Graduate Research in MADA:

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

Edwards, Ryan. *Graduate Research in MADA: Student Experiences, Challenges and Opportunities for Enhancement.* Melbourne: Monash Graduate Association, 2025.

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Introduction

This report examines the experiences of 49 graduate research students from Monash Art, Design and Architecture (MADA) 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 MADA.

Where meaningful, findings are compared to Monash-wide averages to highlight areas where MADA 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

- 49 MADA graduate research students participated.
- Response rate represents approximately 35% of enrolled MADA 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 MADA graduate research contexts.
- Financial pressures and their discipline-specific manifestations.
- Academic progression, career uncertainty and attrition considerations.
- Peer connection and support needs unique to MADA 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 MADA students and what the faculty can do to enhance support.

Key Findings for MADA

This section presents core findings from the 49 MADA 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 MADA 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.
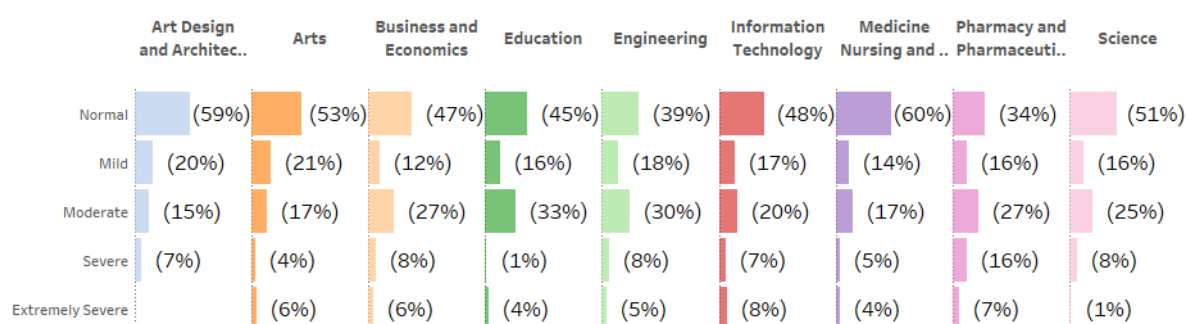
1. Mental Health and Wellbeing

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 MADA students, comparing them to university-wide averages. These findings reveal where MADA students face similar challenges to their peers and where discipline-specific factors may create unique barriers or pressures.

DASS21 Indicators:

MADA students show marginally better mental health patterns compared to those recorded across the University

Depression:

	Art Design and Architec..	Arts	Business and Economics	Education	Engineering	Information Technology	Medicine Nursing and ..	Pharmacy and Pharmaceuti..	Science
Normal	(59%)	(53%)	(47%)	(45%)	(39%)	(48%)	(60%)	(34%)	(51%)
Mild	(20%)	(21%)	(12%)	(16%)	(18%)	(17%)	(14%)	(16%)	(16%)
Moderate	(15%)	(17%)	(27%)	(33%)	(30%)	(20%)	(17%)	(27%)	(25%)
Severe	(7%)	(4%)	(8%)	(1%)	(8%)	(7%)	(5%)	(16%)	(8%)
Extremely Severe		(6%)	(6%)	(4%)	(5%)	(8%)	(4%)	(7%)	(1%)

Anxiety:

	Art Design and Architec..	Arts	Business and Economics	Education	Engineering	Information Technology	Medicine Nursing and ..	Pharmacy and Pharmaceuti..	Science
Normal	(59%)	(47%)	(35%)	(34%)	(39%)	(41%)	(55%)	(40%)	(47%)
Mild	(17%)	(21%)	(29%)	(28%)	(21%)	(14%)	(16%)	(16%)	(14%)
Moderate	(11%)	(9%)	(14%)	(27%)	(22%)	(23%)	(12%)	(17%)	(22%)
Severe	(11%)	(14%)	(8%)	(3%)	(8%)	(10%)	(7%)	(11%)	(16%)
Extremely Severe	(2%)	(9%)	(15%)	(7%)	(11%)	(13%)	(9%)	(16%)	(1%)

Stress:

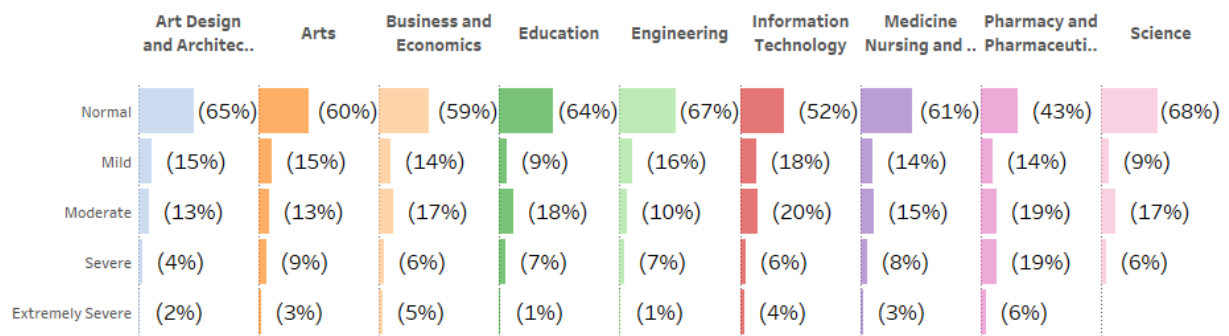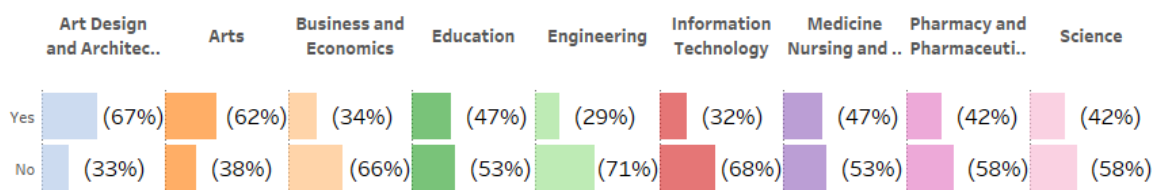|	Art Design and Architec..	Arts	Business and Economics	Education	Engineering	Information Technology	Medicine Nursing and ..	Pharmacy and Pharmaceuti..	Science
Normal	(65%)	(60%)	(59%)	(64%)	(67%)	(52%)	(61%)	(43%)	(68%)
Mild	(15%)	(15%)	(14%)	(9%)	(16%)	(18%)	(14%)	(14%)	(9%)
Moderate	(13%)	(13%)	(17%)	(18%)	(10%)	(20%)	(15%)	(19%)	(17%)
Severe	(4%)	(9%)	(6%)	(7%)	(7%)	(6%)	(8%)	(19%)	(6%)
Extremely Severe	(2%)	(3%)	(5%)	(1%)	(1%)	(4%)	(3%)	(6%)	

These patterns suggest that MADA students experience mental health challenges at rates marginally better than the broader Monash graduate research population. While 59% fall within the normal range for depression (better than the 51% university-wide), approximately one-fifth of MADA students experience moderate to extremely severe symptoms across the three DASS21 domains.

Mental Health Support Access:

MADA respondents have the highest access rate of mental health support across the University.

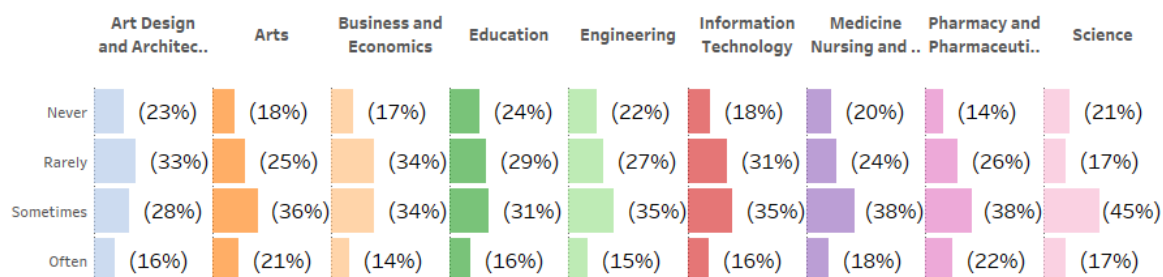|	Art Design and Architec..	Arts	Business and Economics	Education	Engineering	Information Technology	Medicine Nursing and ..	Pharmacy and Pharmaceuti..	Science
Yes	(67%)	(62%)	(34%)	(47%)	(29%)	(32%)	(47%)	(42%)	(42%)
No	(33%)	(38%)	(66%)	(53%)	(71%)	(68%)	(53%)	(58%)	(58%)

Key demographic insights:

- 67% of MADA students have accessed mental health support (vs. 45% university-wide).
- 81% of domestic students (n.28) and 44% of international students (n.18) had accessed support.
  - Both of these are well above the University-wide average for these demographics (Domestic = 62%, International = 32%).
- 46% of men (n. 13) and 72% of women (n.30) had accessed support.
  - Both of these are well above the University-wide average for these demographics (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.

	Art Design and Architec..	Arts	Business and Economics	Education	Engineering	Information Technology	Medicine Nursing and ..	Pharmacy and Pharmaceuti..	Science
Never	(23%)	(18%)	(17%)	(24%)	(22%)	(18%)	(20%)	(14%)	(21%)
Rarely	(33%)	(25%)	(34%)	(29%)	(27%)	(31%)	(24%)	(26%)	(17%)
Sometimes	(28%)	(36%)	(34%)	(31%)	(35%)	(35%)	(38%)	(38%)	(45%)
Often	(16%)	(21%)	(14%)	(16%)	(15%)	(16%)	(18%)	(22%)	(17%)

- 77% of MADA students reported experiencing imposter syndrome at some point (vs. 80% university-wide).
- 44% of MADA students report experiencing imposter syndrome 'sometimes' and 'often' (this is the lowest percentage across the faculties).

