



Submission to the Department of Education

Australian Universities Accord Interim Report

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 handle over 2000 cases each year. SUPRA is governed by a democratically elected body of postgraduate students who attend the University of Sydney. SUPRA has eight equity networks and eight 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, the Carers Officer and the Satellite Campus Officer.

SUPRA submitted a submission to the first call for submissions in April. And we welcome the opportunity to provide further feedback on the experiences of postgraduate students at University of Sydney, based on the Australia's University Accord Interim Report.

Executive summary

SUPRA's submission covers a wide range of issues raised by the Universities Accord Interim Report. We discuss the needs of First Nations students, international students, students on placements, disabled students/students with disability and HDR students. We also discuss SSAF funding, and Purpose Built Student Accommodation. As a postgraduate student representative organisation our focus is largely on the experiences and needs of postgraduate students, although many of our recommendations also support undergraduate students.

To increase the enrolment, retention and success of First Nations students at universities, First Nations students need support not during their time at university, but starting from preschool age. This involves a substantial restructuring of the education system, having First Nations students and communities leading the changes. First Nations students need more access to CSPs for enabling pre-university courses, and increased rates of ABSTUDY that covers the cost of living and studying for all First Nations students undertaking all degrees, including postgraduate degrees. First Nations students should be supported by First Nations designed and led student support hubs embedded within all universities that have guaranteed, consistent funding that covers the cost of supporting First Nations university students. First Nations students need accessible and secure pathways between undergraduate studies, honours and HDR degrees. HDR First Nations students need clear accessible pathways between HDR studies and secure paid employment within universities. And all universities should have First Nations staff at all university levels.

SUPRA strongly opposes the international student levy. Additional costs for international students erode international students' wellbeing and harms Australia's international

education reputation. International students should have more streamlined and accessible paths to permanent residency, and the Government should create a fast-tracked permanent residency stream for high achieving international students. International students should also receive travel concessions in NSW and access to Medicare to support their cost of living and mental health and wellbeing.

SSAF funding allocation must be led by student organisations, and not by universities. SSAF funding should be prioritised for student representative organisations, especially those that offer independent advocacy services. Universities should not be permitted to fund internal activities or departments using SSAF funding.

Postgraduate education is vital to increase the rates of tertiary qualification in Australia. More CSPs should be available for postgraduate students in more postgraduate courses.

Students on WIL/placement should receive financial support while on placement/WIL. Appropriate financial support ensures all students are able to undertake degrees that have placement/WIL, not just students that can afford it. Financial support will reduce the paid work hours students must undertake, and ensures that they are able to engage in deep learning while on placement/WIL. This should not be funded through any mechanism that results in greater debt for students, including income contingent loans.

All income support payments for university students should be increased, and extended to all enrolled students. Increasing the level and access to financial support while at university will increase enrolment and retention rates of university students.

Australians are facing housing and cost of living crises and are having to navigate competing debt repayment demands. HECS/HELP indexation rates should be frozen, and reduced. The minimum repayment rates for HECS/HELP should be increased. A new fairer repayment system based on cost of living for HECS/HELP repayment should be implemented. HECS/HELP debt cannot be the determinant of someone attending university or not.

SUPRA submission also rejects all forms of loans, including income contingent loans, to help students meet the cost of living while studying. Students do not need more debt, they need genuine financial support.

All disabled students/students with disability should have access to hybrid mode. Disabled HDR students need additional support and time to submit their theses. And HDR students need increased PhD stipends, tax-free part time stipends, and greater support during the time between the end of their studies and beginning of their careers.

Sexual violence and harassment on campus needs to be addressed by nation wide planning and investment.

Purpose build student accommodation (PBSA) in NSW needs to be brought clearly under existing legislation that provides student renters with appropriate rights and recourse. Students in PBSA need safe and secure accommodation and will only have this when they have the same rights as other renters in NSW.

First Nations students

- a. creating a new First Nations Higher Education Council to give voice to the needs, aspirations and know-how of community
 - b. moving towards a self-determined approach to national funding and policy settings in relation to First Nations students, employment, teaching, research and engagement, with universities mirroring this approach within their institutions, as is the case in some institutions today
 - c. supporting a First Nations-led review of access, participation and outcomes for First Nations students and staff, research, teaching, use of First Nations knowledges, and First Nations governance and leadership within universities
 - d. enhancing research capability for First Nations knowledges and for collaboration and partnerships between First Nations communities, governments, universities and industry.
- b. setting targets to raise First Nations participation and completion rates in higher education

Supporting First Nations students' education

We support the proposal to extend demand driven funding to all First Nations students at university. However, we firmly believe that this is not enough. First Nations students need to be supported before and during their educational journey to be best placed to enter, stay and succeed at university.

SUPRA believes all universities should have First Nations controlled and led student study and support hubs that design and implement culturally safe supports for First Nations students¹. 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.

These hubs should have sufficient and, crucially, guaranteed funding to ensure secure employment for staff, and ongoing, consistent and reliable support for students. Erratic funding, funding changes and defunding (that is not led by First Nations Peoples) cannot produce the kind of changes the Accord is looking to implement and does not provide the space for First Nations students to thrive.

