

Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations Inc

Federal Election 2007



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Postgraduate education and the 2007 Federal election

This document outlines the issues that CAPA will be focusing on in the lead-up to the Federal election. These issues have been identified through extensive consultation with affiliate postgraduate organisations. In addition to discussion of the issues, supporting data and background information is provided separately.

This document may be used by affiliates for campaigning and media contact.

NOTE: All public comment related to the Federal election, including media releases, must include the name of the person authorising the document, their address, and if applicable the name and address of the printer.

Priorities for postgraduate education:

Secure support for independent student representation and services

Income support reform for research and coursework postgraduate students

Increased funding for HDR scholarships

A sustainable higher education sector

Secure support for independent student representation and services

Universal membership of democratically elected student representative organisations is indispensable to protecting and promoting student rights. The representation and services provided by independent student organisations also contribute significantly to the development and maintenance of sound institutional governance practices, policy development, collegiality and procedural fairness.

CAPA's review of the impact of voluntary student unionism (VSU) on postgraduate student associations (PGSAs) found that:

- At least 8 universities no longer have an independent organisation representing postgraduate students
- At least 4 PGSAs are surviving on less than 5% of their pre-VSU funding
- PGSA staff numbers have reduced by half and many roles diverted from advocacy and representative support
- Of 20 PGSAs that responded to a recent questionnaire, 30% are unable to provide advocacy services

Organisational restructuring on many campuses has meant that universities are increasingly involved, either directly or indirectly, in the governance and management of student organisations. Of particular concern is the threat this poses to the continued provision of independent representation and advocacy. As one PGSA commented in the recent CAPA questionnaire:

Our biggest concern is that the new structure will silence the independent student voice. Currently [the PGSA] can issue a press release, but we are unsure what restrictions will be placed on [the new organisation] in this regard. I suspect the question will not be resolved until [we have] a need to issue a controversial press release.

Key Targets

- Require each institution to support representation and advocacy provided by independent student organisations
- Require that students decide and control the structure and governance of their representative organisation(s)
- Commonwealth to remove the "VSU" amendments from the Higher Education Support Act (HESA) and ensure adequate funding for student organisations

Income support reform for research and coursework postgraduate students

Lack of income support is a significant barrier to postgraduate study. Austudy is not available for higher degree by research (HDR) students or for most postgraduate coursework students.

The AVCC report *Australian University Student Finances 2006* found that full time postgraduate coursework students are among those enduring the most difficult financial circumstances.

This dispels the popular myth that most of these students are already well off. Many postgraduates return to study later in life, often after a career change, with greater carer responsibilities and on-going financial commitments. Add to that the debt load from course fees and you find many struggling just to finish their course of study.

Research students may seem comparatively fortunate in not facing course fees and in cases where they are in receipt of a scholarship. However the reality is that over 60% of research students attempt their degrees without access to any form of income support at all, regardless of their financial circumstances.

Postgraduate students should be provided with income support at a level that enables them to study fulltime. This is a basic matter of equity, as postgraduate study opportunities should not be restricted to the comparatively wealthy or to those few in receipt of scholarships or stipends.

Key Targets

- Extend eligibility for living allowances (Youth Allowance and Austudy) to all postgraduate courses including research degrees
- Reduce the age of independence for income support from 25 years to 18 years
- Increase the base rates of living allowances (exclusive of all additional assistance) to at least the level of the relevant Henderson Poverty Line.

Increased funding for HDR scholarships

The Australian Postgraduate Award (APA) is the main Commonwealth scholarship for higher degree by research (HDR) students.

Available APAs have not kept pace with increases in HDR enrolments, to the extent that at many universities, students with excellent honours results are missing out on scholarships.

A mere 12% of domestic research students receive an APA scholarship and this only provides them with an income of \$19,616 pa. This means that even the lucky few who have such a scholarship are working for a pittance, and often have to supplement their income through other means.

Research students should also be allowed greater flexibility in how they can use their stipends to support their candidature. Scholarship holders should be allowed flexibility in going part time, and part time stipends should not be counted as assessable income.

APAs for PhDs are only available for 3 years, with a possible 6-month extension. However, each student place is funded through the Research Training Scheme for 4 years. This means that many HDR students find themselves without an income in the important final stages of their research, causing hardship and attrition. APAs must be available for the full 4 years of the PhD program. The current situation wastes both talent and funding.

While it is difficult to get an exact figure that allows for variation by discipline:

Most universities estimate that between 65 and 70% of their research is carried out by postgraduate research students. Second, around 25-30% of publications arising from university research has a postgraduate research student as one of the authors. Third, research students are pivotal in helping to establish international collaborative links. [Siddle, D. 1997 Submission to the Committee conducting the Review of Higher Education Financing and Policy from the Deans and Directors of Graduate Education, April 23.]

If Australia is serious about being internationally competitive in research and development, it needs to lift its game in supporting the next generation of researchers and address the abysmal funding levels of HDR students. The APA stipend rate must be increased by at least 30%, and the number available increased by at least 20%. Such a change should be seen as a precursor to further increases.

Key Targets

- Increase the duration of the APA to at least 4 years
- Increase the number of APAs offered by at least 20%
- Increase the stipend rate of all APAs by at least 30%

A sustainable higher education sector

The current government has introduced massive changes to higher education since coming to power in 1996. It has also cut sector funding in that time by up to \$7.7 billion in real terms. A combination of interventionist and autocratic involvement by government, insufficient funding, ministerial assaults on the independence of academic enquiry, and the attempted exclusion of students and staff as stakeholders has significantly weakened the long term prospects for the Australian higher education sector.

Australia needs long-term sustainable research funding, covering all types of research and facilitating the exchange of ideas and freedom of enquiry through an open research environment.

Postgraduate coursework qualifications are increasingly required for base-entry to professions, career development, personal development, and retraining. Very few Commonwealth Supported Places are provided at postgraduate level. Commonwealth Supported Places should be extended to all postgraduate coursework qualifications. This should not be at the expense of undergraduate places.

Indigenous postgraduate students remain one of the most disadvantaged of all equity groups, and are less likely to be enrolled in postgraduate courses than the non-indigenous student population. Further, there has been a drop in retention and completion rates in the last 9 years as significant changes to ABSTUDY and education policy have been made. Improvements in participation and completion rates among Indigenous students must be part of any long-term view of higher education in Australia.

A truly consultative process is now required to reverse the damage of the last 11 years and to set a new direction for a vital, sustainable and internationally competitive higher education sector.

Key Targets

- A significant increase in funding for the sector
- Genuine sector consultation
- Government commitment to freedom of enquiry and academic independence