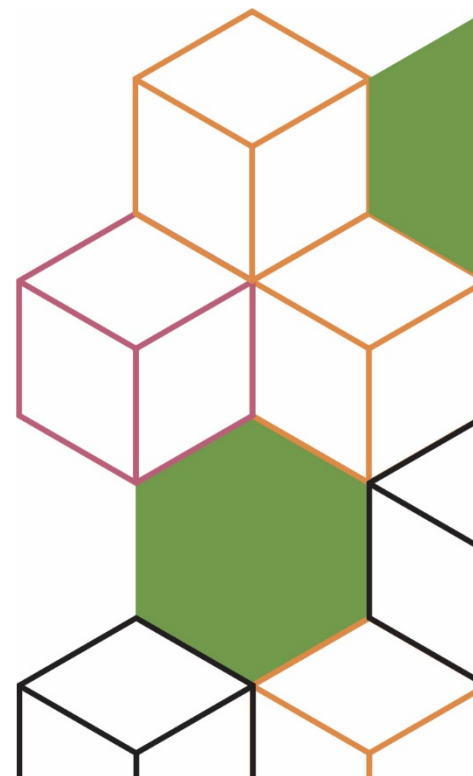


January  
**2021**

Graduate Student  
Association

**2021-22 Pre-budget  
submission**



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

We thank the Treasury for the opportunity to contribute our priorities for the Government's 2021/22 Budget. In this submission, we suggest four key areas for investment:

1. Strengthening graduate research,
2. Supporting international students,
3. Educating the future workforce, and
4. Promoting health and wellbeing.

## Summary of recommendations

We make the following recommendations for change:

- 1.1 Expand the Research Training Program to provide living stipends for all graduate researchers.
  - 1.2 Provide additional funding to extend the standard full-time RTP stipend to four years.
  - 1.3 Amend the RTP guidelines and provide further funding for stipends to be received during the thesis examination period.
  - 1.4 Increase parental leave entitlements for graduate researchers receiving Research Training Program stipends, at a cost of \$3.3 million per year.
  - 1.5 Provide six-month extensions for all Research Training Program stipend recipients enrolled in 2020, at a one-off cost of \$572 million.
  - 1.6 Assist international graduate researchers to return to Australia in 2021, including by funding quarantine.
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- 2.1 Promote housing and food security for international students, including by administering grants for universities and community organisations to provide targeted support.
  - 2.2 Create a \$112.5 million financial aid package for international students experiencing extreme financial hardship.
  - 2.3 Adjust student visa requirements to increase the number of hours international students can work per fortnight.
- 
- 3.1 Expand income support eligibility to all graduate degrees for domestic students.
  - 3.2 Increase the rate of student income support to at least the Henderson poverty line.
  - 3.3 Implement job creation programs that utilise university graduates.

4.1 Support universities to invest in mental health services to address student needs, including by providing support for online counselling options and culturally appropriate counselling offered in languages other than English.

4.2 Reform the Child Care Subsidy scheme to better support student parents.

## Strengthening graduate research

Graduate research students are an important pipeline for the research workforce, as well as a contributor to Australia's research output. In the current funding environment, graduate researchers are severely underpaid, and attrition is high. This is within the context of a severely weakened university research sector due to successive funding cuts.

The Research Training Program (RTP) is intended to support graduate researchers with a living stipend for the duration of their research training. However, the RTP is insufficient to meet these needs, leaving graduate researchers unpaid or underpaid.

Most graduate researchers do not receive an RTP stipend. The number of stipends each year is just one-third of the number of commencing graduate researchers<sup>1</sup>. GSA has previously argued that the failure to provide stipends can be considered a form of wage theft<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, the shortage of RTP stipends weakens the pipeline of the research workforce: domestic students receiving stipends have significantly higher completion rates than those who do not receive stipends<sup>3</sup>. The Research Training Program should be reformed so all graduate researchers are paid for their labour.

### **Recommendation 1.1: Expand the Research Training Program to provide living stipends for all graduate researchers.**

The RTP stipend does not cover the full study duration for a graduate research degree. The RTP stipend covers a stipend for three to 3.5 years, and a fee waiver for four years. However, most domestic doctoral students take five to six years to complete<sup>4</sup>. Students fortunate enough to receive an RTP stipend often find that it cuts out while they are nearing completion. Extending the RTP stipend duration for doctoral candidates to a minimum of four years would support more graduate researchers to complete their research degree and contribute to the national research output.

