ACGR Industry Engagement Survey Report

January, 2026

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF GRADUATE RESEARCH

Executive Summary

The Australian Council of Graduate Research (ACGR) surveyed 52 Universities in Australia and New Zealand that award Higher Degrees by Research (HDR) about industry internships and other types of industry engagement, models that are successful, and barriers to implementation. HDR students refer to students enrolled in either a Masters by Research or a PhD. For the purposes of this report, if we do not specify the analyses are relevant to all HDR students, and where analyses are limited to PhD students this is specified.

All eligible Australian Universities participated. Australian Universities reported, on average, approximately 43 internships per year, significantly more than New Zealand Universities. However, only an average of 25 of those internships were eligible for weighting in the government's Research Training Program (RTP) scheme. Universities that were able to provide data (n = 18) reported significantly more industry engagement outside of their internship programs, with an average amongst respondents of 215 PhD students who were meaningfully engaged with industry. Universities that were members of the Australian Technology Network (ATN) engaged significantly more with industry than other Australian Universities and regional universities had lower levels of industry engagement (although the latter could be due to size). Although most universities reported that they only started routinely expanding industry engagement in the 2020s, all Australian universities reported some level of engagement with industry.

Most universities that reported industry internships sourced them through multiple different mechanisms. For the majority of responding institutions, internships could be initiated via proposals from the industry partner and supervisor (84%), students' existing relationships (75%) or through Australian Postgraduate Research Intern (APR.Intern), the national industry internship provider (72%). This suggests that there are multiple different pathways through which PhD students enter into external engagement with industry partners for internships. Most universities did not routinely apply an extension to students' candidature or stipend when they completed an internship (87%), which is likely to be a barrier to uptake. Most full-time internships were funded directly by the industry, whereas most part-time internships were funded by the university. However, many universities supported unfunded internships.

In total, across the sector, of the 36 institutions that responded to the number of internships completed, there were an estimated 1595 internships with which students engaged in during 2024, but **only 51% of these were eligible for the government RTP internship weighting**. This suggests that relying on the annual numbers reported to government will lead to an underestimate of the number of HDR students completing internships across the

country. Institutions estimated that there were approximately 5661 students (more than three times the number engaged in internships) who were actively and meaningfully engaged in industry-related activities through other activities, such as industry-funded PhDs, industry-embedded PhD programs, CRC training centres, competitive grants, industry-sponsored work and other specialty programs in the sector. University representatives described varying levels of industry engagement, and many types of industry engagement represent a stronger collaboration between universities and industry than an internship but are not captured through any form of reporting. Indeed, one barrier to documenting an accurate level of industry engagement in the sector is that this is not data routinely collected by universities nor reported. As a result, it's likely that the data reported here represents an underestimate of external engagement activity amongst HDR students with industry across the sector.

Universities advocated for a more flexible approach to quantifying industry engagement and believed that there were benefits to PhD training of industry engagement from a light touch approach to a fully embedded experience. University responses informed the development of themes and a framework which may help guide the sector in ways to engage more broadly with industry and a model of progression from light touch approaches that have fewer barriers to fully embedded approaches. Commonly cited barriers to extending industry collaboration included finances, structural challenges, inequity between disciplines, difficulty in reporting institutional data and the need for innovative models to emerge.

Participating Institutions

The ACGR conducted a survey of Australian and New Zealand Universities that provide Higher Degree by Research (HDR) training between July and October 2025 that asked about industry internships, industry engagement, models of engagement that had been successful and barriers to implementation. Representatives of 52 Universities (100% of eligible members) took part in the survey. All 45 Universities in Australia that award the PhD degree had a representative complete the survey. Fifteen participating institutions were considered regional, eight members of the Group of Eight (Go8) and six members of the ATN took part.

How Institutions Source Industry Internships

Amongst all universities that responded, multiple different methods were used to source industry internships at their institution. As Table 1 indicates, the most common method of

sourcing internships was existing relationships between an industry partner and supervisor (85%). Likewise, in nearly three-quarters of institutions, students themselves directly sourced internships. Many institutions (72%) reported using the national provider APR Intern and 29% iPREP (Industry and PhD Research Program). In 59% of responding institutions, industry directly approached the university to request placement. Nearly 40% sourced opportunities through a business development activity and a few utilised the Defence Innovation Network (10%). One third of responding universities also reported other ways in which internships were sourced (e.g. industry PhDs, packaged internships within collaborative projects or co-funded PhDs; placements with local government and through Cotutelle programs).

