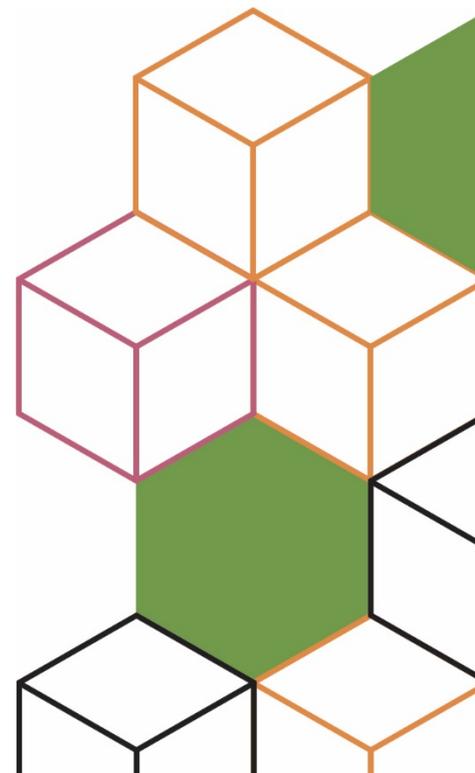


March
2021

Graduate Student
Association

Covid-19 Extensions for Graduate Researchers – Report



Purpose and Scope

This report explores the perspectives of graduate research students in response to the Covid-19 extension and leave provisions at the University of Melbourne. By highlighting the current challenges graduate researchers are experiencing, this report aims to strengthen the University's understanding of the support needs of graduate researchers.

In 2020, the University of Melbourne created paid leave and candidature extensions for graduate researchers whose research had been impacted by Covid-19. Graduate researchers approaching the end of their study were granted automatic extensions. However, the University did not fully implement GSA's graduate researcher campaign recommendations, which proposed a commitment to six-month extensions, simpler extension applications, and not deducting leave from extensions.

In January 2021, the University has limited the existing support provisions by:

- Removing automatic extensions for candidates approaching the end of their study;
- Restricting paid Covid-19 leave to those who have caught Covid-19 or are required to self-isolate; or are the primary carer of someone who has caught Covid-19 or is required to self-isolate.

This report aims to capture the voices of graduate researchers who are still significantly disrupted in their research due to interruptions to data collection, financial loss, or difficult personal circumstances. Through our survey, graduate researchers communicated the ongoing challenges they experience regarding their research progression, mental wellbeing, and financial stability.

Background

GSA conducted an online survey to collect information on the impact of Covid-19 on graduate researchers' projects and overall experience. This was in response to concerns raised about the University of Melbourne's Covid-19 related support provisions.

The survey ran from January 28 to February 16 and was distributed via GSA's social media, mailing lists, and networks of graduate representatives. Survey respondents had the opportunity to enter a random prize draw for one of five \$20 supermarket vouchers. We received 397 survey responses. Data was analysed using Qualtrics reports, Excel, and R. Not all participants answered all questions. Skipped answers are not included in the below figures unless otherwise specified.

Demographics

Figure 1: Number of PhD and Masters researchers

The majority of the survey participants were PhD researchers

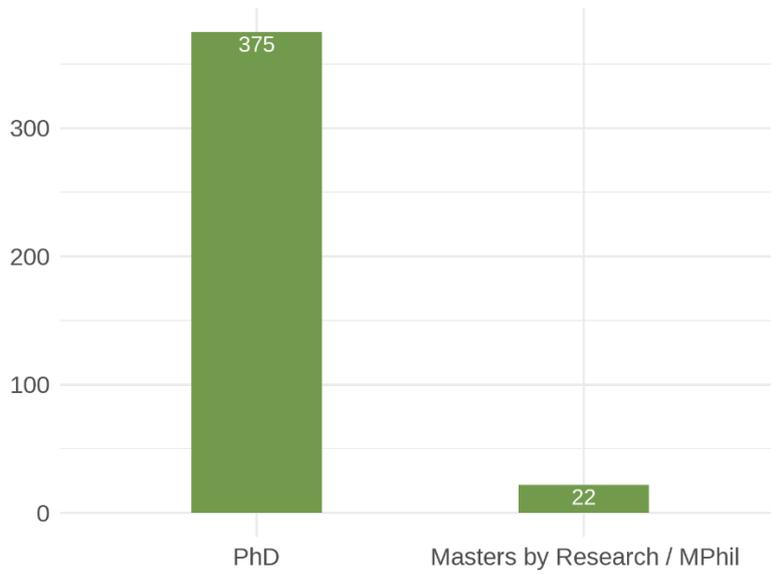


Figure 2: Per cent of Domestic to International graduate researcher participants

Roughly even numbers of Domestic and International students participated in the survey