Student Voices from MADA:

While the quantitative data reveals patterns in mental health outcomes, research pressures and imposter syndrome among MADA 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 MADA:

> *"Overwhelmed with work feeling like what I doing is worthless. I always have the urge to work more and any break or relaxation time only makes me feel guilty."*

> *"As I engage with my research … I often find myself navigating not only the academic challenges but also the emotional and psychological impacts of the realities I study. The process of exploring [my research topic] can be overwhelming and isolating."*

> *"Overthinking about how people have perceived me how I might have alienated myself."*

> *"Stress from workload, money stress from stipend being low, no time and resources to address mental health when it didn't feel like an urgent matter."*

> *"Lack of supportive peer group – too critical and competitive within the research environment."*

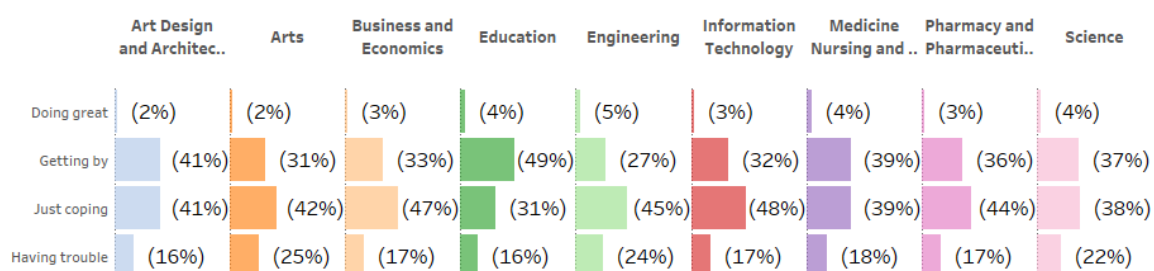> *"The stress from study, family and working."*

> *"I experience a bit of social anxiety and most of my cohort is older than me and not doing similar work."*

2. Financial Circumstances and Career Pressure

This section examines two interrelated dimensions of the MADA graduate research experience: financial circumstances and career navigation. Beyond standard financial wellbeing measures, MADA students face 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 financial and professional challenges that may require targeted interventions.
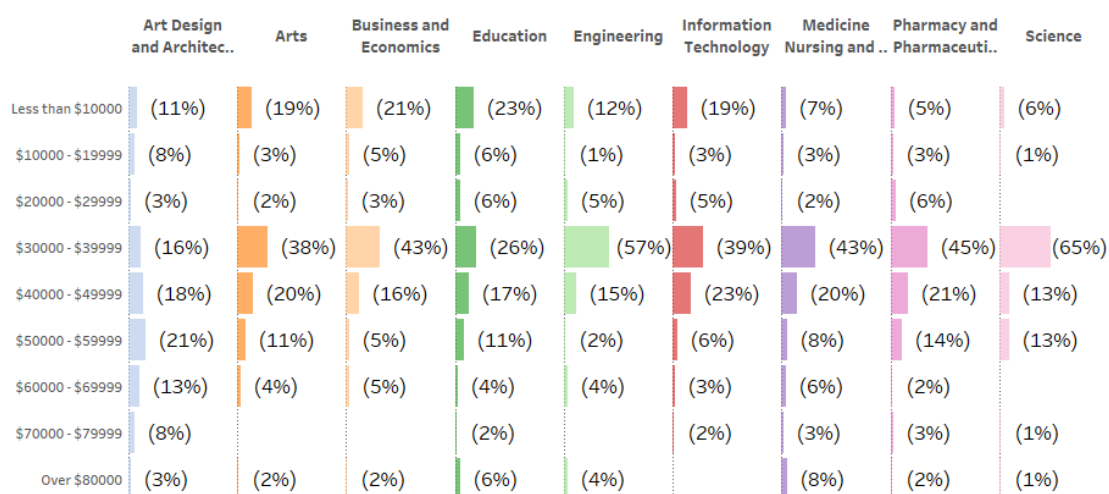
Melbourne Institute's Financial Wellbeing:

MADA graduate research students show financial wellbeing patterns marginally better than their peers across Monash; however, 57% of the faculty's students are either "just coping" or "having trouble."
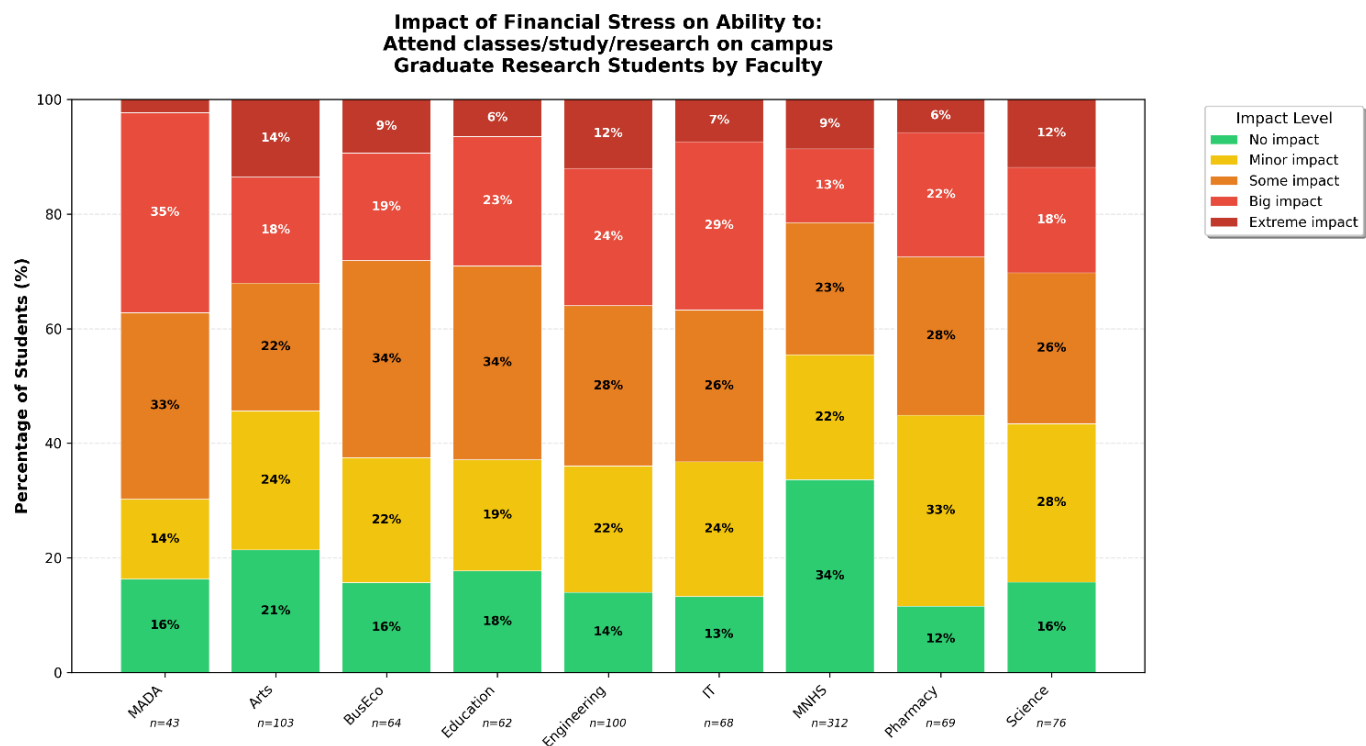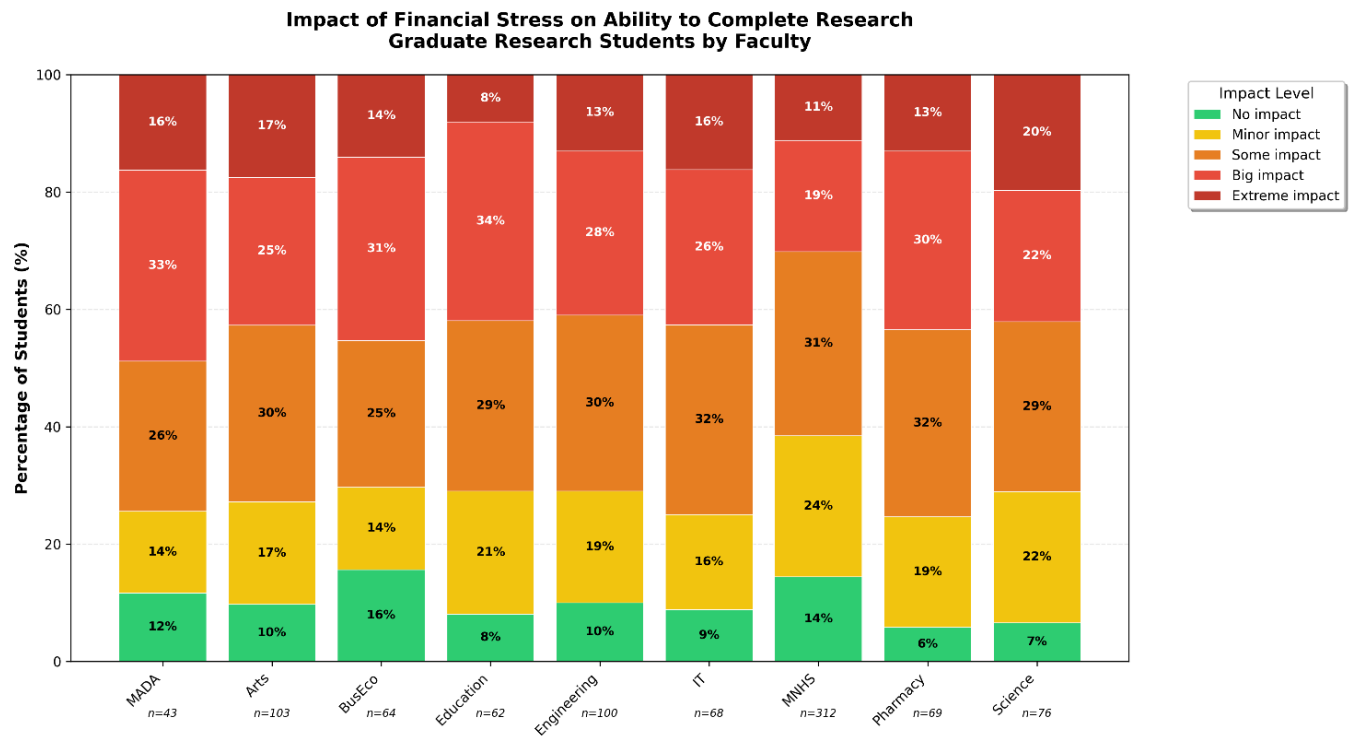
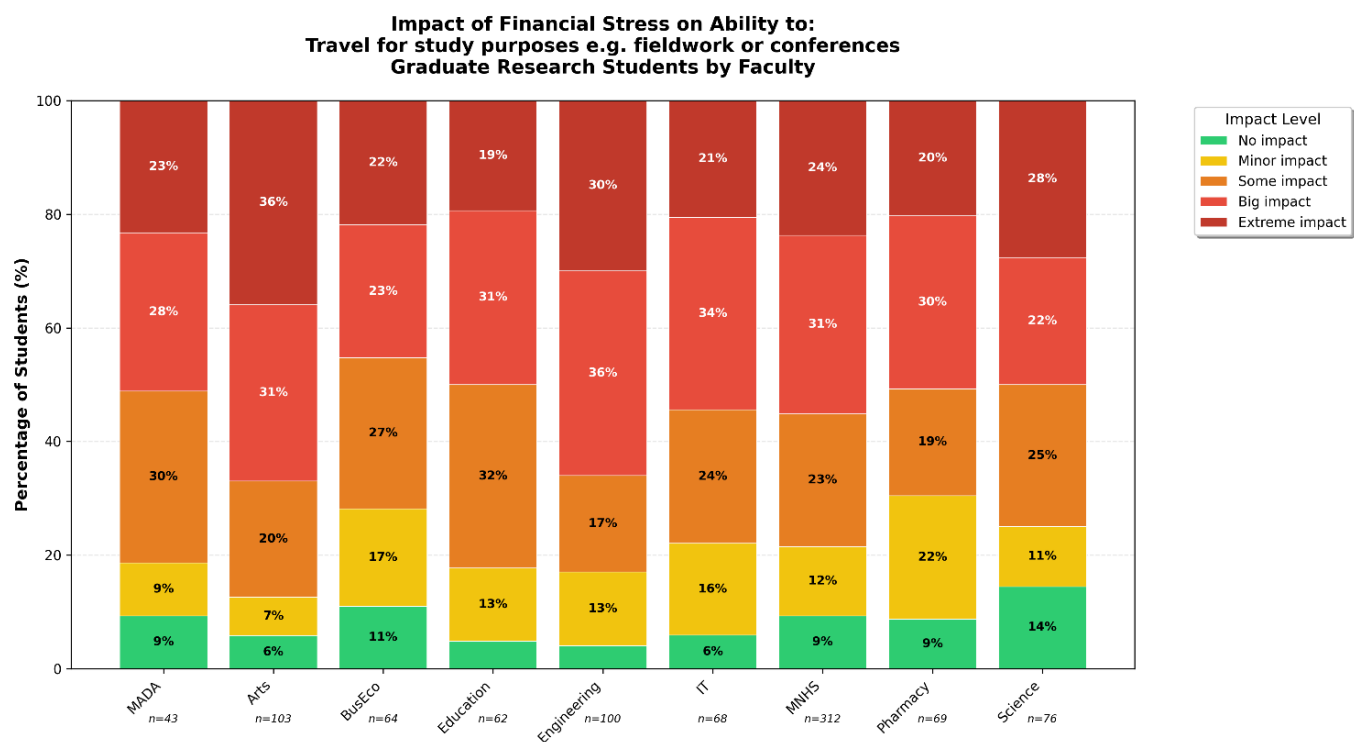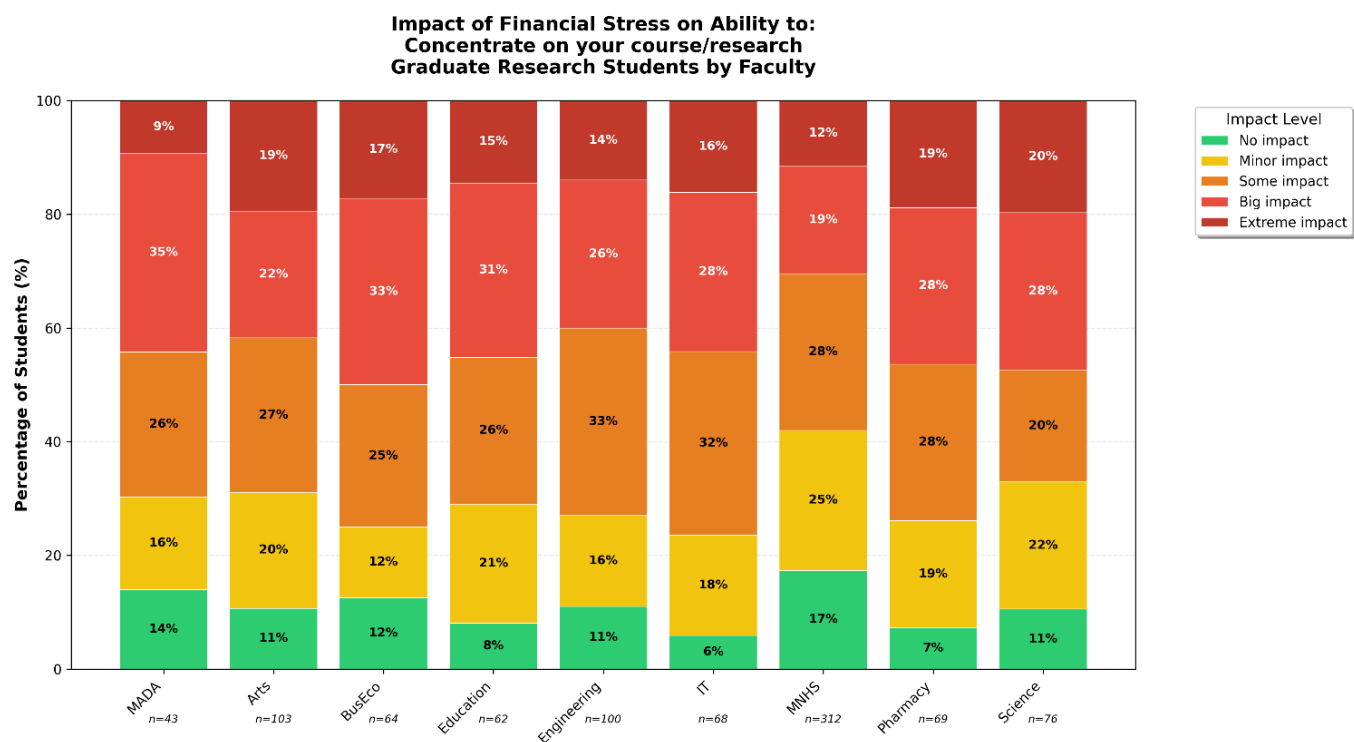|	Art Design and Architec..	Arts	Business and Economics	Education	Engineering	Information Technology	Medicine Nursing and ..	Pharmacy and Pharmaceuti..	Science
Doing great	(2%)	(2%)	(3%)	(4%)	(5%)	(3%)	(4%)	(3%)	(4%)
Getting by	(41%)	(31%)	(33%)	(49%)	(27%)	(32%)	(39%)	(36%)	(37%)
Just coping	(41%)	(42%)	(47%)	(31%)	(45%)	(48%)	(39%)	(44%)	(38%)
Having trouble	(16%)	(25%)	(17%)	(16%)	(24%)	(17%)	(18%)	(17%)	(22%)

Estimated Annual Income (AUD):

MADA students show income patterns broadly above their peers in other faculties, with full-time students reporting median incomes in the $40,000 - $49,999 range (the only faculty to have a median income above the $30,000 - $39,999 range).

	Art Design and Architec..	Arts	Business and Economics	Education	Engineering	Information Technology	Medicine Nursing and ..	Pharmacy and Pharmaceuti..	Science
Less than $10000	(11%)	(19%)	(21%)	(23%)	(12%)	(19%)	(7%)	(5%)	(6%)
$10000 - $19999	(8%)	(3%)	(5%)	(6%)	(1%)	(3%)	(3%)	(3%)	(1%)
$20000 - $29999	(3%)	(2%)	(3%)	(6%)	(5%)	(5%)	(2%)	(6%)	
$30000 - $39999	(16%)	(38%)	(43%)	(26%)	(57%)	(39%)	(43%)	(45%)	(65%)
$40000 - $49999	(18%)	(20%)	(16%)	(17%)	(15%)	(23%)	(20%)	(21%)	(13%)
$50000 - $59999	(21%)	(11%)	(5%)	(11%)	(2%)	(6%)	(8%)	(14%)	(13%)
$60000 - $69999	(13%)	(4%)	(5%)	(4%)	(4%)	(3%)	(6%)	(2%)	
$70000 - $79999	(8%)			(2%)		(2%)	(3%)	(3%)	(1%)
Over $80000	(3%)	(2%)	(2%)	(6%)	(4%)		(8%)	(2%)	(1%)

How Financial Pressures Affect Academic Activities

Financial pressures directly impact MADA 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:

Impact of Financial Stress on Ability to Complete Research
Graduate Research Students by Faculty

Impact of Financial Stress on Ability to:
Attend classes/study/research on campus
Graduate Research Students by Faculty

Impact of Financial Stress on Ability to:
Concentrate on your course/research
Graduate Research Students by Faculty

Impact of Financial Stress on Ability to:
Travel for study purposes e.g. fieldwork or conferences
Graduate Research Students by Faculty

Key Findings on Financial Impact:

- **Research completion capacity**: 49% of MADA students 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).
- **Campus attendance and engagement**: 37% of MADA students 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).
- **Concentration and research quality**: 44% of MADA students report that financial stress has an extreme or big impact on their ability to concentrate on their research (vs. 40% university-wide). Financial stress may push students toward "safer" creative choices that require fewer resources rather than pursuing innovative approaches that might advance their field.
- **Professional development through travel**: 51% of MADA students 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 miss crucial opportunities to exhibit work, build professional networks, understand contemporary practice and develop visibility in their creative field – all essential for successful careers in arts and design industries.

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 MADA.

"With the current cost of living the stipend is really not enough to get by. I sometimes take up additional work to cover life expenses which impacts the hours I should be spending on studies. Unfortunately, it becomes a vicious cycle which can be psychologically and physically taxing resulting in burn out."

"Stipend is too low in the context of extreme inflation rising rents and general cost of living crisis."

"The stipend scholarship needs to be raised it is impossible to live and study to the best of my ability on this amount."

"It's very difficult to manage a full-time study load with working part time to meet my day-to-day cost of living. I rarely go out and most of my income is spent on things like rent bills groceries and public transport. After these needs have been met, I typically have nothing left over. I am also no longer able to afford a studio for my art making due to committing to study which is ultimately affecting my capacity to complete..."