First Nations students need to be able to return to Country for Sorry Business, as well as other familial, cultural and spiritual obligations. This needs to be embedded within university structures, courses and degrees and within scholarships. First Nations students should not have to choose between meeting their cultural and social responsibilities to their communities, and being able to continue their degree, or 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

¹ Robertson, K. Lalovix, A. & Thompson, S.C. (2021). *Improving higher education success for Australian Indigenous peoples: examples of promising practice*. In Neil Harrison, G. A. / N. H. (2021). *Marginalised Communities in Higher Education: Disadvantage, Mobility and Indigeneity*. Taylor and Francis. p 182.

university support for First Nations students to return to Country can directly lead to First Nations students being unable to continue their studies.

First Nations students who leave university without completing their degree need to be supported should they choose to return to their studies at a later date. This support needs to facilitate ease of return and re-commencement and should be provided before the student leaves, while they are away, and upon their return.

The technological divide needs to be addressed, especially for rural, regional and remote First Nations students. This should not only occur through the expansion of the Regional University Study Hubs, but must occur within students' homes, domestic spaces and other places of study.

Recommendations:

- Securely fund First Nations led support and study hubs within all universities, in consultation with First Nations students, staff and communities.
- Require universities to support First Nations students who need to return to Country for Sorry Business within degree structures and scholarship conditions.
- Ensure all universities have clear, accessible and evidence-based support for First Nations students leaving and returning to their studies, as directed by First Nations students and communities.
- Reduce the technical divide for First Nations students and communities.

CSPs and ABSTUDY

Supporting First Nations students at university means genuine financial investment in First Nations students from preschool to high school. Our previous submission outlined some of the research into First Nations students' experiences in the school system. These issues need to be addressed in conjunction with increasing access and support for First Nations students at university.

First Nations students are on average older when they enter university, so their pre-university degree education, including enabling courses, bridging courses, as well as post-graduate degrees need to be funded by CSPs. This allows First Nations students to be fully prepared for university learning and are empowered to flourish while at university.

ABSTUDY payment rates need to be increased, and the scope of people and courses eligible for ABSTUDY should be extended, especially for postgraduate degrees. This is especially crucial for First Nations students who are disabled/have disability and/or are carers and caregivers and so face additional costs of living and additional barriers to accessing university education.

Recommendations:

- Undertake radical reform to education from preschool to high school to ensure First Nations students have the same chance to undertake and succeed at university as non-First Nations students.

- Extend CSPs to all pre-enrolment courses (e.g. bridging and enabling course) for First Nations students.
- Increase and extend ABSTUDY payments to ensure cost of living and learning is met for First Nations students.

First Nations led structures

First Nations students and First Nations Peoples, as experts in their own experience, need to lead, and be supported in, all processes, changes or considerations considered by the Accord, and implemented across universities.

All universities should have Indigenous Research Hubs led by First Nations academics and professional staff. This improves cultural safety for academic and professional staff and students, creates a safe space and support for students moving from undergraduate studies to research degrees, and demonstrates possible futures for First Nations students at university considering working in research or academia.

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 attributes². This should be specific to undergraduate, postgraduate, and HDR degrees and should also include learning opportunities for non-First Nations supervisors of First Nations HDR students.

First Nations staff need to be employed at all levels of all universities³.

Recommendations:

- All processes, changes or considerations by the Accord, and implemented in universities, need to be led by First Nations Peoples and First Nations students.
- Invest in Indigenous Research Hubs at all universities, led by First Nations academic and professional staff.
- Require all universities to have First Nations specific Learning and Teaching Plans.
- Ensure First Nations staff are employed across all levels of all universities.

First Nations HDR students

2.7.1.3 Embedding and prompting First nations research and knowledge systems

Embedding and promoting First Nations research and knowledge systems will require growing the pipeline of First Nations research students. First Nations students are currently underrepresented in PhD enrolments, making up only 1.7% of total enrolments.¹³⁶ Programs should be targeted at

² Ibid, p 184.

³ Robertson, K. Lalovic, A. & Thompson, S.C. (2021). *Improving higher education success for Australian Indigenous peoples: examples of promising practice*. In Neil Harrison, G. A. / N. H. (2021). *Marginalised Communities in Higher Education: Disadvantage, Mobility and Indigeneity*. Taylor and Francis. p 181. Taylor, E.V., Lalovic, A. & Thompson, S.C. Beyond enrolments: a systematic review exploring the factors affecting the retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health students in the tertiary education system. *Int J Equity Health* 18, 136 (2019).

incentivising and supporting First Nations students to undertake and complete HDR programs. These programs could be developed and designed in collaboration with First Nations people and academics. There are already many great examples of this across the sector. (p94)

SUPRA supports increasing First Nations HDR students' access to culturally safe, financially⁴ and academically supported HDR candidatures. Support for First Nations students continuing onto a HDR program must begin at the start of their university career, if not before. Clear pathways to permanent secure employment within universities needs to be created and made accessible to First Nations students. These programs and associated supports must be led by First Nations people, communities, students and staff.

Recommendations:

- Create accessible and secure pathways between undergraduate studies, honours, and HDR studies for First Nations students.
- Create clear and accessible pathways between HDR studies and secure, paid employment at universities for First Nations students.

