Improving the Postgraduate Student Experience and Employability of Postgraduate Students

An Overview of National Research Findings and Preliminary Resource Guide
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Engaging postgraduate students and supporting higher education to enhance the 21st century student experience

Final Report 2016

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http://PostgraduateStudentExperience.com
Executive Summary

- How do postgraduates rate their student experience?
- What matters most to them about this experience?
- How do perceptions of experience vary between those in coursework versus research degrees?
- Is there agreement or dissonance between the perceptions of postgraduate students and the staff who support them?
- How can postgraduate student experience be improved?

Whereas Australia has largescale national surveys of undergraduate students, there are no equivalent regular, ongoing surveys of postgraduates. The Higher Education Academy (HEA) of the United Kingdom separately surveys research and coursework postgraduates (called Postgraduate Taught Students in the United Kingdom) and presents reports ‘in the students’ own words.’ Australia currently has nothing equivalent and the voices of coursework postgraduates appear to be particularly under-represented.

Team Members and Institutional Affiliations
Led by Associate Professors Linda Crane and Shelley Kinash from Bond University, a group of researchers therefore responded to a call from the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching and were awarded a strategic priority research grant to inquire into the postgraduate student experience from the perspective of students and the staff who support them. The other members of the research team were:

- Associate Professor Gary Hamlin, also of Bond University;
- Professor Ken Udas and Professor Helen Partridge, DVC and PVC respectively of University of Southern Queensland;
- Associate Professor Bill Eckersley of Victoria University;
- Dr Sarah Richardson of the Australian Council for Educational Research;
- Harry Rolf, followed by Jim Smith, Successive Presidents of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations;
- Professor Sally Kift, Critical Friend and DVC of James Cook University; and
- Project Managers Madelaine-Marie Judd and Amy Bannatyne.

The Evaluation Team of Helen McLean, Grace Lynch and Garry Allan, RMIT played key formative roles in assuring the impact of the project and contributing to the dissemination.

Goals and Aims
The overall goals of the research were to determine what Australian postgraduates think about their student experience and to recommend ameliorative actions to guide the strategies of higher education leaders. The specific project aims were to: (i) undertake a comprehensive analysis of the broad experiences of Australian coursework postgraduate students, and the relationship these broad experiences have to learning; and (ii) establish evidence based recommendations, including best practice guidelines, that can be used to impact and enhance Australia’s postgraduate students’ broad experiences.
Project Activities and Demographics of Participants

Engagement with 319 postgraduate students and 47 staff (N = 366) was conducted through:
- Student engagement breakfasts (n = 223),
- Face-to-face interviews (n = 82), and
- Face-to-face focus groups (n = 61).

In addition, secondary analysis was conducted of national surveys with over 67,000 postgraduate coursework students and compared against perspectives of undergraduates.

Students and staff participating in the research were widely (and intentionally) varied.
- Overall, 319 students participated from 26 universities and 8 states/territories.
- Among the 319 participating students, 223 were derived from the engagement breakfasts, 38 from the individual interviews, and 58 from the focus groups.
- Of the 261 students participating in the engagement breakfasts and interviews (focus group demographic information was not collected), the average student age was 35 years, the modal age was 24 years and the age range was 21 to 60.
- Sixty nine per cent of these students were female and 30.5 per cent were male (one did not disclose gender).
- The most common discipline of participating students was humanities (17%), followed by business (11%), and general sciences (10%); however, almost half of the students did not explicitly disclose their discipline (45%).
- Over half the sample identified as being full-time students (59%).
- In terms of degrees, 52 per cent were enrolled in a doctoral program and 38 per cent in a master’s program.
- Overall, 56 per cent identified as being enrolled in research-based programs, 27 per cent in course-based programs, and 7 per cent in mixed modes (elements of both coursework and research). An additional 9 per cent identified their programs as “other,” while 1 per cent did not disclose their program.
- Overall, 47 staff participated from 26 universities and 8 states/territories.
- The most common position of participating staff was university lecturer (22%), followed by professor (18%), and institutional or department director (16%). In total, there were 9 different position types included, including non-academic professional staff.
- There were 25 female participating staff and 22 male staff.
Key Findings

Through the course of this work, an understanding of the ‘postgraduate student experience’ emerged and was conceptualised to describe the totality of students’ involvement with, and engagement in, their higher education, and the prioritisation of learning within their broader contextual environment. The term encompasses students’ (and their supervisors/educators) appraisal of, and engagement with, their methods of learning, affective response toward their course, interaction with the institution, sense of identity and belonging, support system (within and outside the university), and the contextual factors that assist or disrupt their progress – personally, academically, and/or professionally. The definition evolved from earlier work with research students (e.g., Leonard, Metcalfe, Becker, & Evans, 2006) to incorporate all forms of postgraduate study, whether that be research, coursework, or a mix of both. Notably, it reflects the journey of a student in multiple domains (e.g., academic, personal, professional, and social), and acknowledges the complexity and diversity of experiences cannot be synthesised into a universal definition.

Four key findings emerged and were confirmed by 107 delegates attending a national symposium in the final stage of the project.

1. The overall design concept of the postgraduate student experience is largely ignored by universities. There is a belief that overall, universities have improved the undergraduate student experience through focused inquiry, consultation and strategic action, but have not put equitable resources into understanding and improving the postgraduate student experience.

2. Postgraduates are highly diverse and the resulting complexity / multiplicity of student experiences are not sufficiently accommodated in universities.

3. Postgraduate students do not receive adequate support for their transition to postgraduate modes of study.

4. There is a pervasive assumption that postgraduates do not need career and employability supports and partially as a result (alongside a tough economic context) graduate career outcomes are unsatisfactory.

In April 2016, 107 delegates from 28 Australian universities and three national organisations (Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching, Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations and Australian Council for Educational Research) came together to consider the postgraduate student experience at a national symposium, which was the main dissemination event of this project. The symposium presenters were drawn from the project team, reference group, and research participants (university staff and postgraduate students). Together (and based on the research data from this project) the attending delegates created a list of strategic action recommendations for executive leaders of higher education (also available on http://PostgraduateStudentExperience.com)
**Action Recommendations for Executive Leaders of Higher Education**

1. Create regular national forums for cross-university and cross-discipline postgraduate conversations.

2. Create tools and dissemination vehicles for national data collection on the postgraduate student experience (coursework and research considered separately and together).

3. Across the country, establish positions with responsibility and authority for coordination of postgraduate coursework programs at the school/faculty/university level as appropriate. This action requires support and training and must be valued and recognised through such means as protected time and recognition in workload/promotion criteria. This action is also intended to establish feedback/action channels for coursework students.

4. Create and disseminate a national ‘value postgraduates’ campaign. As part of this campaign, advance a shared understanding on a national basis, of ‘postgraduate student experience.’ Furthermore, establish clear and agreed indicators of postgraduate ‘success.’

5. Implement supports and strategies at the university level that are customised to address postgraduate employability needs and engage a national campaign to heighten opportunities for graduates from postgraduate degrees.

6. Improve national policies and practices regarding universities as employers. Put more mechanisms into place to support PhD students in the transition from student to academic. Advocate for improved working conditions for early career academics (i.e., longer contracts, reduced workload, improved access to resources and services).

7. Make postgraduate student experience a priority within universities and nationally. Extend equitable and appropriate supports to postgraduate students (as to undergraduate students).

8. Create (and support postgraduate students to achieve and sustain) authentic governance positions (nationally and locally). Furthermore, engage an equity campaign so that ATSI students achieve governance positions that are not limited to ATSI portfolios.

9. Foster greater senses of community within universities and on a national basis so that postgraduate students have increased levels of social supports throughout their studies and into their graduate experiences.

In short, acknowledge, recognise and treat postgraduates as **Citizen Scholars** – ‘students who care not only about gaining information and generating knowledge but that are rooted in the reality of their contexts, problem oriented and interested in applying their knowledge for the betterment of a society.’ (Arvanitakis & Hornsby, 2016, p.1)
Higher Education Employability
Quick Facts from our Research (2014 – 2016)

Research on graduate employability (conducted in 2014; final report published in 2015) and on postgraduate student experience (conducted in 2015 & 2016; final report published in 2017) were strategic priority research projects funded by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The graduate employability project had 852 research participants (students, graduates, staff and employers) across Australia using survey, interview and focus groups methodologies. The postgraduate student experience project had 366 research participants (319 postgraduate students and 47 staff from 26 Australian universities) using student engagement breakfast, interview and focus group methodologies. A National Symposium was hosted to disseminate outcomes and engage impact from each project, with 150 registrants from 21 Australian universities for the first and 120 registrants from 29 universities for the second.

Among 705 survey respondents across Australia (442 students, 102 graduates, 108 university staff and 53 employers) the majority of students, graduates and employers (74, 74 and 87 per cent respectively) think that work experience and internships are the most effective solution towards improving graduate outcomes.

60 per cent of university staff (mostly academics) believe that they do not have the time or resources to make them happen.

Among this same group of survey respondents, the majority of students and graduates (53 per cent of each group) indicated a belief that part time work is an effective employability strategy, whereas the majority of university staff and employers (65 and 60 per cent respectively) indicated the importance of extracurricular activities as enhancing employability.

Twenty interviewed employers (across diverse disciplines) were asked to identify desirable attributes and characteristics of graduate recruits and successful employees.

The top three responses were communication (75 per cent), motivation / initiative (55 per cent) and leadership (50 per cent).
Universities intending to enhance graduate employability would be well-placed to allocate resources to work experience and internships for both undergraduates and postgraduates. Work that students do as part of their learning experience (including assessment) might be designed to mirror the types of work that graduates will be engaged in through their careers.

Graduate attributes of communication, motivation/initiative and leadership remain important to employers and might be fostered through student learning activities and assessment.

Universities might consider strategically balancing appropriate supports for undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Universities are encouraged to align their roles, expectations and strategies as employers and as educators to support the transition of PhD students into academic careers.

