ECU InProgress Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (iPREQ) 2011 - Qualitative Results Summary

Background

Each year, the Edith Cowan University Graduate Research School administers an InProgress Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (iPREQ) to its current cohort of Higher Degree by Research candidates. The purpose of this data collection is to evaluate candidates' needs and monitor their overall experience. The survey measures are designed to complement the Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire that candidates are asked to complete following graduation.

In 2011, 348 Higher Degree by Research candidates completed the ECU iPREQ (53% response rate). The quantitative results are summarised in a separate report: *ECU In-Progress Postgraduate Research Experience: Questionnaire for 2010 - Quantitative Results* which is available at http://research.ecu.edu.au/grs/surveys/.

This report details the results pertaining to three open-ended questions: *What are the best aspects of your course?; What aspects of your course are most in need of improvement?;* and *Have you any comments about the administrative services (Admissions, Assessments and Scholarships) offered to HDR students?* These data have been analysed using a taxonomy developed by the Graduate Studies Office at the University of Sydney (2010). The taxonomy comprises categories and sub-categories that are "based on the SREQ and PREQ factors and additional factors which contribute to the respondents' overall satisfaction with their experience of research training" and "represent the range of aspects of the research higher degree student experience which are considered to have a major influence on the quality of the degree experience" (Graduate Studies office, 2010, p. 2). The results are summarised below according to dominant categories and sub-categories.

Results

What are the best aspects of your course?

Quality of supervision

Overwhelmingly, candidates noted the quality of their supervision, in terms of the support, guidance and expertise that they received, as the best aspect of their course. Most candidates referred to 'my supervisors' indicating that their responses were not limited to one supervisor. Regular and meaningful interaction with their supervisors was central to candidates' appreciation of the quality of their supervision: candidates valued being able to 'work' and 'chat' with their supervisors, to 'discuss their research' and 'gain feedback on their research'.

Personal and intellectual autonomy

With regard to attributes that can be supported through HDR degrees, candidates valued most highly the independence and autonomy that they gained and were allowed through their research degree. Specifically, many candidates mentioned the independent and autonomous nature of their research as one of the best aspects of their course, and enjoyed the freedom of exploring their research and determining their own work structure. In addition, many candidates appreciated being able to work independently whilst knowing that if they did need support or guidance, that this was available to them.

Research and inquiry

Candidates also appreciated the knowledge and skills that they were gaining through their course. In particular, candidates mentioned the development of their critical thinking, and the broadening of their research skills and understanding of the research process as one of the best aspects of their course. Candidates also valued learning about their research topic in-depth, as well as finding out about new areas and fields of study.

General satisfaction with research

With regards to areas that related to overall satisfaction, it was the research itself that candidates appreciated most. Candidates' satisfaction with their research included being able to explore a particular topic in-depth, doing

research that would have beneficial outcomes, and particularly enjoying specific parts of the research process such as data collection.

What aspects of your course are most in need of improvement?

Quality of Supervision

Though supervision was the best aspect of their course for many candidates, it was also there area in most need of improvement for others. In most cases, candidates perceived a lack of meaningful, informed and consistent guidance and feedback from their supervisor/s. For many timeliness of feedback was also an area in need of improvement, and though candidates acknowledged that their supervisor's high workload was likely to be impacting on their capacity to support their students, candidates perceived that more time needed to be dedicated to the supervisory role. Several candidates mentioned the lack of clear guidelines or expectations about the level of support that they could expect from their supervisor and felt that greater clarity on this would be beneficial. There was a perception among some candidates that in their case, their supervisor was not meeting minimal standards in terms of level of feedback, regularity of feedback and knowledge about their research area. These candidates perceived that their research degree was being substantially compromised as a result.

Research training and resources

Candidates wanted more direction on how to structure their research proposal and thesis, and training on how to design their research and manage their research (e.g. milestones, timeframes). Candidates requested more specialised research training, particularly with regard to SPSS and statistical analysis. Training on publishing and on specific software such as NVivo and Endnote was also requested. Candidates also felt that the accessibility of research training was in need of improvement and requested that training be made available online.

Facilities and services

The availability and access to desk, lab and rehearsal space was an area in need of improvement for some candidates. Several candidates also mentioned that their need for basic equipment such as computers, photocopiers and ink were not being met.

Finance and funding

Candidates felt that the level of funding for their research needed improvement, as well as the level of financial assistance that they received as candidates. Candidates would value more information on, and access to scholarships and travel/ conference funds, and many were experiencing financial hardship as a result of being a research student.

Social/ research isolation

Several candidates mentioned feeling isolated, but acknowledged that this was an outcome of their mode of study (part-time or off-campus) that that this was not necessarily something that ECU would be able to address.

Have you any comments about the administrative services (Admissions, Assessments and Scholarships) offered to HDR students?

The quantitative results showed that the following percentage of candidates were satisfied with the services offered by the following administrative services:
- 80.4% for Admissions (n=306)
- 70.2% for Assessments (n=278)
- 67.3% for Scholarships (n=239)

In alignment with these quantitative results, the qualitative results were predominantly positive. Candidates appreciated the level of assistances that they received and noted the helpfulness of the staff.

Candidates also identified several specific areas that they perceived required improvement or attention.

Admissions
Several candidates noted issues that had arisen with not being enrolled in the correct course, or with the appropriate code. It was felt that the admissions process was sometimes convoluted and in some cases, not timely.

Assessments
Candidates noted issues with the online progress reports in terms of inability to accurately capture the supervisory arrangements if they were not typical e.g. with external supervisors. It was also noted that there was an issue with the timeliness of responses to queries sent to Assessments.

Scholarships
Responses regarding the administration of scholarships were overall positive, with suggestions for improvements focussing on the scholarships themselves. The lack of scholarships for international candidates, part-time candidates and mature-age candidates was mentioned. In addition, the level of support provided through existing scholarships was perceived by some to be low, and not appropriately indexed.

Reference
Graduate Studies Office. (2010). Taxonomy for analysing qualitative data from the Student Research Experience Questionnaire (SCEQ) and the Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ) (2nd ed.). Sydney: University of Sydney.

Further information
Reports detailing the quantitative ECU iPREQ results and results from previous years can be found on the Graduate Research School website: http://research.ecu.edu.au/grs/surveys/