



## National Inquiry into Australia's Tourism and International Education Sector

### Submission from the Australian Council of Graduate Research

12 December 2022

The Australian Council of Graduate Research (ACGR) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defense and Trade (JSCFADT)'s inquiry into Australia's tourism and international education sectors

ACGR was established in 1995 and is Australia's peak body for graduate research education. Our purpose is to promote and support excellence in graduate research education through establishing best practice standards, providing a forum for networking and practice sharing amongst graduate research leaders, influencing the development of graduate research policy and promoting the benefits of graduate research. ACGR is deeply committed to ensuring that our universities can attract and support the best possible Higher Degree by Research (HDR) candidates from all over the world to undertake higher degrees by research within Australia so that subsequent graduates are best prepared to contribute academically, socially and economically to the future of our national and globally after they complete their research training.

Every Australian university, and several other higher education providers who are accredited to deliver higher degrees by research, are members of ACGR and a senior academic leader, typically Dean or Pro Vice-Chancellor of Graduate Research, represents each one. ACGR has consulted with its members regarding terms of reference of this inquiry and is pleased to provide the following response for consideration by the Committee.



## General Comments

HDR candidates represent 15%<sup>1</sup> of total university postgraduate enrolments, but they are nonetheless the backbone of our higher education system, providing 54%<sup>2</sup> of the human resources devoted by universities to research and development and driving their global rankings and reputation. This R&D output and contribution to Australia's third largest export (education) combined with the value of our research graduates to the nation's innovation agenda and economy, make it clear that we must do all that we can to maintain our graduate research enrolments and completions.

International HDRs are particularly valuable to Australia. They have high rates of timely completion of their degrees and, often, prodigious research outputs. These global scholars are critical to the cementing current research collaborations and supporting emerging areas of research and innovation. HDR candidates often contribute to the teaching workforce of our universities, thus demonstrating the diversity and international character of our institutions and enhancing the experiences of their earlier-stage students.

Tourism is also induced by international HDRs as their friends and family often visit them while they are studying in Australia and engage in tourist activities using transport, accommodation, attractions and hospitality etc. Friends and family also often return to Australia with the international HDRs when they graduate - further boosting tourism to Australia. Alumni of Australian higher degree by research programs returning to leadership and influential roles their home countries also act as informal ambassadors for Australia in many areas of strategic value including trade and tourism. As they often develop a deep connection with Australia while they are studying here, repeat visits to Australia are not uncommon.

Pre-pandemic, international HDR candidates made up over 36% of total graduate research enrolments. During COVID 19, many within this predominately mature aged cohort struggled to continue their higher degree by research, undertake fieldwork or remain enrolled with competing family responsibilities. Post pandemic, domestic enrolments are dropping, many international candidates have discontinued and the barriers to new international candidates remain. In regional Australia, in particular, international student enrolments help to support/grow the economy and they have significant potential in helping address labour force shortages generally. Urgent action is required to regrow our international HDR enrolments and reclaim the contributions that these candidates make to Australia's university system and broader economy.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Education Higher Education Statistics – Student Enrolments 2020

<sup>2</sup> ABS Research and Experimental Development, Higher Education Organisations, Australia 2020



ACGR asks the Inquiry to note the following challenges and consider these opportunities to support the building of a strong international graduate research program across our universities.

### Support required to rebuild the international HDR market post-COVID

A national effort is needed to promote the graduate research component of our education export industry. The quality and productivity of our graduate research programs are well recognised internationally across the university sector but there is no coordinated national recruitment strategy for graduate research programs which are quite different educational products compared with coursework degrees. Both political and financial support is needed for a national marketing campaign.

### More flexibility in RTP to support international recruitment and retention

The current Commonwealth Scholarship Guidelines limit the amount of RTP that can be utilised for international candidates and programs. Universities should be allowed the flexibility to support both domestic and international HDR candidates as they deem appropriate to their cohort and research and innovation agendas.

### Recognition and support for international research partnerships

Impactful international research collaborations are often supported by or initiated through the establishment of joint or dual PhD programs where candidates work with universities or supervisors from across the world. It is important that we continue to engage in and grow these types of research education programs. Similarly international research training is critical part of Australia's responsibility to support academic capacity building for developing countries. Consideration could be given to new funding to support mobility/engagement efforts, and increased promotion and coordination of this profiling through Austrade or similar.

Barriers to these programs include visa requirements and inordinately slow visa processing (in some instances), inconsistency between government departments regarding issues such as critical technologies and federal funding program conditions. Removal of these barriers will involve collaboration between various government departments. ACGR is keen to support the government in finding to solutions to their challenges.

### Support for and wellbeing of international candidates when onshore

Graduate research stipends are low and close to the national poverty line for all candidates. International candidates, often with dependent partners or children to support, find it particularly difficult meet the rising cost of living and are more like to suffer financial duress. Visa conditions and the current work limitations for candidates receiving a RTP scholarship exacerbate this situation. There is a serious shortage of affordable accommodation for international students in both urban and regional areas, particularly for HDR candidates with families. The current visa requirement to



purchase full health cover for the full duration of their degree (up to \$14,000 for a family with two children) prior to admission to the degree is another insurmountable obstacle for potentially high quality candidates. ACGR would like consideration within the Inquiry of increased access to subsidised housing, amortising the health cover investment over the full candidature and reviewing the income restrictions for candidates in receipt of an RTP scholarship during their degree. Furthermore, given that many universities financially support the Overseas Health Cover for international HDR candidates on scholarships, consideration should be given to the federal government subsidising the health cover for international HDR candidates from a separate pool to the RTP.

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