



# **Submission to the Select Committee on COVID-19**

**University of Melbourne Graduate  
Student Association**

**May 2020**

# Introduction

Australian universities conduct world-leading research, contribute to the economy through education exports, and are the sole pipeline for training the nation's next generation of highly skilled professionals. The COVID-19 crisis threatens the stability of the higher education sector and the welfare of current students. Notably, international students are unfairly and severely impacted through visa conditions and lack of financial support. Additionally, Australian universities require government financial support to continue employing their substantial number of staff, including casual and sessional workers, and to maintain the higher education industry. Universities have been excluded from government stimulus packages, most notably JobKeeper, despite the significance of higher education to the Australian economy.

International education is Australia's largest services export and third largest export overall<sup>1</sup>. International students contribute \$32 billion annually<sup>2</sup> to the Australian economy through course fees and living expenses. The Federal Government has encouraged student migration, accepted student money and issued student visas in order to reap the economic benefits. Accepting high numbers of international students into Australia has consequences, namely, duty of care. We have greatly benefitted from international students choosing to work and study in Australia, with this comes a responsibility to support their health and welfare.

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 an elected Council of 15 graduate students, and on behalf of over 30,000 constituents we represent graduate student interests to the University and wider community, provide facilities and services, deliver events and activities to promote graduate student community and academic excellence, and supports 149 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

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Education and Training 2018, Research snapshot – Export income to Australia from international education activity in 2017, accessed from <<https://internationaleducation.gov.au/research/Research-Snapshots/Documents/Export%20Income%20CY%202017.pdf>>

<sup>2</sup> Parliament of Australia 2019, Overseas students in Australian higher education: a quick guide, accessed from <[https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/pubs/rp/rp1819/Quick\\_Guides/OverseasStudents](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1819/Quick_Guides/OverseasStudents)>

achieve and support representation, academic support, transition to work, engaged and healthy communities, and organisational sustainability.

We welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to the Select Committee on Covid-19. In this submission we recommend the Government adopts these measures to support international students and the higher education sector through COVID-19:

**Recommendation one: That the Federal Government meets their duty of care to international students in Australia through a comprehensive support package including the following elements:**

- **Creating a Federal fund supporting international students financially impacted from COVID-19;**
- **Expanding JobKeeper eligibility to temporary migrants, including student visa holders;**
- **Temporarily easing working restrictions on international students to allow workers in all industries to work up to 60 hours a fortnight for the next six months; and**
- **Introducing a temporary visa extension to international students on a student visa (subclass 500) who have been unable to return to Australia or complete their course on time as a result of COVID-19.**

**Recommendation two: That the Government implements a support package for domestic students, including:**

- **Extending Centrelink support payments to all postgraduate students, subject to means-testing;**
- **Allowing for up to fifteen bulk-billed appointments with a mental health professional in a calendar year; and**
- **For the government to investigate and improve the affordability of childcare for student parents.**

**Recommendation three: That the government develops a comprehensive Federal support package for Australian universities that promotes job security of university employees and compensates against lost income from international student revenue.**

**Recommendation four: That the government provides an additional block grant to universities to allow their PhD students to extend to 4.5 years.**

## **Supporting international students**

## Financial support

International students are struggling to survive the economic impact of COVID-19 in Australia. News outlets in Sydney and Melbourne have reported record numbers of international students attending foodbanks for support<sup>3</sup>. Prior to the pandemic, figures from Universities Australia in 2017 found that 42.4% of international postgraduate coursework students have estimated expenses greater than their income<sup>4</sup>. Around 47% of international postgraduate coursework students report worrying about their financial situation while 10.8% regularly go without food or other necessities because they cannot afford them<sup>5</sup>. These statistics would be significantly higher today amid a global recession and local widespread, sudden job losses. The Federal Government has duty of care towards international students. Social security measures must be implemented to ensure housing and food security for international students.

