Executive Summary

The aim of the study is to explore the first year research experience at Macquarie University and the University’s management of first year Higher Degree Research (HDR) education. This study was initiated in 2003 and annually thereafter by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research) as one of a number of initiatives in quality improvement and more effective candidature management.

The 2006 cohort of MPhil and doctoral students commencing in the first semester were invited to participate in the study. There was a 56% (n= 98) participation rate.

Feedback from commencing students has demonstrated the effectiveness of MQ policy changes since 2004 in assisting students to make a smooth transition into HDR. It has also provided important information on where MQ can continue to improve its HDR practice.

The full report contains the detailed analysis and findings of the research. The key findings are summarised in this Executive Summary with recommendations for institutional responses which are presented to Macquarie University’s Higher Degree Research Committee for feedback and endorsement.

Overview of Findings

General Findings

1. Commencing HDR students perceive MQ to have a positive HDR client service focus.
2. The reputation of individual academics is still the major influence on HDR students to enrol at Macquarie. Scholarships are important in making HDR a reality. There are indications that the HDR information provided on websites and international rankings play an increasing role in student decision making.

Supervision

3. Commencing HDR students express high levels of satisfaction with their supervisors and quality of supervision.
4. The majority of students take great care in selecting their principal supervisor, though in some Divisions students indicate that supervisors are allocated rather than self-selected.
5. Around 10% of students claim that they do not have an associate/other supervisor.
6. Understanding of principal supervisor roles and expectations is improving, but understanding of roles of associate/other supervisors remains relatively weak.
7. The level of supervisor workload is still a concern, especially in some Divisions where HDR students perceive a predominant teaching culture.
8. Many students in the DBA perceive linkage and transition problems between the coursework and research components, including supervisor allocation and specific advice on their actual research proposal.
9. Overall there has been a perceived improvement in Divisional research cultures. HDR students feel welcome in all Divisions but only integrated in some research cultures.
Resources and Skill Support
10. MQ is perceived to support its HDR students overall, although there are still differences between the Divisions.
11. Perceptions of resources to support HDR are strengthening over previous studies, and HDR students are increasingly taking research costs into account in developing their research proposals.
12. Pressures on space continue, with most Divisions finding it difficult to accommodate their commencing HDR students.
13. Secure data storage facilities (e.g. lockable drawers, computers) are still insufficient.
14. MQ IT policy to support HDR remains unclear and there is a lack of consistency in IT support for students across the Divisions.
15. University provision of wireless connectivity is insufficient to meet increasing use of laptops.
16. HDR students are aware of the level of MQ financial support available for their research, however, accessing this funding through their Divisions is not transparent.
17. Using STA for travel continues to be expensive for HDR students and client service weak.
18. Students continue to comment on Library gaps in interdisciplinary and emerging research areas.
19. Students are very positive about Library services, although Library skills courses are still not meeting HDR demand.

Commencement Programs
20. The Central Commencement Program is highly valued and recognised as important in making a good transition to HDR. Communication of its timing, in particular given flexible HDR entry, has been an issue for some HDR students.
21. One quarter of HDR students have not attended a Divisional Commencement Program (DCP) and one fifth do not know or are unsure who their HDR Director is. This is a decline on the 2005 study findings.
22. Overall HDR students perceive their Divisional Commencement Programs did not deal sufficiently with supervision matters and funding provisions for their HDR and, in some cases, with the diversity of students’ research skill experiences.
23. Opportunity to provide student feedback on DCPs appears to be variable and often informal.

Communication and Organisational Issues
24. Communication linkages between all areas of the University need further strengthening. Only 60% of HDR students maintain that they were fully informed on HDR attendance requirements prior to commencement, while flexible HDR enrolment/entry and combined degrees require good administrative communication levels.
25. Divisional communication and assistance with accessing HDR funding are seen as opaque.
26. HDR students, particularly those undertaking interdisciplinary research and those in newly formed research groupings, perceive communication and interaction barriers beyond their immediate organisational area.
Institutional and Divisional Responses: Recommendations

1. Maintain the strengthening of an HDR-client focus at all levels of operation (Deans*, HDRO). [* HDR responsibilities are usually delegated to Directors HDR/Associate Deans Research]

Supervision

2. All Divisions to ensure appointment of Associate/other supervisors by the time of completion of the mid year review/by completion of the DCP. (Deans, HDRO report).

3. Clarify the roles and expectations of supervisors, at institutional and divisional levels through the revised Code of Supervisory Practice, and DCPs. (HDRC, Deans).

4. Review the timing of supervisor allocation and also the transition between coursework and research in the DBA. (Dean MGSM).

5. Divisions to ensure appropriate academic workloads to enable good quality HDR supervision. (Deans).

6. Continue to strengthen Divisional research climates to achieve HDR student integration (Deans).

Resources and Skill Support

7. Revise the University’s IT policy to ensure flexibility, ease of access and support for HDR students (Director ITS).

8. Review the requirement to use STA for on campus travel bookings unless it becomes market competitive. (DVC).

9. Implement University expanded HDR student Space Allocation guidelines and ensure that the space provided is appropriate and conducive to research and writing, and that secure and sufficient data storage facilities are provided (Deans).

10. Continue the development of HDR project research costing and integration with research proposals (Deans-Principal Supervisors).

11. Divisions and the Library to work more closely together to provide research skill courses in demand by HDR students (Deans-Librarian).

12. Divisions together with the Library to examine resource support available in the Library for interdisciplinary fields and emerging research areas (Deans-Librarian).

Commencement Programs

13. Review DCPs, their content and their relationship to the CCP since 2004 (A/Prof. Neumann-Deans).

14. Divisions to review their HDR student profile each year and ensure targeted support to meet the needs of their profile (e.g. part-time & external students) (Deans).

Communication and Organisational Issues

15. The University and all Divisions to review website information and promotion of research areas including early information on HDR student expectations and attendance requirements; and ensure resources for regular maintenance of websites (HDRO-Deans).

16. Divisions to ensure clear information and ease of access to divisional HDR student funding. (Deans)

17. Divisions to introduce/maintain an HDR social event once each semester to further strengthen Divisional research climates and to encourage and assist inter-divisional communication between HDR students (Deans).

18. Strengthen communication linkages between the Division of L&P and the main MQ administrative areas (HDRO, Postgraduate Studies Section) to meet the needs of HDR combined program students in Psychology (HDRO, Postgraduate Studies Section, Dean L&P).

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