



Australian
National
University

Academic Skills HDR Engagement Report

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ANU Academic Skills

Scholarly Information Services

+61 2 6125 2972

academicskills@anu.edu.au

The Australian National University

Canberra ACT 2601 Australia

www.anu.edu.au

CRICOS Provider No. 00120C

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Overview

Academic Skills contributes significantly to HDR students' development of their academic literacies. Through our embedded College/School-based writing programs, our generic skills-based program (STEM and HASS streams) and individual consultations, we equip students with the tools and strategies for effectively planning, structuring, presenting and writing their thesis and articles for publication. In doing so, we help boost students' own sense of self-efficacy and their confidence with academic writing.

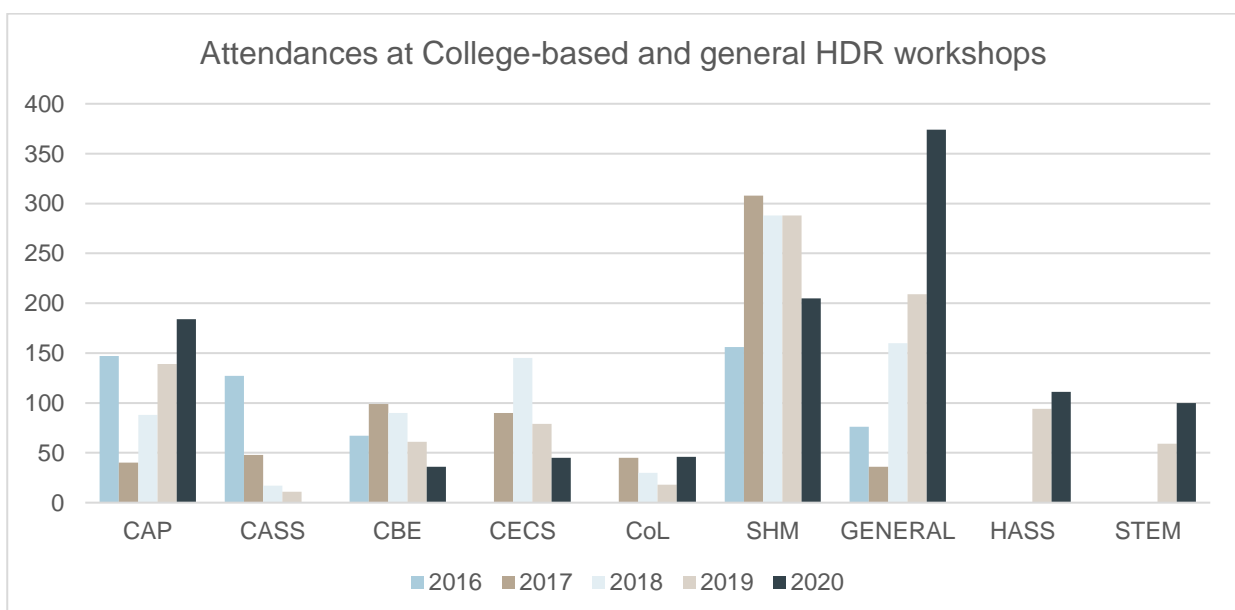
In 2020, Academic Skills delivered 90 HDR workshops to 943 attendees, and 357 appointments to 218 unique HDR students. Of this total number of appointments, 332 were for PhD students, and 25 Masters Research Students. In our end of year HDR student survey in 2020, we received strong positive feedback on our workshops and appointments. Student comments highlight how our workshops provide much sought after guidance and reassurance and the value of having a writing expert from outside the discipline review their work.

HDR workshops

In 2020 Academic Skills provided workshops in all Colleges except for the College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS), despite CASS having the second highest HDR enrolment. Most of our embedded workshops were in the School of Health and Medicine (SHM) and the College of Asia and the Pacific (see figure 1).

Academic Skills workshops within Colleges follow a program of advice targeted to those in early, mid and late stages. These tailored workshops draw on examples relevant to students' discipline and some were co-developed and taught with academic staff.

