



Doctoral Experiences Report

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Executive Summary

This report presents the experiences of doctoral candidates at James Cook University (JCU). The findings are based on qualitative research conducted in November and December 2013. The key aspects discussed with candidates include: advisory experiences, whole of institution resources and supports, the work of the JCU Graduate Research School (GRS) and other discipline/school based experiences. Examples of best practice include: regular school seminars, lab/research group meetings, discipline specific skill development

Overall, themes are largely consistent with 2011 research in which focus groups and interview participants spoke of their positive and supportive advisory experiences, their enthusiasm for their research and the opportunities they were grateful for such as conferences, networking and fieldwork. The main negative factors included administrative procedures, advisor accessibility and some discipline specific resources and facilities.

When discussing advisory experiences, doctoral candidates valued the supportive, personal, flexible and responsive characteristics of 'good' advisors. Positive experiences also included regular communication, enthusiasm, expertise and networking advisors provided. Factors that detracted from advisor support were a lack of communication or access.

In terms of general institutional supports and facilities, library and information technology support were positive. Other policies and procedures were seen as prohibitive or inefficient including travel procedures, dedicated suppliers, paper-based finance procedures and repetitive casual employment procedures. Students also called for more interdisciplinary collaboration. International students provided positive feedback about the Skills for International Postgraduates (SKIP) Program but more networking for postgraduate students was desirable, perceiving that most international support is 'geared at undergrads'.

External students stated that advisors were accessible and flexible and GRS provided good communication too. They recommended improving access to online skill development workshops and materials through real-time participation online or uploading the recordings and resources. Some internal students also mentioned more flexible access to these resources.

The roles and responsibilities of the GRS had largely positive feedback. Students commended the range of workshops and the writing support offered. Communication is perceived to have improved in recent years and staff are seen as responsive to students' needs. Initiatives such as the GRS Update newsletter were welcomed. Communication could be improved further. Engaging HDR candidates with staff and undergraduate students as part of a scholarly community remains a significant issue, which is consistent with 2011 research.

Introduction

While there are universal characteristics of the postgraduate experience at JCU, within schools 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 JCU doctoral students.

Aims of the research

The research addresses the importance of developing an understanding of best practice evident in candidates' experiences 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

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 school further support your experience?

Comparison with previous research of JCU doctoral experiences

Other recent research into the experiences of doctoral students at James Cook University has taken the form of biannual qualitative focus group in each school and large scale surveys conducted internally and externally based on Post Graduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ) 2010-2012.

The previous qualitative focus group study conducted in October 2011 (Halbert, 2012) used the same methodology as this study. In comparing the themes, the following positive experiences are consistent in both studies: advisory supports, skills development and wider scholarly activities (including teaching, conferences and fieldwork etc.). Communication and support from the GRS received far more positive references (and less negative references) in 2013, as opposed to 2011, signalling an improvement. In general students' experiences with space and facilities were more positive than 2011.

In terms of consistent negative factors, policies and administrative procedures involving travel, finance management and fieldwork remain areas of frustration. Negative advisory experiences still referred to a lack of or ineffective communication and access to supervisors. Participants referred to their advisor's workloads explicitly in the 2013 study more frequently than previous research. While isolation was not as frequently mentioned in the recent study, there are still widespread recommendations for more facilitated interaction and community building. Distinctively, recent reform to HDR policies and structures were discussed in the recent study.

The Postgraduate Research Experience Background Report published in 2012 reviewed PREQ results 2010-12, internal survey results and sector results from 2012 and found that in 2012 JCU had above sector level of satisfaction about infrastructure which is consistent with the generally positive feedback about facilities across focus groups, however there were still some specific discipline areas who were dissatisfied. In terms of *Intellectual Climate*, the 2012 survey data indicated that two faculties, Law, Business and Creative Arts (FLBCA) and the Faculty of Arts Education and Social Sciences (FAESS) had levels of satisfaction below the sector mean. Intellectual Climate was measured by questions rating social contact, integration into the community, and involvement in broader research, seminars and overall ambience or stimulation. Improving the intellectual climate through community building was a theme discussed across the university. However, consistent with the survey, FLBCA and FAESS gave it greater significance than the other two, often citing that in these

faculties student numbers are lower and the research practices are more solitary (i.e. less interaction than the physical sciences).

In an internal 'PREQ' survey of students conducted in 2012, only 63% of respondents met with their supervisors at least every fortnight. Candidates who had fortnightly meetings had a mean overall satisfaction of 86% whereas those who did not regularly meet with their supervisor had a significantly lower level of satisfaction – just 58%. This corresponds with the findings of this study in that regular contact was frequently discussed as an indication of a good supervision. There were mixed opinions on the form of contact and regularity required, suggesting that student needs and ways of working vary greatly. Satisfaction levels for *timely feedback on written work* improved from 2010 to 2012. In 2012, timely feedback was an even bigger indicator of satisfaction, with 89% of students who received timely feedback being satisfied overall whereas, only 50% of those who did not were satisfied overall. Timely feedback was a key theme discussed in relation to supervision in the focus groups; in particular the 2013 participants spoke about supervisor workload pressures with more frequency than in 2011.

Methodology

As opposed to more quantitative data gained from the Annual Student Survey and PREQ, this research aimed at gathering more specific qualitative understandings of doctoral students' experiences. Two qualitative methods which capture a sample of the larger group were used in order to examine some of their experiences in detail.

Small focus group interviews

These were conducted within each school on the Townsville campus and for each faculty on the Cairns campus. Semi structured focus group topics included: stages of candidature, expectations/realities of candidature, highlights of the candidature so far, factors which have positively and negatively impacted on progress, Institutional supports, Supervisory experiences and suggestions for improving candidature (see Appendix). The focus groups took approximately 45 minutes. They were audio recorded and participant responses were transcribed for analysis.

Telephone/Skype interviews

These were conducted with external students and students who did not attend the focus group interviews. Telephone interviews were arranged via email and then conducted at a mutually agreed time. They were an average of 15 minutes in duration.

