

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

HDR Candidate Experience Survey Report

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Executive summary

This report summarises the results of a project investigating the experience of current Higher Degree by Research (HDR) candidates at JCU. The need for this project arose from considering the results of the 2019 and 2020 Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ), which is part of the Graduate Outcomes Survey (GOS).

Survey data were collected from current JCU HDR candidates (n=289) based on the PREQ instrument and findings, providing insight into the contemporary experience of the HDR program. Interview data were also collected (n=15) to further unpack the survey results and provide a more nuanced picture of current needs of HDR candidates.

These data were used to inform recommendations for experience improvement strategies for current and future candidates.

Overview: survey results

In response to the statement, *“Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of my higher degree research experience thus far”*, 73% of the candidates answered *Agree* or *Strongly agree*. When we asked why the candidates rated their overall experience this way, “supervision” and “support” were the most frequently mentioned ideas; the candidates’ experience of supervision and support heavily influence how they see their overall experience.

Most candidates were very pleased with the supervision they have received. In response to both supervision items, 83% of candidates were satisfied, with far more candidates responding *Strongly agree* than *Agree*. Most of the improvements to supervision the candidates suggested are related to increasing advisor capacity to invest time in the candidate.

Satisfaction with learning community was lower (54%) among HDR candidates than satisfaction with other aspects of the HDR experience. Also, more candidates agreed that they felt part of a community with their HDR peers than feeling part of their department’s broader community. Female, external and domestic candidates were significantly less satisfied with their experience of learning community than male, internal and international candidates respectively.

When asked about their opportunities for skills development and training, 76% of candidates were satisfied with their training opportunities overall, 75% felt better prepared as a researcher, but fewer (60%) felt better prepared for their career. The most common suggestions for improving skills development opportunities were specific training opportunities from which the candidate would benefit, especially training around careers and employability. The same gap in candidates’ understanding of their employability outside the university sector is reflected in the responses to questions about industry engagement opportunities.

Difficulty seeking and receiving information about candidature (and admin processes associated with candidature) was an issue made evident across several sections of the survey. Some candidates mentioned these things explicitly, while others implied them through responses that showed incorrect expectations or beliefs about what is available to them as HDR candidates.

College specific survey results

The survey results indicated variation between colleges in the level of satisfaction of their candidates for each of the questions in the survey. The level of overall satisfaction for each college ranged from 88% to 63%. Colleges have been provided with the detailed college comparative data and their college survey results where the number of responses exceeded 10.

Overview: interview results

The areas “support” and “learning community” were investigated further via candidate interviews.

Despite their diverse experiences, the interviewees had the following shared understandings or experiences of “support” in their candidature:

- Responsive and accessible advisors
- Peer connections - normalising the experience of doing a PhD or MPhil
- Peer connections - contact with HDRs who are “one step ahead”
- Being able to readily access information about candidature or related processes, and navigate administration
- Personal circumstances are understood and accommodated

The interviewees’ experiences of learning community showed the importance of the candidates’ own initiative in forming connections with other researchers. However, “opportunities to connect” often served as a platform for candidates to go on and initiate connections. Four types of repeatedly mentioned connection opportunities were:

- Regular college or discipline-level online gatherings
- Platforms for casual online communication
- Shared learning opportunities
- Workspace proximity/shared lunch areas

The first three listed connection opportunities were available to candidates regardless of whether they were working on- or off-campus.

Identified areas for improvement

From the areas of need made evident by the survey and interview results, we considered strategies to improve the HDR experience for current and future candidates.

Support:

- Share with advisors and ADREs the importance of the supervisory role – particularly being accessible and responsive – in the overall candidate experience.
- Continue the process of reviewing and restructuring information access and communication with candidates.

Learning community:

- Share with relevant staff how they can help offer candidates opportunities to connect.
- Empower candidates to build their own learning communities.

Skills development, employability, and industry engagement:

- Help candidates better visualise the jobs or industries that require advanced research skills.

- Empower candidates to build their employability during their candidature and better understand the value of their skills outside the university sector through sharing alumni stories.

Finally the survey results have indicated a need to continue to work to ensure equal access to external or remotely located, female, and part-time time candidates which is consistent with the PREQ survey.