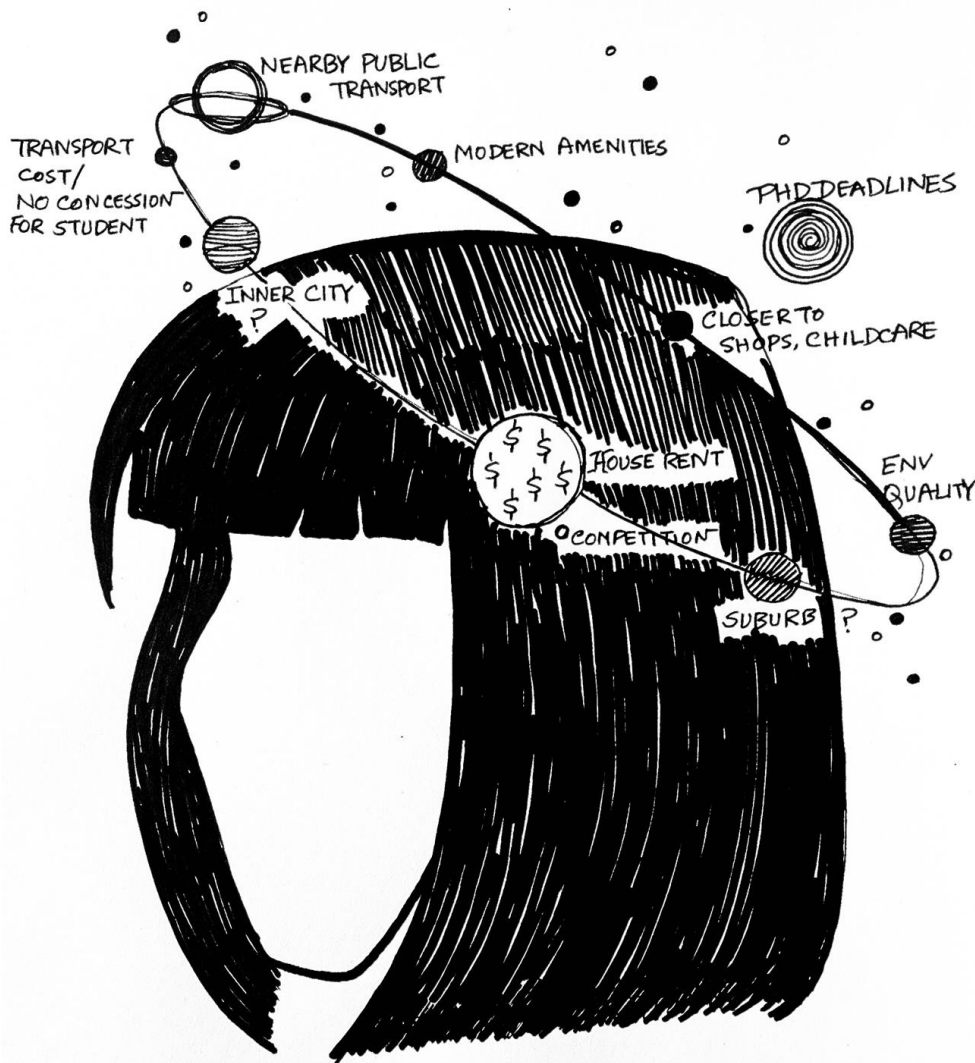




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Melbourne School
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THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

“Where you live can truly be life changing”: Exploring the hidden housing curriculum of graduate researchers at the University of Melbourne

*“My mind becomes a universe filled with celestial bodies representing my housing problems and mental health. The largest body symbolizes the challenge of affording rent. The inner city and suburban bodies create dilemmas, where the latter offers peace but is far from public transport. Other bodies juggle with environmental quality, competition with other renters, proximity to shops and childcare and modern amenities. There's an outlier named 'PhD deadlines' which is constantly hovering around amidst all complexities. Feeling overwhelmed, a chaotic journey through this universe, seeking a balance between affordability, convenience, and comfort”
(female, international graduate researcher)*

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Disclaimer

This report is provided for informational purposes only and is not intended as professional advice. The authors have taken all reasonable measures to ensure the information in this report is accurate at the time of publishing. The authors of this report assume no responsibility for any errors or omissions, or for any losses or damages resulting from the use of the information contained herein. The views and opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the University of Melbourne.

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Abbreviations

IGR	International Graduate Researcher (PhD and MPhil)
DGR	Domestic Graduate Researcher (PhD and MPhil)
GR	Graduate Researcher (PhD and MPhil)
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HDR	Higher degree by research
SES	Socioeconomic status
N	Sample size
M	Mean
SD	Standard Deviation
PBSA	Purpose built student accommodation

1. Executive Summary

Despite the centrality of graduate researchers undertaking a PhD, universities often ignore the voices of doctoral researchers. In the context of an increasingly internationalised cohort in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), graduate researchers' access to university, their identities, their visa status, and their socio-economic and racial backgrounds are increasingly diverse. The Hidden Housing Curriculum project aimed to map the housing experiences of a diverse cohort of graduate researchers undertaking a PhD or MPhil at the University of Melbourne; and how this impacted their health and wellbeing. Specifically, the study aimed to unpack how the mechanisms within this housing context can shape health outcomes. The six-month project surveyed 259 graduate researchers and undertook four focus groups (along with some photovoice contributions) with both international and domestic graduate researchers undertaking either a PhD or MPhil at the University of Melbourne. It is important to note that while the participant sample may not directly represent the PhD cohort at the University of Melbourne, nor the cohort in Australia more broadly, nevertheless, the findings from this report shed light on areas that warrant attention from both the University of Melbourne and other HEIs in addressing graduate researcher housing needs.

1.1 Report Structure

The report briefly details the policy background on housing and graduate researchers, highlighting a notable scarcity of work addressing the health impacts of housing on graduate researchers within the Australian context. The subsequent sections detail the research project that leveraged a mixed-methods design. Findings from our mixed-methods survey, and focus groups are presented detailing the mechanisms underlying the mental wellbeing impacts of housing on graduate researchers at the University of Melbourne. In conclusion, recommendations for improvements are made.

1.2 Key findings

The report emphasises the challenges related to graduate researchers' housing experiences, in particular distinct experiences associated with on-campus, purpose-built student accommodation and private rental accommodation. It highlights the significance of social, cultural and economic capital in managing these challenges, with a focus on complexities tied to graduate researchers' financial support sources, specific accommodation needs of low socioeconomic status (SES) international graduate researchers and mental health and wellbeing. Considering these findings, the report then details some policy recommendations to be considered, along with suggestions for further research.

2. Background

2.1 Graduate Researchers and Housing

Graduate researchers undertaking a PhD or MPhil are central to university research output and impact, accounting for approximately 30-40 per cent of research work (Quilford, 2023). They constitute a flexible academic workforce that educates 1.6 million students yearly and carry out over one third of the nation's research (Quilford, 2023). However, only 40 per cent of Australia's 50,000 graduate researchers obtain a stipend, with the rest of the cohort being self-funded (Hare, 2023). Those that do receive a stipend, receive approximately \$30,000 AUD a year (indexed annually against inflation) which is only two-thirds of the national minimum wage of approximately \$43,000 AUD (Garland & Belward, 2022). This represents an all-time low of 30 per cent as a proportion of average full-time earnings; and situates graduate researchers well below the poverty line. This income deficit is compounded by the social conditions that many graduate researchers face, including casualised employment in low paying jobs, discrimination, cultural and language barriers, restricted social support networks and inexperience navigating and accessing the housing market.

When arriving from interstate or internationally, graduate researchers are often referred to either university-run residential colleges (with rents well-above market rent) or privately-run purpose-built student accommodation (PSBAs) that are affiliated with universities and offer apartment-style living close to campus. PSBAs tend to be cheaper to rent than residential colleges, with shared communal areas, rooms that are furnished; with utilities (like water, electricity and internet) included as part of the fees. While applying to PSBAs is relatively straight forward, it is still often more expensive than market rent, and is unsuitable for families who may require larger spaces. Also, due to their official ties to a university, PSBA providers are often exempt from adhering to Residential Tenancies Acts that offer protections including minimum housing standards, regulated rent increases, safeguards for eviction and the capacity to request rent reductions because of financial hardship (UMSU Legal Service, 2023). Irrespective of these drawbacks, there is a shortfall of 17 PSBA beds for every one student (Property Council of Australia, 2023). Given these constraints, the majority of graduate researchers will often opt for private rental accommodation as a more affordable housing option (Urbis, 2018). While generally cheaper, many privately rented inner-city apartments are criticised for being small and poorly designed, with the private rental application process sometimes being harder, especially for international students who do not have a local rental history or lack certain documentation.

