

JCU Doctoral Experience Report 2016



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Executive Summary

This research report presents the experiences of doctoral candidates at James Cook University. The findings are based on qualitative research conducted in November and December 2015. Key aspects discussed with candidates include: administrative support and processes, institutional resources and support, the supervisory experience, and the overall candidature experience. Further comment was invited on JCU as an institution, individual College experiences, and the role of the Graduate Research School (GRS). Examples of best practice from the student's perspective include the cohort initiative, College based mentoring programs (often lab based or research writing groups) and the social support network for international students.

Overall, the main positive characteristics of JCU and the associated doctoral experience include the tropical research advantage, supervisory expertise, access, support, and the merit of related academic and industry networks, and, the quality and range of skill development programs offered through the GRS. There was also considerable appreciation for the available resources and facilities, particularly the JCU library services and staff.

In contrast to previous research (2011 and 2013), there seemed to be growing concern about reduced funding and opportunities for professional development through conferences, specialised workshops, lab based work, and valuable fieldwork. Correspondingly, the research culture or "intellectual climate" between students was often described as increasingly competitive and/or isolating. External and professional doctorate student groups indicated while supervisors were appreciated and flexible, the current system and processes were not entirely supportive or congruous with these less direct doctoral candidate arrangements.

Issues related to communication between students, the College, the GRS and other sectors of the university received the most criticism and negative feedback. In many cases poor communication processes and procedures were linked to the University restructure and a change in traditional administrative support roles. Purchasing, travel procedures and expense reimbursement protocols continue to be perceived as prohibitive and inefficient.

Consistent with past surveys, recommendations for improvement were primarily focused on administration procedures and processes, social networking opportunities (within and between Colleges) and better communication.

Introduction

While there are universal characteristics of the postgraduate experience at JCU, within Divisions and Colleges there are also discipline specific policies, procedures, expectations and conditions that may shape candidates' experiences in distinct ways. This report highlights the findings of a qualitative study aimed at providing more detailed understandings and feedback about the experiences of JCU doctoral students.

Aims of the research

The research seeks to canvas candidates' experiences and identify best practices (in relation to student satisfaction) that can be disseminated to the wider JCU community. In addition, the research seeks to identify the areas where candidates can be further supported by JCU.

Research Questions

Consistent with the qualitative research design of prior JCU doctoral experience surveys, the focus group component for this project was based around an open positive feedback loop with the key questions:

1. What are or have been the positive aspects of your experience?
2. What are or have been the negative aspects of your experience?
3. In what ways can JCU as an institution and your College further support your experience?

Paper based/hard copies and an online version of these questions also included basic demographic and academic profiling with further elaboration of student experiences within the related themes of administrative support, institutional support, supervisory support and pre-conceived expectations of the doctoral experience (refer to Doctoral Experience Survey in Appendix).

Methodology

To ensure consistency and relevance for benchmarking against prior JCU Doctoral Experience Reports, this research was modelled on the previously established qualitative research methodology. In addition to the original questions and themes, students were also invited to provide basic demographic data to establish an overall profile of student participants – to determine the extent that they are representative of the doctoral candidate student body, and to potentially indicate any correlations between student background and the type of experience.

Small focus group interviews

The primary research approach was founded in small focus group interviews. All enrolled doctoral students (PhD and Professional Doctorate) identified through individual College databases were

invited via email to participate in one of a series of scheduled focus groups for approximately 45 minutes – 1 hour. For Townsville students the focus groups were organised as College based groups, while the logistics and lower number of enrolled students in Cairns resulted in a larger single combined-College session.

Using databases or an email alias provided by each College, email invitations were sent directly from the researcher with further reminders and email support provided from College administration (the College of Healthcare Services sent emails on behalf of the researcher only). Participation rates are indicated in Table 1. To facilitate candid responses and feedback, focus groups on both campuses were conducted in a neutral location away from the direct scrutiny of any supervisors or College administration. Students were not individually identified to the researcher and asked where possible to avoid using names of any individual (unless to provide positive comments). Participants were also asked to respect the confidentiality of other students and comments made during the focus groups sessions.

Following a briefing on the background and rationale of the research project, and securing consent to record the proceedings, the focus groups were structured as a positive feedback loop consisting of positive factors, negative factors and recommendations for improvement. Students were not constrained in terms of content or themes however were directed to use the session as an opportunity for identifying improvements and change rather than to undertake any personal vendetta.

Near the conclusion of each focus group participants were provided with a complete paper based version of the online survey instrument developed (refer to Doctoral Experience Survey in Appendix) and asked to identify, at a minimum, their demographic details. As focus groups varied in size from 6 – 18 individuals and were constrained by time, these structured surveys provided each student an opportunity to provide additional anonymous feedback and/or comments on specific themes or issues where relevant. Each session lasted approximately 60 – 85 mins and were recorded for later data clarification and transcription (verbal consent for recording was provided by all students).

[Online survey \(survey monkey\)](#)

As the research project was intended to capture the experience of all doctoral students, an online survey (refer to Doctoral Experience Survey in Appendix) was developed for external students based around previously established issues and themes and delivered via the Survey Monkey software platform. Any student that indicated interest in the research project but who was unable to attend one of the scheduled focus group sessions was sent a new email invitation and link to the online survey. Online surveys remained anonymous, however students were also offered the option of an

alternative telephone/skype interview. The online survey response period was open from November 25th – December 31st 2015.

Data analysis

All data and information collected from the paper based focus group surveys was manually entered and collated with the completed online surveys through Survey Monkey. The software platform (Gold edition) facilitates direct comparative and thematic analysis. With the benefit of previous research and the themes identified from these surveys, transcripts and interview notes were further analysed for additional concepts or themes. It is in this context that issues of mental health support, an increasingly competitive intellectual climate, and future career uncertainty were identified. New codes were developed until a point of saturation, these codes were then grouped and categorised around areas of frequency and significance. In discussing each theme, the positive and negative aspects were grouped and analysed. Key results were organised under the categories of administrative support, institutional support and advisory/supervisory experience (Table 2, 3 and 4).

Vignettes have been used throughout the report to provide a direct, independent student perspective.

Research Limitations

While email provided the most efficient and convenient form of notification for the research project it also represented one of the greatest limitations. Inclusion in the original email invitation remained reliant on the provision and accuracy of College based email aliases and/or databases. Email returns and direct responses indicated that many of these databases were not entirely up-to-date, and consequently a number of students may have missed the research invitation.

Even more limiting to overall response rates was the identified issue of “email fatigue”. Many participants indicated that they rarely check their JCU emails and/or regularly ignore any email that does not come from their supervisor, Dean, or admin staff, due to the sheer volume of irrelevant emails received. While multiple reminders and the dual approach from both the College and researcher was intended to increase awareness of the project, many students may have remained oblivious of the purpose and intent of the research invitation. The notification period was also relatively short and highly variable between Colleges.

