scheme, including by granting income support eligibility to all domestic Masters students. This was costed at $186 million at the time (Bradley et al. 2008). However, owing to the economic collapse at the time, this initiative was not implemented.

Under recent, more favourable, economic conditions, including the $5 Billion budget surplus forecast by the recent December 2019 Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook (MYEFO), we recommend that the Government invests in making postgraduate study accessible for all Australians. This would boost the long-term employment and earning prospects of low income Australians who would otherwise be unable to take up postgraduate study, thereby reducing unemployment and increasing net taxable income over the long term.

Recommendation one: That income support be expanded to domestic students of all postgraduate coursework degrees, subject to means testing of the student.

**Payment for graduate researchers**

Research students are the main source of hours spent conducting research and development in Australia, contributing 57% of universities’ share of human resources dedicated to research (ABS 2018). Graduate researchers are the often unseen backbone of the national research output, without which Australian research would grind to a halt. Graduate researchers not only work on their own projects. Particularly in STEM fields, graduate researchers contribute towards their supervisors’ work, collaborate with other academics, and perform tasks such as training new students and cleaning laboratories. For full-time graduate researchers, their responsibilities and tasks are similar to those of early career researchers.

That research students should be considered as workers is supported by the July 2019 determination by WorkCover Queensland that graduate researchers are considered workers under the Queensland Workers’ Compensation and Rehabilitation Act 2003, and thus their stipends are considered to be wages.

Despite this close resemblance of graduate study to paid work, most graduate students are doing this work for free. In 2016 (when data was most recently available), only 37% of commencing domestic research students held directly Commonwealth-funded stipends (CAPA 2018). Furthermore, from 2012 to 2016, the number of stipends awarded annually remained stable at around 3,500, yet postgraduate research student numbers increased by 5% over this period (CAPA 2018). Universities are free to enrol students in research degrees without stipends, and have a strong incentive to do so due to the free labour they receive from students and government funding they receive via Research Block Grants upon completion for students who finish their degrees.

Arguably, extracting unpaid labour from graduate students, under the pretext of this leading to a research qualification, is a form of indentured servitude.

We therefore recommend that the Government grant a stipend to every research student. If current enrolment rates of graduate researchers are maintained, the cost of this can be estimated by tripling stipend expenditure, from $798 million per year (ABS 2018) to $2.4 Billion per year. The additional cost to the Government would therefore be $1.6 Billion per year.

Recommendation two: That all domestic Higher Degree by Research students be paid a stipend for the duration of their research degree.

**Family violence leave for graduate researchers**

Graduate researchers in receipt of Research Training Program stipends have access to some leave provisions. However, family violence leave is missing from the current leave provisions. In the higher education sector, paid domestic violence leave is a standard entitlement in Enterprise Agreements. All universities except one (QUT) have dedicated additional paid leave for domestic violence, usually 5 or 10 days per year (Kenna 2018). A postdoctoral researcher is able to access family violence leave if they need it, yet the graduate researcher who does the same work at the next laboratory bench does not have this option if they are to experience domestic violence.

Outside of the higher education sector, domestic violence leave is becoming more common, with many of Australia’s largest companies offering paid domestic violence leave. We anticipate that the vast majority of research students would not access domestic leave provisions. According to a report by The Australia Institute, in each year only 1.5% of female employees and 0.3% of male employees are likely to use paid domestic violence leave (Stanford 2016). While leave entitlements generally include 10 days of paid domestic violence leave, these are rarely utilised in full, with female employees who take domestic violence using an average of eight days, and males an average of six days (Stanford 2016).

There are two options for funding domestic violence leave for graduate researchers. The Government could require universities to offer domestic violence leave using the block funding they are already provided, with an amendment to the Commonwealth Scholarships Guidelines legislation. Or, the Government could provide additional funding for the cost of domestic violence leave. Using the above assumptions that 1.5% of female and 0.3% of male employees would access leave in any given year, and the average number of leave days taken; and the current low rate of pay of Research Training Program stipends, we have determined that this would cost $491,000 per year.

Domestic violence leave for research students would have a large impact on the few who need it, as well as reifying the Government’s commitment to supporting victims of family violence. We therefore implore the Government to provide this small pool of funding.

