MSD
RESEARCH
STUDENTS
ASSOCIATION

University of Melbourne

2023

ANNUAL REPORT

MSD Research Student Association

Contents

1. Executive Summary

The 2023 Research Students Association (RSA) committee was elected to office in February 2023 and since that time it has worked tirelessly to support the research student cohort of the ABP faculty as we adapt to a COVID normal after the past few years of pandemic restrictions. 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 2024 committee to build upon. This year's committee of 13 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.Cultivating friendships, establishing a safe environment for graduate researchers, and facilitating connections between new cohort members and their peers.

This year, the committee has run a series of social and academic focused events. We also collaborated outside the RSA with faculty and groups such as Early Career Academics (ECA) Network and Academics Anonymous to enhance our support for MSD GRs. Among our successes, we provided assistance to faculty in organising the Graduate Research Symposium in October and were successful in securing a Research Development Unit (RDU) Grant with the ECA Network that enabled us to run a highly successful 'Wellbeing Day' in November. Further RSA-run events included the ever popular 'bring a plate to share' cultural meals, advocacy face-to-face roundtables, the publication of Oculus magazine as well as a writing retreat at CERES Environmental Park in Brunswick.

We celebrated the end of the year with a cultural lunch, and the soft launch of the Oculus publication. Oculus is an MSD RSA publication that celebrates a selection of the diverse research undertaken by postgraduate researchers within the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning. The publication reflects the research outputs of PhD candidates that cross architecture, landscape architecture, urban design, planning and construction.

This year saw us carrying out another 'pulse check' survey, which sought to better understand the challenges being faced by our peers and to identify opportunities to provide support. The results of the survey allowed us to focus the faculty's support for, and engagement with, the cohort. This also guided the committee's work throughout the year.

Sincere thanks go to Professor Michele Acuto (Associate Dean, Research), Associate Professor Crystal Legacy (Assistant Dean, Graduate Research) Associate Professor Anna Hurlimann (former Assistant Dean, Graduate Research), Sally Jones (Manager, Research and Industry) and Caroline Deacon (Senior Research Officer), for their responsiveness and consistent support.

The committee has worked seamlessly and with great camaraderie. 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 2024 committee, with the objective of aiding succession planning and to ensure continuity and further development of initiatives started in 2023.

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 2023 MSD RSA committee was made up of 13 members, which included five domestic and eight 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.

The committee for 2023 includes:

- Rebecca Roberts – President
- Shiva Nouri – Treasurer
- Sue Huang – Secretary
- Dorsa Kafili – Research Committee
- Dorsa Fatourehchi – Research Committee
- Sophie Devine – Research Committee
- Uly Faoziyah – Research Committee
- Dinh Huynh – Engagement Committee
- Nayanika Bora – Engagement Committee
- Wahhaj Ahmed – Engagement Committee
- Yasodhara Ranasinghe – Engagement Committee
- Imogen Howe – Advocacy Committee
- Paul Fleckney – 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 empowering our Graduate Research cohort to thrive in their research life. In acknowledgment of the pandemic-induced stresses and disruptions that graduate researchers have faced (and will continue to face), we facilitated opportunities for the cohort to develop both professional and personal skills that will hopefully help them navigate their research journey. We worked closely with other support groups within the faculty similarly focused on graduate and early career researchers' welfare, such as Academics Anonymous (AA), the Early Career Academics (ECA) Network, and the faculty staff team responsible for GR development.

Monthly meetings of the RSA committee have been held. Ad-hoc communication and meetings took place between the RSA committee and faculty staff (Manager, Research and Industry, and Assistant Dean, Graduate Research). These meetings provided an avenue for communicating issues that had arisen amongst the cohort and helped to work through the diverse challenges they faced.

The RSA also plays an active role in facilitating and maintaining positive cohort engagement through the MSD RHD Support Whatsapp group. This year, following GR cohort feedback, it was decided to make the MSD RHD Support Chat a 'GR Only' space. The chat group had been set up by RSA in 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic, as a way of staying connected through the challenging and isolating times of lockdowns, and the enormous change to the GR experience brought about by remote work. Previously, members of staff and faculty were included in the group. However, as well as providing valuable research and candidature related support and information for GRs, the chat group had become a relaxed place for light-hearted 'banter', occasional sharing of photographs, and the organisation of social events. It was felt by some, and agreed by the RSA in consultation with faculty, that the GRs needed to maintain a relaxed place for candid communication with other GRs. A message was posted asking for any non-GRs to voluntarily remove themselves and this occurred without a problem.

Achievements and highlights for the Executive of 2023 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;
- Maintaining an informal presence in the MSD RHD Support WhatsApp chat group to encourage positive and inclusive cohort engagement for GRs, whether they be located in Melbourne or elsewhere;
- Co-organised the Wellbeing Day event in collaboration with the ECA Network, which focused on connection, wellbeing, and professional skills development;
- Advised in the implementation of the inaugural ABP GR Symposium and the MakerSpace info-sessions for GRs;
- Ongoing publication of the MSD Student Directory (updated every six months);
- Pulse check of the cohort; and

- Individualized communications were sent to welcome and inform every candidate at their commencement.

