

Attachment 2:

JCU Doctoral Experience Report

2018

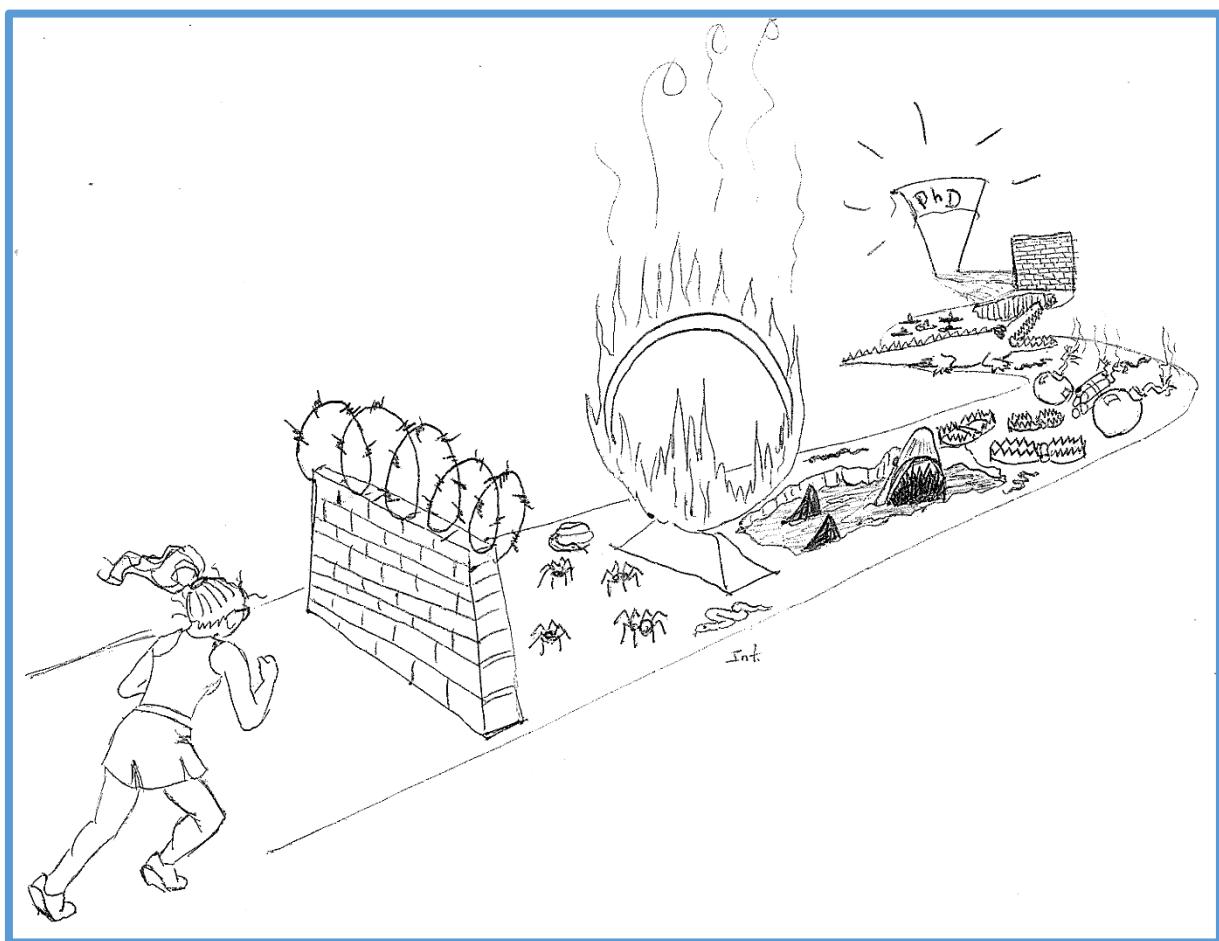


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The PhD Candidate Experience



Inti Aedo 2017

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Executive Summary

This research report presents the experiences of current doctoral candidates at James Cook University (JCU). The findings are based on qualitative research conducted in November and December 2017. Themes remain consistent with prior iterations of the biennial JCU Doctoral Experience report conducted on behalf of the Graduate Research School (GRS). Key aspects include JCU administrative support and processes, institutional resources and support, the supervisory experience, and the overall candidature experience.

Based on the student feedback provided, the cohort initiative continues to provide the most positive all round experience for HDR candidates, delivering regular organised and discipline relevant skills development, a structured mentoring process, good research infrastructure and a social support mechanism for all participants. College based labs or writing retreats reportedly achieve similar “best practice” outcomes however are often less inclusive, based around smaller groups with a common supervisor and/or similar research projects. In recent years, the feasibility of some of these less formalised initiatives has been challenged by financial constraints.

International reputation, tropical research advantage, location, and supervisory expertise prevail as the key positive characteristics of JCU. Further valuable elements include the dedicated research stations, access to specialised facilities and equipment, and recognition of the strong research community with partnerships/links with industry and government. For respondents, the library services, resources and particularly library staff, were the most appreciated form of institutional support.

Consistent with some of the trends identified in recent Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ) reports, this research indicated a general decline in overall HDR student satisfaction at JCU compared with past surveys. While the supervisory experience remained relatively positive and stable, almost every other facet discussed revealed increased student dissatisfaction or issues. Core concerns relate to a distinct lack of financial support/funding, the impacts of continued university restructuring and staff redundancies, and tenuous career prospects for graduates. Growing frustration with institutional supports underlined a common complaint that the university is increasingly managed as a business rather than a research or education centre.

While bureaucratic policies and paperwork requirements are continued complaints for HDR candidates, satisfaction with administrative communication has improved. Key recommendations focus on streamlining processes, greater flexibility in candidate management and improved mentoring and training support (for staff and students).

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 study aimed at providing more detailed understandings and feedback about the experiences of current JCU doctoral candidates.

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 research design of prior JCU doctoral experience surveys, the focus group component 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.

Comparison with previous research

While the university has continued to restructure since the last Doctoral Experience report, the most significant change has been the amalgamation of the former College of Science and Technology and the College of Marine and Environmental Sciences into the new College of Science and Engineering (refer Appendix 1 for current structure). This primarily had administrative implications at the College level, but was accompanied by a number of university wide staff redundancies. Survey respondents were particularly disparaging of these redundancies, which were seen to have had negative consequences on all staff workloads and supervision capacity. The impacts were even more significant when one or more of a student's direct supervisors were made redundant. This remained a continued source of complaint in all sections analysed.

Direct participation in the focus groups for this research was significantly lower than 2 years ago, although consistent with early reports conducted in 2012 and 2014. With the online survey option, overall respondent numbers increased with participation rates up 0.4% to 12%. Comparison with previous demographic characteristics reveals that almost 70% of respondents had completed prior research degrees, and that the majority were in the later stages of their candidature. Student profiles were otherwise similar to 2016.

Recent PREQ research about JCU highlighted issues of a decline in the intellectual climate at several Colleges, and a growing dissatisfaction with skills development and overall goals and expectations for doctoral candidates. This was also evident in this research. In direct contrast to the previous qualitative Doctoral Experience survey in 2016 however, participation rates from the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence were significantly lower (21% vs 4.5%) with predominantly positive responses/comments, this suggests there has been improvement in candidate management and satisfaction within the Centre. Colleges that offered the cohort program were generally perceived more favourably than the other Colleges.

While students were generally unfamiliar with the phrase “intellectual climate”, issues of unhealthy competition between candidates, stress, isolation and mental health remained evident. Emergent concerns included a perceived lack of respect for the knowledge and contributions of HDR candidates, and a culture of sexual harassment/discrimination and bullying. Issues of access, resources and support were again more apparent amongst off campus/external and international students.

Skills development, professional development and career prospects appeared to be interrelated issues. Less than half the students surveyed expressed satisfaction with the current options and processes. Mandatory personal development requirements were considered too generic, too science based, and lacking the flexibility to recognise prior learning (RPL) or relevant workshop/seminars undertaken external to the university. Management and maintenance of formal records for completed requirements/milestones was also considered less than ideal. While students provided an extensive list of recommendations for desired or preferred professional and skills development options, there was a clear demand for better differentiation and diversification between skills aimed at an academic/research career vs more practical industry/government based applications of knowledge.

In terms of goals and expectations most respondents appreciated the opportunity provided by their supervisors and JCU, but were disappointed by the decline in institutional, research and support services available. Few had anticipated the financial/resource constraints, competing demands on their supervisor's time and the extensive paperwork/candidate requirements. Worryingly, a reasonable number indicated that given their experience and difficulties faced as a candidate at JCU they would not recommend the institution to others interested in pursuing a PhD.

Administrative issues identified in previous research remains a source of HDR candidate dissatisfaction. Students describe the paperwork and processes as excessive, cumbersome, pointless, problematic and in some cases prohibitive. Most complaints related to travel, purchasing and fieldwork requirements, although candidate milestones, insurance and ethics procedures were also identified. Communication between the students and all other relevant stakeholders reflected greater approval rates than the previous survey, although recommended improvements were still noted. Most candidates were either highly complementary or content with their overall supervisor experience yet observed that increasing supervisor workloads impacted availability for meetings and extended turnover times for receiving feedback.