Irrespective of housing form, graduate researchers are grappling with an affordability and availability crisis that parallels the challenges faced by renters across Australia. International graduate researchers (IGRs) stand out as a particularly vulnerable demographic, often faced with a 'triple precarity' of precarious housing, citizenship status, and income (Martino et al., 2022). This positioning means IGRs are more likely to rent than domestic graduate researchers (DRs) – and experience housing discrimination and exploitation within an expensive and insecure private rental sector (Morris et al., 2020). Further, IGRs face obstacles in manoeuvring through the housing system such as demanding paperwork, substantial deposits, additional fees, and occasionally the need for a domestic guarantor (Huston et al., 2015). This is compounded due to IGRs socioeconomic positioning with legislation that restricts work hours, a low scholarship stipend, and a reliance on casual teaching (Ruming & Dowling, 2017).

This 'hidden curriculum' or 'housing hustle' has become central to the university experience and shapes different housing, academic, socioeconomic and health pathways (Koutsouris et al., 2021; Sotomayor et al., 2022). For example, the challenges inherent in research work – such as mounting pressure to publish, strained relationships with supervisors, and encounters with bullying and various forms of harassment – significantly influence the experience of candidates struggling within a precarious housing landscape. In this landscape it is not surprising that there is a mental health crisis brewing among graduate researchers, with heightened reports of mental health problems, encompassing anxiety, increased levels of depression, and

thoughts of suicide (Levecque et al., 2017; Mackie & Bates, 2019). The disparity between graduate researchers growing economic contributions and the increasing abstraction of their everyday housing realities prompts critical inquiries for health and housing researchers. A better understanding of how housing experiences impact the health of graduate researchers can offer opportunities for improvements to our existing understandings of diversity, equity and inclusion. Specifically, knowledge of these experiences can be used to better inform strategies and tools that the university can leverage to improve housing access and wellbeing outcomes for graduate researchers.

2.2 The Project

The Hidden Housing Curriculum project aimed to better understand the housing experiences of graduate researchers at the University of Melbourne and how this impacted their mental wellbeing. The data for this study was collected in two phases (survey and focus groups) over approximately a six-month period (November 2023- April 2024). It was led by researchers at the NHMRC Centre of Research Excellence in Healthy Housing [1196456], at the Melbourne School of Population and Global Health (approved by The University of Melbourne Ethics Committee, 27966). The steering group committee consisted of a diverse cohort spanning both professional and research staff, from different career stages. Specifically, there were graduate researchers from the MSPGH, School of Geography, the Melbourne School of Design and Graduate Student Association (GSA) who provided input and offered high level advice.

The formulation of the central research aim drew inspiration from housing and health research that emphasises the significance of **financial, material, and relational factors** in the interconnection between precarious housing and wellbeing (Bentley et al., 2019; Martino et al., 2022) with a realist focus on unpacking the mechanisms that shape wellbeing outcomes. The financial dimension, which garners considerable scholarly and public attention (Bentley et al., 2019; Chung et al., 2020), generally pertains to whether residents are experiencing housing stress, defined as spending over one-third of their income on accommodation. Material aspects of housing can encompass housing quality, access to key destinations, services and resources; and an individual's ability to fulfill their needs within this environment. Relational considerations involve interpersonal factors, such as cohabitation with others, proximity to significant individuals and support networks, and concerns related to personal safety and security of tenure.

3. Methods

A realist epistemology was adopted that recognises that each person's experience can impact their mental health, yet that such experiences are contingent on social and cultural context. A mixed-methods design was utilised: quantitative measures were used to describe housing characteristics and mental health in aggregate; and qualitative methods were used to describe the specific conditions and context under which these broader associations occurred. The comparison of results across methods, exploring both survey data on housing and mental health and focus group data that offers subjective context, allowed for a triangulation of findings, leading to a more holistic depiction of the relationship between housing and health.

3.1 Data sources

A survey was conducted through Qualtrics for six weeks between November-December 2023. The survey included multiple choice and open-ended questions covering demographics, housing characteristics and health. Survey recruitment occurred through self-enrollment in the online survey through university and social media advertisements (e.g., Facebook) and through posters across various locations on campus. Participants were asked to complete an online consent form, and the survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

According to the UoM annual report, there are approximately 3,500 doctoral students at the University of Melbourne. It is recommended that for populations over 1,000, a minimum ratio of 10 percent (in this case 350 responses) is advisable to ensure representativeness of the sample. Our survey received 259 valid responses. All participants were volunteers and were given the option to enter a draw to win a \$50 gift voucher for completing the survey; and also, to leave their contact details if they wished to participate in the follow-up focus groups.

The researchers hosted four focus groups with approximately four-eight people per group in April 2024. The participants were given a \$50 gift voucher for their contribution. While the researchers sought to recruit a diversity of representation (e.g., IGRs, GRs with dependents, GRs from regional / rural areas; and First Nations or gender diverse GRs), most participants who signed up for the focus groups identified as IGRs (80%). Participants were asked to complete an online consent form also. The focus groups were conducted onsite and in person at the MSPGH to discuss graduate researchers' experiences. During the sessions we had some outliers who wanted to attend (i.e., two master's students). It was not deemed ethical to exclude these participants, who indicated that they wanted their voices heard – and expressed that this felt like the “only forum open to them”. Their contributions to the discussions provided additional context around housing and the university experience.

3.2 Measures

3.2.1 Survey Data

Demographic data were gathered, encompassing gender, age, country of birth, identity within the LGBTIQ+ spectrum, relationship status, income sources, and household income. The questions in this study were adapted from several other housing surveys and instruments allowing for potential comparisons with other national datasets (e.g., the Australian Housing Conditions Dataset; ABS 2021; (Cook et al., 2021). Housing measures included questions on affordability, suitability, security and neighbourhood. We used the 10-item Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) as the main mental health variable. The sums from K10 items range from 10 to 50, and a standard cut-off of 25 was used to generate a binary indicator of high and very high level of psychological distress.

3.2.2 Focus Group Data

Focus group participants were asked questions about where and who they lived with; what they liked/disliked about their housing and neighbourhood; how this impacted their relationships and wellbeing; and what they thought could be done to better address their housing needs. The focus groups took approximately 90 minutes each, were audio recorded and transcribed. Focus group participants were presented with an optional follow-up photovoice/illustration activity. Participants were invited to take photos or do an illustration that explores the reasons, emotions and experiences associated with their housing and research experience. Two participants contributed, the first included at the beginning of this report, and the second included at the end of the report.

3.3 Data Analysis

Descriptive and regression analyses were conducted on variables of interest in the survey. Analysis of the focus group data was grounded in a realist approach (Pawson & Tilley, 1997) and a 5-stage thematic analysis framework informed by Ritchie and Spencer (1994) was adopted. This included data familiarisation across team members, development of a coding framework, potential themes proposed to the participants for member checking, themes reviewed and refined, and the summarisation of data and finally, mapping and interpretation of health-related housing experiences. This comprehensive process aimed to capture nuanced insights into participants' experiences and the intricate details of the mechanisms that shaped their housing-related challenges and impacts on well-being.

4. Findings

4.1 Survey

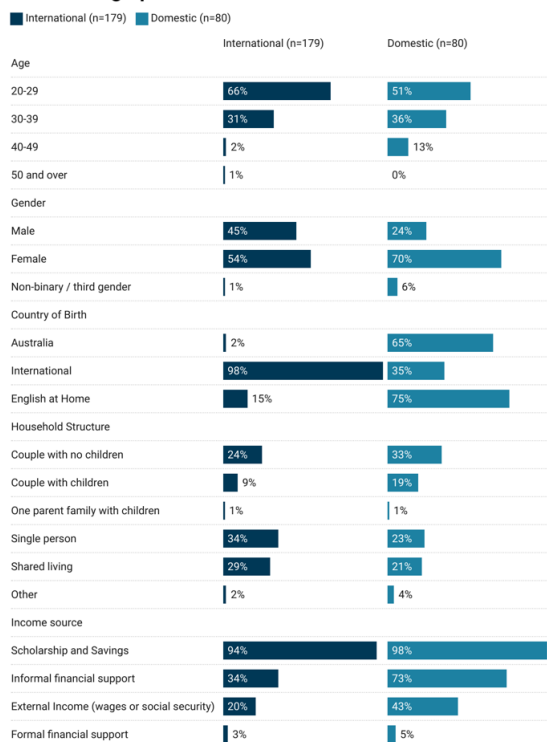
The survey received 259 valid responses (approximately 7.4% response rate) from graduate researchers undertaking either a PhD or MPhil, with 93 per cent full-time and 61 per cent post confirmation. The top three participating Faculties were Engineering and Information Technology (44%), Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences (24%) and Science (10%). 179 IGRs (70%) and 80 (30%) DGRs responded. In the IGR cohort, 43 countries, and 36 languages were represented.