Data analysis

Transcripts of the focus groups and interview notes were thematically coded using NVivo software based on repeating ideas relevant to the key research questions. New codes were developed until a point of saturation, then these codes were grouped and categorised around areas of frequency and significance. In discussing each theme the positive and negative aspects are grouped and analysed. Factors affecting external students were feelings of isolation, access to advisors and communication about university procedures and policy. These issues were also raised by on-campus students and so the data was amalgamated.

Data was also coded thematically (see overview on page 8) and by the school with which each student belonged. This school- based discussion is included in the Appendix. Data was collected in 2013 under a faculty and school based organisational structure and is therefore presented using these groupings.

Advantages and limitations of the research methods

There are some identifiable strengths and weaknesses of the methodological approach. Focus groups and one-on-one interviews are distinctive research tools that facilitate variable levels of disclosure by participants. The advantages for the methods adopted were that they catered for a range of student needs, were efficient way of gathering qualitative data and the shared participation was a benefit for participants and led to rich discussion.

The telephone interviews provided external students with a voice, along with those students who may have chosen not to participate in the focus group. However, compared to the focus groups, there were more negative factors raised within the telephone interviews suggesting that this level of confidentiality which could not be assured in the focus groups, was more conducive to students airing their concerns. Participants may feel more comfortable disclosing opinions without peer judgement.

Recruitment and participation was a challenge and while the data is rich, exploring experiences with the aim of understanding key issues, it is by no means representative of all students, particularly at a school level. There was no monetary incentive or reward provided, students gave of their time freely

and this may be responsible for the lower figures of participation. School- based facilitation of the focus groups also varied to the degree that school staff actively encouraged participation.

Participants

A total of 70 participants were involved in the study. Students were at various stages of their candidature ranging from those recently enrolled to those who had submitted their thesis. This range was beneficial in providing students with an opportunity to learn about and reflect on their own and others' experiences. The participation rate was 8.3% of total HDR enrolments. This is fairly consistent with participation in 2011. Of the participants, 6 students identified as external (located remotely with no time on campus), 24 students were based in Cairns and the remaining 40 were based in Townsville.

Table 1: Participants by Faculty.

Faculty	International	Domestic	Total Participants
Arts, Education & Social Sciences	4	8	12
Law, Business & Creative Arts	2	13	15
Medicine, Health & Molecular Sciences	4	15	19
Science & Engineering	17	7	24

Thematic Discussion

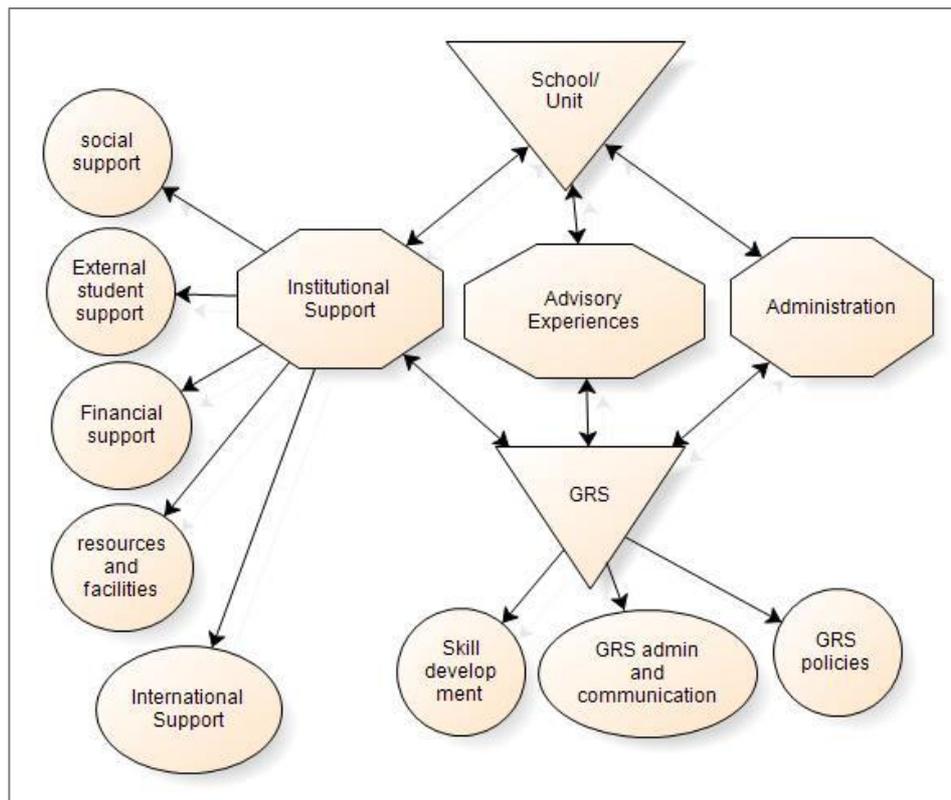


Figure 1: A diagram of institutional structures and supports HDR candidates experience.

The qualitative data is organised around three key doctoral experiences: institutional supports, advisory experiences and administration. Most of the experiences are directly influenced by policies enacted by the Graduate Research School and the relevant organisational unit (e.g. school/centre). Each of the themes is discussed to draw out the positive and negative aspects of candidates' experiences. In the case of material and social resources, these are discussed in relation to the organisation unit that provides them: whole of JCU divisions, the Graduate Research School or faculty/school.

Advisory Experiences were overwhelmingly positive with candidates valuing the interest, enthusiasm and regular contact of their advisors. Adversely, some student concerns stemmed from infrequent communication, feedback or engagement from supervisors.

Institutional supports included the financial and material resources, facilities, social networking opportunities and whole of institution supports for particular groups, such as International and external students. The facilities and resources were generally positives, however more financial and social support varied greatly.

Administration procedures across the university include the various ways that organisational units manage resources and facilities. It also includes the candidate management that GRS undertakes, requiring regular communication between students, advisors, school management and the GRS. Administrative experiences were varied and students' directed recommendations to the GRS or school/faculty.

Table 2: Themes identified by frequency and indicative topics.

