

A background network diagram consisting of numerous grey dots connected by thin grey lines, forming a complex web of triangles and polygons. In the top right corner, there are several overlapping, semi-transparent purple and magenta geometric shapes, including a large arrow pointing downwards and to the right. In the bottom left corner, there are several overlapping, semi-transparent purple and magenta geometric shapes, including a large triangle pointing upwards and to the right.

CARING FOR CARERS – A STUDENT-LED INVESTIGATION TO BETTER SUPPORT ANU HDR CARERS

**AN ANU GENDER INSTITUTE SEED GRANT
PROJECT**

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Family and caring responsibilities significantly impact output, employment, educational opportunities, and experiences for students and staff. Balancing caring responsibilities¹ alongside HDR requirements places significant strains on the time and energy of HDR carers. While ANU is committed to providing services and policies to assist staff and students in balancing family and caring responsibilities with their work and study, the Higher Degree Research (HDR) cohort is poorly understood and inadequately supported. The post-COVID-19 era of high inflation and rising cost of living makes it timely to review and investigate the challenges and opportunities.

In **section 2**, this white paper reviews existing academic literature to shed light on the specific situation of HDR students with caring responsibilities. In **section 3**, a scoping review of current ANU policies finds that significant gaps exist. ANU can and should implement workplace policies and practices conducive to HDR carers balancing their work and caring duties. **Section 4** makes key recommendations that ANU could implement over the short and medium term to improve the HDR carer experience and support. HDR convenors and Inclusion, Diversity and Equity officers across ANU campus have provided input to develop these recommendations. Key recommendations include:

- 1) The ANU Dean HDR, Professor Ann Evans, should table this report with the HDRC and URC.**
- 2) ANU should examine and revise existing ANU policies, or draft new policies, to better support HDR carers.** Initial recommendations for specific policy revisions include:
 - a) Revision of the ANU “Carers’ Career Development Assistance Fund” to include HDRs.
 - b) Improve ANU HDR Parental leave provisions by increasing their flexibility to access parental leave within the first 24 months of a child's life.
 - c) A specific “Work and Study Flexibility Policy” should be drafted for HDRs, similar to the existing policy for ANU staff.
 - d) Revise the HDR Scholarship policy for medical leave, so that it is flexible and easy for HDR carers to claim 2 days paid leave per sickness period to care for sick children, without a medical certificate.
- 3) ANU should undertake a mixed methods research study to better understand the HDR carer cohort at ANU,** through the Office of the Dean for Higher Degree Research.
- 4) ANU should develop clear and transparent formal procedures for student carers to disclose their carer status without discrimination,** for those with caring duties that fall outside of the Carers Recognition ACT 2010 definition.
- 5) ANU should reduce barriers to learning and participation for HDR carers,** including revising HDR presentation scheduling, recording course lectures, and establishing discounted parking rates between 9:30 and 2:30 pm.
- 6) ANU should increase support from supervisors and ANU for current and prospective HDR carers,** including a) training for HDR supervisors, b) develop a resource outlining ANU support for HDR parents and carers, and c) develop a resource for prospective and current international students who are bringing their family/dependents to Australia.
- 7) ANU should improve access to family accommodation for HDR carers**
- 8) ANU should lobby to reduce financial disincentive to study part-time as an HDR**

¹ Caring responsibilities are defined in this white paper/ broadly as any person’s responsibilities to look after someone who needs help with their day-to-day living, including dependent children, an elderly parent, or a family member with a disability or addiction, and include unpaid care work.

2. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

2.1 The academic context: gender, care work, and inequality

Extensive literature has highlighted the inadequacy of current university cultures and policies in meeting the needs of women and people with caring responsibilities² (henceforth carers), resulting in what is commonly referred to as a 'leaky pipeline' phenomenon. While this report refers to a diversity of carers across the gender spectrum, and care is not the prerogative of women, it acknowledges that care work is conventionally framed as a gendered-female concern, and still largely falls to women [1]. The persistent gender imbalance within academic institutions, coupled with the challenges faced by academic carers presents a substantial concern both within Australia [2] and globally [3]. This section highlights the complexities of this issue and underscores the necessity of transforming institutional norms and policies to accommodate the changing landscape of work and family dynamics.