Additional topics that were specifically explored in this research were the proposed introduction of fees for an extension of HDR candidature, student perceptions of the open plan PhD student offices (where applicable) and an investigation of any correlation between supervisor satisfaction and regularity of student/supervisor meetings.

The proposed introduction of a fee for an extension of candidature beyond the 3.5 years "full time equivalent", was met with unilateral concern from respondents. Current students indicated that in most cases extensions were required for circumstances that were beyond the students' direct control such as loss of a supervisor, modification of the original research proposal due to limited facilities/equipment or funding, delayed supervisor feedback on submissions, excessive paperwork requirements and/or unexpected financial and personal challenges. It was proposed that if a fee was going to be introduced that it should be carefully applied on a case-by-case basis aimed at recalcitrant students only. A number of students indicated that if they were required by JCU to pay a fee to continue or submit their thesis they would look to enrol and submit at an alternative university without such charges. An alternative proposal was that JCU should try to incentivise students to complete on time rather than penalise those that don't.

There were mixed reviews from students in regards to the current open plan PhD offices. A number of students believed that the mixed environment facilitated collegiality, interdisciplinary research appreciation and social support networks. More students felt that the open plan environment was noisy, disruptive and not conducive to research. Some of these students have since opted to study from home rather than utilise the allocated office space. Associated logistical/practical issues included limited desk or physical storage space, limited privacy options to conduct research related interviews or verbal communication (in-person, skype or telephone), security concerns and a perceived exclusion of some students due to space availability.

Apparent patterns regarding student supervision satisfaction found in the most recent PREQ report were not evidenced in this research. The data and comments provided show no direct correlation between satisfaction levels and the regularity of student/supervisor meetings. While the frequency of scheduled meetings was highly variable amongst respondents, the primary determinant of satisfaction appeared to be the degree of direct/responsive communication with the supervisor/s and mutually negotiated access. Many students preferred the flexibility to be able to adjust the frequency of meetings depending on the stage of their research and candidature. Dissatisfaction was most evident where students felt the supervisor had been poorly trained/qualified, where supervisors were unresponsive to emails or requests for feedback, or there were clear conflicts in personalities and/or research ideas and approaches.

Methodology

To ensure consistency and relevance for benchmarking against prior JCU Doctoral Experience Reports, this research replicated the previously established qualitative research methodology. In addition to the proposed questions and themes, students were again invited to provide basic demographic data to establish an overall profile of participants and determine the extent that they are representative of the doctoral candidate student body. Such data also provides the opportunity to investigate if there are 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 the GRS 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 the GRS email database, invitations were sent directly from the researcher to students in each College, with further reminders and email support solicited from College administration and the respective College Associate Deans of Research Education (ADREs). 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 and/or College administration. Students were not individually identified to the researcher and asked where possible to avoid using names of any individual participant or staff (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 rational 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 positive change rather than to highlight disputes or personal vendettas.

Focus group participants were additionally provided with a complete paper based version of the online survey instrument developed (see Appendix 2) and asked to identify, at a minimum, their demographic details. As focus groups varied in size from 3 – 14 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 candidates, an online survey was developed for external students based around previously established issues and themes (designed and delivered via the Survey Monkey software platform – refer Appendix 2). Any student that indicated interest in the research project but who was unable to attend one of the scheduled

focus group sessions was sent an additional email invitation with a link to the online survey. An open invitation to the online survey was further provided via the JCU Research Students and JCU Graduate Research School Facebook pages. Online surveys were anonymous, however students were also provided the option of a telephone/skype interview. The online survey response period was open from 27 November – December 31st 2017.

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. Mental health support and social isolation continued to be pervasive issues with additional concerns regarding sexual harassment/discrimination and bullying. 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. Email invitations were based on the most recent GRS HDR database list available (November 2017). There was a high incidence of email responses indicating that students were either conducting fieldwork, attending conferences/workshops or unavailable to directly reply to emails.

Even more limiting to overall response rates was the established 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 email reminders and a dual approach from both the College staff and researcher was intended to increase awareness of the project, many students may have remained unaware of this opportunity. Further notification of the research project was provided via social media (Facebook) in attempt to increase exposure and participation.

Consistent with previous iterations the focus groups were conducted during the month of November with the online survey 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 negative bias in results.

As per the participant profile provided in Table 1, participation rates and inclusion were similar to previous reports. Unfortunately the focus groups were unable to include students enrolled through the Singapore campus however these candidates would have been offered access to the online survey.

Participant Profile

Figures provided by the GRS indicate that in November 2017 there were 767 enrolled research students (824 students listed - 13 students had withdrawn - WD, 43 students on leave of absence – LOA and one was noted as a PASS). As the research project was intended to encompass all aspects and stages of the Doctoral Candidate experience at JCU this total included 25 students undertaking a Professional Doctorate and 51 students which were recorded as “under examination”. The majority of these students were enrolled through the Townsville campus (530) with just over 26% enrolled at the Cairns campus (198) and 5 students on the Singapore campus. Reflecting the diversity of JCU Doctoral opportunities, just under 39% (297) of the enrolled doctoral candidates were international students.

With a total of 92 students either attending a focus group or completing the online survey for this research project, the participation rate was 12% (refer to Table 1). This rate is consistent with the previous iteration of the JCU Doctoral Experience report, however there was a marked decrease in the number of students that attended one of the scheduled focus groups. Several sessions were cancelled In Townsville due to negligible response. Thirty-seven students attended one of the focus

group sessions offered (23 in Townsville and 14 in Cairns). Of these students 36 further completed the paper-based survey for the project providing, at a minimum, basic demographic details. An additional 56 participants completed the online version of the survey only.

Participation rates varied slightly across the campuses – primarily due to the cancellation of scheduled focus group sessions in Townsville (refer to Table 1). Individual College representation ranged from 4.5% - 17%. In contrast to the previous survey, The Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence had the lowest participation rate of 4.5% (down from 21%). Participation from College of Science and Engineering, College of Arts, Society and Education, College of Healthcare Sciences, College of Business, Law and Governance each exceeded 10%. Only one student that attended the combined Colleges focus group in Cairns did not complete the paper-based survey to provide basic participant information. Refer to College Feedback Section for specific rates and issues/comments.

Table 1 : Participants by Research Mode and College

Primary College (total enrolled)	Focus Groups Townsville	Focus Group Cairns	Online Survey	Total Respondents
College of Medicine and Dentistry (59)	-	-	3	3 (5%)
College of Public Health, Medical and Veterinary Sciences (124)	3	1	7	11 (9%)
*College of Science and Engineering (267)	14	5	16	35 (13%)
College of Arts, Society and Education (150)	5	6	15	26 (17%)
College of Healthcare Sciences (52)	-	1	4	5 (10%)
College of Business, Law and Governance (69)	1	-	9	10 (14.5%)
ARC – COE (46)	-	-	2	2 (4.5%)
Not identified	-	1		
Total (767)	23	14	56	93 (12%)

* The College of Science and Technology and College of Marine and Environmental Sciences amalgamated in 2017 to become the College of Science and Engineering

Of the 92 survey respondents (paper based or online) the students were predominantly female (62%), domestic students (61%) younger than 35 (53%), mid to final year candidature (74%) with either a Bachelor (Honours) degree (35%) or Research Masters (34%) as their highest qualification prior to commencing their Doctoral candidature at JCU. While one student indicated they completed their previous qualification less than 12 months ago, 18.5% of the respondents had completed their highest academic qualification over 10 years ago. Through these surveys, 28.5% of students identified as external/off campus. 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

JCU international reputation and tropical advantage continue to be major drawcards for potential doctoral candidates. Within this context there are a large number of recognised, leading experts/advisors in their fields which attract students specifically to this university. Such recognised research capacity is further strengthened by the established industry and government partnerships and networks, visiting lecturers and access to external experts. Marine biology, tropical ecosystems and tropical health were seen as particular research strengths.

Individual students highlighted the value and opportunity to undertake research within the tropics with specialist research stations (eg canopy crane and Orpheus Island), the diversity of lab equipment and access to relevant resources. Relative access to the Great Barrier Reef, tropical rainforest/Wet Tropics, mangrove wetlands, dry tropics, the outback and the diversity of social, flora and fauna communities were considered unique research experiences offered by the university campuses in Australia. External/off campus students were more likely to be drawn by specific supervisors and/or specialist expertise. A small number of students indicated that they chose JCU primarily because a supervisor offered or they were successful in securing a scholarship through JCU.

For other candidates locality was a prime determinant in their choice to attend JCU. This may be a simple matter of convenience as the person lived locally, or had already completed previous studies at JCU. Similarly there were cases of relative proximity, reputation as the biggest university in North Queensland, or the advantage of bi-lateral/interchange agreements between overseas universities. Climate, comparative cost of living, liveability, the natural campus environment, and the small community feel were positive attributes – particularly for those attending the Cairns campus. Both

Cairns and Townsville were perceived as gateway locations for accessing the reef, rainforest, the tropical environment and outback locations, either as visitor or researcher.

