



Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA)

Response to: Postgraduate priorities in the University Accords

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Compiled with the assistance of the office bearers of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) and its affiliated member organisations.

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Foreword

The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) is the peak body representing the interests of the over 455,000 postgraduate students in Australia. We represent coursework and research, as well as domestic and international postgraduates. We are comprised of 28 university and campus-based postgraduate associations and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduate Association (NATSIPA). CAPA carries out its mission through policy, research, and activism, communicating the interests and issues of postgraduate students to higher education stakeholders as well as Federal and State Governments, Opposition parties, and minor parties.

CAPA welcomes and thanks the University Accords Committee and the Minister of Education, Hon. Jason Clare MP for the opportunity to address the concerns of postgraduate students in this process.

Introduction:

CAPA is concerned with the current state of public universities in Australia as not-for-profit higher education providers created to serve the public good. We recognise the responsibility for higher education to form ethical and critical capacities in the population, specifically in the Humanities.

Universities are responsible for nurturing public intellectuals who participate in knowledge generation to benefit their communities and society. These institutions should be free, secular, diverse, democratic, socially accountable, and publicly funded and controlled, recognising that the public system is the most appropriate means of delivering educational services based on social equity and academic freedom.

We believe universities and academia are about the preservation, transmission and extension of knowledge for its own sake, the development of critical capacities and reasoning in an environment of vigorous academic freedom, and which actively fosters the development of abilities to challenge the status quo of one's society.¹

¹ Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations 2015, CAPA Policy Handbook, <http://www.capa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/CAPA-Policy-2015.pdf>

To quote the Report of the Committee on Australian Universities (The Murray Report) released in 1957,² the purpose of universities are:

(1) To educate:

It is the function of the University to offer not merely a technical or specialist training out, a full and true education, befitting a free man, and, the citizen of a free country.

(2) To research:

But there is one kind of research which is in general best done in universities and the greater part of which in recent generations has in fact been done in universities. It is obvious that most of the basic secrets of nature have been unravelled by men who were moved simply by intellectual curiosity, who wanted to discover new knowledge for its own sake.

(3) And to uphold intellectual integrity:

They are, or they should be, the guardians of intellectual standards, and intellectual integrity in the community. Scholars and scientists who spend their lives in the search for knowledge should, at least in their own spheres of inquiry, be proof against the waves of emotion and prejudice which make the ordinary man, and public opinion, subject from time to time, to illusion and self-deceit.

Similar sentiments can be found in that of the traditional European universities as reflected in the Magna Carta Universitium (Great Charter of Universities) about the research teaching culture describing universities as:

² Murray K., Clunies-Ross I., Morris C., Reid A., Richards J. (1957), Commonwealth of Australia, Report of the Committee on Australian Universities, <https://vital.voced.edu.au/vital/access/services/Download/ngv:53782/SOURCE2>

an autonomous institution at the heart of societies differently organised because of geography and historical heritage; it produces, examines, appraises and hands down culture by research teaching.³

The key point to be made is that part of the function of universities is to remain independent and autonomous to fulfil their true purpose to society and be responsible for upholding 'intellectual integrity'. Society does not act without emotion or political bias, and the responsibility of academia is to provide objective proof and reason, as highlighted in the Murray report:

The public, and even statesmen, are human enough to be restive or angry from time to time, when perhaps at inconvenient moments the scientist or scholar uses the licence which the academic freedom of universities allows him, and brings us all back to a consideration of the true evidence and what it may be taken to prove; and certainly the academic scholar has a clear duty to maintain a strong self-discipline to keep himself from attempting to speak with any authority outside his own field of knowledge.⁴

Crucial to its purpose, universities must be immune to external influences (political and financial) in an environment where "no immediate practical aim or profit in view" and all other motives are mitigated,

apart from any desire for the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, university research is recognised as indispensable to the welfare of the nation.⁵

³ Holt, J. (1992). Magna Carta. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press,
<http://www.magnacharta.org/resources/files/the-magna-charta/english>

