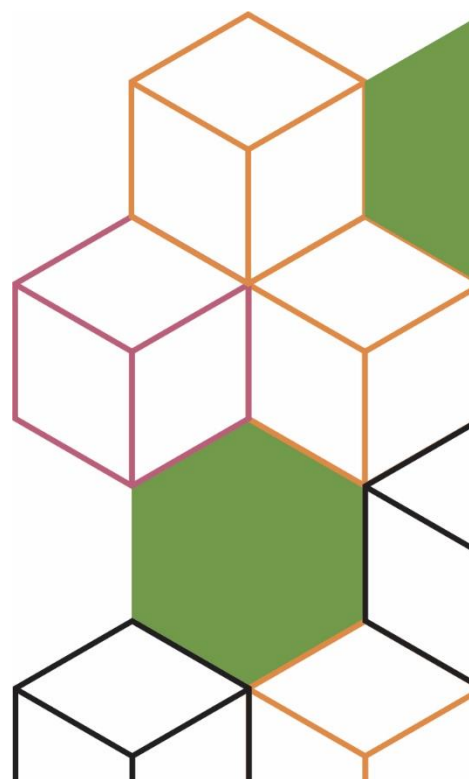


September

2023

Graduate Student
Association

**Response to the
Australian
Universities Accord
Interim Report**



Introduction

GSA welcomes the consultation opportunity for the Australian Government Department of Education *Australian Universities Accord Interim Report*¹ (the report). We acknowledge that the recommendations made in this and the final report will greatly impact graduate students at the University of Melbourne. This submission is GSA's response to the report as based on our ongoing work and consultation with graduate students. It outlines the areas of substantive agreement and disagreement and suggests measures of success which could be used to track outcomes of the recommendations.

The Graduate Student Association (GSA) is the independent representative organisation for all graduate coursework and research students at the University of Melbourne. We are led by 8 GSA Board members and 10 Representative Council members who are all elected University of Melbourne graduate students. On behalf of over 36,000 constituents, we represent graduate student interests to the University and wider community, provide student engagement events, activities, and information to the graduate student community, and support 150 affiliated graduate student groups.

GSA's vision is for inclusive, empowered graduate student communities that achieve meaningful and holistic university experiences. Our objectives are to achieve and support representation, academic support, transition to work, engaged and healthy communities, and organisational sustainability.

This submission was written on the Land of the Wurundjeri People. GSA acknowledges and pays respects to the Wurundjeri People as the traditional custodians of this land.

Executive Summary

GSA is supportive of the overall direction that the report takes in aiming to improve higher education. Areas of **substantive agreement** include:

- Measures towards equity
- Placements and work experience
- Staff and training
- Student involvement
- Supporting international student engagement
- Appropriate regulation.

We have provided breakdowns of specific measures described in the report under these areas which we agree with strongly, including how they are particularly

¹ Australian Universities Accord, *Australian Universities Accord: Interim Report*, July 19, 2023, <https://www.education.gov.au/download/16699/australian-universities-accord-interim-report/33941/document/pdf>

important to graduate students. For some areas we have also provided recommendations to best measure and strengthen the desired outcomes.

Recommendations:

1. Students should be actively involved in decision-making and consultation throughout all processes which relate to current, future, and potential students. As much as possible, co-design and co-production should be used to ensure meaningful and empowered participation.
 - a. Student organisations are well placed to provide support for these processes and should have access to a greater percentage of the Student Services and Amenities Fee to ensure support and representation for students.
 - b. Power dynamics should be accounted for and addressed to ensure student decisions and opinions are respected.
 - c. Graduate students should have specific representation to ensure their needs are met.
2. To improve equity and accessibility, online learning options should be a priority for higher education providers.
3. Student retention (especially for disadvantaged students) should be used in addition to enrolment as a measure for how well supported students are.
4. Subsidised places for international students could be offered in courses relevant to Australian needs and could be part of ensuring the integrity and accessibility of visa pathways for international students.
5. Change and advocate for change in intersecting areas where students and potential students are affected, outside of the education system. This includes welfare support payments, healthcare, and infrastructure.
 - a. In particular, support raising the rate of income support and eligibility to access income support, especially for Youth Allowance and Austudy, to be liveable and address people's needs.
 - b. Increase the Research Training Program stipend to a liveable wage.

