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Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the valuable contribution made by the study participants. Their time and the openness of their responses are important in assisting the University’s quality improvements efforts.

We would like to thank the contribution made by the Higher Degree Research Committee and the Divisional HDR Administrators.

Ruth Neumann
Leah Boucher

December, 2006
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*).

December, 2006
1. Introduction
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 consultation.

2. Aims and Outcomes of the Study
The aim of the study is to examine the transition into higher degree research and the quality of the first year research experience at Macquarie University. Specifically:

1. to investigate the 2006 commencing HDR student cohort’s research experiences and their satisfaction with support and guidance provided by the University, Division, Department and Supervisor;

2. to compare their experiences with those of the 2003-2005 cohort studies in order to ascertain changes in perceived experiences;

3. to continue to measure change against the 2003 baseline;

4. to provide recommendations to the HDRC for the continued improvement of the first year research degree experience at Macquarie University;

5. to provide Divisions with specific feedback.

3. Approach
The study included HDR students in MPhil, PhD and professional doctorate programs who were enrolled in Semester 1 2006.

In 2006 fee-paying professional doctorate students were included for the first time. Professional doctorate students in the DBA and the DAppLing undertake a coursework program in their first year, and hence for these two programs only students commencing the time-based unit of their program were invited to participate.
A total of 175 students were invited to participate through a letter of invitation from the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research). Email and phone follow-up ascertained student availability to participate. The 2006 population was larger than the 2004 and 2005 populations and the same as the 2003 population.

In total, 98 students participated via a number of options i.e. focus groups, individual interviews or email survey. This represented 56% of the population. Participation in 2006 compares favourably with 2003-2005 where similar participation rates were achieved (see Chart 1 below).

![Chart 1: Comparison of Total Participant Sample from Total Population (Actual Numbers) 2003 - 2006](chart1.jpg)

Participation across the Divisions ranged from 25% - 80%. In general around 60% of each Division’s commencing HDR students participated. Such variation has been typical in each study. The chart below shows the percentage participation pattern for each Division across the 2003 – 2006 studies (see Chart 2 below).
All participants were asked to complete a structured survey, which was designed to provide feedback on key changes and follow-up on issues arising in previous studies.

As part of the 2006 project, Divisions were invited to submit an example of their HDR best practice for inclusion in this report. Since the commencement of this project in 2003, student feedback has demonstrated ongoing change and improvements for HDR across the Divisions.

4. Profile of Cohort and Participants

The 2006 commencing HDR student participation generally reflected the profile of the population, with around 55% male/female. Proportionally, more full-time and MPhil students took part.

| Table 1: Profile of 2006 Participants compared with Population |
|---------------|----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
|               | Doctorate | MPhil | Full time | Part time | Female | Male | Total |
| Pop No.       | 155 | 20 | 117 | 58 | 84 | 91 | 175 |
| Sample No.    | 84 | 14 | 73 | 25 | 46 | 52 | 98 |
| Percent %     | 54 | 70 | 62 | 43 | 55 | 57 | 56 |

There were 14 of a possible 20 MPhil students participating in the project. Half of these were undertaking the MPhil by choice rather than as a required entry pathway to the PhD. This pattern is the same as in 2004, but differs from 2005 where two-thirds were required by their Division to enrol in the MPhil.
5. Discussion of Findings

The discussion of findings below makes comparisons with the 2003-2005 findings, highlighting trends and drawing attention to similarities and differences over the four years.

The organisation of the findings are presented in five key areas:

1. Student reasons for undertaking HDR
2. Supervision Matters
3. Resource and Skill Support
4. Commencement Programs
5. Communication and Organisational Issues

5.1 Why HDR and Macquarie University

I was offered a scholarship at two universities, so I had a choice between Uni A and MQ. And I checked the university ratings; you know, general ratings like the Times and other ratings on the internet, and saw that MQ was ranked higher so that is why I chose MQ. I didn’t pay so much attention to how good the source was but I just checked and saw that MQ was always higher. So that is why I chose MQ. (Student Q106)

Students were asked what attracted them to HDR and why they chose to undertake their HDR at Macquarie University. Participants often gave more than one reason. In order of frequency, their reasons were that they:

1. enjoyed undertaking research or had an interest in a specific research topic (49);
2. were hoping to pursue an academic career (24); and
3. believed that HDR would assist their (non academic) career prospects (22).

The three most frequently mentioned reasons for choosing Macquarie University for their HDR, and consistent with those of 2003-2005, were that:

1. the student knew the supervisor from previous study or the student had studied at Macquarie before and wanted to stay / return (65);
2. the student was attracted by the prestige of the University, the particular department, research area or a particular academic (53).
3. the student had received a scholarship to study at Macquarie University (31).