4.1.1 Participant Characteristics

Figure 1 provides a detailed breakdown of the categorical demographic and other variables of the survey participants. Among the participants (n=259), more than half of both the IGRs (66%) and the DGRs (51%) were aged between 20-29; and approximately a third between 30-39 (31% and 36% respectively). 54 per cent of IGRs and 70 per cent of DGRs who did the survey were female; 45 and 24 per cent were male (IGR and DGR respectively); and 1 and 6 per cent identified as non-binary/third gender; with 1 per cent Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. As one might expect, 98 per cent of IGRs and 35 per cent of DGRs were born overseas; and 15 per cent of IGRs and 75 per cent of DGRs spoke English at home. In terms of household structure, more than double the DGR cohort were a couple with children (9 and 19% respectively) and 33 per cent of DGRs and 24 per cent of IGRs were coupled with no children. 34 per cent of IGRs were single compared to 23 per cent of DGRs; with 29 per cent of IGRs in shared living households compared to 21 per cent of DGRs. Moreover, while most IGRs (94%) and DGRs (98%) had scholarship and savings as part of their income, IGRs were less likely to receive other financial support, such as informal financial support through family and friends than DGRs (34% versus 73%) and less likely to receive external income from wages and Centrelink (20% versus 43%). Also, the mean income of each cohort differed, the monthly mean income for IGRs was \$2658 AUD (SD=\$868) and for DGRs \$3451 AUD (SD=\$2126). Regression analysis found there was a high correlation between international graduate researcher status and lower income ($P=0.00519$, effect size Cohen's $d=0.452$).

In terms of housing profile, IGRs were more likely to reside in PBSAs than DGRs (17% versus 9% respectively), and were more likely to reside in high-rise apartment buildings (57% versus 30% respectively). The main reason for renting was an inability to purchase housing (78% IGRs and 80% for DGRs). IGRs were more likely to source their housing from friends and/or family than DGRs (24% versus 14%). Last, IGRs home locations tended to cluster in the inner city and inner east areas of Melbourne relative to the DGR cohort (see Figure 2).

Sociodemographic Profile



International mean monthly income: \$2658 (sd=\$868); Domestic mean monthly income: \$3451 (sd=\$2126)

Housing Profile

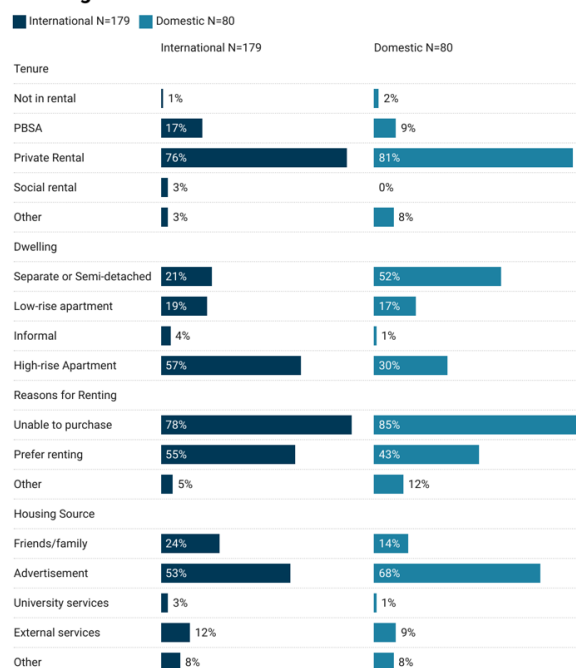


Figure 1 (left to right): Sociodemographic Profile; Housing Profile

Home locations of graduate researchers

Residency status

■ Domestic ■ International

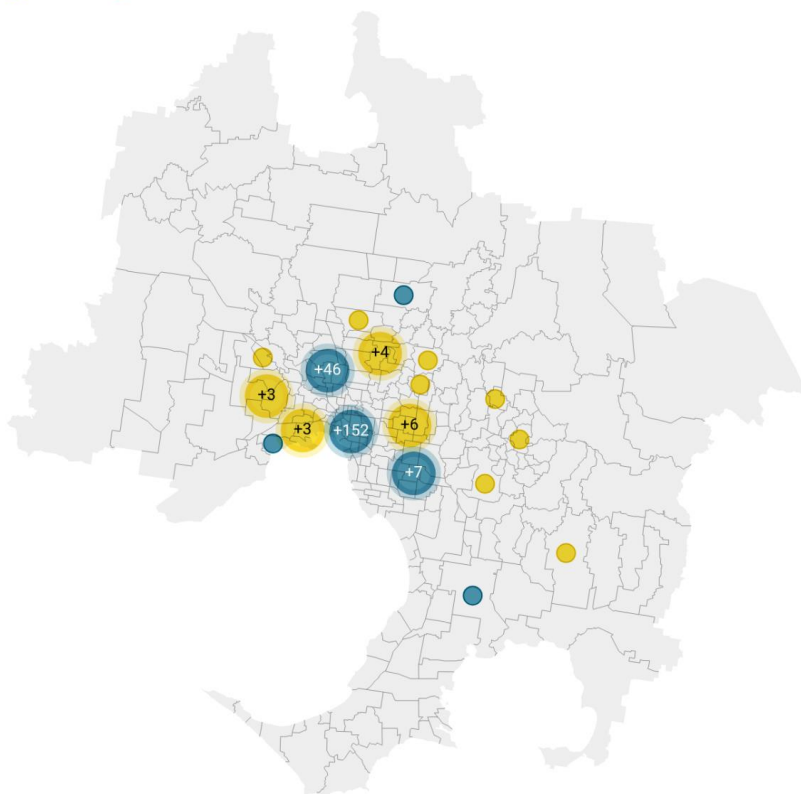


Figure 2: Participant home locations across Melbourne by Residency Status

4.1.2 Housing Characteristics

Affordability, quality and security were all characteristics that defined graduate researchers’ housing experiences. The following sections will provide a breakdown of these findings.

HOUSING AFFORDABILITY

Figure 3 provides a detailed breakdown of some financial factors associated with housing affordability. IGRs were much more likely than DGRs to experience housing affordability stress which is when someone pays more than 30 per cent of their income on housing costs (94% versus 61% respectively). This was highly correlated (using Cramer’s V) also ($P < 0.00001$, effect=0.430). Other factors that were highly correlated with IGR status included ability to pay for essential ($P=0.00791$ effect=0.202), and non-essential ($P=0.000144$ effect=0.273) items, and access to a substantial meal at least once a day ($P=0.000144$ effect=0.173). Critically, 11 per cent of IGRs do not have access to one meal per day. Further, overcrowding analysis of the data using the Canadian National Occupancy Standard (CNOS) method¹, found that overcrowding was highly correlated with IGR status ($P=0.00732$).

