

JCU Doctoral Experience Report 2016



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Executive Summary

This research report presents the experiences of doctoral candidates at James Cook University. The findings are based on qualitative research conducted in November and December 2015. Key aspects discussed with candidates include administrative support and processes, institutional resources and support, the supervisory experience, and the overall candidature experience. Further comment was invited on JCU as an institution, individual College experiences, and the role of the Graduate Research School (GRS). Examples of best practice from the student's perspective include the cohort initiative, College based mentoring programs (often based on research writing groups) and the social support network for international students.

Overall, the main positive characteristics of JCU and the associated doctoral experience include the tropical research advantages, supervisory expertise, access, support, and the non-related academic and industry networks, and the quality and range of skill development programs offered through the GRS. There was also considerable appreciation for the available resources and facilities, particularly the JCU library services and staff.

In contrast to previous research (2011 and 2016) there seemed to be growing concern about reduced funding and opportunities for professional development through conferences, specialist workshops, lab based work, and valuable fieldwork. Correspondingly, the research culture or "intellectual climate" between students was often described as increasingly competitive and/or isolating. External and professional doctorate student groups indicated that supervisors were appreciated and flexible, the current system and processes were not entirely supportive or congruous with the needs of direct doctoral candidates.

Introduction

While there are universal characteristics of the postgraduate experience at JCU, within Divisions and Colleges there are also discipline specific policies, procedures, expectations and conditions that may shape candidates' experiences in distinct ways. This report highlights the findings of a qualitative study aimed at providing more detailed understandings and feedback about the experiences of JCU doctoral students.

Aims of the research

The research seeks to canvas candidates' experiences and identify best practices (in relation to student satisfaction) that can be disseminated to the wider JCU community. In addition, the research seeks to identify the areas where candidates can be further supported by JCU.

Research Questions

Consistent with the qualitative research design of prior JCU doctoral experience surveys, the focus group component for this project was based around an open positive feedback loop with the key questions:

1. What are or have been the positive aspects of your experience?
2. What are or have been the negative aspects of your experience?
3. In what ways can JCU as an institution and your College further support your experience?

Paper based hard copies and an online version of these questions also included basic demographic and academic profiling with further elaboration of student experiences within the related themes of administrative support, institutional support, supervisory support and perceived expectations of the doctoral experience (refer to Doctoral Experience Survey Appendix)

Methodology

To ensure consistency and relevance of benchmarking against prior JCU Doctoral Experience Reports, this research was modelled on the previously established qualitative research methodology. In addition to the original questions and themes, students were also invited to provide basic demographic data to establish an overall profile of student participants – to determine the extent that they are representative of the doctoral candidate student body and to potentially indicate any correlations between student background and the type of experience.

Small focus group interviews

The primary research approach was founded in small focus group interviews. All enrolled doctoral students (PhD and Professional Doctorate) identified through individual College databases were

obligations, there were unavoidable clashes for some students. When identified these students were offered the online survey or telephone interview alternative.

While the paper based and online surveys did provide students with a further opportunity to elaborate on issues, express personal views and relay experiences, through analysis it became evident that the associated anonymity also assisted students to express more negatively focused comments than raised during the focus groups. This may have created a more negative bias in the results compared to earlier reports.

As per the participant profile provided below, participation rates and inclusion were similar to previous reports.

Participant Profile

Figures provided by the GRS (2016) indicate that in November 2015 there were 772 enrolled Doctoral students (excluding students on leave of absence - LOA). As the research project was intended to encompass all aspects and stages of the Doctoral Candidate experience, this total included 26 students undertaking a Professional Doctorate and 81 students which were recorded as "under examination". The majority of these students were enrolled through the Townsville campus (570) with just over 26% enrolled at the Cairns campus (202). Reflecting the diversity of Doctoral opportunities, just under 40% (305) of the enrolled doctoral candidates were international students.

With a total of 90 students either attending the focus group or completing the online survey for this research project

highest participation rate (over 20%) (refer to College-based discussion section for specific rates and issues).

Table 1 : Participants by Research Mode and College

Primary College (total enrolled)	Focus Groups	Focus Group
	Townsville	

Positive Comments and Observations

In reviewing their expectations, experiences and overall satisfaction levels regarding their doctoral candidature at JCU, students were first asked to comment on positive elements. The foremost aspect was the “tropical advantage”. The Great Barrier Reef, the rainforest and the tropical environment (particularly flora and fauna) were highly valued in terms of proximity, access and the related research/specialised supervisor opportunities these offered. Location, climate, convenience and

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Administrative support

(Refer to Table)2

“Very happy with this and the GRS and admin staff are very supportive. Everything is clear.”

A number of external and professional doctorate students however indicated that the current GRS candidate management system did not adequately cater for their varied circumstances

“Much more needs to be made available by way of support and information for those completing PhD off c

involvement with the GRS beyond

Institutional support

(Refer Table 3)

Institutional support was a significant theme within the doctoral experience, encompassing many diverse elements. As students had variable understanding or engagement with certain facilities, the number of references in some of the identified categories was often limited, or there was a high incidence of neutral or not applicable comments. In most cases, differences in opinions/perspectives were often expressed by external/off campus students.

Resources and facilities

Depending on their personal context, students conveyed a wide range of narratives in regards to JCU related resources and facilities, these varied from on-campus catering options, IT support, the diving club and bike club and laboratory access. Most students (69.8% positive references) viewed available resources and facilities favourably.

"Seemingly good resources but not enough information about how to access them"

"I rarely if ever, use on-campus resources and facilities. Access to a shared work station in the doctoral student's area would be useful for periods when I am visiting the Townsville campus."

"The facilities to support my study is available here at JCU. Excellent"

Infrastructure

Infrastructure for many students

and resources (only 3.2% negative references). Recommendations however did include a revision/extension on opening hours particularly during exams and traditional study periods

"I rarely use the library and every time I do, it is an ordeal. I dread going there and asking any of the staff anything. They are extremely unhelpful. I presume it is because as a research student, my questions are a little more obscure and out of the box for them. But they make it so much more difficult. Also, other universities don't charge the outrageous prices for acquiring documents not in the catalogue. At my old university, it was free. Disappointing on every front."

"Superb online library. A major reason to study at JCU."

"Generally excellent although as an external student I don't have an IRA which makes some requests difficult"

Skills development

On campus students were generally both happy and appreciative of the variety and range of skill development programs offered through the GRS and Colleges including (for international students), writing and publishing workshops, research specific writing and the doctoral cohort program. Some Colleges also ran successful internal lab groups or writing retreats. In terms of the programs available, there was some concern that there are not

Professional development

While there are a number of professional development opportunities made available to students through the university, many again felt that there needed to be more discipline specific options. Numerous students commented that supervisors often funded them directly to attend relevant conferences, training programs, research and fieldwork. Many other students lacked such funding or support.

"Supervisors gave good opportunities to gain professional development"

"Poor-need more skills 'real life'"

"Not made aware of opportunities"

Career prospects

Some professional development programs offered through the university were reported to have highlighted the highly specialised, highly competitive nature of future research careers in an environment of limited post

undertaken during the candidature particularly those that did not have an interest in pursuing further research or academia. The students that showed the greatest concern were those that admitted limited "life experience" beyond the university environment (ie transitioned most directly from school into an undergraduate degree then post graduate studies). It was generally felt that the Career Hub and external employment services were not positioned to adequately assist and identify opportunities for highly specialised, skilled doctoral graduates.

"The reality was crushing. Near the end, there was little to no support. When problems came up there was very little support and since graduating there has been zero follow up or guidance as to where you can go next. I feel the system has ticked a box when you submit and then you are completely forgotten/discarded"

Social support and international student support

The extent of social engagement, sense of community, and networking was consistently higher for international students in comparison to domestic students. From initial introductions and friendships made during the obligatory SKIP program the international office was seen to proactively maintain and expand these friendships through regular social events and functions which are highly valued by participants.

Colleges that maintained lab groups, cohort programs, research student conferences and/or formal student mentoring arrangements were also referred to positively in terms of social support. There was however, a reasonable number of students that described the doctoral experience as competitive, isolating and even alienating with a perceived disconnect between PhD students and the rest of the College. Many that provided teaching support services felt that they were in a limbo "not quite staff but not really a student". Social events or opportunities to extend networks or friendships between students of other colleges were considered negligible on the Townsville campus (Cairns supports an open plan PhD office). Again, external students were marginalised in this aspect.

"Really good, Alex Salvador is doing an amazing job"

"Support provided by lab group is excellent"

"Mentors plus supervisors"

"Post grad social network support- BIG NO"

"Minimal. Difficult as working full time in addition to conducting research for PhD"

Mental health support
Students indicated that a

be excessive. In many instances students admitted to using consumables or resources as it was “simpler” and “more efficient” than wasting time to provide the documentary support requested

“The paperwork required for the field is excessive and redundant. A better system needs to be in place.”

“None-had to get my own funding”

Supervisor support

Candidate’s assessment of supervisor support at JCU continues to rate consistently high (77.8% positive comments) The majority of students were highly complementary of the time, effort and commitment dedicated to the research relationship. While there were a minority of negative comments (6.3%) these often related to differences in student and supervisor expectations regarding availability, support and feedback. Students that did express difficulties suggested that there should be more training and accountability for supervisors.

“Perfect, but I think I’m lucky not everyone has enough time or support from their supervisors.”

“Mixed- a lot of support from one area, less from another- some bullying involved”

“Extremely impressive and very supportive”

External student support

External and off-campus students tended to convey a number of mixed and varied messages in comparison to on-campus students. Library support, skills development and social networking were key concerns while there was strong appreciation for supervisor support and IT facilities. Many explained this as the unfortunate reality of their circumstances.

“Being off campus, I often feel that I am completely absent or detached from the University. I have a wonderful relationship with my supervisors however, I have almost none with JCU except when they release a research progress update every 12 months or require me to pay my student fees. Due to my profession ... I am required to move regularly for work opportunities (I work full-time) as such a different approach to off-campus higher degree research students would be wonderful, even just the chance to connect with HDR students at other universities in the cities I am in, or other off-campus students at JCU (even electronically) would minimise the considerable isolation.

Though I am grateful for the opportunity to complete my PhD with JCU I would find it challenging to recommend to anyone else as I have had almost no relationship with the University with the exception of having a wonderful primary supervisor.”

Table 3: Institutional Support Feedback

	Positive	Observations	Negative	Observations
	69.8%	Excellent Good Positive Adequate Very supportive	6.3%	Not great Lack of information on how to access Can't access labs unaccompanied
	52.3%	Improving Great bike service Off-campus video conferencing very good Great postgrad centre	7.9%	Laboratory cleanliness issues Inadequate storage Confusing
	65.1%	Excellent staff Helpful Positive Superb online library Efficient	3.2%	Needs extended operating hours – throughout the year Difficult for external students without IRA Unhelpful
	66.2%	Liz Tynan courses are excellent Positive Need more Interesting Useful	9.5%	Overdone and science orientated Excessive Not enough for social scientists More specialist (eg NVivo/stats) More available to off-campus students
	54%	Positive Very supportive Very useful Great opportunities Great supervisor support Excellent	14.3%	80 hours excessive and often irrelevant Limited Negative Not made aware of opportunities Needs more "real"

Supervision complaints

Although specific details were not provided, a small number of students did report having direct conflict with one or more of their supervisors during their candidature, and expressed general dissatisfaction with the process of dealing with such complaints or issues. Some Colleges have retained a post graduate liaison officer (PLO) to facilitate student enquiries, grievances and advice, although there appeared to be some scepticism about whether such people could remain completely impartial and maintain student confidentiality. One student indicated they had successfully engaged the GRS to mediate their situation and circumstances. Most students preferred the idea of initially seeking relevant advice and assistance from a person external to the College (if the situation could not be resolved directly with the supervisor), however they were generally unaware of the process or available information on accessing such help.

"Better support mechanisms for students to be able to anonymously report/discuss problems they are having with their supervisors."

A number of external students continued to feel that their personal circumstances negatively impacted their experience.

"Working full-time and studying part-time is extremely challenging and has made milestones very difficult to reach. I have a good work network but a poor academic network and as a person who thinks out loud and needs to discuss concepts and approaches with someone, regularly, not having that type of access to my supervisors (or a local alternative) has affected my progress. My supervisors claim that I 'rely on them too much so get my work in

College based discussion

In order to facilitate open, candid, dialogue within the focus group settings, there were no written constraints on the content or structure of these sessions beyond addressing the key questions required for the feedback loop. Consequently, feedback on College specific matters interspersed with more general comments and issues. Where applicable to the wider context of the doctoral candidate experience, this information has been provided within the relevant identified themes.

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Calibration/maintenance required for specialised equipment (inaccuracy can have significant repercussions)

Poor training practices for use of specialised instrumentation

Restrictive access to labs/equipment

No log books

More freedom and autonomy requested for research and the generation of financial support ie. lease out equipment/skills to increase funds/income

Redundant/excess equipment in labs

Isolation of some students (physical and social)

College of Marine and Environmental Science (CMES)

7.6% participation

Efficient services, good admin support (for trip tracker/travel documentation etc) – although changed for some sections of the College with restructure

Welcoming, comfortable, supportive, flexible – other PhD students are the greatest resource to navigate the processes and protocols

Well supervised – variety of flexible styles to suit

Impressive research facilities/access – a number research stations that take advantage of tropical location

Allows teaching support to assist student finances

Lacking in scholarly development – knowing what's out there

Limited scholarly networking in College - not knowing what other students are doing (eg postgrad conference)

Isolation of students that are not involved with established lab groups

Workshops are often seen as unnecessary or repetitive

Questionable seminar value (discipline dependant)

Conflicting information on merits of thesis by publication vs traditional

Publish or perish mentality enforced through many supervisors

College of Arts, Society and Education (CASE)

8.1% participation

Beneficial workshops/writing retreats

Increasing social networking between some disciplinary areas since amalgamation as College eg weekly morning meetings

Variable admin support

Lack of formal induction processes at the College level - allocation of office, IT access and support (central printers) resources, student support funding

Limited social events/collegiality/networking (no formal buddy system or mentor)

Environment of increasing politics and bureaucracy – uni as a business rather than about the research

College of Healthcare Services (CHS)

15.7% participation

Lab groups/peer and supervisor support are very positive

Writing retreats and workshops have been productive and useful (although threatened by reduced funding)

Valuable real life/industry experience

Difficulties in accessing guidance or admin support

Limited communication

College of Business, Law and Governance (CBLG)

17.1% participation

Great range of supervisor knowledge and experience

Although there are teaching opportunities available, students have to be proactive

Poor/old infrastructure – asbestos issues identified in some buildings (Townsville)

Poor communication and admin support (one student was particularly critical to the extent of actively advising potential students not to study with this College)

Poor staff and student morale

PhD students don't feel integrated or valued

Reduced seminar series/engagement/sense of belonging

Concerns about the safety/security of research data

Australian Research Council Centres of Excellence (ARC)

21.2% participation

Useful annual research symposium

Valued multidisciplinary collaborative opportunities – academia and NGOs, national and international networks

Expertise – best in the world reputation – excellent calibre of research

Proactive skills development and mentorship – team work interactions

Diverse nationalities/international representation

Small centre yet diverse opportunities– valued encouraged and supported

“Atmosphere” in Centre sometimes intimidating – high standards and expectations - top down pressure

Competitive goal oriented can create research/student isolation

Pressure to continuously provide publications for high impact journals (advised 10+ needed for post doc) “publish or perish”

Joy of science/knowledge vs output - fear of underperforming/threat of position

isolation and limited support, although satisfaction levels were mixed. These trends seem consistent with the Post Graduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ) 2012-2014 where there has been a decline in overall satisfaction with the intellectual climate, goals and expectations of doctoral candidates at JCU.

Supervisor support continued to receive the most positive feedback from respondents. In most ca

- Conducting effective skills audits
- Providing c

The development of an accessible, centralised electronic record tracking of individual activities and milestones as completed

"I think an electronic tracking system that students can log in (a little like blackboard for higher degree research) would be excellent, a site where all your candidature document can be submitted including ethics and tracked at where it is in the process, it would also be a good place to discuss things with supervisors, student research monitors and the school. It seems to work successfully for coursework based programs so why not for PhD students."

Administration, transparency and accountability

The provision of learner, direct contact details and protocols

- established/identifiable point of contact for specific issues/enquiries to improve response times
- Greater consistency in terminology, forms, guidelines and advice

"Minimal admin support was provided. My only contact with the College was re: organising pre-completion seminar and thesis submission. To this day, I still don't know what the GRS and what the College responsibilities are, and who I was supposed to contact for what. This could be clarified, to avoid future confusion."

Support for external, off campus and professional doctorate candidates

Development of a separate but complimentary system of support, engagement and flexible processes for external or professional doctorate candidates

Generic College processes

Each College was recommended to provide a specific handbook and compulsory induction for each

new PhD candidate

- Highlight additional College based funding and professional development opportunities: IRA top-up support, grants, scholarships, tutoring, marking and teaching
- Information that is regularly maintained/updated and made available to students each year

"The JCU website should have more information of current staff, their duties/ responsibilities and their photo as well. It will be easier for students to locate where to go or who to meet when they need help. Unlike undergraduate students, HDR students start their program differently during the year, GRS/College should organise an official meeting to students and introduce them to the organisation structure, the program, people in charge and do not need to wait until a formal introduction day"

College specific initiatives and improvements should be developed in response to the feedback provided in the College based discussion section

Conclusion

This report presents the findings of a study into the experiences of doctoral candidates at James Cook University in 2015. Qualitative data concerning administrative and institutional support, supervisory/advisory experiences and engagement with JCU the Graduate Research School and each College has identified specific areas of satisfaction and areas of improvement. Areas of satisfaction continue to include research supervisor expertise, advisory support, general facilities and skill development opportunities. Examples of best practice include mentor/lab based student support programs and the proactive social networking opportunities offered to international students. Identified issues include ongoing communication problems, limited funding opportunities, increasing competition, variable mental health support, adequacy of professional career development and varied advisory experiences. Each of these issues help to explain a recent decline in overall JCU candidate satisfaction regarding intellectual climate, goals and expectations which were indicated in the most recent Postgraduate Research Experience Summary Report (2014).

Reflecting a diversity of student experiences which encompass both the recent GRS and wider university restructure, there was a clear level of transition angst and reform that permeated student observations. While some students felt these changes improved processes and systems, par cite 0 Td [(p)3.3(r)g.8

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APPENDIX

Doctoral Experience Survey

1. Are you male or female?

- Male
- Female

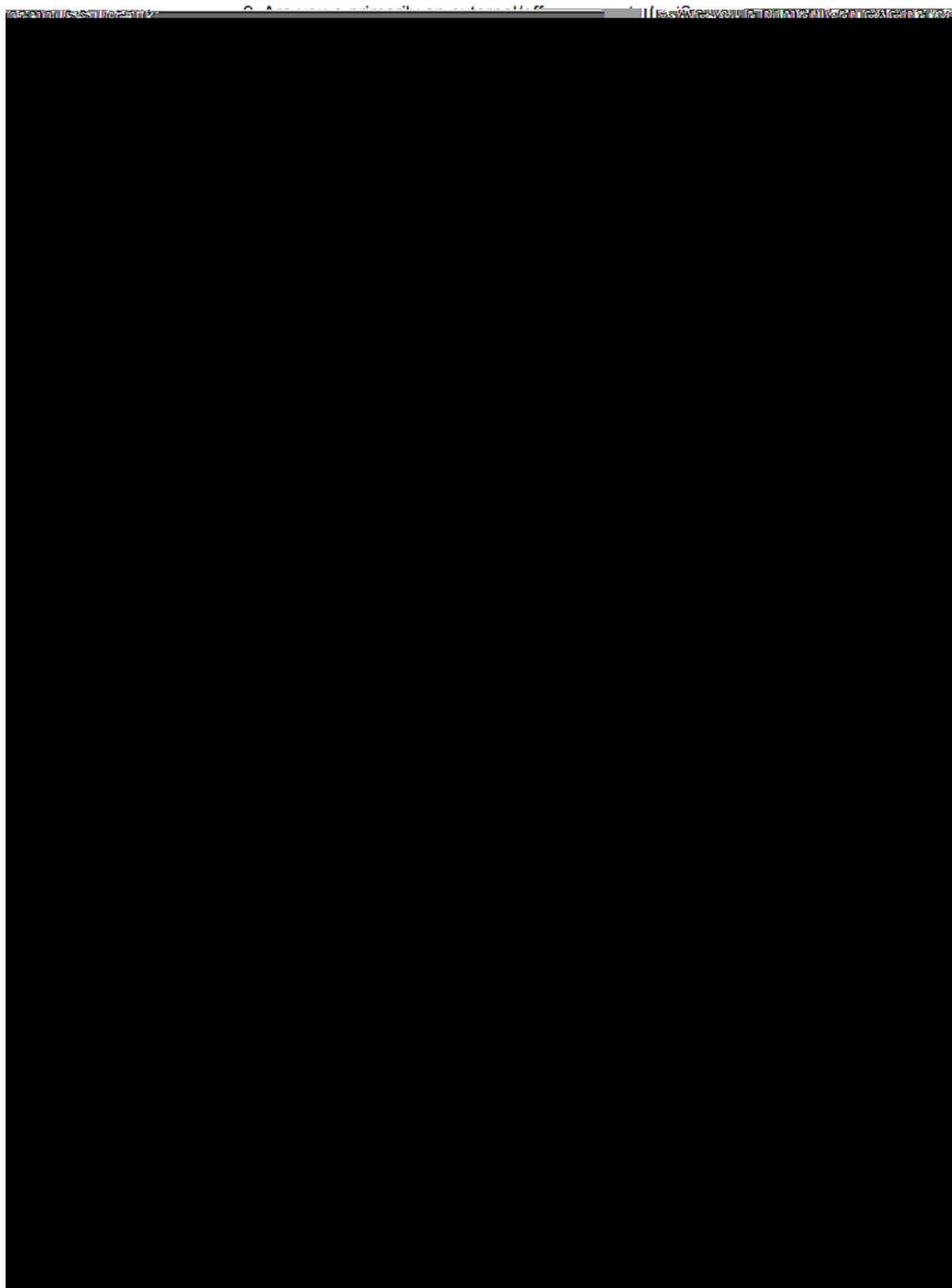
2. What is your current age?

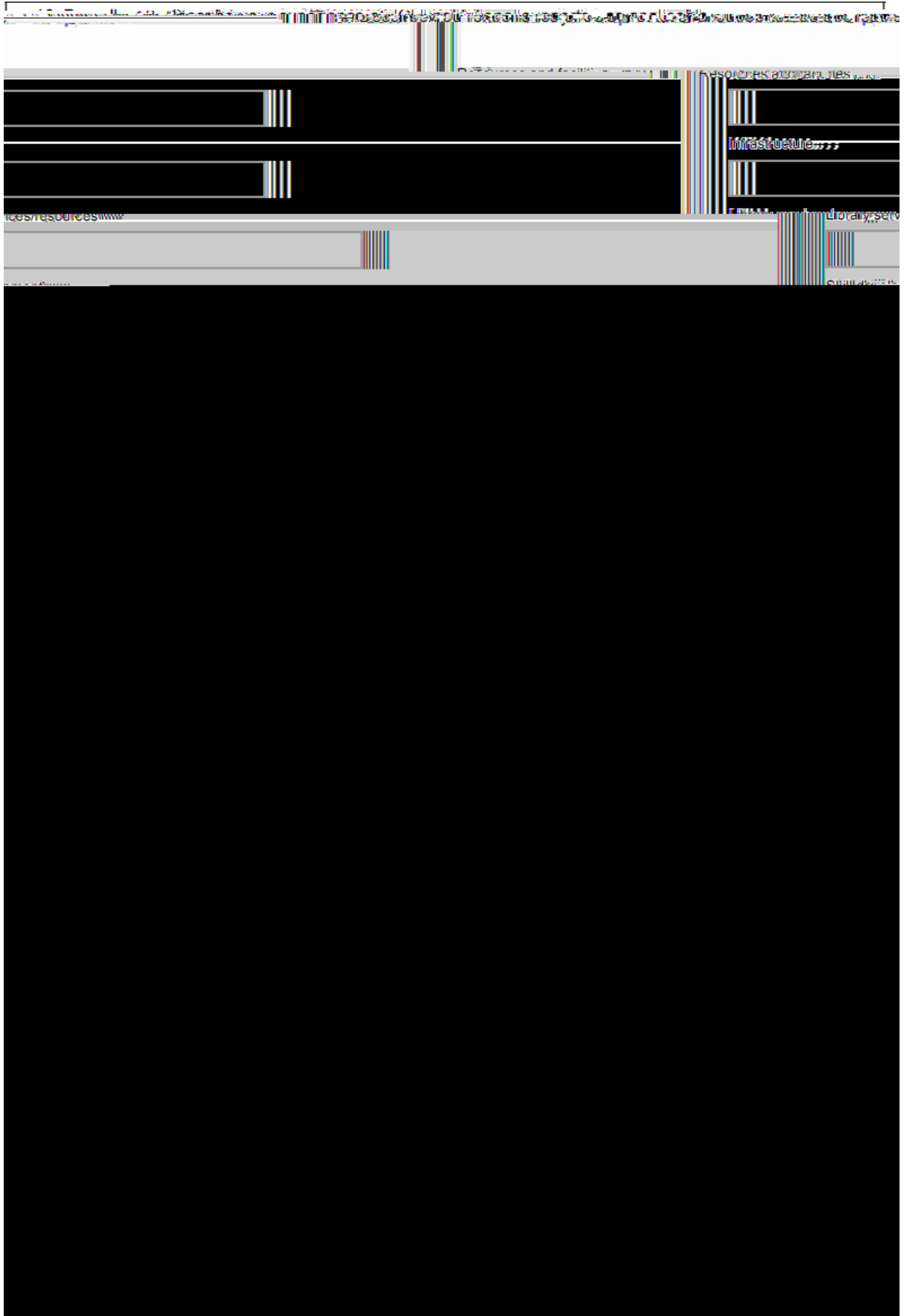
<input type="radio"/>	60 or older
<input type="radio"/>	55-59
<input type="radio"/>	50-54
<input type="radio"/>	45-49
<input type="radio"/>	40-44
<input type="radio"/>	35-39
<input type="radio"/>	30-34
<input type="radio"/>	25-29
<input type="radio"/>	20-24
<input type="radio"/>	18-19

8. Are you enrolled full time or part time?

Full time

Part time





Date	Description	Amount