Theme	Positive freq.	Positive topics	Negative freq.	Negative topics
Advisory factors	40+	Interest and Enthusiasm Communication Regular Contact	10-15	Communication Accessibility/ Workload
Whole-of-institution support	10-15	General opportunities Library and IT support	20-25	Travel regulations and policies Casual Employment
International student support	5-10	SKIP International Centre	5-10	Undergrad focus General Communication SKIP
External student support	5-10	Advisor support GRS support	5-10	Access to resources – workshops, borrowing General communication
Financial support	5-10	GRS grants Scholarships Teaching/RA work	20-25	Paper-based forms Inconsistent minimum resources Lack of transparency
GRS – communication	20-25	Responsiveness of Staff Newsletter and emails	5-10	Email bombardment Confidentiality
GRS – admin	0	-	10-15	Form management Reporting requirements
GRS – skills development	30-35	Writing/Editorial support Range of workshops	5-10	Not discipline specific External/flexible access

Whole-of-institution support

Across the institution, there are centralised, administrative and resource policies and procedures which support and manage candidates. In discussing these, students spoke of some campus specific issues, commented on Library and IT support, as well as specific discipline based resources.

General positive comments were about the access to facilities and support from staff. Library support was seen as “fantastic” and “helpful”. Information Technology comments were mixed with some students citing “great IT support” and others referring to “digital management and storage issues” and platforms such as eGRS as “very clunky”.

Comments about the Cairns campus facilities in particular reflected calls for better access and some discipline specific needs. One student based in the Cairns Institute spoke positively of the workspaces and communal facilities, however most other comments about facilities were recommendations for improvement, particularly the need for twenty-four hour access to study and work spaces. Creative arts students in Cairns cited a lack of studio spaces.

Procedures around travel, suppliers and finances were seen as areas that could be improved to cater specifically for the needs of HDR students. There was some frustration with businesses/supplier regulations. Travel provision was seen as restrictive and inefficient and this was mentioned across multiple schools. For instance, current travel procedures do not “work for field work on short notice” and it is “frustrating that they [WTP] are the fixed provider and have high service fees”.

Fieldwork and travel procedures were of concern across disciplines in the physical sciences as evidenced by comments such as: “Field Trip Tracker takes 2+ weeks until approval, doesn’t respond [to researcher need], e.g. cases of already being in the field when you get approval. Needs to be more flexible, and faster.”

Casual employment was mentioned as another set of institutional procedures that is inefficient and does not recognise the often ongoing and regular work that HDR candidates undertake. Additionally, finance procedures frustrated due to being inconsistent and unclear across organisational units (this is discussed further in the financial support section).

Students recommended more whole of institution mechanisms for collaboration, a recommendation in line with institutional objectives. In addition to the above procedures and resources, there was also reference to the Student Association Fee (amenities fee) from Vet Science candidates who felt that there is “Nothing in Vet to cater for Post Grads” and that “activities seems geared to undergrads and are always located in central areas, isolating Vet”.

International student support

The social/cultural transition, English language support and administrative requirements are specific areas of support. The twenty-five International HDR student participants referred to the Skills for International Postgraduates (SKIP) Program mostly positively, while other administrative issues were negative.

Positive comments about international student support referred to the SKIP program and the induction. Students said SKIP was “so important in my progress” and that it was “excellent” and “very useful”. Another student stated they “would have liked a follow up to that to maintain connections.”

Negative comments referred to general administration, calls for more HDR specific supports and information provision. These comments below include some recommendations for improving the experience of international students:

JCU International seems mostly geared to undergraduates.

SKIP course not a good course, not sure of its intentions for students with adequate English.

Maybe for students with poor English skills, provide ongoing support as students are self-conscious about writing in another language.

Don't feel much support for international students in terms of getting together.

Recommend more information from the University about childcare (e.g. an international student arriving without knowing there was a 2 year waiting list), accommodation, and clarity of processes.

External student support

External students are another group with specific but not necessarily universal needs. There were positive comments about general support and flexibility provided by schools, supervisors, the GRS and the cohort program

Recommendations for improving online access to resources and skill development were to make more workshops available online by recording them and offering real-time participation through online learning platforms. For example one student said:

[It] would be wonderful to have introductory/orientation package and have GRS workshops recorded and made available online. Great resource to keep. Certainly seem to be running great workshops and it's a shame to miss out on them.

Administration and communication with external students was not always clear with the suggestion that this could be improved with information packages and more user-friendly online platforms.

While one external student in the cohort program was very appreciative of the social support of the cohort another student said that they “haven’t had any interaction with other students – but this is not a priority or a big concern”. The student has an existing professional research network in their area through previous work. This illustrates that the capacities and support an external student brings with them and therefore requires from the institution are very particular to each student.

Graduate Research School

The significant themes to arise from discussion of the interaction and support from the Graduate Research School (GRS) related to general communication, administration, HDR policies and procedures and skill development.

Communication

In general, the participants' discussion reflected an improvement in communication between HDR candidates and the Graduate Research School since 2011. This is evidenced by a significant increase in positive references and decrease in negatives. The positive experiences relate to the responsiveness of staff, clear dissemination of information and 'ethic of support'. For example: "Every time I've called GRS to ask something they've bent over backwards to help me" and "GRS helped with advice and answers to questions. Felt more empowered."

There were few negative communication issues. One student had had "supervisor issues" and approached GRS, and felt they betrayed confidentiality in addressing the issues. The main negative in communication was references to "important emails can get overlooked", "email bombardment" and the fact that "some students are across two or three faculties and are bombarded with info". One recommendation to improve communication was the suggestion of "identification or Tags so that these [emails] are easy to navigate?" and another recommendation was "an electronic calendar" of events. Other suggestions included: advertising more funding opportunities and facilitating communication between students to share their issues and peer support.

Administration

Administrative procedures were a source of complaint, including procedures for completing progress reports and grant applications. Key recommendations were to streamline administration and make form design and lodgement user-friendly.

One recommendation for improving document management was "an online system so that everyone can be tagged (supervisor, student, etc.) as the process moves along. Forms could be completed and lodged online so there aren't documents and versions of documents being circulated". General recommendations to improve administration also included "preparing a kit with all paperwork for all new students".

