TEACH[R]

Where to go for a Christian research degree? Part 2 of a two-part report

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> *What were the differences between the way current and graduate candidates … males and females reported on their postgraduate learning experiences*

Abstract

Avondale University is committed to providing quality higher research degrees. Data on candidate and graduate experiences from the institution and across the sector are central in shaping good practice and informing policy, processes and systems designed to support candidate and supervisor research training (TEQSA, 2018) and employment opportunities (Bentley & Meek, 2018).

This paper reports on research conducted at our institution which focused on the following two questions: What were the differences between the way current candidates and graduates reported on their postgraduate learning experiences in the MPhil or PhD degrees at Avondale? And, what were the differences between the way males and females reported on their postgraduate learning experiences in the MPhil or PhD degrees at Avondale?

In this mixed methods research project questionnaires and interviews were used to determine what is valued by current and past HDR candidates of Avondale and which areas of our HDR programs need further development. This is the second of two papers that report the findings of this project and identifies future research which may further support HDR candidates' holistic experiences.

Introduction

In the previous article in this series, *Where to go for a Christian research degree: Part 1 of a two-part report*, the aspects of Avondale's higher degree research (HDR) program that were valued by current and past MPhil and PhD candidates were outlined and this information was used to identify the areas of our HDR program that require further development. Following on from the previous article, this paper reports on answers to the final two[1] research questions of the study.

RQ3: What were the differences between the way current candidates and graduates reported on their postgraduate learning experiences in the MPhil or PhD degrees at Avondale?
RQ4: What were the differences between the way males and females reported on their postgraduate learning experiences in the MPhil or PhD degrees at Avondale?

These questions guided the researchers in their investigation of the differences between two different subgroups within the HDR cohort: that is:

1. Current candidates and past graduates; and
2. Males and females.

The data gathered through the study's questionnaires were analysed to delve deeper into

[1] The answers to Research Question 1 and Research question 2 were provided in the previously published article in *TEACH* titled *Where to go for a Christian higher degree? – Part 1 of a two-part report.*

the experiences and preferences of these subgroups in order to further inform the development of our HDR program and the research training program that supports the supervisors and candidates within the HDR program.

This research project opens up future possibilities for surveying HDR candidate perspectives on mental health and wellbeing as part of Avondale's ongoing responsiveness to data-informed cohort research training, mission-focused course design and delivery, and sector good practice.

Background literature

The experience of higher degree research (HDR) students in degrees such as a Master of Philosophy (MPhil) or a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) is important because it impacts on the commitment of those enrolled in such degrees and the completion rates. The experiences of HDR candidates also reflects on the institution that offers such degrees. Furthermore, many and varied sections of educational institutions contribute to the overall experience of the HDR candidate, including supervisors, administrators, librarians, technical staff and other HDR candidates (Nulty, et al., 2009). While evaluation feedback has been gathered from undergraduate students for many decades to identify strongpoints and weak points of their university learning experiences, this practice has not been as regular in the postgraduate field of higher degree research. Carayannopoulos (2012) noted the importance of closing "the feedback loop with research candidates" (p. 59). HDR candidates also benefit from research training opportunities which enable them to develop as independent researchers (Cummings, 2010; Pearson & Brew, 2002; Sapouna, et al., 2020)

University students' experiences of their degree as a whole are often evaluated through the institution that offers the degree or a governing body's data gathering processes. In Australia, for example, data about undergraduate and postgraduate students' experiences are collected and analysed in the form of Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) data by the Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment. To gather data about research students' experiences, the Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ), an instrument developed by Graduate Careers Australia (GCA), is administered to research graduates who have recently completed masters or PhD degrees. Results of these questionnaires has shown that the proportion of HDR female students has increased over the past 15 years (Radloff, et al., 2017) but there is little published research that investigates the differences experienced by male and female candidates during their enrolment in HDR degrees. There is also little evidence that provides insights into the differences in HDR experiences between current and past candidates who have been enrolled in the Australian higher education sector.

