

AN OPEN LETTER TO ALL PARTIES AND CANDIDATES **AUSTRALIAN ELECTION 2022**

We at the Postgraduate and Research Students' Association (PARSA) represent the voices of nearly 9,000 postgraduate and research students at the Australian National University (ANU). We call on all political parties and candidates in the 2022 Federal Election to address the social, financial and environmental issues that face students in Australia.

As one of the representative bodies of Australia's postgraduate community, the challenges that our members are facing are not unique to our situation but are universal across over 400,000 postgraduates in Australia. As the federal election approaches, our members will be casting their votes informed by candidates' plans for addressing these concerns.

Universities are fundamental to Australia's prosperity. They educate, train and inspire a highly-skilled workforce - the future leaders of this nation. Only through substantial investment in higher education can Australia fulfil its ambitions to become a global leader in cutting-edge technology and innovation.

Within the higher education sector, postgraduate students contribute to over half (56%) of Australia's research and development outputs. At the ANU, thousands of our postgraduate students are driving progress on novel quantum technologies, new biomedical treatments for chronic diseases and sustainable agriculture practices. Our community is addressing some of the world's greatest challenges, propelling innovation and contributing to nearly every area of the economy.

Yet, postgraduate students are facing more barriers than ever to accessing a quality higher education. Collectively, we endure the burden of unaffordable living conditions, rising costs of education and endless funding cuts. We are confronted by the entrenched inequality and unsafe environment of our educational institutions. We struggle with concerns over exploitative workplace arrangements and a dearth of employment opportunities. We face the ever-present threat of climate change from bushfires and floods, to emerging diseases.

Now more than ever, Australia's prosperity depends on its highly skilled and innovative university graduates. We urgently need action, resourcing and investment. We call upon our politicians to demonstrate leadership in addressing education affordability, investing in high-quality jobs, eradicating inequality, and tackling climate change.

You can act by making commitments in the upcoming federal election to:

Reverse funding cuts, eliminate indexation on student loans, and increase federal subsidies and grants for postgraduate and research students beyond the Job-Ready Graduates Package.

Australia's public university investment is well below the OECD average. Years of funding cuts have undermined the quality of teaching, learning, research and engagement. These decisions have diminished the educational opportunities afforded to the more disadvantaged students, threatening to entrench further inequality within Australia.

Commonwealth scholarships for PhD students have not increased with inflation and are not enough to support students with parent or carer's responsibilities. Additionally, most postgraduate courses are not Commonwealth Supported. With HECS debt caps being lowered in 2020, many students are struggling to afford to continue studying at university. But this can change.

We call on all candidates to commit to providing universities with increased direct funding for postgraduate students, creating more Commonwealth Supported Places in degree programs and reducing indexation rates on HECS debts. Only by making postgraduate education more accessible to low and middle-income students can Australia maintain its world-class university system to support the challenging transition underway across the economy and workforce.

Create sustainable and high-quality jobs, provide work-integrated learning opportunities for postgraduate students and install greater protections to prevent workplace exploitation.

All parties and candidates must commit to long-term investment in the creation of meaningful opportunities for postgraduate students to prepare for success in the workforce. This includes developing work-integrated learning opportunities, high-quality graduate jobs and increased funding for research opportunities for all disciplines.

We ask candidates to commit to providing greater workplace protections to crack down on wage theft and other illegal or discriminatory employer behaviours. This is particularly relevant to international students and young people who are vulnerable to workplace exploitation.

Commit to policy initiatives and institutional changes to make our universities safer, more inclusive and more accessible to all.

Our universities remain an unsafe environment for marginalised students. The recent National Student Safety Survey results showed that rates of sexual assault and harassment remain alarmingly prevalent on university campuses. More policy, institutional and funding support is required to make real change and create settings where students can receive a safe and respectful educational experience.

International students have been disproportionately affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and are increasingly undertaking their studies in other countries. As an integral part of the Australian economy, they also make enormous contributions to the diversity and vitality of Australian society beyond financial means. We need to make sure they are given all the resources necessary for them to succeed.

Furthermore, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (First Nations) students have always faced some of the largest barriers to higher education. The Government has not been consistent with their funding commitments since the introduction of the Indigenous Student Assistance Grants (ISAG) and Indigenous Student Success Program (ISSP). Despite significant improvements in enrolment rates and outcomes for First Nations postgraduate students, representation and retention remain an issue.

We call on all candidates to commit to policies that will address these problems at their roots, creating fundamental institutional changes that will truly create a safe and inclusive educational environment.

Take meaningful action on climate change, including increased funding for renewable energy research initiatives, clean energy and environmental policy studies.

The postgraduate community is at the forefront of research focused on world-leading climate science. 'Once in a lifetime' climate disasters are now happening every month in Australia. Despite this, the 2022 budget has forecast a 35% reduction in climate spending by 2026. In lieu of recent tax cuts to major mining companies, inaction is unacceptable.

We call upon our federal representatives to step up their climate commitments to combat the challenges we face due to accelerating climate change. Science-based policies which focus on long-term emission and renewable energy goals are the sole way forward. Only by taking powerful, decisive actions can we alleviate the devastating impacts of climate change.

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We strongly urge all parties and candidates at the 2022 federal election to commit to these actions that will better prioritise higher education and the research sector. The long-term neglect and lack of support for postgraduate students and researchers must be reversed. Only then can we stop the brain drain that will leave devastating impacts on Australia's economy and society in the face of on-going and future global crises.

Yours sincerely,

**Postgraduate & Research Students' Association
Australian National University**

E: parsa@anu.edu.au

W: <http://parsa.anu.edu.au>

T: +61 (02) 6125 4187