

**In a time of uncertainty:
Supporting belonging
and wellbeing for HDR
students**

RMIT University
May 2020



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Acknowledgement of country

RMIT University acknowledges the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nations as the traditional owners of the land on which the University stands. RMIT University respectfully recognises Elders both past and present. We also acknowledge the traditional custodians of lands across Australia where we conduct business, their Elders, Ancestors, cultures and heritage.

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Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused major disruption, stress and uncertainty for Australian Higher Degree Research (HDR) students (Kariotis, 2020)—exacerbating the demands of an already challenging journey towards completion (Batty et al., 2019; Creely & Laletas, 2020).

HDR students constitute *society's future knowledge workers* (Mackie & Bates, 2019) and the repercussions of COVID-19 represent a significant loss of potential for students, with implications for their research aspirations and current and future employment. As Universities grapple with how to best support HDR students through this crisis, we offer a contribution to the understanding that acknowledges the complexity of journey as an intellectual development that has emotional and affective components (Owens et al., 2020).

Becoming a graduate researcher is a *transformative identity journey* involving becoming an expert in a particular field and becoming a scholar or researcher (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010). We take a social ecological approach to the challenges that COVID-19 presents to acknowledge that there are multiple factors in both the University environment and the student's social world that exert a “cumulative and combined influence on wellbeing” (Mackie & Bates, 2019).

In this brief review we:

- **Identify** the range of issues facing HDR students through the COVID-19 pandemic;
- **Highlight** that students from diverse backgrounds are affected differently;
- **Acknowledge** RMIT's commitment and learning from existing interventions.

We **review** strategies and interventions from Universities and other organisations that can help students navigate the academic and personal disruptions of COVID-19, and foster their collective wellbeing.

We conclude with **recommendations** for RMIT that can help HDR students to maintain progress, change direction or succeed.



#unmaskedselfiesforsolidarity Project

RMIT #unmaskedselfiesforsolidarity project asks individuals to share selfies online to show their solidarity for Chinese international students. Social media has the potential to create digital connections and continuity.

Setting the context: Graduate research was stressful before COVID-19

The demanding nature of graduate research and concomitant need for social support and guidance (Owens et al., 2020) for HDR students has taken on a new poignancy in the COVID-19 pandemic. Graduate study is made stressful by factors in the University environment such as supervision issues, the opacity of university processes, workload issues. These co-occur with other pressures in the student's life including financial concerns and career prospects (Mackie & Bates, 2019). The balancing acts required to manage the multiple demands of being a student are reflected in the high rates (83%) of psychological distress in Australian university student populations (Stallman et al., 2019) with social isolation identified as a key factor in attrition of students (Creely & Laletas, 2020).

Mechanisms for addressing issues of isolation include creating opportunities for socialising and creating a sense of belonging through community-led initiatives.

How COVID-19 is affecting HDR students

Data from Universities via The Australian Council of Graduate Research Inc (ACGR 2020) show that up to 40% of HDR students are “directly” affected by the current crisis whether in terms of their material circumstances or the direct impacts on research process/capability.

Furthermore, COVID-19 has exacerbated HDR student's pre-existing vulnerabilities by increasing psychological and emotional distress, financial stress, affecting sleep, diet, and creating pressure to balance responsibilities. Key aspects of student engagement

in campus life including socialising, collaboration and access to infrastructure and resources have been largely replaced with technological solutions to enable remote working. While digital technologies are crucially important, access to these may be differential and issues such as shared housing can impact on the ability to work effectively and make the most of online resources¹.

Two particular areas where HDR students face barriers to completion are when their *social* and *informational needs* are affected (Owens et al., 2020). The substitution of technology for social worlds has made more challenging the creation of a sense of belonging to a vibrant student culture with its associated resources, networks and communities. Postgraduate students also face “extremely precarious” situations, with many concerned about their scholarship support, housing and casual employment (Morris et al., 2020; Robertson & Fyffe, 2019). The current pandemic crisis significantly intensifies the many existing practical, personal and intellectual barriers that can lead to doctoral incompleteness (Creely & Laletas, 2020; Kariotis, n.d.).