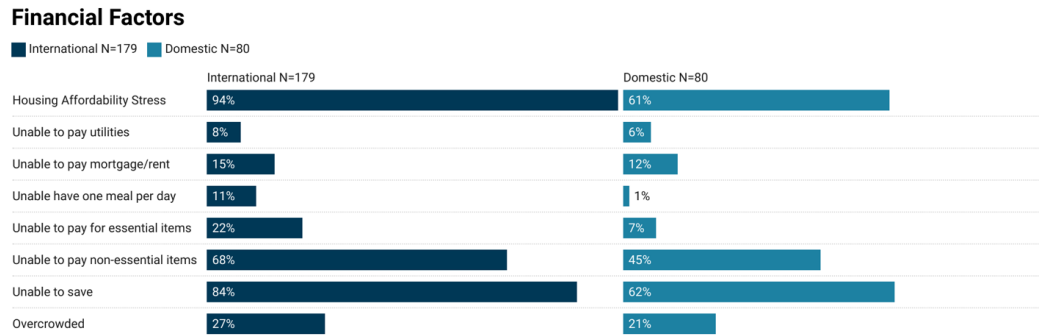


Figure 3: Financial factors

¹ The Canadian National Occupancy Standard (CNOS) is used to assess whether a dwelling has a sufficient number of bedrooms for the occupants, based on specific criteria

Respondents detailed financial challenges:

*"I spend almost every day **worrying about not making enough money** or finding a second job to help supplement my rent. At the moment, I'm currently spending my savings and getting some financial help from my single mother, but I don't know how long I can sustain that"*

"I can't provide for our child"

"Renting an apartment is prohibitive, as the prices are exorbitant, and the scholarship does not cover living expenses. The landlord increases without justification, leading to an additional burden of finding a new place to live. The university residence is also expensive"

HOUSING QUALITY

Figure 4 provides a detailed breakdown of the quality factors associated with housing. Participants were asked: "Since living in your current home, have you experienced any of the following issues?"

The top three housing quality issues that graduate researchers faced included noise from outside (55%), difficulties keeping the house warm (48%), and noise coming from neighbours (45%). A few key differences between the IGR and DGR cohort to note are that 55 per cent of IGRs (compared to 21 per cent of DGRs) felt that they experienced restrictions in the use of their home; 52 per cent of IGRs (versus 30 per cent of DGRs) struggled with noise from neighbours; and 14 per cent (compared to 3 per cent of DGRs) felt they lived in an overcrowded home.

Participants were also asked "How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the following aspects of your current home?" The top three items that caused graduate researchers to be "very dissatisfied" were private outdoor space (14%); acoustic comfort (12%) and communal outdoor space (10%). Inversely, graduate researchers found that the top three items that they were "very satisfied" with included location (43%), public transport access (43%), and privacy (31%). The top three housing problems reported were outside noise (transport/construction) (61%); restrictions on use of home (e.g., pets) (55%); and difficulties keeping house warm (55%).

Housing Quality

Domestic International Total

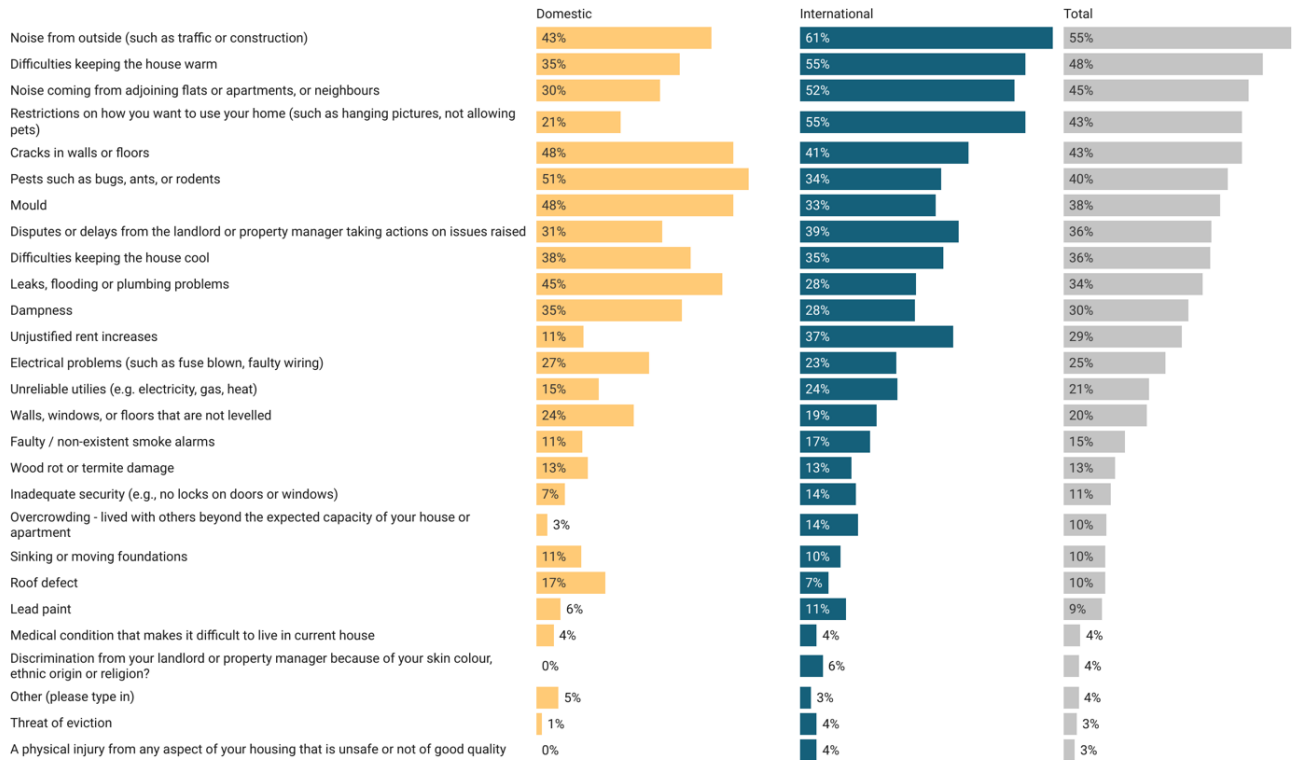


Figure 4: Quality factors

Respondents detailed access and quality challenges:

“Since arriving in Melbourne from overseas in 2023 with my wheelchair and assistance dog, I have had a horrendous experience with multiple accommodation difficulties. I was subjected to ableism, discrimination, racism, extortion, theft, bullying and harassment, offensive commentary and blatant lying by private Rental Provider staff, University of Melbourne staff, and many other people. It took almost three months for the University of Melbourne to finally tell me there was an available 'accessible' room in a University-owned residential college which was vacant since I arrived. I was traumatised and hospitalised due to these experiences”

“I've lived in three different places since moving to Melbourne. The first place was a tiny and horribly unhygienic studio that I was not able to inspect before moving in. I couldn't cook without triggering the fire alarm and I never felt comfortable "in my own space". I made plans to move out as soon as I got there and I paid for it reluctantly though happily. I felt like I was being pressured to stay by the agency though. Horrible. The second place was more dorm-like and started off fine because it was not running at capacity. After more students and working holiday makers came in, I was sharing the three kitchens with 70 people. It was filthy. We had pests. Again, I found myself unable to live comfortably in my own space. The common areas of this dorm space tended to be loud and unfortunately showed usual signs of alcohol use from the night before. I didn't want to spend time at home and would love to spend all day at my desk at my research institute, but I lived near a place that sometimes had unsavoury folk at night so I couldn't get home too late. Also, there was no Wi-Fi! When my six-month lease was up and rates increased, I high-tailed it out of there with a new friend I met at uni. It took us two months to look for a new place and we praise God that we somehow "beat" the competition for my current place. I feel at peace now. I can grab a snack whenever. I can stay up late and open the fridge without smelling second-hand vape on the way. I live in a place as clean as me and my flatmate like it to be (very clean!). Our lease is longer than usual, and we wonder what will happen when it is over, but we hope to not have to move again. We've already found a nice home at a great price point that is close to uni”

HOUSING SECURITY

Figure 5 provides a detailed breakdown of the security factors associated with graduate researchers' housing experiences. The survey found 58 per cent of IGRs and 37 per cent of DGRs are worried about losing their home. While the most common lease arrangement was six to twelve months for both DGRs and IGRs (60%), 65 per cent of IGRs had lived in their home for less than year versus 29 per cent of DGRs; and IGRs were more likely than DGRs to have experienced eviction (7% versus 3%). The survey also asked: “Have you ever had to stay in a hostile housing environment or abusive relationship because you had no other place to live?”. In total 13 per cent answered “yes” to this question and 9 per cent “preferred not to answer”.

