Executive Summary

This study was initiated by the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research) as one of a number of initiatives in quality improvement and more effective candidature management.

The aim of the study was to explore the first year research experience at Macquarie University and the University’s management of Higher Degree Research (HDR) education. Thus, the 2003 cohort of non-fee paying research masters and doctoral students commencing in the first semester were invited to participate in the study.

An overall participation rate of 46% of the cohort was achieved through either focus group interviews, individual interviews or email survey. Many participants commented positively on this study and the University’s interest in their studies.

The text of this report contains the analysis and findings of the research, as well as specific student suggestions.

A Draft Report was presented in February 2004 to Macquarie University’s Higher Degree Research Committee for discussion and feedback. At the March 2004 meeting, the HDRC recommended to adopt the Draft Report as the Final Report and to circulate it to Deans of Division and Postgraduate Coordinators and to distribute copies to participants in the study.

The main issues and findings are summarised in this Executive Summary and there are suggestions for institutional responses.

Overview of Findings

General Findings

1. The main reasons cited by students for undertaking a HDR at Macquarie University are:
   a. the knowledge, reputation and prestige of a particular academic or research area;
   b. successful past study at Macquarie;
   c. the availability of a scholarship or other funding to support the student.

2. The majority of students participating in the study are happy with most or all aspects of their first HDR year.

3. Students were very positive about the degree of freedom and autonomy that existed within the University to undertake research. They appreciated and did not want to lose the flexibility of current arrangements and processes.

4. Students were particularly pleased that the University had undertaken this study to provide an opportunity for their views to be heard and many inquired about future opportunities for this type of feedback.
5. In general, students are not particularly demanding of the University and appear particularly understanding of university pressures (e.g. tightness of space, scarcity of resources and high academic workload).

6. There is a clear difference in personal confidence, degree of guidance required and expectations between students with prior research experience (e.g. Honours) and for those without.

7. While in many instances students would appreciate information and guidance on their HDR from the University, students overall stressed that the responsibility for undertaking skill development and completion of the HDR was a student responsibility. There was nevertheless high praise for University / Divisional initiatives to assist in these areas.

8. The provision of coherent and consistent information on student entitlements and HDR expectations, together with a brief orientation, would cover many identified areas of student needs.

9. University-wide, the areas of greatest need seem to be:
   a. Having a sense of belonging to a research community;
   b. Effective university communication of diverse information;
   c. Transparency and consistency in university / divisional processes.

**Supervision Matters**

1. The research reputation of an individual academic and/or of a research specialisation plays a key, if not the most important, role in attracting HDR students.

2. All students, at the time of participation in the study, had a supervisor, though there were instances where the allocation had only recently occurred.

3. Where students selected their supervisor - a feature most commonly found in the Science fields – there tended to be greater satisfaction with supervision and progress.

4. There was broad variation in the degree of topic definition by mid semester 2, with students in non-science fields, especially Masters students, concerned that they may not be on track.

5. Those students with Honours or other previous research experience tended to have greater self confidence in being able to understand what lay ahead in the research process and in their ability to deal with it.

6. Most students felt that they would have done little different prior to enrolling in their HDR and those students with prior research experience in particular, felt well prepared for the research process.

7. Many students stressed the importance of an HDR peer group, which included more advanced HDR students, in helping them settle into their research and deal with issues as they occur.

8. Students on the whole were unsure whether their area had a Postgraduate Coordinator and even if they knew, some felt reluctant to approach the Postgraduate Coordinator (or other academic) where they had any queries in relation to supervision.

9. Many students expressed a wish for general guidelines on supervisor contact time and supervision responsibilities/expectations.
Resources and Skill Support

1. Many of the full time students participating in the study had some space allocated for their work. Students recognised that there were space pressures within the University but in general it was clear that the space available for the University’s HDR students was insufficient.

2. In instances where open planned areas, e.g. postgraduate rooms, are available to HDR students to work in, and where these spaces are also communal, (for meetings, morning tea, etc,) students appreciated the opportunity for interaction these spaces provided but also found it difficult to undertake work which required more concentration e.g. writing.

