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# Exploring diversity and student expectations in Higher Degree Research programs

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for **equity**  
in higher  
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This project was funded by a seed grant from the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE)

### Project description:

This project examined Higher Degree Research (HDR) student data to examine the composition of equity groups at the University of Newcastle (UON). This project aimed to determine outcomes by group and identify specific issues connected with equity groups engaging in higher degree research. The study also sought to identify whether there are particular expectations and sources of mismatch in expectations specific to different equity groups.

### Research questions:

At UON:

1. Do equity groups differ from non-equity groups in access to Research Higher Degrees over the past 10 years? What is the current pattern?
2. Do equity groups differ from non-equity groups in completion/non-completion rates and average time to completion?
3. Do equity groups differ in their HDR study expectations?
4. Do equity groups differ in the barriers they perceive in their transition into their degree, making progress and whether these barriers are perceived to be the result of a mismatch in expectations or other factors?

### Conceptual and/or methodological framework:

This was a two-phase study.

First, institutional data was collected on:

- HDR student background and previous study, and the composition of equity groups;
- Completions, attrition, changes in enrolment status and approved leave for these groups.

Secondly, focus group interviews were conducted with 10 HDR students in their first year of candidature at UON to explore their experiences of Higher Degree Research studies.

### Key findings:

There were no significant differences between the equity groups and the rest of the HDR population regarding the program type (PhD or Masters), whether they were domestic or international students and the leave taken during candidature. There were significant differences in terms of gender, age, Broad Field of Study, socio-economic status and mode of study. Time to completion was also identified as a point of difference. In terms of average time to completion, the equity groups took up to a year longer to complete than the non-equity groups.

The major findings from the focus groups were that:

- HDR students come from diverse and complex backgrounds;
- There is a mismatch between expectations and experiences for HDR students at the beginning of their candidature which is exacerbated by increased time for completion; and
- The intersections between work and life complicates candidature, particularly for those in one or more of the equity groupings.

### Implications for the future:

The following related areas warrant further research:

- The personalisation of induction programs early in candidature to respond to HDR student diversity and expectations;
- Further exploration of policies and organisational structures for HDR students, particularly pathways and widening participation for those with disabilities; and
- Systematic research to address attrition and time to completion for equity groups within the HDR student population.