Challenges included:

- Limited funding opportunities compared to previous years and relying only on GSA Annual Funding made planning for the events more challenging.
- Positively RSA was involved in more events this year (due to 2022 project grants being implemented in 2023, more efforts from within RSA and also faculty to engage the cohort, etc). However, it was challenging to balance time commitments between our candidature, RSA initiatives, and life outside of university. This is particularly difficult as RSA work is voluntary and not remunerated.
- The concentration of events (both RSA and non-RSA) in the last few months of 2023 compounded the load of organising and planning, as well as potentially reducing attendance numbers.

Opportunities for the 2024 committee include:

- Facilitate research training and networking opportunities for the cohort to develop skills for their GR research journey and the career beyond
- Continue to encourage cohort engagement and maintain the cohort's sense of connection via facilitating events and being active in the MSD RHD Support WhatsApp support group chat
- Explore collaborations or linking up with other groups focusing on graduate/early career researcher development (e.g., ECA Network, the Researcher Development Unit, Graduate Research committees in other faculties)
- Explore means of securing funding and growing the RSA reserves to support the planning and implementation of initiatives
- Improve the look and layout of the MSD RSA Directory according to feedback
- Continue to actively communicate with the ABP faculty to enhance the visibility of the cohort within the faculty and to support a wider range of activities conducted in collaboration between the faculty and RSA.

5. Research sub-committee

Achievements and highlights for the Research of 2023 include:

The RSA Research Committee committed to reinstating Oculus to showcase the work of MSD Graduate Researchers.

Oculus is a Melbourne School of Design (MSD) Research Students Association (RSA) publication that celebrates a selection of the diverse research undertaken by postgraduate researchers within the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning. The publication reflects the research outputs of PhD candidates that cross architecture, landscape architecture, urban design, planning and construction. There are 12 articles in Oculus 2023.

The research sub-committee focused this year on the finalisation and publication of Oculus. There was an informal launch on 12th December 2023 and Oculus 2023 still has not been formally launched. Therefore, the articles also can be accessed in [Oculus | Graduate Research | Melbourne School of Design](#).

Challenges included:

- There were 30 students who expressed interest in publishing their articles in Oculus, but in the end only 12 students submitted their articles. The challenge is to ensure that those who express interest submit their work.

Opportunities for the 2024 committee include:

- Formally launching Oculus 2023 and advertising for the publication in 2024 to GRs to participate.
- There are three annual meetings with the faculty's Research Committee on 11th March, 15th July, and 21st October 2024. A member of the RSA Research Committee needs to attend these meetings. They could also be a voice for GRs. The nominated person will replace Dorsa Kafili who will email Gemma Tan to introduce the new member.
- This year the RSA Research Committee did not proofread the submissions, but in the call for submissions we asked each participant to ask their supervisors to proofread. As each project is specific in its field, we believe this aspect needs to be highlighted in the call.
- Releasing a call for submissions for a 2024 edition of Oculus.
- Managing the process for the collation and publication of Oculus 2024.
- Organising a couple of peer-to-peer learning seminars if possible (ex. AA seminars in 2023).
- Creating opportunities for connection with other research committees beyond the Architecture faculty.

6. **Engagement sub-committee**

Achievements and highlights for the Engagement of 2023:

Although we couldn't secure a great amount of funding as in 2022, the Engagement sub-committee was still able to hold many amazing social events in 2023 thanks to the GSA grant. The events include:

- International Women's Day gathering for morning tea and discussion on 8th March with 19 GRs.
- 'Share a Plate' cultural dinner on 27th April
- Movie night on 15 June featured the Women King, with around 25 participants.
- 'Talk It Out Tuesday' Session on Tuesday 25th July. The session was attended by around 15 GRs and provided them with an opportunity to discuss issues in an anonymous and informal forum. The conversations at the session were extremely useful & reflected MSD RHD Support Chat WhatsApp group discussion that had occurred at the time. Some key issues discussed included supervisory relationships/issues, pressure in PhD including financial and teaching/PhD balance, and other life issues.
- Interactive Lunch and Talk with Simona Castricum on 29th August. The talk was a great opportunity for the GRs to hear and share their thoughts about the PhD journey and useful tips for candidature management. There were attendance of 20 GRs.
- Impromptu 'Meet-up to have Ice cream' on 23rd September. A random group of 5 GRs joined.
- The Writing Retreat at CERES on 3 November with participation of 29 GRs. The full day retreat consisted of writing sections led by two GRs (Paul and Rebecca); a generous and nutritious lunch funded by the RSA and provided by CERES onsite caterers; lunch time chats; trolling along the Merri Creek Trail; and self-funded evening drink at a local pub.
- End-of-year shared cultural lunch and Oculus launch on 12th December 2023.

