Submission of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations

to the

Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee

Inquiry into the Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill 2014
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Introduction

The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) is Australia’s longest continuously-running student peak body and in 2014, celebrates 35 years of representing postgraduate and Higher Degree by Research students across the nation. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into the Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill 2014, and do so on behalf of our thirty member organisations Australia-wide as well as the 325,000+ students who make up the Australian postgraduate and research student community.

The Bill seeks to amend the Higher Education Support Act (HESA) 2003 along with other legislation including the Australian Research Council Act 2001, Education Services for Overseas Students Act 2000 and various associated regulations and guidelines, to implement the Abbott Government’s proposed changes to higher education and research, as announced in the 2014-15 Budget.

The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations wishes to express our strongest concern around what the proposed changes will mean for the students we represent, as well as the higher education sector as a whole. In particular we are vehemently opposed to the move to cut $173.7 million from the Research Training Scheme and to introduce fees on PhDs and Masters by Research for domestic students. We believe that the implications of this policy will be severe and may result in our best and brightest research students choosing to complete their research training elsewhere.

Our submission will provide an overview of our objections to the proposed legislative changes as well as their broader impact on the higher education and research sector. We will also include for the interest of the panel, some of the feedback that we have received from postgraduate and research students and their supporters, as well as an overview of our campaign and media activities in relation to this Bill.

The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations strongly urges honourable members of the Senate to reject the Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill.
Cuts to the Research Training Scheme and the Introduction of Fees on Research Degrees

The changes to the Research Training Scheme proposed by the Bill can be summarised as follows:

- Cut of $174.7 million to Research Training Scheme funding from 1 January 2016, representing a 10% reduction overall;
- Introduction of the ability for Higher Education Providers to charge fees on Research Training Scheme degrees (i.e. PhDs and Masters by Research) of up to $3,900 per year;
- Changes to research degree funding apply to ALL students under the Research Training Scheme, including those enrolled prior to the Budget announcement.

The Research Training Scheme (RTS) is a national program providing block grants to Higher Education Providers for the purpose of funding PhDs and Masters by Research (categorised broadly as ‘Higher Degrees by Research’) for domestic students. Thanks to the Research Training Scheme, domestic Higher Degree by Research students currently do not pay any fees towards their studies. This is a recognition of the contribution that postgraduate research makes to society, to the higher education provider and to the research workforce. There is no application process for students to receive the Research Training Scheme as Universities determine who is eligible and thus, how many domestic Higher Degree by Research students they will accept in any given year. In 2014 the total amount of Federal funding toward the Research Training Scheme was $674,925,651.

The Government is proposing to reduce funding to the Research Training Scheme by 10% from 1 January 2016, which equates to approximately $174.7 million. In order to enable Higher Education Providers to make up the shortfall, they are proposing to offer Higher Education Providers the option of introducing fees on domestic Higher Degrees by Research. These fees will be up to $1,700 per year for a full-time student in a “low cost” course, which includes research relating to fields such as the arts, humanities, law and business. Higher Education Providers may charge up to $3,900 per year for a full-time student in a “high cost” course such as science, engineering, medical studies, pharmacy, dentistry, veterinary science, human movement and psychology. Students can either pay these fees up-front or choose to defer them under FEE-HELP.

Critically, this is one of the few proposed changes in the Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill which applies to all existing students as of 1 January 2016 regardless of when the student enrolled. This means that any domestic Higher Degree by Research student who is enrolled on 1 January 2016 may be required to pay a fee of up to $3,900 by their Higher Education Provider. This is regardless of the fact that the payment of fees may not have been part of the legislation at the time that the student enrolled.
This is a change which will affect a significant number of students enrolled prior to May 2014, when the proposal to introduce fees on Higher Degrees by Research was announced. On average, it takes four years to complete a PhD in Australia. However for a part-time student it can take eight years (longer if the candidate takes intermission). An average PhD student who enrolled at the beginning of 2014, prior to the Budget announcement, will therefore still have two years of full-time study to complete as of 1 January 2016.

It is grossly irresponsible and unjust to propose the cutting of funds such that Universities will be led to the charging of fees on students who were not made aware of the existence of fees at the time of enrollment. It is reasonable to assume that the existence of fees may have had an impact on the student’s decision to pursue further study. This is an assumption which has been backed up by submissions we have received from students since the announcement of the Budget, as we will discuss later. To introduce a fee midway through a student’s studies that was not advertised at the time of enrollment seems to us to be manifestly opposed to all conventions of contract, agreement and responsible advertising.

The Government has emphasised that it will be up to the Higher Education Provider to determine whether to charge a fee on domestic Higher Degrees by Research or not. This fails to acknowledge the real impact of the cut of 10% to Research Training Scheme funding. It is apparent that Higher Education Providers will be left with little choice but to charge fees to make up the shortfall if the reduction to Research Training Scheme funding is delivered upon.

It should be noted from the onset that on page 53 of the Regulation Impact Statement: Higher Education Reforms, a recommendation is made not to proceed with the 10 per cent Research Training Scheme student contribution program.

