

FMHS PGSA Te Ara Paerangi – Future Pathways Submission

Who Are We?

The Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences – Postgraduate Students’ Association (FMHS-PGSA) is based at the University of Auckland (UOA). The signatories of this document are the board members of the FMHS-PGSA. This work stems from our [open petition](#) which garnered over 700 signatures – representative not only of our wider research community, but many constituent members of our organisation. We are providing feedback only for Section 5: the Research Workforce.

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Section 5: Research workforce

In this section, we want information to help us understand how workforce considerations affect Research Priorities and how base grant funding would affect the research workforce, as well as information to help us design funding focused on workforce outcomes.

(See pages 66-68 of the Green Paper for context on these questions)

25. Workforce and research Priorities: How should we include workforce considerations in the design of national research Priorities?

(See pages 69-70 of the Green Paper for additional information related to this question)

We present the argument that PhD students should become officially paid employees and in turn, formalised members of the research workforce. Their funding stream should therefore be linked to national research priorities. We present several misconceptions about the current PhD student situation, along with their corresponding rebuttals and reasons on why PhD students should become officially paid employees.

Misconception #1: Postgraduate student researchers are volunteers. “The research work students do would not be the sort of work that would ordinarily be done by an employed researcher”. This misconception was sent to us by the MBIE team as justification on why PhD students should be paid below minimum wage – see this [link](#).

Rebuttal #1: The work of PhD students in medical research are typically expected to be published in peer-reviewed academic journals. To suggest that this work is not expected to be on par with professional research is disingenuous. For example, the authors of this response are all in the process or have published in academic journals. Irrespective of whether a peer-reviewed journal article was written by a staff researcher or a student, both are treated to the same level of scrutiny and both are included in the QS world university rankings for research outputs.

Furthermore, in the Labour Inspectorate, [drafted by the MBIE](#), they state five indicators that a worker should not be classified as a volunteer, but instead is potentially an employee:

- a. The worker is being paid for their work – including rewards such as free accommodation or food
- b. The worker expected to be rewarded for their work

- c. There is an economic gain made to the business from the work performed by the worker
- d. The work is integral to a business and it is work an employee would normally perform
- e. The workers' hours of work are controlled.

Our corresponding (a-e) points relate to the rules and regulations of the University of Auckland Doctoral Scholarships (<https://cdn.auckland.ac.nz/assets/Scholarships/regulations/university-of-auckland-doctoral-scholarship.pdf>):

- a. The description of the UOA Doctoral Scholarship is: "The intention of the Scholarship is to encourage and support academically excellent domestic and international students ... to undertake doctoral study at the University of Auckland." That is to say, the University is financially incentivising a PhD student to study at the University of Auckland. Much like how a business might financially incentivise a worker to do work at their business.
- b. PhD students risk having their scholarship payments terminated if their work is unsatisfactory – see Point 14: A Scholarship may be terminated by the University of Auckland Council should it receive a report from the Board of Graduate Studies that a candidate's academic progress is unsatisfactory. The PhD student can expect a lack of financial compensation for a lack of work – conversely, the PhD student can therefore expect to be rewarded financially for producing work.
- c. The work performed by PhD students (e.g. performing research duties, experiments, producing research outputs) directly allows Principal Investigators to use these research outputs of evidence of work in order to apply for more funding. Successful applications for funding directly produce an economic gain to the University.
- d. Producing research outputs (e.g. journal articles), performing experiments, and writing up these works are all integral functions of a research-intensive institution such as a University.
- e. PhD students are restricted to undertake a maximum of 500 total hours of work per scholarship year (see Point 12 in the linked document). So, yes, PhD students' hours of work are controlled.

Misconception #2: Postgraduate student researchers are inexperienced. They are solely getting an education. We have heard pushback from our petition for a minimum wage stipend that because of the educational benefits of a PhD, the University is not required to pay a minimum wage; but rather, the training wage.

Rebuttal #2: In order to enrol in a PhD, you need to have completed either an Honours degree or a Masters degree. To say that a Masters degree graduate is then worth below the minimum wage severely denigrates the entire research profession. Furthermore, the suggestion that the educational benefits of a PhD justifies paying below minimum wage is absurd. Does this mean no on-the-job learning is expected in any other research role?