Gender Disparities and the Leaky Pipeline

Care responsibilities remain disproportionately shouldered by women, compounded by the conventional gendered framing of caregiving in Australia [1]. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these disparities [1]. The prevailing normative model of “total commitment” in academia, accompanied by pervasive unpaid overwork, has contributed significantly to burnout, especially among those with heavier domestic responsibilities [3], [6]. The pronounced workload, particularly, exerts a disproportionately adverse effect on individuals who bear substantial domestic and care responsibilities, further accentuating the gender disparity and impacting those unable to allocate resources for outsourced support [7], [8]. The drop in women’s scientific production during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the persistent structural challenges at play [3].

Like many other institutions, ANU exhibits a marked gender disparity among its academic staff. Despite nearly half of PhD graduates being women, women comprise only a quarter of senior academic staff [2]. This discrepancy underscores the existence of a 'leaky pipeline' – a phenomenon observed globally [4], [5]. Recognising the profound consequences of this leaky pipeline, ANU acknowledges “the loss of so many women from the career pipeline is a waste of talent, and negatively impacts our capacity for world-class research and innovation”³.

The underlying causes of the leaky pipeline phenomenon are rooted in traditional academic norms premised on “care-free workers”, which emphasize a 24/7 work commitment and geographical mobility [8]. Furthermore, the historical dominance of privileged, often male, scholars from the global North in knowledge production has perpetuated a skewed perspective on research agendas and methodologies [9]. “The views of this small elite have disproportionately defined which issues are deemed worth researching and which onto-epistemological, theoretical and methodological approaches are deemed valid” [9]. However, these norms conflict with the evolving patterns of work and family structures in Australia and beyond [10].

² Caring responsibilities are defined here as a person’s responsibilities to look after someone who needs help with their day-to-day living, including dependent children, an elderly parent, or a family member with a disability or addiction, and includes unpaid care work.

³ ANU Policy: Work and Study flexibility

Failure to acknowledge care responsibilities beyond the workplace perpetuates a 'care ceiling' in academia [11]. This mechanism results in repackaging care commitments as personal shortcomings, thereby further entrenching gender disparities within the academic realm.

Research Gaps and support for carers

Academic carers encompass a diverse group facing a multitude of caregiving responsibilities. These range from caring for dependent family members, such as children, grandchildren, or elderly parents, to supporting relatives, partners, or friends with disabilities or health issues [12]. The 'Sandwich Generation' is another subset of carers, burdened with simultaneous responsibilities for multiple family members, for example aging parents and young children [13]. The spectrum of caregiving experiences emphasises the nuanced nature of the challenges faced⁴. Despite the recognition of the leaky pipeline issue, limited research has explored the specific barriers impeding the career progression of academic carers, particularly at the PhD level in Australia. Some studies have investigated the benefits of remote work and flexible arrangements [14], as well as the unique challenges posed by academic conferences [12], [15]. Notably, supervisors play a pivotal role in supporting Higher Degree Research (HDR) carers [16], thereby underscoring the importance of mentorship which is aware and sensitive to the navigation of these challenges.

2.2 The intersection of care and gender in the HDR career phase

Support of HDR carers is a fundamental step in attaining the equal inclusion of women in academia, as women's active participation is central to creating sustainable and resilient societies. At present, minimal research has been undertaken into the needs of other carer cohorts, such as staff or undergraduates, and the ANU needs to identify and better understand these groups.