International students

International student levy

I. [The Accord is] examining a funding mechanism such as a levy on international student fee income. Such a mechanism could provide insurance against future economic, policy or other shocks, or fund national and sector priorities such as infrastructure and research.

e. providing a high-quality university experience for international students

SUPRA vehemently opposes any international student levy, regardless of its details or form. Any levy, regardless of mechanism, will be paid for by international students. Extensive research has been done into the financial pressures facing international students, with the varying stressors often culminating in housing precarity and vulnerability to homelessness⁵.

International students already pay exorbitant fees, and a levy will increase those costs either directly or indirectly. International students are facing huge costs of living and housing in Australia, and will find any additional costs further disincentive to attend Australian universities. As two international students told us:

I am in severe depression... and really worried about my future after spending so much money for this degree.

Second year student in the Business School

[I] need more money to survive.

⁴ The University of Technology Sydney (UTS) has met their own First Nations strategy by guaranteeing scholarships for all First Nations HDR students.

⁵ Wilson, S., Hastings, C., Morris, A., Ramia, G., & Mitchell, E. (2022). International students on the edge: The precarious impacts of financial stress. *Journal of Sociology*, 0(0). Morris, A., Wilson, S., Mitchell, E., Ramia, G. & Hastings, C. (2021): International students struggling in the private rental sector in Australia prior to and during the pandemic, *Housing Studies*.

27 year old student in Engineering

A sense of belonging is vital to international students' positive experience of education in Australia⁶. International students involved with SUPRA already feel that they are considered solely of economic value to Australia, and that there is no interest or care for them as individuals, or students.

Introducing this levy, exacerbating the financial constraints faced by international students, and furthering the perception of international students as "cash cows", will fundamentally negatively affect international education in Australia. It will reduce international education's role as soft diplomacy and will damage the relationships Australia has with other countries. This will impact Australia's reputation among international students, their families, and communities⁷. As other countries have increased their investment in their international education offerings, and are becoming increasingly competitive, Australia cannot expect to hold the same position as a destination of choice for international students without ensuring that international students feel welcomed, valued, and belong⁸.

Now is not the time to create additional pressures for international students, now is the time to support and embrace international students who choose Australia as their place to study, work and live.

Recommendation:

- Remove the international study levy from consideration by the Accord.

International student visas

- c. ensuring the integrity and accessibility of visa pathways for international students

SUPRA supports ensuring the accessibility of visa pathways for international students, especially those that are eligible to apply to work in Australia after their studies have concluded. These pathways need to be simplified and made more accessible for people wanting to apply to study or work in Australia.

SUPRA argues for removing the work cap on study visas for international students who are making good progress. As discussed in our original submission to the Accord, removing the cap reduces the vulnerability of international students to predatory landlords and unscrupulous employers who use threats to visas as leverage over international students.

⁶ Yezdani, O. (2021). Australia's strategy to revive international education is right to aim for more diversity. The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/australias-strategy-to-revive-international-education-is-right-to-aim-for-more-diversity-172620>

⁷ Arambewela, R., Hall, J., & Zuhair, S. (2006) Postgraduate International Students from Asia: Factors Influencing Satisfaction, *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 15:2, 105-127. p 105.

⁸ Anderson. I. (2021) Australia's international education market share is shrinking fast. Recovery depends on unis offering students a better deal. The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/australias-international-education-market-share-is-shrinking-fast-recovery-depends-on-unis-offering-students-a-better-deal-162856>

Only being able to work limited hours during semester makes a very tight budget. Its barely enough to live in expensive Sydney.
27-year-old, Business School student.

International students, especially those who are enrolled in PhDs, are highly motivated, highly qualified potential new migrants. Some of these students have been studying in Australia from their undergraduate degrees, which means some have been living and studying in Australia for over 10 years. These students are an accessible viable opportunity for Australia to easily increase our skilled migration.

However, these students need guarantees and surety about their futures in Australia. In our original submission to the Accord, SUPRA argued for creating a fast-tracked permanent residency stream for the top performing graduates at Australian universities. This stream could be contingent upon completion of the degree to a specific standard or level. But it would offer students, who have already invested substantial time, energy and passion studying in Australia, clear paths to their future.

Finally, SUPRA strongly advocates to exclude HIV from the health requirements for permanent residency. Many international students report studiously avoiding accessing free HIV testing and preventative prophylactics because they are afraid to jeopardise their pathway to permanent migration. Given substantial improvements to HIV testing, treatment and the drastic reduction of seroconversion in Australia, it is unjust and discriminatory to continue excluding people living with HIV from meeting these health requirements. It is also hampering existing testing and treatment efforts, which can have negative impacts on students' health and wellbeing.

Recommendations:

- Uncap the working hours of students on study visas.
- Create a fast-tracked permanent residency stream for high achieving students.
- Remove HIV status from the health requirements for permanent residency.

Concession travel and healthcare

e. providing a high-quality university experience for international students

SUPRA supports providing a high-quality university experience for international students in Australia. International students should have access to the same supports as domestic students, especially as it concerns their very high day-to-day travel expenses⁹ and living costs.

