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Equity, policy and practice: disruptions to candidature and barriers to career progression for women HDR candidates

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1. Introduction

Whilst prior research has established barriers to career progression for women academics, the experiences of women HDR candidates and the barriers to candidature progression, including movement to on-going, academic labour, or careers outside of academia, has not received the same level of attention. This project therefore aims to generate a better understanding of equity considerations for research disruption, with particular reference to the COVID-19 pandemic, for women HDR candidates.

There are two key research questions for this project:

1. What are the barriers to HDR progression for WSU women candidates?

2. How might WSU support the progression of women HDR candidates through targeted strategies?

This report provides recommendations for best practice for supporting the progression of women HDR candidates at Western.

2. Literature Review

Little is known about the experiences of *women* Higher Degree Research (HDR) candidates who are carers, and the barriers to candidature progression and movement into on-going, academic labour, or careers outside of academia.

In Australia, there is a lower proportion of women undertaking postgraduate research than undergraduate bachelor study (Australian Government, 2019). Crabb and Ekberg (2014) found that women are less likely than men to rate an academic career as appealing. Furthermore, women are more likely to change their mind about pursuing an academic career, and decide against it, during their HDR study. The authors suggest that the presence or anticipation of caring responsibilities, combined with their experience as HDR candidates, may deter women from pursuing an academic career (Crabb & Ekberg, 2014). It is challenging and can be stressful for women HDR candidates and early career researchers to plan for pregnancy and motherhood, in part due to absent or unclear institutional policies (Eren, 2022).

There is an extensive body of work on the broader experiences of doctoral candidates. A review of factors affecting the PhD experience indicated that difficulty balancing study and a personal life was strongly linked to psychological distress, particularly for those with children, but caring responsibilities were barely discussed (Sverdlik et al., 2018). Some of this literature analyses the data by gender, and there are mixed results as to whether and how gender has an impact on, for example, time to completion (van de Schoot et al., 2013). Others have found that the experience of doctoral study is gendered, where women can have fewer choices of location of study, supervisors, and topic (Wall, 2008).

Women doctoral students were found to face challenges in relation to: finding the time to study alongside managing domestic responsibilities, particularly caring responsibilities; the stress of balancing the demands of study and the home; and taking time away from family responsibilities to attend conferences (Brown & Watson, 2010) or to travel overseas to develop research networks (Henderson, 2019). Cronshaw et al. (2022) describe women combining work and part time study as living in 'perpetual peripherality', where the isolation can be somewhat mitigated through participation in virtual communities. International candidates may also need to sustain transnational family bonds, while adjusting to a new culture, and caring for family members (Phan, 2022).

Statistical analysis of equity across Australian HDR candidate groups does not consider the impact of caring responsibilities on HDR study experiences (Australian Government, 2019). This seems an oversight as many HDR candidates appear to be of an age where caring for children and parents might impact their candidature. Whilst HDR candidates are traditionally conceptualised as people in their 20s, who have recently completed their undergraduate Honours degree, many are in fact older, and have come to their study through non-traditional career paths. In 2019, 44% of HDR candidates in Australia were under 30, 32% aged 30 to 39, and 24% aged 40 and above (Department of Education Skills and Employment, 2020).

We know from an extensive literature on care and gender, that caring responsibilities are ongoing responsibilities rather than one off interruptions (see for example, Craig & Mullan, 2010), and that women are more likely to take on caring responsibilities in families and carry the mental load of organising care (Dean, Churchill & Ruppaner, 2021). Women's caring responsibilities and mental load impact their engagement with workplaces and research on academia suggests that carers continue to be disadvantaged in universities. Research suggests that there is tension between university gender equity policies that accommodate parental leave and flexible work, and the culture of competition and overwork - with the latter tending to undermine the former, to the detriment of carers (Huppatz, Sang & Napier, 2018). Whilst informal flexible work and care arrangements can be important to support academics to combine paid work and care work, managing these within the culture of competition can result in long work hours, indistinct boundaries around paid work, and limited time for self care, which can adversely affect carers' wellbeing (Robertson & Moreau, 2017).

There is a dearth of research on policies that address gender equity for HDR candidates. In the United States, policies that support HDR candidates who are also likely to be teaching or research assistants, with caring responsibilities, are focussed on the new birth mother. In this context leave is likely to be unpaid, extensions are often inadequate, and enacting the policy depends on support from individual advisors (Bokkin & Fleming, 2021). Even less is known about the experiences of carers who are not caring for children or caring for healthy, able-bodied children (Rosa, 2022), with some exceptions where caring for other

family members, animals and friends are included (Henderson, 2020). Diverse caring responsibilities in academia is an area where more research is needed (Moreau & Robertson, 2019).

Research has demonstrated that metrics of excellence within higher education impact gender equity (Huppatz et al 2019). These have notably been conceptualised around the metaphor of Benchmark Man. Those with the characteristics of Benchmark Man, a normative standard of an Anglo, white, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual man, without caring responsibilities (Thornton, 2013), have been shown to ride the tailwinds to academic excellence and success (Anderson et al., 2019). Those who do not resemble Benchmark Man battle headwinds in an attempt to demonstrate excellence. When practices of care within universities clash with trying to excel within these metrics, women who care for and with their candidates, students and colleagues are disadvantaged in the masculine performance-oriented culture, and this disadvantage is compounded by a code of silence around self-care (Gaudet et al, 2022). Further, mentorship and pastoral care responsibilities in higher education often impact women to a greater degree than men (Hu et al., 2017, Huppatz et al., 2019).

Academics have an ambivalent relationship with institutional policies that support carers. Such policies are sometimes absent or unclear (Eren, 2022), do not have the intended effect (Robertson & Moreau, 2017), or women do not feel entitled to claim their rights (Rosa, 2022). This can lead to some preferring support from outside of the workplace, under individual and informal arrangements (Moreau & Robertson, 2019). This is congruent with the response of universities in Australia to treat COVID arrangements as a private matter for women to manage (Nash & Churchill, 2020). In 2019, Huppatz, Townley, Denson and Bansel undertook research on barriers to career progression and promotion for women at Western Sydney University. Findings identified the significant impacts of: caring responsibilities; lack of self-confidence; limited access to mentoring; and inequitable access to opportunity as a result of perceptions of a 'boys club' culture. Recommendations identified the need for targeted, systemic responses that address policy, policy implementation, and research cultures. There is a need to articulate the findings of the study by Huppatz et al (2019) with an understanding of the barriers to progression for HDR candidates and their movement into paid work. Building on existing research, this current research investigates the experiences of women HDR candidates rather than those already employed as academics at the university.

The current research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. The University went into lockdown in 2020, and again in 2021. The pandemic has foregrounded and intensified gender inequity in the sharing of caring responsibilities (Matthewman & Huppatz, 2020), with women reporting a higher level of emotional strain than men due to the impact of COVID (Rupanner et al., 2021). In Australia, during the 2020 lockdown, mother-father parent couples in

dual earner households spent more time at home, had a slight decrease in paid work hours, and an increase in unpaid work hours. Whilst, on average, the relative gender gap decreased between mothers and fathers, mothers' hours in paid work decreased more, and their unpaid work hours increased more. Unpaid work comprised housework and household management, and active and supervisory care for children, the elderly, and sick and disabled persons (Craig & Churchill, 2020). A United States study found that the loss of childcare and requirements for home-schooling due to the pandemic, resulted in mothers being at greater risk of losing their job, or a reduction in paid work hours, than fathers (Petts et al., 2020).

In academia, the 'inherent inequities in confinement' such as internet connections, space, and caring responsibilities, will have an impact on HDR candidates' progress (Corbera et al., 2020, p.192), and there are likely to be significant detrimental impacts on women's career progression (Oleschuk, 2020). The pandemic has exacerbated existing gender inequality in academia, especially with respect to caring responsibilities. Studies show that both women without school aged children, and men as a group, had more time to engage in research activity during the pandemic than women with school aged children (Górska et al., 2021). Women scientists with young children lost more research time than other scientists (Myers et al. 2020), and men published more while women published less (Ribarovska et al., 2021).

