

**National research on the postgraduate student experience**

**Case presentation on postgraduate student diversity (Volume 2 of 3)**

Eckersley, Bill; Crane, Linda H; Kinash, Shelley; Bannatyne, Amy Jean; Hamlin, Gary; Partridge, Helen; Richardson, Sarah; Rolf, Harry; Udas, Ken

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# National research on the postgraduate student experience: Case presentation on postgraduate student diversity (Volume 2 of 3)

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## National Research on the Postgraduate Student Experience: Case Presentation

### VOLUME 2

#### ➔ POSTGRADUATE STUDENT DIVERSITY

<http://PostgraduateStudentExperience.com>



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# PREFACE



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

**+ Postgraduate student diversity**

The other two case studies in this series are:

**+ Volume 1 - First year postgraduate student experience**

**+ Volume 3 - Career development and employability**

This case study presentation on postgraduate student diversity is based on student engagement breakfasts, interviews, and focus groups with 366 people across the stakeholder groups of postgraduate students, educators, and university executives from 26 Australian institutions.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case presentation on postgraduate student diversity is grounded in Australian national research on postgraduate student experiences. This is not a typical or traditional case study, in that the pages that follow present perspectives, stories and proposed solutions from a large number of people. To bind the case presentation to one or two narratives or 'cases' would severely limit the impact. This case presentation is therefore thematic, interweaving many stories, quotes, descriptions, and perspectives on postgraduate student diversity, specifically, within the context of the belonging, course delivery and the learning experience, and balancing priorities.

The reported research was conducted as a strategic priority project of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching, between February 2015 and August 2016. *Bond University* was the lead institution, with partner institutions – *University of Southern Queensland*, *Victoria University*, and partner peak body organisations – *Australian Council for Educational Research* and *Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations*. All types and levels of postgraduates were considered (i.e., course-based, research, Masters, Doctoral). Secondary research was conducted using data from three different national surveys. Results of the secondary analysis were specifically probed through primary research. Notably, the secondary analysis of national survey data painted a 'rosier' picture of postgraduate student experiences and perceptions than did this research, whereupon in-depth conversations were held with and between numerous postgraduate students and the university staff

who work with them. In total there were 366 primary research participants from across 26 Australian universities (319 students and 47 staff). Among the three methodological approaches of engagement breakfasts (7), interviews (82), and focus groups (9) there were 223 students, 38 students/44 staff, and 58 students/3 staff research participants respectively.

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



There appears to be an assumption (reinforced throughout the research reported in this case presentation) in higher education that postgraduate education can be approached from a 'one size fits all' framework; however, it is increasingly evident that no two postgraduate student experiences are alike, with diversity, as opposed to consistency, acting as the norm within the postgraduate student population. When considering the diversity of the 21st century postgraduate student experience, several key areas emerged, including: the length of time between students' undergraduate and postgraduate studies; their experience in learning via a face-to-face, online, or blended learning approach; their background as a domestic or international postgraduate student; their access to quality supervision; and their support to achieve the complex triad of work-life-study balance.

Postgraduate students are increasingly vocal about:

- ⊕ The multitude of challenges they face in terms of isolation and loneliness, and the difficulty in developing a sense of belonging and connectedness among a diverse cohort of varying profiles;
- ⊕ The inconsistencies in course engagement and learning experiences as a result of diverse course delivery and postgraduate cohort differences;
- ⊕ The variation they experience in access to quality supervision and communication with staff.

The challenges in maintaining the complex balance between work, life, and university study, dependent upon the unique and diverse commitments of each postgraduate student.

Over the past decade, universities have invested significant resources in developing services and supports for the undergraduate context; however, research has increasingly suggested additional resources must be focused on the postgraduate context. Experience at the undergraduate student level has demonstrated the positive impact of strategic first year interventions (Cusoe & Farnum, 2007; Kift, 2008, 2015). The increased enrolment in postgraduate courses over the past five years, coupled with the increased diversity of these postgraduate students (Universities Australia, 2015), highlights the need for increased investment at the postgraduate level by government, industry, and universities.

With this in mind, this research developed a number of recommendations for postgraduate students, educators, and university leaders. Key findings included:

- ⊕ Universities must increase their focus and investment in enhancing the postgraduate student experience by developing and implementing a range of initiatives to increase the sense of belonging and closeness among a diverse cohort of students, in addition to improving the connection between postgraduates, the university, and their educators.



- + Enhance international postgraduate students' experiences via strategic interventions that promote the concept of learning and living while engaged in their postgraduate studies.
- + Government and industry support accessed by universities should facilitate investment in innovative blended teaching and learning approaches at the postgraduate levels.
- + Enhance Internet access, capacities, and reliability, to maximise postgraduate student learning and experience.
- + Develop strategies and strategic interventions that will enhance postgraduate student learning and experience by enabling them to maintain a balance in their lives with respect to work, family, and study.





# PROJECT KEYWORDS AND DEFINITIONS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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





# CASE STUDY AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

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

**The specific aims and objectives of this case study are:**



## For Students

To identify key challenges that postgraduate students experience during their studies due to the inherent diversity of this cohort, and propose strategies that will address these challenges and thus enhance learning experiences.



## For Higher Education Staff (Academics and Executive Leaders)

To raise awareness of postgraduate student diversity and the variety of unique challenges experienced by this cohort of student. Additionally, to propose strategies that can be employed to address these challenges, thereby improving learning and retention.



# POSITIONING CHALLENGES / ISSUES

Considerable research has been undertaken to explore undergraduate student experiences in higher education across the globe. In the United Kingdom (UK), institutions and funding bodies have focused on enhancing the overall student experience in order to recruit and retain students, and thus maintain advantage over their competitors (Park, 2008).

At the postgraduate level, UK surveys have been conducted including: the Research Experience of Postgraduate Research Students at the University of Oxford (Trigwell & Dunbar-Goddet, 2005); the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES; Hodson & Buckley, 2011), and the Postgraduate Taught Student Experience (PTES; Park, 2008; Soilemetzidis, Bennet, & Leman, 2014 ). Additionally, the Postgraduate Experience Project (PEP; Morgan & Direito, 2014) has investigated expectations and attitudes toward postgraduate taught (PGT) Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), with respect to post study outcomes from the perspective of students, universities, and employers to support and sustain PGT growth in the UK.

In Australia, there have been three major surveys investigating postgraduate learning: the Australian Graduate Survey (AGS), specifically the Course Experience Survey (CEQ) 2013, the 2010 Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE), and the 2012 International Student Barometer (ISB). As such, it is evident that understanding the postgraduate student experience, specifically, the diversity of this student population and their respective needs, has become an increasing international priority.

Given the increasing enrolments in postgraduate courses over the past five years (Universities Australia, 2015), thereby increasing student diversity, there has been increased Federal Government emphasis on developing and promoting pathways for students who traditionally have not considered higher and vocational education. This was clearly evident in the recommendations outlined by the *Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education* (2009), which emphasised equity and the inclusion of previously under-represented sectors of the community in higher and further education. Overall, the report had significant implications for the manner in which Australian tertiary education institutions approach recruitment and pedagogy.

Greater numbers of students from the under-represented sectors have enrolled in higher education, contributing to an increasingly diverse postgraduate profile. Universities have attempted to provide additional support for under-represented students (both undergraduate and postgraduate) via academic support services and inclusive teaching, learning, and engagement strategies that focus on meeting the students' academic, social, and emotional needs; however, understanding and meeting the needs of our increasingly diverse postgraduate cohorts remains overlooked.

