

HDR Belonging: Practices & Perceptions during COVID-19

Report 2 – August 2020



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Glossary

CASP	Candidate action and support plan, RMIT
CoP	Communities of Practice
COVID-CASP	CASP that addresses changes to candidature, research methods and timeline impacted by COVID-19
DSC	College of Design and Social Context, RMIT
ECP	Enabling Capability Platform, RMIT
HDR	Higher Degree Research
LGBTIQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex and Queer
LoA	Leave of Absence
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation (i.e. non-profit and citizen based)
SGR	School of Graduate Research, RMIT
SEH	College of Engineering, Science and Health
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
WFH	Working From Home

Executive Summary

Learning from Higher Degree Research (HDR) candidates' experiences

The interdisciplinary research team was commissioned by the School of Graduate Research (SGR) to undertake qualitative, ethnographic research to explore HDR candidates' experiences of belonging and connection. Ethnographic methods focus on understanding lived experience through the dynamics of everyday practices and rituals. Moreover, by focusing on narrative as a way we make sense of the world, ethnography helps us to gain insights about people's motivations and meanings.

We shifted the project's aims in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to focus on candidates' experiences of belonging and wellbeing in the context of undertaking a research degree during the pandemic. We shared an earlier brief report, *In a time of uncertainty: Supporting belonging and wellbeing for HDR students*, in May (2020) that provided an overview of key literature and recommendations for RMIT that can help HDR candidates to maintain progress.

From June to August 2020, we interviewed 26 HDR candidates from each of the three RMIT Colleges.

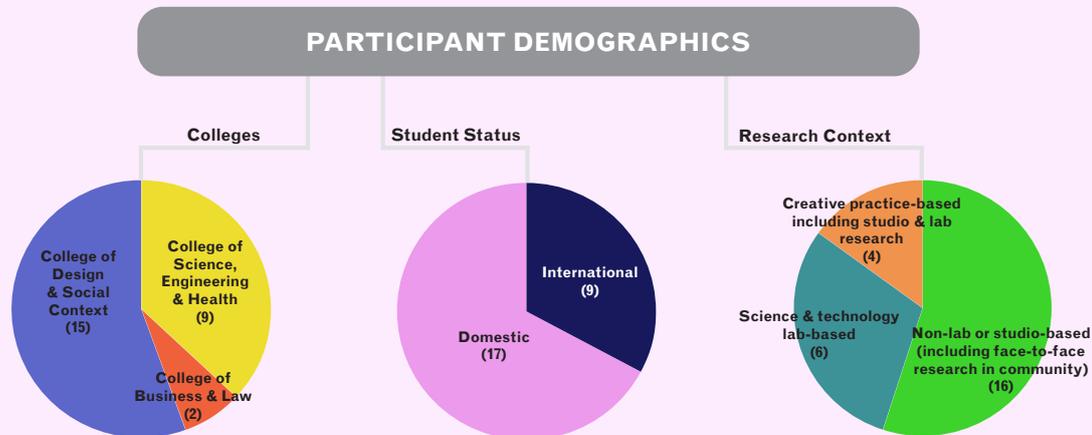
The interviews asked candidates to share their experiences of studying during COVID-19. In particular, candidates discussed the digital resources and

practices that have influenced their life as HDRs, described their sense of belonging or connection in the context of their research degree and what might help them to feel more connected (including suggestions specific to COVID-19-related challenges).

Recruitment methods included calls for participation via the SGR newsletter and Twitter account, targeted group emails to HDR candidates within different Schools (through HDR co-ordinators) as well as research centres, labs and ECPs. Candidates from DSC were especially keen to participate (we had a waiting list of over 20 candidates), however we struggled to increase the number of candidates from SEH and contacted project and program leaders from SEH directly to email smaller groups of HDR candidates.

Some candidates (across Schools and Colleges) were concerned about the confidentiality of their interviews. In response, the research team has carefully provided information about candidates' experiences as well as offered composite accounts of the interviews to further obscure their identities.

Participant distribution, including domestic/international status and research methods, is as follows:



Living in a pandemic

During this time of rapid change, people have been encouraged to “pivot”, be “agile” and “resilient”. As we live through the second lockdown and Stage 4 restrictions in greater Melbourne, different experiences of wellbeing, connection and belonging suggest the need for complex management strategies that recalibrate expectations for emerging, dynamic futures. Many candidates have found they need to substantially modify their research themes and methods while simultaneously experiencing a sense of loss, grief and confusion. And yet, they have also found ways to be resilient and adaptive to emerging and uncertain work futures.

This report captures some of the high level themes, practices and perceptions of HDR candidates in

order to address some of the lived experiences across different disciplines and HDR journeys.

In this report we first provide an outline of our ethnographic methods followed by thematic summaries around key findings gleaned from the interviews: *Belonging and Communities of Practice*; *WFH (Working From Home)*; *Uncertain Futures: Changing Work Futures*; *International Candidates' Experience*; *RMIT Systems and Services, Ethics of Care*. The concluding section summarises key issues raised in the report and how we might *move forward in uncertain times*. While there is some overlap between the themes, and candidates themselves articulated this interdependence, we have distinguished between them here to clearly identify key issues and subsequent recommendations.

