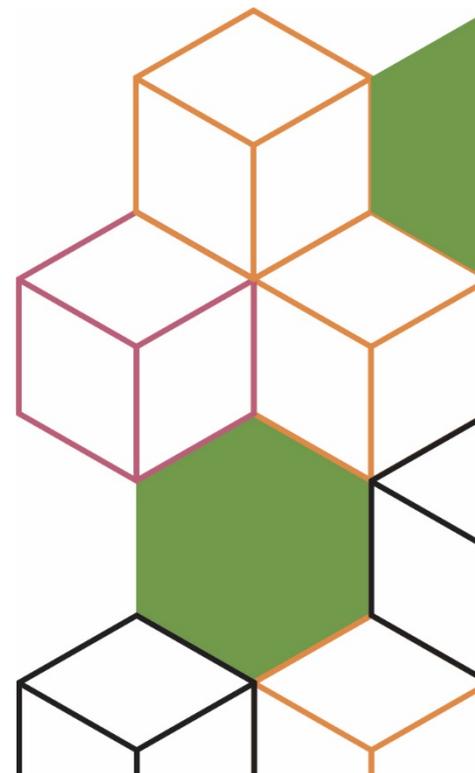


May  
**2021**

Graduate Student  
Association  
**Submission to the  
International  
Education Strategy  
2021-2030  
Consultation**



## Introduction

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, 18 Representative Council members and 20 Faculty Council Members, who are all elected University of Melbourne graduate students. On behalf of over 29,000 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 147 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 support representation through our policy, advocacy and campaign activities, academic excellence, transition to work, support engaged and healthy community activities, and address organisational sustainability.

GSA welcomes the opportunity to contribute a submission to the Department of Education, Skills and Employment's consultation for the Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030. We also emphasise the importance of meaningfully engaging international students and using co-design methods in the development of the Strategy.

A priority of GSA is to advocate and provide regular support for international students. We proactively consult with international students through GSA's International Officer who chairs our International Students Working Group. GSA's graduate committee representatives also provide feedback on international student advocacy issues on an ongoing basis.

For this submission, GSA sought feedback from University of Melbourne international graduate coursework and research students through two focus groups conducted in April 2021. We have also included evidence from surveys and consultations conducted in 2020. This submission presents considerations for the Strategy in three key areas:

1. Academic excellence,
2. Transition to work, and
3. Engaged and healthy communities.

## Summary of recommendations

We make the following recommendations to inform the Strategy:

### Academic Excellence

- 1.1 Ensure that on-campus learning is a core aspect of Australia's educational offerings.
- 1.2 Develop a plan for offshore international students to return to Australia.
- 1.3 Amend visa requirements to allow international students to study part-time.
- 1.4 Guarantee the provision of academic support services for international students in the Strategy.

### Transition to work

- 2.1 Ensure the lift on work hour caps for Student Visa holders is continued and made permanent.
- 2.2 Resource the Fair Work Ombudsman to continue to deliver education initiatives on international students' workplace rights.
- 2.3 Resource the Fair Work Ombudsman to conduct extensive investigations of wage theft perpetrated against international student workers.
- 2.4 Consider additional skilled migration opportunities for international graduates as part of the Strategy.
- 2.5 Continue to count offshore study during Covid-19 towards permanent residency applications.
- 2.6 Continue to extend the period students must apply for a Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) after completing their course until international students can return.
- 2.7 Allocate more funding to community organisations that can provide workshops or provide legal advice to international advice about their visas.

### Engaged and healthy communities

- 3.1 Provide educational initiatives for renters to understand their tenancy rights.
- 3.2 Promote more affordable housing for international students during crisis periods.
- 3.3 Improve affordable healthcare for international students by subsidising Overseas Student Health Cover (OSHC) and amending access to restricted services, such as pregnancy-related care.
- 3.4 Include international students in Australia-wide free counselling services.
- 3.5 Create a provision that stipulates a proportion of Student Services and Amenities Fees (SSAF) must be directed towards student-run organisations that can provide food for students.
- 3.6 Encourage states and territories to offer school fee exemptions and childcare subsidies for dependents of parents studying a higher education degree.
- 3.7 Grant international graduate students access to public transport concessions.