International students have been financially affected through the shutdown of major industries in which they typically work. International students are primarily employed in cleaning and laundry services, hospitality and sales<sup>6</sup>, all industries struggling as a result of COVID-19. Many international graduate students at the University of Melbourne have expressed their financial distress as a result of COVID-19 to GSA. Noting that many international students are already disadvantaged in the workplace through insecure casual work, wage theft and less experience with Australian employment law<sup>7</sup>, it is clear international students will be greatly affected by COVID-19 financially. International students often do not have local support networks and are not

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<sup>3</sup> Sakkal, P 2020, April 12. 'We don't have jobs': Unprecedented demand for emergency food relief. The Age, accessed from < <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/we-don-t-have-jobs-unprecedented-demand-for-emergency-food-relief-20200412-p54j6a.html>>; 7 News Sydney 2020, 30 April. Hundreds of international students, ineligible for government assistance, line up for Sydney food banks [Facebook video]. Accessed from <<https://www.facebook.com/7NEWSsydney/videos/hundreds-of-international-students-ineligible-for-government-assistance-line-up-956966354734932/>>

<sup>4</sup> Universities Australia 2018, 2017 Universities Australia Student Finances Survey: August 2018, accessed from < <https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/180713-2017-UA-Student-Finance-Survey-Report.pdf>>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016, Insights from the Australian Census and Temporary Entrants Integrated Dataset, accessed from <<https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/7d12b0f6763c78caca257061001cc588/d71d3673bd6eaa38ca2583a00012c31c!OpenDocument>>

<sup>7</sup> Clibborn, S 2018, *Multiple frames of reference: Why international student workers in Australia tolerate underpayment*, Economic and Industrial Democracy, accessed from <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0143831X1876524>>

eligible for government assistance. The exclusion of international students from JobKeeper contributes to their disadvantage. International students are tax-paying employees and deserve the benefits extended to other workers. The ineligibility of migrant workers to access JobKeeper disadvantages these workers in the labour market, potentially losing their long-term work. The residency status of a company's employee should not dictate the support offered to the business or its employees.

The Federal Government has a responsibility to support international students who are experiencing financial hardship as a result of COVID-19. Social security benefits must be temporarily extended to migrant workers considering their tax contributions. The necessity of financial support to international students has been recognized by some states and territories<sup>8</sup> however these are single payments and do not provide a comprehensive safety net. The early release of superannuation funds is not a substantive support for international students considering their limited time in Australia, restricted working hours and low-pay work. Additionally, considering the vulnerability of migrant workers to employers who take advantage of their limited work experience in Australia, many may find that their employers have not followed employment law and failed to contribute to their superannuation.

International students are restricted to working only 40 hours a fortnight. The decision to temporarily relax these restrictions for workers in nursing, aged care and supermarkets is commended. However, considering the low pay occupations many international students are in, the Prime Minister's statement that "everyone who has a job in this economy is an essential worker", and the fact that most international students work in cleaning services and hospitality, it is recommended that these restrictions are eased for a wider range of industries and for a longer period.

The alienation of international students will discourage many future students from studying in Australia, jeopardising Australia's economic recovery. International education has substantially benefitted the Australian economy for decades. The Federal Government must now act on its responsibility to support international students struggling financially.

**Case study:** Peta wrote to the GSA describing their issues with working on their PhD from home. Peta and their partner have three children, two

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<sup>8</sup> Ross, J 2020, April 27. Obscure rules and stalled visas 'jeopardise Australian recovery'. *Times Higher Education*, accessed from < <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/obscure-rules-and-stalled-visas-jeopardise-australian-recovery>>

of whom are doing schoolwork from home, the other is a young infant. There is little space or equipment to cater for all of them. Peta is concerned about their family's financial position when their scholarship ends in July as they are worried about not being able to find casual work. Being able to temporarily access social security would assist Peta to finish their near-complete PhD while supporting their family.

## Visa requirements

International students face additional concerns as a result of COVID-19, due to their visa requirements. Graduate students have contacted GSA with concerns about their visas and a lack of clarity on the requirements during this time.

The Prime Minister suggested that international students unable to financially support themselves should return to their home countries. However, this is not a practical option. It is difficult if not impossible for students to return to their home countries, with limited and expensive international flights and many countries closing their borders. International students who return to their home countries and are unable to return before the end of their visa will need to apply for a new visa, which may not be approved. This approach demonstrates a blatant disregard for the wellbeing of international students and their contribution to Australian universities, our multicultural society, and the economy.

For many international students, their course completion date will be affected by COVID-19. Many coursework students will have their course completion delayed by an inability to undertake internships or placements or due to hands-on courses incompatible with online learning. International graduate research students may require additional time to complete their research, with impacts on graduate researchers including pausing of data collection, lack of access to research facilities, and changes to research design as the originally planned fieldwork is not possible due to COVID-19 restrictions. To date, the GSA has heard from twelve international graduate research students who will require extensions due to delays in their research due to COVID-19.

Students who need to reduce their course-load due to mental health issues exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis will also be impacted. For example, a graduate research student contacted the GSA with this concern, fearful of how her visa will be affected if she takes a one month leave of absence. International students who are unable to complete their course by the expected date will have to reapply for their student visas, with no assurances that they will be

approved and able to return to complete their course. Course completion during COVID-19 is largely outside of students control. Students should not be punished for a situation which is already causing distress.