It is also important to note that the imposition of this fee necessitates the creation of an entirely new mechanism for both Universities and the Commonwealth Government to collect fees and provide loan assistance for those that require it. The perceived benefits of the fee are outweighed by this unjustifiable administrative burden.

As noted by Universities Australia the number of researchers in the manufacturing and service sectors of Australia is less than a third of the average figure for each of the four Scandinavian countries and the United States. If Australia is to maintain innovation and

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1 http://theconversation.com/doing-a-phd-can-be-a-lonely-business-but-it-doesnt-have-to-be-19192
2 Universities Australia, ‘Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Australia’s Innovation System’, 2014.
adapt to a ‘knowledge economy’, as has been the policy pursued by successive Governments, the incentive must be there for students to undertake Higher Degree by Research studies. At the very least, obstacles should not be placed in the path of our future researchers.

It ought to be noted, too that the Government’s National Commission of Audit turned its attention to the adequacy of the current arrangements through which research is funded\(^4\). While recommendation 34 proposes several changes to the scheme of research funding, the introduction of Research Training Scheme student fees is not identified in this comprehensive report and arguably runs contrary to the recommendations made around research by the National Commission.

Similarly in the Kemp Review of the Demand Driven Funding System commissioned by this Government, there is no recommendation or suggestion that a student fee on Research Training Scheme positions would be necessary or useful. While outside of the ambit of that report, it is useful to note that the Research Training Scheme amendment has no basis in a public review or inquiry into the system as other amendments might. It is rather aptly described as policy on the fly.

Noting the concurrent funding decreases to the CSIRO, Cooperative Research Centres, Australian Research Council, ANSTO and DSTO; the proposed fee on RTS places indicates a worrying trend in the Commonwealth’s commitment to innovation and research that will ultimately have impacts on the structure of the overall Australian economy.

A potential which must be of significant concern is that the Minister will choose to cut funding to the Research Training Scheme, even in the event that the introduction of fees on Higher Degrees by Research is not successful in passing the Senate. This is a possibility as whilst the introduction of fees on Higher Degrees by Research requires Senate approval, changes to research block grants can be made as part of an Appropriations Bill. The Minister has already threatened to pursue this avenue if the current Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill is unsuccessful.\(^5\)

Such a step would leave Universities in a difficult position in terms of maintaining the number of Higher Degrees by Research they are able to fund. The first priority of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations is to ensure that Higher Degrees by Research remain fee-free for domestic students, but we are also concerned about the potential of the overall number of Higher Degrees by Research being diminished, or a reduction in the quality of research training offered, as a result of reduced block funding.


\(^5\) http://the-scan.com/2014/08/24/govt-to-target-research/
The Cost Impact to Higher Degree by Research Students

The changes to research degree funding have been subject to far less media coverage than the proposed deregulation of coursework degree fees and the shift in responsibility for the majority of coursework degree funding, from the Government, to the student. This is a fact that we find somewhat strange as while the total cost to the student of a Higher Degree by Research will remain significantly lower than that of an undergraduate degree – up to $15,600 for a four year PhD in comparison to projected costs of over $100,000 for a four year Bachelor of Laws – the cost shift from the Government to the student in percentage terms is up to 15,600 per cent for a four-year, full-time “high cost” PhD in comparison to around 20 per cent for a Bachelor of Laws.

The message that is sent in choosing to cost-shift on to Higher Degree by Research students is a serious one as it devalues the importance of research training to our nation’s interests and disregards the fact that a Higher Degree by Research is essentially research work being undertaken by the student free of charge.

In the event that this Bill is successful, the choice to undertake a Masters by Research or PhD will become a serious cost consideration for future students. Below (Table 1) we have mapped the total potential cost of a Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery degree with Honours, followed by a PhD should all of the changes proposed in the Bill become law.

The Government claims that it is trying to encourage medical research through the provision of funding for career researchers. Yet what this modeling demonstrates is that the path to becoming a medical researcher is set to become a prohibitively expensive one under the Government’s proposed legislation. The cost of a Bachelor of Medicine/Bachelor of Surgery, an Honours year, and a PhD appears set to double at the very least, even if the University is only to break even. In a worst-case scenario however, where the University not only breaks even on fees but introduces a 10% increase as recommended by the Bradley Review, the cost of an entry-level qualification to become a researcher in the field of medicine will increase to close to $140,000.

What these calculations make clear is the enormous personal and financial sacrifice that will be involved in deciding to undertake a PhD under the proposed new fee scheme. To commit to undertake a PhD full-time is to price yourself out of making repayments on any existing HELP debt for that four year period. The introduction of indexation of up to 6 per cent – which will apply to existing HELP debt for each of the four years of the PhD and beyond - on top of the extra $3,900 per year to do your PhD, is a significant extra cost burden that cannot be discounted.
Table 1. Cost to become a Medical Researcher

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2015 Cost to Student</th>
<th>Future Cost to Student: University Breaks Even</th>
<th>Future Cost to Student: 10% increase by University</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor of Medicine,</td>
<td>$51,000 ($10,200</td>
<td>$93,576(^6)</td>
<td>$102,934(^7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor of Surgery</td>
<td>per year for 5 years)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(MBBS)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honours Degree</td>
<td>$10,200</td>
<td>$18,715(^8)</td>
<td>$20,587(^9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of Bachelor of Medical</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctor of Philosophy</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$15,600</td>
<td>$15,600</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$61,200</td>
<td>$127,891</td>
<td>$139,121</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Government is eager to claim that students will not be deterred from undertaking higher education in spite of drastically increased fees as they will have the option of deferring payment of their fees on to FEE-HELP. The feedback that the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations has received around the introduction of fees on research degrees has been in strong opposition to this claim and suggests that Australia may be in danger of seeing a “brain drain” to other countries who better value their future research leaders.