While some earlier work focused on LGBT students has been researched at school level (DeWitt, 2012), at this point, the experiences of the different genders at tertiary level have typically focused on heteronormative or cis-normative identities of students who identify with being male or female. However, the way in which students of different traditional genders perceive their higher education learning experiences has been documented in recent years. For example, the study by Grebennikov and Skaines (2009) found that female university students were more focused on the university's services than their male counterparts. Furthermore, while typically based on comparisons of male and female students, various aspects of students' university learning experiences have been investigated in relation to issues such as self-assessment activities (González- Betancor, et al., 2019), abilities to cope with assessment-associated stress (Bonneville-Roussy, et al., 2017) and differences in academic achievement (Pirmohamed, et al., 2017). To date, we have not been able to locate any studies that have focused specifically on the needs of students of varied genders, the binary male and female genders, engaged in postgraduate degrees.

> *we have not been able to locate any studies that have focused specifically on the needs of students of varied genders, … engaged in postgraduate degrees.*

Research methodology

The research methodology used and the research setting of the "Why Avondale?" research project have been described in our previous article in this series, *Where to go for a Christian research degree: Part 1* of a two-part report. In summary, this project adopted a participatory mixed methods research approach (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Creswell & Creswell, 2018) in which evaluation data were gathered from HDR candidates from Avondale's Master of Philosophy (MPhil) and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degrees. Both past graduates and current candidates from these degrees were invited to contribute comments and feedback about their experiences of being enrolled in these degrees. The data provided by these participants was analysed in order to determine the aspects of their HDR degree experiences that they valued or, alternatively, viewed as wanting in some way. The results of these analyses are currently informing our modifications to the HDR degrees as well as the research training program that supports the candidates enrolled in these degrees and their supervisors.

From the total population of 69 potential participants, including 24 graduates and 45 current candidates, 29 participants (42% of the total

population) provided evaluation data in the form of responses to the study's *Why Avondale Online Questionnaire* by providing responses to Likert-style items and closed questions (quantitative data), as well as responses to open-ended questions (qualitative data). In addition to the data gathered from participants' responses to the study's *Why Avondale Online Questionnaire*, eight participants (12% of the total population) provided commentary about their HDR experiences in an interview (qualitative data). While both sets of survey and interview data were used to inform the answers to the first two research questions of the study, reported in our previous article, *Where to go for a Christian higher degree? – Part 1*, we have answered the study's final two research questions by utilising quantitative data gathered from the survey. This decision was made because the answers to the final two research questions (RQs) of the study (RQ3 and RQ4, outlined earlier in this article) required a comparative analysis of quantitative data to determine the extent of the differences (or similarities) between two sub-cohorts within the overall cohort of participants: that is, male and female participants, and HDR graduates and current HDR candidates.

> *"The differences in male and female responses … [are] considered to be statistically significant ($p<0.05$)"*

Findings and discussion

Our findings report on the differences in the perceptions about their HDR experiences of two subgroups who had recently enrolled or graduated from HDR degrees at Avondale between 2016 and 2019. These two subgroups include:

1. Current candidates and past graduates; and
2. Males and females.

By identifying the differences in these subgroups' experiences, the degrees and the research training program have been further developed to meet the needs of these subgroups within the HDR program at the institution.

Differences between current candidates' and graduates' experiences

Our analysis of the quantitative data provided by current candidates and graduates provided us with answers to the study's third research question:

> *What were the differences between the way current candidates and graduates reported on their postgraduate learning experiences in the MPhil or PhD degrees at Avondale?*

To determine the differences between current candidates' and graduates' experiences, we began by calculating the Pearson correlation coefficient to measure the association between the ratings for the two groups. The value was found to be $r = 0.79$, indicating that there is a strong association between the experiences of graduates and current students. When an independent sample t-test was used to compare the means of the two sets of data, the p-value was 0.203, which means we cannot conclude that a significant difference exists.