Fostering HDR networks

Another theme related to communication and general support of HDR candidates was the fostering of stronger HDR networks that the GRS, in part, facilitates. Many of these issues were seen as school/discipline based and are mentioned in the school-based discussion, however some were whole of campus or whole of HDR cohort. Some comments were that there is "little cohesion across students and that "more regular meetings are needed" amongst candidates. Cairns based students said, "The Cairns Christmas party was fantastic" and were supportive of such social events. Candidates in two different faculties referred to the online presence of HDRs recommending "a page for post graduate researchers and "maybe create student research profiles so research students can go online to see what other researchers/teams are working on".

Skills development

A core area of support coordinated by the GRS is the skills development program. Positive comments about the skills development workshops provided referred to the range and the quality of presentations. Writing support was particularly positive. Some negative comments regarding workshops were that in some cases they were seen as broad, dominated by the physical sciences or offered too infrequently.

Recommendations about skill development related to improving access and suggested topics. Access could be improved by recording more public lectures and seminars, utilising video platforms so external students can participate in workshops in real-time., and curating existing online videos on YouTube (JCU produced and externally produced).

Some workshop requests included:

Project management skills and conflict management skills

“Tropical Researchers in a post-colonial world” – many students work in developing countries/post colonial contexts

The structure and styles of PhD theses

Career pathways and preparedness

Qualitative design

Whole day Indigenous protocols training

One other recommendation was that employment in research projects outside of the PhD and even the specific discipline provides very worthwhile professional development. One candidate from the social sciences commented that “it would be nice to have better understanding of university positions out there, not necessarily within school, e.g. as a research assistant. The candidate had gained “publications and statistical experience” from their own involvement in several other projects and suggested that these opportunities could be advertised directly to HDR candidates through the GRS newsletter, Career Hub or emails.

Structure of the PhD

References to the structure of the PhD and the new structures being put in place in 2014 were mixed. Some comments were positive about milestones as valuable for providing advice and direction. There were some concerns about the stress that ‘extra’ milestones might place on candidates, particularly those who are part time or have little financial support.

Comments also indicate that the pathways and milestones need clarification and more dissemination. There were also positive comments regarding regular milestones “other wise you drift along” and support for the completion scholarships.

Some concerns and confusion about the structure related to transparency, the perception that milestones could be “cumbersome” rather than enabling and the need for flexibility given research projects have such a wide array of different demands. Students also wanted more information about the structures and pathways. Students had mixed opinions on the need for publication throughout the candidature or presenting their thesis by publication and the structural implications.

Advisory factors

Doctoral education research (Barnes, Wolfe, Chard, Stassen, & Williams, 2011; Kiley, 2011; Ward & Gardner, 2008) has referred to some good supervisory practices as being: provision of appropriate feedback, the frequency of meetings, making an early start on writing, clarifying expectations, a positive relationship and a sustained topic and advisor. When asked, “what are the characteristics of a good supervisor?” candidates affirmed the importance of a good relationship, expertise in both the field and the research process and an ethic of care and support. Consistent engagement (regardless of the form) was also seen as a key factor in good supervisory practices. Students nominated the following descriptors: *understanding, flexible, knowledgeable, respectful, encouraging/motivating, supportive, responsive* (especially with communication and feedback)

In discussing the interpersonal dynamics of their advisory experience, candidates indicated that there are diverse ways of relating and that matching compatible advisors and students is important:

It is so difficult to create procedures because students and supervisors have different styles; they need to be matched to each other.

Hard to mandate that supervisors have to be a certain way if they're not that sort of person

My supervisor is my close friend and boss, which blur the boundaries. My other supervisor is not overly involved. She comments on my writing but doesn't know much about my methodology.

Must be difficult for supervisors including range in ages. They deal with incredible age ranges, different topics, etc. The onus should be on the researcher.

Positive advisory experiences

Accessibility and communication was a resounding feature of positive advisory experiences. For some students this means flexibility and for others it means predictability and regular meeting times. These comments also indicate the diverse approaches to communication – formal and informal, regular or needs based:

My supervisor is informal. If I want to talk, he says come back after lunch.

We never have minutes of regular discussions.

My experiences have been quite good. Generally speaking we have a weekly meeting. The meetings are not structured but the meeting schedule is of 1 hour face-to-face each week. I find that really helpful because during the week questions arise so I know I have that opportunity to ask my supervisor.

[I] think it's about finding what suits the people involved. If there are weeks I feel I have nothing to say and am not ready to discuss it we just don't have a meeting that week. I think it's about creating that structure at the beginning.

This clear and regular communication is a factor in shaping what Halse and Malfroy (2010) refer to as a ‘learning alliance’ – a mutual commitment and engagement with the research project.

Support and enthusiasm for the candidate fit into what Halse and Malfroy (2010) call “Habits of Mind”, a disposition and modes of behaviour, self awareness, reflective practice, responsiveness to student needs, openness, application of ‘lived knowledge’. Several JCU doctoral candidates referred to such habits as positive experiences:

Highlight and Anchor has been advisors that have faith in what I can do

[My supervisor's are] patient, into detail, inspire direction that I'm seeking, friends to me, open to thoughts, exchange knowledge.

Having a supervisor that encourages you. My supervisor is keen because he's interested, we're doing something that hasn't been done before. He sits in the back and says 'Go, go, go.' Can stay passionate and focused. I've been at crossroads where I simply don't know what to do. My supervisor may not know either, but he says let's sit down and figure out what to do.

[I have] two positive, helpful supervisors and relationship where they understanding where I'm coming from because of my background

Sometimes I walk into my supervisors where I say 'I hate my subject and the whole thing. Tell me what I need to be doing and get me back on track!' And she says, 'Ok, go and do this and you've got this time.'

Managed to talk in supervisory meetings – more substance than other students – and he replies to emails.

There is a lot of trust both ways.