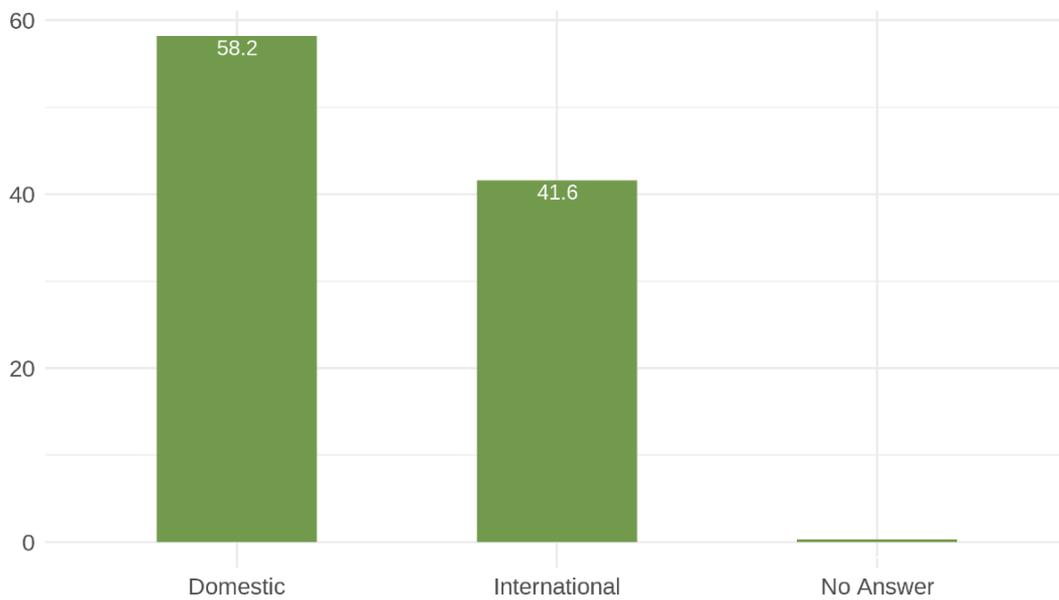
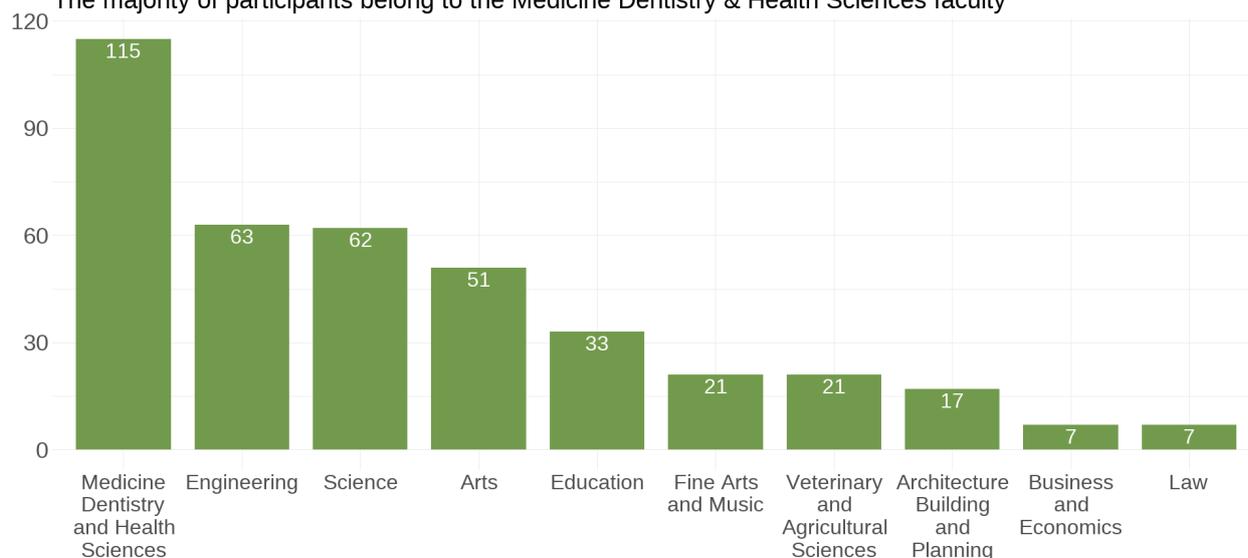


