



Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations Incorporated

Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA)

Response to National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy Framing Paper

February 2019

Foreword

The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) is the peak body representing the interests of the over 400,000 postgraduate students in Australia. We represent coursework and research, as well as domestic and international, postgraduate students. We are comprised of 28 university and campus based postgraduate associations, as well as 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.

We welcome this opportunity to contribute to the National Regional, Rural and Remote (RRR) Education Strategy in order to improve outcomes for these students.

In this submission, we aim to assist the working group by providing recommendations on addressing Challenges B and D that were presented in the framing document for this inquiry. We propose that the financial burdens facing relocating students can be significantly reduced by extending and increasing the value of student income support. We also suggest that increased university investment in on-campus counselling services and student organisations can help RRR students to adjust to university life and provide more formal and informal support towards their wellbeing. Finally, we suggest that the competitive nature of research degree scholarships disadvantages RRR students who have often had less opportunities than their city-based peers to meet the competitive criteria required to be awarded a stipend. As a result, CAPA recommends the following:

1. That income support be extended to all full-time domestic postgraduate students, subject to means-testing;
2. That the rate of Austudy be urgently increased in order to help students afford housing;
3. That universities and affiliated colleges work to keep their rental rates below 50% of Austudy, and where this is not possible, provide a significant increase in the number of scholarships targeted at disadvantaged and RRR students;
4. That all universities provide at least 12 free sessions with a university-based counsellor each year, and invest in reducing wait-times of on-campus counselling services and in providing teleconference counselling options;
5. That the Commonwealth Government legislate that 50% of collect SSAF dues be allocated to student organisation to provide peer-based social support and communities for incoming students;
6. That State Governments which have not already done so extend student public transport concession rates to all students;
7. That the Commonwealth Government allocate RTP-equivalent stipends for disadvantaged students, at a level to compensate for the overall reduction in funding for RTP stipends.

Challenge B: Relocating RRR students face significant financial, emotional and social challenges

Extending income support to all domestic full-time postgraduate students

Student income support refers to the provision of modest living allowances to full-time domestic students, such as Austudy, Abstudy, and Youth Allowance. The original intention of Commonwealth-provided income support was to produce more university graduates by preventing low-income students from withdrawing for financial reasons (Daniels 2017). Income support is a universal entitlement for all full-time domestic undergraduate students, subject to income and assets testing, as well as circumstances. However, there is no universal entitlement to income support for low-income domestic postgraduate research and coursework students.

Postgraduate students enrolled in Masters level coursework degrees are sometimes eligible for income support payments, but only if their course is approved as the “minimum legal or professional educational requirement, the fastest pathway offered by the higher education provider or the only pathway offered by the higher education provider to gain an entry-level qualification for a profession” (Department of Social Services 2018, p. 3). Our research has found that only 28% of Masters level degrees are approved for income support (Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations, 2018).

Research students are not eligible to receive student income support payments through the Department of Human Services. Some students access a living stipend as part of the Research Training Program (RTP) scholarships program. This is a process that generally prioritises students who have achieved research publications and, in the case of PhD students, those who have previously completed a Masters degree. This results in RTP stipends being less attainable for students who have had less opportunity to publish their research or who could not afford to undertake Masters-level study in their research area, compounding disadvantage that they have already faced - which disproportionately applies to RRR students.

We recommend that access to income support be expanded to all domestic full-time postgraduate students, subject to means-testing, in order to facilitate greater access to postgraduate study from low socioeconomic groups - including many RRR students - and to enable more students to complete and succeed in their studies.

Inadequacy of rate of income support payments

While extending eligibility for income support is essential for improving access to postgraduate education for RRR students, another is that the current value of income support for students - for those who are eligible - remains inadequate for students who need to relocate to complete their studies. The current rate of Austudy, the primary form of Government income support for students in eligible postgraduate courses, is currently valued at \$222.70 per week (Department of Human Services, 2019).

This value is wholly inadequate to cover basic living requirements for students who are reliant on these payments. The cost of University supplied accommodation alone often exceeds the Austudy rate, forcing RRR students to rely on other forms of income or the support of family

in order to meet the cost of their accommodation. For example, University Hall located at (and operated by) the University of Western Australia, charges \$365 per week for a standard room or a postgraduate student apartment (University Hall, n.d.). A student receiving Austudy would therefore have to pay \$142.30 per week out of their own pocket, before then paying for other living and study expenses. The University of Melbourne offers accommodation at residential colleges from \$664 per week for undergraduates and \$426 for postgraduates - or \$203.30 to \$441.30 above Austudy (University of Melbourne, 2018).