Other reasons participants gave for choosing to enrol at Macquarie University included:

4. the location of Macquarie University was convenient for the student (17);
5. the student was attracted by the academically open nature of Macquarie (13);
6. the student likes Macquarie (8);
7. the student had had a poor supervision experience at another university (7).
This pattern of reasons for selecting MQ over another University has been consistent since 2003. However, focus group comment in 2006 indicates the increasing importance of information found on MQ, Divisional and individual websites. Students appear to refer to the web far more than other advertising/publicity. Further, a number of students confirmed MQ’s research reputation by checking several international university rankings. This was important for those selecting MGSM, as well as for some of the science fields.

5.2 Supervision

I have received much more than I was expecting. I am lucky that my supervisor is an excellent person and we have a good understanding. We had three meetings last week and one this morning. The Head of Department is not my supervisor but she is very helpful with resources and arranging meetings with industry people. I wasn’t expecting this response. I did my Masters by Research at home and the contact and support I am getting here at MQ are unusual. (Student A506).

Well the best part has been my supervisor. He is absolutely brilliant and very enthusiastic. He is a no-nonsense person and he gives thorough feedback. He is very generous with his time. (Student H206)

I guess that my supervisor is really good. I really get along with him … If I want to do something the opportunity is there, the funds are there, and the equipment is all there. I could just go straight in and get on with what I need to do. ... And that is really nice, especially when speaking with students from other universities .... (Student F106)

I am happy with my supervision although I wanted to comment on the fact that the supervisors stimulate and foster participation in meetings, conferences, internal seminars and I haven’t seen that before in my experience, but it is very useful. (Student F206)

In my case it has been more than what I expected in a positive sense. From the beginning whatever I needed my supervisor (like a father) has provided it for me and told me what to do and made it happen... All the time my principal and associate supervisors are very supportive not only academically but also mentally and psychologically. So I feel very relaxed. (Student I106)

I took a big gamble coming to Macquarie. But it is great. It is working out very well and my supervisor and co-supervisor can’t do enough to help. (Student I306).

Student comments on the quality of their supervision in 2006 have been strong and positive. This is also reflected in the survey responses. Nevertheless, there are areas for continued improvement as discussed in the sections below.

5.2.1 Selection and Allocation of Supervisor

The majority of students (88%) had personally selected their supervisor. Often, students continued with the same supervisor that they had had during their honours year. However, their comments are clear: the student-supervisor relationship is crucial and hence they invested time and care in selecting a supervisor they believed they could work well with.
In 20% of cases, students indicated that their supervisor had been allocated through their Division. This is a slight increase over 2005 study participants but is similar to 2004 participants. The pattern of supervisor allocation is strongest in Humanities and SCMP.

There were still students who, by semester 2, state that they did not have an associate or other supervisor. In total, 10% were in this category, compared with 20% in 2005 and 32% in 2004.

In one area there was comment that a few academics supervising did not themselves have PhD qualifications, although the student did not indicate that quality of guidance was an issue in their particular case. This comment has arisen in past studies also from the same Division.

### 5.2.2 Student-Supervisor Contact

Student responses to the survey showed a very high level of satisfaction on the level of contact with their supervisor/s. 73% of students indicated that they could always see their supervisor/s when they needed to, while 23% could do so sometimes or mostly. Only four students indicated that being able to see their supervisor was difficult and one said that he/she could not see his/her supervisor.

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<th>Sometimes</th>
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<td>23</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td><strong>2005</strong></td>
<td>68</td>
<td>24</td>
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*Question not asked in 2004 survey

Further, 95% of students stated that the time spent with their supervisor/s was mostly or always sufficient for their needs.

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<td>42</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2005</strong></td>
<td>49</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
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*Question not asked in 2004 survey.

As in the previous studies, the amount of time students spend with their supervisor/s varies, and practices, needs and individual situations differ considerably. The variation ranges from 2 hours per month to 3-5 hours weekly. Differences tend to reflect part-time and full-time students and humanities / social sciences and science. It is, however, difficult to present a set pattern of contact time that students believe they need. All students indicate that they have, and like, a range of contact which includes face to face, email and phone. Students clearly appreciate flexibility in their personal supervisory arrangements.

Many students again noted the high workload of their supervisor/s. Nevertheless, they commented positively that, despite so many competing demands, they were still able to see their supervisors as needed. There were some areas where overall departmental teaching loads appear to be very high, where contact time was difficult to achieve. In cases where the student had had experience in a professional field, there may also have been an assumption of a higher level of research confidence on the part of supervisors. In some instances students formed the impression of a strong teaching and weak research culture in these Departments / Divisions.
5.2.3 Supervisor Guidance

The majority of students enthused about the experience, knowledge and expertise of their supervisor/s. In more expensive research fields they noted the success in obtaining grants to support the research undertaken. There were also a number of comments that they appreciated the adaptability and flexibility of their supervisor/s in their research supervision style. They noted different personalities and supervisor skill in understanding how to deal with the different student personalities and learning styles / learning management.

Only a very small number of students (5%) commented that they were unhappy with the level of guidance and contact with their supervisor.

