

ACGR Good Practice Guidelines for

Mental Health and Wellbeing in Graduate Research Education

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About these guidelines

The World Health Organisation defines mental health as a state of well-being in which individuals can realise their potential, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and contribute to the community.¹

The ACGR community has learned extensively about mental health and wellbeing in recent years. Research training programs are rewarding, as candidates generate new knowledge as well as develop valued expertise, extensive networks, and career opportunities while they pursue their passions and interests. Nevertheless, these programs can entail heavy workloads, candidate debt, and uncertain futures. Candidature and mental health are intertwined and affect one another.

ACGR recognises the significance of mental health and wellbeing in graduate research education and the importance of actively supporting wellbeing.

Using the guidelines

The ACGR Good Practice Guidelines for Mental Health and Wellbeing in Graduate Research Education recommend an integrated approach to this complex issue, focusing on modifiable factors that universities can influence.

Recommendations span a number of domains. Across each of these, benchmarking and evaluation should be managed in a consistent and comparable way, to identify the quality and impact of measures adopted to improve the mental health and wellbeing of graduate research candidates.

This document is part of a suite of Good Practice Guidelines² that are designed to support institutions as they develop their strategies and processes in particular important areas of operation. They support the Australian Graduate Research Good Practice Principles³ which articulate a set of standards considered to be essential for the delivery of graduate research programs.

¹ [WHO Fact Sheet April 2018 Mental Health: strengthening our response.](#)

² [Australian Graduate Research Good Practice Guidelines](#)

³ [Australian Graduate Research Good Practice Principles](#)

Recommendations

ACGR makes the following recommendations to universities.

Culture, community and environment

1. Foster a strong, inclusive and respectful research culture that will support graduate research mental health and wellbeing.
2. Set and revisit clear and realistic expectations throughout candidature, including pre-enrolment.
3. Address work-study balance, with realistic goal-setting and boundary-setting.
4. Focus on prevention and resilience by offering dedicated wellbeing services to graduate researchers.
5. Celebrate achievement in candidature, and celebrate the value of candidates' research contribution, discovery and innovation.

Candidate progression

6. Provide clear, detailed and accessible information to candidates and supervisors to support candidature management, such that:
 - confirmation of candidature generates evidence that the candidate is likely to fulfil their degree requirements in the required time.
 - candidate progress is reviewed at least once a year against an agreed project plan.
 - opportunities to alter candidature arrangements are available and clearly communicated to candidates.
7. Provide training for candidates on the skills and attributes required to operate effectively as a researcher.

Supervision and supervisor support

8. Recognise that candidates are highly insulated within their supervisory relationship—a relationship that can be a source of resilience or risk to candidate mental health.
9. Introduce measures to manage these risks such as:
 - encouraging effective and respectful supervisor-candidate relationships
 - ensuring that supervisors and candidates jointly record expectations and responsibilities that reflect shared understanding, and that these are revisited periodically.
 - providing training and resources that engage all supervisors on the topic of mental health and productive relationships.

10. Provide guidance to supervisors about:
 - facilitating the success of candidates
 - warning signs of stress and mental health concerns in candidates
 - how to initiate or respond to conversations with a candidate at risk
 - practical supports available to candidates who disclose or exhibit mental health problems.

Communication and engagement

11. Connect candidates with peer, academic and professional networks.
12. Create social spaces for candidates that attend to issues of relationships, interconnection, and intersectionality.
13. Provide and connect graduate research candidates to resources and services that are appropriately designed for their needs and readily available, including financial support and health-related services.

Identity and identity development

14. Recognise, reinforce and accommodate the multiple identities of research candidates, such as researcher, writer, employee, teacher, industry leader, carer, and project manager.
15. Provide candidates with professional learning opportunities to develop their identities from the beginning of candidature. These opportunities could involve supervisors in promoting candidates' identity development, and could include exploration of how candidates:
 - contribute to the university's research profile
 - define and perceive themselves at various stages of their degree
 - define and perceive themselves as researchers and employable graduates.

Career development and preparedness

16. Advise applicants and candidates about likely academic and non-academic career paths.
17. Customise the development of career capabilities to accommodate the diverse needs of candidates.
18. Work with careers units to develop resources and activities that are tailored to research candidates.

19. Provide scaffolded development opportunities to align with researcher identity and career interest, and consider:

- digital literacy and skill development
- engagement with alumni
- mentoring and networking opportunities beyond academia
- experiential learning and internships.