



Submission to the Department of Education

Australian Universities Accord- Terms of Reference

Prepared by the Postgraduate Advocacy Service, Sydney University Postgraduate
Representative Association (SUPRA)

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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 33,737 postgraduates in 2021. SUPRA's casework and legal services handles over 2000 cases each year. SUPRA is run by a Council of 34 postgraduate students, elected by other postgraduate students enrolled at the University of Sydney.

SUPRA welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Terms of Reference for the Australian Universities Accord.

Access and Opportunity

Education, educational experience and the ability to perform to one's best ability, goes beyond the delivery of information from teacher to student. It encompasses a whole host of additional factors that shape the ability of students to access and perform well in their educational settings. This is a thread present in the Terms of Reference for the Universities Accord- for example under Access and Opportunity "new targets and reforms to support greater access and participation for students from underrepresented backgrounds (including First Nations Australians, those from low socio-economic backgrounds, people with disability, and regional and rural Australians)". This is an acknowledgment that factors beyond the delivery of education can affect a person's ability to take up educational opportunities, be able to perform within particular educational settings, or have the appropriate support to achieve in education to the best of their abilities. SUPRA would like to see this clearly expanded to include additional factors that significantly affect student welfare, including housing, finances, health and wellbeing, and racism.

International students face particular challenges while living, studying and working in Australia. SUPRA has a large cohort of international students that access our services and many of their concerns are with predatory landlords, exploitative employers, and racism. These experiences have multiple causes, that are both structural (e.g. limits on the hours international students are allowed to work) as well as cultural (the attitudes of Australians to international students from, particularly, south-east and central Asia).

These difficulties greatly affect students' educational access and ability, and should be made a clear priority in the Terms of Reference. This will allow a true understanding of factors that affect education in Australia to be considered, and addressed.

- Student Welfare should be clearly added to the Terms of Reference, this could be held under Access and Sustainability.
 - Student Welfare should include, at minimum, a consideration of housing disadvantage, financial difficulties, health and wellbeing, and structural and social racism.
 - Student Welfare should also include any other additional factors that affect educational opportunities and achievement.

Quality and Sustainability

International students make up a significant percentage of the student cohort in Australia. International students contribute greatly to Australia's economy and underpin the financial viability of much of Australia's tertiary education system. Australia's international students are also a major highway for Australia to access and retain highly skilled, educated and motivated new migrants. International students, through their studies, become embedded in Australian communities and culture. They develop attachments to people and places within Australia across the life of their degrees. Postgraduate international students, in particular, offer Australia a group of mature, educated, and motivated people, who have already contributed substantially to Australia's economy and can continue to do so post-study.

However, they also experience a range of challenges, some of which are embedded in their experience of the Australian visa system itself such as excessive charges. And others of which are unintended effects of the Australian visa system, such as the ability for employers to exploit international students through threatening their visas when a student works beyond the limit of their allowable work hours.

In reviewing the university education system, the experiences and pain points for international students should be clearly considered.

- Education and Migration should be clearly added to the Terms of Reference. This could be held under Quality and Sustainability
 - This should include international students' experiences with the migration system as well as the unintended consequences of that system.