There is therefore a strategic opportunity to undertake research with HDR candidates as: a strategy for support during candidature; an intervention into the future employment experiences of a new generation of women academic workers; an opportunity to build more equitable research cultures across the candidature lifecycle and ongoing employment; and a window into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women researchers.

3. The current study

Given the gaps in the literature, and our two key research questions, this project: reviewed WSU policies and procedures governing HDR candidature through a gender equity lens; and interviewed HDR women candidates with caring responsibilities in order to understand how policy had impacted their candidature.

Prior to conducting this research, a gender analysis of data collected on HDR candidates at Western Sydney University was undertaken to provide some context. The WSU HDR cohort was surveyed by the Graduate Research school at WSU to capture the anticipated impacts of COVID on their candidature (internal WSU survey data). During the first wave of the pandemic and University lockdown, in 2020, the majority (57%, 737) of candidates anticipated *no* major disruption to their progression, whilst six percent anticipated significant research disruption arising from the closure of campus facilities. However,

thirty-seven percent indicated expected disruption arising from; home schooling, caring responsibilities, and home space not conducive to study. To assist with managing COVID disruption and to complete on time, in 2020 and 2021 the University announced processes to apply for and grant extensions to candidature and scholarships, and introduced a scheme titled COVID relief. The applications data were analysed (Research Services data, WSU). In 2020, 33 (69%) scholarship extension requests, and 12 (85%) COVID relief applications were received from women. Given 57% of scholarships were held by women, this early data indicated a gendered impact on HDR progression, including potential extended completion times. In 2021 with a subsequent and more significant second wave of the pandemic forcing a more prolonged University closure, 54% (68) of scholarship extensions were granted to women HDR candidates in their final stage of candidature.

A mixed methods approach has been chosen in order to qualitatively examine the experiences of HDR women who have caring responsibilities and examine the policy framework which frames their experiences. We recruited women with caring responsibilities who have been enrolled in a higher degree during the COVID-19 pandemic, who have experienced an uncertain trajectory of research and personal circumstances during their candidature.

We have structured this study in a way that includes those who self-identify as women with caring responsibilities. While we recognise that this excludes men and non-binary people who battle headwinds due to caring responsibilities, racism, transphobia and homophobia, we could not do justice in this small research study to all of these experiences. Instead, we have been clear about the limitation of our scope. We recognise that further research is needed to explore the complexity of intersectional experiences as carers and HDR candidates.

We hope that this project's findings will offer recommendations for improving policy and practice at WSU, with the aim of reducing the gender gap in the experiences of HDR candidature.

4. Methods

A review of WSU HDR candidature related policy and procedures was undertaken. The policies and procedures were scrutinised for language, clauses and paragraphs that might impact on women with caring responsibilities. The policies and procedures included in the review are listed in Appendix B. An inductive approach, based on the literature on gender equity in higher education, was applied.

In total, thirteen women HDR candidates at WSU with caring responsibilities were interviewed. There were three individual interviews, two group interviews each with two participants, and two group interviews each with three participants. The interviews qualitatively examined their experiences of combining caring with HDR study. The interviews were conducted via zoom

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software and recorded. The research assistant transcribed the interviews. Due to a concern for the confidentiality of the participants, the interviews were conducted by the research assistant, and only de-identified transcripts were made available to the rest of the research team.

The research team met to discuss the themes present in the data. This generated a provisional set of themes. The research assistant coded the transcripts in NVIVO, beginning with the draft themes then refining them through the coding process. This analysis was continued through iterative writing of the draft report, and further discussion of themes.

Quantitative demographic data was obtained from interview participants through an online survey. The survey responses were not linked to the interview data. Summary quantitative data is in Appendix C.

5. Findings from the policy analysis

Based on a review of the literature, and informed by the interviews, our policy analysis applied a lens that held the following issues front of mind:

- Caring responsibilities are ongoing responsibilities rather than one off interruptions,
- Some carers also manage paid work and career commitments,
- Caring responsibilities continue to be predominantly shouldered by women,
- Metrics of excellence within higher education impact gender equity,
- Mentorship and pastoral care responsibilities in higher education often impact women to a greater degree than men.

The policies and procedures were scrutinised through this lens. See Appendix B for a list of policies and procedures included in the policy analysis. The authors can be contacted for a separate document that details by policy and paragraph, mapped against the lens applied.

As described earlier, the figure of Benchmark Man has been established within the literature on academic excellence and gender equity (Anderson et al., 2019; Thornton, 2013). We have built on this work by conceptualising HDR candidature as training for becoming Benchmark Man, and have named this figure the 'Unencumbered Bachelor'. In our reading of HDR policies, we articulate the Unencumbered Bachelor as the ideal HDR candidate. Our findings are set out below, organised around eight headings, which introduce, then describe, the characteristics of the Unencumbered Bachelor. These headings are:

- The Unencumbered Bachelor
- Full time study
- Extension and leave of absence
- Restrictions on income from working
- Campus attendance

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- A traditional career path
- Expectations of supervisors
- Achieving equity outcomes requires flexibility.

5.1 The Unencumbered Bachelor

Our policy analysis proposes that the ideal HDR candidate is the *Unencumbered Bachelor*. Bachelorhood is embedded in the language, with the candidate holding a 'masters degree, or … a bachelor degree' (Doctorate Policy clause 11). This view of the candidate as a bachelor is much deeper than this remnant of archaic language. The bachelor to doctorate trajectory follows a traditional career path of carefully timed progression from bachelor degree, to masters, to a doctorate, never deviating or shifting priorities as life unfolds. The candidate puts themselves first, within an unacknowledged web of financial and wellbeing support. The 'merit-based selection-process' that smooths the path of Benchmark Man is embedded in the research degree progression of the Unencumbered Bachelor (Research Higher Degree and Research Training Program Scholarship Policy clause 15). The bachelor is also unencumbered, able to focus entirely on their study, which is their most important endeavour. Scholarship candidates especially, 'should view their candidature as their main occupation' (Research Higher Degree and Research Training Program Scholarship Policy clause 75). We suggest that this positions caring responsibilities as less important than the research degree, disadvantages those on low incomes who also need to work, and those managing a career combined with study or other form of non-traditional career path.

5.2 Full time study

The Unencumbered Bachelor, who studies full time, finishes their research in a fixed period of time, between three or four years for a doctorate (Doctorate Policy clause 36) and two years for a masters (Master of Research Policy clauses 45 and 46). Full-time candidature is the norm. Candidates may switch between full-time and part-time candidature (Doctorate Policy clause 31; Master of Research Policy clause 30). Scholarship recipients 'must usually enrol full-time' (Doctorate Policy clause 30; Master of Research Policy clause 29). A scholarship is terminated if the candidate ceases to be full time, unless they can present a case and receive approval for a part time stipend scholarship. This policy reinforces the norm of the full time enrolment, 'recipients approved to study part-time may revert to full-time study' (Research Higher Degree and Research Training Program Scholarship Policy clause 38), and scholarship candidates do not deliberately embark on their research on a part-time basis.

Approval to study part-time and receive a scholarship requires that 'The candidate must be able to provide evidence that they come from one or more of the University's defined equity personal disadvantaged groups which limits their capacity to undertake full-time study or can demonstrate circumstances that relate to significant caring commitments' (Research Higher Degree and Research

Training Program Scholarship Policy clause 35). This puts the onus on the candidate to prove that they are disadvantaged or have caring responsibilities, reinforcing the normative status of the Unencumbered Bachelor, rather than normalising flexibility with respect to how the university might support a diversity of candidate experiences and priorities around caring for others, career development, and other commitments.

