

## ECU In-Progress Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire 2010 - Qualitative Results

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### Introduction

In second semester 2010, the GRS administered, for the third time in three years, an electronic survey to 623 in-progress postgraduate research students (similar to a national survey distributed to research students at graduation) to evaluate students' needs and monitor their overall postgraduate experience. This report summarizes the qualitative responses of respondents to three open-ended survey questions: 1) Have you any comments about the administrative services (Admissions, Assessment and Scholarships) offered to HDR students? 2) What are the best aspects of your course? and 3) What aspects of your course are most in need of improvement? A total of 232 students responded to at least one of these questions – a response rate of 37.2% for this portion of the survey. The themes that emerged out of students' responses covered the following topics:

- *Supervision* – statements related to students' relationship with their supervisor/s
- *Infrastructure* – campus resources including facilities such as the library, library resources, computer labs, research software, IT support; information about resources and services
- *Funding* – scholarships; funds to travel to conferences; funds to purchase equipment and conduct research; tuition costs; information about funding
- *Intellectual Climate* – seminars, FOPS; research community or culture; social events; relationship with fellow postgraduate students
- *Skill Development* – content related to specialized courses, trainings, and workshops; aspects of course work related to autonomy, independence, flexibility, time management, practical, applied, or challenging research; or critical thinking skills; GRS, research consultants and other staff support;
- *Overall Satisfaction* – general statements that reflect students overall level of satisfaction with multiple aspects of their course work

### Summary and Conclusion

Consistent with the two previous years' iPREQ results, in 2010, students across the disciplines continued to indicate that **infrastructure** is still the area most in need of improvement. The second area that students pointed as needing improvement is **supervision**, particularly in relation to supervisors' workload and their availability to meet and provide timely feedback to research candidates. **Funding** was also highlighted as an area in need of improvement.

Some students suggested ways to further developed current course structure, such as providing more academic writing skills and in-depth training in research methods. Increasing the access to

discipline-base expertise was another proposition. Students continued to suggest a more flexible delivery of training and lectures that combines face-to-face and online modes to facilitate access to external and part-time students who are working full-time. The majority of students indicated an overall level of satisfaction with general areas of their course and that they feel well prepared to successfully conduct their research.

The subsequent sections of this report highlight key aspects of candidates' postgraduate experience with which they felt most satisfied as well as areas they feel are most in need of improvement. Results are organized and discussed at the university level. Whenever appropriate reference is made to specific faculties and schools.

# **Analysis of Responses at the University Level**

## ***1. Infrastructure***

Access to research resources and facilities, including computer lab rooms were mentioned by several students as the best aspects of their courses. A number of students praised the flexibility of their course structure. Similar to last year's report, some students identified the coursework component of their courses as providing an excellent preparation for their subsequent research stages.

Infrastructure is, however, still the area where more respondents commented as needing improvement. Respondents who provided comments in this area (27), requested better access to research facilities and resources. After hours access to campus facilities and more online library resources were called for. Some students indicated that they do not have a proper workspace on campus or that it is not adequately equipped and requested to be given a lockable cabinet and computer with relevant software installed. Noise in some of the Postgraduate Rooms was mentioned as non-conducive to work, particularly around buildings 16 and 17 (ML campus). More specifically, requests were made by some WAAPA students for adequate creative arts workstations at Mt Lawley. In Joondalup, there were requests for adequate laboratory space and equipment as well as properly trained lab staff.

Other students regarded their experiences with research administration as confusing. Some expressed confusion as to who to contact for different administrative purposes as well as highlighted the frequent staff turnover. One student suggested that research administrators should be assigned students as "cases" and provide a more personalised service. Assessment responsiveness to students' queries was also mentioned as needing improvement.

## ***2. Supervision***

A large number of respondents (106), mentioned supervision as critical to their educational progress. Similar to the previous years' reports, many students (80) praised and recognised supervisors for their knowledge, support, accessibility, creating a safe environment to share ideas, providing future research, teaching, or career opportunities, and giving students constructive feedback. In several instances, students considered their supervisors to be the best aspects of their course. Additionally, a few students provided the name of their supervisors. In a couple of instances, praise was directed specifically to the co-supervisors. Common descriptors of supervision were 'helpful,' 'positive,' 'supportive,' and 'superb.'

