



Submission to the Department of Education

Australian Universities Accord

Prepared by SUPRA's Postgraduate Advocacy Service, SUPRA's post-graduate elected Council, and SUPRA's Equity Officers including the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Officer, Higher Degree by Research Student Officer, and Disabilities Officer.

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Foreword

Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association (SUPRA) is the representative organisation for postgraduate students at the University of Sydney. Established in 1970, SUPRA's constituency has grown to over 33,737 postgraduate students. SUPRA's casework and legal services handles over 2000 cases each year. SUPRA is governed by a democratically elected body of post-graduate students who attend the University of Sydney. SUPRA has seven equity networks and seven equity positions including the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Officer, the Higher Degree by Research Student Officer, the International Student Officer, the Disabilities Officer, the Women's Officer, the Queer Officer and the Satellite Campus Officer.

SUPRA welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the experiences of postgraduate students at University of Sydney, for Australia's University Accord.

2. Challenges and opportunities for Australia

Widening participation in the higher education system in Australia, particularly from under-represented groups, should be an obvious goal of the Universities Accord. However, the University system cannot be viewed as an isolated sector of the economy, and growing inequalities in other sectors (housing, employment, social security, intergenerational wealth) intersecting with experiences of marginalisation (experiences of racism, ableism, sex and gender-based violence, to name a few), affect participation in higher education, and contribute towards a society that is becoming more unequal. Attending university is not accessible to all equally, and the effects of structural inequality, and marginalisation mean that some Australians are born into a world where they are less able to attend university and less able to successfully complete their degrees than others.

These issues affect some Australian's ability to attend university, and to go on to participate in certain areas of the economy. This also affects the desirability of Australia as a destination for international students and reduces our global competitiveness in the international education market. To create a truly equal and democratic tertiary system, with equal participation for all, these sites of inequality need to be addressed, with effective strategies employed and additional resourcing allocated, to increase participation and success for marginalised groups.

2.3 Equality, participation and democracy

First Nations students

Graduation from tertiary education has significant positive impacts on First Nations Peoples' ability to access full-time employment, and subsequent socio-economic position (Grant Smith, 2022, p2). However, making progress towards parity in First Nations participation in

higher education has been slow, and retention rates of First Nations students graduating from their degrees remains disproportionately low. This has been proportionally worse at Group of Eight universities (Grant Smith, 2022, p4).

First Nations Peoples are not uniform, and First Nations Peoples have a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences, which can include coming from low SES backgrounds and/or rural, regional and remote communities. They can be disabled/have disability and they can be LGBTQIA+, brotherboys or sistergirls. Any strategies that target participation rates and experiences at university need to first and foremost centre First Nations Peoples as First Nations Peoples, and as variably existing at the intersection of multiple points of marginalisation and oppression. This marginalisation and oppression impacts First Nations Peoples' ability to attend and succeed at university, and needs to be included in any approach aimed to increase the participation and retention of First Nations students.

Education reform at the university level needs to work intimately with education reform at all levels. First Nations children are punished disproportionately during school and have higher rates of suspensions and expulsions (Sullivan et al, 2020). First Nations students also have lower levels of secondary school completion, which impacts their ability to enrol in tertiary education (Grant Smith, 2022, p4). There are myriad other factors that impact First Nations Peoples' participation in tertiary education, including racism, the effects of colonisation, intergenerational trauma, among many others (Grant Smith, 2022, p4). First Nations Peoples are explicitly and implicitly excluded from educational settings at all levels, which prevents future engagement in higher education.

A radical restructuring of the current education system needs to occur, such that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and ways of doing education, which have been central to First Nations cultures for tens of thousands of years, are not optional, but are central to education across Australia. This needs to happen at every level, including primary, secondary and tertiary education (Taylor et al, 2019; Robertson et al, 2021).

All universities should have First Nations-specific Learning and Teaching Plans that outline how First Nations knowledge will be a central part of curriculum, teaching practices and graduate attributes (Robertson et al, 2021, p184). This should be specific to undergraduate, postgraduate, and Higher Degree by Research degrees and should also include learning opportunities for non-First Nations supervisors of First Nations HDR students.

First Nations students need to see First Nations academics and staff at every level of university leadership and governance (Robertson et al, 2021, p181; Taylor et al, 2019). First Nations students need to see First Nations teachers and researchers as integral parts of the tertiary education systems. You cannot be what you cannot see. To do this, a clear, supported and accessible pathway from undergraduate to postgraduate to ongoing permanent paid positions within universities needs to be created to support First Nations Peoples embedded and remaining within tertiary education. This system should be designed specifically for First Nations Peoples, by First Nations Peoples, and should be supported and required by Government to exist in every university.

