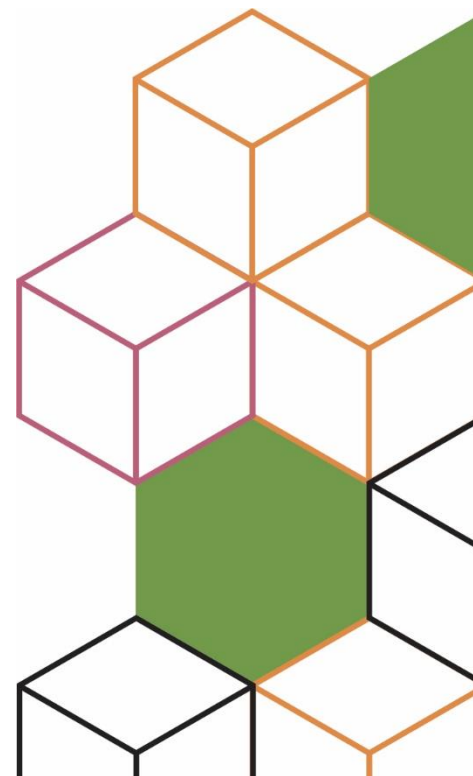


August  
**2023**

Graduate Student  
Association

**Submission to the  
Inquiry into the  
Recognition of  
Unpaid Carers**



## Introduction

GSA welcomes the Australian Government's *Inquiry into the Recognition of Unpaid Carers*<sup>1</sup>. We acknowledge that graduate students face unique challenges in undertaking unpaid care work while pursuing a master's degree, graduate diploma, or PhD. This submission outlines the unique challenges they face, and makes recommendations to the government which address their needs.

The Graduate Student Association (GSA) is the independent representative organisation for all graduate coursework and research students at the University of Melbourne. We are led by 8 GSA Board members and 10 Representative Council members who are all elected University of Melbourne graduate students. On behalf of over 36,000 constituents, we represent graduate student interests to the University and wider community, provide student engagement events, activities, and information to the graduate student community, and support 150 affiliated graduate student groups.

GSA's vision is for inclusive, empowered graduate student communities that achieve meaningful and holistic university experiences. Our objectives are to achieve and support representation, academic support, transition to work, engaged and healthy communities, and organisational sustainability.

This submission was written on the Land of the Wurundjeri People. GSA acknowledges the Wurundjeri People as the traditional custodians of this land.

## Executive Summary

To develop this submission, GSA produced a survey for graduate students currently or previously doing unpaid care work, which received 47 responses. Those responses have been used to develop recommendations and to describe their unique experiences of caring whilst being an unpaid carer.

*"The actual demands of care are worsened by the huge lack of support and recognition. The financial cost and opportunity cost of being an unpaid carer is huge and such a waste of the potential that I could otherwise make to society." – a domestic graduate student, caring for 3 or more people.*

It also showed that nearly half of graduate student carers are international students. Most graduate student carers are caring for a parent or parents, with some caring for multiple people including children or other family members. Forty seven percent are the sole carer for the person or people they care for, and 23% spend 30 hours or more on care work per week on average. For many respondents,

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<sup>1</sup>"Inquiry into the recognition of unpaid carers," Parliament of Australia, viewed July 10, 2023, [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/House/Social\\_Policy\\_and\\_Legal\\_Affairs/UnpaidCarers](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Social_Policy_and_Legal_Affairs/UnpaidCarers)

their caring responsibilities have significantly shaped their day-to-day lives and future opportunities.

Many graduate student carers are young, LGBTIQ+, or culturally and/or linguistically diverse. What united almost all respondents was a need for acknowledgement, flexibility, and increased support from the government and universities. Our results demonstrate the diversity amongst graduate student carers, and the unique needs they have which need to be addressed.

### **Recommendations:**

The survey found that major issues graduate student carers face revolved around the following main themes. The detailed list of recommendations can be found in Appendix 1.

