Graduate Research Advocacy in Action

An Impact Report

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UMSU: A Student Union for All

Forward by UMSU President

The University of Melbourne Student Union (UMSU) supports students and researchers at every stage of their academic journey, from undergraduate study through to graduate coursework and higher degree by research.

While UMSU's representative functions and student outreach and support is well known among the broader student community, the breadth and impact of its work for and with graduate researchers is less visible.

Together with our elected office bearers, specialist graduate researcher representatives undertaking their own candidature and the engine of the UMSU Advocacy and Legal Service which is staffed by professional and indemnified caseworkers providing individual casework advocacy for researchers, UMSU is driven by a unique combination of peer leadership and professional expertise that delivers meaningful representation and support for graduate researchers.

This report shines a light on that work, highlighting the advocacy provided to graduate researchers over the past two years and demonstrating UMSU's role in supporting research candidates to navigate complex administrative, and wellbeing challenges.

Lushy Chinganya
UMSU President 2026

Introduction

UMSU has worked diligently to advance the issues affecting the academic experience and wellbeing of graduate researchers at the University of Melbourne.

This report is the result of the collective efforts of the UMSU President Lushy Chinganya and nominated graduate researchers Xiao Jing and Radhik Rammohan.

Together, they have represented the interests of graduate researchers across key university forums, including the Academic Board, the Higher Degree by Research Committee (HDRC), Committee of Graduate Research Deans and other related bodes.

Through this engagement, UMSU has advocated for improved outcomes for graduate researchers and ensured their perspectives are heard in institutional decision-making and remains committed to being a leading voice for graduate researchers, championing their interests through robust advocacy, meaningful representation and active participation in university governance and policy-making processes.

Issues Register

Key matters raised through University Governance Forums

1. Graduate Researcher Leave Policies

Graduate researchers have limited opportunities to take leave during their candidature, which may have a detrimental effect on their mental and physical health. UMSU Representatives have advocated for clearer, more equitable leave arrangements for graduate researchers. The key issues raised and actions taken are summarized below. Below is a summary of the current issues in this area:

Leave Entitlements During Shutdown Periods

UMSU raised concerns regarding graduate researchers' entitlement to leave during university shutdown periods. In particular, graduate researchers based in university-affiliated medical research institutes often continue their research activities during shutdown periods and are required to use their annual leave to take time off during this time, unlike University staff. UMSU has advocated for graduate researchers across all faculties, department, and affiliated institutes for leave entitlements during university shutdown periods.

Key Outcomes Achieved: Following a meeting between UMSU Representatives and the Pro Vice Chancellor, Graduate Research (PVC GR), the University has now established that University Shutdown Periods apply to all graduate researchers and that time off taken during the shutdown period does not count towards their 20-day recreational leave entitlement. This change has been announced faculty-wide and also reflected in the new Recreational Leave Form, which was co-developed by UMSU Representatives and the Office of the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Graduate Research).

Future actions: UMSU Representatives will continue to monitor the implementation of these arrangements and whether graduate researchers are able to access the shutdown period as intended. UMSU will continue to raise any barriers or inconsistencies through relevant University authorities and committees to ensure graduate researchers have equitable leave conditions across different faculties, department and affiliated research institutes.

Time off In Lieu (TOIL)

UMSU representatives highlighted the absence of a university-wide policy recognizing time off in lieu (TOIL) for graduate researchers who undertake research activities on weekends and public holidays. Without clear guidance or mechanisms to record such work, some graduate researchers report difficulties accessing equivalent time off. This may contribute to excessive workloads and unfair expectations within supervisory relationships.

Future actions: UMSU Representatives will continue to advocate for the introduction of a University-wide

policy and mechanism to record work undertaken outside standard working hours, including weekends and public holidays. This would enable graduate researchers to access appropriate time off in lieu and help ensure that the workloads remain reasonable.

Recreational Leave Recording

There is a lack of a formal mechanism for recording recreational leave taken and accrued by graduate researchers. In some cases, this has resulted in situations where verbal agreements regarding leave were not honoured, leaving graduate researchers unable to access their entitled leave. Additionally, the University does not currently maintain a central record of these arrangements, meaning that graduate researchers may have limited visibility of the leave they have accrued or taken over the course of their candidature.

Key Outcomes Achieved: A new recreational leave form was co-developed by UMSU Representatives and the Office of PVC GR. This form can be used during progress review meetings, providing an opportunity for Advisory Committee Chairs to facilitate discussions between graduate researchers and supervisors regarding recreational leave and encourage appropriate leave arrangements.

Future actions: UMSU Representatives will continue to advocate for a centralized system for recording recreational leave, through which graduate researchers can apply for and track their entitled leave. Such a system would also enable the University to identify graduate researchers who have not taken leave and prompt appropriate discussions between supervisors and graduate researchers regarding leave arrangements, helping to ensure that graduate researchers are able to access their leave entitlements throughout their candidature.