Globalisation and internationalisation have also impacted both the number and nature of postgraduate enrolments in higher education. As such, if Australia is to sustain the growth of postgraduate enrolments it must ensure the respective needs of this diverse student population are understood



and met. However, the rapid growth in postgraduate student numbers in Australia has created challenges in meeting the needs of this diverse cohort, which is increasingly comprised of groups and sections of the broader community that were not previously represented in universities. Meeting the particular needs of postgraduate students that are the first in their family to attend university, where English is not their first language, and where disabilities previously would have prevented attendance at a university, is crucial and progressively becoming the norm in different institutions.

In addition to the complexity of meeting the needs of a diverse postgraduate student population, higher education systems across the globe are experiencing significant challenges with respect to increasing student-staff ratios. Postgraduate student-staff ratios are increasing in Australia. In 2001, there were 18 students to one academic; however, by 2013, the ratio had increased to 21 students to one academic. Additionally, in 2013, the casualisation of staff and number of students completing a higher degree by research (HDR) had more than doubled from 2001. Between 1995 and 2014, the number of domestic students completing a higher degree by research increased by around 84 per cent. While the number of postgraduate enrolments increased by 8.4 per cent from 2013 to 2014, totalling 376,055 in 2014 (Universities Australia, 2015). Overall, this suggests the capacity of academic staff to provide support to a diverse postgraduate student population has become increasingly difficult to deliver.

Access to and feedback from academic staff has been a priority for most tertiary students regardless of background. Universities have become increasingly aware of the need to be more responsive to the student experience, particularly when the outcome leads to improved student retention.

It is recognised that university students who have access to and feel supported by their teachers/educators, and believe they are both helpful and empathic toward them, are more engaged and successful in their learning (Young & Sax, 2009). Furthermore, Tinto (1998) argued that students who feel supported tend to persist with their studies. Recognising the 'student voice' in postgraduate learning has led to the recognition that students' feedback and perceptions about their learning is essential in determining the level and type of support required (Andrade, 2006; Novera, 2004). A quote from Cuseo and Farnum (2007) illustrates this point:



'Student persistence depends on both student effort and institutional effort (i.e., it involves a reciprocal relationship between what the campus does for its students and what students do for themselves)... retention is higher at institutions where students: (a) are provided with accurate information and clear lines of communication about institutional purposes, policies, and procedures, (b) are given opportunities to participate in organizational decision-making, and (c) have experiences with administration that support rather than impede their progress.'



Over the past two decades, researchers have increasingly emphasised that as the backgrounds of higher education students continue to diversify, institutions must respond (Cuseo & Farnum, 2007), as illustrated by the research quote below:



‘Particularly for underrepresented students, a sense of belonging depends on their ability to identify with an environment that allows for the feeling of inclusion. This includes identifying with fellow students, finding belonging among students groups or organizations, identifying with an institution’s mission, or the way in which faculty teach subject matter. Students who are first in their family to attend college often feel the least included in the college or university environment. Yet positive changes can be made at both the institutional and student levels to increase sense of belonging and minimize barriers to student success (Padilla, 1997).’

Students are often motivated to pursue postgraduate studies to enhance their knowledge and skills for the purpose of self-development, desire for career change, and opportunities for employment and/or promotion (Ruhanen & McLellan, 2012). Although international students also hold similar intentions, their motivations can often be influenced by a combination of ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors. Many international students experience the ‘push’ factor within their home country to pursue postgraduate study opportunities overseas (Mazzard, Soutar, Smart, & Choo, 2001). These students also experience a set of ‘pull’ factors within the overseas host country that involve the quality

of learning and teaching available, in addition to a range of financial, environmental, and safety issues within the host country and in proximity to their home country (Mazzard, Kemp, & Saver, 1997). As such, supporting the needs of this student group is of vital importance to ensure international student retention, and more importantly, a beneficial international postgraduate student experience.

Unfortunately, research focusing on international students expectations and learning styles has highlighted a mismatch between the needs of international students and the capacity of academic educators to respond (Hellsten & Prescott, 2004; Ryan, 2005). Assumptions that international students are well prepared for postgraduate studies, particularly in terms of digital technologies, has created a vacuum that impedes learning, aptly noted by Ashton-Hay, Wignell, and Evan (2015, p. 31):



‘... student voices indicate confusion, panic and uncertainty with learning management systems.’

Ashton-Hay et al. (2013) suggest international students do develop proficiency in using technologies, but typically experience challenges in applying their technological skills to enhance and engage in their learning.

Early research by Pascarella (1980) revealed there are strong links between student and academic staff interactions and educational outcomes of the student. Since then, considerable research has been undertaken investigating the merits and outcomes of learning in higher education that is accessed



via online or face-to-face. Understanding how student-staff interactions can be facilitated in effective and efficient ways (regardless of delivery modes) to support learning is of crucial importance (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This is particularly in the context of postgraduate education, where some students (e.g., mature-aged learners) may have limited experience with technology, or engaging with an environment that relies heavily on technological supports, thereby reinforcing the diversity of postgraduate students' ages, backgrounds, learning experiences, skills, and capacities.

In addition to the interactions between students and staff members, understanding the interpersonal transactions between this diverse postgraduate cohort is also of importance. Much has been written about the relevance of student interactions in learning and teaching (Vygotsky, 1978). This is increasingly relevant as the number of postgraduate students accessing degrees via diverse education modes (e.g., online, distance courses) increases. As such, the need to develop online learning communities to account for this diversity has come to the attention of both students and academic staff. Research suggests co-constructing knowledge via interaction with peers and academic staff can be facilitated via online learning communities (Liu, 2008).

One of the challenges experienced by some students enrolled in universities is loneliness and/or isolation, particularly within the first few months of enrolment, due to a lack of contact with families (personal loneliness) and loss of networks (social loneliness; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008). While most research has

focused on the undergraduate context, postgraduate students are not immune to this experience, particularly given their diverse backgrounds, circumstances, and commitments. For example, when considering the impact of cultural diversity on loneliness, Sawir et al. (2008) revealed institutions exacerbated the personal and social loneliness international students often experience. The researchers also identified an additional form of loneliness, which they termed 'cultural loneliness', which arose from students' separation from their preferred cultural and/or linguistic environments. Loneliness has also been defined as an absence of necessary relationships (Weiss, 1973), and more recently, as the outcome (in addition to a range of other unpleasant emotions) of an absence of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Although the impact of loneliness varies across individuals and typically (but not always) diminishes over time as new friendships and social circles evolve and diversify, certain factors have been shown to assist or buffer the experience. For example, research exploring Chinese postgraduate student experiences in Australia, revealed that previous undergraduate experience and commitment to learning the English language better prepared them to cope with the initial isolation and homesickness (Wang & Shan, 2006), possibly due to maturity and reduced communication barriers allowing the development of social networks to form. Research investigating the first year experiences of undergraduate versus postgraduate law students has also revealed that postgraduate students who were more informed and confident about their program



selection demonstrated a greater capacity to learn and balance work/life issues (Larcombe & Malkin, 2011).

The formation of international student organisations within Australian universities has played an important role in building student networks. Many international students, however, tend to gravitate toward developing friendships, and expanding their networks, within their own cultural groups. Sawir et al. (2008) highlighted those seeking to develop new relationships across cultural groups find it difficult, as evidenced by the 65 per cent (two thirds) of Australian students, who experienced feelings of isolation or loneliness, reporting barriers in developing cross-cultural friendships, in comparison to only 36 per cent of non-lonely students. As such, addressing this concern by encouraging cultural integration among postgraduate students and embracing diversity is vital to improving the overall postgraduate student experience.