As doctoral candidates at JCU, key positive factors include supervisor knowledge and support, the social and induction aspects of the SKIP program for international students, some of the professional development courses (particularly with Liz Tynan) and the great library facilities and staff. The cohort program was consistently held in high regard for those students that were able to participate and engage. Writing retreats and some lab groups were seen as similarly supportive programs for training, development, socialising, peer and mentor support. Such programs were not available/accessible for all students.

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)

Administrative support for HDR students is generally provided at both the GRS and College level, although respondents felt that their supervisors also have a responsibility in the management and distribution of relevant information. With the GRS coordinating, prescribing and overseeing the student candidature from enrolment through to completion, the majority of comments related to their role and function. Although satisfaction with communication procedures had significantly improved since the last survey there was more criticism of the enrolment process, the structure of the doctorate/milestones and candidate management. The paperwork/bureaucracy and perceived lack of flexibility and confusion around changing requirements were common complaints.

Enrolment process

Students conveyed variable opinions regarding the enrolment process with the majority (62%) describing a positive experience, acknowledging the support of the GRS admin, the international office and supervisors in facilitating this process.

"Adequate help provided when needed. Relatively painless process."

"My supervisors were very helpful in ensuring I undertook all of the necessary steps and when I did interact with the paperwork/administrative staff the process was satisfactory."

"Good. Helpful and timely feedback and direction from GRS."

Key criticism from some students related to a long “convoluted” and confusing process, the extent of paperwork required, identifying an appropriate point of contact when there were issues, and extensive delays experienced in processing individual applications. Cross referencing details from the online survey data indicates that such issues were more evident with international students.

"Complicated due to poor recognition of external non-Australian degrees"

"Online application software did not work..."

"Difficult to navigate the paperwork process for enrolment, it can be tough to tell who to contact for issues"

"Confusing. I interacted with many different administrative staff from overseas prior to arrival at JCU. It was not clear to me who was responsible for what and so my questions often were forwarded to several people for answers about routine concerns such as: do I have a scholarship and for how long?"

"Chaotic - they lost the paperwork for months"

"The JCU application forms to get the admission and scholarship is the longest in the world :) I say it because I have applied for different parts of the world and the other universities in Australia. Didn't see such long forms like JCU's before. JCU loses some top students because of this matter while it can just easily fix it"

Associated with the enrolment process was a degree of uncertainty about the way research funding and scholarships were allocated. Students provided a range of anecdotal stories about both successful and unsuccessful applicants.

"It was all fairly straightforward, but in order to maximize chances of receiving a scholarship, the preliminary proposal had to be structured in a specific way with the -intent- to modify it the moment a scholarship was received. This was primarily due to the points-based system in Australia and the weighting applied to experienced supervisors for research candidates. All applicants I have spoken to played the same games, even across different universities, to the point where -not- to "lie" in some fashion for the purposes of a scholarship can hamstring your chances of receiving one. The current system could use a lot of revisions around the current points-based scholarship selection."

Structure of the doctorate milestones

While generally positive (53%), comments and feedback on the doctorate milestones revealed a higher degree of neutrality or acceptance than other administrative issues. Most students agreed with the need for a structure to be imposed, however felt there should be a greater extent of flexibility and understanding of individual circumstances with less paperwork/reporting expectations. External/off campus students found the process more difficult.

"Should consider HDR's needs & education background eg. International students from developing countries"

"Well managed, achievable, however there is far too much pressure to meet them."

"It is a little bit complicated and difficult when I am primarily external, due to the fact that all of the training that I need to do is on campus"

"Average since I am an external student, it would be better if we get to participate more often in discussion and focus groups."

Some students found it very easy to locate current information on the Doctoral expectations and milestones, while others expressed confusion and frustration - particularly in regards to changes that may have occurred during their candidature. At least one student in the focus groups admitted to using these changes and associated uncertainty to their benefit so as to avoid meeting a number of mandatory requirements.

"There are guides advising what they are that are easily obtainable through the website"

"Transparency - re paperwork, information, processes, if you change something tell students etc. - Expectation of completion - Publication or Thesis"

"The process is confusing, I haven't received reminders of the process since I started and I am too busy with my research to look into it"

"DTHM Cohort program provided a clear overview of candidature"

Specific reporting and mandatory components were frequently described as time consuming and frustrating in creating unnecessary stress and paperwork with no real research benefit.

"No problem with milestones, however the 6 monthly reviews are sometimes not very useful i.e. too close together"

"Confirmation too involved, polishing documents that will never be published wastes time"

"Mid-candidature review and the mandatory components for it are a complete waste of time"

"GRS micromanagement... 6 monthly progress reports, Confirmation of Candidature (isn't this established when you are admitted as a PhD student???), Mid-candidature, and the list goes on. Treat your PhD students as adults, not as children. Stop helicopter-parenting your PhD's. You don't even read our progress reports; it is just another box checked for GRS management. We have an advisor(s) to

keep track of our progress! Excessive and unnecessary administrative work....one thing JCU is really good at!"

Candidate Management

Candidate management was considered the least constructive aspect of administrative support (less than 50% satisfaction). Positive comments generally acknowledged the facilitating role of individual supervisors. Consistently, changes in supervisory panels was shown to be a significant issue that created delays and often frustration.

"The overall process has been simple and have had fantastic supervisors"

"Some issues with supervision continuity, but has been managed"

"Well organised, strong induction process and reasonable PD courses, apart from just one (NVivo)"

"Unsure if this is supervisors, or GRS. If GRS, not a lot of follow up besides 'generic' emails."

Colleges appear to provide different amounts of administrative support and follow up for individual candidate management.

"I have received timely reminders to complete the various processes associated with my studies. Usually the administrative staff also send an acknowledgement of receipt even without me requesting that"

"Some confusion at times with what is appropriate and where to go to for help with certain things."

Several students indicated that they felt they have been entirely responsible for self-managing their candidature with limited support and/or assistance.

"To be honest, I personally have not used any of the candidate management tools available to me at JCU, this probably made my life a little bit harder overall, but I found that my energy was better put into working towards my degree than ancillary stuff with the online resources"

Communication

Overall communication processes and support for doctoral candidates was considered reasonable (60% positive) by most of the students surveyed. Communication and exchange of information between the GRS and individual supervisors, or student and supervisor, was notably less favourable.

"Good, though it's a lot of information through the website that could be better structured"

"Awful - huge disconnect between GRS requirements & academic staff"

"Difficult to get regular communication from supervisors"

Despite an improvement in student satisfaction regarding formal communication processes, there were two clearly disparate positions in regards to the receipt of information and emails. A large

number of students complained of email fatigue, receiving excessive communication daily on issues that were not relevant. Consequently, most emails that were not from their supervisor were ignored or deleted unread.

“I receive all of the JCU HDR/GRS emails, SMS notifications, etc.”

“Numerous emails, but most not relevant to my current situation.”

In contrast, other students felt they were regularly excluded from important or relevant information, particularly if they weren't on the “the right” mailing lists.

“PhD students are rarely involved in any communication”

“I often do not receive emails destined for the staff but that should be relevant for me. e.g. power outage”

“Very poor. Students are often completely out of the loop with a lot of policy changes, especially during university restructures. There are way too many emails every day to get across everything.”

GRS support

Students were relatively happy with the level of support and assistance provided by the GRS (61%).

Key criticisms primarily related to issues with access to information, forms, websites and paperwork.

“Great people working in both the college team and in GRS, makes it a really great experience Liz Tynan is amazing and so is the whole GRS team.”

“Fantastic. Love the recent initiative of holding monthly morning tea for all colleges' candidates - brings collegiality and cross-disciplinarity”

“The GRS is really helpful when contacted directly via email or in their office. It is hard to find information on their website though.”

“Has changed every year (particularly) paper work”

“GRS micromanages PhD students far too much. It creates unnecessary paperwork and work load. You want us to finish within the 3-3.5 year mark. Let us do our work and bother the people who lag behind and actually need it. I personally feel you make everybody do it because it is easier, and you don't have to address/evaluate PhD's on an individual basis.”

On a more practical planning/logistics level one student commented on the poor accessibility of the Townsville GRS office, while a significant number of Cairns students indicated they had no idea where the Cairns GRS office was located. Consequently most Cairns students had minimal interactions with local GRS staff.

“The engineering building where GRS is situated is extremely inaccessible in a wheelchair”

“I am based in Cairns so most support is in Townsville. Cannot imagine how hard it is for students who are not even close to either campus.”

College based support

Specific College comments are available in the College Discussion section on pg. 35

Based on the feedback provided, most Colleges provide good support to HDR students with a number of administrative staff members individually named for going “above and beyond” to assist. Negative experiences seem to be associated more with the individual student rather than any specific College.

“Excellent - could not have asked for more. Very understanding and supportive in every step of the way”

“Excellent - our HDR support team are fantastic!”

“Terrible. Moved from campuses as it was so poor.”