**Response from Current and Prospective Students to the Proposed Research Training Scheme Changes**

On the day following the announcement of the Federal Budget, May 14, the website of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations temporarily crashed under the strain of unprecedented traffic. We believe that this was largely due to an inability for concerned current and future Higher Degree by Research students to find information specific to the RTS changes, elsewhere.

Below we provide a selection of the feedback we received in response to our media release from concerned current and prospective students:

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\(^7\) Estimate calculated by the NTEU, http://www.nieau.org.au/library/view/id/5570

\(^5\) Calculated based on same mathematics as MBBS

\(^9\) Calculated based on same mathematics as MBBS
“Crap that is me out. I have been slugging at my PhD now for 3 years while working but I won’t pay for the pain.” – , 14 May 2014

“One way politicians will avoid debate is by stating that studying is “a privilege”, and that students should have to pay for that privilege, and that $4000 per year is not an awfully large sum of money.

To any student, PhD or MSc, this is a HUGE amount of money. PhD’s receive only $20k to $25k per yr. This is up to 1/5th of a students current income, which is already far far less than the national average. Barely enough to live on. Master’s research students earn far less, if anything at all in this country.

This policy further compounds the fact that Australia doesn’t have a positive attitude towards intellectualism. There is already such a disincentive to get an education if you live in Australia, as you can earn much more in the mining industry, with no skills whatsoever, than as a highly skilled technical professional. For me coming from the UK, where study is rewarded with the highest paying jobs, these ‘Australian’ ideals are ridiculous.” – 14 May 2014

“So you say you want to improve university rankings, something highly dictated by output of research as well as quality of teaching. And you say you want to provide $20b towards medical research.

HOW is slashing PhDs and Masters by RESEARCH helping the case?” – , 14 May 2014

“As a Master’s student being encouraged to convert to a PhD in the immediate future, I will now look to exercise my EU citizenship and take my research to Europe, as the government in this country is hellbent on keeping me in utter poverty.” – ‘Concerned Student’, 14 May 2014.

“As a Master’s Degree student aspiring to begin my PhD in 2016, this comes as a kick in the teeth. Tony Abbott and his cronies will keep taking from the poor and giving to the rich. So we thought Labour was so terrible that we swapped for the better, eh? The grass is not always greener. Let us not forget this lesson.” – , 15 May 2014.

“As an Aussie currently working abroad in Europe, I completed my Masters here for 5000 Euro (considered expensive in EUR and super cheap back in OZ). Was trying to find a the right Uni to do my PhD with based in Australia because I felt strongly about contributing to our nation’s body of research.
As of yesterday I have decided to do my PhD with a University in Belgium where the total cost, even for an international student, is 250 euro.

There is nothing to even think twice about.

The sad thing is this is exactly what will happen to Australia – the big brain drain. Intelligent, innovative individuals will be ‘forced’ to go elsewhere – a huge loss for Australian research and development. The long term effect that this will have on our economy is immense and such a policy is ridiculously short sighted, if not blinded.” – 15 May 2014.

“You are unlikely to pay in continental Europe, regardless of if you are European or not. In northern Europe, PhDs are often salaried employees. From my experience, I would highly recommend looking that option. The drawback is that it can be very competitive to get a PhD position.” – , 16 May 2014.

“This is clearly what will happen, Australia will lose the research and the expertise and the passion of people aiming for higher education, their contribution of knowledge and insight back into our society. This entire budget seems to have been dreamed up without any understanding of impacts on future economies, social or cultural consequences.” – 17 May 2014.

These are just a few of the Internet submissions that we received via our website. We were also inundated with telephone calls and emails.

As at 21 September 2014, more than 2,500 people have signed CAPA’s petition calling on the Government to reject the cuts to the Research Training Scheme and the imposition of fees on Higher Degrees by Research (view the petition here: http://www.change.org/en-AU/petitions/the-australian-parliament-reverse-research-training-scheme-cuts-phd-and-masters-by-research-fees). We delivered a copy of this petition directly to Minister for Education Christopher Pyne’s Adelaide electorate office on the day that he tabled the Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill in the House of Representatives, 28 August 2015. We are yet to receive so much as an acknowledgement of receipt of this petition from the Minister.