Survey responses showed that 90% of participants were clear on their expectations of their principal supervisor, although only 79% thought that their principal supervisor understood what they expected of them. 14% were unsure. These results were higher than those of 2005 and 2004 participants. There has been a steady increase in the understanding of principal supervisor roles.

| Table 4: Percent with clear idea of expectations of principal supervisor, 2004-2006 |
|-----------------------------------------------|---------|------|------|------|------|
| 2006                                         | Yes     | No   | Not Sure |
| 90                                           | 4       | 7    |
| 2005                                         | 85      | 11   | 4    |
| 2004                                         | 82      | 6    | 11   |

| Table 5: Percent who think principal supervisor has clear idea of student expectations of them, 2004-2006 |
|-----------------------------------------------|---------|------|------|------|------|
| 2006                                         | Yes     | No   | Not Sure |
| 79                                           | 7       | 14   |
| 2005                                         | 71      | 12   | 16   |
| 2004                                         | 65      | 6    | 29   |

Students in ACES and L&P were strongest in their understanding of roles and expectations, with Humanities students in 2006 more likely to be unclear.

Expectations in relation to their other supervisors were not so clear, although stronger than those of 2005 participants. 58% felt that they had a clear idea of their own expectations of their other supervisor/s, compared with 35% in 2005. Similarly, students felt that their other supervisor/s were unclear about what they expected of them, with 53% either not knowing or unsure.

| Table 6: Percent with clear expectations of other supervisor/s 2005-2006* |
|-----------------------------------------------|---------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 2006                                         | Yes     | No   | Not sure | Not applicable+ |
| 58                                           | 14      | 19   | 9    |
| 2005                                         | 35      | 25   | 28   | -    |

*Question not asked in 2004 + do not have other supervisor/s allocated

| Table 7: Percent who think other supervisor/s is clear on expectations of them* |
|-----------------------------------------------|---------|------|------|------|------|
| 2006                                         | Yes     | No   | Not sure | Not applicable+ |
| 49                                           | 14      | 29   | 7    |
| 2005                                         | 34      | 19   | 32   | -    |

*Question not asked in 2004 + do not have other supervisor/s allocate
Students in ACES and ELS felt most confident about their understanding of roles and expectations of other supervisors. Focus group comments showed that many students would appreciate a more in-depth discussion of supervision in their DCP.

Some important issues emerged in relation to the structure of the DBA. These related to the transition between the heavily guided coursework year and the commencement of the (by comparison) unstructured research year. Students noted the need for a stronger framework to guide the transition. In addition, the process of selecting/allocating supervisors for the research component can create a disconnect between the advice provided on research proposal development during the coursework and that provided by their supervisor at the time of developing the detailed research proposal. It is important to note that students were extremely positive about the quality of the coursework and the support that it provided to their research. The issues relate to linkage, transition and timing of obtaining their principal supervisor.

5.2.4 Research Climate

Yes! I feel that I am a part of my Department/Division. We have a departmental morning tea every Tuesday, and it's almost like you're one of them. First name basis and that sort of thing, and it couldn't be better. ... We even have our names on the doors – which I think is very special. (Student B206)

Yes! I feel I am integrated in the Department. (Student B306)

In my Division, they have the seminar series, on a fortnightly basis. ...we don't really get that close, but we see each other quite often. I feel welcome but not close. (B106)

They really do make you feel part of the place. There is obviously a few things where they distinguish between staff and students, but generally in my department... a PhD student, Masters student or Honours students are pretty much considered staff. We get the same things, you get good offices, good computing equipment - you don't even think about that, that is just expected pretty much from our Division. And they are good like that; there are no hiccups for that sort of stuff. (Student 0106)

I'm overwhelmed by the MQ environment. I was almost put off science and research after my honours experience at (another university). .. Coming across my current supervisor and co-supervisor, they are so passionate about their research and passionate to welcome me into their department. Everything is so great. (Student I406)

The quotes above reflect strong improvements overall in Divisional research climates since earlier projects. They also reflect the divisional variation which still exists. Student comments in 2006 from nearly all Divisions show that HDR students feel very welcome and that nearly all Divisions have developed a stronger HDR focus. However, the strongest research climates, as in the past, are still in the science fields. Here, students feel integrated and comfortable in their daily interactions as well as an integral part of the Department’s / Division’s research enterprise.

Small things can make an important contribution to the degree of acceptance and integration that HDR students feel. For example, students comment on the importance to them of having a divisional email (rather than the @students.mq.edu.au) at the time of commencement.
Access to a phone also makes a difference in being able to undertake their research. In some areas students have their own web page or their research forms part of the Division’s research information placed on the web.

In 2006 several Divisions created new centres or groupings of researchers, in line with the University’s research strategy. The benefits to HDR students of this development in terms of support, resourcing and research focus were evident in focus group discussions. However, equally, these students noted that they now found communication and research networking beyond these clusters harder. Students undertaking interdisciplinary research in particular commented on communication barriers within and across Departments / Divisions and were looking to the University to assist in finding ways to break down these barriers. The concerns of HDR students in interdisciplinary fields have been reported in each of the studies.