While we note that many Universities and accommodation providers do have scholarships for RRR students, the number and value of these often make them ineffective at producing a significant increase in the affordability of university to most RRR students. For example, University Hall has only 4 named scholarships to assist with living expenses available to new postgraduate students from RRR areas, two of which would only cover the difference between the room rates and Austudy for one semester.

We echo the plea of the Australian Council of Social Service to urgently increase welfare payments - including Youth Allowance and Austudy - by \$75 per week (Australian Council of Social Service, 2018). We further recommend that Universities and their associated residential colleges work together to ensure that rental rates remain as low as possible, and, where it is not possible to keep rentals rates below 50% of Austudy, that universities and residential colleges provide more scholarships targeted at disadvantaged and RRR students.

Access to mental health support

University students experience mental health issues at significantly higher rates than that of the general population (Stallman, 2011). RRR Student are particularly vulnerable and need additional support to maintain good mental health, due to a number of factors including the stress of moving to the city to study, absence of family and previously built support networks, and financial strain. Most Australian universities are falling short of student needs when it comes to providing suitable mental health services. When done correctly, these services can increase retention rates and completion times.

The primary mental health support offered by most universities is a free counselling service, operated by the university. The cost-free nature of these services combined with the convenience of on-campus support makes these services highly attractive and relatively low-barrier. However, the support received at these services varies wildly across universities. A number of universities, including the University of Western Australia and Monash University, provide up to 6 sessions per year in most cases. ANU provides twice as many, allocating up to 6 sessions per academic semester (12 per year). Other universities, such as the University of New South Wales, do not prescribe a set maximum, but operate on an “as needed” basis.

We believe that six sessions across a year is inadequate to properly support RRR students, particularly in the first year of university. For comparison, the Medicare Mental Health Care Plan - which can only be accessed with a doctor’s referral - provides up to 10 one-on-one sessions with a psychologist per year, and that has previously been criticised by mental health care professionals as being inadequate to properly treat many mental health conditions (Australian Psychological Society, 2018). Across a year 6 sessions equates to one every two months, which would not even provide suitable ongoing support, let alone allowing for crisis intervention. While undergraduate students may only be on campus for 6 months of the year,

many postgraduate students work year-round and thus need to have access to support even outside of standard academic semesters.

CAPA is also concerned by anecdotal reports of long wait times at these services. Our affiliates have reported students being made to wait weeks for crisis support (such as students with suicidal thoughts) and over a month for less severe cases. Delays in receiving support can have severe negative consequences, including the deterioration of mental health, and instances of self-harm and suicide. Additional resourcing is needed to reduced wait-times for both crisis support and less severe mental health support.

CAPA recommends that all universities move to providing at least 12 sessions with a university provided counsellor each year, with an option to provide additional sessions if deemed necessary. CAPA also recommends that universities increase the number and availability of counselling sessions in order to reduce wait-times. Finally, we recommend that universities make arrangements to have counsellors available at all campuses of their university, and to provide teleconferencing options for students studying by correspondence (including online study).

Building a campus community

Strong campus communities are essential for RRR students who have had to relocate. Campus communities help new students to feel at home on university campuses, and develop strong social support networks in their new locale. University supported peer-based networks are able to provide the best support for students, as they have the ability to be more responsive and have a lower entry barrier than institutionalised support systems. In most universities these peer-support networks are formed around university clubs and societies, usually managed by student unions.

Student organisations rely on the university-collected Student Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF). The ability of student organisations to provide a vibrant on-campus experience and strong social support is strongly tied to the amount of SSAF allocated by the university to student organisations. As an example, the University of Western Australia's Student Guild, which manages all non-sporting clubs and societies at UWA, received 30% of the collected SSAF for operation expenses in 2016, and used that money to enable student clubs and societies run 816 events across the year with approximately 90,500 attendees (UWA Student Guild, 2016). In 2017, the Guild received 50% of the collected SSAF and was able to run 1211 club and society events with approximately 121,500 attendees, representing at 48% increase in events run and a 34% increase in number of events attended (UWA Student Guild, 2017). This example clearly demonstrates the link between SSAF allocated to student organisations, and the capacity of those organisations to provide a vibrant campus culture and strong social support to students.