Consistent with previous iterations the focus groups were conducted during the month of November with online surveys available during late November until the end of December. While all attempts were made to avoid conflicts with other research programs, personal commitments, or teaching

obligations, there were unavoidable clashes for some students. Where identified these students were offered the online survey or telephone interview alternative.

While the paper based and online surveys did provide students with a further opportunity to elaborate on issues, express personal views, and relay experiences, through analysis it became evident that the associated anonymity also assisted students to express more negatively focused comments than raised during the focus groups. This may have created a more negative bias in the results compared to earlier reports.

As per the participant profile provided below, participation rates and inclusion were similar to previous reports.

Participant Profile

Figures provided by the GRS (2016) indicate that in November 2015 there were 772 enrolled Doctoral students (excluding students on leave of absence - LOA). As the research project was intended to encompass all aspects and stages of the Doctoral Candidate experience at JCU this total included 26 students undertaking a Professional Doctorate and 81 students which were recorded as “under examination”. The majority of these students were enrolled through the Townsville campus (570) with just over 26% enrolled at the Cairns campus (202). Reflecting the diversity of JCU Doctoral opportunities, just under 40% (305) of the enrolled doctoral candidates were international students.

With a total of 90 students either attending the focus group or completing the online survey for this research project, the participation rate was 11.7% (refer to Table 1). This rate is slightly higher than the previous two iterations of the JCU Doctoral Experience report, however in this case students were incentivised to participate in the focus groups through the offer of a free “light lunch”. With the focus groups there were 76 students that attended one of the scheduled sessions (58 in Townsville and 18 in Cairns). 57 of these students further completed the paper-based survey for the project providing, at a minimum, basic demographic details. An additional 14 participants completed the online version of the survey only.

Participation rates for the research were relatively consistent over each campus with individual College representation ranging from 7.5% - 21.2%. Although the total number of student participants appears lowest for the College of Medicine and Dentistry the percentage (7.5%) is actually fairly consistent with the participation rates for the College of Marine and Environmental Sciences and College of Arts, Society and Education. The Australian Research Council Centres of Excellence had the

highest participation rate (over 20%) (refer to College based discussion section for specific rates and issues).

Table 1 : Participants by Research Mode and College

Primary College <i>(total enrolled)</i>	Focus Groups Townsville	Focus Group Cairns	Online Survey	Total Respondents
College of Medicine and Dentistry (40)	1 (with CPHMVS)		2	3
College of Public Health, Medicine and Veterinary Sciences (92)	6	3	2	11
College of Science, Technology and Engineering (96)	10	1	1	12
College of Marine and Environmental Sciences (224)	11	4	2	17
College of Arts, Society and Education (160)	7	4	2	13
College of Healthcare Services (51)	6		2	8
College of Business, Law and Governance (76)	10	2	1	13
Australian Research Council - Centres of Excellence (33)	7			7
Not identified		4	2	4
Total (772)	58	18	14	90

Of the 71 survey respondents (paper based or online) the students were predominantly female (63%), domestic students (61%), younger than 35 (51%), early to mid-candidature (67%), with either a Bachelor (Honours) degree (41%), or Coursework Masters (36%), as their highest qualification prior to commencing their Doctoral candidature at JCU. Only 14% of the respondents had completed their highest academic qualification over 10 year ago. Through these surveys, 12% of students identified as external/remote. Further comparison with GRS enrolment databases may assist to determine if this is consistent with the doctoral candidate profile across the university.

Positive Comments and Observations

In reviewing their expectations, experiences and overall satisfaction levels regarding their doctoral candidature at JCU, students were first asked to comment on positive elements. The foremost aspect was the “tropical advantage”. The Great Barrier Reef, the rainforest, and the tropical environment (particularly flora and fauna) were highly valued in terms of proximity, aesthetics and the related research/specialised supervisor opportunities these offered. Location, climate, convenience and affordability/costs were all indicated as advantageous attributes. The friendliness of the broader community was felt to enhance the research and wellbeing experience.

In terms of facilities and resources, students on both campuses highlighted the positive role of library and its support staff. Students in Townsville particularly appreciated on-campus resources such as the gym, Woolworths, the medical centre, Miss Sushi and the bike shed services. In Cairns, students were complimentary of the campus layout, atmosphere and perceived integration with the surrounding natural environment. International students expressed considerable approval of the SKIP program, support services and social networking events and opportunities offered through the International Student Centre.

Domestic and international students both commented on the international reputation of JCU in regards to its high level of recognised research expertise and quality. Consistently, it was attributed to offering collaborative opportunities and institutional affiliations not available elsewhere. In many cases it was access to specific supervisors or research programs that encouraged the students to apply for doctoral studies at JCU. The vast majority of students were highly complementary of their supervisor’s knowledge, enthusiasm and associated support. In parallel with this students discussed the benefit, range and diversity of GRS seminars offered throughout their candidature.

Themes

Informed by previous doctoral experience reports, the structure of the written surveys for this research was based around the three broad themes – Administrative support, Institutional support and the Supervisory/Advisory experience. Coding and analysis of the data collected from both the focus groups and the surveys indicated that these remain dominant areas within the doctoral candidature. Key aspects and the prevalence of positive and negative statements have been arranged under these themes and presented within each indicated subsection. Illustrative student comments or responses are also provided.

Administrative support

(Refer to Table 2)

Enrolment process

More than 75% of the comments or statements regarding the enrolment process were positive, indicating minimal problems or issues for most students. Some students did mention that while they had some difficulties, they were supported through the process by their proposed supervisors and/or the GRS. There were reported issues for a small number of international students regarding international visa applications and/or problems with authorised overseas agents. Negative comments primarily related to delays, uncertainty and the extent of paperwork required.

“Quite nice. The administrative staff was very helpful and nice”

“Good support from supervisors, relatively easy process with GRS”

“Incredibly frustrating, no support, very slow”

There was also a level of uncertainty for some students in regards to the obligation to pay Student Association Fees. Based on further discussion, this seemed dependant on the type of scholarship or funding arrangement, however many said they were not aware of this cost until they were advised after enrolment that they had incurred a student association debt.

Structure of the doctorate/milestones and candidate management

Reflecting a period of transition and reform in HDR structure and policies by the GRS at the beginning of 2014, there was significant variability in the experience of milestones and candidate management, predominantly reflecting an “old” and “new” system. Some of the longer term students indicated lack of consistency and clarity, redundancy of links and forms, and difficulties identifying an appropriate, informed administrative contact to get direct answers. In comparison, the majority of newer students expressed general satisfaction with candidate management including the skills development programs, formal milestones, and the reporting processes required by the GRS. The quantity of paperwork (often requiring multiple levels of signatories) was considered a less favourable aspect.

