monash graduate association

Graduate Research in IT:

Student Experiences, Challenges and Opportunities for Enhancement

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement of Country

The Monash Graduate Association respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we work and learn. We pay our respects to the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and Bunurong peoples of the Kulin Nation, on whose unceded lands our Melbourne campuses are situated.

We also acknowledge and pay our respects to the Traditional Custodians of all lands and waters across Australia from which our graduate students participated in this research. We honour the continuing connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to Country, culture, and community and recognise their enduring knowledge systems and contributions to Australian society.

We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Report Production

The Monash Graduate Association would like to thank all those who assisted in the production and distribution of this survey. We would also like to thank the graduate students who completed the survey.

This report was produced by the MGA's Research Manager, Dr Ryan Edwards. Should you have any questions in regard to the paper, please contact Ryan.Edwards@monash.edu for further information.

Use of Generative AI

The design, methodology and core content of this report are the work of the author. Generative AI (Claude) supported specific technical tasks including the coding of open-ended survey responses and the automation of repetitive data analysis procedures. AI assistance was also employed for language editing and refinement throughout the document. All applications of AI were supervised and validated by the research team. The analytical insights, conclusions and recommendations presented in this report represent the independent professional judgment of the author. All cited sources were identified, reviewed and verified manually.

How to Cite this Report

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Introduction

This report examines the experiences of 75 graduate research students in the Faculty of Information Technology (IT) who participated in the MGA's *2025 National Postgraduate Student Survey on Health, Family and Finances*. It complements the university-wide report *Graduate Research at Monash: Student Experience, Challenges and Opportunities for Enhancement* by identifying faculty-specific patterns and opportunities for targeted enhancement within IT.

Where meaningful, findings are compared to Monash-wide averages to highlight areas where IT students' experiences converge with or diverge from broader institutional trends. Given the focused sample size, this report emphasises actionable insights for faculty leadership rather than comprehensive statistical analysis.

Survey Participation

- 75 IT graduate research students participated.
- Response rate represents approximately 23% of enrolled IT graduate researchers.
- Data collected May – June 2025 as part of broader institutional study.

Report Focus

This report addresses four key areas:

- Mental health and wellbeing in IT graduate research contexts.
- Financial pressures and their discipline-specific manifestations.
- Academic progression, career uncertainty and attrition considerations.
- Peer connection and support needs unique to IT students.

Note on methodology: For detailed survey methodology, limitations and comparative analysis with other universities, see the main university-wide report. This faculty report focuses on patterns specific to IT students and what the faculty can do to enhance support.

Key Findings for IT

This section presents core findings from the 72 IT graduate research students who participated in the survey, examining patterns across mental health, financial circumstances, academic progression and peer connection. Where meaningful, findings are compared to Monash-wide averages to identify areas where IT students' experiences align with or diverge from broader institutional trends. These comparisons reveal both shared challenges affecting graduate researchers across disciplines and distinctive patterns that may warrant faculty-specific interventions.

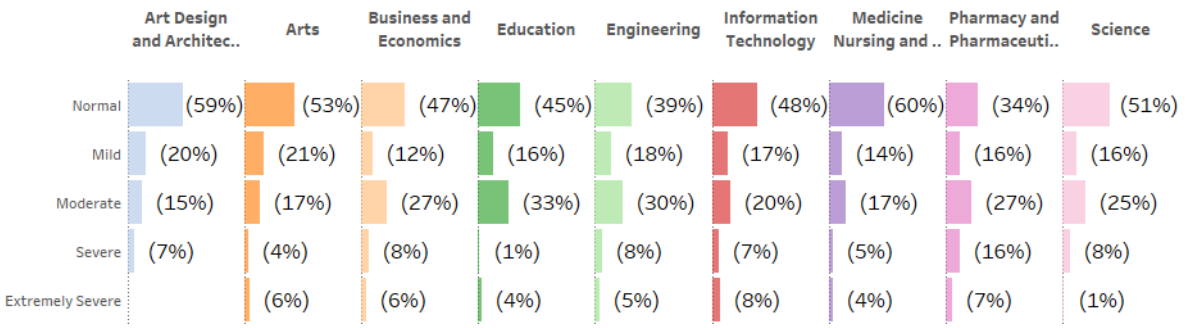
1. Mental Health and Wellbeing

Mental health challenges affect graduate research students across all disciplines, but the intensity and nature of these challenges – and students' willingness to seek support – vary by faculty context. This section examines mental health indicators, support access patterns and imposter syndrome rates among IT students, comparing them to university-wide averages. These findings reveal where IT students face similar challenges to their peers and where discipline-specific factors may create unique barriers or pressures.

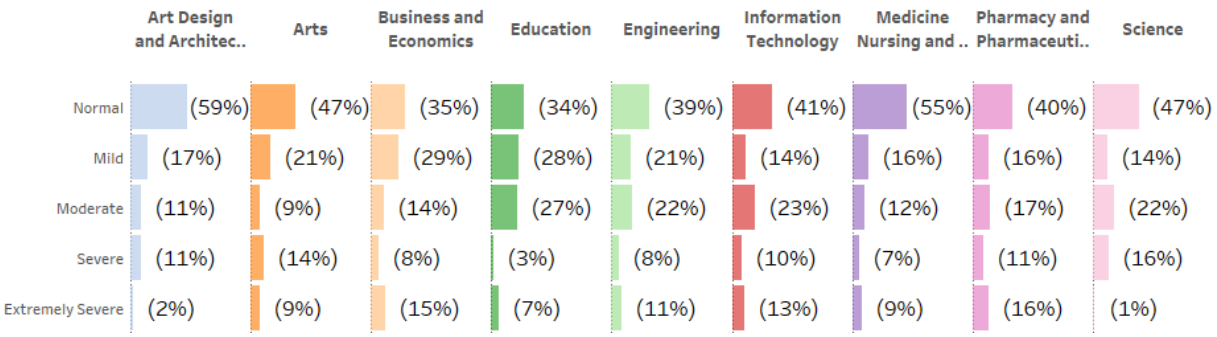
DASS21 Indicators:

IT students show mental health patterns similar to the Monash average.

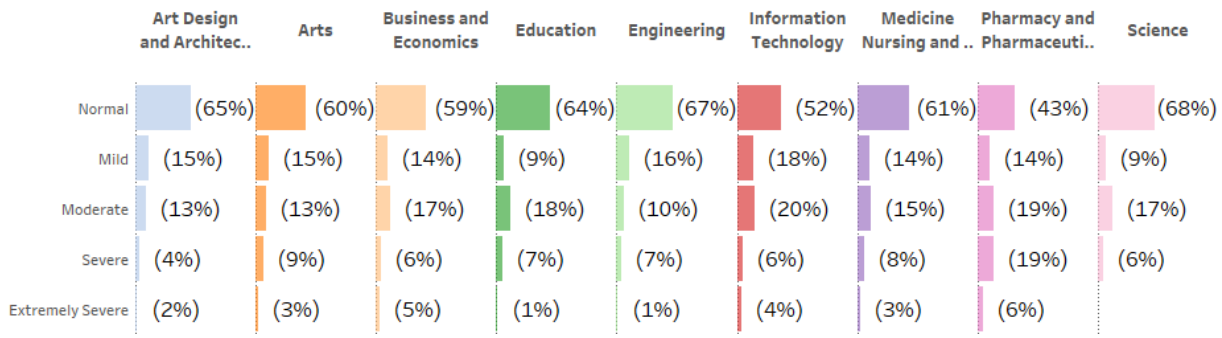
Depression:



Anxiety:



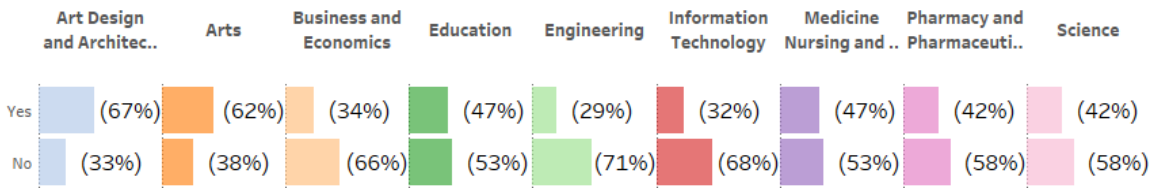
Stress:



Mental health patterns among IT graduate research students largely mirror the broader Monash population, though with some variation. Depression rates are similar, with 48% of IT students falling within the normal range compared to 51% university-wide. Stress levels show greater divergence: only 52% of IT students report normal stress levels versus 60% university-wide. Anxiety presents particular concern, with 23% of IT students experiencing severe or extremely severe anxiety (compared to 18% university-wide).

Mental Health Support Access:

IT respondents access mental health support far less frequently than most other faculties; however, as with Engineering and BusEco, this can be partly explained by the high proportion of the faculty's respondents who were international students. Across the University, international students were far less likely to access support than their domestic peers (32% versus 62%).

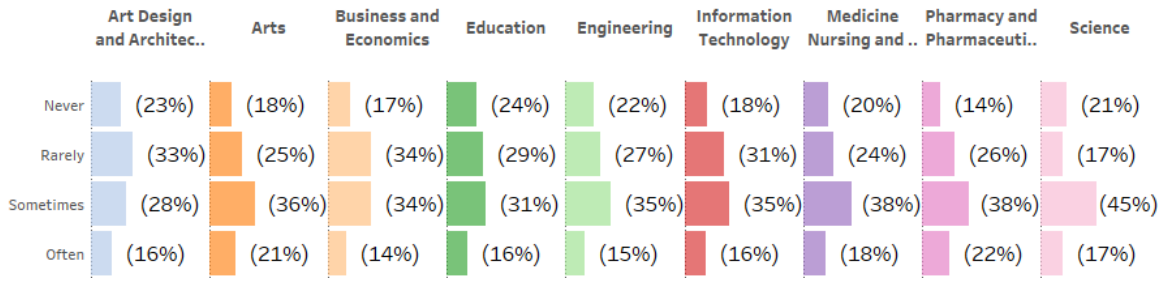


Key demographic insights:

- 32% of IT students have accessed mental health support (vs. 45% university-wide).
- 42% of domestic students (n.12) and 30% of international students (n.59) had accessed support. Both of these were below the average across the university for these demographic groups (domestic = 62%, international = (32%).
- 23% of men (n. 35) and 38% of women (n.30) had accessed support. Again, these levels of access are well below the average across the university for these demographic groups (men = 31%, women = 52%).

Imposter Syndrome:

Beyond clinical mental health indicators, imposter syndrome – the persistent feeling of being a fraud despite evidence of competence – represents a distinct psychological challenge facing graduate researchers. Examining imposter syndrome rates provides insight into how students experience their academic identity and belonging within the research community.



- 82% of IT students reported experiencing imposter syndrome at some point (vs. 80% university-wide).
- Of those IT students experiencing imposter syndrome, more than half (51%) have experienced this feeling 'sometimes' or 'often'.