Ethnographic Methods

The qualitative, ethnographic methods used in this study were chosen as best practice for developing rich understandings of the challenges facing RMIT HDR candidates at this particularly difficult time during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ethnographic methods focus on everyday experiences, culturally-embedded practices, and especially the interconnected nature of individual lives and the ecologies and environments in which they exist.¹ Ethnography allows affective and complex descriptions by participants to provide evocative narratives rather than statistical 'big data'. We used ethnographic methods to gain a deeper understanding of the diverse COVID-19-impacted experiences of HDR candidates and how they managed their changed circumstances. The flexibility of one-on-one semi-structured interviews allowed the research team to engage compassionately with candidates to establish a dialogic supportive relationship for exploring these sometimes-difficult issues. While all interviews were conducted online due to isolation and physical distancing requirements,

as they occurred in situ (their place of residence) respondents shared a great detail about their living situations and everyday lives. Throughout the report we have included 'summary personas' or vignettes that reflect the spectrum of participants' stories. These narratives have been carefully constructed to ensure participant anonymity.

Members of the research team interviewed 26 participants in total for 30 to 60 minutes. We recruited through internal RMIT channels, as well as HDR-related social media accounts. Anonymity was assured and pseudonyms used. Interviews were professionally transcribed and checked by participants for accuracy. The interviews explored aspects of the candidates' changed circumstances in relation to COVID-19 and to their engagement with RMIT. Most respondents described both positive and challenging experiences, which were often highly dependent upon their role/s at RMIT (some are both staff and student), as well as their level of continued engagement with peers, supervisors and the RMIT SGR during the pandemic.



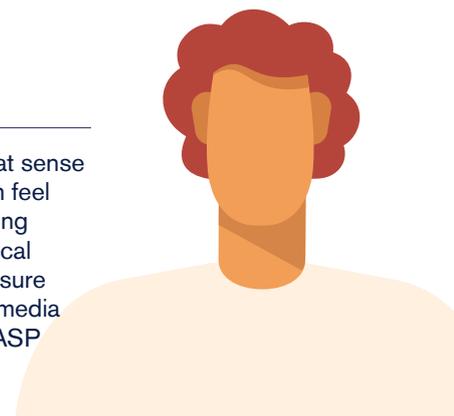
Arushi

Arushi is a part-time candidate whose research is completely lab-based, so she could not advance her work much during the lockdown. She was advised to hone her software skills and simulation work, both of which were accessible remotely. She successfully completed her second milestone during lockdown. She has found the lockdown time valuable for other reasons not related to her study, and has weathered it fairly well with the help of her supervisors and RMIT processes, but wishes there was more clarity about the COVID-19 CASP extension system.

"On a positive note, I mean this has been not so stressful because as research students we don't get too many holidays besides the Christmas break, so that was a relief at the beginning...I think mentally I was sounder than before because I was being more creative and spending time on my hobbies like yoga and meditation. All that was like a privilege for me, as I couldn't do it earlier. Yeah, so definitely that was a good break for me, besides research...I just hope that things change because the labs are open but nothing is working. So it's as good as being shut."

Cameron

Cameron reflects on how being co-located in a research centre has given him a great sense of belonging and collegiality. In particular, he mentions how his supervisor makes him feel an essential part of the research team and how this lack of hierarchy gives him a strong sense of motivation and purpose. He noted that the mental health services and medical centre provided by the university have been great and that SGR has done well to ensure candidates know about these services. He referred to the "echo chamber" of social media and how it has amplified the good and bad. Cameron had no issues with COVID-CASP forms as his supervisor and HDR coordinator gave clear instructions.

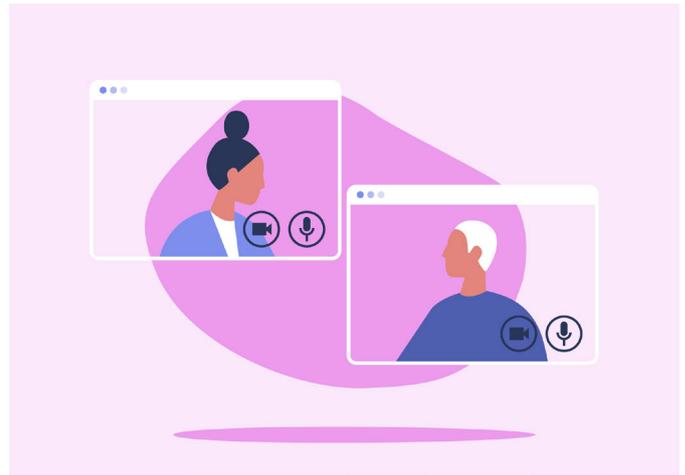


Belonging and Communities of Practice: Digital Amplification

Belonging and communities of practice (CoP) are complex and contested terms. With many RMIT students being mature-aged, the role of lived experience becomes central in defining these concepts. CoP as a concept is defined by anthropologist Jean Lave and educationalist Etienne Wenger to denote people who come together to learn by sharing a field of expertise, passion or concern.² These communities can be formal or informal and can often be invisible—or, in other words, with no clear boundaries (such as family and the home) but they nevertheless contribute significantly to a sense of belonging and wellbeing.

Feelings of belonging for HDR candidates was largely correlated to place-based interactions: research centres, HDR groups, supervisors, researcher clusters, and the more informal encounters in hallways, corridors, and cafes. Many students felt disconnected—and their wellbeing was affected by—their lack of face to face encounters that help build relationships and communities of practice while on campus. A few candidates noted they felt a sense of belonging because they have been able to spend time with family, notably international candidates who live with family members. Or in the case of several mature-aged candidates, their sense of belonging occurred through already well-established communities outside of the university. As one mature age student noted, her networks were strong and her research nearly completed before the lockdown, so she has experienced this differently than others who are younger or just beginning the PhD journey.