Not only does the Unencumbered Bachelor study full time, they are also articulated as more productive per hour than a part-time student. Although 'Part-time recipients are expected to progress at half the rate of a full-time recipient' (Research Higher Degree and Research Training Program Scholarship Policy clause 37), and their stipend is '50% of the full-time rate' (Research Higher Degree and Research Training Program Scholarship Policy clause 59), part time hours are set at 57% of full time hours. Full time is 35 hours a week, whereas 'A part-time candidate should expect to spend approximately 20 hours a week throughout the year' (Doctorate Policy clause 33; Research Masters (Honours) Policy clause 32). Part-time scholarship holders are therefore paid at half the rate, but required to work more than half the hours.

Policies that inequitably allocate resources to part time candidature risk excluding those with caring responsibilities such as parenting, and impact progression along a career trajectory that combines employment and study, a trajectory viewed as non-traditional in universities.

5.3 Extension and leave of absence

If more time is required by the candidate to complete their research degree, an extension or leave of absence may be granted. An extension is only granted in 'exceptional circumstances that are research related' (Doctorate Policy clause 36) and leave of absence is approved in 'special cases', including illness, caring responsibilities, or an employment opportunity that may have arisen (Doctorate Policy clause 63; Master of Research Policy clause 51).

An extension to candidature is approved when 'there is clear evidence that there have been delays beyond the control of the candidate that could not have reasonably been foreseen.' (Doctor of Philosophy by Publication Policy clause 25; Doctorate Policy clause 38; Research Masters (Honours) Policy clause 36). The ebb and flow of the demands of, for example, parenting responsibilities and caring for aged parents over a period of years, are viewed as reasonably foreseen, at least on a whole group level. However, these demands fluctuate in intensity and number for individuals, and their impact on candidature is not always determinable in advance, and so they do cause delays. Given the predictable regularity of delays, but the irregularity of when and how they may impact candidates, policymakers should be responsive to these probabilities and create the flexibility to accommodate them.

An extension to a scholarship requires more stringent criteria to be met and are only granted where the 'circumstances … relate to the research and are beyond the control of the HDR candidate and not of a personal nature' (Research Higher Degree and Research Training Program Scholarship Policy clause 33). These extra conditions exclude personal circumstances, which would include caring responsibilities, and thus favour the Unencumbered Bachelor. An extension of scholarship is limited to six months only, with no part time equivalent indicated (Research Higher Degree and Research Training Program Scholarship Policy clause 34).

The more recent Master of Research Policy (clause 48) stipulates that to be allowed an extension:

Evidence must be provided of research delays or disruptions beyond the control of the candidate that could not have reasonably been foreseen for example:

a) Delays in progress due to unforeseen problems with the MRes and/or working environment (e.g. moving of offices/buildings, change of supervisor etc.) which are outside the student's control.

b) Unavoidable research delays caused by external events (including but not limited to bushfires, pandemics, etc.) that impact access to University campus facilities, infrastructure, fieldwork sites, or state or national institutions.

c) Unavailability or breakdown of essential equipment for an extended period of time, where a candidate is unable to continue research and the use of alternative equipment or methodologies is not possible.'

What is noteworthy here is that although events such as bushfires and pandemics have been categorised as worthy of generating an extension, no extensions will be granted for family commitments, whether within or outside of the control of the candidate. This leads us to conclude that the impact of parenting and other caring responsibilities are not reasonable grounds for extensions.

A leave of absence, however, is easier to obtain. As a general guide, valid reasons for Leave of Absence include serious medical reasons, family/personal reasons or employment-related reasons that are causing significant disruption to the candidate's capacity to study effectively (Master of Research Policy clause 52).

The opportunity for a candidate to continue to work on their thesis whilst on a leave of absence is not permitted by policy (see https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/future/study/courses/research/frequently-asked-questions). However, candidates sometimes access leave of absence to make up for time lost to other causes, such as caring responsibilities, in preference to changing their mode of enrolment (ie: full time to part time). This is partially because of candidature being constituted as 100% or 50% (or 100% or

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57% for scholarship holders). Choosing to work at a slower pace, and staying connected to their research by working at a variable load is not an option within the policy framework and therefore diminishes opportunities for flexibility in enrolment.

Parental leave is addressed only in the Research Higher Degree and Research Training Program Scholarship Policy, where 'Recipients who have undertaken 12 continuous months of their candidature and have been in receipt of a stipend scholarship stipend for 12 continuous months are entitled to a maximum of 60 working days paid parental (maternity or paternity) leave during the duration of the stipend scholarship tenure' (clause 72). The use of the terms maternity and paternity is gendered and heteronormative but does make it clear that men may also take time for caring responsibilities. The requirement for 12 continuous months of candidature to have taken place prior to taking parental leave may disadvantage the parent giving birth, who cannot delay the start of parental leave, and disadvantages anyone who has needed to take extended leave in this time period, perhaps through complications of pregnancy. There is also a limit on the cumulative duration of leaves of absence in a candidature which 'will normally be two sessions in any one candidature' (Doctorate Policy clause 65). Those who choose to take more time than this away from study when a child enters the family are positioned as outside the norm.

5.4 Restrictions on income from working

As constituted in policy, the Unencumbered Bachelor who is enrolled full time is either on a full time scholarship, or of independent means. Indeed, there are limits applied to hours of work for a scholarship recipient: 'An HDR candidate is only permitted to undertake a strictly limited amount of paid employment in a field that directly relates to the recipient research topic, whilst in receipt of a scholarship stipend' (Research Higher Degree and Research Training Program Scholarship clause 76). Clinical practice and teaching work merit a special mention in the policy (Research Higher Degree and Research Training Program Scholarship Policy clause 76), but it is unclear whether these are exceptions to the category of research related work, or exceptions to the limits of paid employment, or given as examples.

If the candidate does need to work more to increase their income, this can be done at the weekends, presumably so as not to interfere with study: 'non-standard work hours (i.e. Saturday or Sunday) as many hours per week of work may be undertaken, providing it does not prevent satisfactory progress and is unrelated to the recipient's research topic' (Research Higher Degree and Research Training Program Scholarship Policy clause 80). Of course, this is only possible for candidates without caring responsibilities at the weekend. However, the candidate is able to take on unpaid internship work during weekday traditional working hours (Research Higher Degree and Research Training Program Scholarship Policy clause 80). This is a very paternalistic view of what

are appropriate working hours, and how people might choose to allocate their time, and ignores the possibility a candidate has caring responsibilities. Furthermore, the classification of whether work is related or unrelated to the research area is subjective, and potentially privileges those on a more traditional career path, where paid work builds a professional portfolio and professional networks. Many candidates take on casual or part time work that accommodates their care responsibilities and this may not be in a field related to their research.

5.5 Campus attendance

Given an emphasis on participation in campus research culture, research training and activities, it might be presumed that the Unencumbered Bachelor lives close to the university and comes to campus every day to work. Workspace provision prioritises being on campus, where 'Standard support means on-campus workspace' (Research Higher Degree Candidature Essential Resources Policy, clause 4). In this workspace, 'Space and storage requirements may be met by shared use of desks and storage' (Research Higher Degree Candidature Essential Resources Policy clause 24). However, lack of privacy in storage may lead to anxiety, for example over the visibility of personal items that risk disclosure of sexuality or gender diversity.

Computer hardware will be provided to 'HDR candidates working primarily on-campus' (Research Higher Degree Candidature Essential Resources Policy clause 32). The policy is silent on whether candidates working from home will be provided with a laptop. Since 'HDR candidates are only permitted to install University licensed software on University issued devices unless approved' (Research Higher Degree Candidature Essential Resources Policy clause 30), those who work from home on their own equipment need to seek extra approvals for this to be possible.

There are various requirements to come to campus. 'Candidates will present their work on campus at least once a year' (Doctorate Policy clause 57) and must 'attend the University for consultation as required by the Principal Supervisor' (Doctorate Policy clause 33). They are available to attend events at the request of the supervisor or school, and 'candidates may be terminated for …. Failure to attend candidate research events deemed compulsory' (Doctorate Policy clause 57). There is little guidance on what may be deemed to be compulsory, but it includes 'participation in seminars, forums and conferences' (Doctorate Policy clause 151). Part time students and those with caring responsibilities may find it hard to arrange to attend these events.

