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Contact Details:

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On behalf of:

Myself

Based in:



Foreword:

I am an Australian citizen, a graduate of Monash University and completing a PhD at Swinburne University of Technology with published work in Bioengineering. Outside of my PhD, I have been a sessional lab demonstrator (casual arrangement) for five years. My connection to higher education policy has been through my time as a student representative, including my status as Caretaker National President of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA).

I was suggested to consider submitting a separate submission as a private citizen to put forward ideas outside the remit of CAPA's representation. As a young person optimistic about change, I could not resist the opportunity to fully immerse myself in this historic moment in the higher education sector. There should also be a special acknowledgement to my supervisors, Dr Huseyin Sumer and Prof. Paul Stoddart, that fostered my academic development. It is their dedication to academic principles that inspired my development into the advocate that I am today.

My vision for transforming higher education is rooted in fundamental beliefs of university function and responsibility in the 21st century. I believe that universities are institutions dedicated to discovering and disseminating new knowledge. It is the home of intellectual curiosity in a way that is almost childish or naïve. Students that attend these institutions are there to embark on a journey of self-discovery, their lecturers being stewards that guide them. Through this process of personal growth, graduates develop 'how to think', analyse, critique, debate and formulate new ideas. This is the foundation of building innovative minds and becoming responsible citizens who understand their civil duty in a democratic society. For the reader, this conviction will reveal itself consistently throughout this submission.

I thank the University Accords committee and the Minister of Education, Jason Clare, for this opportunity to contribute to reimagining post-secondary education in Australia.

Sincerely,

Errol

The Role Of Higher Education In Australia's Future

The Accords should aim to develop an agreement between different stakeholders to reimagine a new higher education system to meet future priorities. Doing so requires an in-depth discussion about the social, cultural, and economic benefits of higher education that everyone can agree to. Unfortunately, the most prominent arguments focus on universities' economic and social impact but much less on their cultural importance to society, which is incredibly disconcerting.

The most apparent limitation Australia needs to overcome is the identity crisis of what universities are and establishing a set of contemporary values of what higher education should be. Without this understanding, all policies related to higher education, funding, accessibility, including social services for support students will be incoherent if they are not fundamentally anchored to a shared vision of purpose. Where the Accords process needs to succeed is to untangle the different priorities and expectations of stakeholders to form a cohesive vision. More importantly, it needs to promote the cultural aspect of the basis of education and research that is near absent in Australian society.

To explain the absence of culture in education and research, it is worth comparing our enthusiasm for sports. Watching or participating in sports is a culture synonymous with the Australian identity. Every country town has a football field and cricket pitch. Regional leagues exist among different age groups, and matches are often attended by local spectators watching every weekend. The government funds many of these leagues and facilities, and their economic benefit is intangible. However, we readily accept these activities' social and cultural benefits without scrutinising them with cost-benefit analysis. Compare this to our attitude towards universities, education and research is subconsciously met with suspicion. Additional funding for education must always be justified in terms of social impact, an explain to justify the economic benefit of investing in research, and always held to performance-based indicators. Imagine if the metrics of winning gold medals determined government funding towards sports won in the Olympics and Commonwealth Games. Would this be considered a fair system, or would there be public outrage? The point is that if our cultural suspicion towards higher education is the limitation, it leads to policies that apply inappropriate performance-based indicators to justify funding, which inherently pulls levers that encourage universities to game the system and behave unnaturally. We can resolve this suspicion if we fully understand what universities should be and keep them accountable to these standards.

Values and beliefs define an identity and form the basis for describing what universities are and what they should be. Universities are teaching institutions, but they distinguish themselves from schools and technical colleges from some unique values seemingly missing from Australia's classification of an Australian university under the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021 of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011. The Threshold Standards describe the activities needed at an institution to be classified as a university and the values it is to uphold as a "commitment to freedom of speech and academic freedom". That is perhaps a commitment to liberationism, but it falls short critically short of describing an academic culture that embraces curiosity-driven research and teaching as an academic mission. It is disappointing because it highlights all the surface-level characteristics of universities but fails to capture the essence and culture of what makes the university identity unique from other educational institutions. Whilst this may seem like a trivial criticism of wording, I think it is exemplary of imitation over substance which we must focus on addressing future challenges. Where this phenomenon of imitation of substance is seen in real-world examples is how bureaucracy and management have overridden the research culture at some institutions.

I have adopted a phrase to describe the issue often seen at universities: the tail often wags the dog at universities and not the other way around. As a university, activities around pursuing and sharing new knowledge should be its core function and culture because that is the distinguishing feature of universities from other types of learning institutes. Therefore, it should be expected that management and administration seek to accommodate the needs of this core function than attempting to regulate and hinder it, which is quite frequently the case, thus tail wagging the dog.

One example is the policies around locking laboratory access over public holidays, which is often a decision made by management that does not recognise or acknowledge the demands of research. If research culture were at the heart of the university's academic mission, laboratories would unquestionably remain open all year round without requiring special permission over public holidays. Just as we are not suspicious about why flying is a natural function of most birds, it seems asinine that academics must explain and seek permission to perform their natural function of conducting research. Moreover, whilst I acknowledge this seems like a minor complaint, it is a decent example of management culture overtaking and regulating the university's core function and research culture. There are countless other examples where universities are seemingly less like an institution for developing and sharing new knowledge and more like a place where research is a relegated side quest of an

institution's function needs to accommodate the priorities of management and administration.

Thus, if universities fully embraced academic values above the management culture, perhaps even held to a creed of academic curiosity for the public good and to serve the global common good above all else, they could shed their image as greedy corporate entities and develop a new bond with our society.

Importance of Universities to a healthy democracy

Ideals are a vital part of building a society, and it seems that the importance of universities to our democracy is often overlooked in these discussions. Universities function as a place of debate and offer a third voice in public discourses essential to a free and democratic society. Throughout this document, references will be made highlighting that investments into education are more than subsidising someone's private benefit; it is an investment into ensuring an educated population essential to maintaining a healthy democratic society that ultimately benefits everyone.

Diverse Missions of Australian higher education providers

Based on an earlier explanation of the university identity, I would claim the academic mission of all universities is to pursue new knowledge and understanding to serve the global common good. The diversity is only in the context of the community they serve. However, their values and beliefs should remain the same. In a report I had put together on behalf of CAPA on regional universities, I noted distinguishing features of regional universities that are often overlooked for federal funding when performance-based indicators are heavily geared towards social impact at a national scale than benefits to local communities. Although a few suggestions were made in that submission, I also acknowledge that creating a truly equitable system that acknowledges local benefits from federal funding is difficult. However, I believe that state and local governments should do their part to increase their contribution to funding institutions such as regional universities rather than leave all the burden on the federal government. The added benefit of state and local government involvement also ensures that state governments have a stake in how universities operate and behave within the local community.

Long-term targets for 2030 to 2040

Increasing accessibility has been the cornerstone of the Dawkins reform by introducing the HECS system. Whilst I agree that this rationale was applicable in the 1980s, we need to acknowledge the limitation to this proposition of accessibility if there are more places than

there is interest to study. For instance, the Minister's announcement for 20,000 Commonwealth Supported Places for lower SES students for 2023 was only half filled with 9,850 positions. Based on this outcome, we have reached a threshold within our population where the participation cost of pursuing higher education is too great to increase participation further. Reducing the opportunity cost, such as addressing the cost of living by improving social service support and decreasing student debt, may become a more practical approach to increasing accessibility.

Thus, a long-term objective could be to continue promoting accessibility to both vocational and higher education by reducing the opportunity cost of pursuing higher education. The barriers that could be addressed include the runaway student debt that is slowly taking longer for graduates to pay off, which could be addressed by increasing government contribution to CSP and increasing accessibility and payment amount of youth allowance, Austudy and ABSTUDY. Progressive increases in student social support and increasing government contribution to CSP places in tandem over the next 20 to 30 years would be crucial in encouraging social mobility.

Challenges And Opportunities For Australia

Challenges for 2030 to 2040

The most significant challenge we will likely need to address is the effect of energy prices on our cost of living, how unaffordable home ownership is becoming in Australia, correcting our higher education system, early childhood education and mental health. These issues were chosen because I believe these areas will improve overall happiness and satisfaction in our society and provide people with the financial freedom to maintain a healthy democracy.