Method of Sourcing Internships	Percentage of respondents (N = 39)
Industry partner and supervisor proposed internship	85% (n = 33)
Student sources own internship	74% (n = 29)
APR Intern (External provider)	72% (n = 28)
Industry approaches university	59% (n = 23)
Through a business development activity	38% (n = 15)
iPREP	28% (n = 11)
Defence Innovation Network	10% (n = 4)
Other	33% (n = 13)

Table 1: Proportion of university respondents who endorsed sourcing internships through different methods.

Industry Internship Funding Sources

For most universities, multiple sources of support are available for full-time PhD students completing an internship. Most commonly the industry partner provides a stipend to students during the internship (77%) or provides a top-up while the student continues to receive their base stipend (71%). Many universities also allow the student to continue to receive their stipend paid for by the university (68%) or co-fund the stipend with industry in equal amounts (57%). Slightly more than half of responding universities allowed students to undertake internships unfunded (54%), and 26% had other methods of funding, primarily where students were embedded in industry during their candidature.

Method of Sourcing Internships	Percentage of respondents (N = 35)
Industry partner through a stipend	77% (n = 27)
Industry partner provides a top-up to existing stipend	71% (n = 25)
University funds the internship through continuing stipend	68% (n = 24)
Co-funded through university and industry partner equally	57% (n = 20)
Unfunded internships	54% (n = 19)
Other	26% (n = 9)

Table 2: Funding sources that are used to support PhD candidates while completing internships full-time

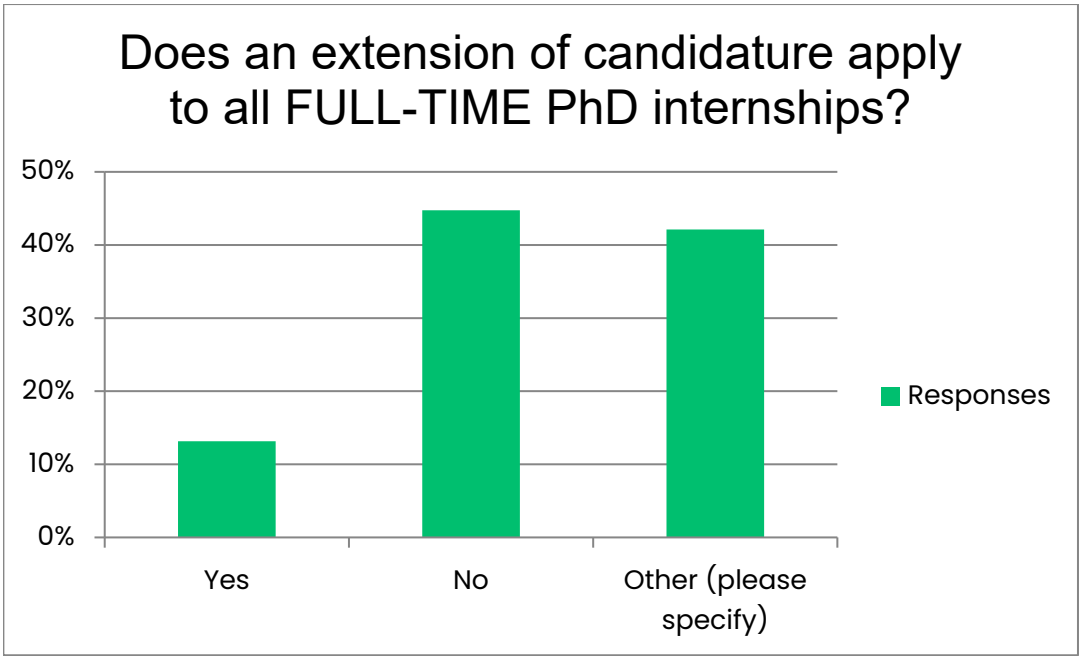
For PhD candidates completing part-time internships, it was most common for universities to continue to support the student through a stipend (62%) and fewer universities reported that industry partners would provide stipends for part-time completion (50%) or provide a top-up (56%) in comparison to if the student were completing the internship full-time (71-77%). Likewise, co-funding was less common than for full-time internships (38%), although unfunded internships were permitted in almost half of the responding institutions (47%). Other funding sources were also reported, including some government co-funding programs and fully embedded PhDs.

