

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

SENATE SELECT COMMITTEE ON COVID-19

Universities Australia is pleased to provide the following answers to questions from the Committee.

28 JULY 2020 (IN-HEARING)

Senator James Paterson asked “I want to put a question on notice to both organisations on whether you made any comment or provided any analysis on the Professor Babones's report in August last year when it was released.”

Answer:

Universities Australia has not made any public comment on the opinion piece that Senator Paterson has referred to.

3 AUGUST 2020 (WRITTEN)

Senator Mehreen Faruqi asked:

A survey [of] PhD students reported by Naaman Zhou in The Guardian on July 10 found half are considering disengaging from their studies because of the pandemic, 5 per cent are currently or about to experience homelessness and 11 per cent are skipping meals.

- a. Does this reflect universities' understanding of the welfare situation of young researchers around Australia?
- b. What consequences would such a mass exodus of young talent have for higher education?
- c. What more could be done by universities and the government to support these students?

Answer:

a) Welfare situation of research higher degree students

The pandemic is creating significant challenges for many members of the university community, including disruption to studies and economic hardship.

- **Disruption to studies:**
Physical distancing and other restrictions impact students undertaking a research higher degree (RHD) such as a M.Phil or Ph.D. Those students that are unable to access labs, clinical settings or other resources including physical collections will struggle to complete their research.
- **Economic hardship**
Although most domestic students studying full time receive a scholarship that provides a living allowance (stipend) and fee waivers, there are many students who support their studies through employment. Some of these students (or their families) have lost employment as a result of the pandemic, and may be struggling to continue to fund their studies. International

students are at particular risk of economic hardship as they are unable to access Australian income support systems.

These disruptions will have significant consequences for the ability of students to complete their research. The journey of RHD completion can be challenging for many candidates and the pandemic may have effects on their family circumstances, physical and mental health, and other factors that can impact their ability to continue their studies. Universities are alert to the challenges facing RHD students and will be attempting to extend support as far as they are able, and we encourage any student experiencing difficulties to contact their institutions to find out what support might be available, and what flexibility may be able to be afforded to help them continue their studies through the pandemic.

Universities Australia understands that a substantial number of RHD students have experienced disruptions as a result of the pandemic and many will be seeking an extension of their scholarship to enable them to complete their degree. The Government has agreed to a six-month extension for students covered by the Research Training Program, although no additional funding has been made available to the universities to pay for these extensions.

b) Consequences of a mass exodus of RHD students from higher education.

Although it is too early to determine if significant numbers of RHD students will be forced to discontinue their studies, Universities Australia is concerned that disruptions to the studies of current students will have a flow-on impact for the supply of skilled research graduates, as well as the ability of institutions to offer places to RHD students in future years. Universities are supporting all students, including RHD students, as best they can, however resources are limited.

c) Efforts of government and universities to support students.

- **Hardship funds:**
All 39 Universities Australia member institutions have created hardship funds to attempt to assist students in need. University communities are doing their best to support the significant numbers of students and staff experiencing hardship. However, with the current challenges to university finances, it is unlikely that universities will be able to provide enough assistance to meet the continuing need. Assistance from state and territory governments to international students has been gratefully received, but Universities Australia would welcome contributions from the Commonwealth to ensure the welfare of all students.
- **Scholarship extensions:**
In response to advocacy from Universities Australia and other groups, the Government has agreed to allow students in receipt of a place in the Research Training Program an extension of up to six months in recognition of disruptions to their studies as a result of the pandemic. At this stage, no additional funding has been provided by the Government to enable these extensions and UA anticipates that the cost to provide extensions for all scholarship recipients will be in the order of hundreds of millions of dollars. Universities would welcome a contribution from Government to help fund these scholarship extensions to ensure that RHD students are able to complete their research – research that could be vital to beating the pandemic or boosting our recovery.