Employability education for students might include the importance of extracurricular activities as part of the full student experience. Activities such as sport, music, clubs and student societies appear to develop graduates as well-rounded and distinctive. Universities are encouraged to monitor the balance of academic expectations in the full student experience so that students have time to engage in activities beyond study. Furthermore, while threshold grades matter as indicators of academic outcomes, students might be informed that study should not be pursued to the extent that no other extra-curricular activities are pursued.

Research indicates that the future of higher education will be personalised learning whereby each student (undergraduate and postgraduate) is supported to discover and develop his/her career goals prior to enrolment and is mentored throughout the degree and beyond graduation to navigate full and bespoke student learning experiences that include both academic and other experiential elements.

Implications for Higher Education Learning & Teaching

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Only 14 per cent (7 people) who expressed an opinion (51 people) among interviewed postgraduate students and university staff (82 people across Australia) are optimistic that postgraduates will secure related careers upon graduation. 51 per cent are pessimistic and the others neutral.

Furthermore, 61 per cent (of the 71 people who expressed an opinion) believe that Australian universities need to improve postgraduate employability supports. The majority of recommendations to enhance employability (37 per cent) related to the provision of work opportunities whilst studying (embedded in curriculum and/or supported work experience and internships).

Only one of seventeen interviewed employers said that only graduates with outstanding grade point averages are recruited. The other employers all stated that a satisfactory standing is necessary to inspire confidence that the applicant has suitable intelligence, literacy and commitment. However, beyond this level, other factors, such as a well-rounded perspective based on diverse experiences are more influential.
National Research on the Postgraduate Student Experience: Case Presentation

VOLUME 3

CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND EMPLOYABILITY

http://PostgraduateStudentExperience.com
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PREFACE

This is volume three of three volumes of case studies to enhance the postgraduate student experience. The theme of this case study is:

+ **Career development and employability**

The other three case studies in this series are:

+ **Volume 1** - First year postgraduate student experiences
+ **Volume 2** - Postgraduate student diversity

This case study presentation on *career development and employability* is based on student engagement breakfasts, interviews and focus groups with 366 people across the stakeholder groups of postgraduate students, educators and university executives from 26 Australian institutions.
This case presentation on career development and employability is grounded in Australian national research on postgraduate student experiences. This is not a typical or traditional case study, in that the pages that follow present perspectives, stories, and proposed solutions from a large number of people. To bound the case presentation to one or two narratives or ‘cases’ would severely limit the impact. This case presentation is therefore thematic, interweaving many stories, quotes, descriptions, and perspectives on career development and employability (in the postgraduate student / graduate context).

The reported research was conducted as a strategic priority project of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching between February 2015 and August 2016. Bond University was the lead institution, with partner institutions – University of Southern Queensland, Victoria University, and partner peak body organisations – Australian Council for Educational Research and Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations. All types and levels of postgraduates were considered (i.e. course-based, research, Masters, doctoral). Secondary research was conducted using data from three different national surveys. Results of the secondary analysis were specifically probed through primary research. Notably, the secondary analysis of national survey data painted a ‘rosier’ picture of postgraduate student experiences and perceptions than did this research, whereupon in-depth conversations were held with and between numerous postgraduate students and the university staff who work with them. In total there were 366 primary research participants from across 26 Australian universities (319 students and 47 staff). Among the three methodological approaches of engagement breakfasts (7), interviews (82) and focus groups (9) there were 223 students, 38 students/44 staff and 58 students/3 staff research participants respectively.

Through the course of this work, an understanding of the ‘postgraduate student experience’ emerged and was conceptualised to describe the totality of students’ involvement with, and engagement in, their higher education, and the prioritisation of learning within their broader contextual environment. The term encompasses students’ (and their supervisors/educators) appraisal of, and engagement with, their methods of learning, affective response toward their course, interaction with the institution, sense of identity and belonging, support system (within and outside the university), and the contextual factors that assist or disrupt their progress – personally, academically, and/or professionally. The definition evolved from earlier work with research students (e.g., Leonard, Metcalfe, Becker, & Evans, 2006) to incorporate all forms of postgraduate study, whether that be research, coursework, or a mix of both. Notably, it reflects the journey of a student in multiple domains (e.g., academic, personal, professional, and social), and acknowledges the complexity and diversity of experiences cannot be synthesised into a universal definition.
There appears to be an assumption (reinforced throughout the research reported in this case presentation) in higher education that postgraduate employability will take care of itself. Beliefs about the postgraduate profile are that these students return to universities with work experience, clearly defined career goals, and established networks. Overall, universities therefore do not invest significant resources in developing career services and supports for the postgraduate context, and they do not consistently articulate and apply strategy to embed employability in postgraduate curriculum, assessment and/or research pathways.

Postgraduate students are increasingly vocal that:

+ they do have substantive employability needs,
+ necessary approaches and supports are different from those designed for undergraduate students,
+ universities are largely not performing due diligence to postgraduate employability.

Only 14 per cent (7 people) who expressed an opinion (51 people) among interviewed postgraduate students and university staff (82 people across Australia) are optimistic that postgraduates will secure related careers upon graduation. Fifty one per cent are pessimistic and the others neutral. Furthermore, 61 per cent (of the 71 people who expressed an opinion) believe that Australian universities need to improve postgraduate employability supports. The 17 interviewed PhD students did not feel that universities effectively support the transition from postgraduate student to early career academic. The majority of recommendations to enhance employability (37 per cent) related to the provision of work opportunities whilst studying (embedded in curriculum and/or supported work experience and internships).

Analysis of focus groups revealed that career development and employability experiences and recommendations for improvements consistently emerged as primary themes. Many of the postgraduate students and staff who support them perceived a ceiling on their learning and graduate contribution, as they were not fully embraced as Australia’s future knowledge resource (an aspirational concept which Arvanitakis & Hornsby, 2016, call ‘citizen scholars’).

Three overall recommendations emerged from the research and are detailed in this case presentation and sub-divided into specific recommendations for postgraduate students, educators and university leaders. It is recommended that:

+ Employability is embedded in the everyday postgraduate curriculum and assessment.
+ Employability is made explicit to postgraduate students.
+ Postgraduate studies actively engage with industry to facilitate practical experiences.
Two exemplar university employability supports are highlighted in this case presentation to provide practice ideas for other universities to consider

- The University College of London’s supports for coursework students (or what is called – PGT – postgraduate taught students in the United Kingdom)
- Queensland University of Technology’s supports for Higher Degree Research (HDR) students

Six discussion questions emerged from the conversations with postgraduate students and university staff to suggest further research directions and to guide practice improvement. These questions are:

- What national data collection and metrics can be used to analytically track the career development and employability of postgraduate students and employment outcomes of graduates? What mechanisms can be put into place to close-the-loop on this data to use an evidence-based approach to improving the overall postgraduate student experience?
- Does today’s employment / unemployment context necessitate postgraduate degrees? i.e. Is today’s postgraduate degree equivalent in employment qualifications to yesterday’s undergraduate degree? If this is the case, are graduates from postgraduate degrees obtaining what they need to be employable through these degrees?
- Given that universities typically have a much higher proportion (and thus derived business income) from undergraduate students, how can these universities be persuaded to dedicate budget and other resources to improving services and supports for postgraduate employability?
- How do employability needs, resources, services, and supports differ between undergraduates and postgraduates in diverse contexts?
- What are the particular skills that are required by postgraduates in specific disciplines/contexts for heightened employability, and how can skills development be balanced with theory and forward-thinking for an overall quality of student experience and outcomes?
- How can programmes and educators address the complexity of improving postgraduate student employability in disciplines/degrees which are generalist in nature and/or do not have defined career paths and outcomes for other reasons? For example, if industry experts are brought into the classroom, which ones are invited given that graduates will move on to a wide variety of careers?
Citizen Scholar is ‘a student who cares not only about gaining information and generating knowledge but one that is rooted in the reality of their context, problem oriented and interested in applying their knowledge for the betterment of a society.’ (Arvanitakis & Hornsby, 2016, p. 1)

Diversity refers to implicit and explicit understanding that each student is unique. It is the notion that all postgraduate students have individual learning preferences, backgrounds, needs, and capacities, which need to be respected and valued to provide excellence and equity in higher education (Morgan, 2013).

First Year Postgraduate Experience describes the totality of students’ experience with, and transition to, their higher education. Consistent with previous definitions of the FYE, which largely focused on the undergraduate context, it is acknowledged that this transition is often affected by social, cultural, and situational factors, resulting in a multiplicity of first year experiences, with no common end-point to the transition (Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006; Kift, 2009).

Graduate Employability means that higher education alumni have developed the capacity to obtain and/or create work. Furthermore, employability means that institutions and employers have supported the student knowledge, skills, attributes, reflective disposition, and identity that graduates need to succeed in the workforce (Hinchcliffe & Jolly, 2011, Holmes, 2013, Kinash et al., 2015a; Kinash et al., 2015b; Knight & Yorke, 2004; Yorke, 2006; Yorke & Knight, 2006).

Loneliness is defined as a lack of contact with families (personal loneliness); loss of networks (social loneliness); separation from preferred culture or linguistic environment (cultural loneliness) (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008).
**Learning Management Systems (LMS)** is a software application or web-based technology used to plan, implement, and assess a specific learning process. Typically, a learning management system provides an educator with a way to create and deliver content, monitor student participation, and assess student performance. A learning management system may also provide students with the ability to use interactive features such as threaded discussions, video conferencing, and discussion forums.

**Postgraduate Student Experience** describes the totality of students' involvement with, and engagement in, their higher education, and the prioritisation of learning within their broader contextual environment.

**Student Experience** can be defined as ‘…a phrase that encompasses not only the academic aspects of teaching, learning, and curriculum but also student lifestyle and extracurricular activities, academic advice, support and mentoring, and work experiences’ (Benckendorff, Ruhanen, & Scott, 2009, p. 84).

**Student Voice** is conceptualised as students’ feedback and perceptions about their learning as essential in determining what support needs to be offered to them (Andrade, 2006; Novera, 2004).

**Transition Pedagogy** is ‘a guiding philosophy for intentional first year curriculum design and support that carefully scaffolds and supports the first year learning experience for contemporary heterogeneous cohorts’ (Kift, 2009, p. 2).