To a lesser extent, HDR candidates felt a sense of



belonging through digital platforms such as Zoom, Teams, and peer-initiated groups via WhatsApp, which tethered people together in formal (reading groups, meetings with cohort/supervisors) and informal ways (coffee chats, online games) and offered a way to maintain their networks, share concerns and exchange information. For those who had existing personal and supportive relationships with supervisors and colleagues, moving to digital modes of connection did not generally compromise these relationships. Candidates often said they preferred (or would prefer) more frequent meetings with micro-milestones to keep focused and alleviate stress. A significant number of students who were not involved in more informal or student-run online groups explicitly identified this as something that would help them feel more supported and connected, suggesting that it would be beneficial if such groups could be more consistently supported and amde accessible to all candidates across the disciplines and Schools.



For others, digital networking did not help alleviate a sense of isolation. As Jessie lamented, “I miss studio life, I miss chats with fellow students”. This feeling was especially notable for candidates who had recently commenced their degree, where networks of ‘strong ties’ had yet to be fully formed. As Jessie and many other students identified, belonging is often directly associated with physical co-location, such as at centres, groups and labs, and many candidates struggled to maintain that sense of inclusion during the pandemic.

Lab and practice-based candidates who relied on their workplaces for peer exchange seemed particularly impacted, both in terms of their sense of belonging to communities of practice, and because their practical research had been significantly hampered or even halted, or due to being unable to access the infrastructure required to do their work.



“nobody is seeing each other working and having actual conversations that you do in a physical environment.”

Several spoke of a sense of loss as their labs or studios were places to meet, debate with their peers and get ongoing incremental feedback from each other and their supervisors. Cameron described how when he was in the lab, he was treated as an emerging researcher. Kane echoed comments of several lab-based candidates in saying “nobody is seeing each other working and having actual conversations that you do in a physical environment”.

Kane’s comment highlights how important communities of practice are to HDR candidates, giving them a sense of belonging and connection, not only in terms of their HDR research (i.e. providing feedback and critical reflection) but also a sense of purpose career-wise. Without the physical water-cooler moments, that sense of belonging was more difficult to achieve in the digital context. Importantly, for some candidates the relation between place and community was also complexly tied to the establishment of a conducive work environment; that is, the absence of a supportive physical collaborative “place” to work impacted negatively on their progress. It is clear that a strong community of practice enhances both personal wellbeing and work-related efficacy, by providing an environment of connection and belonging that in turn scaffolds research progress. The communities of practice identified in this study are outlined in the diagram below:

Communities of Practice (CoP)

Informal communities:

Candidates had their own informal networks both within RMIT (with fellow HDR peers) and with those outside RMIT. Most often, belonging had to do with the communities that supported them both before and during COVID-19.

Formal communities:

Candidates maintained formal communities of practice at RMIT that they had previously established with their supervisors, through their research clusters or labs, or their hot desk environments. Supervisors often played a key role in helping sustain connection with university groups, centres and lab CoPs.

Social media and digital platforms:

Student-created groups for mutual support on platforms like Facebook or WhatsApp helped candidates to feel connected. These were often discipline-based (e.g. a research centre group) or location-based (e.g. all candidates from a School who study in the same building, studio or lab).

Familial: International and domestic candidates mentioned the importance of living with family members for their sense of belonging. This more “invisible” community of practice relates to the things people do in everyday as a way of “being a family”.

Vocational: Outside of RMIT, candidates maintained communities of practice related to their vocations, hobbies or passions such as music, gardening, activism, cooking, artistic practice and the like, but have had limited access to these communities during the pandemic.

Digital Amplification — Connection but not belonging

In a time of COVID-19, the role of digital networks of communication was amplified. The extent to which postgraduates experienced a sense of belonging to HDR peer groups and the RMIT community varied widely, as it was often dependent on existing networks and communities of practice (pre-COVID-19), already established relationships with other candidates and their supervisors, and familiarity with online modes and platforms of communication. For many, we observed that while digital connection with the university was effectively maintained through Teams meetings, RMIT emails, webinars and supervisory contact, this rarely resulted in a sense of belonging and inclusion with RMIT.

Candidates who frequently participated in more informal student-initiated groups spoke very positively about the experience and the way it increased their sense of belonging. Olivia, for example, said that her relationships with her peers had improved during COVID-19, as they all recognised the importance of supporting and listening to each other during this difficult time. Together, her online peer group problem-solved and helped each other with administrative milestones (such as the COVID-19-CASP form), which she said contributed greatly to her “feeling happy” about her progress despite the challenges.

Other candidates relied on extra-curricular online groups, both with co-students and non-university friends, such as Andrew, who met with his peers every week on Zoom to discuss their research, but also just to chat and play Uno and an online strategy game. For some participants, it was clear that their existing familiarity and habitual use of online groups across both study and leisure contexts, and their already established reliance on online networks to provide a sense of digital intimacy, belonging and connection, substantially lessened feelings of loss and loneliness, and made the transition to working from home much easier.

WFH (working from home)

Finding a work/life balance has been even more stressful working from home (WFH). Issues relating to internet access, having a dedicated space to study, carer responsibility, home-schooling, increased noise (whether due to children or housemates), and in some instances, living with fellow HDR candidates, made it difficult to focus on research. Those undertaking research that required specific equipment or resources were uncertain, frustrated and worried about when they could return to their research site. One candidate reflected, “everyone’s all out of routine, really badly”, while another insightfully observed that “everybody’s sort of realising the time is acting funny”.

Peter echoed what many have experienced: “I think probably the hardest thing has been trying to find a routine of some sort, just because it gets constantly disrupted”. Sharon reflected on what happens without a community of practice and a routine, indicating at the beginning she was “productive in a kind of manic way” but over time began to feel “totally unproductive”.

