**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 repeat the 2003 study exploring the quality of the first semester first year research experience at Macquarie and to gauge the effectiveness of key HDR changes instituted in 2004 from the student perspective.

In 2004, 63% of the HDR student cohort participated in the study through either: focus group interviews, individual interviews or email survey. Overall, participants commented very positively on most or all aspects of their candidature during the first semester of their first year. There are numerous suggestions for “fine tuning” and ideas for the University and Divisions to further enhance the student research experience.

This report contains the analysis and findings of the study, as well as specific student suggestions. This final report incorporates the suggestions and feedback provided by Macquarie University’s Higher Degree Research Committee.

**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;
   b. successful past study at Macquarie;
   c. the prestige of the department or research centre; and
   d. the availability of a scholarship or other funding to support the student.

2. Students commented positively on the opportunity to provide feedback on their experiences.

3. Overall students expressed far fewer information needs than in 2003.

4. Half of the participating Masters students were enrolled in a Masters because it was required by their Division.

5. The majority of students participating in the study are happy with most or all aspects of their HDR commencement.
Supervision Matters

1. Most students (84%) select their supervisor themselves, based on past supervision experience and research reputation.
2. Two thirds of students (68%) stated that they had another supervisor in addition to their principal supervisor.
3. In a small number of cases students were notified of their supervisor well after commencement or experienced unexpected changes in supervisor/s.
4. The majority of students have the access to their supervisors that they believe they need, although around 16% are dissatisfied with the level of supervisor contact.
5. More so than in the 2003 study, students commented on the high workload of their supervisors.
6. Students commented favourably on supervisor knowledge, skill, and guidance; with less than 5% of participants commented that they were dissatisfied with the level of guidance and support received from their supervisor.
7. In a small number of cases students felt that they had not sufficiently defined or identified their research topic.
8. Compared with 2003, more students described research of an interdisciplinary nature or involving industry partners.
9. 82% of students said that they had a clear idea of their expectations of their supervisor.
10. However, only 65% felt that their supervisor had a clear idea of what the student was expecting of them as supervisor. Masters students were more likely to be uncertain about expectations.
11. A number of students requested information on Australian expectations of a doctorate or masters.
12. All students responded positively to the Draft Candidature Management Plan for Masters, professional doctorate and PhD students finding it helpful in outlining key stages in the process.
13. A number of students asked for more detailed information on thesis style, preferring to write in the expected format from the start.
14. Many students commented on the helpfulness of mid-year progress monitoring.
15. Students were all aware of the need for timely completions and 88% stated that their completion time estimates were in line with Divisional expectations.
16. In some Divisions students again commented on the need to develop a research climate which was more inclusive of HDR students and the need for more opportunities for informal communication with academic staff.

Resources and Skill Support

1. More than half of the participating students were very happy with the resource support for their research.
2. As in 2003, there was variation in resource support across and within Divisions.
3. Around one third of students (28%) either did not have a work space appropriate for their needs or did not have a space and needed one.
4. An important issue for many students is sufficient (lockable) storage space for research materials.

5. Where students supply their own computer, there can be difficulty in accessing University technical support and software.

6. There was some concern about the overall state of equipment in some science areas.

7. Students stated that they felt well prepared for the HDR.

8. The majority of students commented that Macquarie University was well resourced and generous in terms of student support.

9. The majority of comments about the Library were very positive, students particularly pleased with the courses on offer and the support of Outreach Librarians. There were suggestions to provide more flexibility in course offerings and also in relation to updating material in some areas and library resources for HDR students.

10. Students in ICS, ELS and Linguistics and Psychology stated financial support was clearly outlined and that they needed to put together a budget to support their research needs. The main need for clarification was whether or not students could ‘roll over’ funds from one year to the next.

11. In other Divisions, students either did not raise any financial issues or were unclear about the type or amount of support available to them.

12. Some Divisions indicated that they have flexibility in accommodating specific financial needs to support student research but it is not clear that students are always aware of this.

13. Overall 57% of students believe that they have adequate resources to undertake their research; the remainder are either not sure (20%) or believe that they do not have sufficient resources (22%).

Commencement Programs

1. The University Commencement Program has made a significant difference in assisting students commence their HDR and in meeting many of the information needs students raised in 2003.

2. A total of 90% of participants attended the University Commencement Program.

3. Students would find it helpful to have the dates of compulsory attendance requirements such as University and Divisional Commencement Programs and compulsory regular seminar attendance provided at the time of application.

