

**JULY 25, 2024**

# **ACGR Response to the Australian Tertiary Education Commission Implementation consultation paper**

The Australian Council of Graduate Research (ACGR) acknowledges the work of the government in actioning this recommendation of the Australian Universities Accord Final Report and welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) Implementation consultation paper.

ACGR was established in 1997 and is Australia's peak body for higher degree by research (HDR) education, often referred to as graduate research. Through our programs and advocacy, we support the development of the Australian research ecosystem and research workforce. We engage and consult with stakeholders to advocate for excellence in research training and scholarship, and high standards for all HDR programs. As a group we aim to contribute to the development of effective HDR policy as well as promote the benefits of HDR within academia and beyond into industries and communities.

All HDR-awarding Higher Education (HE) institutions in Australia are members of ACGR, each represented by a senior academic leader. In most cases this is the most senior relevant executive at the institution, usually a Graduate School Dean or Pro Vice-Chancellor with responsibility for graduate research. Additionally, professional leaders in researcher development and management from the member institutions participate in working groups, annual conferences, and webinars, where they contribute insights into operational and regulatory challenges in the recruitment and management of HDR candidates. ACGR is thus uniquely qualified to provide credible advice on the Australian research training environment and is pleased to provide the following responses and recommendations for consideration by the Australian Universities Accord Panel.

**To ensure a robust consultation process, ACGR suggests the inclusion of a dedicated advisory body representing key stakeholders in HDR education across the tertiary education sector to complement the grouping of consulted officials identified in the implementation paper.**

ACGR supports the objectives of the ATEC as outlined in the implementation consultation paper as integral to building a sustainable tertiary education sector that drives the prosperity of the nation. However, while both the Australian Universities Accord Final Report and the ATEC implementation consultation paper cite the importance of engagement and consultation with key stakeholders across the tertiary education system, at present the mechanism for consultation is unclear. For the ATEC to effectively function as a steward of the tertiary education system, voices representing all components of the system must be heard. This is particularly relevant to HDR education, as it has touchpoints across the entirety of the tertiary education ecosystem.

Our key point, then, is straightforwardly that the proposed structure of the Commission does not provide a clear mechanism for issues in relation to HDR education.

PhD candidates comprise more than half of the total university research workforce<sup>1</sup> and are the engine room of university research activity and impact. Many of Australia's top-quality publications include HDR candidates as lead co-authors. HDR research often contributes pilot data to successful grant applications and HDR candidates contribute across the full spectrum of research activities include data gathering and preparation, laboratory and fieldwork, and analysis. Further, HDRs often represent their institution and academic discipline at international conferences, communicate with non-specialist audiences and to the media about their areas of expertise, and work with, for, and between external parties such as industry researchers. They comprise a significant proportion of the casual teaching population of universities, not to mention performing other related professional roles to financially support their candidature.

That is, HDR candidates are a significant part of a flexible academic workforce that contributes to the capacity of the HE sector to educate 1.6 million students per year and

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<sup>1</sup> Postgraduate students provided 44,255 out of 81,090 Person Years of Effort into R&D in 2020. Source: ABS Research and Experimental Development, Higher Education Organisations.

carry out around one-third of the nation's research.<sup>2</sup>

While PhD candidates contribute enormously to the research ecosystem of Universities, it is also important to note that around half of all PhD candidates do not plan an academic career following their graduation. The PhD equips recipients with a range of critical research skills that prepare them to take on senior leadership roles in many sectors, including government, health, education, and, critically, industry. The value of HDR education in building a prosperous nation cannot be underestimated and is at the centre of government objectives related to nation building and the growth of the knowledge economy and industry.

To ensure a robust consultation process, ACGR suggests the inclusion of a dedicated advisory body representing key stakeholders in HDR education across the tertiary education sector to complement the grouping of consulted officials identified in the implementation paper. The expertise of this group may be called upon by the ATEC Commissioners or staff for specialist advice and insight on relevant matters. ACGR advocates representation for HDR education on this advisory body to provide advice specific to matters related to graduate research. The complexities of HDR education are very different to those of undergraduate study, with specific issues in relation to scholarships, the impact of critical technologies, participation of HDRs in institutional workforces, collaboration with industry, and examination of theses. In most Australian HE institutions, graduate research is often managed within a school or administrative unit that oversees issues of policy and quality. For these reasons, it is crucial that those with the expertise in these issues form part of the decision-making body. The unique profile and challenges of HDR candidates and graduates, together with an acknowledgement of the strength and diversity that they bring to the Australian economy and society through research-specific skill sets and mindsets, means that this group are deserved of their own voice/representation on ATEC.

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<sup>2</sup> *Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper*, February 2023, p.7.