Universities that are interested in retaining their postgraduate students, and enhancing their completion rates, must be proactive in facilitating opportunities for international and domestic students to build relationships. Sawir et al. (2008) highlighted the potential for increased cross cultural engagement based on sharing and mutual respect in common learning settings. The researchers argued this can lead to a reduction in the 'initial sense of loss experienced by international students, shorten the period of anxiety and greatest difficulty, provide a starting point for social bonding, mitigate cultural shock, and quicken learning of conversational and academic English' (p. 173). Engaging in community sporting

clubs, agencies, community service groups, and religious institutions can also facilitate interaction with members of local communities. Similarly, employing undergraduate/ postgraduate students as peer advisors and teaching assistants within the university setting can lead to enhanced student engagement and learning (Gordon, Henry, & Dempster, 2013).



# NARRATIVE DESCRIPTIONS

In this section, multiple stories of postgraduate students are shared to highlight the diversity of the postgraduate student experience under four main themes that arose from the various methods of data collection:

- 1 Postgraduate student experiences of connection and belonging (or lack of).
- 2 Postgraduate student experiences of diverse course delivery and learning experiences.
- 3 Postgraduate student experiences of diverse student and academic staff interactions.
- 4 Postgraduate student experiences of balancing diverse priorities.

## POSTGRADUATE STUDENT EXPERIENCES OF CONNECTION AND BELONGING (OR LACK OF)

Overall, postgraduate students shared a range of experiences that highlighted significant challenges in coping with *isolation* and *loneliness* as a result of diverse backgrounds, circumstances, mode of study, and area of study.

Of interest, most of the postgraduates that mentioned concerns related to this theme were domestic on-campus students. For example, a PhD student in South Australia indicated: 'The whole research process is incredibly isolating ... no one knows your project.'

A NSW PhD student agreed:



'Being a postgraduate student ... is actually quite lonely because everybody will normally have their own research topic, so there are not a lot of people interested in assisting with, or getting their head around, what you might be reading.'

A Tasmanian PhD student talked about the importance of critical mass in terms of building a sense of community. He argued, that without critical mass, postgraduates are 'left rather isolated and lonely, hovering on the fringe of the staff sort of community, part of, but not really'. An online part-time Masters student expressed the lack of connection to the university for distance students such as himself. He felt both a sense of isolation and invisibility with respect to the student union that was only partially addressed when he came on campus.

Conversely, the disconnect for some postgraduates was by choice, as highlighted in the following comment:

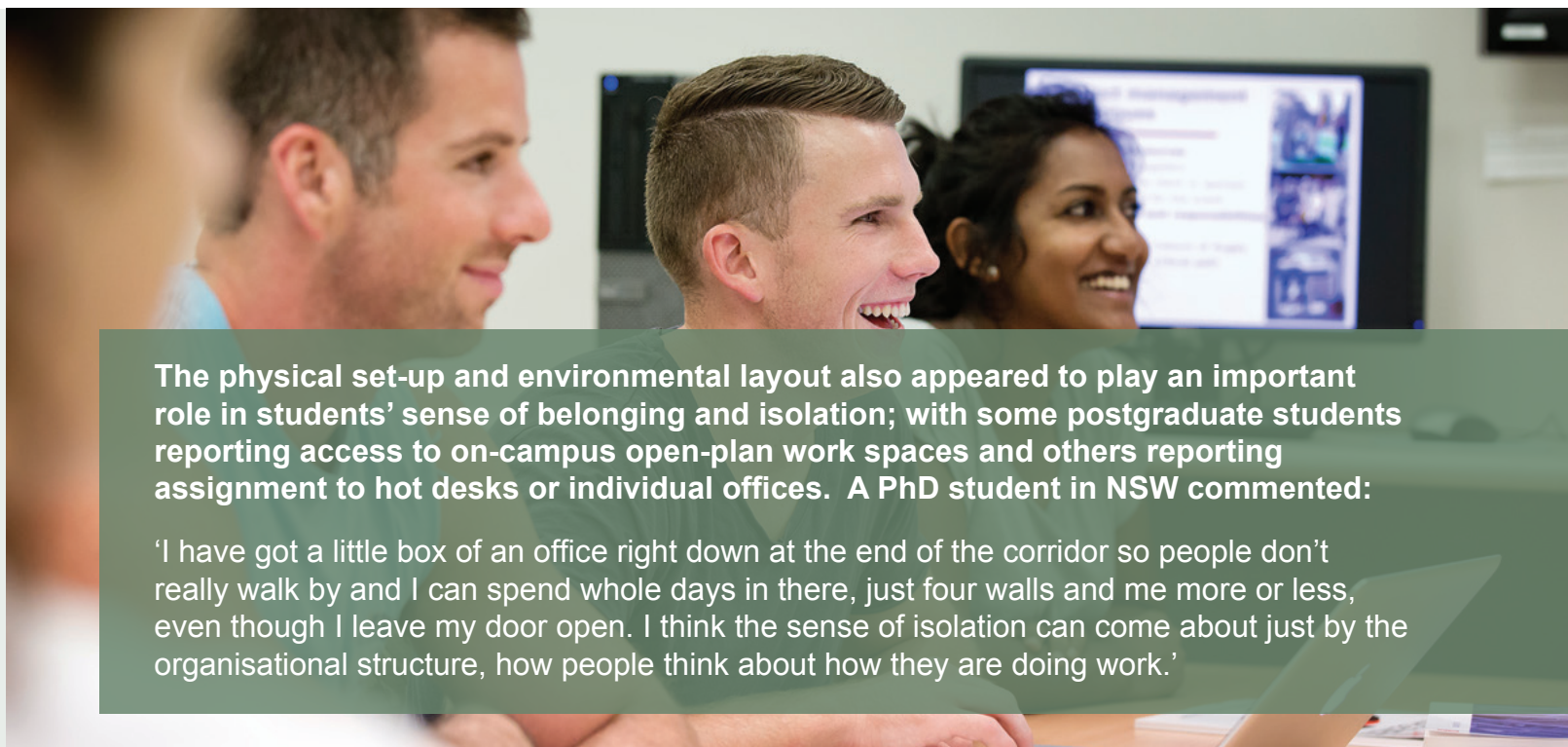


'... probably some of that was my own doing. We were often invited to optional sessions at the university for a free beer and pizza... but that was not for me'.

Managing family responsibilities, maintaining a work-life balance, and keeping in contact with friends, were identified as competing priorities that contributed to this lack of involvement in university life, as illustrated by the quote of an international, full time student in the Northern Territory: 'I don't join anything. I know some people say it is important. But I don't have time to join that group.'



# NARRATIVE DESCRIPTIONS



**The physical set-up and environmental layout also appeared to play an important role in students' sense of belonging and isolation; with some postgraduate students reporting access to on-campus open-plan work spaces and others reporting assignment to hot desks or individual offices. A PhD student in NSW commented:**

**'I have got a little box of an office right down at the end of the corridor so people don't really walk by and I can spend whole days in there, just four walls and me more or less, even though I leave my door open. I think the sense of isolation can come about just by the organisational structure, how people think about how they are doing work.'**

Another postgraduate student expressed her frustration at the lack of support and sense of isolation in an online environment:



**'... I am an online student so I feel a bit isolated starting on my own... we have some discussions [online] with other students but we don't really create a group to say hi... it is not a chatty place, it is just formal discussion.'**

This comment highlights the limitation of traditional online discussion forums that educators may previously have assumed are sufficient in creating a sense 'community' among online learners. Innovative strategies are required to meet the needs of online postgraduate learners who may be limited with respect to time availability and/or challenged with advanced technology.

Recommendations about how best to develop a sense of belonging and community were raised by a number of postgraduate students.

Social networks, forums, or seminars, for research students to meet and discuss their projects in a constructive way were proposed by a Masters coursework student. A domestic student from the ACT discussed her attendance at an information evening in orientation week that was predominantly 'a social, mingling type of event' where she met four other students in her course.

