

ACGR Mental Health Forum

The Student Experience



AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF
GRADUATE RESEARCH

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INTERNATIONAL LITERATURE

- **One in two PhD students** experiences psychological distress;
- **One in three is at risk** of a common psychiatric disorder.
- The prevalence of mental health problems is **higher in PhD students** than in the highly educated general population, employees and higher education students.
- Work and organisational context are **significant predictors** of PhD students' mental health (K Levecque - 2017)



AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE

- Depression, anxiety and stress than age-matched general population
 - Additionally, those who self-reported being behind or exceeding their study schedule had significantly higher scores for depression, anxiety and stress than those who reported they were meeting schedule
 - Whereas, stage of candidature did not affect any of these attribute scores
- (K. M. Barry, 2018)



RELEVANCE TO UNIVERSITIES

Review articles that examine the postgraduate experience often report two sets of factors affecting the **progress and completion of doctoral degrees**:

- University factors and
- Student factors
(Ali & Kohun, 2006; Dominguez, 2006; Manathunga, 2002)

Similarly, factors can be readily categorised as:

- External and
- Internal to the doctoral student
(Sverdlik, 2018)

GAPS IN RESEARCH

- There is a need for more Australian-based research
- Larger sample sizes (larger number of participants and more universities),
- National and University data to be routinely collected/reported
- This is an area that CAPA would like to research in the near future and we would welcome any collaborations in this area

STUDENTS IN HIGHER RISK GROUPS

- International students (Forbes-Mewett, 2011)
- Rural/Regional University students (Mulder, 2015)
- Law/Medicine (Leahy, 2010)
- Low socio-economic backgrounds (Eisenberg et al, 2007)

RISK FACTORS

- **Isolation**
- **Financial**
 - Unable to afford basic necessities
 - Average student HELP debt was \$19,100, taking approximately 8.8 years to repay (Department of Education and Training, 2016)
 - Worry about financial matters (K. M. Barry, 2018)
- **Uncertainty about future career**
 - The majority of PHD's won't get jobs in academia

Consider The Facts

80%

of life science PhDs will become unemployed¹

60%

of ALL PhDs will become unemployed²

<1 of 222

of PhDs will ever be a professor³

9,000

postdocs in Boston alone who are waiting for professorships⁴

84%

gap between PhDs granted and professorships created⁵

\$46,341

average postdoc salary -22% lower than nationwide salaries⁶

Cheekyscientist.com

RURAL/REGIONAL, AORIGINAL & TORRES STRAIT ILANDER AND INTERNATIONAL

Students are at greater risk of mental health problems at universities

(Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2011) (Mulder & Cashin, 2015), (Toombs & Gorman, 2011)

For these people, the stressors of university life can be compounded by:

- relocation from families, friendship and support networks, cultural connections and traditional lands.
- Which can lead to an early course exit (Edwards & McMillan, 2015).

AHRC CHANGE THE COURSE REPORT

AHRC change the course report on sexual assault and harassment at Australian universities, results reported that:

- one in five survey respondents had experienced sexual harassment at university in 2016 and
- 1.6 per cent had experienced sexual assault in a 'university setting' in 2015 or 2016 (AHRC, 2017)

**RESPECT.
NOW.
ALWAYS.**

HELP SEEKING BEHAVIOR

Australian research suggests that among university student populations more than half are unlikely to seek help for mental health issues (Stallman & Shochet, 2009; Wynaden, Wichmann, & Murray, 2013).

- Students report not wanting to be seen as less capable than their peers, personal stigma and/or not knowing where to seek help as major obstacles (Eisenberg, Downs, Golberstein, & Zivin, 2009)

WHAT IS THE IMPACT?

- Early departure and loss of future workforce potential
- Economic impact to government and universities

STUDENT EXPERIENCE

It is all too common to see PhD students work themselves to the point of **physical and mental illness** in order to complete their studies.

- It is less common to see PhD students who feel that they are under such pressure that the only **option is suicide**. But it does happen.

There is a culture of acceptance around mental health issues in academia – **and this needs to change.**

In Australia

- **35.4 per cent** of students had thoughts of self-harm or suicide (NUS & headspace, 2017)
- 50.9% with thoughts of suicide at least once in the past year and 14.8% with at least one attempt (Khan R.L. Collins, 2018)



STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Plenty of students have sought out mental-health care in graduate school. But not all of them did so successfully. Some reported that they tried to seek care, but their:

- universities didn't offer timely counselling to graduate students.
- Others reported month-long waiting lists,
- and/or care that was only available to students in crisis.

A study of eight university counselling services in Australia and New Zealand found:

- 100% agreed severity and complexity had increased.
 - 64% unable to respond to all requests within 2wks.
 - Inadequate staff:student ratios, average 1:3000-5000 students.
- (Stallman, 2012)



STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Universities need to do more to train **supervisors** and to recognise the warning signs of everything from:

- **low-level depression** and **anxiety to suicidal tendencies**
- and **substance abuse**.

And they need to create a **culture of openness** that not only:

- **removes the stigma** associated with mental-health problems
- but **encourages students to ask for help**
- And have **good and welcoming support service** to assist when graduate students do ask for help.

STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Firstly it's really important for students to scope out support services that the university offers:

- from university counselling services to student support groups, As well as establishing a support network

MHFA for peers

It's important that both prospective and current PhD students directly:

- confront the tenuous realities of the academic job market and plan accordingly with career training

Practicing Mindfulness

HIGHER EDUCATION STANDARDS FRAMEWORK PANEL RECOMMENDED

- Every institution should have an institution-wide mental health strategy and implementation plan

STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Despite this, students and academics view researcher development services as:

- Unnecessary.
- Or as an "admission of defeat".
- To use them, is to announce that you are not a perfect researcher.
- Some students are forcibly removed from these sessions by their supervisors

Students feel like it is not OK to admit that they are not OK.

RECOMMENDATIONS

At the national level,

- Australia currently lacks nationally recognised and endorsed guidance to support universities deliver best practice responses
- Mental health and wellbeing not a focus of higher education policy NOR are higher education settings identified in mental health policies
- Student poverty, as a contributor to poor mental health, must be addressed by policy initiatives



RECOMMENDATIONS

At an institutional level, we need advisers, doctoral programs, and institutions to do better. Among other things, they should:

- Provide affordable and accessible mental-health support to graduate students — regularly, not just when crisis hits.
- Normalise open discussions about mental health in graduate school.
- National and University data to be routinely collected/reported
- And prepare students for the realities of the academic job market



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Graduate school policies should make it possible for students to access mental health leave as needed, and ensure that students take the annual leave to which they are entitled
- Supervisors should be trained in recognising mental health issues in their students and able to refer these students to available resources
- Services must have enough available sessions to actually deal with mental health issues (many only provide 6 per year).
- Make sure mental health limits are not based on semesters as these don't apply to research students



QUESTIONS/CONTACT

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capa
Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations

THANK YOU!

The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) is the peak body representing the interests of the over 425,000 postgraduate students in Australia. We represent coursework and research, as well as domestic and international, postgraduates. We are comprised of 28 university and campus based postgraduate associations, as well as the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduate Association (NATSIPA). In Victoria, our members organisations are from the following universities: University of Melbourne, Victoria University, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology, and Monash University.

CAPA carries out its mission through policy, research, and activism, communicating the interests and issues of postgraduate students to higher education stakeholders as well as Federal and State Governments, Opposition parties, and minor parties.



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