“Doesn't provide information unless I ask, so there are a lot of things that I don't know that I'm supposed to know”

The three main College support issues raised related to identifying relevant staff members, currency of information provided and financial/research support opportunities available.

“Was and am still unsure as to the hierarchy and structure and who to talk to about certain things”.

“Generally good, but a lack of knowledge on shifting processes is evident”

“The staff are kind and helpful, no doubt in that, but the financial support of the college is the biggest challenge. Not many funds, grants, projects, or tutoring to involve in as a PhD student”

Table 2: Administrative Support Feedback*

	Positive	Key Observations	Negative	Key Observations
Enrolment Process	62%	Excellent No issues Very efficient Straightforward Simple Positive	24.5%	Complicated Slow Confusing Too much paperwork Delayed Bewildering
Structure of the doctorate/milestones	53%	Reasonable Transparent Good structure Appropriate Logical	18%	Unclear Poor Disconnected Not enforced Challenging Uncertainty Excessive paperwork/reporting
Candidate Management	49%	Good Professional Supported	24.5%	Sporadic Self-managed Too rigid Non-existent
Communication	60%	Good Free flowing Supportive	17%	Poor Disconnect between GRS/supervisors Not relevant Excessive Impersonal
GRS support	61%	Excellent Supportive Helpful Fantastic	18%	Understaffed Disappointing Minimal Repetitive forms
College based support	61%	Good Excellent Brilliant Helpful	14%	Limited Poor Terrible

*Missing percentage values reflect neutral statements or no direct response recorded in surveys. Coloured shading represents a greater than +/- 5% variation on the previous survey results – green indicates an overall improvement in satisfaction rates while red indicates a decline

"JCU facilitated every aspect of this process for me as an Australian off-campus student. This experience was transformational and something that would not have been possible without JCU"

"I think the bureaucratic processes at the university ruined it for me. It was too difficult to get anything done there. Although the staff are great, the processes are horrendous."

"Every bureaucratic process I have encountered in JCU is convoluted and confusing. This has taken many unnecessary hours of work to negotiate. I am enabled by my academic supervisors; disabled by JCU bureaucracy (which is inefficient); and alienated by being off-campus with inaccessible professional development. I am an experienced facilitator and user of online learning and am appalled at how inept JCU staff are in this area."

Institutional support

(refer Table 3)

Covering a broad range of university infrastructure, resources, professional development options and support services, “institutional support” was more topical in this survey than it had been previously. With increased participant response levels there also appeared to be a higher level of negativity related to a perceived decline in opportunities and associated candidate management. The students’ primary observation was that there needed to be a greater value, emphasis and prioritisation of the research and learning environment at the university, reflected in better equipment/facilities, increased specialised skill and professional development opportunities, more expert academic staff and adequate funding. The only facets to receive a greater than 50% satisfaction rating were the library staff/services and supervisor support (the latter had also declined since the previous iteration of this survey).

Resources and facilities

Candidates experience with resources and facilities was highly variable depending on research type, College and location. With the exception of the general feedback provided about the open plan PhD shared offices, positive or negative comments tended to relate more to an individual’s personal and research requirements.

“Not an issue, provided with exceptional resources and facilities to complete my thesis. My office space is enough and comfortable to help me keeping up the good work on the PhD”

“Facilities are pretty poor, any equipment I needed was always a huge challenge to get and I often just went without.”

“Variable - PhD office space generally very poor”

“Fair. I was actually asked by my supervisor not to come work on campus because she perceives PhD working facilities in Cairns as so bad she thinks they are detrimental to getting on with the PhD”

Unsurprisingly external/off campus students felt that they had limited access to the resources and opportunities available to on campus candidates.

“When on campus good off-campus bad”

“N/A off-campus - I rarely experience campus resources & facilities”

“Utilised external facilities and equipment”

Technical and security support services were specific elements that were raised in this section.

"There is an inherent issue with technology support and services on campus. I understand that IT maintenance is necessary, however they always do this on the weekend with limited - if any - notification. Sometimes the computers are shutdown or updated without warning. I sometimes have to leave my computer running for processing and this has caused huge losses of data and time. "

"Security really needed to assist me to feel more supported when on campus. I often was data collecting with participants very early in the morning (before sunrise) and at times requested that security would come when my participant arrived. Security would not often arrive when asked, making me feel unsafe."

Infrastructure

For students that commented on infrastructure, it was generally considered appropriate or adequate (>50% neutral or no response). A number of students praised the excellent lab and office facilities they had access to, particularly the Cairns Institute.

"Excellent - I came back to Cairns to study my PhD at a smaller university for the contact"

"I'm happy with the infrastructure at JCU."

There were however certain infrastructure issues that were identified for improvement.

"Better accessibility by bus or bike would be good (Cairns campus)"

"Need more public toilets"

"Poor facilities. Especially in the chemical sciences."

"Average, difficult to get infrastructure problems fixed in a timely manner"

"Infrastructure is not too bad, I rely on a wheelchair for community access and I find some places are difficult to get to, however I do feel JCU is very responsive to requests and support if necessary"

Postgrad rooms were again indicated in this section as problematic for some students.

"Offices provided; however open plan, for most, is not conducive to research activities. No real privacy."

"All good but the postgrad centre"

Library services/resources

Library services and resources continued to provide the highest level of positive comments with the HDR students surveyed. In particular, library staff were complimented as friendly, supportive and extremely helpful.

"Excellent, I make regular use of online library services on and off campus and library staff are very helpful"

"The Mabo Library is an enormously important part of JCU. Awesome resource. However, the university needs to invest a great deal more into the Special Collections and the facilities for researchers in those archives. The Library staff are brilliant."

"Generally the library provides excellent workshops to support HDR students"

"Very good, although cut-backs of staff have had an impact"

The small number of concerns or negative comments raised relate primarily to the availability of specific resources (journals, articles, databasesrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr and/or books) and the logistics/costs of interlibrary access and borrowing.

"Good online access to journals and e-resources, good loan service (posting books out to me), getting copies of harder to get journal articles from other libraries - cost is prohibitive"

"It's a pain having to order books from Townsville"

"Fine, but a notable lack of resources in my particular research area and limited access to those journals overseas that focus on my area"

Skills development

Consistent with the trend identified in the PREQ survey there was a general sense of discontent with the current skill development training and opportunities available. A significant number of candidates felt that the formal program/offerings were too generic or too focused on skills relevant to the "sciences".

"Development opportunities are generic and not specifically helpful"

"Mostly applicable to science and not humanities/social sciences"

"This is an utter and complete joke! This so-called 'skill development' adds nothing to my skill development required to complete my PhD. Instead, offer seminars or workshops that are relevant and department specific. Seriously.... how to write an abstract, present a poster at a conference, SKIP, conflict management??? It is simply offensive that these sort of workshops are offered and seen as skill developing curricula. This belongs in High school level education, not at a PhD higher education level. Skill development needs to be geared towards a PhD's project and the skills desired/required to perform specific analyses, supporting the PhD towards completing his/her degree. Get rid of it!"

"I feel like a lot of the skill development workshops didn't hold much relevance to me. This is partly because this isn't my first thesis - I've done academic writing, statistics, and so forth so attending the workshops on those topics would really only have the benefit of increasing my professional development hours. I didn't get very much out of the welcome sessions either. The best skill development I've had is through an external project I did with a research organisation, which luckily has counted towards my hours for my mid-candidature review."

The minimum mandatory skill development requirement was considered both inflexible and restrictive for many students. These respondents generally felt that there should be a case by case assessment of candidates, recognising existing skills and capabilities (recognition of prior learning –

RPL). Consistently there was a plea for greater recognition/credit for professional development workshops or courses that were completed external to JCU. External/off campus students indicated additional difficulties in this area in regards to accessing available online modules, and the timetabling, technical issues and recording quality of remote access sessions.

"The skills development is good, but in some ways restrictive. Not everyone requires/ misses the same skills, but everyone is forced to do the same seminars (too some extent). I got the most out of seminars that I chose according to my skill set, but that required additional time since it did not excuse me from many of the required seminars"

"Training for HDRs is problematic - mature students with extensive external experience do not have skills recognised"

"The compulsory skill development program (GRS seminars, etc.) was often not relevant to my work or skills. For example, I had to take the SKIP program when I have excellent English communication skills while other students were struggling with their grammar. Native English speakers (e.g. American) also had to take the SKIP program which made little sense."

For this section students further provided a long and extensive list of courses/skills they felt would be valuable to their own research and development.

"We need more technical training. How to do things, not just science communication but processes software, approaches, modelling etc."

"Can GRS provide the workshop on NVivo and/or on a questionnaire/instrument development? The current available NVivo workshop (introduction to NVivo) is very basic"

"Assistance with grant applications - step by step process - Practical assistance not theoretical"

"Good. Would be good if there was a place or person to go to find specific skill development that is not available at JCU due to resourcing etc"

"Power point workshops needed... more writing for publishing workshops needed...more research analysis methods"

"Increase training for all students in social media - improve research visibility and exposure"

Professional development

Similar to skills development candidates felt that professional development should be more tailored to individual knowledge, experience and research requirements. Supervisors were also credited with providing substantial support in terms of both advice and funding to pursue relevant opportunities.