While some postgraduate students felt their university should create more opportunities for them to interact, other students were proactive in creating their own social networks and peer support groups, highlighting the diversity of experience and differences in perceived solutions. An online domestic student in Tasmania commented:



**'I formed my own little study group and we all got together in a virtual room... we had a quick chat, asked questions... I think we wanted to feel that connection.'**



# NARRATIVE DESCRIPTIONS

**While discussing online learning, one postgraduate academic referred to the development and creation of a ‘virtual water cooler’ in which students and staff can ‘stand around and chat’.**

‘Call it a virtual foyer, the virtual hall of residence. We do not have it right yet but ... I have 1500 people that I regularly talk to via Twitter and 500 of them are educators. I have a wonderful, rich set of conversations around learning, with people all over the world, in the areas I am interested in. These technologies are about enabling human-to-human interaction, so it is not beyond our capabilities to design online learning experiences that provide for that.’

**A postgraduate student expressed her opinion (and a hint of sarcasm) about the comparative levels of engagement between students and staff involved in online learning and teaching, compared with those involved in face-to-face experiences:**


‘Online learning must deliver and engage students. Learning is a social activity. Learning is about engaging with other people .... I love listening to academics who talk about the importance of face-to-face learning. It is intrinsically better than online learning because of that human contact and then they stand in front of a classroom of 400 people and they are talking for 2 hours and then walk off!’

**A Victorian staff member commented:**

‘I think we are very good online.... We live stream all the lectures via a Collaborate [LMS] classroom, and we have a facilitator in Collaborate who facilitates conversation and activities so that the lecturer can focus on the on-campus classroom, and that works really well.’



# NARRATIVE DESCRIPTIONS



**One academic highlighted what she felt were two effective methods of keeping students engaged online.**

‘One is where students are learning at the same time and have the ability to verbally and visually interact with each other to share ideas and foster learning. The other is to learn in the workplace, where there is a link between the employer and the university, and the employer oversees the practical assessments. Both these provide a greater sense of belonging.’

**Another academic commented that educators needed to:**

‘create activities/ projects that force online students to interact near the beginning of the course and this will create a sense of engagement and belonging.’

**A NSW educator emphasised the importance of developing a sense of connectedness within the diverse postgraduate scholarly community, for both online and face-to-face (on-campus) learners:**

‘They have got a sense of belonging when they are having their coffees, that I insist they have, or when they are in class and they are actively taking part in the discussions, but it is different ... It might be a slightly vicarious sense of belonging, but it is an authentic sense of belonging that they have in looking at the postings of other students, then deciding and making the choice of how they are going to respond, what they are going to put their names to, that is a sense of belonging.’



# NARRATIVE DESCRIPTIONS

Overall, postgraduate students and academics interviewed in this research identified a set of factors they believed contributed to the lack of community for online learners:

- + Time differences, which mean people are not online at the same time.
- + Inconsistent and unreliable technology limiting access and engagement.
- + Differences in familiarity and comfort in online environment, particularly mature-aged postgraduate learners.

Attempts to address these concerns were considered by an academic who suggested the use of online discussion boards, groups, and blogs to facilitate interactive virtual tutorial sessions. She also suggested the use of online classroom 'Collaborate', to bring together diverse postgraduate cohorts (both internal and external), and use a 'Blackboard Social-Facebook' style social networking service for students to create profiles and links with others.

**A Western Australian academic described a shift in culture over recent years that recognised that students cannot always attend lectures:**

'The view is that [University name] needs to be flexible. It needs to come into the 21st century. There has been an enormous take up in services like lecture recordings and the utilisation of online learning management systems.'

**Another academic from NSW, in acknowledging the busy and diverse nature of postgraduate students' lives, described the development of a self-paced Master of Business Administration (MBA) at her university.**

'You can start any time, do your assignments at any time, so long as you finish the subject within the year... the assignments are case studies that are aligned with companies that are dealing with problems; hence they are genuine live case studies.'



# NARRATIVE DESCRIPTIONS

## POSTGRADUATE STUDENT EXPERIENCES OF DIVERSE COURSE DELIVERY AND LEARNING EXPERIENCES

### Technology and Infrastructure

Many postgraduate student responses focused on the merits and challenges of online/distance based learning. One of the key themes emanating from the postgraduate interviews concerned the online technology infrastructure. One online domestic Masters student from the Northern Territory was pleased with her access to research articles, but commented: 'Infrastructure that supported, that wasn't good. It was quite clunky, as were the remote tutorials.' The student also expressed some self-doubt about her Internet skills: 'I don't think I can up load this article, and then everybody else is thinking, neither can I.' As stated earlier, some international students, while proficient in using technologies, experienced difficulties in applying this knowledge in their postgraduate learning (Ashton-Hay et al., 2015), again highlighting the skill and confidence diversity among postgraduate students.

### BLENDED LEARNING AND LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

Universities have invested in blended learning in a variety of ways, with significant funding of Learning Management Systems (LMS) being a recent priority. The LMS infrastructure has broadened the learning access for both domestic and international students. LMS systems provide both synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities that cater more effectively for 21st century learners. However, the success of these systems is only as good as the reliability of the technology. Providing sufficient professional development for both students and academics to maximise the online learning platforms is critical, as noted by one PhD student: 'PhD coursework elements which are online (such as posting writing pieces to the [LMS]), are facilitated without guidance or instruction, to create a sense that it is the students' site.'

**Another academic expressed concerns about LMS systems and linked them to differences in information technology literacy among educators:**

'I think there is a disconnection between the lecturer's understanding of the system, the student's expectations of the system, and the system itself. Often the students think the system is broken, when in fact it is that they have not read the instructions properly, have not followed the directions, or they are using old machines and/or old versions of browsers.'



# NARRATIVE DESCRIPTIONS

The adoption of a blended learning model, that embraces both online and face-to-face learning to enhance engagement, was highlighted by a number of postgraduate students. Some students, however, expressed frustration in terms of scheduling due to other competing priorities such as work or family commitments: 'Some of my online subjects have a face-to-face component or work shop but I can't go. I can't attend, because those classes are either in the morning or early in the afternoon.'

**Interestingly, one academic suggested blended learning should not be considered a combination of traditional and face-to-face learning, but a blend of synchronous and asynchronous engagement:**

'It is more about being in the same space at the same time ... so instead of having a class every week, I have four classes, a class every second week until about week 10 and then wrap up in an online class in week 13.... [During the alternate weeks] I am holding Twitter chats on this week's topic ... and I invite a couple of industry people to come and tweet with us.'



# NARRATIVE DESCRIPTIONS

## POSTGRADUATE STUDENT EXPERIENCES OF DIVERSE STUDENT AND ACADEMIC STAFF INTERACTIONS

### Quality of the supervision

There were a number of postgraduate student comments about the quality, amount, and frequency of the supervision they received, which represented a wide spectrum akin to the diversity of the postgraduate cohort. Some students expressed concern at the lack of their supervisors' knowledge of the research field ('... some lecturers are taking projects ... that they are not specialised in'). Others expressed concern at the lack of continuity of supervisory panels due to high turnover of staff and subsequent short-term contract appointments.

A domestic PhD student from South Australia, indicated that although she met regularly with her supervisor (every two weeks), the perceived 'generality' of the feedback she received was concerning. Another PhD student, having experienced a major change that required a new project and literature review described it as 'the most challenging personal experience', with little perceived support from academic staff: '... doing something completely different to what is on my record and that is the interesting part because nobody actually cares.'



A Masters student in Tasmania, completing his course via a blended learning approach, expressed his dissatisfaction with the quality of the supervision he received: 'I found in many instances a lack of efficiency, not being given information in a timely manner, and in some instances, given misinformation [and] limited access to facilitators and coordinators.' He went on to explain:

'You were left to flounder a lot, left to your own devices... that made me feel very frustrated, sometimes inadequate, and questioning my own capacity, which was not good for self-morale... so it really challenged me as a person. Thinking, maybe I can't just do this, and I think it was the system and not me that led to that.'