- **Value and recognition**
- **Financial stress**
- **Daily living needs**
- **Childcare accessibility**
- **University and workplace recognition**
- **Increasing support networks**
- **Access to healthcare and medical support**

*“Ideally, I would like to have access to flexible support services that alleviate the burden of unpaid care work, such as respite care options and counselling support. Additionally, having financial assistance or benefits for carers would greatly help in managing the associated costs and responsibilities.” – a culturally and/or linguistically diverse, LGBTIQ+ international graduate student, caring for 1 person.*

## **Response**

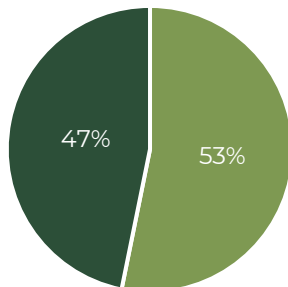
### **Statistics**

GSA’s survey on graduate student unpaid carers had 47 responses, which have informed this submission. The following statistics outline the demographics and experiences of the respondents.

Note: Not all percentages will add up to 100% due to some respondents selecting multiple options for some questions.

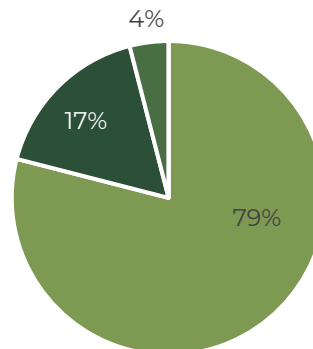
## Demographics of respondents:

### Current domestic or international student



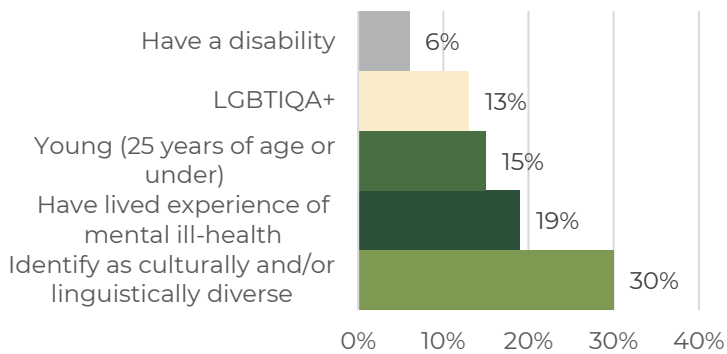
■ Domestic student ■ International student

### Gender

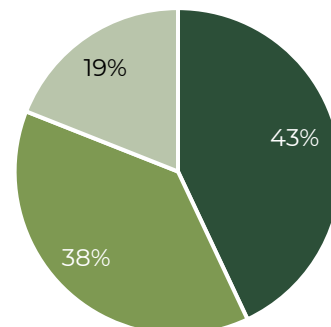


■ Women/female ■ Men/male ■ Non-binary

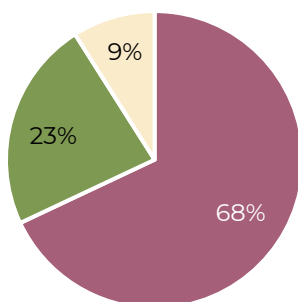
### Identity and lived experience



### Number of people they are caring for



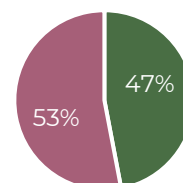
### Caring responsibilities



■ Currently doing unpaid care work  
 ■ Have done unpaid care work at some time during their graduate degree

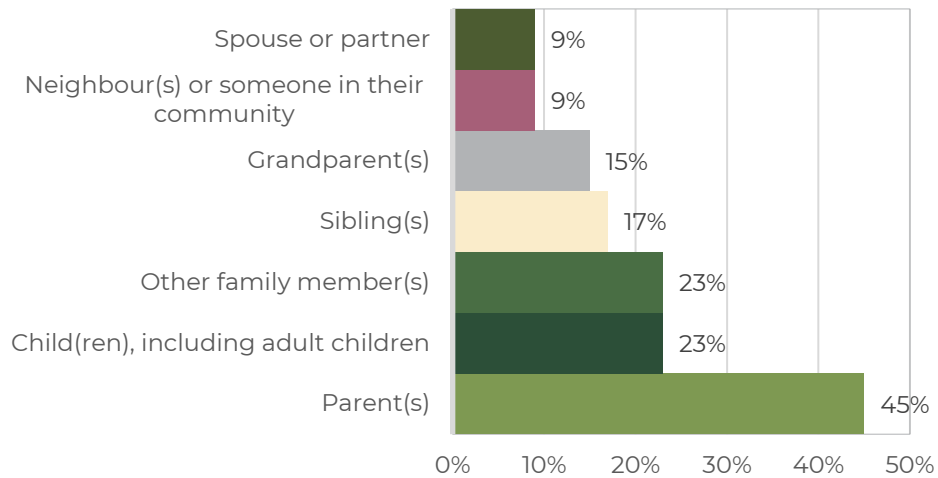
■ Care for 1 person at a time  
 ■ Care for 2 people at a time  
 ■ Care for 3+ people at a time