Method of Sourcing Internships	Percentage of respondents (N = 32)
Industry partner through a stipend	50% (n = 16)
Industry partner provides a top-up to existing stipend	56% (n = 18)
University funds the internship through continuing stipend	63% (n = 20)
Co-funded through university and industry partner equally	38% (n = 12)
Unfunded internships	47% (n = 15)
Other	44% (n = 14)

Table 3: Funding sources that are used to support PhD candidates while completing internships part-time

Extensions to Complete Industry Internships

Very few responding universities had developed provisions for automatic extensions for PhD students who undertake industry internships during their candidature (approximately 12%), which is likely a barrier to uptake of internships amongst the cohort. In more than 40% of universities that responded, no extension was available and this was 50% if the internship



was part-time. Many universities also selected other which included that only some internships qualified for extension (e.g. those which were eligible for RTP weighting; or those unrelated to the PhD). Likewise, some universities supported students by taking a suspension or leave of absence, essentially extending candidature, although such mechanisms introduce problems for international PhD candidates due to visa restrictions.

Figure 1: Proportion of Universities that offer extensions to candidature for full-time internships

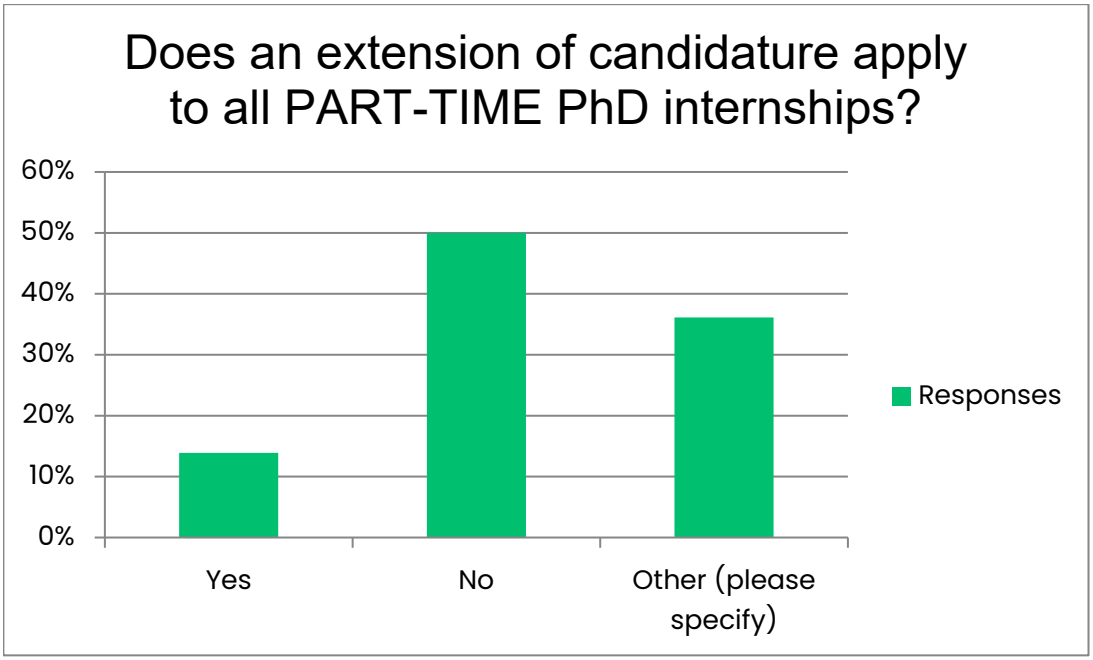


Figure 1 (b): Proportion of Universities that offer extensions to candidature for part-time internships

Number of Industry Internships Offered

In total, across the sector, of the 36 institutions that responded to the number of internships completed, there were an estimated 1595 internships with which students engaged in during 2024, but only 51% of these were eligible for the government RTP internship weighting. This suggests that relying on government reporting would likely underestimate the number of HDR students completing internships. Institutions estimated that there were approximately 5661 students who were actively and meaningfully engaged in industry-related activities through other activities, such as industry-funded PhDs, industry-embedded PhD programs, CRC training centres, competitive grants, industry-sponsored work and other specialty programs in the sector.

