HDR Candidature Management Project:
Improving the first year research experience (2004)

Final Report

April, 2005
Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ................................................................................................................................. ii

Executive Summary ................................................................................................................................. iv

Overview of Findings ............................................................................................................................... iv

General Findings ..................................................................................................................................... iv

Supervision Matters ............................................................................................................................... iv

Resources and Skill Support ................................................................................................................... v

Commencement Programs ..................................................................................................................... vi

Organisational Issues ............................................................................................................................. vi

Institutional Responses ............................................................................................................................ vii

HDR Candidature Management Project: Improving the first year research experience ...................... 1

1. Introduction ....................................................................................................................................... 1

2. Aims and Outcomes of the Study ..................................................................................................... 1

3. Approach ......................................................................................................................................... 1

4. Profile of Cohort and Participants .................................................................................................. 3

5. Discussion of Findings ....................................................................................................................... 3

   5.1 Why a HDR and Macquarie University .................................................................................. 4

   5.2 Supervision Matters ................................................................................................................. 5

      5.2.1 Selection and Allocation of Supervisor ....................................................................... 5

      5.2.2 Student-supervisor Contact ....................................................................................... 6

      5.2.3 Supervisor Guidance .................................................................................................... 7

      5.2.4 Knowing What’s Required: understanding the research process ................................ 8

      5.2.5 Progress Monitoring and Completion ...................................................................... 9

      5.2.6 Research Climate ......................................................................................................... 9

   5.3 Resource and Skill Support ....................................................................................................... 10

      5.3.1 Availability of Physical and Technical Resources .................................................... 10

      5.3.2 Skill Development ...................................................................................................... 12

      5.3.3 Skill Development and Resources Through the Library ........................................... 13

      5.3.4 Financial Support ....................................................................................................... 13

   5.4 Commencement Programs ........................................................................................................ 15

      5.4.1 University ................................................................................................................... 15

      5.4.2 Division/Department Commencement Programs ..................................................... 17

   5.5 Organisational Issues ................................................................................................................. 18

      5.5.1 University ................................................................................................................... 18

      5.5.2 Division ..................................................................................................................... 20

6. Concluding Comments ....................................................................................................................... 21

7. Appendices ....................................................................................................................................... 22

   7.1 Letter of Invitation from the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research) ....................................... 22

   7.2 Focus Group and Interview Session Schedule ...................................................................... 23

   7.3 Focus Group Interview Schedule ............................................................................................ 24

   7.4 Postgraduate Coordinator Interview Schedule ...................................................................... 25

   7.5 Charts ........................................................................................................................................ 26

      7.5.1 Profile of Participation Rates by Division 2004 ......................................................... 26

      7.5.2 Profile of PhD and Masters Students 2004 ............................................................... 26

      7.5.3 Profile of PhD Students in Cohort ........................................................................... 27

      7.5.4 Profile of Masters Students in Cohort ..................................................................... 27

      7.5.5 Profile of Full-Time & Part-time Participation Rates ................................................. 28

      7.5.6 Profile of Full-time Students in Cohort .................................................................. 28

      7.5.7 Profile of Part-time Students in Cohort .................................................................. 29

      7.5.8 Profile of Gender Participation Rates ......................................................................... 29

      7.5.9 Profile of Male Students in Cohort .......................................................................... 30

      7.5.10 Profile of Female Students in Cohort ..................................................................... 30

   7.6 MU HDR Questionnaire Results 2004 .................................................................................. 31

Acknowledgements

HDR Candidature Management Project Report 2004

ii
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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,
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))
HDR Candidature Management Project: Improving the first year research experience

1. Introduction

In 2003 commencing non-fee paying higher degree research (HDR) students were interviewed to gain insight into their commencing research experiences at Macquarie University. The intention was to ascertain what systems and processes at Macquarie University were working well for students and where potential for improvement lay. Students responded enthusiastically to the study, providing numerous suggestions for enhancement and appreciating the opportunity to provide feedback.

Many new policies for HDR education at the University were planned during 2003, and 2004 saw a number of important changes implemented for commencing HDR students. In order to gauge the effectiveness of these changes from the student perspective, the 2003 study was repeated. The study and this ensuing report form part of a number of initiatives in quality improvement and more effective candidature management initiated by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research) and the Higher Degree Research Committee.

2. Aims and Outcomes of the Study

The specific aim of the 2004 study was to repeat the 2003 study exploring the transition into postgraduate research and the quality of the first semester first year research experience at Macquarie. Specifically:

Expected outcomes of the study were:

1. To investigate the 2004 beginning HDR student cohort’s experiences in commencing their research degree and their satisfaction with support and guidance provided by the University, Division, Department and Supervisor.
2. To compare their experiences with those of the 2003 cohort study in order to ascertain changes in perceived experiences
3. To provide recommendations for the continued improvement of the first year research degree experience at Macquarie University.
4. To provide a baseline for the University to measure change in student experience and satisfaction in subsequent years.

3. Approach

The study included HDR students enrolled in research masters, PhD and non-fee paying professional doctorates. Thus, professional doctorate students in Psychology were included but DBA students were not. Only students enrolled from the first half of 2004 were included – at the time of the study it was expected that students had completed at least six months of research toward their degree, thus providing an insight into the early research experiences at Macquarie University.
A total of 152 students within these sample parameters were sent a letter of invitation by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research) to participate in the study (see Appendix 7.1). The letter of invitation was also emailed to these students in order to ensure coverage. This contact was then followed up by a phone call to ascertain the students’ interest and availability to participate.

There were three avenues for confidential involvement in the study. Focus group interviews were offered over a 5 week period from mid-August to late September. Focus groups averaged 4-7 students per group. Secondly, students could choose to attend an individual interview, to suit those who preferred not to be in a group environment. Lastly, after all focus groups and interviews were concluded, an email survey was sent to 41 students who had expressed interest but had been unable to attend either a focus group session or an individual interview.

A total of 96 students, representing 63% of the population, took part, offering a diverse and comprehensive view of the 2004 semester one cohort. Their participation was spread as follows:

- Focus Group = 67 participants;
- Individual Interview = 8 participants;
- Email Survey = 21 participants.

Participation patterns for the 2003 and 2004 cohorts were remarkably similar for all avenues, excepting the email survey of which there was a much higher uptake this year.

In addition to the interview participation, all students were asked to complete a structured questionnaire. The aim of the questionnaire was to provide feedback on key changes and improvements for research on students. These questionnaire responses, together with the more open interview situations, provide consistent information, suggestions and feedback. Finally, to allow for a more complete understanding of issues raised in the sessions, follow-up interviews were also conducted with Divisional / Departmental Postgraduate Coordinators.
and Administrators. Three Divisions, in contrasting disciplines, with differing approaches were selected – Environmental and Life Sciences, Linguistics & Psychology and Humanities.

The possibility of participating in the study was well received by students who appreciated the opportunity to express their views and to listen to those of others. A number of students commented that they valued the opportunity to talk with their peers in both their own and other Divisions. Some of the students attending also brought messages from their peers who were unable to attend. A few students from the 2003 cohort had also emailed asking whether there would also be another opportunity for them to provide feedback.

