



Macquarie University Postgraduate
Representative Association

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Committee Secretary

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Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation
PO Box 6021
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Re: Inquiry into research training and research workforce issues in Australian universities.

This submission is made on behalf of MUPRA, the Macquarie University Postgraduate Representative Association. It is intended to relay firsthand some of the experiences and concerns of postgraduate students studying at Macquarie University who are reliant on Australian Postgraduate Awards (APA) or Macquarie University Research Excellence Scholarships (MQRES). Note that the MQRES is linked in to the APA, and rises with the national rate.

This submission deals specifically with two of the sub-points from the second objective as specified in the Terms of Reference of this Inquiry:

2. The challenges Australian universities face in training, recruiting and retaining high quality research graduates and staff, including, but not limited to:

- Adequacy of training and support (including income support) available to research graduates in Australia
- Australia's ability to compete internationally for high quality researchers

The following email transcripts are actual correspondence received from five international PhD students over the past two months. All five enquiries were unsolicited, that is to say voluntarily submitted and not in response to any specific request for feedback on the topic. In each case, the students felt

compelled to lodge a written request for assistance in response to their own experiences, current media on the issue and MUPRA's ongoing interest in the topic. The final two letters are email follow-ups to enquiries made in person by the students.

MUPRA believes that these enquiries are representative of a much broader anxiety shared amongst research students. They reflect the experiences of our committee members, many of whom are PhD candidates, as well as countless conversations held with other students at Macquarie University. Those domestic students who do not have the financial support of their families are forced to work to survive. But this is made more difficult by a scholarship restriction of an average maximum of 10 working hours a week. Some students have had to abandon their scholarships and change their studies from full-time to part-time so as to earn enough money to live. This is not a good result for the student, the university or the nation as the momentum of the research is lost or may not be completed.

The five students who contacted us directly were all international students. They do not have the option of changing to part-time study. Though concerns regarding scholarship rates are shared by all students both international and domestic, we believe that international students, many of whom are living with and supporting family members here in Australia, are put under particular financial pressure because of the cost of living.

MUPRA supports any steps taken to ease the financial burden all research students face in undertaking their studies.

Yours sincerely,

Phil Betts
MUPRA President and PhD Candidate

Correspondence #1

Submitted by PhD candidates from the Division of Law and the Division of Information and Computing Systems

Hi,

We are postgraduate research students with MQRES approaching you with the petition that in Sydney, it has become very difficult for us to survive with the MQRES scholarship money. You know a one bed room unit near the university costs more than \$260 P/W now-a-days. In addition, there are other expenses like food, travelling etc. In consideration of this situation, the Australian Leadership Award money gets 30% increase with effect from July 2008. Could you please put forward a similar proposal to the relevant authority on sympathising with us.

Correspondence #2

Hi,

I am a MQRES holder. I espouse you to discuss this matter with the relevant authority at the university.

In my case, I live here with my family (with a son) where I have to pay \$ 270 per week for one bedroom unit, excluding bills. As a research student, I feel this is a nuisance and it would be inhibiting the university to achieve its goal to be "top eight research universities in Australia and the top 200 in the world", as stated by the Vice-Chancellor (see the Vice-Chancellor's website at <http://www.vc.mq.edu.au/about.php>)

I realize that the MQRES value depends on Australian Postgraduate Award rate so that I propose you to insist the university provides other benefits for the recipients such as accommodation concession at the university housing.

Correspondence #3

Submitted by a PhD Candidate in the Division of Linguistics and Psychology

Good morning and many thanks for your assistance. I am writing to show my experience of being in Australia on a PhD scholarship.

It's been great to be here for my research as it has given me a really nice multicultural experience, and provided an opportunity to do my research well. But at the same time my experience is that the scholarship is proving to be insufficient and my research needs the following assistance:

1). We are offered scholarship for a period of three and a half (3.5) year, which is not enough to produce good research. I have been working hard throughout the year. I am due to submit my thesis in March next year as that is the time when my scholarship is ending. I still have to do a whole lot of data analysis and then write the theses. And I am in dire need of extension of 6 month. My experience is that to produce a justifiable research we need at least 4 years.

2). Secondly, the scholarship rate is insufficient as compared to the cost of living. The cost of living in Sydney has multiplied in the last two years. A major amount of my scholarship stipend goes to the accommodation. And then very little is left for food and other things.

In my opinion, these two points need the quickest.

I would be grateful if the association or the government or anyone could do to resolve these difficulties of mine as a research student. I am really in difficulty.

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Correspondence #4

Submitted by a PhD Candidate in the Division of Linguistics and Psychology

I am a Ph.D student in the linguistics department and joined this course in Oct 2006. I came here with my 9 year old daughter. Initially it took a very long time to get a place to stay .The cost of renting is very high in Sydney (it's also increasing after every lease expiry),hence my scholarship amount is just enough for that. I am not able to work much because i have the responsibility of my child hence i face a lot of financial problems.I came to pursue my Ph.D here mainly because of the scholarship.I think the scholarship amount should be such that students could live in reasonable conditions so that their main focus is on research; this point is also very important to improve the quality of research output.