"Lucky to have a partner who is able to financially support me if my income drops, which relieves financial stress yet makes me wish for greater financial independence for myself in case anything happens to our relationship/my partners health."
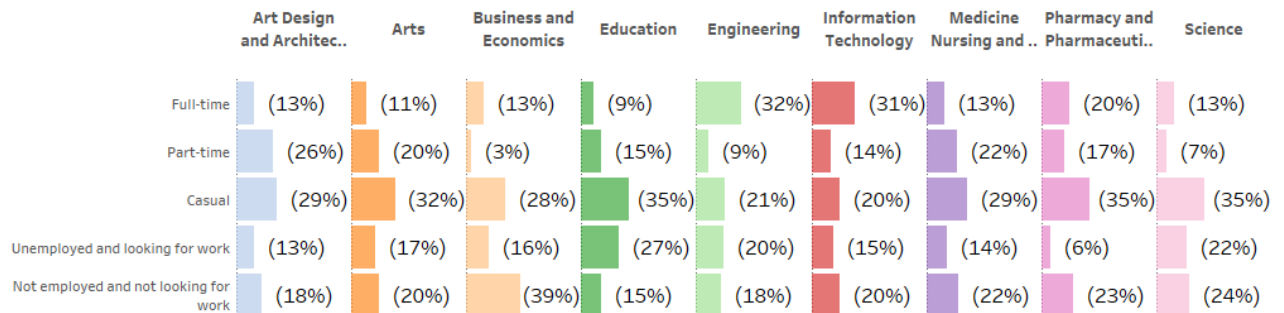
"Courses about final management in Australia for international students will be really helpful."

"I feel comfortable financially only because I work full time and study full time. I am the sole earner in my household and I work very hard for financial stability."
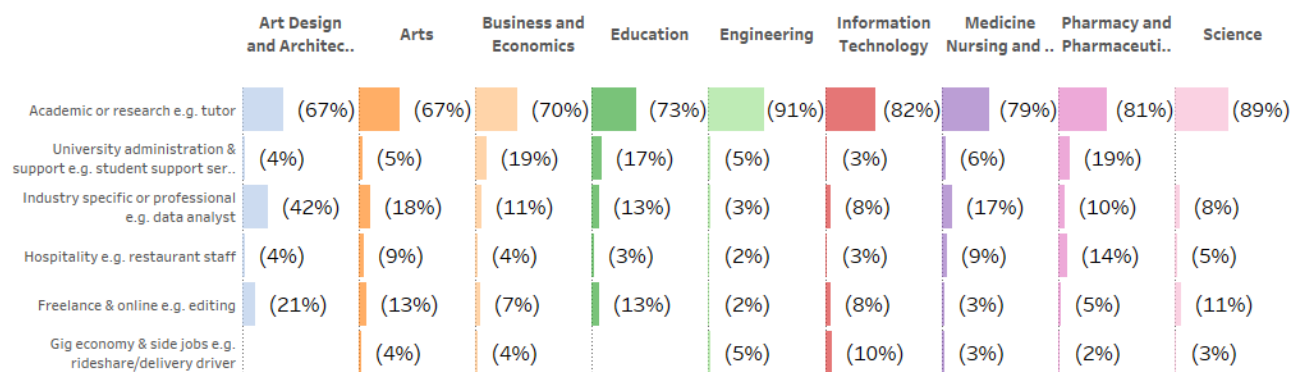
Employment Patterns:

The employment patterns among MADA 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 MADA students navigate.

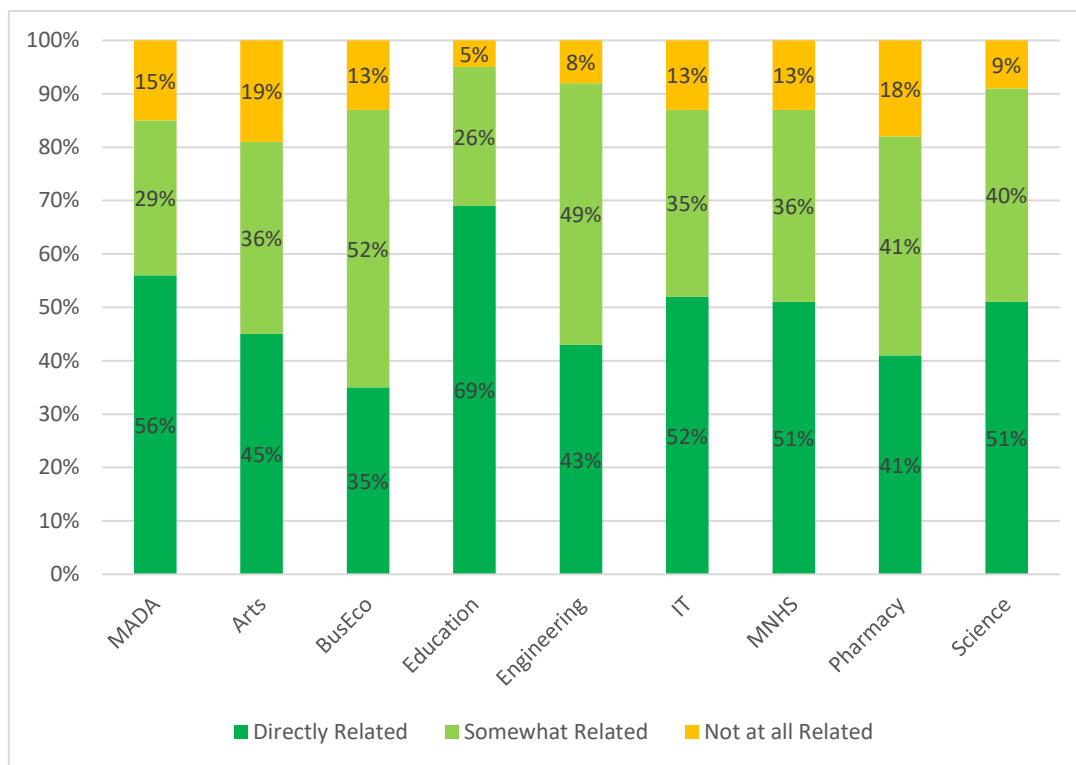*Employment Status of Full-Time Students Across the Faculties:*

	Art Design and Architec..	Arts	Business and Economics	Education	Engineering	Information Technology	Medicine Nursing and ..	Pharmacy and Pharmaceuti..	Science
Full-time	(13%)	(11%)	(13%)	(9%)	(32%)	(31%)	(13%)	(20%)	(13%)
Part-time	(26%)	(20%)	(3%)	(15%)	(9%)	(14%)	(22%)	(17%)	(7%)
Casual	(29%)	(32%)	(28%)	(35%)	(21%)	(20%)	(29%)	(35%)	(35%)
Unemployed and looking for work	(13%)	(17%)	(16%)	(27%)	(20%)	(15%)	(14%)	(6%)	(22%)
Not employed and not looking for work	(18%)	(20%)	(39%)	(15%)	(18%)	(20%)	(22%)	(23%)	(24%)

The Type of Jobs Students are Employed In:

	Art Design and Architec..	Arts	Business and Economics	Education	Engineering	Information Technology	Medicine Nursing and ..	Pharmacy and Pharmaceuti..	Science
Academic or research e.g. tutor	(67%)	(67%)	(70%)	(73%)	(91%)	(82%)	(79%)	(81%)	(89%)
University administration & support e.g. student support ser..	(4%)	(5%)	(19%)	(17%)	(5%)	(3%)	(6%)	(19%)	
Industry specific or professional e.g. data analyst	(42%)	(18%)	(11%)	(13%)	(3%)	(8%)	(17%)	(10%)	(8%)
Hospitality e.g. restaurant staff	(4%)	(9%)	(4%)	(3%)	(2%)	(3%)	(9%)	(14%)	(5%)
Freelance & online e.g. editing	(21%)	(13%)	(7%)	(13%)	(2%)	(8%)	(3%)	(5%)	(11%)
Gig economy & side jobs e.g. rideshare/delivery driver		(4%)	(4%)		(5%)	(10%)	(3%)	(2%)	(3%)

These employment patterns require nuanced interpretation. Students employed in roles related to their degree may be building professionally relevant skills despite time pressures. However, those working in unrelated fields purely for financial necessity face the double burden of competing demands without corresponding professional benefit.

Relation of Job to Research

These patterns reveal a mixed employment landscape among MADA students. 56% work in jobs directly related to their studies, 29% in somewhat related positions and 15% in roles not at all related to their research. This puts MADA marginally ahead of their fellow HASS faculties (52%, 35% and 13%).

The 85% working in directly/somewhat related roles suggests that a substantial number of MADA students successfully integrate their employment with professional development, potentially through research assistant positions or tutoring/teaching roles (67%) and/or industry specific roles (42%).[1] These students may experience employment as less burdensome and more complementary to their academic work.

However, the 15% working in jobs unrelated to their studies highlight students for whom employment represents pure financial necessity rather than career building. These individuals face the particular challenge of devoting significant time and energy to work that offers no direct advancement toward their research or professional goals – a double burden of competing demands and missed opportunity costs. For a discipline where career trajectories can span both academic and industry pathways, ensuring students have access to professionally relevant employment opportunities (whether through expanded teaching assistant roles, research collaborations, or industry partnerships) could transform employment from a competing pressure into a professional development asset. These increased opportunities would also serve to provide valuable income and experience to the 31% of MADA respondents currently unemployed and looking for work/yet to commence looking for work.
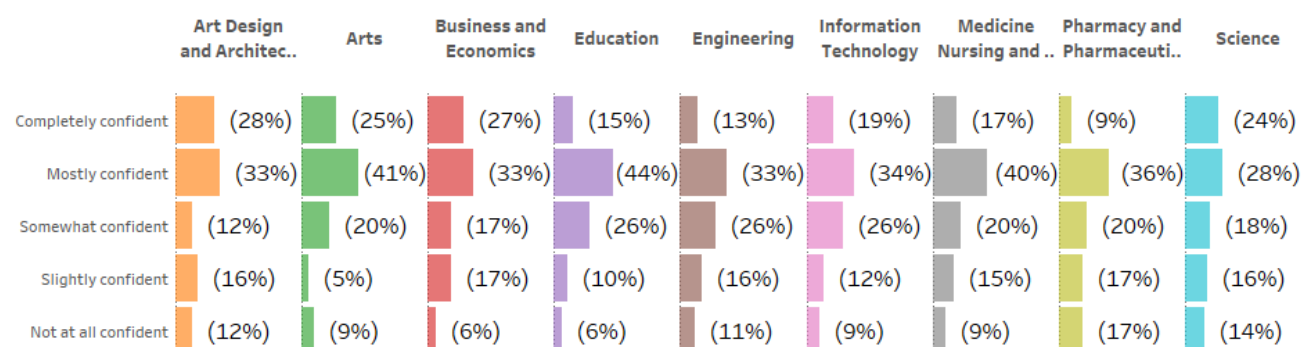
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[1] Students could select multiple categories of job types given some jobs may overlap and some students may have more than one job.