4. Profile of Cohort and Participants

There were several differences between the 2003 and 2004 commencing student semester one cohort. Firstly, as seen in Chart 1 above, there were fewer students overall enrolled in the semester one 2004 i.e. 152 as opposed to 178. Secondly, there were also fewer part-time students. In 2004, 22% of the cohort were part-time compared with 36% in 2003. Thirdly, a much smaller proportion of students were enrolled in a research Masters in 2004 (24%) than in 2003 (33%). Finally, the proportion of male and female students changed from 48% female in 2003 to 54% in 2004.

Overall, 63% of the first year cohort from Semester One 2004 participated in the study. The rate of participation varied across the Divisions, although not as extremely as in 2003. All Divisions presented over 50% participation rates, with EFS at 100% (a total of 3 students) and GSM and ACES also well represented with well over 80% of their HDR students participating. Further, around 50-100% participation was achieved of full and part time students and doctoral and masters students in each Division with the exception of Linguistics and Psychology and Law in one instance. Please see the charts in Appendix 7.5 for details.

The survey revealed that of the Masters participants, one half (n= 12) indicated that they were enrolled in a Masters by personal choice and the other because they were required to do so by their Department/Division. It would be fair to say that most were hoping to convert their research into a PhD; however, the process of doing so was not always clear to them. Among these were overseas students who had completed coursework masters degrees and only just realised this was not sufficient to be recognised as research.

5. Discussion of Findings

From the outset it is important to note that there are some important differences in the 2004 findings. They are discussed in detail in the sections below but the major ones include:

1. There were many more students who stated that they undertook a HDR at Macquarie because they knew their supervisor;
2. The majority of students knew who the PGC in their area was;
3. Overall, students expressed far fewer information needs than in 2003;
4. There were more instances raised of students undertaking interdisciplinary research and industry partnered projects than in 2003;
5. The awareness of completion deadlines was strong, with resultant feelings of pressure;
There were also several areas where student comments showed the same areas of concern to 2003. The two major ones are:

1. Variation within and between Divisions in terms of financial and resource support;
2. Need to cost research more closely prior to commencement in higher cost research areas.

Detailed discussion of these and other findings are presented in the sections below and are discussed in five key areas:

1. Student reasons for undertaking a HDR
2. Supervision matters
3. Resource and skill support
4. Commencement Programs
5. Organisational Issues

Where there are differences between fields of study or Division, type of enrolment, and type of student, these are highlighted. The discussion includes student suggestions for improvement.

5.1 Why a HDR and why study at Macquarie University

Students were asked what it was that attracted them to a HDR and why they chose to study at Macquarie University. Not all participants had or gave an answer for either or both of these questions whereas others gave one or a number of reasons.

When asked why they chose to undertake a HDR, in order of frequency, participants stated (one or more of the following) that they:

1. Enjoyed undertaking research or had a specific question that they wished to pursue;
2. Were hoping to have an academic career;
3. Believed the research experience would assist their career prospects.

Compared with 2003 responses, far more students answered that they were doing a HDR because they enjoyed research.

When asked why they chose Macquarie University for their HDR, the five most frequently mentioned reasons were that:

1. They had known a particular academic, either through previous, usually Honours, supervision or through their reputation in the field; (55 students cf 41 in 2003)
2. They had undertaken previous study here at Macquarie; (36 students cf 35 in 2003)
3. The prestige of the Division or Department or Research Centre attracted them; (35 students cf 28 in 2003)
4. They had received a scholarship to study here; (34 students cf 29 in 2003)
5. They were attracted by the academically open nature of Macquarie. (14 students cf 15 in 2003).
Other reasons participants gave for choosing to enrol at Macquarie University included:

6. They did not like their job or could not find work;
7. They were offered casual academic work;
8. They like Macquarie;
9. The location of Macquarie suited them.

In 2004, reason number 6 on employment was a new explanation raised by participants. In these instances, previous supervision experience here was important factor in decision making. Most importantly, far more students this year cited the reputation and/or personal knowledge of an academic as a main reason for selecting Macquarie University. The importance of individual staff and their research contribution is thus a major university asset.

5.2 Supervision Matters

Issues related to Supervision cover a broad range of areas from the selection/allocation of a supervisor to the process of working the supervisor and extending to the role of the Department or Division in providing a suitable research culture for HDR student research to progress. These issues are all covered in the sub-sections below.

5.2.1 Selection and Allocation of Supervisor

The previous discussion in 5.1 highlights the prime importance of the individual academic in the process of selecting a supervisor. A previous successful supervision relationship, as well as the knowledge area and/or prestige of an individual academic or a particular research group is of prime importance in attracting students to undertake an HDR. The most important means of attracting students is the knowledge and reputation of an individual academic. The survey this year indicated that 84% of participants personally selected their supervisors and the selection was based either on a previous supervision relationship or knowledge of the academic’s work through publication or extensive web searching on the part of students.

A total of 19% of participants in 2004 indicated that they received their supervisor either through a Departmental or Divisional allocation process. Almost half of these students were in Humanities. Further, almost half of the participating ACES students as well as most EFS and LP students were in this category. Three students were from ICS and ELS and this was unusual for these Divisions.

Approximately 10% of students raised the issue that their primary supervisor was on OSP for their commencing semester. In all instances, students had another supervisor and indicated that work was progressing satisfactorily, and, that in many cases they were still in email touch with their primary supervisor during this time. It does however seem to have a psychological impact on students to begin their research with their supervisor absent.

The survey results also indicated that 68% of participants had another supervisor in addition to their principal supervisor. However, 32% indicated that they did not have another supervisor or were not sure whether or not they did. These students came from all Divisions with no divisional pattern easily discernible.
A small number of students also discussed their concern at finding out only mid year that the person they had thought was their supervisor, was in fact not their supervisor, or that the person they had selected as their supervisor was to leave the University and a replacement supervisor, not always someone they would have chosen to work with, appointed as their supervisor. Mostly, for these students these situations were unsettling rather than disagreeable, although where the supervision situation had been unsatisfactory it provided a good opportunity for change without having to personally confront the situation.

As in 2003, a small number of students felt it would be good to have some guidance on how to select a supervisor or of what to look for in a supervisor.

### 5.2.2 Student-supervisor Contact

The degree of supervisor contact that students have, desire, and are satisfied with, varies greatly, including among students in the same field of study. This variability is reflected in the student comments. In the majority of cases, students have the access to their supervisors that they believe they need, while approximately 16% of participants indicated that they were not satisfied with the contact they had with their supervisor. A sample of positive comments from students:

- Supervisor is always easily accessible;
- Can contact supervisor spontaneously;
- Is always easily contactable;
- Have regular and fairly frequent meetings;
- Available on a daily basis;
- Even accessible on weekends;
- Meetings take place at designated time;
- Even when on leave there is easy email contact;
- Always prompt email answers;
- Supervisor will meet off-campus due to distance.

