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Council of Australian
Postgraduate Associations

**Australian Senate
Education and
Employment Committee
Questions on Notice**

**your national
postgrad voice.**

Compiled with the assistance of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) office bearers and their affiliated member organisations.

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Introduction

CAPA is the peak body representing the interests of the over 570,000 postgraduate students in Australia. CAPA represents both coursework and research across domestic and international postgraduates. The Council is comprised of 33 university and campus-based postgraduate associations, and collaborates closely with the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduate Association (NATSIPA). CAPA carries out its mission through policy, research, and advocacy, communicating the interests and issues of postgraduate students to higher education stakeholders and Federal and State/Territory governments, Opposition parties, and minor parties. We welcome the opportunity to contribute our response to the Senate's question on notice.

Overall, CAPA believes that the Higher Education Support (Commonwealth Scholarships) Guidelines do not adequately invest in the next generation of researchers.

The Australian Research Training Program (RTP) stipend has lagged for many years with only marginal increases, despite rapidly increasing cost of living pressures in Australia. As a result, the RTP stipend is now woefully inadequate and isn't representative of the time and energy HDR students are required to commit to their projects.

These conditions are not representative of all OECD countries. Indeed, Canada recently increased their PhD stipend to C\$40,000 PA (~A\$44,000), up from just C\$24,000 PA. Increases to the HDR stipend have also been called upon domestically, with the Universities Accord highlighting a significant increase to the base HDR stipend as a priority area to support Australia's social and economic future.

Question on Notice

“What do you believe should be the annual stipend for PhD students?”

The period of full-time RTP stipend support for HDRs is currently set at a minimum of 3 years and a maximum of 4 years, with a base rate of \$33,500. According to the Australian Council of Graduate Research, the current average period of RTP stipend support is 3.3 years⁽¹⁾. HDR students conduct 57% of HDR research hours⁽²⁾. 41% of candidates intend on remaining in academia⁽³⁾, and therefore must devote remaining time outside of research hours to produce critical papers for future academic success. Universities Australia has recommended that the base rate be increased to \$36,000 annually. However, CAPA believes that the RTP base rate be lifted to ~\$43,920, the equivalent of minimum wage after tax, and that the RTP block grant funding be increased to support the same number of RTP stipends that are currently supported.

Importantly the RTP Base Stipend rate prescribed in the guidelines is below the Henderson Poverty Line. Domestic enrolments in PhD programs have dropped 8% since

2019⁽⁴⁾, with a projected shortfall of 12,000 HDR candidates by 2031⁽⁵⁾. This is unsurprising as the current base rate would result in prospective candidates living under the current Henderson Poverty Line for up to 4 years for a full-time candidate.

Moreover, CAPA's research suggests that the RTP stipend base rate is directly tied to research productivity in Australia. Therefore, increasing the RTP stipend base rate, alongside an appropriate increase to maintain enrolment levels, is critical to ensuring that Australia's research sector does not continue to decline in productivity.

The growing sector consensus now includes the recently released Strategic Examination of Research and Development Interim Report⁽⁶⁾:

“The HDR minimum research training program (RTP) stipend should be raised to be equivalent to the minimum wage. Furthermore, to ensure its long-term financial sustainability, the RTP stipend should be tied to a meaningful cost of living measure such as the minimum wage. Critically, an increase to the RTP stipend must also come with an equivalent increase to RTP block grants given to universities, so that the number of scholarships is not reduced.”

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Critically, these changes cannot be made without also increasing the block grant funding pool for universities. An increase to the base HDR stipend without an increase to the available funding pool means less HDR students.

The RTP Stipend Base Rate Drives Research *Productivity*

HDR candidates are the primary contributors of research and development hours in Australia, contributing 57% of universities' share of dedicated research hours⁽²⁾. This is unsurprising given that 76% of 6000 HDR candidates reported spending more than 41 hours a week on their research⁽⁷⁾. A reduction in a HDRs capacity to commit to research, due to increased need to work externally to support cost-of-living requirements, would therefore impact research productivity.

CAPA investigated historical research productivity using the CWTS Leiden Rankings of Research Productivity (averaged over each year). We found that Australian researchers increased their research productivity 112% between 2006-2016, exceeding the OECD average of 39%.

Interestingly, the majority of that growth occurred after the RTP Stipend Base Rate was increased above the Henderson Poverty Line by Kevin Rudd. In contrast, between 2012-2022, Australian researchers increased their productivity just ~80%.