A smaller group of respondents (26) expressed frustration with the supervision they have received. The main reason for complaints continue to be students' difficulty in accessing their supervisors, receiving constructive feedback or receiving it in a timely manner. A few students indicated that they would like to be told clearly what their supervisors expect of them. Others noted that they are made feel that they are not a priority. In some instances, candidates have also referred to periods of absence of supervision. A minority of students felt that they cannot trust their supervisors, mentioning that supervisors have advised against seeking further support from other staff, such as research consultants.

## ***3. Funding***

A very small number of students (5) regarded financial support through scholarship, no fees and conference and research funding as the best aspects of their course.

Similar to results of the previous IPREQ reports, funding continues to be a main area of concern for many students. In general, respondents (21) expressed that they would like to have their scholarship and/or research funding money increased. This is particularly the case for students conducting data collection overseas, having to buy costly art supplies or those who would like to outsource interview transcriptions. Other students mentioned that they would like to have more funds available for attending conferences. Part-time and external candidates communicated the need for scholarships to support their research. Finally, a couple of students indicated that research funding should be distributed in accordance to the projects' needs, as not all incur the same type of expenses.

#### ***4. Skill Development***

Overall, many students suggested that certain staff at ECU are among the best aspects of their experience, in some cases providing the names of particular individuals or sections of the university. The library, GRS, SOAR Centre, faculty and school based support staff and services were highly praised. Writing and research consultants were also well regarded.

Many students expressed great appreciation for the development of critical and analytical thinking skills, the opportunity to expand their knowledge beyond their specific field while working on a topic of their choice and interest. Many noted the flexibility and level of independence that they have to conduct research as well as the possibility to make a difference with their research as one of the best aspects of their course. Multiple students commented on the usefulness of research training workshops and academic writing skills. A number of students found the combination of practical aspects of their courses, such as developing analytical and problem solving skills, planning, and knowledge management, as very useful in the development of employability skills beyond their courses and outside academia.

Other students (27) identified several areas of skill development in need of improvement. These specific areas include research methods, more writing support, career skills development and help with time management skills. One student also requested that more attention is paid to providing support to candidates with learning disabilities. Several respondents would like to see a school or discipline-based approach to skill development.

#### ***5. Intellectual Climate***

A number of respondents (29) reported on the area of intellectual climate. They indicated that the research culture at ECU and the relationships they maintain with peers are among the best aspects of their course work. They expressed their appreciation for the stimulation they receive from the "people side" of research, interaction with people from different cultures, being positively challenged in their intellectual pursuits and the opportunity to gain different kinds of knowledge (social, cultural and professional). Many indicated the workshops and seminars run at ECU as not only building research skills but also being sources of engagement and intellectual stimulation. A couple of students specifically praised the social setup of WAAPA and FBL efforts in promoting a culture of research. Also special praise was mentioned for the network of peers and staff from GRS and SCA as well as the support from the SOAR Ambassadors.

A very minor number of students (3) expressed that they feel disconnected from their school. In a couple of instances, their feelings were partially explained by their personal and/or working commitments, partial or external mode of enrolment, which does not allow them to fully participate in campus life.

## Recommendations

Over the three consecutive years (2008-2010), students' comments on iPREQ show some consistent patterns in the areas in need of improvement as well as those regarded as the best part of their courses. Supervision has been consistently recognised in these surveys as critical in two ways, positively impacting or rather hindering the candidates' research progress. The fact that some students have mentioned spending periods of their candidature without access to supervision would require follow up as a matter of priority. The other two areas that should receive special attention are infrastructure and funding. In relation to infrastructure, it seems important to continue making effort to allocate adequate work spaces and properly resource laboratories and artwork facilities. In relation to funding, perhaps attention to supporting part-time candidates can be considered.

These three areas consistently marked by students as in need of improvement can impact not only on students' progress but also on how students develop a sense of socio-cultural and professional connectedness. Therefore, they can also affect ECU's ability to establish and promote a strong a research culture.

Further details of previous year's reports can be found on the Graduate Research School website <http://research.ecu.edu.au/grs/surveys/>