Monash Graduate Association Submission for the

Monash Doctoral Program Review 2024

Context

Every year the MGA runs a survey of all HDR students, with each year focused on a different theme. The past three years the themes have been: 2021: *Satisfaction*, 2022: *Motivations and Practice*, 2023: *Health, Family and Finances*. The feedback and subsequent recommendations presented here are the result of these surveys and the recent Advance HE survey on HDR student satisfaction in Australia. The recommendations made here are designed to improve the overall PhD experience and increase student satisfaction. High levels of student satisfaction not only enrich the degree experience at an individual level but are also linked to lower attrition rates and quicker completion times. Accordingly, the recommendations here are focused mainly on student retention and improved progress rather than attracting new HDR students although some overlap between these objectives is inevitable.

In general, HDR students' satisfaction with their degree programs was reasonably high with 80% of HDR students responding positively when asked about their overall experience. Nevertheless, a not inconsiderable number of students still consider leaving their degrees before completion (30%).[1] Over the past three years, the top five reasons given by Monash HDR students for considering leaving were: Covid-19, a lack of motivation, health issues, financial concerns, and poor supervision.[2] Similarly, when asked what Monash could do to aid timely completion, the most common responses were: increased financial assistance, better infrastructure, resources and equipment, better supervision, greater availability of extensions and increased leave, and a more supportive and understanding culture.[3] This feedback is explored in greater detail below.

Lack of motivation: study location and student belonging

A student's sense of belonging is one of the most significant contributors to higher levels of satisfaction and lower attrition rates. When students are more academically integrated into a department or feel more supported by faculty and peers, they tend to have reduced completion times and lower attrition rates.[4] Alternatively, those who do not feel integrated into the academic world or their department, or are isolated from peers, have higher attrition rates demonstrating the importance of student socialization among faculty and peers for overall satisfaction and progress.[5] While levels of belonging can vary depending on a number of personal factors, students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds are more likely to have a reduced sense of belonging during graduate studies and face different challenges to socialization.[6] To improve overall satisfaction efforts must continue to be made to ensure all students, regardless of background or personal characteristics, have a chance to become socialized in their department or school.

Across Australia, both research culture (61%) and community (61%) had poor satisfaction scores among HDR students.[7] Students expressed low satisfaction at feeling part of a community of HDR students (59%), having a sense of belonging (65%), and having enough opportunities to interact with other HDRs (59%).[8] While overall satisfaction scores remained fairly consistent throughout candidature, when it came to students' satisfaction with community, the highest scores were for students in the taught stage before tailing off during writing up.[9] Students, whose contact with staff was mainly in-person, were significantly more satisfied than those for whom it was mostly virtual.[10] Similarly, those whose contact was mainly virtual were also more likely to have considered leaving their degree (34%) before completion.[11]

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> Recommendation: Where possible, Monash must continue to transition back to a predominantly in person/on campus mode of study. There will be exceptions to this, such as students who cannot travel in regularly, and these should be accommodated accordingly.

In 2022, at Monash 69% of HDR students were satisfied that they felt included in their academic unit. While similar scores were recorded by both domestic and international students and those who identified as LGBTIQA+ or Indigenous, they were significantly lower among students who identified as having a disability (47%) or were over 40 years of age (56%).[12] Similarly, in 2023 24% of all HDR students reported having not enough meaningful contact with academic staff with little difference between equity groups.[13]

> Recommendation: Discipline specific events at which both students and staff are in attendance. These may take the form of compulsory attendance at weekly or fortnightly research seminar series that encourage knowledge sharing and interaction between faculty or school members and HDR students. This time could contribute towards Professional Development hours (see below).

> Recommendation: Greater compulsory training for staff, supervisors and the whole HDR cohort in relation to awareness about the diversity of experience for students with disabilities. Information about reasonable adjustments to be made clear to both academic staff and students at the start of candidature through the dissemination of specific informative materials as part of orientation.

Despite 97% of Monash HDRs saying that having social/peer connections during the degree was important, in 2022 only 51% said they felt connected to their peers.[14] Once again this was considerably lower among students with a disability (27%) and those over 40 years of age (35%). Again, in 2023, 38% of all HDRs said they did not have enough meaningful contact with other students or peers. This rose to 49% among those who identified as having a disability.[15] More must be done to ensure students with disabilities and those from older age groups make peer connections.

The potential sense of alienation among students with disabilities is concerning given the importance of belonging to HDR success. Perhaps unsurprisingly, HDR students who identified as having a disability report being twice as likely to have considered leaving (57%) as those who did not (29%).

> Recommendation: Tailor faculty social or academic events for HDR students from groups traditionally less represented in post-graduate research.

> Recommendation: Ensure all faculty and school events are fully accessible to all students and improve awareness of the diversity of the PhD cohort and its associated value.

