



## Australian postgraduate student experiences and anticipated employability: A national study from the students' perspective

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### Abstract

Postgraduate students are navigating a rapidly evolving landscape for their future careers. In this context, higher education providers are responsible for supporting and monitoring postgraduate (masters and doctoral) students' development for both education and employability contexts. This empirical research provides a rich analysis of feedback breakfasts, focus groups and interviews with 319 postgraduate student participants from 26 universities. Emergent themes highlight widespread lack of confidence in university-mediated student experiences, particularly in the context of employability, and pessimism regarding career outcomes. Students expressed a view that higher education providers need to direct further attention and relevant supports toward postgraduate education. Future career despondency was particularly prevalent among students with academic aspirations. The findings are discussed using the theoretical framework of eudemonia and flourishing as an approach to revitalising and improving both the process and outcomes of postgraduate education. The paper concludes with practical recommendations for universities to improve the postgraduate student experience in the context of employability.

**Keywords:** postgraduate, student experience, employability, graduate outcomes, careers

### Introduction

One of the recognised effects of the global pandemic is stock-taking, including in the education sector (Al-Taweel et al., 2020; Torda, Velan, & Perkovic, 2020). Economic downturn and labour market uncertainty are prompting people to reassess the balance between risk and benefit of participating in university study (Churchill, 2020). This is exacerbated in the digital era with the uprise of alternatives to university for educational outcomes (Kato, Galán-Muros, & Weko, 2020). The context of postgraduate (as compared to undergraduate) study is particularly fraught, as the decision is not whether to take the initial step into tertiary education, but whether to extend the

journey. From a labour market perspective, citizens are encouraged to pursue postgraduate study to stimulate and progress the global knowledge-economy, supplying nations with highly educated professionals (Zhan, Downey, & Dyke, 2021). However, whether prospective postgraduate students make decisions based on socio-economic factors is largely unknown (Towers & Towers, 2020).

The reasons students pursue postgraduate study appear to be clearer for degrees associated with established and aligned careers. For example, the majority of MBA students appear to be motivated by the potential to broaden career options and increase earnings (Moogan, 2020). In enterprise and entrepreneurship postgraduate education, the majority of students provide rationales associated with developing entrepreneurial capabilities for management-related jobs in established companies, or to prepare themselves for self-employment or start-up ventures (Rae, Woodier-Harris, & Matlay, 2013). However, it is not only occupation-specific postgraduate degrees that inspire prospective students to make decisions based on careers. Studies across degree-types and disciplines reveal that students tend to be goal-focused in their deliberations, citing rationales such as dissatisfaction with the employment outcomes from undergraduate degrees and wanting to increase their attraction to future employers (Towers & Towers, 2020).

Education scholars have called for further research from the postgraduate student perspective (Le Roux, 2018). The research presented in this paper contributes perspectives about postgraduate student experiences, employability and careers through secondary analysis of data from a large sample of Australian postgraduates from multiple universities (Crane et al., 2016). The research questions that guided this analysis were:

1. When considering what matters in the student experience, to what extent do masters and doctoral students include the notion of employability?
2. To what extent do masters and doctoral students feel satisfied with the employability and career supports and services provided by their universities?
3. How confident do masters and doctoral students feel about their graduate career futures?

A qualitative research methodology was adopted to respond to the need for a broad scan of lived-experiences and emergent issues from the students' points of view, and to identify ways that universities may be able to improve the postgraduate student experience and employability.

## Literature

The higher education literature was examined to identify the meanings of key terms and concepts, namely employability and student experience, specifically in the context of doctoral and postgraduate students.

## Employability

Employability has contested meaning, often situated in one of three orientations: process and policy; people and capabilities; or employment and performance (Knight & Yorke, 2004; Young, Kelder, & Crawford, 2020). In relation to process, universities are expected to enact responsibility towards students through enabling career development opportunities (Irwin, Nordmann, & Simms, 2019; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021). Kendal and Waterhouse-Watson (2020), for example, described the role of universities as providing personalised careers advice, including, but not limited to, the pursuit of academic careers. In respect to people and capabilities, employability refers to having capabilities, such as communication, critical thinking, leadership and problem-solving skills, which should be developed throughout postgraduate study in any discipline or degree-type (Young et al., 2020). In relation to employment and performance metrics, employability is measured as a binary (i.e., employed versus unemployed or underemployed) with university qualifications ranked by virtue of the percentage of graduates employed within a time-limited period after graduation.

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These contested and overlapping definitions are acknowledged and they align with this study through a synthesis of all three orientations: employability is about institutionally driven activities and individual capabilities that culminate in heightened probability of being employed and self-managing future career trajectories.