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<sup>1</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-discussion-paper-October-2018.docx>

<sup>2</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>3</sup> Torka, M 2020, 'Change and continuity in Australian doctoral education: PhD completion rates and times', Australian Universities Review, vol. 62, no. 2, pp. 69 – 82

<sup>4</sup> Torka, M 2020, 'Change and continuity in Australian doctoral education: PhD completion rates and times', Australian Universities Review, vol. 62, no. 2, pp. 69 – 82

## **Recommendation 1.2: Provide additional funding to extend the standard full-time RTP stipend to four years.**

A further weakness of the RTP is that graduate researchers under examination may lose stipend eligibility. Currently, universities have discretion to create their own definition of 'completion of study': the point at which the student ceases to be eligible for their stipend<sup>5</sup>. Some universities define submission of the thesis as 'completion of study', excluding the examination period. This should be amended to universally allow graduate researchers under examination to continue receiving their stipends, with block funding increased accordingly.

## **Recommendation 1.3: Amend the RTP guidelines and provide further funding for stipends to be received during the thesis examination period.**

The RTP stipend has minimal leave entitlements. This particularly impacts graduate students with caring responsibilities. Graduate researchers are only entitled to up to twelve weeks of maternity or adoption leave for students giving birth or who are the main carer, and up to one week of parental leave for students whose partner has given birth. This is only available for graduate researchers who have completed at least one year (or full-time equivalent) of candidature.

Graduate researchers are not eligible for Government Paid Parental Leave scheme, which provides Government-funded leave for working parents. This issue – was raised by the 2014 review of the scheme, with the report noting similarities between doctoral study and paid employment<sup>6</sup>.

Our recent research on graduate student parents has found that only 37% believe they have enough leave available to care for their children when needed, and that leave entitlements were not always suitable or sufficient<sup>7</sup>.

*"To accommodate my parenting responsibilities, I have to take significant amounts of "leave of absence" spread out through the year. Also, the leave of absence system has a minimum of 2 weeks leave, which is really annoying when I just need 2 or 3 days off to care for a sick child." – graduate researcher, GSA Parents on Campus survey*

To support parents and carers as graduate researchers, funding must be provided to create adequate leave entitlements. These reforms should include removing or reducing the waiting period for maternity leave, establishing paternity leave as a standard entitlement, and creating a leave category for ongoing caring responsibilities.

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<sup>5</sup> Department of Education, Skills and Employment 2021, Research Training Program (RTP) – frequently asked questions for university administrators, accessed from <<https://www.dese.gov.au/research-training-program-rtp-frequently-asked-questions-university-administrators>>

<sup>6</sup> Department of Social Services 2014, Paid Parental Leave scheme – review report, accessed from <[https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/06\\_2014/paid\\_parental\\_leave\\_scheme\\_review\\_report\\_accessible.docx](https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/06_2014/paid_parental_leave_scheme_review_report_accessible.docx)>

<sup>7</sup> University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association 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)>

At a minimum, entitlements should be brought into line with the Parental Leave Pay scheme, which includes twelve weeks maternity leave plus six weeks of flexible parental leave, and two weeks of paternity or partner leave<sup>8</sup>.

This additional maternity and paternity leave for graduate researchers is estimated to cost the Government an additional \$3.3 million per year<sup>9</sup>.

Note that this is only for existing RTP stipend recipients. Any additional RTP stipends (as per Recommendation 1.1) have not been considered in this calculation.

**Recommendation 1.4: Increase parental leave entitlements for graduate researchers receiving Research Training Program stipends, at a cost of \$3.3 million per year.**

Finally, it must be acknowledged that the Covid-19 crisis has had devastating impacts on graduate researchers.

Graduate researchers have been slowed down by lack of access to facilities, delayed data collection, and major changes to project methodology. Many graduate researchers have also encountered challenging circumstances such as loss of income, increased caring responsibilities, and home-schooling children during the lockdowns. Graduate researchers must be supported to complete their research and make up for losses to productivity due to Covid-19.