Views of a teaching rather than a research culture in some Divisions / Departments are strong. There were also comments about the heavy teaching load of academics in some areas (see also Section 5.2.2) and that as a consequence there was little time and scope for the development of a research culture within the Department beyond perhaps a handful of individuals.

5.2.5 Progress Monitoring and Completion

Alignment of student, University and Division expectations regarding completion time is important. Thus the survey asks students about their expected completion time and whether this aligns with divisional expectations. All but one of the MPhil students within the sample expected to complete their research within two years (FTE), while the majority of the doctoral students expected a three year (FTE) completion. Only 22 PhD students expected a four year (FTE) completion time. All students undertaking a professional doctorate anticipated a three year completion in line with their program requirements. 87% of students stated that their completion expectations were in line with those held in their Department / Division. 11% stated that completion expectations had not been discussed with them in their Department / Division.

There were still students who maintained that the length of time to organise desk space, computing support and other resource support took far longer than they had expected, maintaining that it affected their progress in the first half year.

In terms of progress monitoring through formal acceptance within their Division of their detailed research proposal, 28% stated that they had not yet completed their proposal. However, given the timing of the focus group consultations, and also the number of part-time students within the group, this should not be surprising.

Students again commented on the benefit of formalising their detailed proposal and the sense of direction and confidence the process within their Division gave them.
5.3 Resource and Skill Support

[Having access to everything I need] feels really good. It is not a limiting factor, the availability of equipment and the help on offer have been really good. There are no resource limitations and there is good direction. (Student F206).

So far resources for our research have been fantastic. (Student H206)

Maybe the desk and computer access should be provided since the first day and we shouldn’t have to do it for ourselves and take three months to sort it out. (Student D206)

I think they [the staff within the Division] don’t want us to know about it [the money] because there are too many people wanting to access a finite, small amount of money. (Student A306)

I have spent money. I also found the information at the CCP and on the website confusing. Mostly I will spend it on conferences and books etc. There are funds in the Division and funds in the Department to claim from, although I am not clear on which to apply for first or for what. I have already given 2 papers at conferences. I am not sure what happens with left over money? Information is presented in a way that perhaps makes sense to the Financial Office of the University; however we students need to know more specific information. I don’t really care where it comes from. (Student A206)

Overall, students comment that they perceive MQ as supportive of their research and this perception has increased since the commencement of this project in 2003. There are however, divisional variations in the strength of the support that students receive.

5.3.1 Availability of Physical and Technical Resources

Pressures on space are evident in all Divisions. The pressures appear stronger than in 2005 and no Division seemed to be exempt.

Responses to the survey indicate no change in 2006 on the 2005 and 2004 participant responses. In total 59% of HDR participants indicate that they have a work space that meets their needs. 13% say that the work space that they have does not meet their needs and a further 28% do not have a work space. In the latter instance, however, not all students require a work space, since most part-time students tend to undertake their research at home. Focus group comments showed that where part-time students occasionally needed space within their Divisions, their needs were accommodated.

Together with the issue of availability of space is the suitability of the space provided. In 2006, as in previous studies, students have noted that they find the following types of space are NOT conducive to research:

- Open planned working areas (too noisy);
- Too many desks / students in a small office;
- No windows and poor ventilation;
- Few power points;
- Hot-desking;
- Lack of storage facilities.
Fewer students commented on data storage problems compared with past years, however, there were still a number of students who did not have shelf or cupboard space, or secure data storage facilities.

Overall, student comments indicate improvements in printer facilities, computer availability, and divisional IT support. A number of students commented that they had purchased their own laptop to facilitate the research process and that they had found this easier than dealing with cumbersome MQ administrative processes and uncertain advice. Perhaps, as a consequence of increased laptop use by HDR students, there were even more comments in 2006 about the lack of wireless connectivity throughout the University.

University IT policy for HDR remains unclear still. As in previous studies, students report different practices in relation to IT support for student purchased laptops used exclusively for their HDR and IT support available to support their HDR on these laptops.

Receiving a departmental email (compared with @students.mq.edu.au) and also a phone connection are important for a smooth commencement. Their role in contributing to perceptions of an inclusive research climate has been highlighted (see 5.2.4). In terms of practical support of research their role is obvious. They contribute to research networking and in many fields the phone plays a central role in research data collection.

Overall, 67% of participants maintained that they had adequate resources to undertake their research. The remainder either did not or were unsure whether resource support would meet their research needs. This is however an improvement on 2005 and 2004 when just over half of participants claimed adequate resources for their research.

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<th>No</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2005</strong></td>
<td>54</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2004</strong></td>
<td>57</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>20</td>
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In 2006, students in ELS and SCMP perceive themselves to be well resourced compared with survey responses from students in other Divisions.

### 5.3.2 Skill Development

Students feel that they are well prepared to undertake HDR. In each year of this study we have reported the very positive comments students make on MQ support of their further research skill development. Among their commencing experiences, they report favourably on the following skill development opportunities:

- Presentations associated with detailed proposal development in their first 6 months;
- Opportunities to attend departmental / divisional seminars;
- Presentation opportunities in departmental / divisional seminars;
- Sessions connected with their DCP, where these are held on a regular fortnightly basis (see also 5.4.2);
- Individualised support on research skill development specific to their project;
- Opportunity for attendance at courses (see also 5.3.3).
In 2006, a number of HDR students commented that they would appreciate more information on the thesis by publication option.