⁴ Murray K., Clunies-Ross I., Morris C., Reid A., Richards J. (1957), Commonwealth of Australia, Report of the Committee on Australian Universities,
<https://vital.voced.edu.au/vital/access/services/Download/ngv:53782/SOURCE2>

⁵ Murray K., Clunies-Ross I., Morris C., Reid A., Richards J. (1957), Commonwealth of Australia, Report of the Committee on Australian Universities,
<https://vital.voced.edu.au/vital/access/services/Download/ngv:53782/SOURCE2>

The reliance on international student enrolments as an alternative source of revenue and performance-based funding models are both distortions to the true purpose of universities. We can see this in the fierce competition for international student enrolments has led to a greater emphasis on improving university rankings as part of Vice-Chancellors' Key Performance-based Indicators (KPIs). In recent years, there has been greater emphasis on 'gaming' the performance-driven funding models than providing quality education. As such, we believe these external forces have distorted universities of their independence and autonomy from Commonwealth government support.

Most importantly, universities play a critical role in ensuring a free democracy. To quote a former Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies:

The corruption of the University will therefore corrupt our democracy, for the University is a crucial character-forming institution for leaders, and it takes character to stand against the tide of populism and civil vice that always threatens a democracy.⁶

This submission will highlight our concerns about the seven main points covered by the Australian University Accords and the changes needed to roll universities back to their collegiate roots.

Meeting Australia's knowledge and skills needs, now and in the future

CAPA believes our universities play a critical role in providing "individuals and communities with access to knowledge through teaching; scholarship and research; and assists in the training of a highly skilled workforce".⁷ However, these responsibilities should be driven by intellectual curiosity rather than "narrow, short-term economic objectives, industry goals and vocational training".⁸ On principle, our organisations stand against many of the ideals embodied in the Job-Ready Graduates package from 2020.

⁶ Chavura S. and Melleuish G. 2021, *The Forgotten Menzies: The World Picture of Australia's Longest-Serving Prime Minister*, Melbourne University Publishing

⁷ Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations 2015, *CAPA Policy Handbook*, <http://www.capa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/CAPA-Policy-2015.pdf>

⁸ Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations 2015, *CAPA Policy Handbook*, <http://www.capa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/CAPA-Policy-2015.pdf>

Whilst we acknowledge the skills shortage currently affecting the global economy, we firmly believe in the long-term benefits to society and the freedom to pursue their passions. The Modern democracy that we enjoy today was built on the common principles from the joint declaration of the Atlantic Charter by the President of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt and the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Winston Churchill.⁹ This charter is a milestone towards the formation of the United Nations and the ideals of human rights, which includes the "freedom from fear and want".¹⁰ In this context, the reference to 'want' is the desire to pursue knowledge or a career path of an individual's choosing.

Our stance is not to say we disagree with state interventions to address skills shortages. Instead, we recommend addressing the current barriers of injustice and inequality that have prevented disadvantaged individuals from accessing education; we will discuss accessibility and opportunity later. We believe that if these barriers are addressed, the current challenges with skills shortage can be addressed with the incentive of pursuing one's passion.

However, we remain wary of policies that encourage targeting those of low socioeconomic to backfill skill shortages or 'unpopular jobs'. Such policies should be flagged with caution as they may perpetuate a class system in which the well-off are allowed the freedom to study and work in careers of their choosing, whilst the less well-off are channeled to jobs that the country needs to be filled.

Access and Opportunity

CAPA is concerned that the current sentiment of accessibility is a victory for social justice and equality. Whilst access to enrol into a university degree is a step forward; it may not always translate to equality with opportunity. There are currently many barriers that students face once they are in the system. Many of those that are first-in-family to attend University are often unaware of the support and opportunities available to them. Other challenges include those with care' responsibilities, managing disabilities, social barriers and the economic cost of attending University. Those who have to overcome these additional barriers are still disadvantaged, and their opportunities are limited to fully experience the benefit of a university education.