On average, for responding Australian Universities (n = 29) there was a range in the number of internships provided annually from 2 to 200, with a mean of 42.7 internships (Standard Deviation (SD) = 55.6). Of these, between zero and 150 of those internships met the criteria set out by the Department of Education (DoE) to become eligible for the Research Training Program (RTP) funding, with an average of 25.5 (SD = 36.2) reportable internships. Notably, although fewer universities had the capacity to report accurately on the number of PhD students meaningfully engaged with industry, those that were able to (n = 18) reported that there were between 10 and 600 students who were engaged meaningfully with industry.

Indeed, for those institutions that responded to this question, on average 215 students per year were involved with industry engagement (SD = 211). Many universities responded to open-ended questions to describe examples of meaningful engagement with industry which allowed us to develop a coding system to identify themes and describe a framework for meaningful engagement with industry.

A Framework for Meaningful Engagement with Industry

Thirty five written responses given to the open-ended question: *Describe the ways PhD students engage with industry outside of a formal industry internship during their candidature?* were thematically analysed. From those responses, we identified four main themes that we organised into a framework to help contextualise the level of Industry Engagement in HDR programs.

The first theme was **engagement as a continuum** and highlighted that engagement spanned a continuum from light-touch (mentoring, networking, data access) to deeply embedded (industry-funded scholarships, embedded PhDs, industry doctorates) levels of engagement. The lower levels of engagement had the least number of barriers and therefore could provide a good introduction to students of the importance of industry as end users of research and potential employers. Likewise, light-touch approaches could also demonstrate to industry the importance of well-trained and independent researchers to achieving their goals. Therefore, the sector was advocating for universities to support industry engagement from across the spectrum and valuing even light-touch approaches, which were viewed as a way to initiate and deepen relationships with industry and develop into more meaningful levels of engagement.

The second theme was around the importance of **co-supervision and co-investment.** This theme highlighted the importance of both the University and Industry partner being mutually committed to strengthening the relationship through the pursuit of shared goals and resources. Collaboration between university-based academics, the industry-based employees and students were seen as key to ensuring that projects could meet the needs of both the industry partner and pedagogical learning outcomes of HDR candidates. The fact that both university and industry provide some level of investment facilitates mutual ownership of the research outcomes.

The third theme placed a strong emphasis on **research relevance and impact**, with candidates positioned as the conduit linking academic and theoretical interests and

applied industry research questions. Respondents indicated that it was engagement was most productive when the interests of industry and academia could be well aligned. Good alignment produced work that had had relevance to the industry partner and was useful to research end-users. However, the point was made that often such research also had benefits to the academic community both through knowledge gain, but also through impact of academic research.

The final theme was the importance of **leveraging University-specific strengths**. Respondents talked about areas that more naturally lent themselves to industry partnerships, including agriculture, health, environment, and projects in Science Technology and Engineering. However, respondents also described that leveraging those high performing academics who already have strong engagement with industry led to the most authentic collaborations that stood the test of time, allowing collaborations to grow and the benefits to be felt by multiple students.

From the responses to this question, we were able to develop a framework to help guide the sector in thinking about ways to engage with industry (See Figure 2). As the themes above suggest, the levels of the framework are seen as developing from **light-touch** to **deeply embedded**, such that early levels of the model build partnerships between industry and the university sector which deepen with continued engagement, as collaboration and co-design of research questions and methods develop further, culminating in strong partnerships that foster mature levels of sustainable engagement between industry and the university sector.

Level 1 refers to "**light-touch"** approaches, such as networking and mentoring between students and supervisors of the university and industry partners, events involving key stakeholders, such as hackathons or workshops that provide mutual benefits and shared resources, such as data, equipment or field sites. There are relatively few barriers to these types of engagement, and they do not require vast resources but are able to seed relationships that can, in turn, develop into partnerships.

