

ECU In-Progress Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire 2009 - Qualitative Results

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Introduction

In the second semester of 2009, the GRS administered, for the second time in two years, an electronic survey to 565 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? 3) What aspects of your course are most in need of improvement? A total of 184 students responded to at least one of these questions – a response rate of 32.5% for this portion of the survey. The themes of students' responses covered the following topics:

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

Summary and Conclusion

Students across the disciplines indicated that infrastructure is still the area most in need of improvement. However, a minor improvement was noted in comparison to the 2008 IPREQ.¹ Some students suggested ways to further develop current course structures, such as providing more structured and in-depth training in research methods (qualitative and quantitative) and academic writing skills. Increasing access to experts in different fields of expertise across the disciplines was another proposition. Other students suggested 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

¹ For a detailed view at the 2008 IPREQ report please visit <http://research.ecu.edu.au/grs/surveys/>.

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 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 school wherever appropriate.

Analysis of Responses at the University Level

1. Infrastructure

Although there has been a slight improvement in relation to the 2008 IPREQ survey, infrastructure is still the area where most respondents commented as needing improvement. A large number of respondents (51) who provided comments in this area, requested better access to facilities and resources than those who considered infrastructure to be among the best aspects of their course (44). Overall, many students suggested that certain staff at ECU are among the best aspects of infrastructure, in some cases providing the names of particular individuals. GRS, faculty and school based support staff and services were among the most highly praised. Writing and research consultants are also very highly regarded. 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. Access to research resources and facilities, including computer lab rooms were mentioned as the best aspects of their courses. In a few cases, students referred to their postgraduate room as key to their success. An important number of students praised their course structure, psychology in particular stood out. Others identified the coursework component of their courses as providing an excellent preparation for their subsequent research stages.

With regard to aspects of infrastructure in need of improvement, limited or no access to an adequate research space was a central issue. A number of students commented that they were given a room that is either shared by too many people, is in a noisy spot or that their desks are located away from their school, academic staff and printing facilities. In both cases, students considered these arrangements to be inadequate to conduct research. Other students expressed they would be happy if they were at least given a desk on campus. A second concern related to some feeling confused regarding whom HDR students should go to for administrative support. Some respondents expressed that they would like a clearer picture of all the administrative bodies that concern postgraduates. One student suggested the production of a single visual document that shows the links and responsibilities of each of the administrative sections. Assessment responsiveness to students' queries was also mentioned as needing improvement. A third aspect highlighted by students was the lack of clarity regarding the boundaries of faculty and school support. Fourthly, some students expressed frustration with library resources, library access and IT timely and adequate assistance. Several respondents mentioned the need to have full-time school-based academic writing and research consultants. Finally, some students referred to the importance of having peer-to-peer support organised. A student mentioned the SOAR centre services as not being adequately advertised and underused by postgraduate students. Other respondents would like to see a school or discipline based peer-review process developed for graduate research students.

2. Skill Development

Skill development was the area most commented on with regard to best aspects of course work at ECU (93 respondents). 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 students noted the flexibility and level of independence that they have to conduct 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 as very useful in the development of employability skills beyond their courses and outside academia.

Other students (37) identified several areas of skill development in need of improvement. These specific areas include using STREAM for ethics applications, statistical programs such as SPSS, and more in-depth qualitative and quantitative research methods. Time management was also mentioned as a general skill that students would like to develop.

3. Funding

A small number of students (11) regarded financial support as the best aspects of their course (scholarships, no fees, and conference and research funds).

Similar to results in the previous IPREQ report, it is evident that funding continues to be a main area of concern for many students. In general, respondents expressed frustration with accessing funding sources for conducting their research, and would also like to see conference and research funding increased. Some suggested that the time limit on scholarships should be extended. Other students indicated that information provided about accessing research funds within and outside of the university is inadequate and not readily available. Master by Research candidates communicated the need for more scholarships at their level of study. 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. For instance, many Doctorate in Psychology students considered that they are disadvantaged by having to pay fees yet not being able to access scholarships. A few Doctorate in Psychology students pointed to their workloads and relevance of projects and that the university gains from their completion is equally important to those of PhD Psych candidates’.

4. Supervision

A significant number of students (59) 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 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. Common descriptors of supervision were ‘excellent,’ ‘wonderful,’ ‘great,’ ‘supportive,’ and ‘understanding.’

A smaller group of respondents (22) expressed frustration with the supervision they have received. The main complaint relates to students' difficulty in accessing their supervisors, receiving constructive feedback or receiving it in a timely manner. A few students indicated their need for a supervisor that is more familiar with their research topic. Other students expressed uncertainty about their rights to feedback or the level of expectation that they should have of their supervisors. A minority of students felt that the treatment they receive from their supervisors is alienating, that the relationship lacks trust and that they feel that they are not made a priority. Compared to the 2008 IPREQ results regarding supervision, the 2009 responses indicate a decrease in satisfaction (from 84 to 59) and a slight increase in the number of critical remarks (from 20 to 22). The 2008 reports can be accessed on the GRS website <http://research.ecu.edu.au/grs/surveys/>

5. Intellectual Climate

An overall small number of respondents (18) reported on the area of intellectual climate. These students indicated that the research culture at ECU and the relationships they maintain with peers are among the best aspects of their course work. Many indicated that the seminars, lectures and opportunities to professional networking are essential to their success. Social gatherings, GRS forums of postgraduate students (FOPS), coffee mornings and family BBQs were regarded by students as being sources of engagement and intellectual stimulation. In some instances, schools' gatherings, seminars and collegial exchanges were pointed as being among the best aspects of their courses. The schools of psychology, communication and arts and natural sciences were singled out by some respondents.

A similar number of students (12) expressed a desire for greater peer support development, and specifically requested that seminars and social gatherings are run after hours to allow the inclusion of full time working students. Some indicated that they feel excluded and disconnected from the research culture at ECU because they do not get opportunities to learn about what other staff and students at ECU and in their schools or disciplines, in particular, are working on. Many students commented on the need for school support for the development of a richer intellectual climate within their relevant disciplines.