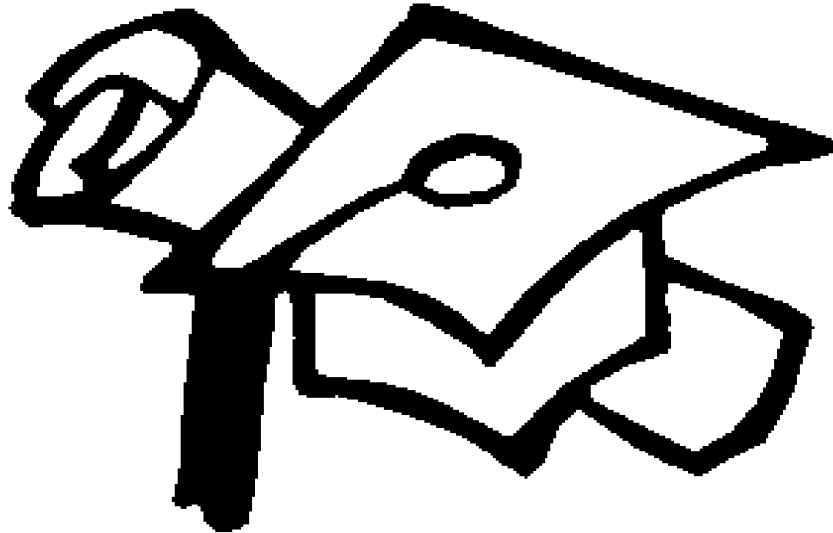


**Adelaide University
Postgraduate Students' Association**



Submission to the

**Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business
and Education References Committee
Inquiry into**

**The capacity of public universities
to meet Australia's
higher education needs.**

March 29, 2001

Introduction

The Adelaide University Postgraduate Students' Association represents postgraduate and honours students enrolled at the University of Adelaide. We welcome this opportunity to comment on the capacity of public universities to meet Australia's higher education needs.

In this submission we will address terms of reference b(ii), d(i) and g(i). Our focus will be the impact of commercialisation on postgraduate coursework education with specific reference to the postgraduate coursework qualifications provided by the University of Adelaide.

Postgraduate coursework students comprise approximately half of the postgraduate student population at the University of Adelaide. In 2001, there are 158 postgraduate coursework programs offered by the University. The fees range from \$3,600 per annum for the graduate diploma in nursing to \$26,400 for Master of Business Administration course.

Postgraduate coursework qualifications include graduate certificates, graduate diplomas, and Masters by coursework degrees. Entry requirements for these qualifications vary, but in general all require the completion of an undergraduate qualification as a prerequisite. For full-time candidates, graduate certificates are normally six months and graduate diplomas one year of study. The duration of Masters by coursework degrees vary from one to two and a half years of full-time study.

Postgraduate coursework qualifications serve a range of important professional and vocational goals. For some professions, the growth in information and knowledge means that such specialist knowledge cannot be adequately covered in an undergraduate degree. Postgraduate qualifications offer students in these fields the professional understanding and clinical skills not covered in their generalist undergraduate qualifications. In certain fields these qualifications have become the requisite entry standards (e.g Master of Clinical Psychology). On the other hand, there are students and employers who are not seeking increased specialisation, but a broader set of skills and knowledge not provided by undergraduate qualifications.

Postgraduate qualifications are vital for people seeking career changes or those who require new sets of knowledge to maintain and enhance their competencies in their current employment. These qualifications provide advanced skills and knowledge essential for the breadth and depth of skills required by the Australia economy.

In this submission we will show that as a result of the deregulation of fee-paying arrangements, and the removal of Commonwealth funding for postgraduate coursework, there has been:

- a significant decline in overall postgraduate coursework enrolments;
- significant reductions in postgraduate student numbers in a number of fields of study; and
- an adverse impact on equity in terms of access to these courses.

Associated with these affects has been significant levels of student dissatisfaction with the promotion, content and delivery of coursework postgraduate programs.

We recommend that the Commonwealth re-regulate and increase funding for the postgraduate coursework sector. In particular we recommend that postgraduate courses be funded through the HECS Scheme. The Commonwealth also needs to introduce a range of quality assurance processes for the postgraduate coursework sector.

