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CREATE CHANGE

Higher Degree by Research Wellbeing, Engagement & Research Culture (WERC) Project Results – 2022 survey





Contents

Executive summary	3
Background and context	3
Scope	3
Process/Method	3
Summary of results	3
Key recommendations	4
Next steps	7
Respondents	8
Demographic data	8
Support Services	9
Results	10
Wellbeing and Engagement	10
International and Domestic Students	11
.....	11
Stage of HDR Candidature	12
Support Resources	13
.....	14
Research Culture within UQ Unit	15
Career Experiences and Pathways	16
Career Pathways	17

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Executive summary

Background and context

The Well-being, Engagement, and Research Culture (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 well-being 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 well-being and engagement of HDR candidates at UQ. A collaboration was formed, and a longitudinal project was established that has since delivered annual surveys to UQ HDR candidates, with a pilot commencing in 2020 and then surveys comprising a longitudinal study in 2021 and 2022. This report summarises results from the survey collected in late 2022, which makes the second wave of the longitudinal study.

Scope

This project aimed to understand more deeply the factors contributing to a positive HDR experience, including indicators of well-being 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 2022, the survey was distributed to all HDR candidates enrolled at UQ and was open until the end of the year. 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 1,202 candidates responded to the survey, giving a response rate of approximately 25%. 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. Overall, the findings were not significantly different to the 2021 data, with the exception of a marked change in financial support indicator.



Summary of key findings:

- **Well-being and engagement.** General wellbeing was rated above the scale mid-point¹ 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. Almost 70% of HDR candidates had accessed wellbeing and career support services of students. Satisfaction with these services were mixed with the average response falling around the mid-point.
- **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 a significantly lower level of financial support in 2022, possible in response to increased cost of living pressures, in particular the increased cost of accommodation.
- **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 feelings of pressure to publish and were conscious of norms that encouraged work out of hours.
- **Career pathways and identity.** Almost half (47%) would prefer to pursue a career in academia, with only 31% actively planning to do so after they graduate. 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 also greater loneliness and psychological distress. Notably, 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 Well-being Working Group was 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 with representation from all major UQ units.

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



Action Plan	Recommendations	Status
Candidate Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. • Clear 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. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoted 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. • HDR candidates can access the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) in addition to Student Services for support at UQ. • Milestones replaced by Progress Reviews in early 2023 – candidate centred and focussed on providing support and advice for candidate to succeed. • Early Candidature checkpoint has been launched mechanism to promote early discussion to align expectations and capture early warning signs in first 6 months of candidature. • HDR support guide tailored for HDR needs, after consultation with HDR candidates, to be launched in October 2023
Candidate development and resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development conversations have been integrated into Progress Reviews • Scan of CDF workshop offerings for HDR wellbeing are underway to check for gaps and improvements. • HDR candidate journey roadmap in development and will be released by end of 2023. • Support map and resources for advisors is in development and also for release in 2023.



	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Roadmap resource of candidate journey – a clear overview of pathways, resources and support available to assist candidates and their advisors discuss and plan progress.
Research environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 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. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Development underway of a space self-audit tool for UQ Organisational Units. This will articulate best practice and enable local units to identify ways they can improve and provide positive and supportive research environments for HDR candidates.• HDR Representative role has been clarified, and role description rolled out in collaboration with APS.• Regular network meetings in place for all HDR representatives to access support, provide feedback, and strengthen HDR peer networks.• Partnership plan between Graduate School and local UQ Units in development to ensure strong, joined up support and effective processes.
Supervisor development & supervision quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 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 support 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 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Compulsory advisor training program was rolled out in 2022/2023 with now over 85% compliance. Content includes 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. This program will be regularly reviewed and updated.• Guide to the Principal Advisor Registry Policy has been improved and support guide for advisors is in development.



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.

- **Community of Practice for HDR advisors has been launched.**

Next steps

This report will be submitted to the UQ HDR Advisory Committee (HAC) and recommendations updated by the HDR Well-being Working Group.

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.

A full report on the longitudinal study will be produced in 2024, following the third wave of data, to provide a comprehensive analysis of well-being and engagement of HDR candidates at UQ and further probe possible strategies to improve the HDR experience and research cultures at UQ.

Respondents

Demographic data

A total of 1202 candidates responded to the survey, giving a response rate of approximately 25.17%.

