



University of Melbourne

2021

# ANNUAL REPORT

MSD Research Student Association

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# 1. Executive Summary

The 2021 Research Students Association (RSA) committee was elected to office in February 2021 and since that time it has worked tirelessly to support the research student cohort of the ABP faculty through the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, including another series of prolonged lockdowns. We hope that the work done this year has helped further develop an ethos of support and collegiality among graduate researchers, while providing a strong foundation for the 2022 committee to build on. This year's committee of 12 members comprises an Executive and three sub-committees: Research, Engagement and Advocacy.

The committee's key areas of focus are:

- Developing a culture of mutual support, collegiality and achievement among graduate researchers;
- Providing opportunities for graduate researchers to share success and develop our skills across research and practice;
- Sharing our collective successes and celebrating our work;
- Providing a constructive voice in working with our faculty colleagues across professional and academic staff; and
- Improving the experience of graduate researchers.

This year, the committee has run a series of online events focused on academic and research skill development and instituted additional meetings including the quarterly open forum and periodic town halls to enable online interaction between the cohort, the committee, and the faculty. On this point, sincere thanks go to Associate Professor Anna Hurlimann (Assistant Dean of Graduate Research), Sally Jones (Manager, Research and Industry) and Caroline Deacon (Senior Research Officer), for their responsiveness and consistent support.

This year saw us carrying out another 'pulse check' survey, which sought to better understand the recurrent challenges being faced by our peers at the hands of the pandemic. The results of the survey allowed us to focus the faculty's support for, and engagement with, the cohort: disruption to research, caregiving responsibilities, and mental well-being were among the primary concerns. This also guided the committee's work throughout the year. The committee has worked seamlessly and with great camaraderie under challenging and ever-changing conditions; this report offers a summary of our achievements, along with lessons learned and opportunities for the future.

## 2. Reading this report

This report is developed to align with the Graduate Student Association's (GSA) reporting requirements. Membership details and requirements are included in the "introducing us" section of the report. Because of the sub-committee structure of the RSA, each sub-committee's highlights and activities are reported in separate sections.

In addition, the Executive and each sub-committee has provided suggestions for the 2022 committee, with the objective of aiding succession planning and to ensure continuity and further development of initiatives started in 2021.

We thank the GSA for supporting our work and look forward to remaining affiliated with the GSA to advance all opportunities for mutual support and development among graduate researchers.

### **3. Introducing Us...**

The 2021 MSD RSA committee includes 12-members – six men and six women, three domestic and nine international scholars. We are a diverse group, working in a number of disciplines including architecture, planning, placemaking, architectural history and urban design.

Any graduate researcher at MSD is eligible for election to the committee. We run annual elections and conduct our affairs in accordance with our Constitution. There is no fee to apply or join: we want committee membership to be widely accessible and provide an avenue for graduate researchers to get involved in activities that support one another.

Our committee includes a three-member Executive, as well as sub-committees across three areas: Research, Engagement and Advocacy. Given the ongoing nature of the pandemic and its associated lockdowns, activities were mostly limited to interaction events with the faculty and research events geared towards management of candidature and working towards a career in academia.

The committee for 2021 includes:

- Jarrod Haberfield – President
- Katrina Ganzon – Treasurer
- Savindi Perera – Secretary
  
- Onur Tumturk– Research Committee
- Anna Edwards – Research Committee
  
- Iain Lawrie – Engagement Committee
- Zhuoya Kang – Engagement Committee
- Dulani Denipitiya - Engagement Committee
- Guillermo Rojas Alfaro - Engagement Committee
- Sue Huang - Engagement Committee
  
- Chigozie Ndukwe – Advocacy Committee
- Nana Yaw Oppong – Advocacy Committee

## 4. Executive Committee

In addition to providing support to the sub-committees, the Executive committee of the RSA was particularly focused this year on high levels of organization and optimizing our effectiveness while working from home. Alongside monthly meetings of the committee as a whole, regular meetings were held between the Executive and Advocacy committee, and faculty staff (Manager, Research and Industry, and Assistant Dean, Research and Training). These meetings provided an avenue for communicating issues that had arisen amongst the cohort and helped to work through the diverse challenges they faced.

### **Achievements and highlights for the Executive of 2021 include:**

- Managing communication and working in collaboration with the other sub-committees throughout the year to support the cohort;
- Managing communication and working in collaboration with senior faculty staff to optimize our role as an intermediary between the University and the cohort;
- Ongoing publication of the MSD Student Directory (updated quarterly);
- Identification of sub-groups by discipline;
- Pulse check of the cohort;
- Individualized communications sent to welcome and inform every candidate at their commencement; and
- Welcome events for incoming students at the start of each intake.

### **Challenges included:**

- Encouraging engagement within the cohort continued to be our greatest challenge. The trend established during the interminable lockdown of 2020 continued throughout 2021. This was demotivating when online events we'd worked hard to facilitate, for example, were poorly attended;
- A pervasive lack of certainty impeded our ability to engage in any long-term or strategic planning; and
- The flow of information from Chancellery to the faculty, and then to us, often took place at a frustrating pace, typically with a lack of clarity or transparency as to the bases for decision-making.