On July 1st, we wrote to each of the members of the new Senate, raising our concerns about the cuts to the Research Training Scheme and briefly explaining the impact that fees on Higher Degrees by Research will have for Australian students and the Australian knowledge economy. We would like to thank the following Senators who responded to our letter affirming their support for higher degree by research students and confirming that they would not support the introduction of fees on research degrees:
Senator the Hon Kim Carr, ALP Shadow Minister for Higher Education (confirming support on behalf of full ALP Caucus)
Senator Lee Rhiannon, Greens Spokesperson for Higher Education (confirming support on behalf of full Greens Caucus)
Senator Catryna Bilyk, ALP
Senator Joe Bullock, ALP
Senator the Hon Jacinta Collins, ALP
Senator Sam Dastyari, ALP
Senator Sarah Hanson-Young, Greens
Senator Jacqui Lambie, Palmer United Party
Senator Sue Lines, ALP
Senator Scott Ludlam, Greens
Senator the Hon Kate Lundy, ALP
Senator Anne McEwen, ALP
Senator the Hon Jan McLucas, ALP
Senator Claire Moore, ALP
Senator Deborah O’Neill, ALP
Senator Janet Rice, Greens
Senator Larissa Waters, Greens

We also received a response from Senator Nick Xenophon, Independent, indicating that he wished to consider further information prior to affirming a position on the Bill.

We note with disappointment that we did not receive a single response or acknowledgement to our letter from a Liberal or National Senator. It is concerning that these Senators hold the nation’s postgraduate and research students in such contempt that they would not take the time to acknowledge a letter from their peak representative body. This is part of a worrying trend set by the Government around a lack of consultation with, and respect for, student leaders throughout the implementation of these Budget measures, something that we discuss later in this submission. We remind Government Senators that students vote, too.

**Recommendations**

1. That the proposal to reduce Government funding of the Research Training Scheme by 10%, or $174.7 million, be abandoned by the Minister.
2. That the proposal to introduce the ability for Higher Education Providers to charge fees of up to $3,900 per year on Higher Degrees by Research, be rejected.
3. That in particular the Senate recognise the injustice of charging fees to Higher Degree by Research students from 1 January 2016 where those students were enrolled prior to the announcement of the 2014-15 Federal Budget.
4. That the proposal to index interest on HECS-HELP debt against the 10 Year Bond Rate up to a maximum of 6 per cent, be rejected.
The Impact of the Bill on Students from Diverse Equity Backgrounds

The Government and others involved in the management of the higher education sector have advanced the proposition that an increased fee rate will not impact access to higher education for people from low-SES and diverse equity backgrounds, insofar that it is offset by generous loan conditions under the HECS-HELP system. In addressing this narrow proposition, existing data is available for the initial introduction of the HECS system from 1996 – 2001 which suggests that this is assertion is a fallacy.

While the overall number of low-SES students in higher education may have increased in numerical terms, this reflects an increase in university places offered, not an increase in overall demand for higher education, as measured by the number of applications. Research by Dr Sarah Wright asserts that during the early period of HECS the "participation rate of students from low socio-economic groups declined but also the number of commencing students from low socio-economic areas has also fallen" based on a longitudinal study of ABS Census data for the Sydney region from 1996 and 2001.

As noted by Stokes and Wright, there has been “found appreciable social stratification in the values and attitudes of students towards higher education, concluding that the socio-economic background of students was a decisive factor influencing student participation in higher education”, while James found that some 39 per cent of students from low SES backgrounds believe that the costs of university may stop them from attending university, as opposed to 23% of high SES background students.

With consideration that less than 17.1% of commencing students in 2013 were from a low SES background, a rapid increase in student fees caused by fee-deregulation stands only to exacerbate these equity issues created by the introduction of HECS. The model proposed fundamentally misunderstands the decision-making processes of persons from low-SES backgrounds in deciding whether or not to invest further in their education.

\[\text{References:}\]

11 Pg. 3, Ibid.
It is noted that the *HERR Amendment Bill 2014* provides for one out of every five dollars of additional total revenue to be put towards scholarship and equity-related initiatives. The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations is opposed to this program as at its very essence it represents students paying for their own scholarships, and forces Universities to drive up fees in order to accommodate students from low-SES and diverse equity backgrounds. It is our opinion that this will result in increased feelings of resentment and difference between the “haves” and the “have nots”.

The legislation provides insufficient guidance as to the nature of the activities that may be undertaken with the funds raised under the proposed equity scholarships program, in addition to what oversight, if any, will be made available to ensure that this funding is spent effectively to improve low-SES activities or activities that support students from diverse equity backgrounds. Because it is ultimately up to the Higher Education Provider to decide how much to charge under deregulation (and therefore how much funding will be allocated to equity scholarships) there is no guidance for future students around how many scholarships will be available, to whom they will apply, or how much funding they will provide. Further, the legislation fails to specify whether this spending may be offset by reallocating existing funding for like programs, making this amendment purely a platitude.

The Government is also proposing to remove low-SES and Indigenous student enrolment targets as part of its Budget measures. This is a regressive step which places in danger the incentive for Universities to institute real and meaningful measures to engage students from these cohorts.

In making these arguments we wish to point specifically to the existing inequities in participation in postgraduate and research studies for students from low-SES and diverse equity backgrounds. We note that 45 per cent of people living with disability live below the poverty line; only one in every hundred research students is Indigenous; and LGBTIQ-identifying individuals face existing social stigmas and higher proportions of mental health concerns than non-LGBTIQ-identifying individuals. For students who face these existing barriers to education, further hurdles only compound the difficulty in achieving equity. It is our contention that many of the proposals contained within the Bill, including the introduction of fees on Higher Degrees by Research and the imposition of increased indexation on HECS-HELP debt, will further exacerbate these existing inequalities.