3. The provision of technical support and distribution of other resources is not always seen by students to be consistent. Students would appreciate clearer guidelines on space and resource entitlements and some consistency within and between Divisions on space allocation processes.

4. Students were highly positive on the library courses available to build computing and research skills.

5. Where it was offered, students were pleased to have a divisional orientation, however not all students made use of this opportunity.

6. In those areas where general research methods courses are required of students, the response is broadly positive. However, the effectiveness of these courses and progress on a student’s research is strongly affected by the availability of concurrent supervision.

7. Access to divisional and university resources does not always take into account the specific needs of part time students in relation to after hours and weekend access e.g. to postgraduate rooms, photocopying etc.

8. In some research fields where students require funding in addition to the $4000 student entitlement (available on a competitive basis), full or detailed costing did not appear to be undertaken on research commencement, which results in student uncertainty of fund availability as well as increasing pressure on tight completion times.

Organisational Issues

1. Overall, university organisational units do not have a particularly strong client service focus for HDR students.

2. Transparency in decision making did not always seem to be present to students in, for example:
   - Space and resource allocation;
   - Availability of technical support;
   - Allocation of part time teaching opportunities;
   - Scholarship distribution;
   - Additional funding opportunities (e.g. divisional supplementation).

3. The effectiveness and consistency of information provided to students varies greatly, and is an issue, both within Divisions and between the University and the Divisions - for example scholarship allocation, funding prospects, assistance for international students, application process etc.
4. Students commented on the need for a basic information pack, the greater development of the HDR website and the availability of specific information prior to enrolment.

5. There needs to be greater recognition, particularly within Divisions, of the different types of students (full time, part time, international, staff as students) and the tailoring of support and assistance specifically to these groups.

6. The role of the Divisional Postgraduate Coordinator, where it exists, is new and developing, and is unclear to many students. This role offers a potential asset to the Division and its research climate, especially if supported by the Divisional Head, as students need a divisional contact in addition to their supervisor, especially for administrative queries.

7. Where the Postgraduate Coordinator role exists, it is not always appropriately resourced and supported.

**Institutional Responses**

1. Maintain the freedom, flexibility and autonomy in the research process that students currently strongly appreciate. *(For action: Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research) and Deans of Division)*

2. Develop a stronger client service focus, particularly in recognising the distinction between undergraduate and advanced research students in terms of administrative and academic support and access to services. *(For action: HDRU)*

3. Continue to make efforts, and make a university priority, to provide more space for HDR students in an appropriate environment to conduct research. *(For action: Deans of Division)*

4. Provide students with specific pre-enrolment information which includes tips/information on how to select a supervisor. *(For action: HDRU and Deans of Division)*

5. Students should be required to provide a more detailed research proposal on application, to enable better supervisor allocation, as well as to assist students in defining their research topic within the context of tight completion times. For example, proposal guidelines could be available on a University / Division web page. *(For action: Deans of Division)*

6. In those fields where funding of research costs is needed, undertake more detailed costing prior to commencement to ensure funding sources are sufficient. *(For action: Deans of Division)*

7. Develop greater sensitivity and mechanisms for improved communication within Divisions and between Divisions and the University. *(For action: HDRU and Dean of Graduate Studies)*

8. Develop greater transparency and consistency in decision making and service provision (allocation of space, provision of technical support, grant and scholarship processes, part time teaching allocation, and provision of information). *(For action: HDRU and Deans of Division)*

9. Formalise the role of the Divisional Postgraduate Coordinator and provide adequate recognition of the workload and resourcing of the role. *(For action: Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research))*

10. Provide, within Divisions, more targeted support for the different types of students. *(For action: Deans of Division)*
11. Where Divisions allocate supervisors to students, develop early, confidential and more frequent follow up mechanisms to ensure the appropriateness of the allocation. *(For action: Deans of Division and Postgraduate Coordinators)*

12. Within the Divisions, monitor consistency of supervision practices. *(For action: Deans of Division and Dean of Graduate Studies)*

13. Where research methods courses are required, ensure that there is regular, concurrent supervision or make general research methods courses a pre-requisite for an HDR. *(For action: Deans of Division and HDRU)*