Candidates adopted workarounds like using headphones and rotating schedules, and sometimes simulated pre-COVID-19 practices such as Andrew’s strategy: “I take myself for a little walk before I start work for the day to give myself the impression of having a commute. And I found

“At first I was productive in a kind of manic way, but now I feel totally unproductive.”

that that actually works a lot better, but having that academic environment is something that I really miss”. Overall, for the majority of students productivity decreased and this has impacted on the pace of study and levels of anxiety around progress milestones.

Although COVID-19 has disrupted routines, some candidates stressed that they hadn’t felt a significant impact, due to where they were in their research process, or because they used the time productively to “restore and reset”. For example, Carol experienced “the most enormous bit of luck” as she had decided against her supervisors’ suggestion that she take a break over summer, and instead completed her data collection before restrictions were imposed. Similarly, other candidates described feeling fortunate or grateful that they had completed a milestone, fieldwork, experiments or art making and were preparing to write just as the university closed. For some, the first weeks of university closure were restorative, allowing them to withdraw from the demands of studying to reconnect with their families, friends, pets and hobbies. This offered reprieve from both the demands of the HDR journey and the uncertainty of the pandemic.



Jessie

As she began to study from home, Jessie shifted her studio practice to her kitchen table. She notes she has “a very accepting partner because I have taken over our entire house as my studio”. Her HDR coordinator arranged some quick visits to the university at the start of the pandemic to collect her materials. Prior to the pandemic Jessie had started collecting objects as part of her art practice and working on the written elements of her research. Then, she “kind of froze for about three weeks” and “was just really full-on procrastinating”. Over time, she says “I made myself get over the procrastination. I see a counsellor at RMIT because the nature of my research sometimes has been kind of overwhelming, and that’s been great”.

Jessie sees her counsellor online once a month. She lamented, “I miss studio life, I miss chats with fellow students” who each share similar research themes. Jessie feels fortunate about her family and living situation at the moment, but says that the pandemic has “brought home the fragility of our planet”. Jessie belongs to “an artistic, creative community” within her research degree and belonging—to her—is about community: “that’s the essence of belonging—understanding others and being understood by others”.

Rhythms and Routines

Prior to COVID-19, everyday routines and practices offered structure for students’ daily lives and defined certain ‘places’ and ‘times’ to do their research work. Without these routines—particularly the commute to and from the university or their workspace—it was challenging for many candidates to remain motivated and productive.

Creating new routines while working from home was sometimes difficult. Care obligations, including home schooling young children, often resulted in constant interruptions and reduced the hours of dedicated study. Sharing space with housemates and family members sometimes involved tedious workarounds and setting up temporary workspaces so rooms could be used by other people when needed. Some candidates found they were working “too much” in the first weeks of the university closure, not taking proper breaks from computer work, and actually missed the casual interruptions from peers passing by their desks throughout the day and the usual routine of commuting.

Adapting to the constraints of physical distancing also allowed candidates to creatively remake their routines and discover alternative ways to support their progress. New routines also offered moments of connection. Sharon said she now scheduled regular walks with friends (when permitted) and has started a meditation practice; something she wouldn’t have done before the pandemic, whereas now she sought new ways of spending time with friends and peers.

Uncertain Futures and Precarious Work

Many postgraduates are in precarious employment circumstances—such as casual retail and hospitality work, or casual university teaching—which have been significantly impacted by the imposition of pandemic restrictions and related cost-cutting measures. This precariousness has impacted on the wellbeing of HDR candidates in several ways. For some, the loss of a job or reduction in hours has resulted in heightened anxiety about their ability to support themselves and their families, such as Pam, a single parent who lost her job due to COVID-19 and is now going through her savings in order to support herself and her children.

Others felt that RMIT supported them as HDR candidates, but as casual tutors they were treated disrespectfully and with a lack of concern, such

as being informed via email that contracts would be reduced or not renewed with little or no notice. Although Esther feels RMIT has been supportive she is struggling with finances as she lost her job as a casual tutor at the end of first semester, with no prospect of re-employment in semester two. She also misses the sense of belonging that teaching provided. Several participants also spoke of the additional hours they now need to work in care-related jobs, which has meant applying for extensions or leave of absence, adding to the stress about research progress.

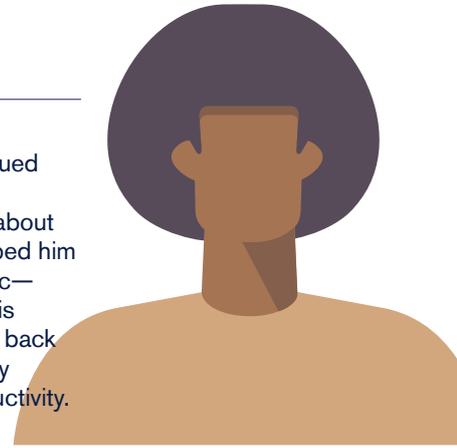
Outside the uncertainty and precariousness of immediate work situations and their economic and emotional impact, candidates were also concerned about their future career prospects, particularly in light of the federal government’s changes to fees and funding in the Arts and Humanities. Alex was worried

about the broader challenges faced by academics and creative practitioners in precarious employment, and how this would impact her and others' studies, especially as her supervisors' workloads had significantly increased. The effect of the pandemic on the university sector in Australia has also affected candidates' motivation, sense of self-efficacy and

their perception of the value of their contribution to society. The broader context of Higher Education in Australia and internationally contributed to candidates feeling anxious, stressed or uncertain about the relevance of their academic work and future plans.