Being knowledgeable about the field of research is also valued as is the networks that a good supervisor facilitates:

[A good supervisor has] lots of field experience and good theoretical background. They can help you out with field work and see the bigger picture. Gives good support and ideas. We don't have a day to meet because I know what I'm supposed to do but I can meet with them anytime to discuss something.

In my field it's definitely theoretical knowledge and contact. I have a main supervisor that is very well regarded. It's been a real door opener, it's a stamp of quality.

I got another associate professor from another university put on my team and she is so knowledgeable in the area. It's fantastic to work with someone you've referenced so many times.

While advisory panels do have the potential for logistical, social and intellectual complexities and tensions (referred to in the negative discussion section below), the participants interviewed generally valued the collective resources and 'back up' provided by multiple supervisors stating they are "Individual, need to be different, need more than one, need balance in the team".

Negative advisory experiences

Negative advisory experiences were adversely related to the characteristics of 'quality supervision', including difficulties in receiving timely, effective feedback, clear communication or access. In addition, some students described interpersonal difficulties with or between their advisors.

Accessibility of supervisors due to distance or lack of response was raised across several schools. Some comments about accessibility particularly referred to the perceived workload of advisors saying "they [supervisors] are busy and sometimes they have more students than they can handle" or "more time in their workload would be good". References to the workload of the advisors are more prevalent across several schools than they were in the 2011 study. While over commitment was also a theme in 2011, the explicit references to workload are distinctive and may reflect increases in student numbers and intensification of academic work.

As mentioned, differences amongst the advisory panel were also a negative experience for some students:

Supervisors can have different expectations

Supervisory teams that disagree, makes it difficult for the student to know what to do. One supervisor would attack at the pre-completion seminar and criticise them. Competing supervisors who dislike each other, doing the opposite.

Other negative experiences revolved around succession planning, a lack of engagement or perceived unethical conduct relating to specific supervisory arrangements and the mobility of supervisors. Some candidates believed their advisors needed training to improve communication skills.

Student agency/role

Managing the role and relationship was explicitly mentioned within focus group discussion. For example dialogue between students spoke of needing “to manage the supervisors and make it very clear from the word go – the roles and responsibilities and your rights as a student”. From these students’ perspectives, it is up to candidates to be independent, disciplined and self-directed. Other students mentioned that it “depends on the student and their independence” and that “you’re the expert in your research” indicating a sense of agency and autonomy in their role. There are some tensions between these perceptions and the guidance that other students wanted from their supervisors.

Other general recommendations to improve advisory experience included the role of adjunct and external advisors. One student recommended protocols for adjunct primary supervisors as they were not receiving timely feedback and questioned whether as adjunct, they were motivated or invested. Another student suggested that the rules of their school restricted supervision from outside the school, to the detriment of candidates. Recommendations were mixed regarding protocols for meetings with supervisors. Some students suggested supervision needs mandated regular meetings while others believed that more flexible arrangements should be negotiated.

Financial support

A significant number of full time HDR candidates heavily rely on teaching/tutoring experiences and supplementary income. Part time candidates are more likely to be undertaking full time work. Financial and personal commitments are the biggest factor affecting progression. Positive comments about financial support related to the provision of scholarships, grants for conference and research travel and the value of casual employment in supporting candidates.

Several negative comments related to frustration with the paper-based system and inconsistencies in the access to and distribution of the minimum resources funding. For example: “there’s the policy of minimum requirements but some schools are choosing not to do that. It needs to be a uniform approach for every PhD”. Funding processes and opportunities need to be clarified, with students stating “not a lot of communication about what is available in terms of grants” and “processes for accessing and monitoring finances seem unclear”. Candidates wanted more guidance on processes and suggested a “flowchart of how this works and time frames” as “descriptive documents hard to interpret”.

Refer to the Appendix for additional written feedback about government support status and policies.

Recommendations

Whole-of-institution support

1. Administrative procedures for travel, finances and casual employment need to be consistent, transparent and streamlined for HDR candidates.
2. HDR advisor workload/accessibility needs to be monitored more closely to ensure equitable advisory experiences.
3. The provision of the minimum resources policy needs to be reviewed to ensure equity across areas of the university.
4. Organisational units need support to foster scholarly communities and collaboration. Further opportunities for community building could include: regular social events, research seminars, student/staff research groups, online profiles and networking.
5. Policies that facilitate and prioritise casual employment for HDR candidates to further improve financial support options.
6. Access to and quality of administration support varies greatly across the institution and should be reviewed to ensure equity and proximity to candidates.
7. Cairns-based candidates should be provided with after hours access to facilities consistent with the provision for Townsville based candidates and the flexibility required for their study.
8. International candidates require more comprehensive information on social services and improved access to personal support when needed.

Graduate Research School

1. Digital management and online lodgement of forms would allow for more efficient coordination between candidates, schools and GRS.
2. HDR changes require further dissemination to address confusion and concerns about 'punitive rather than supportive' milestones.
3. Further develop online resources (e.g. curating a bank of recorded seminars/tutorials and existing media resources) and 'real-time' development opportunities through online learning platforms.
4. In conjunction with Careers and Employment GRS could offer more information about employment pathways and wider academic professions or industry skills.
5. Review the equitable provision of student/supervisor ratios and workload distribution and the protocols surrounding adjunct supervision. These provisions also relate to the facilitation of regular contact and timely feedback as quality supervisory practice and the monitoring of such practices.

Faculty and School based

Arts, Education and Social Sciences

- That community building activities for candidates in the College of Arts, Social Sciences and Education be supported through a mixture of social, self run networking events and more formal seminars. Activities should also focus on cross-disciplinary networking between staff and students.

Law, Business and Creative Arts

- That creative arts facilities be provided in Cairns to reflect recent growth in the HDR cohort and equivalent facilities in Townsville.

Medicine, Health and Molecular Sciences

- That space for HDR candidates in these disciplines could be reconfigured to provide more interaction between candidates and with supervisors.
- That lab management in the Veterinary sciences could be streamlined.
- That the resources and skill development of the cohort program be leveraged/'piggybacked' to provide opportunities for students not in the cohort program.

Science and Engineering

- Sustain disciplinary seminars and promote participation of staff and students.
- Reinstate Engineering social functions and seminars to strengthen the scholarly community.

