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Submission to the Senate Education and Employment References Committee Inquiry into Australian University Graduates' Struggle to Find Work After Graduating

From: Australian Council of Graduate Research (ACGR)

Introduction

The Australian Council of Graduate Research (ACGR) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Education and Employment References Committee inquiry into Australian university graduates' struggle to find work after graduating.

ACGR is the national peak body for graduate research in Australia's higher education sector. All universities accredited by TEQSA to deliver research training programs are members of the ACGR, represented by Deans of Graduate Research and equivalent leaders from Australian universities offering Higher Degree by Research (HDR) programs. Founded in 1997, ACGR plays a leading role in promoting excellence in research and research training nationally and in positioning graduate research as a key contributor to Australia's future prosperity.

This submission addresses the following terms of reference:

- the quality of university education in Australia; and
- whether graduates of Australian universities are being taught the skills that employers are looking for.

While ACGR's principal remit is graduate research education, the issues raised by the inquiry are highly relevant across the broader higher education system.

Executive Summary

Australia's universities continue to deliver high-quality education under a robust regulatory and quality assurance framework. Graduate employment outcomes should not be interpreted as a simple proxy for educational quality, as they are shaped by broader labour market conditions, recruitment practices, geographic factors and economic cycles.

ACGR submits that:

1. Australian Higher Degree by Research training remains internationally renowned and subject to strong quality controls. Australia has an outstanding 25% of our universities in the top 100 globally, ranking us well ahead of other higher education providers in the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada, according to [QS University Rankings \(2026\)](#).
2. Higher Degree by Research training programs delivered through Australian Universities are teaching many of the professional skills employers seek, including communication, problem-solving, digital capability, teamwork and leadership in research translation and commercialisation.
3. Higher Degree by Research training programs make a distinctive contribution by developing advanced research, innovation and leadership capabilities.
4. Stronger pathways between universities and employers are needed to ensure postgraduate talent is fully utilised.

The [ACGR National HDR Researcher Development Framework \(RDF\)](#) provides a contemporary national model for aligning research training with the capabilities needed in academic, industry, government, and community careers.

1. The Quality of University Education in Australia

High standards and continuous quality assurance

Australian universities operate within a nationally regulated system that requires providers to meet rigorous academic and institutional standards. Quality in higher education is supported through curriculum review, external benchmarking, student feedback processes, academic governance, and regulatory oversight.

Within Higher Degree by Research education, quality is further strengthened through candidature milestones, supervision standards, thesis examination processes, research integrity requirements and structured researcher development programs.

ACGR has developed the [Graduate Research Good Practice Guidelines](#) which articulate standards considered essential for the delivery of graduate research programs.

This demonstrates that Australian Higher Degree by Research education quality is supported not only by institutional reputation, but by formal standards and ongoing accountability.

The distinct value of graduate research education

Higher Degree by Research training programs provide the highest level of university education. Candidates are trained not only to understand existing knowledge, but to create new knowledge through original inquiry.

This process develops independence, methodological rigour, resilience, creativity and the ability to solve complex problems in uncertain environments. These are qualities of growing importance in a rapidly changing economy shaped by digital transformation, artificial intelligence and global competition.

2. Whether Graduates Are Being Taught the Skills Employers Are Looking For

Higher Degree by Research training programs delivered by Australian Universities develop both technical and transferable capabilities. Employers typically seek a blend of technical knowledge and broader professional capabilities, including:

- communication;
- teamwork and collaboration;
- critical thinking;
- initiative;
- adaptability;
- digital literacy;
- project management;
- ethical judgement; and
- problem-solving.

A particularly important example of capability-focused education is the [ACGR National HDR Researcher Development Framework \(RDF\)](#).

The Framework was developed by a working group representing 17 universities and informed by sector-wide consultation. It provides a national understanding of the qualities and attributes HDR candidates develop throughout their candidature and supports universities to align their offerings and priorities.

The Framework identifies four integrated domains of researcher capability:

1. Ethical Practice & Inclusivity

Graduates are trained to act with integrity, engage ethically, respect diversity, work appropriately with Indigenous peoples and knowledges, and uphold safe and responsible research practices.

2. Innovation & Intellectual Rigour

Graduates develop critical and creative thinking, disciplinary expertise, evidence-based inquiry, advanced analysis, digital capability, and the capacity to generate new knowledge.

3. Engagement and Impact Beyond Academia

Graduates learn to build partnerships with industry and community, communicate with diverse audiences, manage projects, and design research with real-world impact in mind.

4. Personal Resilience & Leadership

Graduates strengthen professional identity, reflective practice, wellbeing, leadership, strategic relationship-building and adaptability in the face of challenge.

These domains strongly align with the capabilities consistently sought by employers across industry, government, health, technology, education and the not-for-profit sector.

This reflects an important point for the Senate Committee: universities are not solely producing graduates with disciplinary knowledge; they are increasingly focused on producing adaptable professionals equipped for varied career pathways.

Recommendations

The ACGR recommends that the Australian Government, in partnership with universities and employers:

1. Removes the time restriction for research internships to be agreed within the first 18 months of candidature to be eligible for the Research Training Program (RTP) industry internship weighting..
2. Allows co-funding of RTP scholarships with industry.

3. Introduces better incentives for industry to fund or co-fund PhD stipends and/or internships.
4. Removes taxation on part-time stipend scholarships and raises the value of the RTP stipend above the poverty line.
5. Adopts a continuum approach to industry engagement in policy setting centred on the [levels of industry engagement framework](#).
6. Improves employer understanding of transferable capabilities developed through Higher Degree by Research training via promotion of the [ACGR National HDR Researcher Development Framework](#) as a national model of capability development.

Conclusion

Australia's universities continue to provide education of internationally renowned quality and national importance. They equip graduates with disciplinary expertise, transferrable skills, and the broad professional capabilities required in a changing labour market.

The ACGR National HDR Researcher Development Framework demonstrates that research training in Australia is already closely aligned with the qualities employers value: ethical practice, innovation, impact, resilience and leadership.

The challenge identified by this inquiry highlights the need for stronger pathways between education and employment so that Australia can fully realise the value of its graduate talent. Implementing the ACGR's six recommendations (above) will pave smoother pathways from postgraduate education to employment for Australia's next generation of leaders, researchers and innovators.

The ACGR thanks the Committee for the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry.

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