## Academic Excellence

### Delivering high-quality Australian education

International students choose Australia as a study destination anticipating a world-class learning experience. Studying on-campus offers students opportunities to connect with peers, interact with teachers and network with potential employers. Students also have access to university facilities, these include libraries, computers, safe study spaces and research laboratories.

According to a recent survey conducted by IDP Connect, very few international students want to study online at an Australian university<sup>1</sup>. GSA identified that students' overall educational experience has declined after being forced to learn online. Some students expressed that they were frustrated by incompatible time zones, which meant that online classes would be scheduled before 7:00am or after 9:00pm. Other students noted that the new asynchronous delivery model –

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<sup>1</sup> IDP Connect 2021, International Student Crossroads IV: International Students Perceptions, Choices and Motivations During Covid-19, p. 3, accessed from <[https://resources.idp-connect.com/hubfs/Crossroads%20IV%20Infographic.pdf?\\_hsfp=631058890&\\_hssc=251652889.3.1620783105205&\\_hstc=251652889.e4b58f021a5fde7b134bbfb491660af6.1620783105204.1620783105204.1620783105204.1620783105204.1](https://resources.idp-connect.com/hubfs/Crossroads%20IV%20Infographic.pdf?_hsfp=631058890&_hssc=251652889.3.1620783105205&_hstc=251652889.e4b58f021a5fde7b134bbfb491660af6.1620783105204.1620783105204.1620783105204.1)>.

recorded lectures, emails, and Learning Management Systems – made it more difficult to engage in real-time with teachers and peers. In the absence of live lectures and consultative one-on-one sessions, students felt isolated and disconnected from seeking support from teachers and peers. One student in GSA's report on Covid-19 Extensions for Graduate Researchers noted:

*"The loss of access to libraries, mentors, peers, and social isolation is real and sometimes crippling to our research. This is doubly true for those of us without a family or social network here in Australia<sup>2</sup>."* – International Law PhD student

The new Strategy should envision a future in which all international students can live, study and work in Australia. GSA believes that the Government should make on-campus learning a core feature of Australia's offering. Studying on-campus at an Australian University would offer international students a greater range of opportunities to advance their careers, achieve academic excellence and meaningfully connect with peers.

### **Recommendation 1.1: Ensure that on-campus learning is a core aspect of Australia's educational offerings.**

#### **Prioritising on-campus learning**

Many international students are currently studying offshore due to Covid-19. Without further action from the Federal Government, international students cannot enjoy a rounded experience of studying at an Australian university, leaving institutions unable to deliver globally competitive educational experiences.

According to the Mitchell Institute, if the Government dedicated its entire quarantining capacity, it would take Australia six months to bring back all 150,000 international students studying offshore<sup>3</sup>. The report revealed a sharp decline in the number of new international student enrolments. The Mitchell Institute also determined that, if low enrolments continue, by the end of 2021 the number of international students enrolled could fall to a quarter of 2020 enrolment numbers.

Improving Australia's capacity to welcome international students would allow students stuck offshore to safely return to complete their degrees. Increased capacity would also encourage new students to enrol at Australian universities and ensure the continuity of the international education sector. Strategies to enable the return of students should include the establishment of effective quarantine measures and improved Covid-19 vaccination distribution.

### **Recommendation 1.2: Develop a plan for offshore international students to return to Australia.**

#### **Enabling greater access to flexible study arrangements**

Students experiencing extreme stress due to mental health, finances, and family obligations lack the capacity for full-time study. While local students can decrease

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<sup>2</sup> Graduate Student Association (GSA) University of Melbourne 2021, Covid-19 Extensions for Graduate Researchers – Report, accessed from <<https://gsa.unimelb.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/20210315-Graduate-researchers-survey-report-final.pdf>>.

<sup>3</sup> Hurley, P 2021, Stuck in transit: International student update. Mitchell Institute, Victoria University, Melbourne.

their study loads, current student visa arrangements require international students to maintain full-time study. There is an exception for students who have 'compassionate and compelling circumstances,' but the difficulty of meeting this criterion discourages students from applying.

Students expressed to GSA that the requirement to study full-time made them vulnerable to changes in their circumstances. Some students reported that when issues arose with their work, family, or mental health, they felt pressured to disregard wellbeing concerns to complete their studies.