These issues—combined with the changing terrain of the pandemic—make it difficult to have certainty about research progression and completion. Some students are also unaware of the financial, personal or academic resources available through the University.

The Australian Council of Graduate Research Inc (2020) have identified the following challenges:

- Travel related: travel and visa restrictions
- Data related: data collection impediments (Most HRECs have suspended all research in vulnerable communities)
- Health: mental health (relating to personal and professional issues), isolation,
- Infrastructure: network access, reduced library access/support, reduced research office support
- Familial responsibilities: carers' responsibilities
- Financial (job loss, living costs, difficulties withdrawing/interrupting study when on scholarship), requests for extension

¹ It is important to recognise that 10% of the Australian population do not have access to the online. Some HDR students might not have their own computers or working internet access at home. This further exacerbates wellbeing issues when technology cannot be used for social inclusion. See Thomas, J, Barraket, J, Wilson, CK, Rennie, E, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T. (2019) *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2019*, RMIT University and Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, for Telstra, <https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/the-index-report/report/>

Which student sub-groups are most vulnerable?

We bring an intersectional lens to the experiences of HDR students through COVID-19. This approach acknowledges that students' experiences during COVID-19 are shaped through their multiple identities including disability, class, gender, culture, sexuality. The pandemic will have exposed students to additional expectations and responsibilities beyond their roles as student, teacher, and researcher. These may be gendered and cultural roles in relation to care-giving and other social aspects which while potentially enjoyable (or stressful) require additional negotiation and effort. Institutional barriers to retention and completion may be compounded for students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in HDR programs (Hutchings et al., 2019). In addition to well documented existing barriers (Gomes et al., 2019; Gomes et al., 2015) international students may face additional financial hardship, structural barriers including racism, housing, visa implications of candidature suspension and extension as well as barriers to help-seeking (Soong & Procter, 2020).

Supporting students

The recent interim report *COVID-19 The Impact on Graduate Research Students* (Kariotis, 2020, p. 12) argues that “empathy and compassion should be at the core of the university’s response to graduate students at this time” alongside practical and material student support. In this section, we outline targeted responses to support HDR students during the COVID-19 pandemic, and research related to interventions that support HDR students’ wellbeing and progress. We focus on digital media and technology practices as a productive—but not necessarily unproblematic—way of enhancing HDR students’ wellbeing and connection. We then turn to



Students who identify as:

- Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander
- LGBTQI+
- Having a disability

International Students

Students from:

- Low socio-economic backgrounds
- Rural areas
- Who study law and medicine

the journey of “becoming a doctor” or HDR candidate, and consider how approaches that engage with the social ecology of students’ university life and social worlds may inform collective responses to support their wellbeing.

Responding to COVID-19

Australian universities have responded to the disruptions caused by COVID-19 in different ways. Many have promoted existing online “wellbeing hubs” across multiple platforms and enhanced resources by providing COVID-19-specific information on student queries, coping strategies and mental health services. As one example, the University of Sydney developed an AI ‘Corona-Bot’ to answer student’s questions (Matchett, 2020). Other universities have focused on fostering social connection, with the Australian National University (ANU) holding virtual events, such as online book clubs, art exhibitions, e-sport competitions and a virtual meetup with Malcolm Turnbull (Virtual live even, 2020).

Artwork by Louisa Bloomer, Kamilaroi



RMIT's response

To date, RMIT's approach has developed a multi-faceted response targeting HDR students as well as the broader student population.