**Work-study-life balance** is defined as a complex triad in which students simultaneously manage their occupational roles and obligations (paid or volunteer/internship based), academic commitments (both research and/or coursework), and personal life responsibilities.
CASE STUDY AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The overall aims of this research project were to collect, collate, and disseminate postgraduate perspectives on their broad student experiences and the relationships of these experiences with learning. The project engaged students and higher education personnel to derive and disseminate good practice and practical strategies to impact and enhance Australian postgraduate student experiences.

The specific aims and objectives of this case study are:

For Students

To suggest evidence-based approaches to planning, navigating, and prioritising their postgraduate student experiences for heightened employability.

For Higher Education Staff (Academics and Executive Leaders)

To raise awareness of the common experiences of postgraduate students across Australia in the context of employability, and suggest evidence-based approaches to enhancing that student experience for improved employability and the fostering of ‘citizen scholarship.’
POSITIONING CHALLENGES / ISSUES

There appears to be an assumption (reinforced throughout the research reported in this case presentation) in higher education that postgraduate employability will take care of itself. Beliefs about the postgraduate profile are that these students return to universities with work experience, clearly defined career goals and established networks. Overall, universities therefore do not invest significant resources in developing career services and supports for the postgraduate context, and they do not consistently articulate and apply strategy to embed employability in postgraduate curriculum, assessment and/or research pathways.

Postgraduate students are increasingly vocal that:

- they do have substantive employability needs;
- necessary approaches and supports are different from those designed for undergraduate students;
- universities are largely not performing due diligence to postgraduate employability.

To elaborate, many postgraduate students explain that they are returning to university to change careers and/or disciplines (i.e. broadening rather than deepening degrees) and therefore may not have relevant experience, skills, goals, and networks in the new domain. Despite these gaps, postgraduate students (as compared to undergraduate students) tend to be mature aged, have work experience (if in a different field/discipline), and therefore have further developed transferable skills, and a higher degree of complexity of roles and competing demands (e.g. dependents and financial commitments). Furthermore, they tend to have higher developed intellectual or existential goals. Therefore, traditional career services extended to undergraduate students such as resume writing, career fairs and internships in entry-level positions are mostly inappropriate for postgraduate students.

Overall, postgraduate students in coursework programs report that employability is seldom discussed, relevant skills are not taught, and industry is rarely engaged. Postgraduate students in research modes report that they are not coached and supported to transition their student experience into careers. The most common career pathway/ambition from PhDs is into academic careers. PhD students report an unfulfilled pre-enrolment expectation that they would be formally supported to secure and manage careers as early career academics.

Given that the PhD studies are conducted out of the same employment site (i.e. universities) as the sought-after careers, many postgraduate students express surprise that the career transition is largely missing. PhD students may secure contracts as tutors and/or as research assistants, and sometimes receive professional development in teaching. However, beyond these mostly short-term roles, career development/counselling and networking programs to help graduates with PhDs to successfully navigate full-time continuing employment as early career academics seems to be largely non-existent.
The PhD students whose chosen career path is not in academe have other concerns. Postgraduate assignments seem to be almost exclusively of an academic nature (resembling journal papers with numerous in and end text references), resulting in minimal preparation and experience preparing other types of works (e.g. technical writing for industry).

A quote from a research paper on the postgraduate student experience summarises some of these issues.

‘Students tend to enter into a research degree because of a genuine interest in research and a particular research topic, hoping that their research will make a contribution to society and under the premise that a Master’s degree by research or PhD will benefit their future career. Unfortunately, largely due to a lack of job security – “the postdoc treadmill” – pressures on early career researchers in academia and, more so for those entering industry, a lack of generic professional skills (for example, communication and presentation), the majority of science, engineering and technology (SET) postgraduates experienced an arduous task in securing employment.’ (Giles, Ski, & Vrdoljak, 2009, p. 82)

The issues highlighted by these researchers in the context of academic employability are that:

- there are minimal suitable vacancies for graduates,
- those who are hired as early career researchers meet with stressful conditions, and
- employability skills beyond academic research are not sufficiently developed through postgraduate studies.

Three participants in the research reported in this document emotively expressed similar experiences and perceptions.

'I’ve had to make my own opportunities. There essentially was no career development that takes you from your degree into academia. Other than pushing someone off a cliff.'

'I would go anywhere where there’s a permanent position. However, I’ve been told by the workforce out there that I’m unemployable. So I’ve spent 10 years perfecting a CV that’s suited to academia, which essentially, I’m told that I can’t even get a job answering phones with.’

‘Help with transition from PhD to academic – a large proportion of higher degree research students still want to follow this path and should be helped where possible. How do you get there? What skills do you need to do so? Where are your gaps in these skills and how can you work to achieve them? Also what I think would be great is also advice for females wanting to make this transition but also having to navigate the idea of beginning a family and how/when to fit this in to the transition.’
PhD graduates with academic aspirations are not the only postgraduate students experiencing employability challenges. Despite the growth of course-based postgraduate degrees in response to industry vacancies, employability remains problematic. Mistry, White, and Berardi (2009) described the discrepant perspectives and experiences of employers and academics in the fields of geography, and earth and environmental science.

‘First, there is often conflict between what students, staff and employers perceive as “real world” skills. … Thus there is a potential ethical conflict in what some employers need (for example, the fostering of conservative and neo-liberal goals through vocationally oriented education) and what academia wants to teach (the promotion of knowledge, skills and values that encourage social and environmental justice). This could potentially be reflected in the skills that employers require, e.g. oral communication, technical expertise, team and group working, and the skills that academia wants to teach, e.g. critical thinking, reflective practice, independence, applying knowledge.’ (Mistry, White, & Berardi, 2009, p. 124)

A PhD student who is also a part-time sessional university lecturer articulated related sentiment in an interview for the research presented in this document.

‘The death of intellectualism, with more emphasis on job skills. It is not what university is meant to be anyways. Job skills should be on the job. University should really be about the pedagogical process and that is not our focus. As a result, academics are not given the opportunity to really showcase their skills within the university setting in a way that they should.’

Another postgraduate student research participant asked,

‘Are we seeing people as our greatest asset and resource and treating them accordingly? Or are we seeing them as an objectified resource that is disposable? I think that is the early 21st-century question in the workplace across all domains.’
NARRATIVE DEPICTIONS

Four stories of postgraduate students who participated in this research are summarised here. These stories are illustrative of the recurrent issues emerging throughout the research. While these particular stories highlight the diversity of postgraduate students (gender, discipline, domestic/international, course/research-based), the depicted experiences and themes are not ‘outlier phenomena’ and as such, were echoed in various forms throughout the research. Each of the research participants reviewed and ‘okayed’ the narrative presentation, but remained de-identified to maintain confidentiality of themselves and their universities.

Course-based male postgraduate student

At one of the student engagement breakfasts, it was the overall consensus that career development and employability supports are seldom provided for postgraduate students, and when they are provided, it is the perspective of the participating students that services and supports have largely been designed for undergraduate students and do not meet the needs of postgraduates. One postgraduate student explained that he transitioned a mid-level career in the finance industry from full to part-time to commence postgraduate studies. In order to fulfil his program requirements for graduation, he was forced to quit his paid employment to commence an unpaid internship in an entry-level position. The other students at the breakfast were not surprised, sharing similar stories. Across breakfasts, many postgraduate students described career fairs and other university career events as ‘wastes of time’ because the employers who were present only had entry-level vacancies appropriate for graduates from undergraduate degrees.
Course-based female Masters student in multidisciplinary degree

One of the interviewed postgraduate students is nearing completion of a Masters degree that does not have a defined discipline and according to the interviewee ‘is not part of any national agenda.’ The degree is about change and complexity and her university supported her to personalise the degree in a bespoke manner, putting together units and research of her choosing. Her degree was coming together nicely until the key administrator went on maternity leave. As she nears graduation, she is increasingly concerned about graduate employment outcomes. She said that she and her postgraduate student peers rate the career counselling supports provided by the university ‘poorly.’ She believes that she will find her career search particularly challenging because of a high unemployment rate of graduates her age (under 30). Furthermore, she believes that postgraduate qualifications are no longer a differentiating feature and she believes that she may be forced to move overseas to find work. When asked what suggestions she has for university improvements to career development and employability supports, she replied that assessment should be practically applied (where appropriate) and that more internships would be beneficial.
Another of the interviewed postgraduate students is also pursuing a Masters degree in a course-based program. She has obviously put a great deal of thought into what postgraduate experience means to her, and three interactive themes emerged throughout her depiction. First, she believes that through postgraduate studies, students have the opportunity to develop their personhood, engaging in a rich process of self-discovery and self-development. She said, ‘Postgrad study is more than just learning to get a better job. It’s an existential process.’ Second, she has a gestalt perspective on the postgraduate experience, in which the whole person and life experience is nurtured and supported. She said, ‘Postgraduates do not split their work from their lives. Each is for enrichment of each other.’ Third, she believes that effective postgraduate student experiences are highly social, community-based, and grounded in communal activity. Intertwining these three components, she used the example of regularly bringing her four young children on-campus, whereupon the university community welcomes and involves the children in the life of the university.
Another student explained that her country of origin did not have the educational opportunities that she and her husband desired for themselves and their children. They researched many countries and chose Australia, believing that it is a ‘nation of minds that can lead the world in research.’ The family does not regret the move, but believes that Australian higher education can further improve. The interviewed student had expected to be valued and respected as a member of a national community of citizen scholars (as high-level occupation). Instead, she feels somewhat stifled, suppressed, and limited. Furthermore, she feels tired and described herself as ‘struggling.’ She has had to work full-time throughout her studies to support herself and her family, and her applications for scholarships were denied. She provided two poignant specific examples of unsatisfactory postgraduate student experiences. First, in order to match supervisors and research students, the students each prepared a poster and stood in front of it. The supervisors walked the line of displayed students and selected the ones they would add to their load. The students were not told about their prospective supervisors’ credentials nor how the match would progress the students’ research/career goals. Years into her degree, this student does not know the names or the research topics of the other students supported by the same supervisor, never-mind students in other disciplines or other universities. Second, one of her co-supervisors was away for an extended time and instead of contacting the student to consult about arrangements, she was sent an email that gave her a name of someone else appointed to cover the absence. The student’s reaction was, ‘Hang on. No! Not again. That is NOT going to happen to me again.’ She believes that beyond graduate careers, through postgraduate studies, universities can ‘empower our next generations to solve the problems of the planet.’ However, universities are going to have to change in order to promote this higher level emancipating, intellectual potential.
APPLICATION TO PRACTICE

Throughout the breakfasts, interviews, and focus groups, there was a central proposition that the onus of responsibility for employability is on the academics (including lecturers, tutors, and supervisors) who have direct day-to-day contact with the postgraduate students. The research participants placed less emphasis on university career development centres or their services (perhaps because these services and supports are already in existence at most universities). Research participants were concerned about the employability knowledge, skills and attributes that they felt should be developed within their subjects and/or supervised research experience.