Student Voices from IT:

While the quantitative data reveals patterns in mental health outcomes, research pressures and imposter syndrome among IT students, hearing directly from students themselves provides essential depth and context to these statistics. The following testimonies illustrate the lived experiences behind the data, revealing how mental health challenges manifest in the daily realities of graduate research students in IT:

> *"That I'm an imposter in the domain and others are better at what they do than me*
>
> *"No avenues to share common PhD problems and solutions [are] expensive and time consuming. Drive to campus (pay for petrol, parking, food, childcare) [is also expensive] as I have a long commute from outer suburbs. Not any students around or they are busy with their work with headphones on. No access to language support or research support people - requires long admin processes with book appointments with RCALS person weeks in advance ... Supervisors never check in apart from work related meetings and then meetings are very work focussed and no attention to emotional wellbeing. Stipend low so I am required to engage in paid work."*
>
> *"The academic pressure is great … I feel like I can't keep up."*
>
> *"Ashamed of not being able to complete PhD and see my new born baby … No money to go home; No money to bring them here. Barely survive at high costs … Pressure with failures in experiments. Even the easy things become hard with no focus."*
>
> *"Felling low because of many factors study financial and many more."*

"The anxiety for the future."

What This Means for IT:

IT students access mental health support at significantly lower rates than the university average (32% vs. 45%), with particularly concerning gaps for both domestic and international students within the faculty. While only 30% of IT's international students have accessed support – consistent with the 32% university-wide rate for international students – just 42% of IT's domestic students have sought help, well below the 62% university average for domestic students. This suggests that barriers to support access affect IT students across demographic groups, not solely as a function of international student composition.

The gender patterns are equally concerning: only 23% of men and 38% of women in IT have accessed mental health support, both substantially below university averages (31% and 52% respectively). These low access rates occur despite clear indicators of need: stress levels among IT students are worse than university averages (only 52% report normal stress vs. 60% university-wide) and anxiety presents particular concern with 23% experiencing severe or extremely severe anxiety compared to 18% university-wide.

Student testimonies reveal how these mental health challenges manifest in IT research contexts. Students describe the isolating nature of technical work – conducting research alone on specialised projects with limited peer interaction, particularly when others work from home. They express concerns about keeping pace with rapid technological advancement and feeling like imposters in their domain. Financial pressures compound these stresses, with students managing childcare costs on insufficient stipends, working night shifts to study during the day and experiencing anxiety about uncertain futures in a competitive field.

The discipline-specific nature of IT research may create unique barriers to help-seeking. The technical, problem-solving culture of computing fields can inadvertently promote "fix it yourself" mentalities where seeking support feels like admitting failure rather than proactive wellbeing management. The rapid pace of technological change combined with specialised research areas may intensify imposter feelings, as students compare themselves to the broader tech industry while working on narrow research questions. Additionally, the predominance of individual coding and computational work means some students spend extended periods in solitary activity with less natural opportunity for peer check-ins that might surface wellbeing concerns.

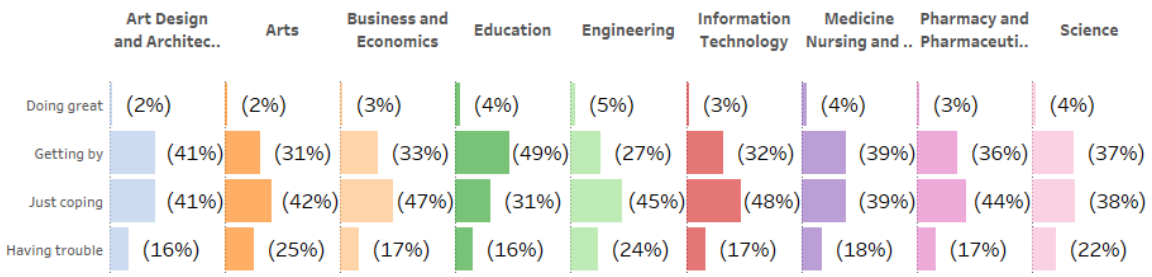
The faculty's challenge is clear: targeted outreach is essential to reach IT students who are currently not accessing support despite substantial mental health impacts. Strategies should address both the demographic composition (with culturally responsive approaches for international students including multilingual options and explicit messaging that support access doesn't affect visa status) and discipline-specific barriers (reframing mental health support as "performance optimisation" for cognitive-intensive technical work, addressing imposter syndrome in rapidly-evolving fields, and creating peer support structures that work for students engaged in solitary computational research).

2. Financial Circumstances and Career Pressure

This section examines two interrelated dimensions of the IT graduate research experience: financial circumstances and career navigation. Beyond standard financial wellbeing measures, IT students face discipline-specific pressures including international conference/fieldwork expectations, professional presentation standards and the tension between academic career paths and industry opportunities. These factors combine to create unique financial and professional challenges that may require targeted faculty-level interventions.

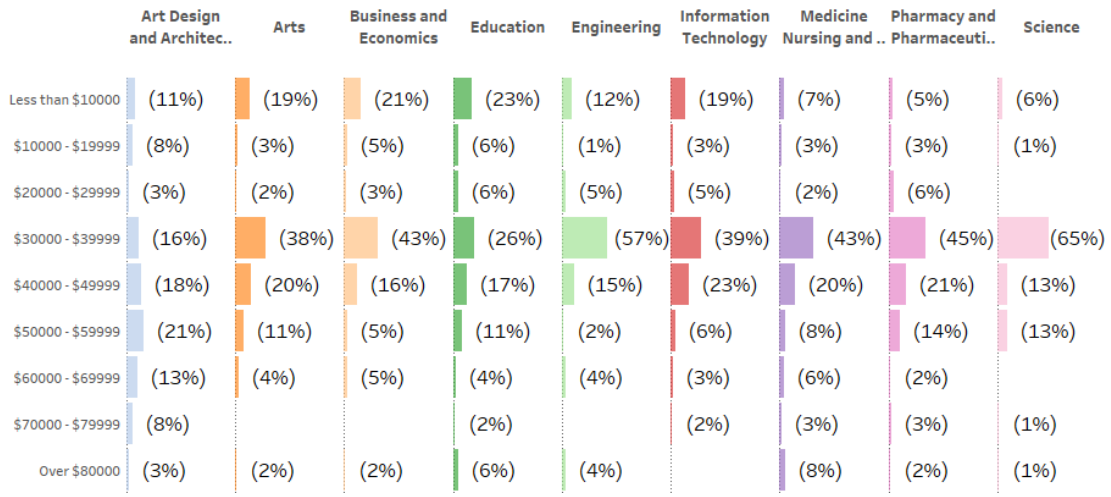
Melbourne Institute's Financial Wellbeing:

IT graduate research students show financial wellbeing patterns similar to the Monash average with 65% of the faculty's students either "just coping" or "having trouble."



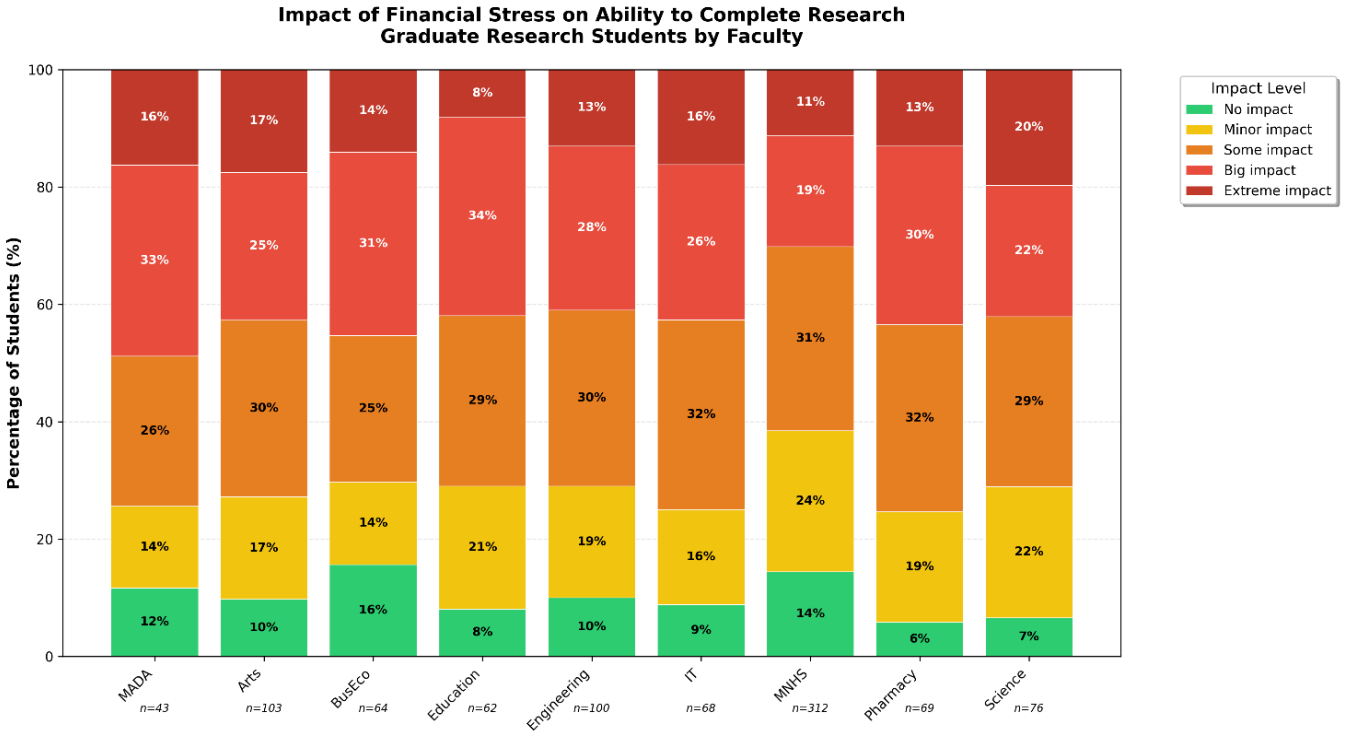
Estimated Annual Income (AUD):

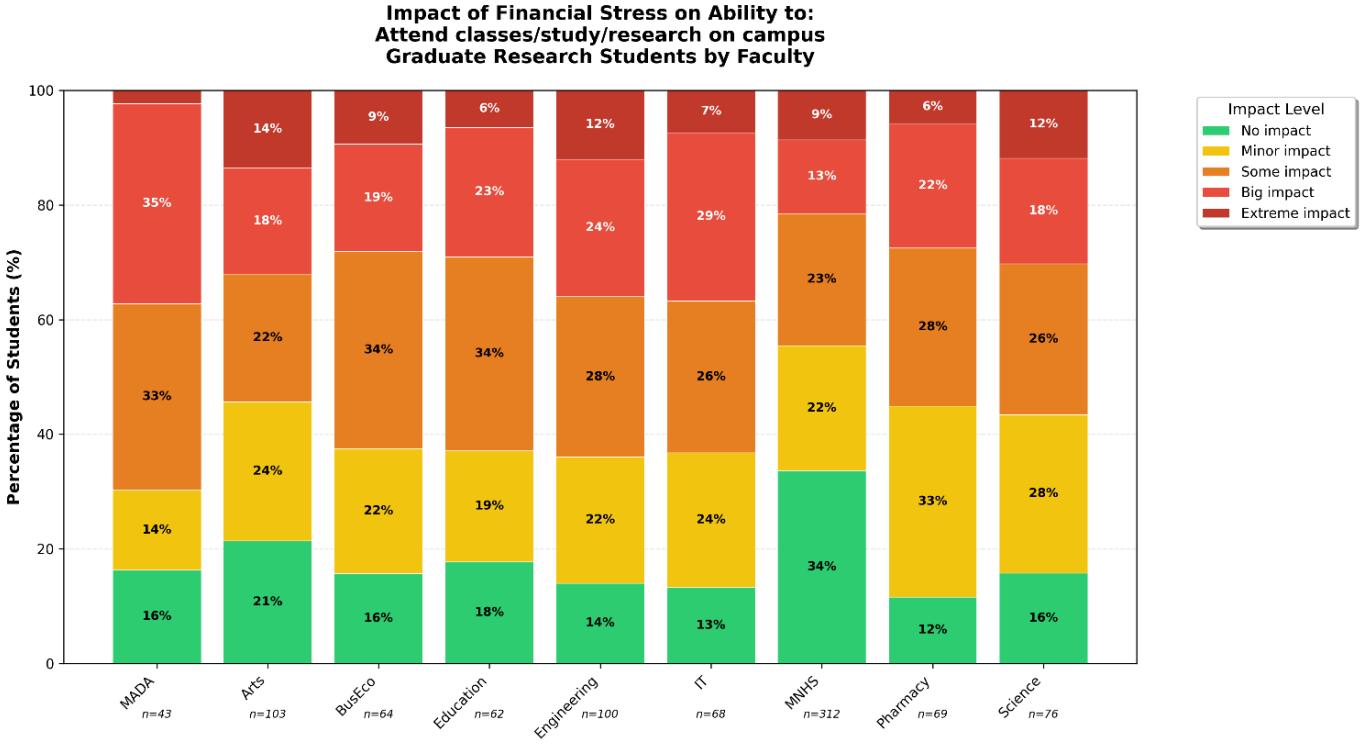
IT students show income patterns broadly consistent with university trends, with full-time students reporting median incomes in the $30,000-$39,999 range (reflecting scholarship levels).