### Sole carer status

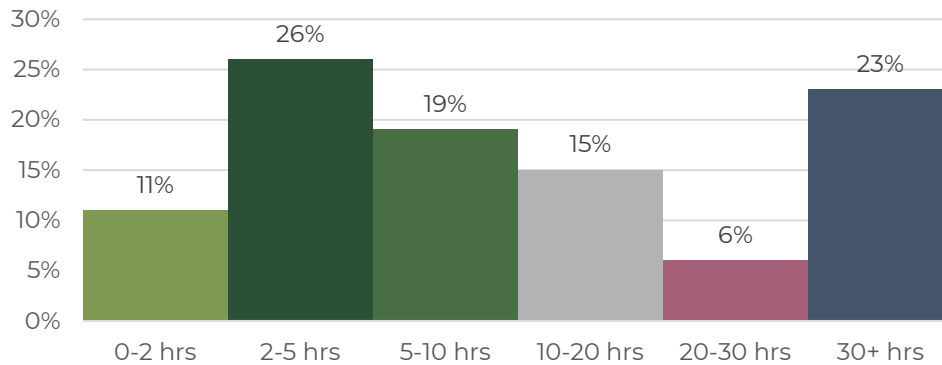


■ Sole carer for the person or people they care for  
 ■ Not the sole carer

## Who graduate students are caring for



## Time spent per week on average doing unpaid care work



More than half (53%) of respondents said they receive no support. Of those who do receive support, this included:

- Practical support from family, friends and spouse/partner (e.g. household chores and share caring responsibilities)
- Financial support including from family and spouse/partner
- Accommodation support
- Study leave or adjustments from the university
- Formal psychological support
- Emotional and moral support and recognition from family and friends

## Impact of being an unpaid carer

### Value and Recognition

Being a carer is something that many respondents are glad they do. While they acknowledge how difficult it can be, many feel that they are able to provide value to their loved ones by taking on care work. While some receive recognition and feel valued by their families and communities, many discussed feeling undervalued and that their work was not adequately recognised by the people in their lives, including family and friends, workplaces, and university.

*“As a woman, it is expected that I can provide the care needed and at no stage am I considered.” – a domestic graduate student, caring for 1 person.*

Multiple respondents noted the cultural and gendered expectations on them to provide care, which some found burdensome and stressful. They described having to translate, advocate, and explain for the people they cared for as the only available carer who speaks English. This is especially true for international students, who often need to navigate even more complex system than permanent residents and citizens.

*“I am a bridge between my family and the society in many ways. Due to language and culture barriers, I need to be there for the elders when they can't deal [with] the issues. I also need to teach the young one the languages and cultures.” – a culturally and/or linguistically diverse domestic graduate student, caring for 3 or more people.*

Respondents discussed having sacrificed career and life opportunities to undertake care work, with some feeling that there was no other option and no one else to do or significantly support the caring obligations. They spend significant amounts of time simply trying to understand systems including the medical system and Centrelink services. They struggle to know what support is available and how to access it, often being referred to services, providers, or government bodies who are ultimately not able to help them, leading to frustration and wasted time. It was also noted that the care work they do is “unofficial”, meaning they care for someone who may not meet the government’s criteria for requiring a carer, or they do relatively small amounts of unpaid care work. For these people, accessing support is either much more difficult, or does not exist at all.

*“Centrelink has very specific requirements for caring allowances and often the flexibility of university and multiple part-time jobs mean that most of the labour goes unrecognised.” – a young, domestic graduate student, caring for 2 people.*

### Recommendations:

1. Acknowledge and account for the gendered aspect of unpaid care work.
2. Acknowledge and account for cultural expectations around care work, ensuring that policies and systems are culturally appropriate and support people to make educated decisions around taking on unpaid care work.
3. Streamline avenues for support across all levels of government and throughout systems to ensure ease of access and information.
  - a. Provide clear guidelines for unpaid carers to access support.

4. Ensure workplaces and higher education providers provide flexibility and understanding to employees taking on unpaid care work.
5. Acknowledge the wide variety of unpaid care work which is necessary to support people to expand support.