There were also examples of student and supervisor reaching an agreement on frequency of contact at the start. Where this agreement was not kept, students felt let down and frustrated.

Where there were a number of different supervisors involved, such as in industry projects or supervisors external to Macquarie, a few students commented that it can be a battle to get all parties together [student K704], though in no situation did it seem to present a problem for students’ research progress.

There were a number of negative comments about the degree of contact with the supervisor and also supervisor accessibility. While the number was small, half of the comments came from students in one of the Divisions. The comments made by students include:

- Don’t feel comfortable about approaching my supervisor;
- Have to make an appointment six weeks in advance;
- Supervisor misses meetings;
- Supervisor has too many students and not enough time for me;
- Compulsory fortnightly seminars cut into time available for supervisor contact (from part time students working full time).
One area of potential concern for the University is the number of students who commented on the time pressure their supervisors were experiencing. Students commented on, for example, high undergraduate teaching loads, high administrative load, large number of HDR students to supervise. These observations were particularly strong in those Divisions with high numbers of HDR students, but were certainly not restricted to these. Interviews with PGCs confirmed workload issues had risen, and that it was no longer as easy for a supervisor to encourage a student to just drop in. However, they maintained that the University’s and Division’s workload model was the avenue for dealing with this matter. In this context too, some students commented that it would be helpful to have some idea of what degree of contact a student could expect.

### 5.2.3 Supervisor Guidance

It would be fair to say that if a student was satisfied with the level of supervisor contact, then they were also happy with the guidance that they were receiving from their supervisor/s. Students commented favourably on supervisor knowledge and skill, advice, timely and pertinent feedback, and, general support in the important early stages of commencing a HDR. Some students “complained” that their supervisor was pushing them to begin writing or present their research proposal. In many cases students also commented favourably on their feelings of satisfaction, increase in self-confidence or satisfaction with progress once such tasks had been achieved.

In a very small number of cases, representing less than 5% of participants, students were strongly dissatisfied with their supervisor and guidance and support received. The level of discontent in such situations is summarised by this student:

> My supervisor has no time for me and can’t remember my name. One 10 minute meeting with my supervisor since I started has been all I could get and that gave me no guidance whatsoever. A thoroughly useless experience. [Student ES0504]

There were also instances where it was clear that students had either not sufficiently formulated their research area prior to commencement or had come to a supervisor with their own project in an environment where team / supervisor projects were more the norm. In the latter situation, students maintained that their supervisor’s guidance and interest in their project was not as great as that received by students working on the supervisor’s broad research agenda. In the former, students were still grappling to define their research area, identify a topic or even asking their supervisor to give them an area to research. Such situations underscore the importance of providing a more detailed research proposal at the time of application.

One issue arising which did not occur in the 2003 study, is the case of HDR projects involving industry partners where the involvement of the industry partner was seen by some students to hold a differing conception of PhD research. In all cases students appreciated the strong support and guidance of their supervisors.

Further in 2003 there were some isolated instances of interdisciplinary research where students raised mainly supervision allocation matters. In 2004 the number of such HDRs seems to have increased. Students in such situations with supervisors across Divisions reported mostly positive experiences. However, the matter of research and communication connections across Divisions remains.
5.2.4 Knowing What’s Required: understanding the research process

The majority of students maintained that they felt well prepared for a HDR and that they also had a good understanding of what was required of them. In many cases students claimed that they were able to draw on past research experience at either honours or masters level or in their work experiences. They would do few things differently except in some instances try to begin their HDR earlier, i.e. pre-enrolment.

These views were supported by the survey results where 82% of students said that they had a clear idea of their expectations of their supervisor. There were 17% who were either not sure or did not know what they expected of their supervisor. Students from six of the Divisions were in this category. Half of the students were enrolled in a Masters.

While most felt confident in their own expectations, only 65% felt that their supervisor had a clear idea of what the student was expecting of them as supervisor. A large 35% were either not sure or maintained that their supervisor did not know of their expectations – 29% and 6% respectively. This may be a reflection of the pressures on contact time that students discussed – see section 5.2.2 – and the high workload that they felt their supervisor carried. However, there may also be other considerations. Half of the students who expressed uncertainty were Masters students. This would indicate that further guidance and information for Masters level research expectations and the supervisory relationship should be made more explicit prior to or on commencement. Half way through the focus groups students were offered the University’s Draft HDR Candidature Management Plan outlining key milestones in the Masters, professional doctorate and PhD process. Students received these enthusiastically and commented on the helpfulness of seeing the key stages outlined. Based on this immediate student feedback perhaps this document could be provided to students on enrolment or the University Commencement Program.

Further, seven of the nine Divisions were represented by these student comments and in the Divisions with the largest HDR enrolments between one third and one half of their participating students responded in this way. Thus, a clear is to make mutual expectations of the research and supervisory process more explicit. Where it is not already the case, it could be covered in the departmental or divisional commencement programs.

Two things in particular were raised by students in relation to the research process. The first was that while students may understand what a PhD or Masters entails based on their past experience, it would be very useful for the University to provide information of the distinctive features of a HDR, whether PhD or Masters, in Australia. The second was that a number of students had wanted to begin their writing using a template or style expected of a finished thesis. They discussed their frustration at not being able to find sufficient guidance for this and suggested that the University should provide more detailed information on thesis styles on commencement.

5.2.5 Progress monitoring and completion

At the time of the interviews most students were in the process of completing a mid year review, had recently completed one or had given a public presentation on their research. Students responded positively to this requirement, citing their feeling of achievement once it
was complete. For some it gave a sense of self-confidence in their ability, progress and being “on track”.

In Divisions / Departments where such progress presentations form part of a regular seminar, there was student feedback that tight chairing of such seminars assisted students better in terms of feedback received. Further, seminars interspersed with “question and answer” opportunities on the research process and/or “airing of problems” are particularly helpful. Having HDR students at later research stages also present was a feature of some seminars and highly valued by commencing HDR students.

Based on the survey the majority of students had completed a research plan either before or since commencement. However, 20% indicated that they had not yet completed a research plan. Since the majority of these students were full-time PhD students from one Division, and since students in this Division had also commented on their satisfaction with their progress and supervision, it may be that the terminology of “research plan” did not fit with the language used in this area of research.

In terms of understanding HDR completion requirements, students maintained that the University and Divisional commencement programs had made this clear. All except one Masters student expected to complete in 2 years and most PhD students in 3 years. For 88% of students this was in line with Departmental / Divisional expectations. However, 10% of students indicated that expected completion time had not been discussed. Most of these were Masters students and hence it may be that if they were hoping to convert to a PhD and discussion had not taken place until progress and research achievements were clearer.

Students in general had no issue with completion times mandated and were pleased to have support in meeting requirements. Three issues however were raised. Firstly, students undertaking a combined masters/PhD expressed concern that the requirements of the combined degree would make it difficult for them to achieve this deadline. Secondly, students on scholarships were concerned that money for the scholarship ran for only 3 years and they knew that there was always a chance that they would require 6-12 months extra. The prospect of no financial support for this remaining, crucial time was a worry to them already at this stage. Thirdly, many students felt that the message of completion times had been so strongly pushed in their commencing months that the effect was actually a negative one and that the push to complete creates the impression that the research is not as important as the completion [Student 0404].