## Student experience

Postgraduate student experience can be described as *the totality of students' involvement with, and engagement in, their higher education, and the prioritisation of learning within their broader contextual environment* (Crane et al., 2016, p. 6). As indicated throughout this paper, the published literature is creating a clear and resonant message of postgraduate students' inclusion of employability as a key facet of their student experience (e.g., Keele, Sturre, von Treuer, & Feenstra, 2010).

There is a growing body of research into graduate employability and associated university-led career support regarding masters and doctoral student experiences and career outcomes, but seldom from the students' points of view. Recent studies have indicated that many aspects of the postgraduate journey are not meeting the needs of students and, furthermore, that masters and doctoral students are not immune to the problematic context of graduate employability (Giles, Ski, & Vrdoljak, 2009; Jackson & Michelson, 2015; Jones, Torezani, & Luca, 2012; Keele, Sturre, von Treuer, & Feenstra, 2010; Crane et al., 2016). Particularly since the Global Financial Crisis, masters and doctoral graduates have struggled to secure, in a timely manner, long-term, discipline-related, full-time employment (Giles, Ski, & Vrdoljak, 2009; Mistry, White, & Berardi, 2009; Social Research Centre, 2016).

While factors such as personal characteristics, learnedness, mind-expansion, scholarship and an overall broadening of one's career options, play a role in motivating people to enrol in masters and doctoral programs (Cleary, Hunt, & Jackson, 2011; Herrera & Nieto, 2016), students have commonly asked, *how is this Master's [or other postgraduate degree] going to help get me a job?* (Mistry, White, & Berardi, 2009, p. 143). This is particularly relevant given students' reports that, overall, they feel a lack of agency to enact their desired career futures (Beasy, Emery, & Crawford, 2021) or a need for greater return on their financial investment (Richardson, 2015; Tran et al., 2020).

Foote et al. (2012), who examined the tensions between academic rigour and corporate relevancy in masters geography education, concluded that more must be done to incorporate employability and ensure that postgraduates can *connect their work to more general public debates [to] increase their engagement in relevant political, social and environmental issues* (p. 62). In other words, Foote et al.'s study reinforced the relevancy of eudemonia and flourishing as the theoretical framework for the current study. Similarly, Young, Kelder and Crawford's (2020) review of 20 published papers on doctoral employability concluded:

*Whatever the future for doctoral education, the focus must be candidate-centric, contextualised to their institution and future personal and professional prospects. The value in doing so is the generation of knowledge that enables societal development and sustains the perpetual development of scholarship over the next century.* (p. 8)

Taking a candidate-centric perspective, Young, Kelder and Crawford (2020) identified several issues. First, that postgraduate programs have not kept up-to-date and have not responded, through curriculum and pedagogy, to accommodate labour market changes intersecting with digital innovation. Second, while there has been increasing emphasis on graduate attributes in undergraduate programs, this development has not occurred in postgraduate education. Third, and related to the second point, transitions from study to work, and transferability of knowledge, skills, and attributes to industry, have not been well-managed by the sector. Finally, universities need to

better support postgraduates to explore diverse career options, including academic and non-academic fields.

Empirical studies provide mixed conclusions on factors related to employability and careers, motivations for undertaking postgraduate study and perceptions of careers success post-graduation. These are summarised in Table 1 (see page 152).

## Theoretical orientation

The theory underlying the research described in this paper is that of flourishing and eudemonia. The relevance of this theory is that it integrates postgraduates' quests for knowledge and career ambitions. Opposing the dichotomous belief that postgraduate students are motivated either through the process of university as knowledge expansion or through the product and outcome of career credentialing, this theory unites these university purposes. Flourishing and eudemonia theory postulates that human happiness tends to be elevated by engagement in robust and productive work. The concept of flourishing is linked to the Aristotelian notion of eudemonia, which is loosely translated as happiness. For Aristotle, happiness was closely linked to intellectual inquiry. It is said that he believed ... *that the highest good and happiest life for human beings is a life devoted to intellectual inquiry or 'contemplation' as its highest aim* (Curren, 2010, p. 548).

Human flourishing is receiving renewed scholarly attention within the positive organisational scholarship discipline with results reaching beyond management disciplines (Allison, Waters, & Kern, 2020; Cameron & Dutton, 2003; Cameron & Spreitzer, 2011; Wolbert, de Ruyter, & Schinkel, 2015). Within educational philosophy, the connection between eudemonia and flourishing is that the first is said to be *an exemplar or prototype* for the second (Wolbert, de Ruyter, & Schinkel, 2015, p. 119). Scholars in this intellectual tradition write that flourishing is the *overarching aim of education* (Kristjánsson, 2017, p. 87), but it is also part of the educational process. In other words, education that engages, enthral and inspires learners, results in them becoming more, doing more with their lives and thereby heightening their contributions as citizens. Wright and Pascoe's (2015) detailed analysis of five actions within this philosophy include to *connect, be active, take notice, keep learning and give* (p. 297). Applying these actions to postgraduate study and career outcomes, the overall thrust of the argument is that a quality student experience incorporates these collaborative activities to develop students' capacities for these actions upon graduation.