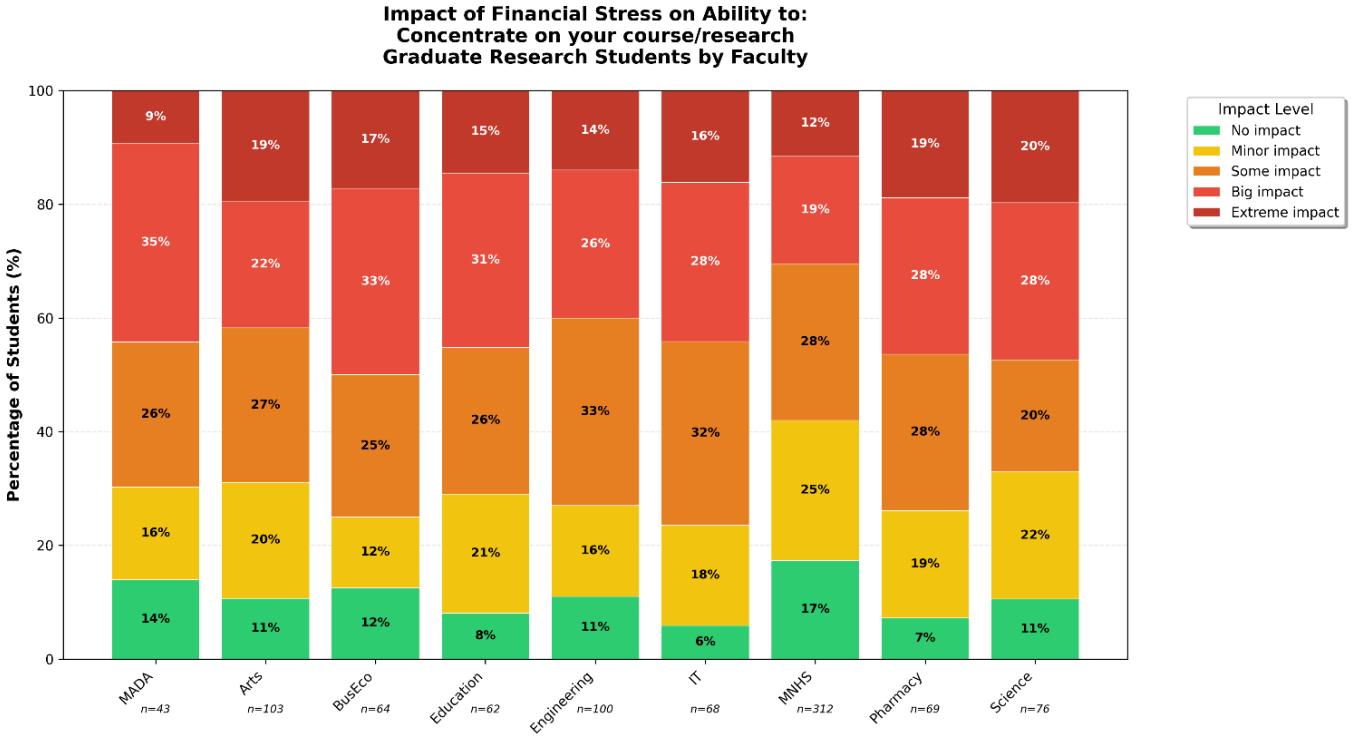


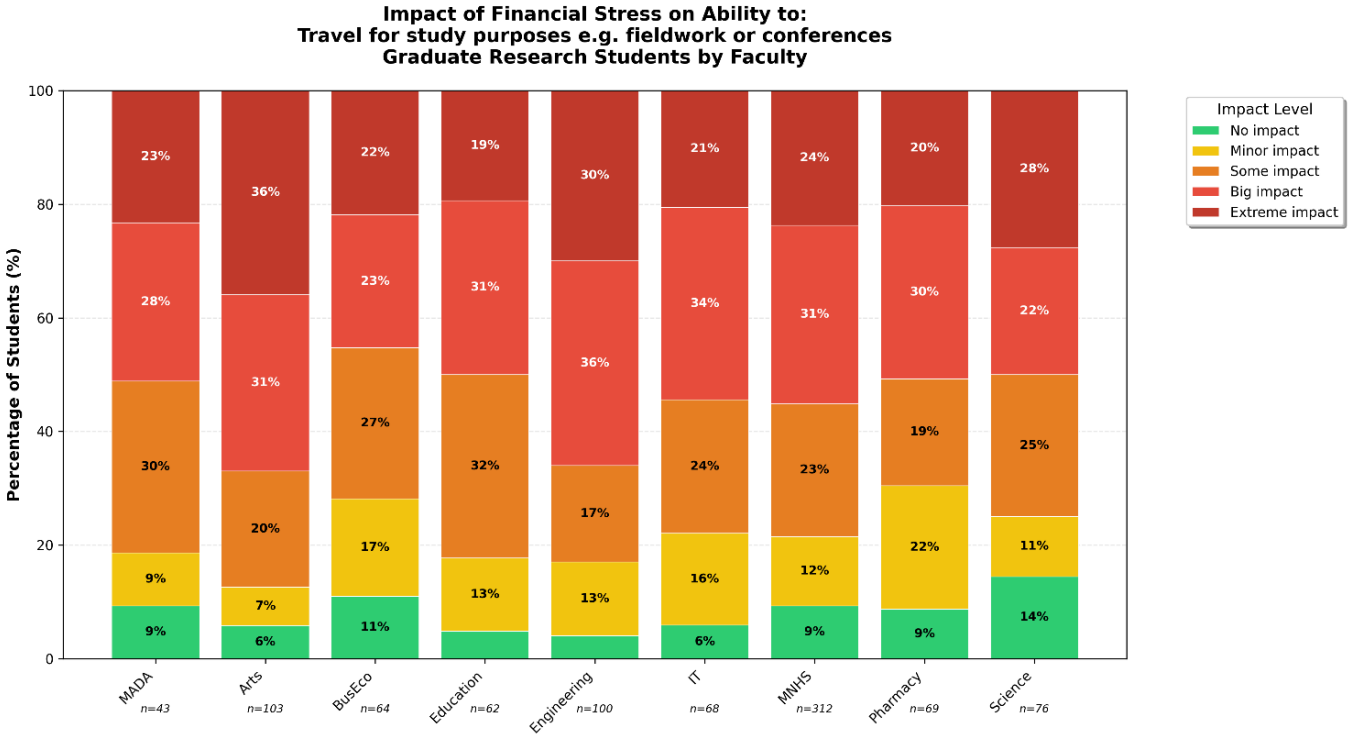
How Financial Pressures Affect Academic Activities:

Financial pressures directly impact IT students' ability to engage fully with their research and professional development opportunities. The following data reveal how financial stress affects key aspects of academic engagement:









Key Findings on Financial Impact:

- **Research completion capacity:** 42% indicate that financial stress has an extreme or big impact on their ability to complete their research to the best of their ability (vs. 39%

university-wide reporting extreme/big impact). This metric captures the cumulative effect of financial pressures on overall research quality and completion prospects.

- **Campus attendance and engagement:** 36% report that financial stress has an extreme or big impact on their ability to attend classes, study or conduct research on campus (vs. 28% university-wide). For students unable to afford transport costs or who work extensive hours to meet living expenses, physical presence on campus – essential for accessing resources, connecting with peers and engaging with the research community – becomes a luxury rather than a standard part of the graduate research experience.
- **Concentration and research quality:** 44% of IT students report that financial stress has an extreme or big impact on their ability to concentrate on their research (vs. 40% university-wide). This suggests that financial pressures directly undermine the cognitive focus required for high-quality scholarly work, with IT students experiencing higher rates compared to peers across the university.
- **Professional development through travel:** 55% report that financial stress has an extreme or big impact on their ability to travel for study purposes such as fieldwork, conferences or research collaborations (vs. 56% university-wide). Students facing financial constraints may miss crucial networking opportunities, visibility in their field and professional development experiences that are expected – if not required – for successful academic or industry careers.

Student Voices on Financial Reality:

The following testimonies illustrate the lived experiences behind the data, revealing how financial pressures manifest in the daily realities of graduate research student in IT – from managing basic living expenses to affording professional conferences and navigating the tension between stipend constraints and the financial expectations of a business-oriented discipline.

> *"Working at nights so I can study in the day means I have left hours sleep and little to no leisure time."*
>
> *"The stipend is too low we work and produce far too much value for the university to be paid less than minimum wage."*
>
> *"It's very hard to live with a family of 4 under the current amount of scholarship."*
>
> *"While my financial situation is manageable - in an ideal world I would be able to focus almost exclusively on my research without needing to worry about taking on additional jobs (i.e., if the stipend was sufficient to cover cost of living)."*
>
> *"I study part-time due to caring responsibilities and mental health issues and not due to other full-time work, the tax deduction further reduced my take home $$ amount."*
>
> *"The scholarship is enough for day-to-day expenses but considering that international students need to at least visit family of not travelling for hobby and when wanting to go anywhere it is at least 2k to 3k just for the flights not mentioning other expenses. Also, many want to apply for graduate visa or PR visa and will be out of money until finding a job not being able to save that much puts an extreme stress during their candidature. Not to mention how hard it is to find a job on student visa with not so clear and known workings rights for employers. Also considering the age this is the age when people get married or*

other family situations. That is also another issue relating to financial situation. These are my concerns now."

"When the faculty decasualised PhD students into the PhD Teaching Fellowship role I was assured by HR that my starting salary would be reflective of my [significant] teaching experience. When I started in the role, I found that every single PhD Student was hired at the same pay. This represents thousands of dollars lost and a pay cut relative to my casual rate and has affected my financial stability."