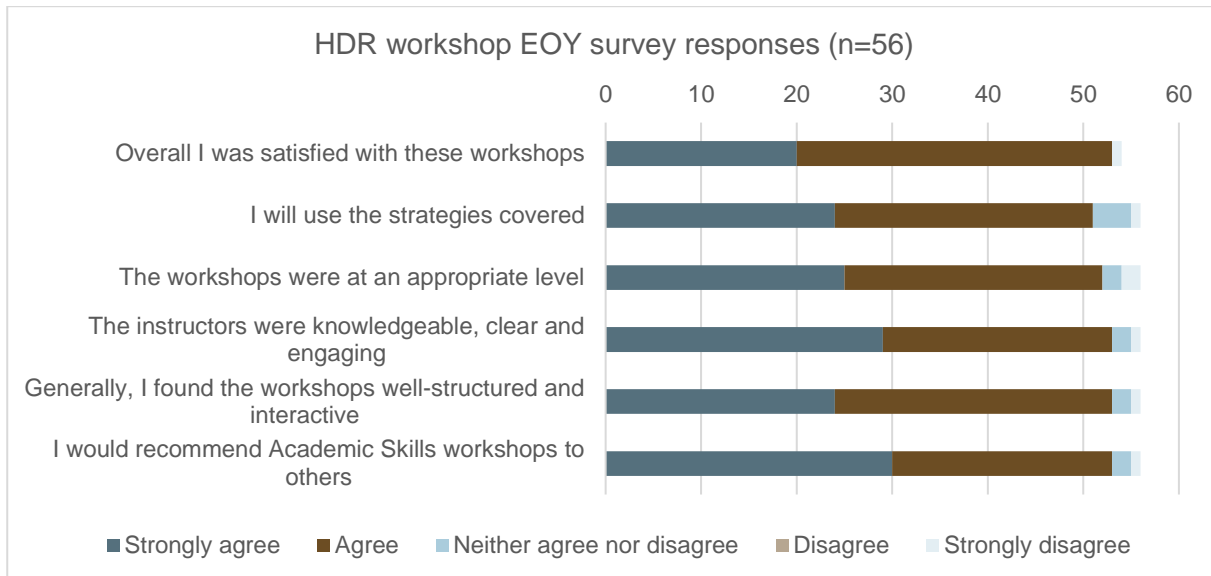
Figure 1



Student feedback on workshops

We often survey attendees at the end of individual workshops (though this was inconsistent in 2020). However, at the end of 2020 we conducted a survey of all participants who attended our workshops throughout the year. Overall, student feedback for our workshops is extremely positive with students indicating high levels of satisfaction with the workshops and that they would recommend the workshops to others. They reported that the workshops were at an appropriate level and provided strategies that they intend to use in future.

Figure 2:



In the EOY survey responses to ‘Which workshop/s did you find the most useful and why?’ a number of students could not decide between the workshops, as they found them all useful. One student commented: ‘I found all the workshops useful because they have given me clarity on direction and how I should go about writing my thesis. They have also given me a sense of “I can do this!”’ Another student exclaimed, ‘I found that all the workshops were very well tailored to their topics well, and all of the tips that were provided were highly useful.’

Most students, however, had clear favourites. Thesis structures was the most popular workshop (8 responses), followed by Journal Article Writing (6), Thesis Proposal Reviews and writing literature reviews were equally popular (at 5 comments each). Workshops that covered writing introductions, and editing for writing style and voice were also mentioned. Several students found Kick Start Your PhD helpful as the workshop ‘was a good way to get started and provided helpful advice for beginning a PhD’, while another said “it told me a lot of do’s and don’ts in the first 6 months and saved a lot of time.” Below are some of the reasons for nominating the workshop they found most helpful:

- *Thesis structure format - am doing thesis by publication ie each chapter is a published article or in-process of publication. It was important to know how to format. I would like to attend this workshop again in 2021 as it seems different Colleges do different things.*
- *As I only attended one this year (Thesis structures) - that one. I found the accompanying materials on Wattle extremely helpful. They have allowed me to structure my thesis, understand structures and write better!*

- *Thesis Structures and Introductions, because examples of work were discussed from different disciplines providing an insight about different approaches that would be acceptable.*
- *The tips about how to identify and approach good academic journals was great too.*
- *Publishing in a journal - as I was able to learn the specific process and steps involved in publishing in a journal.*
- *Journal article writing was helpful. Got knowledge on the styles of writing*
- *Presenting research and journal writing. Got to know lot of information that I didn't know before*
- *Thesis proposal review. gave me a better idea and understanding*
- *Thesis proposal workshop - it was engaging; sharing my [sic] with other students and receiving their feedbacks was informative and interesting.*
- *The Thesis Proposal Review workshop was the most useful as I did it in preparation for my TPR, in which I used many of the strategies and approaches discussed in the workshop. And the TPR was a success.*
- *Introductions and Literature Review - I found identifying the links in the thesis and making sure the whole introduction and literature chapters connected to the conclusion, was really helpful. I found the slides gave me a good reminder of the content and I had taken notes as well and am now using them to make sure I make those solid links and connections.*
- *Writing workshops were invaluable; the hands-on approach motivated and inspired us, eliminating uncertainty around milestones.*