Amending student visa requirements to allow students to study part-time would make Australia a more attractive destination for students to further their education. International students would be able to study in Australia with the confidence that they can amend study loads to suit their needs.

### **Recommendation 1.3: Amend visa requirements to allow international students to study part-time.**

#### **Providing effective academic support**

Universities across Australia are undergoing staff cuts due to a decline in international student enrolments. As a result, students are experiencing obstacles in accessing academic support services that facilitate academic continuity and excellence. GSA is concerned that the limited staff available to assist students with learning needs will disproportionately affect students that need a higher level of support, including offshore students who are enduring the challenges of online learning.

GSA collected feedback from graduate students about the value academic support services bring to their educational experience. We found that at the University of Melbourne, there is a scarcity of one-on-one appointments with academic advisors who support students' learning needs. One student commented that they faced an almost two-week wait for an appointment. Another student stressed the importance of academic support services in promoting academic integrity, which guides students on how to avoid plagiarism.

Including measures within the Strategy that ensure international students have access to support within their educational providers will promote academic excellence as an inherent aspect of an Australian education.

### **Recommendation 1.4: Guarantee the provision of academic support services for international students in the Strategy.**

## **Transition to work**

#### **Promoting fair working conditions**

Many international graduate students informed GSA that they are enduring extreme financial hardship.

In our Student Resilience survey, 57% of international students reported that their studies had been affected by financial stress<sup>4</sup>. Feedback received from international students demonstrate the impact of this hardship:

*I have to minimise the money I spend on basic living, like foods, grocery, and clothing.*

*I have had to utilize Our Shout, SecondBite, and other community food assistance programs.*

One mechanism for increasing international students' self-sufficiency is increasing the number of hours they are legally permitted to work. Increasing working hours was precedented in 2020 when the Government temporarily relaxed the limitation to support the delivery of critical services<sup>5</sup>. More recently, the Government has temporarily removed the existing 40-hour fortnightly limit for students who work in the tourism and hospitality sectors to provide more flexibility and facilitate economic recovery<sup>6</sup>.

Removing the working hours cap across all sectors would give international students a greater chance to achieve financial stability. Australia's economic security within tourism, hospitality and additional industries will also be strengthened in the long-term.

### **Recommendation 2.1: Ensure the lift on work hour caps for Student Visa holders is continued and made permanent.**

GSA believes that the new Strategy should prioritise the improvement of employment conditions for international students living and working in Australia. Many international students undertake paid work while completing their studies, typically in hospitality, retail, cleaning services, healthcare, aged care and delivery driving<sup>7</sup>. International student workers in these industries frequently experience poor working conditions alongside underpaid wages and superannuation.

Nationally, half of international student workers over 20 years of age are paid below the minimum wage<sup>8</sup>. Students feel pressured to accept underpayment to attain employment, as expressed by this student in GSA's submission to the Senate Inquiry into Unlawful Underpayment of Employees' Remuneration:

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<sup>4</sup> Graduate Student Association (GSA) University of Melbourne 2021, Student Resilience Project, p. 20, accessed from <<https://gsa.unimelb.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/student-resilience-project-final-report.pdf>>.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Home Affairs 2021, Temporary relaxation of working hours for student visa holders, accessed from <<https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/getting-a-visa/visa-listing/student-500/temporary-relaxation-of-working-hours-for-student-visa-holders>>.

<sup>6</sup> Department of Home Affairs 8 May 2021, More Support for the Australian tourism and hospitality sector, accessed from <<https://minister.homeaffairs.gov.au/AlexHawke/Pages/support-for-australian-tourism-and-hospitality.aspx>>.

<sup>7</sup> Berg, L and Farbenblum, B 2020, As If We Weren't Humans: The Abandonment of Temporary Migrants in Australia During COVID-19, Migrant Worker Justice Initiative, accessed from <<https://www.mwji.org/s/As-if-we-werent-humans-Report.pdf>>.

<sup>8</sup> Farbenblum, B, and Berg, L 2020, International Students and Wage Theft in Australia, Migrant Worker Justice Initiative, accessed from <<https://www.mwji.org/s/Wage-Theft-and-International-Students-2020.pdf>>.