“Unclear - I am in the old system but really the information is hidden on the JCU website – it is very difficult to know if you are doing something right and there is always a form you didn't know about in a strange place”

“Positive- it is ok but I suggest a decrease in the quantity of paperwork/ less documentation”

“Very happy with this and the GRS and admin staff are very supportive. Everything is clear.”

A number of external and professional doctorate students however indicated that the current GRS candidate management system did not adequately cater for their varied circumstances.

“Much more needs to be made available by way of support and information for those completing PhD off campus. A human touch would have been very welcome on the rare occasions that I required assistance. It is not possible to navigate all that is required for the PhD by consulting the website.”

Communication

With over 33% of the students references to communication categorised as negative, this may be considered one of the most problematic aspects of the current doctoral experience. Communication issues related to: networking between students (within and across Colleges), administration (at all levels), website and database content management, and general email management. Citing examples of multiple websites and software platforms including the GRS webpage, College sites, student, LearnJCU/Blackboard and even Facebook – there is no apparent centralised location for all relevant student administration and information. Existing systems were described as counter intuitive, with contradictory information, evident redundancies, and dead links which regularly create frustration in locating appropriate documents.

“Communication is haphazard and not proactive. Primarily administrative in content. Administrative procedure and requirements constantly change without consultation or prior notice.”

“Bad between departments/ GRS/ College”

“Sporadic – pretty poor actually”

“College communication about general things are frequent but generally irrelevant for me.”

Despite consistently identifying issues with communication processes and procedures, students were not be able to recommend a singular, agreed, preferred, method of effective communication. Most students admitted to email fatigue and regularly ignoring emails – particularly those that came from group email aliases rather than from an individual. Except in strained relationships, students almost always prioritised emails that were sent directly from their supervisors.

GRS support

While aware of their role in assessing potential candidate applications, candidate management and coordinating SKIP and skills development programs, most students admitted limited direct

involvement with the GRS beyond administrative reporting requirements. Consequently, the GRS was often associated with documentation, rules, and protocols. The majority of references to the GRS were positive (61.5%), with specific processes and the extent of paperwork required the main criticism.

"I haven't had much direct interaction"

"Good. I am in a cohort and have found them to be a practical and supportive group during my candidature"

"GRS needs a bit more stability and consistency in its processes, procedures and requirements. ...GRS needs to understand the different research methods and conventions of the separate disciplines within each 'College' grouping and incorporate this within its requirements and expectations."

College based support

Opinions on College based admin support appeared to be highly variable across, and particularly between, Colleges. While candidates perceived the College admin to have the most direct and significant role in supporting them administratively throughout their doctoral experience, expectations and the level of service provided were not always consistent. Most of the negative feedback referred to changes in admin that had occurred since the university restructure. Disturbingly, there were a number of newer students that said they had no idea who the relevant support staff in their College were, or how to contact them.

"It was excellent before re-structure, we lost our admin support therefore knowledge loss in process."

"Is there any?"

"A few individuals are wonderful and supportive"

A number of established admin staff within Colleges were actively praised for their efforts to facilitate HDR admin, communication and enquiries.

Table 2: Administrative Support Feedback*

	Positive	Key Observations	Negative	Key Observations
Enrolment Process	75.4%	Efficient Prompt Supportive Excellent Easy Good Helpful	13.8%	Incredibly frustrating Slow/delayed Challenging/complicated Inconsistencies Too much paperwork Unprofessional Online application - poor
Structure of the doctorate/milestones	64.6%	Positive Adequate Happy Clear	13.8%	Poor - terrible Limited help/feedback Cumbersome/time consuming Unclear Frustrating Too much paperwork
Candidate Management	53.8%	Excellent Minimal required Positive Helpful Excellent Excellent supervisory panel	20%	Lacking Incompetent Bullying External = overlooked Management vs support Haphazard Poor
Communication	43.1%	Good Positive Good at school/College level Helpful Clear Satisfied	33.8%	Negative GRS – poor Too many PowerPoints Needs improvement Sporadic Largely irrelevant Confusion
GRS support	61.5%	Helpful staff Good Supportive Satisfactory Excellent Great programs	16.9%	Little/limited support or interaction Too much paperwork Slow - improve No point of contact Inflexible processes
College based support	63.1%	Good Available when needed Supportive environment	15.4%	Non-existent/none Poor Difficult to access Bad since restructure

***Missing percentage values reflect neutral statements or no direct response recorded in surveys**

“Although it had been a significant period since I was last involved in postgraduate research at JCU I was unprepared for the greater degree of administrative involvement in the research process that has occurred over this period. While this provides a greater degree of accountability and allows for earlier intervention in unsuccessful candidatures, I am not convinced that overall there has been a commensurate increase in value to the student.”

Institutional support

(Refer Table 3)

Institutional support was a significant theme within the doctoral experience, encompassing many diverse elements. As students had variable understanding or engagement with certain facets, the number of references in some of the identified categories was often limited, or there was a high incidence of neutral or “not applicable” comments. In most cases differences in opinions/perspectives were often expressed by external/off campus students.

Resources and facilities

Depending on their personal context, students conveyed a wide range of narratives in regards to JCU related resources and facilities, these varied from on-campus catering options, IT support, the diving club and bike club, and laboratory access. Most students (69.8% positive references) viewed available resources and facilities favourably.

“Seemingly good resources but not enough information about how to access them”

“I rarely if ever, use on-campus resources and facilities. Access to a shared work station in the doctoral student’s area would be useful for periods when I am visiting the Townsville campus.”

“The facilities to support my study is available here at JCU. Excellent”

Infrastructure

Infrastructure for many students was seen as an aspect similar or related to resources and facilities, however, this category did not receive as many direct positive references (52.3%). There was some concern over access and cleanliness of certain labs and buildings. Similarly, other students complained over office space, the lack of storage options, and general maintenance. While some students in Cairns found the open plan post-grad centre counter-productive to research progress, others were very complementary of this arrangement.

“Off campus - videoconference facilities very good.”

“Ok, some laboratories need more cleaning”

“Ok-great to have a PG centre with everyone”

“Good, but please consider the weather, sometimes looks like we forget we are in Townsville”

Library services/resources

With the exception of two students that directly indicated unsatisfactory experiences with the library during their candidature, almost all students had positive things to say about the library services, staff

and resources (only 3.2% negative references). Recommendations however did include a revision/extension on opening hours particularly during exams and non-traditional study periods.

"I rarely use the library and every time I do, it is an ordeal. I dread going there and asking any of the staff anything. They are extremely unhelpful. I presume it is because as a research student, my questions are a little more obscure and out of the box for them. But they make it so much more difficult. Also, other universities don't charge the outrageous prices for acquiring documents not in the catalogue. At my old university, it was free. Disappointing on every front."

"Superb online library. A major reason to study at JCU."