While classified as students in ANU policy, HDR candidates straddle academic staff and student worlds in both work roles, expectations, and commitments. Many HDRs hold dual roles as HDR students and as casual staff members (e.g. CSAs or RAs). HDR roles and responsibilities often include expectations to travel for conferences, field work and professional development, akin to academic staff roles. The HDR cohort also ranges from recently graduated undergraduates to professionals returning to study after extensive professional and life experiences. This range also suggests a cohort with varied caring roles.

HDR Carers – Financial Costs

Caring responsibilities can negatively impact academic performance, impose financial strain, and juggling care work and study imparts emotional and physical strain [17]. HDR students are often in vulnerable positions because of a lack of access to financial resources, given most domestic and international stipends and scholarships which sit below the minimum wage [18]. The low income associated with undertaking a PhD is an important context which is exacerbated for those with care-related costs.

⁴ "Caregiving was sometimes occasional, sometimes regular; it covered short and long periods of time; it was provided from a proximity or from a distance; it was extensive or parsimonious; it was of a mostly practical or emotional nature" [12].

The financial challenges confronting HDR candidates are magnified when caregiving obligations necessitate supplementary income to cover caregiving-related expenses, such as childcare, loss of income, and healthcare costs. This predicament often leads to reduced research hours, consequently impinging upon the capacity of HDR carers to formulate and develop critical research concepts and outputs [19]. Certain HDR carers face risk of increased disadvantage, including single parents, international students with caring responsibilities, and HDR carers from low socio-economic or marginalised backgrounds. This is particularly stark for international HDR students who cannot access national childcare subsidy schemes and many carers face financial precarity because unpaid care work reduces the amount of paid work they can take on [17]. As outlined in Box 1, some HDR carers currently at ANU are living below the poverty line, without sufficient income for basic goods and services, including food and health care.

Box 1: An international HDR carer at ANU

Sally is an international student from a developing country. She has been awarded a PhD position and basic PhD scholarship. She travels to Australia with her two children aged 2 and 8, and her husband. The university and her supervisors have not provided her with any information about the cost of childcare in Australia, or that she would not be eligible for child care subsidy. As a result, when she arrives and discovers that childcare is \$130 a day, she realises that she cannot afford to send her 2-year-old to childcare. Her family is now faced with the difficult reality that if her husband finds paid work, she will have to care for her son while also trying to progress her research. Her fieldwork involves extended trips away from their new home in Canberra.

Living on just her PhD stipend is almost impossible, but until Sally and her husband find extra work they are forced to do so. Sally's stipend is \$2,607 a month, plus \$55 per dependent child a week. Rent is \$2,280 a month. **Sally and her family have just \$437 a month to live on, after rent is paid. The average cost of groceries for a family of four in Canberra is \$1477 a month.**

The absence of recognition and adequate support for HDR carers has the potential to shape the academic trajectory of caregivers, potentially hindering their progress and influencing their decision to remain in academia. The significance of the postgraduate and HDR experience is paramount, as it serves as a foundational platform for cultivating interest and commitment to academia [19]. Therefore, a thorough understanding of the support provided to, and the challenges faced, by HDR candidates is pivotal for fostering the recruitment and retention of women in academic spheres. Further, clear and transparent formal procedures need to be implemented for student carers to disclose their carer status without discrimination [7]. Effective support for HDR carers holds far-reaching implications for gender parity, improving diversity and addressing inequality within academia.

In summary:

- Inadequate support of HDR carers disproportionately affects women's participation in academia.
- More data is needed to understand how universities can better support HDRs with caring responsibilities.

- A flexible approach to supporting student carers needs to be adopted by universities.
- Universities need to provide clear and structured information that details financial and practical support available to carers.
- Staff and supervisors need access to information and services outlining support for carers as supervisors play a key role in support for HDR carers.
- Clear and transparent formal procedures need to be implemented for student carers to disclose their carer status without discrimination.