Sick Leave

UMSU welcomed improvements to the University's sick and personal leave processes for graduate researchers. Previously, there was a lack of clarity surrounding requirement to provide medical certificates or other supporting documentation when applying for sick or personal leave. Following a review of these arrangements, the University removed the requirement for supporting documentation for the first 10 days of sick and personal leave. This change reduced administrative barriers for graduate researchers and provided greater clarity and flexibility in accessing leave when needed.

Future actions: UMSU will continue to advocate for clear, accessible, and equitable leave provisions for graduate researchers. This includes monitoring the implementation of the revised sick and personal leave arrangements, identifying any barriers students may experience in accessing leave, and working with the University to ensure leave policies support the wellbeing of graduate researchers while minimizing unnecessary administrative requirements.

2. Graduate Research Progress Reviews: Navigating Power and Accountability with the Supervisory Panel

UMSU raised concerns regarding the operation of graduate research progress review processes, particularly where supervisory teams may impose expectations beyond the University's formal requirements for confirmation and progression. Graduate researchers, including some within the Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology, reported being asked to achieve additional milestones, such as publications or further data collection, before receiving approval to progress, despite having met the University's stated requirements.

UMSU highlighted the inherent power imbalance that can arise within progress review processes between graduate researchers and their supervisory panels. Existing professional relationships between supervisors and advisory chairs may create real or perceived conflicts of interest potentially discouraging graduate researchers from raising concerns about their supervision or review outcomes. Drawing on both student experiences and sector research, UMSU advocated for clearer safeguards and transparent procedures to ensure graduate researchers can participate in review processes with confidence.

The HDRC acknowledged these concerns and recognised the issue as an ongoing area of attention. UMSU called for the development of clear protocols to manage conflicts of interest and strengthen trust in candidature review process. Committee members (HDRC) reaffirmed that students may escalate concerns through University channels and noted the important role of the UMSU Advocacy Service in providing independent support and representation to graduate researchers.

Future actions: UMSU Representatives will continue to advance policies that address inherent power imbalance experienced by graduate researchers and listen to graduate researchers reporting on difficult relationship dynamics with their supervisors and advisory panels.

3. Strengthening the Supervisory Agreement

Currently, the Supervisory Agreement can feel more like a compliance or tick-box exercise rather than a meaningful agreement between the graduate researcher and supervisory team. Based on experiences by PhD candidates, there are instances where the supervisory arrangement indicates that appropriate research support will be provided, but the support available may not align with the practical needs of the research project. For example, a clinician who supervises a laboratory-based PhD may not necessarily be able to provide the wet-lab expertise or day-to-day research support required by the project or they may not be as present due to clinical work.

Strategic Recommendations Proposed to PVC GR: Using existing progress review meetings to not just assess whether the agreed meetings are occurring, but whether the student is receiving adequate research guidance, technical support, and access to appropriate expertise. The agreement should outline role of each supervisor and identify who will provide support to the candidate if technical expertise lies outside of the principal supervisor. Depending on the project, this might be a co-supervisor, an experienced researcher, a technical specialist or another suitably qualified team member. We have also emphasized that role of the advisory committee chair needs to be strengthened to ensure that candidates are receiving adequate support and this should be discussed in every progress review meeting.

Future actions: UMSU Representatives will continue to liaise with the office of PVC GR to ensure that PhD candidates are receiving the support they needed from the supervisory team to succeed in their candidature.

4. Development of Academic Adjustment Plan (AAP) Framework for Viva Examinations

UMSU Representatives have been working closely with Equity and Accessibility Supports (EAS, formerly known as SEDS) to develop an academic adjustment plan framework to enable equitable participation for Graduate Researchers (GRs) with disabilities, neurodivergence, or medium to long-term physical or mental health conditions.

UMSU Representatives have called for the framework to:

a) Consider allowing longer or more frequent breaks and adjournment and rescheduling of viva where a candidate cannot reasonably continue or an option to split a viva across multiple session or days.
   - Consider flexible communication and response methods for candidates
   - Explicitly state that candidate should not be penalised for a health-related interruption, and examiners should not treat it as evidence of inadequate academic ability.

b) Better clarify application processes and the handling of personal medical information that is sensitive

Future actions: UMSU Representatives will continue to work together with EAS to further revise and refine the AAP framework to ensure equitable viva examination participation for graduate researchers with disabilities, neurodivergence, or medium to long-term physical or mental health conditions.