**Table 1: Empirical Studies on PhD and Masters Graduate Employability and Career Outcomes**

Study	Aim	Location	Sample	Design	Study Conclusions
Bessudnov, Guardiancich, & Marimon (2015)	Career outcomes of doctoral education	United States and Europe	79 research fellows and 76 doctoral applicants	Student applications and survey data	Doctoral education has a positive effect on life satisfaction for graduates, and their publication activities.
Bos et al. (2017)	Reflection of an internship scheme	United Kingdom	4 graduated postgraduates	Collective autoethnography	Postgraduate internship schemes can enable advancement of diverse knowledges, writing skills, and increase employment prospects.
Beasy, Crawford, Young, & Kelder (2021)	Age and gender perceptions of employability	Australia	222 current PhD candidates	Self-administered survey	That PhD candidates had different perceptions of their preparedness for employability, with initiatives of employability skewed towards the younger and often male candidates.
Edwards (2009)	Examine labour market impressions	Australia	120+ people involved in science training, employment, and research	Interviews	The labour market presents uncertainty for those interviewed, with a view that collaborative research studies will enable success.
Giles, Ski, & Vrdoljak (2009)	Career outcomes and perceptions of employability	Australia	123 case studies and 1,206 STEM masters and PhD students	Case studies and surveyed	Participants described limited career success and employability preparedness in Australia. One third of the participants relocated to work in universities overseas on, mostly, short-term sessional (adjunct or casual) contracts.
Haapakorpi (2017)	Doctoral careers. Employer motives.	Finland	1,183 PhD holders, 26 employers	Student self-administered survey, employer interviews	Generally, the doctorate holders found employment in the academy or in the public sector and only small proportion in private sector companies or as entrepreneurs.  Occupational profile of PhD holders: research, management and expert work, profile varied

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Study	Aim	Location	Sample	Design	Study Conclusions
					between sectors.  Three issues: relationship of labour markets and education, personnel policy of organisations outside the academy and academic reputation strategy of universities and companies and other non-academic organisations.
Harman (2004)	Examine and assess CRCs integrated model of research training.  Compare experience of PhD programs.	Australia	651 PhD students in CRC or traditional science-based programs	Self-administered survey	Integrative doctoral programs aim to develop skills in researchers transferable to a range of different employment contexts.
Ho, Kember, & Hong (2012)	Factors and motivation	Hong Kong	21 part-time coursework masters students	Interviewed	There are six interactive motivating factors for PhD completion. Four related to employability and careers (qualifications, professional competence, career shift and professional networks) and the other two factors centred on intrinsic motivations for postgraduate study (interest and perpetual habituation).
Jackson & Tomlinson (2020)	Career planning, student employability perceptions	Australia, United Kingdom	433 undergraduate and postgraduate students	Survey	Student perceptions are important in their sense of employability and career planning - those reporting positive perceptions of the current labour market were less engaged with proactive career behaviours.  Students perceptions of employability, sense of career control and reported career proactivity positively determined their engagement in career planning.
Leonard, Becker, & Coate (2004)	Motivation	United Kingdom	162 doctoral graduates	Self-administered survey	Most participants were motivated to undertake a doctorate for educational, emotional, and intellectual growth reasons rather than for

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Study	Aim	Location	Sample	Design	Study Conclusions
					vocational (career-related) reasons.
Manathunga, Pitt, & Critchley (2012)	Graduate preparation and employment outcomes Industry-ready PhD graduates	Australia	1,068 PhD graduates including 327 CRC and 741 non-CRC graduates (response rates of 35 percent and 26 percent respectively)	Survey	Cooperative Research Centre PhD training provides greater exposure to industry or business meetings and professional interactions than conventional university PhD programs and a higher percentage graduates are employed outside the university sector.  Key stakeholder information is needed about knowledge and skills required to ensure effective preparation for a variety of employment destinations or career redirections.
Mowbray & Halse (2010)	PhD students' perspective on employability skills as part of PhD process	Australia	20 final year PhD Candidates	In depth semi-structured interviews / inductive and deductive procedures of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).	Frames the purpose of the PhD as the "acquisition of an interrelated suite of intellectual virtues" (p. 662). Extends beyond the limited economic agendas of employability skills.
Neumann & Tan (2011)	Doctoral employment destinations	Australia	Nationally, number of doctoral respondents ranged from 1707–3063 graduates a year (45–60% of Australia's doctoral graduates).  Employment profiles of doctoral graduates from two	Self-administered survey (national Graduate Destination Survey).  Comparison of national, institutional and disciplinary employment profiles	Australian doctoral graduate employment: one quarter in government sector, one-half in the education sector (of which 44.4% are in higher education).  Only one-quarter of all doctoral graduates are initially employed in academic positions on completion of their PhD.