"Generally excellent although as an external student I don't have an IRA which makes some requests difficult"

Skills development

On campus students were generally both happy and appreciative of the variety and range of skill development programs offered through the GRS and Colleges including, SKIP (for international students), writing and publishing workshops, research specific training, and the doctoral cohort program. Some Colleges also ran successful internal lab groups or writing retreats. In terms of the programs available, there was some concern that there are not enough discipline or skill specific options, and that relevant external courses were often financially prohibitive to attend. Other students indicated that the mandatory skills requirements for their candidature should be more flexible.

"There are always lots of interesting workshops. The program provided by Liz Tynan is extremely valuable"

"Not enough opportunities for social scientists to gain technical skills"

"Good, but sometimes unnecessary- should allow candidates to have input"

External or off campus students were less satisfied with the opportunities available.

"Training courses and other opportunities are extremely limited for external students. Many of the GRS 'skills' courses need to be made available to off-campus students."

"Recordings of relevant seminars are good (e.g. on publishing in the sciences) but take a long time to be uploaded to the website and aren't publicised very well"

Professional development

While there are a number of professional development opportunities made available to students through the university, many again felt that there needed to be more discipline specific options. Numerous students commented that supervisors often funded them directly to attend relevant conferences, training programs, research and fieldwork. Many other students lacked such funding or support.

“Supervisors gave good opportunities to gain professional development”

“Poor-need more skills 'real life”

“Not made aware of opportunities”

Career prospects

Some professional development programs offered through the university were reported to have highlighted the highly specialised, highly competitive nature of future research careers in an environment of limited post-doc fellowships and grant funding, to the extent that some students had become increasingly stressed about their capacity to find meaningful employment once they had completed their doctorate qualifications. This was highly equated with the “publish or perish” philosophy within some disciplines/Colleges.

“My supervisors have been excellent however money for conferences and travel is pretty limited or non-existent. That is pretty much expected as the status quo these days. While I have almost finished my PhD there is no advice on post-doc funding or a future career or even how to move to a full time academic/researcher position.”

In terms of developing a tertiary teaching profile, students complained that there were limited direct teaching opportunities or chances to develop teaching experience beyond coordinated tutoring, marking, or the occasional guest lecture. Very few students had been able to contribute to the development of subject content, material, assessment or coordination, and felt unqualified to apply for university teaching positions.

“The PhD itself is fine (other than my supervisor), but no one gives any thought to what happens next – I want to be an academic but there seems to be little chance of getting a job other than on a casual basis from JCU.”

A small number of students close to completion, or who had recently submitted, expressed a further sense of uncertainty over the level of professional expertise or practical skills development

undertaken during the candidature – particularly those that did not have an interest in pursuing further research or academia. The students that showed the greatest concern were those that admitted limited “life experience” beyond the university environment (ie transitioned almost directly from school into an undergraduate degree then to post graduate studies). It was generally felt that the Career Hub and external employment services were not positioned to adequately assist and identify opportunities for highly specialised, skilled doctoral graduates.

“The reality was crushing. Near the end, there was little to no support. When problems came up there was very little support and since graduating there has been zero follow up or guidance as to where you can go next. I feel the system has ticked a box when you submit and then you are completely forgotten/discarded”

Social support and international student support

The extent of social engagement, sense of community, and networking, was consistently higher for international students in comparison to domestic students. From initial introductions and friendships made during the obligatory SKIP program, the international office was seen to proactively maintain and expand these friendships through regular social events and functions which are highly valued by participants.

Colleges that maintained lab groups, cohort programs, research student conferences and/or formal student mentoring arrangements were also referred to positively in terms of social support. There was however, a reasonable number of students that described the doctoral experience as competitive, isolating and even alienating – with a perceived disconnect between PhD students and the rest of the College. Many that provided teaching support services felt that they were in a limbo of “not quite staff but not really a student”. Social events or opportunities to extend networks or friendships between students of other Colleges were considered negligible on the Townsville campus (Cairns supports an open-plan PhD office). Again, external students were marginalised in this aspect.

“Really good, Alex Salvador is doing an amazing job”

“Support provided by lab group is excellent”

“Mentors plus supervisors”

“Post grad social network support- BIG NO”

“Minimal. Difficult as working full time in addition to conducting research for PhD”

Mental health support

Students indicated that a number of supervisors/Colleges seemed to informally promote an ethos of stoicism when it comes to mental health, personal problems and issues, or even stress during their candidature – to the extent that more than one student was warned by other students to “suck it up and deal with it – particularly don’t mention it to your supervisors”. Most indicated they would not be comfortable discussing personal issues with their supervisors, and were unsure where to access appropriate mental health support if required. Generally, there was seen to be a stigma associated with admitting a mental health issue.

“Pressure is good but over pressure is not useful since it just increases stress”

Students that did disclose their access to health support services had variable experiences. While two students conveyed positive associations, the consensus seemed to be that JCU support services lacked the resources (particularly personnel) and understanding to mitigate the pressures and issues of a doctoral candidate. Extended referral times to access support was seen as particularly problematic.

Financial support

Each College appears to have their own arrangement and procedures for students to access funding for activities beyond their initial PhD application, such as additional fieldwork, conferences and equipment. Such arrangements include; minimum annual stipends to the student support account, annual capped competitive scholarship/grants, direct supervisor funding, and/or external grant applications. The general consensus however, was that such funding was limited and increasingly competitive (23.8% negative references).

Students on scholarships were appreciative of the support provided, however often relied on part-time work, tutoring or marking opportunities to meet their everyday costs of living. There was also some concern about the “limbo period” between thesis submission and examiners comments where candidates would no longer be eligible for scholarship payments. Students employed full time or self-funding their research indicated the struggles of balancing competing interests.

“I did not realise I would have to battle for finances to do the project I was enrolled in. That has been a disappointing aspect as I would like to focus on the research.”

“\$1000/year is not a lot. Apparently other universities provide much more”

“Restrictive - especially conference funding- nil for PhD students 2015”

Fieldwork/travel/lab support

Although a number of students did not require fieldwork, travel or lab support as part of their research endeavours many linked this category closely with the issue of limited financial support and funding. The processes, protocols and paperwork required for procurement, travel and acquittals was seen to

be excessive. In many instances students admitted to self-funding consumables or resources as it was “simpler” and “more efficient” than wasting time to provide the documentary support requested.

“The paperwork required for the field is excessive and redundant. A better system needs to be in place.”

“None-had to get my own funding”

Supervisor support

Candidate’s assessment of supervisor support at JCU continues to rate consistently high (77.8% positive comments). The majority of students were highly complementary of the time, effort and commitment dedicated to the research relationship. While there were a minority of negative comments (6.3%) these often related to differences in student and supervisor expectations regarding availability, support and feedback. Students that did express difficulties suggested that there should be more training and accountability for supervisors.

“Perfect, but I think I’m lucky not everyone has enough time or support from their supervisors.”