3. Academic Progression and Career Uncertainty

Beyond the immediate pressures of mental health and financial stress, MADA 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 MADA students. Understanding these patterns reveals how the distinctive pressures facing MADA students – including the tension between academic and industry pathways – affect their sense of progress and professional direction.
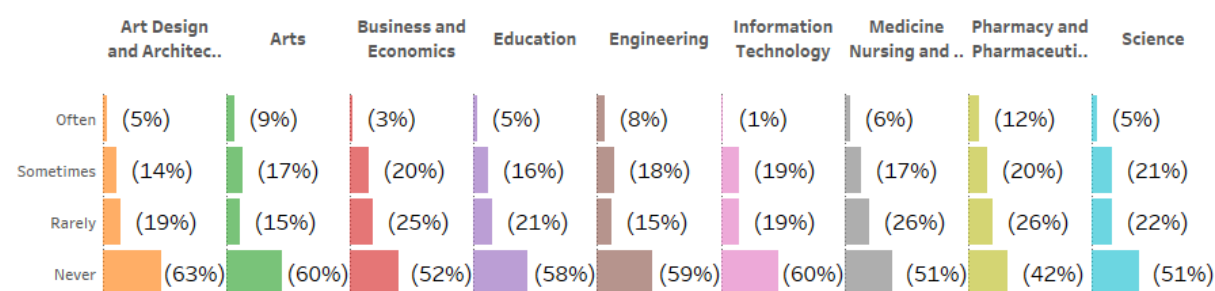
Completion Confidence:

MADA students show modestly higher completion confidence than the university average (61% vs. 55% completely/mostly confident). However, 28% still harbor a high degree of doubt about timely completion.

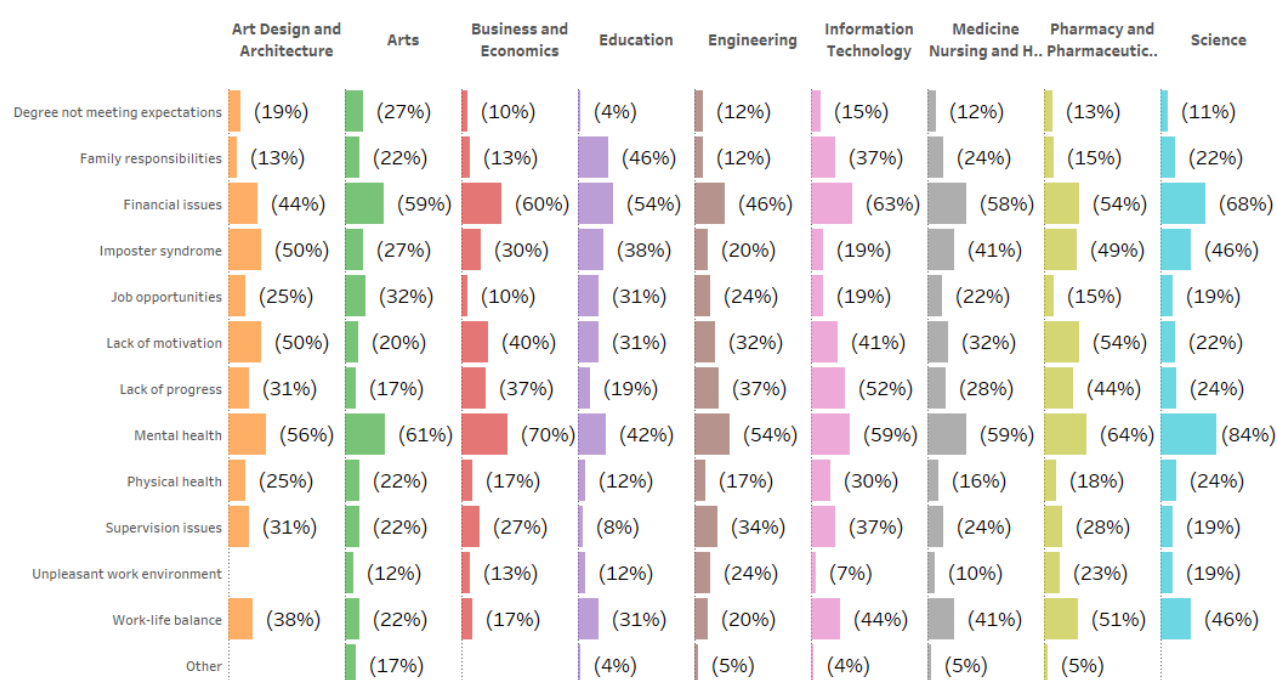|	Art Design and Architec..	Arts	Business and Economics	Education	Engineering	Information Technology	Medicine Nursing and ..	Pharmacy and Pharmaceuti..	Science
Completely confident	(28%)	(25%)	(27%)	(15%)	(13%)	(19%)	(17%)	(9%)	(24%)
Mostly confident	(33%)	(41%)	(33%)	(44%)	(33%)	(34%)	(40%)	(36%)	(28%)
Somewhat confident	(12%)	(20%)	(17%)	(26%)	(26%)	(26%)	(20%)	(20%)	(18%)
Slightly confident	(16%)	(5%)	(17%)	(10%)	(16%)	(12%)	(15%)	(17%)	(16%)
Not at all confident	(12%)	(9%)	(6%)	(6%)	(11%)	(9%)	(9%)	(17%)	(14%)

Considering Leaving:

Consideration of leaving one's degree represents a 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 MADA 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.

	Art Design and Architec..	Arts	Business and Economics	Education	Engineering	Information Technology	Medicine Nursing and ..	Pharmacy and Pharmaceuti..	Science
Often	(5%)	(9%)	(3%)	(5%)	(8%)	(1%)	(6%)	(12%)	(5%)
Sometimes	(14%)	(17%)	(20%)	(16%)	(18%)	(19%)	(17%)	(20%)	(21%)
Rarely	(19%)	(15%)	(25%)	(21%)	(15%)	(19%)	(26%)	(26%)	(22%)
Never	(63%)	(60%)	(52%)	(58%)	(59%)	(60%)	(51%)	(42%)	(51%)

Over one-third (37%) of MADA students have considered leaving at some point, which is below the 46% university-wide average, with 5% considering leaving often (vs. 6% university-wide). This pattern is particularly noteworthy given the faculty's demographic composition. MADA has a higher proportion of domestic student respondents and across the university, international students consider leaving substantially less frequently than domestic students. As such, across both demographic groups, MADA respondents were less likely than their peers across the University to consider leaving. Among the international cohort the difference was MADA 28% to 38% across Monash, while among the domestic cohort the difference was MADA 44% to 56% across Monash.

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

	Art Design and Architecture	Arts	Business and Economics	Education	Engineering	Information Technology	Medicine Nursing and H..	Pharmacy and Pharmaceutic..	Science
Degree not meeting expectations	(19%)	(27%)	(10%)	(4%)	(12%)	(15%)	(12%)	(13%)	(11%)
Family responsibilities	(13%)	(22%)	(13%)	(46%)	(12%)	(37%)	(24%)	(15%)	(22%)
Financial issues	(44%)	(59%)	(60%)	(54%)	(46%)	(63%)	(58%)	(54%)	(68%)
Imposter syndrome	(50%)	(27%)	(30%)	(38%)	(20%)	(19%)	(41%)	(49%)	(46%)
Job opportunities	(25%)	(32%)	(10%)	(31%)	(24%)	(19%)	(22%)	(15%)	(19%)
Lack of motivation	(50%)	(20%)	(40%)	(31%)	(32%)	(41%)	(32%)	(54%)	(22%)
Lack of progress	(31%)	(17%)	(37%)	(19%)	(37%)	(52%)	(28%)	(44%)	(24%)
Mental health	(56%)	(61%)	(70%)	(42%)	(54%)	(59%)	(59%)	(64%)	(84%)
Physical health	(25%)	(22%)	(17%)	(12%)	(17%)	(30%)	(16%)	(18%)	(24%)
Supervision issues	(31%)	(22%)	(27%)	(8%)	(34%)	(37%)	(24%)	(28%)	(19%)
Unpleasant work environment		(12%)	(13%)	(12%)	(24%)	(7%)	(10%)	(23%)	(19%)
Work-life balance	(38%)	(22%)	(17%)	(31%)	(20%)	(44%)	(41%)	(51%)	(46%)
Other		(17%)		(4%)	(5%)	(4%)	(5%)	(5%)	

Among MADA students who have considered leaving, the pattern of reasons reveals both shared challenges with the broader graduate research population and some distinctive emphases. Mental health emerges as the dominant factor, cited by 56% of MADA students who have considered leaving (vs. 61% university-wide). Encouragingly, the faculty's comparatively high rate of mental health support access suggests that students at risk of withdrawal are finding avenues for help rather than acting on that impulse.

Financial issues follow as the second most common factor at 52% (vs. 57% university-wide), with MADA students again showing slightly lower but still significant rates.
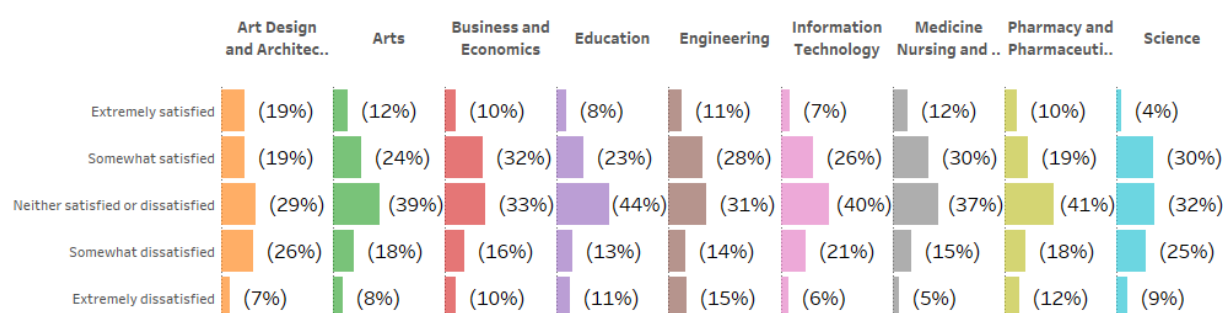
Imposter syndrome affects 33% of MADA students considering leaving (vs. 36% university-wide), while work-life balance concerns appear in 30% of cases (vs. 36% university-wide).

