

How COVID-19 challenged PhD students



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In the initial stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, PhD research students were anxiously thinking about the transmission of the virus, even though they did not have any symptoms or close contact to the disease.

During the pandemic lockdown, PhD research students were stressed by the

many new tasks they now had to adapt to, such as setting up an office at home, taking responsibility for their children's home-schooling, and extra hygiene measures, including fastidiously washing their hands and disinfecting groceries.

All this added anxiety caused PhD research students like ourselves to wonder, 'what will happen to my research'? It is evident that the whole world has been impacted by disruptions caused by COVID-19; however, empirical evidence is helpful to ascertain how much COVID-19 has impacted PhD research students.

We therefore conducted an informal study, not related to any organisation, or supported by any university or institution, among our peers and colleagues to understand the impacts of COVID-19 on PhD research students in Australian universities.

We collected data via a survey using snowballing sampling techniques to recruit participants. The survey, consisting of an online questionnaire offering six questions and a box for comments on the impact of COVID-19 on research studies, was sent to PhD candidates at different universities in this country.

The study received 57 responses from participants attending eight different universities and found that Australian PhD research students were strongly affected by the disruptions caused by COVID-19.

Approximately 90% of the total participants reported that COVID-19 had impacted their continuing research, and 70% argued that their planned research outcome would be severely affected.

A Downturn in Research Productivity

PhD research students are considered as staff at their university and are usually allocated a workstation and free access to all the facilities their studies require. The COVID-19 shutdown forced them to work from home like many other employees across the education sector.

However, setting up the home office was not always easy, and PhD researchers have been struck by a multitude of factors beyond their control. For example, in the personal experience of one author, it took nearly six weeks to receive delivery of a suitable desk, forcing him to use an ironing board for his studies.



Figure above: An improvised home desk.

The survey showed that research-associated work output during the pandemic decreased dramatically compared to the pre-COVID situation. More than two-thirds of the participants reported a loss of work output of between 20% and 80%.

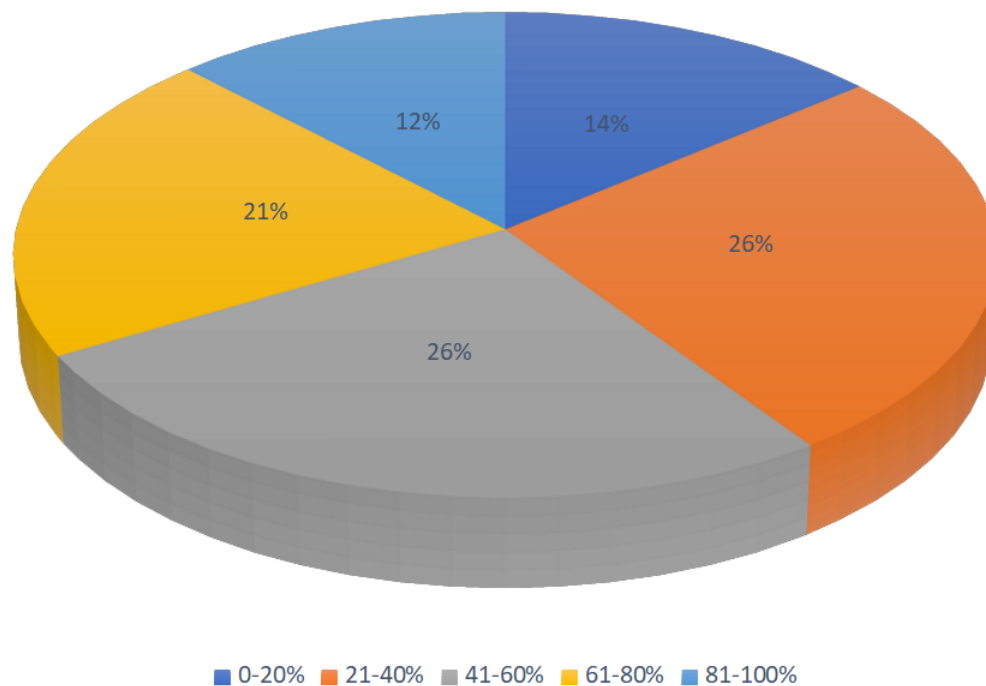


Diagram above: Research productivity during the pandemic.