“Mixed- a lot of support from one area, less from another- some bullying involved”

“Extremely impressive and very supportive”

“There needs to be more guidelines for them”

External student support

External and off-campus students tended to convey a number of mixed and varied messages in comparison to on-campus students. Library support, skills development and social networking were key concerns while there was strong appreciation for supervisor support and IT facilities. Many explained this as the unfortunate reality of their circumstances.

“Being off campus, I often feel that I am completely absent or detached from the University. I have a wonderful relationship with my supervisors however, I have almost none with JCU except when they release a research progress update every 12 months or require me to pay my student fees. Due to my profession ... I am required to move regularly for work opportunities (I work full-time) as such a different approach to off-campus higher degree research students would be wonderful, even just the chance to connect with HDR students at other universities in the cities I am in, or other off-campus students at JCU (even electronically) would minimise the considerable isolation.

Though I am grateful for the opportunity to complete my PhD with JCU I would find it challenging to recommend to anyone else as I have had almost no relationship with the University with the exception of having a wonderful primary supervisor.”

Table 3: Institutional Supports Feedback*

	Positive	Observations	Negative	Observations
Resources and facilities	69.8%	Excellent Good Positive Adequate Very supportive	6.3%	Not great Lack of information on how to access Can't access labs unaccompanied
Infrastructure	52.3%	Improving Great bike service Off-campus video conferencing very good Great post-grad centre	7.9%	Laboratory cleanliness issues Inadequate storage Confusing
Library services/resources	65.1%	Excellent staff Helpful Positive Superb online library Efficient	3.2%	Needs extended operating hours – throughout the year Difficult for external students without IRA Unhelpful
Skill development	66.2%	Liz Tynan courses are excellent Positive Need more Interesting Useful	9.5%	Overdone and science orientated Excessive Not enough for social scientists More specialist (eg NVivo/stats) More available to off-campus students
Professional development	54%	Positive Very supportive Very useful Great opportunities Great supervisor support Excellent	14.3%	80 hours excessive and often irrelevant Limited Negative Not made aware of opportunities Needs more “real-life”/discipline specific None - negligible
Social support	39.7%	Post grad room is great Good Comfortable Great mentors and lab groups	17.5%	Negative/None Not much for HDR students Limited None for external students
Financial support	36.5%	Good Secured by supervisors	23.8%	Lacking Discouraging Restrictive Minimal Unnecessarily bureaucratic

Fieldwork/travel/lab support	34.9%	Supervisor support Good Satisfied	14.3%	None Had to get my own Too many forms/paperwork Bureaucratic
Supervisor support	77.8%	Excellent Fantastic Good Great	6.3%	Insufficient Mixed None/limited Issues with at least one supervisor
International student support	33.3%	Alex Salvador is amazing Good Great Positive	-	
External student support	9.5%	Good Positive	9.5%	Negative Limited

***Missing percentage values reflect neutral statements or no direct response recorded in surveys**

"This has been a self-directed and highly autonomous experience, with minimal involvement of JCU. The notable exceptions have been JCU provided me with an excellent primary supervisor, and superb online library facilities. My secondary supervisor helped me navigate the more difficult administrative processes.

Having videoconferencing facilities available for my pre-completion seminar was helpful, and is a progressive move on the part of JCU. The IT department have always been very supportive, re technical glitches along the way. My communications with the GRS and College were limited and restricted to formal, administrative and bureaucratic exchanges. In two years there appeared to be no chance to experience personal, positive exchanges or to develop any sense of support from the GRS. I recognise that this is likely to be a function of my odd circumstances, as it seems the on campus experience is very different. I therefore feel that the process towards the PhD has been entirely my responsibility, which I expected at this level of study. I am very grateful that JCU facilitated this autonomy.

I am also very proud of the project, and feel that it makes an importation contribution to the clinical community with whom I have worked, and this is deeply satisfying.

I am also pleased that my supervisors benefit from several publications arising from my research - So too does JCU, who additionally benefit from the low -comparatively speaking- costs associated with my enrolment. I am very grateful for the opportunity to complete a PhD. I worked very hard over many years to achieve this, but I am also mindful that not everyone is offered this chance."

Advisory/Supervisory experience

(refer Table 4)

Student supervision

While there was almost universal commendation for the knowledge, skills and expertise of JCU supervisors (77% and 80.3% positive references for the categories of support and access), individual student comments on the supervisory experience seemed to be primarily based on subjective expectations of the student/supervisor relationship. Common elements included the regularity of scheduled meetings and lab groups, formal and informal access, mentoring, teaching and conference support, and timely feedback. For some students, research supervision was very structured with regular communication, fortnightly meetings, standardised access and agreed feedback timeframes. In contrast, other students were more appreciative of a flexible, access as required, supervision style. When negotiated directly between the student and supervisor each of these styles were seen to have their pros and cons. Many students had very mixed experiences, depending on the supervisor.

"I try to manage my study okay but not very hard for me. I always inform my supervisors all achievements or anything I do. My supervisors always give useful suggestions to solve my problems"

"I now understand what people mean when they talk about the challenges associated with doing a PhD and with the relationship with your supervisors. It is a very special relationship since you want to be as independent as possible, but heavily depend on the advice of your supervisors. If I didn't contact my supervisors myself, they would never contact me. A PhD comes with a lot of responsibilities and self-drive."

"Supervisors are excellent, spend more of their time with PhD students than required."

In many cases the student skills audits completed with supervisors at the commencement of the candidature and around certain milestones, were perceived to be superficial and token, with very little consideration of real capacity and needs. Some students similarly felt that there should be more supervisor accountability and that students should also be able to audit the performance of their supervisors.

"While the PhD experience is consistent with my expectations and the skills sessions are good, I really expected more emphasis on the learning process- often I feel it is expected that you are already a professional - class researcher"

"Personally, collection of student's feedback about supervisors should be more often because some problems cannot be solved in time, which affects progress greatly. Every case needs to be considered individually and carefully"

Supervision complaints

Although specific details were not provided, a small number of students did report having had direct conflict with one or more of their supervisors during their candidature, and expressed general dissatisfaction with the process of dealing with such complaints or issues. Some Colleges have retained a post graduate liaison officer (PLO) to facilitate student enquiries, grievances and advice, although there appeared to be some scepticism about whether such people could remain completely impartial and maintain student confidentiality. One student indicated they had successfully engaged the GRS to mediate their situation and circumstances. Most students preferred the idea of initially seeking relevant advice and assistance from a person external to the College (if the situation could not be resolved directly with the supervisor), however they were generally unaware of the process or available information on accessing such help.

“Better support mechanisms for students to be able to anonymously report/discuss problems they are having with their supervisors.”

A number of external students continued to feel that their personal circumstances negatively impacted their experience.