All universities should have First Nations run and directed centres that cater specifically to the needs of First Nations students (Robertson et al, 2021, p182). This should not function as a silo, but should be a hub and safe space for First Nations students. These centres should in turn be supported by university-wide learning and growth on how to facilitate and support First Nations Peoples' participation in tertiary education.

The connections between secondary school First Nation students and universities need to be fostered, with programs designed to connect First Nations students with universities, as well as to other First Nations students who intend to attend university. This helps to demystify university and to form early and ongoing connections between universities and First Nations students (Barney, 2022). This in turn facilitates First Nations student enrolments at universities, as well as increases the likelihood of First Nations students remaining at university to complete their degree (Taylor et al, 2019). This support needs to continue throughout First Nations students' time at university with investment in orientation programs, effective mentoring and tutoring programs, flexible delivery of content, First Nations specific support centres, social and financial support, and assistance in returning to university for those who leave before graduation (Taylor et al, 2019).

First Nations Peoples need to be financially, structurally and socially supported so they are not prevented from engaging in education due to disparities in access to technologies (the digital divide). This must range from facilitating technological literacy, to providing the infrastructure First Nations families need to support students in tertiary education. This needs to happen on a State, National and university level and should be driven by First Nations students, their families and communities, to determine what supports First Nations students need to succeed at university. This is particularly acute for rural, regional and remote First Nations students.

Government and universities need to increase the number of scholarships available to First Nations students at both the undergraduate and post-graduate levels. This is particularly the case for First Nations students undertaking Higher Degree by Research degrees. Financial support is essential to First Nations Peoples participation in tertiary education.

Finally, students needing to return to Country for Sorry Business, as well as other familial, cultural and spiritual obligations need to be supported with scholarships. First Nations students should not have to choose between meeting their cultural and social responsibilities to their communities, and being able to afford basic goods and services. Universities must make accommodations for First Nations students returning to Country during the semester, including providing alternative arrangements for learning and assessment, and other university obligations (such as sports). A lack of financial and University support for First Nations students to return to Country can directly lead to First Nations students being unable to return to their studies.

People with disability/disabled students

SUPRA endorses and supports the recommendations made in the *Disability and Higher Education in Australia* (Shim, 2022) report. In particular, SUPRA supports the vital changes that need to be made to the legal and legislative landscape to bring about genuine equality

between disabled and non-disabled Australians, including the establishment of a Disability Education Commissioner to actualise accountability for the implementation of the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth) and the *Disability Standards for Education 2005* (Cth).

SUPRA also supports the need to make the Disability Support Pension accessible to more disabled people and should actively accommodate for undertaking higher education studies, without penalty. Payment rates for all income support payments should be immediately raised above the Henderson Poverty Line, to support disabled people accessing tertiary education.

Remote learning options should be integrated into BAU tertiary education provisions for all disabled students and disabled staff who require this as a reasonable accommodation.

Further to the report, SUPRA recommends that universities or education providers review their practices to facilitate regular and formal consultation with all students, but especially disabled students, on their learning experience throughout their degree, and respond with continual adjustments to teaching and assessment policies and practices.

Universities and education providers need to provide case management services to disabled students, and all carers. This service should extend beyond creating accommodations or liaising with faculties/departments on reasonable adjustments. It should also aim to actively advocate with disabled students and carers within their university settings and the broader community, while also assisting students to navigate any administrative processes for their benefit.

All proposed changes should be done in consultation with disabled people and representative organisations whose members are disabled people, and where appropriate, carers.

International students and reducing their risk for exploitation

Living and working conditions are integral parts of international students' learning experiences in Australia. Many international students face exploitative working conditions, a situation which worsened during COVID-19 (Berg et al, 2020, p8). International students are exposed to the threat of their visa being cancelled, because, in part, they have had limits on the hours they are allowed to work. Some employers take advantage of this, by locking those students into working for below minimum pay or working additional hours without pay.

Most students will balance the hours they need to support themselves, with the desire to do well in their studies, if given the freedom to do so. Study semesters, or sessions, have fluctuating time demands, and students should be able to balance their needs, as they see fit. International students who are making good academic progress should be able to do paid work uncapped. International students with capped hours of paid work should have their hours capped per session, or per year, rather than per fortnight.

