THE UNIVERSITY
OF QUEENSLAND
AUSTRALIA

CREATE CHANGE

Higher Degree by Research Wellbeing, Engagement, & Research Culture (HDR WERC) Project

Results – 2021 Survey

Contents

Citation

Executive summary

Background and context

The WERC project was initiated in 2019 by a small group of Higher Degree by Research (HDR) candidates and staff/researchers interested in improving the mental health and wellbeing of HDR candidates at The University of Queensland (UQ). The UQ HDR Committee had noted that recent HDR survey responses indicated low satisfaction with research environment and engagement measures and concluded there was a need to probe deeper into research culture as well as the wellbeing and engagement of HDR candidates at UQ. A collaboration was formed, and a longitudinal project was established that has since delivered a survey twice to UQ HDR candidates, commencing in 2020. This report describes results from this second survey in 2021.

Scope

This project aimed to understand more deeply the factors contributing to a positive HDR experience, including indicators of wellbeing and engagement, such as meaning in life and HDR motivation, and factors that should contribute to these positive HDR experiences, including the role of supervisors, a supportive research environment, having a sense of belonging, as well as other elements such as HDR-life balance. In addition, sources of support and career identity were explored to better understand the needs of candidates during and after their HDR program.

Process/Method

To achieve these aims, a survey was designed to gather data from UQ's HDR cohort. This survey is administered annually in November to enable the gathering of longitudinal data to allow for stronger conclusions and a deeper understanding of HDR student trajectories over the course of candidature.

The survey was developed following an extensive literature review, incorporating relevant established scales where possible, and received UQ ethics approval (#2020002572). In November 2021, the survey was distributed to all HDR candidates enrolled at UQ and was open for 4 weeks. Participation was voluntary, and responses were anonymous – participants nominated a unique confidential identifier to enable longitudinal tracking for future surveys. All data were stored and analysed in an aggregated and non-identifiable format.

Summary of results

A total of 1,492 candidates responded to the survey, giving a response rate of approximately 30%. Participants were representative of the entire HDR cohort in terms of gender, domestic/international status, and distribution across UQ organisational units (Schools & Institutes), enabling us to generalise conclusions to the wider cohort.

An analysis of results included findings related to the themes below. More detailed results and graphs are contained in the body of the report

Summary:

- **Wellbeing and engagement.** General wellbeing was rated above the scale mid-point[1] and most reported having meaning in life with good resilience, but levels of HDR burnout, loneliness, and psychological distress were higher than the mid-point.

- **Support services.** Most students had accessed support from the Graduate School and Directors HDR (DHDRs), and satisfaction with these services was well above the mid-point. Just over 60% of students had accessed UQ services for wellbeing and career and employability services. Satisfaction with these services were mixed with the average response falling around the mid-point.

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[1] On a scale of 1 to 7, the mean score was above 4

- **Support resources.** Most HDR candidates reported having a supportive Principal Advisor and an effective advisory team, although a minority rated support as very low. In terms of other sources of support, most candidates reported high levels of personal and peer support, but lower levels of financial support.

- **HDR-Life integration.** HDRs reported mixed experiences in relation to the integration of HDR study and life. Many respondents reported difficulties with boundary management, often spending time on their work during time off. However, many candidates felt their level of work-life balance was in line with their values, e.g., some students who spent considerable time on their HDR work were happy with the balance as it aligned with their priorities.

- **Research culture.** Most HDRs identified with their UQ organisational unit (e.g., School, Institute) and felt that their HDR identity was compatible with other aspects of their life. However, many reported feeling pressured to publish and were conscious of norms that encouraged work out of hours.

- **Career pathways and identity**. A third of students planned to pursue a career in academia. Most reported that they had high confidence in completing their program of research but felt that on average their HDR experience was not as positive as they had expected. HDRs who perceived better career prospects were more engaged. However, those experiencing career distress reported poorer wellbeing.

- **International candidates.** International candidates reported higher HDR satisfaction and meaning in life than domestic candidates, but they also reported greater loneliness and psychological distress. Domestic students reported higher levels of burnout.

- **Stage of candidature.** There were higher reported rates of burnout and distress as candidates approached their final progress review (toward the end of candidature). Pre-confirmation students reported higher life satisfaction, meaning in life, and HDR satisfaction.

Key recommendations

In response to the initial findings in 2020, the project team drafted 16 recommendations. The HDR Wellbeing Working Group has been established, comprised of staff and HDR candidates and chaired by the Director of the Graduate School, to develop an action plan and implement changes and improvements based on these recommendations, under sponsorship from the HDR Advisory Committee, a committee established in 2021 to continue the work of the ReTT (Research Training Transformation Committee, established by the DVCR in response to the external review in 2019).

Candidate support recommendations

- Dedicated **HDR counselling support** available to all candidates, with an understanding of HDR specific issues and ability to rebook with same person for continuity of support

- C**lear and consistent expectations to monitor progress.** Milestone requirements (now Progress Reviews) should be transparent, and candidates should have the opportunity to discuss challenges and recommendations for improvement and development.

- Establish **shared expectations –** mechanisms to enable an open conversation early in candidature, ideally at Induction, between Candidates and Advisors to discuss and develop a shared understanding to work constructively together.

- **HDR Support Guide –** consolidation to provide easy reference of key contact points to navigate and source help quickly and more easily.