3. KEY ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR BETTER SUPPORT OF HDR CARERS AT ANU

This section outlines key issues and opportunities with respect to supporting HDR carers at ANU. These issues have been identified through desktop research and first-hand accounts and experiences of current HDRs at ANU. This report does not provide a comprehensive analysis of ANU policy for carers and those with family responsibilities. **We propose that alongside these recommendations, ANU should undertake a comprehensive analysis of ANU policy for HDR carers.**

3.1 Data on HDR carers

Currently very little data is publicly available regarding the HDR cohort at ANU, or in the academic literature. We propose research should examine caring responsibilities across the HDR cohort, including domestic and international students, married and single parents and carers, LGBTQ+ parents and carers, First Nations parents and carers, those caring for children and families with disabilities and those caring for extended family members and/or partners (see Box 2), addressing gaps in existing research [9].

3.2 ANU Policies

Currently there is no explicit mention of HDRs in ANU policies. Explicitly referring to HDRs in ANU policy would help ensure that the cohorts' unique structure and roles are not overlooked.

3.2.1 Work and study flexibility Policy

The matters to be considered and mitigations to ensure options for flexibility to support students with family and caring responsibilities directly support students who follow a coursework models. The policy does not take into consideration the requirements of a HDR role. **We propose that a specific policy on HDR carers is drafted, with 'Matters to be considered by supervisors in respect of staff'⁵** to be applied to HDRs.

3.2.2 ANU Carers' Career Development Assistance Fund

ANU provides support for individual academic and professional staff with caring responsibilities through the Carers' Career Development Assistance Fund⁶. The Fund grants up to \$2,000 for care of dependants to support staff participation in significant national or international conferences, workshops or symposia that contribute to their careers. Despite HDRs being generally expected to attend conferences and career development opportunities, this fund is not available to HDRs as they are classified as students.

⁵ https://policies.anu.edu.au/ppl/document/ANUP_000482

⁶ <https://services.anu.edu.au/human-resources/respect-inclusion/supporting-families> The University recognises that many staff have caring responsibilities that may impact on their access to opportunities for the development of their careers. The CCDAF is for individual academic and professional staff with caring responsibilities who require support to participate in significant national or international conferences, workshops or symposia that contribute to their careers. Grants of **up to \$2,000** are available for reasonable costs relating to care of dependants where existing care arrangements are not available.

3.2.3 Parental Leave Policy

At present carers are only allowed to access HDR parental leave in the first 12 months of their child's life⁷. We recommend extending this to 24 months of age to allow families more flexibility in the way they access this leave.

3.2.4 Support for Carers

Currently at ANU, support is offered for people who are defined as carers in line with the Carers Recognition ACT 2010: "Carers are people who provide personal care, support and assistance to another individual in need of support due to disability, medical condition, including terminal or chronic illness, mental illness or is frail and aged. A person is **not** considered a carer simply because they: are the spouse, de facto partner, parent, other relative or guardian of an individual who requires care; or live with an individual who requires care"⁸. As a result, ANU provides no formal structure to recognise and support HDRs with caring responsibilities that fall outside this definition.

Box 2: Caring for an ill parent - Alex's story

Alex is a first-year chemistry PhD student. His single mother, Helen lives interstate a few hours' drive away. Alex is an only child and has always been close to his Mum. He is the first person in his extended family to attend university. At the start of Alex's second semester, his Mum is diagnosed with a treatable cancer, but requires several rounds of chemotherapy. Alex has just started a crucial experiment as part of his PhD, requiring him to be in the lab frequently. Alex's workmates are supportive and arrange to cover for him several times so he can go and take care of Helen for a long weekend following each round of chemotherapy.

Alex is unable to take longer periods of leave due to his workload as well as the fact he cannot afford to pause his PhD scholarship payments. After six months of chemotherapy, Helen's cancer is still detectable and her specialists recommend a course of radiotherapy. By this point, Alex has used up his paid medical leave, and feels unsupported by his supervisor, and hasn't been able to navigate to get formal support as a carer. He decides to drop out of his PhD to take care of her full-time.