Our economic vulnerability to gas and oil prices due to international conflicts should be taken seriously. Besides criticism of price gouging by some of these businesses, introducing regulations would only serve as a temporary measure because absolute freedom with energy would require diverse energy sources to power our economy. Building an energy infrastructure with formidable energy storage capacity would be the most effective way of keeping energy companies honest with their prices.

Affordable housing is becoming increasingly unattainable in parts of Australia. I believe Australia could focus more on engineering, design and materials research to optimise the space to create desirable apartments suitable for raising a family. Whilst I recognise the Australian dream is to own land and a home, Australia is a country built on migration; its very possible that many would be satisfied with a large apartment that is spacious, eco-friendly,

using higher quality material for insulation with double glazed windows (not standard in Australia) to help reduce energy consumption. Furthermore, the logistics required to move building materials to build individual homes and the cost of infrastructure planning would be exponential as our cities grow. Therefore, we should take some inspiration from European countries and even Asian countries like Singapore on how they develop high-quality public housing apartments.

I will briefly mention the corporatisation of public universities in this section, as it will be repeated numerous times in other sections. The managerial culture at universities often diminishes the academic culture of our public institutions, which consequently means that universities are not necessarily providing the best quality education to our society. It is my view, but also shared by many other academics, that the university governance of all universities is in dire need of reform. Universities must return to a collegiate environment and be held accountable to our communities that pay for their operations. Funding for universities should not be from the exploitation of international students, which will be discussed later. Instead, state governments should return to actively funding universities in partnership with the federal government instead of being silent beneficiaries. Finally, our public universities must be adequately funded by a transparent and progressive tax system to prevent universities from behaving in ways that undermine academic values by pursuing corporate interests.

More research and an emphasis on early childhood education is what I believe is the most effective way of tackling inequality. As someone diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder later in life, I can only imagine my life if I had been diagnosed earlier and had the support needed to succeed. At the same time, my journey led me to undertake a PhD. However, the numerous unsettling challenges I had to overcome significantly deteriorated my mental health. If we can fully understand how we differ in how we will behave and learn, perhaps mental health will someday become a less prevalent issue. I can speak from experience that whilst I have made some achievements throughout my life, it came at the expense of my mental health, affecting my overall productivity, performance and ability to give back to society.

On evolving institutions and the needs of society

I believe that the way institutions need to evolve, or if new types of universities were to emerge, they could blend vocational learning with the principle philosophies of traditional academia. I speak of this more in a later section on vocational education. However, the ideals of blending

these ideas could be adopted in a new type of university that embraces learning through more tactile approaches. Whilst this could be a feasible approach, our society must shed away its old prejudices of vocational education as a stream for the less academically inclined.

Challenges and Opportunities for the higher education system

Reforms for higher quality education

The needed reforms must allow universities to revert to prioritising academic interests before commercial interests. Many universities are far too focused on marketing their prestige through university rankings or employability. In the short term, it is often to develop technical skills and not the crucial soft skills that will be needed. As will be mentioned later, the emergence of ChatGPT and other similar AI technologies will challenge universities to rethink how students should be assessed. Future graduates must demonstrate value by applying their skills and knowledge in innovative ways that AI cannot easily substitute. Furthermore, all disciplines will need a greater emphasis on critical thinking skills, which will be needed in the future for scrutinising AI-generated information.

Fundamentally we need to revisit how we view higher education and move away from the utilitarian view that a university qualification is about getting into a better-paid career. It is indeed one of the outcomes of quality education. However, it should not be the primary driving force that defines its purpose to society because the risks of doing so will distort the academic culture of universities.

Some reforms previously mentioned include smaller class sizes to allow for greater focus on the needs of individual students, especially those with learning difficulties and absorb information differently. From the perspective of someone neurodiverse and the first-in family to attend university on campus, I struggled with coursework early on with the one size fits all approach to education. The feeling of unpreparedness that often lingered from seemingly unspoken expectations often reminded me that I did not belong. Nevertheless, some would summarise my journey as a positive outcome and evidence to suggest that the existing system works. However, I would argue that along the way, the support from selfless parenting, mentorship and the kindest and most understanding PhD supervisors a student could hope for made all the difference. Community support of this nature is not available to everyone. This is where the system can improve significantly to allow others without such community support to have the same opportunities as I did.

I often ask the undergraduate students in my classes about the most significant challenges they currently face at university, and their response is the cost of living. The cost of relocating closer to campus is often compromised by more time commuting with public transport, which significantly reduces the hours in a day they have available to study or work. After long days of classes to reduce the times they need to travel a week, students in my class are often exhausted and unable to focus and fully engage with their learning. Furthermore, I found that my students are often knowledgeable about unit content but are sometimes less proficient with unpacking the assessment question to receive full marks for their answers. Sometimes they feel overwhelmed by the content they absorb to perform academically. These are examples of bright young people who have worked hard to learn the unit content but have effective study methods to retain knowledge. The ability to break down complex problems into smaller manageable pieces was a skill most students had developed during my undergraduate studies at a Group of Eight University. After spending additional unpaid hours guiding individual students over weeks, visible improvements in their abilities and confidence suggest that some of these inequalities can be addressed. If more contact hours were available to support individual students and more explicit attempts to help them develop learning skills (than pushing more teaching content), there would be significantly less inequality among university graduates.

Meeting Australia's Knowledge and skills needs

Align with the changing needs of the economy and society

There needs to be a greater emphasis on attrition within professions where the heart of the issue exists. Consider the shortage of teachers and nurses in our current situation is at least partly attributed to these occupations' poor working conditions. If we increase the number of graduates moving into these professions without improving their working conditions, we would effectively send people into career 'meat grinders' where the sector struggles to keep the attrition rate below the recruitment rate. Such a system would be utterly unsustainable because it is highly vulnerable to societal disruptions to training (i.e. pandemics), which can immediately cause a shortage in the sector and loss of or inability to develop expertise in the profession due to the attrition rate.

In my view, we need to ensure students can study courses they are passionate about to ensure they succeed in a career that most suits them. Their passion and motivation are essential to productivity and career progression, contributing to a sense of personal accomplishment and

happiness that benefits society. The current policy direction is seemingly geared towards pushing and pulling people towards careers on an economic basis with seemingly very little consideration of the human factor that seems crucial for motivation, productivity and happiness, which everyone wants. Pursuing a career that allows for personal satisfaction is increasingly limited to the privileged in our society. It is seemingly an inequality that today's society is willing to accept. However, it is worth questioning whether the consequences of such inequality currently present themselves through high attrition rates in some careers and the lack of productivity due to the loss of motivation.

These shortages could be addressed by improving the prospects of these career paths with better remuneration, improving work conditions and using technology to reduce the administrative burden on staff. Much like universities, when we remove the human factor in these policies and apply tangible cost-cutting measures, our society becomes increasingly hostile to people and reduces overall job satisfaction and productivity. We must move policymaking away from treating people as products shipped through a pipeline.

Accessibility and Demand for Higher Education

Increasing access to higher education has always been the argument for popular higher education policies, but is it ever discussed what success looks like for accessibility? Are the goals around accessibility for every Australian citizen to have a university qualification, or is the policy battle on accessibility won far before this? One perspective is that the argument around providing enough accessibility through more CSP places might have run its course if only half of the 20,000 CSPs designated specifically to lower SES groups have been filled. Two additional points why I believe the accessibility issue is no longer focus on providing enough CSP places because (1) a university qualification should not be a measure of social equality or mobility and (2) society does not need an entire population with a university education in order to maintain a healthy democratic society.

It is an old-fashioned belief that everyone with a university qualification will live more fulfilling lives and enjoy a better career. These ideas are a remnant from when university places were status symbols of privileged individuals, which is no longer the case. The rarity of university graduates has driven down significantly, where the median salary of an undergraduate still hovers at ~\$65,000 per annum comparatively to some vocational career paths that can earn significantly more. Thus, some could argue that the social divide within our society may not be between the haves and have-nots with university qualifications. Instead, I see a new social divide of privilege developing within the university graduate population. Everyone may have

university qualifications, but the degrees at different institutions and experience can vastly differ, whereby the career opportunities and social mobility among graduates are not the same.