Access to affordable health care

International students would benefit from greater access to Medicare and Government subsidized health and wellbeing support. For mental health specifically, international students are at greater risk of poor mental health due to isolation, language barriers, academic pressures and financial stress (Orygen, 2020). And they are less likely to access support, than domestic students, when they do face mental health challenges (Orygen, 2020).

International students often have to pay upwards of \$200 for a single session with a psychologist, psychiatrist or counsellor. This is not only taxing to their finances, but is often a requirement for accessing appropriate adjustments within the University system.

Many international students who contact SUPRA are struggling with mental health difficulties or are in crisis. And many of them are unable to afford appropriate treatment or care due to the exorbitant costs of mental health support. While there are some low cost or sliding scale mental health services, there are even fewer that are multilingual, or who provide ongoing medium or long term support; resulting in students are having to choose between paying for mental health support and food, rent or other essentials.

International students should be able to access Medicare and other Government subsidies, especially for mental health support. The Government should also create a National International Student Mental Health Strategy informed by best practice, and in consultation with key stakeholders, including universities and international student representative bodies.

Racism and discrimination

International students face racism and discrimination both on and off campus, both before, during and after COVID-19 (Tran, 2020; Orygen, 2020; Garnier, 2019; Berg et al, 2020). These experiences not only affect the wellbeing, safety and security of international students, but also negatively affect the desirability of Australia as a location for education and migration.

The Government, in collaboration with Universities, should create a task force that 1. establishes best practice in reducing racism experienced by international students, within and outside of university spaces 2. disseminates best practice, and coordinates cross-university practices and programs designed to reduce racism and 3. creates and monitors an anonymous reporting mechanism for occasions of racism experienced by international students.

The Government should also demonstrate the value of international students, beyond their economic benefit, by providing the same access to the services and support that domestic students receive (e.g. Centrelink support payments).

Tenancy, vulnerability and exploitation

The increasing financialisation and marketisation of the Higher Education sector in Australia has had the simultaneous effect of expanding participation in higher education, while completely transforming the everyday student experience through increasing student debt and greater reliance on highly precarious employment and housing markets (Jayasuriya, 2021). Students are now more indebted than ever before, and this increasing indebtedness affects students' ability to access loans and contribute to skyrocketing cost of living and housing pressures (The Guardian, 2022).

University students in Australia are more reliant on family support than in previous generations. In the same way that average wage earners in Australia are now more reliant on intergenerational wealth transfers to enter the housing market than in previous decades, participating in higher education also often requires monetary assistance or in-kind support from parents in the form of rental assistance or rent-free shared housing (Adkins et al, 2022). For postgraduate students, who are more likely to be taking on additional fees and more likely to access full-fee paying university places, this burden is exacerbated.

Students who cannot rely on family support for housing and/or income are thrust into a housing market that provides very little protection from exploitation, precarious tenure, and high costs. From our experience providing student advocacy in NSW, we find that students in the private rental market face many pressures, including:

- Low levels of regulatory compliance from landlords and the real estate industry that largely administers the rental system in NSW for its own benefit and to the detriment of university students
- Pressure to sign expensive and exploitative leases
- No protection from excessive rent increases
- Low security of tenure and little protection from eviction
- Difficulty in effecting repairs and maintenance
- Regular and highly sophisticated rental scams, especially targeting international students
- Threats, as well as verbal and physical violence

Additionally, the emergence of Purpose-Built Student Accommodation (PSBA) as a global asset class has demonstrated that (1) PSBA is primarily driven by investor profit rather than student need, and (2) that PSBA is implicated in the financialisation of urban housing markets that drives ongoing inequality (Revington et al, 2023).

For those students who cannot access housing in the private rental market, through University accommodation, or through PSBA, the only recourse is an unregulated, unsafe, and highly exploitative informal housing sector consisting of unapproved secondary dwellings, informal subdivisions, room sharing, and "hot-bedding" (Gurran et al, 2021). This segment of the housing market has been shown to expose students to quite serious safety risks (Gurran et al, 2022), and provides fewer opportunities for recourse through administrative or legal systems (Nasreen et al, 2021).

There is a high correlation between students experiencing financial stress and those experiencing housing crisis (Wilson et al, 2022). For those students who experience a

housing crisis, there are limited options available. While some Universities are able to provide short-term crisis housing responses, and domestic students are able to access specialist homelessness services (SHS), international students in particular face difficulties in accessing SHS and can very quickly turn to rough sleeping, couch surfing, and other forms of primary homelessness (e.g. rough sleeping, sleeping in cars), or secondary homelessness (e.g. couch surfing).