Support for students set out in the Research Higher Degree Candidature Essential Resources Policy provides funding for a range of items including 'skill development; … field work; … transcription costs; … travel for conference attendance; … other travel consumables; … WHS awareness and training' (clause 17). Although the list of items that can be funded is not exhaustive, there are some notable omissions regarding support for candidates with family

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responsibilities to attend conferences, for example childcare for conference attendance, children's travel costs if accompanying parents to conferences, or respite care costs for those being cared for.

The Unencumbered Bachelor must remain in Australia during their candidacy. This is particularly the case for those on a scholarship stipend, who 'must reside in Australia for the duration of their course of study' (Research Higher Degree and Research Training Program Scholarship Policy clause 9), and 'Unauthorised absence from Australia may result in the termination of the HDR scholarship.' (Research Higher Degree and Research Training Program Scholarship Policy clause 88). This precludes the possibility of overseas travel to care for family members, or to follow a spouse's career opportunities. The Unencumbered Bachelor may travel overseas for fieldwork to further their own research program, but cannot travel overseas to support their spouse's career or research.

These requirements and normative standards prioritise face to face attendance on campus. We have learnt from COVID that in many cases many research and study activities can be done online just as easily, and for many people with other responsibilities, such as earning money to support candidature, living away from Sydney to support other family members, or child related daily demands, an expectation to regularly attend campus could be difficult. There is an improvement in the more recent Masters of Research Policy, with the introduction of 'domestic remote', allowing approved candidates to be located outside of Sydney to study at WSU, and engaging 'online … for agreed milestones' (clause 99).

The Unencumbered Bachelor may be an international student. The expectation of full-time study in this case is emphasised: 'international candidates must be enrolled as full-time' (Master of Research, clause 37). If the Unencumbered Bachelor is an international student with a spouse and children, it is assumed that their spouse will support the candidate's full time study, economically and via child care support.

Any deviation from the role of the Unencumbered Bachelor is subject to permission from the University; a case must be made to accommodate part time candidature, significant income generating activities, interruptions to candidature, or overseas travel. Any changes to circumstances are also subject to review from the University, whether they affect a candidate's progress or not, with a requirement to advise of any 'changes to their personal and contact details' (Research Masters (Honours) Policy clause 23). It is unclear what constitutes 'personal details', whether these are simply administrative details such as change of name or contact details, or more intrusive details such as employment, caring arrangements, travel plans or gender affirmation. This lack of clarity can result in candidates unnecessarily sharing sensitive information when they are required to plead a special case to have other life circumstances taken into account when applying to vary candidature.

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5.6 Follows a traditional career path

The Unencumbered Bachelor follows a traditional career path of carefully timed progression from bachelor degree, to masters, to doctorate. In the event that the candidate takes time for other activities before embarking on a Master of Research, there is a limit of five years to this deviation (Master of Research Policy, clause 15). Although there is a qualifying clause following this requirement, with other ways of demonstrating recency of knowledge, this clause sets the normative expectation, making it clear that those who have taken a non-traditional route to a masters, or taken time to have children, are not expected to be there, and have to make an argument to be included.

Neither can a candidate 'engage in any academic course of study leading to a qualification that is not an essential part of their research program' (Research Higher Degree and Research Training Program Scholarship Policy clause 98). This marginalises the non-traditional career path, where a concurrent course of study may be complementary for the candidate's career and intellectual development. Opening up possibilities of supporting those on non-traditional career paths, to think of women on their career pathways rather than in a pipeline, has been identified as a strategy to improve gender equity in the academy (Barthelemy et al., 2015, Woollen, 2016).

Opportunities for non-traditional progression are hampered in other clauses of the policies. If candidates in the Doctor of Medicine do not hold a Bachelor degree from WSU, they must hold 'a salaried or Conjoint appointment in the School of Medicine… that must remain current throughout the period of candidature' (Doctorate Policy clause 204). Tying candidature progression to employment may disadvantage women who are more likely to take career breaks for caring responsibilities.

5.7 Expectations made of supervisors

Supervisors are measured on whether their candidates successfully complete their research degree in a timely manner (Supervision of Research Candidates Procedures clause 12). This may penalise those supervisors who are supervising women with caring responsibilities. Given that candidates often seek out a supervisor with similar interests and experiences, this may penalise women supervisors more than men. We might, then, conclude that Benchmark Man supervising the Unencumbered Bachelor is the ideal scenario.

The Research Higher Degree Candidature Essential Resources Policy commits the University to providing 'appropriate levels of pastoral support' (clause 44). Research has demonstrated that 'appropriate levels' of support are subjective, and that women as supervisors and teachers are held to higher levels of pastoral care, and provide higher levels of pastoral care, to the detriment of their own career progression. It is also likely that the Unencumbered Bachelor has less need for pastoral care, given their lack of responsibilities other than their

research. Supervisors are not recognised for providing high levels of pastoral care when this is needed.

The Research Higher Degree Candidature Essential Resources Procedures attempts to bring some clarity to the responsibility for providing pastoral care, allocating responsibility to schools and research institutes to have procedures for 'Candidature Support Funds', and 'Workspaces, Storage, CIT Facilities and Office Materials'. The Graduate Research School and the School or Institute each have some responsibility for 'Diversity and Pastoral Care', largely related to linking candidates into University wide support services. Pastoral care is framed as something that supervisors determine the need for, and then send students off to University wide services to meet that need. This model of care is a masculine approach to outsourcing care, rather than ongoing care within the supervisory relationship.

5.8 Achieving equity outcomes requires flexibility

A major theme emerging from this review is that more flexibility is required in the policy framework and provision of support to enable candidates' progression through their research degree. In the absence of this flexibility, conditions favour the Unencumbered Bachelor. The Research Higher Degree Candidature Essential Resources Policy clarifies its purpose as to:

'a. provide support to HDR candidates;

b. enable flexibility in meeting the requirements of candidates working in broadly different areas of academic enquiry;

c. guide consistency across the University to ensure equity of candidature support among candidates.' (clause 3).

This clearly demonstrates that flexibility is seen as an appropriate approach to manage disciplinary differences, but a more rigid approach is applied to the management of equity support. Equitable outcomes in candidature support also require flexibility, as different candidates have different needs and circumstances, and operate within different structural positions. This flexibility should be applied consistently.

6. Findings from the interviews

There were 13 participants in the interviews. Seven interviews were conducted, two with three participants in each, two with two participants in each, and three with one participant in each. Interviews were conducted over zoom, for around an hour.

Participant demographics are set out in Appendix C. Of the 13 participants, 62% were studying full time, 69% were domestic candidates, 69% in HASS

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disciplines. One of the domestic candidates was located interstate, one of the international candidates was located overseas. There were 46% who held a scholarship. Forty six percent had been studying for 2 years or less, 38% between 2 and 4 years, and 15% for over 5 years. Those under the age of 40 comprised 31% of the group. 62% of participants were partnered. Regarding their caring responsibilities, 62% cared for a child, 8% for their partner, 38% for a parent. Three participants chose 'Other' for their caring responsibilities, and described this as: grandchildren and their parents; household; and caring for relatives and friends. This demonstrates a range and complexity of caring responsibilities. Based on the data from the interviews, we developed the following themes:

- Modes of care
- A room of one's own
- Access to support
- Constraint of time or money
- Flexibility.

6.1 Modes of care

Participants' accounts of candidature demonstrated a wide range of examples of caring responsibilities, including caring for children, partners, parents, friends, and work colleagues. Some of the candidates lived in the same household as those they cared for, others did not. Sometimes the care relationships were interstate, and some participants were caring for family overseas. Appendix A contains a series of vignettes that have been constructed to demonstrate the breadth of these caring responsibilities. Although many candidates shared care with others, such as their husband or siblings, they carried a greater share of the cognitive load of organisation and worry, and often a higher load of care provision.