5. Graduate Research Travel

UMSU highlighted the importance of travel opportunities in enabling graduate researchers to develop professional skills, build academic networks, attend conferences, undertake fieldwork, and conduct research in specialized locations. While these opportunities are critical to the graduate research experience, access to research-related travel is not always equitable across graduate researchers. Students have reported differences in the availability of travel funding across faculties and departments, with some graduate researchers receiving greater institutional support while others have had to cover significant travel costs out of pocket. Students have also reported that travel and study away processes can be complex, unclear and administratively burdensome.

UMSU advocated improvements to ensure that both travel-related processes and funding opportunities are transparent, accessible, equitable, and proportionate to the needs of graduate researchers. The current scheme requires the navigation of multiple systems and processes to manage travel activities, including Study Away applications, travel insurance registration, travel risk assessments, and travel support arrangements. This can result in duplicated efforts, inconsistent experiences and limited visibility.

Key areas identified for improvement include:

- **Clarifying study away requirements,** including when graduate researchers are required to apply for study away approval and the circumstances in which approval is necessary.
- **Improving guidance and documentation** to help graduate researchers understand travel insurance requirements, application processes, and risk assessment obligations, particularly for travel to medium and high-risk destinations.
- **Establishing clearer procedures for insurance coverage extensions** when unforeseen circumstances such as flight delays require graduate researchers to remain overseas beyond their approved travel period.
- **Providing alternative approved pathways** for conference travel where graduate researchers have secured external funding but are unable to obtain approval from their principal supervisor.
- **Improving equity in access to travel funding across faculties and departments.** UMSU advocated for the University to establish a minimum "basic" travel support package for all graduate researchers, ensuring that every student has access to a baseline level of funding for essential research-related travel and professional development opportunities, regardless of their faculty or department.

Future actions: UMSU will continue to work with the University to simplify travel and study away processes, improve the clarity of guidance provided to graduate researchers, and advocate for equitable access to travel funding through a minimum University-wide baseline of support. UMSU will also advocate for fair and transparent decision-making frameworks that support participation in research-related travel and professional development opportunities.

6. Transparency in Admission and Scholarship Scoring

UMSU advocated greater transparency in graduate research admissions and scholarship processes, noting that applicants currently have limited visibility into how applications are assessed and ranked. This lack of clarity can make it difficult for prospective graduate researchers to understand the criteria used in admission and scholarship decision-making.

UMSU provided feedback on the University's scholarship scoring guidance to ensure that assessment criteria are clear, practical, and consistently applied. As part of this work, the Committee of Graduate Research Deans (CGRAD) is developing guidance on the recognition of professional experience and equivalent qualifications for PhD admissions and associated scholarship consideration.

Future actions: UMSU will continue to advocate for transparent and accessible admissions and scholarship processes, including clearer communication of assessment criteria and decision-making frameworks.

7. Graduate Researcher Feedback and Action Plans for Faculty Course Reviews

UMSU advocated for stronger graduate researcher representation during faculty course review processes. While faculties develop action plans in response to Course Review recommendations, these processes have historically occurred at the faculty level without direct input from graduate researchers while the action plans are being developed.

UMSU recommended that the Chair of the HDRC incorporate graduate researcher perspectives into the development of the faculty action plans during their design process instead of after-the-fact. UMSU emphasized that meaningful student involvement during the development of the plans is essential to ensure that Course Review outcomes reflect the lived experiences and needs of graduate researchers and lead to more effective and responsive improvements across the University.

Future actions: UMSU will continue to advocate for formal mechanisms that enable graduate researchers to contribute to Course Review implementation processes and to ensure that their perspectives remain central to continuous improvement initiatives.

8. Increase in Tutoring Opportunities

UMSU continued to advocate for increased teaching and tutoring opportunities for graduate researchers, recognising that may possess valuable subject-matter expertise and are keen to develop teaching experience as part of the academic and professional development. Graduate researchers have consistently identified teaching opportunities as an important pathway for building transferable skills, strengthening employability, and preparing for future careers in academia and beyond.

To advance this issue, UMSU graduate researcher representatives engaged with the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Graduate Research), Professor Justin Zobel, and the Graduate Research Academic Advisory (GRAA) team to discuss barriers to participation and opportunities for reform. These discussions focussed on improving both the availability and accessibility of tutoring positions for graduate researchers across the University. By raising this issue, UMSU sought to strengthen professional development of teaching experiences within the graduate research pathway.

Future actions: UMSU will continue to work with decisionmakers within faculties and members of governance committees to expand teaching and tutoring opportunities, improve transparency in recruitment processes, and ensure that graduate researchers can access meaningful teaching experiences that support their career development.

9. The Graduate Research Experience and the Ethical use of AI

UMSU raised concerns about the lack of clear and comprehensive guidance on the use of AI in graduate research. As generative AI technologies become increasingly integrated into research workflows, existing University policies may not fully address the practical, ethical and disciplinary considerations faced by graduate researchers.