Recommendation three: That the Government amends the Commonwealth Scholarships Guidelines to establish paid family violence leave, and provides an additional $491,000 to universities to fund a family violence leave scheme for recipients of Research Training Program stipends.

**Capping the cost of tuition fees**

We recommend that the Government investigates capping the cost of tuition fees for domestic coursework postgraduate students at public universities. Currently, higher education providers are free to set the cost of postgraduate coursework degrees, due to the deregulation of postgraduate coursework degrees in the late 1980s and 1990s. Our research has found that the vast majority of postgraduate students - 70% - enrol in full-fee paying places (NUS, CAPA, GSA, UWA Student Guild, & UMSU, 2018). For some of the most popular undergraduate and postgraduate degree combinations, typical study fees range from $70,000 to $120,000.

As many of these students borrow from the Government under the Higher Education Loan Program, escalating and unregulated tuition fees represent a substantial risk to both individual students and the national budget. Under borrowing limits instated by the Federal Government last year, each student can borrow up to $104,440. However, the Government has lost control over the total amount they lend under HELP due to deregulation of the number of enrolments and cost of tuition. The total outstanding HELP loan debt burden of the Commonwealth Government has grown from $17.821 Billion in 2009 to $61.924 Billion in 2018 (Department of Education, 2019). Critically, this rise cannot be attributed to increasing student numbers alone, with the average HELP debt amount and repayment time climbing over that period (Department of Education, 2019; Parliamentary Library, 2019). We contend that a return to some form of price regulation for postgraduate coursework degrees would assist the Government in making budget savings by reducing the amount of student debt held by the Commonwealth. Furthermore, such a change would also assist students by reducing the amount of debt they hold as individuals, allowing them to participate more fully within the economy.

Recommendation four: That the Government implements a maximum costs for tuition fees of postgraduate coursework degrees for domestic students, such that the maximum is comparable with current costs of student contributions towards undergraduate degrees.

**Secure research and teaching funding**

Current levels of Federal Government funding are insufficient to support the teaching and research conducted in Australian universities. This results in universities increasing their reliance on alternative sources of funding which compromise their purpose as fostering knowledge and promoting education for public good. We are concerned that accepting corporate sponsorships, philanthropic donations, and Ramsay Centre funding compromises freedom of speech and academic freedom in universities. This comes at a time when there are escalating fears about constrained freedom of speech in universities, with Minister for Education, Dan Tehan, being so concerned that he ordered a review into the topic (the French review). As we have previously argued, if the Minister wishes for universities to be a community space in which freedom of speech is encouraged, there is a need to fully fund universities as public entities (CAPA 2019).

The purpose of publicly funded research is to develop new knowledge, innovation and technology at universities to benefit of national interests. We are concerned that reducing research funding by $328.5 million over the next three years, as announced in the December 2018 Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook (MYEFO), is causing an increase of universities' reliance on corporate sponsorships and international collaborations for research funding. Research supported by the aforementioned funding sources often raise concerns with conflicts of interest as their motivation to support specific areas of research may not be apparent. Whilst we agree that developing international collaborative research will greatly improve Australia’s international research profile, an overreliance on foreign support will also increase the vulnerability of universities to foreign interference. These interferences could be an effort to influence or direct research agendas, and to gain the rights to intellectual property produced in Australian universities, who will acquiesce to the demands of their external funders.

In response to reduced government funding for teaching and research in successive federal budgets, many universities are attempting to compensate for this budget shortfall by aggressively recruiting international students. We are furthermore concerned that over reliance on international student fees can lead to universities restricting the free speech of their academics. This has been seen recently with Murdoch University suing Associate Professor Gerd Schroeder-Turk for millions of dollars in lost international student revenue after he publicly spoke out about the university’s treatment of international students.

We recommend that universities be fully funded to conduct teaching and research so that they are able to be maintained as public entities in which freedom of speech flourishes. Moreover, this does not come at a long-term cost to the Australian taxpayer. Research conducted by Australian universities provides demonstrable economic benefits. Analysis of the Group of Eight’s research output suggests that, for every dollar of taxpayer investment in research at Australian universities, just under $10 is returned to the Australian economy (London Economics, 2018). We therefore agree with Science & Technology Australia’s assessment that the decline in public investment in science and technology research puts the Australian economy at risk. In addition to our recommendation that the Government fully fund universities, we echo the call of Science & Technology Australia, in their pre-budget submission, for a 4% annual increase in base funding for national research agencies and government research institutions, including universities.