Conclusion

This report presents the findings of a study into the experiences of doctoral candidates at James Cook University in 2013. Qualitative data concerning advisory experiences, engagement with the Graduate Research School and specific school based issues and initiatives have identified areas of satisfaction and areas of improvement. Areas of satisfaction include advisory supports, general facilities, skill development, communication with the GRS and school-based initiatives.

Examples of best practice include: regular school seminars, lab/research group meetings, discipline specific skill development. Areas of improvement include engaging HDR students with staff and undergraduate students as part of a scholarly community, administrative procedures, financial transparency and some advisory issues. In addition, the qualitative data about recent changes around the structure and policy and procedures for HDR candidates indicates that there are 'mixed feeling' about the reforms, signalling a need for clear communication as candidates transition into new organisational and course structures.

References

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Appendix: School-based discussion

Faculty of Arts, Education & Social Sciences

Positive experiences within the faculty:

- Strong Psychology cohort
- Research seminars and blackboard community in Education

Key issues/concerns:

- Community building

Arts and Social Sciences

Positive Comments:

Support is there if you search for it. I don't expect to be spoon fed because of the level where it. Don't wander and wonder, ask the questions.

Biggest positive – external feedback from extra advisors, contact with Head of School. Start to realise you can do stuff and it's worthwhile outside of an undergraduate degree

Interactions is good. Amongst psychology cohort.

Able to chat to most of lecturers

Psych lecturers know us and we know them

SASS post-grads Facebook group have meetings every now and then.

Fizzled out a bit though. Used as way of communicated, don't know if it's particularly ... effective

People have tried to get together

Good relationships amongst post-grads and academics.

Really approachable admin ladies.

Negative Comments:

Frustration at times. Particularly amongst post-grads, feeling of being underappreciated. Shuffled by that, not as much – teach subjects from supervisor.

Paid for marking. Feel like doing so much more and not being appreciated.

Not feeling supported at school level.

School Manager wouldn't know me by name.

People we know dependent on who is in room and area.

Environment created or ruined by staff. Filters down.

Have not been to SASS seminars. If it doesn't interest me then I won't go along.

Go to psych seminars. We have an alternative that we go to.

Recently applied for SA grant - most academics think we have space we get together. Surprised there is not a space provided for us. Physical space like common room.

Position of PLO – not much to do with people, no contact at all. Would be nice for him to pop up and listen to what we're actually doing.

Would be great to know what other people in the building are doing in the faculty but you just don't get that.

Education

Positive comments about the school:

DRE has increased the opportunities for involvement – with the Research Matters and Blackboard community

Admin is fantastic – Wendy (SoE in Cairns) is great.

IT support is good

"Everyone's done their best" to assist

Negative comments related community building and requests for more admin support:

Only interaction with staff is through teaching unless you are working in a subject you are not connected.

Research Matters – a good initiative but it is hard to get to them

Weekly meetings?

Little cohesion across PG students.

Recommends a page for post graduate researchers

More regular meetings are needed

Space and location had changed greatly with new facilities – PGs were in one shared office space – more informal support – now divided and co located with supervisors and casual staff

CNS – request a Cairns specific PGO – "you need a face" – so many incidental queries/issues and someone to help you pay attention to the admin. At a school level and GRS – something was missing in orientation. Arrived feeling lost with no orientation to facilities in the PG centre,

TSV - feels like a stranger to admin, procedures depend on who you are dealing with – inconsistency. Some requests feel like needs aren't being met, repeatedly not getting responses – customer service?

Would like a lot more communication and support.

The process of accessing stipend money is unclear

Faculty of Law, Business & Creative Arts

Positive experiences within the faculty:

- Annual student conferences and weekly seminars
- Multidisciplinary research

Key issues and concerns:

- Admin support/clarification of processes
- Creative Arts facilities in Cairns

Business/Law/IT (participants were across these disciplines and so comments were amalgamated)

Positive Comments:

My school are very efficient and very nice and understand what you are talking about. For example, signing the annual report they organise everyone else to sign it. Very professional in answering all my questions in depth. They prepared a file of all the paperwork and told me to follow instructions and said to send it to them not the supervisors.

Facilities are good,

Attended 3 conferences in 2013 supported by school funding

The school has an annual student conference and weekly seminars

Enjoy the multidisciplinary nature of the school as their research

Thought being a PhD student I might be taken under the wing by my schools, and business have done that. Supervisors have been very nurturing but outside of that, particularly Earth Sciences have not done a lot to look after me.

Overall School of Business generally does a good job.

Happy with office spaces

School of Business are awesome, print out forms, organise supervisors.

Because I'm 40% Business, 60% Earth Sciences I go to Business for everything because they give what I want with a smile whereas Earth Sciences say 'what do you want.' They're too busy.

In the Law school, we have study groups and meet once a week to support each other. We talk about what went wrong in interviews, everyone claps if they say they got this done or wrote 1,000 words each week. Motivation can very easily go down the drain especially when you reach the second year mark.

Negative Comments:

The organisation and admin of the school. Balancing point – teaching best practice but this is not reflected in their own admin. Disconnect between theory and practice.

Admin procedures a little unclear.

We're supposed to have facilities – I have a desk and computer. I have a \$100 allowance for printing, apparently this is a rule but everyone else has free printing. So I spend a lot of money on printing. It's a silly system and I'm not comfortable to say anything because everyone else might get the shady deal. But \$100 a year which I think is the official policy is

outrageously small. Our literature review is gone in no time. I've spent my printing allowance, I don't know how to review and edit text without printing it

Don't think there is any support from the school but from the university (Law)

The Creative Arts

Positive Comments:

Great to see Cairns growing. Did masters in Townsville, great sense of distance. Principal supervisor in Singapore. Definitely having supervisor on the ground in Cairns shows Cairns is maturing.