*“In China children’s unpaid care of our parents and grandparents is a duty and obligation, and if you fail to do so, people around you will accuse you of being ungrateful. Therefore, it is a very common thing in our country, but it puts a heavy burden on the children, especially the only child, we usually need to take care of four old people by ourselves, which is very hard.” – a young international student, caring for 2 people.*

## Financial Stress

Financial stress was a theme throughout the answers respondents gave. While financial support is relevant throughout this submission, this section focuses on the financial burden many graduate unpaid carers face and the solutions they suggested to address this burden.

*“It is stressful and costly. I cannot work for income while I am caring for this person.” – an international student living with a disability, caring for 1 person.*

Taking on unpaid care work necessarily means that a person’s capacity to pursue employment is hindered. With nearly a quarter (23%) of our respondents caring for 30 or more hours per week on average, the financial burden of not being able to work is enormous. Respondents noted that hiring help, whether carers or cleaners, is expensive and inaccessible to them. Further, the Research Training Program base stipend for a full-time student is below the national minimum wage by 35%<sup>2,3</sup>, meaning that many PhD students and candidates already face financial stress.

*“The stress of balancing graduate research and care responsibilities is enormous. In order to cope I transferred to part-time, however this has in fact increased mental and emotional stress through the financial hardship of heavily reduced and taxed stipend. For me I simply cannot juggle research and teaching as well as carer duties.” – a domestic graduate student, caring for 2 people.*

For international students there may be issues in using their insurance to cover the costs of medical visits and pharmacy items, leaving them to pay large amounts of money out-of-pocket for the care work they are doing, on top of the cost of their own needs. For those who are domestic students, many undertaking graduate degrees are not eligible for Youth Allowance or other payments.

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<sup>2</sup> “Research Training Program,” Australian Government Department of Education, last modified February 16, 2023, <https://www.education.gov.au/research-block-grants/research-training-program>

<sup>3</sup> “Minimum wages increase from 1 July 2023,” Fair Work Ombudsman, last modified July 10, 2023, <https://www.fairwork.gov.au/newsroom/news/awr-2023>

Transport was raised as a consideration for many graduate carers, especially because graduate students are not eligible for public transport concessions. Carers often spend considerable time and money transporting the people they are caring for to and from appointments and other engagements. These types of costs add up quickly and are compounded especially for those who are already under financial stress.

*“I had to travel a lot to visit my grandparent and it took up my study time.” – an international student, caring for 1 person.*

Respondents further noted that the conditions a person must meet to be considered eligible for a disability support pension or carer allowance do not necessarily reflect the actual needs a person has. For example, some people may be ill but not officially disabled and while they do not require care for tasks such as dressing or feeding themselves, they are unable to drive, travel far, or go to the supermarket alone. This means that someone still needs to provide a high amount of care, although they are unable to access government support. Noting that the adequacy of payments for carers is out of the scope of this inquiry, there is still a significant need for change in which reflects people’s needs as carers.

*“As a young person, this unpaid care work makes me struggle with my finance and costs me a lot of time so I can hardly focus on my studies.” – a young international student, caring for 1 person.*

### **Recommendations:**

6. Provide financial support for graduate students who are not Australian citizens or permanent residents to access healthcare and pharmaceuticals.
7. Advocate to the federal government to reduce the barriers to accessing the Carer Payment and ensure all graduate students have targeted access to it, including international students.
8. Ensure all graduate students can access Youth Allowance and other relevant government payments.
9. Advocate to the Victorian Government to ensure all graduate students, including international students, can access public transport concessions.
10. Provide taxi cards and other necessary transport vouchers to support unpaid carers proving transport.

### **Daily Living Needs**

Unpaid care work extends beyond looking after the direct needs of the person being cared for. This is further compounded when the graduate carer is caring for multiple people including their children and other family members. Many described cooking and cleaning as significant burdens to their time and ability to undertake work or study. For those already experiencing financial stress, access to food is a substantial issue. Further, some respondents described the nature of household work as highly gendered, with the expectation on them as a woman to undertake this work. This was especially true for some carers who described their culture as a key factor in this dynamic.