To explain this idea, I would refer to privileged individuals as those born into having exclusive access to community support that can provide direct financial support and exposure to broader social connections, including mentorship that can offer shared experiences with invaluable insights. This support stretches beyond helping individuals access higher education; instead, it shifts the dial on inequality within the competitive university system. Those with access to this privilege are less time-poor, meaning they may not need to work as much for an income allowing more time to be invested into studying and performing better academically. They also have more time to attend extracurricular events to develop their professional networks that translate to future career opportunities, ultimately differentiating them from their graduate peers. Those of lower SES that may also be carers are often time-poor compared to what has been described, which is where inequality exists.

In the previous section, I referred to my personal experiences and the inequality that comes with shared experiences. How much insight prepares some students with the necessary learning skills to succeed academically is often not accessible to less privileged students. Thus, it is debatable whether having a university qualification is a fair determinant of wealth and privilege because I have observed a new division of inequality developing among the university graduate population. These inequalities could be addressed with reforms that increase student payments to allow students to engage with their education and improve the teacher-to-student ratio to ensure that students needing additional guidance receive it.

My other argument for focusing on quality over accessibility is to recognise how the indirect benefits of universities disperse throughout our society. An overemphasis on the private benefits of a university qualification grossly overshadows the indirect social benefit of an educated population. I believe an educated population is needed to ensure a healthy democratic society; similar to vaccination regimes, herd immunity is often achieved long before a 100% vaccinated population. Likewise, I believe there is plenty of room for people to pursue a healthy career within our society that benefits from higher education without necessarily attending university.

Life-long learning

Life-long learning is a detestable buzzword that seems like an idea driven by capitalism to encourage students to become returning customers of universities. The marketing obsession

with this phrase is made out as a nuanced approach to education in this manner, but this is entirely untrue. Quotes like “You never stop learning” or “Learning is a continuous journey.” have always existed. In my opinion, where our education has slowly lost its way is in developing critical thinking skills that allow self-guided learning. Self-guided learning is essential to skill development, allowing for ‘life-long learning’ without needing additional formal education or micro-credentialing

Today’s society has seemingly stigmatised learning on the job and instead prefer to verify ‘job readiness’ through formal qualifications and micro-credentials. It’s ironic how such high expectations come from employers that seemingly play no part in funding our higher education system but are happy to make demands of what they want. There is an old-school yard term we used back in the day called being a scab. Sadly part of this can be attributed to how university degrees have devalued themselves by not equipping graduates to develop the skills of self-guided learning. Fundamentally I believe that if we want a society that embraces some interpretation of lifelong learning culture. Universities must return to the basics, develop critical thinking skills, and nurture the ideals around self-guided learning because life-long learning and micro-credentialing are nonsense marketing gimmicks.

Connection between the vocational education and training and higher education systems

We must recognise that the traditional methods of educating and assessing students were not optimal methods of learning but optimal for administrative convenience to deliver education and assessments to a large volume of students. Today we recognise there are many different ways people learn, and the one size fits all approach to education will not allow us to benefit from the diversity of people in our population. In this section, I propose a few ideas that will be critical for harnessing the full benefits of diversity.

I believe that, as early as possible, schools need to incorporate more tactile learning into their curriculum to allow all students to succeed. Before continuing, I want to correct a prejudicial stereotype that tactile learners are those best suited to vocational education and trade. That misconception is based on traditional education of assessments and exams that inherently filtered out students into a trade if they could not cope with the particular way education was taught. As a tactile learner, I was just able to scrap through the traditional system to eventually reach a PhD where I could fully exercise my abilities since a PhD is, in fact, quite hands-on. Therefore, I advocate a dual education pathway in that individuals can crossover to a parallel alternative stream.

An example could be splitting a student cohort after year 10 into a traditional academic stream (year 11 and 12) and a vocational stream. However, the vocational stream should not be treated as a pathway to developing skills for a trade career; it should include a tactile curriculum for particular STEM education. Students undertaking a vocational stream could receive an ATAR score based on their performance as a direct path into university. Similarly, tertiary education could be overhauled to bridge certificates 1-4 towards prior learning towards a two-year associate's degree. Likewise, an associate's degree could make up for the first year of a relevant bachelor's degree.

The critical aspect I would be most concerned over is ensuring that bridging vocational education into a bachelor's degree does not reduce the academic standards of a university degree for developing critical thinking skills. However, in my view and based on personal experience, critical thinking skills can be developed in a vocational context as long as there is an opportunity to reflect upon what has been done and why a particular task was performed in a certain way. This provides a philosophical inquiry into vocational activities and effectively what PhD students have to do to justify a rational approach to their experimental design, so why isn't this something practiced in vocational education? I would press this point further with some students accepted into a PhD program based on academic performance but struggle because 'they aren't meant for research'. Academic achievements alone are not a perfect indicator because research requires applying knowledge to situations that can be pretty hands-on. This suggests that a vocational approach to a PhD program could be feasible if the pathway works towards the philosophical understanding of developing new knowledge whilst developing vocational skills.

A System That Delivers New Knowledge, Innovation And Capability

Developing a research culture in Australia

Leading up to writing a few submissions to the ARC review panel, I investigated how several research agencies overseas compared to the ARC. To my surprise, my findings indicated that Australia did not legislate ideas around research culture for the ARC compared to research agencies of other countries. My realisation came from identifying the generic purposes of ARC as stated in the *Australian Research Council Act 2001*. It was generic to the extent that I could replace the word 'research' with 'charity' and easily repurpose the Act entirely. At that moment, I realised that our Federal Parliament had not passed a mandate through a bill to have our national research agency foster a research culture. I hope that through this Accord,

the government of the day will realise the significance of this oversight and take the appropriate steps to help foster a healthy research culture for Australia.

Amending the *Australian Research Council Act 2001* would be the first positive step to renewing and invigorating a new chapter of Australian research to set the tone for developing a research culture. Similar to legislation found overseas, our research agency needs to emphasise the importance of developing new knowledge for social, cultural and economic benefit. It must capture the essence of curiosity-driven research by promoting and fostering academic values. I believe these values determine certainty, and certainty develops trust, which is essential for research partnerships with communities and industry.

Reforms to promote research excellence

The reforms needed at Australian research institutions allow academic values to be the main driving force of its operations and do away with imperfect performance-based indicators like university rankings, citations and publication records. When funding is based on performance indicators and vicious competition amongst universities, academic values and the true purpose of universities will become the secondary focus to keepings performance indicator numbers high. Layers upon layers of performance-based funding have prevented universities from performing properly. However, if future reforms allowed universities to focus on their true purpose to society, far fewer regulatory policies may be needed for universities to perform their original function.

Improving pathways for HDRs

The pathway to a research career can extend from schooling to university. However, this section focuses on research degrees and early career research (ECR). Deciding to undertake a research degree can be an exciting prospect for many students, especially the first in their families to have such an opportunity as mine. Those offered a PhD stipend to undertake a PhD, and this is vindication for years of hard work not just to the individual but also to their family. I can say that the opportunity was certainly rewarding for my family, which had supported me for years growing up. So it is disappointing to see how PhD students are generally perceived as self-victimised citizens for undertaking a PhD and therefore unworthy of sympathy when exploited by the system, mistreated by institutions and paid below the poverty line.

For some context, I am a first-generation migrant who came to Australia with my family without any extended family for support. I attended public schools, the first-in family to attend university on campus and the first in my family to pursue a career in science. Should I be

blamed for self-victimisation for being the first to undertake a PhD degree with a scholarship and making my family proud? Is it reasonable to assume I should have known the sacrifices and burdens I would experience for undertaking this degree? Should I have let my family down and passed on the scholarship opportunity? If the answer was no to any or all of these questions, I put forward; I would then ask why the higher degree by research policies in Australia seem to victim-blame individuals like myself for the choices and circumstances we find ourselves in.