Further detail is provided in Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3.

Differences between male and female candidates' and graduates' experiences

Tables 4, 5, and 6 contain data that show a comparison of male and female results when the current or graduated status is removed. The results of this analysis provide answers to the fourth research question:

> *What were the differences between the way males and females reported on their postgraduate learning experiences in MPhil or PhD degrees at Avondale?*

The differences in male and female responses are highlighted in Table 4, Table 5 and Table 6 where the two groups are compared statistically. When a two-tailed independent sample t-test was calculated to compare the means, the value was $p = 0.0063$ which indicates that by conventional criteria, this difference is considered to be statistically significant ($p<0.05$). An independent sample t-test was used because the objective was to compare the means of two independent cohorts on the same criteria (Cohen, et al, 2002).

Table 4 indicates the items with largest and least difference, while Table 5 shows the most positive responses for males and females, and Table 6 lists the most negative aspects of the candidate experience.

Summary of findings and discussion

When we analysed the quantitative survey data from the current candidates and past graduates of Avondale's HDR programs, even though there was no significant outcome from the t-test that indicated a difference in the means of the two sets of data, we noted a distinct difference in themes between where these two groups agree the most, and disagreed the most. Table 1 illustrates there is little difference between the way they saw the supervisors' helpful feedback, their satisfaction with their supervision, and their growing confidence in tackling unfamiliar problems.

The areas where these two groups disagreed the most was primarily on support services. To a large extent it can be seen that graduates show a

Table 1: *Comparing graduates' and current candidates' greatest and least differences in ratings**

		Graduates	Current candidates	Combined	Difference
Items with greatest difference	Avondale's Library services were helpful to my study	3.86	4.71	4.29	-0.85
	Avondale's IT services were helpful to my study	3.86	3.0	3.43	-0.86
	I benefitted from having more than one supervisor	5.0	4.19	4.60	-0.81
	I communicated with staff in the Research Office at Avondale	3.57	4.38	3.98	0.81
	I used Avondale's Library services	4.86	4.05	4.45	-0.81
Items with least difference	My supervisor(s) provided helpful feedback on my progress	4.14	4.14	4.14	0.0
	Avondale provided opportunities for social contact with other postgraduate students	3.14	3.14	3.14	0.0
	I had adequate financial support for my research project	3.57	3.55	3.56	-0.02
	I found the online environment at Avondale useful to collaborate with other staff or students about my research	2.57	2.62	2.60	0.05
	Overall, I am satisfied with the supervision I received	4.14	4.19	4.17	0.05
	As my research progressed, I felt more confident about tackling unfamiliar problems	4.14	4.10	4.13	-0.05

*Responses indicated level of agreement on a Likert scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

high level of satisfaction with support services when compared to current candidates. It is likely that current candidates experience frustrations with any obstacles they encounter during their studies and that these obstacles are at the forefront of their memories, when compared to corresponding views held by past graduates who may not remember these obstacles with as much detail or urgency. It is equally likely that graduates are so satisfied in having completed the degree and achieving their academic title, that any such frustrations they experienced are now in the past, and they can look back more positively about their experiences.

The one area of difference that is much more positive for current candidates than for graduates, is the level of communication provided by Avondale's Research Services Office. It is pleasing to note that the deliberate effort by the higher degree course convenor and the research services officer to provide regular communication with higher degree candidates, is being appreciated by those currently in the program.

Table 3 contains the least agreed on factors for graduates and current candidates. The main areas of positive responses from both groups included: the good work of the supervisors, the way they see they have sharpened their analytical skills while doing the research, and the positive impact of the library on their study. The main areas of negative responses included the candidates'/graduates' perceptions that there was little opportunity to work with other research students during their degree.