- **Expanding** the Student Hardship Assistance fund and Equity Scholarship fund to provide two types of financial assistance: Emergency Financial Grant for living costs, and Technology Grant to support access to equipment and digital resources.
- **Monitoring** student progress through a *candidate action and support plan (CASP)*
- **Supporting** HDR students to change to part-time candidature or leave of absence in response to COVID-19 related hardship
- **Redeveloping** the *PhD Up program* as an online resource
- **Providing** basic necessities like food parcels and grocery boxes

These actions have been enhanced by state and council-led responses by City of Melbourne and the Victorian Government such as the Student Emergency Relief Fund.²

Learning from existing interventions

HDR students' wellbeing and mental health, particularly the relationship between experiencing depression and graduate study, has received significant attention in industry press and academic research (for example Evans et al., 2018). In response, a growing body of research explores responses and interventions that attend to HDR students' unique challenges. These existing initiatives and productive frameworks may offer useful insights to direct support for students and their supervisors during the pandemic, as well as inform new research priorities.

Evans, Bira, Gastelum, Weiss and Vanderford (2018) call for increasing students' access and awareness of mental health resources alongside broader cultural changes within academia, such as rebalancing work-life demands and prioritising researcher self-care. Other scholars champion wellbeing programs for graduate students that enhance students' social and emotional capacity, cultivate skills informed by positive psychology, or develop mindfulness-based strategies to address wellbeing deficits (Burkhart, 2014; Cabrera-Caban et al., 2016; Cohen & Miller, 2009; Edwards et al., 2019; Kaczan, 2015; Marais et al., 2018). Given the uncertainty of graduate research, Wright (2006) argues for counselling for candidates who are unlikely to complete their studies. Other initiatives emphasise the value of directing students to attend to their self-care in ways that are

proactive rather than reactive (Bamonti et al., 2014; Zahniser et al., 2017).

There is also value in establishing practical or material support during candidature. For example, collective writing groups have the potential to decrease stress as well as support completion (Russell-Pinson & Harris, 2019). Evidence suggests that financial support does enhance timely candidate completion (Zhou & Okahana, 2019).

Initiatives to support graduate students' mental health may also learn from effective interventions targeted at undergraduate or general university student populations (for example Farrer et al., 2019; Stallman, 2011; Stallman, Ohan & Chiera, 2019). However, Mackie and Bates (2019) argue that the stressors HDR students face are often interdependent and contextual, and therefore policy and intervention must be directed by research specifically targeting HDR students. They point to the limitations of approaches where HDR students "learn to manage the effect of the doctoral environment on their own mental state, thus alleviating their symptoms, rather than seeking to change their underlying circumstances" (572-3).

As these challenges are intersectional and "mostly embedded in and mediated by research ecologies," problems cannot be resolved or addressed with singular programs (575-6). Mackie and Bates (2019) list examples of these embedded issues that are likely to be exacerbated during the pandemic; for example, students experiencing financial insecurity may

² Victorian Government's \$45 million International Student Emergency Relief Fund, <https://www.studymelbourne.vic.gov.au/news-updates/international-student-emergency-relief-fund>

undertake excessive teaching or research assistant workloads, or supervisors may face pressures to their own workload that strain their capacity to adequately support students and their mental health. Interventions must address different levels—individual, relational, departmental and institutional—in order to address not only the systemic challenges that hinder HDR students' progress and wellbeing (Liechty et al., 2009).

Digital connection as an “essential service”

Digital media and technologies—and the activities they afford—are “essential services” for HDR students now more than ever. With internet-based resources and digital devices, students have continued their research in challenging and creative ways. Some students have shifted or modified their candidature to incorporate digital practices including online supervision meetings or adapting research methods to incorporate digital or virtual platforms. Others have intensified already digital-heavy research practices. Social media, digital platforms and video games also allow students to maintain social and playful connections while they physically distance themselves away from research labs and offices (Hjorth & Richardson, 2014).³ What students do online can be a lifeline, not only for their research, but their social and mental health. This can be as simple as sharing memes about the frustrations of student life (Ask & Abidin, 2018) or campaigning for increased student financial support.