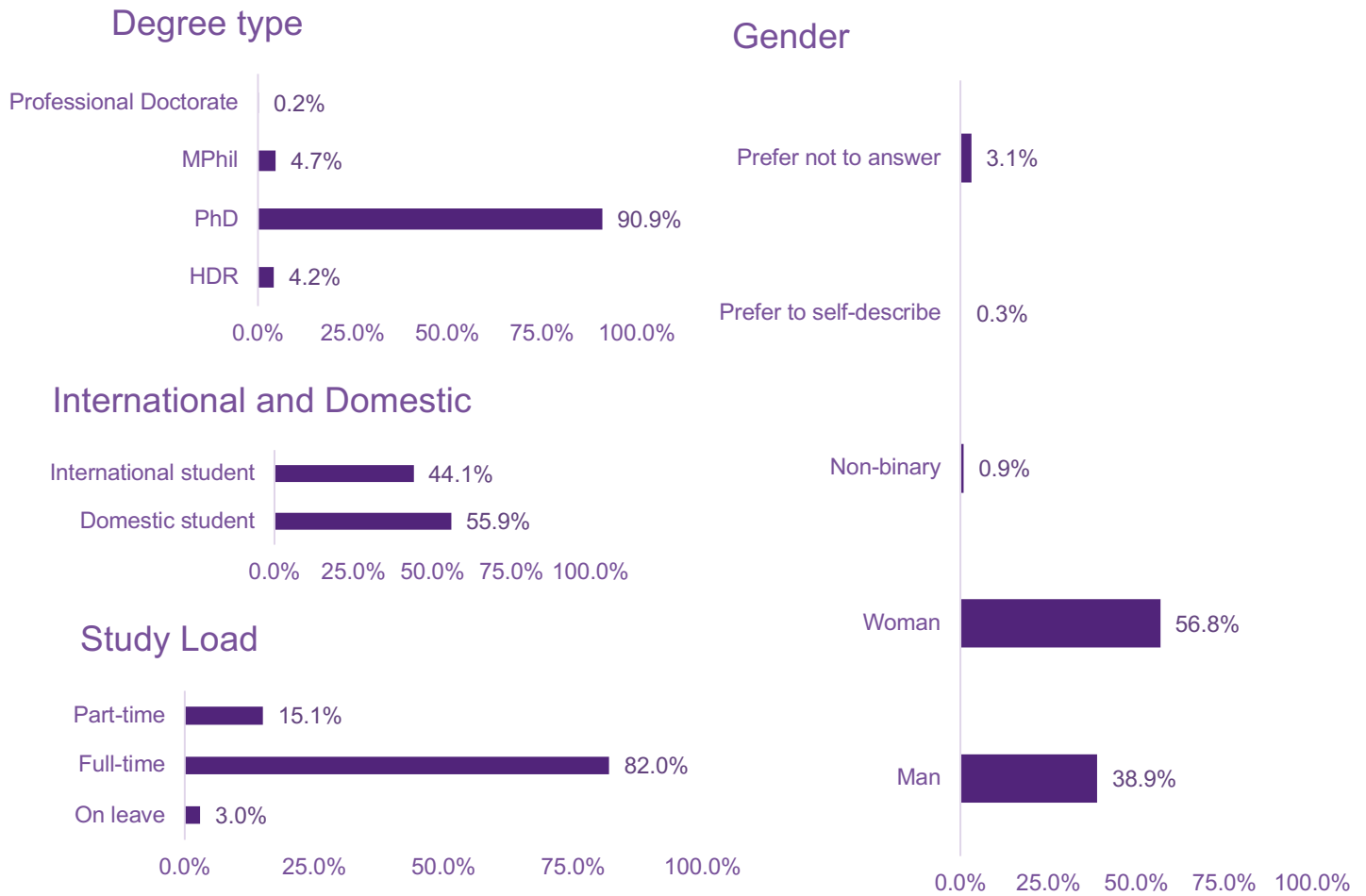


Figure 1: Representativeness of survey respondents

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

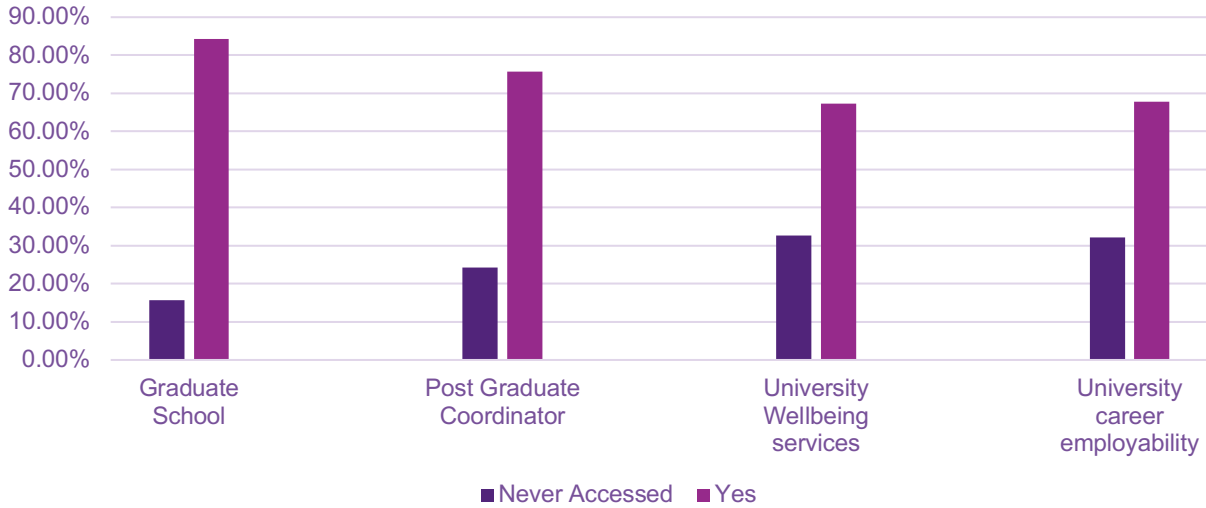


Figure 2. Proportion of valid responses indicating if students had accessed these services, alongside participants who marked "not applicable" to indicate never having accessed these services. (Note *Post Graduate Coordinator* now called *Director HDR* at UQ).