Besides the events initiated by the RSA, there were several collaborative events organised with the Academics Anonymous (AA) and ECA Network throughout the year. Members of the RSA's committees were also members of the AA, or created working groups with ECA, and helped to organise guest presenters and coordinate the social and engagement aspects within those events.

**Challenges and opportunities for the 2024 committee:**

The average attendance of 2023's events was 20 each. This number is encouraging given the regular number of GRs studying on campus remains low. However, considering the total number of current GRs is around 120, with many outside Melbourne, the 2024 committee is encouraged to create initiatives that encourage more engagement from the cohort both on campus and online.

It is strongly recommended that the Engagement Committee and the RSA as a whole seek funding through grants as early as possible in the year, to promote more events for 2024. The GSA grant remains a valuable resource, and self-funded events such as the BYO Cultural Dinner/Lunch could be promoted more, however additional funding and prompt organisation allows for the continuation of popular events such as the successful 2022 off-site writing retreat, and the 2023 CERES writing retreat.

The social drinks at the Clyde bar have happened now and then during the year and should be maintained because they were great occasions for engagement outside the workplace.

Shared Culture Dinner 27 April
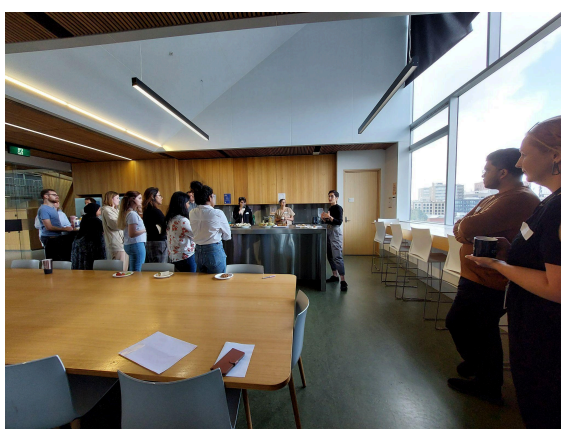
International Women's Day tea and discussion   *Movie Night*

Lunch and Talk 29 August   *Ice cream today on 23rd September*

CERES Writing Retreat 3rd November

End of year shared lunch and Oculus Launch

7. Advocacy sub-committee

Achievements and highlights for the Advocacy of 2023 included:

- Developed the 2023 MSD RSA Pulse Check survey to understand GRs' present needs and concerns.
- Conducted the Pulse Check survey and shared the findings with the RSA (which helped inform RSA's planning and activities for the year), the faculty, and students.
- Met with the faculty to address the requests and concerns of the GR cohort that emerged from the Pulse Check survey.
- Advocated for student wellbeing in particular in relation to graduate researcher spaces and student-supervisor relationships.
- Furniture was obtained for the GR kitchen on L3 to create comfortable reading/studying and social spaces to foster vibrant GR relationships and reduce stress.
- An open dialogue was created between the Assistant Dean of Graduate Research Crystal Legacy and the Research Team, Caroline Deacon, Janine Campbell and Sally Jones to foster collaboration between staff and graduate students.
- Regular meetings will be held between these teams to ensure GR and staff continue to feel connected and to create energy between GR cohort and staff too.
- Out of this improved dialogue came the idea of hosting regular morning teas for staff and GRs combined to enable connections across groups.
- Met with members of Academics Anonymous and Faculty Research Team (Crystal, Sally, Janine and Caroline) to discuss how to absorb the legacy of AA into the future.
- Held an RSA Advocacy roundtable with representatives from RSA and GR cohort to discuss and prioritise issues for 2024. Key concerns raised were student-supervisor relationships, casual contract fairness and improved disability advocacy.

Challenges included:

- Some issues are difficult to resolve as there is no good pathway to meaningful action. E.g. providing coat hooks for GRs could be easily resolved by installing removable 3M hooks - but whose responsibility is this and who funds it?
- Response rate to survey is still low. While GRs tend to have an opinion about the sorts of things asked in the survey, they don't appear to want to invest the time in responding to the survey.

Opportunities for the 2024 committee include:

- Conduct Pulse Check Survey or similar - perhaps hold a forum to raise issues/questions instead of a Pulse survey. It might be less work and more effective.
- Follow up on items raised in previous survey and action wherever possible.
- Continue as the conduit between student concerns and faculty - with focus on improving student-supervisor relationships, and advocating for fairer casual work practices for GRs and increased disability advocacy.
- Engaging with Graduate Research Committees in other faculties to scale up advocacy if this is seen as valuable.

- Continue to advocate for in person formal and informal connections between GR cohort and staff/faculty.
- Establish some format for peer-to-peer learning and other valuable sessions that were hosted by Academics Anonymous in 2023.
- Relaunch the Buddy program to pair first/ second year GRs with more experienced GRs and ECAs.