⁹ The Atlantic Charter 1943, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2018757217/>

¹⁰ The Atlantic Charter 1943, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2018757217/>

We are concerned that students who may wish to pursue postgraduate study cannot do so due to the lack of government support. As noted numerous times in our past submissions, most postgraduate degrees cannot access Austudy and ABSTUDY.¹¹¹² Consequently, many who can pursue a postgraduate education often seek employment, sustaining through family or partner's income. Those with additional responsibilities (Parenthood, carers) and those without the support of family or a supportive partner will not be able to advance their careers with postgraduate education.

HDR students are in a similar situation, with only an estimated 40% of PhD students receiving an RTP stipend scholarship with their letter of offer.¹³ The remaining students who do not receive a stipend often find employment at a university where they are easily exploited with wage theft and precarious work arrangements, affecting many students during the pandemic lockdowns where sessional jobs were the first to be cut.¹⁴ We are also deeply concerned that the minimum full-time stipend rate of \$29,863 for 2023 will be below the poverty line (\$31,786.04) for a single person, including the cost of housing as estimated by the Melbourne Institute: Applied Economic & Social Research.¹⁵¹⁶ Whilst many universities have increased their stipend rates to above this benchmark, numerous universities have not and urge the government to increase the minimum stipend amount.^{17 18} This ensures HDR students receive a livable stipend, making a PhD degree more accessible to those that do not have family support.

¹¹ Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations 2022, Pre-budget Submission 2022-23, <http://www.capa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/CAPA-Pre-budget-submission-2022.pdf>

¹² Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations 2021, Pre-budget Submission 2021-22, <http://www.capa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/CAPA-Pre-budget-Submission-2021-2022-final-version.pdf>

¹³ Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations 2020, Submission to Senate Inquiry on 'COVID-19: From a research student's perspective.', http://www.capa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CAPA-COVID-19-submission-final-version-edits-4_6_20.pdf

¹⁴ Heffernan, M. 2021, *Casuals bore the brunt as COVID drove unis to shed 7500 jobs*, The Age, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/casuals-bore-the-brunt-as-covid-drove-unis-to-shed-7500>

¹⁵ Department of Education 2022, *Historical stipend rates for postgraduate scholarships*, <https://www.education.gov.au/download/1868/historical-stipend-rates-postgraduate-scholarships/29226/historical-stipend-rates-post-graduate-scholarships-2021/pdf/en>

¹⁶ Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic & Social Research 2022, *Poverty Lines: Australia*, https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/4222195/Poverty-Lines-Australia-March-2022.pdf

¹⁷ Swinburne University of Technology 2022, *Research Training Program Stipend - RTPS*, <https://www.swinburne.edu.au/study/options/scholarships/214/research-training-program-stipend---rtps/>

¹⁸ University of South Australia 2022, *Research Training Program domestic (RTPd) Scholarship*, <https://www.unisa.edu.au/research/degrees/scholarships/university-wide-scholarships-for-australian-research-degree-applicants/#:~:text=The%20total%20stipend%20is%20at,relocation%20expenses%20may%20be%20reimbursed.>

As a final point on accessibility and opportunity, PhD students often receive little sympathy from their advocacy because the degree is seen as a privileged opportunity. However, we ask to consider the perspective that a PhD has only become more accessible in recent years, and it is a natural reaction (especially for those that are first in the family) to accept an offer to undertake a doctorate in fear this will be their only opportunity and rejecting the offer would be letting down our families. As such, it can be pretty disheartening to feel our hardships and struggles are so quickly diminished with the perception of privilege. It is worth asking, would others have overcome the feeling of letting others down and reject an offer to undertake a doctorate?

Investment and affordability

CAPA believes society benefits from considerable social, cultural and economic benefits from higher education and should, therefore, be free and accessible to all. We believe that Federal investment in higher education is an investment in its citizens. An investment in human capital ultimately pays for itself in a progressive taxation system over the long term. This would be the most equitable way to ensure the cost of funding higher education is shifted away from those most vulnerable and restricted from accessing post-secondary education. We would support the abolition of HELP and the phased forgiving of all existing HELP debts.

