

Contact:

Early Career Research Committee
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Professor Mary O’Kane (Chair)
Panel for the Review of Australia’s Higher Education System
Australia Government

Dear Professor O’Kane,

Re: Priorities for the Review: Terms of Reference

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Priorities for the Review of Australia’s Higher Education System – Terms of Reference.

This submission is on behalf of the Early Career Research (ECR) committee who represent postgraduate researcher students who are undertaking study for PhDs at the **Australian Research Council (ARC) Centre of Excellence for Climate Extremes (the Centre)**. This is Australia’s leading climate science centre co-located across five partner universities - The University of New South Wales, Monash University, The Australian National University, The University of Melbourne, and The University of Tasmania. We represent about 100 members.

The ECR committee supports the Panel in its review of the Australian Higher Education System, and we acknowledge the Panel’s key role to advise the Government to deliver a higher education system that meets the current and future needs of the nation.

Whilst we support the substance of the review as outlined in the Terms of Reference, we would like to draw the Panel’s attention to the issues raised by our members as laid out in this submission.

Investment and affordability

The Terms of Reference have rightly recognised that investment and affordability are an area of investigation. As stakeholders in this debate, we would like to highlight to the panel that our member’s role in higher education is being undermined, damaged, and hampered by a lack of supportive PhD stipends.

Our region is already facing climate extremes which affect many facets of Australian society and our role in training, understanding, and researching the climate is of paramount importance to the future of Australia. However, our members are conducting their study in conditions that mean many live close to or below the poverty line with impacts on their own well-being as well as family and work. This fundamentally affects the Higher Education system’s ability to attract students, maintain quality education and deliver a Higher Education system fit for purpose.

We urge the Panel to consider the following issues in their consideration of the terms of reference.

Stipend payments

Attracting and retaining quality students to universities is essential to maintain Australia's influence and standing as a world class research environment. Our early career researcher's contribution to climate research is fundamental to Australia's prosperity and success. Whilst the expectations on them are enormous, society puts little value on their development, well-being, and ability to succeed. As a demonstration of this, here is the level of PhD stipend payments for our members across the Centre:

- **University of New South Wales** **\$35,000 (Jan 2023), \$37,684 (Jan 2024)**
- **Australian National University ANU** **\$34,000 (Oct 2022)**
- **University of Tasmania** **\$31,500 (Feb 2023)**
- **University of Melbourne** **\$34,000 (2023)**
- **Monash** **\$33,000 (2023)**

The obvious disparity in payments between universities demonstrates where you study becomes a lottery for your living conditions. It should also be noted that as of 1 July 2022 the National Minimum Wage is \$42,255.2 per annum and as many of our members undertake tutoring and demonstrating roles with varying degrees of payment, their contribution is not fully recognised. Additionally, this level of stipend payment is a recent increase implemented by universities and funding received from the federal government in the form of the Research Training Program (RTP) does not reflect the stipend increase that some universities are willing to pay. As a consequence, these universities will not be able to offer the same number of stipends and the number of funded PhD positions can be expected to be reduced.

The lack of properly funded positions impacts issues of equity and access for those thinking of entering the system as well those currently in the system. Greater accessibility to higher education will ensure we attract talent for all corners of society to contribute to Australia's future. The current situation neither supports nor incentivises students to embark on postgraduate study.

Coupled with the lack of adequate stipend payments, there are increases in general living expenses including rental increases, COVID-19 pressures and inflationary impacts. Many students are already facing significant debt from their first degrees with the current PhD debt accumulating on top.

ECR committee survey of members

As a committee representing students, we have been aware of the issue of insufficient stipends for some time. Encouraged by recent media around the topic and supported by our supervisors, we decided to conduct our own internal survey amongst our cohort to assess the situation. We conducted a survey of our members and received fifty replies from across the Centre. Whilst it is not a comprehensive survey, it does provide indicative results which we present here for the Panel to consider:

- Over two-thirds of our survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed that their financial situation while studying impacted their mental health.
- Just over two-thirds of our survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they needed a part-time job to supplement their income in order to afford necessities. Despite some of our students being lucky enough to be supported in additional ways with top-up incomes awards, they still found they were struggling to survive after paying basic expenses such as rent and utilities.
- **Nearly one-third of our survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they had considered quitting their higher degree research studies due to their financial pressures.**
- Just under 60% indicated that they had actively refrained from using health care as a result of their financial situation.
- Students also commented that their financial situation:
 - curbed or halted family planning/marriages/vacations/visits to family.

- were more inclined to work from home to reduce costs of public transport
- were more inclined to reduced heating and cooking to saving on power bills (reduce heating/cooling)
- had little or no reserves in terms of savings for emergencies
- made it more difficulty to focus on research, especially coupled with the need for part-time work exerting extra pressure on an already full workload.

Recommendation to Panel

It is becoming increasingly urgent that we support our postgraduate students to live with dignity and humanity so they can succeed in developing their skills which are essential to Australia's future.

As such, we urge the Panel to explicitly recognise the conditions in which postgraduate students are living and working and look comprehensively at the issue of postgraduate stipends across the university sector as part of the Terms of Reference for this review. Any comprehensive evaluation of the Higher Education system must consider the students who are central to the sector's success.

We encourage the Panel to investigate and consider.

Thank you for considering the issues outlined in this submission, we would be happy to provide further advice if required.

Regards,



Dr Wilma Huneke,
On behalf of the Early Career Researcher Committee
ARC Centre of Excellence for Climate Extremes