International students are at greater risk of poor mental health due to isolation, language barriers, academic pressures and financial stress¹⁰. And they are less likely to access support,

⁹ According to Grant-Smith et al (2019) transportation one of the major contributors of financial stress to students on placement.

¹⁰ Orygen (2020). *International students and their mental health and physical safety*. Accessed March 2023. <https://internationaleducation.gov.au/International->

than domestic students, when they do face mental health challenges¹¹. While they are required to have OSHC, it is both expensive and limited in the support it can provide to students, especially around mental health support. International students need access to subsidized mental health support via Medicare, and universities need to provide more free mental health support, in particular clinical psychological services, for short, medium and long term needs.

All international students should have access to concession cards for travel. Currently NSW is the only state that provides no support to international students' travel costs. Victoria provides limited support to international students. Travel costs can be substantial and disproportionately affects students who must live further away from their campuses due to the cost of rent, and who have to travel for placements. SUPRA supports the extension of the travel concession program to international students in NSW, and to part-time domestic students.

Recommendations:

- Provide all international students with access to funded mental and physical health support via Medicare.
- Require all universities to provide free mental health support, in particular clinical psychological services, to international students for short, medium, and long term mental health support.
- Provide all international students with access to travel concessions.
- Provide all part-time domestic access to travel concessions.

Student Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF) and student organisations

The Accord will consider:

- a. improving student wellbeing and safety, including empowering students on matters that affect them
- e. providing a greater percentage of the Student Services and Amenities Fee to student unions to ensure the support and representation of students.

SUPRA strongly believes that student organisations offer invaluable representation and expertise on student matters and are vital for empowering students on matters that affect them. However, SUPRA agrees with the National Union of Students (quoted on page 118) that the current arrangement, where universities determine which organisations receive SSAF funding and how much, embeds unequal power dynamics between student organisations and the university. The result of this is diminished and stymied student led representation, and undue influence by the university on the direction and activities of student led organisations.

How SSAF funding is allocated is overwhelmingly controlled by universities. At the University of Sydney the University allocates SSAF funding to student organisations as well as, more

[network/Australia/InternationalStrategy/EGIPrompts/Documents/ORYGEN%20-%20International%20Student%20Mental%20Health%20and%20Physical%20Safety%20June%202020.pdf](https://www.supra.org.au/network/Australia/InternationalStrategy/EGIPrompts/Documents/ORYGEN%20-%20International%20Student%20Mental%20Health%20and%20Physical%20Safety%20June%202020.pdf)

¹¹ Ibid.

recently, university departments and services. The University establishes the criteria that applications must meet to be eligible for SSAF funding, based on the University's interpretation of the SSAF Policy. The University determines the method through which student organisations should apply for that funding and when applications should be submitted. The University assesses whose applications meet these criteria, and how much of that funding should be allocated to that group, organisation or activity. When consultation has occurred, student organisation feedback has not been taken on board, and when the general student population has been consulted, the surveys used have been overly technical, obscure and confusing.

The current SSAF status quo disincentivises universities from even basic consultation with student organisations. And as a result, student organisations are increasingly limited in directing funding towards student priorities and interests. SSAF funding being allocated through universities also provides incentives for universities to use SSAF to meet the universities strategic goals, rather than funding being used to support the goals and interests of students themselves. Universities should have far less discretion on SSAF distribution, and SSAF funding allocation should be led by student organisations.

Because of universities' control over SSAF funding there is inherent interest to provide departments and activities within the university itself, as opposed to student organisations that are affiliates, with increasing amounts of SSAF funding. Under this model universities are inclined to fund their internal activities using SSAF, rather than using their own substantial revenue to support students.

Over the last 5 years at SUPRA we have seen the university significantly increasing the percentage of SSAF funding that they allocate to university activities and departments. In base funding alone (which does not include contestable or infrastructure funding) the universities allocation to university based activities or departments has increased hugely, from \$2,986 in 2020 to \$1,452,796 in 2023.

For SSAF funding applications there is substantial inequality in capacity and ability across organisations and groups seeking funding. The expectation that student organisations, which are run by students, should compete with professional university staff, who can have significant experience with applying for funding and have the organisational support to submit refined funding applications, is deeply unfair. It is similarly unfair for student organisations to be expected to compete with large student organisations that have significant commercial funding streams and professional staff with expertise in funding applications.

Recommendations:

- SSAF funding should be controlled, and allocation led, by independent student organisations and used to support student interests and needs.
- Student organisations should be the main priority for SSAF funding.
- Independent student organisations that provide welfare support to students and representation for student interests should be prioritised for SSAF funding.

- Applications should be straight forward and led by student organisations as representatives of the student body.
- SSAF funding should not be used for university initiatives or activities, including the provision of non-independent advocacy services, which should be funded by the university.
- SSAF funding should be limited for student-led organisations that have significant commercial funding streams.
- Caps should be placed on SSAF funding being used for internal university activities and departments.
- Caps should be placed on SSAF funding provided to large student organisations with commercial funding streams.
- Any mechanism for assessing SSAF funding must be led by, and have genuine consultation with, student organisations.