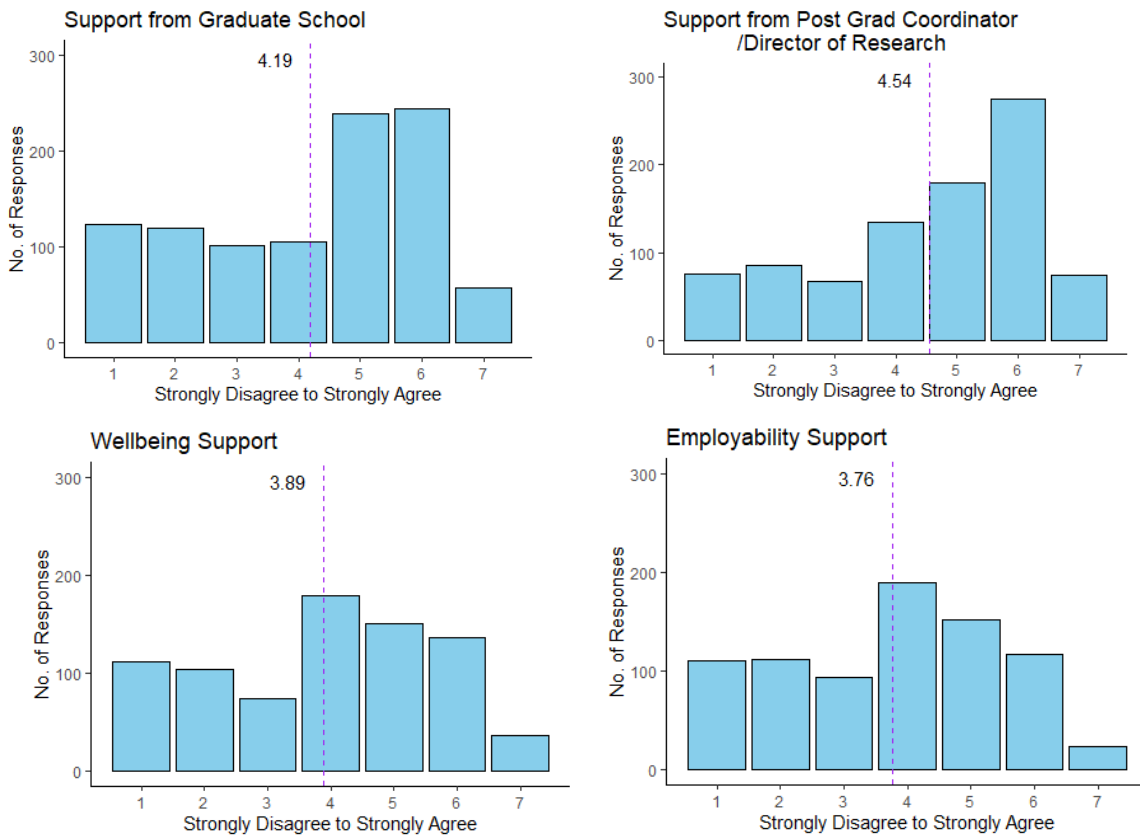


Figure 3. Of those who gave a valid yes response to the previous question, this data represents the degree to which students felt satisfied with the support from each service.

Results

Wellbeing and Engagement

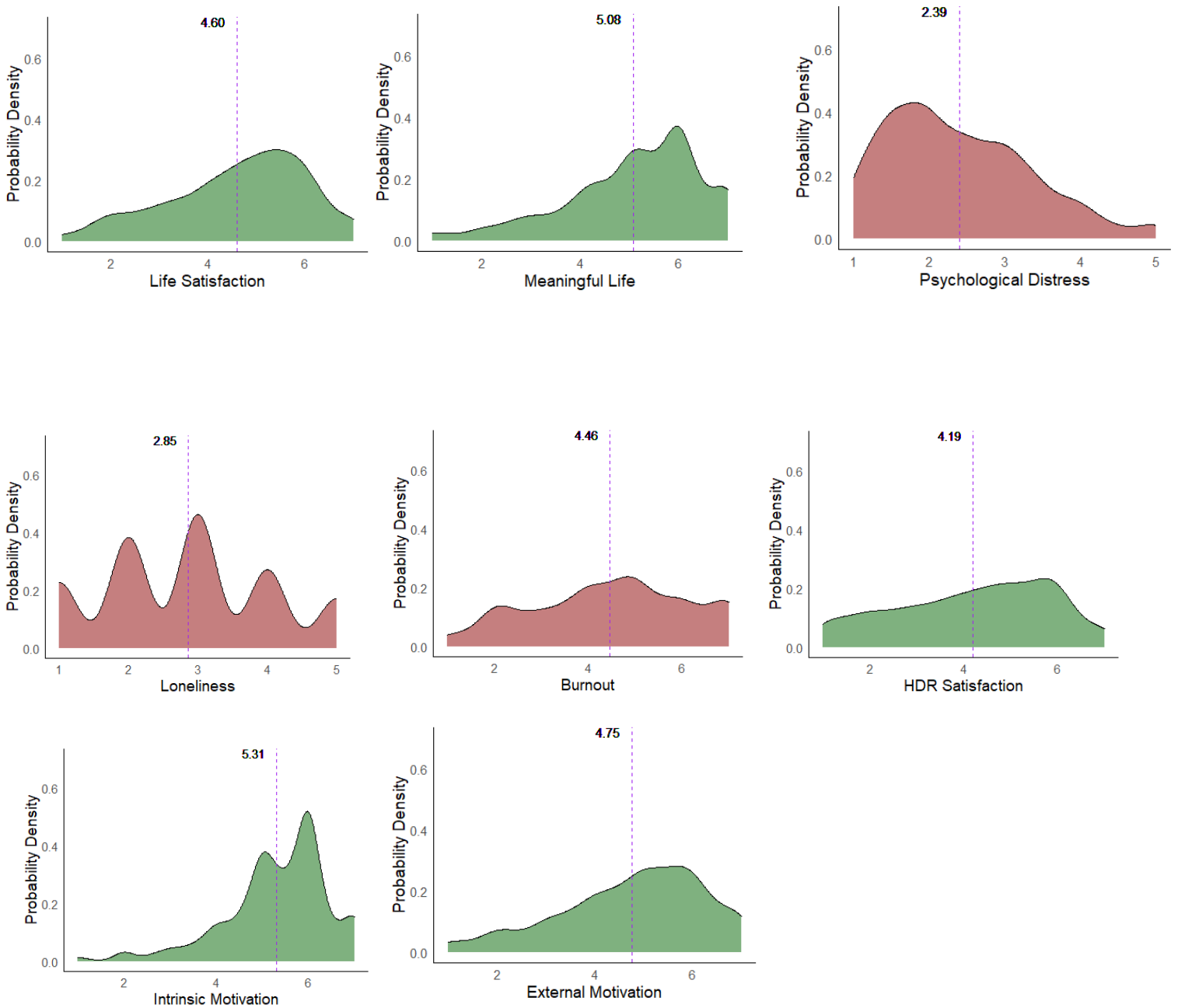


Figure 4: Wellbeing and engagement measures distribution^{2,3}

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

³ Probability density on the y axis reflects a continuous representation that describes the likelihood of obtaining a particular value or range of values.