Discussing the experiences of graduate law students using social media, Zwart et al. stress that social media provide connectivity and interactivity, and therefore are “vital social lifeline[s] for research students” (2014, p. 81). The key benefits of social media in their research were its ease and “immediacy of connectedness” with different groups of people particularly those beyond their own department or institution (p. 92). Digital resource sites and online conversations (e.g. twitter chat hosted around a shared hashtag), such as the PhD support site *Virtual Not Viral*, offer opportunities for connection and information sharing beyond institutional boundaries (Cabraal & Thomson, 2020).

However, any digital initiatives or resources to support HDR students must take into account the diverse and often uneven digital experiences, accessibilities and literacies of students.



(Photo credit: Curtis 2020)

Building identity and community

Interventions and programs creating social spaces for HDR students that attend to the interconnected, intersectional and relational challenges they face offer opportunities to enhance the collective wellbeing of HDR students. Successful programs that address the specific challenges of HDR students may extend beyond writing skills or learning new research methods to—more holistically—explore students' experiences of confidence, frustration, loneliness, fear, confusion, boredom and love (Mewburn, 2015a).

Social connection, group participation and friendship is central to supporting international HDR students in particular such as student societies and mentor programs (Menziez & Baron, 2014). Coaching models and groups offer multi-faceted support for HDR students beyond programs with singular goals. Williams, Thakore and McGee (2017) stress the importance of these models to provide emotional, information and appraisal support for underrepresented racial and ethnic minority HDR students. Sharing stressors and challenges within a facilitated group validated and normalised students' concerns and experiences of stress, discrimination and isolation and “provided emotional support via a sense of community” (2017, p. 10). As coaches included academics outside of students' own institutions, the coaching group “provided both *inside* knowledge of how science and graduate schools work in general and *outside* voices that were independent from the students' specific institutions” (2017, p. 10).

³ The role of videogames to help not only in COVID-19 safe messaging but also for social connection during a time of physical distancing has been embraced by organisations such as the World Health Organization (WHO). See Snider, M. (2020) Video games can be a healthy social pastime during corona virus pandemic, USA Today, March 29th, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/gaming/2020/03/28/video-games-whos-prescription-solace-during-coronavirus-pandemic/2932976001/>

Recommendations

Student isolation is a significant factor in whether graduate students remain and complete their studies. Success and retention are influenced by the quality of the supervisor–student relationship (Baker & Pifer, 2011; Barnes & Austin, 2009) and providing support and opportunities for students to socialise with other doctoral students (Ali et al., 2007). For example, Austin (2009) identified that a key factor in supporting persistence among doctoral students is to successfully embed or socialise them within their departments, communities of practice and foster feelings of solidarity and belonging. Learnings from the digital experiences of students during this time will add to our ability to enhance resilient initiatives in the face of future crises.

University initiatives

Strengthen supervision communication and resources through strategic, intentional and skilful communication from supervisors and the wider University;

Review administration and progress practices at each stage of candidature, e.g. supervisors to negotiate regular meetings with HDR students and review frequency as needed; graduate research offices to tailor communication that acknowledges specific COVID-19 challenges;

Enhance a strong research environment that is respectful, inclusive and supportive of students;

Build collective and group-based opportunities for HDR students to connect with others, including both formal and informal opportunities within and beyond the University;

Connect students with the resources that are available including budgetary support, effective online mental health support etc.

Students' social worlds

Understand the diversity of students' experiences in order to respond with empathy, appropriate scale and timing;

Provide assurances that students' concerns are being heard and addressed through visible outcomes or actions;

Facilitate appropriate and timely collective rejuvenating and nourishing practices;

Promote interactive and responsive online social activities, events and seminars that build a sense of belonging and community.

Support research to understand students' concerns and experiences of COVID-19

Employ diverse research methods to explore the impact of COVID-19 for different student groups as well as other stakeholders e.g. research partners, supervisors etc;

Understand students' digital practices and the most effective online support and activities for students;

Review, explore and/or evaluate productive frameworks, initiatives and interventions to support students' wellbeing more broadly;

Evaluate current student digital practices during COVID-19 to learn from lived experience for future disaster recovery.

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