"Need to determine what is 'appropriate professional development' for a post-career student (which should not be the same for a young student!)"

"Need to look at the personal history of the candidate; some, who have actual real world experience, should not be subjected to 'online' eportfolios, as an example."

"The best other professional development I received was the advice of my supervisors to attend and present at major conferences."

"Maybe just send out regular surveys to PhD candidates to ascertain what PD support we need and try to arrange specialised courses at least once a year, this will be a great support."

While candidates were trying to remain optimistic about career prospects in an increasingly competitive environment, it was suggested that the formal professional development offerings could be more diverse to reflect the variety of prospective employment opportunities.

I know that roughly 60% percent or more of PhD students do not end up in academia. But there are still some of us that want to try and hopefully will end up there, and I found that a lot of the career development seminars at JCU are focused solely around a career outside of academia. I understand that the justification is that this is not the traditional path i.e. people might have less information on this path, but I am sure things have changed within academia too in the last 20+ years meaning that our supervisors are not necessarily the right people to give us the newest information about how to make your career work in this aspect. Maybe career advice should be split into separate events, one for people that want to stay inside academia and one for people that want to work outside academia. I always felt very discouraged at these events because I felt the only advice about careers inside academia that I received was that I probably won't make it.

Social support

Less than a third of the respondents surveyed were satisfied with the level of social support provided to HDR candidates. In most cases students indicated that they were unaware of any social programs or initiatives, that support was non-existent, or simply not accessible. International students still valued and benefited from both the formal and informal activities offered by the international student centre. Some Colleges within the university were more proactive, particularly where the cohort program, lab groups or writing retreats were offered. Other students felt that the social atmosphere was isolating, overwhelmingly competitive, and in some cases bordering on hostile between some individuals.

"Isolating experience... need more opportunities to meet others"

"A really supportive post grad student culture in the college (CASE), all attending one another's Confirmation seminars and supporting one another. Need to extend this to the whole university, not just keep it siloed within each college but rather across all the colleges. It will enable all students be aware of research undertaken by other colleges and students of other disciplines."

"There's not a lot of social support. I'd like to see more social events organised for HDR students, perhaps around the welcome sessions would be a good place to start."

"The DTHM cohort program provided exceptional social support to discuss concerns and to celebrate successes."

Mental health support

Although there was no specific question on the survey provided, mental health support and issues were again raised organically through the survey feedback and focus group comments. Closely associated with the perceived level of social support available/offered, most students were cognisant that monitoring personal and individual mental health was vital throughout the candidature. Reflecting diverse experiences in this regard there were a number of common sentiments expressed, particularly regarding access, resourcing, recognition of issues and pressure.

“Mental services in the library are good, but I find it hard to make appointments. An online system where you can log in and book an appointment time would be very useful”

“Need more psychological support & counselling. Many students struggle psychologically with no support.”

“The formal PhD process and expectations does not adequately allow/cater to different life stages”

“Mental health support is an issue. There is still a huge stigma associated with admitting you are feeling the pressure and/or struggling to cope. Numerous students are on the verge of breakdown due to an unspoken rule or culture of not discussing personal problems.”

“There is so much pressure to finish the PhD on time and while all students probably feel this, there isn’t a supportive environment. Students are actively encouraged to be stoic and deal with it all themselves rather than pursue the options available. I know of students that have just simply stopped attending, dropped out and disappeared. There is limited awareness and training to support and sometimes it feels that the PhD experience is just a production and that we are meat cows for slaughter”

Financial support

Scholarship recipients (40% of those surveyed) were generally grateful for the support and opportunities this enabled, although many also felt that the scholarship was not sufficient to cover the general cost of living. Five percent of respondents indicated they were self-sufficient for their PhD without a scholarship, employment, or supplementary financial support. Irrespective of individual financial position, there was an overwhelming sense of concern for respondents in regards to available financial resources and funding throughout the university. Most felt that they were operating in an environment of scarcity. Depending on the research and/or supervisor some had the benefit of external project funds, however most relied on internal College funding opportunities and/or teaching assistance. Respondents felt that both grants and teaching opportunities had become more competitive and restrictive. The almost prohibitive fee/cost of publishing in open access journals relevant to some disciplines was an additional issue identified.

“More competitive grants on attending/presenting at conferences, please”

"Limited project, publication and conference funding. It's ridiculous the amount of hurdles I had to jump through to be able to publish my work. As a metric the university uses to measure research output you should make it easier for students to publish. I had to pay for my own thesis copy editing because the college couldn't get their act together..."

"Create teaching or research assistant positions for PhD students to both improve their career options, inclusion with the college, and provide more financial security."

When discussing finance, students raised the issue of student association fees and student research support accounts. In both contexts there seemed to be some confusion for students about where to access reliable information, or transparency regarding the information provided. There appeared to be no consistency across the Colleges in regards to how student support accounts were set up and how much funding students were eligible to receive each year. Consistently, many students did not know whether they were liable for student association fees or if this had been waived. External students questioned the need to pay such fees when they felt they do not benefit from any of the infrastructure or services. More than one student only became aware of the student association fees when advised in an email about an outstanding balance.

"I had to be proactive to set up my SSA account, and did so only partway through my candidature after chasing with relevant parties for info - it would be good to have more up front information regarding this."

"The process was not transparent for finding out information about the student association fees. The fees are not up front and I assumed that they could be nominated to HECS. No one discussed this with me – it was just assumed I knew and I really feel this fee is of no benefit to me"

Fieldwork/travel/lab support

Consistent with previous years there was significant feedback in regards to the processes and paperwork required for fieldwork, travel and procurement. Less than 25% of students were satisfied with the current system, indicating issues regarding the complexity, the excessive paperwork, and the time it takes to complete the necessary forms. Even when students had completed the relevant training sessions they complained that the procedures and paperwork constantly changed and consequently took shortcuts or simply paid for research costs out of pocket. Some JCU policy requirements and restrictions were seen to be unnecessary or illogical.

"We need training to help manage and spend our research grants. The paperwork is very complicated to buy material or travel and we receive absolutely no training for it."

"Exhausting procedures, too long, too expensive"

"Poor! Both on the logistical/administrative/financial level. Several times I had to pay out of pocket for conference travel/registration/lodging etc, while being a first author on poster or oral presentations"

"The Ethics Approvals process is a nightmare. I was asked to change details and justify points that were out of scope for the Ethics Panel."

"Accessing and using min resources allocation for research and conferences is a massive stuff around. Takes days, multiple phone calls and emails and far too much paperwork (repetitive). Wastes crucial time and end up missing out on cheaper flights/accommodation opportunities. It's a waste of JCU's admin resources too and the travel company is unnecessary. Why should we wait for them to book something and pay a commission, when the student could do it themselves in a tenth of the time for a fraction of the cost?"

In terms of fieldwork there was one student that indicated that they had an issue of uncertainty in regards to available insurance coverage. In planning for fieldwork and the relevant travel component the student was advised they would be covered under the JCU insurance policy, however there is no obvious statement or even consensus regarding the extent to which pre-existing medical conditions would be covered (eg something like Type 1 diabetes). Furthermore if students were required to purchase supplementary policies this additional cost would be discriminatory. In this context it was felt that a travel request should prompt to provide relevant medical information for assessment where relevant.

Supervisor support

Although this facet rated less than in the previous HDR experience survey, supervisor support was still considered a strength at JCU with over 60% satisfaction. Most respondents felt supervisors were performing at or above expectation, but were increasingly constrained by conflicting commitments related to teaching or administration. Areas of most concern related to the variable level of experience/training a supervisor may have with research students, and the loss of supervisors either through natural attrition or redundancy.

"Excellent! My supervisors are awesome and always respond promptly and offer great advice and support"

"Good, depending on their teaching commitments"

"Very bad. Even when I lived closer to campus I couldn't get appointments. Often didn't get answers to my emails. Advisors made me start articles then dump them. No support in professional development. Descended into total chaos towards the end of the candidature."

"I feel sometimes that I am always struggling to get information and or advice. Even though I am a mature aged student, I still also require guidance. I had to wait quite a while to find a supervisor in my area, who then left JCU after a couple of years. It was over 4 months after this departure, before anyone could confirm if he could continue to be my supervisor. So with a change of supervisor in 2015 and then being unsure about supervisor status in 2017, I feel I have been a little disadvantaged which has put me behind."

International student support

Although almost a third of respondents were international students there was limited feedback in regards to the support services available. The consensus appeared to be that the international office staff are very friendly and supportive in relation to both the academic and social environment, and that SKIP was a reasonable program that needed a little more flexibility depending on a student's background and individual needs.

External student support

Representing just over a quarter of enrolled doctoral candidates (28.5%) external students felt particularly challenged and frustrated in regards to the level of support available/received. As indicated in previous sections there is limited access to resources and infrastructure, the technology is problematic, they are expected to pay fees for services they do not use, and in many cases it can be very socially isolating. As the Doctoral cohort program arranges intensive face-to-face contact periods for all enrolled participants this was seen to be more enabling.

