

THE BOND UNIVERSITY RESEARCH SCHOLARSHIP PANEL

Bond University values its higher degree research student cohort, and provides a substantial level of direct financial support to many students. In 2017 new stipends and other direct financial for PhD students from both Commonwealth and Bond University funds will be in the order of \$450,000 per annum.

As with any higher education provider, Bond University is not in a position to offer scholarships to all students. A scholarship is defined by the Australian Tax Office as financial aid to scholars that is awarded on merit, and open to a wide range of candidates. To give this definition affect, Bond University has a merit based approach to determining which students are eligible for a scholarship. Being provided an offer of entry into the PhD program does not guarantee that a student will receive a scholarship. A scholarship will only be offered to the top students in a cohort. A scholarship for all successful applicants includes a stipend (living allowance), and for international students it also includes a fee waiver and overseas health cover.

There are two key overarching principles for determining the distribution of scholarships among applicants. First, scholarships are to be awarded through a competitive merit-based process. Second, scholarship applicants are to be treated equitably and fairly regardless of their research discipline, and regardless of the source of their scholarship funding.

Bond University established a Scholarship Panel in 2014 which makes the merit based decisions. Membership of the panel is to include at least one person affiliated to each Faculty. The Scholarship Panel is chaired by the Chair of the Higher Degree Research Subcommittee (HDRS), and the exact membership of the Panel will be reviewed annually by the HDRS, although the Chair may appoint, with relevant consultation, a replacement for a designated member that is unable to attend a meeting. It is not possible or indeed necessary for every specific discipline to be represented on the Panel. A panel member is not an advocate for a Faculty or a discipline, but rather their role is to collectively and collegially come to a consensus based decision on the best recipients for a scholarship for Bond University as a whole. Where potential conflicts of interest occur, for example a scholarship panel member being part of an applicant's supervisory team, they will be declared and managed on a case by case basis. Normally in such an instance, this will include the scholarship panel member leaving the room for any substantive discussions on the merit of the applicant.

In terms of the process for ranking, scholarship panel members rank each individual applicant against the criteria included in Appendix 1. These criteria were developed with input from the Scholarship Panel. The collective scores are summed, and a preliminary list of ranked applicants constructed. Starting with the top ranked applicant, each applicant is individually assessed and any moderation to individual scores from a scholarship panel member is undertaken. Moderation typically occurs when on reflection and/or on the basis of panel discussion, a scholarship member alters their individual score. This may or not alter the overall rankings.

Students are generally only allowed to apply for a scholarship once, however in exception cases, the Chair of the Scholarship Panel may permit a student to reapply once only. Half scholarships are not given. Where a student with a scholarship is to be enrolled in their PhD program part-time, there are tax implications, and the need for them to check their individual financial circumstances will be communicated to the student.

APPENDIX 1 Assessment of Scholarship Applications Framework

HDR Scholarships focus on attracting high calibre research students to Bond University, in a highly competitive student market. The challenge with assessing scholarship applicants is that a direct “apples with apples” comparison is often difficult. This is because the topics and methodologies can differ substantially across disciplines, and applicants are often at different stages of their career meaning they have had varying opportunities to demonstrate research capacity. Some applicants may have interruptions to their careers due to family matters.

The following is meant to be a guide to assist panel members in determining rankings for scholarship applicants. This is particularly the case with respect to the suggested weighting of scores (summarised in Table 1). There can clearly be a need to consider each application on a case by case basis rather than just applying an overall score. This is likely to be particularly important for applicants that are around the margin of being approved or rejected for a scholarship. Bond University has deliberately taken a more flexible and inclusive approach to scholarship assessment than many other higher education providers.

Table 1. Summary of weightings for attributes to assess scholarship applicants.