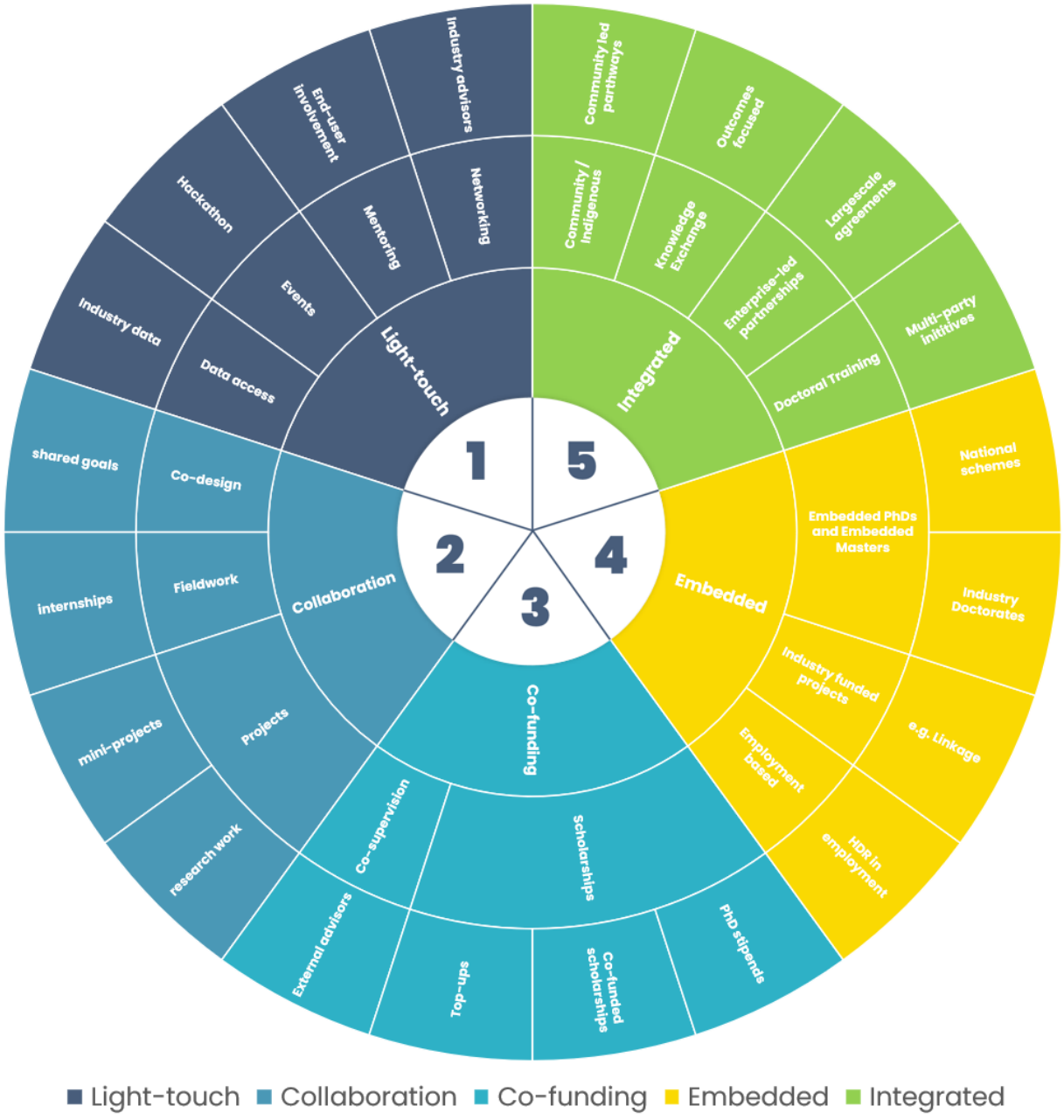


Figure 2: Framework for levels of Industry Engagement in HDR programs

Level 2 often develops from those seeded partnerships whereby the research becomes characterised by its applied nature, forming a true **collaboration** between industry and academia. In level 2, the research projects are co-designed such that research questions are jointly shaped by industry and university partners, leading to shared goals. Such projects can emerge through PhD candidates participating in larger industry projects, in smaller projects during industry internships or collecting research data within workplaces or at industry-based field sites. At level 2, the intellectual contribution is shared, although the financial contribution is not necessarily.

Co-funding and shared supervision marks level 3 where external industry supervisors are formally included in the projects and share the responsibility for researcher development of the PhD candidate with their university supervisors. Co-funding can be in the form of top-up scholarships, co-funded stipends or other industry contributions to research support. The investment of funding from both partners into the research is one element that demonstrates the value of the research to industry and university, alike.