Additionally, students who were unable to begin their degrees due to travel restrictions, missing the “must arrive before” date will need to reapply for their visas and may have incurred substantial costs as a result. There must be considerations in visa applications to ensure students are not disadvantaged, financially or otherwise, for failing to comply with requirements as a result of COVID-19.

Forcing many international students to reapply for existing student visas will complicate and introduce further uncertainty into the lives of many students already settled in Australia. Australian universities will also suffer financially if the visa requirements for international students are difficult, heightening the need for the Government to assist universities to remain solvent.

**Recommendation one: That the Federal Government meets their duty of care to international students in Australia through a comprehensive support package including the following elements:**

- **Creating a Federal fund supporting international students financially impacted from COVID-19;**
- **Expanding JobKeeper eligibility to temporary migrants, including student visa holders;**
- **Temporarily easing working restrictions on international students to allow workers in all industries to work up to 60 hours a fortnight for the next six months; and**
- **Introducing a temporary visa extension to international students on a student visa (subclass 500) who have been unable to return to Australia or complete their course on time as a result of COVID-19.**

## Support for domestic students

### Financial support for postgraduate students

Australians are suffering financial, health, and wellbeing hardships as a direct result of COVID-19. These challenges are being felt by many community members, including students – who are often engaged in casual work and have precarious finances. Services are needed to foster students’ wellbeing and support them to continue and complete their studies.

While domestic undergraduate students are entitled to access income support payments such as Youth Allowance and Austudy, this support does

not exist for most postgraduate students. Many full-time domestic postgraduate coursework students are ineligible for study payments through the social services system, regardless of income level of the student. Eligibility is determined by course rather than financial need. Only a small subset of postgraduate degrees are deemed eligible for income support according a list published by the Department of Social Services. At the University of Melbourne, only 36% of Masters-level courses are eligible for Youth Allowance or Austudy<sup>9</sup>. Identifying this as an issue has been an outcome of the recent Senate inquiry into the adequacy of Newstart and related payments. In the committee's report, it was recommended that the Government immediately undertake an inquiry into the eligibility criteria, application process, and payment rates for Austudy and ABSTUDY<sup>10</sup>.

JobSeeker payments are unsuitable for postgraduates due to the requirement of Mutual Obligations. When the pause on Mutual Obligations ends on June 1, any postgraduates receiving the payment will be required to abide by the punitive Mutual Obligations requirements, which includes applying for up to 20 jobs per month, attending appointments and supervised online job searches, despite the workload of full-time study and the importance of social distancing.

The absence of Centrelink study entitlements for postgraduate students forces many students to prioritise work over their studies in order to meet their basic needs. Considering the widespread job losses during COVID-19, many postgraduate students are affected by significant loss of income. It is recommended that all full-time students, including postgraduate students, are deemed eligible for Youth Allowance or Austudy subject to means-testing. This would provide postgraduate students with the support they need to remain enrolled in their studies, supporting their future transition to work. Extending Youth Allowance and Austudy payments to all domestic postgraduate students would empower them to focus on their studies without unnecessarily spending time in the punitive unemployment payment system.

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<sup>9</sup> Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations 2018, Income support for domestic postgraduates in Australia: Discussion paper, accessed from <<http://www.capa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Income-support-discussionpaper-October-2018.docx>>

<sup>10</sup> Community Affairs References Committee 2020, Adequacy of Newstart and related payments and alternative mechanisms to determine the level of income support payments in Australia, accessed from <[https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportsen/024323/toc\\_pdf/AdequacyofNewstartandrelatedpaymentsandalternativemechanismstodeterminethelevelofincomesupportpaymentsinAustralia.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportsen/024323/toc_pdf/AdequacyofNewstartandrelatedpaymentsandalternativemechanismstodeterminethelevelofincomesupportpaymentsinAustralia.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf)>

## Support for student parents

Students with children face additional struggles during COVID-19. While navigating the changing environment for work and study, student parents now must manage care and home-schooling for their children. This has caused significant disruptions to student parent's studies and many students have reported their distress to GSA. Nationally, 25% of full-time students and 40% of part-time students between the ages of 25 and 44 have at least one child under fifteen years of age<sup>11</sup>. Three percent of university students are single parents<sup>12</sup>. Many student parents face difficulties in completing their studies. In a GSA survey of student parents, two thirds of those who work are in casual or sessional employment. The insecurity of work and income causes additional worries. Single parents and parents from low-socioeconomic backgrounds face additional disadvantages in managing work, study and parenting responsibilities. Failing to provide adequate childcare for students often places the burden on mothers, disadvantaging women in their work and study. Many students will be ineligible for the updated Child Care Subsidy if they study full-time and do not undertake paid work.

