

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on research students in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Early Career Researchers (ECRs) are particularly vulnerable, among academics, to the societal fallout of COVID-19.¹ Research students, who are at the very beginning of their research career, are facing the prospect of establishing themselves amongst the uncertainty imposed by COVID-19 with long-term consequences. Those undertaking postgraduate research are under immense financial strain, have little voice in decision-making of institutions, are facing severely limited job opportunities, and are still expected to thrive under what some consider to be the toxic culture and expectations of success in academia.

These issues will be further exacerbated for those individuals that universities and research institutions have historically failed to support in Aotearoa New Zealand and who are underrepresented—for example women,² Māori,³ Pasifika,⁴ cultural minorities, LGBTIQ+ people and Takatāpui, those who are disabled or chronically ill, caregivers, and first-in-family in higher education.⁵ COVID-19 could result in the loss of a generation of diverse and talented research students. University leadership must provide urgent support, and has a duty to avoid making decisions in response to financial pressure that further harm those among us who are already structurally marginalised and vulnerable.

Critical issues arising from the pandemic

Across New Zealand's tertiary institutions there has been inconsistent, often inadequate, support for postgraduate students, particularly as they attempted to continue their studies over lockdown. Some research has ground to a halt as researchers no longer have access to the facilities and equipment required for their research.⁶ Others have been able to continue by working from home, only to be met with an expectation they should continue with 'business as usual' in the most unusual of circumstances. Increased workloads for senior academics have meant less supervision, less progress, and less support. Restricted access to supervision—exacerbated as supervisors transition their focus to research, management, and/or family responsibilities necessitated by the crisis—has limited the invaluable (and often unrecognised) opportunities for informal learning and support that students would usually have access to when working in the same location as their supervisors and colleagues.

¹ Early Career Researcher Forum, 'Early Career Researchers in Aotearoa: Safeguarding and Strengthening Opportunity after COVID-19'.

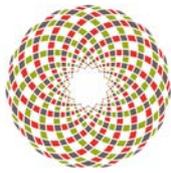
² Walker et al., 'Where to from Here?'

³ McAllister et al., 'Why Isn't My Professor Māori?'

⁴ Naepi, 'Why Isn't My Professor Pasifika?'

⁵ See Early Career Researcher Forum; and Evans, Murdoch, and Spencer, 'A Resilient Research, Science & Innovation Sector Enabling Post Pandemic Economic Transformation'.

⁶ See, for example Hoogenboom, 'Agronomic Data and the Coronavirus Epidemic'.



A lack of clarity from tertiary institutions about extensions and financial support has created a climate of uncertainty—suspending or extending postgraduate study may leave students trying to complete their research without income. The University of Auckland, for example, offered to waive 3-months of fees for PhD students who could *prove* their studies were disrupted by COVID-19, but only once those students reached 42 months of study. Victoria University of Wellington offered a Doctoral Hardship Scholarship, which required students to disclose all of their bank account balances and 2-months worth of transactions. These policies were put in place during the March-May lockdown, but no further clarity or additional support had been communicated as of August, when alert levels were once again raised.

The general advice to PhD students from universities throughout the pandemic has been to suspend their studies or move to part-time registration if they are significantly disrupted. This puts students on scholarship in a position to choose between access to their main source of income or extending their deadlines. PhD students on scholarship use their stipend to pay for basic necessities, such as rent, power, internet access, and health and childcare costs—already a difficult task given stipends pay less than minimum wage.⁷ Add to this the reduced availability of paid hours for tutoring and marking, vital supplementary income for many, as universities try to cut costs or shift assessments online.⁸ All the issues discussed above will be exacerbated for international students, who face the additional challenges of studying away from family and support networks, and must grapple with complicated funding and visa arrangements. This includes being unable to leave the country for urgent family matters if they want to continue their studies, as they would not be able to re-enter under current border policies.

Working from home has presented similar challenges for research students as for many others, particularly with regards to mental health. Studies in recent years have repeatedly shown more than a third of doctoral students suffer from mental disorders such as moderate to severe anxiety and/or depression,⁹ which represents a rate that is six times more likely than the general population.¹⁰ The effects of lockdown on social isolation will only have exacerbated the already dire situation.¹¹ Working from home has made it very difficult to draw a line between “work space/time” and “leisure space/time”, particularly for those in shared accommodation or substandard housing. Many students rely on university facilities to provide an appropriate work environment and do not have the luxury of a dedicated at-home work space, or even a warm, dry bedroom. Many have incurred additional costs trying to set up home working spaces in addition to the (ongoing) unpaid work required of casualised staff during the pandemic.¹²

It is clear the pandemic itself will be ongoing for the foreseeable future. Even when lockdown requirements relax, research students must contend with the uncertainty and precarity of an ongoing health crisis while preparing to navigate its longer-term impacts. We are entering what may be the largest economic recession ever. Those who have recently completed, or are soon to

⁷ Johnson et al., ‘The Quiet Crisis of PhDs and COVID-19’.

⁸ Early Career Researcher Forum, ‘Early Career Researchers in Aotearoa: Safeguarding and Strengthening Opportunity after COVID-19’.

⁹ Levecque et al., ‘Work Organization and Mental Health Problems in PhD Students’; Peterse et al., ‘Addressing the Mental Health Crisis among Doctoral Researchers, Part I’; ‘The Mental Health of PhD Researchers Demands Urgent Attention’.