Security Factors

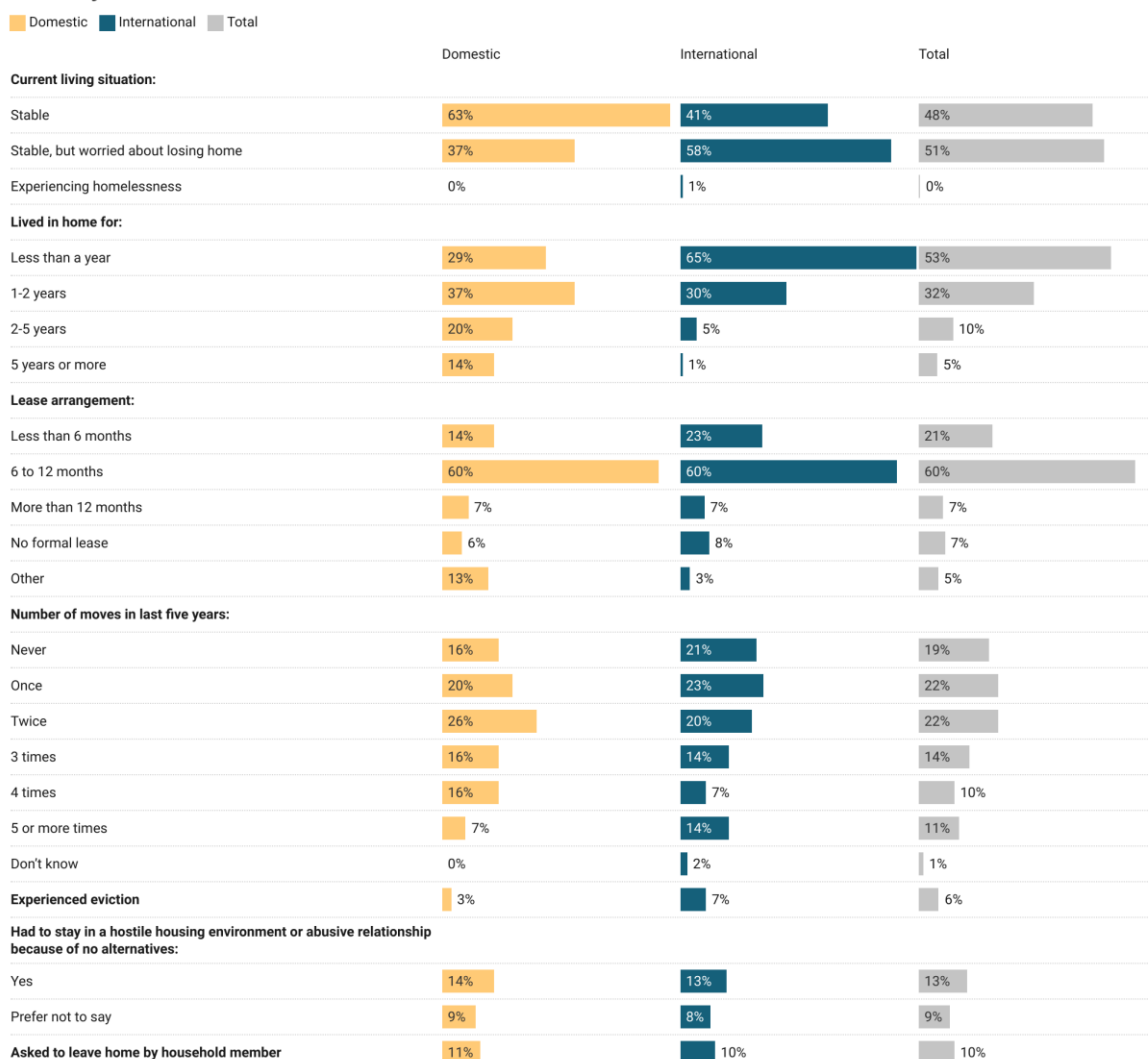


Figure 5: Security factors

Figure 6 provides a detailed breakdown of the top reasons graduate researchers wanted to move, with some distinct differences between cohorts. 78 per cent of IGRs and 54 per cent of DGRs indicated that they wanted to move for assorted reasons. The top three reasons included “worried that the rent will increase” (39% for IGRs and 19% for DGRs), “current dwelling too expensive” (33% for IGRs and 13% for DGRs) and “want to move to a better location” (27% for IGRs and 13% for DGRs).

Reasons for wanting to move

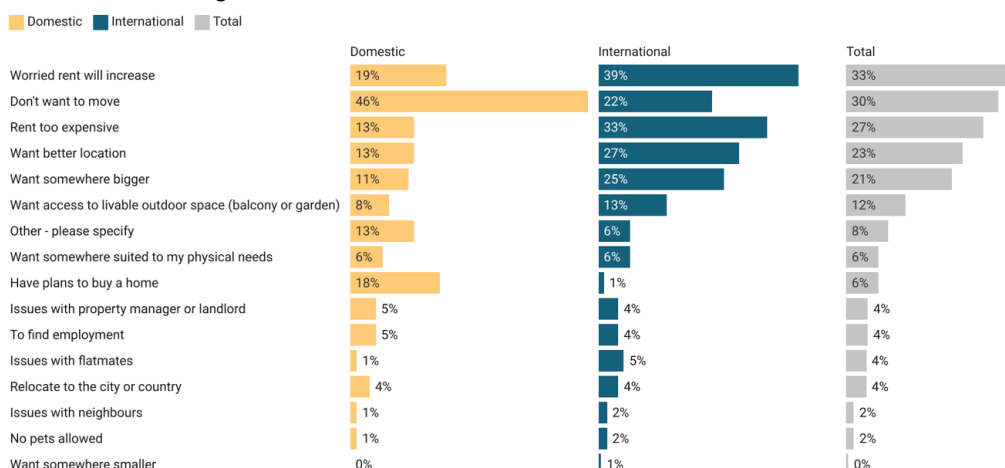


Figure 6: Reasons for wanting to move

Respondents detailed security challenges:

"It is hard to be accepted for a lease by an agency or landlord as an international student. I tried hundreds of applications for a place to rent and none were successful"

"I secured a rental, found out on day 1 [that it had] big mould problems. I had to liaison with VIC legal aid and consumers affair Victoria to terminate before possession, I had conflict with the landlord and I am now waiting for an appointment with VCAT to recoup moneys owed. Over this time, I was in temporary accommodation I was renewing weekly for around two months while looking for accommodation. Probably the most stressful period of several years, covid included, that very much impacted my mental health and my research output, and to be honest is the main reason I was interested in taking this survey on housing. Right now, the rental situation for students in Melbourne is completely ridiculous"

STUDY AND MENTAL HEALTH

The survey asked graduate researchers about how their housing impacted their research, study and health. Figure 7 provides a breakdown of how housing affordability, quality, and location impacted graduate researchers' study practices. Of note is that, except for the commute, IGRs rank higher across all metrics. That is, dwelling size (57%), quality (54%), and number of residents (47%) impacted IGRs ability to study at home, and cost (55%) impacted the amount of time that IGRs dedicated to research and study.

Study impacts

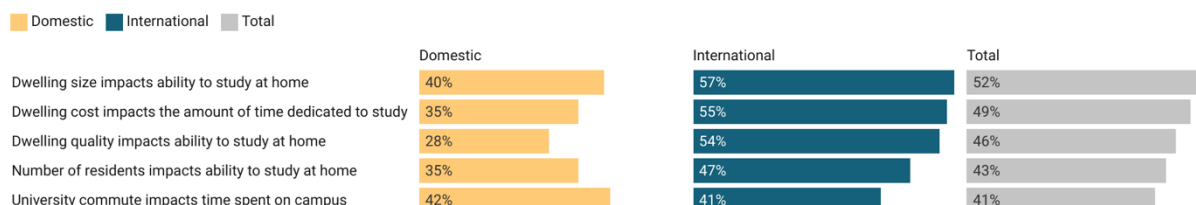


Figure 7: Study impacts

Further, Figure 8 provides a detailed breakdown of the health and wellbeing factors assessed. While both IGRs and DGRs reported fair/poor general health (14% and 18% respectively), approximately half of both cohorts (51% for IGRs, and 47% for DGRs) recorded high-very high psychological distress using the Kessler measure (K10). Moreover, a third (33%) of DGRs reported that they had a long-term health condition, impairment or disability; with 19 per cent of DGRs living in a household with someone experiencing a health condition, impairment or disability. In total, GRs felt their housing circumstances over the last 12 months had impacted their sleep quality (26%), mental health (26%), physical health (14%), and opportunities to engage in healthy eating practices (14%).