"It is unbelievably frustrating being an off-campus student and trying to access PD opportunities. I am regularly blocked from attending online. I am very disappointed with JCU's lack of capability in online learning and engagement. There is absolutely no point offering writing courses or critical theory seminars (or other opportunities) when staff are not sufficiently capable in delivering an inclusive experience. I have given up trying to be involved in Confirmation of Candidature or Pre-completion seminars. I would have thought if nothing else, the Uni would ensure these are available, after all, how am I supposed to know what my candidature involves if I can't adequately participate in these."

"Upskill in use of online technologies and develop seamless integration of external students"

"It seems that if you not on campus you don't exist"

"Limited external student support, more things need to be online to be accessible for training otherwise it is really hard to get all the training hours that is needed for the professional development unit. I am still not sure how I am even going to get them all without multiple expensive trips to get on campus"

"Doctoral cohort makes it so much easier to be an external student."

Table 3: Institutional Supports Feedback*

	Positive	Observations	Negative	Observations
Resources and facilities	48%	Online resources Lab and facilities Excellent Good Great resources	18%	Budget restricted Poor database access Nothing for off campus Outdated Insufficient Limited storage space
Infrastructure	35%	Good Great office space Fine Adequate	14%	Limited equipment Accessibility issues Slow repairs
Library services/resources	71.5%	Excellent Fantastic Supportive staff Remote access	7%	Limited ebooks online Cross campus ordering Cost to access specific journal/articles
Skill development	40%	Appropriate Comprehensive Very good Liz Tynan	22%	Not accessible Limited relevance Science focused Inflexible Too generic
Professional development	47%	Good Appropriate Useful Professional	28.5	Poor Non-existent Frustrating Self-driven Unsuitable for HDRs
Social support	31%	International office Cohort program Supportive	31%	Non-existent for HDRs Isolating experience Rare for external Not accessible
Financial support	34%	Fair/adequate Good Supervisor support Excellent	32.5	Limited High costs Non-existent for HDRs None/NA
Fieldwork/travel/lab support	24.5%	Supervisor funded Excellent Supportive	31%	Prohibitive Exhausting Chaotic Time consuming No training
Supervisor support	63.5%	Excellent Fabulous Very good	19%	Problematic Inexperienced Limited Time constrained
International student support	13%	Supportive Very good	-	
External student support	12%	Fine Good Teleconferencing	19%	Limited Non-existent

*Missing percentage values reflect neutral statements or no direct response recorded in surveys. Coloured shading represents a greater than +/- 5% variation on the previous survey results – green indicates an overall improvement in satisfaction rates while red indicates a decline

Advisory/Supervisory experience

(refer Table 4)

Overall student satisfaction with the supervisory experience at JCU remained relatively high and stable (above 65% in all categories) comparative to past surveys - although there has been a slight decline in perceptions of student support. Frequency of meetings, supervisor satisfaction and provision of feedback was highly variable across all Colleges and often dependant on the success of the professional working relationship established between the student and supervisor/s. Competing workload and supervision expectations/requirements for supervisors was seen to have a negative impact on the level of support offered.

Access to regular meetings

With a satisfaction level over 75% students were generally content with the regularity of meetings with their supervisors. For some this was a weekly or fortnightly meeting while for others it was a more ad hoc arrangement. The key to a successful student/supervisor relationship appeared to be the quality of communication between all parties. Candidates in the latter stage of their thesis indicated that there had been a notable decline in time and availability for most of their supervisors.

"Yes. Usually as needed and agreed, but regular. When issues or questions arose, meetings were almost immediate."

"Overall, my advisory panel is fantastic, approachable, flexible and in regular communication. As a whole, we do not follow any regimes or formal communications or set regular meetings, just communicate where necessary via email and have an open door policy."

"None. Primary supervisor has emailed or responded to an email three times in the past 12 months. Usually he doesn't respond to emails. I stopped emailing. Secondary supervisor is better, generally responds within a few days. I now generally just email him if I have a question."

"None. Primary supervisor never answers emails, only emails when she wants me to do something for her. Originally tried to have meetings with my primary supervisor but she would threaten me to the point where I did not feel safe in her presence."

Timeliness of Feedback

Students that were satisfied with the extent of supervisor support and communication were generally also happy with the timeliness of feedback received. Conversely, when there were evident issues in

student/supervision relationship feedback was often delayed. When candidates had more than one supervisor the feedback timelines could be variable.

"Feedback is always quick and valuable"

"Had little support, slow feedback and general lack of commitment from supervisor. Overall, a very frustrating time and very disappointed in supervisor"

"Feedback from one of supervisors is always negative and never provides example of what he is looking for. Very psychologically draining."

Supervision Complaints

With the prominence of the recent Broderick Review and anti-bullying campaigns, respondents were very assured in raising concerns about sexual harassment, bullying and clear breaches in the professional Code of Conduct. Through both the focus groups and survey there were reported incidents of sexual harassment, bullying, use of students work/IP without proper acknowledgement, abuse of power relationships, and a lack of explicit boundaries.

"Academics who use their position to claim student's work/IP/ideas/research niche should be dealt with more harshly"

"My primary supervisor used my work at 4 conferences, without asking me and without acknowledging that it was MY work."

"I actively discourage people from doing a PhD at JCU due to the lack of support. This is a very common problem (4 out of the 4 PhD students I know at JCU also are very unhappy with their supervisor and do not want anything to do with the university or academia after they have finished). My goal after my PhD was to go into further research and academia at JCU but I now never wish to be in academia due to the toxic culture where people don't help each other. The bullying culture by supervisors is frightening."

In cases where there was either a real or perceived issue with a supervisor, students were not familiar with the process or procedures to access support.

"There needs to be a better grievance process if the relationship with the PhD advisors doesn't work out!"

"I don't feel like there is anyone I can talk to that will be sympathetic to my experiences. I don't have an RSM."

Student Supervision

Candidates provided feedback in terms of how they believed the HDR research supervision could be improved with particular reference to training, supervisor accountability and competing supervisory commitments.

"Improve training for supervisors as often they are a little lost about the forms, requirements of the milestones"

"I think it'd be good if supervisors were somehow held more accountable for the level of support they provide to their students. I feel like mine have taken me on even though they don't actually have time or want to spend time on me or my project."

"If a professor or academic staff has got too many students to supervise, please give a limitation for the maximum number of students they can handle. Otherwise, they (the students) could wait too long to get their writing back."

"JCU needs to increase staff numbers and value staff more. Needs to remember it is a LEARNING INSTITUTION PRIMARILY NOT A MARKETING BUSINESS"

Given that only a small percentage of graduates are likely to remain in academia on completion of the PhD, many also felt there should be the flexibility to have a more diverse advisory panel that may include industry or agency input.

"Need to think carefully that many (most?) PhD students will not stay in academia; yet most of the advice from advisors comes from academics who have spent little time outside academia. Need for industry/agency involvement in some supervisory panels to help students who clearly don't see themselves staying in academia..."

"There needs to be support in professional development, networking within the research community; there needs to be more of a mentor function (which can be the advisors or an additional person)."

Table 4: Advisory/Supervisory Experience*

	Positive	Observations	Negative	Observations
Access/regular meetings	76.5%	Good Fantastic Open door policy Regular	14%	Difficult Doesn't happen Variable None Irregular
Timely feedback	73%	Quick Valuable Excellent Timely	18%	Inadequate Poor None
Support	66%	Good Excellent Supportive Appreciated	21%	Limited Poor More

* Missing percentage values reflect neutral statements or no direct response recorded in surveys. Coloured shading represents a greater than +/- 5% variation on the previous survey results – green indicates an overall improvement in satisfaction rates while red indicates a decline

"I expected that I could lay out and agree to a plan with my advisors and would mostly be able to work towards it which was very far from the real experience. I expected a lot more clear expectations and feedback which I also didn't receive. And most of all I expected some kind of regular meetings, be it online or in person, which was a problem throughout the candidature. Most of all I expected to be treated like an adult and budding expert in my field, especially as the candidature evolved. But instead I felt treated even more disrespectfully the further my candidature advanced. Towards the end of my candidature it plainly descended into chaos making me question if I might not be better off discontinuing for the sake of my mental health".

"So far my PhD is going better than I could have hoped. Thanks to my amazing supervision I have completed a lot of professional and skills development that I would not have thought of previously. I really like that the PhD gives you the opportunity to develop the skills that will lead your career in the direction that you want it to go. However, I am not sure how much of this is JCU related or thanks to my primary supervisor. I think overall, JCU could do better in encouraging exactly that aspect of the PhD. JCU supported/ did not discourage the development options that I choose, but without my supervisor (and my own drive) I would not have asked about them. JCU did not push or even inform me about these options unless specifically asked"

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 and recommendations. Staff names have only been included in positive comments/feedback.