### **Opportunities for the 2022 committee include:**

- Rebuilding engagement of the cohort and a sense of connection to the MSD;
- Restarting offline activities for the cohort as our ability to live with the pandemic evolves; and
- Minimal funds were used this year (refer financial report attached). The new committee can explore means of growing the limited reserves.

## 5. Research sub-committee

### **Achievements and highlights for the Research of 2021 include:**

The research sub-committee focused this year on re-starting the once-annual publication, Oculus. The call for papers has opened for Oculus 2022, a style guide for papers has been prepared and shared with the prospective authors. The research sub-committee will collect the papers at the end of February 2022 and publish Oculus 2022 until June 2022. The committee has worked as intermediary between the graduate researchers and ABP Graduate Research Support Office to provide feedback for the regular research forums and panel discussions organised by Assistant Dean of Graduate Research. The forums succeeded in providing an environment for graduate researchers to learn from academics and colleagues about research related issues.

### **Opportunities for the 2022 committee include:**

- Completing the publication process of Oculus 2022, and releasing a call for submissions for a 2023 edition.
- Continue supporting the regular research forums and panel discussions, and guiding the ABP Graduate Research Office by providing feedback from colleagues as to subjects of interest;
- Continue to develop stronger relationships with faculty staff to identify and further support shared research priorities.

## 6. Engagement sub-committee

### **Achievements and highlights for the Engagement of 2021 include:**

The Engagement sub-committee was able to hold several in-person and online social events in 2021, during periods of eased restrictions and as people adjusted to using online platforms to socialize. These events included:

- Two Welcome events for new students, held via Zoom on 1 June and 14 October
- Two in-person catch-ups, held at The Clyde Hotel on 23 April and 16 December ('end-of-year'; food covered by GSA funding)
- Two online catch-ups, held via Zoom and Gather Town respectively on 18 June and 25 November ('end-of-year')
- Weekly in-person lunchtime catch-ups on Tuesdays, held from April to June (disrupted due to Melbourne being in several COVID-19-related lockdowns and work-from-home conditions between June and October)

The Engagement sub-committee co-launched the 'Ask an ECA' initiative with the ABP faculty's Early Career Academics (ECA) Network in November. Interested students were matched with volunteer ECAs to learn about navigating the graduate research life and what comes after; each pair will meet 1-on-1 in a one-off, 30-minute informal chat. 10 students and 16 ECAs signed up in the first trial. The matched pairs are expected to meet between December 2021 and January 2022.

Sub-committee member, Dulani, represented the RSA (as an offshore candidate) at the ABP Graduate Researcher forum for offshore students held on 27 July.

**Challenges included:**

In-person events were prohibited during several lockdowns in Melbourne (the first lockdown was from June to July, the second from August to October). International students remained offshore due to Australia's closed borders. Attendance rate was low in online events, possibly due to fatigue and challenges associated with socializing online, differences in time-zones, additional home-schooling and other commitments during lockdown, etc.

**Opportunities for the 2022 committee include:**

The uncertainties over the COVID-19 situation continue to pose challenges for (in-person) event planning, but hopefully there will be more stability in 2022 given Victoria's high vaccination rate. Australia's borders are open to offshore students from December 2021, so optimistically speaking we can anticipate the return of international students in 2022.

Opportunities include:

- A 'Welcome to Melbourne' meeting for newly arrived international students
- Welcome event for newly commenced students, to be held twice a year to coincide with the start of the semesters when most students enroll (to be coordinated with Caroline)
- When students are allowed back on campus, reinstate weekly lunchtime catch-ups
- Establish 'Ask an ECA' initiative – collect feedback from first batch of participants, promote initiative among students, launch next round(s) of registration
- Continue to engage with onshore and offshore students and explore virtual platforms such as Gather Town to hold online social events

## **7. Advocacy sub-committee**

### **Achievements and highlights for the year included:**

- Advocated for student wellbeing and working conditions during the COVID-19 crisis;
- RHD Pulse Check Survey and sharing those outcomes with the faculty and students;
- Assisted in setting up the RSA Town Hall meetings with faculty;
- Strengthen communication channel between the faculty on behalf of the students;
- Highlighted the challenges faced by students to the faculty;
- Developed a Survey to understand the challenges of offshore international students. Regrettably, this was turned down by the faculty; (and)
- Communicating the travel challenges of offshore international students and agreeing a virtual town hall meeting to be held in February 2022

### **Challenges included:**

- While appreciating the attentiveness and compassion of the faculty's professional staff during the COVID crisis, some of the requests made by the RSA were not actioned by the faculty as they were constrained by the limitations placed on them by Chancellery; (and)
- Difficulty in attracting the students to participate in RSA events, especially engaging with the advocacy sub-committee.

### **Opportunities for the 2022 committee include:**

- Continue as the conduit between student concerns and faculty, including cohort-wide surveys and statistics to support proposed actions;
- Engaging with Graduate Research Committees in other faculties to scale up advocacy.
- Need to follow up on all the issues communicated with the faculty;
- Clearer communication from the faculty on what the RSA can do;
- Institutionalise (in person) quarterly town halls between cohort and faculty; and
- Make research hubs (key contacts, topical scope) more visible to all students for engagement