### 5.3.3 Skill Development and Resources Through the Library

Students again commented very positively on the range of courses available through the Library, although as in previous years, HDR student demand is still not being met. In particular the offering times are unsuitable for part-time students. A few Divisions have arranged courses with the Library for their HDR students and this may be a more suitable way to meet demand.

High levels of satisfaction were again expressed with the support provided by Liaison librarians and the valuable service of VDX.

In relation to library resources, the student experience was more varied. Many were satisfied with the available material and did not expect the library to have all relevant or obscure material. Others felt the library was not adequately stocked for their specialisation and were relying on other university libraries, in particular the Fisher Library.

There were fewer comments on numbers of passwords required than in 2005. The Library, in response to the 2005 report recommendations, committed to reviewing and streamlining passwords.

HDR students used Library space for research and noted that the availability of wireless was an advantage but the lack of storage facilities limited the usefulness of the Library for a longer term space solution.

### 5.3.4 Financial Support

Students were positive about the strong level of financial support that MQ provides for its HDR students. The importance of scholarships was reinforced and students recognised the generosity of MQ scholarships. There was some concern that the number of scholarships available would be reduced with the introduction of COREs. Early web information on changes would assist to alleviate student – and academic staff - concerns.

HDR participants were also clear on the funding provided by the University to Divisions to support HDR costs. Around two-thirds of participants (compared with half in 2005) stated that they had clear information about their Department’s / Division’s funding provisions.

<p>| Table 9: Percent who have clear information on departmental funding provisions, 2005-2006* |
|-----------------------------------|--------|--------|----------|</p>
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<th>Yes</th>
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<th>Not sure</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>64</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>40</td>
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</table>

*Question not asked in 2004 survey.

The biggest concern in 2006 was on how to access the funding available. This was a major discussion point in most focus groups. Based on student comments, participants from ACES, ELS and L&P were the most positive on the ease and clarity of access to the funding provided.
There is improvement in student awareness of costs in undertaking research. However, only 22% of participants had undertaken a research costing as part of their detailed proposal, with another 23% stating that a research costing was not applicable to their research.

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<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
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<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>46</td>
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As in 2005, students commented on the high cost of using STA for their travel as required by the University. Further, the client service focus of STA was still perceived as wanting. There has been little improvement in this area since 2005.

5.4 Commencement Programs

I really enjoyed the support that officially the University wants us to do well – that message helps a lot. (F206)

It was different to what I thought. Before enrolment I had no idea about CCP or DCP which really turned out to be a good thing. It’s not as isolated as expected. It’s hard to know what is expected but the DCP made it a lot easier. (Student G106)

It wasn’t really clear to me when I received my enrolment pack when I was meant to start. So I nominated a start date that was two weeks after the CCP. ... I thought that we had a fairly fluid start date but it turns out that the University was assuming that we were all going to have started by the time of the CCP. (Student G306)

It can be really, really frustrating having attendance and deadlines announced and handed to us as a big favour. Just because they are part of the DCP they are somehow thought to be good for us. .... It is quite a useful series of lectures but it is really not nice having to put my life on hold at two days notice to do it. (Student G306)

I did the certificate of research preparation last year: .... So, I knew exactly what was expected of me, and so the transition and everything was really smooth. I found the CCP really helpful; I thought that was really great. It was too easy and we got heaps of notice. However, then they sprung the Divisional CP, and I knew I had to attend it and I felt quite pressured to attend it. In what I do, I am only a part-time research student and I practice part-time. ... I took the morning off work, and then I went there and [my research work] doesn't really fit into that sort of circle. So I was sitting at this DCP listening to how to [undertake specific fieldwork] and things like this. I thought that doesn't apply to me at all and I’d taken the morning off work and I felt pressured to be there and felt disgruntled about it. (Student G206)
5.4.1 University: Central Commencement Program (CCP)

Commencing HDR students were very positive about the value of the CCP in providing a smooth transition into both MQ and also into HDR. Students comment that the CCP makes them feel welcome at the University and that they feel like researchers within a vibrant institutional research environment.

Those students using the on-line CCP commented positively, although of this group, many prefer the face-to-face attendance if possible.

Overall, at the time of the focus groups, only 8% of participants had not taken part in the CCP compared with 10% in 2005 and 2004.

An issue in 2006, and one that appears related to the adoption of flexible HDR enrolment throughout the year, is that communication of the CCP date was not clear to those commencing in the weeks after February. Thus, there were students who would have liked to have attended the CCP, although their formal commencement was after the CCP date, yet they were unaware of the attendance requirement, or had been told that attendance was only for HDR students already formally enrolled.

