



2 July 2020

The Committee Secretary
Economics and Industry Standing Committee
Level 1, Harvest Terrace
WEST PERTH WA 6005

Dear Committee Secretary,

RE: HDR joint submission to Parliament

As elected postgraduate student representatives from the largest and top performing tertiary institutions in Western Australia, we call upon the State Government to acknowledge the significant impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on graduate research. We implore the WA Government to provide strategic support to higher degrees by research (HDR) students as we navigate through this unprecedented crisis.

A highly skilled research workforce is critical for our innovation economy. Australia's HDR training system provides this skilled workforce, contributing substantially to research and innovation across government, non-government, academic and industry sectors. The Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) report recognises that HDR students generate 57% of Australia's research output¹. According to data from Universities Australia, "every \$1 invested in higher education research and development is linked to a \$5 return to GDP"². Australia's HDR training system supports both domestic and international HDR students, who respectively comprise of 63% and 37% of the graduate research population³. There is no doubt that supporting HDR students is beneficial to the state economy.

COVID-19 has had negative impact on HDR students and their research. At the University of Western Australia (UWA), almost 40% of HDR students reported experiencing anxiety about submission deadlines. Preliminary survey data from Curtin University shows that the majority of HDR students have experienced significant disruptions to research progress (of approximately 3 - 6 months) as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Social distancing measures have required that students cancel research which involves interaction with people, fieldwork, travel and access to facilities and technologies. The delay in research output, coupled with the limited

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics. 8111.0 - Research and Experimental Development, Higher Education Organisations, 2018

² Deloitte Access Economics. The importance of universities to Australia's prosperity. A report prepared for Universities Australia, 2015

³ Australian Government. Student data. <https://www.education.gov.au/student-data>



access to resources, has caused tremendous anxiety and hampered productivity among HDR students. While students have appreciated efforts to ensure they remain well, universities have failed to communicate to students how to navigate this new working environment of remote supervision and research, leaving it to the HDR students to 'figure it out' for themselves.

Between 2016-17 and 2018-19, the WA Government decreased funding to research and experimental development (R&D) - while expenditure was increased across all other major states. In the same year, the R&D sector saw a \$29 million (1%) decrease in funding by Commonwealth government organisations⁴. In addition, a recent report by Deloitte found that 90% of tertiary funding has been diverted away from research⁵. Our state's research capacity is being eroded away at this critical time in a highly competitive national and global market, which reflects poorly on WA universities. The COVID-19 pandemic is further eroding the state's research capacity. If not addressed and rectified the repercussion of this will have a detrimental effect on WA.

It is well known that COVID-19 has wrought devastation on the economy, affecting casual workers the most. Approximately half of the casual academic workforce in universities are HDR students⁶, and as such their income source has been severely affected. However, HDR students are disqualified from welfare and government aid provided during this pandemic, even though the federally administered Research Training Program (RTP) stipend, which supports that majority of HDR students in WA, provides remuneration at less than minimum wage. Furthermore, a substantial number of students are non-recipients (do not receive any scholarship support for their studies), living beneath the poverty line without access to substantial government subsidies, i.e. Austudy. This puts many students at risk of terminating their studies.

The Federal government has announced that RTP scholarships can be extended to a maximum of 4.5 years, increased from 4 years. We welcome this announcement. However, the provision of these extensions remains at the discretion of universities. Typically, RTP stipends offered at WA universities are only provided for 3 years (the minimum allowed term), with some opportunity for extensions to 3.5 years. While the Federal government announced the extension, it has not provided additional money in support. As such, universities are expected to fund this shortfall – at a time when universities are expected to lose \$19 billion in the next three years⁷. Despite strong advocacy from students and university staff, universities have refused to provide

⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics. *8104.0 - Research and experimental development, businesses, Australia, 2019*

⁵ Deloitte. *Transparency in Higher Education Expenditure, 2019*

⁶ Norton, A., Cherastidham, I. & Mackey, W. *Mapping Australian higher education 2018*. Grattan Institute, 2018

⁷ Peter Hurley. *Australian universities could lose \$19 billion in the next 3 years. Our economy will suffer with them*. The Conversation, 2020



affected students with additional scholarship extensions. HDR students as a vulnerable demographic are exacerbated by the lack of targeted financial assistance from universities and the government.

Several national publications, including data from Universities Australia and the Rapid Research Information Forum (RRIF), conclude that the research workforce is set to shrink significantly as a result of COVID-19. Australia's Chief Scientist has anticipated that the research sector will see more job losses now than compared to the 2008 global financial crisis⁸. The loss of employment prospects and expertise in research is the single greatest threat to the professional livelihood of HDR students. To date, universities have not communicated any plans to mitigate the impact of this on graduating HDR students. In the current climate, HDR students are facing a grim job market and lack of government support for our expertise.

Given the substantial positive impact that HDR students have on the state's research capacity and economy, we are asking for the WA Government to support vulnerable HDR students in the immediacy. We are proposing that:

1. Existing RTP scholarships be extended by 6 months to ensure fee waiver to 4.5 years and stipends to 4 years for eligible students.
 - o Scholarship extensions, with appropriate funding support, must be on the agenda at the National Education Council with Minister Tehan.
2. The provision of 6-month bursaries for students who are not in receipt of RTP stipends to assist with living expenses. This financial assistance is critical for our HDR cohort as they are ineligible for Austudy.
3. The provision of funding support that goes directly towards HDR initiatives such as travel grants, access to resources, professional development and research publications.

There is a significant opportunity for the WA government to take leadership in support of WA research in order to position ourselves to be a strong research and innovation centre in a post- COVID-19 world. The extremely successful WA Government response to COVID-19 has put us in an enviable position both within Australia and globally, and now provides us with a unique opportunity. As WA continues to ease its restrictions ahead of other states and countries, we are already back at work, recommencing our studies, and looking to the future of our research. If the WA government begins a strategic investment into WA research, with a particular focus on supporting HDR students, who will be the researchers of the future, WA will have the opportunity to develop as a key international research hub. This, however, requires concerted, strategic support to boost a heavily impacted sector.

⁸ Larkin et al. *Impact of the pandemic on Australia's research workforce*. chiefscientist.gov.au, 2020



The initiatives above are necessary to ensure continued success of WA's research and innovation sectors. Furthermore, the State Government would provide much needed support to some of the most valuable and vulnerable members of the WA workforce. If the government fails the tertiary sector in supporting HDR students, not only will there be longitudinal and monumental implications for the international reputation of the Australian university sector (thus resulting in long-term distrust from international students seeking to attend Australian universities), but also a diminishment of the quality of research more widely across the nation, preventing innovations, progress and future possibilities for generations to come.

Postgraduate students from Curtin, UWA, Murdoch and Edith Cowan University are grateful to the State Legislative Assembly for the opportunity to discuss the impacts of COVID-19. We would welcome the opportunity to provide further input on this crisis. Should you have any questions in relation to the above, please do not hesitate to contact us on

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Majim'.

Curtin University Postgraduate Student Committee President

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rahul'.

University of Western Australia Postgraduate Student Association President

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Vani Goani'.

Murdoch University Postgraduate Student Association President

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Anu'.

Edith Cowan University Postgraduate Student Association President