4. There is scope for fine-tuning the University and Divisional programs with some sessions considered more appropriate at Divisional level. About 10% of participants felt that the university program could be shorter.

5. Students suggested the offering of optional follow on sessions from the University Commencement Program which could include thesis writing, first steps in getting started on a HDR, staying motivated.

6. A total of 80% of participants attended a Divisional / Departmental commencement program.

7. Students provided good feedback on best features of Divisional programs.
Organisational Issues

1. Most contact that students have in the early stages of their HDR is with the HDRU. The majority of comments were positive, though with the need to ensure a strong client service focus for all dealings with students.

2. A total of 93% of students found the enrolment either easy or average but also offered a number of suggestions to assist the HDRU as they continue to improve this area.

3. Two categories of students where application and enrolment could be improved are for those local and international students applying from overseas and also for students in doctorates other than the PhD.

4. A total of 52% of students commented positively on the HDRU website and there are numerous suggestions provided for improvements and additions that students would find useful.

5. A number of students commented on difficulties and assistance needs in relation to gaining ethics approval for their research.

6. Students commented positively on the social interaction provided by the International Office and the availability of Travel Grants.

7. Compared with 2003 many more students (82%) knew who their PGC was and 71% had had contact with their PGC in some form.

8. Part-time and Masters students were more likely not to know who their PGC was.

9. Strong departmental fragmentation within a Division is more likely to lead to student perceptions of administrative and resource inequities among students in the Division.

Institutional Responses

Overall

1. Continue to focus on communication and information improvements. (For action: Dean of HDR)

Information

2. Provide a calendar of important dates for students at the time of application, which includes dates for the Commencement Programs and other compulsory attendance requirements. (For action: HDRU)

3. Make clear prior to enrolment all regular and compulsory attendance requirements in Divisions. (For action: HDRU)

4. Make available the Candidature Management Plan documents for Masters, professional doctorates and PhDs, even in draft form, prior to commencement. (For action: HDRU)

5. Provide information no later than the time of enrolment on Australian PhD, professional doctorate and Masters expectations, research processes and outcomes. (For action: HDRU)

6. Provide from commencement more specific information on thesis expectations, including a style template. (For action: HDRU)
Supervision

7. Make available to students prior to application suggestions on selecting a supervisor. *(For action: HDRU)*

8. Ensure that overall supervisor workload supports additional HDR supervision at time of acceptance of new HDR students. *(For action: Deans of Division)*

9. Ensure at divisional level that the more specific needs of different categories of students are met (e.g. interdisciplinary students, part time, distance, staff as students, international) and provide more targeted support where needed. *(For action: Deans of Division)*

10. Clarify all student research costs particularly in higher cost areas at the time of application. *(For action: Deans of Division)*

11. Clarify mutual expectations in relation to supervision. *(For action: Deans of Division)*

12. Continue to monitor consistency of supervision practices within the Divisions. *(For action: Dean of HDR, Deans of Division)*

Commencement Program/s

13. Fine tune the University and Divisional Commencement Programs. *(For action: Dean of HDR, Deans of Division)*

14. Include in Commencement Program a short session specifically for Masters students on University requirements and expectations, including for transferring to PhD. *(For action: Dean of HDR, Deans of Division, HDRU)*

15. Provide optional follow on sessions from the University Commencement Program on thesis writing, staying motivated, initial steps in getting started on a HDR. *(For action: Dean of HDR, Deans of Division)*

16. Ensure divisional commencement programs provide sufficient coverage of supervisory relationships and expectations, financial, technical and administrative support available, introduction to key people, tour of department/division. *(For action: Dean of HDR, Deans of Division)*

Administration and Resources

17. Continue to develop the HDRU website as a resource for students. *(For action: HDRU)*

18. Examine institutional processes of dealing with enquiries and applications from students while overseas in order to enhance communication and advice. *(For action: HDRU)*

19. Look at the administration of scholarship payments. *(For action: HDRU)*

20. Continue to ensure appropriate physical resources, including sufficient secure storage space for research materials. *(For action: Deans of Division)*

21. Within Divisions ensure transparent process for allocation of resources, support and assistance with administrative requirements. *(For action: Deans of Division)*

22. Examine how the University can support students who provide their own laptops for their HDR. *(For action: DVC (Research))

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