Commonwealth Supported Places for post-graduate courses

Postgraduate degrees have huge value to individuals and communities, national economic growth, and innovation¹². However, in Australia not all postgraduate degrees offer Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs) and many degrees only offer a limited number of CSPs.

SUPRA believes all postgraduate degrees at all eligible universities should offer CSPs at a sufficient rate to incentivise undertaking university education for mature aged learners (anyone over 21 years of age).

Postgraduate courses offer substantial benefits for individuals wanting to undertake a university degree. Postgraduate courses tend to be shorter, more focused and only require students to leave the work force for a shorter period of time in order to upskill or re-skill in specific areas. The cohort trends towards older students, who are highly focused on their degrees and careers¹³. Postgraduate degrees in turn are more likely to be designed for mature aged learners, who have additional commitments¹⁴ and prior work experience to consider¹⁵.

Comparatively, starting an undergraduate degree as a mature aged learner can be less desirable. Undergraduate courses tend to be more general and years longer than postgraduate degrees. And they tend to be designed for students coming out of high school so may be less accommodating for students with additional commitments, or not designed for students with substantial work experience.

Despite the benefits of postgraduate degrees, the cost of postgraduate degrees without CSPs are substantial, with fees easily over \$20,000 per year. The prohibitive cost of

¹² Morgan, M. (2014) Patterns, drivers and challenges pertaining to postgraduate taught study: an international comparative analysis, *Higher Education Research & Development*, 33:6, 1150-1165. p 1150.

¹³ Ibid, p 1150.

¹⁴ Forsyth, H., Laxton, R., Moran, C., van der werf, J., Banks, R., & Taylor, R. (2009). Postgraduate Coursework in Australia: Issues Emerging from University and Industry Collaboration. *Higher Education*, 57(5), 641–655. p 643.

¹⁵ Ibid, p 642.

postgraduate degrees combined with the duration of undergraduate degrees that are not designed for mature aged students, adds substantial disincentivise for mature aged individuals wanting to undertake university study.

SUPRA believes that more CSPs need to be provided to students undertaking a range of postgraduate degrees. This will increase access to university education for individuals wanting to undertake a university degree later on in life, and for those needing or wanting to re-train. This is likely to provide additional opportunities and support for First Nations Peoples who enter university at a later age than non-Indigenous people¹⁶. And it may also have a positive impact for disabled people/people with disability and carers who also have reduced access to university.

Given that First Nations students access enabling courses and pre-bachelor/degree courses at high rates before entering university, and that these courses likely assist in the retention and success of First Nations students at university, these courses should also have CSPs. CSPs for enabling and other pre-university courses will also assist anyone starting university after a break from their secondary education. This may increase access to university for people with disability/disabled people, carers, as well as older people.

Recommendations:

- CSPs should be offered in more postgraduate degrees.
- More CSPs should be available in postgraduate degrees.
- CSPs should be made available for all enabling and pre-degree courses.

Financial concerns for students

Work Integrated Learning/Placements

[The Accord will consider] "improving Work Integrated Learning (WIL) and placements by providing participating students with better incentives and financial support"

Students on compulsory placement/WIL are in desperate need of financial support due to the significant financial stress they face while on placement/WIL. Students on placement/WIL often must reduce their paid work hours while also taking on additional travel costs and caring expenses to cover hours they are on placement¹⁷. They can struggle to pay rent, or afford food and other basic necessities during this time, often relying on familial funds, savings or borrowing¹⁸, which are not available to all.

Students trying to self-sustain during placements are often having to work during their non-placement hours in order to continue to afford to live. This leaves students working seventy-

¹⁶ Norton, A. (2023). Will demand driven funding for all indigenous students make much of a difference. Andrewnorton. <https://andrewnorton.net.au/2023/08/04/will-demand-driven-funding-for-all-indigenous-students-make-much-of-a-difference/>

¹⁷ Grant-Smith, D & Zwaan, L. (2019) Don't spend, eat less, save more: Responses to the financial stress experienced by nursing students during unpaid clinical placements. *Nurse Education in Practice*, 35 (1-6).
Maidment, J. (2003) Problems experienced by students on field placement: using research findings to inform curriculum design and content, *Australian Social Work*, 56:1, 50-60.

¹⁸ Ibid.

hour weeks—four to five day weeks at the placement site, then working nights and weekends to pay expenses. This not only has substantial impact on their health and wellbeing, but can also impact their ability to participate fully in their placements¹⁹.

Two postgraduate students have said:

I am financially stressed as I have less time to work and end up working every Saturday and Sunday, and doing placement Monday to Friday full time. It is exhausting but there is no financial help available.

26-year-old, first in the family to attend university, Social work.

It's incredibly difficult to make full time placement work while also earning enough to cover living expenses.

Domestic student, Occupational therapy.

Meanwhile many of these industries (teaching, nursing²⁰) are facing critical shortages, likely not helped by the daunting prospect of many years of study, many months of unpaid placements, and a future profession that society does not appropriately respect or compensate. Many industries, such as nursing, teaching and social work, rely heavily on the labour of students in unpaid placements. We believe students should be appropriately remunerated for this work.