¹⁰ Evans et al., ‘Evidence for a Mental Health Crisis in Graduate Education’.

¹¹ Langin, ‘As the Pandemic Erodes Grad Student Mental Health, Academics Sound the Alarm’.

¹² Casuals Network - University of Sydney, ‘Over-Worked and Worked Over: Casual Academics Bear the Costs of COVID-19’.



complete, their studies are entering a job market with severely limited domestic post-doctoral and other research opportunities, while simultaneously universities implement hiring freezes and make cuts to their already precarious workforce. In the last two decades, PhD graduates from New Zealand universities have increased three-fold (1450 graduated in 2018 with majority wanting to remain in New Zealand) but the number of full-time equivalent positions in academia has remained steady.¹³ Current students are facing an already broken career pipeline and it will only be exacerbated by this pandemic.

The prevailing wisdom of academia, to uproot one's life and chase the promise of work overseas, is no longer justifiable as international opportunities become inaccessible (unless one is willing to accept significant risks to their health, wellbeing and family life).¹⁴ Even if these opportunities were available, research students in New Zealand would struggle to compete for them. The cancellation of domestic and international conferences and summer schools has removed the opportunity to connect with peers and senior scholars in-person, to present research, to upskill, to network—all unpaid labour research students are routinely expected to perform in order to secure stable work in their field.

Students were left out of pocket when conferences were postponed or cancelled if travel costs were non-refundable, and those events that have been rescheduled may not be accessible to students who are soon graduating and will lose access to institutional funding. Many conferences that have continued to be held online are not compatible with our time zone. Even when international travel does become available again, it will likely be prohibitively expensive for those in New Zealand and many will be hesitant to make significant financial and time commitments in such a climate of uncertainty. Overall, there are fears that missed opportunities and continued border closures are going to disadvantage research students with respect to their career development, their ability to engage in interdisciplinary research, and the opportunity to build community with peers from outside New Zealand.

Even domestic events are severely compromised by the uncertainty introduced by changing alert levels. Events like writing retreats, workshops, and even social events provide valuable face-to-face opportunities to connect with colleagues throughout the country and build collaborations and networks, all of which are important to stimulate a diverse and connected research, science, and innovation sector moving forward. The Te Pūnaha Matatini Whānau has postponed and cancelled multiple events because it was important to prioritise the health and wellbeing of our members, and regional lockdowns would result in inequitable access to events. Opportunities have been moved online—for example we organised an ongoing webinar series—but it is unrealistic to assume this can replace the experience and benefits of being with people.

Measures to support research students

Many of the issues we have discussed are systemic and ingrained in our tertiary education and research, science and innovation sectors. The pandemic is acting to exacerbate these issues to the detriment of research students, particularly those with intersectional identities. Postgraduate students yet to complete their research need *funded* extensions to their study, and for institutions

¹³ Early Career Researcher Forum, 'Early Career Researchers in Aotearoa: Safeguarding and Strengthening Opportunity after COVID-19'.

¹⁴ Early Career Researcher Forum; Evans, Murdoch, and Spencer, 'A Resilient Research, Science & Innovation Sector Enabling Post Pandemic Economic Transformation'.



to lead with understanding and empathy. Importantly, universities need to provide comprehensive and accessible mental health care for students who are affected by the extra pressures from the pandemic, and ensure that those services are extended to all students who need them, permanently. We suggest a joint working group across institutions—in collaboration with the ECR Forum of the Royal Society Te Apārangi and student organisations—could be used to set national standards and implement solutions to improve the experience of research students in New Zealand throughout this pandemic and beyond.

Academics need to consider how they can support their students through the provision of part-time work that not only supplements students' income but provides valuable experience beyond tutoring and marking. They can also play an active role in increasing prospects of international collaboration and opportunities for students post-study, through enabling online networking with relevant investigators and lab groups internationally, and making connections outside of academia. For academics to provide the necessary supervision and care, they need to be well-supported by their departments and institutions and not be saddled with the often impossible workloads and toxic expectations of academia—all which must be navigated on top of family life and are intensified by this pandemic.

Once borders reopen, institutions could make conference and travel funding, as well as on-going access to subscription resources, available to recent PhD graduates, who may still want to enter academia but need to take other work to make ends meet. Travel grants offered post-pandemic should take into account the higher costs that will be incurred for those travelling internationally.

To prevent the loss of a generation of early-career researchers and diversity and equity gains in the sector,¹⁵ we must encourage the creation of post-doctoral and other early career positions in New Zealand—for example, by reducing overheads on such positions in academic and research institutions,¹⁶ and requiring these roles to be integrated into major funding applications. Targeted funding opportunities over and above existing sources need to be offered to support those who are structurally marginalised, and any support given must uphold the values and obligations required by Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

By recognising the valuable contribution of emerging researchers to the productivity and connectivity of the research ecosystem, we are calling for everyone, at all levels, to find ways to support this vulnerable group in the on-going fallout from COVID-19.

¹⁵ Evans, Murdoch, and Spencer, 'A Resilient Research, Science & Innovation Sector Enabling Post Pandemic Economic Transformation'.

¹⁶ Early Career Researcher Forum, 'Early Career Researchers in Aotearoa: Safeguarding and Strengthening Opportunity after COVID-19'.



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