Action Plan and Progress from HDR Wellbeing Working Group:

- Promote stronger awareness of mental health and peer support by encouraging more engagement with the Mental Health Champions Network and dedicated Mental Health First Aid for HDRs

- Milestone process – the milestone process has been reviewed and updated to clarify expectations and advice to candidates (launched July 2022 – now Progress Reviews)

- Checklist for an Early Candidature checkpoint has been drafted – WG to advise on mechanism to promote early discussion to align expectations and capture early warning signs

- HDR support guide is in development with key resources and contacts that are tailored for HDR needs

Candidate development and resources - recommendations

- **Expand wellbeing offerings in Career Development Framework (CDF) – add** sessions to support wellbeing and resilience and extend Mental Health First Aid to all HDRs.

- Promote and **expand HDR career advising** and support activities.

- Integrate the use of an **Individual Development Plan** into the candidate journey, prompting discussion of a tailored approach to development planning to meet the needs of each candidate and reviewed at each Progress Review, with explicit consideration of wellbeing and engagement

- **Roadmap resource of candidate journey –** a clear overview of pathways, resources and support available to assist candidates and their advisors discuss and plan progress.

Action Plan and Progress from HDR Wellbeing Working Group:

- Development conversations have been integrated into Progress Reviews

- Career development training and education to be expanded with exploration of other opportunities (e.g., through UQ alumni)

- Develop information support to help advisors feel more confident to have development and career conversations with HDRs throughout candidature

- HDR candidate journey roadmap under development

Research environment

- **Needs analysis of local research environments** – develop a needs analysis tool to enable each local Unit to better understand and improve on aspects contributing to an inclusive and supportive research environment for HDR candidates.

- **Strengthen HDR peer networks** – support Student Leaders and Association of Postgraduate Students (APS) to promote an inclusive HDR network across UQ, increasing opportunities for engagement and sharing best practice.

- Advocate for **dedicated HDR space** wherever possible to enable the co-location of HDR candidates with their peers to encourage interaction and support.

Action Plan and Progress from HDR Wellbeing Working Group:

- Development underway of a space self-audit tool for UQ Organisational Units. This will articulate best practice and enable a review of space to better cater for HDR needs in a way that is informed by research.

- HDR Representative role – currently engaging to strengthen and support this network alongside developing a stronger connection with the Association of Postgraduate Students (APS) and a clearer position description
- Reviewing a risk model template to help the Graduate School and UQ Units partner to capture best practice and identify gaps.

Supervisor development & supervision quality

- **Mental Health awareness training** encouraged for all Directors HDR (DHDRs), Chairs of Milestone Panels and Principal Advisors within 3 years.
- **Advisor Development** – compulsory development for advisors to include building **inclusive research communities**, information and resources on **mental health suppor**t and wellbeing and appropriate expectations and equipped to enable and support **career development of candidates they supervise**.
- **Guide to the Principal Advisor Registry –** a guide to increase transparency of the expectations of Principal supervisors at UQ and the process to register to be eligible as a supervisor
- **Excellence in HDR Supervision awards** - include criteria based on **nurturing and supporting candidate wellbeing**.
- Create a **Community of Practice on HDR supervision**, showcasing and profiling good supervision and to encourage interaction and discussion of best practice and engaging research environments.

Action Plan and Progress from Wellbeing Working Group:

- Compulsory advisor training program rolling out in 2022. Content to include inclusive research communities and supportive development practices and the importance of mental health support and wellbeing. This includes support and referral information and principles of healthy work boundaries and appropriate expectations as well how to support Student Access Plans.
- Guide to the Principal Advisor Registry Policy has been improved and draft guide has been developed
- Proposal that HDR Supervision Awards include criteria on nurturing and supporting HDR candidate wellbeing.
- Community of Practice for HDR advisors – currently formulating proposal to engage HDR Champion Advisors to share best practice.

Next steps

This report will be submitted to the UQ HDR Committee and the UQ Mental Health Strategy Board and recommendations considered by the HDR Wellbeing Working Group to update the action plan.

A summary report (executive summary plus key data) will be developed as a short report for all HDR Candidates and Advisors and additional details to Heads of Units and key stakeholders across UQ.

An engagement plan is being developed to try to increase participation in this longitudinal study to also help gain further insights and better inform actions.

Respondents

Demographic data

A total of 1492 candidates responded to the survey, giving a response rate of approximately 30%.
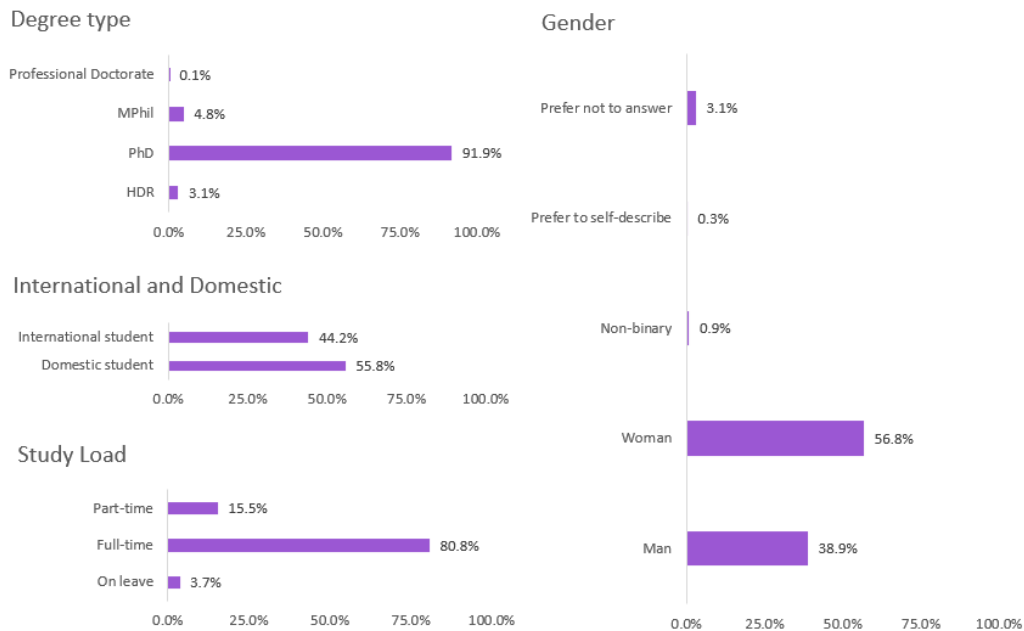