International and Domestic Students⁴

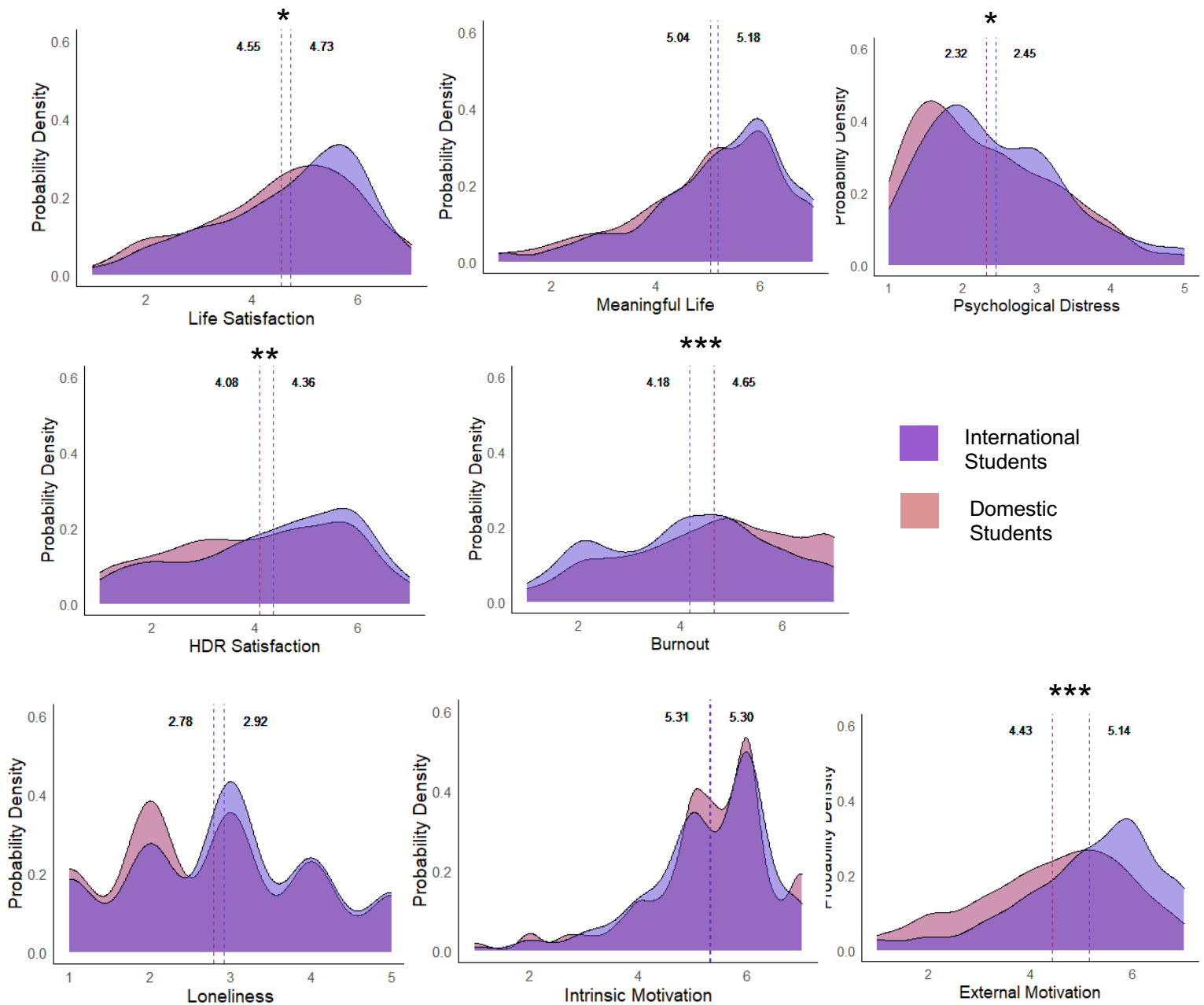


Figure 5: International students show significantly higher levels of external motivation, HDR satisfaction and Life Satisfaction compared with domestic students. Domestic students show significantly higher levels of Psychological Distress and Burnout compared with international students.

⁴ Independent groups t-tests were used for comparisons, except for external motivation where a Mann-Whitney test was applied. Differences between international and domestic students are denoted as follows: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Stage of HDR Candidature⁵