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Study	Aim	Location	Sample	Design	Study Conclusions
			universities, compared with the national profile.		
Passaretta, Trivellato, & Triventi (2019)	Explore changing PhD's occupational prospects after academic reforms	Italy	2 cohorts PhD graduates (2004, 2008)	Self-administered survey	Decreasing employment in academia; increasing chance of a fixed-term contract, employment abroad and working outside academia in research-related occupations. Academic reforms affected soft more than hard academic disciplines opportunity to work in academia.
Pederson (2014)	Assist policy decision-making (number of PhDs to meet expected needs)	European Union	Careers of Doctorate Holders survey (2009) on PhD labour market outcome	European Commission survey	Need better (national) data to understand mobilisation patterns.  PhDs change employers within higher education institutions more than other sectors but transition between the other sectors limited. PhD holders may be leaving academia due to unfulfilled expectations or involuntarily because insufficient positions available.
Pitt & Mewburn (2016)	Critical analysis of academic job descriptions	Australia	178 job advertisements	Textual analysis	Australian academic hiring practices are inconsistent and lack transparency and equity. Academic "a multi-talented, always ready and available worker ... the 'academic super-hero'" (99).  Need better understanding of the nature and purpose of academic work including in preparing our higher degree by research students for this arena.

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## Methodology

A qualitative research methodology was used because the purpose of this study was to explore and understand the postgraduate student experience. Multiple data collection methods (i.e., semi-structured feedback opportunities via breakfast meetings, focus groups and interviews) assured the validity and trustworthiness of the findings and provided ample opportunities to hear and interpret many robust and complex stories of postgraduate students' experiences, hopes and dreams (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000; van Manen, 1997). This research was conducted in accordance with ethical standards obtained through a private university in Australia (Bond University, RO1917).

## Participants

A sample of convenience approach was used to include diverse student voices (Kelly, Lesh, & Baek, 2008) from across coursework and research postgraduate degrees and professionally and non-professionally focused courses in all Australian states and territories. Postgraduates were invited to participate in the study via: (1) Targeted research team contact with students; (2) invitations through senior administrators; (3) emails to postgraduate associations; (4) posts on social media; and (5) outreach via research team networks and professional associations.

Throughout 2015 and early 2016, a total of 319 postgraduate students participated in their choice of the three data collection methods (Table 2). Student participants were enrolled in masters (38%) and doctoral (52%) programs<sup>1</sup> across a broad range of disciplines in research (56%), coursework (27%) and mixed study modes (7%)<sup>2</sup>. There was an average of 40 and range of 14 to 101 student participants per Australian state or territory from 26 Australian universities.

Participants at the feedback breakfasts and focus groups were not separated by enrolment type, level or discipline, meaning that masters and PhD, research and coursework students participated together in the research. This facilitated rich discussions between students who expressed a diversity of experiences and perceptions that did not fit into neat categories aligned with enrolment type.

**Table 2: Number of Research Participants by Method and Australian State or Territory**

Collection Method	QLD	WA	TAS	VIC	ACT	SA	NT	NSW	Total
Feedback breakfasts	69 (2)	34	32	31	29	28	—	—	223
Focus groups	30 (2)	2	2	—	—	—	15 (2)	9	58
Interviews	2	5	5	5	5	5	6	5	38
Total	101	41	39	36	34	33	21	14	319

The average age and age-range of the participants was 35 years and 21 to 60 years respectively, and 69 per cent identified as female. Notably, these figures correspond with the latest national data of

<sup>1</sup> 10% of participating students identified as neither masters nor doctoral students, stating that they were in a program of transition between the two or from their undergraduate program.

<sup>2</sup> The percentage of students in research-based, course-based and mixed mode (combined) does not add-up to 100% as some of the students did not select a category on the distributed demographic worksheet.

student demographics (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020). Overall, 59 per cent of the participants were engaged in full-time study.

### Data collection

Data collection involved three types of engagement – feedback breakfasts, focus groups and interviews – and was conducted on-campus at ten universities, ensuring all eight Australian states and territories were covered.

Seven feedback breakfasts were held, each with an average of 32 students seated approximately six students per table. Broad questions were designed to provide participants the opportunity to discuss and depict the breadth of their student experience, including what they valued most and least and for suggestions to improve the university experience (see Appendix pp. 167–168). The primary facilitation strategy was the construction of word-clouds, involving students using coloured markers on poster paper to generate visual representations of their agreed group responses to the questions posed, for example, what was done well and not done well at their universities. As part of thematic analysis and coding, the word-clouds produced by each table were collated into mega word-clouds across all tables, then across all breakfasts, then independently thematically analysed and, finally, thematically confirmed by multiple researchers.