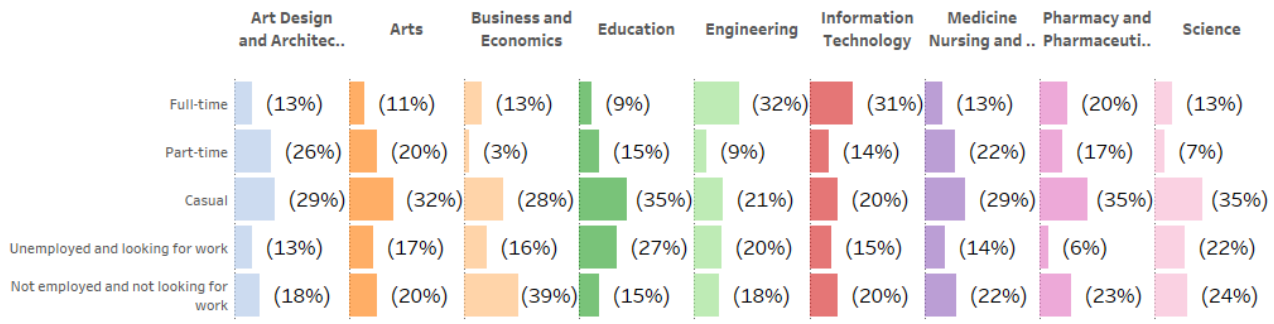
"I have a [young] son … and expenses are so hard to be managed with. TA opportunities are cut. I'm so buried in financial hardships and uncertainty with PhD experiments and … I had to switch to a new supervisor but the deadlines for submission don't extend automatically. This is too much pressure both financially and cannot work in a job because of supervisor change. Around 2600 is not enough to live for a family with a child (even when the family is in my country with very little expenses like 300 dollars per month; impossible to live here)."

"The stipend I receive is adequate for my own needs if and only if I live in a share house with 6 other students and eat like a penitent monk. Being married my spouse now lives with me and our finances are strained to their utter limit. Even when I have things locked down financially there's no way on earth I could afford to consider investment for my future."

Employment Patterns:

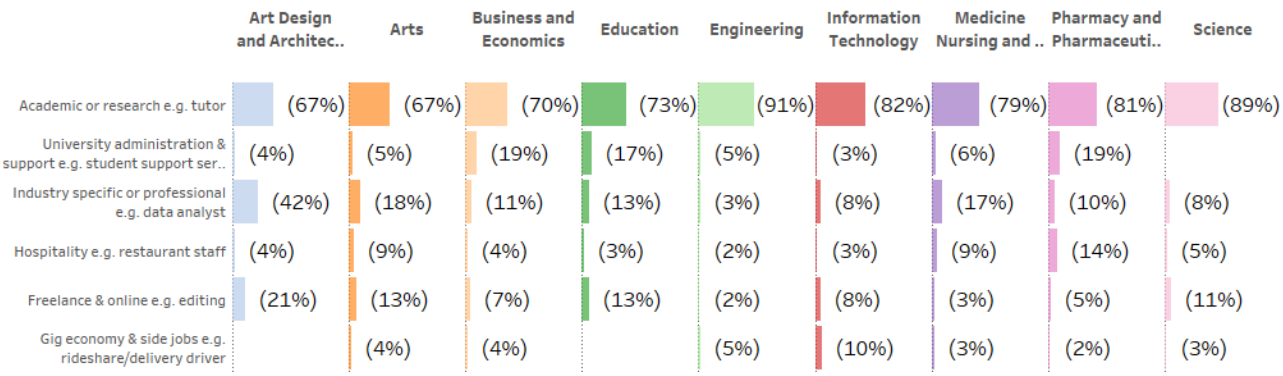
The employment patterns among IT students reveal the complex relationship between financial necessity, professional development and research progress. Understanding who works, in what capacity and how employment relates to research provides insight into the discipline-specific challenges IT students navigate.

Employment Status of Full-Time Students Across the Faculties:



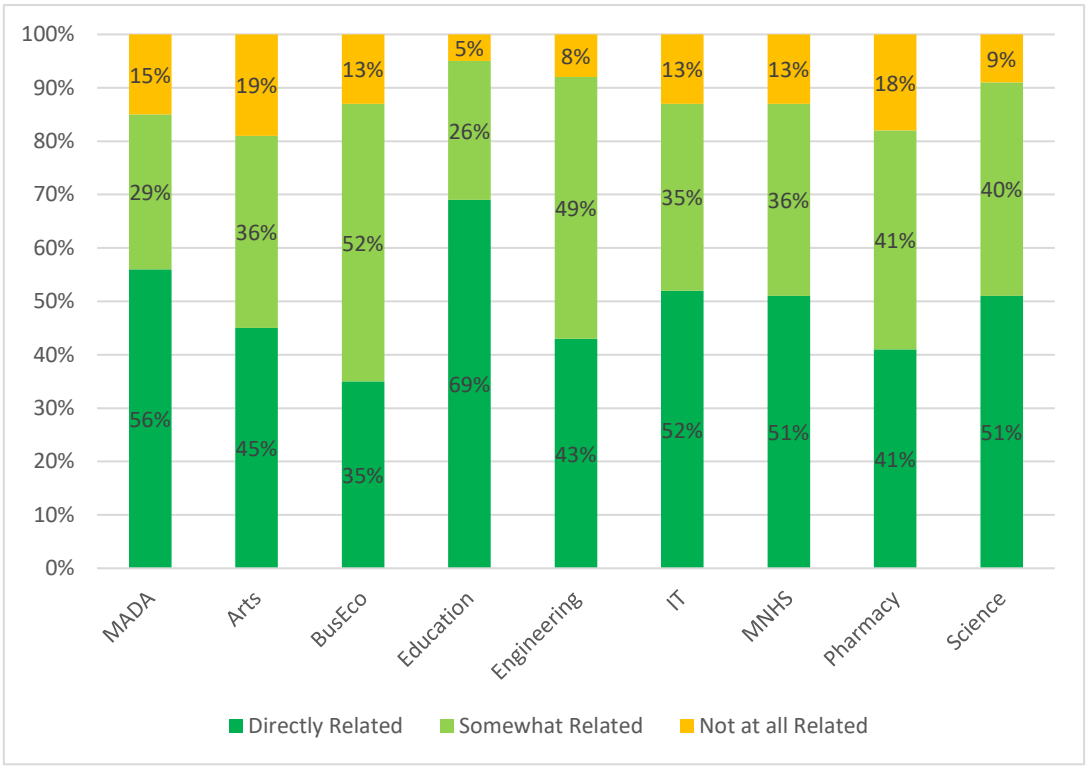
One-fifth of IT graduate research students are not employed and not looking for work, while a further 15% are unemployed and looking for work. The faculty also has the second-highest proportion of students employed full-time (31%), which is interesting as 92% of IT respondents were studying full-time.

The Type of Jobs Students are Employed In:



A comfortable majority of employed IT respondents had a job in academia. Meanwhile, although it was only 10%, IT had the highest proportion of "gig economy" employees.

Relation of Job to Research



The majority of IT graduate research students successfully integrate employment with professional development. Over half of employed students (52%) work in jobs directly related to their studies, while 35% work in somewhat related roles – meaning 87% are building professionally relevant experience. These figures align closely with patterns across STEM fields at Monash (49% direct, 38% somewhat) and HASS disciplines (52% direct, 35% somewhat). This success likely reflects the faculty's existing pathways: academic or research positions, research collaborations and industry

partnerships that transform employment from a competing pressure into a career development asset.

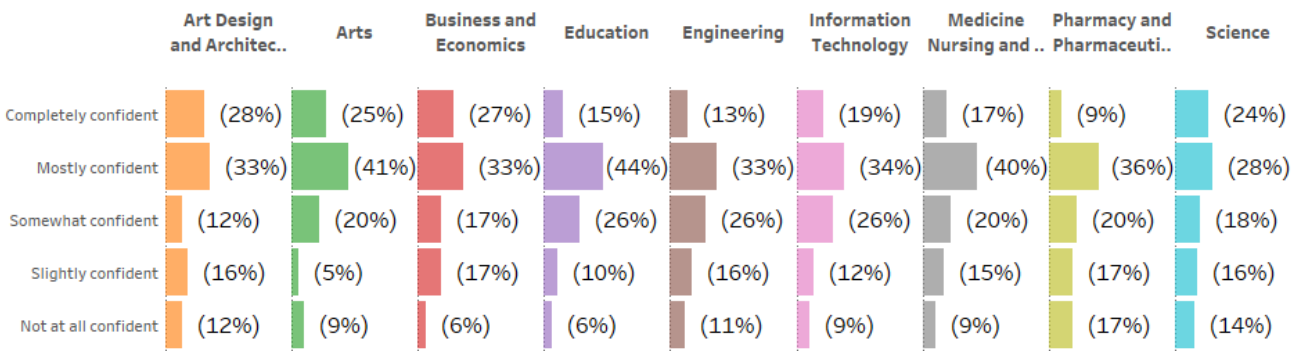
However, not all students benefit equally from this landscape. The 13% working in jobs unrelated to their studies face a double burden: devoting significant time and energy to employment that offers no direct advancement toward their research or professional goals, representing pure financial necessity rather than career building opportunities. Additionally, the 15% unemployment rate indicates that some students struggle to secure employment at all – a concern for a discipline where career trajectories span both academic and industry pathways. These gaps suggest room for expanding accessible employment opportunities beyond current offerings.

3. Academic Progression and Career Uncertainty

Beyond the immediate pressures of mental health and financial stress, IT graduate research students must navigate questions about their academic trajectory and post-PhD careers. This section examines completion confidence, consideration of leaving and satisfaction with career guidance among IT students. Understanding these patterns reveals how the distinctive pressures facing IT students – including the tension between academic and industry pathways – affect their sense of progress and professional direction.

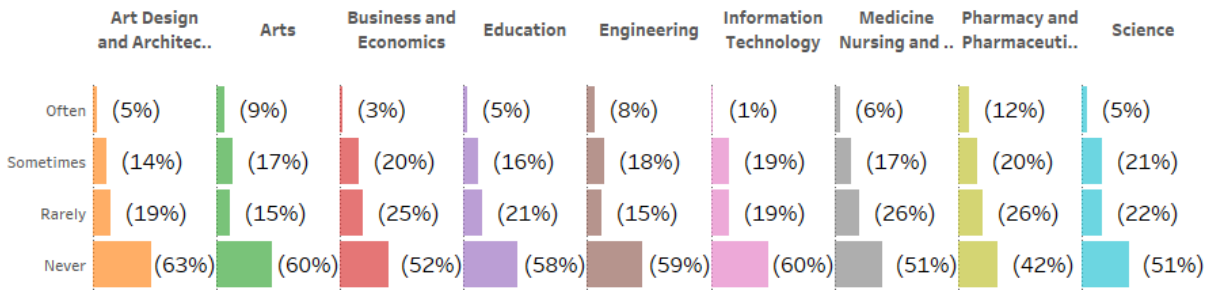
Completion Confidence:

IT students show similar completion confidence to the university average (53% vs. 55% university-wide completely/mostly confident). However, 21% still harbor a high degree of doubt about timely completion.



Considering Leaving:

Consideration of leaving one's degree represents a relatively normal part of the graduate research journey for many students, reflecting moments when challenges feel overwhelming or alternative paths appear more appealing. Examining how frequently IT students experience these thoughts and how this compares to university-wide patterns, provides important context for understanding retention risks and the effectiveness of current support systems in sustaining students through difficult periods.