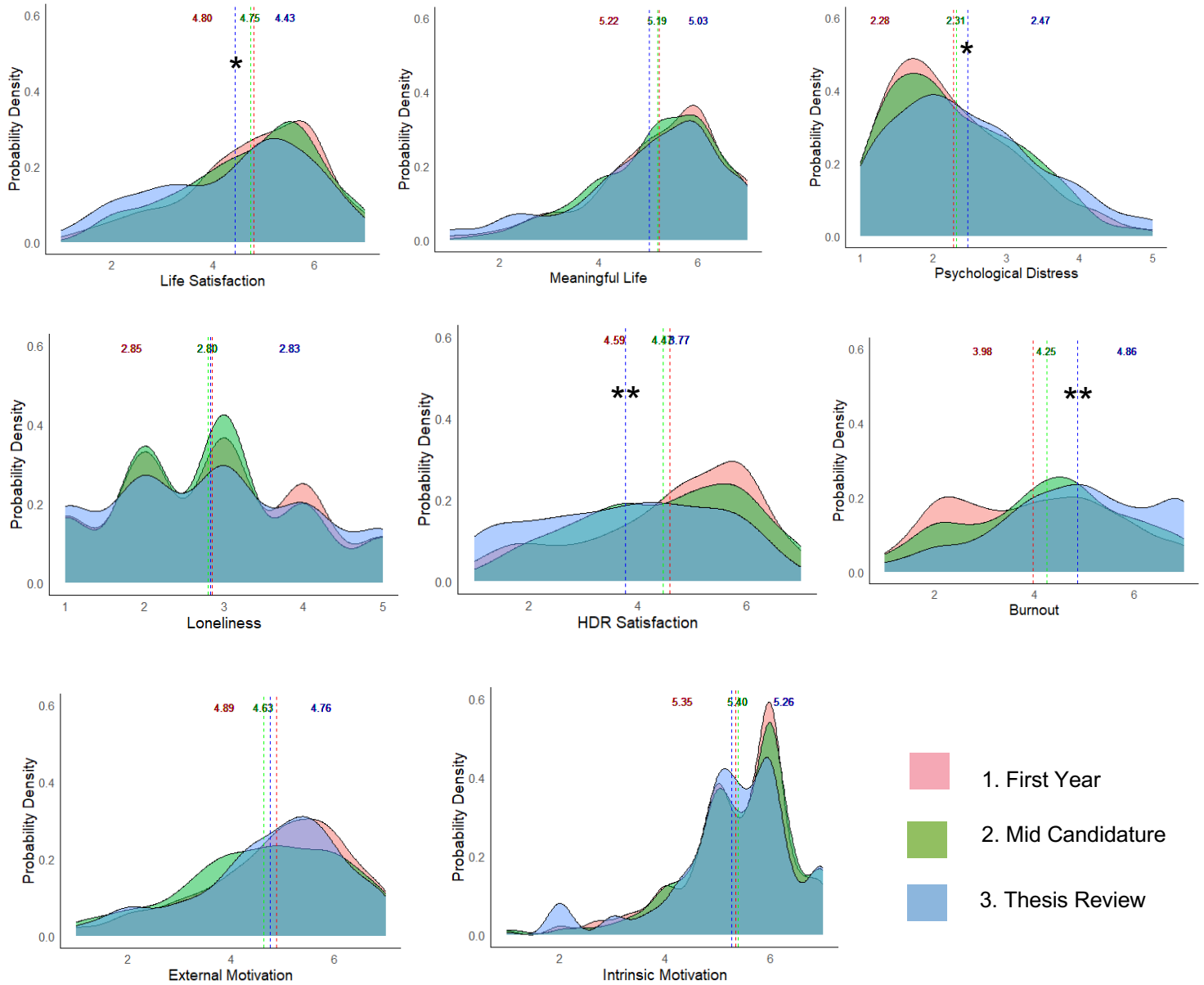


Figure 6: Life satisfaction and HDR satisfaction begin to decline between mid-candidature and the thesis review period. Psychological distress and burnout also show a significant increase between these milestones.

⁵ Bonferroni corrected comparisons. **Life Satisfaction:** 1 vs 3, 2 vs 3 significant ($p < .05$); 1 vs 2 non-significant (ns). **Psychological Distress:** 1 vs 3 significant ($p < .05$); 1 vs 2, 2 vs 3 ns. **HDR Satisfaction:** 1 vs 3, 2 vs 3 significant ($p < .001$); 1 vs 2 ns. **Burnout:** 1 vs 3, 2 vs 3 significant ($p < .001$); 1 vs 2 ns. All other variables were ns.