Figure 1: Representativeness of survey respondents

The results in Figure 1 indicate the sample is representative of the HDR cohort at UQ in terms of gender, program type (PhD or MPhil), international or domestic status, and study load (full-time or part-time).
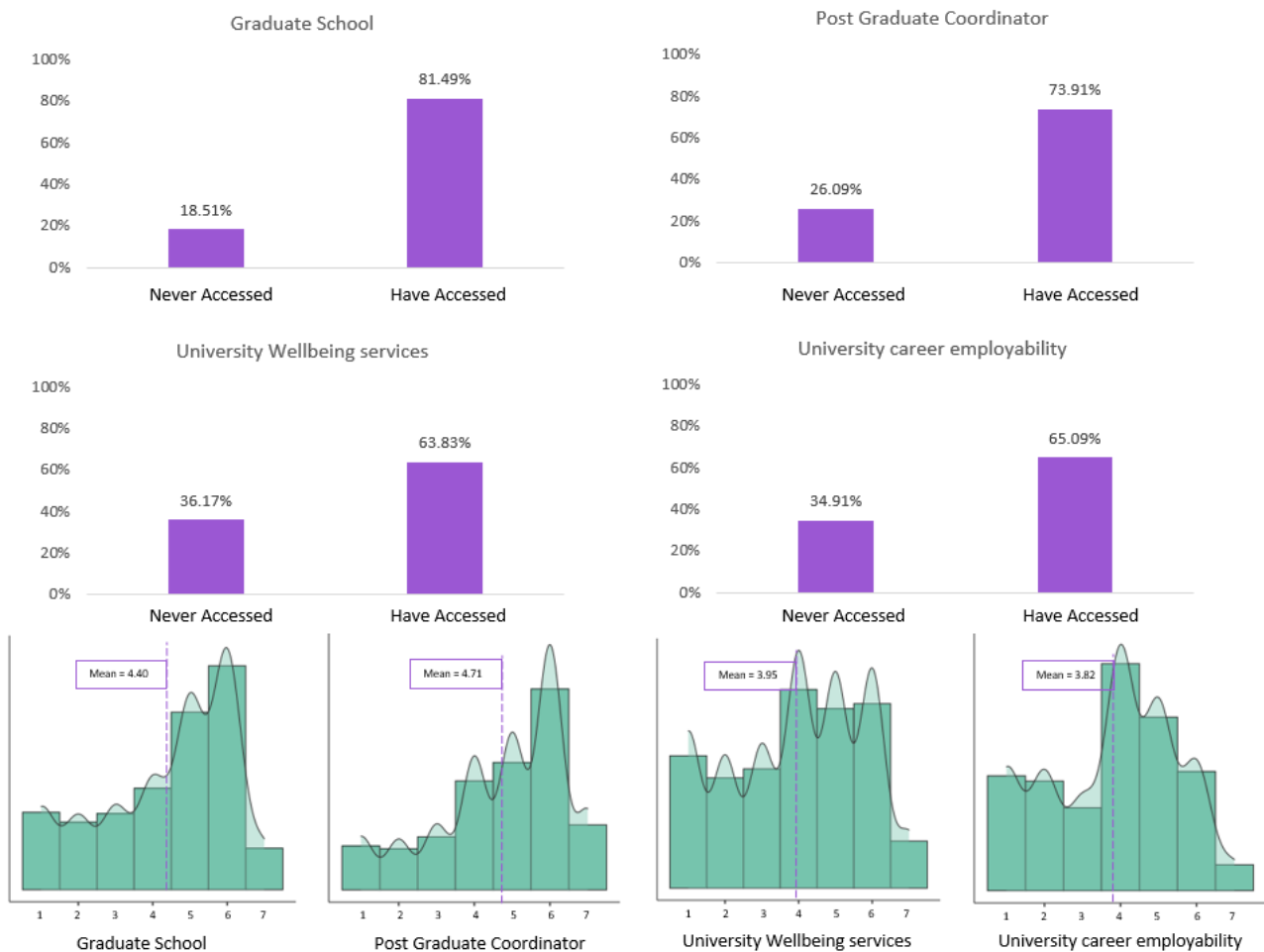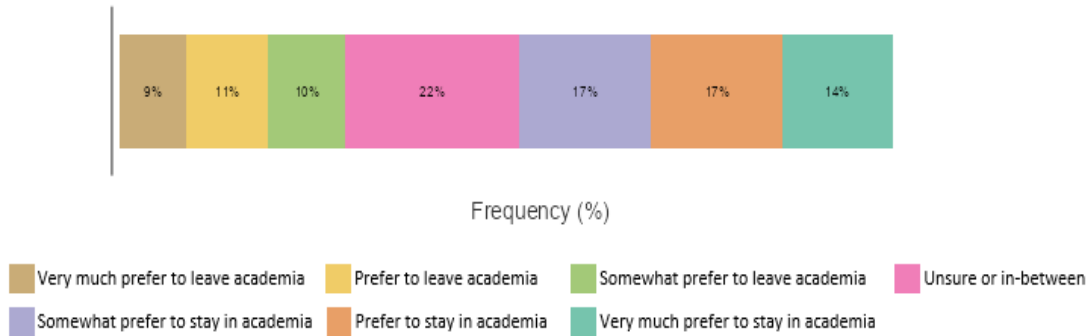
Support Services