For someone who earned his way through education and now works in the higher education policy space, I can say the most asinine part of higher education policy is that sympathy seems to be given to those who cannot or have not chosen to enrol on the university. However, once you are in the system, you are booted in the rear for being privileged despite the struggles you may have overcome, and injustices to you are just collateral damage. Perhaps there are political reasons for this, but it isn't pleasant to research students that undertake real work in research for the good of society but are essentially told to suck eggs when concerns are raised about being paid below the poverty line.

The Problems with Research Training in Australia

The introduction of the Research Training Program (RTP) through the *Commonwealth Scholarships Guidelines (Research) 2017* and I've studied how this policy has affected PhD programs nationwide since 2018. My calling to become a student representative was precisely because of concern in this policy space. To briefly summarise the trends and effects in PhD programs since the introduction of the RTP system, I note the following:

1. Significantly increase the number of PhD recruited
2. Increased pressure for PhDs to finish in 3 years despite having up to 4 years to complete
3. Fewer 6-month stipend scholarship extensions that would increase stipend duration from 3 years to 3.5 years.

Unfortunately, each of these reasons is driven by financial motivations that do not act in the interest of research students, and I will attempt to describe some of the consequences of these actions.

The RTP block grant (~\$967 mill) is distributed between universities based on performance-based metrics of research income and the number of PhD graduates over two years. RTP share is divided proportionately relative to the performance of other institutions over two years prior. For example, 2023's RTP block grants are distributed based on the performance

(research income and the number of PhD completions) from 2020 and 2021. Research income and PhD completions weigh 50% each into these metrics. Thus if a university can increase the number of PhD completions, they can easily increase their share of RTP funding in later years. The grotesque nature of using PhD completions as part of a performance-based indicator distorts and overtakes academic motivations to train more PhD students because the goal is to increase the number of PhD completions. I have seen the consequences of the rapid expansion of PhD enrolments without improving infrastructure to support the increased cohort size. For example, a shortage of PhD office space would leave many new PhD students to use temporary hotdesks for months into their PhD. There are stories of how universities have tried to create more desk space by monitoring the desk usage of individual students to determine whether they use their desks enough or if they should allocate their desks to a new student. The fact that universities have reduced themselves to monitoring their students' movements like a police state is appalling and naturally lowers a student's overall PhD experience.

The increased emphasis on completing a PhD in 3 years than in the average 3.5 to 4 years relates to the previous point of managing the cohort capacity. Increasing the completion rate allows more students to flow through the system without increasing capacity. Furthermore, universities are only paid after a PhD student graduates. Shortening a PhD reduces the overhead cost of keeping them enrolled, and the sooner they can receive money to fund more research students. Unfortunately, this entire scheme takes little consideration of the academic integrity of a PhD thesis and instead focuses on optimising the RTP funding.

The final point is reducing the frequency of granting PhD students 6-month stipend extensions to 3.5 years of stipend. Essentially denying 6-month extension to six students will create sufficient funds to fund a 7th PhD student. Doing so will allow a 15% increase in PhD students enrolled with a stipend with the same funds available. The other reason for denying PhD students extensions is to use financial pressure to motivate students to finish sooner than provide them with a stipend for up to the full 4 years of their PhD.

Ultimately the reasons stated take little consideration for the well-being of PhD students and are heavily influenced by the metrics of the RTP system. Applying financial pressure on PhD students as a strategy to have them complete more quickly is unethical, and increasing the number of PhD enrolled without being able to support them properly is equally unethical and unfair to students. Thus, I've considered significant changes that will hopefully improve the conditions of PhD students.

Reimagining the Status of HDRs

I want to bring the Accord panel's attention to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) *Frascati Manual 2015: Guidelines for Collecting and Reporting Data on Research and Experimental Development*¹ which describes the activities undertaken by the PhD as classified as work. It clear states the following:

Research and experimental development (R&D) comprise creative and systematic work undertaken in order to increase the stock of knowledge – including knowledge of humankind, culture and society – and to devise new applications of available knowledge.

The term R&D covers three activities: basic research, applied research and experimental development.

1. Basic Research
2. Applied Research
3. Experimental Development

General exclusions

Reference to the Frascati Manual should be made for detailed analysis of exclusions, but general exclusions to highlight are:

- education and training other than PhD research
- general purpose data collection (such as recording weather statistics), routine testing and analysis of materials, components, products, processes, etc.
- feasibility studies
- policy-related studies
- phase IV of clinical trials (unless they result in a further scientific or technological advance).

Based on this definition and OECD standards, the activities undertaken in a PhD are classified as work and should be remunerated at a taxable rate comparable to an employee-level A

academic. A PhD would be treated as an apprenticeship to become an academic researcher. Whilst CAPA's legacy has been synonymous with lobbying against the taxation of PhD stipends, I believe that if stipends remain at the lowest possible levels as it currently does at quite a few universities, then perhaps PhD students are better off with a taxable salary that is covered by employment laws.

Furthermore, this would bring consistency to the tax arrangement between full-time and part-time research students, where part-time stipends are not tax exempted. This policy already discriminates against any PhD students who are often enrolled part-time, regional students, and first nation students or need to support young families, have carer responsibilities or manage a disability. Thus, increasing PhD students' income and taxing both full-time and part-time makes logical sense.

Transitioning from PhD to Early Career Researchers

As a PhD student who has worked on policies in this area, I have a unique position to understand how the existing system works and how to forge a unique pathway into a research career. However, for most, the mainstream pathways after graduating with a PhD are seemingly filled with uncertainty and precarious work. Part of the issue is that most prospective PhD students idealise a research career from their interactions with the academics that taught them during their undergraduate degree. Some are often unaware of the hardships ahead of a PhD; others, even made aware, cannot fathom the hardship until they are in the system. Speaking from personal experience, I was not caught entirely unaware with a lecturer once giving me his candid view of what our career prospects were at a university. My dad's former classmate passed on some shared experience writing research grants every year as the primary reason she changed career paths. Despite these warning signs, it still seems quite unlikely to fully understand what these warning signs are until we experience the system first-hand. For example, many of us assume that a PhD would have been an easy 32-40 hour a week commitment that leaves plenty of time for other employment or relaxation. However, until we are engaged in the system, we often do not realise the mental and emotional strain a PhD has on an individual, which turns a 32-40 hour week into a 50 or more hour work week. We do not imagine wage theft and years under a fixed-term contract as what awaits us when we graduate. Instead, we miniaturise the warning signs because we have been presented with an exclusive opportunity to do what nobody in our family has had the opportunity to do before. Nevertheless, perhaps the most important piece of advice I never

received, and most do not, is that PhD scholarships could be much more abundant than we think. Not all opportunities are equal, and sometimes waiting for an ideal PhD opportunity is better than grabbing the first opportunity is always ideal, which I will explain in my next point.

Most prospective students are unaware that a research career can be catapulted or handicapped starting from the PhD opportunity they accept. Several factors play a part in this starting with the reputation and experience of the supervisor in both their research field and within the campus community open new networking opportunities. Where all research students typically receive a total of ~\$3000 HDR support fund for the entire duration of their candidature to cover the cost of their research, better-resourced supervisors will often contribute additional funds to their student's research which can reduce repetitive work (thus reducing workload) and fund research experiments that would typically be too costly to perform with the HDR support fund alone. Being part of a cooperative research group can also provide a sense of comradery with other PhD students and academics in collaborations can also be highly beneficial to develop a broad range of skills and secondary authorship to publications that a student enrolled on a supervisory team working alone would not necessarily be able to experience. Finally, students who can develop genuinely positive rapport with their supervisors will benefit more from the professional relationship. These factors can easily be the difference between completion with 1 or 2 publications and 5 to 6 publications during their PhD with the network connection for an immediate transition into a postdoctoral research position. All of these points I have made are more likely to be known by prospective students with the time to engage with academics and family to understand how to navigate the system to ensure the highest quality outcome. In later sections, I will refer to this as a form of privilege that those first-in-family had to work a job and did not have time to engage in this kind of prior research. Ultimately, one form of inequality does translate into the types of PhD projects students end up in and their ECR trajectory after graduation.