*"I am unable to collect data. While there is some other work I could be doing, it is not all possible. First, finalising my literature this early in my PhD wouldn't be possible, plus some of the books I need to move forward on my literature review are not available electronically. Finally, and most importantly, I have no time to do any of this as I'm supporting my primary-school aged child learning from home and have a part time job; this difficulty is not adequately acknowledged." – Graduate researcher, reported to GSA in May 2020*

The impact of Covid-19 on graduate researchers has been acknowledged by the Government in temporarily extending the maximum duration of RTP stipends by up to six months for graduate researchers<sup>10</sup>. However, no additional funding was attached to this announcement, with universities required to fund any extensions. This disincentivises universities from offering adequate extension provisions.

We propose that all graduate researchers receiving RTP stipends should receive a one-off six-month (full time or equivalent) extension, allowing them to catch up on lost progress in 2020.

This is estimated to cost the Government \$572 million<sup>11</sup>.

**Recommendation 1.5: Provide six-month extensions for all Research Training Program stipend recipients enrolled in 2020, at a one-off cost of \$572 million.**

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<sup>8</sup> Fair Work Ombudsman, n.d., Parental leave, accessed from < <https://www.fairwork.gov.au/how-we-will-help/templates-and-guides/best-practice-guides/parental-leave#paidparentalleavescheme>>

<sup>9</sup> See Appendix for calculation.

<sup>10</sup> Department of Education, Skills and Employment 2021, Research Training Program, accessed from < <https://www.dese.gov.au/research-block-grants/research-training-program>>

<sup>11</sup> See Appendix for calculation.

Support is needed for international graduate researchers who have paused their research and returned to their home countries during the Covid-19 pandemic. Some have no way to return for the foreseeable future, risking the investment that has already been made into their research at Australian universities. The Government should support international graduate researchers to return to Australia, including by covering the cost of any compulsory quarantine periods.

**Recommendation 1.6: Assist international graduate researchers to return to Australia in 2021, including by funding quarantine.**

## Supporting international students

International education is an important contributor to the Australian economy. In the 2018-19 financial year, the international education sector contributed \$37.6 billion to the Australian economy, supporting 240,000 jobs<sup>12</sup>. Border closures due to Covid-19 have seen a temporary halt to new international students arriving in Australia, with 99.7% fewer new international students arriving in October 2020 as compared to one year prior<sup>13</sup>.

The long-term outlook of the international education sector is threatened by reputational damage owing to poor treatment of international students. Over half of international students are less likely to recommend Australia as a study destination due to how Australia has handled the pandemic<sup>14</sup>. Prospective international students are seeking alternate study destinations such as Canada and Britain<sup>15</sup>. International students in Australia must be supported in order to meet a duty of care and to restore Australia's reputation as a desirable destination for international education.

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, many international students were experiencing precarious financial circumstances. Universities' Australia's 2018 survey found that the median annual income for international graduate coursework students was \$21,900, with 42.4% having more expenses than income<sup>16</sup>. International graduate researchers had a median annual income of \$30,000, with 30.6% having more expenses than income. About one in ten international graduate students reported that they regularly cannot afford food or other necessities.

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<sup>12</sup> Tehan, D 2019, International education makes significant economic contribution, Media release, accessed from < <https://ministers.dese.gov.au/tehan/international-education-makes-significant-economic-contribution> >

<sup>13</sup> Hurley, P 2021, 2021 is the year Australia's international student crisis really bites, The Conversation, accessed from < <https://theconversation.com/2021-is-the-year-australias-international-student-crisis-really-bites-153180> >

<sup>14</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://internationalstudentsandhousing.files.wordpress.com/2020/09/international-students-and-housing-survey-report-final-report.pdf>>

<sup>15</sup> Patty, A 2021, Overseas students dump Australia for Canada and COVID-ravaged Britain, Sydney Morning Herald, accessed from < <https://www.smh.com.au/national/overseas-students-dump-australia-for-canada-and-covid-ravaged-britain-20210111-p56tai.html> >

<sup>16</sup> Universities Australia 2018, Student Finances Survey, accessed from < <https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/180713-2017-UA-Student-Finance-Survey-Report.pdf> >

It is likely that the current level of poverty among international students is now much higher, as the economic and social impacts of Covid-19 have exacerbated the difficulties experienced by onshore international students. In a University of Technology Sydney survey of international students in Sydney and Melbourne before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, it was found that 61% of international students working prior to the pandemic had lost their job. Of those, only 15% found a new job. Of those who retained their job, two-thirds had reduced hours<sup>17</sup>.