There were seven focus groups averaging eight students per group. The facilitator followed a semi-structured focus group guide, which asked general questions about the student experience. For example, a sample question was: ‘When I say the words *postgraduate student experience* what comes to mind? In other words what does this term mean to you?’ A probing question, in the context of employability and careers, was: ‘Do you receive adequate support for your career development?’ The facilitator ensured that all focus group participants were invited to engage and contribute.

In addition, 38 one-hour individual semi-structured student interviews were conducted to probe greater details about the individual experiences and perspectives of additional students, using the same question guide. Details of the prompts and questions used are provided in *Supplementary Material*.

### Data analysis

Documents from the feedback breakfasts, focus groups and interviews were inductively coded into themes, focusing on *experiential* patterns and perspectives. Thematic analysis was done separately by two researchers, and then reconciled and re-coded by a third (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Shaddock, 2014). To enable a reflexive dialogue between researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and thematic confirmation, the researchers coded, grouped and regrouped themes iteratively.

### Findings and discussion

This section commences with discussion of the theoretical framework of eudemonia and flourishing as applied to postgraduate student experience and employability, and then responds to the research questions, comparing the findings to those included in the literature review.

Postgraduate students in this study expressed views that they were expecting intellectually challenging educational experiences that would prepare them to contribute to the world as graduates, including through work. They appeared to concur with Bullough Jr. and Pinnegar’s (2009) statement that ... *happiness follows when work is found intrinsically rewarding, morally upstanding, purposeful, appropriately challenging, and fully supportive of the learning and development of the people involved* (p. 246). Thus, rather than perceiving a dichotomy between the quest for knowledge



## 1. When considering what matters in the student experience, to what extent do masters and doctoral students include the notion of employability?

Participating students conceptualised employability, careers, and related services and supports, as key and fundamental to their overall student experience. When specific probes were provided, students discussed the interaction of process and outcomes. For example, they indicated that the postgraduate student experience would need to be ‘overhauled’ if postgraduates are to achieve desired success, including careers, upon graduation. In the context of flourishing and eudemonia, the postgraduate students did not see a binary between being students and being graduates, or between vocations and meaning. In other words, purpose should be synergistic and promoted through all phases and environments, pre- and post-graduation.

Students highlighted the importance of career development within their specific fields of interest, particularly given that some had enrolled in postgraduate studies having been *told by the workforce out there that [I am] unemployable*. Some students said that they felt pressured to self-direct towards academic careers because they were told that they were overqualified for alternate career pathways and other industries. The postgraduate students’ recommendations were to *provide specific career development that takes you from your degree into academia* and *provide advice for females wanting to make this transition [into academia]*. Students felt that they were not supported with targeted advice for their desired career outcomes.

These results align with the research findings of Ho, Kember and Kong (2012), in that four of the six motivating factors for study were related to employability. They reflect a shift since Leonard, Becker and Coate’s (2004) study in which the UK students were motivated by educational, emotional and intellectual growth as opposed to employability and careers.

## 2. To what extent do masters and doctoral students feel satisfied with the employability and career supports and services provided by their universities?

The feedback breakfasts prompted frequent commentary about the design of the breakfast experience being in stark contrast to their usual postgraduate experience. The conversational nature of the breakfasts gave participants an opportunity for new cross-disciplinary peer-to-peer interaction, and a sense of belonging (as scholars), which they valued. They also commented that the breakfast settings (e.g., university faculty clubs) made them feel respected and valued. One representative student’s comment was:

*This is the first time I have actually experienced what I thought the whole postgraduate experience would be – would feel like. At university, no one has taken the time to introduce me to anyone else. I don’t get the chance to build networks. I don’t even know what other students in my same department are studying, never mind people in other departments or other universities. Today, I met lots of people I will continue to collaborate with (including from other universities), including after we graduate. This is what it should be like overall, if we’re to be successful and if we’re to be the next generation moving the world forward.*

Remarks such as the above align with postgraduate students’ desires to flourish within and beyond the student experience. Eudemonia, a desire to have global impact as postgraduate students, was also emphasised. Participants commented that their student experience was often a barrier, rather than a catalyst, towards becoming leaders and change agents. Students mentioned their pre-conceived expectations conflated their enrolment with a ‘scholar’s club’ where they would be invited to consult, present, advise and network. In other words, they were expecting to be treated as scholars while postgraduate students, similar to the model of Commonwealth Government-sponsored Graduate Positions (Australian Government, n.d.). Instead, people who had become

students during, or after holding, staff positions expressed sentiments that they had lost status and privilege as students. Some said that, for this reason, they withheld their student status from others, continuing to say they were staff, without revealing that they were also students.