As a result of being privileged to information, students will complete their PhD with varying publication achievements. Those that can publish multiple papers are more likely to find a postdoctoral position, irrespective of networking conferences or through their supervisors. The appeal comes from their publication strength, which can earn an ARC ECR research grant more easily. Those with a less impressive publication record may instead need to seek to leverage their networks to find senior academics with funding to take them on for a postdoctoral position, choose to work as a research assistant, find work in industry or work precarious fix-term contracts with a university whilst waiting for a permanent position to become available. In any case, the publication record of an ECR may not reflect the individual's

ability but the advice they received (or not received) when deciding which PhD program to accept. The most disappointing part of the current system is that the road to recovery can be uncertain once you are behind in your publication strength.

The most intriguing aspect of my higher education journey is that we have been selected based on academic performance in coursework, which becomes a key selection criterion for a research degree. However, besides developing the ability to apply academic knowledge to practical research, PhD candidates are suddenly expected to develop networking skills to communicate their ideas better and develop professional relationships. These valuable skills were not developed during our undergraduate degrees, nor were they expected of us. As someone diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, some human interactions are inherently unnatural to me, and the realisation that I needed to develop these skills rapidly to land a postdoctoral position someday was incredibly stressful. Perhaps I could have accessed better advice early in life and found specific support needed for individuals such as myself. However, I can honestly say the system was particularly cumbersome to those that do not fit a particular mould, in my case, someone that cognitively different from most.

In practical recommendations that could improve the research pathway, we can better prepare PhD students to understand their decisions and the disadvantages they may face compared to their peers. We cannot control how much support supervisors can or should provide students. However, perhaps through legislation, we can increase to ensure each PhD student receives a fair amount of HDR support funds for their candidature. Suppose each PhD student receives, for example, an annual top-up of \$1000-2000 each year on top of their existing HDR support fund; this will likely address the under-resourcing issue that many less fortunate students face.

Creating Opportunities for Australians

Redefining Policies Around Accessibility

As previously outlined in an earlier section on *Accessibility and Demand for Higher Education*, the focus of opportunity creation should be improving the pathways into vocational education and reducing participation costs. The stigma around vocational education as a pathway for the less academically inclined is a bias developed from a rigid academic selection process that benefited those able to learn and memorise information in a particular way. If we are genuine about embracing diversity, our education system must discard this dogmatic view of vocation and tactile learners as less academically gifted. I would again refer to the previous

section on vocational education on how to rectify this but focus this section instead on reducing the cost of pursuing higher education.

Improving early-childhood education in public schools is likely one of the most important aspects of improving accessibility by preparing students with the necessary life skills to cope with the new experiences of navigating the higher education system and building a professional career. Those that attend private education or have family members that have been through the higher education system often provide shared experiences that provide some assurance and support to future students. Our education system needs to evolve to ensure a functional state support system to guide those not born with such community support already in place.

Where state-based support can provide equity to the disadvantaged is to improve accessibility to welfare payments (as well as increasing payments to a livable amount) to help manage work-life balance. Developing or improving mentorship programs at schools and universities so students can benefit from the lived experience of others before them, which may include coping with academic stresses, the support available and planning a career pathway. This will help alleviate the stresses most students unfamiliar with the higher education system face. Uncertainty is one of the significant stressors that can affect academic performance and as a deterrent to pursuing further education. Thus, we need to consider more personalised support and mentorship for all students to normalise the education experience and rely less on the community support individuals are born with to improve accessibility.

Alleviating cost of living pressures

As the cost of living pressures continue to increase, the accessibility issue is less about whether enough CSP places exist and more about whether pursuing higher education is affordable. The biggest issue I've seen in this policy area is the perception that higher education provides a personal benefit to an individual. Any support we provide them is a generous act expected to be paid back through student debt and taxes. It may sound like a reasonable argument, but the economic rationalism of this approach has significant limitations because it places a quantitative limit on how much support the state would sponsor for students based on the projected return they will receive later as taxpayers. If the monetary return on investment is low, then the amount of financial support will remain low even if it is irrationally below livable income, and I believe that is the problem that we currently face. When student fees are consistently increasing, the median wages of graduates stagnate at a mere \$65,000, which suggests they are not much better off; it makes increasing support

payments to students today challenging to justify from an accounting perspective. So how can we rationalise further support to improve accessibility that will both rationalise increasing student payments and see beyond the monetary return on investments? We must embrace specific values that are seemingly forgotten due to economic rationalism. That is, the ability to access higher education is a civic right of all citizens, and it is our civic duty of all citizens to fund these opportunities through a progressive tax system. Doing so will rationalise investing in supporting those undertaking education as an essential investment into a healthy and functional democracy. Whilst some may argue that it is inherently unfair that some individuals will be paying for the private benefits of others, I would argue that the most egalitarian societies in the world are also societies with a high population of educated individuals funded by the state. Thus, funding a sustainable higher education through a progressive tax system should be accepted as an essential part of the social contract of participating in our society because it ensures the maintenance of a fair and democratic society.

Regarding policy reforms to address the cost of participation, we need to expand Austudy to all postgraduate and research students. The current arrangement for Austudy is that eligibility is only for students undertaking a postgraduate degree that is proven to be the shortest pathway to a professional career. This policy fails to recognise that the workforce has been increasingly oversaturated with individuals with undergraduate qualifications. Hence, whilst an undergraduate qualification is a minimum requirement for a particular professional career, a postgraduate degree is becoming increasingly necessary to remain competitive in the employment market.

Specifically on research students, I have been vocal that only about 50% of PhD students receive a stipend to undertake research. For those fortunate to receive a stipend, some receive the legislated minimum of \$29,863 per annum, which remains below the poverty line. Whilst most universities have increased their stipend rates to ~\$32,000 per annum, many still have kept their stipend rate at the lowest possible amount. Nevertheless, I believe PhDs should be remunerated at a rate reflective of a level A academic in recognition of their research work as recognised by the *OECD Frascati Manual 2015: Guidelines for Collecting and Reporting Data on Research and Experimental Development*. Doing so will reclassify PhD students as employees with livable but taxable income. This will come with the added benefit of greater flexibility for students that need time off to raise their families and allow them access to government initiatives such as paid parental leave, which PhD students are currently not eligible to as students. This idea is worth considering in light of new employment arrangements I have seen

universities trying to implement exclusively for PhD students with fixed-term teaching contracts.

I have heard from colleagues about a teaching PhD Scholarship being presented in the University of Sydney Enterprise Bargaining Agreement. The conditions include a .2 FTE at a rate of a level A academic for teaching up to six tutorials, including marking and admin, for \$19,000 per annum (p.a). Whilst this does increase accessibility, especially to those without a PhD stipend, it is highly exploitative because underpayment for marking and administrative work is often the common source of wage theft. Also, the arrangement conditions prevent a student under this work agreement from being allowed any further teaching opportunities at the University of Sydney or any other university. My concern with such an arrangement is that universities will offer such teaching scholarships to students over PhD stipend scholarships, of which universities will essentially get level A employees at .2 FTE teaching and .8 FTE research but pay them at a rate that is below minimum wage. Thus, it is my view that if the OECD already classifies the activities of PhDs as work and thus taxable income, and if universities are willing to remunerate them as level A academics, then we should pay PhD students a taxable income of .8 FTE at the rate level A academics.

Governance, accountability and community

Governance Structures

The privilege of institutional autonomy universities enjoys as public institutions have been questioned after years of reported unethical management practices, exploitation of international students and wage theft. Traditionally, these privileges were granted to ensure universities could enjoy the academic freedom of pursuing new knowledge without political interference. However, some will argue that as universities dilute their academics and culture, straying from their traditional roots, many in the sector (including myself) have called for reforms to university governance to ensure universities are held accountable for their actions.

The argument for significant governance reforms is that the existing governance structures of most universities are insular and ineffective at ensuring institutional accountability to the general public. Such statements are supported by the laundry list of controversies universities have been embroiled in, including unethical management practices, exploitation of international students and wage theft. If we are to rectify these issues, universities will likely need to be cleansed top-down of the over-corporatised culture that currently runs these public institutions.

