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 Higher Degree Research (HDR) candidature management.

The aim was to repeat the 2003 and 2004 studies exploring the quality of the first semester first year research experience at Macquarie University and to gauge the effectiveness of key changes in HDR policy and practice from the student perspective.

In 2005, 56% of the first semester commencing HDR student cohort participated in the study. 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 final report incorporates the feedback provided by Macquarie University’s Higher Degree Research Committee and recommendations for action.

Overview of Findings

General Findings
1. There is evidence of a strengthened HDR client focus at Macquarie University.
2. Overall support for HDR students is very good, though targeted support to specific groups (e.g. part-time, staff as students, international) is limited.

Supervision Matters
3. The majority of students take great care in the selection of their principal supervisor.
4. Prior experience at Macquarie, personal knowledge of their supervisor and the departmental research reputation remain the principal reasons for undertaking HDR here.
5. The majority of students express satisfaction with their supervisory relationship.
6. The allocation, role and expectations of associate and other supervisors are unclear to students.
7. A number of students commence their HDR not knowing that their principal supervisor at that time will be away (e.g. OSP). While nearly always supervision is well covered, students express disappointment that they had not been told.
8. Many Divisions are seen by students not to have a research culture that is inclusive of HDR students.
9. While not stated by students as directly as in 2004, supervisor workload appears to still be an issue in need of attention.

Resources and Skill Support
10. Only in a few Divisions do all HDR students undertaking their research on campus get an allocated space with secure storage facilities for data. Where a practice of ‘hot desks’ exists they do not seem to be sufficient to meet demand and on a daily basis many full- time students find that available space has been taken, while after hours building and room access is restrictive. Further, where there is a practice of shared ‘hot desks’ there are also insufficient lockable data storage facilities to meet the University’s requirements for research.
11. There is concern about the maintenance and age of equipment in a number of experimental fields.

12. University IT policy continues to be problematic for students in terms of: technical support for students’ own IT equipment, software licensing, email and the number of required passwords.

13. The Library focus on HDR students in terms of holdings, appropriate research space and availability of courses has gaps.

14. The availability of scholarships is a key reason for being able to undertake HDR.

15. All commencing HDR students are aware of financial support for their research. However, accessing this funding is difficult for a large number of students and Divisional guidelines and practices for approval, distribution and reimbursement need clarifying and streamlining to meet research student needs.

16. Students voiced strong concern about the service and prices of STA Travel on campus. Students commented that the University’s funding allocation is insufficient to meet STA prices and other associated travel costs.

**Commencement Programs**

17. The Central Commencement Program is valued, though its timing in late February excludes students who commence later (and they are required to complete the online program).

18. Overall, Divisional Commencement Programs do not sufficiently address supervision expectations, practices and research processes as well as funding processes.

19. Where there are also Departmental Commencement Programs within a Division, there can be great variation in addressing important departmental specific research and supervision needs, and in some instances mechanisms for the allocation of funding.

**Communication and Organisational Issues**

20. A number of students, in particular part-time students, say that they were not informed prior to commencement of regular attendance requirements, creating employment difficulties.

21. The departmental fragmentation in some Divisions creates communication barriers and perceptions of a lack of transparency.

22. Many HDR administrative practices in Divisions are seen by students to be time consuming with a large number of forms to complete.

23. Students undertaking interdisciplinary research, or venturing into ‘innovative’ research areas, perceive the University as lacking the flexibility characteristic of their undergraduate experience. The two key issues raised are inter-departmental and inter-Divisional communication and resource sharing.

**Institutional Responses**

**Overall**

1. Maintain the strengthening of an HDR-client focus at all levels of operation, including opportunity for student feedback. *(Dean HDR; HDRU; Deans of Division)*

2. Develop more targeted support for specific categories of HDR student. *(HDRU; Deans of Division)*

**Supervision Matters**

3. Inform students at the time of application of regular attendance requirements and times. Such information should be available both in Divisions and through HDRU (e.g. website links). *(HDRU; Deans of Division)*
4. Draw attention to the allocation, role and expectation of associate and other supervisor/s. *(Dean HDR; Deans of Division)*

5. Inform students prior to enrolment of known supervisor absence on their commencement. *(Deans of Division)*

6. Divisions and Departments, particularly those in humanities and social science fields, should examine their research practices to ensure HDR student inclusivity. *(Deans of Division)*

7. Monitor supervisor workload and reward structures within Divisions. *(Deans of Division)*

**Resources and Skill Support**

8. Access to dedicated space with computers and printers, lockable data storage facilities, and flexible hours of building and room access should be ensured. *(Deans of Division)*

9. Examine the University’s IT policy to ensure flexibility, ease of access and support for HDR students. *(Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research); Dean HDR)*

10. Examine research space for HDR students in the Library and access to Library courses for part-time HDR students. *(Librarian; Dean HDR)*

11. Maintain, and if possible, increase the number of University HDR scholarships available. *(Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research))*

12. Continue to refine Divisional allocation of HDR research funding, ensuring relevance for HDR student needs and timeframes as well as ease of access. *(Deans of Division)*

13. Review the requirement to use STA Travel on campus to ensure competitive prices and client focus. *(Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research))*

14. Ensure adequate resources when accepting students in new and emerging fields of research. *(Deans of Division)*

**Commencement Programs**

15. Continue to review the Central Commencement Program and its timing and also include a brief outline of University IT policy and travel policy as applicable to HDR students. *(Dean HDR)*

16. Divisional Commencement Programs should ensure adequate coverage of research processes, supervisory expectations and practices, as well as funding processes. *(Deans of Division)*

**Communication and Organisational Issues**

17. Examine administrative and communication practices within Divisions to remove fragmentation and perceptions of lack of transparency and consistency. *(Deans of Division)*

18. Examine administrative practices and requirements for students at Departmental, Divisional and University level to ensure efficiency and minimise double handling. *(HDRU; Deans of Division)*

19. Consider the introduction of an annual or biannual meeting between HDRU and Divisional administrative staff with HDR responsibility to examine improvements in administrative procedures, in particular when new policies and practices are introduced. *(HDRU)*

20. Examine barriers to interdisciplinary research and communication within the University and resource availability in ‘emerging’ fields. *(Dean HDR; Deans of Division)*