The greatest variation between the survey responses that reported on the perceptions of males and females was related to the quality of the supervision in terms of the feedback provided and the supervisor's availability. The results in Table 4 showed in total that females were much more positive

"The main areas of negative responses included the candidates'/ graduates' perceptions that there was little opportunity to work with other research students during their degree."

Table 2: *Graduates' and current candidates' most agreed upon factors**

Graduates most agreed with	Score	Current candidates most agreed with	Score	Overall most agreed with	Score
I benefitted from having more than one supervisor (if applicable)	5.00	My supervisor(s) made a real effort to understand difficulties that I faced	4.52	Doing my research sharpened my analytical skills	4.62
Doing my research sharpened my analytical skills	4.86	I learned to develop my ideas and present them in written work	4.48	I benefitted from having more than one supervisor (if applicable)	4.60
I used Avondale's Library services	4.86	I communicated with staff in the Research Office at Avondale	4.38	I learned to develop my ideas and present them in written work	4.52
Avondale's Library services were helpful to my study	4.71	Doing my research sharpened my analytical skills	4.38	I used Avondale's Library services	4.45
I learned to develop my ideas and present them in written work	4.57	Avondale's Research Office staff were helpful to my study	4.33	I had access to suitable working space when needed	4.36

*Responses indicated level of agreement on a Likert scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

> *"females were much more positive about their perception of the supervision experience while males expected more and were less positive."*

Table 3: *Graduates and current candidates' least agreed upon factors**

Graduates least agreed with	Score	Current candidates least agreed with	Score	Overall least agreed with	Score
Opportunities to work with other research students were provided	2.29	Avondale's counselling staff were helpful to my study (if applicable)	2.00	Opportunities to work with other research students were provided	2.41
Studying for a higher degree has had a negative impact on my social life (transposed)	2.29	Studying for a higher degree has had a negative impact on my mental health (transposed)	2.48	Studying for a higher degree has had a negative impact on my social life (transposed)	2.48
I found the online environment at Avondale useful to collaborate with other staff or students about my research	2.57	Opportunities to work with other research students were provided	2.52	Avondale's counselling staff were helpful to my study (if applicable)	2.50
I was encouraged to become integrated into Avondale's community	2.57	Studying for a higher degree has had a negative impact on my physical health (transposed)	2.57	I found the online environment at Avondale useful to collaborate with other staff or students about my research	2.60
Avondale provided opportunities for me to become involved in the broader research culture	2.71	I found the online environment at Avondale useful to collaborate with other staff or students about my research	2.62	Studying for a higher degree has had a negative impact on my mental health (transposed)	2.67

*Responses indicated level of agreement on a Likert scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

about their perception of the supervision experience while males expected more and were less positive. Males and females were in agreement, however, on the amount of guidance they received to do their literature review, the helpfulness of IT services and the stimulus they received at Avondale through the research environment. The two groups both agreed and were both very positive in their views about the

Table 4: *Comparing male and female candidates' greatest and least differences in ratings**

		Males	Females	Combined	Difference
Items with greatest difference	Avondale's counselling staff were helpful to my study (if applicable)	3.38	1.81	2.50	1.56
	Supervision was available within a reasonable time period when needed	3.25	4.79	4.05	1.54
	My supervisor(s) provided helpful feedback on my progress	3.46	4.62	4.14	1.16
	Avondale's Student Administration Services (including Academic Office, etc.) were helpful to my study	4.00	2.88	3.48	1.12
	Opportunities to work with other research students were provided	1.79	2.89	2.41	1.10
Items with least difference	I received valuable guidance in my literature search (if applicable)	3.29	3.29	3.29	0.00
	The research context at Avondale stimulated my work	3.08	3.05	3.07	0.03
	Avondale's IT services were helpful to my study	3.42	3.33	3.38	0.03
	Doing my research sharpened my analytical skill	4.50	4.58	4.54	0.08
	I found the online environment at Avondale useful to collaborate with other staff or students about my research	2.46	2.56	2.60	0.10

