



# Project Abstract: Engaging postgraduate students and supporting higher education to enhance the 21<sup>st</sup> century student experience.

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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 organizations – *Australian Council for Educational Research* and *Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations*. A total of 366 research participants across 26 Australian universities and 8 States/Territories (319 students and 47 staff) were recruited via three main methodologies: engagement breakfasts ( $n = 223$ ), interviews ( $n = 82$ ), and focus groups ( $n = 61$ ). The most common position of participating staff member was university lecturer (22%), followed by professor (18%), and institutional or department director (16%). In total, there were nine different position types, including non-academic professional staff. Among staff, 53 per cent of participants were female and 47 per cent male. The average student age was 35 years, the modal age was 24 years, and the age range was 21 to 60 years. Sixty-nine percent of participating students were female and 31 per cent were male. The most common discipline of participating students was humanities (17%), followed by business (11%), and general sciences (10%); however, almost half of the students did not explicitly disclose their discipline (45%). Over half the sample identified as being full-time students (59%). In terms of degrees, 52 per cent were enrolled in a doctoral program and 38 per cent in a master's program. Overall, 56 per cent identified as being enrolled in research-based programs, 27 per cent in course-based programs and 7 per cent in mixed modes (elements of both course and research). An additional 9 per cent were enrolled in "other" programs, while one per cent did not disclose their program.

Results clustered into six themes. The first theme regarded *diversity and profiling*. Data suggests that there are six common profiles of postgraduate coursework students, these include: those who progressed immediately from undergraduate studies; those who are employed and see their coursework degree as contributing to a clear perceived career trajectory; those who undertake coursework studies to change their career path; those who are unable to obtain employment within their field and are still deciding what to do; those who feel the degree is required in order to reach professional goals and; those who complete the studies purely out of interest. The second theme regarded *tiering and belonging*. The sheer diversity of the postgraduate cohort leads to a difference in perceptions of 'belonging.' In the research, postgraduate students referred to such key activities as 'networking,' and 'community' and described that these factors are integral to their student experience. The third theme was in the context of *first year experience*. Postgraduate students appear to have similar needs to undergraduate students with respect to first year experience. The majority of staff and students participating in this research believe that first-year supports require improvement. The fourth theme regarded *career development and employability*. Only 14 per cent of interviewees (7 people) who expressed an opinion (51 people) among interviewed postgraduate students and university staff (82 people across Australia) are optimistic that postgraduates will secure related careers upon graduation. Furthermore, 61 per cent (of the 71 people who expressed an opinion) believe that Australian universities need to improve postgraduate employability supports. The majority of recommendations to enhance employability (37 per cent) related to the provision of work opportunities whilst studying (embedded in curriculum and/or supported work experience and internships). The fifth theme is in the context of *student services*. Due to the sheer diversity of the postgraduate cohort, it appears that universities continue to grapple with the student support and learning services that this cohort requires. The sixth theme addressed *demographic differences* in the variety of postgraduate student experiences. Results suggest that postgraduate needs differ depending upon student demographics. Factors such as international/domestic, metropolitan/regional, coursework/research, and online/face-to-face appear to impact the student experience and services required from universities.