

Enablers and Barriers to an equitable Higher Degree by Research (HDR) learning Environment

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Project Summary

Little is understood about the learning environment of Higher Degree Research (HDR) candidates in terms of their engagement with and progression through the complex 'matrix of opportunities, resources, monitoring processes and expectations' (Pearson, Evans, & Macauley, 2016, p.2121). Widening access to undergraduate study has been paralleled by narrowing access to postgraduate study and research suggests that those from equity backgrounds are less likely to enrol in HDR study and are more likely to drop out. Compounding this, equity groups have varying opportunities and resources to participate in research activities (Petersen, 2014; Pearson et al., 2016; Odena & Burgess, 2017). For doctoral attrition, the most striking risk factors are having a disability, family and carer responsibilities, part-time employment outside the PhD, financial hardship, and part-time stipends (West et al., 2011).

A previous case study at the University of Newcastle (UoN) identified significant differences between equity and non-equity groups including longer time to completion and greater risk of attrition. Using Shaw's (2010) journey plot tool and interviews, insights from HDR students on the enablers and barriers to students' full participation during candidature were gained and the aspects of their learning environment that were most helpful to them identified. The data expanded the scope of the recommendations by exploring the implications for each equity group and unpacked the assumptions and practices that currently underlie the support and supervision of HDR candidates and that reproduce inequality in the increasingly complex researcher development environment.

Key Points

- The research focused on female students in two different contexts, a regional university with an established equity program and a research-intensive capital city G08 University comparing experiences in STEM and Medicine with those in HASS, Business, and Creative disciplines across stages of candidature.
- Barriers identified included financial pressure; lack of a quiet work environment; challenges with supervision; need for ongoing systematic support; unequal distribution of support across faculties and schools; lack of a strong research community; technical and compliance issues; misrecognition of equity groups; and emotional ups and downs.
- Enablers included central provision of workshops/writing groups and the networking opportunities these provided; "hidden" help from academic advisors and colleagues; positive emotions at being recognised as an equity group member; positive partner support.

Recommendations for Policy or Practice

- **Access to supervision:** Supervisors may need to think about staggering leave so that one supervisor is available at all times to give advice, particular over the Christmas break.
- **Clarify expectations:** Help candidates, particularly those off campus or from different cultures, to understand the support structures available.
- **Office provision:** Develop spaces based on stage of candidature, with frequent access to learning communities during the early stages and quieter spaces towards the later stages.

- **Training:** To support research students at the point of need, develop online training resources.
- **Recognise prior learning:** Recognise the experiences that candidates bring to their studies, particularly those already working in academia, from another culture or from the workplace.
- **Social media:** Extend researcher development activities around the most popular social networking sites for candidates.
- **Cohesion:** Make more visible the support offered institution-wide, and promote at a point closer to the student i.e., school or faculty.
- **Pulse checks:** The journey tool provides a way to check-in and self-regulate progress.

Recommendations for Future Research

- The transmissive form of supervision is not sufficient, the doctoral research environment needs closer examination focusing more on access for diverse candidates.
- Doctoral students with significant work and/or carer responsibilities need further investigation, particularly the support structures for those completing their research program through online or blended modes.
- More focus is needed on the idea of an equitable PhD degree, how fairness and equity are recognised and acknowledged in this historically elite learning space.

References

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