*Responses indicated level of agreement on a Likert scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

> *Males and females were in agreement, however, on the amount of guidance they received to do their literature review, the helpfulness of IT services and the stimulus they received*

Table 5: *Male and female graduates and current candidates' most agreed upon factors**

Male candidates most agreed with	Score	Female candidates most agreed with	Score	Overall most agreed with	Score
Doing my research sharpened my analytical skill	4.50	Supervision was available within a reasonable time period when needed	4.79	Doing my research sharpened my analytical skills	4.62
I benefitted from having more than one supervisor (if applicable)	4.42	My supervisor(s) made a real effort to understand difficulties that I faced	4.73	I benefitted from having more than one supervisor (if applicable)	4.60
I used Avondale's Library services	4.38	I benefitted from having more than one supervisor (if applicable)	4.64	I learned to develop my ideas and present them in written work	4.52
Avondale's Research Office staff were helpful to my study	4.38	My supervisor(s) provided helpful feedback on my progress	4.62	I used Avondale's Library services	4.45
I learned to develop my ideas and present them in written work	4.29	Doing my research sharpened my analytical skills	4.58	I had access to suitable working space when needed	4.36

*Responses indicated level of agreement on a Likert scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Table 6: *Male and female graduates and current candidates' least agreed upon factors**

Male candidates least agreed with	Score	Female candidates least agreed with	Score	Overall least agreed with	Score
Opportunities to work with other research students were provided	1.79	Avondale's counselling staff were helpful to my study (if applicable)	1.81	Opportunities to work with other research students were provided	2.41
Studying for a higher degree has had a negative impact on my social life	2.29	I found the online environment at Avondale useful to collaborate with other staff or students about my research	2.56	Studying for a higher degree has had a negative impact on my social life (transposed)	2.48
A good Research Training program was provided for postgraduate students	2.33	Studying for a higher degree has had a negative impact on my social life	2.82	Avondale's counselling staff were helpful to my study (if applicable)	2.50
I found the online environment at Avondale useful to collaborate with other staff or students about my research	2.46	Avondale's Student Administration Services (including Academic Office, etc.) were helpful to my study	2.88	I found the online environment at Avondale useful to collaborate with other staff or students about my research	2.60
Studying for a higher degree has had a negative impact on my physical health	2.46	Opportunities to work with other research students were provided	2.89	Studying for a higher degree has had a negative impact on my mental health (transposed)	2.48

*Responses indicated level of agreement on a Likert scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

> *It is also interesting to note that across all of the data for males and females, females were consistently more positive about their experience*

way in which their analytical skills were sharpened in the process of completing their HDR degree.

Table 5 shows the most positive responses for males and females. While the sharpening of their analytical skills featured in the top five most positive responses for both groups, males rated this as the most positive. It is interesting to note the top five most positive responses from female candidates, four of them mention the supervisor, while for males, only one of the top five mentioned anything about the supervisor experience. It is also interesting to note that across all of the data for males and females, females were consistently more positive about their experience, and were most positive about their work with people including supervisors. Males however, tended to appreciate the individual skills they developed and the functionality of the support services.

Some of the differences between male and female responses identified in this study align with a study of student satisfaction carried out by the University of Western Sydney (Grebennikov & Skaines, 2009). In that study it was found that females were more concerned about administrative services and getting the more routine activities of a higher education student done efficiently and effectively. These factors largely did not rate for males. Similarly, at Avondale, two of the greatest differences between female and male response were in the services provided by Student Administrative Services and Avondale's Counselling Services. Here males were far less concerned in these areas than female candidates.