5.2.6 Research Climate

In 2004 students again raised the issue of the extent to which a research climate exists in their Division / Department. Important features of a strong and conducive research climate mentioned by students were:

1. Provision of a postgraduate room within the department offering desk space, secure storage, computers etc.;
2. Peer mentoring and information sharing with more experienced students;
3. Close, day-to-day interaction with academics;
4. Understanding how things are done in the department;
5. Assistance with, and explanation of, administrative and financial support and requirements;
6. Effective internal communication systems;
7. Shared postgraduate/staff facilities; and
8. A departmental research seminar program, with staff and HDR students presenting and discussing research in progress.

All Divisions have many of these aspects. In particular, features 1 and 2, with the exceptions noted in 5.3.1. below, are strong. Less strong in more than half of the Divisions are 3-6, while 7 and 8 are only found in a small number of Divisions. Particularly strong on staff/student inclusiveness are ICS, ELS and Linguistics and Psychology. In other Divisions, students commented on the lack of opportunity for informal mixing of staff;

*The academic research seminars are not attended by students since they feel intimidated. I felt very disconcerted at the one I attended. The staff were outwardly friendly but I felt intimidated and as if I had nothing to contribute.* [Student 0304]

*Compared with other universities where I have studied another striking absence is the lack of atmosphere of a community of scholars. Postgraduate students here have a separate tea room and there is no mixing with the academic staff and consequently little exchange of ideas between staff and students. Such a ‘separation culture’ was not at any of the other universities, either in Australia or overseas.* [Student 0604]

In discussion, students made quite clear that they would not feel comfortable expressing these views in their Departments / Divisions.

There is an important message here about the importance of integration, communication and inclusivity. Where this exists students are happy and are more likely to indicate that they feel comfortable about raising any matters with staff in their Department / Division. Where it does not, the student voice is unheard.

### 5.3 Resource and Skill Support

*To date the level of support provided has far exceeded my experiences at two other universities.* [Student ES0304]

Resources that students may require in the course of HDR vary quite widely and can be quite discipline specific. These are discussed below in relation to physical and technical support needs, skill development needs, the library and the important issue of funding student research costs. As the quote above indicates, the majority of students overall are very satisfied with the resource support the University provides. There are however important issues that can be addressed to improve support for students research and there is still considerable variation within and between Divisions.

#### 5.3.1 Availability of Physical and Technical Resources

*I am happy to spend my time looking for books but I do not want to spend a day trying to plug in my computer.* [Student, A504]
Key physical resources for students are availability of space, ideally dedicated space, to work in, a desk, storage for research documents and data, computing, printing and photocopying facilities. In this respect, there were wide ranging differences across Divisions and in some instances within Divisions.

Particularly in ELS and ICS, students indicated that they were well resourced, had their own desk and storage and were able to work freely on their research without resource concerns.

From the survey, 78% of participants indicated that they had an allocated work space in their Department and 22% had no allocated space. However, not all students require a space to work and where students have a space this may or may not meet their needs. In finer detail the situation was:

- 60% had a space to work and this met their needs;
- 18% had a space to work but it did not meet their needs;
- 12% did not have a space to work and did not want/need a space;
- 10% did not have a space to work and did need a space.

Students who did not need a space to work were often enrolled part time and working elsewhere or lived some distance from the university. In such cases students either had a home office which better suited their needs or had their needs met in their work environment.

Of the students where the allocated space did not meet their needs, most concern was expressed in Humanities, Law and Linguistics & Psychology where between a quarter and one fifth of students raised issues. However, students in other Divisions also commented on space needs. In some areas, the concern was more that the particular room layout was not conductive to writing and research, a matter that students in many cases felt could be readily solved. In other cases, students felt isolated from their peers, in particular if provided with a shared office with students in other fields. In Humanities in particular, students recognised the efforts of the Division and the improvements already made, however, desk space was shared on a “first come first served” basis with the main concern lack of storage space for research data and papers. In other instances students maintained there were differences within their Division and that while the space situation in some departments was good they cited their own or other student incidences where the space or room was inadequate in terms of, for example, size, lighting, power points, ventilation. Students in these situations were particularly unhappy.

In six Divisions there were students who said that they were not offered space and maintained they needed it. In one Division this was of such concern to some of the students that, despite very satisfactory supervision situations, they were considering changing their HDR enrolment in some form.

Nearly all students were satisfied with resource support in terms of printing and internal photocopying although in two Divisions paper and toner supplies could be unreliable and security card access restrictive.

The issue of technical support in relation to computers was overall satisfactory however in a few Divisions there was a perception that access to technical support for computers was unevenly distributed between Departments and that students in some Departments were particularly disadvantaged.
In terms of computers, nearly all students had a computer or access to one. In some Divisions students were more likely to have to share a computer. Where students had provided their own computer the main concern for students was University / Division support for technical assistance was not available since it was not University-purchased equipment. Further, they could not have university-licensed software on their computer, even if dedicated to their HDR. Given a choice between using university money for a computer or using the money to support research costs associated with data collection and analysis, most students preferred to purchase their own computer and utilise the money for research associated costs.

These concerns were also raised in 2003 and it would be helpful to examine what the University could do to assist students who provided their own computer in order to maximise funds for research expenses and to make the computer, software and computer support situation clear at the Departmental / Divisional Commencement Program.

In some science fields, while many students commented on how well looked after they were, the issues of the general state of disrepair of equipment and of insufficient funding for basic laboratory supplies were causing delays and difficulties for some students. Students in such situations commented that the quality and amount of resources available to them was heavily dependent on their particular supervisor.

Knowing where to go for support in these matters in 2004 was much easier for students than in 2003, no doubt due to the Commencement Program where in many cases such matters appear to have been covered.

5.3.2 Skill Development

As in 2003, students felt that they were well prepared for their HDR and that they had the skill level to undertake their degree. Students who had undertaken honours in particular felt that they had gained many skills in terms of time and self management.

A number of students were aware of the possibility of undertaking further coursework to fill gaps in knowledge and/or skill. Several students were doing so and most of these were very satisfied. In the case of a very small number who had come to Macquarie University from elsewhere there were some comparisons with recent coursework undertaken in other universities which did not favour Macquarie University. Also in a small number of cases, students had been given conflicting information within the University on whether this coursework was HECS-exempt resulting in personal frustrations and delays.

In 2003, compulsory coursework requirements for Masters students in some Divisions had created supervision issues and supervisory delays. Perhaps due to the different cohort profile in 2004 there were fewer students who discussed having compulsory coursework requirements. However, where requirements existed there were again students concerns, though this year the concern was more on lack of clarity in regard to the connection between coursework and thesis rather than the supervisory matters raised in 2003. Where coursework is required it would help if Departments / Divisions clearly spelt out how this fits into the overall degree in terms of expectations and timeframes for students and supervisory responsibilities.
By far the majority of students commented that Macquarie University was well resourced and generous in terms of student support and that any further gaps were the responsibility of students themselves.

