



Friday 15 April 2020

Dear Dr. Michael Spence AC,

SUPRA is reaching out to you on behalf of our diverse postgraduate student community. We are grateful for your ongoing considered response and efforts during these uncertain and challenging times. SUPRA is continuing to receive countless emails daily. Our casework team, legal team and online student support assistants are carefully responding to all queries.

I am closely monitoring the current situation for both coursework and HDR students. I have discussed trending issues with SUPRA executives, councillors, professional staff and SUPRA's online peer support assistants. I have collated the main areas of concerns we are receiving and observing on our various social media platforms, including Facebook groups, WeChat groups, as well as comments posted on Yammer, Twitter and Instagram.

The information I am presenting below is an amalgamation of all of these sources. I understand it is not a rigorous data collection, but it is the best we can do currently under the circumstances. Most of the issues that were discussed in March have been overshadowed by the rapidly changing nature of the crisis and thus need some updates. I have tried to represent the student voice most accurately and have passed this document to many peers for comments and feedback.

The priority of concerns currently are as follows. We request additional support and responses to the below issues:

For All the Postgraduate Students

1) Comprehensive Fee reduction for all the courses offered online

In the light of COVID-19 crisis, it is clear that the University of Sydney has moved majority of classes online. Tuition fees for online courses should not equal those of face to face. We request a comprehensive fee reduction for all the postgraduate students domestic and international alike. We believe the university should reduce student tuition fees by 20% for all units, which have been transferred online, and refund 20% of tuition fees already paid.

Celebrating 50 years of students working for students

SUPRA

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Many domestic postgraduate students have lost their service industry jobs that helped support their study at the University. Many international students pay around \$25,000 on tuition fees per semester. While the university has made some promises regarding this matter for part of our student community several weeks ago, we speak on behalf of all the postgraduate students and request a comprehensive fee reduction for all.

2) Automatic extension for all the students that require more time to do their works

Everyone is stressed about deadlines for assignments or thesis. This is perhaps the most common and pressing concern for all the postgraduate students currently. The Covid-19 crisis has had wide and deep unprecedented negative impacts on all postgraduate students. We are asking the university to urgently amend the simple extension policy of 2 days to 5 days since this is a more meaningful extension, under the circumstances. We do not believe students should have to go through additional processes to be granted extensions and by amending the simple extension policy students can directly request via their teacher.

3) The quality of online courses

It is clear that academic and administrative staff have dedicated themselves and made countless efforts to move courses online. We are extremely grateful to all the hard work staff have done and continue to do. We understand that face-to-face education has many advantages that online courses simply cannot mirror.

We have received many complaints about the low quality of teaching for some online course. Feedback outlines that some classes have poor course structure. Students have told us they are simply reading power points; while some classes have 'discussion questions' throughout the entire unit without any teaching at all. Classes are using recordings rather than zoom and some of the recordings are out dated and the content needs to be re-recorded to be relevant. There have been complaints that group work needs to be more closely monitored by the course coordinator or their assigned tutors. We've received many complains that some group members are absent or not contributing, which has put a great strain on the students still trying to work hard. SUPRA seeks urgent intervention by the University to ensure proper support for unit coordinators and tutors delivering online teaching so the student learning experience is immediately improved.

4) Census date for intensive courses

Intensive courses are six weeks in length and the census date for those courses was the 20th March rather than 31st March 2020. However, due to the virus, many our fellow postgraduate students have their 2nd class, which commenced on 21th of March moved online. Most of these courses are discussion based and therefore, moving those subjects online made many of the courses not beneficial for students. Students want to withdraw, however, the census date remained the same – 20th March 2020. We request the University consider the current situation and offer some alternative solution to students impacted.

5) Centralised and structured communication

Given the crisis, it is clear that everyone is being overloaded with unprecedented levels of information from different sources daily. Students are finding it extremely difficult to follow all the updates and current changes. We request that the university consider having a few dedicated platforms and pages to communicate all changes and important information – with current links and access to external information easily accessible. The information needs to be concise, transparent and centralised.

6) Mental Health

The emphasis on mental health support is crucial considering the very high rates of mental health issues existing in our student community. There is no doubt the loss of income, time pressures and enhanced isolation will only elevate student's anxiety and pre-existing conditions. We request the University to provide additional resourcing to the Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS) to enable CAPS to increase the level of online and phone counselling to all students.