In one example, a candidate took up a major caring role in their workplace, to address a lack of organisational compassion for a work colleague. In another case, an international student was organising the day to day living requirements, such as grocery shopping and healthcare, for parents in her home country. Her parents were ordered to stay in their home for months due to ongoing high levels of COVID in their city, and did not have the technology and skills to organise delivery of basic necessities.

The provision of care and the cognitive load of caring is disproportionately shared by women, and this was reflected in the interviews. At the end of one focus group, a student added this observation:

> *I was waiting to see if my husband was within earshot. … because I was gonna make the comment as a generalization … [about] the gender difference in the expectation around what's required at home. So those roles that you automatically play when you're in the house. And it's been magnified so much during COVID, because you're here all the time. And so*

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that expectation is that you are maintaining a household, you're looking after kids, you're cooking, you know, and then on top of that study and work, so it does become quite a demand and a lot to balance. And my husband is quite supportive. But it's just that, that default position is that, and ... I'm sort of echoing the comments I get from other friends ... It's just the way things are at the moment. There's an increased expectation for the role of women at the moment. (FG 2)

Others may help out, but it falls to women 'to schedule that, week to week, so he can assist' (FG 2). The restrictions of the COVID pandemic have, in many cases, compounded the cognitive and practical caring workload of women more than that of men.

Compassion drove some women to take on care loads where they could see that someone needed care, but no-one had stepped in to take this on. This compassion was described as 'doing the very best you can by someone' (FG 1). Some also voiced understanding and compassion for their supervisors, as an explanation for the supervisor not being able to provide academic guidance in a timely fashion, or for staff in departments in WSU that were understaffed or underfunded, and had not been helpful to the candidate.

Despite these care loads, which generated high levels of stress and anxiety in many cases, women often described themselves as 'lucky' or 'privileged' for the support they did have, or because they did not have as big a load as others. In the words of one participant:

better not complain, you know, like, there's real women out there suffering. I don't, okay, I don't have anyone to care for me, but I don't have domestic violence. (FG 1)

In this case, the candidate did not have the traditional responsibilities of caring for children and a husband, which may have made her feel not quite a 'real' woman. In one focus group, the candidate who was expecting her first child felt she had less to manage than the candidate with three children. Some international candidates compared Australia with their home countries, recognising that some things were easier here, like being able to take time off to have a baby, or a functioning healthcare systems during the pandemic. As one person observed:

because Australia have everything. ... I know that here if something happened, I can easily call triple zero or get help. .... I'm living in the very good country that the healthcare system is much better than [my home country]. And I also get, got the vaccine, so living here give me a feeling of I'm confident ... I can get the support. (FG 4)

These observations are not evidence that some women have an easier situation to deal with than others, rather they show the ability of the women to be optimistic and feel lucky with what they had, despite their challenges.

Important ideas within the theme of modes of care are that caring responsibilities are broad, and take many forms and combinations. Caring is often driven by compassion for others, and stepping in to meet a need across many sites, including friendship, family and work. Women often take on the larger cognitive load of organising care, emotional engagement in care, and performing care. Despite this, women were able to see the ways in which they were also privileged.

6.2 A room of one's own

The theme of a room of one's own is related to the importance of having the physical and mental space to be able to engage with study. COVID has forced children out of school and day care, and candidates off campus. Where candidates are sharing a house with others, they may have to share space and resources. This often meant that a room of one's own, or even a desk or computer of one's own, was not possible:

> *I find that my PhD is done on the lounge, in the bedroom, out in the backyard, on the front fence, anywhere I can still get wi-fi and work on it. … both our kids have a desk each in a bedroom, we don't have the space to have the desk in our bedroom. And, … I spread my stuff everywhere. .. and I just sometimes look at it and go, … doing your PhD without a desk? … crazy times.' (FG 4)*

Having access to the tools required to study was important. Most important was a laptop. Some candidates had been loaned a laptop by the University, which one candidate described as 'a lifesaver, because it lets everyone in our house have our own computer' (FG 3). Others had requested a laptop but were still waiting to hear if they could borrow one. Internet access was also a challenge, as were access to resources such as printers and software.

Caring demands crowd out the calm headspace needed to focus on study, which requires deep concentration, and interruptions break concentration. One candidate painted a vivid picture of:

> *a partner lecturing in the same room and … there's Star Wars on the television, a metre away from me, and I'm trying to read Karen Barad (FG 4).*

Prior to COVID, being able to study at home, or on campus, had provided quiet time away from caring responsibilities to focus on study, for themselves. This was much harder under COVID: 'there's no downtime at all, I don't get respite. For me University was respite' (FG 3). The *vicious cycle* of care and study means *constantly feeling the pressure that I have to keep up and not fall behind.* As a result, candidates reported:

> *I'm spending longer and longer hours, which means I get less sleep, which means I don't get down time, I get fatigued, I'm not as productive because I'm fatigued. (FG 3)*

Many were now working during the night to get some peace:

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> *sometimes I really start early in the morning when all the member of the family is still sleeping so that I can really focus, like this morning I start my day at three o'clock in the morning (FG 5)*

One participant spoke about regularly hearing ambulances pass, at the height of COVID pandemic infections,

> *every day, sometimes five, six times a day. Sometimes 10pm, sometimes, four am, it wakes me up, it is very stressful (FG 4).*

For this candidate, even the night is not a peaceful place.

A room of one's own is not only having a physical place, with appropriate tools of trade, from which to work, but also being able to carve out extended periods of time during which candidates can immerse themselves in study, free from anxiety and interruptions due to caring responsibilities. This is not always easy at the best of times, but under COVID restrictions it has become significantly harder.

6.3 Access to support

When candidates talked about existing institutional support that they had found helpful, the majority of this support was general candidature support, rather than support for caring responsibilities. It is especially important for carers that regular support is easily accessed at the time they need it. Support from IT and the library were well spoken of, as was academic literacy support from the Graduate Research School.

Online writing groups and peer groups worked for many, although the timing of these groups was not always suitable because

> *I might be writing … at 10 o'clock at night when I get a chance, so I look at the writing groups and go that'd be great but that's breakfast time, that's lunch time, that's the end of the day. (FG 3)*

Candidates valued having access to funds for research costs such as providing research participant gift vouchers, or the purchase of a laptop. Some wanted this extended to include article publication fees for HDR candidates. Access to training such as Excel and Nvivo was also valued.

Supervisor relationships were generally positive, in that supervisors were understanding, but did not necessarily have practical strategies to suggest. Things that went wrong included long delays in supervisors reading written work, or the commencement of a new supervisor who had different ideas about the research project.

Some participants had accessed counselling, although more often this was outside the university than counselling provided by the university. Counselling had limitations, because:

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nothing the counsellor could do could change the circumstances, like, a lot of the mental health conversation is all about making the victim of bad behaviour turn themselves like a pretzel, to try to have a magical different response to the behaviour. And I'm like, I'm being bullied, WorkCover says this should stop. But there is nobody to make it stop. So, continuing to try to find magical ways to turn myself into a pretzel adjusting is just bonkers. But I think too, because there's been so many demands on me for caring … I have just been so swamped with stuff I have to do, there is no time to have a feeling. Keep on trucking. (FG 1)

COVID restrictions have severely limited the opportunities for connection to the University. One participant spoke about how much she valued Western Success contacting her:

Western Success, I believe, like, calling us frequently asking, 'How are you going? Are you making progress on your PhD?' Things like that. Even though sometimes, that's only you know, it's like, simple questions and repetitive questions, probably to other people is not meaningful. But then yeah, perhaps it's really connected me to the university because I haven't had this kind of many experiences with the university due to the lockdown. So like, listening to somebody else reaching out for for me, like, you are a member of the Western Sydney. Yeah, it means a lot. (FG 5)

Some participants had positive stories to tell about receiving support from their Institute, School or Graduate Research School (GRS). However, getting information had been hard for others.