When asked to reflect on what was and was not going well in their university experience, students were more vocal about what was *not* going well. The only positive comment raised consistently at all breakfasts and across multiple tables, in relation to employability development, was *practical career-related fieldtrips and/or field research*. Additionally, salient negative themes emerged at every breakfast including: (1) lack of career-related professional development of staff and students; (2) insufficient practical application of curriculum; (3) few opportunities for paid tutoring in study area; (4) no effort to accommodate and map relevant paid student work (other than tutoring) into formal studies; and (5) no formalised networking with student peers, as professionals, through created opportunities for peer engagement. Themes that had conflicting positive and negative comments included: (1) career counselling planning and pathway support; (2) development of transferable skills and curricular development; (3) embedding extra-curricular activities into student experiences as co-curriculum; and (4) inviting professionals and industry experts into the learning experience.

A predominant theme, emerging at all seven focus groups, was direct comparison with their experiences of undergraduate employability services and supports. Masters and doctoral students commented that they felt well-supported (overall) in their undergraduate degrees in respect to employability development, including via embedded curriculum support for peer-to-peer collaboration and explained need for specific skill development in the workplace. Interpreted within the theoretical framework of flourishing and eudemonia, the students had expected their postgraduate experience to be more than what is designed for undergraduates. That is, to be co-creating and contributing at a higher level (reciprocally acknowledging and further developing themselves within a sentiment of flourishing), leading towards future careers that would be eudemonic, as opposed to dissonant.

While the need for universities to improve employability and careers-related supports was a strong emergent theme, consistent with Durham, Jordan, Naccarella and Russell (2020), postgraduates also emphasised a view that their needs and desirable strategies were different to those of undergraduates. For example, students at each of the focus groups said they felt they had mastered concrete career management skills, such as resume writing and answering interview questions, during and/or after their undergraduate degrees. However, what they needed now, were skills and instrumental supports *further up the career ladder*, such as guidance for how to apply for promotions in the workplace once they had their postgraduate credentials.

Students with aspirations as future academics (with masters or doctoral degrees) felt they needed mentoring on how to secure continuing academic positions, as opposed to casual contracts. They also felt they needed guidance as to what kinds of publications (e.g., conference papers versus journal articles) would strengthen their future academic portfolios. A dominant idea expressed by students was that course-based assignments should be designed to derive a publication. Related to assignments, students emphasised that deadlines and supports (such as through the library) seemed to cater for full-time undergraduate students (Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm), as opposed to part-time and/or mature aged students. The postgraduates emotively expressed how they balanced work and study, often with dependents, and identified that more accommodating university scheduling would support their career development. They emphasised the importance of research scholarships, grants and/or fellowships as instrumental to their specific career development and student experience needs (and as opposed to those of undergraduates) through providing opportunities to apprentice, work-shadow and develop career-related skills.

Networking was another substantial emergent theme across the focus groups. Students at one focus group had an extended discussion about 'connections', for example:



*You start to panic a little bit. I am starting to get to that stage now when even a few classmates are getting job offers already and you are [like], 'I don't even know anyone yet'.*

Across the focus groups, students suggested that current masters and doctoral students would benefit from formalised connections with alumni from their discipline, similar to evidence from Dollinger, Arkoudis and Marangell (2019). A representative comment was:

*I think what I need is ... recent graduates who studied with the similar subject, similar discipline or specialisation as me, and have successfully hunted good jobs and then come back to the university campus to share with us.*

Across the one-to-one interviews, the most salient theme was negative or neutral feelings about how well they felt their universities were addressing their individual employability and careers support needs. Examples of satisfaction and positive reflections on postgraduate employability and career development experiences were minor themes. The reasons that interviewed students provided for such sentiments were consistent with those articulated by postgraduates at the breakfasts and focus groups.

Interviewed students who commented specifically on their university's employability and careers services and supports tended to express dissatisfaction for what they perceived as services specifically designed for undergraduates and used, without adaptation or scaffolding, in their masters and doctoral programs. PhD students aspiring to academic careers felt particularly unsupported for this career trajectory. These results align with the findings of Foote et al. (2012) who concluded that universities need to enhance the incorporation of skills, as well as higher-level thinking and leadership, in education.

### **3. How confident do masters and doctoral students feel about their graduate career futures?**

There was a strong theme of pessimism across the individually interviewed postgraduates in regard to launching careers after graduation; optimism was rarely expressed. Similar sentiments were shared by postgraduates at the engagement breakfasts and focus groups.

