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ACGR Response to the Decadal Plan for Australian Education Research 2025–36 Consultation Paper

The Australian Council of Graduate Research (ACGR) was established in 1997 and is Australia's peak body for higher degree by research (HDR) education, often referred to as graduate research. Through our programs and advocacy, we support the continued development of the Australian research ecosystem and research workforce. We engage and consult with stakeholders to advocate for excellence in research training and scholarship and uphold high standards across all HDR programs.

All HDR-awarding Higher Education (HE) institutions in Australia are members of ACGR, with each institution represented by a senior academic leader. In most cases this representative is the most senior executive with responsibility for graduate research — typically a Graduate School Dean or Pro Vice-Chancellor of Research Training. In addition, professional leaders in researcher development and management from member institutions participate in ACGR working groups, annual conferences, and webinars, contributing insights into operational and regulatory issues in the recruitment and management of HDR candidates.

ACGR's mission is to contribute constructively to the development of effective HDR policy and to promote the value and impact of HDR education both within academia and across industry and communities. ACGR is thus uniquely qualified to provide credible advice on the Australian research training environment and is pleased to provide the following recommendations for consideration in response to the Decadal Plan for Australian Education Research 2026-35 Consultation Paper.

PhD Candidates as a Critical National Asset

PhD candidates play a central role in Australia's research and innovation landscape. They conduct original research that expands knowledge and drives breakthroughs across sectors including science and technology, health, environment, education, government,

and industry. PhD programs not only enhance Australia's academic reputation, but they also address workforce demands and skills shortages in essential fields and contribute significantly to the research-intensive capabilities of the nation. Despite the importance of HDR, recent trends indicate structural risks to the future of Australia's research workforce. Between 2018 and 2023, domestic PhD enrolments declined by 8 per cent, even as the national population grew.

Challenges Facing PhD Candidates

A central concern for PhD Candidates in Australia is that PhD stipends — particularly the base rate funded through the Australian Government's Research Training Program (RTP) — remain insufficient to meet living costs. In 2025 the base stipend was $33,511 per annum, which is barely above the poverty line and significantly below the national minimum wage. Additionally, universities that choose to increase stipends often face financial trade-offs, as higher stipends within fixed budgets result in support for fewer candidates overall. This disproportionately affects students with greater financial responsibilities, including those with families or mortgages.

This inadequate funding creates significant financial stress for candidates, discourages prospective students from commencing PhD study, and acts as a barrier to equitable access for talented individuals from diverse backgrounds. The exclusion of HDR candidates from essential government-supported benefits such as paid parental leave further compounds these challenges.

Common misconceptions persist that PhD candidates are predominantly young students moving directly from undergraduate degrees and that their skills are narrowly specialised. In reality, the average age of a PhD candidate in Australia is 37 years old, with many bringing substantial work experience, enriching both research and broader workforce outcomes. Moreover, PhD programs cultivate transferable capabilities including critical thinking, high level research and communication skills, advanced problem-solving, project management, and collaboration — skills highly valued outside of academia in industry, government, and community sectors.

PhD candidates are indispensable to Australia's research excellence, global competitiveness, and national problem-solving capacity. Yet current financial, structural, and policy settings are constraining the potential of talented researchers at a time when their contributions are more crucial than ever. By strengthening financial support, expanding participation, and enhancing pathways to impact, Australia can secure a robust

and resilient research workforce for the decades ahead.

Recommendations

Recognising the importance of PhD candidates to Australia's future, proactive steps are essential to strengthen and secure the nation's research workforce. Offering adequate financial support to PhD students is crucial for attracting top talent to research training programs and ensuring a transformative development experience for researchers.

We recommend:

1. Enhanced financial support and equity measures to improve the feasibility of PhD study in Australia:
    a. increase the minimum stipend to meet a realistic cost-of-living benchmark, with indexing to maintain this standard,
    b. expand the RTP funding pool to cover the increased minimum stipend while supporting the current number of domestic candidates,
    c. extend eligibility for government-funded parental leave, and
    d. remove taxation on part-time stipend scholarships.

Universities have a social responsibility to deliver exceptional research training experiences for international students, particularly those from lower- and middle-income countries in our region and beyond. International PhD candidates play a crucial role in addressing current skills shortages, yet the current RTP cap that limits international participation to 10 per cent restricts Australia's ability to fully leverage global talent. Additionally, international PhD candidates represent 30% of the national PhD cohort, creating a misalignment between international PhD candidate participation and RTP funding cap restrictions.

We recommend:

2. Increased support for international PhD candidates to address industry and workforce needs, particularly in regional and remote locations:
    a. raise the international cap on RTP funding from 10 per cent to 20 per cent to better support international students, and
    b. increase the RTP funding pool to support additional international candidates without reducing the number of domestic candidates.