# NARRATIVE DESCRIPTIONS

**In contrast, an international Masters coursework student from NSW, expressed satisfaction with the accessibility and quality of support she was receiving from her academic staff:**

‘The lecturers ... give you good explanations and they always welcome questions... there are no silly questions. Feel free to ask them anytime, email or you can ask them on Facebook. They create groups, and students can come in and talk with them, or post them updated news that they may find interesting, and that should be discussed in class.’

**Another on campus domestic PhD student expressed satisfaction at the acceptance and recognition that she and her peers received as a result of working in a relatively small department: ‘I really enjoy being part of the ... team here... the postgrads can chat about the main things with the Head of School without any worries’. She did, however, make the important point that this did not happen serendipitously:**

‘We have made an effort to be included and be a very active presence, we push a quite a lot... we have a lunch group because we all get hungry at the same time... we bitch a lot and celebrate together... creating those networks so that 10 years down the track, 20 years ... we do have people all over the place that we can contact.’



# NARRATIVE DESCRIPTIONS



**Similarly, a Victorian on-campus PhD student expressed satisfaction at the support he was receiving:**

‘... The person [lecturer] was very adamant about having coffee and setting up support networks... so we now have an email group... some of us meet for coffee, and I have another friend who started a PhD, is part time... and we kind of bounce off of each other, so the peer support is there.’

In summary, the quality of research supervision continues to be the priority, as aptly noted by one academic staff member: ‘



The supervisory relationship, I think, is absolutely critical... supervision is that bridge between the student’s research project, their world, and the world of the university... it is a critical bridge.’



# NARRATIVE DESCRIPTIONS

## POSTGRADUATE STUDENT EXPERIENCES OF BALANCING DIVERSE PRIORITIES

As discussed throughout this case study, postgraduate students are a diverse group of individuals, comprised of domestic and international students, full time and part time students, on campus and online students, in addition to coursework, research, and mixed coursework-research students. Hence, the needs of this diverse group of students are broad and the capacity to cater for them is challenging. This suggests postgraduate students need to manage their own learning and thus be proactive in seeking out support, both internal and external to their university, to address their needs.

The one common message emanating from this research is the priority given to learning. Many postgraduate students are required to balance very busy lives consisting of work, family, and university responsibilities. For many, extra-curricular activities (i.e., societies, clubs) are 'nice, but not a priority'. A university in Western Australia offers sporting and recreation activities, guild clubs, and a postgraduate student association. A staff member from the university argued that while postgraduates are first and foremost on a learning journey, engagement with



'clubs, sports, societies, and social events are absolutely critical... they are the insulation that makes sure the continuum stays on track... because if they haven't got a life, nothing is going to work... I think it is quite critical for postgraduate students and especially our international students.'

A fulltime PhD student in NSW argued that international students at her university are strongly encouraged to 'get outside of their small groups and go and meet domestic students and other internationals outside of their own community'. However, she also noted for many international students this is not possible: '... they are so focused on their deadlines, the limitations of their visa, and they might have to work as well, so they don't get the opportunity to do something which actually is fundamental.' A fulltime international PhD student in the NT explicitly highlighted this in a comment: 'I don't join anything. I know some people say it is important... but I don't have time to join that group.'

**An academic staff member from the NT summarised the argument she hears from many postgraduate students:**



'... because of the nature of being a postgraduate, their age and therefore their maturity in terms of readiness to engage with learning .... [postgraduate students say] look, I have done all that, I know exactly what I need, my time is very, very precious, because I am looking after my family and trying to hold down a job. I am doing this for a very focused reason, this is about learning these professional skills, and that is what I want to do. If you are trying to get me to engage and do social things, I have done that, I don't have time for that.'



# NARRATIVE DESCRIPTIONS

The perception that learning and living (or socialising) are mutually exclusive can, however, be challenged, as noted by a Victorian academic who argued that learning can be aided by social networks and events:

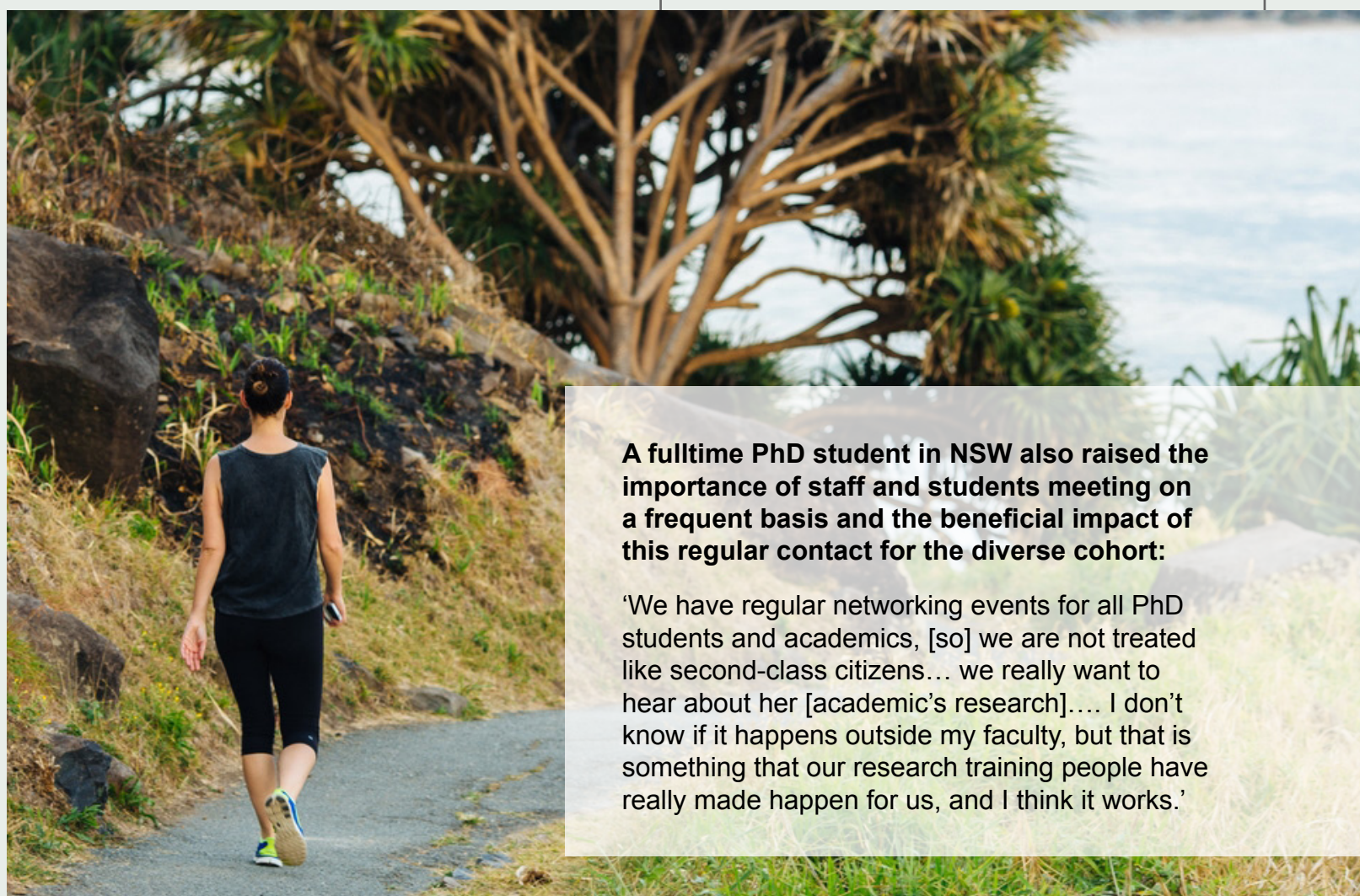


‘So what we are trying to do is focus on the academic side of things. Get people [postgraduate students] engaged in listening to people who talk about research [while having coffee / socialising]. So each of our speakers, virtually or face-to-face, are asked to talk about how they construct the research methodology.’