Aspirations and frustrations regarding academic careers were a resonant emergent theme across the combined dataset. Participants commented that they had observed media reports about a shift away from academic career aspirations. In other words, these reports said that contemporary PhD students had preferences for non-academic careers. However, many of the participating doctoral students said this was an over-simplification, emphasising that they had applied for PhDs primarily to pursue aspirations to join the Academe, but were reconsidering their career goals during their studies. Salient reasons for changing career trajectories were that they constantly heard academics (including their own supervisors and professors) complaining about their jobs, universities and/or bleak academic career entry prospects. An illustrative quote was:

*You look at them and they've all got bags under their eyes and they all look as if they are on the verge of a nervous breakdown at any time. This is hideous. I don't want to live like that.*

Within the theoretic framing of flourishing and eudemonia, the overall finding regarding career hopes and aspirations was that many of the postgraduate participants had changed their minds about academic careers because of what they observed. They were of the view that academics were not flourishing or experiencing academic careers in ways that reflected eudemonia. Postgraduates were clear that this was their career expectation coming into higher education as students and this observation made them question their futures as academic staff.

Students commonly expressed perceptions about the casualisation of the academic workforce, particularly highlighted by students who balanced academic roles with PhD study, for example:

*I would go anywhere where there's a permanent position. However, I've been told by the workforce that I'm unemployable. So, I've spent 10 years perfecting a CV that's suited to academia, which essentially, I'm told that I can't even get a job answering phones with.*

Some participants were university lecturers prior to their PhDs *in an attempt to break-into continuing positions*, while others had begun teaching after commencing their PhDs to graduate with practical career-relevant skills and experience. Participants in both streams complained about working semester-after-semester without any indication that they were *earning their stripes* and would be *rewarded with a bonafide academic career*. PhD students emphasised that they felt taken-advantage-of and treated like cheap labourers without equitable benefits, such as those afforded to continuing academic staff, similar to 'inevitable' power imbalances articulated by Miles et al. (2021). Some mentioned feeling complicit in this power-imbalance (i.e., hegemony) and articulated requirements for related work experience. These students felt forced to accept sub-standard student employment conditions to be potentially employable upon graduation.

An indicative quote described university transitional careers support (for aspiring academics) as the metaphoric equivalent of being *pushed off a cliff*. The postgraduate student continued:

*I've had to make my own opportunities. There essentially was no career development that takes you from your degree into academia.*

Another asked how universities can expect to succeed in fostering graduate employability for disparate industries when they had not yet figured out how to prepare, educate, transition and support their own future workforce.

In summary, the masters and doctoral students who participated in this research did not feel that they were receiving the employability and career supports they needed and expressed widespread pessimism about their future careers. Participants with academic aspirations were particularly despondent about their university careers supports and pessimistic about their chances of achieving a rewarding and stable academic career that would enable flourishing and eudemonia. These results are consistent with the findings of Giles, Ski and Vrdoljak (2009), whereby one-third of the participating Australian graduates felt compelled to move overseas to pursue rewarding academic careers. Further research is warranted to address the extent to which this may be a unique problem in the Australian context, given that 90 percent of the UK graduates in one study reported successful graduate employment (Leonard, Becker, & Coate, 2004).

Wright and Pascoe's (2015) actions (i.e., to connect, be active, take notice, keep learning and give) exemplify the sentiments expressed by the postgraduate participants in our research. In reflecting on their studies, the participants seemed to want a relational postgraduate student experience that would enable them to network with fellow students and beyond the university walls. They wanted to be engaged in a fulfilling process of continual intellectual inquiry (i.e., flourishing) with their expertise acknowledged and drawn-upon and they wanted to contribute within and beyond their university (i.e., eudemonia). Synthesising these findings, we suggest that Wright and Pascoe's actions may provide a useful lens for universities to improve the ways that they prepare postgraduates for impactful career futures.

## Recommendations and further research

Four practice recommendations were derived from this analysis and contribute details in relation to careers and employability, which add to the original recommendations of the primary research (see, section *Action Recommendations for Executive Leaders of Higher Education*, Crane et al., 2016).

First, it is recommended that universities design integrated opportunities for robust scholarly interaction between postgraduate students, such as participants experienced in the feedback breakfasts. Applying the theory of flourishing and eudemonia, these experiences as students, would

develop postgraduates' positioning as leaders and collaborators upon graduation. Second, it is recommended that universities design and enact intentional employability strategies, in the context of postgraduate education. In the experience of the participating students, grafting postgraduates onto undergraduate strategies is ineffective. Third, it is recommended that universities take a personalised approach to postgraduate employability, giving students access to success coaches who can give them targeted and contextualised advice along their journey towards their graduate careers. Fourth, and finally, it is recommended that universities recognise postgraduates as their emerging workforce through mentoring, championing and creating opportunities to transition into early career academics.

This study was designed to explore Australian postgraduate student perspectives on their experience. A design strength, in relation to the sample, was the large number and broad range of student perspectives considered. Limitations include unequal sample sizes across the states and territories, unequal representation across the study types and that perspectives of online students were not explicitly sought.