There were numerous accounts of delays in getting information from the university about administration and policy. One student began study near the end of the academic year and missed the orientation courses. She said:

it would be good if there was just a very simple thing that might help actually, for new student when you're starting. Could be, give me give me an org chart for GRS. Tell me some of the people like, if you have this problem, ask that person, if you have this problem, ask that person. That would be really helpful. (FG 1)

The impact of delays in obtaining information were significant, particularly when the supervisor relationship is not working.

I was having a little bit of meltdown, somewhere in the middle of it all. And I think one of them referred me to somebody else, and I sent the requisite email and didn't hear anything. But I was over [my supervisor]. And I was just ropable, and sad and distraught and whatever. … And this thesis was now a year late, because, oh, yes, you have to call whoever it was. And I did. And I left a message and I sent an email, and I never ever heard. (FG 1)

The lack of response compounded the stress that many carers were already under:

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you usually got a voicemail, if you ever rang, but people just didn't reply to your messages for weeks. So that was really difficult. Because especially when you're under stress. (FG 2)

Informal networks were a source of supportive for many students. For example, one candidate was able to get information on what to do and who to contact from other international candidates from her home country with the same scholarship provider.

Some candidates had accessed WSU support specifically for carers. On campus childcare was 'amazing', 'good quality' and 'convenient' for one student (FG 3). The limitations were that it caters for children of a particular age and was closed periodically during COVID. Another had received an HDR Carer's grant to fund after school care for her children, which she then had to postpone until after the lockdown to use. Having to argue a special case for caring responsibilities was mentioned unfavourably, in contrast to the expectation and simplicity of managing lab access delays, or in contrast to universities who granted blanket extensions due to COVID.

There were mixed feelings about research continuity plans. Sometimes they were experienced as an opportunity to have a constructive discussion about expectations and potential difficulties in the PhD journey, a discussion which should be routine, and 'built into the PhD on a regular basis' (FG 3). Others did not find the process helpful, one student reported that 'I've had to do three … they just add to the administrative tasks and the stresses of COVID' (FG 6).

The kinds of support that the students found most helpful was support that is common to all students' academic progress – accessible and knowledgeable supervisors, IT support, librarians and academic writing groups. Given the extreme demands on their time, it was particularly important for candidates to have information about this support so that they could access it at the point that they needed it, rather than having to search for information. While some candidates had accessed specific tailored support such as carer support or disability support, having to argue a special case for this sometimes made it too onerus.

6.4 Constraint of time or money

A central dilemma for the HDR carers was the decision to either study part time, leaving time for caring responsibilities and, possibly, paid employment, but having to do this for an extended period; or to study full time, which is over more quickly, but is more difficult financially. Whilst finding the time to study was difficult for most candidates, it was the deadline of scholarship money running out that loomed large.

For some, part-time study is necessary:

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there is absolutely no way I could have done any study at all unless it was part time, … and there were times where I went to them and said, I have to stop because I have to go back to making money, and they're not offering any kind of scholarships for people who are part time' (FG 4)

Structurally, being on a part time scholarship is hard to arrange,

I can't really go part time because of the nature of my [work], not easily, because of the scholarship and everything. It's complex. And also because I'm part of an ARC project, which has a delivery date, which is separate to university policy (FG 2)

Another student explained their dilemma this way:

I've been almost afraid to ask for support because I've heard from other parents that if I ask for support, they'll just say to take a leave of absence. Or they'll say just switch to part time. But then I lose money, I lose the ability to support myself, so it doesn't really solve a problem. So I'm a bit hesitant to ask for more because I don't want people to turn around say well, don't do the PhD, don't finish or take a leave of absence. And that's not helpful. (FG 3)

Studying part-time puts the student at a financial disadvantage because the scholarship is taxed differently. This is one of a number of external factors that impact University policy, such as taxation, migration, and external body scholarship rules.

Candidates reported that there was always support from supervisors and the University to take short periods of leave to prioritise caring responsibilities. This was sometimes useful, for example when one candidate took two weeks to navigate the support systems she could put in place for her parents. Sick leave was used to manage exhaustion during pregnancy, and the stress of dealing with a difficult supervisory relationship.

However, candidates' capacity to make progress ebbed and flowed, and managing this by turning the time clock on and off through periods of leave was not particularly useful. This was for two reasons. Firstly, taking leave assumed periods of not working, when in fact it is the speed of work that varies, not whether study is happening or not. For example, one student planned to use maternity leave to work slowly on her literature review. Living with study and caring responsibilities is more of a day to day, ongoing, process, rather than switching between the two by moving in and out of periods of leave.

I didn't take leave. Did I take leave? hard to remember, really difficult to remember. And I had an AIP [Academic Integration Plan] and I had a lot of support, and I got counselling through the university. And I had, I have my own counselling, and that is tied to my [child's], and I just have a lot of support. I'm getting through, and everybody in my network is very aware of what everybody's doing. And we work incrementally. We do what we need to do. We do big things in small steps kind of thing. (FG 4)

And another participant said:

> *I feel like I would lose my momentum. If I took a break or extension… being able to keep chipping away working towards the end game probably is what keeps me motivated, [leave] would prolong the agony somehow. (FG 3)*

Having a supervisor that can work in this way, who 'knows the history of me' (FG 6) both personally and academically is highly valued.

Secondly, the administration involved in taking leave could be difficult. Obtaining an extension to a scholarship was ideal. However,

> *you can't use personal circumstances to substantiate a request. It has to be 'I did not have access to the laboratory for X amount of weeks.' (FG 3)*

There was disappointment that the University had required people to justify the need for a scholarship extension during COVID.

> *I know other universities gave blanket extensions to everybody. No ifs or buts, no questions. (FG 3)*

The burden of making a case for support was not restricted to COVID

> *I've had to jump through hoops for disability support that ended up I haven't used a great deal …. I have found at times that trying to access support from university, when I have been in crisis, … harder than just going to university would have been. (FG 4)*

As previous research has found, having to argue a special case positions care responsibilities as outside of the norm (Huppatz et al, 2019).

Candidates were also managing their career networks and track record. Most had embarked on a PhD in part to progress their career, sometimes whilst continuing to be employed in a demanding, related, job in industry. Continuing to be in paid employment is important for a career track record and networks. One participant explained:

> *I'm really fortunate that I have people around me who are, who understand what I'm doing and are flexible about that. I think it would be incredibly difficult if you didn't already have that setup to establish that kind of flexibility. Being able to work 10 hours a week within the Monday to Friday is not a very attractive option for prospective employers, you just don't get enough out of someone to be bothered to do the admin …. And I think that means there's more of a likelihood, especially if you're an international student, with certain restrictions around what you can and can't do because of your visa… I think that would likely push you into doing more casual work, … definitely more precarious work, your chances of getting a contract, or getting secure employment, when you're not doing a PhD is hard enough, let alone when you can only offer 10 hours a week from Monday to Friday, bananas. It's definitely … deleterious to, to your future prospects, … so I'm lucky because my project is very much applied, and I have a project partner in the applied space. But being able to build other skills around that is also really, really important. Because if you're going into a practice, like an interview for a practice-based job and applied job, in industry or something, they're going to want to know that you, you really have to prove to them that your PhD is not in an incredibly niche*

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topic that has a very narrow set of skills, you have to be able to demonstrate that you have a broad skill set. And if … you're only allowed to work 10 hours a week, your ability to develop a broad skill set is very constrained. If you're not already employed or sponsored by your employer to do it, so I think it has real equity concerns, real equity outcomes, if you're trying to also be a mother, forget it. If you're, if you're a single mother, forget it, you just wouldn't even start. No way. (FG 7)

Limiting paid employment to 10 hours a week, even on average over the year, limits the career opportunities of women who are carers.