Health Factors

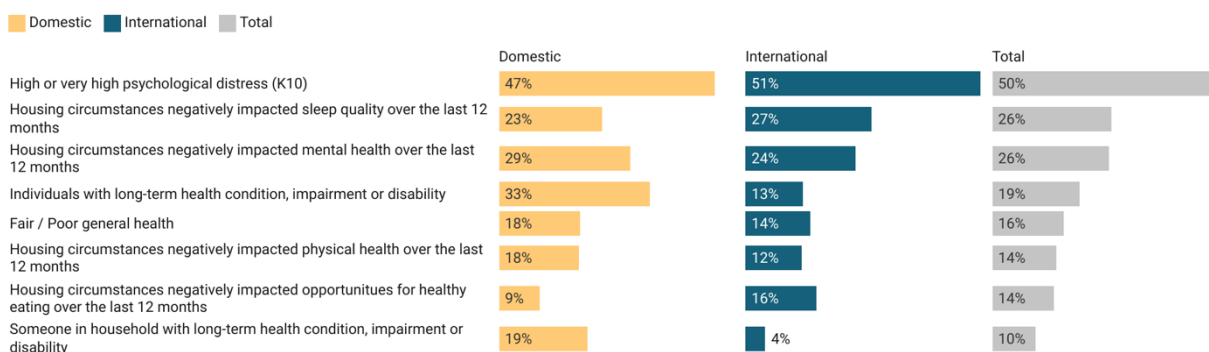


Figure 8: Health factors

Respondents detailed health challenges:

"My housing situation is now far better than it was, as I switched to part time and was finally able to buy my own home after obtaining full-time (though fixed-term) employment. Previously, though, my housing situation had a negative impact. My previous rental was full of mould and the landlord would do nothing about it. The one before that had a construction site next door for two years during COVID lockdowns. Both situations adversely affected my physical and mental health with flow on effects for my ability to progress my PhD. Now I am paying 60% of my income towards a mortgage that extends a decade beyond the normal retirement age, but at least I control my own destiny and no longer have the same housing issues as before"

"While living at College, I was often treated poorly with little empathy for my financial situation or cultural difficulties. The College posed a risk to my health and safety as I was stalked by a resident that got kicked out of university eventually. There is a lack of cultural awareness by staff members at the University"

ADDRESSING GRADUATE RESEARCHER HOUSING NEEDS

At the end of the survey, graduate researchers were asked: "In your opinion, what can be done to address the worsening rental crisis, especially for graduate researchers?" Graduate researchers indicated that they felt that the university could do more. One respondent indicated:

"Paying PhD students a living stipend. Or actually, just a stipend. I do not receive a stipend from the University, so I need to work three jobs (as well as my studies) to make ends meet. Not everyone at unimelb is from a privileged background. I am the first in my family to attend university, low SES, and have a family background of abuse and trauma which means there is no safety net or support. My work as a sessional tutor and research assistant is insecure, and I am definitely not paid in line with my hours for the tutoring. Yet I am expected to continue to meet deadlines and still do unpaid work for opportunities to get a job later. Pay graduate researchers enough to survive".

Another stressed:

"I think the university should really step up and have a system in place to help out international students. Either have a person that is designated to stand in for students for inspections, or even perhaps expand the accommodations the university can provide as the Graduate House is not

enough. A university with UniMelb's reputation, and above all DEPENDENCE on international students, should do a whole lot more than it currently does... which is pretty much nothing"

4.2 Focus Groups: Housing to put “your mental baggage away”

Focus group discussions offered greater context that highlighted that graduate researchers face challenges in finding a place to live, across different forms of housing, often negotiating social, cultural and economic capital. They revealed that housing significantly impacted the health of graduate researchers, especially mental wellbeing. As one IGR noted:

Housing is essential because that's where you can put your stuff away, your mental baggage away (IGR, female, FG2).

This ability to “put mental baggage away” was shaped by housing context such as affordability, location, quality (in terms of both the physical conditions and social environment), and security of tenure, including challenges in accessing housing. Thematic analysis revealed several mechanisms through which housing affected psychological and physical health such as financial strain; environments; overcrowding; social isolation; mobility/accessibility; stability and safety; and regulations, and policies.

4.2.1 Housing unaffordability: "It's like living on eggshells"

Graduate researchers indicated that they faced fierce competition for housing and were often paying above the market rate for housing. Many noted that their rents were more than 50 per cent of their income and that the PhD stipend was insufficient to cover housing costs; forcing them to supplement their stipend with paid (and often insecure) employment. As one IGR noted:

I pay 60 per cent of my stipend on rent and then bills. It's like living on eggshells. I am one missed payment away from being homeless. So that factors into the work ... I question doing the PhD everyday (IGR, male, FG1).

Graduate researchers indicated that they faced rapid increases to rent, with some examples given of PBSA providers that increased rent substantially over a short period of time (e.g., from \$300 AUD to \$500 AUD per week). Some had observed that the room rates were discretionary depending on when people moved into the PSBAs. Participants also spoke about the high cost of energy, public transport, and fresh food.

IGRs indicated that they felt particularly disadvantaged because they did not receive social support (i.e., healthcare or childcare subsidies) and, along with GRs, do not receive transport concessions. When rents did increase, participants indicated that they felt that they could not move due to moving costs. Moreover, many IGRs indicated that they relied on their savings (which they had not anticipated prior to coming) and spoke of trying to get free food at university. Overall, there graduate researchers felt that there was a discontent between the stipend which did not increase in line with cost of living/inflation increases. They indicated that this financially precarious landscape was a key cause of stress and anxiety.

4.2.2 Housing location: "Where you live can truly be life changing"

In terms of location, some graduate researchers indicated that they preferred Melbourne compared to Sydney because they could travel for free – and that Melbourne supported high-density housing. One participant lamented that Sydney was full of commercial buildings with no PBSA housing; and that there was better value for housing in Melbourne. However, many expressed frustrations that they were not entitled to public transport discounts given their low stipend; and wished that the “free tram zone” could be extended to include the University of Melbourne.

Some participants indicated that they lived far away (as far as Geelong) while others lived close to campus. Many graduate researchers indicated that they made trade-offs between choosing higher cost, smaller housing close to the University versus larger and more affordable housing further away. For example, either living in a small one- or two-bedroom apartment in the inner city, or a large, detached home in the suburbs. Some tried to apply for studios through the PBSAs, but found they were in demand and could not secure them. This trade-off impacted the degree to which graduate researchers felt “connected” to their cohort and the PhD experience. For example, one DGR noted:

The apartment is quite good, even though it's small. It's quite clean ... I'm just very grateful. It's a 10-minute walk [to uni] which is just a dream. I've never had this kind of convenience in my life, compared to my life living in [outer Melbourne] where I'd have to drive at least three hours a day. That's been life changing. Where you live can truly be life changing (DGR, female, FG4)

Key environmental characteristics of importance that participants noted included noise, nature, social infrastructure (third spaces), and easy access to public transport. Specifically, graduate researchers indicated that noise negatively impacted their ability to sleep and do research (and to make a home); and that access to nature and community spirit was beneficial to their mental health. When moving, some indicated that they sought to remain in the same location, looking for places near public transport.

Of note, many participants spoke about the intersection between where they lived and their relationship with healthy eating. That is, that their dwelling shaped where (and what type of food) they purchased, how (and to what extent) they prepared food, and last, how they managed food waste. One participant indicated that they had compared the supermarket options in the CBD versus the middle and outer suburbs and indicated that the CBD tended to have less fresh food variety and that the cost of groceries was higher. They also indicated that some kitchens (especially in some of the PSBAs) made it harder to cook and dispose of food.

4.2.3 Housing quality: "I felt trapped and found it hard to breathe"

Graduate researchers indicated that they had a diversity of household structures. Some lived alone, or with other researchers or students, or with their families (parents, spouses, children). Some lived with very young children or in multigeneration households (e.g., one IGR noted that their parents lived with them to help take care of children). Participants indicated that their dwelling size impacted their ability to study at home and shaped their ability to socialise with family and friends. Some participants indicated that their buildings did not support universal access; with some IGRs expressing a disconnect between what a “typical” home should be versus what they felt that had access to. One participant expressed that they needed “more space to live”, with many lamenting that much of the available housing was not family-friendly, with many spending more time at the office and only sleeping at home. Medium/higher density developments with communal areas were seen as supportive of building social capital yet sometimes seen as overcrowded and difficult to maintain in terms of cleanliness; with some reporting pest infestations.