Recommendations

By investigating the views of their HDR experiences across two subgroups of the study's participants, this study has revealed that there were not major differences between each groups of candidates within each of the subgroups. However, the differences were slightly more distinguishable between the male and female candidates than the past and current candidates. These results have been used to make practical modifications to the MPhil and the PhD degrees at Avondale and we have also drawn applications from this study to strategically improve our Research Training Program. Specifically, the results of this study have resulted in the following practical applications to our HDR program:

- Continued evaluation of current and past candidates' experiences
  While a large difference between the views of current and past candidates from the 2014-2019 period was not found, a number of changes have taken place in the HDR program since this study concluded. As a result, collection of evaluation data from current and past graduates will be collected in future years within the HDR program.

- Information regarding Avondale's internal services
  There was some variation between the past and current candidates' understanding of the internal services (e.g., library and IT) available to HDR candidates. As a result, our new and current candidates are currently fully aware of the range of services available to them. Time in our orientation, re-orientation and research training activities are currently ensuring awareness about these services.

- Regular communication with candidates
  On the whole, candidates expressed an ongoing appreciate for the communication they received from the University's Research Services Office. The recent attempts to keep regular contact with candidates about their enrolment, progress, examination and graduation will continue.

- Importance of administration and counselling services
  When comparing the differences between male and female candidates, females appeared to be more interested in the administration and services offered by the institution. When enrolling new candidates, this issue will be clarified during orientation sessions, for both males and female candidates.

- Perception of supervision
  Male candidates appeared to be more critical of their supervisors than their female counterparts. While program providers do not want to distinguish the quality of supervision afforded to male and female candidates in the future, we will be integrating more activities throughout our research training program in which supervisors and candidates share their expectations of each other, in order to reach some form of agreed-upon set of realistic expectations.

While the research-informed practical recommendations listed above were deemed suitable for implementation at the institution where this study was conducted, readers of this article from other universities may consider a selection of these recommendations for application in their own contexts, based on their knowledge of their own HDR settings.

However, when reflecting on the implementation of sustainable recommendations at a supervisory level, an observation from Duke & Denicolo's (2017) research into 'What supervisors and universities can do to enhance doctoral student experience (and how they can help themselves)' proves relevant to creating supportive HDR environments:

> It is critical that supervisors do not feel they alone are responsible for all aspects of their doctoral candidates' development and well-being, but are aware of and actively engaging with support services. This interaction will allow supervisors to better balance these new requirements and demands at the same time as enhancing student experience, by working in partnership to create safe places where supervisory practice can be explicitly shared and to build inclusive interdisciplinary communities to better support all doctoral students.
> (pp 4-5)

This framing of the doctoral journey as a shared practice with distributed responsibilities acknowledges both individual and collective contributions in producing a successful outcome.

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Limitations of the current study and suggestions for future research

In the research instruments developed for use in this study, two options were provided for participants to nominate their gender: female and male. However, we recognise that, in future replications of this study, participants may be offered more than two options to choose from when nominating their gender.

Universities seek to create communities where HDR candidates experience support and inclusion regardless of gender, sex characteristics or sexual orientation. The work of English and Fenby-Hulse (2019) is one example of agentic research which documents the diverse experiences of doctoral researchers and addresses the question of "what support, culture, and pedagogy might better support candidates who identify as LGBTQ+" (2019, p. 403).

In the context of our study, because the final two research questions were answered using data from the questionnaire used to gather data from current candidates and past graduates from the HDR program at Avondale, this limitation of the study may act as a catalyst to further explore the differences between candidates' and graduates' views about studying at Avondale through focus group interviews or individualised interviews. By continuing to investigate the differences between these two groups using qualitative research methods, the reasons behind some of the differences illustrated by the participants' questionnaire responses may be revealed.

Studies of the type outlined in this article may be extended to further investigate the differences between the needs of students from varied genders (Lindahl, et al., 2020). Such future research may assist in ensuring that a greater level of equity is achieved in meeting the requirements across groups of candidates representing varied genders, as noted by Grebennikov and Skaines (2009) who suggest that "a sharper focus on these areas for improvement action could help the university ensure

equity and better manage competition" (p. 71). Future research may also focus on candidate and graduate perceptions on diversity and inclusion.