Interestingly, some postgraduate students recognised and acknowledged that when they socialise, they often do so in a strategic manner, thereby learning from diverse others while socialising:



‘Learning is more important, but the two [learning and socialising] are much intermingled.’



**A fulltime PhD student in NSW also raised the importance of staff and students meeting on a frequent basis and the beneficial impact of this regular contact for the diverse cohort:**

‘We have regular networking events for all PhD students and academics, [so] we are not treated like second-class citizens... we really want to hear about her [academic’s research].... I don’t know if it happens outside my faculty, but that is something that our research training people have really made happen for us, and I think it works.’



# APPLICATION TO PRACTICE

It is important at this stage to reflect on who is responsible for the quality of postgraduate students' experiences for the duration of their course. What are the postgraduate student experiences: are they common to all postgraduate students, and how should the university address those experiences that are considered to have a negative impact on the students' learning and overall experience?

The following recommendations and/or expectations have arisen as a result of the data analysis and references to the research literature.

## **1. Ensure all postgraduate students feel a sense of connection and belonging to their cohort, educators, and the university as a whole**

It has been recognised in the research literature that higher education students (including postgraduate students) can experience isolation and/or loneliness (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008), particularly during the initial months of the degree. As stated earlier, loneliness has been defined as an absence of necessary relationships (Weiss, 1973) and more recently: if the need to belong is not satisfied, negative feelings are generated, including loneliness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The impact of loneliness varies across individuals and typically (but not always) diminishes over time as new friendships and social circles evolve.

Universities have become increasingly proactive within the undergraduate sector to initiate strategies that lead to enhanced engagement and learning experiences

for their students. Previous neglect led to falling retention rates, which cannot be ignored in this competitive higher education environment. An increased focus by universities is required at the postgraduate student level to minimise the degree of isolation, and at the same time, increase the sense of belonging and connection between the students, the university, the lecturers, and peers.

Developing a sense of community for postgraduate students working in online environments was highlighted. Having a sense of connectedness and belonging were recognised as important features that impacted positively on successful online learning experience. Factors that impinge on the development and/or maintenance of a feeling of community included different time zones, unreliable technologies and infrastructure, and lack of technological skills. While some of these can be addressed via suitable professional development, others factors may continue to frustrate learning, depending on where the student lives in Australia.

It is important to employ a variety of strategies and initiatives to mitigate the negative impact of postgraduate student loneliness and isolation. For some students, being involved in sporting club agencies, and/or community service groups, may be beneficial. For others, gaining employment, either on or off campus, as Learning Common's rovers, peer advisors, or teaching assistants, could have a positive impact on their lives. International and postgraduate student associations can play important roles in building a sense of community for both undergraduate and postgraduate students.



# APPLICATION TO PRACTICE

## **2. Embrace and provide equal support and resources for the diverse modes of study**

Many participants highlighted strengths and challenges in engaging in courses that are delivered either face-to-face, online, or via a blended learning approach. Access to course materials and resources, regardless of where the postgraduate student lives or time of day, has proven to be very popular in recent years.

The development of Learning Management Systems has increased the number and diversity of postgraduate students to engage in successful online learning tasks, access reading materials, watch course videos, and engage in reflective discussions either synchronously or asynchronously. Both students and academic staff identified in their interviews that technology infrastructure problems were an ever present danger, regardless of whether they were at home, university, library, or an internet café.

Many universities have invested significant funding resources to facilitate blended learning approaches to facilitate teaching and learning via online tools such as Learning Management Systems (LMS). However, Internet access, capacities, and outdated browsers continue to frustrate many users. All LMS users need to feel confident and competent in navigating and engaging in learning via their LMS.

It should be noted that postgraduate students (including international students) returning to study should have access to professional development that focuses on how to apply their technological skills to enhance and engage in their learning (Ashton-Hay et al., 2015).



# APPLICATION TO PRACTICE

## **3. Encourage and develop strong, consistent, and transparent supervisory partnerships**

Concerns expressed by some postgraduate students indicated dissatisfaction at the quality of supervision they had been, or were receiving, during their research studies. Concerns about the lack of supervisors' breadth and depth of content knowledge, related to the postgraduate students' research, caused frustration for some. High academic staff turnover led to a lack of continuity of supervision for others. In contrast, other postgraduate students expressed satisfaction in terms of access to their supervisor and the quality of the support received.

It is important that postgraduate students know that they can request a change in the supervision arrangements if considered necessary. Universities and relevant academic staff need to communicate with their postgraduate students and their organisations on a regular basis to access and respond to student feedback in a timely and effective manner. Maintaining high-quality learning and research requires strong supervisory partnerships.





# APPLICATION TO PRACTICE



## **4. Provide flexibility and support for postgraduate students to balance diverse priorities**

As stated previously, postgraduate students are a diverse group of individuals. Some are considered as local domestic students while others are international. Some are part time, some full time, some are completing their degree on-campus, others off-campus via online, and an increasing many are engaged in a blended learning experience.

For many, maintaining the 'right' balance in their lives with respect to work, family, and study is a major challenge. While many universities offer extra-curricular activities to engage students at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, many of the student participants in this research clearly indicated that they had no time to engage in such activities. As one full time international PhD student stated: 'I don't join anything.... I don't have time to join that group.'

One Victorian academic proposed encouraging postgraduate students to participate in social events, which at the same time focus on some aspect of their learning. This academic argued that discussing research related matters over a coffee with other postgraduate students provided an opportunity to share, reflect, and engage in intellectual dialogue while developing a sense of belonging and community.



# EXEMPLARS OF GOOD PRACTICE

## ENHANCING CONNECTION AND BELONGING IN DIVERSE POSTGRADUATE COHORTS

### **The Concierge at City Service at La Trobe University**

In response to the growing number postgraduate student enrolments and the need for specialised support services to create a sense of belonging and connection among postgraduates, La Trobe University have developed and launched a pioneering program known as the Concierge at City service.

La Trobe University (City Campus) is a postgraduate destination for Business and Law courses. It supports a total of 623 coursework students undertaking courses in Master of Business Administration, Master of Business Analytics, Master of Management, and Juris Doctor. At the city

campus, postgraduate students experience a new standard of customer-orientated support as part of a new concierge concept. The concierge borrows best practice from award-winning customer service programs and reimagines what it is to study; adopting a truly customer-centric perspective.

The Concierge at City service is symbolic of La Trobe's continued investment in its students and commitment to 'Student First'. Understanding the unique demands of postgraduate study, this dedicated service provides an interface between existing service channels, which is designed to optimise the responsiveness to students, create personal connections, and respond to student cues.

Through La Trobe's commitment to personalising the educational experience, the concierge has delivered initiatives that continuously improve how students





interact with the University. The movement away from 'cohort segmentation' towards individualised support has enabled the concierge to respond to the unique enquiries and opportunities through its lean operations and empowered front line staff.

The concierge, supported by operations and teaching functions is addressing the growing demand for service outside traditional 9:00am-5:00pm business hours. Therefore, when students are on campus, concierge staff are at hand to assist. The concierge delivers services defined by three simple principles:

- ❶ Aggregating services, not students;
- ❷ Re-defining undergraduate services to meet the needs of postgraduate education;
- ❸ Utilising the combination of a customer approach to service, and a student approach to learning.

