

## Recommendations from Yetta Gurtner's report and GRS Response

In addition to enduring issues and recommendations identified in the previous doctoral experience report (i.e., 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.

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#### **GRS Response:**

Practices relating to college-based inductions and college manuals are on the agenda for the next meeting of the Research Education Sub-Committee Executive.

#### 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.

#### **GRS Response:**

All GRS Forms were redesigned and simplified in 2017. The GRS plans a year of consolidation of processes and forms. Any changes will be clearly advertised on the GRs newsletter GRS Update on and the GRS website. The GRS will review the FAQ section on its website.

### 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.

### **GRS Response:**

The Handbook for HDR candidates was extensively revised in late 2017 and provides comprehensive information regarding candidate expectations, milestones, and reporting obligations. The Manager Graduate Research Operations will raise the issue of improved communication between Colleges and GRS regarding candidature management with the Administrative Services Officers of GRS and Colleges at joint meeting.

## **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

### **GRS Response:**

GRS Update is monthly newsletter from the GRS which is sent to all candidates. The GRS does not have the staff capacity to increase the frequency of this newsletter. The GRS will investigate the possibility of increased college input to this newsletter (e.g. guest editors) at the next meeting of the Research Education Sub-Committee Executive.

## **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.

### **GRS Response:**

The improved Minimum Resources funding should reduce concerns about project funding. Advisor time is a challenge. The GRS will investigate additional training for advisors about group supervision and cohort support.

## **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.

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.

### **GRS Response**

This matter is on the agenda for next Research Education Sub-Committee Executive with an invitation to Associate Professor Tynan, Co-ordinator GRS Professional Development Program.

1. The introduction of the compulsory doctoral subject RD7003 Professional Development was not universally welcomed, either by the student cohort or by advisors. Some advisors actively oppose the imposition of compulsory PD, although opposition does seem to be waning as the system beds down. In some cases any lingering negativity is likely to affect the attitude of some candidates. A proportion

of candidates/advisors are inevitably going to treat the requirements of RD7003 as a bureaucratic imposition. That may well account for at least some of the negativity shown in the report.

2. Taking that into account, there are some criticisms in the report that are valid and need to be addressed. For example, the point made about the GRS PD program being more science-focused than humanities-focused is valid. We do need to bolster our humanities/social sciences training. We are instituting much-needed NVivo training this year, using a trainer from ACSPRI, and this should alleviate concerns over the lack of training for candidates using that program. However, this training is expensive and we are having to ask students to make a co-payment. We will also need to find another presenter for the workshop Qualitative Research Design, following the departure of Brian Lewthwaite. Professor Christine Bruce is an expert in this area.
3. The increase from 80 to 120 hours (increasingly the sector norm) of PD from this year is bound to cause a rise in negativity from some quarters. Associate Professor Tynan already provides a regular RD7003 information session for HDRs, as well as the invitation to a separate session for advisors to discuss this and other issues such as SKIP (Skills for International Postgraduates Program) and PELA (Post-Entry English Language Assessment). Advisor sessions are often not well-attended.
4. Associate Professor Tynan is happy to ensure that strong messages are sent during these sessions about the available PD workshops and courses (including external courses which can be funded from the increased Minimum Resources Allocation) and emphasise the fact that the Elective Component is extremely flexible so that candidates and their advisory team can choose anything suitable within broad criteria (much more flexible than most other universities). She will especially emphasise the availability of coursework subjects that may be undertaken at JCU for free, and which provide about 40 hours each towards RD7003. She will also discuss the fact that the PD they undertake during their candidature will be formally noted on the Australian Graduation Statement, something that we perhaps have not emphasised sufficiently in the past.
5. The 2018 GRS Induction Days will strongly highlight the need to plan for the requirements of RD7003 and see it as an opportunity, not an imposition. A handout will be made available at Induction (and included in the welcome kit for incoming HDRs) that shows what is available flexibly. The Handout makes the point that new HDR candidates should start thinking as early as possible about their professional development program, to make the most of the opportunity to build their professional skills.
6. Associate Professor Tynan will actively seek opportunities to introduce more humanities-based options including: (1) pitching and writing for *The Conversation*, (2) using archives for research (3) more on using social media (some offerings already).
7. External candidates have more reason to be dissatisfied than internal candidates regarding access to PD opportunities. This is always going to be an issue when we have limited resources. However, the availability of Epigeum modules (e.g. University and College Teaching, plus the various ethics and research skills modules) are helping. Also, better technology to join classes remotely is gradually coming into place, so this is going to help. At present, the GRS does whatever we can to make workshops available remotely, but some workshops simply do not lend themselves to this approach.
8. The way that some candidates undertake their PD audit and plan is clearly unsatisfactory. It appears that a proportion of them see it as a bureaucratic exercise rather than an opportunity to reflect upon their current skills and their future requirements. The GRS will investigate introducing a workshop to alleviate this problem.

## 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.

#### **GRS Response**

The GRS will raise the need for college-based mentoring etc at the next Research Education Sub-Committee Executive meeting. SSAF funding has enabled the GRS Ambassador Service to be extended in 2018 to all commencing HDRs at JCU who have come from other universities (domestic and international).

### **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.

#### **GRS Response:**

This ongoing issue is being addressed with new software at a university level.

### **Advisory/Supervisor experience**

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.

#### **GRS Response:**

Advisor training is being upgraded including requirements for a compulsory refresher course (on-line quiz developed). A separate Advisor Handbook has been developed. Complaints processes are under active review at present at a University level. Candidates are encouraged to submit confidential reports. There are discussions about recording concerns about advisors as part of the JCU incident reporting process.

### **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.

#### **GRS Response:**

The research profile for individual HDRs is scheduled to go live before the end of March 2018 having been delayed due to the illness of a key staff member.