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**An Open Letter to the:**

*Deputy Vice Chancellors (Research) of the Universities of Australia and New Zealand;*

and

*Heads of the Departments and Schools of Psychology Association (Australia)*

The Australasian Cognitive Neuroscience Society (ACNS) is Australasia's leading professional society representing researchers in the field of cognitive neuroscience. Our members work primarily in the field of experimental human research and include neuroscientists, psychologists, psychophysicists, computational biologists, behavioural scientists, who work across a range of diverse range of institutions including Schools of Psychology in Australasian universities, medical research institutes, biomedical imaging facilities, and philosophy departments.

We write here regarding the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on research productivity in our field, and our concerns about the potential impact this may have on our members' career security and progression. As our discipline often works with human volunteers and uses methods that require close physical contact with the participant to acquire data, cognitive neuroscientists have been particularly negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic social distancing restrictions. Even with progressive return-to-testing, there remain significant challenges for what research can be conducted and how adherence to guidelines will impact rate of progression.

Collectively, members of our Society are concerned about a wide range of issues arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. At the core is a general concern about the disruption to research and the impact it will have on opportunities in the future. For our students, it means prolonged candidatures with uncertainty regarding extended stipends to cover their living expenses. For postdoctoral scientists, who rely on "soft-money" contracts and their regular renewal, it means an uncertain employment future, given the financial strains currently being experienced across universities. This insecurity of research positions will also impact those who have recently finished their PhDs and are now looking to take up postdoctoral positions. Finally, for tenured/continuing, and fixed-term academics in this field, there are concerns that the funding cut-backs will cause research to grind to a halt. Forced lab closures prevent research and career progression, and for some, will lead to retrenchments. In some cases, research can be re-commenced relatively easily, but other projects will take months to recalibrate, resulting in lengthy research delays<sup>1</sup>. For those most affected, loss of productivity during the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have a cumulative effect over years, as reduced capacity to collect data, publish, apply for grants and attract students now, will continue to affect academic progression for many years to come.

Evidence from several sources illustrates that the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are being disproportionately borne by specific segments of the research workforce. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data show that between March and April 2020, women were disproportionately affected by the pandemic compared to men in the Professional, Scientific and Technical Services, as well as the Education and Training sectors<sup>2</sup>. A recent Rapid Research Information Forum report (dated May 2020) from the Australian Academy of Science to the Australian Government notes that the negative employment impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are being 'disproportionately felt by junior researchers including recent graduates, early-career and mid-career researchers, and women, who more commonly than men have additional commitments of childcare and other home responsibilities<sup>2</sup>. That report notes that research journals have already noted a reduction in the number of submissions from women.

The Australasian Cognitive Neuroscience Society recognises the very significant impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the operations of the University and research sectors. However, we are concerned that the Higher Education and Research sectors may now see many of the research achievements and hard-won gains for equity start to recede as the community recovers from the public health and economic effects of the

COVID-19 pandemic. We are also concerned that these losses may be disproportionately borne by disciplines which have not been able to continue operating as usual during the pandemic, that cannot modify their research to meet physical distance guidelines or proceed online, may take many months to re-start as the public health restrictions are relaxed, and will be disproportionately impacted by any second wave of lockdowns. Importantly, while evidence suggests that women will be the largest workforce segment affected by the pandemic, we stress that research students, early- and mid-career researchers, individuals with caring responsibilities other than children (e.g., sick or immunocompromised relatives), people with a disability or mental illness are also disproportionately affected.

As such, we request that:

- Universities consider the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on procedures for promotions and contract renewals, specifically taking into account discipline-specific characteristics (i.e., whether research could vs. could not continue as usual during the pandemic), as well as the fact that women, PhD candidates and other research students, early- and mid-career researchers, and minorities have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Specifically, we request concrete policies be made detailing how research delays, teaching disruptions/workloads, etc. will be accounted for.
- As academic workloads increase and are re-distributed, we request that Heads of Schools take into account the increased workloads that is already being shouldered by particular segments of the workforce; and also to consider that some segments, including women<sup>3,4</sup> and minorities<sup>5</sup>, may already shoulder a disproportionate burden of service and administrative roles.
- As budgets are tightened, special consideration is given with regards to whether equity initiatives (e.g., carer support, childcare) continue to be supported.
- Budgetary considerations should also include the disproportionate cost of conducting basic research across different disciplines (e.g., surveys vs. costly medical research fees)
- Eligibility requirements for grants and other initiatives are extended, and use 'years since PhD' corrected for career disruption, rather than age, as eligibility criteria
- Consider using the *Women in Science Parkville Precinct* survey<sup>6</sup> (or other scale) to measure the impacts of the pandemic on the research workforce.

In recent years, great progress has been made in cognitive neuroscience research and addressing the inequities in the academic research sector. The strength of these accomplishments will be put to the test as the University sector recovers from the public health and economic crisis that the COVID-19 pandemic has presented. The Australasian Cognitive Neuroscience Society requests that commitments to equity are fully embraced and strengthened as the sector recovers from the crisis.

Kind regards,

**Professor Paul E. Dux**

**President, Australasian Cognitive Neuroscience Society**

**On behalf of the Australasian Cognitive Neuroscience Society Executive Committee:**

Dr Sharna Jamadar  
Prof Frini Karayanidis  
Prof Thomas Carlson  
Prof Robert Hester  
Dr Sophie Andrews  
Dr Patrick Cooper  
Ms Tess Nikitenko  
Ms Gemma Lamp  
Dr Tijl Grootswagers  
Dr Patrick Goodbourn

## References

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