

As COVID-19 hits Australian universities hard, how have online writing groups enabled researchers to stay connected and sustain their work?

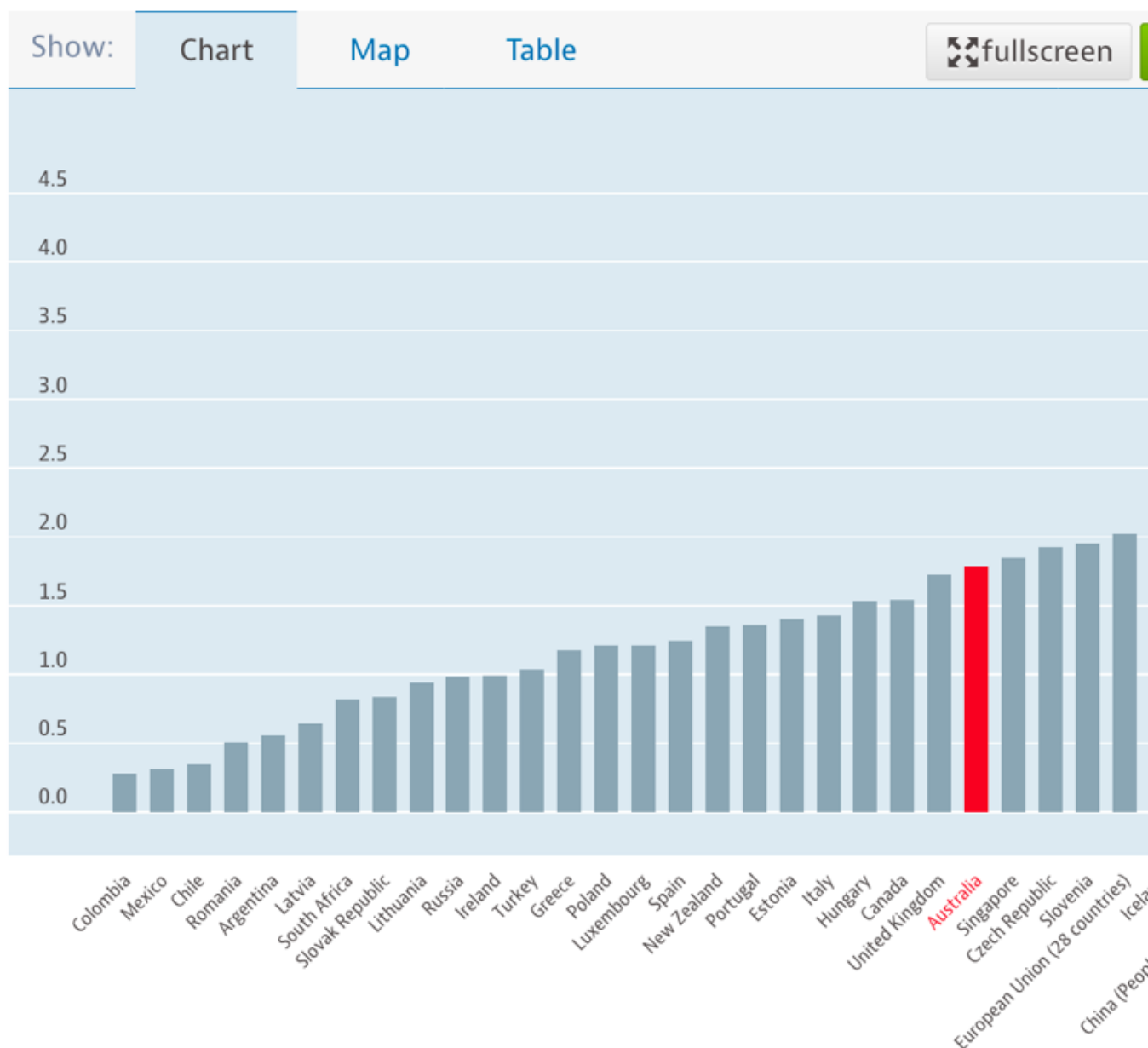
*The COVID-19 crisis has amplified the instability of funding streams in Australian universities, resulting in an already precarious system for researchers being exacerbated. However, in the face of an ongoing retraction of income which is threatening research and the livelihood of researchers, **Dr Lisa Hodge and Dr Jason Murphy** discuss the flourishing forms of academic community that have persevered by adapting and moving online. They discuss academic writing groups and the affective support that these groups engender and consider how online academic writing communities are providing examples of how those working in higher education can support each other and foster research – both now and beyond this pandemic.*

The crisis in Australian Higher Education

The Australian higher education sector is in a deep crisis. As we enter the second half of the year, jobs in the sector are [being cut significantly](#) with [forecasts of 21,000 job losses](#) by the end of 2020. These large contractions are principally due to the COVID-19 pandemic travel restrictions and associated loss of international students. The [Mitchell Institute](#) projects a \$19B shortfall across the education sector over the next three years due to this loss in international students.

While this impact is being felt across the board, doctoral candidates and early career researchers – many of whom were subject to unstable employment prior to the escalating COVID-19 situation are particularly vulnerable. In the state of Victoria alone, as many as [68 per cent of staff were already employed precariously](#) – as casuals, or on short-term contracts before the pandemic began. A recent study conducted [by Sydney University](#) revealed that 11% of doctoral candidates are now skipping meals and living well below the poverty line, with up to 5% facing homelessness. Alarming, this is threatening Australia's brightest minds, with 45% of candidates now considering leaving, or have already exited their studies. Early career researchers face the prospect of unemployment, due to course closures.