The Impact of Fees on Postgraduate Coursework Education:

The National Policy Context

Fees for international postgraduate students were introduced as part of the overall introduction of fees for international students in 1996. In the following year, then Labor Government Minister Dawkins, announced plans to allow institutions to charge fees for domestic postgraduate students. Fees were to be restricted to:

*... specialized post-basic courses designed for professional up-grading or extension purposes or which are directed primarily at those already well established in employment. Students proceeding directly from undergraduate courses to postgraduate studies will not be affected.*¹

After the introduction of domestic postgraduate coursework fees in 1988, the Labor government through a series of incremental changes effectively removed most restrictions on the charging of fees by higher education institutions. In particular, those rules regulating the numbers of fee-paying postgraduate students and the types of courses for which fees could be charged were relaxed. By 1994, only holders of Australian Postgraduate Awards, students enrolled in HECS-liable places, and students enrolled in initial nursing and education qualifications were exempt from fees.

Prior to 1994, a 20% cap applied to the number of fee-paying postgraduate students within Commonwealth funded load. This cap was also removed in the 1994 Ministerial guidelines along with the removal of the minimum fee requirement. There had been no regulation limiting the maximum fee for postgraduate courses.²

The effect of the 1994 Ministerial Guidelines was to remove most controls and regulations governing the fee-paying postgraduate sector. From that point in time, the numbers of fee-paying postgraduate students have been effectively controlled via Commonwealth funding arrangements negotiated with institutions.

The election of the Howard Government in 1996 has seen a more aggressive approach to the commercialisation of the postgraduate coursework sector. In its first budget the Coalition announced significant cuts of the order of 1 percent, 3 per cent and a further 1 per cent for the years 1997, 1998, and 1999. There can be no doubt that it was the intention of the Government for the postgraduate coursework sector to absorb most of the reduction in Commonwealth funding. According to the Government's Higher Education Statement for the 1997-1999 Triennium institutions were expected to maintain undergraduate load at previously agreed levels, while making "any necessary" adjustments to postgraduate coursework load.³

The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations has estimated that as a result of the reduction in Commonwealth funding for postgraduate coursework the imputed postgraduate HECS liable places were cut by 27,500 Effective Full-time Student Units (EFTSUs).⁴

¹ The Hon John Dawkins MP, Ministerial Guidelines to the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission (CTEC), September 1987.

² Anderson D, Johnson R, Milligan B, Access to Postgraduate Courses: Opportunities and Obstacles, Higher Education Council, 1998, p. 1.

³ The Hon Senator Amanda Vanstone, Minister for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, *Higher Education Funding Report for the 1997-1999 Triennium*, DEETYA, December 1996.

⁴ Frankland M, *HECS places in Postgraduate Coursework*, CAPA Research Memorandum, February, 2000.

Impact of Deregulation of Domestic Postgraduate Coursework Fees

There have been three major problems associated with the deregulation of fee-paying arrangements and the removal of Commonwealth funding in the postgraduate coursework sector.

1. Equality of access for postgraduate coursework awards.

Postgraduate student associations have argued for over a decade that the charging of tuition fees for postgraduate courses has acted as a major barrier to these courses for people from low-income and other socially and educationally disadvantaged sectors of the Australian Community.

Two major studies commissioned by the Higher Education Council have provided solid evidence to back up these claims. The first study, *The Effects of the Introduction of Fee-paying Postgraduate Courses on Access for Designated Groups* (1997) examined enrolment statistics for the years 1993 to 1995, and used enrolment in HECS-liable places as a measure of the deterrent effect of full-fees. This study concluded that:

*fees have a clearly observable deterrent effect on enrolment in postgraduate courses and in practice direct some groups, particularly women and those of low socio-economic status, towards HECS-liable courses. Since not all courses in all universities allow for HECS-based enrolment, this means that such students are in practice directed to certain fields of study and discouraged from others.*⁵

A more recent study by the same authors examines the enrolment statics in the years 1996 and 1997, and thus includes the effects of the 1996 Budget cuts⁶. It also adds to this analysis by surveying, through a questionnaire and interviews, the intentions of recent graduates of an undergraduate degree and final year undergraduates. This provides crucial information about the decisions of people who decide not to enrol because of the deterrent effects of tuition fees.

This second study found that of those surveyed who had stated that they were unlikely to enrol, one in five stated that the costs of studying and the lack of availability of HECS were important factors in this decision.⁷ This clearly indicates that the widespread conversion of HECS places to fee-places at most higher education institutions in recent years will discourage many qualified people from undertaking further study.