“Working full-time and studying part-time is extremely challenging and has made milestones very difficult to reach. I have a good work network but a poor academic network and as a person who thinks out loud and needs to discuss concepts and approaches with someone, regularly, not having that type of access to my supervisors (or a local alternative) has affected my progress. My supervisors claim that I 'rely on them too much so get my work into shape' and I admit that I wonder what their job is, if not to help me get my work into shape?! Clearly a disconnect in expectations.”

“The reality is more complicated and much more stressful than expectations, mainly caused by supervisor and student relationship and isolation, but I keep faith and push forward. I appreciate a lot of the help and support from my colleagues and families.”

Timeliness of feedback

Most supervisors were seen to be fairly efficient and timely in providing feedback to their students (77% positive comments) however there were concerns about how rushed, time poor, or overcommitted some supervisors were. In most cases supervisors did return feedback within an agreed timeframe, however in one case a student indicated that they had not received any feedback from their primary supervisor for over 2 years.

Table 4: Advisory/Supervisory Experience*

	Positive	Observations	Negative	Observations
Access/regular meetings	80.3%	Excellent Positive Very Good As needed Constructive	11.5	No – no repercussions None Difficulties with at least one supervisor
Timely feedback	77%	Excellent turnaround Quick Great Very good Efficient	14.8%	No feedback in 2 years No repercussions for poor supervision Can take months/slow None/shocking Irregular
Support	77%	Excellent Collaborative Positive Very supportive	6.6%	Blind leading the blind Minimal

***Missing percentage values reflect neutral statements or no direct response recorded in surveys**

“Supervisors need to be regulated- in their commitment to a student. Some are great- timely feedback etc. but some spend so long time giving feedback, due to fulfilling multiple obligations”

“There should be clear comprehensive guidelines for both advisors and students for a wide scope of issues”

“My supervisor is the primary reason for me to be at JCU, he is too good and helpful.”

College based discussion

In order to facilitate open, candid, dialogue within the focus group settings, there were limited constraints on the content or structure of these sessions beyond addressing the key questions required for the feedback loop. Consequently, feedback on College specific matters was interspersed with more general comments and issues. Where applicable to the wider context of the doctoral candidate experience, this information has been provided within the relevant identified themes and categories. The amount of rich data relating to specific Colleges was highly variable, often dependant on the number of students or perceived issues. To avoid potential identification of any particular student, applicable observations have been clustered to reflect the scope of positive and negative references.

College of Medicine and Dentistry (CMD)

7.5% participation

Excellent university and study experience

Recommended upgrade to research facilities and laboratories at the Cairns campus

College of Public Health, Medicine and Veterinary Sciences (CPHMVS)

12% participation

Independence, freedom, not micro-managed

Diverse range of projects available

Flexible supervisor relationships

Cohort program applies (both positive and negative comments about the experience)

Mandatory training sessions – improving

Improvement in postgrad engagement and management since restructure

College of Science, Technology and Engineering (CSTE)

12.5% participation

Positive admin support

Professional development opportunities (variable feedback) with seminars sharing experiences and pitching ideas in some disciplines

Cleanliness and OHS concerns regarding lab materials/facilities/maintenance - improvements to certain buildings required

Issues in the purchase and use of common resources for labs

Calibration/maintenance required for specialised equipment (inaccuracy can have significant repercussions)

Poor training practices for use of specialised instrumentation

Restrictive access to labs/equipment

No log books

More freedom and autonomy requested for research and the generation of financial support ie. lease out equipment/skills to increase funds/income

Redundant/excess equipment in labs

Isolation of some students (physical and social)

College of Marine and Environmental Sciences (CMES)

7.6% participation

Efficient services, good admin support (for trip tracker/travel documentation etc) – although changed for some sections of the College with restructure

Welcoming, comfortable, supportive, flexible – other PhD students are the greatest resource to navigate the processes and protocols

Well supervised – variety of flexible styles to suit

Impressive research facilities/access – a number research stations that take advantage of tropical location

Allows teaching support to assist student finances

Lacking in scholarly development – knowing what's out there

Limited scholarly networking in College - not knowing what other students are doing (eg postgrad conference)

Isolation of students that are not involved with established lab groups

Workshops are often seen as unnecessary or repetitive

Questionable seminar value (discipline dependant)

Conflicting information on merits of thesis by publication vs traditional

Publish or perish mentality enforced through many supervisors

College of Arts, Society and Education (CASE)

8.1% participation

Beneficial workshops/writing retreats

Increasing social networking between some disciplinary areas since amalgamation as College eg weekly morning meetings

Variable admin support

Lack of formal induction processes at the College level - allocation of office, IT access and support (central printers) resources, student support funding

Limited social events/collegiality/networking (no formal buddy system or mentor)

Environment of increasing politics and bureaucracy – uni as a business rather than about the research

College of Healthcare Services (CHS)

15.7% participation

Lab groups/peer and supervisor support are very positive

Writing retreats and workshops have been productive and useful (although threatened by reduced funding)

Valuable real life/industry experience

Difficulties in accessing guidance or admin support

Limited communication

College of Business, Law and Governance (CBLG)

17.1% participation

Great range of supervisor knowledge and experience

Although there are teaching opportunities available, students have to be proactive

Poor/old infrastructure – asbestos issues identified in some buildings (Townsville)

Poor communication and admin support (one student was particularly critical to the extent of actively advising potential students not to study with this College)

Poor staff and student morale

PhD students don't feel integrated or valued

Reduced seminar series/engagement/sense of belonging

Concerns about the safety/security of research data

Australian Research Council Centres of Excellence (ARC-COE)

21.2% participation

Useful annual research symposium

Valued multidisciplinary collaborative opportunities – academia and NGOs, national and international networks

Expertise – best in the world reputation – excellent calibre of research

Proactive skills development and mentorship – team work interactions

Diverse nationalities/international representation

Small centre yet diverse opportunities– valued encouraged and supported

“Atmosphere” in Centre sometimes intimidating – high standards and expectations - top down pressure

Competitive goal oriented can create research/student isolation

Pressure to continuously provide publications for high impact journals (advised 10+ needed for post doc) “publish or perish”

Joy of science/knowledge vs output - fear of underperforming/threat of position

Comparison with previous research

Given the significant restructure within the university throughout 2014 – 2015 it is difficult to draw direct parallels to specific School and Faculty based recommendations on the doctoral experience at JCU from previous biannual reports (Halbert 2012, Halbert 2014). The former Faculties - Faculty of Arts, Education & Social Science, Faculty of Law, Business & Creative Arts, Faculty of Medicine, Health & Molecular Sciences and Faculty of Science & Engineering were reconceived under a new Academy structure reflecting two Divisions with administration of seven Colleges. Each of these Colleges were further sub-divided into 4 or 5 academic groups (refer to Restructure Diagram in Appendix).