Figure 2:   University support services and associated satisfaction

Most candidates had accessed the Graduate School for help and support and three-quarters of candidates have sought support from their Postgraduate Coordinator (PGC) (now Director of HDR) (Figure 2). In general, HDR candidates rated the help received from these sources as above the mid-point. On the other hand, around two-thirds of students have accessed the university's mental health and wellbeing services, indicating a strong need for these services. Satisfaction with mental health and wellbeing services was mixed with the average response falling below the midpoint. Similarly, two-thirds of students accessed the university's career and employability services, and among those, the level of satisfaction regarding the help they received was slightly below the midpoint. It should be noted that students could be referring to a range of service contact points across UQ.

Career Pathways

Preference to continue working in academia

If you were completely free to choose, would you prefer or not prefer to continue working in academia?

| 9% | 11% | 10% | 22% | 17% | 17% | 14% |

Frequency (%)

- Very much prefer to leave academia
- Prefer to leave academia
- Somewhat prefer to leave academia
- Unsure or in-between
- Somewhat prefer to stay in academia
- Prefer to stay in academia
- Very much prefer to stay in academia

Career after completing research degree

What type of career do you have in mind for when you complete your research degree? - Selected Choice

| 31% | 11% | 23% | 1% 3% | 3% 3% | 6% | 16% | 4% |

- Academic career in higher education
- Research career in higher education
- Research career outside higher education
- Teaching (in an area outside higher education)
- Returning to or remaining with employer who is sponsoring degree
- Returning to or remaining with employer who is not sponsoring degree
- Self-employment (including setting up own business)
- Any other professional career
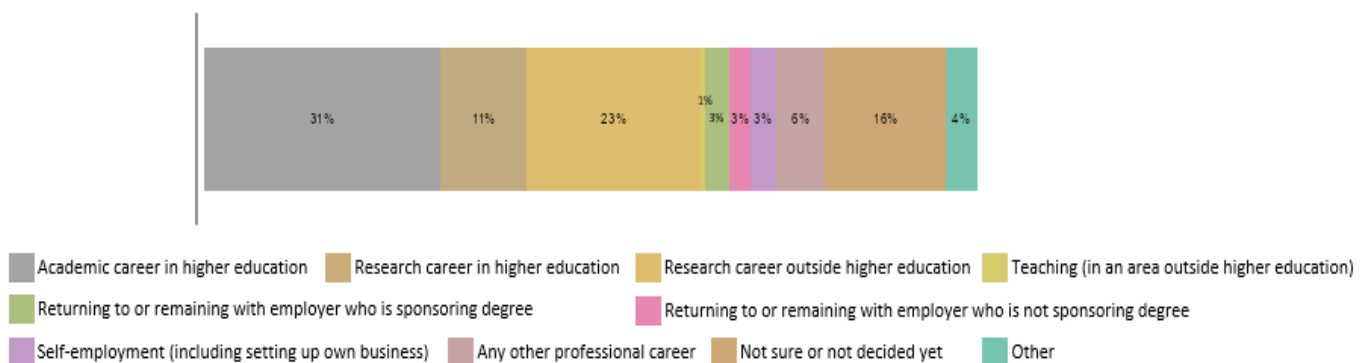- Not sure or not decided yet
- Other

Figure 3:   Career pathways

Approximately half of respondents indicated they would at least somewhat prefer to stay in academia (with 22% indicating they were unsure). A total of 31% said they had an academic career in mind when they completed their degree (Figure 3). The large number of candidates who were unsure about continuing in academia may be explained by the later results around career distress, where many candidates indicated negative feelings about finding a career.
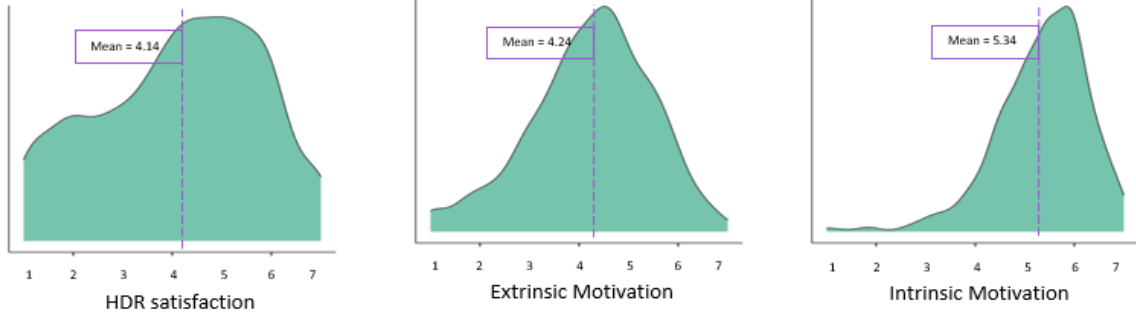
Results