5.3.3 Skill Development and Resources through the Library

Approximately half of the 80 or so comments made by participants about the Library in the 2004 study were extremely positive. The training courses offered by the Library were well-known and highly praised (‘fantastic’, ‘great’, ‘recommended by everyone’).

Suggestions for improvement of library courses included:

- increasing access to courses for part-time students;
- offering courses after hours and on weekends;
- providing more Endnote courses, and;
- adding an advanced Endnote course.

Students were also very positive about the Librarians and especially the Outreach Librarian service, with descriptions of ‘excellent communication skills’, ‘wonderful’, ‘friendly’, ‘very approachable’ and ‘willing to help’. Students also felt that the library tour and introduction to the Outreach Librarian offered during a number of the Divisional Commencement programs were particularly useful.

Compared with 2003, this year students commented that library resources were inadequate in some areas. About one quarter of students bemoaned a general lack of books, especially up-to-date books in their research area, and the limited access (both online and otherwise) to only the more major journals as opposed to ‘the more obscure journals’. Comments came from students across all Divisions. A number of students indicated that they utilised other libraries in lieu of Macquarie. A small number of students also raised difficulties for them with the new Inter-Library-Loan system. These ranged from delays to research caused by lengthy (up to 5 months) waiting times, and lost requests. Students recognised that the new system had ‘teething troubles’ but current concerns with completions placed pressure back on students.

Additional specific student suggestions in relation to library resources included:

1. Provide more computers and microfiche machines;
2. Provide more study rooms;
3. Provide more Postgraduate rooms, and;
4. Provide more lockers.

5.3.4 Financial Support

The extent of financial resources required to support HDR student research can vary considerably across the disciplines. An important factor for the University and its Divisions is to ensure that there is sufficient financial support for all HDR projects and, particularly for
the higher cost areas, that the needs of the project do not outstrip the financial resources available. In 2003 a number of students in some high cost areas indicated concern that the only way to fund their projects was to apply, early in their candidature, for research grants to support at least a portion of the work. The concerns for students in terms of time pressure, uncertainty of grant success and if they were successful, of funds coming through at the appropriate time were discussed in that report.

For 2004, the University had undertaken to ensure that all Divisions not only have the resources allocated to each HDR student, but that the amount of money and the formula received by each Division per student was explicit. Divisions need to ensure that the funding they receive provides effective supervision and support for successful and timely completions and an explicit requirement is that a minimum of 25% of the total allocation goes directly to students to support their project. In addition, the Commencement Program provided students with an outline of the funding support that the University was providing to each of the Divisions, making clear that the amount varied depending on the disciplinary cost band and mode of enrolment. Within these parameters, Divisions are free to allocate the resources.

During the focus groups it became very clear that practices both across and within the Divisions were indeed quite different, with students most satisfied with the financial support they received found in ICS, ELS, and Linguistics and Psychology. In these Divisions, the main issue for clarification was whether the funds would ‘rollover’ at the end of each year or if they would be lost to the student.

Within these Divisions students were required to put together a budget with justification of need and for it to be approved for spending. Students commented on both the positive and negative aspects of this added responsibility, with a vast majority pleased to have the opportunity to “manage” their own budget within given parameters and guidelines. However, the successful communication, and minimal nature, of the administrative processes involved in this account-keeping process is imperative.

Students in ACES, Law and GSM did not raise any issues in relation to financial support and funding of research costs.

The remaining Divisions presented more students with issues regarding a lack of clarity and/or consistency of funding entitlements. In these Divisions, many students stated that they were unclear on entitlements to financial support, how much was allocated to them and how to access it. Following the University Commencement Program where an overview of funding of student research was presented, students had approached their Postgraduate Coordinators, who were trying to ascertain what the situation was for them.

The PGC discussions highlighted that Divisions and Departments have flexibility in assisting students with ‘out of the norm’ needs. If students make a case most needs can be accommodated and they cited various examples of how this had occurred. However, while some students may have used this avenue, only one student in the interviews stated that they had made a case requesting specific financial support of a research cost.

In low cost fields the main needs students mentioned were photocopying and specialist books which may not be held by the Library. The only funding support students mentioned (as in 2003) is an annual $50 photocopy card – if they know to ask for it. Students invariably stated that $50 was insufficient for their needs and most indicated they are funding their own
photocopying costs, which for them were their predominant research costs. There was also a lack of knowledge among students about whether they could order books for the library, the process for doing so or how to obtain expensive specialised books without paying for them personally. Better communication with students, perhaps through Divisional Commencement Programs, could solve such uncertainties.

One Division had established in 2004 a new divisional conference and travel fund with the HDR money allocated by the University. However, since no student in the Division mentioned this fund, it could again be that its existence and mechanism of operation are not sufficiently communicated to students.

Students in several Divisions, where students had already attended conferences assisted with university funding, stated that reimbursement of conference costs seemed to be inconsistent or unclear to students. Further, students need assistance in understanding and accounting appropriately to University requirements for different types of expenses.

There were also some student comments wanting greater flexibility in the range of research activity supported by the University PGRF. There appears to be a perception among some students that only conference travel is supported.

In responding to the survey, 57% of students maintained that they had adequate resources to undertake their research. The remaining 42% were either not sure or thought that they did not have sufficient resources. As in 2003 in the interview situation a number of students indicated that they themselves need to apply for external grants to support their research costs. Other students commented that they needed more money than they felt they had access to within the University. Together around one fifth of students made such comments.

In relation to costing of research, 22% of participants indicated that their research plan had involved a costing of research, while 24% said this was not applicable to their area of work. Of the remainder 54% were either not sure whether a costing had been undertaken or said that no costing had been undertaken for their research. An important consideration is however that 21% of students said that by the time of the focus groups they had not yet completed a research plan and half of these students also were not sure whether their project had been costed. In part this may be because a number of students have come in working on an aspect of an already funded research project belonging to their supervisor. In such situations students tend to assume that all costs are taken care of. Further, when students are accepted they tend to assume research expenses are covered and, as stressed by the PGCs, a Division signs off on coverage of research costs.

5.4 Commencement programs

5.4.1 University

A major new initiative in 2004 was the introduction of a compulsory Commencement Program for all students beginning a HDR at Macquarie. The aim of the program was to provide an overview of HDR study at the university and an introduction to important considerations in undertaking a research degree as well as providing a range of information on university-wide services that students are likely to need access to during the course of their candidature. This university-wide Commencement program was complemented by a follow-up Divisional or Departmental Commencement program.
There is no doubt from the 2004 study that the Commencement program has made a major difference to students in their settling in to an HDR. Compared with the 2003 study there were very few comments on lack of information, not knowing where to find things etc. There was a positive response – 90% of participants had attended the University Commencement program. 10% indicated that they had not attended. The main reason appears to be associated with notification of the date of the program.

There were two issues raised in the focus groups about the University Commencement program. The first and no doubt a feature of its first year of offer, is that students would like earlier notice of dates where compulsory attendance is required. This is a detail which will no doubt be easily rectified for the 2005 cohort. This was especially an issue for part-time students, who had to secure time off work; external students, who had long distances to travel and; international students, planning their arrival date in Australia.