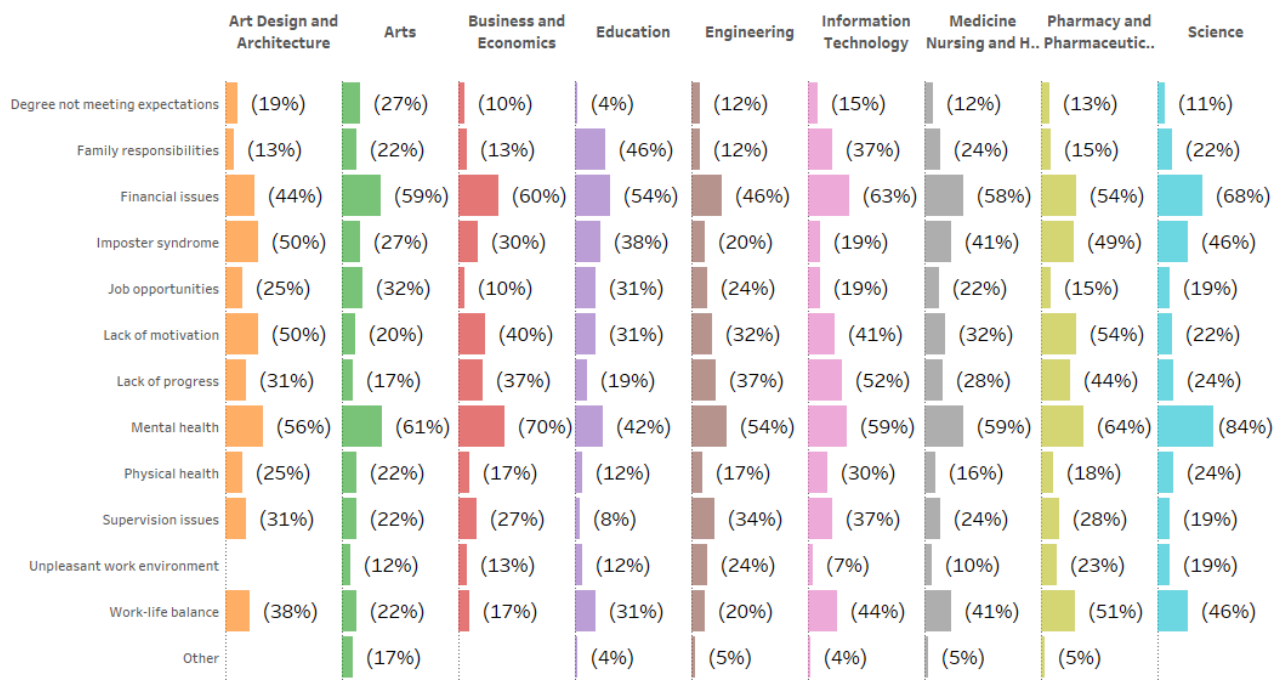


Just under two-fifths (40%) of IT students have considered leaving at some point, which is lower than the 46% university-wide average, with 1% considering leaving often (vs. 6% university-wide). IT has a higher proportion of international student respondents and across the university, international students consider leaving substantially less frequently than domestic students (38% vs. 56%). The fact that IT students report slightly elevated consideration of leaving despite having more international students – who typically show stronger persistence – suggests that discipline-specific or faculty-level factors may be influencing retention beyond demographic composition alone.

Several factors may contribute to this pattern. The visibility of lucrative industry alternatives may create ongoing tension about whether the PhD path is "worth it" financially, particularly when students face the financial pressures documented earlier in this report.

However, the low rate of frequent consideration (1% often vs. 6% university-wide) provides reassurance. While almost two-fifths of students have contemplated withdrawal at some point, very few do so persistently, suggesting that most students who experience these thoughts ultimately find reasons to recommit – whether through supervisor support, research breakthroughs, career clarity or connection with the academic community.

Primary Reasons for Considering Leaving (among those who have considered):



Among IT students who have considered leaving, the pattern of reasons reveals both shared challenges with the broader graduate research population and some distinctive emphases.

Financial issues represent the most common reason at 63%, consistent with the substantial financial pressures documented throughout this report. This rate is comparatively high among the faculties – the second-highest figure recorded – but financial stress affects consideration of leaving across all disciplines, not uniquely within IT.

Mental health emerges as another dominant factor, cited by 59% of IT students who have considered leaving. This finding, combined with the lower mental health support access rates documented earlier in this report (32% vs. 45% university-wide), suggests a critical gap: IT students experience severe mental health impacts on their persistence, yet access support at lower rates than their peers.

Over half (52%) of those who have considered leaving cite lack of progress – the highest figure of any faculty for this category. This, in combination with the 37% citing supervision issues (again, the highest of any faculty), suggests a reinforcing cycle where inadequate supervision support leaves some students without the guidance to overcome obstacles or the external validation to recognise progress, making IT candidatures particularly vulnerable to attrition.

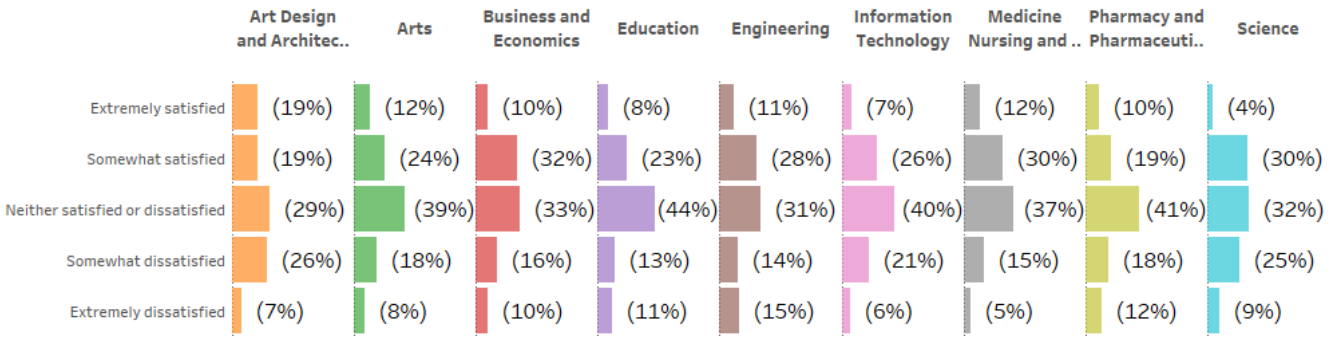
Notably, IT students cited family responsibilities (37%) more frequently than any other faculty, which aligns with some of the comments earlier regarding distance from family and the costs associated with raising a child. This pattern suggests that IT graduate research students may be disproportionately balancing caregiving obligations alongside their studies, creating compounded pressures where financial strain from childcare costs intersects with the emotional and logistical demands of supporting dependents—potentially indicating a need for targeted family support resources within the faculty.

Alternatively, Imposter Syndrome (19%) was the lowest recorded across the faculties, while only 7% mentioned that an unpleasant work environment was a factor. This suggests that IT students possess strong technical confidence and work within supportive environments, yet face significant external and structural pressures that may compound over time.

The combination of factors – substantial financial stress, high mental health concerns, lack of progress and supervisor issues – suggests that consideration of leaving among IT students typically stems from the cumulative burden of the psychological and financial pressures of a demanding degree rather than any single crisis point. Early intervention on these compounding stressors becomes critical to prevent gradual erosion of student wellbeing and engagement. This pattern reinforces the priority areas identified throughout this report: improving mental health support access (particularly for international students) and addressing financial sustainability are the most critical interventions for supporting retention within IT.

Career Guidance Satisfaction:

Career guidance represents a critical component of graduate research training, yet one that often receives less attention than academic supervision or research skill development. Graduate researchers must navigate complex career decisions – including whether to pursue academic positions, transition to industry or explore alternative pathways – while simultaneously managing the demands of their research projects. The timing, networking strategies, skill development priorities and application approaches differ substantially across these trajectories, making discipline-specific career guidance particularly valuable. Understanding how satisfied IT students are with the career support they receive provides insight into whether current services adequately prepare them for the diverse professional pathways available to PhDs.



IT students recorded the second-highest proportion of indifference to careers support (40% neither satisfied or dissatisfied), which may reflect relatively clearer post-PhD career pathways than in other faculties; however, 33% were satisfied and 27% were dissatisfied with the support they received in this area.

The IT Career Challenge:

IT graduate research students face unique career navigation challenges:

- **Rapidly evolving technical landscape**: The fast pace of technological change means research specialisations can feel outdated quickly, creating pressure to maintain current technical skills (e.g., latest deep learning frameworks, cloud platforms, emerging programming

paradigms) alongside deep theoretical research expertise – a balance that academia doesn't always value but industry demands.

- **Timing and opportunity costs**: When to pursue industry internships or build side projects without derailing research progress; whether to prioritise publishing in top-tier academic journals (lengthy review cycles) or developing practical skills and industry networks; how to balance the slow, methodical pace of research with the rapid iteration cycles valued in industry.
- **Specialisation vs. breadth tension**: PhDs can demand deep specialisation in narrow research questions, while industry often values broad technical skills and ability to work across multiple domains – creating uncertainty about whether years of specialised research will translate into competitive advantages or limitations in the job market.

Student Voices on Career Guidance:

Student feedback reveals specific gaps in current career support for IT researchers. The testimonies below illustrate both what students need – proactive outreach, discipline-specific guidance, industry connections – and what current services may be missing:

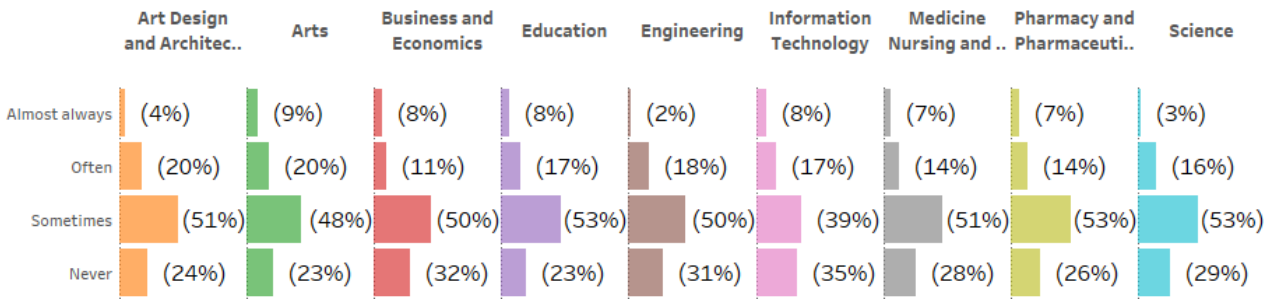
> *"Human led and facilitated resume and career development and guidance advice instead of automated AI opportunities for career planning with experienced academics. More networking sessions with industry partners. Time to properly engage with professional dev modules (takes time but supervisors consider it should be done on the side without any impact on PhD project). Supervisors should understand the value of us engaging in programs outside of PhD for Researcher development and build skills and network and support us with encouragement and support letters etc. It would be useful to have a jobs channel for job opportunities for PhD students (many post-doctoral opportunities are not even advertised or have a preferred person so it seems). Guidance to prepare post-doc applications etc would be helpful also."*
>
> *"Any professional development courses targeted on career guidance such as start-up formation findings opportunities in industry would be nice."*
>
> *"PhD students should teach as TAs but university doesn't even provide enough opportunity for that. No interviews even for new TA applicants. Opportunities go to previously known people by the lecturers. It's not right. TA is what provides some experience towards academic career while earning some money. Regarding technical stuff I think some workshops can help students improve their technical knowledge (e.g., Deep Learning frameworks). If you can organise some meetings with industry people at early stages of the PhD/course they can have some idea what needs to be done during the course/research."*
>
> *"There are career guidance services??"*
>
> *"I'd like some events focusing on PhD students to connect with Monash alumni and facilitate getting a prominent job in the industry."*
>
> *"Reach directly to student not waiting for them to seek help."*

4. Peer Connection and Disciplinary Community

Social connection and peer relationships provide essential support throughout the extended graduate research journey, yet the independent nature of doctoral work creates particular challenges for community building. This section examines how IT students experience isolation, belonging and meaningful contact across different relationship types. Understanding these patterns reveals where existing community-building efforts reach IT students effectively and where discipline-specific factors – such as methodological diversity, competitive cultures or varied career orientations – may create barriers to connection.