> Recommendation: The establishment of peer support networks via Moodle or similar, through which students with similar experiences and goals can connect. Students must be invited to participate early on in their candidature.

Professional development, coursework and milestones

The inclusion of professional development modules and compulsory coursework is a recent addition to PhD programs in Australia, and one that has not always been welcomed by academics or students. While some see it as an opportunity to introduce PhD students to new knowledge areas that are deemed indispensable to their field or the transition to industry, others find it to be an unnecessary burden on students, who are already under pressure to finish their degrees in a timely manner and whose time could be spent better pursuing activities more closely related to their research topic.[16] Yet despite regular criticism from current and former students, 77% of students across Australia report being satisfied with their professional development during their degree.[17]

By contrast, at Monash, only 52% felt the compulsory coursework was useful with 21% feeling that coursework was not relevant to their research and 23% saying it was not a good use of their time. Similarly, only 45% thought Professional Development was beneficial, with 32% saying it wasn't relevant to their research nor a good use of their time.[18] If Monash is to continue with compulsory Professional Development and coursework in any form, it needs to consider how to make both relevant for PhD students' research projects and their future development. Many PhD students pursue 'extra curricula' professional activities beyond their thesis research including—but not limited to—publications beyond the requirements of the degree, public engagement, attending and presenting at conferences or public seminars connected to their research, the compilation of pedagogical materials, developing projects with industry, and industry placements. These activities are needed in order to be competitive in the job market but are time consuming and can contribute to longer overall candidature lengths.

> Recommendation: Reduce significantly compulsory coursework and Professional Development hours.

> Recommendation: The inclusion of 'extra curricula' professional activities in the Professional Development hours. These could count towards the total required Professional Development hours either as part of recognized prior learning or separately.

Monash HDR students were generally satisfied with confirmation, mid-candidature, and pre-submission reviews, although a number of students felt the requirements and administrative processes surrounding the milestones could be communicated more clearly.[19]

> Recommendation: The creation of professional roles in each faculty to provide specific administrative support for milestones and to improve the clarity of information disseminated concerning specific requirements (e.g. discipline or faculty specific).

Finances

Numerous studies have examined the link between PhD students' finances, overall satisfaction and completion rates. They demonstrate that financial stress not only directly impacts completion times

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but also contributes to lower overall satisfaction and poorer mental health outcomes.[20] 29% of PhD students in Australia have considered leaving their degrees with financial difficulties reported as the most prevalent reason why.[21] In 2023, the MGA ran a survey using the Melbourne Institute's financial wellbeing scales. Respondents scores were categorized in four categories from best to worse: Doing Great, Getting By, Just Coping, and Having Trouble. One in five Monash HDR students were categorized as Having Trouble. This was in part due to the median annual income of Monash HDRs at just $30,000-39,999, well below the national minimum wage. In the same survey, 28% said financial stress was having a 'big' or 'extreme' impact on their ability to complete their course with 30% saying the same for their ability to concentrate.[22]

Recommendation: Increase HDR stipends to the annual minimum wage and index in line with annual inflation.

When it came to the length of the PhD, at Monash 65% said they were happy with the timeframe for completion with only 15% not happy indicating that the time allotted is not unreasonable.[23] Nevertheless, across Go8 universities just under one in four domestic students complete their degrees within four years.[24] Despite this, PhD stipends in most Australian universities cover just 3.5 years. This results in funding being removed at a key stage of candidature.[25] Students must enrol part-time or find work elsewhere with the knock-on effect that completion times drag out. Providing longer stipends can reduce attrition rates as students can dedicate more hours to their research in this final, critical phase of their degree.[26]

Recommendation: Increase the length of stipends to four years.

For students with disabilities, however, only 50% were happy with the length while 34% thought it unreasonable.

Recommendation: Greater availability of extensions of candidature for up to five years, a greater leave allowance, and increased funding for students with disabilities for research related costs.[1]

The ability to travel for study or research purposes is an integral part of any PhD process. Attendance at conferences or research visits to other institutions play an important role in developing impactful research as well as fostering a sense of belonging and identity among graduate researchers. As it stands, the current centrally allotted maximum travel funding amount is $2115.[27] Not only is this amount too low to facilitate travel outside of Australia, but it is also lower than several other Go8 universities (for which information was available) including Sydney, Adelaide and ANU.[28]

While faculties also contribute their own funds to research travel, this funding is not spread equally across different subject areas or even individuals within the same subject area. The lack of transparency about what faculties provide what funding has been cited as particularly frustrating by HDR students, who may have chosen to pursue their research through a different faculty if they had known prior to submitting their application. Similarly, the lack of clarity on how to apply for faculty funding has provoked similar concerns with many students relying on supervisors to 'tip them off', with the subsequent impression that some supervisors act as 'gatekeepers' to available funding.

> Recommendation: Increase the maximum available travel funding. This may be achieved by reappropriating money from competitive scholarships for general funding to ensure more students get an equal opportunity to travel. Provide more transparency on what faculties offer what funding and how to apply for it.