The study found that students from low socio-economic backgrounds were less likely to continue on to postgraduate study. For those students who did make the transition to postgraduate study, the high costs of study were more of a barrier than for students from higher socio-economic groups. On the question of gender equity, Anderson *et al* concluded that:

*Although a larger proportion of women than men envisage postgraduate study, the evidence from a variety of sources, is consistent and makes it abundantly clear that more women than men face obstacles related to costs. The problem is exacerbated by reduced access to support from employers ... significantly fewer women than men have their postgraduate fees paid by employers, receive assistance in meeting HECS debts or are granted time off for study.*⁸

⁵ Anderson D, Johnson R, and Milligan B, *The Effects of the Introduction of Fee-paying Postgraduate Courses on Access for Designated Groups*, Higher Education Council, NBEET, May 1997, p. 69.

⁶ *Access to Postgraduate Courses: Opportunities and Obstacles*, op cit, p. xi.

⁷ *Ibid*, p.66.

⁸ *Ibid*, p.67.

2. Declining enrolments in postgraduate coursework awards.

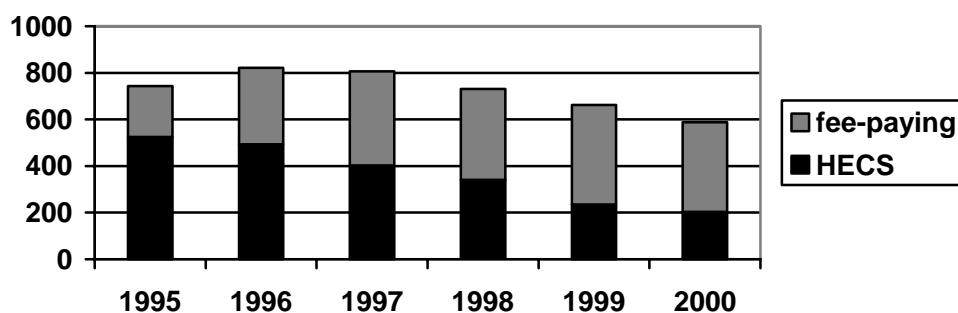
Analysis of DETYA statistics by the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) found that between 1996 and 1999 effective full time equivalent domestic postgraduate student numbers (EFTSU) fell by 7.5%. Their analysis shows that while the number of fee-paying students increased over this period, the increase was insufficient to compensate for the reduction in numbers due to the loss of HECS places.⁹

At the University of Adelaide a far more dramatic decline in postgraduate coursework load has occurred. Between 1995 and 2000 the total domestic postgraduate coursework load has declined by 154.2 EFTSU or 20.8%. As with the national figures, fee-paying domestic postgraduate numbers have increased (by 167.5 EFTSU between 1995 and 2000), but not in sufficient numbers to address the dramatic reduction in HECS load (38.8% or 321.7 EFTSU over the same period). Table 1 and Figure 1 show the HECS-liable and fee-paying postgraduate loads for the years 1995 to 2000.

Table 1: Adelaide University Domestic Postgraduate Coursework Load (EFTSU).¹⁰

Year	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
HECS load	525.4	493.6	402.4	340.2	234.5	203.7
Fee-paying load	217.1	328.0	404.4	391.0	427.0	384.6
Total	742.5	821.6	806.8	731.3	661.5	588.3

Figure 1: Adelaide University Domestic Postgraduate Coursework Load (EFTSU)



CAPA's analysis found that the changes in national postgraduate coursework load were not uniform across different fields of study. They found that between 1996 and 1999 the broad field of Mathematics, Computing and Information Technology increased by 10.3%, and the broad field of Management, Economics and Administration increased by 6.0%. All other broad fields of disciplinary study have experienced declining numbers of domestic postgraduate coursework students. These range from a 2% decrease for Health Sciences to a reduction in enrolment load of 25% or more for the field of Humanities, Sciences, Agriculture and the Visual and Performing Arts. The changes in national domestic postgraduate load are shown in table 2.¹¹

⁹ B Smith, "Market Sinks Postgrads", *The Australian Higher Education Supplement*, May 17, 2000.

¹⁰ Data provided by Adelaide University Strategic Planning Unit.