*My experience is that when I apply for a job, I know how low my salary is, and I still apply for this job [...] if you don't do it, a lot of others will be willing to do the low paid job<sup>9</sup>.*

Some international students have a limited understanding of their workplace entitlements, including penalty rates that they may be owed<sup>10</sup>. Students who are aware of their rights are often reluctant to report violations, fearing retaliation from their employer or visa consequences<sup>11</sup>. There is a need for ongoing and proactive investigations of illegal underpayment to ensure that workplaces do not impede on these regulations that contribute to making Australia a desirable place to live, work and study.

The ability to work and benefit from clear workplace regulations is a crucial aspect of Australia's distinct educational experience. The Strategy should aim to enforce workplace rights and invest in educational initiatives for international students to understand their entitlements and how to report workplace violations.

**Recommendation 2.2: Resource the Fair Work Ombudsman to conduct extensive investigations of wage theft perpetrated against international student workers.**

**Recommendation 2.3: Resource the Fair Work Ombudsman to continue to deliver education initiatives on international students' workplace rights.**

### Enhancing post-graduation employability

Graduate students are concerned about their narrow employment prospects during and after their studies. In GSA's 2020 International Students Town Hall, participants highlighted experiences of discrimination within hiring processes. Students found that many graduate jobs require three years of working rights. However, international student visas only grant two years of working rights. One student from GSA's Submission to the Select Committee on Temporary Migration reflected:

*Career progression is really difficult to plan with my employer. As I'm a temporary migrant I'm being paid less than otherwise, as my employer struggles to see the value on investing in developing my talent if I don't have the prospect to stay permanently<sup>12</sup>.*

Research from Deakin University noted that students found employers less willing to hire international students due to perceptions that international students are

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<sup>9</sup> University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association 2020, Submission to Senate Inquiry into unlawful underpayment of employees' remuneration, accessed from <<https://gsa.unimelb.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/GSA-wage-theft-submission.pdf>>.

<sup>10</sup> Clibborn, S 2018, Multiple frames of reference: Why international student workers in Australia tolerate underpayment, Economic and Industrial Democracy, epub ahead of print.

<sup>11</sup> Reilly, A, Howe, J, Berg, L, Farbenblum, B, and Tan, G 2017, International students and the Fair Work Ombudsman, Fair Work Ombudsman, accessed from <<https://www.fairwork.gov.au/ArticleDocuments/1160/International-students-and-the-fair-work-ombudsman-report.pdf.aspx>>.

<sup>12</sup> Graduate Student Association (GSA) University of Melbourne 2020, Submission to the Select Committee on Temporary Migration, accessed from <<https://gsa.unimelb.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/20200729-Temp-migration-submission-v5-final.pdf>>.

less proficient in English and unfamiliar with Australian workplace cultures<sup>13</sup>. Similarly, university teachers who organise placements for students expressed that the complexity around visa regulations discourages employers from recruiting international students.

The Strategy should consider enhancing career and migration pathways for international students wishing to remain in Australia. This would reward the attainment of Australian degrees and promote international students' confidence about transitioning into the workforce after they graduate.

**Recommendation 2.4: Consider additional skilled migration opportunities for international graduates as part of the Strategy.**

The Government has stated that offshore students will continue to receive points for meeting study requirements<sup>14</sup>. These awarded points contribute to the attainment of permanent residency. In GSA's focus groups, students voiced the concern that the Government will revoke this exception while they remain stuck overseas.

Until all international students can return to Australia, the Government should continue to count points for permanent residency applicants who met their study requirements overseas.

**Recommendation 2.5: Continue to count offshore study during Covid-19 towards permanent residency applications.**

The Government has extended the period students have between completing their study and applying for the Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) from six to twelve months. This amendment aims to ensure international students are not disadvantaged by Covid-19 border closures. Despite this, students reported that the inability to return to Australia produces feelings of anxiety around finding future work in Australia.

The Government should continue to extend the period students have to apply for a Temporary Graduate visa until students can return to Australia.

**Recommendation 2.6: Continue to extend the period students must apply for a Temporary Graduate visa (Subclass 485) after completing their course until international students can return.**

Many international students are seeking advice on pathways to migration. However, options for free or low-cost legal advice are limited. Students have approached GSA for guidance in this area and are frustrated by the lack of available resources.