The implicit recommendations/expectations were that:

1. Employability is embedded in the everyday postgraduate curriculum and assessment.

*From published research*

‘Developing teaching and assessment methods that further enhance a range of communication and team working skills and link to what employers want. For example proposal, briefing, and speech writing is achievable and the evidence from this study shows that this is already occurring in many Masters courses. Interestingly, however, we found that these transferable skills, in the majority, were only assessed informally. Formal assessment (i.e., marks that went towards final grades) was generally through assessment modes such as essays or more intensive written projects, possibly giving students the impression that skills such as oral communication and group working are not as important. Numeracy, a skill which is in high demand by employers, was almost invisible within the summative assessment agenda of many Masters courses.’ (Mistry, White & Berardi, 2009, p. 143-144)

*From an interviewed staff person*

‘Actual employers who nationally are going to drive the scope of practice of what they want in terms of their graduates. So what that does it is drives and defines into the future what jobs your graduates will be required to do. What we are then able to do is actually shape the nature of the workforce and then respond to that in terms of what is taught in the actual curriculum itself and the focus of the curriculum, whilst also responding to and being cognisant of the quality overlay from the national boards.’

*From an interviewed staff person*

‘Small boutique bespoke courses that are driven, that are very responsive, that the curriculum is continually evolving. As the needs of the employer changes, the curriculum changes so we have very contemporary, responsive curriculum, and students feel that they are part of partnerships with their employers.’

*From an interviewed staff person*

We find that we have much better value to students and to lecturers if we are in their curriculum, in-curriculum rather than generic extra-curricular stuff. Students don’t see the value coming along to an extra-curricular workshop, so to try and embed and integrate what we are doing into the curriculum.’
2. Employability and the concept of citizen scholarship are made explicit to postgraduate students.

From published research

‘In many cases, students do not know or realize that what they have learnt within courses and through particular activities is what employers look for. Therefore, another step course directors could take is to make employability skills developed within courses more explicit to students. This could be done by stating various employability-related skills developed within course descriptions and/or through reflective sessions with students on their learning experiences and the link to future careers.’ (Murray, White & Berardi, 2009, p. 144)

From an interviewed postgraduate student

‘About six months ago when I did my confirmation, during conversation with my two supervisors and the Head of School of Graduate Research, they asked me something very similar. They sort of said, “how can we improve the postgrad experience here? What do you guys want?” And so I was charged with going away and getting a list from all the postgrads in an area of things that would be helpful. And so what we came up with were actually all about employment. Talk to students about employment. Have seminars with real people talking about where they have gone after their PhD, not necessarily people in academia because we have got contact with them, but people who have gone interesting places or whatever. Not necessarily professional – “this is what I have done” – but

real people and other things like opportunities to organise speakers to get involved with organising conference or seminars. And realistic goals and expectations. What is an actual realistic timeframe? How long can we expect to be unemployed for? Some of those things because the gloss isn’t very helpful for us but I think a lot of that is done within our department.’

From an interviewed staff person

‘Part of our responsibility as academics is to be able to carefully explain and to instil the confidence in our students that, okay it might be considered a fairly esoteric area of study that they are doing, but when they consider their analytical skills, their conceptual skills, their ability to communicate, their ability to write, their ability to work in a cross-cultural setting, they are all precisely the employment skills that the best employers are looking for.’
3. Postgraduate studies actively engage with industry to facilitate practical experiences.

*From published research*

‘Promoting vocational and placement opportunities can develop a wide range of skills employers are looking for … and also providing students with opportunities to interact with alumni can be beneficial … they are a great source of information on what employers really want.’ (Murray, White & Berardi, 2009, p. 144)

*From an interviewed staff person*

‘Courses are valued in the workplace because they are linked to workplace increments based on your professional development through the industry. Students engage in their workplace and then are overseen by supervisors and preceptors actually in the workplace.’
‘AS THE NEEDS OF THE EMPLOYER CHANGES, THE CURRICULUM CHANGES, SO WE HAVE VERY CONTEMPORARY, RESPONSIVE CURRICULUM, AND STUDENTS FEEL THAT THEY ARE PART OF PARTNERSHIPS WITH THEIR EMPLOYERS.’
EXEMPLAR UNIVERSITY EMPLOYABILITY SUPPORTS

COURSEWORK POSTGRADUATES

University College London’s (UCL) careers support to enhance the employability of coursework postgraduates (Postgraduate Taught Students)

UCL has 14,713 postgraduate students which is the highest number from a single institution in the United Kingdom. Courses are largely one year in length and there are many niche courses. For example, there are approximately 45 coursework degrees newly introduced per annum. UCL designed three strategic support initiatives to improve the employability of coursework postgraduates and their graduate employment outcomes.

Small Private Online Courses (SPOCs)

This is a bespoke / personalised online pathway that provides an efficient way for postgraduate coursework students to career plan prior to enrolling in the course and to promote specialised postgraduate support available through the UCL Careers Centre. This initiative is similar to Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) in that the students study online, but unlike MOOCs there is a registration fee and clear credit pathway established. To date, 1500 students have engaged from 49 international countries. There are six careers and employability modules available to students, but they are not required to do all of them.

The six modules are based around questions:

- Why do you need to think about your career right now?
- What are your career options?
- How do you write effective job applications?
- How do you succeed in interviews and presentations?
- How do you make useful contacts?
- How will UCL Careers support you?

As evidence of the success of this initiative, 100 per cent of students completing surveys after completing SPOC indicated satisfaction. Two illustrative postgraduate student comments were:

- ‘Very helpful, lots of information, very well put together – easy to understand. Keeps you interested with the variety of videos, PDFs, slides, and documents’
- ‘This introductory course … a fantastic and interactive way to improve my social network contacts or improve my interview skills when dealing with a job offer for instance.’

Intensive Support for Graduates

UCL has specialised services and supports for postgraduate coursework students offered through UCL Careers. All students can use UCL Careers for two years after graduation. There is additional service and intensive support for most ‘at risk’ departments. A specialised pilot of services for postgraduate coursework students was conducted in
2015. In the summer of 2015, telephone calls were placed to 2500 postgraduate coursework students to inquire into their employment status. Among these students, 41 per cent reported being unemployed. As a follow-on, eight departments/disciplines were chosen for intensive support based on a higher than average number of their students indicating being unemployed. The intensive support model included five components: a dedicated careers coach, proactive and regular contact with each graduate, one-to-one careers coaching, graduate workshops such as ‘Building Resilience’ and individual progress tracking. The postgraduate pilot is too new to have yielded outcomes. However, in equivalent initiatives with undergraduates in 2013 and 2014 unemployment fell from 17.9 to 8.4 per cent in the ‘at risk’ departments.

**On-Campus Activities**

All departments/disciplines were surveyed to establish the level of provided and needed level of postgraduate coursework student careers provision, as well as whether these services and supports were and should be in-curricular or extra-curricular. Aims were to ensure coverage across all courses and share best practices between them. As a result, additional Central Careers workshops for postgraduate coursework students were run across the year. Four sample topics were:

- Career planning
- Applications
- Interviews
- Finding and Funding a PhD

Evidence of the success of this initiative was found in students ‘voting with their feet.’ For example, in October 2015 there were eight workshops with a total attendance of 957 coursework postgraduate students.

For further information about this suite of exemplar career development and employability initiatives for postgraduate coursework students, contact UCL Vice-Provost Anthony Smith or Karen Barnard, Director of UCL Careers.
Queensland University of Technology’s (QUT) career development initiatives to enhance the employability of Higher Degree Research (HDR) graduates

QUT recognises the need to address the employability and graduate outcomes of HDR graduates. To action this priority, QUT Careers and Employment has worked closely with academic and professional staff members to develop a number of initiatives to enhance the overall employability of QUT HDR graduates. Research has identified the increasingly competitive nature of academic careers, limitations in PhD programmes in regard to preparing candidates for academic careers, and the need to provide HDR graduates with opportunities to increase their transferable skills and employability for careers outside academia (Probert, 2014).

There are three main problems necessitating improvements to postgraduate employability supports.

- The number of PhD graduates in Australia far exceeds the number of available academic vacancies (Cuthbert & Molla, 2015).
- PhD graduates are lacking skill-sets that prepare them for positions outside academia.
- Universities are not providing satisfactory career development programs to prepare PhD students for academic careers or careers outside academia (Cuthbert & Molla, 2015).

QUT Careers and Employment has developed ten specialised initiatives through multiple delivery modes, including online resources and training and individual counselling sessions. Half of these initiatives are facilitated directly through the careers service and their personnel, and the other half are embedded throughout the curriculum, across the university, and/or are directly facilitated by other areas of the university. This strategic whole-of-university approach to career services and employability is a vital component of QUT’s impact on postgraduate employment outcomes. Beyond being an add-on service, employability is everyone’s business at QUT and all students and staff collaborate to assure success.

**QUT Careers and Employment Initiatives**

- **Specialist postgraduate career counsellors** – QUT appears to be the only Australian university with multiple dedicated postgraduate career counsellors, all of whom hold postgraduate qualifications. Tailored assistance features longer individual and shorter walk-in career counselling sessions.