College of Medicine and Dentistry

5 % participation

“More than adequate professional development support and opportunities are available for the taking and staff are encouraging and keep us posted as well”

“Labs facilities are not of a good standard – quite disappointing”

“More support staff for HDR students”

College of Public Health, Medical and Veterinary Sciences

9% participation

“Admin support has improved over the last 12 months”

“Melissa Crowe and team are exceptional”

“In Doctoral cohort so everything is REALLY good”

“The Cairns Institute facilities are excellent”

“Infrastructure is poor, especially in the chemical sciences”

“I had to be proactive to set up my SSA account, and did so only partway through my candidature after chasing with relevant parties for info - it would be good to have more up front information regarding this”

“Doctoral cohort makes it so much easier to be an external student”

“Doctoral experience has been great mainly due to the support and assistance from being part of the doctoral cohort”

“I feel so far that my experience has been excellent. I have felt well supported from my advisors, the doctoral cohort and administration people and GRS”

"Great support from Kerry Anne, she has been a great advocate for students and a huge difference as ADRE – connecting with students, available to discuss, engages very well in the communication process and understanding of the policies and processes of JCU (there had been previous inconsistencies in interpretation, resulting in misinformation and conflicting GRS advice)... She fights for the students, resolving issues, supports and make times"

"Sheree Everyham in vet office is always helpful/supportive ie travel issues and insurance, freight"

"Grace Stanton in tech support goes above and beyond"

"Shane Walker and Tina in the office providing academic services, they are friendly and very personable – they remember your name and are great at sorting through the processes"

"For my research I can't really be competitive. The labs and research equipment I have access to reflect subpar facilities and I have to outsource a lot of my processing. There is a significant lack of capacity here and I don't have the funding to do everything I need to do. Much of the equipment I need is in the new Science place but because I am not in that College I am not allowed to used them – I feel disadvantaged compared to other elements of the university"

"There are over 20 students using broken lab equipment that never gets maintenance or calibration"

"There is no security, no student responsibility and no lab techs in the open labs. There is extensive unauthorised access, broken equipment and absolutely no accountability."

College of Science and Engineering

13% participation

"Minimum support for the courses we need"

"This has been very good. Bec Steele in particular has been very helpful throughout my candidature."

"I now have to apply to my college fund allocation when candidates were told we were guaranteed \$1000 per year when we started"

"Lecturer/professor level faculty have been excellent, and there is a great collegiate environment at science and engineering, my involvement with higher-level administration (within my faculty) has been limited but also effective."

"I haven't had too much interaction with the CSE staff through my PhD. Mel Norton helped me a lot in the initial stages of my PhD in working out how the whole process worked and getting my confirmation seminar sorted for me. I've also had a fair bit of assistance from the CSE Admin team recently in trying to pay for the publishing fees associated with an open access article of mine that's in final stages of pre-publishing."

"Plenty of issues, big delays. Big problems with moving equipment to new building"

"I like the Postgraduate Centre, we are like a big family, both local & international students"

"While the idea of a new well equipped Science Place sounds good it has been very disruptive. Not all students were moved to the building which meant that colleagues and lab groups were ripped apart – this has significantly changed the dynamics and undermined social and mental health support. The open plan office is isolating and unwelcoming. You can't converse, there is no privacy, you can't answer the phone and there are no meeting room areas. It has created division..."

College of Arts, Society and Education

17 % participation

"College admin support is really good- Maree is great"

"Was and am still unsure as to the hierarchy and structure and who to talk to about certain things."

"Having some kind of orientation for the general workings of the University and its services, one that involves going around and meeting people in their place of work, rather than having them say a few words one after another in a room then not remember who and where to find them and why we needed to know them."

"I have always found Maree Searston to be very approachable and helpful. Other personnel who I have had contact with have also been helpful and used good customer service with me."

"Needs to be better monitoring of the student experience and student progress more regularly"

"I have been surprised by the lack of respect for HDR students - generally they appear to be considered much like undergraduates, some simple actions that make them feel more respected and that their work has some value would reduce dissatisfaction enormously"

"Having the Post-Grad Centre as a place to base yourself is great. The peer support and knowledge base has been invaluable and having a mix of disciplines is a great thing too. My supervisors have been very supportive and the opportunity to attend some great workshops has increased my capacity to make the most of this PhD experience."

College of Healthcare Sciences

10% participation

"Our College ADRE is fantastic, she provides clear instructions of what needs to be done at the various stages of the candidature."

"Provided with exceptional resources and facilities to complete my thesis"

"The DTHM cohort program provided many sessions to enhance skills, exceptional social support to discuss concerns and to celebrate successes"

"The college provides a stipends however to publish open access, this stipend is not enough. The use of equipment in my project was not an option as there was no funding available"

"Please, to deliver workshops related to research skills at specific areas (health or nursing), such as how to interview patients or how to do a research method of observation in clinical settings"

College of Business, Law and Governance

14.5% participation

"Excellent College support, when one takes the time to interact. No individual contact if not personally requested."

"The staff are kind and helpful, no doubt in that, but the financial support of the College is the biggest challenge. Not many funds, grants, projects, or tutoring to be involved in as a PhD student"

"Perhaps the ADHDR's workload needs to be revised to allow further interaction with HDR students"

"More workshops relevant to our study."

"Offices provided; however open plan, for most, is not conducive to research activities. No real privacy."

"Distributing the casual employment (tutoring, marking etc) fairly (and to the PhD student)- Better financial support "

"Digitise all of your processes. Make it easier for me to get publication funding. Communicate new university policies."

"Promote a culture of cross disciplinary research"

"College induction for new students"

[ARC – COE](#)

4.5 % participation

"Excellent College administrative support"

"I experienced major health problems throughout this year. If it wasn't for the support of my supervisors and ARC, I would have left the PhD program. I received very little support from JCU, which was very disappointing. On top of this I've had numerous administrative issues with JCU, mainly due to understaffed and undertrained administration."

Recommendations

In addition to enduring issues and recommendations identified in the previous doctoral experience report (ie excessive paperwork and documentation, improved doctoral communication and management, improved external student support and addressing expectations of supervision), the students surveyed for this research project indicated a number of specific initiatives and strategies to improve the existing systems and processes. Key recommendations focus on continued streamlining, greater flexibility in candidate management, better resourcing, and improved mentoring and training support (for staff and students). These recommendations are presented in respect to the key themes of administrative support, institutional support, and supervision.

Administrative support

Generic induction to JCU and College processes

Identifying relevant administrative personnel and support remained a problem in most Colleges. Students recommended a more comprehensive induction process which includes the provision of a guide or manual which provides direct individual contact details (rather than email alias) and current information regarding all relevant College procedures, facilities, resources and funding arrangements. As personnel, policy and processes change this information would also need to be updated and widely disseminated.

“Having some kind of orientation for the general workings of the University and its services, one that involves going around and meeting people in their place of work, rather than having them say a few words one after another in a room then not remember who and where to find them and why we needed to know them.”

“Practical elements of induction – IT, identifying right contact people – needs to be included in an extra day as I eventually just end up asking other students rather than going to an official source”

“Finding a point of contact or reference to assist can be difficult and many students are not comfortable in asking. It would be easier if there was a manual for HDR students in each College”

“Unclear and often messy. I really do not have a clear picture of the organisational structure and the people in it, so it’s hard to know who I should be relating to. This would be solved by an up-to-date org chart - with correct current names.”

Paperwork and documentation

While changes have been implemented since the last iteration of the HDR experience survey, students still complained about the excessive quantity and bureaucracy of forms. Recommendations again proposed fewer, simpler, consistent, user friendly forms accessible from an intuitive centralised

repository that is regularly and accurately maintained. This should also support a FAQ section (frequently asked questions) and/or direct referral process to relevant admin staff. Students, supervisors, and all relevant admin staff should all be kept familiar/updated with any changes as they occur.

Candidate management

Numerous issues were identified with candidate management – primarily in regards to the lack of flexibility, monitoring, and maintenance of records. With external students or extensive fieldwork requirements it is often difficult for candidates to attend mandatory courses or meet prescriptive milestones. Respondents suggested a need for greater flexibility in the timing of training programs and potential exclusions where appropriate. Similarly they wanted clearer, unambiguous information regarding candidate expectations, milestones, and reporting obligations. A better system to record and track completed objectives should be maintained as a single, accessible centralised database.

“HDR training and courses are an issue. The same ones offered at same time of year which is when I generally do my fieldwork.”

“I attended and presented at a conference at the time my mid candidature was due – I should be eligible for an exclusion list.”