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<sup>13</sup> Tran, L, Rahimi, M, Tan, G, Dang, X and Nhung, L 2020, 'Post-study work for international graduates in Australia: opportunity to enhance employability, get a return on investment or secure migration?', *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, vol. 18, no. 5, pp. 495-510.

<sup>14</sup> Department of Home Affairs, COVID-19 and the border: Student visa, accessed from <<https://covid19.homeaffairs.gov.au/student-visa>>.

Community organisations are well positioned to provide students with guidance and legal advice. These organisations should be funded to perform this function.

**Recommendation 2.7: Allocate more funding to community organisations that can provide workshops or provide legal advice to international students about their visas.**

## Engaged and healthy communities

International student support needs can be understood through a social determinants of health framework<sup>15</sup>. Social factors including housing security, food security, social support, and transport must be considered as part of international students' in-country experience.

### Increasing housing security

Housing instability diminishes students' experience of studying in Australia.

International students routinely experience housing insecurity and poor living conditions. A 2019 study found that half of international students had experienced one or more housing issues including sudden rent increases, unfair evictions, misinformation about the condition of the property, and harassment by landlords or other tenants<sup>16</sup>. In 2020, one in five international students living in Melbourne or Sydney were worried about becoming homeless, and one third reported often going without food and other necessities so they could afford rent<sup>17</sup>. In the same study, only half of international students reported being aware of their tenancy rights.

Educational initiatives and support measures would assist international students living in Australia to have positive and stable experiences.

**Recommendation 3.1: Provide educational initiatives for renters to understand their tenancy rights.**

**Recommendation 3.2: Promote more affordable housing for international students during crisis periods.**

### Improving access to healthcare

International students face barriers to access healthcare services due to limitations in their insurance coverage. International students are required to have Overseas Student Health Cover (OSHC), which covers doctor's appointments, some hospital treatments, ambulance trips and some medicines. OSHC does not cover all medical treatment and students must endure waiting periods.

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<sup>15</sup> Wilkinson, R, and Marmot, M 2003, Social determinants of health: The solid facts, World Health Organisation, accessed from <[https://www.euro.who.int/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/98438/e81384.pdf](https://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/98438/e81384.pdf)>

<sup>16</sup> Berg, L, and Farbenblum, B 2019, Living precariously: Understanding international students' housing experiences in Australia, accessed from

<[https://static1.squarespace.com/static/593f6d9fe4fcb5c458624206/t/5ddf5c9d51c72e2c5ef38b64/1574919334303/Living+Precariously\\_2019.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/593f6d9fe4fcb5c458624206/t/5ddf5c9d51c72e2c5ef38b64/1574919334303/Living+Precariously_2019.pdf)>.

<sup>17</sup> Morris, A, Hastings, C, Wilson, S, Mitchell, E, Ramia, G, and Overgaard, C 2020, The experience of international students before and during COVID-19: Housing, work, study and wellbeing, accessed from <<https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2020-07/apo-nid307336.pdf>>.

There are six different health insurance providers that offer OSHC. Coverage prices range from \$600 to \$3000 per year for families. Individual costs range from \$300 to \$1100 per year. Limitations apply for the basic coverage, including or non-prescription medicine or ongoing treatment with pharmaceuticals for long-term conditions. While some students can afford additional coverage, those who cannot pay out of pocket expenses are excluded from accessing medical support. OSHC also warns students of waiting periods, ranging from three to twelve months<sup>18</sup>. The stress around costs and waiting times to access basic healthcare conflicts with the high-quality educational experience Australia claims to offer, especially if students are struggling to pay tuition fees due to unaffordable medical bills.

The current OSHC limitations also have severe implications for the reproductive health of women-identifying international students. OSHC providers are not obliged to cover pregnancy related services, such as ultrasounds, until a student has been a member for 12 months. However, research by the Multicultural Centre for Women's Health found that 73% of claims for pregnancy-related treatment for international students occurred within the first 12 months of their time in Australia<sup>19</sup>. This privileged access renders students vulnerable if they are not able to pay thousands of dollars for additional private healthcare.