- **Faculty-specific employability initiatives** – Briefings, workshops, lectures, seminars, forums, and networking events are customised for PhD students in particular disciplines/faculties.

- **Career mentor scheme** – Through this initiative, students have the opportunity to meet with industry professionals for support in career development, networking, and transition from study to professional life.
EXEMPLAR UNIVERSITY EMPLOYABILITY SUPPORTS

+ ‘Real World’ placement program – This initiative assists students with short-term, not-for-credit placement opportunities within industry and volunteer sectors. It also provides access to specialised career development workshops and peer/professional networking opportunities.

+ Careers and employment services – Online review resources, modules, and services are provided to postgraduate students to support career skills such as writing application letters, resumes, and selection criteria statements. In addition, students have access to a broad suite of experiential employment preparation workshops, including building a LinkedIn profile, networking, and preparing employment applications.

QUT University Initiatives (Facilitated beyond Careers and Employment)

+ Research student network (Student Support Services) – Working in consultation with staff persons from Careers and Employment, staff from Student Support Services offer a series of workshops. Topics include: building an academic career, preparing for conferences, time management, careers outside academia and preparing for a job.

+ Leadership, development and innovation program (Student Support Services) – This is a comprehensive and customisable leadership and development program aimed at equipping students with practical skills and experience. The program design is based on a Learn-Act-Lead model and formally recognises student learning and achievements through awards.

+ Teaching advantage (Cathcart, Neale & Greer, Business School) – This is a multi-award-winning, multi-mode program run by QUT academic staff. The overall aim is to facilitate vital teaching knowledge and enhanced skills in preparation for a university teaching career. Careers and Employment presents a career development and employability session as part of this program.

+ Sessional career advancement and development program (Human Resources) – This is a two-day program developed by Human Resources that has been recognised with multiple awards. Highly experienced QUT academics run sessions on building an academic portfolio (interweaving teaching, research and service). Careers and Employment facilitate career development and planning sessions throughout the program.

+ eGradSchool (Offered to all HDR students in the Australian Technology Network) – This online initiative is extended to QUT postgraduate students as well as those enrolled in any of the ATN universities. The overall goal is to enhance relevant professional and leadership skills. Topics include: entrepreneurship, leadership and communication, research commercialisation, project management, public policy, and global sustainability.
Informal feedback indicates that students, graduates, employers, and staff are very satisfied with these new initiatives. These initiatives are currently being formally evaluated for their impact on employability and employment outcomes.

For further information about this suite of exemplar career development and employability initiatives for postgraduate research students, contact QUT Careers and Employment Service.
For Postgraduate Students

The following recommendations are verbatim and paraphrased from the transcripts of interviewed staff and postgraduate students.

The research participants suggest that postgraduate students improve their employability by:

- Undertake industry-related projects when you have a choice of assessment modes.
- Find out about internships and work experience that your university offers and do them.
- Study in teams with other postgraduate students. Establish networks while you are at university for future contacts, connectors, and clients.
- Engage in extra-curricular activities, particularly leading student societies and/or contributing to your university by being the postgraduate student representative on university committees.
- Get to know your professors and make sure they know you for future job leads.
- Attend conferences and present your project and/or research work. Particularly try to participate in international conferences.
- Try to get published while you are still a student.
- Go to optional workshops, particularly if they are skills-based.

Be as interdisciplinary as possible. Ensure that you obtain a broad-base of study and knowledge.

Differentiate yourself and understand where you ‘sit’ in the world of research and/or practice.

Be confident and proud of your discipline of study.

Practice telling employers about all of the transferable skills that you have gained through postgraduate studies, like spoken and written communication, analysis, and team work.

Do your research on target employers and positions and be able to express why you want that job.

An extended quote from an interviewed student expands upon the final point.

‘Some of the larger industry partners came in to just explain what they are looking for in a graduate and their number one thing was perhaps surprising to most graduates. It wasn’t how well you did at Uni or what your marks were or how well you knew things. What they were after is someone with passion and enthusiasm who felt that they understood the job enough to say, ‘Yes, I want to do this for the next few years.’ It doesn’t have to be a lifetime, but two or three years. So there is definitely a difference between what the university tells you to expect and what the industry want. If you’re getting those skills, perhaps from industry, take-up networking opportunities with industry.’
For Educators

Embed employability in the everyday postgraduate curriculum and assessment.

This means that employability goals should be aligned with and represented in the learning outcomes of postgraduate subjects and research workshops. Furthermore, the types and variety of assessment and feedback processes should be selected and designed to support the development of employability skills and attributes.

Make employability explicit to postgraduate students.

Postgraduate students may be involved in career-related learning activities, but be unaware that they are advancing their employability. Explicitly identify and discuss employability throughout the postgraduate learning experience to support postgraduate students to build their career identity.

Design project-based work for postgraduate students.

Whether postgraduate students are engaging in further study for purposes of broadening (i.e. branching into different fields, disciplines and/or careers) or deepening (i.e. extending their knowledge, skills, attributes, and identity in the same field, discipline, and/or career path), the experience of an undergraduate degree has developed their capacity for independent knowledge assimilation and thereby a need for further application and discovery. Students and staff throughout this research indicated that postgraduate students thrive and that their employability is heightened when supervised in project-based activity, where they are ‘hands-on’ experimenting, doing, and self-discovering. Furthermore, these projects are said to be particularly beneficial when they are industry aligned, such as going out into the field and engaging in projects with/for employers, or when projects are designed to be authentic experiences of what graduates will be doing in their careers.

Actively engage with industry throughout postgraduate studies to facilitate practical experience.

There are multiple means of engaging with industry throughout postgraduate experiences. Some examples derived from the research participants in the study reported in this study are listed below.

- Include employers on panels to advance accreditation, course review, and curriculum development for new programs.
- Invite employers and/or employed alumni as guest speakers for lectures, workshops, and online activities.
- Co-mark assessment with employers.
- Observe and shadow current roles and responsibilities in the workplace, and mirror these activities in tutorials, seminars, and assessment.
- Host whole-of-program question and answer panels of employers to address maximising employability from the employer perspective and advise on career pathways.
Keep employer networks up-to-date to facilitate referrals for internships, project work, and graduate career opportunities.

Work closely with the University Career Development Centre to ensure that postgraduate needs (i.e. suitable employers and vacancies) are met through career fairs and other such events.
RECOMMENDATIONS

For University Leaders

Explicitly identify postgraduate students in the context of employability within university-wide policy and strategic plans.

In order for postgraduate employability to be improved, the recommendations made on the previous page should be undertaken by academics at every level and within every faculty and program of the university. Academics require executive leadership, direction, and support in order to put these recommendations into place and sustain them over time.

Design a formal academic development program for postgraduate students with academic career ambitions.

Consistent with published research (Sutherland & Gilbert, 2013) the largest proportion of PhD students within the research reported in this document aspire towards academic careers. As described on the previous pages, nearly all of them felt that these career ambitions went largely unsupported by their institutions. This is peculiar given that the focus of training and development and the prospective employer are one and the same. Furthermore, a large proportion of these PhD students were previously working as sessional/adjunct academics for the same universities where they are now studying their PhDs.

Many articulated the goal of study as an attempt to accelerate/improve their careers and/or positioning – ‘PhD and publish OR perish.’ The most concrete aim of PhD completion was to be re-classified from a sessional/adjunct (with short-term contracts) to the professorial stream in a full-time continuing position, with better working conditions and rates of pay afforded to such positions.

A number of universities represented in this and published research (e.g. Hamilton, Fox, & McEwan, 2013) articulated strategies and supports for sessional/adjunct academics once contracted by the institution (i.e. typically identified as early career academic supports), but few seemed to have formal programs in place if the postgraduate students were not yet hired.

This is further complicated (and creates an imperative for a formal development program) in that a question with conflicting outcomes is whether people who take sessional/adjunct contracts are less likely to ever achieve full-time continuing professorial-track positions – ‘always a bridesmaid, never a bride’ (Dolan, Hall, Karlsson, & Martinak, 2013; Liftig, 2014; Mann & Hochenedel, 2003). It was recommended multiple times throughout the research that universities develop graduate development programs or postgraduate students with academic career ambitions. Such programs could be modelled after those designed by multi-national corporations (MNCs) as described by Kinash et al. (2015b).
The fit between the MNC’s formal graduate development programs and university formal academic development programs is appropriate in that in the former, people are accepted into the program without guarantee of employment.

The elements of formal programs that emerged in this research are:

- Career advice and formal mentoring (e.g. when and which contracts to consider)
- Teaching development (teaching theory, strategy, and pedagogy)
- Research skills and navigation (including how to plan research for strong metrics and impact)
- Networking and introduction to future employers and opportunities

Notably, it is important to personalise employability and career supports for postgraduate students who do not wish to pursue academic careers. The profiles and ambitions of the current cohort need to be carefully considered so that, for example, not all assessment is designed as academic papers.
REFERENCES


For further information & resources:

http://PostgraduateStudentExperience.com/

THANK YOU TO:

The many postgraduate students and staff (366 from 26 Australian universities) who so generously volunteered their time and energy to contributing to this student experience research.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following discussion questions derived from the conversations with the 366 participants in the research described in this document. The research team did not commence the inquiry into career development and employability of postgraduate students with these questions in mind and therefore did not specifically ask or probe these questions. The questions emerged out of the research and thus serve as recommendations for further research. They can also be used to lead discussions, focus groups, and task-forces to further investigate and determine strategic action improvements to career development and employability supports for postgraduate students in university contexts.

- What national data collection and metrics can be used to analytically track the career development and employability of postgraduate students and employment outcomes of graduates? What mechanisms can be put into place to close-the-loop on this data to use an evidence-based approach to improving the overall postgraduate student experience?

- Does today’s employment / unemployment context necessitate postgraduate degrees? Specifically, is today’s postgraduate degree equivalent in employment qualifications to yesterday’s undergraduate degree? If this is the case, are graduates from postgraduate degrees obtaining what they need to be employable through these degrees?