Support Resources

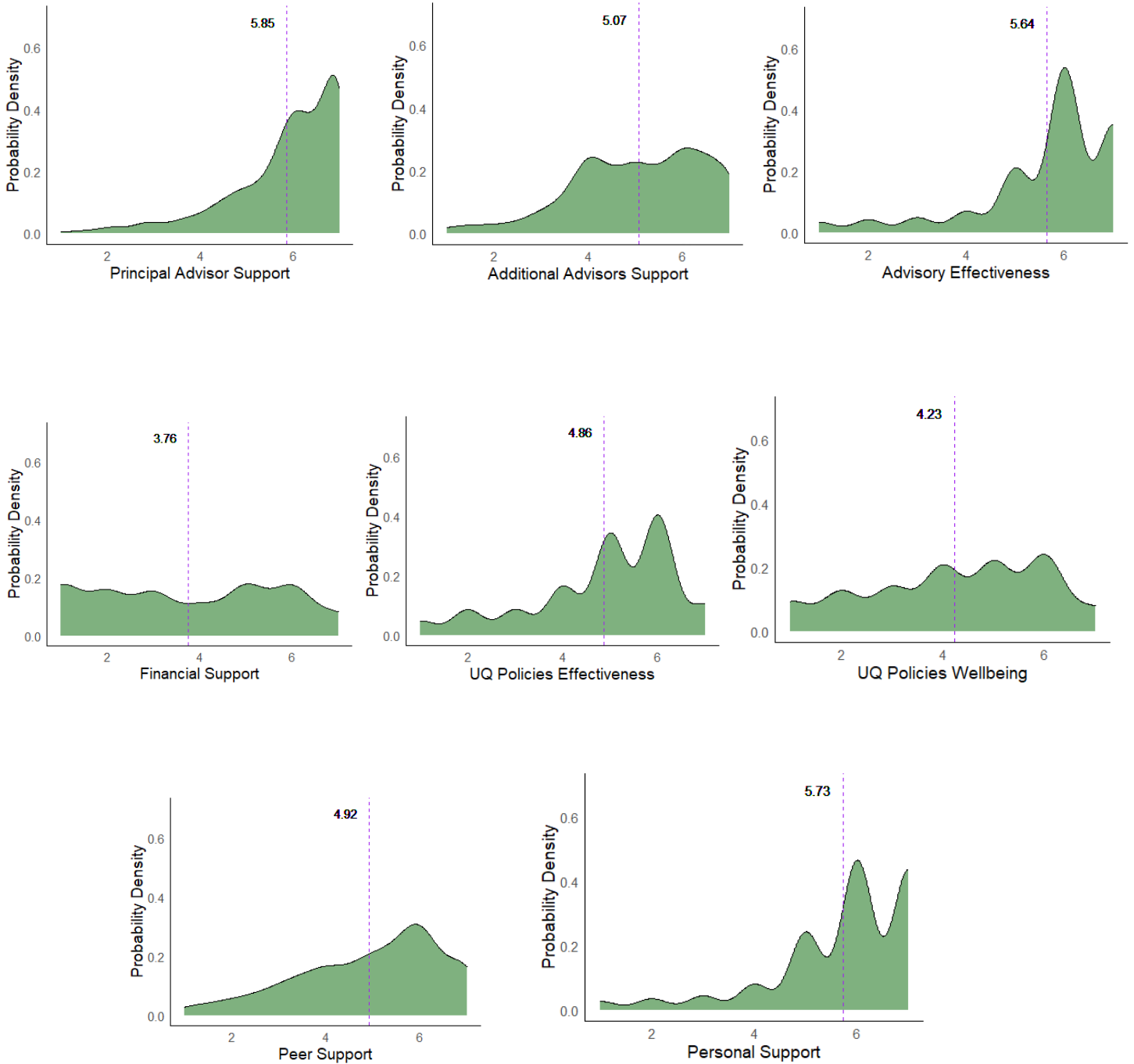


Figure 7: Support resource outcomes distribution

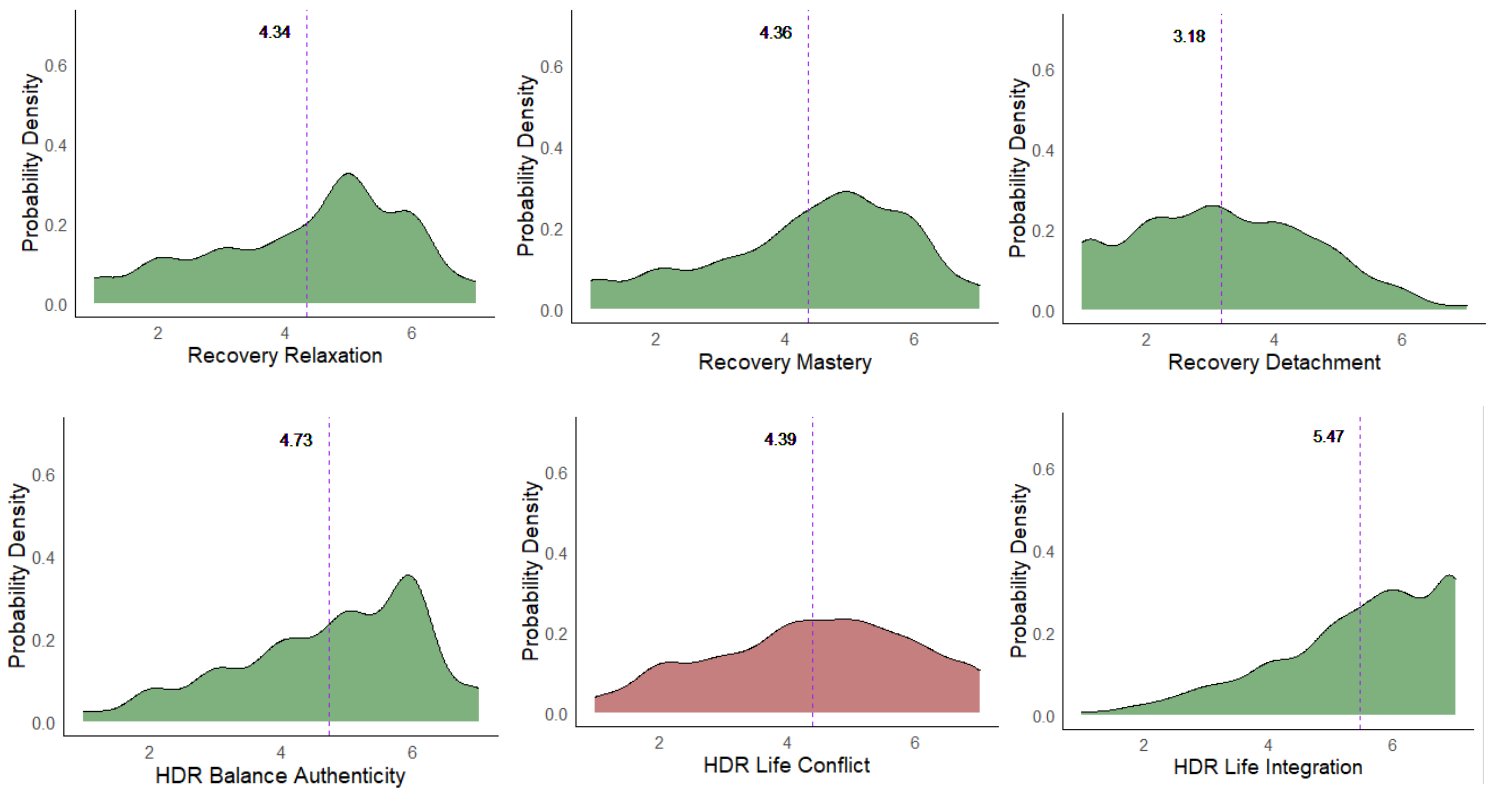


Figure 8: HDR life integration outcomes distributions

Research Culture within UQ Unit