Regarding areas of **substantive disagreement**, GSA noted the following areas where caveats, clarifications, or additions are needed:

- Within the Accord Terms of Reference there is a need to acknowledge and address intersecting issues students face.
- All actions, including immediate actions, require active and meaningful student involvement. This is not immediately clear within the report.
- GSA disagrees with the proposed funding mechanism of a levy on international student fee income due to the implication of international students having to take on extra costs. International students require additional support.
- PhD and graduate researcher supports are necessary and not recognised by the report. Specifically, increasing stipends and removing the taxation of stipends for part-time researchers.
- Valuing knowledge development through long-term research and substantive courses is needed beyond micro-credentials.

Areas of substantive agreement

Overall

GSA welcomes the overall direction the report recommends, especially in addressing key issues including higher quality more accessible higher education options. This focus on equity demonstrates a much-needed recognition of many issues that students and potential students face in accessing higher education, and the value of higher education itself.

GSA also supports a student-centred approach, noting that students should be involved throughout every stage of input and decision making through best-practice co-design and co-creation processes.

Importantly, GSA highlights the following areas of substantive agreement, where graduate students have significant need for change:

Measures towards equity

- **Supporting equity of access for people from regional, rural, remote and other suburban areas**, including:
 - Supporting transition to metropolitan areas to access higher education.
- **Putting First Nations at the heart of Australia's higher education system**, including:
 - Students, culture, knowledge, research and communities – acknowledging and addressing the systemic barriers which continue to harm First Nations students, to be led by First Nations students.
- **Encouraging students from underrepresented groups to aspire to higher education and fulfil their potential**, noting:
 - The report has a strong focus on enrolment as a measure, but students from underrepresented groups should be met with appropriate supports when they do enter higher education. GSA suggests an important measure of success is student retention as a long-term goal.
- **Providing a more flexible and adaptive approach to learning**, specifically:
 - To enhance accessibility, especially for students with disabilities and chronic illnesses, student carers, and those working whilst studying. Access to online learning options should be maintained for accessibility and flexibility.
- **Modernising the income support architecture to increase eligibility and sufficiency**:
 - The report suggests modernising and changing the income support payment arrangements, including eligibility tests around independence, part-time study and unpaid work placements. Income support payments including Youth Allowance and Austudy

must be raised to at least \$76 per day and must be indexed with wages and price increases² to ensure that they meet student's needs.

- Students undertaking graduate studies are not necessarily eligible for Youth Allowance and Austudy, meaning that many may be prevented from further study. Graduate research students are not able to access Austudy at all. Graduate research and coursework studies should not be excluded from these payments.
- **Change the Job-ready Graduates (JRG) package:**
 - GSA strongly agrees that changes are needed to the JRG, especially removing the 50% pass rule which not only causes stress but makes success at university even more difficult for those already struggling.

Placements and work experience

- **Improving Work Integrated Learning (WIL) and placements by providing participating students with better incentives and financial support, especially:**
 - For graduate students, who often must complete time-extensive placement which impacts their ability to undertake paid employment, leading to cost-of-living stress.
- **The national jobs broker system, helping students to find part-time work in their areas of study, crucially:**
 - Students should be paid appropriately for this work with their knowledge and input being valued.
- **Supporting students to undertake placements:**
 - Students must be proactively supported to undertake placements, especially those who face hardships and demands such as caring duties, and long-distance or time intensive travel.

Staff and training

- **Addressing precarious employment conditions for university staff, in particular:**
 - Noting that many university staff are also graduate students.
- **Enhancing the professional development of academic staff in teaching, especially for those newly employed to teach, especially:**
 - For graduate students who are new to teaching, acknowledging that teaching is a unique skill which requires different knowledge than just expertise in an area.
- **Developing a national, holistic policy for research training:**
 - This could be used to improve graduate researcher's experiences.