5.4.2 Division / Department Commencement Program (DCP)

Discussion of the DCP in this section includes both single day events as well as, where this is the practice, attendance at regular HDR information and skill development sessions designed as part of the DCP.

In 2006, around one-quarter of HDR participants had not attended a DCP. This participation level is the lowest since Macquarie introduced commencement programs in 2004.

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<th>Year</th>
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<th>None offered</th>
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<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>14</td>
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Overall, 40% of HDR participants (more than in 2005) state that they were not fully informed on HDR attendance requirements prior to commencement. Fewer students than in 2005 and 2004 knew their Division’s HDR Director at the time of this study’s student consultations in August/September. Consequently, a smooth transition into HDR within the Division was more difficult than for 2005 participants.

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<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>82</td>
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At the end of 2005, a number of Divisions changed their HDR Directors for 2006. It could be that this change resulted in some communication gaps for commencing HDR students. In
addition, the introduction of flexible HDR enrolment / entry could have resulted in further communication gaps. Many students commencing after the traditional February enrolment date, in particular if they were part-time, seemed to miss out on important HDR information. The importance of good communication structures is highlighted.

Of those who had attended a DCP, many commented on the benefits of their Division’s / Department’s program. There were however, two areas not dealt with in sufficient depth for many students. The first was the matter of supervision and roles and expectations. The second was on how to access, through their Division / Department, the funding that MQ provides to support HDR costs.

This year, students in three Divisions felt that their Division offered a one-size-fits-all program that did not sufficiently meet the diversity of student needs. There were comments that, particularly in the area of research skills, coverage was at honours level, not relevant to their discipline, and not flexible enough to deal with more specific research skill requirements. These comments were new in the 2006 study.

HDR participants from Humanities and SCMP were particularly positive about their DCP.

### 5.5 Communication and Organisational Issues

*I’m actually really enjoying it. If anything, the situation and things exceeded my expectations. I haven’t had anything go wrong to bring me down or be upset or make me not happy with where I am right now. Everything is fine.* (Student B206)

*[My Division]* is working very hard to accommodate part-time research students. They're trying many different things and while it is not all perfect yet they are really putting in an effort to get it together. (Student H206)

*The only slight qualm that I have is that the department itself is quite segregated. Because you have the Division, then the Department and then the Centre, which is the people I have to answer to. To get things done can sometimes be quite problematic. To organise basic things I have to go through three departments who all have different sets of rules and regulations. So that is a down side. The actual supervision and the work I’m doing is great. And that is important.* (Student I306).

#### 5.5.1 University

Overall students perceive a positive HDR client focus at MQ and they feel welcome. However, there is scope for improvement. The findings indicate that a strengthened focus on communication at all levels is warranted and the development of a stronger culture of effective web communication at University, Division and student levels is needed.

*Higher Degree Research Office (HDRO)*

Of all the university offices, the HDRO is the area with which students have had most contact. Student comments reflected general satisfaction. Areas of dissatisfaction were in relation to scholarship and enrolment changes. Student frustration in these instances was
strong. These are however also areas where the University had made important administrative changes to bring flexibility to students. A number of MQ scholarship holders discussed difficulties and delays in scholarship notification. In particular, communication to students from their Divisions and from the HDRO were seen as unsatisfactory, since applications made in late 2005 or early 2006 after the APA and E-IPRS rounds were not processed until several months later, causing concerns and frustrations for a relatively small number of students. The confusion in these cases resulted from substantial administrative changes to scholarship approval processes associated with PPR-based (Project Proposal Request) RAACE and iMURS schemes. Thus, there may have been a communication gap between the various administrative areas and student awareness of such changes which resulted in student perceptions of administrative inefficiency. Scholarship information and processes are now clearly provided on the HDRO website.

Further, in mid 2006 the new MQRES scholarship scheme was designed for 2007 funding, as part of MQ’s strengthened research focus and strategy. MQRES replaced RAACE and iMURS from the 2007 budget. There was clearly some concern among academics, transferred to HDR students, about the implications of these changes, with a strong view formed by some that only students in Concentrations of Research Excellence (CORE) would receive these MQRES scholarships - even though the guidelines on the web specified a much wider range of allocation categories. There was also a view that, overall, MQ was providing fewer research scholarships. This in fact is not the case and the University has moved to increase communication and awareness of the changes, highlighting that even more scholarships are available to support the strengthened MQ research strategy.