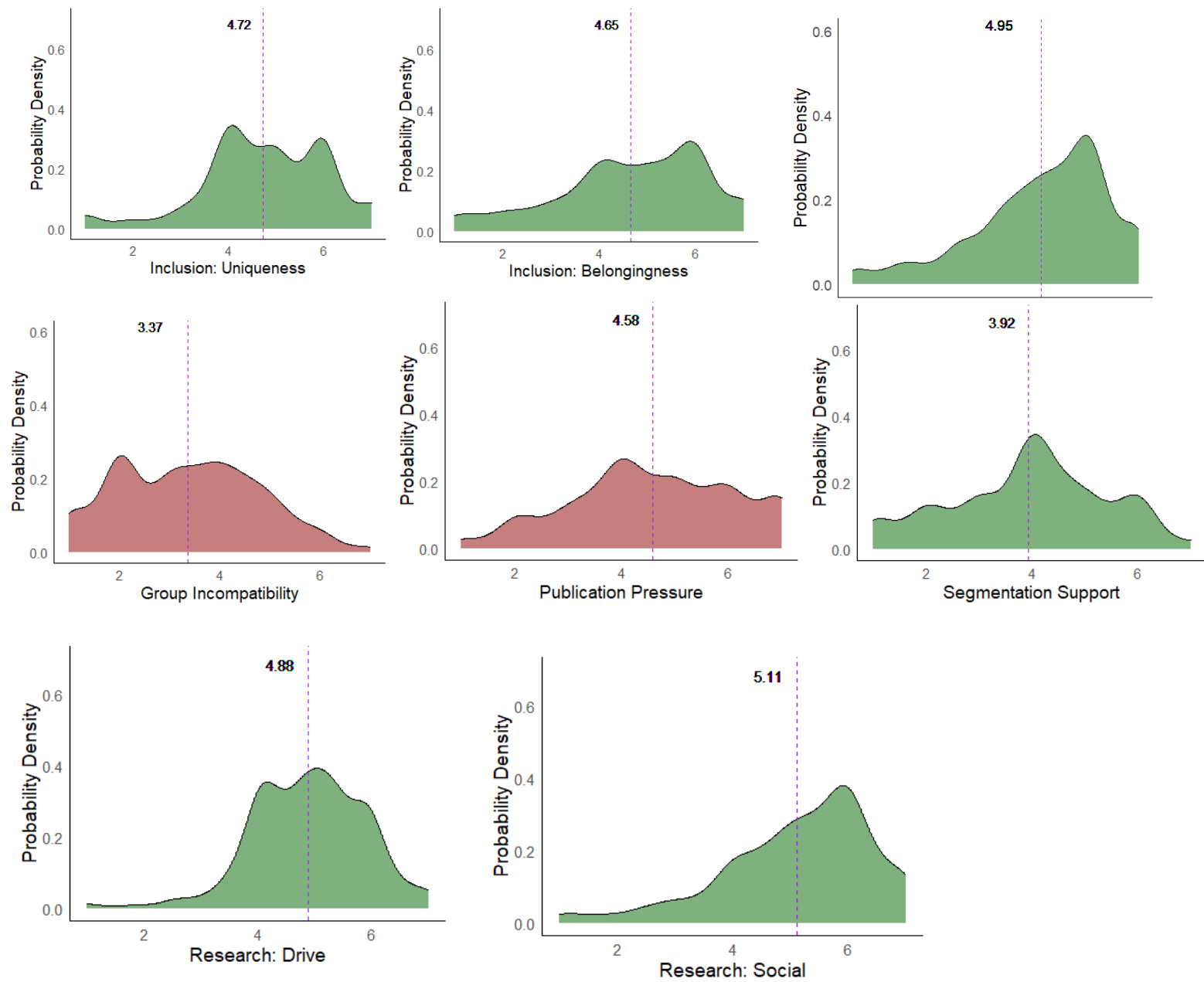


Figure 9: Research culture within UQ unit outcomes distribution⁶

⁶ High scores on green graphs indicate a positive outcome; high scores on red graphs indicate a negative outcome