¹¹ "Market Sinks Postgrads", op cit.

Table 2: National domestic postgraduate coursework load. Changes in Effective Full-Time Student Units (EFTSUs) by field of Study from 1996 to 1999.

Broad Field of Study	Percentage change from 1996 to 1999
Maths, Computing & IT	10% increase
Management, Economics, Administration	6% increase
Health Sciences	2% decrease
Social Sciences	15% decrease
Education	16% decrease
Engineering	19% decrease
Architecture	20% decrease
Humanities	25% decrease
Sciences	25% decrease
Agriculture	26% decrease
Visual/Performing Arts	29% decrease

The Adelaide University PGSA has conducted a similar analysis of domestic postgraduate load trends for each of the University's Faculties. These Faculties correspond to a large degree to the broad discipline fields used in CAPA's analysis. The Faculties are: the Faculty of Agriculture and Natural Resource Sciences; the Faculty of Health Sciences; the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences which includes Education; the Faculty of Science; the Faculty of Engineering, Computing and Mathematical Sciences, and the Faculty of PALACE (Performing Arts, Law, Architecture, Commerce and Economics). Management is located in the Faculty of PALACE. It is only this last Faculty that does not correspond to a distinct field of study or a grouping of similar fields of study.

Table 3: Adelaide University domestic postgraduate coursework load by Faculty.¹²

Faculty	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	Percentage change 1996 to 2000
Health Sciences	137.6	189.8	185.0	206.5	193.9	40.9% increase
Ag & Natural Resources	37.3	39.0	30.7	35.7	35.5	4.8% decrease
PALACE	199.4	201.5	186.2	177.7	163.2	18.2% decrease
Eng, Maths & IT	47.5	46.1	48.2	33.1	27.7	41.7% decrease
Hum & Social Sciences	375.9	320.5	277.2	206.4	167.3	55.5% decrease
Science	24.0	9.9	3.9	2.2	0.8	96.7% decrease

Again, the decline in load by Faculty is far more dramatic than the national figures. The Faculty of Science is reduced to almost zero load. Humanities and Social Sciences are cut by more than half, and these figures would be worse if the enrolment figures for the Graduate Diploma in Education were not included. In 2000, there were 121.9 EFTSUs taught in the Graduate Diploma of Education. The only Faculty that experienced an increase in postgraduate coursework load over this period was the Faculty of Health Sciences. However, it should be noted that these numbers are largely underpinned by enrolments in a suite of nursing graduate diplomas (93.3 EFTSUs in 2000). It should also be noted that the cost of the nursing graduate diplomas is \$3,600 per annum in 2001. This is the lowest cost of any full year fee-paying course at the University of Adelaide.

¹² Data provided by Adelaide University Strategic Planning Unit. EFTSU here refer to the EFTSUs taught by each Faculty. In some cases subjects in an award or degree may be taught by another Faculty and would count as an EFTSU load in that Faculty.

3. Lack of quality assurance

Compared to undergraduate education and postgraduate research very little attention has been directed towards quality assurance in postgraduate coursework at both the institutional and national levels. This is despite the fact that postgraduate student organisations have expressed concerns about the pressures of commercialisation on the quality of postgraduate coursework degrees for a decade. In the early 1990's, CAPA produces a series of annual reports documenting trends in the charging of fees for postgraduate coursework degrees. CAPA reported a number of serious concerns about the quality of fee-paying postgraduate courses. Criticisms included:

- Lack of accurate information about course costs and refund policies;
- Insufficient information about key aspects of the course such as whether the course had been accredited or not, if and when course material had been updated, the availabilities of facilities, and whether assessment or grievance procedures were in place;
- The use of outdated course content and the inclusion of undergraduate subjects in postgraduate courses.¹³

Dissatisfaction expressed by postgraduate students about the inclusion of undergraduate subjects in their courses highlights the affects that commercialisation has had on the quality of postgraduate courses. It is not hard to trace the reasons for the re-packaging of undergraduate subjects in postgraduate courses. With reductions in the level of Commonwealth government support, Universities have been under extreme pressure to find sources of income. There is a clear incentive to create new niche or specialist postgraduate courses to bring in income at the lowest possible costs. The repackaging of undergraduate subjects reduces the requirement to develop new curriculum and teaching materials. It also means that postgraduate students can be taught in the same classes and tutorials as undergraduate students with savings in staff salaries.