Approximately 10% of students felt that the Commencement program, while important and valuable, was a little too long and could be cut back to half a day. Students maintained that there was a reasonable degree of overlap between the University and Divisional Commencement program, though other students suggested that the overlap was not really an issue and that it does not hurt to have matters repeated. It was clear however from many of the students’ suggestions that some fine-tuning between university and divisional programs would be worthwhile. Some matters it was believed were more readily dealt with on a divisional basis than on a university-wide basis e.g. Library usage and available resources, including the Outreach Librarians. Other areas which were felt to be better dealt with on divisional rather than a university basis were Ethics and Intellectual Property.

Those participants commencing their higher degree as new students to Macquarie stressed how valuable the day had been to immediately orient them to the university and make them feel a part of the institution. One suggestion for students completely new to the University was to include an optional tour of the university as part of the Commencement Program. For those participants who had done previous study at Macquarie, they also stressed the value of the program in giving them an overview of what was expected, what was available and addressing the issues and considerations that they had.

In terms of follow on from the central Commencement Program, participants would see value in the offer of optional programs or sessions in relation to:

1. Initial steps in getting started on a HDR;
2. Keeping motivated and confident;
3. Thesis writing skills.

However, it must be stressed that many students felt that they would not want to do such a program on a compulsory basis but could see that some students may feel a need. This issue of compulsory on-campus sessions was raised by some part-time and external students as one of which they were uninformed of prior to commencement and one that causes them some degree of difficulty.
5.4.2 Division/Department Commencement Programs

From 2004 it was a requirement that all Divisions provide a Commencement Program for commencing HDR students. Many participants indicated that their Division provided both a Divisional and a Departmental Commencement Program, usually fairly brief, while in some Divisions, Commencement Programs were undertaken only at a Departmental level. A total of 80% of students had attended such a program; however 6% indicated that their Division / Department did not offer such a program, with half of these students from one Division. Fourteen percent of survey respondents did not attend a Divisional or Departmental program, with half of these students in one Division and the rest spread across five other Divisions.

In a vast majority of cases, students were very happy and satisfied with their local Commencement Programs. Best features across the board for Divisions to ensure for inclusion were:

- A tour of the Department/Division (including mail room, post-grad resources etc);
- An introduction to all relevant people (including Dean, PGC (Academic and Admin);
- Talks given by students at later HDR stages of experiences and useful information;
- Session given by relevant Outreach Librarian and Library tour;
- Details of expectations for an HDR degree, (not just completion);
- Clear outline of student entitlements and resources (including, Divisional/Departmental approaches to financial support for research costs);
- Suggest initial steps to begin research after the Divisional Commencement Program;
- Discussion of academic and administrative matters – those small issues taken for granted (eg. Style and referencing expectations, how to logon to the intranet, retrieval of phone messages, access to data storage facilities both online and material).

In some Departments the Commencement Program in fact lasts for the duration of the year, requiring regular attendance on, for example, a fortnightly basis. Students with this requirement suggested that the best features were:

1. Freedom to add items to the (fortnightly) agenda;
2. Talks given by students at later HDR stages;
3. Explicit opportunities for students to raise and solve problems as an integral part of the seminar;
4. Firm chairing of sessions;
5. Being exposed and oriented to the research requirements of their field;
6. Attendance requirements made clear at the time of application or admission;
7. Fair enforcement of compulsory attendance;
8. Opportunities to get to know other postgraduates and academics, reducing isolation and raising self-confidence;
9. Courses to aid being ‘better equipped to do research’ eg. Equipment use, methodologies.
Problems with the regular attendance at compulsory seminars raised by participants were firstly, by part-time students who had not been made aware of the compulsory requirement of this regular attendance pattern and for whom this unexpected requirement placed difficulties given their work situation – since of most worked full-time – or other difficulties in terms of travel. The point was strongly made that such compulsory requirements should be made clear prior to student enrolment. Several students indicated that had they known of this, they would not have continued with enrolment at Macquarie.

5.5 Organisational Issues

5.5.1 University

As would be expected, most HDR student experiences at this stage related to applications, enrolments and scholarships. For a small number there may also be other candidature matters arising which take them outside of their Department / Division and to University administrative units. By far the greatest contact for students is thus the HDRU and this is clearly reflected in the sections below.

Higher Degree Research Unit (HDRU)

For the majority of participants, their experience with the HDRU was generally good with comments such as ‘fabulous’, ‘helpful’, ‘positive and motivating’ and ‘fine’. Participants indicated that they would (and did) seek advice from the HDRU regarding options and inconsistency in information. There were a number of exceptions though and these address administrative and service issues. In such instances there were comments on the importance of having a ‘customer service focus’ in dealing with “the small questions that students have”.

The survey asked students specific questions on enrolment and the HDRU website and in addition, the focus groups raised an important issue of payment of scholarship students. These are discussed below.

Enrolment processes

The enrolment process received many positive comments and was described as ‘Easy’ by 63% and ‘Average’ by 30% in the survey. Comments such as: the ‘enrolment process was very well done’; ‘HDR students were well taken care of by friendly administrative staff’, and; ‘good friendly instructions’ were made by many students. Students offered numerous suggestions for enrolment improvement including, in order of frequency:

1. Facilitate online enrolment;
2. Centralize enrolment process to save running around the University;
3. Increase awareness of enrolment staff of post-graduate course structure;
4. Enrol post-graduates on a separate day to undergraduates;
5. Improve signage for enrolment from public transport access areas;
6. Automate enrolment in compulsory PhD subjects;
7. Provide student access to photocopier in the enrolment office.
There were those however who experienced major difficulties with the enrolment process. The two main categories of students in this situation were students – whether international or local – applying from overseas (which may be explained by issues of the handover process from the International Office late 2003) and students undertaking a combined degree or a professional doctorate. In such cases students commented on communication issues, the need for greater understanding about their specific situations and administrative red tape.

**HDRU Website and overall student information needs**

The HDRU website was accessed by 65% of survey respondents, with 52% of these commenting positively that the website was ‘helpful’ or ‘very helpful’. There were a number of respondents however who indicated that the website was ‘confusing’ ‘complicated’ and that it ‘was hard to find specific things’, and could contain more information targeted at specific categories of students.

Although informational needs of students were reduced this year, through dissemination during the Commencement Program, there were still a number of informational issues that students highlighted would be appreciated at the pre-application stage which would perhaps be best addressed at least on the HDRU website. These include:

1. Dates for Commencement Programs, both University-wide and Divisional level;
2. Early notification of any compulsory attendance requirements and where needed links to Divisions/Departments;
3. Dates for half-yearly and yearly reviews and dates for other institutional requirements;
4. Summaries and comparisons of scholarship and other funding options, both internal and external;
5. More explicit information regarding expectations eg. Student progress, deadlines, difference between and expectations of both a PhD and research Masters etc.;
6. Style and Reference Guide specifications, or Departmental/Divisional templates for thesis structure to facilitate understanding of, and compliance with, research requirements;
7. A contact sheet for students both at University and Divisional levels on services and support available.