In particular, we support the Melbourne Institute’s research around the unequal impact that these changes will have upon women students,¹⁵ who still earn 81.8 cents to every dollar earned by their male colleagues on average.¹⁶ Their report notes, “The analysis


presented here points to a substantial increase in the time graduates will take to repay student loans and an increase in the incidence of partial repayment of debts, especially among female graduates. That such a large proportion of women might not repay their loans could put the loan scheme in future jeopardy as governments/taxpayers meet the cost of unpaid HECS-HELP debt.”

Recommendations
5. That participation targets for Indigenous students and for students from low-SES backgrounds not be scrapped.
6. That students not be forced to foot the bill for their own equity scholarships, and that it be acknowledged that a program that requires Higher Education Providers to dedicate $1 from every extra $5 raised under deregulation, directly incentivises higher fees, which in turn will have the regressive impact of driving low-SES students and students from diverse equity backgrounds, out of higher education.
7. That further guidance be provided around the proposed implementation and regulation of the equity scholarships program.
8. That meaningful dialogue take place between the Government/the Department of Education and those Higher Education Providers with high rural, low-SES and first-in-family participation rates, as well as with students and future students from these cohorts, to determine the best means of funding scholarships to encourage participation from these cohorts as well as the real impact of fee deregulation on study aspirations within these cohorts.
The Impact on Regional Universities
and
A Lack of Response to Concerns Pertaining to Indigenous Access to Education, as
Raised Within The Behrendt Review

The President of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations, Ms Meghan B. Hopper, and the co-Vice President Equity of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations, Ms Sadie Heckenberg, were recently privileged to undertake a tour of some of Australia’s small and regional University campuses, including a number which feature significant Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander student enrolment rates and/or significant Indigenous Research Schools or Centres. Ms Heckenberg is a Wiradjuri woman and is the recipient of the 2014 Fulbright Indigenous Scholarship for her research in Indigenous oral history.

Campuses visited by Ms Hopper and Ms Heckenberg as part of this most recent tour included the University of South Australia, Charles Darwin University, the Batchelor Institute for Indigenous Tertiary Education, James Cook University (Townsville), the University of Sunshine Coast and Federation University (Gippsland).

At each of these campuses Ms Hopper and Ms Heckenberg held conversations with a range of student and academic leaders, a number of whom were from Indigenous backgrounds.
Of the representatives that Ms Hopper and Ms Heckenberg met with at these institutions, we can advise that none expressed support for any of the following measures:

- Deregulation
- Increased burden of degree cost to the student
- Cuts to the Research Training Scheme
- The introduction of fees on research degrees
- Indexation of HELP interest at rates of up to 6 per cent
- Changes to ABSTUDY and AUSTUDY which prevent overseas travel
- Changes to the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) which result in it becoming a competitive grant-tendering process

Both student and academic leaders expressed concern around these measures, a number of which they felt had not been adequately communicated to important stakeholders who would be impacted by their introduction. In particular the changes that will impact most specifically upon Indigenous students, namely changes to ABSTUDY and AUSTUDY and changes to the ITAS, were little-known and representatives did not feel adequately consulted with or prepared to address the impact that these changes would have on students at their institution.

Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education and Charles Darwin University will be strongly impacted by these new changes due to their high connectivity to local and remote Indigenous communities. Batchelor Institute underwent a structural change in 2011-2012 and as a consequence all undergraduate and postgraduate coursework Indigenous students from Batchelor Institute have become students of Charles Darwin University within the Australian Centre for Indigenous Knowledges and Education (ACIKE). With this change students who have made the transfer into a new educational environment are now more than ever relying on ITAS and ABSTUDY support services. With the majority of Batchelor’s VET and postgraduate HDR students using ITAS services and supported by ABSTUDY these changes are going to have a huge impact on this Institute.

Deregulation, the shift in majority CSP funding to students, and the introduction of fees on Higher Degrees by Research are all changes which will have a devastating effect on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, due in no small part to the high correlation between being an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander student and low-SES status. The cutting of start-up scholarships has already increased the amount of debt that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students will incur after graduation so any more increases will be a deterrent to entering higher education let alone the cost of Masters or a PhD. Future students will be less likely to do a Masters or PhD, which will mean they are less likely to move into the sector as an academic, which will have significant impacts on already low Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academic staffing levels.
The changes to the budget will result in social and economic inequity. Some measures which we view as being of particular significance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students include:

- Abolition of the start-up scholarships and relocation scholarships
- Abolishing the target to have 20% enrolments from low SES backgrounds
- Cutting the funding to HEPPP by $51m
- Removing the price limit on fees for Commonwealth supported places
- Lowering the income threshold and imposing real interest rates on outstanding student loans

Setting a target to increase low-SES student participation was an important accountability measure to address a long standing problem in education. By abandoning these targets the government will not ‘close the gap’ in Indigenous education within a decade.17

Cuts to the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) funding will make it overwhelmingly difficult for universities to develop partnerships with local communities and to provide services like learning support to attract and retain disadvantaged students.