Housing instability among international students was intensified by the Covid-19 pandemic. The same survey found that, by mid-July, one quarter of international students were not able to pay their rent in full, and almost one in eight had been threatened with eviction.

Australian universities provided hardship grants to 75,000 international students in the period March to June 2020, totalling \$110 million<sup>18</sup>. While universities are exhausting their hardship funds, international students in crisis continue to require support.

The Federal Government has a duty of care to international students experiencing poverty and housing instability, including through providing grants directly and equipping universities and community organisations to provide support.

We recommend that the Government creates a hardship relief fund to support international students who are unable to meet living costs due to the impacts of Covid-19. A \$112.5 million fund, matching the amount provided by universities, would provide 75,000 students with an average of \$1500 each.

**Recommendation 2.1: Promote housing and food security for international students, including by administering grants for universities and community organisations to provide targeted support.**

**Recommendation 2.2: Create a \$112.5 million financial aid package for international students experiencing extreme financial hardship.**

Another possibility to encourage international students' self-sufficiency is to increase the number of paid work hours permitted for student visa holders. Currently, international students on a student visa (subclass 500) may work a maximum of 40 hours per fortnight. To support the delivery of critical services, this condition was temporarily relaxed for student workers in certain sectors during the Covid-19 pandemic<sup>19</sup>.

A longer-term increase for the number of permitted working hours across all industries would empower international students and reduce their reliance on

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<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://internationalstudentsandhousing.files.wordpress.com/2020/09/international-students-and-housing-survey-report-final-report.pdf>>

<sup>18</sup> Universities Australia 2020, 2020-21 Pre-Budget Submission, accessed from <<https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/200824-Submission-2020-21-Pre-Budget-Submission.pdf>>

<sup>19</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>>

support services. This would also facilitate the continued delivery of key services at a time when no new migrant workers are entering Australia. We recommend that this increase be implemented for an initial three-year period, and that tax incentives for employers be considered to stimulate international student employment.

**Recommendation 2.3: Adjust student visa requirements to increase the number of hours international students can work per fortnight.**

## Educating the future workforce

Centrelink study payments such as Austudy are intended to support low-income domestic students<sup>20</sup>. Significant reforms to income support are required to meet this objective.

Many full-time domestic graduate students are ineligible for Austudy. Eligibility is determined by course, rather than by income level of the student. At the University of Melbourne, only 36% of graduate coursework degrees are eligible for income support<sup>21</sup>. The need for income support should be based on financial need, not on choosing a degree from an arbitrary list of approved courses.

**Recommendation 3.1: Expand income support eligibility to all graduate degrees for domestic students.**

For students who do receive Austudy or other student income support, the rate of payment is dangerously low. This has been acknowledged by the Government with the introduction of a temporary Coronavirus supplement of \$150 per fortnight.

The current maximum rate of Austudy for a single person with no dependents is just \$462.50 per fortnight (excluding the Coronavirus supplement). This is far below the poverty line for a non-working single person<sup>22</sup>, and less than a typical rent payment for a one bedroom flat in Melbourne<sup>23</sup>.