Figure 3: Number of survey participants from each faculty

The majority of participants belong to the Medicine Dentistry & Health Sciences faculty



Note: The relatively smaller cohort of participants from faculties such as Business and Economics and Law represent potential opportunities for further research

Results

Table 1: A significant proportion of participants report that they are struggling with University policies around Covid-19

<i>Negatively impacted by University policies</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Count</i>
Yes	53.9	214
No	35	139
Unsure	11.1	44

Table 2: Graduate researchers continue to face an array of problems related to Covid-19

<i>Recurring issues in student responses</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Count</i>
<i>Negatively impacted by extension policy</i>	51.1	203
<i>Impacted by restrictions on paid Covid-19 leave</i>	26.2	104
<i>Still dealing with challenges from Covid-19</i>	36.3	144
<i>Need to apply for extensions</i>	25.4	101
<i>Issues with data collection</i>	24.9	99
<i>Leave application adds extra administrative and psychological burden</i>	14.4	57
<i>Parenting/Caring responsibilities</i>	5.8	23

Over half of the survey participants (53.9%, n = 214) say that the University's policies negatively impact them, while 35% (n = 139) of the respondents say they are not negatively impacted. The remaining 11.1% (n = 44) were unsure.

A significant proportion of respondents (51.1%, n = 203) say that the University's extension policy does not provide them enough support (either the 2020 policy and/or the changed policy in early 2021). Additionally, 26.2% (n = 104) say they are specifically negatively impacted by paid leave restrictions. Some students (14.1%, n = 56) report that both the leave and extension policies negatively impact them.

Survey participants also describe in their responses some of the factors which contribute to their need for support beyond what is currently available. Roughly a third (36.3%, n = 144) of respondents report that they are continuing to deal with challenges brought on by Covid-19, and a quarter (24.9%, n = 99) say that they are experiencing delays with data collection. One quarter (25.4%, n = 101) say that these challenges mean that they will need to apply for an extension.

Some of these respondents (14.4%, n = 57) comment that the extension/leave application process adds an extra administrative and psychological burden. Additionally, 5.8% (n = 23) express that the University's policies do not appropriately accommodate graduate researcher's parenting/caring responsibilities.

Of the 35% (n = 139) who report that they are not negatively affected by the University's leave and extension policies, some provide further detail. Some respondents comment that their projects had not been delayed because they are still early in their research (5%, n = 20). However, some of these respondents also flagged that they could be negatively affected closer to their completion date (1.8%, n = 7). Additionally, some participants said they are not impacted by changes to leave and extension entitlements because they are not receiving a stipend (1.3%, n=5).

We note that there was limited participation of graduate researchers from several faculties including Business and Economics and Law, and that the University could conduct further consultation with these cohorts to understand their specific needs.

Key Issues

Many students have fallen behind due to Covid-19

A large proportion of the survey participants comment that they have less time to complete their research due to a broad range of factors all relating to Covid-19. Some cohorts share specific experiences, such as parents with school-age children, who have fallen behind in their research due to home-schooling.

“I have a small child, and as such, have managed my time throughout my candidature very closely and carefully - I can't work on weekends, as I'm caring for him, and there's not much time left in the evenings once parenting responsibilities are taken care of, so I have always been very strict about getting my PhD work done and achieving the milestones that my supervisor and I set. Having him at home last year during lockdown was obviously very difficult, and even in the non-lockdown periods, I have found it difficult to achieve the same kind of outputs as in the pre-pandemic time” – Domestic Science PhD student

Additionally, graduate researchers who had planned to collect data in 2020 are unable to progress their research. This issue particularly affects students who require access to labs, many of whom say that they continue to experience difficulties.