This will result in a tiered system of education in Australia. Students who come from reasonably well off backgrounds may be in a position to pay for a fully serviced degree, but students from disadvantaged backgrounds might have to settle for an inferior educational experience.

Regional universities will be disproportionately hit by an across-the-board 20 per cent course funding cut because they have limited scope to increase fees and cannot attract international students to the bush. They operate in thin markets where there is limited incentive for young people from metropolitan backgrounds to move to the country even if the fees are cheaper. A compensation structure should be considered for regional universities who cannot compete with metropolitan universities. Modelling by the National Tertiary Education Union shows regional and outer suburban universities will be hit hardest by the funding cuts contained within the 2014-15 Budget.18

The Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, chaired by Professor Larissa Behrendt (aka ‘The Behrendt

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Review’) recommended that Indigenous culture and knowledge be embedded across the entire university so greater cultural change is achieved, and that Indigenous-specific spaces on campus should be increased and strengthened.

A number of Indigenous-specific academic programs at universities are under threat, whilst some universities have reviewed and restructured Indigenous centres or made them obsolete. In addition, Indigenous support programmes have been absorbed into the mainstream support areas where students feel culturally unsafe.

**The Behrendt Review**

In 2011, *A Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* was commissioned to establish and examine how higher education outcomes among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people contribute to nation building and the reduction of Indigenous disadvantage.

A panel of experts, namely Professor Larissa Behrendt (Chair), Mr Robert Pettigrew, Ms Patricia Kelly and Professor Steve Larkin, directed the Review which drew on submissions and advice from key stakeholders, especially the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC).

The Review developed a strategic framework that identified key priorities, actions and opportunities for the Government and the higher education sector to consider, all of which were aimed at ‘closing the gap’ between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous university students and staff across a range of outcomes.

In her letter to then-Minister for Higher Education and Research, former Senator the Honourable Chris Evans, Professor Behrendt hoped that the Review would have “the potential to dramatically improve the Australian higher education sector”. The Review explicitly drew on the opinions of student leaders and commended the input of Mr Frank Gafa, a representative from the National Union of Students.

The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations sees no attempt by the current Government to address the recommendations of The Behrendt Review, either in the current Bill or in general. Indeed we are concerned that recent changes to the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) and to ABSTUDY are contrary to the recommendations of The Behrendt Review.

**The Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS)**

Since its introduction in 1993, the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) has been a vital source of support to Indigenous students from kindergarten right through to postgraduate and research studies, and has improved the number of Indigenous
students participating in higher education, bringing them slowly closer to parity within Australian Universities.

Higher Education Providers currently receive funding for ITAS based on the provider’s number of enrolled Indigenous students. Each student is given the opportunity to have a qualified tutor for a maximum of two hours per week per subject during the teaching period and up to a maximum of five hours in total during the examination period.

Recommendation 13 of the Behrendt Review called on the Australian Government to reform funding for supplementary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander support programs, including the Indigenous Support Program and the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme to allow universities greater flexibility to provide locally relevant, tailored support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and staff; to target available funding to achieve an improvement in current enrolment levels but also with a greater emphasis on retention and completion rates; to ensure that funding would be simple to administer; and to ensure that funding would support clear outcome-focused accountability for universities. In addition it was recommended that the new funding model should include consideration of inclusion in tutoring support of students who were previously ineligible for ITAS-TT assistance.

The Government is proposing to replace the ITAS program from 2015 with a competitive grants process under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy. Whilst the Behrendt Review recommended reform of the ITAS program, at no stage did it encourage the Government to turn the program into a competitive grants strategy which would force Higher Education Providers to compete against each other for funding.

The sudden announcement has put major pressure on Indigenous centres and organisations, many of whom may miss out on funding if they are unable to make a submission by the closing date of October 7th.

The promotion of these changes by the Government has been appalling. Even as at September 22, if you visit the Department of Industry website that provides information on the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme, you are referred to the 2013 Guidelines with no reference to the changes: http://www.industry.gov.au/highereducation/IndigenousHigherEducation/Pages/IndigenousTutorialAssistanceSchemeTertiaryTuition.aspx. Visiting the Indigenous Advancement Strategy website, http://www.indigenous.gov.au/indigenous-advancement-strategy, there is no clear pathway to information about higher education participation. Representatives of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Consortium (NATSHEC) and the Innovative Research Universities (IRU) – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Network were advised of these changes by a representative of Prime Minister & Cabinet in early September, just days before submissions to the competitive tendering process opened. No criteria or guidelines were provided to representatives at that time and it was widely noted that the
Department of Prime Minister & Cabinet did not undertake consultation in reaching this decision.\(^\text{19}\)

It cannot be stated too firmly, how opposed the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations is to the way in which these changes have been handled and the profound disrespect that has been shown to the leaders within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community who contributed to the Behrendt Review and to Indigenous academics and students, in failing to consult with them.