Candidates recognised that the University had to work within constraints of their funders:

the tricky thing with a lot of this stuff is that university has to make decisions in a really resource constrained environment. And sometimes that's an actively hostile environment from their major funder. So, … you can't accommodate everything and everyone. … I think, you know, there's issues at any university, but Western Sydney … has a culture and an ethos about trying to accommodate and find different ways for people that don't necessarily fit the usual mould of things. (FG 7)

To continue to progress this culture and ethos at Western Sydney requires lobbying and influencing external bodies to modify those regulations and processes that result in gender inequity.

In summary, candidates are caught between a lack of time and a lack of money, where there is rarely enough of either available. There is a trade-off, in that taking more time to study means having less money, but engaging in paid employment for money means less time to study. This is experienced as a decision to study full time or part time, where inequity is compounded by the impact of part time study on scholarship possibilities and arrangements, and restrictions on employment with full time scholarships. Whilst taking leave is often presented as a way of supporting women with caring responsibilities, this sometimes does little but extend the challenging period of HDR candidature and can lead to drift, disengagement, and a significant slowing of pace in the late stages of candidature. This compromises progression and timely completion.

6.5 Flexibility

Candidates emphasised that the flexibility to study at their own pace, as described in a number of ways above, was of utmost importance. It is critical to recognise that flexible study looks different for different candidates. Central to discussions of flexibility was the ability to decide for oneself when and how study was most productive. Some preferred Saturday workshops, some loved having IT support available at night. Some did not access writing groups as they were not at a useful time of day, but used the information and advice such groups circulated. Some were living with a disability, their own or someone else's, which required managing their energy and health to create fertile time to study. One

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had a child who did attend school (COVID permitting), but they needed to be constantly on call in case they had to go to the child's school. During the pandemic, flexibility meant identifying small bite sized bits of work that could be done in the short time periods available. COVID required the ability to 'constantly pivot' (FG 4) and find different ways of working as circumstances changed. Employment opportunities also changed, and were not standard or regular hours, for example one student generated her income through unpredictable creative work.

Caring responsibilities ebb and flow too. Some candidates were at a stage where they were consciously looking to the future, planning for caring responsibilities that they knew would soon eventuate, such as a child coming into the family, or an increase in care required for a parent. One candidate described her proactive, flexible approach this way:

> *[My caring] challenges are prospective. So, because we know that the likelihood of mum's cancer will become worse, if not terminal in the next few years, it's really a priority for me to be able to create space [to] take time off, or do things remotely or flexibly …. I've basically designed it into my project that I will be doing that, just because the likelihood is quite high. So that's been a real priority for me. And in some ways, actually, that was one of the reasons that I chose to take on this PhD project, because it was self-directed, and I could do it remotely, it afforded me potentially more flexibility than other forms of full-time work that are from a distance. (FG 7)*

For this candidate, the COVID pandemic had made this easier to do:

> *I think people's mindsets have shifted quite significantly in terms of what people are willing to accommodate with flexibility … I started when we were already in a pandemic time, so I was able to design my project on that basis with that kind of flexibility in mind. (FG 7)*

There were a number of perspectives on campus attendance. The pressure of having to attend physically was lifted. One international student was living overseas in her home country due to COVID restrictions, and while this made connecting to the University difficult, the benefit was that she did not need to leave her children behind to study, or to navigate the complexities of bringing them to Australia with her. Others saw the absence of travel time to work or to campus as a benefit as they could fit much more into their day.

As no one was able to attend campus much under COVID, not just those with caring responsibilities, connecting to the University through online events and services was now much easier, and lifted the pressure of periodic mandatory attendance. This was a significant improvement for one student:

> *it's become better for me, physically, and emotionally. I love the zoom experience, I love being able to attend more than what I was attending physically. It would take me an hour and a half, I'd usually have to leave two hours each way to travel. And I've got travel, additional travel written*

in into my academic integration plan. I also have hearing issues. And yeah, it's been a hell of a lot better for me. I've attended a lot more from home than I would if I had to go into campus. I'm really hoping zoom continues for all the activities. (FG 6)

However, as discussed under the theme a room of one's own, many did use attendance on campus to carve out dedicated time to study, and not being able to do this made dedicated study time harder. One student explained, too, that being able to work on campus was especially beneficial in a hot summer, when residential accommodation overheated, and as refuge from the threat of bushfires.

The two important lessons in this theme of flexibility, are the mixed benefits of attendance on campus compared with online connection to the University, and the need to plan ahead to build flexibility into the candidature in a way that is tailored to the candidate's requirements.

7. Summary and recommendations

In this study we have articulated the relationship between relevant academic literature, our gender analysis of WSU HDR policies, and insights drawn from interviews with women HDR candidates with caring responsibilities. We have focused specifically on the extent to which policy and its implementation has differential, and often unequal, impacts on women candidates who have caring responsibilities. Drawing on the figure of Benchmark Man as the ideal of academic success, we have proposed the figure of the Unencumbered Bachelor as his predecessor. Both share similar characteristics of autonomy, individualism, competition and less restricted access to building networks and promoting their research than their female counterparts who have caring responsibilities. This raises questions about the extent to which women with caring responsibilities are relegated to the margins of academic/HDR discourse, policy and practice. We have, accordingly, identified a range of recommendations that aim to make visible both the barriers and opportunities for women with caring responsibilities to thrive at WSU. Importantly, we recognise that care takes many forms and is extended to many people including children, partners, extended family members, friends, peers and colleagues. Women are carers at all life stages, and not only mothers of babies and infants. In acknowledging that care responsibilities can be ongoing, periodic and emerge at particular times in candidature, the capacity to respond in agile and flexible ways to carer needs is of critical importance. A caring community cares for all its carers.

In highlighting insights drawn from our study, we suggest a range of responses to the everyday challenges faced by candidates with caring responsibilities. These range from a review of internal policies and procedures, attending to gender neutral and inclusive language in policies and communications, seeking flexibility in practices wherever possible, and advocating for policy change at the local and national level. We suggest that although there are some very useful

policies and processes in place in our institution in relation to HDR candidature, gender bias continues to work through the systemic interaction of the normative expectations of HDR candidates and candidates' caring responsibilities. In order to redress this gender gap, we need to challenge these perceptions and look to practical, administrative, cultural and educational solutions. It is in this spirit of flexible responses to the need for flexibility that we propose a number of possible recommendations.

In summary, Western Sydney University should be congratulated on the changes it has made to the HDR policy and procedures in recent years, and here we suggest further changes that could be implemented in order to continue WSU's commitment to gender equity:

- Consolidate a culture in which HDR candidates share the entitlements and practices extended to academic and professional staff regarding caring responsibilities. This aims for coherence and consistency across all policies.
- Develop a global definition of caring to inform policy that broadens the definition of care responsibility to explicitly include forms of care other than care for young children.
- Policymakers should be aware of, and responsive to, different caring responsibilities and the carers' need for flexibility and able to accommodate them.
- Lobby for change to those dimensions of external policy that are inflexible and disadvantage women with caring responsibilities (eg: allowing international candidates to study part time; offering extensions to candidature on the bases of caring responsibilities).
- Consider an HDR extended parental leave scheme.
- Review and revise policies to ensure language is inclusive and address normative assumptions about HDR candidates that marginalise women with caring responsibilities.
- Essential resources policy and procedures to include the allocation of candidature support funds to candidates with family responsibilities to attend conferences, for example childcare for conference attendance, children's travel costs if accompanying parents to conferences, or respite care costs for those being cared for.
- Establishment of a designated scholarship for future HDR candidates who have had /continue to have caring responsibilities impacting on their training or career trajectory.
- Establishment of new norms that enhance gender equity targeted to the HDR cohort that embrace flexibility in principle, policy and practice.
- Establish a mentoring program for the HDR cohort that supports candidates to navigate barriers and set new norms to balancing motherhood, caring responsibilities, HDR training and future work roles.