In a GSA survey conducted in 2019, 50% of graduate student parents surveyed indicated that being a parent frequently affects their ability to attend work or class while 59% stated that being a parent affects their work or study performance. It is important to support students with children through their studies, empowering rather than discouraging. These students, their skills, research and families are important. Students should not be disadvantaged for their caring responsibilities.

**Case study:** Julie contacted the GSA regarding her difficulties with caregiving responsibilities while studying a PhD. Julie has exhausted her medical leave but requires further leave for an operation that has been postponed due to COVID-19. Her 7-year-old daughter is now home-schooled, her husband is only working part-time. She is concerned about her family's financial position and difficulties accessing further leave.

**Case study:** Leah contacted the GSA regarding her stress studying a PhD while caring for her primary age child and her elderly parents. Leah described the emotional, logistical and demanding expectations placed

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<sup>11</sup> Cherastidtham, I, and Norton, A 2018, University attrition: what helps and what hinders university completion?, Grattan Institute, accessed from <<https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/University-attrition-background.pdf>>

<sup>12</sup> Edwards, D, and van der Brugge, E 2012, Higher education students in Australia: What the new Census data tell us, Australian Council for Educational Research, accessed from <[https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1019&context=joining\\_the\\_dots](https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1019&context=joining_the_dots)>

on her during COVID-19 which she said was exacerbated by caring responsibilities. Leah has a pre-existing health condition that has worsened during this time but is concerned about taking sick leave. Other parent colleagues she has spoken to are experiencing many of the same issues in balancing care with their work. Leah states this has significantly affected her work, as her time is fragmented and she is unable to achieve depth and quality in her work. Leah argues all student parents are struggling with increased care loads, working from home and financial and emotional stress.

## Mental health support

Many university students are experiencing exacerbated mental health issues as a result of COVID-19. One in five Australian university students experience a mental health disorder, a significantly higher rate than the general population<sup>13</sup>. Additionally, amplified psychiatric distress is experienced by postgraduate students than in other students or the wider Australian public<sup>14</sup>. Many postgraduate students have written to the GSA describing their heightened anxiety and worsened depression among other mental health issues. Comprehensive support is required to ensure the wellbeing of postgraduate students and other at-risk Australians.

**Case study:** Chris wrote to the GSA describing his anxiety attacks that have been worsened due to financial and academic concerns. Chris described his limited financial resources compounded with the stress of being away from his family, worrying about their health in addition to his academic performance.

### **Recommendation two: That the Government implements a support package for domestic students, including:**

- **Extending Centrelink support payments to all postgraduate students, subject to means-testing;**
- **Allowing for up to fifteen bulk-billed appointments with a mental health professional in a calendar year; and**

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<sup>13</sup> Stallman, HM 2010 in Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Mental Health April 2019, accessed from <[https://www.pc.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/240686/sub241-mental-health.pdf](https://www.pc.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/240686/sub241-mental-health.pdf)>

<sup>14</sup> Levecque, K, Anseel, F, De Beuchlaer, A, Van der Heyden, J, and Gisle, L 2017 in Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Mental Health April 2019, accessed from <[https://www.pc.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/240686/sub241-mental-health.pdf](https://www.pc.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/240686/sub241-mental-health.pdf)>

- **For the government to investigate and improve the affordability of childcare for student parents.**

## Ensuring quality and viability of Australian universities

Higher education is economically important to Australia and ensures we have an educated, skilled population. A strong and viable higher education sector supports the interests of students, researchers and staff. Universities require federal support to continue serving Australia through quality teaching and research.

The absence of comprehensive support for universities will negatively affect universities, including their staff and students. In 2016-17, upwards of 200,000 individuals were employed by Australian universities in academic and professional roles<sup>15</sup>. Two thirds of university employees already experience job insecurity in casual, sessional, and part-time roles<sup>16</sup>. The exclusion of public universities from JobKeeper encourages insecure working arrangements and the redundancy of large amounts of university staff.