Recommendation five: That the Government provides ongoing adequate funding for university teaching and research.

**Enriching the student experience**

A strong campus community is essential for students to feel at home and involved at their university. University supported peer-based networks are able to provide the best support for students, as they have the ability to be more responsive and have a lower entry barrier than institutionalised support systems. In most universities these peer-support networks are formed around student unions and their departments, including clubs and societies. Feeling part of a student community means that students are less likely to withdraw from their studies. This is most crucial for groups of students who tend to be at risk of attrition, such as low-SES students, students from a rural or regional background, first-year undergraduate students, and research students.

Student organisations rely on the university-collected Student Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF). The ability of student organisations to provide a vibrant on-campus experience and strong social support is strongly tied to the amount of SSAF allocated by the university to student organisations. As an example, the University of Western Australia’s Student Guild, which manages all non-sporting clubs and societies at UWA, received 30% of the collected SSAF for operation expenses in 2016, and used that money to enable student clubs and societies run 816 events across the year with approximately 90,500 attendees (UWA Student Guild, 2016). In 2017, the Guild received 50% of the collected SSAF and was able to run 1211 club and society events with approximately 121,500 attendees, representing a 48% increase in events run and a 34% increase in number of events attended (UWA Student Guild, 2017). This example clearly demonstrates the link between SSAF allocated to student organisations, and the capacity of those organisations to provide a vibrant campus culture and strong social support to students.

While a 50% minimum allocation of SSAF to student organisations is mandated by legislation in Western Australia, there is no minimum legislated allocation in any other state. Universities are free to decide how to spend the SSAF they collect, with most using this money as an additional pool for their own priorities. We have heard from our member organisations that it is common for universities to spend SSAF on art installations, furniture which is ostensibly used by students, re-painting walls, and outdoor lighting. While universities are deciding to use SSAF to top up their maintenance budget, the student experience is being neglected.

Most student organisations, particularly postgraduate associations, are forced to operate on a pittance which is given at the mercy of their university. We collected information on this in 2018, finding that independent postgraduate associations operate with an average of $61 per head - only 20% of the maximum collected SSAF from these students. Some postgraduate associations operate on far less, for example, the Wollongong University Postgraduate Association receives only $3.50 per student.

Better regulation is needed to ensure that these funds are being put towards their intended use of enlivening the student experience. Other than the administrative costs associated with the passage of legislation, this would be a budget-neutral measure. We therefore recommend that the Federal Government legislate that a minimum of 50% of SSAF collected by Australian universities be allocated to undergraduate and postgraduate student-run organisations.

Recommendation six: That the Commonwealth Government implements legislation requiring at least 50% of Student Services and Amenities Fees be received by independent student associations.

**Implementing university-based draft recommendations of the Productivity Commission’s Review of Mental Health**

In 2019 the Australian Productivity Commission released its draft report into the mental health sector in Australia. The wide-ranging and holistic report made recommendations in a number of sectors including higher education. They found that students are more likely to experience mental health problems than the general population (Productivity Commission, 2019; Stallman, 2010). Poor mental health has been linked with increased dropout rates, poorer engagement with education and lower overall grades (Productivity Commission, 2019). Furthermore, research indicates that postgraduate students, in particular, show greater mental health distress than typical undergraduate samples (Levecque, Anseel, De Beuckelaer, Heyden & Gilse, 2017)

The Commission had a number of recommendations regarding increasing access to mental health support services. While CAPA believes that all recommendations within the draft report should be considered by the Australian Government, two recommendations in particular will be raised in this submission that CAPA believes would greatly benefit students with poor mental health.