Such a lack of hygiene was seen to have impacted one’s ability to use the home for activities such as cooking. Moreover, building material and design impacted access to natural light, ventilation, and humidity levels, and with many participants indicating that homes lacked insulation, air-conditioning or heating, as well as adequate natural light or shade:

The apartment was dark and small and it was not well ventilated. I could not stay in that apartment apart from when I went home to sleep, because I didn't know anything about the outside world when I woke up. I felt trapped and found it hard to breathe (IGR, female FG4).

Further to this, one participant indicated that there were tensions between wanting natural light and maintaining privacy and safety. Another graduate researcher noted that they were left for days without hot water, then without any water whatsoever. Overall, these experiences of housing quality were seen to impact the graduate researchers physical (ie asthma, mould causing allergies) and mental health. Many

stressed that these issues impacted their ability to do research, as well as impacted their relationship with others and/or intimate relationships.

4.2.4 Regulations, policies, practices and organisational systems: “like applying for a new job”

Most participants expressed that they had found the process of finding housing extremely time consuming, lacked transparency and that it was “like applying for a new job”. They spoke about “needing experience” to engage in the housing system and felt that they were often denied their housing rights from providers. Many graduate researchers expressed a lack of trust and confidence across a range of public institutions and expressed difficulties when exposed to unfair rental regulations, exclusionary policies and practices, and opaque organisational systems. For example, some noted that while the University offered residential colleges, that these colleges were prohibitively expensive with no family-friendly options. Moreover, others noted that while it was easier to access PBSAs than private rentals and colleges, that this ease of access came at a cost premium (ie higher than market rents) with often strict rules around use of the home. Inversely, while private rental was seen as a cheaper option, participants indicated that they struggled to secure these properties, especially so for IGRs.

IGRs indicated that they were unable to do virtual inspections prior to arriving, and lacked rental history or pay slips that can be used for rental applications. Moreover, IGRs expressed frustration at discrimination from real estate agents who encourage rent bidding for properties – as well as frustration at others taking advantage of new IGRs who also engage in bidding to sublease properties at much higher rents. Participants indicated that even once the home had been secured that they struggled to get repairs or maintenance completed, and that they were subject to discretionary rent increases, with little knowledge of the system:

I think education around this is really important because I'm a lawyer and I don't even know the [rental] processes and how to look into it. People aren't taught this at school. A lot of us end up renting at least once in our life and nobody teaches us. (DGR, male, FG4).

Despite these challenges, some participants indicated that they fared better navigating the housing system compared to other post-grad or undergrad students as they had a “regular” income from their stipend. Moreover, some participants spoke about how they engaged in informal acts of advocacy or relied on social connections to better support others to find housing. For example, one participant had filled out forms for others, bought furniture for them, and another had done an inspection on behalf of a friend. Critically, most graduate researchers noted that the time commitment of learning how to navigate the Australian housing system negatively impacted their research; and that the endemic housing insecurity created unease and stress; fearful that their home could be ripped away at any point.

4.2.5 University failing in their duty of care: “can you run your labs without us?”

Further to this, graduate researchers spoke about the importance of safety and the ontological security that housing offers and felt that the University was actively failing in their duty of care to support this aim. Many participants, especially IGRs, expressed frustration that the University provided tokenistic housing support and felt that the university could do more. Some suggested that the University could employ a specialised housing advocate to help guide them; and some suggested the University could head lease properties that could be used as transitional/short-term housing while new graduate researchers found permanent housing. In addition, some suggested the University offer housing subsidies for low-income cohorts, or seek to increase the stipends they offer to ameliorate the housing affordability crisis. Last, most participants expressed support for large scale investment in dedicated affordable housing that was below market rent:

I think the solutions of clear. The only thing that is very important is that the government or the university should understand that it's a job for graduate researchers. And they should focus forty hours per week on this job. And they can't do anything else. So I think that the only thing that the government

and the city should do is understand the situation of graduate researchers and the solutions will show themselves (IGR, female, FG2)

5. Discussion

The primary objective of the study was to explore how housing shapes the graduate research experience and mental wellbeing of graduate researchers at the UoM. It is important to note that while the participant sample may not represent the graduate research cohort at the University of Melbourne, nor the cohort more broadly in Australia, nevertheless, the findings shed light on areas that warrant attention from both the University of Melbourne and other higher education institutions (HEI). Central to the findings was that finding and securing suitable and affordable housing was a key priority for graduate researchers, aligning with previous work in this space (Ruming & Dowling, 2017). The findings highlight graduate researchers' intersectional identities as parents, teachers, colleagues, and migrants. In particular, graduate researchers stressed that their housing – as home – needed to foster a greater relationship between the university, which they consider their workplace and gateway to accessing different forms of social, cultural and financial capital. Moreover, reflective of similar work (Ruming & Dowling, 2017), they wanted more affordable, secure housing that supported different family compositions through larger homes than is typically provided in PBSA housing environments.

The results echo findings from other studies (Garland & Belward, 2022) that graduate researchers currently have insufficient income to meet their living and housing costs. Critically, IGRs consistently experienced higher rates of housing unaffordability, poorer housing quality and more insecure housing than DGRs. Moreover, insecure, unaffordable and poor-quality housing was shown to negatively impact participants' sense agency over their housing environments and influenced how secure they felt; impacting their ability to progress their PhD. This should be viewed in the broader context that individuals with insecure employment face a fivefold increase in the likelihood of experiencing housing affordability stress and are more susceptible than securely employed households to the adverse mental health impacts of housing unaffordability (Bentley et al., 2016, 2019). More broadly, this research project highlights, like other research in this field (Martinez et al., 2021) that a graduate researcher-informed understanding of housing needs should extend beyond food and housing to include hygiene, sleep, transport and mental health amongst others. This re-framing has implications for future research, and in particular, how we design programs, and policy to address housing insecurity in the higher education sector.

6. Recommendations

While unique strategies are required to address graduate researcher housing needs, it is acknowledged that many of the problems identified – with availability, affordability, poor quality and exploitation – are happening in the context of a broader rental crisis both in Australia and internationally. Australian universities can better support graduate researcher housing needs by taking actions that align and collaborate with other work on rental housing in Australia. In particular, HEIs can mitigate housing precarity among at risk groups, particularly for IGRs; promote housing security in university health frameworks; offer housing assistance; improve and streamline student support services; and direct investment in accommodations. Building on some of the survey and focus group insights, the following are some recommended strategies that Australian universities – including the University of Melbourne – could adopt to better support graduate researchers. The authors would like to note, however, that many of the following would constitute some form of university-owned and/or affiliated housing, and as such they may be exempt from the Residential Tenancies Act. As a priority, HEIs should work with advocates to repeal these exemptions as a first step and matter of priority in terms of any long-term student housing strategies.

6.1 High impact and low effort “quick wins”

There are several low effort strategies that Universities could leverage to achieve high impact in the housing and graduate researcher space. Namely, investment in support services, subsidised housing programs, head leasing of properties and promoting quality safe and affordable housing through agreements with third party housing providers.

6.1.1 Invest in Graduate Researcher Support Services

Enhancing graduate research support services related to housing, such as housing advisory officers, “relational housing navigators” (Burke et al., 2021) or tenant advocacy programs, can assist individuals in navigating the rental market, resolving housing-related issues, and accessing resources for housing assistance. This approach aims to depart from deficit discourses, instead supporting a social pedagogical perspective; with such outreach effective in raising access for disadvantaged individuals in higher education (Herbaut & Geven, 2020). While many of these support services exist, such as legal support services like the UMSU Legal Service who provide tenancy advice to students, they are overwhelmed by demand (UMSU Legal Service). This is consistent with other research findings that there are challenges in providing support and services for mental health due to increased demand for services and resourcing limitations; increased demand for services; a lack of service awareness; and in particular, a lack of awareness of cultural differences and language barriers (Orygen, 2020).

Moreover, HEIs can encourage the formation of graduate-led initiatives such as housing cooperatives to empower individuals to collectively manage and maintain affordable housing options; as well as increase the availability of free health and wellbeing supports for graduate researchers (e.g., bulk billing GPs and psychologists). Last, Universities might consider establishing subsidised meal plans with affordable on campus dining options; or more flexible childcare supports such as occasional care models.