The other factor influencing the use of undergraduate subjects within postgraduate courses is the low number of postgraduate students enrolled in some fields. At the University of Adelaide there are some postgraduate courses with fewer than five students, and subjects with only one or two postgraduate student enrolments. The only way for the University to offer courses for such low numbers is to relabel undergraduate subjects as postgraduate subjects and package them as a postgraduate course.

The result is that a considerable number of postgraduate coursework students attend the same lectures and tutorials as undergraduate students and receive the same lecture material. The only difference is that they may be required to produce longer assignments and are marked at a higher standard. The frustration for postgraduate students is that they may have already obtained this knowledge and information at an undergraduate level, or that the material is pitched at a level lower than they require. It is certainly not the advanced skills and knowledge they expected when they enrolled in the course. Not only is this a great source of dissatisfaction for the postgraduate students concerned, but it raises very real concerns about the standard of postgraduate courses offered by Australian universities. In our opinion, it is this issue: the question of the quality of curriculum and courses delivery, far more than allegations of 'soft marking', that puts at risk the reputation of Australia's higher education system.

¹³ Heagney M, Stead M and White K, *Goodbye rhyme or reason: a report on postgraduate courses for which Australian students are charged fees*, Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations, 1994, pp 6-7.

What is the extent of postgraduate student concerns about the quality of their courses? Recent research by postgraduate organisations has shed light on the extent postgraduate coursework dissatisfaction. A 1997 study of 852 postgraduate coursework students at Deakin, RMIT, Swinburne and the Clayton campus of Monash University found that 20% of respondents were not at all satisfied or only borderline satisfied with their course.¹⁴

While it is clear from this figure that the majority (80%) of postgraduate students are satisfied with their courses, the levels of dissatisfaction (one in five students) are significant and cannot be ignored. It needs to be recognised that this study also found that many of those respondents who indicated overall satisfaction with their course, were not satisfied with specific aspects of their course. In particular, it found that:

- Nearly 40% of respondents were borderline or not at all satisfied with feed-back on progress received from academic staff and 28% not at all satisfied or borderline with the availability of academic staff for consultation;
- One-third were borderline or not at all satisfied with the level of resources and services provided by their department or faculty;
- Around 23% were borderline or not at all satisfied with delivery of course material (e.g lectures) and the accuracy of advertising the course;
- Around 20% were borderline or not at all satisfied with the content of their course.¹⁵

To what extent is student dissatisfaction confined to fee-paying courses? This study including both HECS-liable and fee-paying students in its sample and found significant levels of dissatisfaction in both groups. It found that almost a quarter of fee-paying students were borderline or not at all satisfied with their course, compared to 15% who deferred their HECS. In other words, fee-paying students were less likely to be satisfied with their course than HECS-liable course.¹⁶

What has been the experience of fee-paying international postgraduate students? The case work of the Adelaide University Postgraduate Students' Association indicates the following areas of concern for international postgraduate coursework students:

- Inadequate information about courses. Students arrive from overseas to find that the provision of resources and the delivery of subjects are very different to statements contained in advertising material or in terms of what students had come to expect from their discussions with recruitment agencies.
- Inadequate access to resources and services. Along with domestic postgraduate students, international coursework students are a low priority when it comes to being able to access departmental resources and facilities.
- Problems with the availability of teaching staff and supervisors of research projects.
- Lack of adequate complaint procedures.

¹⁴ Fullarton S, Identifying the Needs of Coursework Postgraduate Students, Deakin Postgraduate Association, Monash Postgraduate Association, RMIT Postgraduate Association and Swinburne University Postgraduate Association, 1997, p. 13

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 15.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 13.

The following case study illustrates many of the issues experienced by domestic and international postgraduate coursework students.

The case involves a North American student enrolled in a Masters by coursework qualification in a Science and Technology Faculty. The student enrolled in this course and travelled to Australia because of the specialist education it claimed to provide. In order to undertake this course the student took a year off from a professional position of employment in local government. The student experienced the following problems:

1. Inaccurate promotional material - the promotional material and course information indicated that the University would provide high technology, state -of-the-art laboratories and classrooms containing modern computing equipment and international data networks, and that the department would provide all full-time postgraduate students with a chair and desk for their exclusive use.