- Provide HDR candidates with an organizational chart with GRS contacts for specific enquiries.
- GRS to continue to monitor progression from a gendered lens at the School and Institute level to map completion of milestones throughout candidature leading to, supported timely completion.
- Provide occasional care facilities, conference care, school holiday care
- Properly pro- rata hours expected for part time scholarship (currently 50% scholarship for 57% of full-time load).
- Challenge the norm of scholarships being full time in order to accommodate HDR candidates with caring responsibilities.
- Introduce short-term doctoral mobility schemes that support travel and networking for women HDR candidates who are carers.

Finally, our project pointed to several issues that could be further researched by the university. These include:

- How do AD HDR/Directors, supervisors and GRS administrators support candidates with caring responsibilities? Do current HDR candidate policies provide a supportive framework for them to do this, or do the policies hamper constructive and flexible engagement with HDR candidates who have caring responsibilities?

8. Appendices

8.1 Appendix A. Carer vignettes

From the interview data, we have constructed a collection of vignettes that illustrate the variety of caring responsibilities that students may have. These vignettes are intended for policy makers and others, to enable an empathy and understanding of diversity of experience.

Maja

Maja has three children, one in childcare, three at school. Having children at home engaged in online learning means she has to supervise their learning, and share her computer. She asked for a laptop from WSU, but has had no response. Her youngest child attends WSUEL childcare on campus, which Maja is very happy with, allowing her to spend uninterrupted hours studying on campus when her other children are at school. However, during COVID, WSUEL attendance has been intermittent. Her eldest child started high school in 2021, and the associated changes and uncertainty have been challenging. Maja finds it hard to find time free of distractions, quiet space, and a computer to progress her studies. She often works from 10pm to 2am to manage this. Maja is also a volunteer at her children's soccer club, and it has continued to be a significant workload keeping the club viable through COVID.

Aisha

Aisha lives alone. She has two children who attend school and live with her ex-wife in Newcastle. The children live with Aisha in the school holidays and some weekends. She cares for a friend living nearby with a disability, and provides emotional and practical support for another friend going through treatment for cancer. Aisha's study requires lab work, which she can manage to schedule in term time, but COVID restrictions mean that this work has been significantly delayed. Her supervision team has changed recently, and while her original supervisors were supportive and understanding, her new supervisors don't yet understand the ebb and flow of her progress. One wants her to take her work in a new direction, the other is suggesting she take leave to manage her caring load.

Haniya

Haniya is an overseas student living in Sydney. In Pakistan, she has one child who lives with her husband and is finishing high school, and her parents need increasing care. Haniya speaks to her parents every day and makes decisions about their care. She feels pressure to finish because of her scholarship conditions from her university in Pakistan. However, she knows she will not finish in the required time period due to COVID disruptions, and worry about her family in Pakistan. The fall in the exchange rate over the last two years

means that her scholarship stipend is inadequate. Haniya delivers take away food to make ends meet. Her main source of support and information is a group of students who also have scholarships from universities in Pakistan. What she would also like to have is a WSU writing group of people with similar research interests, but she has not been able to build up this network.

Finn

Finn embarked on research study to add depth and expertise to their 15 year career. Finn has almost completed fieldwork through online surveys and interviews. Finn juggles a busy job with fulltime study, because taking a career break for years of study was unrealistic due to the damage it would do to their career networks and track record. During COVID, Finn has valued being able to participate in supervisions and seminars online, rather than having to travel to campus. Although Finn has a stipend scholarship from an external agency, they cannot limit their paid employment to ten hours a week and maintain career momentum. Finn is pregnant, and unsure about how to structure the next few years to achieve the flexibility and support they need.

Bronwyn

Bronwyn lives with her husband and her 14 year old. She and her husband also care for her husband's parents who live locally. Her child has autism, and thrives best when at home with Bronwyn, working on self-generated projects. Her child cannot engage with online learning and has sporadic school attendance when school is face to face, so Bronwyn needs the flexibility to be available during the school day. While she and her husband share the care load, her husband is exceptionally busy at work. His job in logistics and delivery has meant extra hours during COVID, leaving her to take on more of the organising and provision of care, together with housework. Bronwyn studies part time, because she did not want the pressure of finishing within three years, but could not access a part time scholarship, so money is tight. Her supervisors are considerate of her situation, although slow to read her work. The only practical suggestion they have is to take leave when things sometimes get too much. Bronwyn knows that taking leave would not help, rather it would extend the time she spent managing these competing demands.

8.2 Appendix B: Policies reviewed

Charter of Academic Freedom,
https://policies.westernsydney.edu.au/document/view.current.php?id=352

Doctorate Policy, June 2016, Western Sydney University

Doctor of Letters and Doctor of Science Degrees Policy, October 2013, Western Sydney University

Dual Award and Joint Higher Degrees Policy, November 2015, Western Sydney University

Freedom of Speech Policy, date, Western Sydney University
https://policies.westernsydney.edu.au/document/view.current.php?id=349

Master of Research Policy, January 2021, Western Sydney University

Research Higher Degree Candidature Essential Resources Policy, November 2020, Western Sydney University

Research Higher Degree Candidature Essential Resources Procedures, November 2020, Western Sydney University

Research Higher Degree and Research Training Program Scholarship Policy, July 2020, Western Sydney University

Research Masters (Honours) Policy, September 2012, Western Sydney University

Supervision of Research Candidates Policy, January 2021, Western Sydney University

Supervision of Research Candidates Procedures, January 2021, Western Sydney University

8.3 Appendix C: Demographics of the women academics

Full time or part time candidature?

	Frequency	Percentage
Full-Time	8	62%
Part-Time	5	38%

Note: No candidate had switched from full-time to part-time during their candidature

Note: No candidate had submitted their thesis at the time of the research.

Domestic or international candidature?

	Frequency	Percentage
Domestic	9	69%
International	4	31%

Note: one international candidate was studying from their home country at the time of the research, and one domestic candidate was located interstate.

Note: countries of origin of the 4 International candidates were China, Indonesia and Sri Lanka.

HASS or STEM discipline?

	Frequency	Percentage
HASS	9	69%
STEM	4	31%

Have you been awarded an HDR scholarship?

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	6	46%
No	7	54%

Note: Of the 6 candidates who had been awarded an HDR scholarship, in 5 cases this was for the duration of their candidature.

Note: Of the 6 candidates who had been awarded an HDR scholarship, one had applied for an extension to their scholarship.

Length of candidature to date

	Frequency	Percentage
One year or less	2	15%
13 to 24 months	4	31%
25 to 36 months	2	15%
37 to 48 months	3	23%
49 to 60 months	0	0%
61 to 72 months	2	15%
Total	13	100%

What is your age?

	Frequency	Percentage
20-29 years	1	8%
30-39	3	23%
40-49	7	54%

	Frequency	Percentage
55-60	1	8%
61 and above	1	8%
Total	13	100%

How would you describe your ethnicity?

	Frequency	Percentage
Indigenous or Torres Strait Islander	1	8%
Asian	4	31%
European	3	23%
Other	4	31%
Prefer not to say	1	8%
Total	13	100%

Note: Responses for 'Other' were Australian (2), Indonesian (1), Saxon Germanic (1).

Are you partnered?

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	8	62%
No	5	38%

What type of caring responsibilities do you have?

	Frequency	Percentage
Caring for children	8	62%
Caring for partner	1	8%
Caring for parents	5	38%
Other	3	23%

Note: Those that answered 'other' then described this as: grandchildren and their parents; household; caring for relatives and friends.

Do you have access to?

	Frequency	Percentage
Childcare	1	8%
Family support	5	38%
Other support	2	15%

Note 1: Access to childcare was described as

- Schooling (outside of lockdown) Family (partner).

Note 2: Access to family support was described as:

- 1 grandparent currently working fulltime. All other grandparents and aunties live 2 hours or more away.
- My family are supportive of each other.
- Husband helps with caring duties
- informal support from grandparents
- My husband and my parents

Note 3: Access to other support was described as

- I receive government financial support when I cannot work 'family support'
- In-home carers support my parents 3 times a week under federal government's Home Care Package funding

9. References

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