One of the most critical issues that must be addressed in university governance reforms is removing the university council's insular structure. Whilst there is a genuine need for expertise on the university council to ensure the institution is financially sustainable and responsible, the reality is that this rhetoric has been taken to extremes. The expertise required on the council extends beyond financial sustainability; it also needs experts on academic values and insights into the sentiment of the university and local community needs and wants. Where universities have failed to engage and understand the needs of their community can be exemplified by the ongoing events currently taking place at the University of Tasmania. A parliamentary inquiry into the *University of Tasmania Act 1992* has revealed how far removed the university council has been from engaging with the local community and academic community when deciding to relocate their Sandy Bay campus to Hobart. Whilst the inquiry is still ongoing, there are several recommendations that I have made that would apply to all universities. They are:

1. **Restructuring University Council** - Universities should restructure their university councils and academic boards to include more community stakeholders (staff, students and local representatives) should be elected that do not necessarily have corporate expertise.
2. **Purpose** - The universities' legislated objectives should reflect adhering to academic values at the forefront of its purpose. Its core function is to pursue new knowledge and disseminate knowledge.
 - a. Inclusion of engaging with local communities, perhaps even as an annual town hall meeting in collaboration with the local council
 - b. That universities are a public good to serve the global common good.
 - c. Removal of university objectives/purposes that are explicitly driven by commercial motives and are inherently not academic such as the commercialisation of research. (Noting this is not to say they should not commercialise research, and ideas, only that it should not be seen as a primary objective equal to the academic mission)
3. **Amend the responsibility of Council Members** - That the university council is not just liable for ensuring the institution is operating financially stable but also for ensuring it lives up to its legislated purpose.

The benefit of legislating community engagement is to ensure universities are held to account to ensure they are actively engaged with their local communities. It will also encourage greater

participation from that local and state governments to help fund local projects, and perhaps such collective efforts can draw attention to being granted supplementary federal funding.

Another consideration that can reduce barriers to community collaboration is the misuse of apply non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) on council members. Universities are public institutions funded by the public purse, which means taxpayers have the right to know what is discussed and how their money is being spent. Applying an NDA on council members is an act that represents institutional distrust and secrecy from the general public, which works against fostering a collaborative working relationship with local communities. Furthermore, it prevents university councils from becoming insular echo chambers because council members will be held to account for the decisions made.

National Governance System

The frequently discussed governance issues at universities in the media suggest that the existing regulatory bodies, such as TEQSA, the fair work commission, and the Ombudsman, are seemingly ineffective in regulating the activities of universities. I believe that a national governance commission is needed to review and regulate university activities, including

- their pricing of postgraduate tuition fees
- funding allocation of Student Services Amenities Fees (SSAF)
- external reviews of sexual harassment and bully complaints
- professional guidelines for academic integrity and conduct

Interestingly unlike other industries, such as the energy sector, there is no regulated pricing for postgraduate degrees. Figure 1 is data I've collected on the domestic postgraduate fees of various courses in 2009 and 2023 at an Australian university which I will keep anonymous. The domestic postgraduate fees for all degrees have increased consistently at 5-7% every year, which is consistently above the inflation rate for the measured period. Considering that most universities' postgraduate fees have increased roughly at the same rate in this period, universities have been charging domestic postgraduates more than the cost of delivering courses yearly. Thus it seems that domestic postgraduate students have been at least in part subsidizing for other university expenses unrelated to their degree. For this reason, there is an argument about whether universities need a pricing commission to determine the cost of delivering a university degree and whether fee increases are justified and used to improve the quality of education.

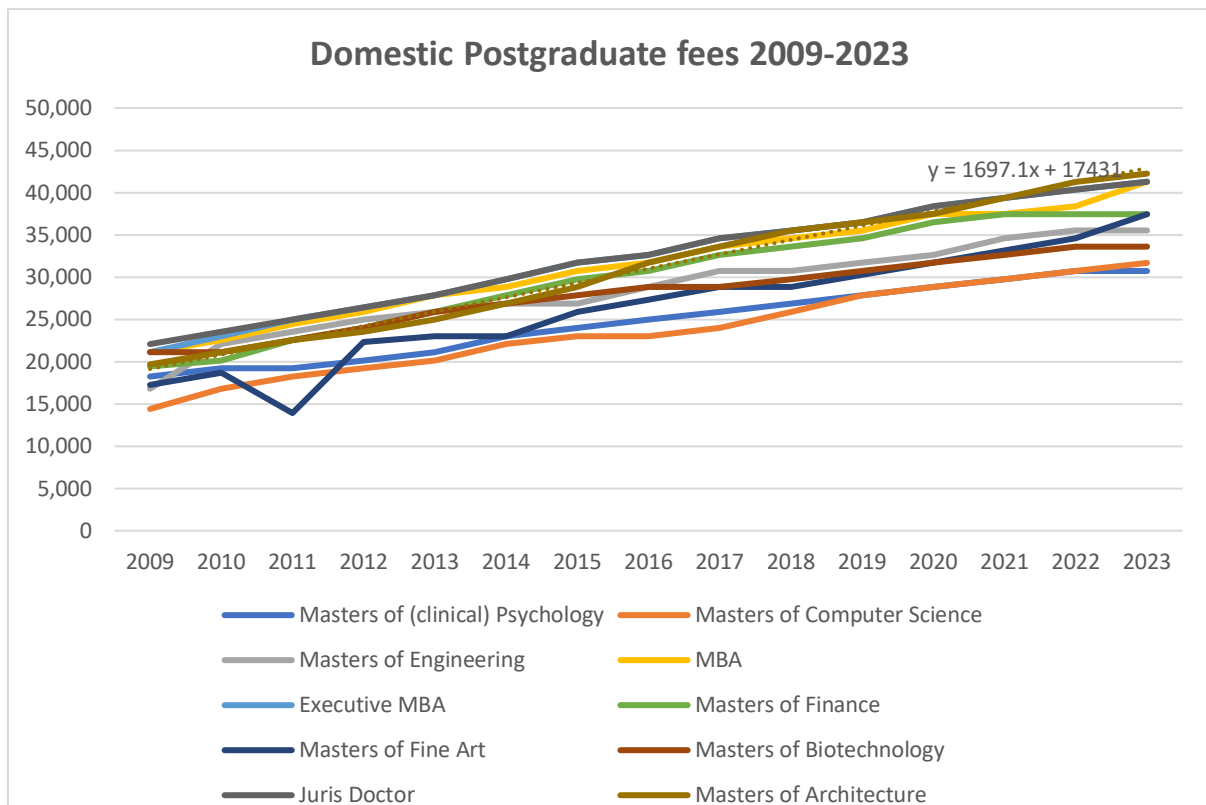


Figure 1: The domestic tuition fee of various postgraduate courses at an Australian university between 2009 and 2023.

Another area that needs to be regulated is how SSAF is allocated to student organisations, sports and other student amenities. A student organisation's role is to represent students' voices, which can sometimes be critical of the university. Thus it should be obvious that there is a significant conflict of interest in allowing universities to decide how well resources their critics should be funded with SSAF. This is why for many years, student organisations have always hoped to legislate a guarantee that 50% of SSAF should be given to the student organisations in order to operate. Alternatively, another consideration could be to have SSAF negotiations proceed through a national governance system such as a higher education commission. It would be ideal for placing student organisations on an even playing field when negotiating how much SSAF they should be allocated to support students.

A higher education commission for a national governance system would also help address academic and professional misconduct, including cases of sexual harassment. Prior to the pandemic, discussions were moving towards an independent sexual harassment task force to investigate cases at universities. These are complicated issues that affect both the accuser, the accused and the university institution, which will often place their institutional interest before the formerly mentioned parties. Whilst internal investigation processes exist,

they are rarely effective at resolving disputes and should instead be handled externally. A later section on feeling safe on campus covers more on this issue.

Transparency with research students

Specifically, on the performance of research schools and their performance, I have found a lack of transparency around student satisfaction surveys. Most research schools conducting HDR student satisfaction surveys will often keep the results for internal use only. I had raised a recommendation a Quality Indicator for Learning and Teaching (QILT) HDR student satisfaction survey would certainly draw intrigue and help improve the overall satisfaction of PhD programs nationally. However, my suggestion was seemingly met with an unusual amount of resistance from some individuals from various graduate schools.