Practising artist as supervisor, huge drawcard for me. Crux of choosing to do PhD here in Cairns with this supervisor. Constantly in Arts you're critiquing yourself, having someone in field with process with you. Add something to written research and theories. Someone who is a thinking artist

Negative comments were mostly about the lack of disciplinary specific resources, particularly on the Cairns campus:

Old uni – printing presses, workshop. So much more productive. Having to go above and beyond

Artist – happy to buy materials, but space is needed

Studio space for me

Very small school and I'm only admin person here.

Little in terms of facilities – virtually non-existent. Use own resources. Just a computer on a desk.

Entitled to computer under minimal resources policy. Different disciplinary needs for resources and extra space

No after hours. 7-8 o'clock (pm) security keen to clear building.

No access to any space after 24 hours. 1 computer lab

Trouble getting supervisor because of discipline, photography. Neither of supervisors are photography. Doing a brilliant job but neither have background in discipline

Only one supervisor in Cairns, wonder if this will grow. If supervisors from other disciplines will come.

Positive experiences within the faculty:

- Active research groups- face-to-face and technology supported inclusive of HDR
- Cohort program

Key issues/concerns:

- Admin processes
- Physical facilities – office space and labs

Medicine and Dentistry

PGO also follows up on important emails

In recent times there has been more emails from Emma (PGO) and Melissa Crowe

The current spaces are isolating – the students are spread out in different buildings

Call for more informal get togethers

Some of the office space is open plan and this is problematic – there is a need for protocols for operating in the space.

Support for co location with supervisors.

Had some contact with Emma Anderson but not sure if she is from my school or GRS. Have emailed her with queries. She organised confirmation of candidature. Got me a computer at one stage.

Public Health

Biggest hurdle constantly in so many ways is administration. Horrendous. Private enterprise. Incompetent people vortex. 18 months couldn't do confirmation seminar. We were supposed to be contacted by student liaison officer. Didn't happen. Set up new lab here. Seemed as if administration didn't know what to do with students in our situation. Preliminary programs and preparatory seminars for us to go to were not applicable to us in our situation. Nightmare for 6-12 months. Worked at QIMR, WALTER and Melbourne Uni – world class institutions before. Shocked to come here. Administration was a hindrance. Looking back now it's comical. Other people were depressed and in disbelief that they had moved here to do a PhD and they were surrounded by incompetence.

I am one of the most easy going, positive people and I wasn't happy.

My school have been really good as well. Ross Sparks was awesome.

No one is willing to put their hand up to go above and beyond their point of call. They use every excuse they can to say, "It's not my responsibility." Not sure if they're scared or incompetent. So difficult to get in contact with. If they don't know, how would I know?

Looking after students, don't know how is supposed to take responsibility for us. Grey area. Not just having one port of call. Back ups in case they are unavailable.

Support for accommodation and travel to the cohort group sessions twice a year.

My school keeps the records of our progress so far and does remind us for tasks that we have not met towards the candidature. It also does most of our administrative work for us that JCU requires.

Some travel expenses? I don't really know what money comes from the school and what comes from the GRS.

Some brick walls as a result of bureaucracy e.g. just finding an office space

Stigma of being a student – administratively and financially despite the fact that a big proportion of PGs are in professional roles. Stigma on international students

One student wasn't made aware of stipend

One student referred to road blocks from school manager. Need for more transparency of process. Some of the information is ad hoc

*Space PG shared office space results in information sharing and social/emotional support
Not a lot of physical space*

School research group – S2 is a part of, involved students and staff working on a similar topic. Great opportunity to find out about conferences and grants etc.

The group is supported by google hangout – to bring together on campus and external students. Every week somebody presents something. Needs people to drive it. Supports problem solving and there is variety and diversity in the group. Fosters good communication. Helps students to navigate new norms and expectations.

Pharmacy

The only Pharmacy specific comment was support for inclusion of students on the Cairns campus:

I haven't had a lot of contact with the school. The majority of the school are in Townsville. Every time there is a confirmation seminar or talk it is in Townsville. I don't see things in my field. Want to have something to see to compare to. Majority are not video-linked. I email to ask for video-linked and they can't. Other schools video-link.

Nursing, Midwifery & Nutrition

No specific school-based feedback .

Veterinary & Biomedical Sciences

Positives aspects of the school:

The 3-year scholarship was first time they gave that out.

Try and give time off – 6 months of no teaching load this year.

Everyone is supportive in wanting me to finish

Bought goats to accommodate research

Concerns and recommendations related to lab facilities in the school and the perceived valuing of HDR candidates below other groups:

Some students are disappointed with labs, equipment and labour (intensive with little technical support)

Students had different expectations of the facilities.

“labs are poor quality”

Only fish lab in northern Australia and it is not in good condition

Can depend on when/if you do lab work with your supervisor or not, the methodology you employ (working with supervisor might mean better resources)

It takes time for optimization of lab work, to perfect new techniques, this has to be factored in.

Admin – processes move very slowly

Administration and Budgeting had left HDR students feeling like second class/segregated

The School PGO is really good but “we as the Post Grads never get a say in the school”

PGs in general don't participate in seminars - supervisors should encourage this.

Used to have regular seminar with guest speakers but the seminars are not limited to milestones (confirmations and pre-completions)

Need a lab manager overseeing facilities, processes are different in every lab – they shouldn't be different procedures for safety, cleaning etc.

There were some mixed opinions on the opportunities available at a school and uni level with the comment:

There are opportunities but they don't join...they think that life is their PhD.

Faculty of Science & Engineering

Positive experiences within the faculty:

- Recent conference in Engineering
- Physical facilities and resources

Key issues/concerns:

- Lack of networking/interaction amongst HDR candidates
- Administration support (SEES)

Earth & Environmental Sciences

There was general satisfaction with office space and resources. Institutional processes around fieldwork and travel (as discussed in earlier section) were key concerns for these disciplines. Some students said there is “Good admin support” and that they are “happy with the office space”. School based activities include:

Regular morning teas and seminars – geology, very technical, not open to everyone

Weekly lab meeting (environmental)

There was general science seminars – was instigated by PGs but was very hard to sustain. Have to work with undergrads and staff. Like the seminars being multidisciplinary. Some support for recommending these.

