

# ECU In-Progress Postgraduate Research Experience: Questionnaire for 2008 - Qualitative Results

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## Introduction

In the second semester of 2008, the GRS administered an electronic survey to 503 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 two open-ended survey questions: 1) What are the best aspects of your course? 2) What aspects of your course are most need of improvement? A total of 197 students responded to one or both of these questions – a response rate of 39% for this portion of the survey. The themes of students' responses covered the following topics:

1. Funding – scholarships; funds to travel to conferences; funds to purchase equipment, software, or present performances; funding issues for external students; tuition costs; information about funding, grants, and scholarships
2. Infrastructure – campus resources including facilities such as the library, library resources, computer labs, research software; GRS, research consultants and other staff support; information about graduate policies; information or resources specifically for international students
3. Supervision – statements related to students' relationship with their supervisor/s
4. 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
5. Intellectual Climate – Google groups research Listserv; FOPS; research community or culture; social events; relationship with fellow postgraduate students
6. Overall Satisfaction – general statements that reflect students overall level of satisfaction with multiple aspects of their course work

## Summary and Conclusion

Considering the data presented across all faculties, students indicated that funding and infrastructure are areas most in need of improvement. Many respondents across disciplines suggested possible ways of building infrastructure by increasing the number of research trainings on offer, by hiring experts in advanced research methodologies, and by offering events such as FOPS and workshops on-line for external students or students conducting research overseas. Students in each faculty suggested an overall level of satisfaction with general areas of their course work and are generally happy, prepared, and proud to be affiliated with ECU.

The subsequent sections of this report highlight key aspects of students' postgraduate experience that they are most satisfied with and those areas they feel are most in need of improvement. Results are organized and discussed at the university level, then by faculty, and finally by school.

# Analysis of Responses at the University Level

## 1. Funding

Considering the frequency of responses within each theme discussed by respondents, it is evident that funding issues are a main concern for many students. In general, no student provided comments that the funding of the university is among the best aspects of their course work and many indicated it was an area most in need of attention. External students expressed the greatest frustration with accessing funding sources for conducting their research. Many internal students indicated that although they currently receive research funds, they feel that the amount of funding is inadequate for covering costs associated with conferences, computer equipment and software not provided by the university, and data collection (especially for field work). Other students indicated that information provided about accessing research funds within and outside of the university is inadequate. Finally, several respondents suggested that tuition costs are too high or that funding is not distributed in an equitable manner among all postgraduate research students.

## 2. Infrastructure

More respondents commented that the existing infrastructure to support postgraduates needs improvement than did respondents who indicated it is among the best aspects of their course work (47 versus 58 respondents respectively). In general, students suggested that certain staff at ECU are among the best aspects of infrastructure. GRS and faculty based writing and research consultants and lab staff are among the most highly regarded and mentioned the most frequently, followed by staff support within particular faculties. Other aspects of infrastructure that students found valuable are the library and library staff – many students feel that using library resources on and off campus are key to their research success.

With regard to aspects of infrastructure in need of improvement, research space was a central issue. An overwhelming number of students commented that they do not have an adequate work space (e.g., space does not exist in an accessible location, it is not secure and private, or it does not contain the computer equipment or software they need for their research). A second concern related to the articulation of information about graduate policies, reimbursement procedures, and the management structure within each faculty or school. Students commented that they did not know where to obtain information or whom to ask, and external and international students were most likely to report such concerns. Another frequently mentioned aspect of infrastructure that students feel needs improving relates to training in qualitative and quantitative data analysis. Many students argued that the university should provide an expert in each methodological area to consult with students about performing advanced techniques. Finally, multiple students expressed frustration with library hours, library assistance, and IT assistance suggesting that it is often hit or miss.

## 3. Supervision

An overwhelming number of students (84) provided great praise for their supervisors as being critical to their educational progress. Overall, supervisors were recognized for their knowledge, support, accessibility, creating a safe environment to share ideas, providing future research, teaching, or career opportunities, and giving students constructive and timely feedback. Additionally, many students provided the name of particular individual(s) whom they found the most helpful, often describing their supervisor(s) as “excellent,” “wonderful,” “extraordinary,” or “superb.”

A smaller group of respondents (20) expressed significant frustration with the supervision they have received. Students indicated that they need a supervisor that is more familiar with their research topic, consistent with their time and feedback, and clear about guidelines and the amount of support they can offer. A minority of students felt that the treatment they receive from their supervisor is alienating, that the relationship lacks trust, that they are made to feel that they are not a priority, and/or that their research ideas are not worthwhile. Additionally, a handful of students made reference to being on their second or third supervisor suggesting that they have not had good working relationships with a previous supervisor.

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

Skill development was the second most commented on theme with regard to best aspects of course work at ECU (by 79 respondents). Students expressed great appreciation for the development of critical and analytic thinking skills, the flexibility and level of independence gained in conducting research, and the opportunity to explore topics of interest and create new knowledge within their field(s). Multiple students commented on the usefulness of research training workshops, especially developing academic writing skills, writing a literature review, and using NVivo.

Other students (40) identified several areas of skill development in need of improvement. These specific areas include using STREAM for ethics applications, Endnote, statistical programs such as SPSS, navigating research literature in a manageable way, writing for publications or conferences, and performing qualitative data analysis. Two general areas of skill development were also mentioned: time management and practical professional skills. Several students discussed a desire to write theses that are more practical for career development (for example, several smaller publishable papers) rather than one long document considered not conducive to securing future employment outside of academia.

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

Numerous respondents (28) reported that the research culture of ECU and the relationships they maintain with other postgraduates is among the best aspects of their course work. Networking, social gatherings, and the research community of students and staff represent sources of social support that are highly regarded. GRS and the forums of postgraduate students (FOPS) were discussed by a number of students as being sources of engagement and intellectual stimulation. In addition, several students mentioned good relationships between students and staff.

A similar number of students (22) expressed a desire for greater cohort development, more FOPS sessions, more critical discussions amongst graduate students, and increased dialogue among students and the University. Some students indicated that they feel excluded and disconnected from the research culture at ECU because they are external to campus or located in Bunbury. Finally, a small group of students suggested that there is a hierarchy among postgraduate students in which some are more favourably treated by ECU faculty and staff.