Although early in its inception (launched in April 2016), anecdotal feedback has already indicated the concierge service is meeting postgraduate expectations of excellence in customer (student) experience, while accessibility of staff outside traditional hours is encouraging and supporting the complex work-study-life balance that postgraduate students encounter. More extensive evaluations are planned and will be implemented over the next few months to understand the broader impact of the concierge service on postgraduates, staff, and the campus environment.

For further information about this innovative postgraduate service, contact Professor Leigh Drake (ProVice Chancellor – Employability and Postgraduate Coursework) or Mr Shawn Walker (Director, Student Recruitment).





# EXEMPLARS OF GOOD PRACTICE

## ENHANCING ONLINE LEARNING AND ENGAGEMENT IN DIVERSE POSTGRADUATE COHORTS

### Connecting worlds via virtual mobility at the Maastricht University

In an effort to increase online engagement and international student collaboration, an online virtual mobility, peer-to-peer learning program was created by the Maastricht University in the Netherlands, who have a strong focus on problem-based learning. Maastricht University recognised that collaboration is stimulated by creating interdependence. Virtual mobility offered a unique opportunity to develop 21st century competencies that are valued by employers, including cross cultural competence, collaborative problem solving, digital literacy, cultural sensitivity and tolerance, and global citizenship.

As such, the virtual mobility project was developed as a key assessment piece for international work and organisational psychology students at Maastricht University (from 33 countries to total) to communicate with 30 graduate students at Padjadjaran University in Indonesia.

Overall, the project provided students from both universities with the opportunity to:


- + Experience collaboration with others in a virtual setting, thereby fine tuning virtual communication, information literacy, and collaborative problem solving skills;

- + Learn about different cultures through social and academic interactions with students from another country and by studying cultural characteristics of different countries, thereby building cross-cultural competence and respect for diversity;
- + Learn about humanitarian work and roles from a psychological viewpoint, thereby strengthening ethical and moral reasoning and perspective.

The outcomes of the program are two-fold. For Maastricht University students, the experience contextualises and enriches the literature they have access to. For the Indonesian students, the program affords an 'internalisation-at-home experience' due to the limited resources Indonesia students have to achieve physical mobility.

Student perception surveys revealed the project strongly impacted satisfaction with, and understanding of, intercultural group work, assertiveness, respect for diversity, and virtual collaborative problem solving (particularly perspective taking and ambiguity management). The project was awarded 2nd place in the 2015 Wharton QS Innovation Awards for the category of 'Regional Award – Europe'.

#### For additional information, visit:

 <http://application.reimagine-education.com/the-winners-individual/2015/438/bf0e5628ebcfc8dccbfe15ad2adc5b0b/Maastricht+University>







# EXEMPLARS OF GOOD PRACTICE

## ENHANCING THE QUALITY AND FREQUENCY OF POSTGRADUATE STUDENT-STAFF INTERACTIONS

### Deakin Anywhere at Deakin University

In 2012, the eSolutions team at Deakin University set out to improve not only the way staff and student communicate with the University, but also to directly enhance student-staff interactions. The result was a University-wide collaboration platform that can be used by students, faculty, and staff to connect and collaborate effectively and intuitively, known as Deakin Anywhere.

Deakin Anywhere is an integrated set of communication, productivity, and collaboration tools that allow staff, students, and researchers to study and work wherever they choose or need to be. In an industry first, this portfolio has implemented Lync 2013, Microsoft 2013, SharePoint 2013 alongside cloud services including Office 365 and Yammer, resulting in improved quality and speed of staff, student, and researcher engagement in a global context. Completed in 2015, Deakin Anywhere has provided 8,000 staff and 50,000 students with the ability to access data and communicate with each other and external stakeholders in ways not previously possible, including:

The ability to communicate by instant message, voice, and video, among staff, students and federated partners from any device, in any location;

- + Dynamic data collaboration, as opposed to static file sharing by email;
- + Mobile access to files, without the need for complex VPN connections;
- + Co-authoring;
- + Online teaching;
- + Enhanced student/staff collaboration via online tutorial groups and online drop in sessions with educators;
- + Teleworking enablement across geographically diverse campus’;
- + Social collaboration by opening communication channels previously inaccessible.

In addition to increase connection and enhancing interactions, the project has also provided students, staff, and external researchers with choices – choice of work and study location, choice of engagement mode, choice of device, and choice of software. These choices aim to make it simple for an individual to commence a project at his/her usual workspace on a desktop machine, continue working on his/her mobile tablet in transit between campuses or workplaces, finish the project on their laptop in an airport lounge, whilst communicating seamlessly in real time with internal and external stakeholders.



Deakin Anywhere has produced a number of promising and positive results since its implementation, including:

- + Improved collaboration and productivity** – in the first quarter over 50,000 instant messages were sent, resulting in fewer emails and quicker response times. It was estimated that 70,000 hours of efficiency was gained.
- + Engagement** – the initiative has provided a rich engagement experience for students and has improved connectivity among geographically diverse students, staff members, and researchers.
- + Reputation** – as a result of Deakin's partnership with Microsoft, Deakin has received global recognition as a best practice case study. Deakin Anywhere was also awarded 3rd place in the 2015 Wharton QS Innovation Awards for the category of 'Regional Award – Oceania'.
- + Increased revenue** – by enhancing the student experience, the project is also reported to have resulted in increased revenue due to student retention and the availability of additional student places due the increasing popularity of online learning via Deakin Anywhere. This increase in the off-campus delivery model has also attracted global students to attend live classes, increasing revenue while substantially reducing costs associated with travel and time.

**For further information about Deakin Anywhere, visit:**



<http://www.deakin.edu.au/about-deakin/administrative-divisions/esolutions/strategic-services/deakin-anywhere>



# EXEMPLARS OF GOOD PRACTICE

## BALANCING DIVERSE POSTGRADUATE STUDENT PRIORITIES

### **The Holistic Graduate Student Experience Program at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)**

Over the past decade, MIT has increasingly recognised the importance of personal support, access to equitable resources, work-life balance, and community cohesion, to the academic, professional, and personal success of their postgraduate students. MIT acknowledge that postgraduates of the 21st century must not only have the capacity to create new, original knowledge as frontiers of their fields, they must also understand what this knowledge means in the broader context and possess a more extensive skill set to be able to act on this new knowledge in way that benefits the community at large. As such, MIT advocate the equal important of professional and personal development in preparing postgraduate students for a range of future career paths.

In 2010, MIT completed a Survey of Graduate Women, which provided valuable data in relation to how well MIT were meeting the needs of graduate women at the time, in addition to providing insight into how MIT could improve the quality of life of all postgraduate students. As a result, a number of initiatives were developed to encourage and achieve a holistic postgraduate student experience.

### **+ *Personal support***

- ➔ Individual needs assessments for each postgraduate student;
- ➔ Development and promotion of community wellness program through interdisciplinary collaboration and support;
- ➔ Creation of mechanisms to ensure all diverse postgraduate students are connected to valuable support resources;
- ➔ Provision of resource training with collaborative partners and staff in areas such as cultural sensitivity, identifying early warning signs of personal and professional difficulties in, the manifestation of trauma, coping with loss, conflict resolution, dealing with academic integrity issues, and managing complaints.
- ➔ Detection and rapid response to harassment, stalking, and bullying, with the aim of creating a safer environment for all postgraduate students;
- ➔ Development and implementation of a postgraduate student case database to ensure consistency and transparency (where possible).



### **+ Community support**

- ➔ Pre-orientation programs, where students from diverse countries engage with each other in a face-to-face or online context prior to departing for their postgraduate course at MIT.
- ➔ Family support services that serve the identified needs of postgraduate students,
- ➔ Community and engagement mechanisms to reach out to off-campus students.