I had raised this suggestion because of the deteriorating conditions of PhD students during their candidature. Students have lost their desk spaces, and some have been outspoken that university administration is slow with indexing their stipends annually as they are supposed to. Given that all other university students have a QILT survey to air their satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) to help improve courses, why don't research students have the same opportunities?

Employment Practices for Retaining Instrumental Expertise

Some parts of Australia's research capacity seem to be hampered by the shortage of technical expertise for specialised instruments at some public facilities. This significant issue hinders research progress, especially for PhD candidates. The significant difference between safely operating specialised equipment and the expert proficiency needed for cutting-edge research often seems unappreciated. I learned this during my PhD whilst learning how to operate a half-a-million dollar instrument at a proficiency level needed for experimental work without experienced staff that could have assisted. Occasionally I found support from the manufacturer's customer support, but losing weeks and months to troubleshooting often slowed down progress and limited the scope of my research. After speaking with numerous technical staff on this matter, an understanding of a sector-wide issue that needed to be addressed emerged. Fundamentally it came down to a failure to provide career progression amongst technical staff without transitioning into administrative work at public institutions. The reality is that the experienced staff members that have spent years developing proficiency in specialised equipment are only acknowledged for their skills through promotions under enterprise bargain agreements. Unfortunately, these promotions involve an increase in administrative duties which takes them away from supporting users, which means there is no

room for career progression for technical staff too valuable to be taken away from the lab or workshop space. Consequently, many experienced university operators eventually find themselves better off leaving the public sector and working in private industries, ultimately leaving the labs with less experienced junior staff to support users. Where the reforms have often been centred around addressing the skills shortage, I believe there also needs to be a more significant consideration for initiatives to help maintain decades of expertise operating specialised instruments in the public research sector.

I had considered creating a new fund to subsidise the cost of retaining experienced technical staff with specialised skills at public institutions. Where applicable technical staff members should be able to negotiate supplementary remuneration to their EBA pay scale of how their experience and expertise improve research output strictly on an academic basis. Fundamentally, the goal is to recognise technical staff's technical expertise for specific research instrumentation and incentivise universities to retain technical staff with highly specialised skills with research instruments. Furthermore, this fund could be extended as a grant application for funding the professional development of technical staff to pay for the formal training with specialised equipment. Another idea may include expanding or creating more organisations, such as the ANFF, where specialised research instruments can be registered to form a national directory of specialised equipment supported by experienced operators across multiple public institutions. Improving pathways.

Quality and Sustainability

On quality student experiences

A quality student experience depends on greater engagement and feedback for students and ensuring students can fully engage with their education. The over-reliance on overloaded sessional teaching staff can often mean larger teacher-to-student ratios and limited feedback from marked assessments. As someone who currently teaches, I can attest that streamlining the delivery of course material to suit large classes means less flexibility in how we can teach and engage. It means less time guiding each student through their learning journey, especially for individuals that need additional assistance and feedback. Marking is paid at a rate of the number of reports marked per hour and is often sufficient for marking but not providing written feedback or further consultation with students.

Essentially adequate funding must be set aside for teaching and not used in research (discussed later) to tackle the challenges of emerging technologies such as ChatGPT. Such

AI systems have already demonstrated the capability to generate essays that could pass as a submission for a student assignment. Fundamentally this would undermine the academic integrity of our institutions because our current method of assessment is based on expressing their knowledge of a subject matter which is easily generated with AI. However, assessments should be graded on students' ability to demonstrate their knowledge by applying it to a new situation. Therefore, I would argue that the emergence of AI in this context is not a threat but a much-needed wake-up call that forces a course correction on where our education has failed to nurture critical thinking skills. However, focusing on nurturing critical thinking skills in teaching and assessment will require less streamlining of course content and a greater focus on student development.

The other aspect of ensuring a quality university experience is ensuring students are not time-poor to engage in their education. I once had a student fall into a mental breakdown during a lab class because they felt the course content was a waste of their time, given she was working three jobs whilst attending university. It was heartbreaking to hear their story, but it was a classic case of students trying to make ends meet, unable to commit to their education fully, and feeling their education was unrewarding. How can we expect a student to have real quality university experience if they are juggling three jobs? It seems clear that the social services available to students are inaccessible, and the payment amount is inadequate to support the student.

On feeling safe on campus

Part of feeling safe on campus is being heard when concern is raised by students and by staff. There are many instances where students have often felt unheard when raising concerns on matters that affect them. An example of this is the treatment of PhD students at many universities. As someone that has spent years advocating for research students, I have heard harrowing stories of the mistreatment that often go untold. Research students as victims of intellectual property theft, bullying and sexual harassment often find no support when filing a complaint to the university. Where a student union is often the first point of contact, many are underfunded and thus ill-equipped to guide and support these victims.

My involvement with student representation provides a breadth of experience dealing with the issues postgraduate students face. It is a common misconception that undergraduates as students are similar enough to postgraduates that their needs are the same. Postgraduate students are often at a different stage of their lives with higher career expectations. Their interaction with their education is significantly more complex than expected in undergraduate studies, especially for research students. The needs of postgraduate students are multitudes

different from undergraduate students, and I have often found that when the support systems are shared between undergraduate and postgraduate students, the outcome has often been inadequate support for postgraduate students. This is why I firmly believe that postgraduate students must have autonomous representation at both campus and national levels. Universities must resist ideas surrounding combining postgraduate representation into a student organisation often dominated by undergraduate students.

Most recently, the Australian National University has discontinued funding its postgraduate student association (Postgraduate & Research Student Association – PARSA). Macquarie University has been seemingly unwilling to negotiate to fund a newly formed student association, Macquarie Graduate Research Union (MGRU). These organisations provide support services to postgraduate students that universities or undergraduate-dominated student associations cannot offer. For example, the recent National Student Safety Survey noted

postgraduate research students (14.5%) more likely than other students to report that the perpetrator was a university staff member.²

These incidents often occur under circumstances particularly unique to research students, who often work under precarious conditions as sessional staff for additional income. Many fear the risk of retaliation if they file a complaint against a university staff member of seniority which may result in the loss of teaching opportunities or a potential future postdoctoral position. These predicaments are entirely unrelatable for most undergraduate students. Thus, they often isolate victims without proper student advocacy and support on campus.

Incidences involving research students often go unreported because the risk of filing a complaint against a staff member may result in little action being taken and fear of retaliation. Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume a university will look to protect its interest and reputation when proceeding with an internal investigation against its staff members. Consequently, if a victim proceeds to file a complaint to the university, there is a risk the outcome will be a sense of injustice for the victim and inherently leaves them feeling unsafe.

Whilst an external complaint system exists through TEQSA, students are often advised to pursue addressing through the internal complaints process first. However, victims often have to relive the trauma during an internal investigation process. They are often far less willing to

repeat the process externally again externally through TEQSA. For this reason, I believe there should be a way for victims to engage directly in an external complaint process, hopefully assuring an unbiased investigation and a just outcome.

Prioritising and supporting research quality

Metrics such as the number of citations, h-indexes and university rankings are inadequate measures of research performance and quality as supported by the ideals of the San Francisco Declaration of Research Assessment (DORA). Bad actors can exploit the abovementioned metrics' imperfections through self-citations, nepotism and incompatibility of these metrics between different research disciplines. So it is unfortunate that most people regard the quality by rankings because it is dominated by universities based in the US and UK, the two of the main competitors in the international education market. Nevertheless, it is worth questioning whether university rankings are a legitimate measure of research quality or becoming more of a marketing gimmick for promoting international education.

Universities can prove their value to society in ways other than metrics, such as ranking and citations. This flows back to my first argument that Australia needs to develop a culture around appreciating the development of new knowledge. In many other countries, especially in Europe, they significantly contribute to society. Their governments and population acknowledge them without the need to chase rankings because they appreciate education without constantly being convinced.

The Role of International Education

The Exploitation through International Education

In my previous consultation submission, I briefly mentioned our fourth largest export was based on exploitation and something we must discuss seriously as a nation. Expanding on this idea, I wrote in CAPA's submission to the Accords that the United State Department of *State's 2017 Trafficking in Persons report's* description of human trafficking and modern slavery.