However, our current system is funded through a Higher Education Loan Program (HELP) and in the current economic and political climate, we have shown public support for increasing the minimum repayment income.¹⁹ We would encourage the government and other policy groups to consider our recommendations in our upcoming submission concerning the inquiry into the Education and Other Legislation Amendment (Abolishing Indexation and Raising the Minimum Repayment Income for Education and Training Loans) Bill 2022.

The affordability of attaining a quality experience from a higher education degree is increasingly difficult. Our emphasis on quality experience is about our previous points of opportunity, including the increasing cost of living and the on-campus experience of face-to-face learning. As previously mentioned, the inadequacies of the current welfare system to address the current inequalities in our society means students have less time to

¹⁹ Black S., 2022, *When the 'good debt' stopped being good: the fallout and future of rising student loans*, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/nov/26/when-the-good-debt-stopped-being-good-the-fallout-and-future-of-rising-student-loans>

invest in their education to excel academically. Consequently, the reduced quality of education delivered online and decreasing investment in engaging in their education is devaluing the higher education experience.

Governance, accountability and community

The governance of universities ensures that the processes and practices of these institutions reflect their intended purpose and function. In earlier sections, we cited the interpretations of some reputable sources, each touching on educating, research, academic integrity, serving the public good and immunity to external influences (political and financial). For each University, the University Council is responsible for the governance and is accountable for ensuring the institution's day-to-day operations meet its true purpose to the community.

Our concern at this time is that the governance structures currently in place at many Australian Universities are governing universities towards a corporatised culture that is superseding the academic interest of the community and the public good. Numerous examples can be seen in recent media, including allegations of wage theft, the rising prevalence of workforce casualisation and the exploitation of international students as 'cash cows'. Those that have spoken out against the managerial culture at universities claim to be silenced by management and, in some cases, terminated from their employment.²⁰ Various articles have been published suggesting the greater representation of actively engaged community members to sit on university councils to ensure their concerns can be of influence at the highest level of university governance.²¹ Similar public discussions have been raised in the Parliament of Tasmania through the inquiry of the *University of Tasmania Act 1992*, to which we contributed our submission to the University of Tasmania's responsibilities to its local community.²²

Regarding community engagement, CAPA is concerned that student's voice has felt similarly silenced as many of our affiliating members (student organisations) currently receive only a small proportion of Student Service Amenities Fees (SSAF) to operate student advocacy

²⁰ Ross J., 2022, *One-person redundancy round claims university council member*, Times Higher Education , <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/one-person-redundancy-round-claims-university-council-member>

²¹ Guthrie J., Lucas A., 2022, James Guthrie and Adam Lucas: It's time for a Royal Commission into the governance of Australia's public universities, Pearls and Irritations, <https://johnmenadue.com/james-guthrie-its-time-for-a-royal-commission-into-the-governance-of-australias-public-universities/>

²² Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations 2022, *Response to the 'Inquiry into the Provisions of the University of Tasmania Act, 1992'*, <http://www.capa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/58-CAPA-and-NATSIPA.pdf>

services for students. Their SSAF funding for our members is often negotiated towards the end of each year and typically favours the university management that stipulates the funding agreement conditions, which consequently limits the advocacy of these organisations in fear of financial retaliation. An exception is the student Guilds of Western Australia, in which state legislation guarantees student guilds receive 50% of the annual SSAF contribution allowing greater freedoms to advocate for their constituents.

The more significant concern is postgraduate student associations challenges in this space. The needs of postgraduate students are significantly different to our undergraduate counterparts and still bear the scars from voluntary student unionism, with many of our postgraduate associations collapsing into a combined student organisation with undergraduates.