However, there were some negative comments about school support:

Didn't get much school support. Always been an independent worker, don't want to ask for much help. Don't want to make a fuss, don't want to look like I'm having problems. Asked deputy HoS at SEES – advice was to go to union rep and research student monitor. Latter very helpful.

very slow in dealing with bureaucracy, not reliable, try hard to keep in touch with them, need to call, also reading email, wait for reply – messy system.

My school forgets documents, time-consuming process of. Feel like I'm dealing with administrative issues than with issues. Paperwork all the time but I realise it is worse for professors. Admin staff never know anything

I have a friend in Earth Sciences who has to go to town to do all her own printing.

Engineering & Physical Sciences

Candidates were happy with the office space in Townsville, which consists of the top floor of building 17, referred to as the Post Graduate Precinct. Each student has a cubicle and there is a shared kitchen area. However participants commented that “on same floor but no interaction”.

Candidates in this school referred to positive experiences in 2012 such as regular social events and PG seminars that didn't happen in 2013 and voiced support for these being reinstated:

Could have more frequent seminars and workshops to get everyone together. The school used to have regular events (afternoon teas) but not recently

Not any more get togethers with PhD

Monthly chips and drinks has gone. Informal friends group. Three of us have joined staff social club. Not really formal things for post-grad and not really extended to all of them

Used to be seminars, tried to get them going again. Bit more in first year. Used us to make conference. Post-grad conference. Been really good

Did have weekly seminars for the first year (Thurs afternoons) Last year had post-grad committee. If that was going on more then we could it every six months. Committee doesn't exist anymore.

Monthly party helps interaction and informal discussion.

Other general comments:

Good support with administration

Started to get a bit more of network together. Not a lot of explanation of things earlier on. Bit more experience with various processes would be good.

Cutting back on support staff. Cutting back on this and making supervisors do things themselves. Contention with senior management in school to approve funds, tutoring funds. Tricky to work with a lot of the time.

Roped us into doing the conference

Suggestion to improve interaction amongst students. Scope for interaction, get to know others and what they're doing. Recently had a conference. Everyone gets together and then you know what they're doing and the sciences that they're from.

Participants stated, "As much as it sounds like we're complaining, it is all pretty good" and "Overall the school is good. We understand the limitations of what can be done".

Marine & Tropical Biology

School based comments were positive about administration support but in some instances concerned about interaction with other researchers and funding.

My school supports with paperwork, helping us sort out for field work, payments, purchases. We have very good people helping us get things in shape to meet university standards. They take a look at the paperwork especially because I have a lot to go into the field. Make sure you do everything right in the easiest way possible. Tell you the best way to buy something and they even order it for you. Have not experienced any issues yet.

Weak camaraderie. Practise talk and we give feedback. Not close to fellow dugong researchers. Closer to people outsides, like scientists from CSIRO and partnership with University of Queensland.

There's official things like seminar days but there's no interaction with people

Research in field, data from satellites – not much interaction. I could have stayed in the States and probably been at the same stage I'm at now

Laura Castele gives grammar and structure feedback. I never use them everyone else around me does and has such great things to say about her. Having someone that knowledgeable and accessible is great to have as a resource. Advertised well from emails to post-grads

weak in funding to go to conferences, especially international.

Semi structured focus group topics

Stages of candidature

- Can you tell me where you are at with your research the milestones that you have experienced?

Expectations/realities of candidature

- What expectations did you have about what undertaking your doctoral research would be like?
- In what ways are these similar or different to your experiences so far?
- What do people expect lies in store?

Highlights of the candidature so far

- What have been the strengths or highlights of your experiences so far/ these could be relating to any aspect of the study

Institutional supports

- In what ways does the school support you?
- In what ways does the GRS support you?
- Any areas of support you feel could be improved/ How?

Supervisory experiences

- What makes a good supervisor?
- What are some of the good practices amongst our supervisors?
- Has anyone had any issues with supervisors?
- Any aspects of their supervision that could improve?

General suggestions for improving candidature

- General feedback to the school and the GRS?

Additional written feedback – wider policy and financial support

Other recommendations to improve financial support:

The GRS and the school want to control funding I've obtained from external funding sources. Surely the agreements that I have with these funding bodies are sufficient to dictate what I spend them on. I have to spend significant amounts of time dealing with multiple people and filling out lots of forms to spend money which if I spent wrong would be in breach of my funding agreement anyway.

Funding should be checked at confirmation – to ensure that the school can and will support you. Core expenses should be assured

Some comments related to government regulation:

Financial constraints biggest constraint in progress – on Centrelink unemployment benefit, module experience hours takes away from PhD

Feel the 8 hours of work per week restriction of the APA scholarship is limiting.

Individual Student Submission:

There is probably one important lowlight to the PhD process that I should mention. As a part time student, I have had no end of problems with the Centrelink, Job Services Australia process.

The job services Australia member can decide at any time that my PhD is an inappropriate activity and place me in something else that they think is "more suitable" to further my employment prospects (such as work for the dole, or interview and job application lessons). They have placed me in work for the dole in a previous year, as they think that I am undertaking a PhD because I am "work shy". At any time they can make completion virtually impossible.

This tight control is justified by Centrelink and the department of inhuman services, as a PhD "doesn't lead to employment".

Furthermore, at the start of January this year, my income dropped by 20 per cent, mainly because I worked towards (through publications), and was awarded a scholarship. The United Nations has identified this drastic reduction in subsistence as a human rights issue for the parents in Australia, and the government is yet to adequately address the issues raised by the UN Commissioner. To continue my PhD under the new regime, I have stopped taking some of my medications. Obviously not those that keep me alive, but rather those that make my life more comfortable and mean that my output was more rapid and astute than it is now.

My advisors are well aware of my position, but because I am off campus it is difficult to supplement my income through employment (as has been arranged for other candidates that have had difficulties). The result is that many parents in my position will find it even more difficult to undertake a PhD in the future, effectively discriminating against those with low incomes and carer responsibilities.

I am aware that this is not a direct responsibility of the University, however I think that my situation and ongoing difficulties are worth noting, as it may lead to an awareness that will trigger change.