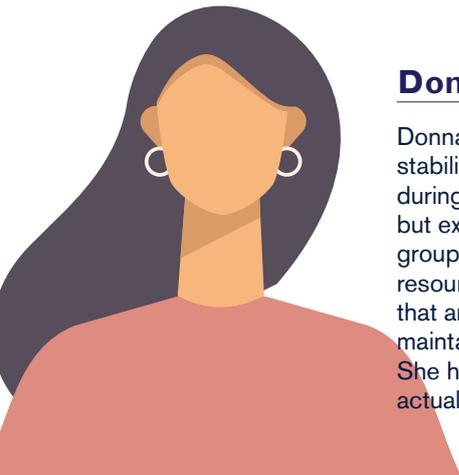
Peter

Peter speaks about his in-betweenness—the different kinds of belonging which are place-based and connected to his office on campus, and how they have not continued during COVID-19. Peter has been staying on a family rural property for most of the pandemic, so has not felt the same sense of isolation as those in the city. He talks about healthy boundaries around his PhD work, and how doing a PhD later in life has helped him maintain these boundaries. His motivation has been hit hardest during the pandemic—in the immediate sense of completing his PhD and more long-term with regard to his prospects for work after completion. He also mentioned the challenges of reverting back to his own hardware (computers, other equipment) which is older than the university equipment. He has had limited bandwidth, which has negatively impacted his productivity.



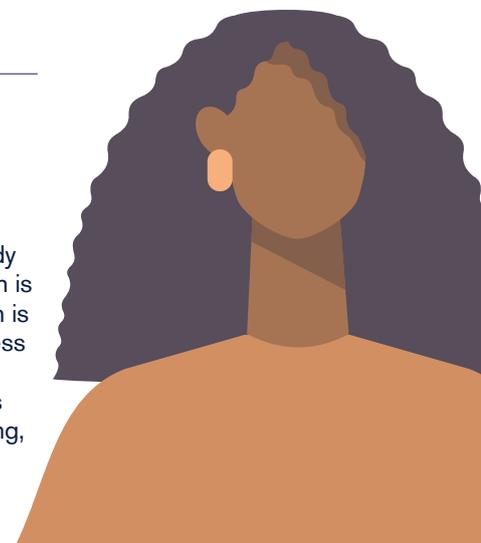
Donna

Donna has work at the university which has afforded her additional financial stability throughout COVID-19. She has experienced great peer support during her candidature, from face-to-face through to Facebook groups, within but extending outside of RMIT. She feels it is important to have these student groups and initiatives for connection, especially early on in the first year. Other resources exist, she says, but wonders how accessible they are for students that are not so familiar with the university. She relates how she has been able to maintain existing relationships, but not establish new ones during the pandemic. She has had to move house and feels precarious about whether she can actually finish her doctorate, despite the fact that she is nearing the end.



Penelope

Penelope moved to Australia with her partner for his job. She has attempted to cultivate a sense of belonging by joining a number of committees. She valued the formal doctoral study event and has kept in touch with a cohort of folks from whom she feels support. Her biggest issue has been the stress of working in a small, cramped apartment with her husband who is also working from home. The acoustics in the apartment make using the bathroom challenging, and as her study is the dining table, she has to deconstruct and reconstruct it every evening, which is frustrating for her. Because she is in a practice-based discipline and her research is part of a project with industry, her fieldwork has been impacted (she cannot access her research sites). She feels the communication has been very fragmented and dispersed, but her supervisors have increased the number of meetings. She feels anxious about the future and would like to be talking about that much more, stating, "it feels quite scary walking into this very unknown and a scenario where we feel like there's probably no jobs at the end of the line or there's really quite shocking circumstances".



International Candidates' Experience

International HDR candidates have faced similar challenges as those of domestic students: feelings of vulnerability, frustration and claustrophobia due to the impact of the global pandemic, but for some these feelings were exacerbated by a sense of cultural isolation and lack of extended family close by. Candidates shared with us how they faced difficulties undertaking research and writing, and described how living arrangements posed diverse challenges. Several international candidates explained they were both living and studying in mostly their bedrooms, as they were in share arrangements with larger households; they explained that this situation often felt claustrophobic and was not conducive for study. For example, Esther's shared accommodation made concentration on work difficult, and Migi found struggled to spend enough time outside and suffered lockdown-related health issues due to Vitamin D deficiency.

As with domestic candidates, some international students were also concerned about the uncertainties of employment after the completion of their degrees. Here they reflected on the impact of COVID-19 on the higher education sector which has resulted in job losses and hiring freezes.

For a number of international candidates we interviewed, their lived experiences and concerns were directly impacted by their temporary migrant status. Many have not been able to tap into the same support structures as domestic candidates (e.g. JobKeeper and JobSeeker) primarily because of their visa status; and are therefore very concerned about their immediate finances. Esther, for instance, had lost her job as a tutor and was anxious about her financial situation. She has been applying unsuccessfully for various grants from RMIT and from the Victorian Government specifically for international students.

Some International HDR candidates were still residing in their home country, either having flown home before the borders closed, or unable to make it back to Australia in time. New international candidate Maria started her degree in April and has been "feeling lost".

She explained that being newly enrolled as a remote student at RMIT she has not been able to establish a strong connection to the institution or to her peers. While there are online workshops made available to her as a new candidate, she has not participated in most of them due to family care responsibilities and different time zones.

Most of the international HDR candidates who took part in this pilot study came from countries with less developed healthcare systems than Australia, and understandably have been worried about the families they left behind. Maria said that it "felt like a tsunami" was approaching as infection numbers and death rates in her country continued to rise. Ali's wife is expecting their first child but she has gone returned to their home country where she will be giving birth without him. Ali's wife accompanied him to Australia but he has been concerned for her safety and arranged for her to return home earlier in the year. Conversely, the presence of in-person family support alleviated the stresses brought on by COVID-19, such as one student who shared a flat in Australia with her brother, and had relatively few concerns about her wellbeing.