SUPRA strongly supports students receiving financial support during their compulsory placements/WILs. This should include both domestic and international, full and part time students. This needs to be at a sufficient level that students are able to significantly reduce their paid work commitments, and are able to genuinely engage with deep learning while on placement/WIL. Placement/WIL are central to students learning their profession and entering the workforce of Australia's myriad understaffed industries with confidence and ability.

We note that on p67 of the Accords interim report, income contingent loans (ICLs) are put forward as potential options for financial support for students on placement/WIL. SUPRA strongly opposes the financial support for students on placement/WIL being provided through any form of loan system, or arrangement where a student incurs debt. Students are drowning in in debt, and further debt adds additional disincentive for students to enter professions that are not culturally valued or appropriately compensated.

Recommendations:

- Students on placement/WIL should be appropriately financially supported.
- This support needs to cover genuine cost of living while on placement.

¹⁹ Grant-Smith, D & Zwaan, L. (2019) Don't spend, eat less, save more: Responses to the financial stress experienced by nursing students during unpaid clinical placements. *Nurse Education in Practice*, 35 (1-6). p 2.

²⁰ Grant-Smith & Zwaan (2019) found that nursing students struggled financially more so than medical students. This is may be the result of gender difference in the cohorts and nursing students being more likely to have other caring responsibilities.

- Support should be easily accessed so that there are limited barriers to receiving financial support.
- This should not be provided by any kind of ICL or debt mechanism. Students should not accrue more debt as a result of undertaking placement/WIL.

Income Contingent Loans

- b. exploring the advantages and disadvantages of ICLs to help students meet living expenses

SUPRA strongly opposes any mechanism where students incur more debt. This includes any form of income contingent loan (ICL). Students are already inundated with debt, and many potential students are not seeing the benefit of accumulating tens of thousands of dollars in debt to go to university, especially when it is not clear that this debt will yield high earnings²¹. Debt is often distributed unevenly, landing more heavily on those already from disenfranchised groups with lower incomes²². This would likely include First Nations Peoples, and people from lower SES groups; two groups of particular focus for the Accord. The effect of high debt and “wasted money” can echo intergenerationally, with parents passing a critical attitude about university education onto their children²³. Resulting in an expanded negative effect on groups whose attendance at university the Accord plans to increase.

Loan schemes make students vulnerable to market forces such as inflation, as we have recently seen with the indexation of HECS/HELP loans. These forces can be unpredictable and unable to be planned for, leaving students having to navigate competing debts for decades into the future.

If the Accord is genuinely invested in increasing student numbers, ICLs are not the means to do so. Students need genuine support from the government, that covers their cost of living and provides them with viable means to attend university without accruing more debt than they already do.

Recommendations:

- ICLs should not be used to support students cost of living.
- Current social support systems should be increased and expanded to cover more students genuine cost of living.

Income support payments

- a. changing income support payment arrangements, including eligibility tests around independence, part-time study and unpaid work placements

²¹ Corliss, M., Daly, A., & Lewis, P. (2020). Is a university degree still a worthwhile financial investment in Australia? *Australian Journal of Education*, 64(1) 73-90.

²² Goldrick, R. & Steinbaum, M. (2020). What is the problem with student debt? *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, Vol. 39, No. 2, 533–552.

²³ Ibid.

SUPRA supports increasing the rates of all income support payments, and expanding eligibility and access to these payments. Students are under huge financial pressure due to the increased cost of basic necessities like food and fuel²⁴ and a lack of increase in wages²⁵. Student renters are facing reduced rental vacancies and a lack of affordable housing due to mammoth rent increases in major cities. In Sydney, where SUPRA is based on Gadigal Country, the median weekly rent is now \$744²⁶. A cost that is insurmountable for many students, especially those without access to familial wealth.

Students are frequently reporting to us not being able to balance full or part time study with earning enough to meet the current cost of living. This is especially the case for postgraduate students who are more likely to be full fee paying, and have dependents and other non-negotiable financial pressures. As two students told us,

I am overloaded with work, and I can't turn off and focus on my studies often. I also can't not work as I need the money to survive.

34-year-old student with disability, first in family to attend university, from rural and regional area.

I don't have a [PhD] stipend, so I have to work as many hours as it takes to pay my living costs -- this takes precedence over my research, so my research gets completely stopped sometimes to allow for my day job.

29-year-old student in mathematics, earning below \$30,000.

Sufficient income support payments that cover the genuine cost of living, for all students enrolled at university will increase the enrolment rates, retention and performance of students at university. If the Accord wants to see genuine improvements in tertiary education this is a vital and necessary change.

Recommendations

- Increase the current income support payment rates for all students to cover the genuine cost of living while studying.
- Expand income support payments to all students including full time, part time, domestic, international and HDR students without scholarships.

HECS/HELP repayments

c. reforming the Higher Education Loan Program to ensure students do not experience long-term financial burden.