Australian universities remain public institutions responsible for education, employment and research. Public funding for Australian universities has reduced dramatically from 85% of funding supplied by the Federal Government in 1990 to 30% today<sup>17</sup>. The University of Melbourne has reported a 13% decline in proportion of public funding in the previous five years, now receiving only 31% of university income from public funding<sup>18</sup>. Universities have become increasingly reliant on revenue from international students' tuition fees, which are anticipated to be greatly reduced due to COVID-19. The existing

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<sup>15</sup> Workplace Gender Equality Agency in National Tertiary Education Union 2018, The flood of insecure employment at Australian universities, accessed from <<https://www.nteu.org.au/library/download/id/8988>>

<sup>16</sup> National Tertiary Education Union 2018, The flood of insecure employment at Australian universities, accessed from <<https://www.nteu.org.au/library/download/id/8988>>

<sup>17</sup> Hunter, F 2020, May 3. Never waste a crisis: will COVID-19 be a catalyst for change at Australia's universities?. The Age, accessed from <<https://www.theage.com.au/politics/federal/never-waste-a-crisis-will-covid-19-be-a-catalyst-for-change-at-australia-s-universities-20200501-p54ozg.html>>

<sup>18</sup> University of Melbourne 2019, 2018 annual report, accessed from <[https://about.unimelb.edu.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0030/89544/2018-Annual-Report.pdf](https://about.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0030/89544/2018-Annual-Report.pdf)>

support package is completely inadequate for the estimated losses of up to \$4.6 billion from reduced enrolments of domestic and international students<sup>19</sup>. Australian universities require a meaningful support package to remain stable during this time and maintain their rate of employment.

The anticipated loss of international student enrolments ensures that the sector will be affected by COVID-19 for years to come. A loss of income may affect the critical research universities are responsible for. Australian universities are highly ranked for their research internationally. Universities across Australia have worked on crucial and urgent research during COVID-19, notably University of Queensland researchers are developing a vaccine since receiving international funding in January<sup>20</sup>. Furthermore, medical and health research by Australian universities are rated above world standard by Excellence in Research for Australia<sup>21</sup>. Australia's distinguished research reputation is at risk due to government negligence. Graduate students completing higher degrees by research have contacted GSA concerned about the academic job market they are graduating into. Research cannot be undervalued during this time.

Graduate researchers play a significant role in Australian research: 56% of research hours in Australian universities is completed by postgraduate students<sup>22</sup>. Graduate researchers experiencing disruptions to their research will require extra time to complete their research degrees. The Government has relaxed Research Training Program rules so that universities can have graduate researchers on stipend for up to 4.5 years; however, this announcement did not come with funding to execute this. We agree with the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations' recommendation, in their

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<sup>19</sup> Universities Australia 2020, Uni Viability Crucial to National Recovery, accessed from <<https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/media-item/uni-viability-crucial-to-national-recovery/>>

<sup>20</sup> University of Queensland 2020, UQ COVID-19 vaccine shown to induce potent protective response in pre-clinical trials, accessed from <<https://www.uq.edu.au/news/article/2020/04/uq-covid-19-vaccine-shown-induce-potent-protective-response-pre-clinical-trials>>

<sup>21</sup> ERA in Grattan Institute 2018, Mapping Australian Higher Education 2018, accessed from <<https://www.5050foundation.edu.au/assets/reports/documents/907-Mapping-Australian-higher-education-2018.pdf>>

<sup>22</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics 2020, 8111.0 Research and Experimental Development, Higher Education Organisations, Australia, 2018, accessed from <<https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/8111.0Main+Features12018?OpenDocument>>

submission to this enquiry, that the government should provide an additional block grant to universities to allow their PhD students to extend to 4.5 years<sup>23</sup>.

Australian universities have not received an adequate support package despite the anticipated losses as a result of COVID-19. Private industries including mining, tourism and retail are receiving government assistance. Public universities deserve federal support to support the quality and viability of the higher education sector. Higher education is an important investment for Australia: for every \$1 invested in higher education research and development, \$5 comes back into the economy<sup>24</sup>. Higher education contributes to a skilled population, creates jobs and informs research. The Federal Government has a responsibility to provide public universities with support to cope with the effects of COVID-19.

**Recommendation three: That the government develops a comprehensive federal support package for Australian universities that promotes job security of university employees and compensates against lost income from international student revenue.**

**Recommendation four: That the government provides an additional block grant to universities to allow their PhD students to extend to 4.5 years.**

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<sup>23</sup>Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) 2020, Submission to Select Committee on Covid-19.

<sup>24</sup> Universities Australia 2020, Uni Viability Crucial to National Recovery, accessed from <<https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/media-item/uni-viability-crucial-to-national-recovery/>>