Gross domestic spending on R&D Total, % of GDP, 2019 or latest available



Source: OECD (2020), Gross domestic spending on R&D (indicator). doi: 10.1787/d8b068b4-en (Accessed on 2020-08-19)

These impacts pose a grave risk to Australia's future research and solutions to many of the challenges we face in Australia and globally. While the impacts are directly related to the current downturn in teaching income, Australia has fared poorly in its support of research. The unfolding contraction of international students exposes the sector's reliance on this income to supplement research. [According to the latest OECD figures](#), Australia is ranked 23rd in its support of research and development (as a total percentage of GDP) – behind China, Slovenia and the Czech Republic. Dr Alan Finkle, Australia's Chief Scientist, in an [open letter to the National COVID-19 Coordination Commission](#), recently underscored our reliance on teaching revenue 'to partially cover the costs of research, including salaries, co-funding of projects and investing in facilities.'

The amplification of academic anxiety

Research and knowledge sharing are core elements of a healthy society and need to be nurtured and protected, with researchers, and in particular doctoral candidates being our vital pipeline for future research outcomes. [In 2018, Nature](#) reported that up to 41% of graduate researchers suffer from anxiety and 38% with depression. The source of these issues are complex, [however the isolating nature of graduate study](#), compounded with the challenges of writing and gaining support around this are key factors. [Wegener et al.](#) recently reported that 'writing involves not only anxiety but an occasional total lack of confidence in one's own ability to become a researcher'. The pandemic has only amplified an already tenuous situation.

The institutional structures of universities provide mixed support and a student researcher's experience can be determined by their [individual supervisor](#) or university. Doctoral work can be a lonely journey and evoke feelings of isolation and insecurity.

The emergence of flourishing extra-institutional support networks: research writing groups

While there are many factors beyond our control, avenues of support for doctoral candidates and early career researchers are emerging from outside of established institutional structures. This support is taking place informally and on a grassroots level from within the academic community. In the current climate of contraction and protection of financial loss, a crucial support mechanism for some is being realised through [research writing groups](#). These groups typically are made up of early-career academics and doctoral candidates, and their focus is on writing and other research related activities. The structure of these writing groups often centres around the use of the [Pomodoro Technique](#), a time management system that alternates between 25-minute focused intervals and five-minute breaks. Open in nature, researchers from a cross-section of institutions, meet at an agreed place and roll up their sleeves to get writing done together.

Recent findings from empirical research conducted in 2019 by Dr Jason Murphy and Dr Lisa Hodge, from RMIT and Victoria Universities suggest that prior to the pandemic, writing groups were providing a safe and supportive community. There is a sense of belonging created within these groups, which directly contributes to research outputs. For example, one respondent said:

'Research can be isolating. Engaging with a community of individuals undergoing similar projects engenders a sense of belonging that might otherwise be lacking – working together in structured sessions creates an atmosphere of productivity, which is conducive to getting things done'.

While academic writing is the main purpose of these groups, another key finding was that the breaks between writing were as important as the writing itself. These pauses facilitated networking opportunities and a platform to discuss writing, and identify solutions to research challenges. A further unanticipated finding was the range of academic experience of the attendees. While it was expected that the groups would mainly consist of doctoral candidates, it was found that early and even mid-career researchers regularly attend, with this creating important mentoring opportunities for candidates – in addition to their own supervisors.

The researchers were also interested in what impact the pandemic may have had on academic writing groups, and whether they provide signs of a more long-standing model for wider adoption by universities as a support mechanism?



Writing groups move online during the pandemic

Due to the lockdown, writing groups have moved to an online format, being hosted on such platforms as Zoom. Preliminary findings from these groups suggest this online format continues to provide the same sense of belonging that has enabled academics to remain connected, with groups in Victoria expanding to include researchers from other states. Engi Messih, a doctoral candidate from La Trobe University who attends writing groups says that:

'it helps me mentally and in practice, to get tasks done, and to feel supported. Attending these sessions has allowed me to progress my article writing, which I would not have been able to do with teaching demands'.

Another writing group attendee, Sonya Iskandar, a doctoral candidate from Swinburne shared that there is:

'a sense of belonging, particularly in this isolating, topsy turvy time. [This writing group], as well as its people, encourage participants to keep coming back because it offers a supportive space to just write ... Melbourne Write Up has become one of my principal go-to places to keep chipping away at my PhD thesis work'

Similarly, Jonathan O'Donnell, a doctoral candidate at the University of Melbourne shared his experience from another group stating:

'On Friday each week I run a writing group. I feel good both because I get some writing done, and I'm helping others, too. It helps to hear a different perspective and see how others are doing'.

Despite the unprecedented and challenging times COVID-19 presents, online academic writing communities are flourishing and providing examples of how those working in higher education can support each other and foster research – both now and beyond this pandemic. With the ongoing retraction of institutional and governmental support for research, online writing groups provide one innovative model of support that has been established through the research community itself.

If you are interested in finding out more about the writing groups running in Victoria, or would like to establish your own group, you are welcome to contact Drs Lisa Hodge or Jason Murphy for advice.

Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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