Career Experiences and Pathways

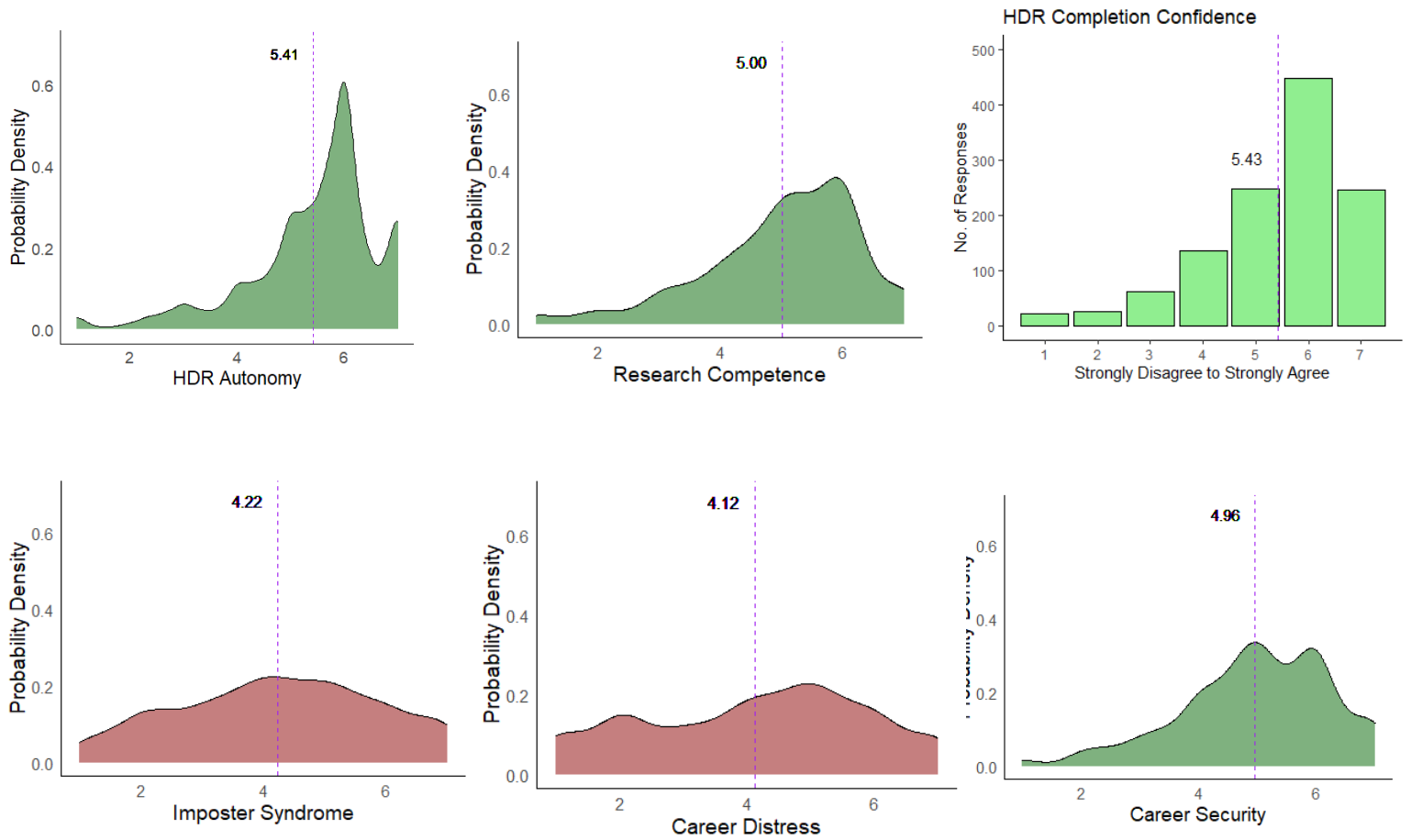


Figure 10: Career outcomes distributions

Career Pathways

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

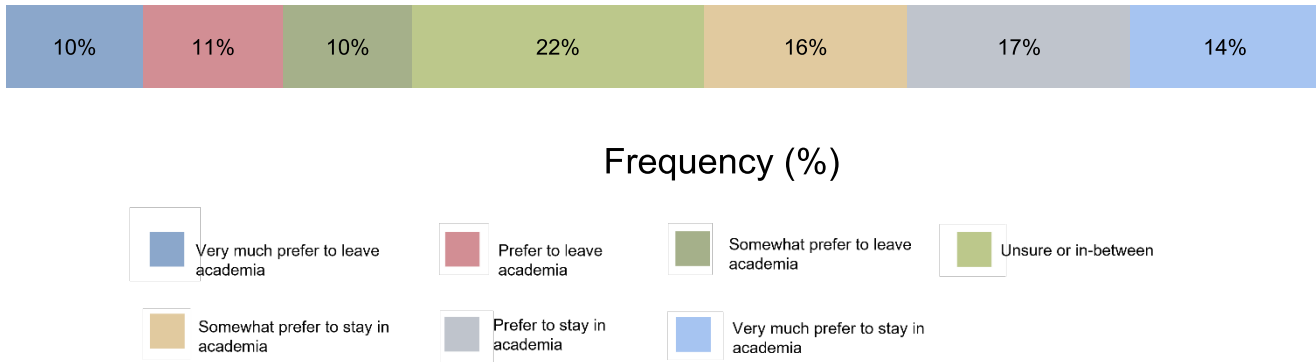


Figure 11: Preference to continue working in academia.

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

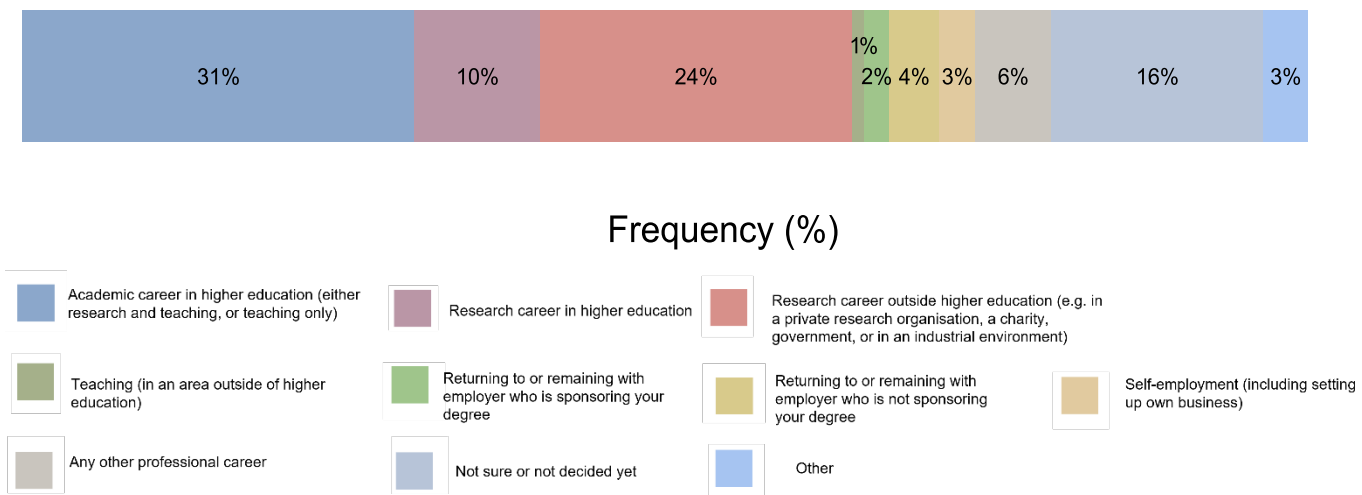


Figure 12. Career after completing research degree.

Approximately 47% 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 12). 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. These results closely parallel the findings from the 2022 survey.



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