*“Having the additional burden of caring for family members makes university even more challenging than it already is. As a young person, I never expected to be caring for both of my parents so early.” – a young domestic graduate student, caring for 2 people.*

Respondents noted that having in-home support for cleaning and household chores would be immensely helpful to them being able to take on other tasks. Similarly, paid care work and practical support such as a support worker and/or case worker were described as being ideal, however there are significant financial barriers to obtaining this help for many unpaid carers.

*“I am the responsible person for cooking and cleaning and almost everything I have to do for them but in return I get nothing.” – a domestic graduate student, caring for 3 or more people.*

### **Recommendations:**

11. Provide graduate unpaid carers with access to material aid including food.
12. Provide consistent in-home support including paid carers, support workers, case workers, and cleaners to alleviate the burden of care placed on unpaid carers.
  - a. This could be achieved through the expansion of the *Help at home* program<sup>4</sup>.
13. Provide free and accessible respite care to support graduate carers.

### **Childcare Accessibility**

For graduate unpaid carers who care for their children there are unique barriers to their participation in paid employment and graduate studies. The main barrier raised by respondents revolved around access to childcare, especially for those working or studying part-time, who receive less subsidised childcare. For international students there is no available subsidy to access childcare.

*“For international students in Australia, childcare very expensive and does not qualify for any support. We do not have communal or extended family support on childcare when necessary.” – a culturally and/or linguistically diverse international graduate student, caring for 1 person.*

The current Research Training Program stipend, even for a full-time student, falls below the average cost of childcare in Victoria of \$139.39 per day<sup>5</sup>. This means that with rising childcare costs, research students face enormous financial pressure if they have to use childcare services.

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<sup>4</sup> “Help at home,” Seniors Online Victoria, Victoria State Government, last modified December 6, 2022, <https://www.seniorsonline.vic.gov.au/services-information/help-home>

<sup>5</sup> “Childcare services in Vic,” Care for Kids, accessed August 1, 2023, <https://www.careforkids.com.au/child-care/vic>

Further, for many unpaid carers undertaking a research degree or PhD, the time that it takes for them to complete their work often takes significantly longer than the prescribed 40 hours full-time, or 20 hours part-time which is allowed for. This means that despite undertaking longer hours of work, there is no acknowledgement of this overtime which would contribute to better childcare options and allowances.

*"I have to pay high childcare fee[s] out-of-pocket for the additional time I spend on my PhD that I cannot claim because of being officially enrolled as part-time." – a culturally and/or linguistically diverse domestic graduate student, caring for 2 people.*

These issues further compound the financial burden and stress of care work.

### **Recommendations:**

14. Ensure graduate unpaid carers have access to free or significantly subsidised childcare which meets their needs.
15. Ensure graduate international students who are unpaid carers have access to the same childcare allowances as domestic students to better meet their needs.

### **University and Workplace**

Some respondents mentioned that part of the support they received as a carer was the ability to reduce their workload, or take leave for carer responsibilities. Others noted that those options were not available to them, and taking significant amount of time to care had severe impacts on their studies and career opportunities. They had to use up their own personal leave to undertake care work, meaning that when they were unwell or needed personal leave for their own reasons it was unavailable.

*"I was expected to take care of my cousin even though I need enough time to concentrate on my own study and work." – a young, culturally and/or linguistically diverse international graduate student, caring for 1 person.*

Additionally, others noted that they are not able to physically spend much time on campus or in the workplace due to their caring responsibilities. This meant that their options for participating in professional and social activities was greatly reduced, and resulted in fewer available working opportunities. They highlighted the importance of flexibility in universities and the workplace, with access to Zoom and online engagement as their only option to meaningfully participate.

*"I am unable to travel to conferences or attend events outside my planned hours on campus. I have not been able to 'make the most' of my time as a graduate researcher, or be a consistent presence on campus, so I have dropped off the radar in the department and do not get invited to things or given any casual work." – a domestic graduate student, caring for 2 people.*

For some, while completing a PhD, their main option to work involve tutoring at the university. This is almost always casual work, which does not provide reliable

hours or income which they can use to support themselves and the people they are caring for. As noted above, the inadequate Research Training Program stipend is not sufficient for people to support themselves, so when provided with additional work this needs to be reliable.