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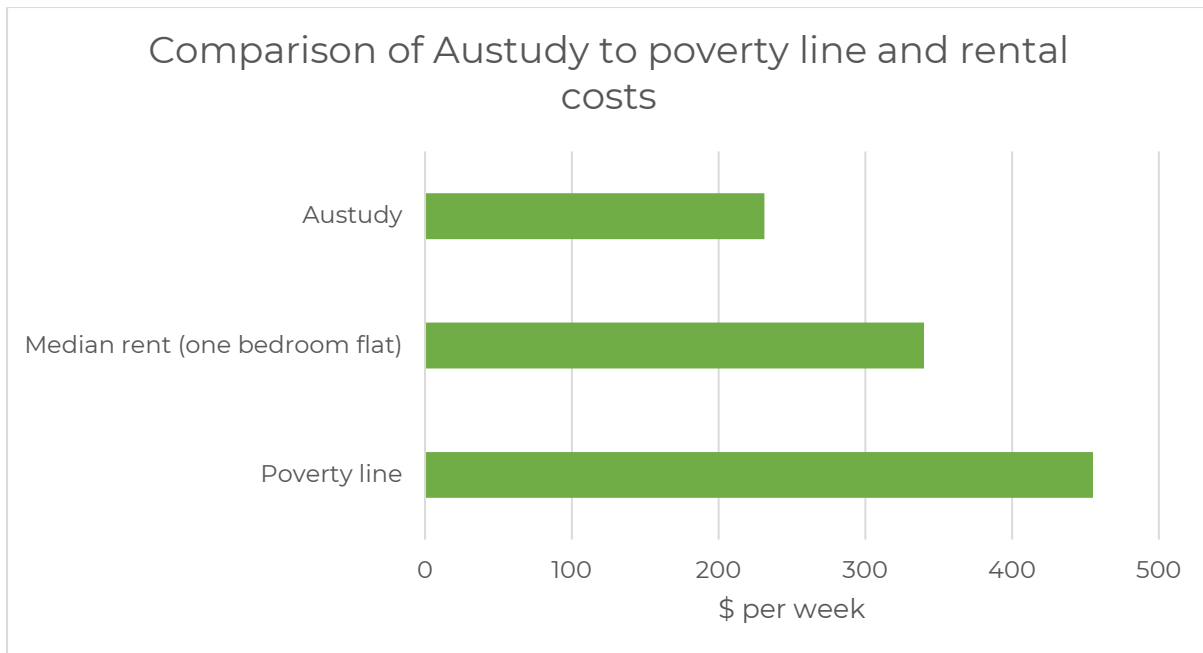
<sup>20</sup> Department of Social Services 2017, Social Security Guide – 1.2.2.30 Austudy Payment, accessed from < <https://guides.dss.gov.au/guide-social-security-law/1/2/2/30>>

<sup>21</sup> Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations 2018, Income support for domestic postgraduates in Australia: Discussion paper, accessed from from <<http://www.capa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Income-support-discussion-paper-October-2018.docx>>

<sup>22</sup> Melbourne Institute: Applied Economic & Social Research 2020, Poverty lines: Australia – June quarter 2020, accessed from < [https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0011/3526877/Poverty-Lines-Australia-June-2020.pdf](https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/3526877/Poverty-Lines-Australia-June-2020.pdf)>

<sup>23</sup> University of Melbourne n.d., Cost of living, accessed from < <https://students.unimelb.edu.au/student-support/scholarships-and-financial-support/financial-aid/cost-of-living>>





The failure of Austudy to scale in line with increasing costs of living has left many students in precarious financial positions. This must be addressed urgently to support low-income students to complete and excel in their studies.

**Recommendation 3.2: Increase the rate of student income support to at least the Henderson poverty line.**

There is a need for targeted initiatives to support students in their transition to the workforce. The Government should investigate incentives for job creation, including embedding diversity initiatives. This would enable the utilisation of graduates of all life stages including those with caring responsibilities.

**Recommendation 3.3: Implement job creation programs that utilise university graduates.**

**Promoting health and wellbeing**

Mental health and wellbeing are key concerns for graduate students.

In our survey of graduate students at the University of Melbourne, nearly 90% stated that in 2020, their studies were impacted by stress levels<sup>24</sup>. Two in five also reported that their studies were impacted by health issues. However, there are insufficient support services available for students. In our survey, two-thirds of students indicated the need for shorter waiting times to access appointments. Many students expressed a desire for adequate, sustainable and proactive support services.

*“There needs to be more rigorous mental health services provided through the university. Counselling and Psychological Services are short-term only and offer no real support for students struggling with mental health issues such as anxiety*

<sup>24</sup> University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association 2021, Student Resilience Project (forthcoming).

*and depression which can often be lifelong conditions requiring mental health support and are further extremely exacerbated by the PhD experience.” – graduate researcher, GSA Student Resilience survey*

International students may encounter the issue of mental health support services being unfit for their needs. In a survey of 84 international graduate students at the University of Melbourne, we found that almost half had not accessed counselling services when needed<sup>25</sup>. Of those who had not accessed counselling, one quarter thought they would not be likely to access counselling in the future if they needed it. Common barriers to access included anxiety, long waiting lists, difficulty in booking an appointment, and cost.

*“More interventions or supports available are only made available to local and not international students. I feel like the counsellors themselves have a poor understanding of international student issues, than I expected. And feel like i have to explain myself rather than being helped.” – international graduate student, GSA International Student Health Check-In survey*

To support students’ health and wellbeing, universities should have access to funding and resources to provide local and appropriate services.