²⁴ Evershed, N. & Sonnenschein, L. (2022) Cost of living 2022: see how inflation has changed prices in Australia in the June quarter. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/ng-interactive/2022/jul/27/cost-of-living-australia-price-changes-inflation-2022-sydney-melbourne-brisbane-interactive-data-explorer-june-quarter>

²⁵ McDonald, P. (2022). Australia's cost of living. Parliament of Australia. https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/Briefing_Book47p/CostOfLiving

²⁶ SQM Research. (2023) Rental vacancy rates fall back to 1%. chrome-extension://efaidnbmninnibpcjpcglclefindmkaj/https://sqmresearch.com.au/12_1_2_National_Vacancy_Rate_December_2022_FINAL.pdf

SUPRA supports reforming HECS/HELP to reduce the burden of long-term debt. We strongly support the Green's push for free education for all²⁷. We support freezing and reducing indexation of HECS/HELP, and raising the minimum income repayment rate. We also support establishing other fairer means of indexing HECS/HELP that is not contingent on CPI, but reflects the cost of living. Addressing HECS/HELP debt is crucial in this moment of high inflation, high cost of living pressures and the housing crisis.

Recommendations:

- Freeze and reduce HECS/HELP indexation.
- Raise the minimum income repayment rate for HECS/HELP.
- Establish a fairer indexation mechanism for HECS/HELP that is tied to cost of living.

Disabled Higher Degree Research students

c. creating research training targets for equity groups

Clearly the Accord is invested in students with disability/disabled students attending and succeeding at university. The Accord also offers a number of areas for improvement for HDR students more generally. However, there is a lack of attention paid to disabled HDR students within the interim report.

Different universities have different goals and different support structures in place for disabled HDR students. This leaves disabled HDR students receiving very variable support depending on their university. Disabled HDR students should have consistent and predictable supports across universities.

To genuinely support and embrace disabled HDR students, SUPRA advocates for several basic accommodations available to all disabled HDR students that should be mandated across all universities.

The first is additional time for disabled HDRs to complete their degrees. This is a simple but significant accommodation that would facilitate disabled HDR students undertaking and completing their degrees to the best of their ability. Disabled HDR students may experience additional time and energy demands due to being disabled, and may need additional time in their candidature to accommodate for these demands.

Disabled HDR students should also be able to access flexible arrangements in terms of moving from full to part time status, and back, as needed. This should be easy for HDR students to change, and should not have unnecessary limits to the duration of part/full time periods.

All disabled HDR students should have access to appropriate work spaces, if they require work space on campus.

²⁷ The Greens. Free education for life. <https://greens.org.au/platform/education#>

Part-time scholarships should be tax free. This is especially crucial for disabled HDR students who may need to move to part time study to navigate their disability.

Recommendations:

- Disabled HDR students/HDR students with disability should have consistent supports and accommodations across universities.
- Disabled HDR students/HDR students with disability should be granted additional time to complete their degrees.
- Disabled HDR students/HDR students with disability should be able to move between full and part time as needed.
- Part-time scholarships should be tax free for all students and especially disabled students/student with disability.

Higher Degree Research students

Improving the research training system to support and attract students to research careers:

- a. increasing PhD stipend rates

HDR students are fundamental to the higher education system, and SUPRA strongly supports increasing HDR stipend rates to cover the actual cost of living for HDR candidates. This increase needs to continue over time, based on changes to cost of living and CPI. All HDRs should be provided with stipends, regardless of part time, full time, domestic or international status.

HDRs at SUPRA frequently report struggling to balance their paid work, studies, life commitments and professional development due to the limited stipends they receive. HDR candidatures are difficult at the best of times and mental health rates of HDR students are poor due to the pressures of their candidature and balancing limited time and excessive demands beyond the research they conduct²⁸. As one HDR student, among many, has said:

Cost of living is always hard as a PhD student. This semester things are good. Last semester without teaching, things were hard. PhD stipends are not living wages. We need living wages.

28-year-old, social sciences.

Extensive research has supported the link between the provision of appropriate levels of funding with higher completion rates and reduced dropout rates. While also demonstrating that HDRs who have to undertake paid work have lower completion rates and higher dropout rates²⁹.

²⁸ Brownlow, C., Eacersall, D., Nelson, C. W., Parsons-Smith, R. L., & Terry, P. C. (2022). Risks to mental health of higher degree by research (HDR) students during a global pandemic. *PLoS One*, *17*(12), e0279698–e0279698. p.2

²⁹ Bekova, S. (2021) Does employment during doctoral training reduce the PhD completion rate?, *Studies in Higher Education*, *46*:6, 1068-1080. Ehrenberg, R. G., & Mavros, P. G. (1995). Do Doctoral Students' Financial Support Patterns Affect Their Times-To-Degree and Completion Probabilities? *The Journal of Human*

While HDR students are paid below minimum wage, they are also producing substantial contributions to Australia's research output throughout their candidatures³⁰. HDRs are considered the future of Australia's research and development, and the future educators of Australia's university students. Stipends that genuinely cover the cost of living while undertaking a HDR will alleviate some of the burden we require HDR students to shoulder across their candidature.

Recommendations:

- Increase PhD stipends to provide meaningful support to HDR students.
- Increase the number of PhD stipends available to HDR students.
- Increase the number of PhD stipends available to international students.
- Part-time scholarships should be tax-free for all students.

b. offering postgraduate and postdoctoral researchers extra skills-oriented training in parallel with PhD study or postdoctoral work

SUPRA supports HDRs access to training in parallel with their PhD work, but this should be optional and not mandatory.