The Government should strive to protect the health of its international students to promote safe, high-quality, and affordable Australian study experiences. This can be achieved by contributing more funding towards OSHC and creating national health programs that are gender-specific and culturally inclusive.

**Recommendation 3.3: Improve affordable healthcare for international students by subsidising Overseas Student Health Cover (OSHC) and amending access to restricted services, such as pregnancy-related care.**

**Expanding access to mental healthcare**

International students encounter wellbeing challenges and require access to mental healthcare. This need has been exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic, as both onshore and offshore international students became disconnected from peer networks and support systems.

International students are at higher risk than domestic students of experiencing mental illness, with risk factors including isolation, financial strain, language barriers, and feeling pressured to achieve high academic performance<sup>20</sup>. One participant in our Student Resilience survey expressed concern around the limit on mental health services available to international students:

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<sup>18</sup> Australian Government Department of Health 2020, Overseas Student Health Cover (OSHC) Fact Sheet, accessed from <<https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020/06/overseas-student-health-cover-oshc-fact-sheet.pdf>>.

<sup>19</sup> Poljski, C, Quiazon, R & Tran, C 2014, 'Ensuring Rights: Improving Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health Services for Female International Students in Australia', Journal of International Students, vol. 4, no. 2, p. 157, accessed from, <<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=eric&AN=EJ1054792&site=eds-live&scope=site>>.

<sup>20</sup> Orygen 2020, International students and their mental health and physical safety, accessed from <<https://www.orygen.org.au/Policy/Policy-Areas/Employment-and-education/Education/International-students-and-their-mental-health-and/International-Student-Mental-Health-and-Physical-S.aspx>>.

*The Overseas Student Health Cover (OSHC) covers psychology appointments for free up to ten sessions. It scares me that I'd better wait until an emergency to take sessions, instead of not being worried about the session limits.*

The need for mental health support has amplified in the past year. The UMSU International Student Survey found that 68% of respondents indicated a decline in their mental health during the Covid-19 lockdowns<sup>21</sup>.

The Australian Government aims to provide a world-class educational experience to international students, which should include access to support services. As part of the Strategy, the Government should commit to providing free and accessible mental health and counselling services for students, whether they are in Australia or offshore.

### **Recommendation 3.4: Include international students in Australia-wide free counselling services.**

#### **Promoting food security**

Many students find it challenging to afford sufficient and nutritious food. Food insecurity particularly affects international students who need to adjust to living in a new country while ensuring they have enough money for housing and medical expenses.

Studies suggest that over 40% of students could be experiencing food insecurity<sup>22</sup>. To further explain students' experiences of food insecurity, researchers from the University of Melbourne interviewed students who had trouble accessing food<sup>23</sup>. This research confirmed that students think it is the 'norm' to struggle to purchase food, particularly healthy food. Despite the prevalence of this issue, their research also highlighted how students felt ashamed to reach out for support. Instead of relying upon food pantries for help, students preferred to search for deals or seek free food on-campus. For example, student-led organisations sometimes provide free breakfasts and sausage sizzles. Students also found University-prepared ready-made meals beneficial and suggested that universities continue this support. University-led or funded food initiatives help students avoid the stigma of asking for help.

By creating a provision that requires universities to allocate a portion of Student Services and Amenities Fees (SSAF) towards student-led organisations that can provide food for students, the Government can strengthen an enjoyable Australian educational experience. These enriched experiences will position students to recommend studying in Australia to others.

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<sup>21</sup> UMSU International 2021, International Student Survey 2020 Report, p. 57.

<sup>22</sup> Whatnall, M, Hutchesson, M and Patterson, A 2019, Predictors of Food Insecurity among Australian University Students: A Cross-Sectional Study, Int J Environ Res Public Health, vol. 17, no. 1, p. 60, accessed from, <<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31861750/>>.

<sup>23</sup> Jeffery, C, Scrinis, G and Dyson, J 2021, 'God, I miss fruit!' 40% of students at Australian universities may be going without food, The Conversation, accessed from <<https://theconversation.com/god-i-miss-fruit-40-of-students-at-australian-universities-may-be-going-without-food-156584>>.