**Scholarship issues**

Over half of the students participating in the study indicated that they held a scholarship. Students commented positively on the importance of the scholarship to them and its assistance in making HDR study possible for them. This is also strongly reflected in student decision making in undertaking their HDR degree at Macquarie University.

The majority of students reported smooth scholarship processes. However, around one third of those students who indicated that they held a scholarship raised issues of delays in payment on commencement. Such comments reflected the array of scholarship types, but were more prevalent among students holding APA-I and iMURS scholarships. Delays ranged from only a week or two to several months.
**Research Office (RO)**

Students would not expect to have much contact with the Research Office at this stage of their candidature. Of those who had contact most related comments about the Ethics approval process. There were a number of students who indicated that they felt the Ethics approval process was attempting to “micromanage” research and was more geared to scientific research than that of the social sciences.

It was suggested that the Ethics Committee might allow for the possibility of an interview in addition to the application to ‘allow for interaction and explanation’ which would ‘minimize time for students and remove delays’.

Where it does not already exist, it may be valuable to include a more detailed ethics session in Divisional Commencement Programs in areas of the University where students are more likely to need ethics clearance for their research.

**International Office (IO)**

International student participants rated highly the social contact that was encouraged by the IO holding lunches and get-togethers. The Travel Grants that are offered by the IO were also appreciated by those students that knew of them and either had already or planned to utilize them next year.

Suggestions included giving students more information at the Commencement Program as to the availability and guidelines for funding from the IO.

**5.5.2 Division**

In 2003 many students reported uncertainty about who in their Division or Department they should go to for HDR related information. In 2004 this situation had vastly changed with such comments being an exception rather than the norm. While there were still areas where there was lack of clarity – see earlier sections on e.g. funding – there have been very apparent improvements for students based on comments of their experiences.

In 2004 participating students were surveyed on whether or not they knew who their PGC was and also whether they had had any contact with them. Given that in 2003 most students were uncertain or did not know who to go to or even what a PGC was, in 2004, the fact that 82% knew who their PGC was and that 71% had had contact with him/her, confirms the benefits of changes introduced. Only 17% either did not know, or were uncertain, who their PGC was. Part-time and Masters students were more likely not to know and there was at least one participant in each of seven Divisions in this category.

Discussions with PGCs indicated that theirs was a role with a high workload. Based on the interviews this year the workload was seen to be sufficiently covered through the workload model. Welcome for most PGCs, where it does not already exist, is some form of teaching relief and the possibility of research assistance at times. Appropriate, dedicated administrative support was seen as crucial for the role to function smoothly.
As in 2003 strong fragmentation within a Division is also likely to lead students to perceive inequitable treatment of students within the Division and a lack of transparency in decision making and resource allocation (e.g. technical support and room allocation). Students in several Divisions commented on perceived inequities.

In general, Divisions that are strongly fractured along departmental lines, and where HDR enrolments are lower, seem to present the most difficulty for students in terms of ease of navigation of administrative and resource matters.

6. Concluding Comments

The majority of the students participating in this study are happy with all or most aspects of their HDR at Macquarie University. There are of course variations across and within Divisions as well as between the different categories of student.

The changes introduced by the University for the 2004 HDR cohort have been very favourably received and the Commencement Program in particular has reduced the number and range of information needs expressed by students in 2003. The changes in explicit financial support for student research has been appreciated by students and most are now more alert to the financial aspects of their research.

There are however still areas for fine tuning in relation to communication of institutional requirements, expectations and support available and the provision of relevant and timely information to students.
In 2004, Macquarie University introduced a number of improvements for Higher Degree Research students including the development of a Commencement Program for new research students. These changes were the result of 2003 planning for HDR students and included consultation with research students through a focus group study.

To continue to better understand experiences and views of commencing research students, we will be undertaking over the next few weeks, a number of focus group interviews with students enrolled for the first time at Macquarie University in 2004, in either a research masters or a doctorate.

I am writing to invite you to participate in one of these focus groups. Each focus group will take an hour.

The University is interested in your views on all aspects of your research experience at Macquarie during your first year. I would like to encourage you to take part and to feel free to be open with your views and suggestions. No comments that you make will be attributed to you as an individual.

The focus groups will be conducted by Ruth Neumann, Higher Education Policy Officer of the University. A series of focus group sessions has been planned for mid-August to mid-September. The groups will be small (6-8 students) and the sessions will be held during both day and evening for maximum convenience.

If you are interested in taking part in a focus group, please reply to Ruth. She will arrange a time and obtain your agreement to participate. Should you prefer to have an individual interview, please advise Ruth. She can be contacted on 02 9850 6403 or by emailing highered@vc.mq.edu.au.

All participants in the focus groups will receive a report of the findings. If you would like to look at the report of the 2003 Candidature Management Project, please go to ‘Articles of Interest’ at www.ro.mq.edu.au/HDRU.

I hope that you will be able to make time in your busy study schedule to participate and help to improve the research environment for postgraduate students at Macquarie University.

Yours sincerely,

Jim Piper
Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research)
### 2004 Focus Group and Interview Session Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Session Type</th>
<th>Morning Session</th>
<th>Afternoon Session</th>
<th>Evening Session</th>
<th>FAC/NT</th>
<th>Number Attended</th>
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<td>18/08/04</td>
<td>Mixed FG</td>
<td>11-12pm</td>
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<td>RN/LB</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Fri</td>
<td>20/08/04</td>
<td>Individual</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tues</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>RN/LB</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mon</td>
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<td>2-3pm</td>
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<tr>
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<td>10/09/04</td>
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<td>11-12pm</td>
<td></td>
<td>RN/LB</td>
<td>7</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mon</td>
<td>13/09/04</td>
<td>Mixed FG</td>
<td>11-12pm</td>
<td></td>
<td>RN/LB</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mon</td>
<td>13/09/04</td>
<td>Mixed FG</td>
<td>3-4pm</td>
<td></td>
<td>LB/RN</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Mixed FG</td>
<td>11-12pm</td>
<td></td>
<td>RN/LB</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tues</td>
<td>14/09/04</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>2-3pm</td>
<td></td>
<td>RN</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Fri</td>
<td>17/09/04</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>2-3pm</td>
<td></td>
<td>LB</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Tues</td>
<td>21/09/04</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>11-12pm</td>
<td></td>
<td>RN</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

75
7.3 Focus Group Interview Schedule

HDR Candidature Management Project: Improving the first year research experience

Focus Group Questions

AIM: To explore the transition into postgraduate research with a view to improving the first year student experience and the University’s management of HDR education.

1. You have all started on a PhD/Masters this year, what attracted you to enrol in a research degree at Macquarie University?

2. You have been involved in your research for around 6 months so far. What has been the best part for you so far? What’s worked really well for you?

3. In the past few months, since you started your research, what has gone differently from your expectations? What challenges have you come up against?

4. Looking back, what would you do differently before enrolling in a PhD/Masters? Do you think that you could have been better prepared? How?