CAPA modelled CWTS Leiden research productivity based on the historical RTP Stipend Base Rate, taking into account academic, research support and postgraduate students (conducting research and development) numbers as reported by the ABS and developed a mathematical model to forecast future research productivity (Total Research Outputs and Top 10% Cited Outputs):

$$\Delta \log_{y_t} = \alpha + \beta_0 s_t + \beta_1 s_{t-1} + \beta_2 s_{t-2} + \gamma_1 t + \gamma_2 t^2 + \varepsilon_t$$

- y_t : the target outcome in year t.
- s_t : stipend change (increase) rate in year t (e.g., 0.04 for 4%).
- $\Delta \log_{y_t} = \log_{y_t} - \log_{y_{t-1}}$: an approximation to the percentage growth rate of y.
- α : intercept.
- $\beta_0, \beta_1, \beta_2$: distributed-lag effects of stipend on the growth rate of y:
- β_0 : current-year (contemporaneous) effect,
- β_1 : one-year lag effect,
- β_2 : two-year lag effect.
- γ_1, γ_2 : time trend (Year and Year²) to absorb secular dynamics unrelated to stipend policy.
- ε_t : error term.

This model enables CAPA to account for the lag effect of a RTP Stipend Base Rate increase, as the impact of productivity is not instantly realised.

As can be seen in Figure 1, there is a clear relationship between the RTP Stipend Base Rate. Worryingly, since 2020, research productivity has been flat-lining. However, increasing the RTP Stipend to the equivalent of minimum wage (\$42,920) would provide an essential 'kick-start' to Australia's flat-lining research productivity.

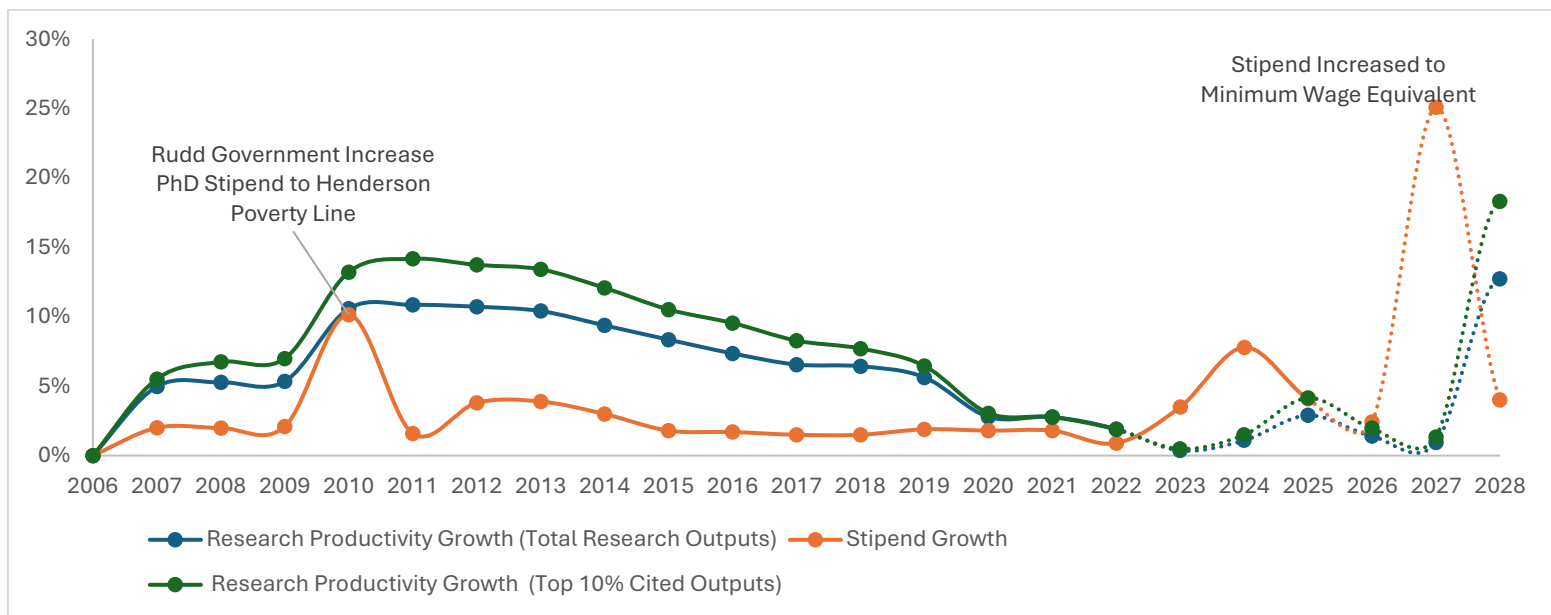


Figure 1. Growth in Research Productivity and The PhD Stipend Rate Since 2006 (Dotted Line: Forecast Based On Historical Relationship). (Source: CWTS Leiden, ABS and Department of Education)