Though packaged as a new more flexible initiative, the completive grants process in fact seems to be a step towards future uncertainty. Indeed the new model only gives 4 years of funding with programs of up to 3 years being funded. This is resulting in instability for students as to whether ITAS will be available during their entire degrees.

Universities are left with no clear indication about what will happen after the current 4-year funding period concludes. Will the money still be there to apply for or will it be eaten up into a general funding pool? This new grants process also makes it harder for each educational institution to obtain the full amount of funding per student that ITAS granted. With less money for funding overall and bigger universities having more experience in applying to such grants the worry is that smaller less competitive institutions will lose out on funding for their students.

It is our concern is that the government appear to be taking recommendations from the Behrendt Review and twisting them to fit within their ideas of what Indigenous higher education should look like. These recommended changes, far from responding to the Behrendt Review, in fact contradict it, and will only further disadvantage Indigenous students. The government should be ‘closing the gap’ not widening it.

\textit{Inability to Access ABSTUDY, AUSTUDY or Youth Allowance (student), if the student departs Australia for any period of time}

The Budget 2014-15 has proposed to limit the Six-Week Portability Period for Student Payments.\(^\text{20}\) These changes are very concerning to all students currently undertaking an undergraduate or postgraduate degree who are supported by Youth Allowance, AUSTUDY or ABSTUDY. We contend that these changes will have a particularly uneven effect on Higher Degree by Research students, who often have occasion to travel internationally to participate in or present at research conferences, for example. Limiting the ability of students on ABSTUDY and AUSTUDY to travel internationally will result in less well-off students being prevented from having the same research and academic development opportunities as their more well-off counterparts.

\(^{19}\) http://m.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/key-indigenous-tuition-program-disbanded/story-e6frgjc-1227048080456?nk=69719de8605fe1f1cf1c4444bc384d1e7

Students who travel overseas from 1 October 2014 will only be eligible to continue to receive student payments Youth Allowance (student), Austudy and ABSTUDY where they are:

- undertaking approved overseas study that is part of their full-time Australian course, including for up to 10 days travelling to and from their eligible course
- attending an acute family crisis
- receiving eligible medical treatment not available in Australia
- attending a training camp with the Australian Armed Forces Reserves.

Students who have left Australia before October 1 October 2014 will be paid under the existing rules affecting payment overseas. However this leaves many students disadvantaged. Students who rely on Centrelink payments for their main or only income should not be at a disadvantage to their future research outcomes. Indeed these students should not be denied even a holiday that other students are allowed to partake in freely. Higher Degree by Research students need to be able to have access to international venues to show their research or observe others in their particular field. This kind of participation is considered invaluable to a student’s depth of research as well as to future career opportunities. To exclude students from low socioeconomic and Indigenous backgrounds from these vital experiences is unacceptable.

**Recommendations**

9. That the Government outline how it intends to address the recommendations contained within the *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People*.

10. That the changes to the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme which result in institutions being required to competitively tender for funding, be abolished.

11. That the changes to ABSTUDY and AUSTUDY which prevent students from departing Australia for any period of time without payments being cut off, are recognised as being of particular consequence to Higher Degree by Research students, who are frequently required to travel for the purpose of furthering their research; and that these changes be reversed.
Lack of Consultation with Students and Student Leaders in the Preparation and Evaluation of the Bill

We wish to now touch briefly upon the profoundly rushed nature of this Bill, the lack of response within the Bill to recent expert reviews of the higher education sector, and in particular the lack of consultation around this Bill that has taken place within the sector and most specifically with the largest and most important stakeholder in the higher education sector – the students.

On 16 July 2014, the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations wrote to Minister Pyne seeking clarification around a number of changes to the make-up of Government representative groups, and to consultation with student leaders, that had alarmed us. In particular the Presidents of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations and of the National Union of Students had not been invited to sit on the Office for Learning and Teaching’s Awards Standing Committee for the first time since its inception. There had been no attempt to engage with student leaders in the lead-up to, or following the Budget announcements around higher education. Minister Pyne has yet to acknowledge that letter.

Students have consistently been refused entry to forums conducted by Government representatives on the higher education changes which have taken place on their own University campuses. At one point the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations formally requested that an invitation be extended to a forum that took place at La Trobe, Mildura. That was denied.

Responding to dissent around the Budget announcements in higher education, the Government determined to commission three working groups to review the reforms: the Legislation and Finance Working Group, Chaired by Professor John Dewar, Vice Chancellor of La Trobe University; the Quality, Deregulation and Information Working Group, Chaired by Professor Peter Shergold AC, Chancellor of the University of Western Sydney; and the Higher Education Infrastructure Working Group, comprised of Mr Philip Marcus Clark AM and Emeritus Professor Denise Bradley AC.

No student representatives have been appointed to any of the three working groups. Student representatives were not given an opportunity to provide feedback to the Legislation and Finance Working Group, which has already handed its recommendations to the Government; it is stated that the other two groups will consult “widely” and report back on their findings in early 2015 (i.e. several months after the Minister tabled the Bill in the House and several months after he expects the Senate to pass it).  