Wellbeing and Engagement
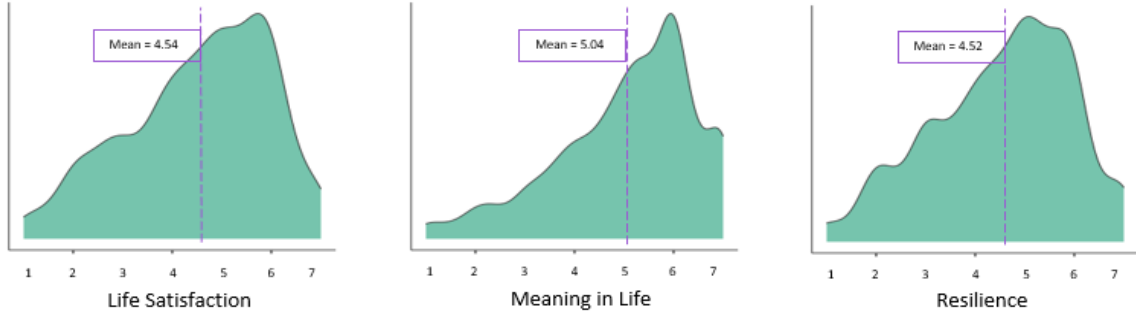
Figure 4:   Wellbeing and engagement measures distribution[2]

These graphs show the wellbeing and engagement outcomes of HDR candidates (Figure 4). Regarding general wellbeing and HDR motivation and satisfaction, positive outcomes were rated between 4.14 and 5.34. Within the negative experiences of wellbeing, burnout was rated higher than loneliness and psychological distress.

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[2] High scores on green graphs indicate a positive outcome; high scores on red graphs indicate a negative outcome