Career and job opportunities are cited by 19% of MADA students (vs. 22% university-wide), reflecting the realistic concerns about employment prospects in competitive creative industries where traditional academic positions are limited and portfolio-based freelance or studio practice

requires significant self-promotion and business acumen beyond creative skills alone.

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 MADA 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.

	Art Design and Architec..	Arts	Business and Economics	Education	Engineering	Information Technology	Medicine Nursing and ..	Pharmacy and Pharmaceuti..	Science
Extremely satisfied	(19%)	(12%)	(10%)	(8%)	(11%)	(7%)	(12%)	(10%)	(4%)
Somewhat satisfied	(19%)	(24%)	(32%)	(23%)	(28%)	(26%)	(30%)	(19%)	(30%)
Neither satisfied or dissatisfied	(29%)	(39%)	(33%)	(44%)	(31%)	(40%)	(37%)	(41%)	(32%)
Somewhat dissatisfied	(26%)	(18%)	(16%)	(13%)	(14%)	(21%)	(15%)	(18%)	(25%)
Extremely dissatisfied	(7%)	(8%)	(10%)	(11%)	(15%)	(6%)	(5%)	(12%)	(9%)

MADA students' satisfaction with career guidance reveals an important area for potential improvement. Dissatisfaction with career guidance in MADA is the second-highest of the faculties across the university, with 33% of MADA students reporting being 'somewhat dissatisfied' or 'extremely dissatisfied' with their experience of career support.

Career Pathway Complexity:

The moderate dissatisfaction with career guidance among MADA students reflects the genuine complexity of career pathways in creative fields. Unlike disciplines with more established professional trajectories (medicine, law, certain sciences), creative practitioners navigate highly diverse and often non-linear career paths that may include: independent studio practice, freelance design consultancy, gallery representation, teaching positions, industry design roles, architectural practice, curatorial work, arts administration or hybrid combinations of these options.

Current career services may struggle to provide guidance across this breadth of possibilities, particularly when career success in creative fields often depends heavily on portfolio quality, professional networks and entrepreneurial capability rather than following standardised application processes. Students consistently request more discipline-specific guidance that understands the realities of creative industry careers and can help them translate research work into professional opportunities.

Student Voices on Career Guidance:

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

> *"Face to face talk."*

> *"More pathways for recent PhD grads."*

> *"Invest in teachers."*

The MADA Career Challenge:

Art, Design and Architecture graduate research students face unique career navigation challenges:

Portfolio vs. publication tension: Unlike traditional academic fields where success is measured primarily through peer-reviewed publications, creative practitioners must develop high-quality portfolios of creative work while also potentially pursuing academic publication – two demanding and somewhat distinct skill sets requiring different time investments and professional development strategies.

Diverse creative career trajectories: Independent studio artist, gallery-represented practitioner, design consultant, architectural practice, academic appointment, curatorial roles, arts administration, teaching positions or hybrid "portfolio careers" – each requiring different networking strategies, business skills and professional development approaches. Students must navigate this complexity without clear roadmaps.

Entrepreneurship requirements: Many creative careers effectively require students to operate as small business owners, managing self-promotion, client relations, pricing, contracts and financial sustainability – skills rarely addressed in research training but essential for professional success outside traditional employment.

Visibility and reputation building: Success in creative fields often depends heavily on developing professional visibility through exhibitions, awards, publications and networks. Students must balance research requirements with opportunities to build their professional reputation – sometimes feeling these aims compete rather than complement each other.

Material resource access: Establishing independent creative practice after completing research often requires significant capital investment in studio space, equipment and materials – barriers that students without family financial support or accumulated savings struggle to overcome, regardless of the quality of their creative work.
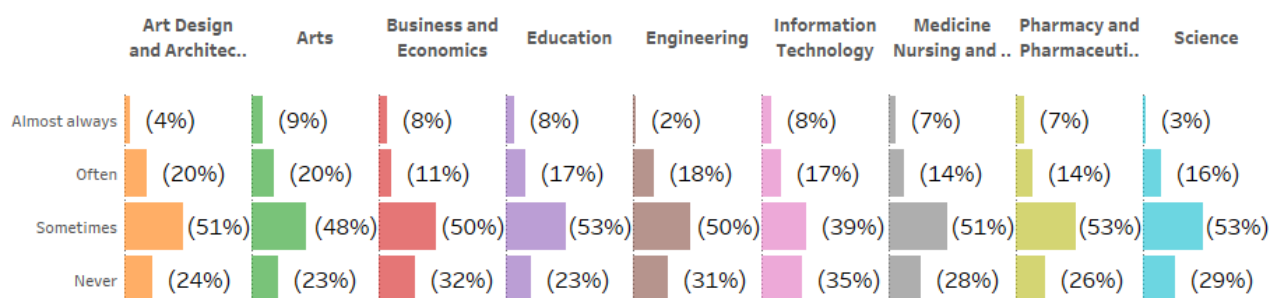
4. Peer Connection and Disciplinary Community

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 MADA students experience isolation, belonging and meaningful contact across different relationship types. Understanding these patterns reveals where existing community-building efforts reach MADA students effectively and where the barriers are.

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 MADA students experience connection – or disconnection – within their academic community.

	Art Design and Architec..	Arts	Business and Economics	Education	Engineering	Information Technology	Medicine Nursing and ..	Pharmacy and Pharmaceuti..	Science
Almost always	(4%)	(9%)	(8%)	(8%)	(2%)	(8%)	(7%)	(7%)	(3%)
Often	(20%)	(20%)	(11%)	(17%)	(18%)	(17%)	(14%)	(14%)	(16%)
Sometimes	(51%)	(48%)	(50%)	(53%)	(50%)	(39%)	(51%)	(53%)	(53%)
Never	(24%)	(23%)	(32%)	(23%)	(31%)	(35%)	(28%)	(26%)	(29%)

- 66% of MADA students experience some degree of isolation (vs. 72% university-wide).
- 24% experience high levels of isolation ("often" or "almost always") vs. 22% university-wide.

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 MADA students feel adequately connected and where they experience insufficient contact.
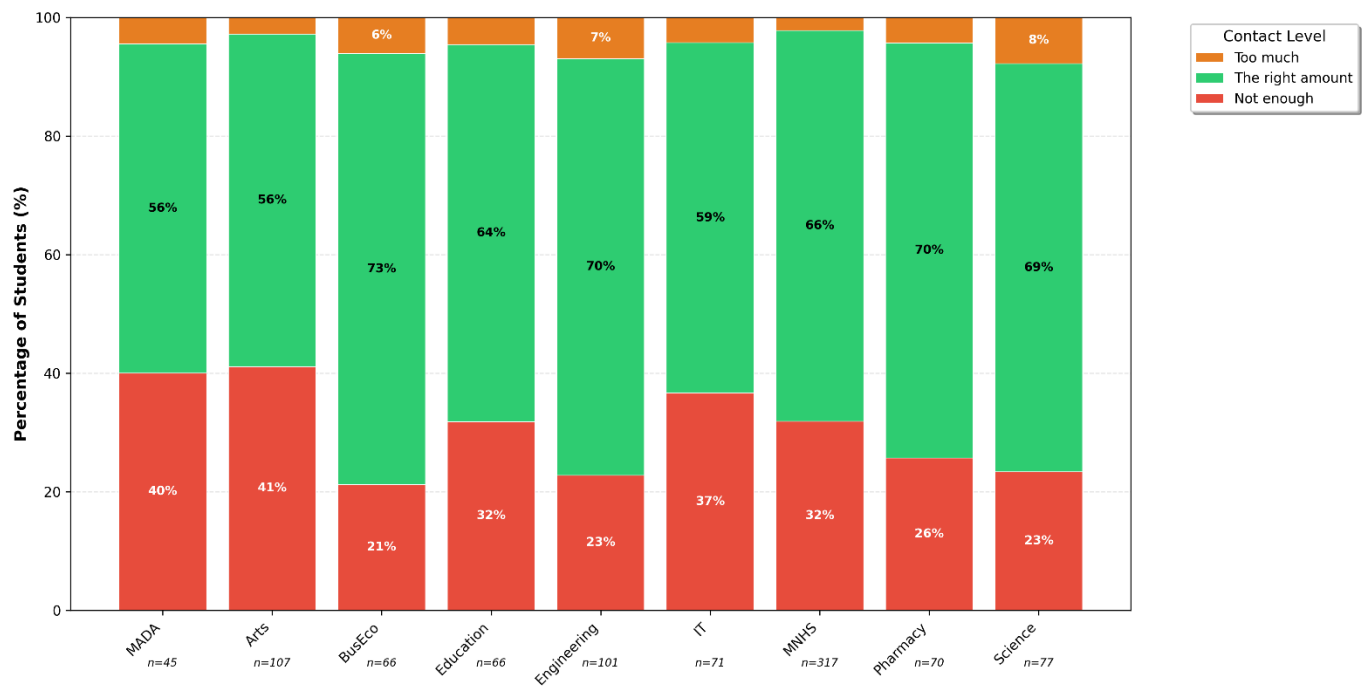
Meaningful Contact with Academic Staff
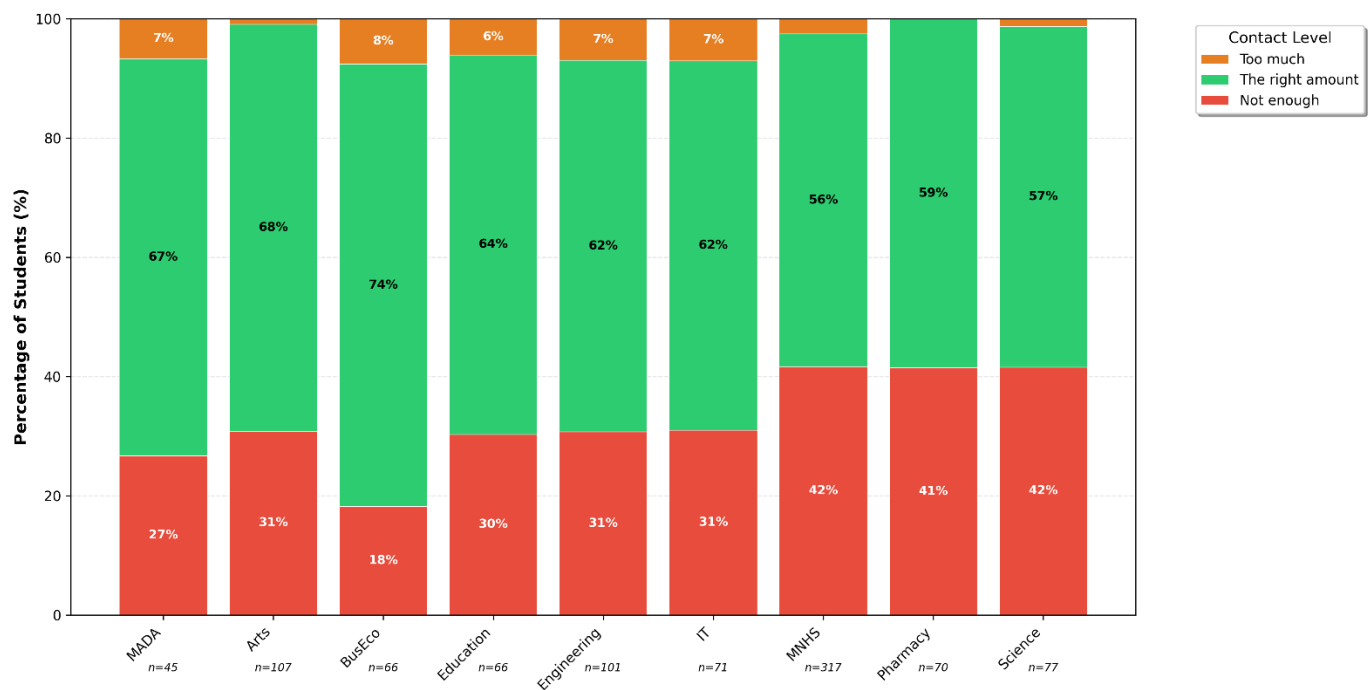Graduate Research Students by Faculty