Isolation and Belonging:

Feelings of isolation and lack of belonging represent common challenges in graduate research, where students often work independently on specialised projects over extended periods. The following data reveal how IT students experience connection – or disconnection – within their academic community.



- 65% of IT students experience some degree of isolation (vs. 72% university-wide).
- 25% experience high levels of isolation (“often” or “almost always”) vs. 22% university-wide.

Student Voices on Isolation

While the quantitative data reveals patterns in isolation and connection among IT students, hearing directly from students themselves illuminates the lived reality behind these statistics. The following testimonies reveal how isolation manifests in the daily experience of graduate research – from the solitary nature of creative work to the challenge of finding peers who understand discipline-specific pressures.

> *“Not enough contact with peers [and] no social events to mingle with others [or] share experience or relax over food/coffee/drinks. Feeling I am lagging behind others in my progress as it appears from a distance that everyone else is progressing better.”*

“The distance from my friends and family and the lack of any of either here in Australia. Also, my friends’ apparent failure to understand how to properly maintain contact over the long distance and difference in time.”

“Doing a PhD can be isolating sometimes because you are only person who works on your project. But when you do bachelors or masters you get to meet other students chat with them collaborate with them and have fun with them. It was really easy for me to do this during my honours degree as you meet a lot of students on daily basis. But when I started PhD the things are not the same. Sometimes I am the only person present in my research group. Because others feel more productive at home. And when you come across some blockers there's no one available to get some quick tips because no one is around. You have to email them and wait for their answers. I guess it’s the nature of this degree program.”

“I usually better concentrate and safe to work at home but we have a lab full of people whenever they see me they say oh come to the lab more often so I tried to do that and then I saw so many new people I haven't seen and I felt awkward and too self-aware and when I was around them.”

“No person to talk with.”

“When I am on campus the area where my desk is in is nearly totally empty. Only about 10% of HDR students are on campus at any given time.”

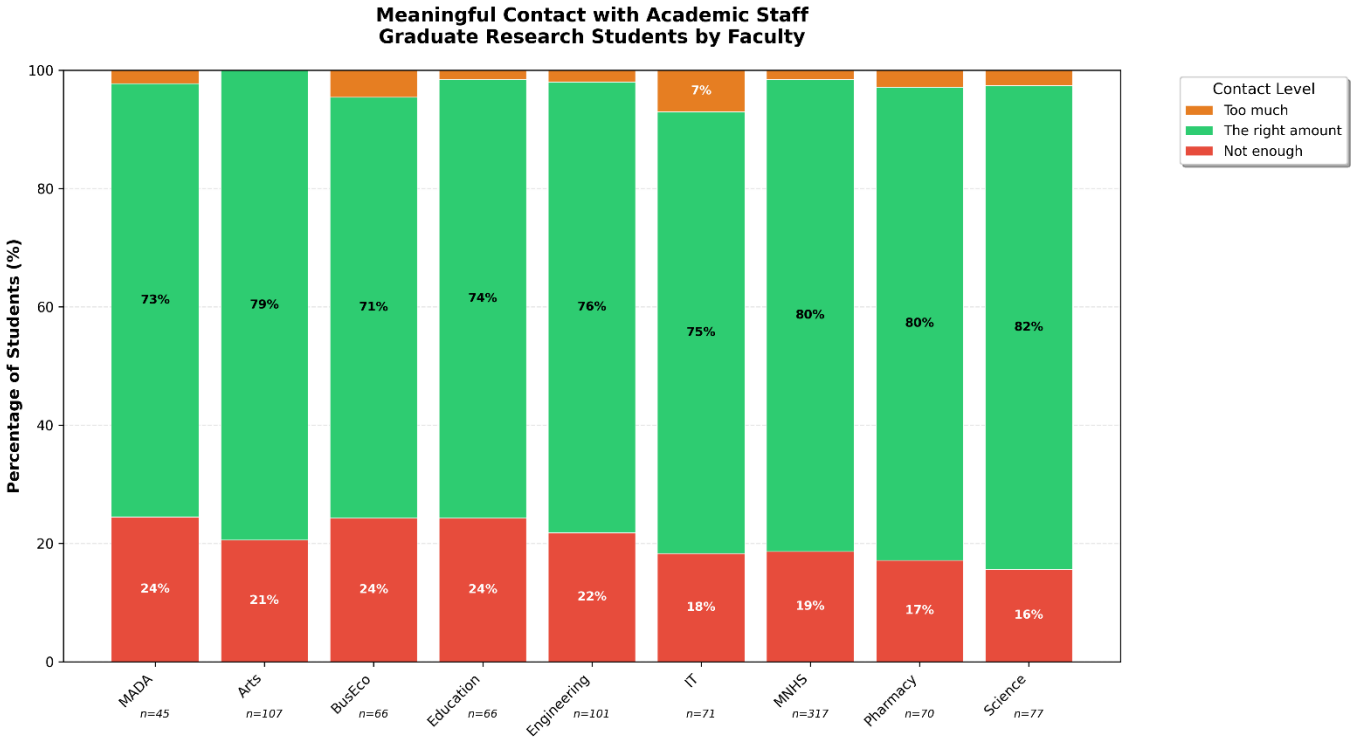
“No social interaction or circumstances to do so.”

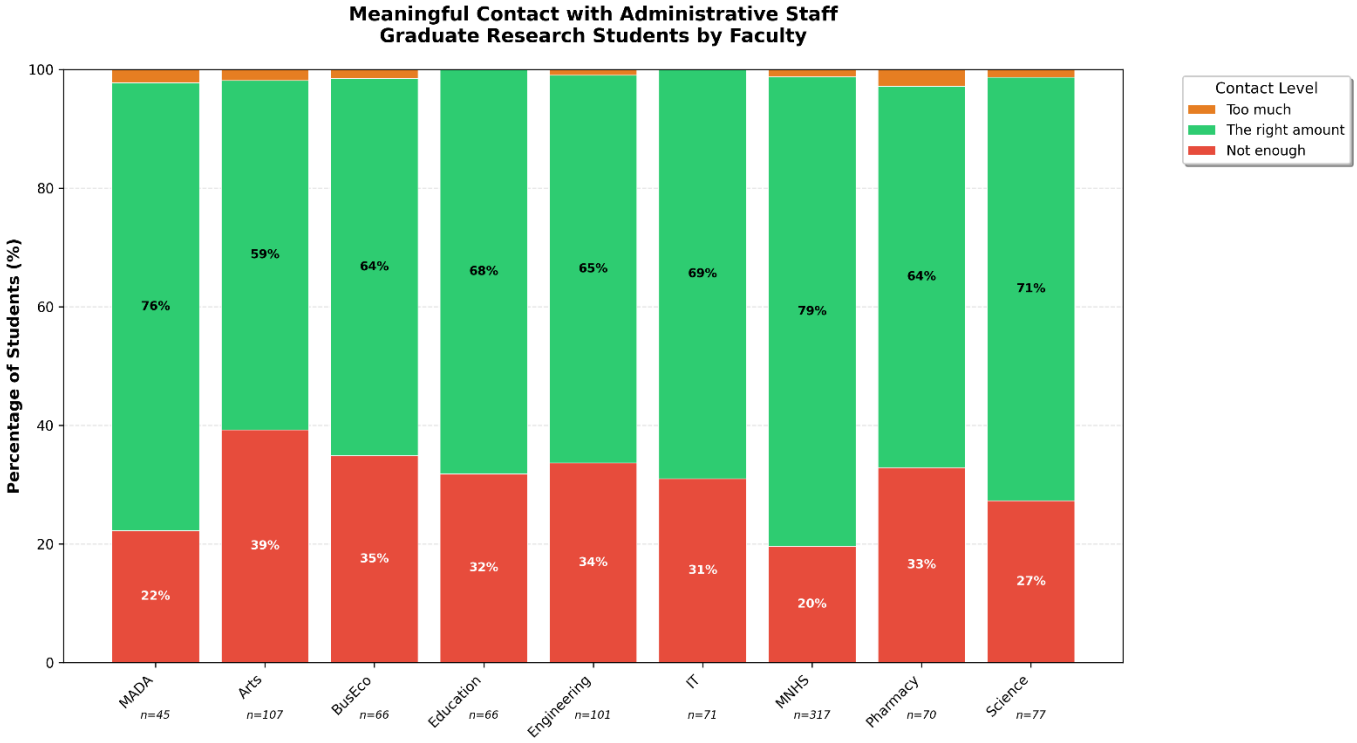
“When faced with a problem at work there is no one I can talk to.”

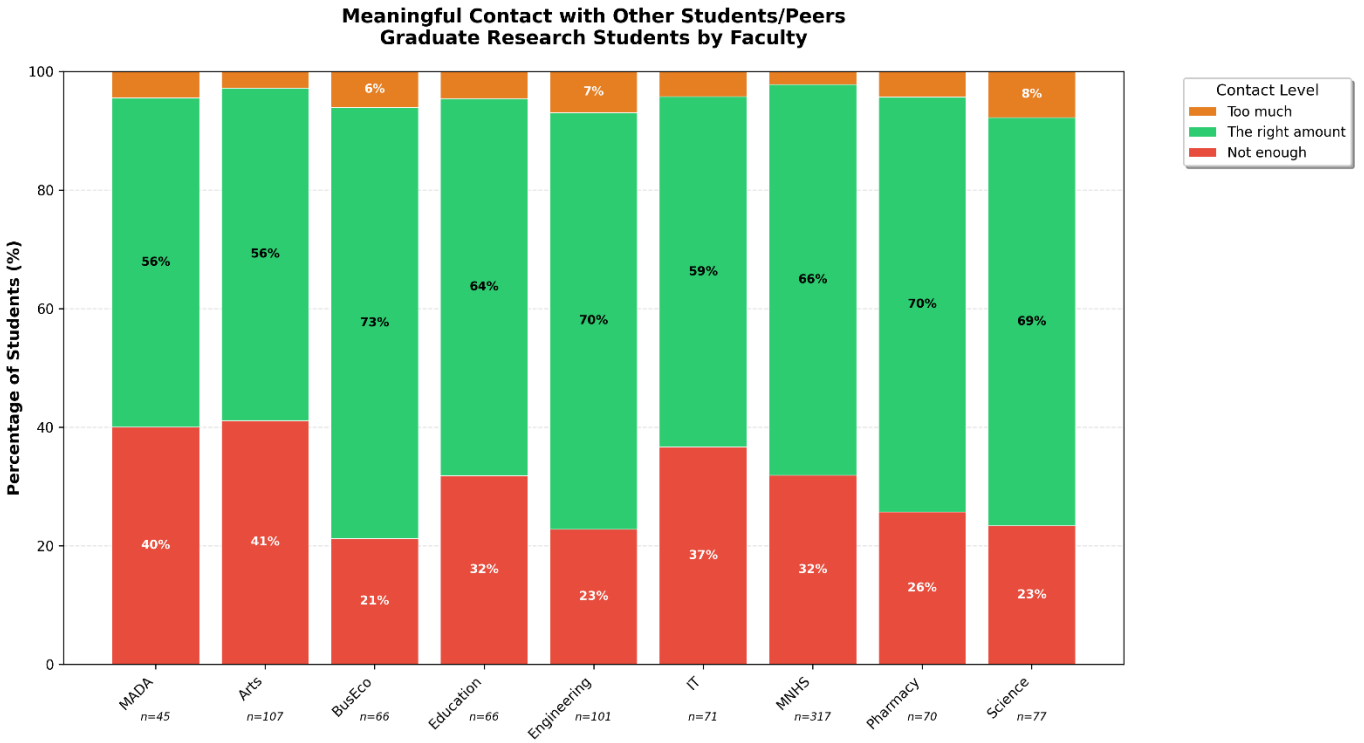
“I felt like my social battery had already been exhausted by meetings correspondence familial duties and general research. So, when it would be appropriate to try and connect with other students or faculty, I just felt so tired that I couldn't work up the energy to do it. Also, I'm older than a lot of my peers which makes me feel like a space alien.”