Recommendations:

- Provide additional, non-compulsory, educational opportunities for HDRs throughout their candidature.

f. providing explicit support for tutors, research trainees and others on the boundary between student and staff status, and enhancing career stability for early career academic staff

SUPRA supports greater support mechanisms for individuals sitting between HDR student and early career researcher. Currently, this is a liminal period where students are left to navigate as best they can a lack of financial or institutional support. Students are left disoriented and adrift, which likely results in substantial numbers of qualified individuals leaving research for the guarantee of structured employment. It also leads to research loss through unpublished PhD thesis that would be better placed more firmly within the public realm.

Resources, 30(3), 581–609. Haert, M., Ortiz, E., Emplit, P., Halloin, V., & Dehon, C. (2014) Are dropout and degree completion in doctoral study significantly dependent on type of financial support and field of research?, *Studies in Higher Education*, 39:10, 1885-1909. Spronken-Smith, R., Cameron, C., & Quigg, R. (2018) Factors contributing to high PhD completion rates: a case study in a research-intensive university in New Zealand, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 43:1, 94-109.

³⁰ Zhang, D. Tsounis, C., & Karras, J. (2023). Nation suffers for selling short our PhD research talent. The Australia. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/nation-suffers-for-selling-short-our-phd-research-talent/news-story/96829c40f14bf32e39bc78e268ec0464#>. Begicevic, R. (2022) Graduate research students are giants upon whose shoulders universities stand. *Impact Blog*. <https://www.acgr.edu.au/impact-blog/graduate-research-students-are-giants-upon-whose-shoulders-universities-stand/>

SUPRA encourages the Accord to implement further targeted funding for recent graduates to publish their work and to refine their post-completion portfolios. This funding would not only support individuals' career growth but would also address national industry needs through encouraging directed strategic professional growth and activities.

Recommendations:

- Increase funding and support for individuals sitting between HDR student and early career researcher.

Other welfare and support issues

Disabled students/students with disability

2.1.3 ...It also shows that there has been recent positive increases in students with disability participating in higher education.³⁷ This positive increase has been due to increased accessibility to higher education as a result of moving to online learning during the pandemic, and increased reporting of mental health conditions. There is a risk that this positive increase might stall or reverse if universities don't allow ongoing hybrid learning to continue.

SUPRA strongly supports the provision of continued hybrid mode for disabled students/students with disability to maintain and increase access to higher education.

Recommendation:

- **Require all universities to provide hybrid mode to disabled students/students with disability.**

Sexual violence and harassment on campus

Immediate action: Through National Cabinet, immediately engage with state and territory governments and universities to improve university governance, particularly focusing on:

- student and staff safety

Potential consideration of:

a. developing a national student charter, in collaboration with domestic and international students, ensuring a national commitment and consistent approach to the welfare, safety and wellbeing of all students

Students should be safe while learning at university. SUPRA believes extensive work needs to be done to address sexual assault and harassment on campus. This goes beyond a national charter to the genuine investment and resourcing of behavioural and cultural change within universities, including at university accommodation.

The Accord should work towards centralising data on rates of sexual assault and harassment across universities, understanding the mechanisms universities use to reduce rates of sexual

assault and harassment, and the success, or not, of those interventions. This needs to be part of a national approach to sexual assault and harassment at universities that also includes educating and resourcing universities to undertake evidence based best practice interventions to reduce sexual assault and harassment on campus.

A key part of this is the National Student Safety Survey, which should be run regularly to track the progress or decline in student safety.

All interventions should be led by survivor organisations and informed by best practice and research about how to effectively reduce sexual assault and harassment within university spaces.

Recommendations:

- Centralise and resource data collection and information sharing about interventions universities are undertaking to reduce sexual assault and harassment on campus.
- Ensure a national approach to sexual assault and harassment at universities is appropriately resourced, informed by best practice, and led by survivor organisations.
- Regularly run the National Student Safety Survey to track rates of sexual assault and harassment experienced by students.

Purpose Built Student Accommodation

a. improving student wellbeing and safety...

Many students live in Purpose Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) in NSW. This sector is highly under-regulated. PBSAs are not covered fully by either the Residential Tenancies Act (2010) or the Boarding Houses Act (2012), and students often experience unfair conditions with no recourse.

For example, the SUPRA casework service has recently supported multiple students who have terminated their tenancy with a PBSA and have been charged both a termination fee and have been required to pay rent until the room has been filled by the provider. We believe this is doubly punitive for the student—they are effectively punished twice for breaking the contract. This arrangement also creates incentive for unscrupulous PBSAs to stretch out a penalty by failing to find a 'suitable' replacement tenant.

Additionally, many students have reported squalid conditions, waiting weeks or even months for essential repairs. Again, these students have no ability to seek mediation through NCAT.

Students have reported wait times of more than sixty days for bond refunds, even when there are no issues with the property and no deductions to be made. This is a substantial hardship, and can seriously impact students ability to secure other safe accommodation because they cannot afford the bond.

Recommendations:

- Define the NSW PBSA sector as either a residential tenancy or a boarding house-style tenancy.
- Bring the administration of these tenancies under existing NSW regulation.