Moreover, our modelling suggests that increasing the RTP Stipend Base Rate to the equivalent of minimum wage is the best way to increase Domestic Enrolments (Figure 2).

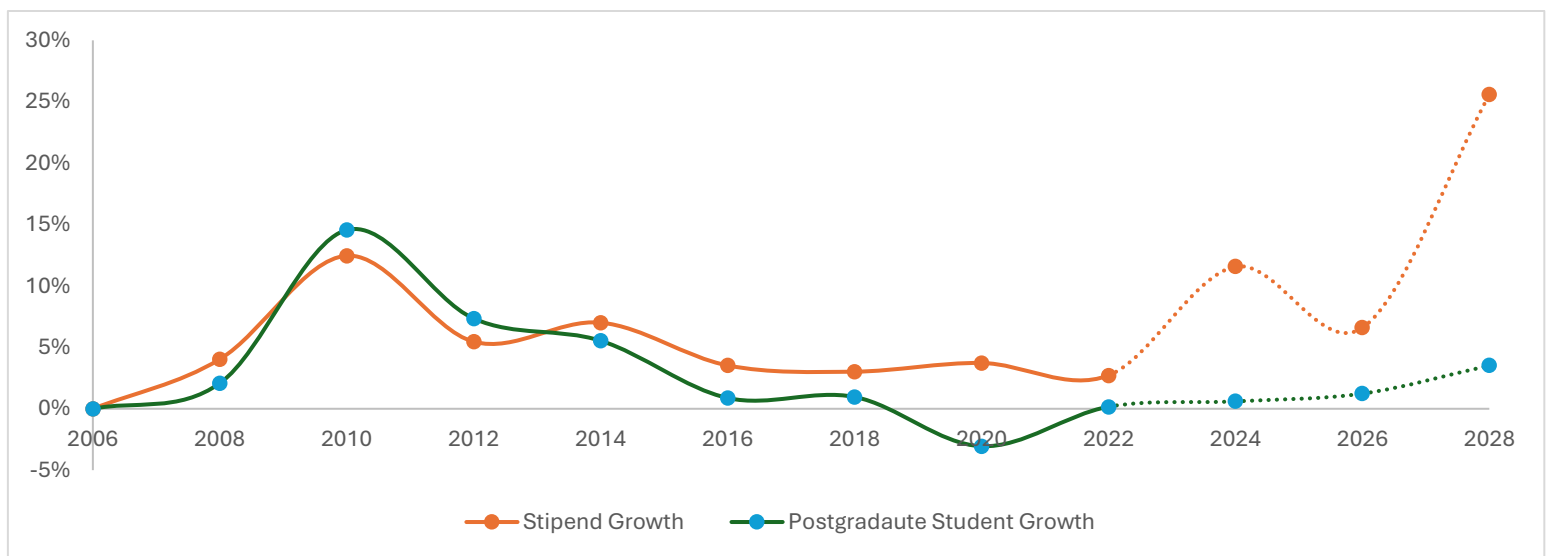


Figure 2. Growth Postgraduate Researchers and The PhD Stipend Rate Since 2006 (Dotted Line: Forecast Based On Historical Relationship). (Source: CWTS Leiden, ABS and Department of Education)

The 2025 RTP Stipend Base Rate is Below the Poverty Line

Critically, the base full-time stipend of \$33,511 PA is below the March 2025 Henderson Poverty Line (\$34,357.44 PA), and the 0.6 (\$43,555 PA), and 0.5 (\$36,296 PA) measurements of the median Australian income (\$72,592)⁽⁸⁾. In 2023, the University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association (GSA) Student Survey, demonstrated that of 1478 HDRs, 76% of HDR candidates reported that cost-of-living was a major issue and 54% reported housing as a major issue (Figure 3)⁽⁹⁾.