While a 50% minimum allocation of SSAF to student organisations is mandated by legislation in Western Australia, there is no minimum legislated allocation in any other state. Most student organisations, particularly postgraduate associations, are forced to operate on a pittance. We collected information on this on 2018, finding that independent postgraduate associations operate with an average of \$61 per head - only 20% of the maximum collected SSAF from these students. Some postgraduate associations operate on far less, for example, the Wollongong University Postgraduate Association receives only \$3.50 per student.

We, therefore, recommend that the Federal Government legislate that a minimum of 50% of SSAF collected by Australian universities be allocated to undergraduate and postgraduate student-run organisations.

Access to public transport concessions

In Victoria and New South Wales, not all full-time students are able to access public transport concession fares. Victorian postgraduate students are excluded from student concession fares, as are international students in New South Wales.

The need for public transport concession fares has been long argued for by student associations in Victoria and New South Wales as well as by others in the higher education sector such as Universities Australia, the Group of Eight, and the Australian Council for Private Education and Training (University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association, 2018).

For rural students, the lack of public transport concessions greatly restricts their ability to travel to urban universities. For example, in Victoria, V-Line services into suburban or urban areas cost up to \$46.76 per day (Public Transport Victoria 2019). Extending concessions to postgraduate students would halve their costs of travel on public transport, enabling them to travel to class, meetings, and research sites. We recommend that concession fares are extended to all students, regardless of state, to enable students to afford to use the public transport network.

Challenge D: RRR often experience multiple forms of disadvantage

Equity considerations for Higher Degree by Research stipends

The main form of income support for postgraduate research students is a RTP stipend. The RTP stipend is a competitive scholarship that is allocated by each university on behalf of the Commonwealth Government. There are no national equity guidelines for the allocation of RTP stipends. Our examination of policies of Group of Eight universities found that none included equity criteria in the allocation of RTP stipends (Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations 2018). Furthermore, two of these universities prioritised students intending to study on-campus, therefore explicitly disadvantaging students who are live remotely.

While each university has its own allocation criteria, all are primarily based on previous academic performance, measured by the highest previous degree, research outputs, research experience and work history. The University of New England, for example, selects applicants based upon “academic merit and research performance” indicated by:

- Academic qualifications and awards
- Research experience
- Employment history
- Publications
- Non-Traditional research outputs
- Statement of Support from supervisor
- Academic Referee reports

English Language requirements (University of New England, 2017)

While the evidence included in this list provides a good overview of an applicant's academic output, it fails to take into account the circumstances of the individual. These assessment criteria will naturally favour applicants who have previously had more access to opportunities to build towards these competitive criteria. It will therefore disadvantage those who have previously come from marginalised backgrounds or remote areas who have had limited access to opportunities to demonstrate their academic capacity.

The competitive nature of the RTP scheme therefore further entrenches disadvantage amongst RRR research students. This is evident in two ways. Firstly, it forces the students who have not received RTP stipends to either work or otherwise be supported by family during their research degree. This can lead to longer completion times, reduced completion rates, and financial stress on the student and their family. Secondly, upon graduation, these students must compete for academic and research jobs against students who have a demonstrated ability to attract competitive funding (previous RTP stipend awardees), a highly desirable trait for potential employers. This makes it more difficult for students to break into the research workforce.

With the current funding environment, obtaining an RTP is becoming more competitive. In the period 2012 to 2016, the number of stipends available each year remained stable, yet postgraduate research student numbers increased by 5% over this period (Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations, 2018). A research funding freeze introduced more recently for the 2019 intake has resulted in up to 500 fewer stipend recipients (Gardner, 2018). More students are now competing for a smaller pool of funding - and those who have experienced disadvantage, including many RRR students, are more likely to miss out.

We recommend that the Government work with universities to allocate research stipends, of equivalent value to the RTP, to students from RRR or disadvantaged backgrounds. This could be conducted as a reallocation of the funds saved from freezing the RTP stipends for 2019. We furthermore suggest that Australian universities incorporate equity considerations into the criteria for allocating RTP stipends to applicants.

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