Yet international candidates have also shown resilience by proactively relying on support networks both within and outside RMIT. These networks, often built up over the course of their study in Australia, have been integral to their identity as international students (within RMIT) and based on their national/cultural affiliations (outside RMIT). Prior to coming to Australia, Ali proactively made friends with international students at RMIT who were from his hometown, so that he had a support network waiting for him. Ali also had a communal support network outside RMIT which he relied on. Many students also noted that they provided emotional support to their friends and peers in these different networks.

Some international candidates expressed a sense of belonging to RMIT not through their degree programs but through employment at the university (primarily teaching-related). Both Donna and Esther said they felt a sense of purpose and belonging as members of staff; Esther, for example, felt that as a tutor she had a deep connection to her students.



Esther

Esther is PhD international candidate whose thesis is due at the end of the year. The pandemic has been financially stressful for Esther. She was a casual tutor but has since lost her job. Tutoring however also provided Esther with a sense of belonging because she feels that helping her students gives her a sense of purpose. Esther also has an informal WhatsApp group with postgraduates across RMIT which she has found useful before and during the pandemic in helping her feel a sense of community. While Esther thinks RMIT has been supportive during the pandemic, she's found the leave of absence (LoA) process challenging - it's taken a long time to receive a response and she feels she's been left dangling with uncertainty.

RMIT Systems and Services

Supervisors were highly regarded with candidates noting how important they were in supporting them through the uncertainty of COVID-19. Several students mentioned they relied on their supervisors to convey information about RMIT business and procedures related to the pandemic. At times, candidates felt digital communication with supervisors and colleagues was more intimate, personal and supportive than in face-to-face contexts. Moving to digital technology to connect did not, in general, compromise the student-supervisor relationships.

However, candidates were cognisant that their supervisors were taking on increased teaching loads, and additional pressures, limiting their capacity to for support. Gaps in institutional knowledge were exacerbated and there was uncertainty about the administrative structure of SGR, and who their “go-to person” is (e.g. their HDR or SGR contact/representative).

A few candidates mentioned the difficulty of navigating RMIT systems, specifically the website, in terms of finding information about procedures related to COVID-19. The forms required particular literacies and some felt unsure about what to write or how much evidence to provide. They noted it was a disorganised form (e.g. needing to scroll down to find a help number), and several candidates indicated there was no pro-active engagement with students from SGR, and felt the responsibility was on them to navigate the system.

Candidates noted that while the COVID-CASP plans were implemented in a hurry, the feedback had been slow. One noted they had submitted a form in March but had yet to hear the outcome of their application by June, increasing their anxiety about candidature. John expressed his frustration with this delay: “there’s so many teams; I reached out to as many people as I could to find out what’s going on with the CASP, what’s going on with the extension”. He eventually heard back about the CASP but not

the extension, creating what he describes as a “peak kind of stress and anxiety”.

A few candidates (and their supervisors) were unaware of the timeframe (3 months) for changes to their study status, and some were unsure if their situation met criteria or allowed them to access support. For example, some explained they while they could continue research from home, the COVID-19 restrictions impacted on their capacity to study in ways that were difficult to articulate or quantify (such as the distraction of family and caring responsibilities). This in turn increased stress around progress.

Arushi, a lab-based student, highlighted the issues around timeframes: “if the CASP thing could be extended for another month or so, then that will be great because it will give us more time towards the end.”

Several candidates stated that the universal emails from RMIT felt supportive, but that they wanted more specific information—more reassurance, identifying what steps and timeframes were in place for return to campus, and notably, some guidance for post-HDR work opportunities. This anxiety was compounded by the loss of sessional work and an increased sense of precarity for the sector in general. Steph, who also works as a casual underscores the problem, “everything that happens in your life will impact your capacity to do good research”.

Xanthe suggested it have be valuable if there were “ways to bring us [HDR candidates in her School] all together in a really deliberate way, for us to maybe just ask questions, voice concerns” that allowed for a “sense of openness, that sense of being heard, because it’s not like the university can fix everything”.

Lack of teaching support for those HDR candidates working as sessional teachers further impacted their research and wellbeing. This was exacerbated for those engaged with industries, sectors or communities that were affected by the pandemic, including arts organisations and NGOs. As a result, timelines needed to be shifted, or research put on hold.



Simon

Simon spent some time in regional Victoria with his family at the start of the pandemic, but had moved back to his share house with other HDR candidates (not from RMIT) where “everyone’s all out of routine, really badly”. He misses opportunities to catch up and meet other people both at university and through his interests, “I miss just seeing lots of other people all around”. Before the pandemic, Simon spent at least 8 hours on most days in the lab on campus, and relied on the informal social contact with co-researchers there, as they would often catch up for coffee to break up their days. Now, he stays connected with those friends and peers through WhatsApp and SMS.

Ethics of Care

Ethics of care is a complex term with an interdisciplinary and gendered history emerging from moral development to feminist research that has sought to take seriously the complex role of care in cultural practices and attitudes to ethics.³ The field owes a great deal to the work of feminist philosophers—such as Carol Gilligan and Joan Tronto, and more recently Maria Puig de la Bellacasa.⁴

“Care” refers to actions that carers undertake that benefit others across institutional, the domestic and community contexts. Care can be widely invoked in diverse circumstances, from economic and social policy, to the ‘crisis of care’ facing children, domestic labourers and the aged, to how we live with each other and the planet during a climate crisis. The interdisciplinary field of care ethics has increasingly informed attempts to rethink social and political subjectivities, including, more recently, the re-design of cities and services to abate the sense of loss and uncertainty and to provide additional support to those most affected by the pandemic.