- Given that universities typically have a much higher proportion (and thus derived business income) from undergraduate students, how can these universities be persuaded to dedicate budget and other resources to improving services and supports for postgraduate employability?

- How do employability needs, resources, services, and supports differ between undergraduates and postgraduates in readers’ contexts?

- What are the particular skills that are required by postgraduates in the readers’ disciplines/contexts for heightened employability, and how can skills development be balanced with theory and forward-thinking for an overall quality of student experience and outcomes?

- How can programmes and educators address the complexity of improving postgraduate student employability in disciplines/degrees which are generalist in nature and/or do not have defined career paths and outcomes for other reasons? For example, if industry experts are brought into the classroom, which ones are invited given that graduates will move on to a wide variety of careers?
ENGAGING POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS AND SUPPORTING HIGHER EDUCATION TO ENHANCE THE 21ST CENTURY STUDENT EXPERIENCE

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Good Practice Guide to Support the Postgraduate Student Experience
2016

http://PostgraduateStudentExperience.com
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Citizen Scholar is ‘a student who cares not only about gaining information and generating knowledge but one that is rooted in the reality of their context, problem oriented and interested in applying their knowledge for the betterment of a society.’ (Arvanitakis & Hornsby, 2016, p. 1)

Diversity refers to implicit and explicit understanding that each student is unique. It is the notion that all postgraduate students have individual learning preferences, backgrounds, needs, and capacities, which need to be respected and valued to provide excellence and equity in higher education (Morgan, 2013).

First Year Postgraduate Experience describes the totality of students’ experience with, and transition to, their higher education. Consistent with previous definitions of the FYE, which largely focused on the undergraduate context, it is acknowledged that this transition is often affected by social, cultural, and situational factors, resulting in a multiplicity of first year experiences, with no common end-point to the transition (Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006; Kift, 2009).

Graduate Employability means that higher education alumni have developed the capacity to obtain and/or create work. Furthermore, employability means that institutions and employers have supported the student knowledge, skills, attributes, reflective disposition, and identity that graduates need to succeed in the workforce (Hinchcliffe & Jolly, 2011, Holmes, 2013, Kinash et al., 2015a; Kinash et al., 2015b; Knight & Yorke, 2004; Yorke, 2006; Yorke & Knight, 2006).

Loneliness is defined as a lack of contact with families (personal loneliness); loss of networks (social loneliness); separation from preferred culture or linguistic environment (cultural loneliness) (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008).

Learning Management Systems (LMS) is a software application or web-based technology used to plan, implement, and assess a specific learning process. Typically, a learning management system provides an educator with a way to create and deliver content, monitor student participation, and assess student performance. A learning management system may also provide students with the ability to use interactive features such as threaded discussions, video conferencing, and discussion forums.

Postgraduate Student Experience describes the totality of students’ involvement with, and engagement in, their higher education, and the prioritisation of learning within their broader contextual environment.

Student Experience can be defined as ‘…a phrase that encompasses not only the academic aspects of teaching, learning, and curriculum but also student lifestyle and extracurricular activities, academic advice, support and mentoring, and work experiences’ (Benckendorff, Ruhanen, & Scott, 2009, p. 84).

Student Voice is conceptualised as students’ feedback and perceptions about their learning as essential in determining what support needs to be offered to them (Andrade, 2006; Novera, 2004).
**Transition Pedagogy** is “a guiding philosophy for intentional first year curriculum design and support that carefully scaffolds and supports the first year learning experience for contemporary heterogeneous cohorts” (Kift, 2009, p. 2).

**Work-study-life balance** is defined as a complex triad in which students simultaneously manage their occupational roles and obligations (paid or volunteer/internship based), academic commitments (both research and/or coursework), and personal life responsibilities.
INTRODUCTION

Introduction to Good Practice Guides to Support the Postgraduate Student Experience

This Good Practice Guide to support the Postgraduate Student Experience is part of a suite of resources developed during the 2014 Strategic Priority Project: Engaging postgraduate students and supporting higher education to enhance the 21st century student experience, funded by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. This three part guide is primarily intended to provide recommendations that can be used for easy reference by the following stakeholders:

+ Postgraduate students seeking to maximise their engagement with their program of study;
+ Educators seeking to improve their curriculum and/or support structures in ways that enhance postgraduate student experience; and
+ University administrators/leaders seeking to embed institutional policies or frameworks that support educators and postgraduate students.

Most recommendations can be contextualised to apply to either postgraduate coursework or higher degree by research; however, some are specific to one group or the other.

For this reason, the Good Practice Guide has been conceptually separated into three main sections addressing either the totality of postgraduate experience or particular features of coursework or higher degree by research:

1. Supporting a quality postgraduate student experience;
2. Good practice for coursework postgraduate students;
3. Good practice for research postgraduate students.

The recommendations are extracted and synthesised from the primary resources of the project. More detail and information about the project methodology and recommendations can be found in those resources – they are:

+ The Final Report
+ Three Case studies:
  (i) First Year Postgraduate Student Experience
  (ii) Postgraduate Student Diversity
  (iii) Postgraduate Student Career Development and Employability
+ Presentations, posters and discussion at the National Symposium for Postgraduate Student Experience hosted by the project in April, 2016.

All resources (including this three part Good Practice Guide) are available from the project’s website:

http://PostgraduateStudentExperience.com
Additional exemplars of good practice are included as appropriate. These originate from published literature and a range of publically available sources and have been included to illustrate initiatives that are underway to improve the postgraduate student experience.

The sources include:

OLT Citations for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning

Presentations at the 2016 National OLT Conference: Learning and Teaching 2030: Collaborating to shape the future of learning and teaching.

Final reports and websites of projects funded by OLT Australian University Teaching including the Australian University Teaching Criteria and Standards Framework
http://uniteachingcriteria.edu.au/resources/resources/

Awards targeted at good practices within university learning and teaching including:

- The AFR Higher Education Awards

- The Wharton Business School QS Stars – Reimagine Education
  http://www.reimagine-education.com/

Australian Council of Graduate Research
http://www.ddogs.edu.au/
PROJECT METHODOLOGY

The recommendations contained within the sections of this Good Practice Guide are sourced from synthesis of the results from the activities and literature searches conducted as part of the project. A summary of these activities is presented below to place the recommendations that follow in context. A full description of the activities including participant demographics is available in the Final Report, which can be downloaded from the project’s website:

http://PostgraduateStudentExperience.com

PROJECT PARTICIPANTS & DEMOGRAPHICS

Engagement with a total of 319 postgraduate students and 47 staff (N = 366) was conducted through: student engagement breakfasts (n = 223), face-to-face interviews (n = 82), and face-to-face focus group (n = 61).

SUMMARY OF PROJECT ACTIVITIES

Project activities were managed in three phases that were progressive, in that themes from the first approach were used as probes in the second and so on into the third.

1 **Secondary Analysis of National Surveys**

Secondary analysis was conducted on the results of three surveys by a project team member under the employ of ACER. The surveys were:

- Secondary Analysis of National Surveys
- Student Engagement Breakfasts
- Interviews and Focus Groups
**Student Engagement Breakfasts**

Seven student engagement breakfasts were held in six of eight States/Territories. Participants were targeted to ensure a diverse range of experiences with course and research-based postgraduate degrees, on-campus, online, and mixed-mode study, and professionally and non-professionally focused courses. Participants sat at self-selected tables of 4 to 7 students, and discussed five key questions at each of the engagement breakfasts:

- What do the words ‘student experience’ mean to you?
- What are the most valuable and/or key components of the postgraduate student experience?
- What is well-done by your university?
- What is not well-done by your university?
- What strategies do you suggest to improve the postgraduate student experience?

At each table, participants generated word clouds to illustrate their collective responses to each question using coloured markers on poster paper. The students were encouraged to illustrate emphasis through use of colour and size. Word clouds were subsequently analysed by team members to identify themes arising across all tables and breakfasts.

**Interviews and Focus Groups**

A total of 82 interviews (44 staff and 38 students) were conducted across all eight States / Territories. The staff interviews were conducted with higher education teaching academics, executive, and other leaders. Students and staff were each asked nine research questions (see Final Report for details of the questions asked). Interviews were fully audio-recorded and transcribed, with the transcriptions subsequently analysed by team members and research assistants until concordance of theme identification was reached.

There were a total of nine focus groups. Eight were comprised of postgraduate students and the other was comprised of staff. Each of the focus groups was facilitated by one of the Project Leaders and/or the Project Manager. The facilitator followed a semi-structured interview guide, which provided structure, yet also allowed the focus group conversation to be participant-directed. All of the prompts were derived from themes arising in the student engagement breakfasts. Two audio-recorders were used to ensure all comments were captured. The recordings were fully transcribed and a narrative analysis software tool (NVivo) was used for the thematic analysis, allowing identification of key words and themes from the transcripts.
The following recommendations are relevant to students enrolled in, or university educators/leaders involved with, postgraduate study whether they are coursework or higher degree by research.