3.2.5 Information for international HDR on cost of dependents in Australia

Most international students are not eligible for Child Care Subsidy and therefore are liable for paying the full fee per day. **Many international HDRs arriving to study at ANU have not been made aware of childcare fees in Australia by their supervisors or ANU.** At present, current fortnightly cost of childcare at the full fee rate is almost equal to a standard fortnightly PhD scholarship payment. University of Sydney has a 'Bringing your family to Australia' Booklet⁹ that is sent to international

⁷ <https://services.anu.edu.au/human-resources/respect-inclusion/supporting-families/parental-leave-fact-sheet>

⁸ <https://www.anu.edu.au/students/health-safety-wellbeing/access-inclusion/support-for-carers#link1>

⁹ <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKewix94a8q5KCAxXR4DgGHdvDDBgQFnoECBcQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.sydney.edu.au%2Fcontent%2Fdam%2Fstudents%2Fdocuments%2Fsupport-resources%2Fchildcare%2Fbringing-your-family-to-australia-guide.pdf&usg=AOvVaw2yI5QFIZ7ObuiMp25ueHqK&opi=89978449>

students, and offers a good example of how ANU could better provide information to International HDR carers.

3.2.6 Campus access and accommodation

At present there is no ANU accommodation suitable for families. Having some on campus accommodation for families commencing HDR study would improve equity across student cohorts and particularly assist international HDR students relocating with their families to Canberra.

Improve campus access for parents through the introduction of flexible parking arrangements. Parking on ANU campus is almost impossible for parents with school drop off responsibilities. We propose ANU allow HDR parents with caring responsibilities to access undercover parking at discounted rates between 9:30 and 2:30pm to allow them to attend campus more often and improve equity. Current undercover parking in Kambri charges more for parking 9:30-2:30 and offers discounted rates for full day parking.

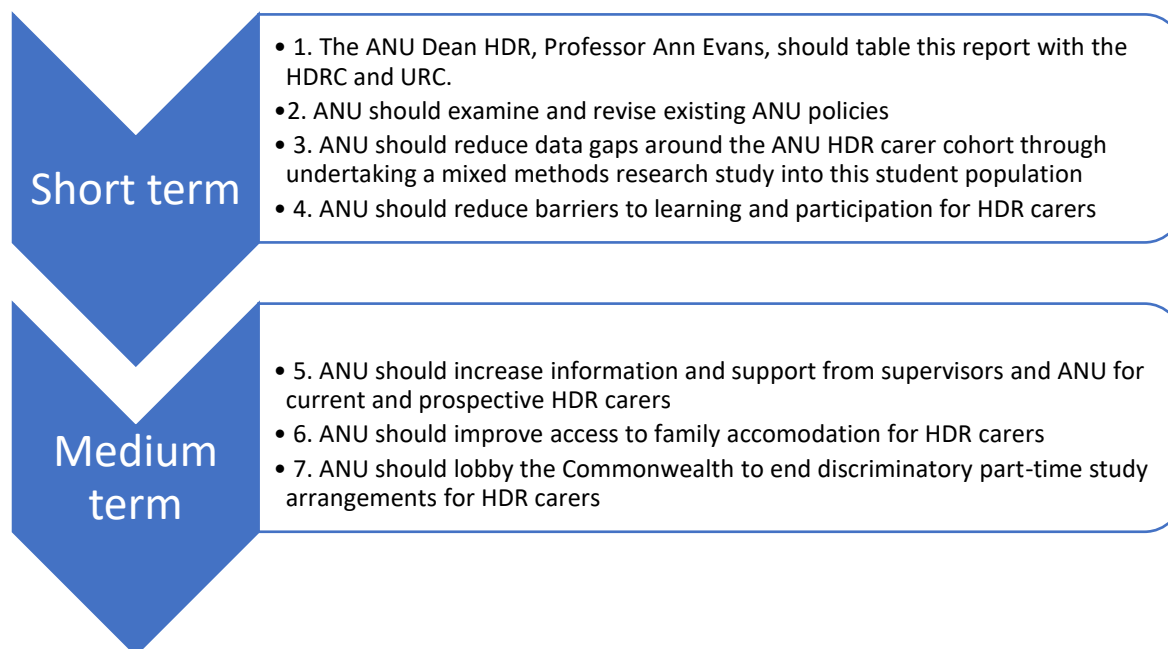
Improve access to education and events by offering hybrid virtual/in-person events and the opportunity to submit questions early for those unable to attend due to caring responsibilities. Many carers are unable to attend ANU events due to their caring responsibilities. Covid actually increased the opportunities for this cohort to participate by providing more flexible online attendance options.

