**2022/2023 Summer Research Project Description**

Please use this template to create a description of each research project, eligibility requirements and expected deliverables. Project details can then be uploaded to each faculty, school, institute, and centre webpage prior to the launch of the program.

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| **Project title:** | **Are dogs our best friends? The impact of pet ownership on the mechanisms driving gaze following.** |
| **Project duration, hours of engagement & delivery mode** | Duration of the project: 10 weeks during Summer Vacation.  Hours of engagement: 25 hrs per week  COVID-19 considerations: Aspects of the project could be completed under a remote working arrangement, however on-site attendance will be required for testing participants. |
| **Description:** | From the moment we are born, we follow the gaze of others. Not only is gaze following thought to be a core aspect of social cognition in itself, it is an essential developmental building block for language acquisition and theory of mind. However, we do not yet understand whether our capacity to follow the gaze of others is driven exclusively by human gaze direction cues. This project is designed to investigate the plasticity underlying gaze following by measuring the impact of pet ownership on our sensitivity to gaze direction cues in nonhuman faces. This line of investigation is significant and impactful because it will inform neural models of gaze following and social attention. Further it will provide empirical support for the use of animal-assisted interventions for mitigating the symptoms of attentional and affective disorders.  *Specific aims and approach:*  This project constitutes the a step towards understanding whether, at the behavioural level, there is any evidence to suggest that pet owners are more sensitive to gaze direction cues (in human or pet faces) than people without pets at home. We will use standard gaze following experiments to measure sensitivity in a large sample of human participants. We will also need to query each participant’s level of experience and empathy towards animals. |
| **Expected outcomes and deliverables:** | The successful applicant will be expected to learn how to set up behavioural experiments in the laboratory. They will gain experience in collecting and curating behavioural data. Ideally, the applicant will also have the opportunity to help prepare their data for publication. They may also be asked to produce a report or oral presentation at the end of their project. |
| **Suitable for:** | This project is open to applications from students with a keen interest in social cognition, vision science or cognitive neuroscience.  Coding experience with matlab or python is desirable but not necessary.  3rd – 4th year students only (except in rare circumstances). |
| **Primary Supervisor:** | Dr Jess Taubert |
| **Further info:** | Students considering applying for this project are encouraged to contact **Jess Taubert** via email prior to submitting their application.  Email: j.taubert@uq.edu.au |