“At the time of the first lockdown and lab shutdowns, I was supposed to be carrying out experiments at my 2.5 year mark. I had just submitted 2 papers to journals before that and therefore exhausted all the data I could write about. I had also completed my literature review during my first year. During the first lockdown, I tried to spend my time planning experiments in even more detail. But, what often happens is that only through experimenting can you determine whether certain things will work. It's an iterative process of going back to the drawing board and trying again. That happens regardless of how well you try to plan on paper. There was no way to carry out anything meaningful since we were not allowed in labs then. I even tried some simulation work, but after some exploring, my supervisor and I also found that it was not that meaningful. Furthermore, the lab capacity restrictions, strict booking and buddy systems, time limits (no weekends, no working after 6pm), reapplication for building and lab access etc. all caused significant delays to our progress even after some of us were approved to return in mid-June.” – Domestic Engineering PhD student

Many students also feel that they are not getting the support that is needed to conduct graduate research. They report having decreased contact with their supervisors, little to no connection with their peers, and limited opportunities to attend and participate in conferences.

“The loss of access to libraries, mentors, peers, and social isolation is real and sometimes crippling to our research. This is doubly true for those of us without a family or social network here in Australia.” – International Law PhD student

“COVID has impacted the quality of my PhD experience - inability to attend onsite, collaborate with fellow researchers, conferences etc. there has been much lost due to lockdown and COVID.” – Domestic Medicine Dentistry and Health Sciences PhD

Failing to sufficiently support students creates a risk of students taking longer to complete or withdrawing their candidature

Even before the advent of Covid-19, it was common for graduate researchers to seek extensions to complete their research. With the added challenges of the past year, the University must provide graduate researchers with additional support. By failing to offer graduate researchers adequate extensions, there is a risk that graduate researchers will take longer to complete or withdraw from their research entirely.

Furthermore, students' perception that the University is not providing adequate support acts as a deterrent for some graduate researchers to seek help. The University should not only offer sufficient and accessible leave and extensions, they must also ensure that graduate researchers know that the University will give them support if they need it.

“I do not intend to apply for Covid leave. However, the paid Covid-19 leave conditions already felt difficult to satisfy, so this is another level of restrictions. It makes graduate students feel like they require exceptional circumstances that are outside of what everyone else is already going through to feel worthy of applying for funding” – Domestic Engineering PhD student

“Although not applying for Covid-19 leave I did intend to apply for an extension due to the impact of Covid-19, however having heard the University's attitude to granting extensions (which is that they are not granting them even when the impact is clear-cut), I have withdrawn my application for now.” – Domestic Medicine Dentistry and Health Sciences PhD

The policies create an extra administrative and psychological burden for graduate students

A significant proportion of survey participants report that the application process creates an added hurdle to receiving necessary support and makes them feel uncertain over whether their application will be approved. Students add that these issues, in addition to the amount of stress they are already experiencing,

further robs them of the time they need to spend completing their research.

“It is just an extra heap of unwelcome stress and uncertainty added to what has already been an at best underwhelming amount of support from the university. Withdrawing such a basic amount of support, which in reality would have been given to most candidates on a case-by-case term in normal situations, really says that the university has no regard for graduate students above some statistics.” – Domestic Science PhD student

There are also cases where students feel strongly that they have been detrimentally impacted by Covid-19 but will not be eligible for paid leave.

“The international student community has been impacted by COVID -19 in more than one way. The psychological impact of COVID 19 has been quite severe. It may not be possible to document every incident or situation in which students have been impacted by it, despite requiring leave. Narrowing down of the criterion for paid leave is going to make it even more difficult.” – International Law PhD student

In one case, a graduate researcher described their experience applying for three months of Covid-19 leave. This researcher explained in their application that their project was experimental-based, which meant they were unable to collect data during the lockdowns. They added that they were the parent mainly responsible for assisting their five-year-old child with home-schooling. And throughout Covid-19, they have felt anxious over the wellbeing of their elderly parents living in Indonesia. These issues resulted in the researcher losing a significant amount of time working on their project. But, to the researcher’s disappointment, the University declined their request for three months leave and instead only granted three weeks with little justification for their decision.

Additionally, graduate researchers report having issues using the website that manages extension and leave applications. According to these students, the website is separate from more commonly recognisable online University systems – such as Canvas – and say that they need to search through emails they received months or years ago to find the link. They add that it is also difficult to find the correct log-in details. For some students, their details are their email, while others appear to be their initial and last name. Together, these issues disincentivise students from reaching out for support, which would otherwise help them carry out their research during this challenging period. Instead of relying on an unfamiliar online platform that potentially prevents students from applying, the University should create a more straightforward application form on Canvas which also features clear steps outlining the process.