7) Pass/fail system

I understand that the university is in discussion about implementing a pass/fail system. We believe the university should provide more opportunity to our fellow students to contribute to this decision and discussion. There needs to be more transparency around the process of how these decisions are made, how they will impact students and how students are being considered and consulted in the process.

II For all the Higher Degree Research students

1) Extension on submission

SUPRA appreciates the recent HDR support offered by the university. We have concerns over offering only 1 research period extension. Many HDR students are suffering financial hardship through loss of income, reduced work hours and not being eligible for Centrelink payments. In addition, many HDR students have carer responsibilities meaning their ability to meet research deadlines is impossible. Suspending if you receive a scholarship means no income, not being able to pay rent or eat. One research period is not enough.

Students commencing before 2019 who have a 4 year submission date should be given a 6 month extension and students commencing from 2019 who have a 3.5 year submission date should be given a 4 year submission date.

Further extensions should be compassionately considered on a case-by-case basis. We understand that the move to 3.5 years is a financial decision based on the way the university receives funds from the government. We feel that it should be incumbent on the university to lobby the government for additional financial support.

2) Scholarship

The 2020 changes to RTP scholarships have been deeply unsatisfactory to many. The university has developed two different financial classes of HDR students: 1) those on the new \$37,000; 2) those on the old RTP of \$28,000 plus a \$5,000 top up; 3) Those on the old RTP or \$28,000; 4) Those with some other type of scholarships; 5) Those without a scholarship.

Many HDR candidates have recently lost their supplementary jobs and income. We are concerned about the impact the crisis will have on those whose scholarship ends during this period. Never before has there been a worse situation for postgrads to transition from funded research to some form of fellowship, postdoc funding or employment.

SUPRA is seeking a financial package to be developed for HDRs who are not receiving the \$37K stipend. We ask that the University provide an emergency financial package to support all the HDR students struggling to pay rent, cover basic costs of living while still trying to complete their research time frames. Again, we believe it is incumbent on the University to acquire these funds from the Government.

We request 1) that all RTP scholarships be lifted to \$37,000. 2) All those not on a scholarship be given a financial assistance for the next six months. 3) Offer more online University work (such as Admin work) to HDR students first before advertising externally.

3) Progress Reviews

There is often much apprehension around PRs as candidates are expected to meet or exceed at their review. We request that PRs have additional guidelines added to convey more empathy to the current and ongoing situation facing HDR students. SUPRA seeks clarification on how PRs will be held in the upcoming months. We ask that the method to facilitate PR's be communicated in a timely, clear manner and impacts of the Covid-19 are taken into account.

III Postgraduate International students

The university must continue to expand support for international students throughout COVID-19 as we believe they are the most vulnerable during this crisis. Being far from their family and hometowns and isolated in Sydney during a lockdown is extremely distressing. Many international students are facing further complex issues as family members back home are losing income and are unable to continue to offer financial support.

1) SUPRA is seeking a comprehensive financial package to be developed for international students other than the above-mentioned fee reduction for all. While we appreciate the hardship fund for students who are currently struggling financially, it should be available for all the international students rather than through an eligibility application process. Many international students supported their living costs in Sydney by working in the service industry. They are now unemployed. We ask the university to provide an emergency financial package to support students to pay rent and cover their basic living expenses in Sydney.

2) The university must commit to lobbying the government to support international students and temporary residents affected by the economic shutdown with the same urgency as Australian citizens. We ask that international students also be able to access the \$550 Coronavirus Supplement. We had a huge win with the government stimulus package being extended to cover student payments like Youth Allowance, ABSTUDY, AUSTUDY. While this is great, once again international students continue to be left out.

3) The University should urge the government to extend all Subclass 500 Student Visas by 12 months, in recognition of the interruption to international student's education during this crisis. The university needs to provide help for international students who need to extend their visas. The university needs to urge the government to amend visa conditions and CoE to allow international students to shift to part-time study while impacted by online study and isolation measures.

4) We urge the university to pressure health insurers to cover the cost of any COVID-19 related medical expenses under OSHC insurance for international students.

5) Any students in their last semester who paid the tuition granted fee rebate or subject exception should be refunded in full and in cash. According to the international student refund policy, students will only be refunded 50%. We ask this be amended temporarily to 100%.

We understand how challenging and unsettling this rapidly changing situation is for you and the university to navigate and respond to. We want to reassure you that we will do our best to assist you and we are doing all we can to support students during this uncertain time. I also want to assure you that we are aware of the complexities around course accreditation and online study and are investigating this as a matter of urgency. I hope to provide further information soon.

Yours truly,

Minran Liu