² ACOSS, "It's hell": how inadequate income support is causing harm, March 2023, https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/ACOSS-cost-of-living-report2-March-2023_web_FINAL.pdf

Student involvement

- **Exploring the potential for a student-centred, needs-based funding model that recognises the additional costs involved in teaching students from equity groups and underrepresented communities:**
 - This should be led by students through co-design and co-production methods, ensuring students are involved in all levels of decision-making. Students from equity groups and underrepresented communities should be prioritised through this process.
- **Strengthening institutional governance and empowering students, crucially:**
 - The notion of “empowering students” in this context is vague. Students and relevant staff should be actively and meaningfully involved in decision making, as all university decisions affect them in some way. There should be clear processes for how they are to be involved and collaborated with.
 - A greater percentage of the Student Services and Amenities Fee should be provided to student unions and associations to ensure the empowerment, support, and representation of students.
- **Shared stewardship in the higher education system:**
 - This is important, and the stakeholders listed include unions. Student unions and associations have a crucial role in supporting the higher education system and should be involved in system stewardship. This needs to include organisations for both undergraduate and postgraduate students to reflect the distinct needs of both cohorts, and embed post-graduate representation into the student voice.
 - Stewardship should also minimise the impact of power dynamics to ensure that students have equal and respected input.

Supporting international student engagement

- **Fostering international engagement** (including corresponding policy areas):
 - These areas are important, especially where they support international student engagement. Subsidised places for international students could be offered in courses relevant to Australian needs and could be part of ensuring the integrity and accessibility of visa pathways for international students.

Appropriate regulation

- **Ensuring tertiary education regulation, including the role of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), enables innovation in the tertiary education system:**

- This is crucial, however it must be carefully considered how TEQSA can also ensure quality and adherence to standards while encouraging accountability in the higher education sector.
- **Establishing a Higher Education Student Ombudsman:**
 - This establishment would be hugely beneficial. It would provide advocates with a clear avenue to pursue change when the university institutions are unable to provide adequate outcomes.

Areas of substantive disagreement

Need: acknowledging and addressing intersecting issues

- **The Accord Terms of Reference:**
 - Acknowledging that the terms of reference are broad, there is a need to acknowledge and ideally work toward addressing major issues faced by students including access to welfare such as income support, access to healthcare including mental health support, and the impacts of the current cost of living crisis many students and potential students are heavily impacted by.

Need: active and purposeful student involvement

- All actions, including **immediate actions**, must have strong student involvement, especially involvement in decision-making. Where possible, students should be engaged in co-design for actions taken which affect them.

Need: support for international students

- **The proposed funding mechanism of a levy on international student fee income:**
 - GSA strongly opposes a levy on international student income if this will or could impact international students themselves. International students undertaking graduate study face extremely high costs to access this education. This has potential to act as a further preventative factor to attracting international students to pursue graduate studies in Australia.
 - If international students would have the burden of extra costs due to this levy it would likely work against many of the objectives the report is working towards, including the attention needed to address industry attitudes towards hiring international students and graduates, and ensuring international students studying in areas of Australia's skills needs are supported and have opportunities for work in Australia following their studies.
 - GSA has experienced an increase in demand for material support, particularly from international students. GSA's

Healthy Breakfasts program, which provides free breakfasts to graduate students, shows that international students are in need of further support and could not support an increase in costs. Postgraduate international students were overrepresented at these breakfasts, comprising around 90% of total attendees.

Need: PhD and graduate researcher supports

- **The report does not mention the need to increase the Research Training Program (graduate researcher/ PhD) stipend:**
 - The current full-time base stipend falls below the national minimum wage by 35%^{3,4}. It does not meet student's needs and forces students to struggle with cost-of-living pressures. This is further compounded as the demands of a full-time PhD do not allow significant amounts of paid work to be taken up for most students. This is a major preventative factor in students being able to undertake long-term research.
- **The report does not mention the need to remove taxation of part-time Research Training Program stipends:**
 - GSA advocates for the removal of taxation for part-time graduate research students accessing a Research Training Program stipend. As noted above, as a full-time stipend is already well below the minimum wage, so when students doing a part-time load are still taxed on this income it can cause further financial stress. This is particularly true for PhD students doing unpaid care work or have caring responsibilities.

Need: Value knowledge development

- **The report strongly pushes for micro-credentials, potentially to the detriment of other goals in the report including improving research and building knowledge.**
 - While GSA acknowledges micro-credentials serve a purpose, an over-reliance on technical micro-credentials could undermine the value of tertiary courses. It may imply that tertiary education is purely for skills-based learning, and not based on the exploration of knowledge.

³ "Research Training Program," Australian Government Department of Education, last modified February 16, 2023, <https://www.education.gov.au/research-blockgrants/research-training-program>

⁴ "Minimum wages increase from 1 July 2023," Fair Work Ombudsman, last modified July 10, 2023, <https://www.fairwork.gov.au/newsroom/news/awr-2023>

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