The PhD student is a vital necessity to New Zealand research, working on critical global problems and constantly engineering new fields in research. For example, the authors of this submission are undertaking crucial research to identify new therapeutics for depression and cerebral palsy. Projects undertaken by PhD students particularly in the FMHS require advanced, specialised techniques that can only be learnt through hands-on experience gained during a masters or honours degree. Many of these people are crucial to their respective labs in the day to day running of the labs, along with assisting in grant applications and completion of grant goals. These people possess specific skill sets that are likely only found within their lab groups and, as such, have skill sets that are invaluable to the University. It would be in the best interest of the University to pay PhD candidates a living wage at a minimum so as to procure these unique skill sets for their use in furthering the research the University represents.

Misconception #3: The PhD scholarship is similar to the minimum wage when tuition fees are included.

Rebuttal #3: Firstly, taken at face value, this is not true. Even including tuition fees for 2022 at the University of Auckland (NZD 7,454.40) + stipend (NZD 28,800), this yields a total annual monetary value of NZD 36,254.40. Minimum wage as of 1st April 2022 is \$21.20 per hour (* 40 hours * 52 weeks) yielding a value of NZD 44,096. Even if you take away tax, this would yield a take-home pay of NZD 37,253.79. Besides, it is the stipend that a PhD student can use to purchase rent. The free fees tuition waiver does not financially enable the PhD student.

Furthermore, we argue that the term 'tuition' is misleading as the vast majority of training is placed on the shoulders of supervisors, research fellows, technicians and other PhD students. The main incentives for supervising PhD students is for professional development and, as discussed above, labour. Other than the supervisor, there is no obligation by any other party to provide such training and instead is done out of the good will or from utter necessity to reach grant deadlines or fill labour shortages in an underfunded industry. This relationship has long been taken advantage of by the university as no party other than the university benefits from this tuition fee, it is simply an overhead for students to be in research group which already pays overheads. If tuition fees are being used to fill grants to assist with PhD student research, we argue that only a minority of supervisors have access to the RDA grants and this is not specifically for supporting the student. Furthermore, the PReSS account (a financial account a PhD student has access) of \$2,900 per annum is only a fraction of the \$7,454.40 tuition fees, however irrespective of whether this money is used by the student; which industry expects the worker to pay out of pocket for materials used at work? Overall, the PhD student experience is being paid by the supervisor/ research group who already pay the university overheads, the university is simply cashing in on the existence of the PhD student.

Misconception #4: We can promote equity and diversity in the research workforce whilst paying PhD students below the minimum wage.

Rebuttal #4: The principal author of this feedback has been involved in teaching every single PGDipBiomedSc/PGDip Physiology/Masters of Biomedical Science student since 2017 via a compulsory course. With roughly 30 students each year, across 5 years, only two students (of the ~150) were of Māori ethnicity. Both did not continue with the research profession. In this author's teaching experience in the wider medical science field, students of Māori descent do not view research as a viable pathway as they cannot survive on a PhD stipend which barely pays them enough to support themselves, let alone their family members – whom are usually dependent on the would-be students' support. As a Faculty-based Postgraduate Students' Association, we interact widely with numerous postgraduate students involved in medical research and we struggle immensely to engage with and sustain our tangata whenua. All advertisements directed at Māori undergraduate students encourages them to pursue a clinical career (via the MAPAS programme). Any suggestion that we must increase the representation of Māori research workforce cannot begin without raising the PhD stipend as that is a current huge bottleneck which disincentivises the entry into the research profession. As the Green Paper has rightly said, Māori researchers are often expected to work a double-shift as a researcher and a "cultural expert". To alleviate the workloads of these double-shifted Māori academics, we must increase the number of Māori PhD students particularly in areas of national research priority. The lack of a sustainable PhD stipend acts directly against promoting diversity and equity, acting instead to further broaden the ever-widening equity gap in the research workforce in New Zealand. The MBIE boasts its policies shall be made with te Tiriti guidance, however we fail to see how any te Tiriti principles are upheld with the policy changes.

Conclusion: PhD students are already required to be highly trained – notably with a requirement of a Masters degree or an Honours degree. Yet, they are paid as if they are not highly trained. This has

meant that PhD students have simply been used as “cheap labour”. In fact, supervisors have been known to encourage PhD students to prolong their studies or even actively obstruct their completion due to the low cost they can pay a PhD student (<\$30,000pa) compared to an employed research fellow (>\$80,000pa) or, if funded by an overhauled grant, (>\$200,000pa). Given the lack of coverage of employment law over PhD students, this has allowed numerous cases of abuse of PhD students that are regularly ‘swept under the rug’ with little to no consequences to the perpetrators. By tying PhD student employment to research priorities, it sends a clear, easier signal of entry into the research workforce to both undergraduate students and target equity groups of a prescribed career trajectory.