*“Increase the graduate stipend. As a part time student I am liable for tax on top of the minimal stipend. I am barely coping financially or logistically and currently I am seeking paid work on top of my other commitments to cope with the cost of living.” – a domestic graduate student, caring for 3 or more people.*

Much like how people are able to take parental leave from their workplaces or study, graduate carers often have high time demands which necessitate them to take leave, sometimes on short notice. Unfortunately, this is not generally as widely accepted as parental leave options as there is rarely or never a formal way to take extended or long-term leave as a carer while retaining the job or enrolment. Without options for paid and unpaid medium-long term leave options many graduate carers are unable to undertake care work and achieve their goals.

*“Research must be interrupted anytime once either one of parents [in my] home country is unpredictable ill. [A] professional care worker is very expensive.” – an international student, caring for 2 people.*

### **Recommendations:**

16. Significantly increase the Research Training Program stipend to a liveable wage, above minimum wage.
17. Ensure universities and workplaces provide graduate carers with leave for carers responsibility, including options for medium and long-term, paid and unpaid leave which ensures enrolment and job security for research and coursework students.
  - a. Ensure international student graduate carers who need to take extended periods of leave from work or study do not have their visas impacted by leave status.
18. Ensure short-term carer’s leave entitlements are separate from personal leave for graduate carers.
19. Ensure universities and workplaces provide flexible and accessible options of engagement, including via online platforms such as Zoom.
20. Ensure universities provide reliable teaching work for employees both through casual employment, and secure options including full-time and part-time work.

### **Increasing Support Networks**

Due to the pressures of being a graduate student, and a carer, self-care and maintaining mental health is particularly challenging for graduate carers. Many respondents described feeling constantly overwhelmed and having no time to look after their own basic needs. During their time caring, many had experienced a significant increase in mental-ill health, including stress, anxiety, and depression.

*“I have very little time to look after my own mental health, which has meant it becomes harder to provide the care my mum needs.” – a domestic graduate student, caring for 1 person.*

With the time commitments necessary, respondents described having to spend late nights and weekends working on university work and research, as much of their time during the day was taken up with care work. This lack of free time results in exhaustion and stress, which makes working even more difficult.

*“Ultimately the mental health system is broken, and seriously ill people do not receive any real support, just get bounced around. The support is provided by families, which is extremely difficult, especially given other life pressures such as disability.” – an LGBTIQ+ domestic graduate student living with a disability, caring for 3 or more people.*

Respondents also discussed a toll taken on their personal support systems and relationships, resulting in loneliness. Additionally, respondents noted the emotional energy used in their care work, especially when they were caring for family members and having to work through the reversal of parent/child roles or loss of a parent or loved one. One young respondent noted spending up to 16 hours per day caring for their unwell grandparent, which illustrates how complex maintaining personal support is under these circumstances.

*“There are also feeling[s] of guilt because you want to spend more time caring for your family members, but you also need to balance it with paid-work and study. Unpaid care work can also produce feelings of loneliness because you don't have time to see friends.” – a domestic graduate student, caring for 2 people.*

Physical health also takes a toll through undertaking care work. Respondents described having physical strain and injuries due to the nature of the care work they were doing. Another stated that their own disability means that they have their own needs, which may not be able to be addressed in a timely or effective way. Respite care available to graduate carers would help to ensure they have time to look after their own needs. They require both personal and professional support networks to ensure their own physical and mental wellbeing.

*“While I protected and took care of my mental health by some means, my physical health went down. I was already underweight and I lost more weight, my muscle mass is negligible and I don't have the stamina or strength I used to have a few years ago.” – an international graduate student, caring for 3 or more people.*

### **Recommendations:**

21. Provide graduate carers with free and accessible mental health support which addresses their specific situation.
22. Provide resources and education for graduate carers to understand their options for support for themselves.
23. Run social or community groups for graduate carers to create personal support networks.

- a. Ensure these groups are culturally safe and appropriate for different groups of carers.

## Healthcare and Access to Medical Support

Graduate carers describe their needs for more support in accessing healthcare for the people they care for. Many feel overwhelmed by the complex nature of the healthcare system, especially when they have to book medical appointments with specialists and keep track of information and pharmaceuticals for the person or people they care for. They described wanting accessible centralised support, such as a General Practitioner being able to provide oversight and continuity of care to ease the burden on the carer.

*“The whole system seems stacked against both him and me... My need for support is coming from dealing with government agencies.” – a domestic graduate student, caring for 1 person.*

At home, there is a need for equipment to support the carer to provide care, such as mobility equipment and professional first aid so that they can respond to the needs of the person they are caring for safely. These supports, along with the significant costs of accessing medical care, can add to financial stress for the carer. This is particularly true for international student carers who do not have access to Medicare subsidies. For some international students, their medical insurance is not able to cover their parents or grandparents who are aged over 70 years, significantly limiting their access to healthcare for the person they are caring for.

