



University of Melbourne

2020

ANNUAL REPORT

MSD Research Student Association

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1. **Executive Summary**

The 2020 Research Students Association (RSA) committee was elected to office in February 2020 and starting in March, it has worked tirelessly to support the research student cohort through the lockdown resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic around the world. We hope that work done this year has helped further develop an ethos of support and collegiality among graduate researchers, while providing a strong foundation for the 2021 committee to build on. Our nine-member committee comprises an Executive and sub-committees across Research, Social activities and Advocacy. The committee has a focus on:

- 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.

Further, since our year started with the pandemic and the lockdown, the committee rapidly conducted a pulse check for the cohort to identify their urgent needs given the new work from home conditions. Disruption to research, caregiving responsibilities, and mental well-being were among the primary concerns. This guided the committee's work over the year. The committee has worked hard in a difficult year and this report offers a summary of this work, 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 to achievements, highlights and challenges, the Executive and each subcommittee has provided suggestions for the 2021 committee. This has been done in order to aid 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 further opportunities for mutual support and development among graduate researchers.

3. Introducing Us...

The 2020 MSD RSA committee includes nine-members – five men and four women, four domestic and five 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 able for election to the committee. We run elections annually in accordance with our constitution (attached). There is no fee to apply or join: we want committee membership to be broadly 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, Social and Advocacy. The year 2020 saw the formal reduction of committee sizes following the change in constitution at the start of 2020. This was also the second full year on Advocacy committee's work. Given the pandemic and lockdown, activities were 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 2020 includes:

- Jarrod Haberfield – President
- Chigozie Ndukwe – Treasurer
- Rewa Marathe – Secretary
- Onur Tumturk– Research Committee
- Sajal Chowdhury – Research Committee
- Carolina Isabel Maria Rivera Yevenes – Social Committee
- Iain Lawrie – Social Committee
- Paris Hadfield – Advocacy Committee
- Katie Skillington – Advocacy Committee

We are guided in our work by a committee constitution.

4. **Executive Committee**

In addition to providing support to the sub-committees, the Executive committee of the RSA was particularly focused this year on easing the transition to working from home. Regular monthly meetings were held between the executive committee, the advocacy committee with members of the faculty (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 identify the diverse challenges they faced.

Achievements and highlights for the Executive of 2020 include:

- Managing communication and working in collaboration with the Advocacy Committee over the year to support the cohort;
- Establishment of Student Directory;
- Identification of sub-groups by discipline;
- Regular pulse check of the cohort; and
- Two welcome events for incoming students at the start of each intake.

Challenges included:

- Ensuring consistent engagement with the cohort given limited availability of time and the lockdown; and
- Committee's role was advocacy heavy this year but it was hard to follow up on results given the committee's limited power for representation beyond the faculty.

Opportunities for the 2021 committee include:

- Restarting offline activities for the cohort as the pandemic is managed further and vaccines are available for all; and
- No funds were used this last year. The new committee can explore means of growing the limited reserves.

Future events will require funding from the GSA or other sources. The Executive acknowledges with sincere thanks the commitment and contribution of all committee members, and the support of faculty staff and academics: David Nichols, Sally Jones, Jane Trewin and Caroline Deacon.

5. Research sub-committee

Achievements and highlights for the Executive of 2020 include:

The research sub-committee focused this year on working with faculty staff towards re-starting the once-annual publication, Oculus, as well as organising candidate-led research forums. Two panel talks were conducted with the aim of supporting the cohort given the changing academic and research sectors due to the COVID-19 outbreak and lockdown. The forums succeeded in providing an informal and friendly environment for graduate researchers to share stories and learn from colleagues.

Opportunities for the 2021 committee include:

- Progressing to the next stage of re-launching the Oculus publication, including releasing a call for submissions for a 2020 edition;
- Continue running candidate-led forums, guided by feedback from colleagues as to subjects of interest;
- Work with faculty staff to run events with newly-provided research funding, secured during 2019;
- Continue to develop stronger relationships with faculty staff to identify and further support shared research priorities; and
- Teaching during a PhD panel talk has created opportunities for future collaborations with BEL+T (Built Environment Learning + Teaching) group.

6. Social sub-committee

The Social Committee's work was significantly disrupted over 2020 due to limits on face-to-face gatherings. Combined with a sense of fatigue and the limitations of using online platforms for social events (allowing one person to talk at a time is challenging in larger groups), much was postponed. A 'meet and greet' for new students was budgeted and organised at the beginning of 2020, but due to the pandemic did not proceed.

On April 23rd the Social committee offered a welcome PhD meeting for the 2020 cohort. The meeting was focused on sharing main ideas about the pre-confirmation process.

Challenges included:

The COVID-19 crisis severely impacted the ability to undertake social activities, as noted above. Isolation and additional home-schooling and other requirements limited the committee's ability to arrange other activities within parameters of the health and university restrictions.

Opportunities for the 2021 committee include:

With restrictions easing and an urgent need to reconnect and build social capital among the RSA cohort, there are substantial opportunities to re-commence multiple formal and informal social events through 2021. Particular focus will be on new students (concerning 2020 and 2021) and those not residing in Melbourne.

7. **Advocacy sub-committee**

Achievements and highlights for the year included:

- Advocacy for student wellbeing and working conditions during the COVID-19 crisis;
- RHD Pulse Check Survey and sharing those outcomes with the faculty (and WhatsApp support chat group);
- Assisted in setting up the RSA Town Hall meetings with faculty;
- Communication with the faculty on behalf of the students;
- Highlighting the challenges faced by students to the faculty; (and)
- Meeting with the GSA to represent the cohort's concerns.

Challenges included:

- While appreciating the attentiveness and compassion of the faculty's professional staff during the COVID crisis, it appears that many 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;
- It is unclear how effective our role can be and unclear how much the faculty actually wants to 'give' to RHDs;
- Limited support from GSA; and
- Declining interest of the wider cohort in the cohort as a group.

Opportunities for the 2021 committee include:

- Continue as the conduit between student concerns and faculty, including cohort-wide surveys and statistics to support proposed actions;
- Potentially embedding "advocacy" across the executive, research, and social committee portfolios for a streamlined approach in current context (subject to future expansion of committee);
- Engaging with Grad Research Committees in other faculties to scale up advocacy.
- Access to software etc;
- Need for follow up on all the issues communicated with the faculty
- Doing another pulse check - The pulse check has helped in supporting the demands/requests made by the students (facts and figures) even for the faculty as they represent our interests to the chancellery and others in the University.
- Reframing MSD RSA's charter to highlight advocacy – there has been some discussion to date regarding whether advocacy work should sit within each sub-committee, rather than as a stand-alone entity. To be discussed further during 2021.
- Clearer communication from the faculty on what the RSA can do;
- Follow up / engage with new Graduate Research Plan implementation;
- 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