Firstly, draft recommendation 5.4 proposes that a change to Mental Health Care Plans be trialled, to allow individuals to use the current 10 individual and 10 group sessions as 20 sessions for either individual therapy or group therapy. In many cases, patients will only access the individual sessions, as group-based therapy is either an unsuitable or inferior treatment option for their individual needs. However, more than 10 sessions with a mental health professional is regularly needed for those individuals with difficult cases, those with ongoing mental health issues, and those who require time to learn techniques for introspection that are needed to successfully complete therapy. Critically, the Productivity Commission outlined how “clinical evidence suggests that of those people with mental illness who are best treated through individual face-to-face psychological therapy, most need more than 10 sessions (the current MBS limit) for their condition to significantly improve” (Productivity Commission, 2019, p.57). This often results in individuals with mental health issues positioning their sessions at the end of the coverage period, enabling them to gain another Mental Health Care Plan at the start of the following period and allowing for more sessions in succession, or otherwise receiving an insufficient level of care.

The added flexibility of being able to use all 20 allowable sessions for any combination of individual or group therapy would enable those who need longer term or more intensive therapy to receive treatment in the form most conducive to their recovery. Assuming a worst case scenario, where all 1.3 million individuals with a Mental Health Care Plan transition from using 10 individual sessions to 20 individuals session (which is highly unlikely), this would have a budgetary impact of $112 million per annum. A more realistic figure of 10% of plan holders utilising an increase, would cost just $11.2 million annually, and would significantly improve the treatment of those individuals with more complex cases. A smaller scale trial of this would cost significantly less in the near-term. We therefore endorse the Productivity Commission’s draft recommendation (5.4) to conduct a trial that allows these 20 sessions to be used flexibly, as directed by medical and mental health care professionals.

Recommendation seven: That the Australian Government adopts the Australian Productivity Commission’s draft recommendation to “undertake trials allowing up to 20 sessions of individual or group therapy in total over a year for consumers whose clinical condition requires more than the current 10 sessions”  within the next two years.

A second key draft recommendation from the Productivity Commission, recommendation 18.2, proposes that the Commonwealth Government should amend the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015 to require that higher education providers have an effective mental health and wellbeing strategy in place, as a requirement for registration. While changes to the Mental Health Care Plans will benefit all Australians with mental health disorders, university students regularly rely on university-based mental health support services as a first port-of-call. Despite the importance of these services to students, the Commission’s report noted that the “level and types of mental health support offered to students varies substantially between tertiary education providers” (Productivity Commission, 2019, p. 36). This account supports our findings in ongoing CAPA research, which has found critical discrepancies in the mental health support services advertised across universities.

The Productivity Commission has recommended that all tertiary education providers be required by the Commonwealth Government to have a student mental health and wellbeing strategy, and actively create a learning environment that does not undermine the mental health of students. Specifically, it recommends that the Commonwealth Government should amend the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015 to require that higher education providers have an effective mental health and wellbeing strategy in place, as a requirement for registration. We echo this call. Further, we note that such a measure would be most successful if combined with some initial investment by the Commonwealth, in order to assist universities to develop and implement new strategies and programs, but the ongoing costs of such a change would otherwise be budget neutral. The cost of administering these mental health and wellbeing strategies would be borne by higher education providers themselves, and reviews of compliance with the Framework would be conducted as part of existing reviews conducted by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA).

We therefore recommend that the Australian Government amend the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015 to require higher education providers to have an effective mental health and wellbeing strategy, and further recommend that the Australian Government create a $5 million fund to assist higher education providers to develop these strategies and new programs to improve mental health on their campuses.

Recommendation eight: That the Australian Government amend the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015 to require higher education providers to have an effective mental health and wellbeing strategy

Recommendation nine: That the Australian Government create a $5 million fund to assist higher education providers to develop these strategies and new programs to improve mental health on their campuses.

**Conclusion**

In our submission to consultation on the Government’s upcoming 2020/21 Budget, we have provided advice on budget measures that would improve the wellbeing of coursework and research postgraduate students. Several of our suggestions require minimal expenditure or are budget neutral, and our proposal to implement a tuition fee cap for postgraduate coursework degrees is an opportunity for the Government to substantially reduce their lending through the Higher Education Loan Program. Specifically, we make the following recommendations:

Recommendation one: That income support be expanded to domestic students of all postgraduate coursework degrees, subject to means testing of the student.

Recommendation two: That all domestic Higher Degree by Research students be paid a stipend for the duration of their research degree.

Recommendation three: That the Government amends the Commonwealth Scholarships Guidelines to establish paid family violence leave, and provides an additional $491,000 to universities to fund a family violence leave scheme for recipients of Research Training Program stipends.

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