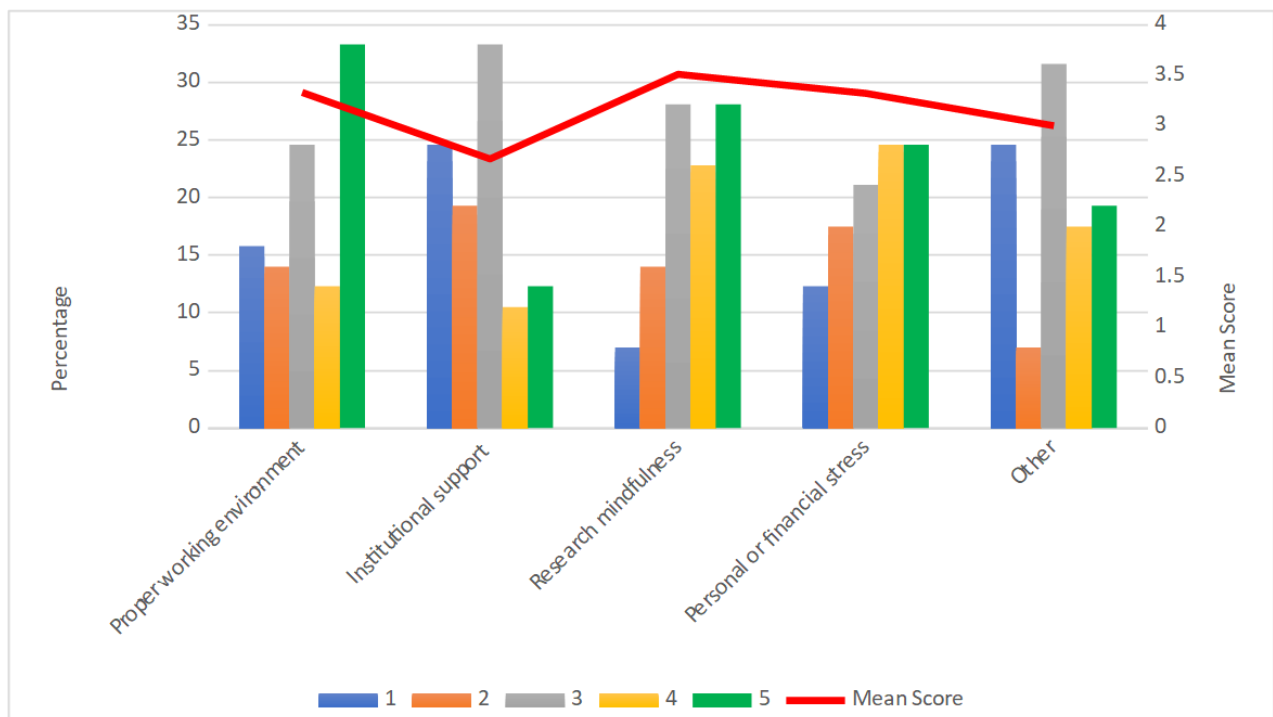
Research from Home Challenges

The survey participants were asked to rank five significant challenges they commonly faced during the COVID-19 disruptions. The respondents saw the lack of “research mindfulness” as the most serious disruption, with an overall score of 3.51 in the scale of 1 to 5.

One participant admitted that:

“I have lost a bit focus and direction and am only just starting to get back into everything.”

This was followed by the lack of a proper working environment with a score of 3.33 and was closely followed by personal and financial stresses. Institutional support was the least of their concerns, indicating that universities have done well in their support of candidates working from home.

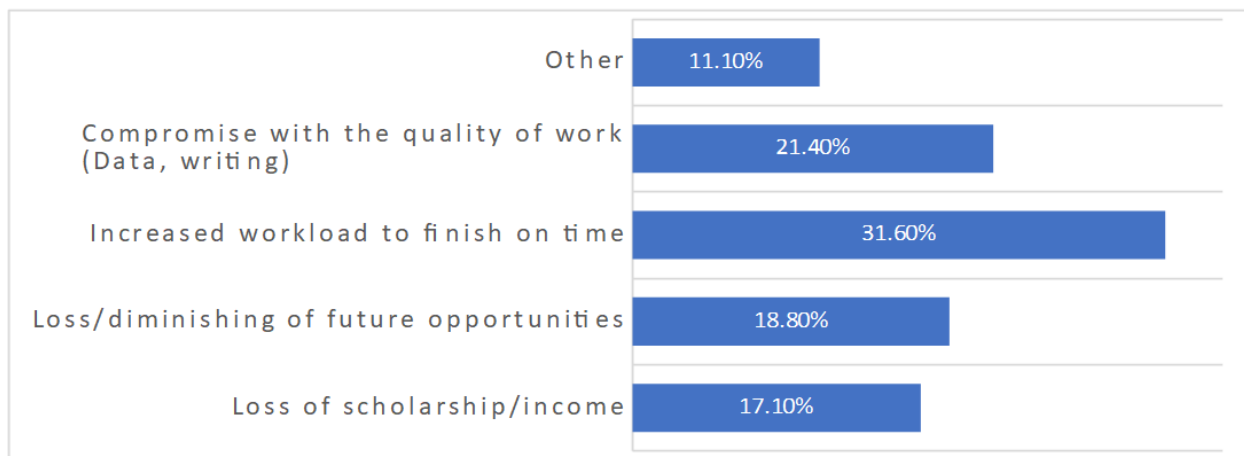


Graphic above: Rank of five significant challenges commonly faced by PhD research students.

Impending Stress and Anxieties

The disruptions to their research work put extra pressure on candidates if their final submission date remains the same. The chart below shows that 17% of participants fear losing their scholarship or income and 32% anticipate an increased workload once the university resumes as scholarships, or any other financial supports, may no longer be available.

More than one-fifth believe they may have to compromise the quality of their work as there will now be less time to do the fieldwork, analysis and writing required; and 18% think that even an extension of the tenure to finish their current research will not be enough to restore future opportunities.



Graphic above: Projected challenges.

Participant Feedback

At least 1 million Australians could become jobless due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the unemployment rate could surge from 5.1% towards 15%. PhD research students who work as casual academics also lost their jobs due to campus closures and the budget deficits incurred by their universities. The national and institutional job losses will adversely affect current and future research settings.

One responder noted that,

“My husband lost his job so I might have to go back to work full-time [in a different sector, not academia] this will significantly impact my ability to finish my works on time.”

Like other sectors, research and education is an essential area in Australia, and PhD researchers require support and assistance to manage these uncertainties. Maintaining a sound and mindful approach can be hard during any disruptive situation and about 30% argue that they would need candidature and scholarship extensions.

A significant number of participants believed they would require financial assistance along with mental health and wellbeing support, and about one-fifth called for additional time from their university to continue their research.

The significant losses and fears being experienced by PhD researchers in this survey are overwhelming, and a range of support is required to safeguard Australian research excellence.

About the corresponding author

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