Current or proposed Federal housing policies, including the Housing Australia Future Fund, are targeted towards long-term social housing needs and will not significantly address the issue of university student housing. While an increase to Commonwealth Rental Assistance (CRA) is overdue and would be welcomed, not all university students can access Centrelink payments and this would not universally improve student housing outcomes. Advocates have been calling on Universities and the Federal Government to provide *at least one semester* of housing for all arriving and commencing international students, which would protect those students at the time at which they are most vulnerable to scams and exploitation. SUPRA is supportive of this recommendation.

It is imperative that the Universities Accord additionally addresses the following systemic issues that affect equality and participation in the Australian University system:

- Unaffordable and insecure housing, especially in the private rental market and the informal housing sector
- Low levels of income support, including Commonwealth Rent Assistance
- Increasing marketisation and financialisation of student housing through Purpose Built Student Accommodation
- Increasing levels of student indebtedness and its effect on subsequent life choices
- Inadequate support services to respond to acute and medium-term student homelessness and housing pressures

3. Challenges and opportunities for the higher education system

3.7 Quality and sustainability

3.7.2 Research quality

Myriad factors shape the ability for universities to produce quality research. This includes providing appropriate support for HDR students, who contribute substantially to university output and as well as the broader economy. Alongside this, greater investment is needed in quality supervision for HDR students through appropriately funding and training of supervisors.

Universities need to ensure greater integration between HDR studies and industry, with more support needed for students with workshops, training and networking opportunities. This will enhance the quality of the work being produced by HDRs and creates a greater connection between HDR studies and work post-HDR studies, outside of academia.

HDR students need greater and more reliable access to advanced analytical facilities in all Australian universities. The current shortfall is impacting both the speed and quality of research output, discoveries and innovations. Limited access to funding especially post-

submission is also hampering the progression of innovative projects to the translational stage and beyond.

HDR students from diverse backgrounds and experiences need more places, infrastructure, supervision support and financial assistance within universities. Limited diversity and inclusivity is impacting the range of perspectives and experiences that are brought onto research projects.

MPhil programs should be central to postgraduate research programs, with students being able to access MPhil programs prior to undertaking PhD programs. MPhil students should be supported with scholarships, and universities need to have financial incentives to invest in MPhil programs. This will create greater exposure of pre-PhD students to the trials and benefits of research, and ensure that students are prepared for a longer term commitment to a PhD program.

3.8 The role of international education

Australia's international students are a major highway for Australia to access and retain highly skilled, educated and motivated new migrants. Australia's international education sector contributes substantially to Australia's economy¹, Australian culture and society. International students who study here can continue to contribute in myriad ways post-study.

The students SUPRA encounters can experience the current visa system as costly, inflexible, unclear and extremely stressful. We want to see a system that encourages people to come to Australian universities, over other countries, and to bring their knowledge, experience and energy into Australia.

Extend the length of time for the post-study work visa

The length of time of the post-study work visa generates interest for students to study and work, which in turn facilitates greater access for Australia to these highly skilled individuals. Currently, both Canada and New Zealand offer a comparable post-study work visa for 3 years, for a degree of 2 years or more², or for a degree at level 7 or higher³ respectively. Increasing the length of Australia's post-study work visa, for all degrees, will greatly increase the attractiveness of studying and working in Australia. Australia should increase the post-work study visas to 5 years for all Masters degrees.

18 month Masters degrees

¹ Universities, alone, reported receiving A\$9.8 billion dollars from International students in 2019. And International students contributed over A\$40 billion dollars to the Australian economy, in 2019 (<https://theconversation.com/2021-is-the-year-australias-international-student-crisis-really-bites-153180>).

² <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/study-canada/work/after-graduation/about.html>

³ <https://www.immigration.govt.nz/new-zealand-visas/apply-for-a-visa/about-visa/post-study-work-visa>

Currently, completing an 18 months Masters degree does not enable students to meet the Australian study requirement to be eligible for the post-study work visa.

SUPRA frequently sees students who are enrolled in courses that will not make them eligible for a post-study work visa, despite being told as much by education agents. If SUPRA sees them early in their degree, these students may have options. However, if they are at the end of their degree, they are forced to undertake and pay for additional study.

We recommend that the Australian studies requirement can be met by any combination of CRICOS courses. And where the student is applying for the post-study work stream, a requirement that only 75% be eligible qualifications. A student would be able to meet the Australian study requirement by completing a 72 week Masters course followed by a graduate certificate in a related field.