Communication of change through the web is important. Survey results indicate that 70% of students access the HDRO website for candidature and/or scholarship information. Through avenues such as the CCP and DCP it is important to develop a stronger culture of using the web for HDR information and developments for both staff and students. Changes and developments during 2006 of the Research Office and Higher Degree Research web pages have been substantial.

| Table 13: Percent who access HDRO website for candidature/scholarship information, 2004-2006 |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----|-----|
|                                               | Yes | No  |
| 2006                                          | 70  | 30  |
| 2005                                          | 80  | 20  |
| 2004                                          | 65  | 35  |

Despite a number of administrative refinements by HDRO and the introduction of flexible enrolment / entry to HDR, there has been little change in student perception of ease of enrolment.

| Table 14: Percent who perceive enrolment process easy, 2004-2006 |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----|-----|
|                                                              | Easy| Average| Difficult |
| 2006                                                          | 58  | 35     | 8         |
| 2005                                                          | 56  | 35     | 9         |
| 2004                                                          | 63  | 30     | 7         |

Also important are the interface and communication between coursework and research administrations in the University. This is particularly the case for psychology students enrolled in the Combined Masters and PhD. Although a relatively small group of students, each year participating students are unanimous in their complaint: the enrolment times for the
two components of their degree do not coincide and each component is looked after by a
different section of student administration, HDRO and Postgraduate Studies Section. Given
the new flexibility by HDRO in enrolling HDR students, streamlining of enrolment for
Combined Degree students should be achievable.

Overall participants say that communication of HDR requirements needs strengthening.
Fewer students in 2006 than other years believe that they have been fully informed of
attendance requirements prior to commencement. Communication is a shared responsibility
between the University and the Divisions.

Table 15: Percent who are fully informed on HDR attendance requirements prior to
commencement, 2005-2006*

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<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>16</td>
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*Question not asked in 2004 survey.

Participating students in L&P appear to be best informed on attendance requirements.

The mismatch between flexible enrolment / entry and communication of attendance at the
February CCP has already been discussed (see 5.4.1).

Research Office (RO)

At this early stage of candidature, few students have had need to interact with the Research
Office. There were a small number of comments on the length and complexity of the ethics
form and information, but there have been administrative changes to the ethics procedure
during 2006 as well as the appointment of a half time Director, Research Ethics. These
changes may have been the reason for fewer comments on difficulties with ethics applications
than in past years. It may also be that there is increased ethics support through DCPs.

5.5.2 Divisions

During 2006 there have been a number of administrative changes to strengthen HDR student
support in several Divisions. Divisional efforts to improve their research climate have been
noted (see 5.2.4). Dedicated HDR student administrative support has been strengthened in a
number of Divisions. In many Divisions the Director HDR also changed in the first half of
2006. Communication and support in the transitional phase was evident in a number of
instances.

Nevertheless, communication of student attendance requirements was a stronger issue in
2006 than in past years (see 5.4.2). The flexible HDR enrolment/entry option appears to have
exacerbated the situation, since many students commencing after the traditional February
time were affected. They had not attended a DCP, did not know the appropriate HDR contact
person/s, and consequently had a poorer transition.

An important issue in all past studies has been departmental fragmentation. Here too, the
comments of 2006 participants show that there have been improvements. There have been far
fewer comments on preferential treatment for IT support and space allocation – though they
still exist. Divisional fragmentation for administrative procedures remains an ongoing area for improvement.

The most important new issue emerging from 2006 participants is the difficulty in accessing HDR funding to support their research. During 2006 Divisions have reported changes and refinements in procedures, in particular to increasing funding flexibility and moves to encourage research project budgeting. Student comments indicate that the key issue for them rests with clear communication and streamlining of administrative procedures and processes to access the money to support their HDR.

There have been efforts by many Divisions to cater more specifically for part-time students. The increased comments by part-time students on feeling included were noticeable. There were very few comments on difficulties on room and building access. However, early provision of a divisional email address is important to students (see also 5.2.4 and 5.3.1).

A remaining area is the removal of barriers within and across Divisions for HDR students undertaking interdisciplinary research projects. Comments on communication and networking difficulties continue. The formation of more research centres appears to have had a negative effect on this aspect of research communication.

6. Best Practice in HDR

Since commencement of this project in 2003, the University has introduced many changes for more effective HDR candidature management. Divisions too, have refined their HDR policies and practices in response to student feedback and the changing HDR environment. The effects of these changes on the commencing research experience have been documented in the reports each year.

In recognition of the strengthened HDR climate Divisions have been invited to submit one example of their HDR best practice. These MQ Best Practice examples are provided in a separate document.
Over the past few years, Macquarie University has introduced a number of improvements for Higher Degree Research (HDR) students, including the development of a Commencement Program for new research students. These changes were the result of planning for HDR students which included student consultation through an annual focus group study.

To continue to better understand the experiences and views of commencing research students, and the effect on them of the University’s policy changes, we will be undertaking a number of focus group interviews with students enrolled for the first time at Macquarie University in 2006, 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 approximately one 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 from 2005 consultations with commencing research students, please go to ‘Articles of Interest’ in the ‘Current Students’ section of the HDRU website - http://www.ro.mq.edu.au/HDRU/current.htm - and select ‘Higher Degree Research Candidature Management Project’.

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

Yours sincerely,

Jim Piper
Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research)
1st August, 2006
7.2 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
7.3 MQ HDR Questionnaire Results 2006

NB. More than one response per question may have been given; the first figure is the number of responses to that
answer; the second figure is the number of responses expressed as a percentage of total responses to that question
(given in parentheses after the question).