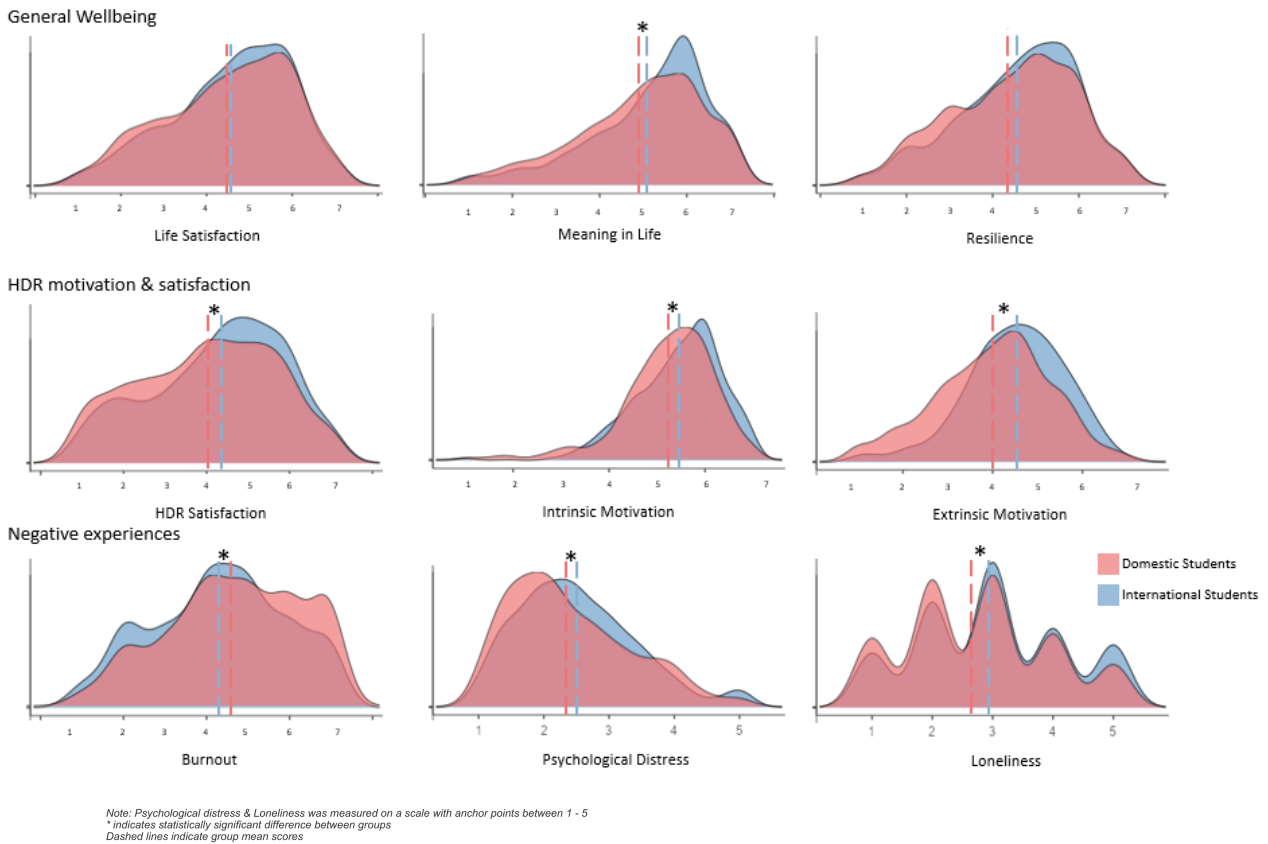# International and Domestic Students

Figure 5:   Wellbeing and engagement measures distribution by enrolment status

Across general wellbeing outcomes, domestic students rated meaning in life significantly lower than international students (* indicates significant differences). Regarding HDR motivation and satisfaction, international candidates reported significantly higher levels of motivation and satisfaction with their HDR, intrinsic motivation, and extrinsic motivation than domestic candidates. International candidates reported significantly higher levels of loneliness and psychological distress than domestic candidates, while domestic candidates reported significantly higher levels of burnout than international candidates.
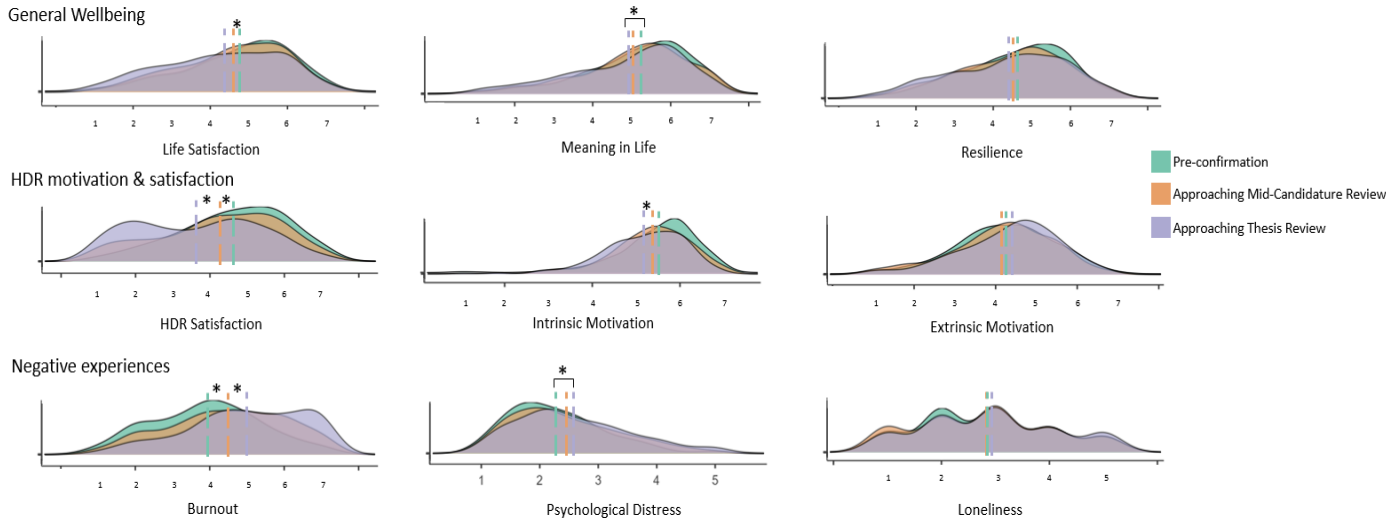
Stage of HDR Candidature

Figure 6:   Wellbeing and engagement measures distribution by candidature stage

Overall, there were no significant differences reported for resilience, extrinsic motivation, or loneliness relative to the stage of the respondent's candidature (early, mid or late). HDR candidates approaching thesis review reported significantly higher psychological distress and burnout and lower HDR satisfaction and intrinsic motivation, likely related directly to the impending deadline of their thesis submission and conclusion of their study.
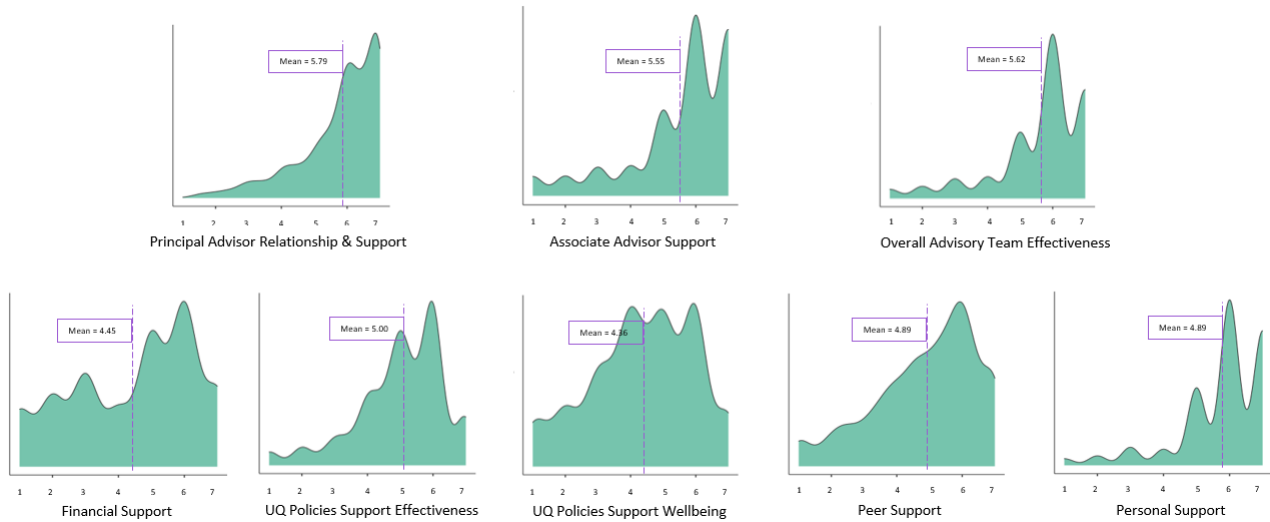
Support Resources