Meaningful Contact with Administrative Staff
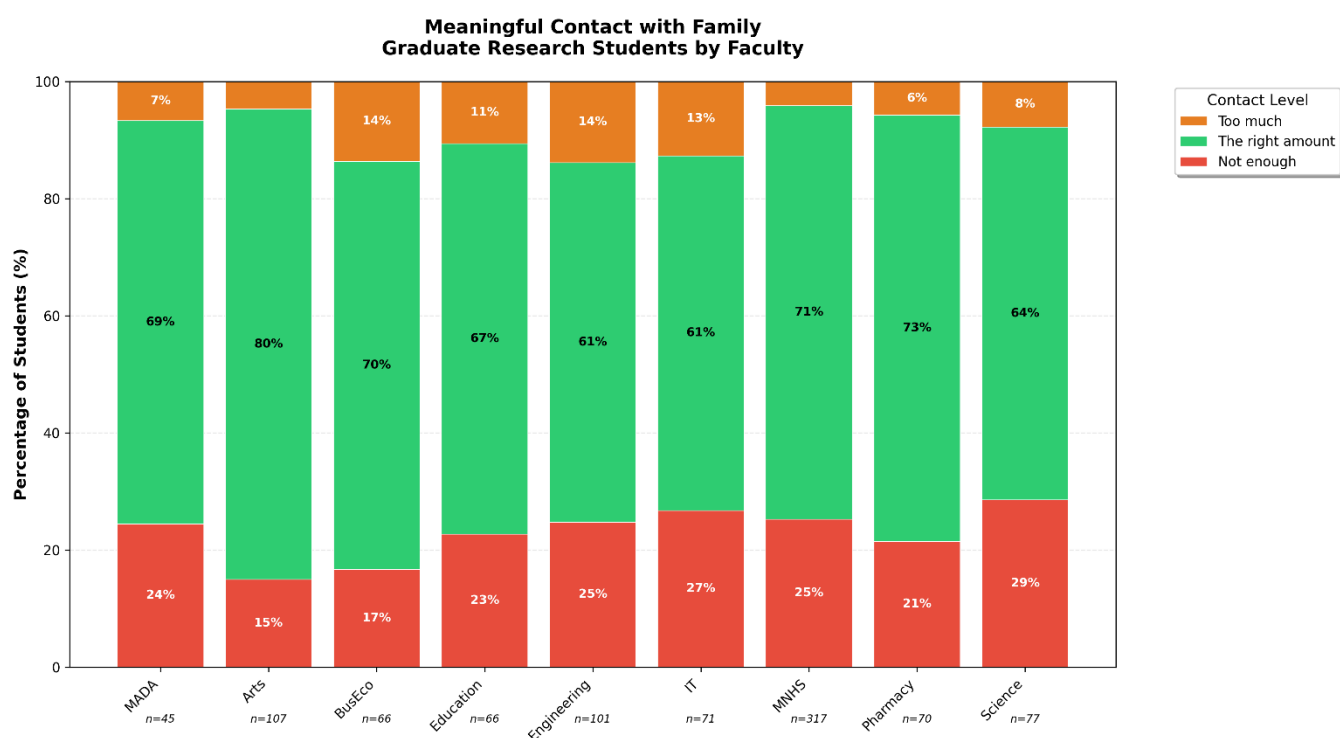Graduate Research Students by Faculty

Meaningful Contact with Other Students/Peers
Graduate Research Students by Faculty

Stacked bar chart showing Percentage of Students (%) by faculty. Contact Level legend: Too much (orange), The right amount (green), Not enough (red).

Faculty	Not enough	The right amount	Too much
MADA (n=45)	40%	56%	
Arts (n=107)	41%	56%	
BusEco (n=66)	21%	73%	6%
Education (n=66)	32%	64%	
Engineering (n=101)	23%	70%	7%
IT (n=71)	37%	59%	
MNHS (n=317)	32%	66%	
Pharmacy (n=70)	26%	70%	
Science (n=77)	23%	69%	8%

Meaningful Contact with Friends
Graduate Research Students by Faculty

Stacked bar chart showing Percentage of Students (%) by faculty. Contact Level legend: Too much (orange), The right amount (green), Not enough (red).

Faculty	Not enough	The right amount	Too much
MADA (n=45)	27%	67%	7%
Arts (n=107)	31%	68%	
BusEco (n=66)	18%	74%	8%
Education (n=66)	30%	64%	6%
Engineering (n=101)	31%	62%	7%
IT (n=71)	31%	62%	7%
MNHS (n=317)	42%	56%	
Pharmacy (n=70)	41%	59%	
Science (n=77)	42%	57%	

Meaningful Contact with Family
Graduate Research Students by Faculty

These patterns of meaningful contact reveal a complex picture for MADA students, with notable strengths in some areas but significant gaps in others. MADA students report lower levels of connection with peers than in other faculties, with 40% indicating insufficient peer contact (vs. 31% university-wide).

The studio-based nature of some MADA work creates opportunities for informal peer interaction and mutual support that students in other disciplines may not experience. Students working in shared studios can naturally observe each other's creative processes, provide informal feedback, share technical knowledge and develop collegial relationships through physical proximity. This organic community formation represents a significant strength of practice-based research training.

However, this strength comes with corresponding weaknesses. Students whose research doesn't require regular campus attendance – those working primarily in digital design, theoretical research or off-campus sites – may miss these organic connection opportunities entirely. Part-time students who must schedule studio time around employment commitments may often work during off-peak hours when few peers are present, experiencing the isolation of solo studio work without the benefits of community. International students, particularly those whose English language proficiency limits their confidence in informal social interaction, may find it challenging to break into established peer groups even when physically co-located in studios.

The faculty's challenge lies not in creating peer community from scratch, but in ensuring that existing studio-based networks extend to include all students – part-time students whose schedules differ from the full-time cohort, students working primarily in digital media who may not require physical studio presence, international students who may face cultural barriers to joining informal groups and students whose financial constraints limit their ability to participate in social activities that involve costs (exhibition openings, social gatherings, meals out with peers).

The studio culture among MADA students may reflect several positive factors: dedicated physical spaces that encourage regular presence and informal interaction, small cohort sizes that make peer

recognition more likely, shared technical challenges that create natural grounds for mutual assistance, exhibition and critique cultures that normalise peer feedback and perhaps a collaborative rather than purely competitive creative research culture. Understanding and preserving these positive elements should remain a priority even while extending similar benefits to students who currently don't access these networks.

Student Voices on Isolation

While the quantitative data reveals patterns in isolation and connection among MADA 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.

> *"Lack of engagement with a consistent community."*

> *"Because I'm working from home. Also, some Australians are not particularly welcoming."*

> *"I've gone through a big career transition to be here so it's a new environment, a new pace and a new set of operational and social norms to adjust to. Furthermore, to step out of a 20-year career and into being a PhD student is a significant shift both behaviourally and financially and affects close to every aspect of life – especially as a mature student. This is something I think worth mentioning and, that said, it's not outrageous to think that much like taking on a new role, transitions like this come with a little bit of an identity crisis and this can affect the felt experience. Isolation can work as a catchall for these new unfelt feelings of adjustment … Having spent a couple of decades designing these things, 90% of organisations and institutions get it wrong and or could use improvements, which in turn mitigate the effects being observed in this survey."*

> *"Working off campus not being able to find many likeminded peers and people of similar life experience."*

> *"There are not many PhD students in my faculty and I don't know where to 'find' other students."*

> *"Usually when I am working from home for more than two days in a row, I tend to feel more isolated. I need to have contact with other people throughout the week to feel connected."*

What Makes MADA Distinct: Key Themes

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

Creative Commitment as Protective Factor: Lower Attrition Risk Despite Material Barriers

MADA students demonstrate a distinctive retention paradox: despite facing significant material and financial barriers specific to creative practice, they report substantially lower rates of considering departure (38% have considered leaving vs. 46% university-wide, with only 5% considering leaving often vs. 6% university-wide).