**Recommendation 4.1: Support universities to invest in mental health services to address student needs, including by providing support for online counselling options and culturally appropriate counselling offered in languages other than English.**

For students with young children, the high cost of child care is a source of stress and barrier to participation in study and work.

*“Childcare costs are the major issue for anyone with young children. As a woman, the more I work the more financially unviable my work is.” – graduate researcher, GSA Parents on Campus survey*

The Government Child Care Subsidy is intended to assist families with the cost of child care, facilitate workforce participation of parents, and support the early learning of children<sup>26</sup>. Currently, graduate students are excluded from this program despite typically being low income earners. The Child Care Subsidy is based on an activity test of time spent in commitments such as paid work, volunteering and studying. The legislation allows only for study up to level eight of the Australian Qualifications Framework. This excludes graduate courses, which are levels nine and ten. Graduate students can only access the subsidy if they complete enough hours in the other listed activities.

To better target support to those who need it, the activity test for the Child Care Subsidy should accept graduate study as a form of study.

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<sup>25</sup> University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association 2020, International Student Health Check-In survey, unpublished

<sup>26</sup> Department of Social Services 2018, Family Assistance Guide – 1.2.6 Child care subsidy, accessed from < <https://guides.dss.gov.au/family-assistance-guide/1/2/6>>

**Recommendation 4.2: Reform the Child Care Subsidy scheme to better support student parents.**

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## Appendix: Cost estimates

### Increased parental leave entitlements for graduate researchers

Non-public sector utilisation rates for primary and secondary parental leave<sup>27</sup>:

	Male	Female
Primary	0.3%	4.3%
Secondary	1.5%	0.1%

There are approximately 40,000 RTP stipend recipients<sup>28</sup>.

Assume the gender split of RTP stipend recipients is the same as the gender split of all graduate research students, 48.9% are male and 51.1% are female<sup>29</sup>.

Assume general parental leave utilisation rates apply to RTP recipients.

Therefore, the number of RTP recipients taking primary and secondary parental leave each year is:

	Male	Female	Total
Primary	59	879	938
Secondary	293	20	313

The minimum RTP rate is \$28,597 per annum<sup>30</sup>, or \$549.94 per week.

To bring entitlements into line with the Parental Leave Pay scheme, primary carers require an additional six weeks of leave and secondary carers require an additional one week of leave.

To determine the cost of additional primary leave provisions:

Primary leave takers x weekly RTP rate x 6 weeks

$$938 \times \$549.94 \times 6$$

$$= \$3,094,651$$

To determine the cost of additional secondary leave provisions:

Secondary leave takers x weekly RTP rate x 1 week

$$313 \times \$549.94 \times 1$$

$$= \$172,542$$

<sup>27</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics 2020, Gender Indicators Australia – 10. Work and Family Balance, accessed from < <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/gender-indicators-australia/2020/41250DC0010.xlsx>>

<sup>28</sup> Tehan, D 2020, Critical support for Australian university research, Media release, accessed from < <https://ministers.dese.gov.au/tehan/critical-support-for-australian-university-research>>

<sup>29</sup> Department of Education, Skills and Employment, n.d., uCube, accessed from < <http://highereducationstatistics.education.gov.au/>>

<sup>30</sup> Department of Education, Skills and Employment 2021, Research Training Program, accessed from < <https://www.dese.gov.au/research-block-grants/research-training-program>>

Total cost for additional primary and secondary leave is \$3,267,193.

### **Covid-19 extensions for graduate researchers**

There are approximately 40,000 RTP stipend recipients<sup>31</sup>.

The minimum RTP rate is \$28,597 per annum<sup>32</sup>.

To determine the cost of six-month extensions for all currently enrolled RTP recipients:

Number of recipients x annual RTP rate x 0.5

40,000 x \$28,597 x 0.5

Total is \$571,940,000.

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<sup>31</sup> Tehan, D 2020, Critical support for Australian university research, Media release, accessed from < <https://ministers.dese.gov.au/tehan/critical-support-for-australian-university-research> >

<sup>32</sup> Department of Education, Skills and Employment 2021, Research Training Program, accessed from < <https://www.dese.gov.au/research-block-grants/research-training-program> >