Figure 7:   Support resource outcomes distribution

Most HDR candidates reported having a supportive Principal Advisor and an overall effective advisory team although a minority rated support as very low. In terms of other sources of support, most candidates reported high levels of personal and peer support, but lower levels of financial support. HDR candidates found that UQ's policies and procedures, such as progress reviews, leave arrangements, and changes to topic/advisor were somewhat supportive of the effectiveness of their research, as well as their general wellbeing.
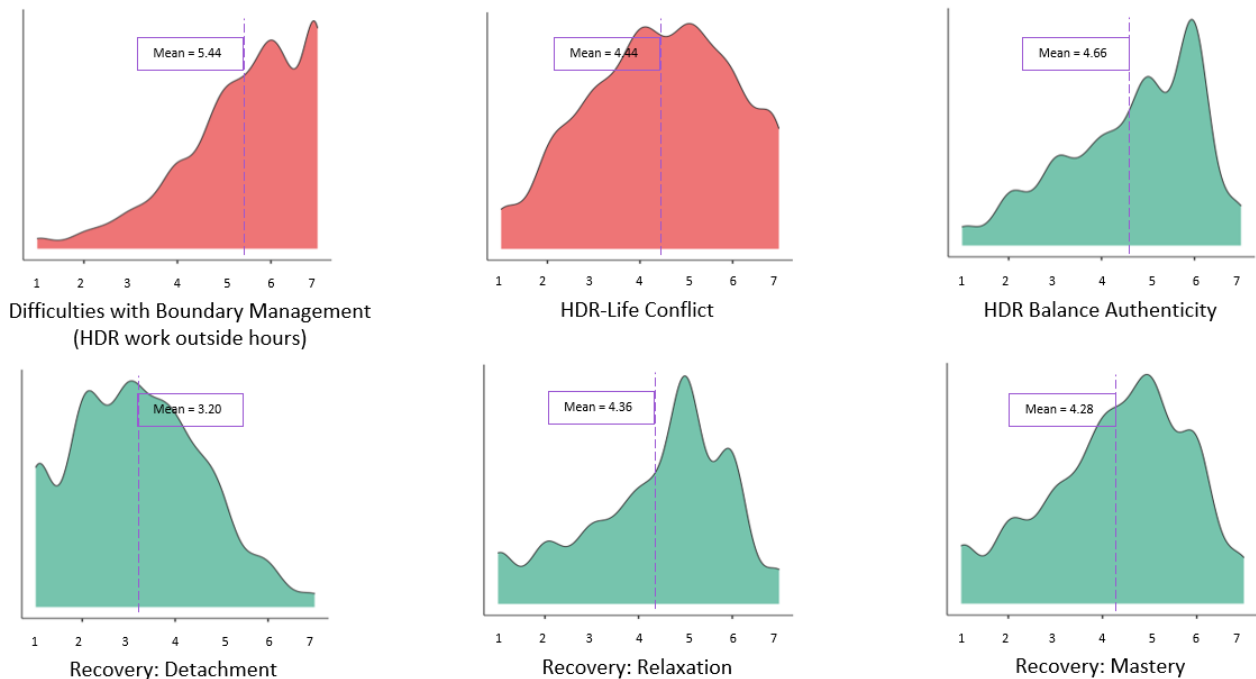
Support Resources

Figure 8: *HDR life integration outcomes distribution[3]*

HDR candidates reported difficulties with managing work-life boundaries, often spending time on their work on weekends and during time off. HDR-Life conflict was also above the mid-point, with candidates struggling to find a balance between HDR work and home life. There was, however, a feeling of balance authenticity, meaning that many students felt their work-life balance aligned with their values. For example, some students who spend a lot of time on their HDR work were happy with this arrangement because it matches their priorities.

Candidates had trouble detaching from their thesis during leisure time. However, many students were able to relax and focus on learning new things during their leisure time, which is important given the considerable evidence for these experiences being beneficial for health, wellbeing, and performance in the general population (Steed et al., 2019).

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[3] High scores on green graphs indicate a positive outcome; high scores on red graphs indicate a negative outcome