Day-to-day issues affecting Melbourne University HDR Candidates

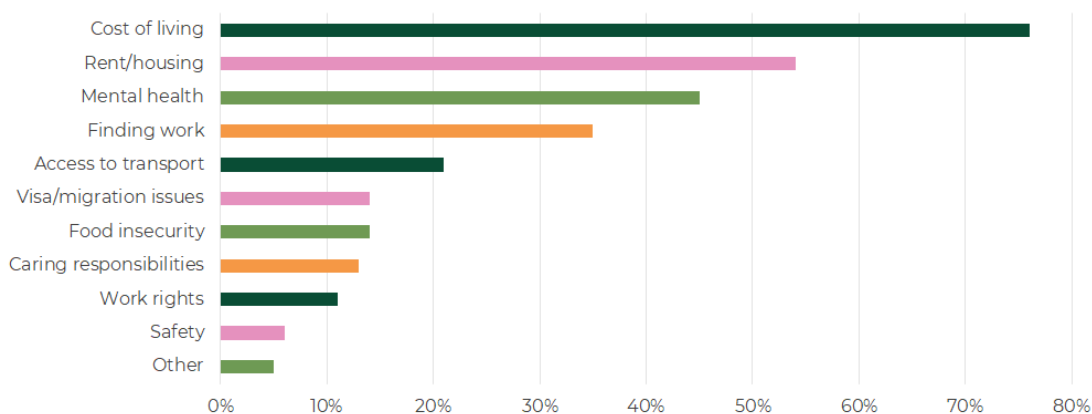


Figure 3: Day-to-day issues affecting University of Melbourne HDR candidates (n=1478)

This was corroborated by the Monash Graduate Association (MGA) who surveyed 365 Monash HDRs about their estimated monthly expenditure. The MGA demonstrated that the average Monash HDR candidate spent \$1,347 per month on rent, and \$722 per month on food (Figure 4)⁽¹⁰⁾.

Monash HDR monthly expenditure

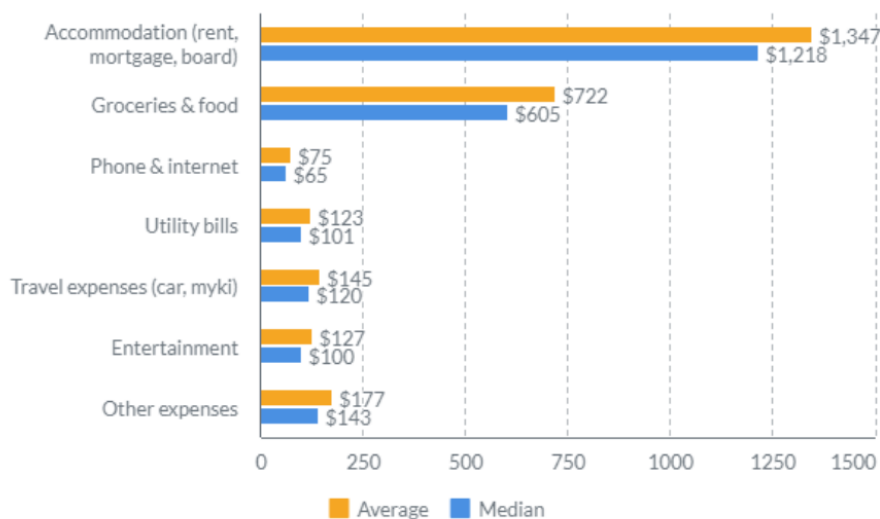


Figure 4: Cost of living issues faced by Monash University Postgraduate students (n=365)

Resultingly, of the 42 universities surveyed by the Australian Council of Postgraduate Research (ACGR) in January 2024, only 9 still offered the 2024 RTP Stipend Base Rate. An additional 14 offered a rate below the then sector average (\$34,244 PA), 6 universities offered above \$36,000 PA, and only the University of Sydney offered a stipend above \$40,000 PA (\$40,109)⁽¹⁾.

However, in order to 'top-up' the stipends above the base-rate, universities must utilise funding from alternative sources, such as philanthropic, commercial income or operational funds. Ultimately, this reduces the availability of non-RTP equivalent scholarships which the universities often create. A reduction in supply dramatically increases the scores required to be awarded an RTP Stipend. Therefore, prospective Australians from disadvantaged background, such as low-SES, regional or those with disability are the first to miss out. Noting that less than 3% of Regional Australians have a postgraduate degree⁽¹¹⁾. Ultimately, this is not a long-term nor sustainable solution.

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