6.1.2 Invest in Subsidised Housing Programs

Investing in subsidised housing programs for graduate researchers, especially those from low-income backgrounds, can significantly reduce homelessness risk. Universities can offer scholarship programs and/or subsidies for rents that are needs-based and targeted towards graduate researchers facing housing insecurity. Such interventions have been found to boost labour force participation as well as increased likelihood of financial and housing stability and food security (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2024); with need-based

funding or subsidies found to improve rates of completion for disadvantaged students (Herbaut & Geven, 2020).

6.1.3 Head lease properties

Head leasing properties has been adopted extensively across Australia to facilitate and support stable housing. For example, Unison offers a Private Rental Access Program (PRAP) which supports low-income households to access housing (Unison, 2024). Universities could leverage this model to head lease housing in the private rental sector as transitional/short-term housing for newly arrived graduate researchers or for those who must undertake regional placements in areas where housing is scarce. However, given such accommodation would be exempt from the Residential Tenancies Act (i.e. because it is “owned or leased by” an educational institution) there is a risk that individuals may have less protection than renting private accommodation themselves. With adequate safeguards in place, such housing could offer flexible short-term options that can facilitate transitions into longer-term housing. This flexibility ensures that graduate researchers have suitable housing arrangements regardless of their circumstances. Moreover, providing housing guarantees can alleviate the stress of finding accommodation in a competitive rental market, promoting a smooth transition into a PhD.

6.1.4 Promote Housing Quality, Security and Affordability

Universities should promote quality, safe and affordable graduate researcher housing either directly through on campus housing or indirectly through private PBSA providers. In particular, the University of Melbourne could consider developing clearer guidelines and/or contracts when working with PSBAs who may be exempt from the Residential Tenancies Act; and strengthening protections for those that are exempt. For example, some providers (under Section 21 of the Victorian Residential Tenancies Act) are exempt from the Act, which means many graduate researchers cannot access rights and protections provided by rental laws. Given universities and their affiliates are sizable commercial entities well-equipped to comprehend and adhere to landlord or rooming house operator obligations under rental laws, they should review current agreements with providers to ensure that graduate researchers’ rights are protected despite this exemption. This might also include rent freezes/rent caps consistent with recommendations across the broader rental sector.

6.2 High impact and high effort “major projects”

In addition to these low effort strategies, Universities could consider investing in larger and more innovative reforms that can achieve greater social impact for the graduate researcher community. Such innovative reforms might include collaborating more extensively with local authorities, nonprofits and the private sector; renovation and retrofitting of existing infrastructure; and increasing the PhD stipend or offering alternate employment models.

6.2.1 Collaborate with Local Authorities, Nonprofits and the Private Sector

Rather than maintain current trends that see Universities selling off student accommodations to private operators, Universities might want to consider the financial and social benefits of directly investing or partnering with local/state governments, nonprofits or limited profit housing associations (LPHs) to facilitate the development of affordable housing. This may include Universities leveraging their land assets (e.g., selling air rights) or providing incentives to attract investment to construct new dormitories or apartment-style residences. Universities can work with local governments to develop affordable housing options that are integrated into local government infrastructure, such as the Cause we Care project that built affordable housing above the city-owned public library (Kwan, 2017). In support of this, Universities can explore long-term financing strategies, such as securing low-interest loans to fund affordable housing initiatives. Aside from the social benefits, there are financial benefits to such approaches. For example, given universities are

endorsed charities, if they provide housing for less than 75 per cent of market value, they can access GST concessions for both the accommodation fees and the supply of the housing itself.

6.2.2 Renovation and Retrofitting

HEIs might consider renovating existing housing stock to improve energy efficiency and reduce maintenance costs that can help lower expenses; which can be passed on as housing savings. Moreover, universities might consider leasing existing facilities to tourists in the academic off seasons to subsidise operations; or renovating existing facilities to make them more affordable and conducive to wellbeing.

6.2.3 Increase the PhD stipend or offer alternative employment models

Housing insecurity is inseparable from income. The generic income scheme offered to PhD candidates is a tax-free stipend, known as the Australian Postgraduate Award (APA), from their HEI. Universities are allocated these funds via the Research Training Program (RTP) that offers flexibility in stipend rates (within specified minimum and maximum limits), length of stipend support, and the distribution of monies among stipends, allowances and scholarships (Quilford, 2023). For example, Universities receive \$32,192 (2024) for each PhD candidate but can choose to pay above that amount (with a maximum stipend rate of \$50,291). The stipend has only increased 21 per cent in the last ten years; well below the increase of 34 per cent of the minimum wage. Moreover, while the stipend is tax-free, graduate researchers can only engage in 20 hours' worth of paid work per week or the stipend will be rescinded.

Recently, the key industry body the Australian Council of Graduate Research (ACGR) recommended that the APA stipend be increased by 50 per cent (Quilford, 2023). Given Universities can offer discretionary top-ups, they should seek to better financially support researchers through this avenue. Specifically, the ACGR could advocate for alternative PhD funding models that support GRs for a fixed term at a cost-of-living level. For example, the ACGR note that certain universities in Denmark provide scholarships in the form of a salary, employing graduate researchers until they submit their PhD, typically over a three-year period. During this time, candidates are offered approximately six months of equivalent work. Denmark also offers Industrial Researcher PhD pathways, where students are employed by an industry partner and collaborate with both the industry and the university in developing their research project. The grant covers contributions to the candidate's salary, travel expenses, and provides funds to the university for supervision, facilities, and assessment. Similarly in Norway, graduate researchers have salaried status as research fellows for around three years, with industrial PhD pathways, resembling the Danish model, that receive support.

In addition to changing the funding model, the ACGR recommends enhancing the flexibility of the current Research Training Program leave provisions. That is, the introduction of cultural leave for First Nations candidates and the inclusion of domestic violence and carers' leave for all graduate researchers. Given current stipends are granted based on 'excellence', Universities could commit more internal funding to establish support programs for graduate researchers focused on equity and inclusion.

6.3 Conclusion

By adopting an interdisciplinary lens, the researchers hoped to capture a diversity of perspectives that were rich and meaningful to participants and the university; and that such knowledge is leveraged for graduate researcher support. At a fundamental level, while most graduate researchers have already done four or five years of university studies and have advanced, valuable skill sets, they are being asked to live far below the minimum wage (Garland & Belward 2022). As highlighted, this stipend rate has not kept pace with the rising cost of housing, potentially contributing to a stagnation in completions (between 2019 and 2020, both domestic and international higher degree by research (HDR) completions witnessed declines of 8.4 per cent and 4.1 per cent respectively (Universities Australia, 2022) as candidates shift to part-time status to balance work and financial responsibilities. This places graduate researchers at risk of housing instability, increased mental health pressures, and, from a HEI financial perspective, increases the risk that they will not complete

their PhD; and the university will not receive completion funding. Estimates suggest that the number of people beginning their doctoral studies is declining (13,880 in 2021 compared to 14,895 in 2017). Given reduced enrolments is a significant risk for the Australian education sector, universities are urged to consider the broader implications of their housing policies, with a view to importing affordable housing policies and models that can support their community.

Critically, this report highlights that IGRs face particular challenges in accessing secure, quality and affordable housing. It is no coincidence that the quantity of student-exclusive apartments constructed in Australia has more than doubled over the last decade, coinciding with the nation's increasing dependence on international students to finance the university sector. That is, revenue growth for Australian universities has been primarily driven by fees from international students (approximately 59% of the \$6.4 billion increase in revenue from 2016 to 2019 was overseas student fees) (Parliament of Australia, 2024). Universities might want to consider how they can reinvest some of that income to better support this cohort. Further research in the space might seek to a) chart who is working in the student housing policy environment across HEIs; b) chart and evaluate what is happening and what could happen; and c) identify the enablers and barriers to improving student housing in Australia.

Increasing investment in housing aligns with the Advancing Health 2030 (Faculty Strategy) in its support for “a values-driven, inclusive and accountable community” by “actively and thoughtfully engaging] with our community”. The recommendations in this report offer fresh insights into strategies for addressing the housing needs of graduate researchers. It hopes to enrich broader discussions regarding the multifaceted nature of housing and research as fundamental components of both health and social well-being, beyond material and economic significance.

***“This is the view from our rooftop. Seeing the view makes it explicitly easy for me to believe that life is good and a bright future is ahead”
(female, IGR)***



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