The analysis would have been strengthened by explicitly setting structural research themes prior to data collection to facilitate thematic alignment and triangulation across the sources, thereby increasing the power of the overall results. Moreover, differences could not be effectively codified by demographic, geographic or programmatic factors; noting there is published evidence of demographic differences among doctoral candidates in relation to graduate employability (Beasy, Crawford, Young, & Kelder, 2021). Further research could test students' assertions that their experiences would not cluster by type, level or discipline of study.

Despite these limitations, this study provided a unique opportunity for the postgraduate student experience to be probed (and permitted to emerge), as opposed to restricting the focus to specific topics, such as employability and career development supports. The researchers asked students what matters in their student experience and two prevalent themes were *employability* and *careers*. A reasonable implication to draw is that, of their own volition, participating students raised matters that were important to them, providing deep depictions of their situated experiences. Now that this matter has been raised by students' themselves, future research might specifically address and deeply probe postgraduate perceptions within these contextual frames.

## Conclusion

This study of 319 postgraduate students across 26 universities indicated that these students considered employability and careers to be expected elements of their postgraduate student experience. The results revealed widespread Australian postgraduate student dissatisfaction with the employability and careers development support they were receiving and associated scepticism about their graduate employability. The significant contribution of this paper is a call to action to the higher education sector to improve employability and career development supports for masters and doctoral students in the ways described, and through a theoretical framework of eudemonia and flourishing. This is particularly pertinent in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has devastated employment prospects and severely impacted the higher education sector.

## Acknowledgements

This research is indebted to over 300 students, who so candidly and generously shared their stories, experiences and perceptions. The authors wish to acknowledge Harry Rolf. As the President of Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations at the time this research was conducted, Harry was instrumental in recruiting student participants, sharing knowledge of the research, and analysing and interpreting the results. This work was supported by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching under Grant SP1404599.



## Declarations of interest

Funding: This work was supported by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching under Grant SP1404599.

Conflicts of interest: None.

Ethics approval: Bond University, RO1917.

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## Appendix<sup>1</sup>

### Engagement Breakfast Table Prompts

#### Activity 1

What do the words *student experience* mean to you?

- Construct a group 'wordle', plus individual comments on the Dropbox cards if you wish.

#### Activity 2

What do you see as being the key functional and operational components of your experience? (e.g., lectures, assessments, student associations).

- Construct a group 'wordle'.

#### Activity 3

Think about how aspects of what you value are being addressed at your institution.

- Of these, which are being *well done* and which are being *not so well done*

#### Activity 4

*Part A* – discuss what is valuable about an on-campus experience.

- How does this differ to an off-campus experience?

*Part B* – discuss how a sense of community can be enhanced for off-campus students.

- Create a list to highlight the key issues from your discussions in Activity 4a & 4b

#### Activity 5

Each participant should offer one or two strategies and/or recommendations to improve the student experience.

- Create a 'wordle' highlighting the most important of these after discussing the ideas.

#### Activity 6

Please remember to use the Dropbox cards to tell us anything else about postgraduate student experience that you think will help.

Thank you!

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<sup>1</sup>(Source: Crane et al., 2016)

## OLT Commissioned Postgraduate Student Experience Interview Questions

### Student Version

1. Tell me about your university and your postgraduate degree.  
Prompts: coursework, research, online / F2F  
  
Why did you choose this university? This degree?  
What are the strengths of and needed improvements to your postgraduate degree program?
2. Tell me about your university's
  - a. application process
  - b. enrolment process
  - c. student supports (have you used any and if so, what was the experience like for you?)
  - d. study assistance supports (have you used any and if so, what was the experience like for you?)
  - e. IT environment
  - f. online resources and interaction
  - g. assessment?  
Do you consider any of these to be particularly flexible? Innovative?  
  
Overall, how do you rate student services at your university? (On a scale of 1-5 with 5 being high)
3. This research project is in response to a call from the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching about the postgraduate student experience. When I say the words "postgraduate student experience" what comes to mind? In other words what does this term mean to you?
4. Could you please draw me a picture of your/the postgraduate student experience (through your university). Perhaps you would like to show the spaces/places where you engage/learn/interact. Or 'a day in your life' as a postgraduate student. Or what it's like to be a postgraduate student / what matters to you about this experience.
5. Do you think that there are things that make you unique as a postgraduate student? If so, what particular needs does this create? Does your university address / meet these needs? How?
6. Using your drawing as reference, to what extent is your depicted experience about LEARNING and to what extent about other things? e.g. clubs, sports, societies, social events. Tell me about the balance.
7. What do you value most about that experience? What is most important to you? Non-negotiable? Prompts: WiFi, online resources, library, campus life
8. In that experience, what is the relationship between online and on-campus? What is the balance between the time you spend ON line and ON campus? Does this affect your feeling of "belonging"? What does the university do about this?
9. What are your plans for after graduation? Do you think your university has adequately prepared you for / supported you in - these plans? Need for improvement? Additional supports?
10. Is there anything else you would like to say about your postgraduate student experience?