

## **Macquarie HDRs Need Additional Support in Light of COVID-19 Pandemic: An Open Letter from Macquarie University Students and Staff**

Edit: On Friday 26th June, the University announced the establishment of the COVID-19 Extensions Scholarship Scheme, a scheme that enables HDR students to apply for extensions of up to 3 months when students can prove extreme disruption to their field work, data collection or experimentation. While we hope that some students benefit from this scheme, we remain committed to pursuing our demands of universal 6-month extensions and COVID-19 specific leave to reduce the stress of bureaucratic processes and to fight for relief commensurate with the disruption to our work.]

The Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students, staff, and supervisors at Macquarie University write to express our urgent concern regarding the absence of adequate and ongoing COVID-19 support for HDR students. In April 2020, Macquarie University announced a number of measures and schemes to support HDR students, which were focussed around how we might best implement wellbeing and research tools to continue our research via ‘alternative pathways’. Since then, it has become clear that such measures are not sufficient to support the long-term disruption that students will face throughout the remainder of their candidature. The current measures inflict further stress upon students who have already been operating at high levels of anxiety and uncertainty for several months. These measures also do not adequately address the concerns and needs of students for long-term sustainable research during a global pandemic.

HDR students at Macquarie University have experienced significant and sustained disruption to their research and lives (MQ HDR Survey, 2020). Many do not have adequate working-from-home arrangements. Many have lost casual hours or other sources of income. Many have been overloaded with additional unpaid teaching hours during the transition to online teaching, while others will have no casual teaching for the remainder of 2020 due to the financial hit of COVID-19. Many are experiencing extremely adverse conditions to their health and wellbeing and are unable to receive the support they would normally access (Kariotis, 2020, Interim Report). Moreover, HDR students have been unable to access on-campus research facilities and resources, essential data, archive materials, and work spaces during the initial lockdown. International HDR candidates have also been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19,

being ineligible for coronavirus relief packages and faced with uncertainty regarding movement across Australia's borders. At the time of writing, limited on-campus work stations have been re-opened, and access is projected to remain restricted for the remainder of the year. Despite the severity of this global pandemic, the line from Macquarie to HDR candidates since early April has been to 'continue work as usual', while reiterating that individual cases for extensions will be considered. For the long-term support and sustainability of the HDR community, this is not enough.

There has been no meaningful update to HDR support since April 2020. While we appreciate the University providing wellbeing services to us during this time, these tools individualise the problems associated with COVID-19, provide little material assistance, and disproportionately favour certain individuals over others. The University has also failed to offer COVID-19 specific paid leave arrangements and are, instead, urging students to either take existing paid leave, which is capped at 12 weeks, or to explore unpaid leave options in order to mitigate the interruptions to our work. Additionally, social distancing rules will further limit the already highly contested resources and on-campus spaces that HDR students rely on to effectively pursue their work. Some students have been successful in attaining necessary and immediate extensions, such as MRes Year 2 students. Some have been provided short-term paid leave to compensate for mandatory quarantine. As we are now understanding the COVID-19 situation to be one that will impact the operation of Australian universities until the end of 2020 at the earliest, these measures are inadequate, inequitable, and unsustainable. Despite the University's claims, it is clear that this is not a situation where we can 'continue work as usual'. The University has both a responsibility and an interest in extending greater structural support for HDR students to complete their research to the expected high standard.

Students need material support and reassurance now, not in 12 or 18 months as their submission date approaches. Moreover, students have been required since April to submit individual applications to be considered on a 'case-by-case basis' by their supervisors, schools, faculties, and the University. This process is not only overly bureaucratic and forces students to disclose sensitive personal information to multiple authorities, but also disproportionately favours certain individuals over others. For example, in Mewburn, Cuthbert, and Tokareva's (2014, 168) research on the gendered experiences of the HDR progress report, "women [suffered] unnecessary disadvantage because when they asked for help they did not always receive it at least to the extent that they wanted or needed." In light of Macquarie's recent commitment to

gender equity during and after COVID-19, Mewburn et al.'s findings raise concern over whether there will be a divide at the University between those students who ask for help through formal, bureaucratic measures and those who will 'suffer in silence'.

All HDR students contribute greatly to the University. They build its reputation through presenting at conferences and seminars, publishing world-leading research, and forming networks that secure future research and funding at Macquarie. Such opportunities have been cancelled, postponed, or shifted online, further reducing our ability to produce research and make the most of our time and opportunity at Macquarie. We are the future of not only Macquarie, but of each of our disciplines. We fear for the future of both if we are forced to continue without proper support. And finally, we fear that continued insufficient support to HDR students will lead to additional and avoidable strain on full-time academic staff and supervisors as they are forced to take up teaching and marking that was once handled by HDR students.

We are not ignorant of Macquarie's difficult situation as an institution. We extend our solidarity to all those affected by COVID-19 - students and staff alike - who are struggling at the moment. But feigning normality in the face of a global crisis is at its best ignorant, and at its worst, grossly neglectful. The Australian National University has been the first to provide universal six-month extensions to its HDR candidates, with other universities across Australia beginning to follow suit. The initial COVID-19 support schemes from Macquarie University were a start. Now more is needed to be done.

We need it to be known that many HDR students are struggling and feel left behind. As such, we are asking for compassionate, equitable, and long-term solutions that reflect the invaluable position Macquarie HDR students are repeatedly told we hold within the community.

We urge Macquarie University to immediately abandon its 'continue work as usual' strategy and adopt an equitable and long-term approach to assisting students by:

1. Offering an automatic six-month extension of all HDR candidatures and stipends, including those beyond 3 years full-time, in addition to the existing duration of candidatures and stipend entitlements.

2. Offering paid COVID-19 leave for HDRs of up to 60 days, upon application, to limit the premature exhaustion of paid leave and unpaid leave.
3. Meeting with HDRs periodically over the next 12 months to discuss the ramifications of COVID-19 on HDR research as issues continue to arise or in the event that a second wave of the pandemic impacts research again. These meetings will provide a platform for the University to co-design support packages.
4. Applying the above measures universally to both domestic and international students, part time and full time.

If Macquarie is truly You to the Power of Us, then the University needs to play its part in this equation.

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