Rather than the former Faculties and Schools this research was based on the newly defined College structure: College of Medicine and Dentistry; College of Public Health, Medicine and Veterinary Sciences; College of Science, Technology and Engineering; College of Marine and Environmental Sciences; College of Arts, Society and Education; College of Healthcare Services and College of Business, Law and Governance. As the Australian Research Council Centres of Excellence (ARC-COE) represents a significant research entity supporting more than 30 doctoral candidates it was also included in the research scope.

In relation to the more general themes indicated from previous research there are a number of consistencies. Administrative processes continue to be an issue – in particular, travel, finance and fieldwork requirements are still considered cumbersome and problematic. While mainly positive, there were highly variable responses about the effectiveness of candidate management in terms of enrolments, milestones, expectations, ethics approval and the formal roles and responsibilities of supervisors, Colleges and GRS. Communication remained a critical concern. In addition to a lack of engagement between most students, respondents indicated a lack of clarity regarding administrative support at all levels. With the university restructure and increasing use of email aliases, students complained of the difficulties in identifying an established, individual point contact to facilitate their enquiries.

In terms of institutional supports there was ongoing appreciation of the library services at JCU, the skills development programs offered through the GRS, and many College HDR student initiatives. Opinions on the quality of facilities and infrastructure available varied significantly between the Colleges. Professional development opportunities, social, and financial support, each rated less favourably than previous reports, with the exception of international postgrads social networking, which had significantly improved. External students in particular, continue to identify issues of

isolation and limited support, although satisfaction levels were mixed. These trends seem consistent with the Post Graduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ) 2012-2014 where there has been a decline in overall satisfaction with the intellectual climate, goals and expectations of doctoral candidates at JCU.

Supervisor support continued to receive the most positive feedback from respondents. In most cases advisory arrangements were consistent, or exceeded, expectations in regards to regular meetings, timely feedback and support. The range and expertise of supervisors was a major factor in attracting students to study at JCU. Only a minority of students surveyed indicated dissatisfaction with one or more of their supervisors. Issues included a perceived lack of experience in HDR supervision, inadequate familiarity with GRS candidate management requirements, supervisor availability, and timeliness of feedback.

Recommendations

In addition to enduring issues and recommendations identified in previous doctoral experience reports (i.e. student engagement as part of a scholarly community, a streamlining of admin and paperwork processes, improved financial procedures and transparency, and clearer advisory arrangements), the students surveyed for this research project indicated a number of specific initiatives and strategies to improve the current system and processes. These recommendations fit within three key areas: JCU/institutional support, the GRS and candidate management and generic College processes.

JCU/Institutional support

Paperwork and documentation

Fewer, simpler, consistent, user friendly, forms accessible from an intuitive centralised repository that is regularly maintained and supports a FAQ section (Frequently Asked Questions) and/or direct referral process to relevant admin staff

“The complex system of paperwork for everything- particularly for field trips. Lots of these new systems (finance, field work etc.) are developed by people who don't actually use them - the user suffers. This often creates extensive, unnecessary delays”

Supervisor Proficiencies

Greater guidelines, training and HDR supervisor accountability in reference to:

- Appropriate feedback times
- Mentoring/fostering student research

- Conducting effective skills audits
- Providing constructive feedback
- Competing research, student supervision, administration, and teaching time commitments
- Appreciating ethnic/gender sensitivities

“Greater supervision of supervisors, ability to have consistent bad behaviour with students reported and monitored without individual consequences”

Accessible research profile/database for networking

Development of a centralised Doctoral Candidate Research Profile/database to facilitate social/research support and networking, including:

- Student background (nationality/language, previous academic qualification and discipline etc)
- Research interests
- PhD information (research project, start date, stage etc)
- Specialised equipment/database skills or expertise
- Interest in mentoring and teaching/availability/preferred subject area

“Communication between students about what they do should be encouraged.”

Other concerns

Although no specific strategies were identified, students recommended extensive improvement in current communication processes, funding availability and opportunities, targeted career development and the level of external student support.

“JCU has a good reputation as a regional research university and could attract more off-campus postgraduate students with a better targeted marketing strategy and flexible support arrangement”

Graduate Research School and candidate management

Structure and management of candidature

The provision of a clear and unambiguous Gantt chart/plot including:

- expected professional/skills development requirements
- candidate milestone
- mandatory reporting obligations

The development of an accessible, centralised electronic record/tracking of individual activities and milestones as completed.

“I think an electronic tracking system that students can log in (a little like blackboard for higher degree research) would be excellent, a site where all your candidature document can be submitted including ethics and tracked at where it is in the process, it would also be a good place to discuss things with supervisors, student research monitors and the school. It seems to work successfully for coursework based programs so why not for PhD students.”

Administration, transparency and accountability

The provision of clearer, direct contact details and protocols

- established/identifiable point of contact for specific issues/enquiries to improve response times
- Greater consistency in terminology, forms, guidelines, links and advice

“Minimal admin support was provided. My only contact with the College was re: organising pre-completion seminar and thesis submission. To this day, I still don't know what the GRS and what the College responsibilities are, and who I was supposed to contact for what. This could be clarified, to avoid future confusion.”

Support for external, off campus and professional doctorate candidates

Development of a separate, but complimentary, system of support, engagement and flexible processes for external or professional doctorate candidates.

Generic College processes

Each College was recommended to provide a specific handbook and compulsory induction for each new PhD candidate including:

- Relevant administrative personnel, roles, responsibilities and contact details (must be kept up to date). *Email aliases were found to be frustrating and unhelpful as there never appears to be any individual ownership, obligation or accountability*
- Organisation of a student mentor or buddy system
- Provide extensive guidance on College based policy and procedures: lab groups, desk/room allocation, computer access, IRA/student support funding, purchasing, fieldwork (finance and trip tracker) etc
- Develop a comprehensive list of support services within the College and wider university

- Highlight additional College based funding and professional development opportunities: IRA top-up support, grants, scholarships, tutoring, marking and teaching
- Information that is regularly maintained/updated and made available to students each year

“The JCU website should have more information of current staff, their duties/ responsibilities and their photo as well. It will be easier for students to locate where to go or who to meet when they need help. Unlike undergraduate students, HDR students start their program differently during the year, GRS/College should organise an official meeting to students and introduce them to the organisation structure, the program, people in charge and do not need to wait until a formal introduction day”

College specific initiatives and improvements should be developed in response to the feedback provided in the College based discussion section.

Conclusion

This report presents the findings of a study into the experiences of doctoral candidates at James Cook University in 2015. Qualitative data concerning administrative and institutional support, supervisory/advisory experiences, and engagement with JCU, the Graduate Research School and each College, has identified specific areas of satisfaction and areas of improvement. Areas of satisfaction continue to include research supervisor expertise, advisory support, general facilities and skill development opportunities. Examples of best practice include: mentor/lab based student support programs and the proactive social networking opportunities offered to international students. Identified issues include ongoing communication problems, limited funding opportunities, increasing competition, variable mental health support, adequacy of professional career development, and varied advisory experiences. Each of these issues help to explain a recent decline in overall JCU candidate satisfaction regarding intellectual climate, goals, and expectations, which were indicated in the most recent Postgraduate Research Experience Summary Report (2014).