*“I have no support.” – a young international graduate student, caring for 1 person.*

### Recommendations:

24. Ensure General Practitioners are able to provide oversight and continuity of care for people being cared for, even those who require unofficial care.
25. Provide graduate carers with free or heavily subsidised equipment such as mobility equipment so that they can provide safe care.
26. Provide graduate carers with education in first aid so they can provide safe care.
27. Provide affordable healthcare, including specialist care, for all. This includes those who are not permanent residents or citizens, and those who are not able to be covered by insurance.

## Bibliography

- Australian Government Department of Education. "Research Training Program." Last modified February 16, 2023. <https://www.education.gov.au/research-block-grants/research-training-program>
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- Victoria State Government. "Help at home." Seniors Online Victoria. Last modified December 6, 2022. <https://www.seniorsonline.vic.gov.au/services-information/help-home>

## Appendix 1:

### Full recommendations

#### Value and Recognition

1. Acknowledge and account for the gendered aspect of unpaid care work.
2. Acknowledge and account for cultural expectations around care work, ensuring that policies and systems are culturally appropriate and support people to make educated decisions around taking on unpaid care work.
3. Streamline avenues for support across all levels of government and throughout systems to ensure ease of access and information.
  - a. Provide clear guidelines for unpaid carers to access support.
4. Ensure workplaces and higher education providers provide flexibility and understanding to employees taking on unpaid care work.
5. Acknowledge the wide variety of unpaid care work which is necessary to support people to expand support.

#### Financial Stress

6. Provide financial support for graduate students who are not Australian citizens or permanent residents to access healthcare and pharmaceuticals.
7. Reduce the barriers to accessing the Carer Payment and ensure all graduate students have targeted access to it, including international students.
8. Ensure all graduate students can access Youth Allowance and other relevant government payments.
9. Advocate to the Victorian Government to ensure all graduate students, including international students, can access public transport concessions.

10. Provide taxi cards and other necessary transport vouchers to support unpaid carers proving transport.

### Daily Living Needs

11. Provide graduate unpaid carers with access to material aid including food.
12. Provide consistent in-home support including paid carers, support workers, case workers, and cleaners to alleviate the burden of care placed on unpaid carers.
  - a. This could be achieved through the expansion of the *Help at home* program<sup>6</sup>.
13. Provide free and accessible respite care to support graduate carers.

### Childcare Accessibility

14. Ensure graduate unpaid carers have access to free or significantly subsidised childcare which meets their needs.
15. Ensure graduate international students who are unpaid carers have access to the same childcare allowances as domestic students to better meet their needs.

### University and Workplace

16. Significantly increase the Research Training Program stipend to a liveable wage, above minimum wage.
17. Ensure universities and workplaces provide graduate carers with leave for carers responsibility, including options for medium and long-term, paid and unpaid leave which ensures enrolment and job security for research and coursework students.
  - a. Ensure international student graduate carers who need to take extended periods of leave from work or study do not have their visas impacted by leave status.
18. Ensure short-term carer's leave entitlements are separate from personal leave for graduate carers.
19. Ensure universities and workplaces provide flexible and accessible options of engagement, including via online platforms such as Zoom.
20. Ensure universities provide reliable teaching work for employees both through casual employment, and secure options including full-time and part-time work.

### Increasing Support Networks

21. Provide graduate carers with free and accessible mental health support which addresses their specific situation.
22. Provide resources and education for graduate carers to understand their options for support for themselves.
23. Run social or community groups for graduate carers to create personal support networks.

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<sup>6</sup> Victoria State Government, "Help at home."

- a. Ensure these groups are culturally safe and appropriate for different groups of carers.

#### Healthcare and Access to Medical Support

24. Ensure General Practitioners are able to provide oversight and continuity of care for people being cared for, even those who require unofficial care.
25. Provide graduate carers with free or heavily subsidised equipment such as mobility equipment so that they can provide safe care.
26. Provide graduate carers with education in first aid so they can provide safe care.
27. Provide affordable healthcare, including specialist care, for all. This includes those who are not permanent residents or citizens, and those who are not able to be covered by insurance.