Consistent with the major themes identified within the project these have been grouped as particularly relevant to first year students as they commence their studies; support services for students; support for employability; and those relating to students’ social and/or networking activities or student representation within the university system.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STUDENTS

First year experience

 cardboard Even before you have enrolled, ensure you are aware of and use the institution’s preferred methods of communication, which are frequently the institution website and the institution email system. There is no value in missing important opportunities because you are only monitoring your personal preferred methods of electronic communication.

 cardboard Participate in an induction event that focuses on the course, the lecturers, and the postgraduate students.

 cardboard ➡ Do not make instant judgements, such as: ‘orientation seems to be more for undergraduates, why am I being asked to attend’. Rather, take the initiative and find out which parts of orientation are likely to add value to your experience and then attend with an open and enquiring mind.

 cardboard Early in your program, ensure you know the range of support services available to you and take full advantage of all they have to offer (see ‘Support’ section below).

 cardboard ➡ Again, do not make instant judgements, for example: ‘study supports seem to be more for undergraduates, why am I being asked to attend’. Rather, take the initiative to find out which study supports may add value to your experience. Being a postgraduate does mean performing more like a mature learner, it is a process of reflecting on your skill set (both strengths and weaknesses) and seeking opportunities to develop these.

 cardboard Work-life-study balance is arguably the most significant challenge you will face. Remain cognisant of this, and take proactive actions, such as;

 cardboard ➡ planning before you commit;

 cardboard ➡ developing interpersonal skills;

 cardboard ➡ obtaining a mentor to provide guidance – this could be a senior student, a recent graduate, or a trusted advisor;

 cardboard ➡ making careful, considered and planned decisions about workload, percentage enrolment, and social activities;

 cardboard ➡ remembering that social activities are a vital component of success.
Social/networking

+ Get to know your fellow postgraduate students.
+ Participate in social networks, forums and / or seminars.
+ Form study groups that are face to face, online, or combination of both.
+ Engage with postgraduate students who are not from your primary cultural group.
+ Study in teams with other postgraduate students. Establish networks while you are in university for future contacts, connectors and clients.

Student representation

+ Participate in a Postgraduate Student Association (or equivalent).
+ Use your student voice. Let the institution know that you are there and have concerns and ideas to contribute to the discourse about your student experience. Always approach these discussions with a value add and action orientated intent.

Student support services

+ Introduce yourself to the university librarian(s) and seek their assistance (e.g., Endnote, research literature synthesis, navigating research data bases, library catalogues, journals and e-journals, library guides, and theses).
+ Be proactive in seeking assistance from Academic Support personnel in your university (e.g., academic writing, referencing).
+ Be proactive in seeking assistance from Information Technology (IT) specialists that are employed by your university to assist you with IT related matters.
+ Be proactive in seeking assistance from Blended Learning design specialists that are employed by your university to assist you with Learning Management System (LMS) related matters.
+ Develop confidence in navigating and maximising the potential of the Learning Management System in your university to enhance your learning.
+ Just because something is labelled as a “generic” skill, do not assume that means it is a low level skill just for undergraduates. Be aware that even the most successful individuals sometimes contract professional “coaches” to provide guidance in developing interpersonal skills and skills associated with task orientation and time management.
Student support services cont ...

- Actively look for and seek advice on finding the right balance in your approach to learning. Yes, postgraduate is a higher level qualification than undergraduate but that does not mean you need to (e.g., do it all on your own in order to meet the requirements of the program. Self-directed learning does not mean it is all up to you; rather it is a collaborative approach to identifying the learner’s strengths and weaknesses with respect to the programs outcomes and then working constructively on building strengths and developing capacity in areas of weakness.

Employability

- Undertake industry-related projects when you have a choice of assessment modes.
- Find out about internships and work experience your university offers and do them.
- Engage in extra-curricular activities, particularly leading student societies and/or contributing to your university by being the postgraduate student representative on university committees.
- Get to know your professors and make sure they know you for future job leads.
  - Go to optional workshops, particularly if they are skills-based.
- Be as interdisciplinary as possible. Ensure that you obtain a broad-base of study and knowledge.
- Differentiate yourself and understand where you 'sit' in the world of research and/or practice.
- Self-identify and present yourself as a citizen scholar.
- Be confident and proud of your discipline of study.
- Practice telling employers about all of the transferable skills you have gained through postgraduate studies, like spoken and written communication, analysis and team work.
- Do your research about target employers and positions and be able to express why you want that job.
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

First year experience

- Specifically plan, develop, and implement orientation activities and processes that support the diversity of postgraduate students, inclusive of online students. Details of orientation programs should be specifically communicated to postgraduate students, clearly identifying the benefits for these programs.

- Ensure that there are opportunities to access information and support for postgraduates with diverse backgrounds.

- Be cognisant of the structure and scheduling of postgraduate orientation programs to ensure students can access the information and support they need, without the distraction or annoyance of less relevant information. Only take the time required to achieve the objectives. Ensure that orientation only takes the time that is needed to achieve its objectives.

- Early in the program incorporate more sophisticated generic skills like managing uncertainty in student supports programs and clearly communicate the benefit of such skills to postgraduate students.

- Develop a communication strategy about the support programs to ensure postgraduate students are able to understand the intended value and applicability of the program to their study.

Curriculum/program strategies

- Facilitate postgraduate learning opportunities and engagement using blended learning approaches.

- Ensure that all postgraduate students can access and use the relevant features of the Learning Management System (LMS).

- Maximise the potential of the LMS to engage your postgraduate students and extend their learning.

- Create activities / projects that require online students to interact with each other near the beginning of your course/unit.

- Develop a culture of collaboration rather than competition in your postgraduate classrooms.

- Seek feedback from your postgraduate students about how you can assist them in their learning.
Strategise, develop, and implement plans to not just manage the diversity of postgraduate students in your courses and programs, but also seek avenues for this diversity to enrich the experience for all participants.

Explicitly identify the mode of study for each course, and provide mechanisms to explain this to students as well as the other types of study modes identifiable within the institution. Adopt common language and, as much as possible, common structures and processes within Faculties and Schools in the same institution and (if possible) across the institution.

Consider ways in which student support services can be embedded in the curriculum.

Develop opportunities for cross program engagements that not just provide opportunities for socialisation but importantly provide opportunities for skill development in learning and working in multidisciplinary teams and environments.

Look for technology based solutions to minimise isolation felt by online students. Create program time and space in learning management systems, for online students to share experience, preferably without the gaze of the educator.

**Social/networking**

Facilitate opportunities for postgraduate students to engage, work, and/or collaborate across cultural groups.

Facilitate postgraduate students to network with alumni and potential future employers.

Seek multiple ways to stimulate a sense of belonging for your postgraduate students.

Invite postgraduate students (and particularly international postgraduate students and their families) to your home for a meal (i.e., pot luck-bring food to share).

Develop opportunities for cross program engagements that not only provide opportunities for socialisation, but also important skill development in learning and working in multidisciplinary teams and environments.

Be conscious that although sometimes poorly attended, face-to-face events are often highly valued by students. Remember that often lack of attendance can be due to inappropriate scheduling and/or lack of communication about the purpose and value of interaction, rather than an intrinsic lack of student interest. Consider using the student voice to identify and explain the value.
Student support services

Educators and learning support staff develop collaborative ways and means to explicitly develop and/or identify support resources that are deliberately tailored to the needs of diverse postgraduate students in diverse modes of study and strategically communicated to each student group. Increasing the accessibility of existing and new support resources by tailoring the communication to diverse postgraduate students groups about the values, applications and outcomes of these resources is likely to enhance the experiences of educators and students alike.

Specifically identify the study support requirements of your postgraduate students and plan, develop, implement appropriate support programs.

Increase access and acceptability of support programs by developing flexible support programs that can be accessed “just in time” with respect to the individual student needs.

Acknowledge and communicate that work-life-study balance can be a concern for postgraduate students.

Develop flexible and accessible supports tailored to these learners who may already have significant education and life experience.

Employability

Embed employability in the everyday postgraduate curriculum and assessment.

Make employability and the concept of citizen scholarship explicit to postgraduate students.

Design project-based work for postgraduate students.

Actively engage with industry throughout postgraduate studies to facilitate practical experience.
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR UNIVERSITY LEADERS

First year experience

+ Facilitate informative induction programs and regular professional development activities that enhance the transition, learning and engagement experiences of postgraduate students.

+ Develop enabling language and discourse, and genuinely flexible delivery, to ensure the accessibility of study support programs to students. Remember that generic skills are actually sophisticated and whilst requiring foundation in first year should be scaffolded throughout the student experience. After all, these are often the skills that experienced professionals encounter in continued professional development programs, usually for a good reason.

Curriculum/program strategies

+ Facilitate opportunities for cross-disciplinary activities that encourage postgraduate student engagement.

University processes/administration

+ Interrogate feedback from all stakeholders about the organisation’s administrative processes. If positive feedback seems to be related more to people than process, fix the process.

+ Develop flexible systems and processes enabling all aspects of administration to be completed after hours and off-campus.

+ Ensure administrative requirements are clearly communicated, and that necessary information is accessible, understandable, and meets the applicant/student needs.

+ Lobby for an investigation into the utility of current testing methods of English language proficiency with respect to testing for readiness for tertiary and, in particular, postgraduate tertiary studies.

+ Lead discussion of the appropriate fulltime load for international students for whom English is not their first language.
Review institutional language support centres and study support programs to assure services and supports are:

- appropriate for the diverse mix of students;
- robust and sufficiently tailored to meet requirements for English language proficiency across the diversity of postgraduate offerings;
- clearly and consistently communicated to all students;
- safe, flexible, and accessible;
- appropriate and accessible for on-line students.

Identify the study supports necessary for the postgraduate student experience to ensure a transformative experience that enables students to reach high-level postgraduate outcomes.

**Social/networking**

- Facilitate opportunities for international students to engage socially and academically with domestic students: presentations, performances or discussions.
- Provide suitable facilities for postgraduate students to meet in and talk with peers (e.g., kitchen facilities, reading area).

**Student representation**

- Facilitate postgraduate student representation on key university research, learning and teaching and academic boards/committees.

**Student support services**

- Provide Academic Support Services that postgraduate students can access during the day and evening.
- Provide Blended Learning design and Information Technology specialist personnel who can provide academics and postgraduate students with support as required.
- Ensure that the online (LMS) infrastructure is accessible and reliable for academics and postgraduate students both domestically and internationally.
- Facilitate professional development and training sessions that enhance postgraduate students' skills and capacities to engage successfully with the LMS and other aspects of online learning.
Employability

Explicitly identify postgraduate students in the context of employability within university-wide policy and strategic plans, and involve postgraduate students (student governance) in the design and development of services and supports.

In addition to these recommendations that were synthesised through the project, discussion at the National Symposium for Postgraduate Student Experience gave rise to a series of **Action Recommendations for Executive Leaders of Higher Education**.