Further explanations of the limitations of this research and suggestions for future research, are included in to our earlier paper published in this journal, *Where to go for a Christian research degree? Part 1 of a two-part report*.

Conclusion

While the results of this study are not intended for wide generalisation, central to the purpose of this research project is the importance of direct feedback from HDR cohorts completing an MPhil of PhD degree at Avondale University in contributing to the improvement cycle of institutional processes and practices.

In this paper we focused on two questions exploring the differences in perceptions of HDR experiences from various subgroups: current candidates and past graduates, and males and females.

The findings from the current study indicated there were not major differences in perceptions between groups of candidates within the current and graduate subgroups. However, differences were slightly more distinguishable between male and female subgroups with the greatest variation in survey responses linked to the area of supervisor feedback and availability where females responded more positively. The data also highlighted that male respondents where less concerned about administrative or counselling services.

As a result of this research, external referencing and course re-accreditation, the institution has implemented practical and policy refinements for the MPhil and PhD degrees, and expanded the Research Training program. The impetus for such improvements for developing and supporting HDR candidates has also been guided by the regulatory body TEQSA which notes: "The student [candidate] is expected also to develop a more or less fully-fledged identity as a researcher, so their research activities often generate deep personal reflection and emotional significance" (2018, p.5). This theme of researcher identity has been considered when re-shaping aspects of the HDR orientation and re-orientation program, along with the need to more overtly promote services which provide emotional and psychological support for candidates engaged in a sustained research program.

The survey feedback has also heightened the need for regular two-way communication between the institution and candidates, and has further refined institutional communication systems and process which underpin good practice and support candidate progression. Their feedback has also invited further institutional thinking around how to provide greater opportunities for candidates to formally and informally connect with each other during their study, increase interdisciplinary research projects and communities of practice, and engage with potential employers.

> *"feedback … invited … thinking around how to provide greater opportunities … to formally and informally connect … increase inter-disciplinary research projects and communities of practice, and engage with potential employers."*

While the "*Where to go for a Christian higher degree?*" research project data and analysis have led to tangible improvements in course design, delivery and connection for the current HDR cohort, this study invites further research opportunities that are responsive to institutional need and sector concerns. In particular, the area of HDR mental health and wellbeing is a key focus of the Australian Council of Graduate Research (ACGR), and Avondale's missional focus on holism encourages ongoing work related to candidate wellbeing. Researchers from various Australian universities have sought evidence-based interventions to promote mental wellbeing (Ryan, et al., 2021; Beasy, et al., 2021; Mackie & Bates, 2019), and a future Avondale research project could contribute to a deepened understanding of the psychosocial needs of candidates and services that may better support challenges encountered during their higher degree by research.

It is important to note that our study was conducted before the global pandemic, and we acknowledge that stresses typically associated with higher degrees by research (Woolston, 2019) may have further intensified through the impact of the COVID-19 (Haas, et al., 2020). In the context of doctoral programs and early career researchers, Paula (2020) also notes the threat of the global pandemic on progression:

> It is also essential to understand that being locked down at home does not equate to a boost in productivity. We are living through stressful times, and even if our work can be performed remotely, other concerns, such as caring for family and coping with mental and physical health, must take precedence and will affect productivity. (p. 999)

Through our ongoing commitment to institutional improvement for the MPhil and PhD degrees, and the implementation of responsive strategies for mitigating attrition and enhancing course satisfaction, we see further research opportunities for exploring HDR candidate perspectives on mental health and wellbeing during this unprecedented time of COVID-19 and its residual effects. Such candidate-centred research would assist Avondale University proactively address the ways we can further create and promote a culture of compassion, support and enablement. TEACH

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> *Avondale's missional focus on holism encourages ongoing work related to candidate wellbeing … that may better support challenges encountered during their higher degree by research.*