



BEYOND INTERNSHIPS

**RETHINKING DOCTORAL CAREERS BEYOND ACADEMIA
THROUGH AN AUSTRALIAN CASE STUDY**

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Australia's PhD landscape – UWA context

10k

AU PhD completions in 2024
(estimated)

3.1%

UWA PhD completions in 2024



~3% of Australia's PhD completions

~6% of Group of Eight's (Go8) PhD output

~40% of Western Australia's PhD completions

PhD internship and industry engagement - Australia

1595

Internships (2024)

85%

Method of sourcing internships:
Industry partner and supervisor
collabs

83%

Graduate full time employment
outcomes

Strong industry engagement and outcomes, but capability gaps persist

What employers say about doctoral graduates:

Highly valued

Deep analytical capability, research
rigour, intellectual independence

Gaps identified

Commercial awareness
stakeholder communication
project adaptability
speed-to-contribution

Emerging concern

Narrow training pipeline not keeping
pace with non-academic demand for
doctoral skills

Sources: ACGR Industry Engagement Survey Report
Department of Education, Graduate Outcome Survey

The Australian policy landscape

Pre-2020

- **Research Training Program (RTP)**

Funding awarded for completed masters and PhDs
Internship activity weighted in institutional funding allocations (introduced in 2022)

2021–22

- **National Industry PhD Program (NIPP)**

Federal initiative providing stipend top-ups to incentivise industry-linked doctoral study

2023–24

- **Universities Accord**

Emphasis on R&D, next gen-graduate employability, engagement, and research translation at scale

2024+

- **Institutional responses**

Steady growth and investment in internship infrastructure

Internships became the focus for external engagement

What internships do well

Non-academic exposure

Structured experience in industry, government and applied research environments

Industry Engagement

Direct connection with research end-users and real-world problem contexts

Transferable skills

Communication, project management, professional networks beyond academia

Employability

Enhanced graduate outcomes and career readiness for non-academic roles

The UWA case



PROGRAMME DESIGN PRE 2024

- Ad hoc, fragmented processes
 - Limited coordination and visibility
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REFORM (2024 - 2026)

- Living allowance for doctoral interns
 - Institution-wide internship dashboard
 - Streamlined agreements, SOPs, policy and central resource hub
 - Structured candidate support (application to completion)
 - Institution-wide engagement
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WHAT IT REVEALED

Even a well-designed internship programme exposes its own limits:

who participates, what gets counted, and what is left out

What gets privileged?

Made visible by the internship model

- Placement-based engagement
- External work visibility
- Industry-facing outputs
- Easily measurable activities
- STEM and business-aligned disciplines

Potentially overlooked

- Entrepreneurial activity
- Community and civic engagement
- Policy engagement and advocacy
- Portfolio and independent careers
- Research translation outside formal placements
- Creative and interdisciplinary pathways

What counts as career preparation?

Equity and access

Not all candidates can equally participate:

Caring responsibilities

Geographic limitations

Visa and work rights restrictions

Funding realities

Discipline misalignment

Supervisor support variability

If internships become the default marker of employability readiness, inequities may deepen

Emerging tensions

01

Flexibility vs Scalability

Scaling requires standardisation, reshaping the doctoral experience

02

Diversity of engagement modes vs Standardised pathways

Candidates outside dominant pathways are left to self-navigate

03

Breadth of engagement vs Measurable activity

What is measured increasingly defines what is valued

These tensions emerge because institutions naturally gravitate towards activities that are visible, scalable and measurable

In closing

Internships matter.

But strong engagement alone is not enough.

Career diversity requires pathway diversity

Over reliance on a single mechanism risks narrowing how doctoral career development is imagined, supported and measured.

For reflection and discussion

What forms of doctoral engagement may be overlooked when internships become the default model?

How can universities support broader doctoral career ecosystems without reducing engagement to a single measurable pathway?

How are your institutions navigating these same pressures?

Is industry engagement the right organising frame for research training or is that assumption worth examining together?

Key References

Australian Council of Graduate Research. (2025) [Industry Engagement Survey Report 2025](#)

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THANK YOU

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