“There needs to be greater flexibility and understanding that the PhD is individual journey rather than standardised process”

HDR Information and Communication

Rather than the multitude of mailing lists and emails for communicating new information, funding opportunities, seminars and events, it was proposed that this content could be better consolidated. This could be done in a weekly email or newsletter from the GRS and sent to all candidates. This would reduce the number of individual emails and facilitate awareness and understanding of activities in other Colleges and fields of research

“I think that much more information could be made available about the PhD process. I'd also like to hear from the GRS more in newsletters & general update emails. I think that social events would also be of great benefit - I'm lucky in that I did my undergrad at JCU and still know a lot of people in Townsville, but it would still be nice to meet people actually doing a PhD. It would greatly benefit people who've come here from somewhere else not knowing anyone too”

“GRS communications : should email notifications of confirmation mid-term reviews and pre-completions across the entire university to all HDR students - we are moving into multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research and to keep this information in silos is ridiculous and social media communication is not the answer. We can always delete emails we don't want but we can't attend other people's presentations if we don't know about them”

Institutional support

Resources

In an environment of declining funding, facilities, equipment and resources, respondents advocated for a shift in the corporate culture of JCU – away from a business mentality towards the more traditional foundations of research, training and education. Following significant restructuring and redundancies it was suggested that the university better value and support its staff and students.

Skills and Professional development

Students wanted to see greater flexibility in both skills and professional development to reflect the diversity of knowledge, experience, access, research obligations and anticipated professional demands. Rather than prescriptive courses and mandatory requirements this could be managed on a case by case basis.

"I spend 6 months in field as my research is very field intensive, getting professional development courses completed in time is problematic."

While there were numerous requests for specific, specialised courses it was proposed that other PhD candidates with relevant, desirable skills sets or experience could be listed in a database and be available to assist and mentor others. To negate any issue of cost this mentoring could count towards either skill development/professional development requirements.

Social support, student reps and mentors

Consistent with other universities it was suggested that the GRS or Colleges set up a system of post doc or early career mentors to support HDR candidates. Some Colleges have set up HDR ambassadors or student representatives, however it was proposed that there needs to be a more supportive social environment and networking opportunities with a checking mechanism for students that are struggling. The monthly morning tea was considered a valuable initiative. Given the issues of social isolation experienced by external students, additional effort should be made to involve them with other students either online or in person if in close proximity.

Fieldwork, travel and lab support

While students provided a number of ideas in regards to travel bookings, risk assessment, student access to credit cards, procurements, and acquittals, it was expected that the introduction of new processes and software such as Concur Travel would minimise some of the existing concerns.

Advisory/Supervisor experience

Supervision

Key recommendations for student supervision related to better awareness of current policy and processes, better training of supervisor and student, and greater accountability for performance in terms of availability, feedback and conduct. Procedures regarding supervision issues or complaints need to be clearly identified and accessible without recrimination.

Student recognition

HDR candidates advocated for the establishment of an open accessible research profile along with greater respect and recognition of their contributions during the candidature.

"HDR candidate successes need to be celebrated more with better public profiles if possible. Better access and management of their SSA funds should be available to all students - we're not children. Give PhD students research portfolio profiles! Decouple training costs from SSA's - necessary training support should be paid for by this university. Provide a comprehensive and universal policy/induction manual for all new PhD students - don't expect them to use the terrible JCU website. Maintain a register of student experts who will mentor to provide specialist one off support to other students (eg. provide help with video editing, graphical content etc.) At least give them HDR personal development hours for doing it if not payable - solves problems if JCU not wanting to pay for external consultants"

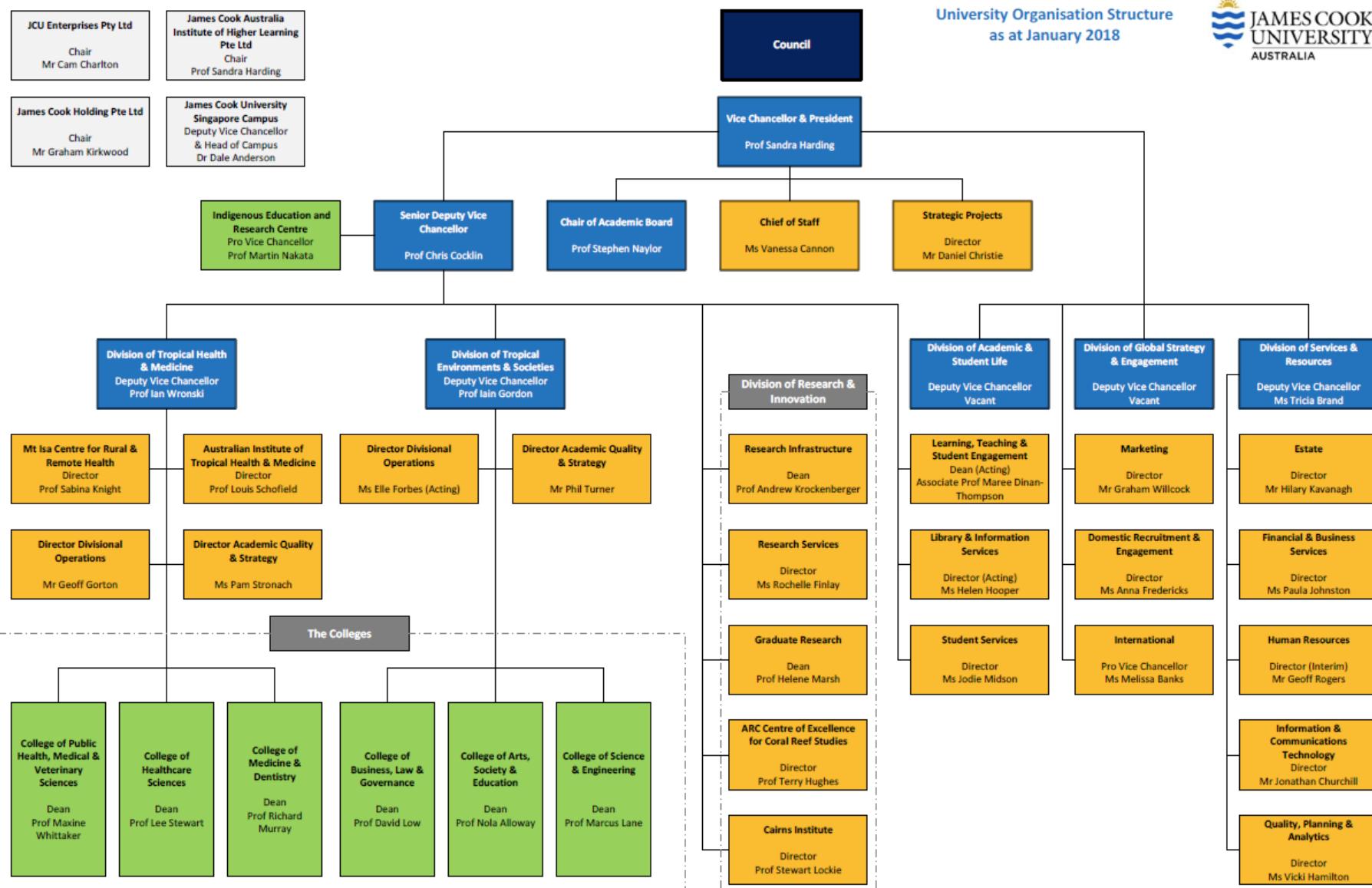
Conclusion

This report presents the findings of a study into the experiences of doctoral candidates at James Cook University in 2017. Qualitative data concerning institutional support, advisory experiences, engagement with the Graduate Research School and specific College based issues and initiatives have been identified in relation to levels of satisfaction and areas of improvement. Areas of satisfaction continue to include the tropical advantage, library services, research supervisor expertise and advisory support. Examples of best practice include the cohort program, mentor/lab based student support programs and similar proactive social networking/mentoring opportunities. Limited funding, adequacy of skills and professional development opportunities, research and potential career competition, and mental health support are recognised ongoing and unresolved issues. Newly identified issues include the adverse, university wide impacts of staff redundancies, bullying and sexual harassment, respect and recognition for candidates' research contribution, and a demand for greater flexibility in existing processes and policies.

As the number and types of student concerns has increased, this report demonstrates an overall decline in JCU candidate satisfaction in most themes and categories. This reinforces some of the trends on intellectual climate, goals and expectations, skill development and external student dissatisfaction which were indicated in the most recent Postgraduate Research Experience Summary Report (2016). This research shows that while students value their supervisors and the opportunity they have been provided, they are becoming increasingly frustrated with JCU as an institution. An operating environment of declining funding, reduced staff time/availability and limited resources has resulted in current candidates actively dissuading prospective research students from coming to JCU. These findings provide feedback and recommendations to introduce significant improvements.

APPENDIX

Appendix 1: 2018 University Organisation Structure



Appendix 2 : Doctoral Experience Survey

1. Are you male or female?

- Male
 Female

2. What is your current age?

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> 20-24 | <input type="radio"/> 35-39 | <input type="radio"/> 50-54 |
| <input type="radio"/> 25-29 | <input type="radio"/> 40-44 | <input type="radio"/> 55-59 |
| <input type="radio"/> 30-34 | <input type="radio"/> 45-49 | <input type="radio"/> 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?

- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="radio"/> College of Public Health, Medicine and Veterinary Sciences | <input type="radio"/> College of Business, Law and Governance | <input type="radio"/> College of Science, Technology and Engineering |
| <input type="radio"/> College of Healthcare Services | <input type="radio"/> College of Arts, Society and Education | |
| <input type="radio"/> College of Medicine and Dentistry | <input type="radio"/> 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