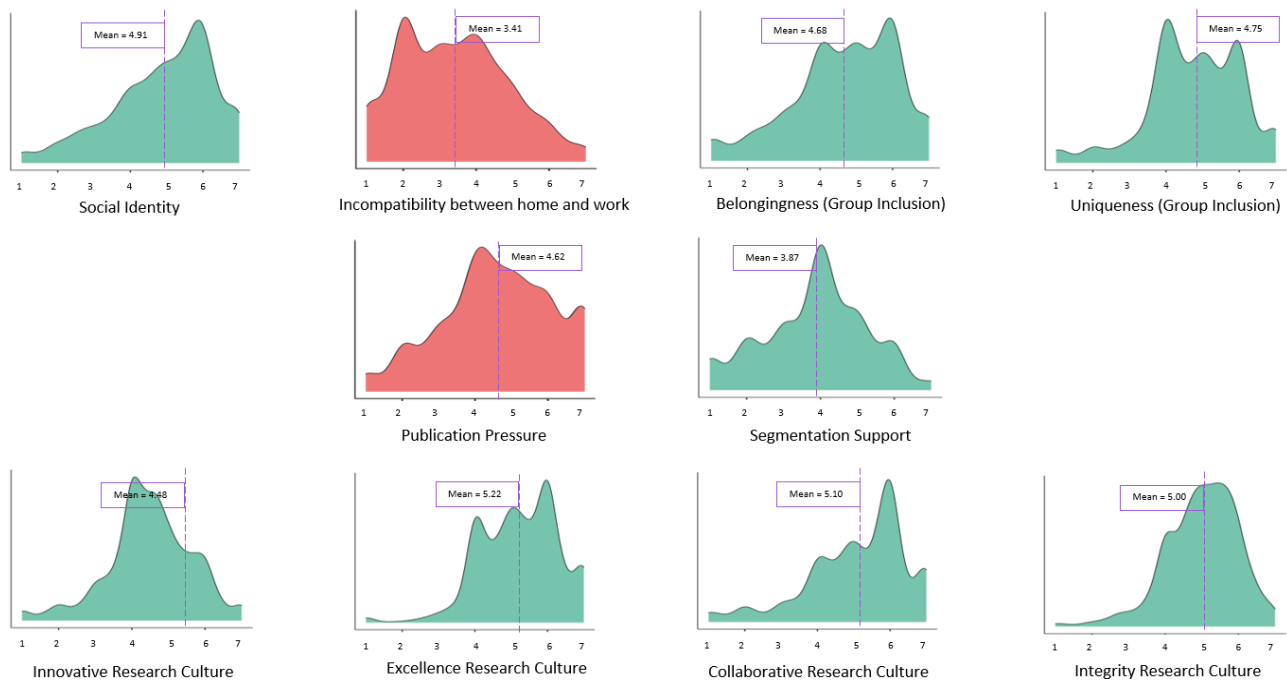# Research Culture within UQ Unit

Figure 9:   Research culture within UQ unit outcomes distribution[4]

HDR students felt a high sense of identification with their UQ unit (e.g., school or institute). Identity incompatibility (where high scores indicate incompatibility between HDR life and personal life) was below the mid-point indicating candidates felt that their identity with their program was mostly compatible with other aspects of their life. Candidates also felt some sense of belonging and that individual uniqueness was welcomed in their UQ unit, but both these ratings sat just above the midpoint. Ratings of work-life segmentation support was mixed, with a combination of low to high ratings across UQ – suggesting work and leisure separation is supported within some areas but unsupported in others. HDR candidates predominantly agreed that they experience pressure to publish.

Two types of different research cultures were identified by HDR at UQ: a "drive culture", encompassing both excellence and innovation/entrepreneurship, and a "social culture", encompassing collaboration and ethical behaviour/integrity. Both were associated positively with HDR well-being and engagement.

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[4] High scores on green graphs indicate a positive outcome; high scores on red graphs indicate a negative outcome
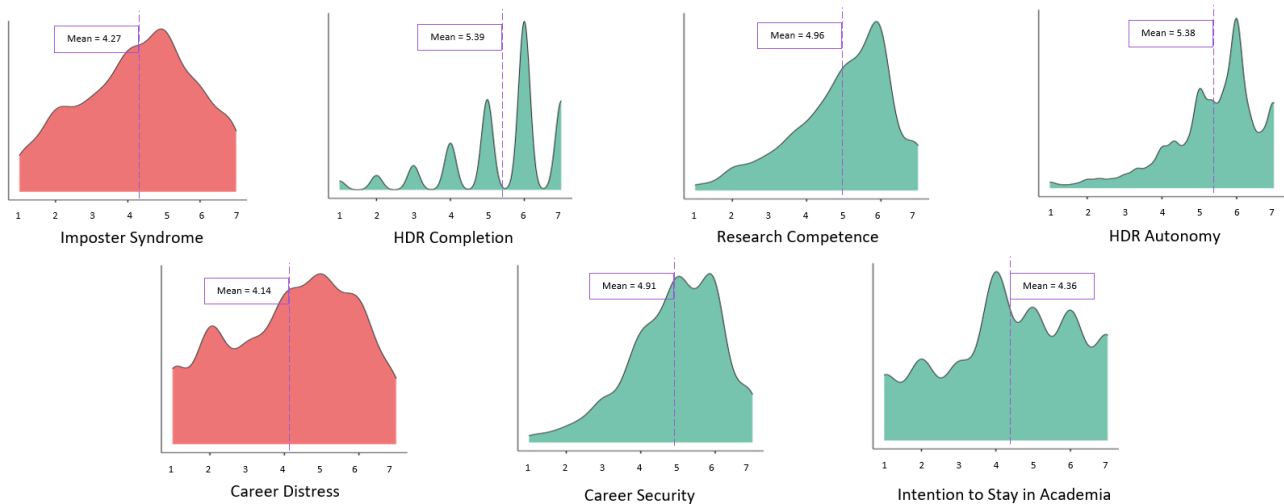
Career pathways and identity

Figure 10:   Career outcomes distribution[5]

HDR students felt they had autonomy in their research and were relatively confident in being able to complete their program. Most were satisfied with the research skills they were developing, however, there were some questions about confidence in these abilities considering many respondents reporting some degree of imposter syndrome, and some students strongly agreeing that they felt like an imposter in research settings.

Many students experienced career distress, indicating stress and anxiety about in finding and planning their career, however many also remained optimistic that their skills would be valuable and that their future career opportunities were favourable (career security).

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[5] High scores on green graphs indicate a positive outcome; high scores on red graphs indicate a negative outcome