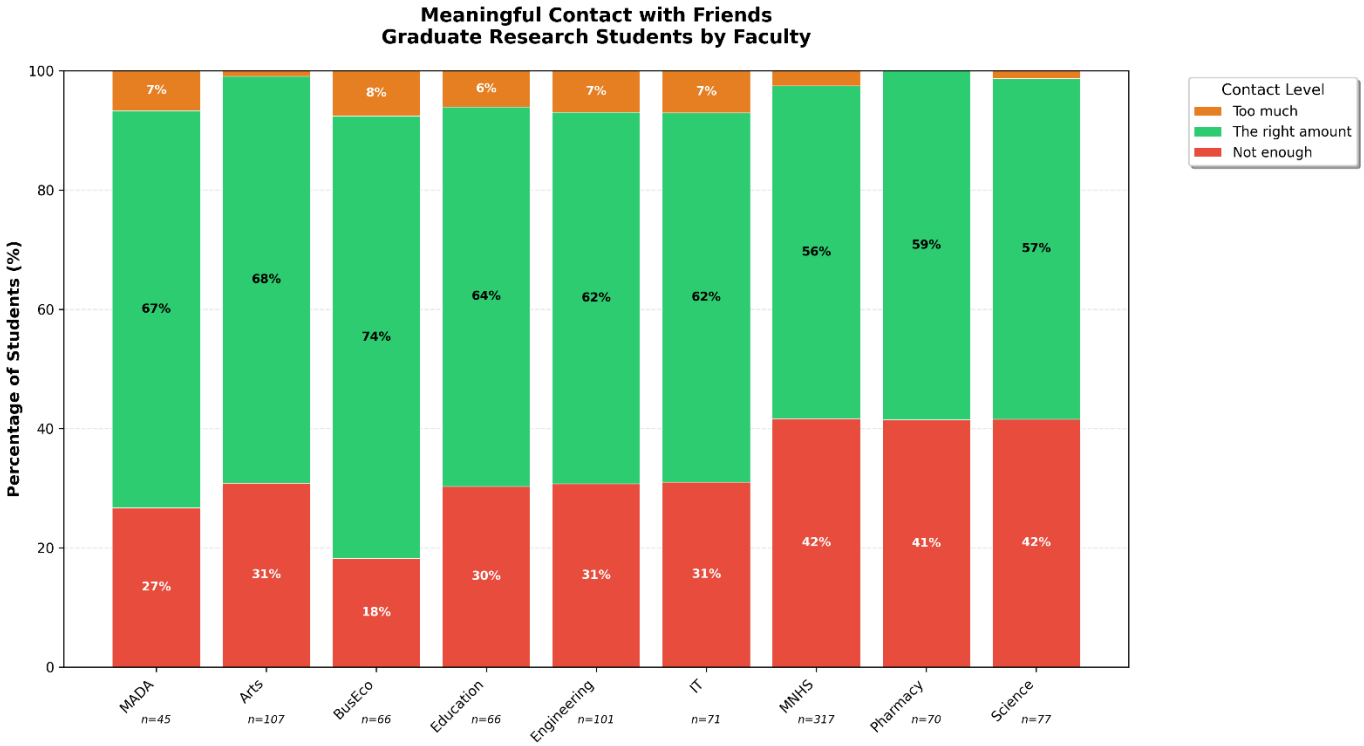
Meaningful Contact:

To better understand connection patterns, students were asked to evaluate whether they have sufficient meaningful contact with five key groups: academic staff, administrative staff, peers, friends and family. The following data reveal where IT students feel adequately connected and where they experience insufficient contact.






Meaningful Contact with Other Students/Peers
Graduate Research Students by Faculty
Percentage of Students (%)
Contact Level
Too much
The right amount
Not enough
MADA n=45
Arts n=107
BusEco n=66
Education n=66
Engineering n=101
IT n=71
MNHS n=317
Pharmacy n=70
Science n=77
56% 40%
56% 41%
6% 73% 21%
64% 32%
7% 70% 23%
59% 37%
66% 32%
70% 26%
8% 69% 23%


Meaningful Contact with Friends
Graduate Research Students by Faculty
Percentage of Students (%)
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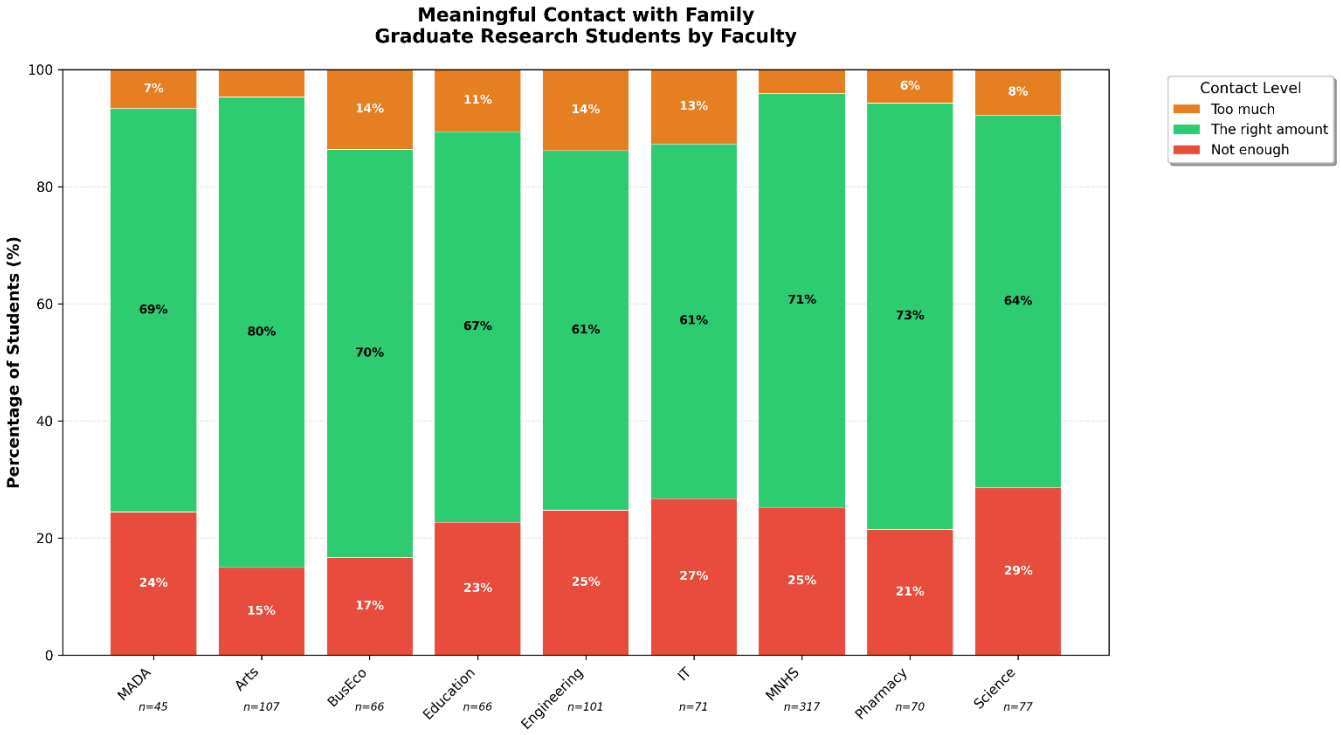
Engineering n=101
IT n=71
MNHS n=317
Pharmacy n=70
Science n=77
7% 67% 27%
68% 31%
8% 74% 18%
6% 64% 30%
7% 62% 31%
7% 62% 31%
56% 42%
59% 41%
57% 42%



These patterns of meaningful contact reveal a mixed picture for IT students, with 37% reporting insufficient peer contact – largely in line with the 33% university-wide average, though still representing more than one in three students.

Academic staff contact shows relative strength (75% report the right amount), suggesting supervisory relationships function reasonably well for most students, though 18% reporting insufficient contact represents an important minority potentially experiencing inadequate guidance.

Administrative staff contact shows strong performance, with 69% reporting the right amount of contact – suggesting that IT administrative support structures effectively serve most graduate researchers' needs. However, 31% report that they do not have enough contact with faculty administrative staff, potentially indicating a need for greater efforts to educate students on services available, where to access support and when this support is available.

Peer contact affects 37% who report insufficient connections. The solitary nature of computational work – extended periods coding, debugging or analysing datasets – creates fewer natural opportunities for spontaneous interaction compared to fields requiring shared lab spaces. Student testimonies reflect this reality: "when I am on campus the area where my desk is in is nearly totally empty" and feeling "awkward and too self-aware" when trying to integrate into a full lab. This suggests that IT students may need different connection infrastructure than what works elsewhere: structured opportunities like organised research groups or peer writing sessions rather than relying on spontaneous encounters, plus digital community spaces that align with how many IT students naturally communicate.

Friend and family contact reveals notable gaps with key support networks, with 31% reporting insufficient contact with friends and 27% with family. The demands of IT research can crowd out personal relationships. For international students (a large proportion of IT respondents), family contact challenges are compounded by time zone differences, expensive travel costs noted in

student testimonies and the financial pressures documented earlier that directly constrain ability to visit or bring family to Australia.

What Makes IT Distinct: Key Themes

Based on both quantitative patterns and qualitative student voices, two themes distinguish the IT graduate research experience from most other disciplines at Monash.

The Mental Health Paradox: High Need, Lower Access and International Student Composition

IT students present a distinctive mental health profile characterised by both high psychological burden and lower support access compared to university averages. While anxiety presents particular concern – with 23% of IT students experiencing severe or extremely severe anxiety compared to 18% university-wide and stress levels showing concerning patterns with only 52% reporting normal stress versus 60% university-wide – only 32% have accessed mental health support compared to 45% university-wide.

This paradox requires careful interpretation: the faculty's lower access rates are partly explained by demographic composition rather than unique cultural barriers. With a high proportion of international student respondents (84% of the IT sample) and international students accessing support at only 30% within IT, the overall 32% access rate reflects this demographic reality. However, this explanation does not diminish the urgency for intervention – it simply clarifies where efforts should focus.

Yet the pattern extends beyond international student composition alone. IT's domestic students access support at only 42% compared to 62% university-wide and gender disparities are also pronounced: just 23% of men and 38% of women in IT have accessed support, both substantially below university averages (31% and 52% respectively). This suggests that barriers to help-seeking affect IT students across multiple demographic groups.