3.2.7 Commonwealth policy taxes part-time HDR study

Lobby the Commonwealth to end discriminatory part-time study arrangements for HDR carers. At present part-time PhD students get taxed on their PhD stipends while full-time students do not. This is because the government assumes part-time study is due to students having other employment, not that they may have significant caring responsibilities. Currently the Australian Taxation Office makes this regressive policy decision, and generates a huge financial disincentive to working part time on a PhD. Part-time students, who demonstrate they have caring responsibilities should be paid their stipend tax free. As outlined in Box 3, the option to go part-time is often suggested to students with significant caring responsibilities, but the financial reality of this choice means it is often not a realistic option.

4. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The report outlines four short term and three medium term recommendations.



4.1 Short Term Recommendations

- 1) **The ANU Dean HDR, Professor Ann Evans, should table this report with the HDRC and URC.**
- 2) **ANU should examine and revise existing ANU policies to support HDR carers, including:**
 - a. Undertake a systematic review of ANU policies to understand how ANU can better support HDR carers through its policies.
 - b. Draft specific policies for HDR carers. Recommendations for specific policy revisions and new policy include:
 - i. Revision of the ANU “Carers’ Career Development Assistance Fund” to include HDRs (see section 3.2.2).
 - ii. Improve ANU HDR Parental leave provisions by increasing their flexibility to access parental leave with first 24 months of a child's life (see section 3.2.3).
 - iii. A specific “Work and Study Flexibility Policy” should be drafted for HDRs, similar to the existing policy for ANU staff (see section 3.2.1).
 - iv. Revise the HDR Scholarship policy for medical leave, so that it is flexible and easy for HDR carers to claim leave days to care for sick children, without a medical certificate. We propose HDR carers with children under 12 years old can claim 2 days paid medical leave without a medical certificate at a time¹⁰, which will also extends their scholarship period.

¹⁰ This would also relieve pressure on the medical system as parents would not have to take children to the doctor simply to get a medical certificate for common colds, and common children diseases which are easily manageable at home.

- 3) ANU should undertake research to better understand the ANU HDR carer cohort through a mixed methods research study through the Office of the Dean for Higher Degree Research.**
- a) ANU should lead a quantitative and qualitative social science study to understand needs of HDR carers, building on the work of the recent PARSA survey. Further, ANU should lead a policy analysis and benchmarking of other G8 universities to understand Australian best practice, and analysis of selected international institutions to understand international best practice regarding HDR carer support, for both domestic and international students. Research questions to be addressed include: *What type of caring work do ANU HDR students undertake? What policies and practices exist at other universities to support HDR carers? What new policies should ANU draft or revise to better support HDR carers?* (see section 3.1).
 - b) ANU should develop clear and transparent formal procedures for student carers to disclose their carer status without discrimination, for those with caring duties that fall outside of the Carers Recognition ACT 2010 definition. This may be enacted at the supervisor or school level, or through Candidate-Supervisor Agreement forms.
- 4) ANU should reduce barriers to learning and participation for HDR carers.**
- a) HDR presentations to be scheduled according to a flexible, hybrid model during core office hours. The READ program in Crawford is a great example, where it schedules its seminar series on Thursdays at 12:30pm offering in person and online attendance. By contrast the School of Music's Postgraduate Seminar is scheduled on Thursday's at 3.30pm which aligns directly with school pickup.
 - b) ANU to make recording of all course lectures mandatory.
 - c) ANU to set a target of 50% of event to be held after hours and 50% of events to be held during core school hours (9:30-2:30).
 - d) ANU to allow HDR parents with caring responsibilities to access undercover parking at discounted rates between 9:30 and 2:30pm to allow them to attend campus more often and improve equity.