Among MADA students who have considered leaving, mental health (56% vs. 61% university-wide) and financial issues (50% vs. 57% university-wide) appear at somewhat higher rates than peers elsewhere, while career concerns (25% vs. 22% university-wide) also register below average.

However, this overall positive retention picture masks important vulnerabilities. The 49% of MADA students reporting extreme or big financial impact on their ability to complete research to the best of their ability (vs. 44% university-wide) indicates that resource constraints directly compromise research quality for nearly half the cohort. The specific challenge for MADA is not whether students leave, but whether those who stay can produce the calibre of creative work their research demands when constrained by potentially inadequate funding. The intersection of lower departure rates with high resource constraints suggests that MADA students persist despite significant disadvantages, raising concerns about research quality compromise rather than outright attrition.

Studio Culture Paradox: Strong Foundations with Accessibility Gaps

MADA students report peer connection patterns that reveal both distinctive strengths and systematic exclusions. With 40% reporting insufficient peer contact (well above the 31% university-wide average), MADA's peer connection patterns appear low in aggregate.

The nature of MADA research creates natural opportunities for informal peer interaction, technical knowledge sharing and creative feedback through physical co-location – advantages unavailable to desk-based researchers in other disciplines. Students working in shared studios can naturally observe creative processes, provide spontaneous critiques, share specialised equipment knowledge and develop collegial relationships through proximity. This organic community formation represents a significant structural advantage that should register in stronger connection patterns.

Yet MADA's peer connection rates are well below the university averages, suggesting that studio culture benefits reach only some students while systematically excluding others. The study location data reveals why: only 23% of MADA students study entirely on-campus, while 27% study entirely off-campus and 50% adopt hybrid on/off-campus patterns. This means that the studio culture advantage – requiring regular physical presence – remains inaccessible to the 77% majority whose research arrangements prevent consistent engagement with campus-based peer networks. Even the 50% with mixed arrangements may experience fragmented access, attending campus only for

specific equipment needs or scheduled meetings rather than maintaining the sustained presence that enables informal peer relationships to develop.

The gap between MADA's potential advantages (dedicated creative spaces, small cohorts enabling recognition, shared technical challenges, critique cultures) and actual outcomes (low peer connection rates despite only 23% studying entirely on-campus) indicates that studio culture benefits currently serve a minority while systematically excluding the majority whose study patterns differ from full-time, on-campus models.

This pattern suggests that MADA's challenge differs fundamentally from faculties needing to create peer community from scratch. Instead, MADA must extend existing successful informal networks to include currently excluded populations – the 27% entirely off-campus and the 50% with hybrid arrangements who cannot access studio culture benefits through traditional physical co-location. This requires not wholesale community building but rather targeted interventions that create peer connection opportunities independent of sustained campus presence, such as online community platforms, scheduled virtual peer critique sessions and hybrid events designed to include remote participants meaningfully rather than as afterthoughts.

Faculty-Specific Recommendations

These recommendations are tailored to patterns observed among MADA 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, MADA should focus faculty efforts on two distinctive challenges where targeted intervention will have maximum impact:

1: Extend Studio Culture Benefits to Off-Campus and Hybrid Students

The Challenge: Only 23% of MADA students study entirely on-campus, while 27% study entirely off-campus and 50% adopt hybrid patterns. Despite MADA's structural advantage of dedicated studio spaces that should foster peer connection through physical co-location, peer connection rates are well below university averages (40% insufficient peer contact vs. 31% university-wide). This indicates that studio culture benefits currently reach only the minority with sustained campus presence, systematically excluding the 77% majority whose study arrangements prevent consistent engagement with campus-based networks.

Recommended Actions:

Establish online MADA community platform serving as virtual studio space for the 27% entirely off-campus and enabling asynchronous connection for the 50% with inconsistent campus presence. Include channels for technical troubleshooting, work-in-progress sharing, equipment recommendations and social connection.

Resource Requirements: Low-to-moderate investment (platform subscription costs $5-10k annually, staff time for facilitation and moderation, hybrid event equipment). Primarily organisational changes rather than major capital expenditure.

Success Metrics: Platform engagement rates (active users, post frequency, peer interactions); participation in virtual critiques across study location categories; reduction in isolation rates among off-campus and hybrid students; qualitative feedback on peer connection quality from previously excluded populations.

2: Develop Portfolio-Centred Career Guidance for Creative Industry Pathways

The Challenge: MADA students navigate uniquely diverse and non-linear career pathways (independent studio practice, freelance design, gallery representation, architectural firms, curatorial work, arts administration, teaching or hybrid combinations) that require portfolio development, professional networks and entrepreneurial capability rather than following standardised application processes. Current generic career services struggle to provide guidance across this breadth of creative industry possibilities, leaving students without discipline-specific support for translating research into professional opportunities.

Recommended Actions:

- Appoint or designate a career advisor with creative industry expertise and established networks across art, design and architecture sectors. Prioritise candidates who understand portfolio-based career development and creative industry realities.
- Develop portfolio review workshops teaching students how to present research-based creative work for different professional contexts (academic appointments, gallery applications, design consultancy pitches, architectural portfolios) rather than one-size-fits-all CV preparation.
- Offer entrepreneurship and business skills workshops addressing pricing creative work, negotiating contracts, managing client relationships, marketing creative practice and financial planning for freelance/independent careers – skills essential for many creative careers but rarely addressed in research training.
- Establish alumni mentoring network connecting current students with recent MADA graduates across diverse career paths (1-5 years post-completion) who can provide realistic insights into career transitions and how PhD research translates to various professional contexts.

Resource Requirements: Moderate investment (career advisor appointment or contracted services, event hosting costs, workshop development, alumni database management). Can start with workshop programming while building toward comprehensive infrastructure.

Success Metrics: Career guidance satisfaction increase (from current 33% moderate to extreme dissatisfaction rate); student engagement with career programming; portfolio review participation rates; alumni mentoring matches; career outcome tracking for program participants; qualitative feedback on career preparation adequacy.

Conclusion

These two recommendations directly address MADA's most distinctive challenges – extending studio culture's natural peer connection advantages to the 77% majority studying off-campus or hybrid patterns (Priority 1) and providing career guidance appropriate for the diverse, portfolio-based creative industry pathways MADA graduates pursue (Priority 2). Both are immediately actionable at faculty level, require modest initial investment (if resourcing Priority 2 from within existing staff) and build from low-cost interventions toward longer-term strategic enhancements.

By focusing faculty efforts on these targeted priorities, MADA can meaningfully improve outcomes for graduate research students while establishing a model for discipline-responsive support that recognises the distinctive nature of creative practice research. These interventions acknowledge that supporting creative researchers requires more than applying generic graduate student support models – it demands attention to the physical infrastructure that creates but also limits peer connection opportunities and the professional development needs unique to portfolio-based creative careers where success depends on exhibition records, professional networks and entrepreneurial capability as much as scholarly contributions.

Appendix: MADA Demographics

Campus	Respondents
I do not regularly attend campus	3 (6%)
Clayton	4 (8%)
Caulfield	44 (92%)
Peninsula	0 (0%)
Parkville	0 (0%)
Malaysia	0 (0%)
Hospital or Medical Centre	0 (0%)
Indonesia	1 (2%)
Suzhou	0 (0%)
other	1 (2%)

School/Department	Respondents
Architecture	15 (31%)
Design	19 (40%)
Fine Art	14 (29%)
Other	0 (0%)

Domestic/International	Respondents
Local student (Australian or New Zealand citizen/permanent resident)	29 (60%)
International student	19 (40%)

Study load	Respondents
Full-time	42 (86%)
Part-time	7 (14%)
On leave from study	0 (0%)

Study location	Respondents
Entirely on-campus	11 (23%)
Mix of on-campus and off-campus	24 (50%)
Entirely off-campus	13 (27%)
Other	0 (0%)

Time since last degree	Respondents
Less than 1 year	6 (13%)
1-5 years	23 (48%)
6-10 years	11 (23%)
11+ years	8 (17%)

Degree progress	Respondents
First year	13 (27%)
Second year	14 (29%)
Third year and beyond	22 (45%)

Study hours	Respondents
Less than 5	2 (4%)
6-10	2 (4%)
11-20	10 (21%)
21-30	12 (25%)
31-40	16 (33%)
Over 40 hours	6 (13%)

English proficiency	Respondents
Fluent	34 (71%)
Advanced	9 (19%)
Intermediate	5 (10%)
Elementary	0 (0%)
Beginner	0 (0%)

Gender	Respondents
Woman	32 (67%)
Man	13 (27%)
Non-binary/gender diverse	3 (6%)
Prefer to self-describe	0 (0%)
Prefer not to say	0 (0%)

LGBTIQA+	Respondents
Yes	11 (23%)
No	32 (67%)
Prefer not to disclose	5 (10%)

Indigenous (domestic students only)	Respondents
Yes	0 (0%)
No	29 (100%)
Prefer not to disclose	0 (0%)

Disability	Respondents
Yes	4 (8%)
No	41 (85%)
Prefer not to disclose	3 (6%)

Registered disability with DSS	Respondents
Yes	2 (50%)
No	2 (50%)

Age	Respondents
24 or under	4 (8%)
25-29	7 (15%)
30-39	21 (44%)
40 and over	16 (33%)

Parental status	Respondents
Yes – living with me	11 (25%)
Yes – not living with me	1 (2%)
No	32 (73%)

Primary carer	Respondents
Yes	2 (18%)
Shared responsibility	9 (82%)
No	0 (0%)

Carer status	Respondents
Yes	1 (2%)
No	43 (98%)

Employment status	Respondents
Full-time	6 (14%)
Part-time	13 (30%)
Casual	13 (30%)
Unemployed and looking for work	5 (11%)
Not employed and not looking for work	7 (16%)

Work hours	Respondents
Less than 5	5 (16%)
6-10	10 (31%)
11-20	7 (22%)
21-30	7 (22%)
31-40	3 (9%)
More than 40	0 (0%)

Scholarship recipients	Respondents
Yes	34 (77%)
No, but I previously held a scholarship	1 (2%)
No	9 (21%)

Value of scholarship	Respondents
Less than $33,511	4 (12%)
$33,511 (National full-time RTP stipend minimum)	4 (12%)
$33,512 - $36,062	1 (3%)
$36,063 (Monash full-time RTP stipend)	15 (44%)
$36,064 - $47,626	3 (9%)
More than $47,627 (National minimum wage)	7 (21%)