Attribute	Weighting
Personal statement	5
Previous academic performance	25
Research experience and research potential	30
Referee reports	5
Supervisory team and support	10
Research proposal	20
Awards and recognition	5
Total	100

Personal Statement (Score out of 5)

The personal statement should be formally written using professional language. It should convey succinctly the motivation for the student in undertaking higher degree studies. Ideally, it should have an emphasis on recognising the desire by the applicant for advanced research training in their chosen discipline. It can include brief mention of any work experience in the private or a public sector that is specifically relevant to the proposed research project.

Previous Academic Performance (Score out of 25)

It can be argued that previous coursework achievement is not always the best indicator of research potential, but nonetheless it does potentially provide some insight into the applicant’s attributes, including time management which is important for a timely HDR completion. The focus should be on coursework achievement that is directly relevant to the proposed area of research study. Any training in research methods or the philosophy of research should be considered favourably. The importance of previous coursework achievement may be diminished depending on the time elapsed since completion and work experience (including research assistant work).

Research Experience and Research Potential (Score out of 30)

This is a parameter that is highly influenced by career stage and professional opportunity (including career interruptions). The challenge is that panel members need to weigh-up research potential versus research output that has been realised. As a bare minimum a recently graduated applicant should have undertaken “minor thesis work”, and the grades achieved for this should be a Distinction or High Distinction (or equivalent). A student with First Class Honours in a dedicated research focussed Honours year should rank highly, although it should be recognised that the prevalence of such an Honours year differs substantially across disciplines and is also declining in some discipline areas. Students that have had the opportunity to publish should also rank highly, although the exact level of input by the student into the publishing process should be ascertained if possible, as well as the quality of the publication forum. Some students may have publications by doing some very basic RA work, but having done so in a laboratory where all staff involved in the project are included as co-authors regardless of actual contribution. The opportunity for RA work is also highly variable across disciplines and these should also be taken into consideration.

A prospective student may have substantial relevant work experience related to their proposed research topic. This can include research assistant work, clinical experience and other work in the public and private sector that is relevant to the project. Again, this is a parameter influenced by career stage and professional opportunity (including career interruptions). A recent graduate may have less work experience opportunities. A potential applicant may have developed new research skills, or further developed existing skills over and above the level achieved in previous study. For a high professional achiever, a consideration is also how the prospective student will transition from the workplace to the HDR environment, particularly given the likely difference in responsibility and individual control that can occur.

Referee Reports (Score out of 5)

Ideally the applicant should provide referee reports from persons that are able to provide first-hand experience of their research potential or research output. General character references or references focussing on coursework achievement are of less value unless they link to research potential or research output. Referee reports from potential supervisors are ineligible.

Supervisory Team and Support (Score out of 10)

A good supervisory team can influence the probability of a successful completion and the timeliness of completion. A scholarship applicant may also have additional academic support outside the formal supervisory team. While the general adequacy of the supervisory team and the supervisory loads of the supervisors will be assessed as part of the enrolment, the supervisory team and its track record is a consideration for scholarship assessment. This assessment of track record of the supervisory team should include previous successful and timely completions. If a student has worked previously under the supervisory team (wholly or in part) in a research context this should be looked at favourably as the student has been “road-tested”. However, a consideration in this regard is the transferability of RA experience for example into the design and implementation of a PhD level project.

Research Proposal (Score out of 20)

While certainly elements of a research proposal will be specific to a certain discipline, there are elements which should stand out across the disciplines. This includes a clearly defined scope of work, a literature review of sufficient depth to demonstrate that the applicant has a grasp of the literature base, organisation of the research proposal, clear and succinct research questions, and well-described, feasible and appropriate methodology. The applicant should also be able to demonstrate that they have a grasp of methodologies relevant to their discipline area. At least one panel member should be able to provide additional background in the discipline area to inform the panel of any specific details.

Awards and Recognition (Score out 5)

Awards and recognition are a good way to judge an applicant relative to their peers in their discipline. University awards (e.g. University Medals) and professional association awards should be more highly regarded in most instances than community awards.

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