While one student felt that workshops weren't worth their investment of time: 'No workshops cover anything that my supervisory panel cannot tell me', the majority of students surveyed benefited greatly from attending our workshops. Students expressed appreciation for having opportunities to gain important information, learn about academic writing, and being able to connect with their peers in a friendly learning environment. One student wrote: 'It was a really rough year, and having regular contact with a group of people who were friendly and engaged was really helpful beyond the content of the workshop. The networking aspect of the programme is invaluable.' Another offered, 'I think these workshops are an amazing asset [sic] to the HDR student cohort. They provide a lot of information that is often assumed to be common knowledge, and provides opportunities for improvement and growth.'

The workshops were seen as a great introduction to our service and friendly staff: 'Thank you. I feel lucky to have the opportunity to learn from such knowledgeable, well-prepared and thoughtful experts.' Another student expressed, 'I am very grateful these workshops are available. They also provide a friendly way to meet the people at Academic Skills and to find out what else is available.' The workshops are seen as crucial for first year PhD students: 'Attending Academic Skills workshops has been a highlight of my first year of candidature. It's been especially fun sharing and getting to know others while learning valuable skills in a safe, friendly environment.'

HDR appointments

Overall, HDR appointments were roughly proportional to College enrolments (see figures 3 & 4). We experienced a general drop in appointment numbers which matches the drop in 2020 enrolment numbers. Figure 7 shows that 50% of our appointments were in relation to thesis writing, followed by general discussion (14%), journal article writing, and research proposal (8% each). Anecdotally, many of our HDR appointments in 2020 focused on writing literature reviews and developing plans for how to reframe their work in light of limitations with data collection.

The number of appointments with domestic students has increased since 2018 (see figure 8). This could possibly be due to Academic Skills' involvement with the Thesis Boot Camps (TBCs) – we saw a total of 91 participants for the November and December 2020 TBCs – as well as the growth in the number of our workshops in the Colleges.

Figure 3

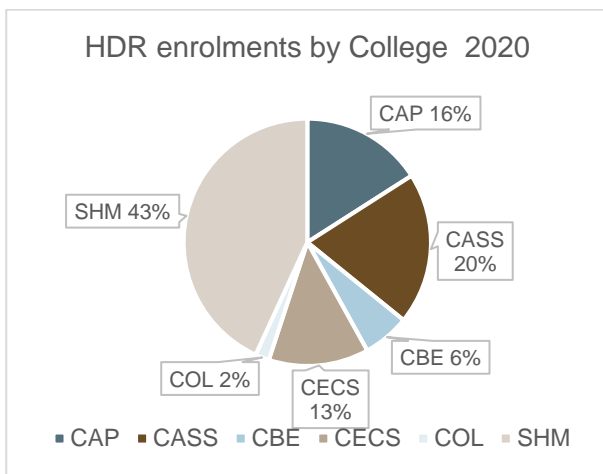


Figure 4

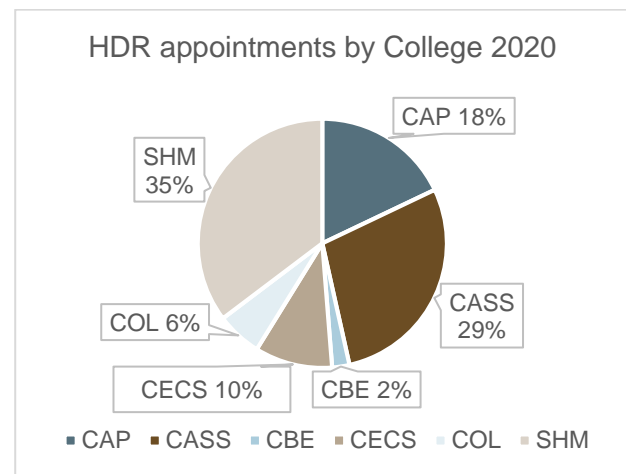


Figure 5

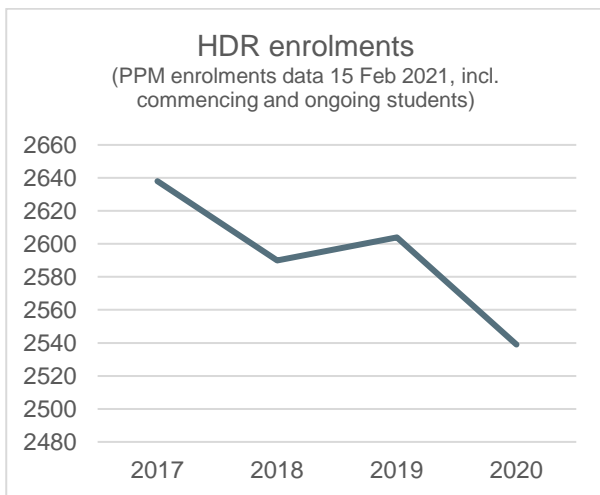


Figure 6

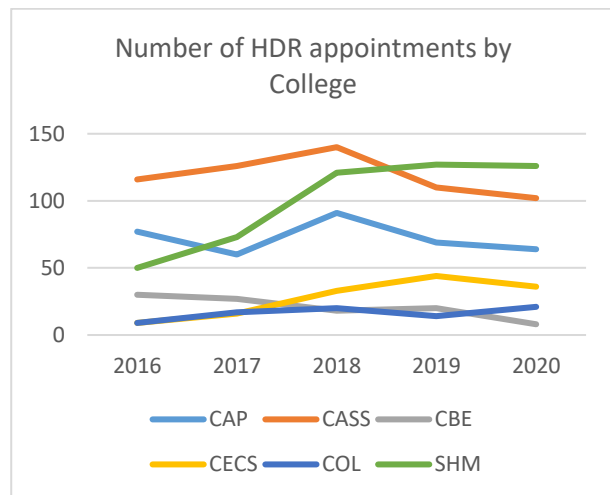


Figure 7

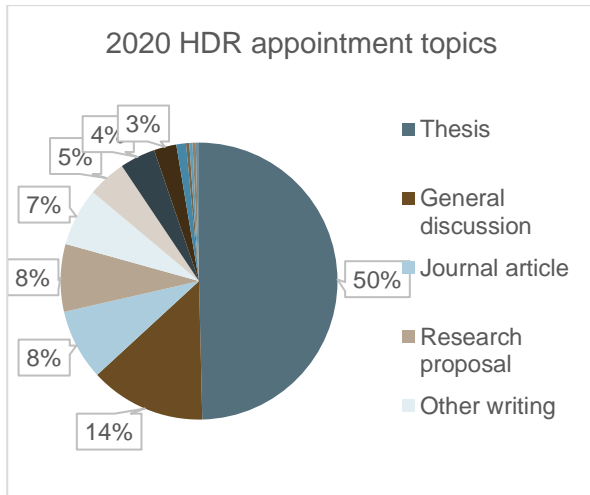
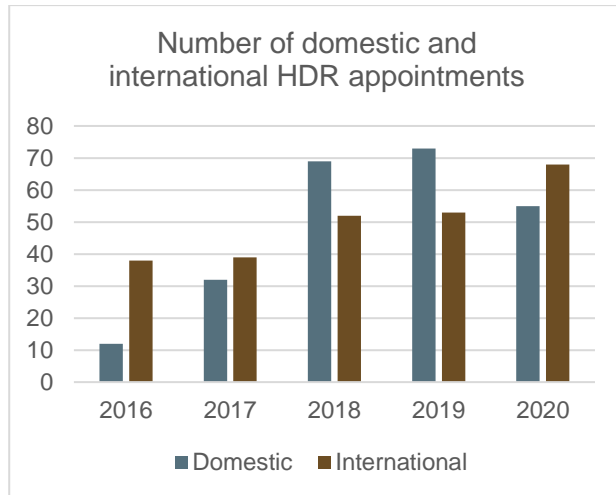


Figure 8

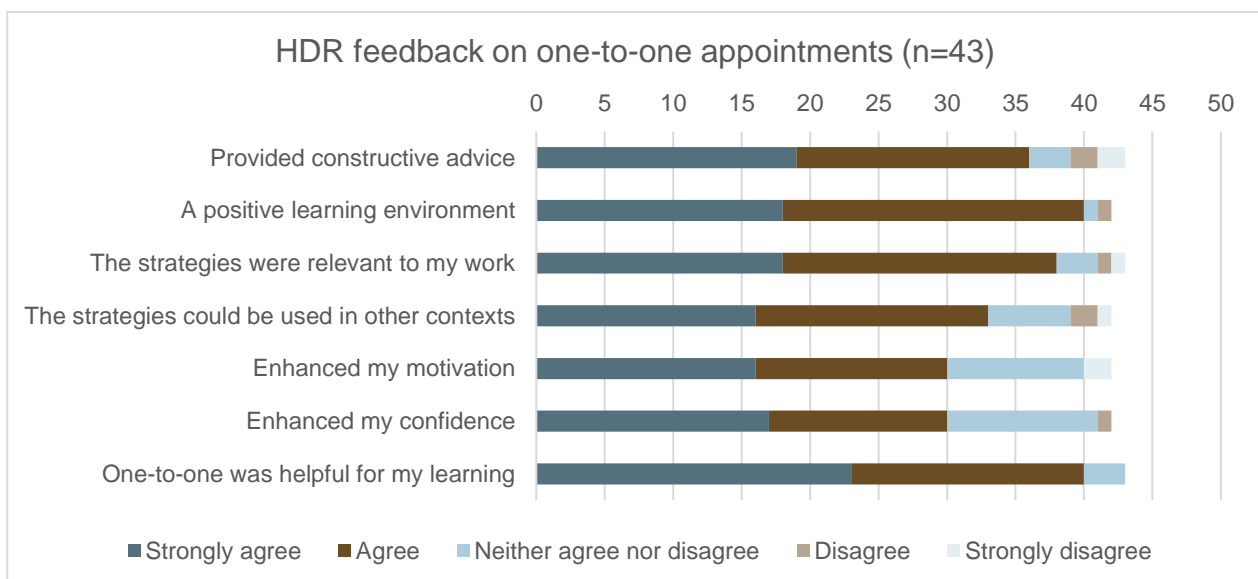


Student feedback on appointments

In our end of year HDR survey, we also sought student feedback on the effectiveness of the one-to-ones for their learning, including whether students felt that they were given useful strategies to apply to their work and beyond, and whether the consultations specifically improved their confidence and motivation.

We had a response rate of 20% (n=43 out of 218 unique students). Figure 9 shows that 84% of students either strongly agreed or agreed that the consultations provided constructive advice, and 88% either strongly agreed or agreed that the strategies provided were relevant for their work. Importantly, the majority felt that the one-to-ones were helpful for their learning with 93% saying that it was a positive learning environment.

Figure 9



The high satisfaction levels aligned with the overall positive qualitative comments student made about their experience of the individual consultations. HDR students reported that the individual appointments provided helpful guidance on organising and structuring their thesis and developing their academic writing and argumentation skills. Some students felt that the appointments really

helped them to make progress on their thesis and especially appreciated being able to submit drafts of their work and having an adviser who is outside their field and discipline provide another perspective. It was heartening to read comments about how the sessions had increased their confidence, motivation and even enjoyment of the writing process. Some of the positive comments include:

- *I was stuck (and dreading the writing process) before my appointment and then was unstuck (and excited about the writing process) after the appointment. The presentation and written feedback gave me new ideas, clarity and encouragement that really was valuable of delivering manuscripts required for my PhD by publication as well as developing my writing capabilities and being able to better enjoy the process of it all.*
- *Both appointments have been vital to the development of my thesis. Not only did they assist me with academic writing but they forced me to really think clearly about the structure of my thesis. This structuring has helped with both my research and my writing. I would be struggling without these two appointments. The adviser was really skilled.*
- *The meetings greatly helped me tighten my thesis and remove unnecessary information*
- *Thinking about how my thesis would fit together, and the knowledge that I could send chapters to you for help :)*
- *I tried to follow their advice that improves my writing skills*
- *Filled in a gap in availability of a supervisor and gave other perspective*
- *It was a brief appointment necessary for the thesis bootcamp, but it did help me to touch base with someone outside my discipline, and to hear their comments on my thesis structure. It mainly affected my work in increasing my confidence, reassuring me that what I'm writing does seem to make sense to someone else!*
- *It gave me assistance and motivation at pivotal point in the PhD writeup process It made me confident that I can do it.*
- *It provides good suggestions and help me identify how to improve my works.*
- *I received feedback and use it to improve my Thesis.*
- *I have got advices on my poor language skills on writing.*
- *Feedback and notes from the academic advisor was extremely beneficial in developing my work.*

Those who felt negatively expressed disappointment at having to wait for appointments, confusion between our service and the Crawford School, and a mismatch of expectations.

Plans for 2021

In 2021, we plan to run a similar number of workshops, both in person and via Zoom. We will also continue to work with the Colleges to provide tailored programs, as well as offer our skills-based programs to those without a tailored program. What is changing in 2021 is that we are working more closely with Researcher Development to devise a shared HDR curriculum. Both teams are jointly collaborating with the different Colleges, including with CASS to ensure the development of coherent HDR programs across the different Colleges.