5. What do you think the major hurdles will be for you for the next 2 or so years? And how can the University help?

6. Well, from our discussion today, what wouldn’t you like to see changed? And what needs to be changed?

Areas to probe:
- Supervisor selection
- Topic development
- Departmental / Divisional support and climate
- University support and climate (including administrative support RO / HDRU)
- Infrastructure
- Skill gaps
- Understanding what’s required of a research degree
7.4 Postgraduate Coordinator Interview Schedule

HDR Candidature Management Project: Improving the first year research experience

Questions to Divisional / Departmental Postgraduate Coordinators

Questions:

1. Firstly can you outline your role within the Division/Department?
   a. What issues do you have to deal with?
   b. Personal workload

2. How would you describe the Divisional/Departmental interface?

3. How would you describe the Divisional/University interface?

4. Are there any particular issues in relation to those 1st year enrolled HDR that appear different to those of students in later years?

5. What works particularly well? What doesn’t work so well and how could it be improved?

Areas to probe:

- Orientation program
- Peer support
- Fortnightly seminars
- Enrolment process
- Resources
- $ for research costs
7.5 Charts

7.5.1 Profile of Participation Rate by Division 2004

The participation rate for all students by Division was higher this year than in 2003, with 56% or higher of students from every Division participating via one avenue or another.

7.5.2 Profile of PhD and Masters Students Participation Rates 2004

Chart 7.5.2 illustrates participation by HDR type and, with the exception of Linguistics and Psychology (with only 3 Masters students), 50% to 100% involvement was realised.
7.5.3 Profile of PhD Students in 2004 Cohort

In all Divisions with PhD students, over 50% participated, with total PhD participation across Divisions at 64%. Most Divisions with smaller populations had a higher rate of participation eg. MGSM (86%), ACES (80%) and SCMP (71%).

7.5.4 Profile of Masters Students in 2004 Cohort

In 3 Divisions i.e. EFS, GSM and ACES, we received 100% participation of Masters students although this dropped to 33% in LINP and 50% in SCMP and LAW, which all have smaller populations. The overall participation rate for Masters students was 61%.
7.5.5 Profile of Full-Time and Part-time Students Participation Rates 2004

Participation rates of both full-time and part-time students were higher than in 2003 and the overall participation rates for these students respectively were 64% and 62%.

7.5.6 Profile of Full Time Students in 2004 Cohort

For all Divisions there was over 55% participation of full-time students in the study, with those in smaller population Divisions again better represented e.g. 100% in EFS and GSM, 80% in ACES and 75% in LAW.
### 7.5.7 Profile of Part Time Students in 2004 Cohort

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Division</th>
<th>Part-time Sample</th>
<th>Part-time Pop</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EFS</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GSM</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACES</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HUM</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAW</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCMP</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELS</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LINP</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICS</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Four of the five Divisions with smaller part-time student populations showed 100% participation this year.

### 7.5.8 Profile of Gender Participation Rates 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Division</th>
<th>Male Participants</th>
<th>Female Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EFS</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GSM</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACES</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HUM</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAW</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCMP</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELS</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LINP</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICS</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

EFS had the highest participation rates for both genders at 100% although this represents only 3 students. There were no females eligible for participation in LAW this year.
7.5.9 Profile of Male Students in 2004 Cohort

It should be noted that the ratio of males to females undertaking First Year HDR this year shows a marked difference to that of 2003. Overall there was a 64% participation rate for males, with 100% involvement in EFS and MGSM.

7.5.10 Profile of Female Students in 2004 Cohort

While the number and ratio of females enrolled in an HDR this year has increased compared to 2003, the overall participation rate of females was 62%, slightly lower than for males.
### 7.6 MU HDR Questionnaire Results 2004

NB. First figure listed is the number of responses to that answer; the second figure is the number of responses expressed as a percentage of total sample (96 respondents). More than one response per question may have been given.

1. How did you get your Principal Supervisor?
   - a. Personally selected = 66 69%
   - b. Previous supervisor = 14 15%
   - c. Department/Division allocation = 18 19%
   - d. Don’t yet have one = 0 0%
   - e. Other = 5 5%

2. In addition to your Principal Supervisor, do you have another supervisor?
   - a. Yes = 65 68%
   - b. No = 24 25%
   - c. Not sure = 7 7%

3. Do you have a clear idea of what you expect from your supervisor?
   - a. Yes = 79 82%
   - b. No = 6 6%
   - c. Not sure = 11 11%

4. Do you think your supervisor has a clear idea of what you expect of him/her?
   - a. Yes = 62 65%
   - b. No = 6 6%
   - c. Not sure = 28 29%

5. How did you find the 2004 enrolment process?
   - a. Easy = 60 63%
   - b. Average = 29 30%
   - c. Difficult = 7 7%

6. Did you attend Macquarie University Commencement Programs offered in 2004?
   - a. February 2004 = 72 75%
   - b. July 2004 = 14 15%
   - c. No = 10 10%

7. Did you also attend a Divisional/Departmental Commencement Program in 2004?
   - a. Yes = 77 80%
   - b. No = 13 14%
   - c. None offered = 6 6%

8. Do you know who the Postgraduate Coordinator for your Division/Department is?
   - a. Yes = 79 82%
   - b. No = 8 8%
   - c. Not sure = 9 9%

9. Have you had any contact with your Postgraduate Coordinator?
   - a. Yes = 68 71%
   - b. No = 16 17%
   - c. Have not needed to = 12 13%
10. Have you completed a research plan?
   a. Yes, before commencement = 37 39%
   b. Yes, since commencement = 44 46%
   c. No = 20 21%

11. Does your research plan involve costing of your research project?
   a. Yes = 21 22%
   b. No = 44 46%
   c. Not sure = 8 8%
   d. Not applicable = 23 24%

NB. For Q12-Q18, only 89 responses as 7 participants did not complete p2 of questionnaire.

12. Do you have adequate resources to undertake your research?
   a. Yes = 51 57%
   b. No = 20 22%
   c. Not sure = 18 20%

13. Do you have an allocated space to work in your department?
   a. Yes, it does meet my needs = 53 60%
   b. Yes, it does NOT meet my needs = 16 18%
   c. No, no space = 20 22%

14. Are you undertaking a Masters/PhD?
   a. PhD = 68 76%
   b. Masters (i) enc’d/req’d by Div = 12 13%
   (ii) student chose to do = 11 12%

15. How long do you expect you will need to complete? [FTE = full time equivalent]
   a. 4 years(FTE) for PhD = 20 22%
   b. 3 years(FTE) for PhD = 49 55%
   c. 3 years(FTE) for Masters = 1 1%
   d. 2 years(FTE) for Masters = 20 22%

16. Is this in line with your Department’s/Division’s expectations?
   a. Yes = 78 88%
   b. No = 2 2%
   c. Hasn’t been discussed = 9 10%

17. Do you access the Higher Degree Research Unit website for candidature and/or scholarship information?
   a. Yes = 58 65%
   b. No = 31 35%