Reflecting a diversity of student experiences which encompass both the recent GRS and wider university restructure, there was a clear level of transition angst and reform that permeated student observations. While some students felt these changes improved processes and systems – particularly in candidate management, in many cases the changes were seen to unnecessarily increase paperwork requirements, bureaucracy, politics and delays. Students were predominantly satisfied with JCU, yet there were identifiable opportunities for improvements.

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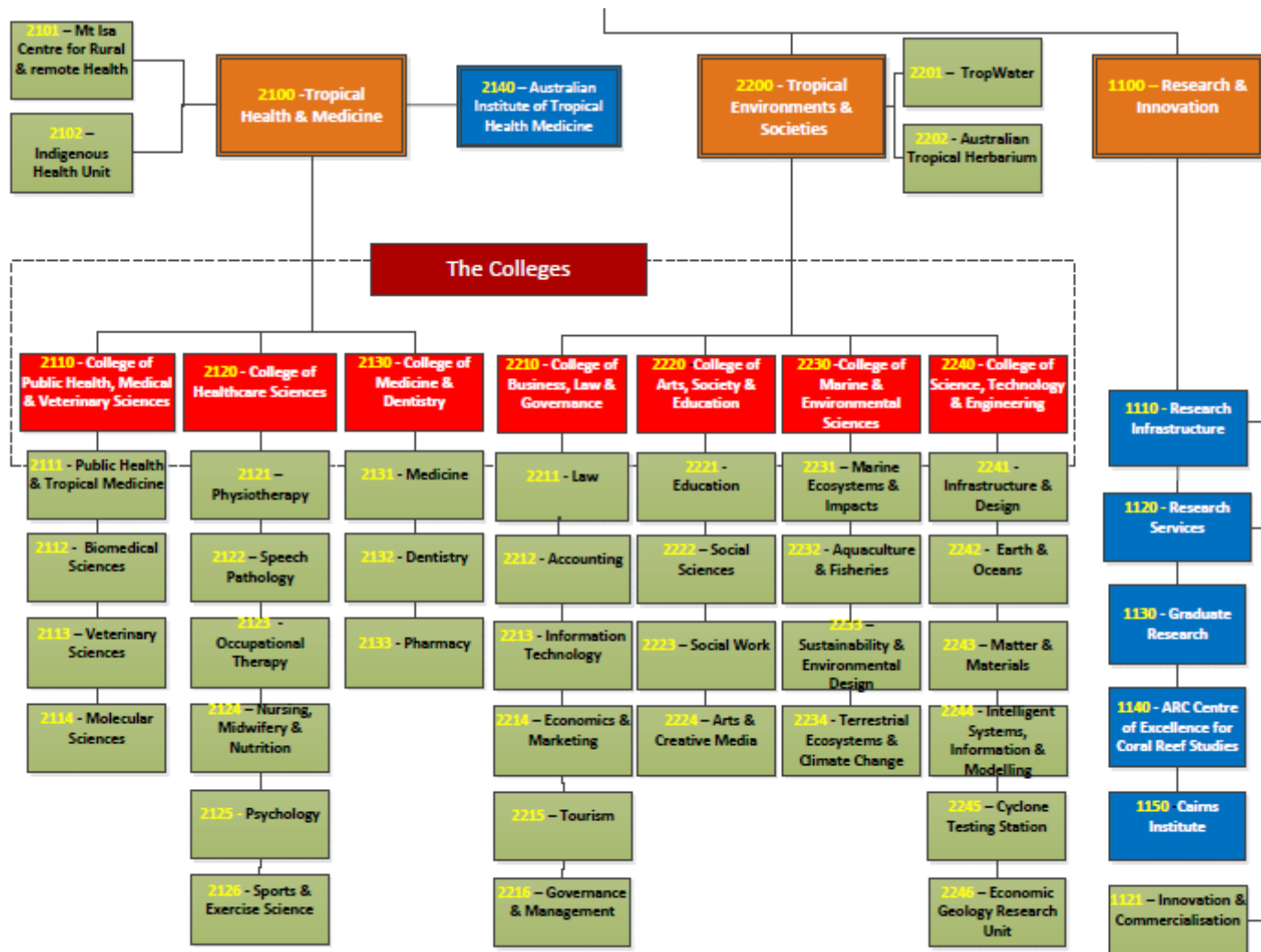
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APPENDIX

Divisions, Colleges and the GRS under the University Restructure 2014/2015



Doctoral Experience Survey

1. Are you male or female?

- Male
 Female

2. What is your current age?

- 20-24 35-39 50-54
 25-29 40-44 55-59
 30-34 45-49 60 or older

3. Are you an international student?

- Yes No

4. Is English your first language?

- Yes No

5. What is your highest level of academic qualification prior to your doctoral candidature (or closest equivalent)?

- Bachelor degree (Honours)
 Post Graduate Certificate
 Post Graduate Diploma
 Coursework Masters
 Research Masters

Other (please specify)

6. When did you complete this qualification?

- Less than 12 months ago 4-6 years ago Over 10 years ago
 1-3 years ago 7-10 years ago

7. Which is your primary College for administration purposes?

- College of Public Health, Medicine and Veterinary Sciences College of Business, Law and Governance College of Science, Technology and Engineering
 College of Healthcare Services College of Arts, Society and Education
 College of Medicine and Dentistry College of Marine and Environmental Sciences

8. Are you enrolled full time or part time?

- Full time Part time

9. Are you primarily an external/off campus student?

- Yes No

10. At what stage of your candidature are you?

- Early stage - prior to confirmation seminar Final year - prior to pre-completion seminar
 Mid candidature - research phase Final stages/final submission

11. Which of the following categories best describes your employment status in addition to your research commitments?

- Employed, full-time Research scholarship
 Employed, part-time Research only
 Employed, casual Volunteer

Other (please specify)

12. Describe your experience of the administrative support for your candidature at JCU

Enrollment process

Structure of the doctorate/milestones

Candidate Management

Communication

GRS support

College/school based support

Other comments or recommendations

13. Describe your experience of JCU institutional supports - as applicable

Resources and facilities

Infrastructure

Library services/resources

Skill development

Professional development

Social support

Financial support

Fieldwork/travel/lab support

Supervisor support

International student support

External student support

Other comments or recommendations

14. Describe your advisory/supervisory experience at JCU

Access/regular meetings

Timely feedback

Support

Other comments or recommendations

15. How have your goals and expectations of your doctorate experience compared to the reality at JCU?

16. Any general suggestions to improve JCU doctoral experience?

College

GRS

JCU

Other comments or recommendations