Graduate students are not able to access the paid Covid-19 leave that they need

For researchers with parenting responsibilities, school policies that encourage children to stay home when they are slightly ill mean that they are vulnerable to increased financial stress. Graduate researchers who need to look after their children at home are not eligible for Covid-19 leave under the new policy. As outlined by GSA's Parents on Campus report, other categories of leave are not sufficient for graduate researchers with caring responsibilities.

"My COVID leave has been exhausted but recently my child became sick with hay fever and was sent home from day care for 5 days. Now, I have to rely on unpaid leave." – International Engineering PhD student

Some participants also say that the restricted eligibility criteria for paid Covid-19 leave heightens their financial stress. In some cases, they add that members of their household have lost their jobs, which has forced them to decrease the amount of time they spent on their research to pick up paid work.

"My project was significantly affected. COVID impacted my mental health, and I also meant that I needed to work more hours because my partner's hours were reduced by half. I need to take Covid-19 leave, but now I can't". Domestic Engineering PhD student

Recommendations

GSA believes that providing quality graduate education involves:

- ❖ Ensuring students have the means to achieve academic excellence,
- ❖ Helping students transition to work,
- ❖ Supporting their emotional health and wellbeing,
- ❖ Ensuring students are represented in decisions that affect them, and
- ❖ Making sure students have ongoing organisational support.

Due to Covid-19, many of these areas have been adversely impacted. Based on the responses to this survey and these factors, which contribute to quality education, GSA has found three critical areas where the University of Melbourne could improve its support: academic excellence, transition to work, emotional health & wellbeing.

Academic Excellence

Recommendation 1: Offer candidates who have been negatively impacted by Covid-19 an elevated level of support and an appropriate program of services to complete their research. This support should include automatic candidature extensions and services such as a bursary to help facilitate data collection and data analysis.¹

Recommendation 2: Create additional support services for graduate researchers stuck overseas. This support should include specialised counselling services and assistance with returning to Australia when possible.

Recommendation 3: Provide graduate researchers with additional time and support to amend their research proposals in line with the challenges presented by Covid-19 restrictions.

Recommendation 4: Provide supervisors with training to enable them to empathetically and holistically support their graduate researchers.

Transition to Work

Recommendation 5: Create more opportunities for graduate researchers to supplement their income and allow them to develop skills. These opportunities could involve additional tutoring roles or other forms of employment at the University.

¹ Using the University's student population data from 2016 and the ratio of survey participants who were both completing a PhD and were impacted by the restrictions to paid leave, we estimate that a bursary of \$500 would cost approximately \$419,152.86.

Recommendation 6: Advocate to Government on crisis funding for opportunities for graduate researchers and early career researchers to strengthen their educational experiences and employment outcomes.

Emotional Health and Wellbeing

Recommendation 7: Broaden the eligibility criteria for access to paid leave. Access to paid Covid-19 leave should include international students who receive stipends and require candidature extensions and graduate researchers who need to work extra hours to support their family². It should also include parents required to home school their children when their child's school is closed due to Covid-19.

Recommendation 8: In addition to expanding Covid-19 leave as above, implement a system of short-term leave for graduate researchers with caring responsibilities. If the leave management system is unable to administer periods of leave under the current minimum, this could be designed so that leave is recorded when it is taken and credited at the end of each year.

Recommendation 9: Move the leave of absence form to a module on Canvas LMS with clear steps within the page to make the process more transparent, which will enable students to apply more easily.

Conclusion

This report explores feedback from graduate researchers regarding the University of Melbourne's Covid extension and leave policies. Students' responses highlight the setbacks they experienced at the outset of Covid and the ongoing challenges many continue to face. These issues include being unable to collect data due to restrictions, having less access to support from peers and supervisors, and dealing with difficult personal circumstances. The responses also highlight the barriers students run into when they look for support from the University. For some, these barriers involve filling out leave application processes, which are onerous and sometimes opaque and confusing. For others, it means being ineligible for leave despite being adversely impacted by Covid. This report sets forth recommendations that would enable graduate researchers to successfully complete their research degrees. The University must ensure that students continue to receive a quality educational experience and feel confident that if they need support, they will receive it.

² Again, using University student population data from 2016, the ratio of PhD researchers who both participated in the survey and said that they were impacted by the restrictions to paid leave, we estimate that expanding the criteria for 14 days of paid Covid leave would cost the University approximately \$1,205,471.03.