

# How supported were postgraduate students during the initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic?

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## Background

In March 2020, University campuses closed in response to the COVID pandemic, disrupting the normal educational situation, particularly for on-campus students and impacting social connectedness. With previous studies showing postgraduate student support needs are not well addressed<sup>1,2</sup>, the current study focussed on the experiences of postgraduate taught (PGT) students during this challenging period.

## Aim

To assess the views of postgraduate taught students within the School of Medicine, Medical Sciences and Nutrition (SMMSN) on the support provided during the initial COVID-19 response, focussing on students' feelings around social isolation, institutional assistance, and any gaps in this provision.

## Methods

- Online SNAP survey conducted from June to September 2020 among students across all 23 PGT programmes and On-Demand courses delivered by SMMSN.
- Survey included questions specifically developed for the study or adapted from previous validated instruments<sup>3</sup>.
- Following approval from School ethics board, all eligible students (n=498) invited via email to participate.
- Quantitative data analysed in SPSS using chi-square or Fischer's exact test.
- Thematic analysis conducted on responses to open ended questions.

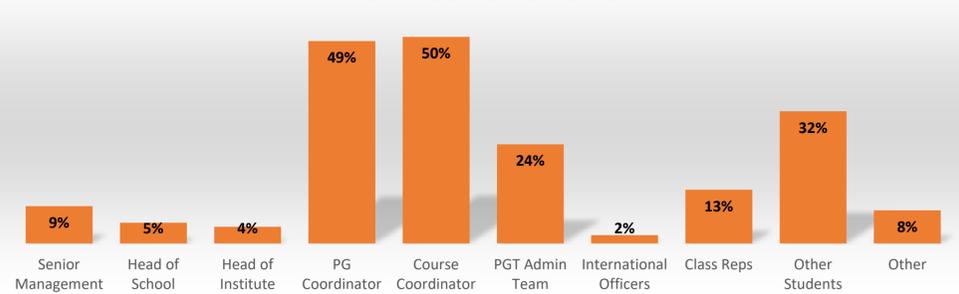
## Results

100 PGT students (20%) completed the survey from across SMMSN (64% female; 53% full-time students; 44% on-campus programmes).

### Support from University

79% reported receiving support from the University, with 59% receiving 2 or more sources of support, the majority from programme and course coordinators and other students (Fig. 1).

FIGURE 1: SOURCES OF SUPPORT



- 75% felt they received adequate support from the University (Fig. 2)
- 84% felt the University communications were sufficient (Fig. 3).
- 84% felt they had adequate access to digital capacity and technology facilities / support to continue studies (Fig. 4).

FIGURE 2: SUPPORT FROM UNIVERSITY

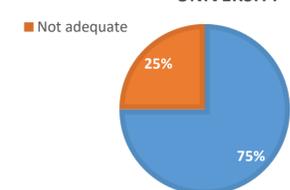


FIGURE 3: UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS

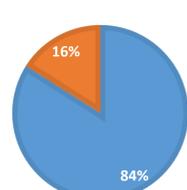
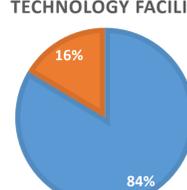
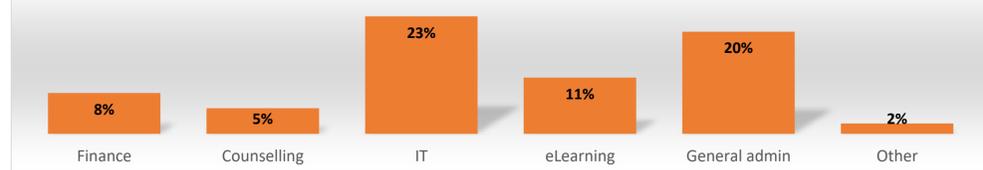


FIGURE 4: ACCESS TO DIGITAL CAPACITY AND TECHNOLOGY FACILITIES



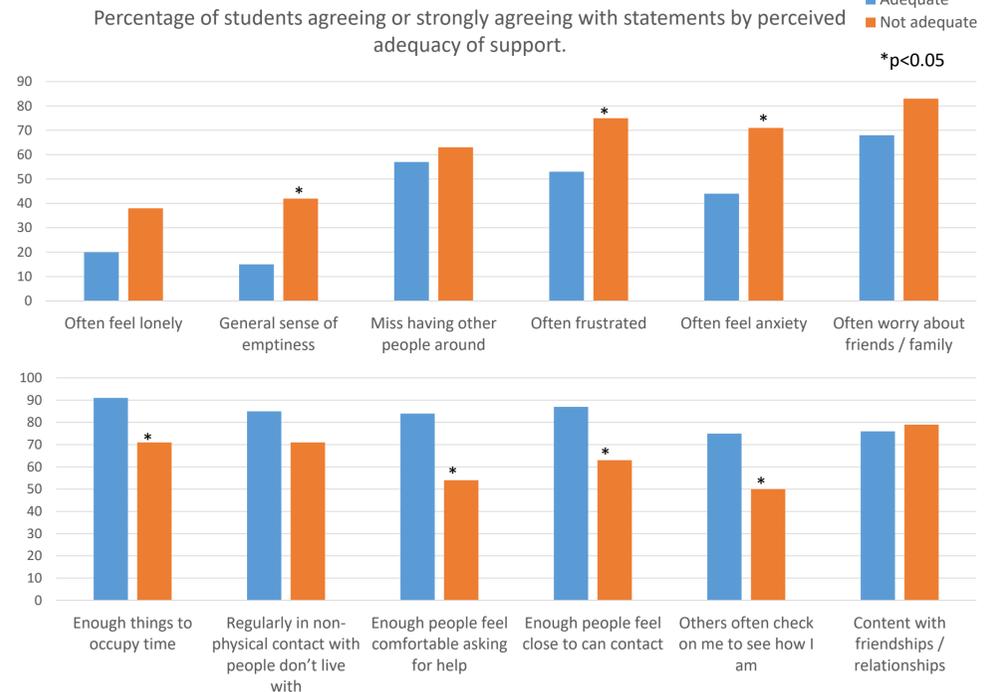
- 50% contacted support services for help, most commonly IT and general admin (Fig. 5). 17% sought help from 2 or more sources. 89% found the help adequate.

FIGURE 5: SUPPORT SERVICES CONTACTED



Overall students' wellbeing was good, those who felt they had adequate support had significantly greater wellbeing in several areas (Fig 6), although the direction of this relationship is unknown.

FIGURE 6: STUDENTS WELLBEING FOLLOWING INITIAL LOCKDOWN



### Impact on learning

- 70% felt COVID had impacted their learning.
- A significantly higher proportion of on-campus and blended learning students felt this way than online (84% vs 49%).
- Those who felt they had adequate support were significantly less likely to feel that COVID had impacted their learning (64% vs 88%).
- Themes of areas of impact: change of learning environment; reduced interactions; impact on wellbeing; potential impact on grade.

## Themes of suggested improvements to communications / support:

Although a high percentage of students were satisfied with the support, suggestions were made on areas for improvement, helping inform future support provision.

### Communications

- tailored / targeted
- frequent
- rapid response
- consistent
- clear communication about no detriment policy

### Support

- financial concerns
- international student support services / early advice for foreign students
- keeping vital student services open
- increased online opportunities to interact with lecturers and other students

### References

1. Crane et al. 2016. Final report prepared for the Learning and Teaching Support Unit, Australian Department of Education and Training.
2. MacPherson et al. Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice. 2017; 5: 42-50.
3. De Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg. Res. Aging. 2006; 28: 582-598.