4.2 Medium Term Recommendations

- 5) ANU should increase support from supervisors and ANU for current and prospective HDR carers (see section 3.2.5).**
- a) ANU should develop carer training for HDR supervisors to ensure consistent application of support for HDR carers. Completion of this training should be mandatory for all HDR supervisors.
 - b) ANU should develop an easily distributed resource outlining ANU support for HDR parents and carers
 - c) ANU should develop an easily distributed resource for prospective and current international students who are bringing their family/dependents to Australia.
- 6) ANU should improve access to family accommodation for HDR carers (see section 3.2.6).**
- ANU should develop affordable short-term and long-term family housing for HDRs. This would particularly assist international HDR students relocating with their families to Canberra, and those struggling to access accommodation in the current expensive and unstable rental market.
- 7) ANU should lobby the Commonwealth and ATO to end discriminatory part-time study tax arrangements for HDR carers (see section 3.2.7).**

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Carla Alexandra

Carla Alexandra is a PhD candidate at the Fenner School ANU, and the ANU Institute for Water Futures. Her research focuses on how to integrate foresight practices into water resource decision-making. Carla lives in Ngunnawal country, and started her PhD with a 2-year-old and a 4-year-old in 2021, juggling ACT Covid lockdowns and the realities of parenting young children in the covid era (including not being able to send them to childcare with any covid symptoms – a weekly reality in Canberra winter!). After previously living, working, and studying for her Master's in Sweden, Carla's experience as a HDR with young children in Australia has led her to advocate for more equality and support for carers within academia, including this project on HDRs with caring responsibilities.

Chell Lyons

Chell Lyons is a Sir Roland Wilson PhD scholar at the Crawford School of Public Policy and lives in Ngunnawal country. Her PhD research explores the investment transition to net zero emissions, with a particular focus on the role of public green banks in accelerating clean technology investments. She started her PhD in 2021 with a 10-month-old, 2-year-old and 9-year-old. One of her children is on the NDIS and another has an autoimmune condition. She is passionate about ensuring the academy is inclusive of carer cohorts throughout the ANU. Chell was a Crawford School HDR student representative from February 2022 to August 2023 and is a passionate advocate for HDR students.

Katrina Waters

Katrina Waters is a PhD candidate at the ANU School of Music, National Institute of the Arts. Her creative practice research focuses on the mid-career transitions of female dramatic voices and asks how to build the largest and loudest female operatic voices and have them heard. Her research has been awarded a 2023 ABC Top 5 Arts Media Residency and the 2022 Early Phase Residency at The Street Theatre.

She resides in Melbourne on the lands of the Boon Wurrung people and began her PhD in 2021 when it became apparent after the first 3 Melbourne lockdowns that her active performing career as an operatic mezzo-soprano had become impossible. The first year of her PhD was characterised by juggling Melbourne's successive lockdowns 4 – 6 with the homeschooling and caring responsibilities of her 3- and 6-year-old. Her further two years of research have been regularly interrupted by being the default carer for sick children in her relationship (despite having no carers' leave provisions) and having to accept more work to fund an extra \$1000 a month for the mortgage due to 9 rate rises since 2022. While working through the night has been suggested as an appropriate way to deal with the pressures of this workload, she refuses to do this as it is incompatible with managing the school drop-off.

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