Common expiry dates

Health insurance policy dates affect the end date for visas for international students. The variation in end dates based on health insurance policies should be streamlined and made clear, with the automatic expiry date of health insurance policies to be 2-3 months after the end of the expiry date on the confirmation of the enrolment. This will enable students to remain in the country while students wait for their completion letters. Students who want an earlier expiry date for their health insurance, can make a specific request for this earlier expiry date.

Retaining the highest performing students

International students that have a clearer and more assured ability to move towards permanent residency within Australia will be more likely to select Australia for study and work. Australia should create a fast tracked permanent residency stream for a percentage of the top performing graduates at Australian universities.

3.9 Investment and affordability

3.9.2 Student contributions and the Higher Education Loan Program

The cost of living has increased substantially over the last few years. This has not been matched by an increase in wages (McDonald, 2022). The increased cost of basic necessities like food and fuel is putting great financial, emotional and psychological pressure on individuals and families (Evershed et al, 2022).

As has been extensively covered in the media, tens of thousands of Australian home owners are in current mortgage stress, and many more will join them over the next 12 months. The interest rate increases since early 2022 have increased pressure on home owners. This is likely to increase as interest rates also increase, in an attempt to reduce inflation (Touma, 2021; Roy Morgan, 2023).

For renters, reduced rental vacancies and a lack of housing, has increased rent in major cities by 24.7% over 12 months (until 12 February 2023). Nationally, rent has increased by 17.4% in over the same period. The national median weekly rent is \$562 a week. In Sydney, where SUPRA is based on Gadigal Country, the median weekly rent is \$744 (SQM Research, 2023). Continuing to index HELP debt, and to maintain the current minimum repayment rate, will further increase the cost of living pressures Australians are facing.

Beyond this exacerbation, the maintenance of the current status quo for HELP debt repayments is also likely to discourage Australians from pursuing higher education, due to the fears of additional debt burdens. This will have a disproportionately greater impact on women, who have bigger HELP debt and take longer to pay it off (West, 2020). As well as First Nations Peoples, low SES and fixed income earners, disabled people and carers (Hamilton-Smith, 2023). This would have flow on effect to who, and how, these groups are able to participate in the work force, and the access that their children then have to higher education.

This will also affect Higher Degree by Research students who have high levels of debt by virtue of extensive, and obligatory, pre-HDR studies. Currently the most straightforward way to enter a HDR degree is through completing a bachelors degree and then honours. Even if a HDR student is able to access a fee-offset scholarship to undertake their HDR, eligible, passionate and highly capable students may choose not to undertake further study, so that they are able to enter the work force, where they will be paid a living wage, and are able to pay off their HELP loans sooner. Any reduction in HDR students has potentially catastrophic implication for Australia's global standing and output of research and development in all fields, including science and medicine.

A reduction in participation in higher education could also have a long-term impact on the country's human capital, as fewer people may choose to pursue higher education. This is particularly the case alongside the impacts of the Jobs Ready Graduates package, which discourages, and in some cases, will prevent students from continuing their tertiary degrees in the event of fail grades.

The Labor Government is struggling to bring down the cost of living (Clun, 2022). Abolishing HELP debt indexation, and increasing the minimum repayment income level, is one clear, and quick, way to intervene in Australian's cost of living crisis. If HELP debts continue to be indexed during this time, the pressures on many individuals and families will also increase. This is not only detrimental to the wellbeing of Australians, but with increased stress and financial insecurity there will likely be a decrease in overall consumer spending, and a negative impact on the broader economy.

3.9.3 Job-ready Graduates (JRG) package

The punitive aspects of the Jobs Ready Graduate Package should be dissolved. The most detrimental part of the JRG package excludes students from tertiary education who do not meet progress requirements, by removing their CSP. Students who have their CSPs stripped have to pay course fees until they meet their progress requirements. This stratifies students into two groups. One group who can risk not meeting progression requirements because

they come from families who are able to afford the course fees, and when they underperform are still able to stay in their courses of choice (for example medicine or law). And a second group who cannot risk underperforming, and whose underperformance, that may not be a reflection of their actual ability, will result in them being excluded from their course, because they and their families cannot afford the fees.

Clearly, this disproportionately affects student who have less access to financial and other resources, who are students who are already at the margins and from low SES groups. This aspect of the JRG package makes university less inclusive, less democratic and reduces participation in tertiary education for the most vulnerable students. It should be removed.

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