Acknowledging an ethics of care is also important in education and community of practice settings because it highlights interpersonal, management and institutional practices including pastoral and intellectual care, and highlights the often invisible nature of labour (such as emotional labour).⁵ As McKechnie and Kohn observe, “care is affective as well as effective”.⁶ Care does require specific competencies and skilful practices, which can be enhanced when adapted to address people’s individual needs.⁷ That is, effective care must be being unique and specific and authentically ‘felt’ by the recipient. We see these diverse forms of caring for, with, and about when we look more closely at the

institutional context of HDR belonging and wellbeing.

What is considered helpful by one person or community might be different for another.

An ethics of care is best understood in an HDR context as a cluster of practices and values, many of which resonated in our interviews with HDR candidates. Institutional practices can include “structures, systems, relationships, teaching quality, monitoring arrangements, extra-curricular activities and ethos”.⁸ The need for HDR candidates to feel supported during the pandemic extends beyond domestic settings, to include different contexts related to their wider communities and institutional places of study. Sometimes care devolved to institution-wide systems of pastoral care, which included specific points of online connection and extra-curricular activities offered as a form of ‘general care’ targeted at the larger student body, rather than individual students’ and their personal and unique needs. For example, Donna was able to access support from her supervisors regarding specific research challenges, and generalised care from the university’s suite of services: “I feel that the university is helping me, directly, but my supervisory team, that’s more a one-to-one relationship, and you build that over the years. They have been extremely supportive of me. The school is also doing some forms of support. I think I do use the counselling services that the university provide”.

On the other hand, Georgina highlights how for some candidates during COVID-19 there have been competing imperatives between pedagogy and care. The pressure of milestones and deadlines can constrain caring practices, as they take second place to pedagogical progress. Georgina appreciated the communication from the university but would



Lucy

Lucy has found the experience of being a PhD candidate quite lonely, and this feeling has increased during the COVID-19 restrictions. She really misses catching up with her peers on campus, where she would go to study every day. Lucy has a 6-year-old child who she had to assist with home schooling, which made her feel “really stressed” and “so guilty” as it meant she had to “squeeze all [her] work” in after he was in bed. She has received a great deal of support from her supervisors and enjoyed video meetings, something she is familiar with as she often uses WeChat to talk to her family. Overall, she said she sometimes feels “unsafe” because she knows some of her peers have not received positive administrative support from the university in terms of approving extensions and leave of absence. She is also very concerned about her career prospects and feels the university could better assist candidates to prepare for the future, especially in terms of the challenges postgraduates now face. Lucy remarks how “a lot of students would be, at the moment, worrying about the future and that is quite a weight. As you’re studying you sort of think of all the work that you’re putting in, but what will be the outcome of that in the end”.

have preferred more personal contact from her supervisors: “I do think that it would have been good if my supervisors had contacted me, like rung me or something early on to find out how I was going”. Donna and Georgina’s stories represent the various components of caring and the disparities reflect an uneven experience of care, especially when dependent on interpersonal relationships.

For Pam, being able to care more for her family has been one of the “positive” effects of being in lockdown. She can be home more with her children and attend more meetings/events online because she can “do childcare” as well as attend, unlike in person. Working from home, Arushi echoed a similar sentiment about extending care to her four “pet colleagues” and has used some of the downtime to engage in “a self-introspection time, self-reflection” through working on her hobbies and engaging in contemplative practices. For some candidates like Jordan with family in other countries, there was the issue of caring from a distance: “I’m worried about them. I’m worried about if I’m even going to see—when am I going to see them? And it stresses me out and I question more why I’m not with my family now and I’m not even doing a PhD really”.

Olivia balanced her writing between caring for her children and assisting them with home schooling, in part because her extended family are in Vietnam. She established a strict schedule for herself, her partner

and children to ensure her research could progress. Describing her daily routine, she said: “I need to manage my time. I separate my time in four parts a day. First, I will wake up around 5.00am and I will be writing until 9.00am, and when my kids wake up I need to guide them to study online until 1.00pm... After 1.00pm they can play with each other—I have two kids—and I continue with writing until 6.00pm, and then have dinner and play with kids. When they go to sleep I will spend one or two hours reading”.

COVID-19-associated physical distancing and social isolation have heightened our awareness of the benefits, but also the limitations, of online and networked communication. For many of our participants, digital interfaces did not provide the same sense of support and caring as face-to-face encounters. Lucy misses catching up with other PhD candidates on campus, and in general she feels online activities and seminars only allow limited interaction as the groups are quite large; there is not the same sense of connection. Of all the organised activities, initiatives such as the ‘Sit and Write’ was most useful, as it included breaks and a chance to chat and network with her peers.

The pandemic has become an opportunity to better understand the various pathways and contexts of care, and to develop sustainable affective and effective practices through institutional systems and support infrastructure.

Care

- *Care at a distance:* technology mediates our everyday life during the pandemic and we consequently demonstrate care by connecting with each other via digital platforms. Care at a distance maintains strong ties to family and friends, and includes a myriad of online activities that work to foster social inclusion. Yet for some, acts of caring acts can be limited by the barrier of the screen. Care at a distance acknowledges that mediated communication is most effective when used in tandem with co-located, face-to-face interaction.⁹
- *Care for others:* our families and friends are keeping us grounded and purposeful during the pandemic. We show care for those we love by cooking, socialising, feeding, and going for walks. We also donate or support in other ways, to people and companion animals who are in need.
- *Care face-to-face:* prior to the pandemic, HDR candidates had every day “caring” encounters—in their labs, research centres, and with their supervisors.
- *Institutional care:* the university provided care to the larger student body through SGR and RMIT counselling. HDR supervisors were able to provide more personal and tailored support.