26. Base grant and workforce: What impact would a base grant have on the research workforce?

(See pages 70-71 of the Green Paper for additional information related to this question)

The base grant idea would be good to stabilise long-term funding and improve career stability. We also strongly concur with the problem of academic precarity (in reference to the recent work by NZUSA and NZAS) as a definitive deterrent for many people thinking of continuing their research careers in New Zealand – thereby encouraging many postgraduates overseas after completion of their PhD. However, we must strongly reiterate that these base grants appear to give institutions more power to underpay their PhD students and coerce them into below minimum wage situations. Perhaps if the “base grant” was tied to the condition that PhD students directly tied to national research priorities were considered employees, this could be more effective in promoting the research career. In our recent interactions with numerous staff on the matter of PhD stipends, they have refused to accept the stipend was below the minimum wage and been dismissive in the plight of PhD students. For example:

“As indicated earlier I do not accept the argument with regard to either minimum wage...”

- Despite the fact that the cash on hand is \$8750pa lower for the UOA PhD Stipend (2022) than the 2022 minimum wage.

“The allowable 500 hours/year additional work (without paying secondary tax) is a reasonable way to cover other costs and certainly is an earning opportunity that would not be so attractive to a minimum wage workers who would be paying secondary tax on that 500 hours.”

- Despite the fact that this would mean PhD students are expected to work 50 hours per week to make ends meet; and that any excessive tax is paid back to the taxpayer’s bank account at the end of the tax year. This shows a complete lack of empathy or understanding from senior University staff.

“As holder of a UoA guaranteed doctoral scholarship the student has a degree of freedom to choose what they do and don't do when following their research ideas that a minimum wage worker could only dream of (or even a PhD student who is tied to a grant funded stipend and has to work toward the goals and aims of that grant). That freedom has a tangible value.”

- We asked for the dollar value this person would associate with this “freedom”. They have yet to justify this amount.

“The student has access to a work environment, equipment, expertise, mentoring, international travel (pre-2020), a securely funded 3 years and other intangible “perks” that the typical minimum wage worker (who has nowhere near the same earning security) could only dream of. The skills and knowledge being acquired, and the close mentorship and guidance from supervisors also has a tangible value.”

- Despite the fact that students are often abused and depression rates amongst postgraduate students are higher than in the general public. No thought is given to the occupational hazard of poorer mental health outcomes when it comes to postgraduate student researchers.

“The period on the near minimum wage (slightly above in my opinion - see 1) is very temporary. Within 3-3 1/2 years of starting their research training, post-doc starting salary at UoA is 1.6 times the median NZ salary - there are not too many other fields where there is such a significant jump like that.”

- If PhD students were **guaranteed** to get a job after their graduation, we would not be arguing as tenaciously about this – but PhD students are not given any sense of job security post-graduation.
- “In fact, only 65% of the doctoral cohort will find employment 4 years after they last studied. This was a lower rate of employment in New Zealand than domestic bachelors and masters graduates from the same leaving year.”
<https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/80898/do-people-with-doctoral-degrees-get-jobs-in-nz-post-study>
- Furthermore, if future high wages are a justification for paying a below-minimum wage, then we would like to query what the point of a minimum wage is in any position.

Many of our interactions with regards to the minimum wage PhD stipend are outlined in this document:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1iXhFGHbYcdRajbC6oEaTKk9lfkae7IEUNo3AO92hV84/edit#>

We note that time and time again, many people dismiss the issues that are tangibly affecting postgraduate students’ welfare.

27. Better designed funding mechanisms: How do we design new funding mechanisms that strongly focus on workforce outcomes?

(See page 72 of the Green Paper for additional information related to this question)

We advocate for PhD students to be regarded as employees when working on national research priorities. This would bring their wage up to a liveable and legal standard. By doing this, this would attract people to a sustainable profession which would allow people who otherwise would not have the means to enter this research profession and promote diversity in the future workforce. Funding mechanisms should come with stipulations that PhD student researchers must be employed and base grants should stipulate that any PhD student researcher should be employed at such institutions.

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