### **+ Professional and personal development and support**

- ➔ Professional Development Portal (PRO-DEPOT) to provide competency in core skills, in addition to attempting to upskill areas postgraduate students perceive skill deficits.
- ➔ Foundational Skills Program to provide key skills necessary for different career paths;
- ➔ International Exchange Programs to encourage cross-cultural diversity experiences;
- ➔ Work-life balance sessions and materials to assist postgraduate students with core skills of time management, organisation, coping, and stress management.





# RECOMMENDATIONS

## FOR POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

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

It is important to reflect and again acknowledge the diversity of the postgraduate students that are enrolled in Australian universities. Meeting the academic, professional, and social needs of domestic and international postgraduate students who are enrolled in multiple higher education courses delivered via face-to-face, online, or blended learning approach is challenging. These students are enrolled in course work and/or research focused degrees.

The recommendations listed below have been identified within one or more of the following four key elements of postgraduate student experience: connection and belonging; diverse course delivery and learning experiences; diverse student and academic staff interactions; and balancing diverse priorities.

The participants in this research suggested that to enhance the quality of the postgraduate student experiences future (or current) postgraduates should:

- + Participate in induction events that focus on the course, the lecturers, and the postgraduate students.
- + Get to know your fellow postgraduate students.
- + Participate in social networks, forums, and/or seminars.

- + Form study groups that are face-to-face, online, or a combination of both.
- + Participate in a Postgraduate Student Association (or equivalent) and related activities.
- + Engage with postgraduate students who are not from your primary cultural group.
- + Introduce yourself to the university librarian(s) and seek their assistance (e.g., Endnote, Research literature synthesis, navigating research databases, library catalogues, journals and e-journals, library guides, and theses).
- + Be proactive in seeking assistance from Academic Support personnel in your university (e.g., academic writing, referencing).
- + Be proactive in seeking assistance from Information Technology (IT) specialists that are employed by your university to assist with IT related matters.
- + Develop confidence in navigating and maximising the potential of the Learning Management System in your university to enhance your learning.
- + Develop confidence to discuss supervision matters with your supervisor in a timely manner (e.g., more or less regular meetings; more transparent feedback).







# RECOMMENDATIONS

## FOR EDUCATORS

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

The steady increase in postgraduate enrolments in Australian universities over the past five years has provided increased challenges for universities, academics, and in particular supervisors, to cater for these students needs. Postgraduate student-staff ratios are increasing (Universities Australia, 2015). As stated previously, an increasing number of postgraduate students are the first members of their family to attend a higher education institution, some do not speak English at home, and students with disabilities are seeking increased opportunities to extend and enhance their learning.

Postgraduate students are seeking greater access and increased support from their lecturers, as they believe this will assist them to become more engaged and successful in their learning (Young & Sax, 2009). Meeting the expectations and learning needs of international students continues to challenge academics (Hellsten & Prescott, 2004; Ryan, 2005;).

The participants in this research suggested that in order to enhance the quality of future postgraduate student experiences, educators should:

- Develop opportunities for postgraduate students to engage, work, and/or collaborate across cultural groups.
- Encourage postgraduate students to network with alumni and potential future employers.
- Facilitate postgraduate learning opportunities and engagement using blended learning approaches.
- Ensure that all postgraduate students have access to, and utilise, the relevant features of the Learning Management System (LMS).
- Maximise the potential of the LMS to engage postgraduate students and extend their learning.
- Be proactive in seeking assistance and advice from Information Technology (IT) specialists to support IT related matters.
- Be proactive in seeking guidance and advice from Blended Learning Design specialists to support LMS related matters.
- Seek assistance from university librarians/specialists (e.g., Endnote, Research literature synthesis, navigating research databases, library catalogues, journals and e-journals, library guides, and theses).



- + Utilise multiple methods to stimulate a sense of belonging and connection for postgraduate students who, by nature, are a diverse cohort that may not respond collectively to one strategy.
- + Create activities/projects that require online students to interact with each other prior to, or near the beginning, of their course/unit.
- + Develop a culture of collaboration, rather than competition, in postgraduate classrooms.
- + Seek open and transparent feedback from postgraduate students about how you can assist them in their learning and engagement.
- + Organise appropriate social interactions with postgraduate students' in an off-campus context to strengthen student-staff relationships (e.g., group coffee meetings, group lunches, group conference attendance).



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## FOR UNIVERSITY LEADERS

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

Australian universities have become more aware of their roles and responsibilities in enhancing their postgraduate student retention and completion rates in an increasingly competitive environment. Increased international postgraduate student enrolments are providing additional income streams; however, this has steadily increased the richness and diversity of the postgraduate cohort.

Supporting the varied social needs of postgraduate students (particularly at the commencement of their courses), via community and sporting clubs, service groups and agencies, or university employment (e.g., peer advisors, teaching assistants) must be institutional priorities. An increased focus on enhancing postgraduate students' career and employment potential via alumni networks, meetings with employers, and internships has also gained priority in Australian universities.

The participants in this research suggested that in order to enhance the quality of future postgraduate student experiences, Universities should:

- + Facilitate the appointment of a supervisor(s) (and the related process) that will maximise the postgraduate students' learning, research, and writing capacities.
- + Provide flexible Academic Support Services that postgraduate students can access outside of traditional business hours.
- + Provide Blended Learning Design and Information Technology specialist personnel who can provide academics and postgraduate students with support as required.
- + Ensure that online (LMS) infrastructure is accessible and reliable for academics and postgraduate students, both domestically and internationally.
- + Facilitate professional development and training sessions that enhance postgraduate students' skills and capacities to engage successfully in LMS and other online learning.
- + Develop and implement informative induction programs that enhance the transition, learning, and engagement experiences of postgraduate students.
- + Include postgraduate student representation on key university research, learning and teaching, and academic boards/committees.



- Encourage and facilitate opportunities for cross-disciplinary activities that encourage postgraduate student engagement.
- Create opportunities for international students to engage socially and academically with domestic students through presentations, performances, and/or discussions.
- Provide suitable facilities for postgraduate students to meet in and talk with peers (e.g., kitchen facilities, reading area, group work spaces).
- Facilitate alumni networks, meetings with employers, and access to internships that focus on enhancing postgraduate students' career and employment opportunities post-graduation.





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For further information & resources:

 <http://PostgraduateStudentExperience.com/>

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# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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

In relation to increasing belonging and connection among a diverse cohort of postgraduate students:

- What is the role and responsibility of the university, the academic, and the postgraduate student in enhancing the academic, social, emotional, and physical experiences of the postgraduate student?
- What strategies need to be employed to enhance the postgraduate student experience, improve postgraduate learning outcomes, and strengthen postgraduate student retention?
- How can the postgraduate student voice be used to enhance their experience?
- How does the university use the diverse knowledge, skills, and experiences of postgraduate students from multiple domestic and international backgrounds to enhance cross-cultural engagement and learning experiences for all?

In relation to managing supporting the needs and requirements of diverse postgraduate course delivery and learning experiences:

- How can formative and summative feedback be used to enhance the postgraduate student experience?
- How can universities provide consistent and reliable technologies that enhance postgraduate student access to and engagement with course resources and materials, academics, and other postgraduate students?

In relation to enhancing diverse postgraduate student and academic staff interactions:

- How can the university improve the academic supervisory appointment process to ensure successful learning/research outcomes for the supervisor(s) and the postgraduate student?
- How can the university support postgraduate students and academics that have concerns about the relationships they have with their research partner?

In relation to supporting postgraduate students balance their unique and diverse priorities:

- What impact does on-campus employment have on the postgraduate student experience?
- How can the university/academic/postgraduate student facilitate social/community building activities that enhance learning and engagement with each other?