The reality was very different. No students in the course were provided with the use of a chair and desk and no space was set aside for students in the course. Initially there was no access to computers. When computer facilities were provided the computers were old, did not function properly, and were housed in a room that was only cleaned once during the year the student was enrolled. Hardly a healthy working environment and certainly a long way from the state of the art laboratories advertised.

2. Poor course delivery. In a key subject required for the student's career, University documentation indicated that students would receive 39 contact hours. In fact only three hours of lectures were provided. Students were instructed to undertake self-directed projects and the lecturer claimed that he would be available for consultation. However, there were times when the class turned up and the Professor did not show. The student now has to undertake an equivalent course to obtain the skills they require for their career plans.
3. Inadequate supervision for the research project. The student secured for supervision and facilities from an outside agency. This was done without the assistance of the department. They receive in total only 1.5 hours supervision from the departmental supervisor, and only 1 to 2 hours supervision per month from the external industry supervisor. Neither of the supervisors provided meaningful feedback on the student's draft thesis. The student's research experience was significantly diminished by the lack of substantial interaction and intellectual exchange with the supervisors.
4. Inadequate complaint procedures. When the student lodged a complaint the University provided with the wrong complaint procedures. When the University responded to the student's complaint they acknowledged the substance of the complaint but decided not to uphold the complaint. The University has rationalised this curious response on the grounds that because the student passed the subjects in question with high grades that they had not been adversely affected by the manner in which the subject and supervision were provided.

The student has taken up the complaint with the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC). Research by the Adelaide University PGSA indicates that the University of Adelaide is a corporation in trade and commerce and is subject to the Trade Practices Act, 1974. The ACCC was sufficiently concerned about the issues raised in the complaint to hold discussions with the University. Despite the intransigence of the University, the student is not in a position to pursue a legal action against the University due to the legal costs involved.

This case raises three major points about postgraduate grievances.

1. Postgraduate students making complaints often come from, or are currently employed in, professional positions. They are usually in very good position to judge whether a service is of a high standard or not. If they are dissatisfied with a course it is due to genuine concerns that they are not receiving the standard of education as advertised by the University.
2. Many postgraduate student grievances would be prevented if the Higher Education sector and individual institutions adopted adequate policies, codes of practice and quality assurance processes for postgraduate coursework degrees.
3. It needs to be recognised that legal actions taken against Universities can be extremely expensive, and these costs effectively prevent many students from pursuing just compensation. What is required is cheap and effective complaint mechanisms that are external to Universities to enable students to receive an independent review of their complaints about the quality of their courses.

Conclusions

The implications of deregulation and fees in the postgraduate coursework sector are clear. Many suitably qualified people have been prevented from undertaking postgraduate courses that would have improved and enhanced their professional skills and abilities. In some cases, the high cost of courses have prevented people from undertaking postgraduate qualifications that are required for entry into the profession of their choice. The high cost of courses has meant that fees have had a greater negative impact on the aspirations and educational choices of women and people from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Furthermore, deregulation and the removal of HECS places has led to a general decline in postgraduate coursework enrolments. While the number of people with postgraduate management and IT qualifications have increased, there have been significant reductions in the enrolments in a number of disciplines. Australia runs the risk of shortages in advanced skills in areas as diverse as agriculture, science, engineering, performing arts, humanities and the social sciences. These areas are vitally important to the social, economic, scientific and creative development of this country.

The Adelaide University PGSA strongly recommends that additional Commonwealth revenue be directed to the postgraduate coursework sector in the form of HECS places. We note that the Prime Minister announced a loans scheme for postgraduate coursework as part of his Innovation Statement. While this would address in part some of the up-front cost disincentives created by postgraduate tuition fees, we are very concerned that in a deregulated environment Universities would be encouraged to increase the level of tuition fees and that many postgraduate students would incur significant debt as a result. The re-introduction of HECS would be a better solution as it would set a cap on the level of fee charged.

While most postgraduate students are satisfied with their courses, research indicates that a significant numbers of students are not satisfied with their courses. The higher education sector needs to give urgent attention to the question of quality assurance and standards in postgraduate coursework education – in terms of course content, teaching and supervision, the availability of resources and services, and marketing and promotion. To provide an incentive for Universities to adopt and implement appropriate codes of practice, these should be made a condition of receipt of Commonwealth funding. In addition, a higher education ombudsman's office should be established to provide an independent mechanism to investigate student complaints.