**Recommendation 3.5: Create a provision that stipulates that a proportion of Student Services and Amenities Fees (SSAF) must be directed towards student-run organisations that can provide food for students.**

**Supporting student parents**

GSA's Parents on Campus report found that childcare is unaffordable for international student parents<sup>24</sup>, which undermines students' ability to engage within their learning. While there is some financial assistance for international students at the University of Melbourne through the University's student rebate scheme, childcare is difficult to access. One international student noted that:

*The childcare services are great, but they are ridiculously expensive for international students living on a scholarship budget because we are not eligible for any government subsidy<sup>25</sup>.*

Subsidising university childcare facilities and encouraging universities to contribute funding for student parents in difficult circumstances would address the alienation and challenges student parents often experience.

Encouraging state governments to offer public school fee exemptions for international students undertaking a higher education degree will also alleviate financial stress and students' general anxiety. Additionally, school fee exemptions might incentivise international student families to complete their study and research in Australia, as well as invest in our communities and Australia's broader economy.

A range of fee exemptions already exist across Australia. For example, in Queensland, the State Government covers the cost of primary and secondary school education for dependents of parents pursuing tertiary study on a temporary visa<sup>26</sup>. South Australia and the ACT offer similar school fee exemptions for temporary visa holders who are undertaking higher education research degrees and have school-age children<sup>27</sup>. Victoria provides a discount to dependent students if they have a parent studying in a tertiary institution. GSA believes that the Government should strengthen this incentive by facilitating all states to offer primary and secondary school tuition exemptions for international student parents who study at higher education institutions.

**Recommendation 3.6: Encourage states and territories to offer school fee exemptions and childcare subsidies for dependents of parents studying a higher education degree.**

**Providing affordable transport**

International students rely on public transport for day-to-day travel to their university campus. For students without a private vehicle, affordable and

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<sup>24</sup> Graduate Student Association (GSA) University of Melbourne 2020, Parents on Campus, accessed from <[https://gsa.unimelb.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/parents\\_on\\_campus-FINAL.pdf](https://gsa.unimelb.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/parents_on_campus-FINAL.pdf)>.

<sup>25</sup> GSA 2020, Parents on Campus, p. 17.

<sup>26</sup> Department of Education 2021, Temporary Residents Admissions, Queensland Government, accessed 6 May 2021, <<https://eqi.com.au/study-options/temporary-residents>>.

<sup>27</sup> Australian Government Trade and Investment Commission Study 2021, Bringing your children, accessed from <<https://www.studyinaustralia.gov.au/english/australian-education/bringing-your-children>>.

accessible public transport is essential for students to engage in their studies and the local economy.

In Victoria, international graduate students are excluded from student concession prices on public transport<sup>28</sup>. Similarly, in New South Wales, international students (undergraduate and graduate) are not eligible for student concession fares<sup>29</sup>. An international student who participated in the Fares Fair PTV campaign commented:

*Because students are on a reduced budget, especially some international students, having a concession card would make a significant difference for saving money and encourage more travel.*

Having a cohesive national public transport concession scheme for all higher education students, including international students, would signal Australia's commitment to welcoming international students to live, work, and study in our communities.

### **Recommendation 3.7: Grant international graduate students access to public transport concessions.**

## **Conclusion**

International students are global ambassadors for Australia's educational experience and as such, their treatment defines our image as a welcoming, safe, and high-quality study destination. As a progressive country that strives to promote freedom and inclusivity, Australia should uphold the rights of international students and invest in a diversified student and professional community.

This submission presents recommendations that will improve the experience of international students who choose to study at an Australian higher education provider. GSA has highlighted how international students are currently disillusioned with the support provided by the Australian community and are struggling to maintain academic excellence due to financial stress, food insecurity, housing issues, healthcare limitations, insufficient learning support and challenging working conditions. The Department of Education, Skills and Employment should consider implementing GSA's recommendations to place international students at the centre of Australia's 2021-2030 International Education Strategy.

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<sup>28</sup> Fares Fair PTV 2018, Public transport concessions for Victorian postgraduate students, accessed from <<http://faresfairptv.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Fares-Fair-PTV-Position-Paper-2018.pdf>>.

<sup>29</sup> Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations 2019, Discussion paper: Public transport concessions for international students in New South Wales, accessed from <<http://www.capa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/International-concessions-NSW-position-paper.docx>>.