Health and support services

HDR students regularly report poorer mental health outcomes than the general population.[29] Poor mental health, depression and anxiety come with serious personal risks for those undertaking graduate research. Poor mental health outcomes, including depression and anxiety, can also be linked to poor academic performance, itself a cause of increased stress levels.[30] Across Australia, after financial difficulties the second most common cause of PhD students considering leaving was poor mental/emotional health.[31] Not only does this carry personal costs for individual students, but it is also linked to significant economic costs for universities through higher attrition rates or extended completion times.[32]

At Monash, in 2023 a quarter of HDR students reported having poor mental health, more than three times the number that reported the same at commencement.[33] The most common causes of stress were: coursework, Professional Development, supervisory issues, running out of finances before completion, and not being job/fellowship ready.[34]

Monash offers valuable free counselling to its students as well as the new Thrive app. Yet despite declining mental health and the counselling available, half of Monash HDR students had not previously accessed mental health services.[35] While digital mental health interventions provide valuable help to students, uptake among cohorts can often be low.[36] Efforts must be made to increase engagement with mental health services among Monash's HDRs.

> Recommendation: All HDR students to attend at least one compulsory counselling session at commencement to set up a mental health plan. This and signing up to Thrive to be compulsory requirements of confirmation.

In relation to facilities and services, only 73% of HDR students were positively satisfied with those offered by Monash. Again, this was considerably lower among students with disabilities with just 47% responding positively.[37] While the relatively low satisfaction levels with the facilities and resources on offer were due to an array of different issues, some recurrent issues included software licensing, poor desk space, low quality chairs, and access to grants and funding to support research.

> Recommendation: Monash to invest in better office facilities across disciplines and ensure software permissions and licenses are up-to-date. Alternatively, it may consider allowing students to download the software they need more easily.

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Supervision

Supervisory issues are one of, if not the most, commonly ascribed reasons for delays in completion and high attrition rates among HDR students.[38] In general, Australian PhD students are more satisfied with supervision than in other countries. Australian students are especially satisfied when supervision is conducted in person (see above re belonging).[39] At Monash, 84% of students responded positively in relation to their supervision. At the other end, 17% of students reported a conflict with their supervisor/s.[40] Monash students are generally more satisfied if they choose their own topic and supervisor rather than being allotted one.[41] This is undoubtedly related to the fact that most PhD students enrol in their degree to pursue a personal interest.

> Recommendation: Encourage students to choose their own supervisors and topic, and to meet in person whenever possible.

Different supervisors and students have different work patterns so there is no 'one size fits all' model of supervision. Expectations play a crucial role in a supervisory relationship and many relationships can break down due to a misalignment of expectations around meeting times, supervisor input, or feedback detail and turnaround times.[42] Setting out expectations early is crucial for a productive supervisory relationship.

> Recommendation: Implement a student > supervisor agreement that sets out the terms of the relationship including meeting times and formats, preferred means of contact, expected working hours, intellectual property, and authorship. Feedback expectations should also be set out early on in candidature using the 'Feedback Expectation Tool' or similar.[1] Both supervisor agreements and feedback tools should be renewed every year to give both supervisor and student an opportunity to reset their expectations as their candidature progresses.

Yet, while student satisfaction is important, it should also be acknowledged that many supervisors are overworked and subject to a number of competing demands.

> Recommendation: Reduce the maximum number of students each supervisor can supervise (currently set at 8 main supervisions, or 16 in total).

> Recommendation: Create new professional roles to reduce the administrative burden on supervisors.

Career development

As an increasingly small number of PhD graduates continue in academia, there is a growing desire for students to explore other career options in industry both to increase Australia's research capacity and meet its future skills needs.[43] At Monash, HDR students overwhelmingly enrol for career opportunities and due to personal interest in a topic.[44] Unsurprisingly, the opportunity to connect or network with industry experts was cited as important for 98% of international and 91% of domestic

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students. Similarly, industry placements and internship opportunities were considered important for 90% of international students and 64% of domestic.[45]

> Recommendation: Monash continues to develop industry links and provide placement opportunities or internships as an integral part of the PhD program for students across disciplines.

As well as career development and opportunities during the PhD, a number of students report confusion or a loss of direction when considering new careers after graduation, with many citing a lack of knowledge about what transferrable skills they have and how they can be applied in industry roles unrelated to their research topic.

> Recommendation: A dedicated careers advisor and related sessions provided through Career Connect that are specifically designed for PhD students. Students should be encouraged to make use of this service as early as possible during their candidature.

This report was produced by the research and policy team at the MGA: Dr Ash Finn, Dr Ryan Edwards, and Ms Dina Galanopoulos. Should you have any questions in regard to the information or recommendations outlined here, please contact ashley.finn@monash.edu for further information.

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