Conclusion: Co-designing with Care for Uncertain Futures

In this report we have outlined some of the key themes, issues, practices and perceptions experienced by HDR candidates relating to:

- *Belonging and Communities of Practice*
- *Working from Home*
- *Uncertain Futures and Precarious Work*
- *International Candidates' Experience*
- *RMIT Systems and Services*
- *Ethics of Care*

COVID-19 has recalibrated everything—work, life and study—as many of these activities become compressed in the home. Digital amplification can be felt palpably on all areas—in good and less positive ways. For HDRs, this recalibration has added another layer of complexity and instability in an already undulating journey that is both intellectual and psychological. Work futures have rapidly come under revision—compounding the feelings of uncertainty, loss and change.

By listening to the lived experience of HDRs we can work collaboratively to develop nuanced systems

and processes that nurture growth during these uncertain times. While digital engagement can help, digital pivots can only provide a certain amount of connection. Connection doesn't always translate to belonging. Understanding and addressing belonging during the pandemic means developing more agile co-designed methods for engagement and communities of practice to foster a collaborative and sustainable future—both as part of the HDR journey and beyond.

This report has sought to give a voice to the diverse and divergent lived experiences of current HDRs, across different fields of research and stages of the research.

Overall, candidates felt supported on their HDR journey and students appreciated their supervisors, the counselling support provided by SGR around wellbeing, and connecting to the medical centre's professional counselling staff. Many appreciated that the university and SGR provided access to such facilities during this difficult time.

However, there are opportunities to increase support during any further lockdowns and implement sustainable practices post-COVID-19.

These opportunities include micro and macro changes:

- **Communication Science:** There is a need for clear and concise communication during the pandemic, around the processes and procedures for HDRs, supervisors and HDR coordinators. This will help HDRs feel confident that support structures and services are in place and easily accessible.
- **COVID-19 specific Contingency Plans & Processes:** There was confusion and multiple interpretations around COVID-19 CASP plans—especially how they related to general CASPs. Many international candidates feared submitting a CASP plan as it was perceived it could impact on their visa status. There were multiple interpretations of the process across the Schools and Colleges, and uncertainty around the purpose of the COVID-19 specific CASPs, voluntary/involuntary requirements, criteria for applying, and how decisions would be made. An alternative name for the plans may help ensure clarity. Candidates sought further clarification about risk management plans and the arrangements for return as it would take approximately a month to “set up” their work again (e.g. clean out the lab fridge, recalibrate technical equipment etc.).
- **Counselling services:** Participants identified the key role these services play in helping support HDRs intellectual and emotional journey. HDRs praised the counselling services, however some international candidates who had returned home had difficulty accessing services, and SGR have been quick to address this gap. HDRs also wanted more accessible, flexible online services that are culturally and linguistically diverse, responsive to LGBTIQ+ issues, and HDR-specific concerns (a good example is The Thesis Whisperer blog, which deals with the emotions experienced during the PhD journey).
- **Codesigning Curriculum options and the digital pivot for future workforces:** The pandemic has impacted upon how PhDs can be conducted, and expectations around the PhD journey need to be calibrated. Codesigning alternative options with candidates (i.e. hybrid PhD by publication, micro-credentials) will help empower them to reframe their PhD projects. More PhD-specific upskilling resources and conversations around work futures would enhance candidates' sense of efficacy and hopefulness.

- **Planning for Restart, Hope and Recovery:** The pandemic has radically transformed the present and future of postgraduate degrees. This challenge presents an opportunity for reinventing postgraduate degrees for future workforces focused on agility, creative and strategic thinking.

- **Transition new international HDR candidates** by closely brokering and pairing/introducing them to *both* established international and domestic HDR candidates. This will help those unfamiliar with RMIT and Australia (Melbourne) transition better. This personal approach might be more effective and thus motivate candidates to make use of RMIT's SGR, personal development and research workshops and webinars.

HIGHER DEGREE RESEARCH FUTURES

Supervision reimagined through digital media

Reimagining supervision as virtual where supervisors and HDR candidates are both able to communicate and exchange ideas despite lack of face-to-face interactions might become a reality. How might the digital be used in creative and innovative ways beyond Teams and Zoom? How could mobile media apps in Augmented Reality (AR) be deployed to create critical pedagogy and enhance belonging? Currently digital media provide connection but not belonging.

Partner institution (international HDR candidates)

In the case of international candidates, RMIT might rethink collaborations with other partner institutions where practice-based research can be taken remotely under the guidance of supervisors based at RMIT. The institution might also consider extending relationships with current offshore partner education providers (e.g. Singapore Institute of Management) to include the use of their facilities.

Joint supervision with partner institutions (international HDR candidates)

Joint supervision with supervisors in partner institutions overseas might be a consideration for international HDR candidates who are unable to come to Australia.

BEST PRACTICE GUIDE

A report by the UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (UNESCO-IESALC, 2020) suggests supplementing the current responses from higher education institutions with additional strategies, including: managing the health impacts of the pandemic; restructuring calendars for teaching and research milestones; providing resources and technological infrastructure to replace in-person teaching with virtual tools; and providing social support. Beyond the pandemic, they propose a broad framework to ensure that inequalities are not generated or deepened, and that the right to higher education for all is protected. They recommend clear communication and job security for staff to support a return to teaching that is supported by clear processes and mechanisms. Lastly they support equity and inclusion through the redesign of teaching and learning activities following the more intensive use of technology and possible return to face to face teaching. This redesign should be designed collaboratively by staff with students in order to build resilience in the sector, so that universities are well prepared for future crises that may arise.¹⁰



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