Over the years, we have seen postgraduate representation wane on campus, where resources are shared under such an arrangement due to our smaller but no less relevant cohort. We often reflect a broader demographic and include research students that face distinctively different challenges from coursework students, which requires autonomy that can only be achieved with a separate postgraduate representation. To emphasise the importance of the postgraduate voice, we only need to look back at the pandemic, in which many PhD students could not collect data during the lockdown periods. CAPA and our members would lobby for an extension of PhD candidatures to 4.5 years full-time equivalent to assist students affected by the pandemic and for additional research funding to cover the shortfall of international students and the stipend extensions. These concerns were partly due to the contribution of funding postgraduate representation and their funding of CAPA.

The connection between vocational education and training and higher education systems

On principle, CAPA supports a credit transfer process and recognition of prior learning to improve mobility between vocation and tertiary education. We believe that national and statewide databases be used to allow cross-institutional credit transfers, which may include international credit transfer relationships to benefit international students. Most importantly, the application process for credit transfer arrangements through prior learning should be presented with transparency along with accessible information guides.

Quality and Sustainability

CAPA is concerned with the rise of online learning as a by-product of the COVID pandemic. In principle, we support flexible delivery initiatives in education, which will embrace the expansion of coursework awards to those who would otherwise find higher education inaccessible.

While expressing general support for developing more flexible delivery modes, we are nevertheless concerned that the new initiative that has emerged is still incomparable (in terms of quality and engagement) to face-to-face learning. Lockdowns are far behind us, but many universities continue to mainstream hybrid learning claiming positive feedback for flexibility from internal surveys. Whilst other universities have taken the policy of delivering quality over flexibility.

For example, the University of Sydney recently announced returning to complete face-to-face learning with the Vice Chancellor, Mark Scott, saying "patchy video platforms meant the college can not provide quality education." and supported by Clinical Psychologist Professor Adam Guastella that "online learning isn't the best and being in person, interacting and engaging with demonstrations in tutorials - [students] have missed out on a lot of that, so I think the transition back into online learning is going to be very helpful for a lot of students".²³ These perspectives suggest that a permanent transition to hybrid learning undermines the quality of education expected of university education as it begs to question, at what point is learning from other online platforms with educational material (udemy, Skillshare, masterclass, youtube) become more economically viable engage with for gaining fundamental and technical expertise.

There is also a point to be made about supporting students with disabilities and from disadvantaged backgrounds who may find online learning detrimental to their learning experience.²⁴ For example, students first in the family to attend University often do not enter the system with prior knowledge and advice from family. Instead, they engage in campus life and learn how to cope with university life by learning from their peers. Online learning may

²³ Hobman, J. (2022). University orders all of its students BACK to campus after haunting image exposed the reality of student life in 2022, Daily Mail Australia, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11379349/Sydney-University-orders-students-campus-scrapping-online-zoom-classes.html>

²⁴ Ngubane S., Zongozzi N., 2021, *Online learning can be hard for students with disabilities: how to help*, The Conversation, <https://theconversation.com/online-learning-can-be-hard-for-students-with-disabilities-how-to-help-158650>

offer flexibility but also takes students away from interacting in an intellectually stimulating environment and community.

Given the corporatisation of higher education and lack of public funding, we are also concerned that the increased flexible delivery will offer institutions the opportunity and incentive to expand their fee-paying base. We believe public universities need to be adequately funded to deliver quality education, and that should not be commercialised as a 'product' or 'commodity'.

Delivering new knowledge, innovation and capability

CAPA believes innovation and capacity building at universities will require a return to the collegiate culture of universities where ideas are motivated by intellectual curiosity. The forces that distort universities from performing their natural function must be addressed to achieve this. They are university governance at the top levels of management, the Job-Ready Graduates reform with increased funding, and performance-based models that drive the sector.

These forces promote bureaucracy and managerial decisions that place the institution's interest before academic and community's. Increasing competition has not necessarily raised productivity or the quality of outcomes. Instead, participants have distorted the culture of universities in order to game the system set by performance-based funding models.