The symposium was attended by 107 delegates from 28 Australian universities and three national organisations (*Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching*, *Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations*, and the *Australian Council for Educational Research*). These Action Recommendations were discussed during the final session and subsequently circulated to delegates for comment. Delegates expressed the opinion that implementation of the strategies outlined in the nine recommendations would greatly enhance overall postgraduate student experience and so contribute to maintaining the quality of Australia's higher education sector.
THE ACTION RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EXECUTIVE LEADERS OF HIGHER EDUCATION ARE:

1. Create regular national forums for cross-university and cross-discipline postgraduate conversations.

2. Create tools and dissemination vehicles for national data collection on the postgraduate student experience (coursework and research considered separately and together).

3. Across the country, establish positions with responsibility and authority for coordination of postgraduate coursework programs at the school/faculty/university level as appropriate. This action requires support and training and must be valued and recognised through such means as protected time and recognition in workload/promotion criteria. This action is also intended to establish feedback/action channels for coursework students.

4. Create and disseminate a national ‘value postgraduates’ campaign. As part of this campaign, advance a shared understanding on a national basis, of ‘postgraduate student experience.’ Furthermore, establish clear and agreed indicators of postgraduate ‘success.’

5. Implement supports and strategies at the university level that are customised to address postgraduate employability needs and engage a national campaign to heighten opportunities for graduates from postgraduate degrees.

6. Improve national policies and practices regarding universities as employers. Put more mechanisms into place to support PhD students in the transition from student to academic. Advocate for improved working conditions for early career academics (i.e., longer contracts, reduced workload, improved access to resources and services.)

7. Make postgraduate student experience a priority within universities and nationally. Extend equitable and appropriate supports to postgraduate students (as to undergraduate students).

8. Create (and support postgraduate students to achieve and sustain) authentic governance positions (nationally and locally). Furthermore, engage an equity campaign so that ATSI students achieve governance positions that are not limited to ATSI portfolios.

9. Foster greater senses of community within universities and on a national basis so that postgraduate students have increased levels of social supports throughout their studies and into their graduate experiences.
GOOD PRACTICE GUIDE PART II – GOOD PRACTICE FOR COURSEWORK POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

The following recommendations are particularly relevant to students enrolled in or university educators/leaders involved with coursework postgraduate courses. These recommendations should be read together with those addressing the needs of all postgraduate students in Part I of this Good Practice Guide.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STUDENTS

+ Undertake industry-related projects when you have a choice of assessment modes.
+ Study in teams with other postgraduate students. Establish networks while you are in university for future contacts, connectors and clients.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATORS/UNIVERSITY LEADERS

+ Develop, enunciate and enact the value proposition for postgraduate programs, particularly postgraduate coursework programs.
+ Identify the place for postgraduate coursework students within the institution, the sector and within debate about the reform and enhancement of the sector.
+ Develop and embed best practice frameworks to support the postgraduate coursework student experience across the sector, particularly the first year student experience.
+ Investigate the dimensions of a fulltime study load for postgraduate coursework programs and develop recommendations for fulltime load.
+ Explicitly identify the mode of study for each course, and provide mechanisms to explain this to students as well as the other types of study modes identifiable within the institution. Adopt common language and as much as possible common structures and processes within Faculties and Schools in the same institution and if possible across the institution.
EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

Prior reports addressing good practice in postgraduate courses:


   This report provides an overview of best practice approaches to postgraduate coursework programs in the fields of Health, Business and Education. The report can be retrieved from:
   


   This report provides an overview of grants and fellowships funded by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching and its predecessor bodies on postgraduate coursework and research degrees. The report can be retrieved from:
   

Individual institution initiatives:

Two examples of individual initiatives are included – one at a whole of institution level and one at an individual discipline level.

1. **La Trobe University Postgraduate Help**

   This initiative provides support for postgraduate students through individual consultations, workshops and a range of other services tailored for postgraduate coursework or Higher Degree Research (HDR) students. To learn more, visit:
   

2. **University of Queensland MBA Career Resource Centre**

   The Career Resource Centre provides individual career advice, and is responsible for the delivery of specialised events, programs, and workshops designed to prepare students for an increasingly competitive, global job market. For more information, visit:
   
The following recommendations are particularly relevant to students enrolled in or university educators/leaders involved with higher degree by research (HDR) postgraduate courses. These recommendations should be read together with those addressing the needs of all postgraduate students in Part I of this Good Practice Guide.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STUDENTS

- Develop confidence to discuss supervision matters with your supervisor in a timely manner (e.g., more or less regular meetings; more transparent feedback).
- Attend conferences and present your project and/or research work. Particularly try to participate in international conferences.
- Try to get published while you are still a student.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATORS/UNIVERSITY LEADERS

- Educators and leaders are encouraged to think of other service type roles, apart from teaching, that HDRs could contribute to such as a scholarship involving responsibility for managing a range of HDR student engagement activities.
- Consider implementing and refining existing frameworks for multiple supervision of HDR students to meet the needs of students and programs.
- Facilitate the appointment of a supervisor(s) (and the related process) that will maximise the postgraduate students’ learning, research and writing capacities.
- Rethink scholarships for HDR students to expand on opportunities to contribute to academic work, such as sessional teaching, by including roles associated with developing and managing student network and engagement activities.
EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

Prior reports addressing good practice in postgraduate courses:

1. **Graduate Research Good Practice Principles, Australian Council of Graduate Research**
   A statement of good practice principles for the development of graduate research programs developed by the Australian Council of Graduate Research. To retrieve, visit the following link:
   
   [http://media.wix.com/ugd/f39714_e846281b7f0d405284613846baa86377.pdf](http://media.wix.com/ugd/f39714_e846281b7f0d405284613846baa86377.pdf)

   This report provides an overview of grants and fellowships funded by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching and its predecessor bodies on postgraduate coursework and research degrees. To view the report, visit:
   

**Individual institution initiatives:**

A number of universities have recognised that many HDR students will seek employment in academic roles when they complete their studies and have developed programs to enhance employability – either through general programs or programs designed to improve teaching skills. Links to those programs are below:

1. **Employability in Europe: Enhancing post graduate complementary skills training**
   The gaining of complementary skills is one of the aims of the European Higher Education Area as it promotes training to ensure that all graduates have the skills necessary to enter the global job market. Whilst PhD training in the UK has seen the inclusion of transferable generic skills, in addition to subject-specific, such training is not common in all European universities. There often exists a lack of understanding amongst academics supervising PhD studies as to the importance of such skills to the future employability of their students. The Marie Curie Initial Training Network DITANET (Diagnostic Techniques in Particle Accelerators) aimed to improve the employability of researchers by providing both subject specific and generic training from a variety of academic and industry trainers. In this contribution, the training concept is presented and student feedback summarised as a means of understanding the benefits, or otherwise, derived from such trainings. To learn more about this initiative, visit:

   [https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/psc_159_0.pdf](https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/psc_159_0.pdf)
La Trobe University Postgraduate Help
Support for postgraduate students through individual consultations, workshops and a range of other services tailored for postgraduate coursework or Higher Degree Research (HDR) students. For further information, visit:

http://www.latrobe.edu.au/students/learning/postgrad-help

Macquarie University Genes to Geoscience Research Enrichment Program
One key aim of the Genes to Geoscience Research Enrichment Program (GGREP) is for researchers to encounter new research questions and possibilities across a wider range of fields than just in their own lab. They will then be better prepared to take the lead as new cross-discipline fields emerge. The second key aim is for researchers to learn useful skills, at higher standard and more efficiently than by self-education. To learn more about this program, visit:

http://www.mq.edu.au/research/research-centres-groups-and-facilities/secure-planet/centres/centre-for-genes-to-geoscience/research-enrichment-program2

Queensland University of Technology Teaching Advantage Program (2015)
Teaching Advantage (TA) is a professional development program for advanced PhD students at Queensland University of Technology. The program builds skills in teaching, unit coordination and forging an academic career through a series of interactive workshops. The workshops include in-depth activities and guest presentations to illustrate practical and relevant teaching, coordination, and career-building techniques. This program is designed to fill the teaching experience gap between part-time tutoring while undertaking a PhD, and completing an Early Career Academic Development program once candidates secure their first Lecturer role. To learn more about this program, visit:

http://doctoralteaching.org/teaching-advantage-program/

Curtin University Enhancing learning in the laboratory: identifying and promoting best practice in the professional development of demonstrators.
A Laboratory Demonstrators Professional Development Programme (LDPDP) was developed to enhance the teaching skills of laboratory demonstrators. The benefits are twofold – an enhanced learning experience of students in laboratories and enhanced professional skills of demonstrators who are often HDR students. To learn more about this initiative, visit:

REFERENCES


For further information & resources:

http://PostgraduateStudentExperience.com/

THANK YOU TO:

The many postgraduate students and staff (366 from 26 Australian universities) who so generously volunteered their time and energy contributing to this student experience research.

WE WANT TO KNOW ABOUT YOUR INITIATIVES!

When researching the contents of the good practice guides, we came across so many great exemplars of good practice. Unfortunately, there was just not enough room to fit them all. As such, we would like to take the opportunity to invite you to let us know about your wonderful initiatives and programs that support and/or enhance the postgraduate student experience. With your permission, we plan to create an online catalogue of domestic and international initiatives on our project webpage.

To let us know, please email:

olt@bond.edu.au
Visit our websites for a wealth of resources and information 😊

http://postgraduatestudentexperience.com

http://graduateemployability.com
A small example of our suite of resources

National Research on the Postgraduate Student Experience: Case Presentation

**VOLUME 1**
FIRST YEAR POSTGRADUATE STUDENT EXPERIENCE
http://PostgraduateStudentExperience.com

**VOLUME 2**
POSTGRADUATE STUDENT DIVERSITY
http://PostgraduateStudentExperience.com

**POSTGRADS (MASTERS AND DOCTORAL) DON’T NEED EMPLOYMENT SUPPORTS – OR DO THEY?**

When we think of Masters students, we usually think of people who have completed Bachelor degrees and successfully moved into careers in their field. They are returning to university on their own volition, or with their employer’s sponsorship, to deepen their knowledge base and refine their skills. We tend to