Traffickers, labor agencies, recruiters, and employers in both the country of origin and the destination country can contribute to debt bondage by charging workers recruitment fees and exorbitant interest rates, making it difficult, if not impossible,

to pay off the debt. Such circumstances may occur in the context of employment-based temporary work programs in which a worker's legal status in the destination country is tied to the employer so workers fear seeking redress.

I have raised this concern since March 2020 in CAPA's submission of Temporary Migration³ which received no real focus but received little attention and again at the senate inquiry into Unlawful Underpayment of Employees' Remuneration.⁴ On the 23rd of April, *The Guardian* released an article, "Sold a dream': the international students lured to Australia with false promises"⁵ that describes circumstances consistent with the Trafficking report. More specifically on Australia, this report states:

Some identified victims are foreign citizens on student visas who pay significant placement and academic fees. Unscrupulous employers coerce students to work in excess of the terms of their visas, making them vulnerable to trafficking due to fears of deportation for immigration violations.⁶

Again this description describes university students that pay exuberant international fees to study in Australia and the wage theft that takes place to pay students cash-in-hand to allow them to work beyond their visa work restriction of 20 hours a fortnight.⁷ Similarly, it describes the circumstances of many international PhD students studying in Australia. The power imbalance between supervisor and student leaves international students vulnerable to exploitation, reflecting the abovementioned statements in the 2017 Trafficking report. For example, it is not uncommon for international students to feel pressured to obey their supervisor's demands fearing that a negative interaction may lead to an unexplainable loss of

³ Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations 2020, *CAPA's response to the Inquiry on Temporary Migration*, <http://www.capa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/C0026-Submission-on-Temporary-Migration.pdf>

⁴ Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations 2021, Official Committee Hansard Senate Economics References Committee [Hansard], <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22committees%2Fcommesen%2F5bc74de3-bf3e-4b2b-842d-f75866e1a4bb%2F0000%22>

⁵ Cassidy C. 2023, 'Sold a dream': the international students lured to Australia with false promises, *The Guardian*, last updated: 23rd April 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/apr/23/sold-a-dream-the-international-students-lured-to-australia-with-false-promises>

⁶US Department of State 2017. *Trafficking in Persons Report*, June 2017. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/271339.pdf>

⁷ Farbenblum, B. and Berg, L., 2020. International students and wage theft in Australia. Available at SSRN 3663837.

teaching opportunities or being removed from their PhD program for making unsatisfactory progress.

Sadly, after years of raising awareness on this issue, we have not acknowledged that our fourth-largest export may involve activities comparable to modern slavery and human trafficking by one of our closest allies. I understand that the perfect egalitarian society is an idealistic aspiration because inequality will always exist in one form or another. So instead, we should ask, 'What level of inequality are we willing to tolerate in our society?'

The Accords has often discussed equity and accessibility to ensure a fairer system for Australians, but what of international students? We have recently extended an education agreement with India and encouraged international students to come to Australia to help address our skills shortages, but are we just promoting the exploitation of international students through fees and labour? These are the questions I believe Australians should reflect on our values to confront and discuss whether our vision for an egalitarian society should come at the expense of potentially exploiting international students. We should not continue to look away and pretend these practices do not happen or accept that it is the type of society we willingly wear the blood on our hands.

The true purpose of international education

Over the century, we have seen numerous examples of the societal consequences of isolationism. International education is one access point that ensures we remain connected and engaged with the rest of the world. Inviting international students to study at our institutions allows us to foster a pocket environment that reflects the international community within our borders. It allows our domestic students to enjoy the benefits and diversity of international culture without bearing the expenses of travelling out of Australia.

Thus we need to do more to recognise the benefits of international students and form a quid-pro approach to international education. For far too long, Australia has hung a pathway to immigration and "prestigious Australian university degrees" like a carrot as if the benefits of this relationship were one-sided favours, which leads to a perverse expectation that international students would have to give back to our society for the opportunity to be here. Whilst this perspective is not readily shared publically (exceptions: Scott Morrison in 2020), the rationale behind many of our policies around international education inherently places a value on international students.

Investments and Affordability

Funding for State government

After considering various funding avenues, it seems feasible to re-introduce state government funding towards operating universities. My interactions with the federal government on matters concerning universities often lead to a conversation about the limitations of Section 96 of the Australian constitution to 'providing financial assistance with terms and conditions'. Similarly, the state government's inaction to address university issues is because 'the problems originate from federal funding'. Whilst this may be true, it seems more likely that the federal government would welcome states to share some of the cost of teaching, research and infrastructure that a local community requires, particularly in regional communities. Nevertheless, the benefit of state governments' involvement in university funding is greater attention by state governments to ensure universities properly serve their local communities than deferring responsibility to the federal government.

On the Job-Ready Graduates

Many of the hallmark features of the Job-Ready Graduates (JRG) package boasted of addressing seemingly made little effect as they had intended or seemingly created more funding issues within the university sector. Since its inception, the JRG's attempt to use price signals to channel students has shown no effect in changing students' preferences as predicted except for those of lower socio-economic backgrounds. Whilst the latter seems like an accomplishment, it raises a perverse idea of inequality by encouraging 'less privileged' students to study careers that perhaps most people do not want to do. In a previous section, I mentioned a social divide among graduates based on the freedom to choose a career path based on privilege and selling courses with 'good career prospects' to lower SES students to backfill skills shortage is a relatively regressive policy in the long run. We should instead revert the government contributions to pre-JRG levels and work towards normalising student contribution costs to be the same in all discipline bands.

The JRG influenced universities to change the number of course positions based on the discipline bands' economic sustainability. Some research-intensive universities have increased the number of high-margin humanities courses to subsidise the low to negative-margin STEM courses and to fund university rankings. Research-intensive universities have a 'milked' system that glorifies world university rankings to attract more international students and leverage higher tuition fees. It is a self-perpetuating cycle of sustaining high research output to attract more international student fees to fund more research. Prestige also attracts

the brightest and most able students, who (as mentioned in a previous section) are often already endowed with the resources and support for success.

The most concerning aspect of the JRG is that it seemingly encourages a two-tier system of universities. Firstly, the winners are prestigious and rich research-intensive universities like Ivy League universities and the losers, who become teaching-focused universities that promote employability comparable to the public community colleges in the United States. As I've said in public hearings and submissions, if the Minister believes postcodes should not determine school and university opportunities, he should apply the same logic to ensure our reforms do not drive public universities to differentiate in this way.

Finally, the other regressive aspect of the JRG is students losing their CSP for failing more than half of their units because it places students that could be of lower socio-economic background already facing hardship in a further worse position. It also seems unethical and cruel to generate motivation by inflicting additional stress and burden on vulnerable people.

More generally, on student loans

I had previously eluded to the previous section that the decades-long accessibility argument that the HECS/HELP system may be obsolete because the number of CSP places is no longer the main barrier to accessibility. Instead, we should acknowledge the different ways of learning, improve vocational education, and lower the cost of undertaking a higher education qualification.

There is a significant concern with growing student debts, especially with the cost-benefit rationality that accepts a university qualification as a financial investment. When tuition fees and student debts are set high, the expectation to be paid more becomes even higher, inherently perpetuating inflations over a long period. Furthermore, it places a significant emphasis on the economic aspects of a university qualification and less on the importance of maintaining an educated population needed for a healthy democracy, and this mindset needs to change.

Considering that we now live in an era where information and misinformation are abundant to drive populism politics, we can only imagine what AI-generated information will do to a democratic society unprepared to educate its population. These threats will significantly affect our society which regulatory censorship cannot address because such an approach can also be seen as tyrannical. Therefore the best approach to censorship is individual censorship, which is the ability of an individual to comprehend information, evaluate the

quality of the information presented and form their own opinion. However, such critical thinking skills require adequate funding for our high-quality education system.

Since it is in everyone's interest to maintain an educated population that will question and debate dogmatic political ideologies rather than readily accept them as they are presented. Everyone should be responsible for funding our higher education system irrespective of whether they attend university because their investment into higher education is an investment into a healthy democratic society. Therefore we must discuss how we can take progressive steps to reduce and eventually eliminate student debt through a progressive tax system because it is the responsibility of all of us to protect one another from those in control of disseminating information.