UMSU representatives highlighted the need to identify and address potential gaps in current guidance, including expectations around the responsible use of AI in research activities, requirements for transparency and attribution, and considerations relating to data management, confidentiality, and intellectual property.

UMSU emphasised the importance of developing clear and discipline-sensitive guidance that enables graduate researchers to engage confidently with emerging technologies while maintaining integrity and the quality of their research.

Future actions: UMSU will continue to engage with the University on the development of AI-related policies and guidance, advocating for clear expectations, appropriate safeguards and educational resources that support graduate researchers in navigating the evolving use of AI in research.

10. Graduate Research Workspace Constraints

UMSU raised concerns about the availability and allocation of workspace for graduate researchers across multiple faculties. Graduate researchers have identified stable access to appropriate workspaces as essential for maintaining productivity, fostering academic engagement, and supporting a positive research experience.

The University acknowledged these concerns and committed to improving its approach to workspace allocation. The University also undertook to strengthen consultation with graduate research representatives before implementing future changes to workspace arrangements, helping to ensure that the needs and perspectives of graduate researchers are considered in decision-making processes.

Future actions: UMSU will continue to monitor workspace availability across faculties and advocate for equitable access to dedicated research spaces, so researchers have access to suitable facilities that support their academic success and wellbeing.

11. Recognition of HASS and STEMM in the Best Thesis Award for Indigenous Students

UMSU advocated for the expansion of the University's Indigenous Best Thesis Award to better recognise excellence across the diverse range of graduate research disciplines. At present, the University offers a single Best Thesis Award category for Indigenous graduate researchers which can tend to recognise STEMM researchers over HASS researchers.

To address this, UMSU recommended the creation of separate award categories for STEMM and HASS fields, ensuring that these are accessed within appropriate disciplinary contexts and that outstanding research achievement is recognised more equitably across the graduate research community.

The HDRC considered the proposal and referred the matter for further deliberation by the HDRC chair and the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Graduate Research).

Future actions: UMSU will continue to advocate for an awards framework that appropriately reflects the diversity of graduate research disciplines and promotes equitable recognition of Indigenous graduate researchers' achievement.

12. Strategic Engagement with Graduate Research Leadership

Quarterly Meeting with Pro Vice Chancellor Graduate Research

UMSU strengthened its engagement with University leadership through the establishment of regular quarterly meetings with the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Graduate Research) and Associate Deans responsible for graduate research. These meetings provide an important forum for raising issues affecting graduate researchers, discussing emerging concerns, and developing recommendations to enhance the graduate research experience.

CGRAD Representative Pre-Meeting

UMSU has maintained regular engagement with the Associate Director, Graduate Research, Amanda Davis, prior to meetings of CGRAD. These discussions enable UMSU representatives to seek clarification on University decision, identify emerging issues, and ensure that matters affecting graduate researchers are raised through relevant governance channels.

Policy Consultation Network

The UMSU Advocacy Service has continued to engage with the University's policy consultation network and provide advocacy and feedback on the graduate research experience based on individual casework trends.

In 2025 and 2026, the UMSU Advocacy Service provided substantial feedback on the following policies:

- Managing Potential Breaches of the Australian Code for Responsible Conduct of Research Procedure - April 2026
- VC Protest Rules - April 2026
- Proposed Surveillance Policy - April 2026
- Proposed Changes to the Student Appeals Policy - February 2026
- Proposed Changes to the Student Conduct Policy - February 2026
- Proposed Changes to the Appropriate Workplace Behaviour Policy - February 2026
- Sexual Misconduct and Gender-based Violence Prevention and Response Policy - December 2025
- Proposed Changes to the Research Integrity and Misconduct Policy - December 2025
- Provision and Acceptable Use of IT Policy - October 2025
- Proposed Changes to the Privacy Management Policy - July 2025

Future actions: UMSU will continue to utilise these forums to continually advocate for meaningful improvements to student and researcher experiences and ensure those perspectives are represented in University decision-making.

13. Graduate Research Cohort Dialogue and Information Gathering

UMSU Graduate Working Group and the ISS feedback loop

UMSU is committed to strengthening engagement with the graduate research community. To that point, in 2026, UMSU established the Graduate Working Group, a forum that brings graduate researchers and graduate coursework students together to share lived experiences, identify academic and systemic challenges for graduate researchers, and discuss improving the graduate research experience at the University.

Meeting periodically throughout the year, the Working Group has provided a valuable mechanism for gathering feedback from a diverse cohort of graduate coursework student and graduate researchers, informing UMSU of its advocacy priorities.

Additionally, UMSU has refined the International Student Survey (ISS) to capture feedback from international graduate researchers, so UMSU representatives are better placed to understand the concerns activating the international researcher cohort.

Future actions: UMSU will continue to expand participation in the Graduate Working Group and use the insights gathered to inform advocacy, representation and policy development on matters affecting graduate researchers.