It seems that the Government’s primary concern in this Bill is to meet the desires of University management. There is no desire or attempt to meet the needs of students. There has been no attempt to consult with student leaders regarding the impact of the Bill and indeed, any approaches by student leaders to discuss these changes in a respectful and productive environment, have been rebuffed.

This is a cavalier approach to the students that Minister Pyne is asking to pay for his higher education reforms. When the primary purpose of higher education legislation ceases to be to respond to the needs to students, there is something badly amiss.

If the outcome of this Bill is, as Minister Pyne claims, a spreading of opportunity to students – why is he so eager to avoid speaking to us?

Recent Governments have commissioned a series of comprehensive, expensive expert reviews into the Higher Education sector and its funding. Amongst these reports are the Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People (2012), which has already been canvassed extensively in this submission; the Review of Australian Higher Education (2008), Chaired by Professor Denise Bradley, AC; the Higher Education Base Funding Review (2011), and the Independent Analysis of Higher Education Funding approach (2012), conducted by Ernst & Young.

The Minister for Education should be taking as his basis for reforms to the Higher Education sector, not the bottom line that happens to appear on this year’s Budget or the media grabs provided by the cohorts within the sector that are financially benefited by the introduction of fee deregulation, but the expert views of representatives commissioned by prior Governments with the specific task of reforming the Higher Education sector. These reviews each provide an in-depth, long-term vision for higher education in Australia and whilst we do not agree with all of their recommendations, we believe that they provide the foundation for real and considered change.

To ignore these important contributions by life-long educators and higher education reformers, in deference to a Budget package that was rushed out by a Minister in his first year following no attempted consultation with the sector and no engagement with the standing evidence, is complete folly.

Recommendation 17 of the Behrendt Review was that the Australian Government and Higher Education Providers, in consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student representatives examine any outstanding issues regarding Government income support payments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, including issues relating to ABSTUDY, APAs and income support for students undertaking postgraduate degrees that were formerly undergraduate degrees, focusing on the needs of students with children, and explore opportunities to partner with philanthropic and private sector organisations to provide additional income support for students.
The Government has announced the budget reforms without consultation with the stakeholders listed above, further corroborating our concern that this Government is making no attempt to address the recommendations of the Behrendt Review. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and academic leaders are expressing concern that there has been no consultation nor have the changes been adequately communicated. This lack of consultation was made profoundly clear during our recent tour of rural campuses in Central and Northern Australia, where numerous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives expressed a lack of knowledge or feeling of consultation around the proposed reforms. The changes to ABSTUDY, AUSTUDY and ITAS will impact severely on Indigenous students yet representatives have not been adequately consulted about the impact on students or on Indigenous centres at Higher Education Providers.

Recommendations
12. That the Government be directed to conduct a further review of the Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill with a view toward ensuring that student feedback is obtained.
13. That the Government establish a bi-annual meeting of the leaders of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations, the National Union of Students, the Council of International Students Australia and the Mature Age Student Network of Australia; the Minister for Education and, where one exists, the Minister for Higher Education and Research; and relevant representatives from within the Department of Education or the higher education sector, to discuss issues of importance to the student community and to receive feedback and respond to concerns from student leaders.
14. That a review be conducted into student representation on Government committees with an aim toward increasing student involvement.
Conclusion

In concluding our submission, we would like to again thank the Committee for making available the opportunity for to provide feedback to the Inquiry into the Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill 2014. This process has provided us as student leaders, representatives and advocates with a valuable platform from which to raise our concerns around the rushed and unconsultative nature of this Bill and the profound impact that it will have on students.

We urge the Senate to reject the Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill 2014, and to instruct the Minister for Education to instead undertake a considered and thorough consultation with sector leaders and student representatives around changes to the funding of the higher education sector.

The Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill if passed would hold damaging implications for the postgraduate and higher degree by research community, and in turn, Australia’s research workforce and future academic community. It would also have profound ramifications for students from low-SES, remote and regional, first-in-family, diverse equity, Aboriginal, and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. We provide you with this feedback having been entrusted with it by the thousands of members of the postgraduate and research community who have engaged with our response to the Budget 2014-15 so far, and we hope that you will carry it forward and make a recommendation that reflects the grave concerns of the postgraduate and research student community.
Acknowledgements

This submission was authored by Ms Meghan B. Hopper, 2013-14 National President of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations. It features substantive and valued contributions from fellow Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations Executive members, Ms Sadie Heckenberg, 2014 co-Vice President (Equity); Ms Sharlene-Leroy Dyer, 2014 Indigenous Liaison Officer; and Mr Sharangan Maheswaran, 2014 Policy & Research Advisor.

The opinions canvassed within this submission draw on extensive feedback and consultation undertaken with the Australian postgraduate, higher degree by research, academic, and student activist community over the months following the release of the 2014-15 Federal Budget. We are indebted to each and every student who has contributed their voice to our national campaign to prevent cuts to higher education, regressive changes to equity and access programs, and the introduction of fees on research degrees.

We would like to acknowledge and thank the National Tertiary Education Union for their continued support and provision of resources.

We acknowledge that this submission was prepared upon the traditional lands of the Wurundjeri people and of the Dharug people and that these lands were never ceded, and we pay our respects to elders past and present and to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
List of Member Organisations of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations