

Myths vs Facts about Higher Degree Research



Myths and Facts about HDR

Stage 1: Thinking about starting the HDR Process

Myth: I'm not brilliant enough to complete a Masters or PhD thesis.

Fact: While you do have to have a reasonable degree of intelligence, you need other qualities as well – such as being organised, hard-working and motivated. Take comfort from the fact that the university will only let you into the program based on your own demonstrated academic ability. If you're able to get into the program then this is a good indication you have the requisite ability. This perspective, returning to the evidence rather than your worries, is an important antidote to the old "imposter syndrome", which is commonly felt when we invest in something outside our comfort zone. For more information about imposter syndrome, you may find free introductory information from the book "Imposter Syndrome" by Hugh Kearnes, an academic from Flinders University, helpful. <http://impostersyndrome.com.au/index.php/the-free-guide/>

Myth: I must have a completely new idea to commence research.

Fact: Very few research theses contain *completely* new ideas. Most research builds on existing ideas and seeks to add a small but significant piece of information to current scholarship. Research may also test existing ideas or seek to demonstrate previously hypothesised concepts.

Myth: Doing research is isolating and lonely.

Fact: While a lot of the work you undertake when doing research is solitary, there are avenues to increase your social support. Often on-campus students have offices, laboratories or work spaces that are located near other HDR students and a social network of students can develop from this. UNE also has a number of clubs and societies that can help students connect with one another and their study discipline.

Myth: I will be a 'starving student' for the rest of my life.

Fact: It may be possible to receive a number of generous postgraduate awards and scholarships to help out with the cost of study and living expenses. Contact HDR Services or check out their webpage to find more info on this. Remember that doing a PhD or Master's program may increase your employability and may lead to more lucrative employment opportunities.

Myth: I'm too busy.

Fact: Download this free ebook for practical strategies about balancing work and personal life: <http://www.ithinkwell.com.au/free-books/ebook-the-balanced-researcher>

Myth: No one will ever read or publish my research.

Fact: Highly unlikely! Electronic databases permit researchers worldwide to access dissertations and theses. You might find yourself citing a thesis by another postgraduate student in your own review of the literature. Some disciplines also lend themselves to thesis by publication—whereby various chapters of your thesis comprise published journal papers. This is often the case with research that involves stages, sequences, or a series of experiments or components. Many supervisors will encourage their students, irrespective of whether they are undertaking a traditional thesis or thesis by publication, to consider publishing some of their work during their candidature, or to present a paper or a display-and-discussion poster at a conference. There is usually School or faculty funding to assist students to get their work published or presented. There are also other opportunities to put your ideas out there: whether it be at a School symposium, a 3-minute thesis presentation, the annual UNE Postgraduate Conference, or a "brown bag" (i.e. byo lunch) lunchtime seminar series.

The support you need to succeed

Myth: I won't have people there to support me?

Fact: What "support people" means will vary for one student to the next. Support people might need to include friends and family for one student or might only refer to fellow students and academic staff for another. For most students it is a mixture of people from all parts of their life, including possibly a student's faith community, their pub friends, sporting club mates, or even family pets (admittedly not people, but can be just as important).

Stage 2: Beginning the HDR Process

Myth: All other HDR students seem so competent and knowledgeable about the research process except me.

Fact: In Stage 1 we mentioned the "imposter syndrome". Sometimes that annoying feeling of being an imposter can linger when you have just started your Masters or PhD—that feeling that other students are speaking a more superior language and know more than you! It's possible that some students might know more about their research area as they may have commenced their studies before you. But many are most likely sitting with some uncertainty about what they have just embarked on, and might be putting lots of energy into looking like they know what they are doing. That in and of itself is an exhausting trap to avoid. HDR students do not need to know everything up front and no one is expecting you to. Supervisors, peers, and colleagues will find it refreshing to hear that someone does not have all the answers, is grappling with some gaps in their knowledge, is a bit lost, and needs to ask questions and seek guidance. True learning occurs when students feel able to say what they don't know and can freely seek guidance and support about how to take responsibility for their learning.

Myth: It's difficult to find a supervisor.

Fact: One can argue that this might sit in Stages 1 and/or 2. The relationship you have with your supervisor can be as important as the topic itself. Don't be afraid to "shop around"! Read the bios and prior research of potential supervisors and arrange face to face meetings to speak about their interest areas. Gather an understanding of their general approach to research by reading the work of other students they have supervised. You are of course able to present your own research ideas, however, most topics are decided through collaboration, where you both fine-tune the topic. If this is the first time you have done post-graduate research, then value your supervisor's experience; whilst you might be passionate about a certain area, they will know what is achievable within the timeframe/ethical guidelines/resources you have available.

Myth: I won't know what to expect from my supervisor

Fact: It's good to be clear both on what your expectations are of your supervisor and any self-doubt you may be experiencing. It's important to remember that the supervisory relationship is ultimately a professional one and that your supervisor has many other competing demands on their time. This should not be misinterpreted as a lack of interest in you, or a repudiation of your ideas and abilities. Similarly, your own self-doubt may lead you to crave affirmation and to be overly sensitive to anything that isn't this. It may lead you to interpret feedback and suggestions as criticism and condemnation. If you feel that the relationship you have isn't working then you should discuss the reasons as to why with your supervisor to see if a more beneficial arrangement can be reached.

Ultimately, you have more control over the supervisory relationship than you might think. This can be both a blessing and a curse, however, if done mindfully, you will likely find the research process a much more positive experience. From the beginning, consider how you can arrange regular meetings with your supervisor, establish an agenda with specific outcomes for these discussions, and send an email afterwards to clarify key points. You may find the following fact sheet by Hugh Kearns, "The Care and Maintenance of Your Adviser", helpful. <http://www.nature.com/naturejobs/science/articles/10.1038/nj7331-570a>

The support you need to succeed

Stage 3: Middle of HDR Process

Myth: I'm falling behind.

Fact: It's appropriate and helpful for you to be aware of all the things that still need to be done with your project. With any type of research, delays are to be expected. Check in with your timetable and consider revising it to reduce this anxiety and also discuss your progress with your supervisor to get their opinion on the situation.

Many factors can impact on motivation and procrastination; some common traps include feeling like you need to have completely finished your readings, or entirely understand where you are going with your work before you start writing. Instead, consider the "salami approach", whereby you look at tackling a small piece or slice at a time, even before you feel 100% "ready", rather than the whole big picture (this makes the experience much more enjoyable!). Aim for small study chunks regularly (1-2hrs of writing a day) instead of setting aside a whole day once a week.

Myth: Numerous revisions means my project is flawed and my abilities as a writer and/or researcher are poor.

Fact: Multiple revisions are a normal part of the process of writing a thesis. It is likely that you will need fewer of these as your skills develop. Remember, your supervisor wishes your work to be as brilliant as possible, and at this level of academia, this can take time.

Myth: I've been rejected by a journal, this means my project is poor and I should reconsider any plans I have for a career in academia.

Fact: It is not unusual for HDR students and academics alike to submit their work to several journals before an article is accepted for publication. Many academics learn to value the feedback they get from reviewers, and see it as an opportunity to further refine their work rather than to take it as a personal rejection. Many researchers will seek the services of a professional, approved editor or proof reader to ensure their work reads well and is as polished as it can be for publication. Find out via the HDR Office at UNE who are approved thesis editors.

Myth: I will become bored by research.

Fact: It is normal for any HDR student's enthusiasm for their research to wax and wane. Often this is due to feeling so close to something or immersed in it that you lose perspective and might wonder "does anyone really care about this?". You will become an expert on what may be a very narrow focus, and may lose sight of how it fits into the bigger picture. If that is the case, then this is where attendance at postgrad seminars, conferences in your discipline, opportunities to present and publish your work are important. Meeting with others who share the same passion, and where all the pieces of the puzzle that your research is a part of come together. Do speak to your supervisor and/or HDR coordinator about opportunities to meet others doing similar research. Also, while it can be good to have your own space to do your research, create times where you are not working in isolation. Meet with your postgrad peers.

Myth: I will lose track and not find my way again.

Fact: This can be a common feeling in the middle of your research as you are required to be internally motivated and self-directed with time management. It can help to arrange semi-regular (i.e. fortnightly) face to face or phone meetings with your supervisor if you haven't already, and ensure that you send an agenda or have prepared key points beforehand so you get the most out of it. You might also find it helpful to read examples of "good theses" if relevant to get a sense of structure and case conceptualisation. Try not to become too consumed by the finish line and instead focus on small tasks that are achievable within each day.

Stage 4: End of HDR Process

Myth: There's not enough time to complete it

Fact: Try to stay focussed on the limitations of the project you are completing; if you are doing Honours, then you are not expected to be doing an exhaustive review of everything within that field! And remember, good quality research includes a review of the study's limitations so there is a legitimate place to raise these concerns and make suggestions for future enquiry.

Be honest about your progress and make sure you ask for help early if you are legitimately off track. Your supervisor wants you to do well (it's their name on the research too!) so will work with you to make things achievable.

Now more than ever it is important to develop a study plan. Consider the primary goals and break these down into smaller chunks so you have a clear focus for each study session and can easily see your progress.

Myth: No one will want to read my work.

Fact: As mentioned in Stage 1, this might be your belief but is unlikely to be shared by anyone else. Many students at the write-up phase start to question if what they are writing is worthy of seeing the light of day and convince themselves that no one will want to read or publish their work. The fact is that you would not have got to this phase of your research if your supervisors and others did not have faith in what you have done to date. The challenge is to put your voice and confidence into what you are writing – to show you have a compelling new story to tell in your area of research.

Myth: I'll be either over or under qualified and won't find a job.

Fact: It has to be said that completion of any academic qualification does not guarantee any graduate a job. The length of time before a graduate gets work hinges on a number of factors—one obvious one being supply and demand for certain types of graduates in the job market. Sometimes HDR students will "pidgeon hole" themselves—meaning they believe the only job they can apply for is one in academia, or one specifically in their research area. While this is an option that should not be ruled out and might be seen as the ideal or "dream job", being open to a whole world of jobs that you may not have considered, and for which you may not realise you have the skills for, is very much encouraged. If you want to be armed with the facts rather than the myths about graduate/post-graduate positions, and to be clear about what "transferrable" skills you have that lend themselves to many types of jobs, then we encourage you to make an appointment to speak to the Career staff at UNE. They provide a free service to all students which includes assistance with resume preparation, mock interviews, advice re: graduate positions and where/how to apply. For more information go to: <https://www.une.edu.au/current-students/support/student-support/career-development>

For an appointment with UNE Student Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS) call (02) 6773 2897.

Also go to the Student Support homepage for more information about the range of support services. <https://www.une.edu.au/current-students/support/student-support>

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