**UQ 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.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Project title:** | **Are dogs our best friends? The impact of dog ownership on the mechanisms underlying social cognition.**  |
| **Project duration, hours of engagement & delivery mode** | How many positions would you like to offer? One Six weeks with the hours of engagement approximately 25hrs per week. Applicant could complete some aspects of the project remotely but would be expected to be on campus to attend week meetings with their supervisor and weekly lab meetings, in addition to any necessary laboratory hours. |
| **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 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:** | Scholars will gain valuable experience in a research active environment, working on a cutting-edge topic that is also fun and accessible. Scholars will be involved in the initial stages of a large-scale project that will ultimately combine brain and behavioural data. More specifically, scholars will be expected to help collect and curate stimuli, set up behavioural experiments and collect pilot data. |
| **Suitable for:** | This project is open to applications from students with a keen interest in visual cognition, social neuroscience and systems neuroscience. Coding experience with matlab or python is desirable though not necessary. Students who have (or will have) completed NEUR2020, NEUR3192 or NEUR3302 are strongly encouraged to apply. 3rd and 4th year students only (except in rare circumstances) |
| **Primary Supervisor:** | Associate Professor 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 |