1. Is your principal supervisor: (96)
   a. Personally selected = 72 = 75%
   b. Previous supervisor = 12 = 13%
   c. Department/Division allocated = 19 = 20%
   d. Don’t yet have one = 0 = 0%
   e. Other = 3 = 3%

2. Do you also have one or more associate supervisor/s, co-supervisor/s or adjunct supervisor/s? (98)
   a. Yes = 87 = 89%
   b. No = 10 = 10%
   c. Not sure = 1 = 1%

3. a) Do you have a clear idea of what you expect from your principal supervisor? (97)
   a. Yes = 87 = 90%
   b. No = 4 = 4%
   c. Not sure = 7 = 7%
   b) Do you have a clear idea of what you expect from your other supervisor/s? (97)
   a. Yes = 56 = 58%
   b. No = 14 = 14%
   c. Not sure = 18 = 19%
   d. Not Applicable = 9 = 9%

4. a) Do you think your principal supervisor has a clear idea of what you expect of him/her? (98)
   a. Yes = 77 = 79%
   b. No = 7 = 7%
   c. Not sure = 14 = 14%
   b) Do you think your other supervisor/s have a clear idea of what you expect of them? (97)
   a. Yes = 48 = 49%
   b. No = 14 = 14%
   c. Not sure = 28 = 29%
   d. Not Applicable = 7 = 7%

5. How did you find the 2006 enrolment process? (96)
   a. Easy = 55 = 58%
   b. Average = 34 = 35%
   c. Difficult = 8 = 8%

6. Did you attend a Macquarie University Central Commencement Program (CCP) in: (96)
   a. February 2006 = 56 = 58%
   b. July 2006 = 17 = 18%
   c. No, completed Online (i) Yes = 15 = 16%
   (ii) No = 8 = 8%

7. Did you also attend a Divisional/Departmental Commencement Program in 2006? (96)
   a. Yes = 73 = 76%
   b. No = 15 = 16%
   c. None offered = 8 = 8%
8. Do you know the HDR Coordinator for your Division/Department? (97)
   a. Yes = 76 = 78%
   b. No = 10 = 10%
   c. Not sure = 11 = 11%

9. Have you had any contact with your HDR Coordinator? (97)
   a. Yes = 54 = 56%
   b. No = 26 = 27%
   c. Have not needed to = 18 = 19%
   c. Not sure = 11 = 11%

10. Have you completed a detailed research proposal? (97)
    a. Yes, before commencement = 46 = 47%
    b. Yes, since commencement = 27 = 28%
    c. No = 27 = 28%

11. Does your research proposal involve costing of your research project eg. External lab costs, archive visits, fieldwork, conferences? (96)
    a. Yes = 21 = 22%
    b. No = 47 = 49%
    c. Not sure = 6 = 6%
    d. Not applicable = 22 = 23%

12. Do you have adequate resources to undertake your research? (98)
    a. Yes = 66 = 67%
    b. No = 15 = 15%
    c. Not sure = 18 = 18%

13. Do you have an allocated space (eg. desk, office, lab) to work in your department? (97)
    a. Yes (i) Does meet needs = 57 = 59%
       (ii) Does NOT meet needs = 13 = 13%
    b. No = 27 = 28%

14. Are you undertaking a research Masters/PhD? (98)
    a. PhD = 74 = 76%
    b. DBA = 7 = 7%
    c. Other Prof Doc = 4 = 4%
    d. Masters = 14 = 14%
       (i) enc’d/req’d by Div = 5 = 42% (of MPhil student responses)
       (ii) student chose to do = 7 = 58%

15. How long do you expect you will need to complete? \( FTE = \) full-time equivalent\] (96)
    a. 4 years(FTE) for PhD = 22 = 23%
    b. 3 years(FTE) for PhD = 47 = 49%
    c. 3 years(FTE) for Prof Doc = 8 = 8%
    d. 2 years(FTE) for MPhil = 13 = 14%
    e. Other = 6 = 6%

16. Is this completion time in line with your Department’s/Division’s expectations? (95)
    a. Yes = 83 = 87%
    b. No = 2 = 2%
    c. Hasn’t been discussed = 10 = 11%

17. Do you access the Higher Degree Research Unit website for candidature and/or scholarship information? (96)
    a. Yes = 67 = 70%
    b. No = 29 = 30%
18. Were you fully informed on HDR attendance requirements prior to commencement? (94)
   
a. Yes = 56 = 60%
b. No = 20 = 21%
c. Not sure = 18 = 19%

19. Are you able to see your supervisor/s when you need to? (97)
   
a. Yes, Always = 71 = 73%
b. Sometimes = 22 = 23%
c. It is difficult = 4 = 4%
d. No = 1 = 1%

20. a) Is the time you have with your supervisor/s sufficient for your current needs? (96)
   
a. Always = 51 = 53%
b. Mostly = 40 = 42%
c. Sometimes = 3 = 3%
d. No = 2 = 2%

21. Do you have clear information about your department’s funding provisions for your research costs? (95)
   
a. Yes = 61 = 64%
b. No = 21 = 22%
c. Not sure = 13 = 14%