The Family Responsibilities Burden: IT's Hidden Retention Risk

IT students cited family responsibilities as a reason for considering leaving at the highest rate of any faculty (37% among those who have considered leaving), revealing a distinctive challenge that compounds the financial and mental health pressures documented throughout this report. This pattern suggests that IT graduate researchers (25% of whom are parents and 21% of whom have carer responsibilities for someone other than a child) are disproportionately balancing caregiving obligations alongside their studies, creating intersecting pressures that threaten retention.

Student testimonies reveal the lived reality behind this statistic. Multiple IT students describe acute financial strain: "I have a [young] son … and expenses are so hard to be managed with," "It's very hard to live with a family of 4 under the current amount of scholarship," and most poignantly, one student's anguish at being "ashamed of not being able to complete PhD and see my new born baby … No money to go home; No money to bring them here." These testimonies illustrate how family responsibilities intersect directly with the severe financial pressures affecting IT students, where stipends become catastrophically inadequate when stretched across dependents or required to maintain international family connections.

The solitary nature of IT research particularly disadvantages students with family responsibilities. Unlike disciplines with collaborative lab work, IT students working independently may not encounter peers who understand caring situations. As one student noted: “not many students in a caring situation like myself who understand.” Students managing childcare report that even campus attendance becomes prohibitively expensive: “Drive to campus (pay for petrol, parking, food, childcare) [is also expensive],” while part-time students face additional challenges: “I study part-time due to caring responsibilities … the tax deduction further reduced my take home $$ amount.”

Supervisors may not be adequately recognising family pressures. One student reported: “Supervisors never check in apart from work related meetings and then meetings are very work focussed and no attention to emotional wellbeing.” For students managing significant family responsibilities, purely research-focused supervision creates additional stress.

The faculty’s challenge is to recognise that family responsibilities represent a structural retention risk disproportionately affecting IT students. Addressing this requires emotional and financial support adequate for students with dependents, supervisor training to recognise caregiving responsibilities and peer support networks for researchers balancing family obligations.

Faculty-Specific Recommendations

These recommendations are tailored to patterns observed among IT students and prioritise actions the faculty can take to enhance support. For detailed implementation guidance, see the corresponding recommendations in *Graduate Research at Monash: Student Experience, Challenges and Opportunities for Enhancement*.

Based on the data, IT should focus faculty efforts on three distinctive challenges where targeted intervention will have maximum impact:

1. Improve Mental Health Support Access for Underserved Populations

The Problem: IT students face heightened mental health challenges, yet only 32% have accessed mental health support compared to 45% university-wide. While the faculty's high proportion of international students (79% of respondents, with only 30% accessing support) partially explains this gap, the pattern extends beyond demographics: IT's domestic students access support at only 42% (vs. 62% university-wide) and just 23% of men and 38% of women access support (vs. 31% and 52% respectively), indicating barriers across multiple demographic groups.

Most critically, mental health is a frequently cited reason for considering leaving among IT students who have contemplated departure, creating a dangerous retention risk where students experiencing the challenges most likely to drive attrition are not receiving help that could sustain them through candidature.

What the Faculty Can Do:

Immediate Actions:

Partner with Monash Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS) to develop IT-specific mental health messaging for international students:

- For international students: Explicit statement that accessing mental health support does NOT affect visa status.
- Acknowledge cultural differences in understanding mental health.
- Use peer testimonials from international students who successfully accessed services.
- Provide key information in relevant languages (Mandarin, Hindi, Bahasa, etc.).
- For men: Reframe mental health as “performance optimisation” rather than crisis intervention.
- Use language that resonates: “Managing Research Stress,” “Building Mental Resilience.”
- Highlight that high achiever proactively manage wellbeing as part of their success strategy.

Faculty Actions:

- Associate Dean Graduate Research coordinates with CAPS and international student services.
- Identify international student volunteers for testimonials (with appropriate support).
- Track whether messaging reaches international students effectively.

Success Metrics: Increase support access from 32% toward 45% university average; reduce demographic disparities (particularly international vs. domestic gap and gender gap); student feedback on messaging relevance; reduction in mental health as primary reason for considering leaving.

For detailed implementation guidance, see main report: Level 1 – "Integrate Wellbeing Check-ins into Existing Academic Milestones" and "Redesign Mental Health Service Communications for Underserved Populations"; Level 2 – "Develop Preventative Mental Health Workshops"; Level 3 – "Implement Culturally Responsive Mental Health Service Delivery."

2. Support Research Productivity for Financially Stressed Students

The Problem: 42% of IT students report that financial stress has an extreme or big impact on their ability to concentrate on research – marginally higher than 40% university-wide – and "financial issues" (60%) represent the most common reason IT students consider leaving their course.

What the Faculty Can Do:

Immediate Actions:

- Develop quarterly workshop series: "Maintaining Research Productivity Under Pressure."
    - Protecting research time when working multiple jobs.
    - Managing cognitive load during financial stress.
    - Strategic research planning on limited resources.
    - Accessing emergency support (MGA grants, financial counselling).
    - Assessing free budget tools and online resources (e.g., moneysmart.gov.au).
- Create online "Productivity Under Pressure" resource hub with:
    - Budget-conscious research planning templates.
    - Strategies from students who successfully navigated financial stress.
    - Crisis planning guides.
    - Links to emergency grants, financial counselling, hardship support.
- Train supervisors to recognise and talk about financial stress impacting productivity and making appropriate referrals.

Faculty Actions:

- Consider inviting successful graduate students to share strategies.
- Create and maintain online resource repository.
- Integrate financial awareness into supervisor training.

Success Metrics: Workshop attendance; student feedback on usefulness; half reduction in concentration impact from 42% toward 21% university average in future surveys.

For detailed implementation guidance, see main report: Level 1 – "Develop Graduate Research-Specific Financial Literacy Resources and Workshops."

3. Enhance Support for Student Parents and Carers

The Problem: IT students cite family responsibilities as a reason for considering leaving at the highest rate of any faculty (37% among those who have considered departure). Student testimonies reveal acute financial strain managing dependents on inadequate stipends, isolation from peers who understand caring situations and supervisors who focus exclusively on research progress without acknowledging wellbeing or family circumstances. The intersection of family obligations with IT's financial pressures and solitary work culture creates a distinctive retention risk.

What the Faculty Can Do:

Immediate Actions:

- **Integrate family circumstances into milestone reviews:** Provide supervisors with prompts to ask about caring responsibilities and their impact on research capacity. Document these discussions in milestone records to ensure continuity if supervisors change.
- **Create visibility for existing family support:** Develop IT-specific communications highlighting university resources (MGA Emergency Grants, childcare subsidies, flexible candidature options, financial counselling) with clear guidance on eligibility and application processes.
- **Establish peer connections for student parents/carers:** Facilitate introductions between IT graduate researchers with caring responsibilities through opt-in directory or organised coffee sessions, creating informal support networks for students who feel isolated in their circumstances.

Faculty Actions:

- Integrate family support into IT-specific orientation and milestone communications.
- Allocate modest budget (~$5K annually) for peer connection events and resource development.

Success Metrics: Reduction in family responsibilities as consideration-of-leaving factor; utilisation of peer networks and resources; student satisfaction with acknowledgment of caring circumstances; retention rates among students with dependents.

For detailed implementation guidance, see main report: Level 1 – “Develop Graduate Research-Specific Financial Literacy Resources”; Level 2 – “Establish Peer Support Networks for Underrepresented Groups”; Level 3 – “Implement Flexible Candidature Models for Students with Caring Responsibilities.”

Conclusion

These three recommendations directly address IT’s most distinctive challenges – mental health support access gaps affecting students across demographic groups, financial stress undermining the sustained concentration required for cognitive-intensive computational research and family responsibilities driving consideration of leaving at the highest rate of any faculty. All three are immediately actionable at faculty level, require modest initial investment and build from immediate

low-cost interventions toward longer-term strategic enhancements. By focusing faculty efforts on these targeted priorities, IT can meaningfully improve outcomes for its graduate research students while establishing a model for discipline-responsive support that recognises the unique pressures facing graduate researchers in technical fields.

Appendix: IT Demographics

Campus	Respondents
I do not regularly attend campus	5 (7%)
Clayton	70 (95%)
Caulfield	11 (15%)
Peninsula	0 (0%)
Parkville	1 (1%)
Malaysia	0 (0%)
Hospital or Medical Centre	0 (0%)
Indonesia	1 (1%)
Suzhou	2 (3%)
other	0 (0%)

School/Department	Respondents
Data Science and Artificial Intelligence	27 (37%)
Human-Centred Computing	27 (37%)
Software Systems and Cybersecurity	17 (23%)
Other	3 (4%)

Domestic/International	Respondents
Local student (Australian or New Zealand citizen/permanent resident)	12 (16%)
International student	62 (84%)

Study load	Respondents
Full-time	69 (92%)
Part-time	6 (8%)
On leave from study	0 (0%)

Study location	Respondents
Entirely on-campus	27 (37%)
Mix of on-campus and off-campus	39 (53%)
Entirely off-campus	8 (11%)
Other	0 (0%)

Time since last degree	Respondents
Less than 1 year	16 (22%)
1-5 years	43 (58%)
6-10 years	10 (14%)
11+ years	5 (7%)

Degree progress	Respondents
First year	26 (35%)
Second year	29 (39%)
Third year and beyond	20 (27%)

Study hours	Respondents
Less than 5	0 (0%)
6-10	1 (1%)
11-20	13 (18%)
21-30	19 (26%)
31-40	24 (32%)
Over 40 hours	17 (23%)

English proficiency	Respondents
Fluent	27 (37%)
Advanced	29 (39%)
Intermediate	16 (22%)
Elementary	2 (3%)
Beginner	0 (0%)

Gender	Respondents
Woman	33 (45%)
Man	35 (47%)
Non-binary/gender diverse	2 (3%)
Prefer to self-describe	0 (0%)
Prefer not to say	4 (5%)

LGBTIQA+	Respondents
Yes	3 (4%)
No	62 (84%)
Prefer not to disclose	9 (12%)

Indigenous (domestic students only)	Respondents
Yes	0 (0%)
No	11 (92%)
Prefer not to disclose	1 (8%)

Disability	Respondents
Yes	2 (3%)
No	66 (89%)
Prefer not to disclose	6 (8%)

Registered disability with DSS	Respondents
Yes	2 (100%)
No	0 (0%)

Age	Respondents
24 or under	6 (8%)
25-29	32 (43%)
30-39	31 (42%)
40 and over	5 (7%)

Parental status	Respondents
Yes – living with me	16 (23%)
Yes – not living with me	2 (3%)
No	53 (75%)

Primary carer	Respondents
Yes	9 (56%)
Shared responsibility	10 (63%)
No	0 (0%)

Carer status	Respondents
Yes	15 (21%)
No	56 (79%)

Employment status	Respondents
Full-time	21 (30%)
Part-time	12 (17%)
Casual	14 (20%)
Unemployed and looking for work	11 (16%)
Not employed and not looking for work	13 (18%)

Work hours	Respondents
Less than 5	11 (24%)
6-10	7 (15%)
11-20	16 (35%)
21-30	5 (11%)
31-40	6 (13%)
More than 40	1 (2%)

Scholarship recipients	Respondents
Yes	55 (79%)
No, but I previously held a scholarship	2 (3%)
No	13 (19%)

Value of scholarship	Respondents
Less than $33,511	7 (13%)
$33,511 (National full-time RTP stipend minimum)	12 (22%)
$33,512 - $36,062	7 (13%)
$36,063 (Monash full-time RTP stipend)	26 (47%)
$36,064 - $47,626	2 (4%)
More than $47,627 (National minimum wage)	1 (2%)