As industry engagement matures, students and university partnerships become **embedded** within the industry partner's organisation. The research may be physically based with the industry partner, as funded by the industry or through national schemes (such as the National Industry PhD or the CSIRO PhDs). Often embedded engagement occurs through employment-based research where professionals align their PhD studies with their professional role, sometimes engaging in part-time candidature alongside their professional responsibilities. The embedded nature of engagement at level 4 often occurs in the context of long-term or strategic partnerships, where the entire project might be funded by the industry partner.

Finally, level 5 marks a fully **integrated partnership model** between the university and industry partner. Fully integrated partnership models typically have a strong focus on delivering research that can be translated into workplaces with impact on policy or practice. Typically, these are supported by multi-party initiatives that have sustained industry involvement and are co-led by university and industry-based staff. Large-scale agreements are typically in place (such as in Doctoral training centres, centres of excellence or government initiatives) where multiple PhD candidates are embedded within industry over multiple years. The integrated partnership model notably extends beyond "industry" and can be represented in community-led partnerships, such as in community-led Indigenous research.

Barriers to Industry Engagement

Whilst respondents were positive about the opportunities to build on the considerable traction that the sector has gained in the past decade in relation to industry engagement as part of the PhD experience, there were a number of barriers that were identified. **Financial pressures** are a major barrier for HDR student participation, particularly in Australia's current cost-of-living context. Internships often prolong the timeframe of a PhD, during which the typical candidate is living close to the poverty line. This is, for many, a disincentive to engage with industry.

Likewise, respondents called out **systemic and structural challenges** within the University context that are barriers to engagement. Siloing within disciplinary schools and departments means that good practice of industry engagement is not widely shared. There is a lack of dedicated resources to support efforts to engage with industry, particularly at smaller universities (e.g. signing contracts, IP agreements). These resource limitations can create institutional friction in delivering and measuring engagement.

Indeed, the measurement of industry engagement across universities and particularly within PhD cohorts is a real barrier. **Definitions and metrics of "industry engagement" are variable**, creating difficulty in reporting nationally consistent data. Currently, reporting requirements focus on DESE-eligible internships, but our data suggest that these represent the tip of the iceberg in terms of industry engagement in the sector.

The final concern that was noted by some was that **disciplinary inequity** persists, with structured opportunities for internships and engagement more broadly favouring STEM. It is undoubtedly true that the word "industry" is used in relation to internships, for example, to refer to research end-users which can mean community, non-government organisations, government departments etc., which need not be STEM-focused. Nevertheless, the perception remains that industry engagement is STEM-focused. Universities need to focus also on other forms of engagement, including inclusion of community as industry partners in Indigenous research as models for how to continue to ensure that PhD-led research meets the needs of our society and equips candidates with skills for employment across a range of sectors.

Despite these noted barriers, respondents remained convinced that **innovative models are emerging**, such as cooperative universities, themed scholarship cohorts, and inclusion of community as industry partners. National schemes, although limited, give good examples of embedded and integrated models of engagement that can be leveraged by the university sector.

Recommendations

On the basis of both the qualitative and quantitative results of this project, we make the following recommendations:

1. The data from this survey was clear that only half of all completed internships were DoE RTP internship weighting eligible, and the main reason was that about half of all internship agreements are not signed within 18 months of the commencement of candidature. While early internships can shape the research, later internships can

also be advantageous because candidates may be more skilled and can learn to adapt their skills to industry, often resulting in employment. Such outcomes are also in the national interest. **The ACGR strongly recommends removing the requirement for DoE RTP Internship weighing -eligible internships to be agreed within the first 18 months of candidature.**

2. Under current funding arrangements, scholarships funded through the Research Training program cannot be co-funded by Industry. However, co-funding of stipends would allow universities to mature relationships with industry while being able to support additional candidates. This could help in reducing the current decline in domestic PhD candidates nationally. **We recommend that the government allow co-funding of RTP scholarships with industry**

3. Currently, the financial incentives for universities to engage with industry is through the DoE RTP -eligible internships weighting and the RTP funding. However, government incentives for industry to engage with universities through funding internships, or stipends would help encourage engagement of industry with the university sector for mutual benefit. **We recommend the introduction of better incentives for industry to fund or co-fund PhD stipends and/or internships.**

4. The responses from the sector explicitly indicated that industry engagement existed on a continuum and that more light-touch approaches to engagement benefited institutions in many ways and led to the development of stronger partnerships and more integrated pathways to engagement. **We recommend the adoption of a continuum approach to industry engagement in policy setting centred on the levels of industry engagement framework.**