

FACULTY OF ARTS
STUDENT RESEARCH EXPERIENCE QUESTIONNAIRE (SREQ)
POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH STUDENTS
ANALYSIS OF OPEN RESPONSE COMMENTS: 2005

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Student Research Experience Questionnaire (SREQ), which evaluates the quality of research higher degree students' experiences, was introduced in 2002. As part of the questionnaire students are asked to provide comments on the best aspects of their university experience and those that could be improved.

Based on the responses to these questions, this document seeks to provide an analysis of the areas of best practice, and opportunities for improvement, in the experiences of postgraduate research students in the Faculty of Arts in 2005.

Degree experience: areas of best practice

The aspects of degree experience which attracted most positive comments from postgraduate research students in 2005 were:

	% of comments received	
	2005	2004
Quality of supervision: supervisor	39%	32%
Overall satisfaction: satisfaction with research	17%	21%
Research climate: supportive work environment	16%	8%
Generic skills: working independently	10%	12%
Quality of infrastructure: physical facilities: workspace, building etc	10%	4%
Quality of infrastructure: research resources: library	9%	12%

Degree experience: opportunities for improvement

The areas of degree experience which postgraduate research students considered most in need of improvement in 2005 were:

	% of comments received	
	2005	2004
Quality of infrastructure: physical facilities: workspace, building, office	27%	30%
Research climate: interaction with other research students (study related)	14%	11%
Quality of infrastructure: physical facilities: computing facilities and resources	10%	
Quality of infrastructure: funding: not scholarships or PRSS	10%	
Quality of supervision: supervisor	9%	15%
Research climate: seminars, workshops	8%	9%

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1 Introduction

The Student Research Experience Questionnaire (SREQ), which evaluates the quality of research higher degree students' experiences, was introduced in 2002. As part of the questionnaire students are asked to provide comments postgraduate research students are asked to provide comments on the following:

- What are the best aspects of your research higher degree experience?
- What aspects are most in need of improvement?

Based on the responses to these questions, this document seeks to provide an analysis of the areas of best practice, and opportunities for improvement, in the experiences of postgraduate research students in the Faculty of Arts in 2005.

In 2005 81% of students who responded to the SREQ provided comments on the best aspects of their degree experience, and 73% on aspects that were considered to be in need of improvement. The substantial difference in the number of positive comments received compared to those expressing the opposite opinion, possibly indicates an overall satisfaction with the degree experience of postgraduate research students in the Faculty of Arts.

2 Arrangement

1. Analysis of comments referring to best aspects of the degree course
2. Analysis of comments referring to aspects that could be improved
3. Analysis of comments from international students

Within the first two sections, responses are ranked according to the percentage of comments received for each aspect. Sample comments are provided for the six aspects that received the highest percentage of comments. For comparison, results for the previous years qualitative analysis (2002 – 2004) are provided in brackets after the 2005 results. This part of the analysis is based on comments received from all students who responded to the survey – local and international.

Only aspects that received more than 5% of comments in 2005 are included in this report. To preserve student confidentiality, sample comments are only provided if there are six or more comments relating to that aspect in the responses. Comments that may possibly identify the student are not been included in the sample comments. Comments are transcribed exactly as they appear in the original documents.

The last section provides an analysis of comments received from the twelve international postgraduate research students who responded to the survey.

3 Analysis of the comments: taxonomy and process

The manual analysis and evaluation method used by the University is based on an in-house taxonomy which allows for standardisation of reporting across the university and ease of comparison with the SREQ quantitative analysis reports.

Within the taxonomy, categories used for the SREQ are identical to the SREQ factor scales, with the addition of Administration and organisation, Ethics Administration, Academic Board policies, International Office, and other administrative areas and support services¹. This taxonomy is under constant revision as the need to sub-divide categories and create new ones becomes apparent.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Quality of supervision• Quality of infrastructure• Generic skills• Research climate• Overall satisfaction | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Academic Board policies• Cultural diversity and Equity• Communication• Administration and organisation• Student support services |
|---|--|

Categories used in the analysis of SREQ Open Response comments

Each comment received is analysed according to the SREQ Taxonomy, with those including more than one aspect being counted in each aspect mentioned.

It should be noted, however, that the absence of favourable comments on a particular aspect of research training does not reflect that this is not an area of best practice. Rather that the students are happy with their experiences, and prefer to focus on commenting on areas in need of improvement.

¹ A copy of the taxonomy is provided as a separate document

4 Analysis of comments referring to the best aspects²

Quality of supervision: supervisor

(2005: 39%)

(2004: 32%; 2003: 31%; 2002: 37%)

- I have excellent mentors in my supervisor and associate supervisor and their contributions to my research are complementary. Both of them have given me ideas and 'leads' which have proved rewarding.
- Flexibility with my supervision arrangements, I feel my supervisor is very accessible when I need her input but I am also free to go off and "do my own thing" without being questioned. My supervisor is very efficient in reading and commenting on my work and obliging in arranging meeting times that suit me.
- The enthusiasm and sharing of knowledge of my supervisor for my project. This has enabled me to research the topic with the confidence that my research now will equate something towards the actual dissertation.
- My supervisors have been absolutely wonderful. They are both intellectually and emotionally supportive. Also, the postgraduate seminars organised by X X are great.

Overall satisfaction: satisfaction with research

(2005: 17%)

(2004: 21%; 2003: 19%; 2002: 19%)

- Researching an area that I am interested in and the opportunity to meet different people through the experience. I feel that I have developed considerably as a person through the research experience.
- Working on a topic of own choice and focussing on particular research interest
- The opportunity to contribute original research in an area I feel worth the effort. Even in this last six month of my candidature, I am enjoying the experience. I am most satisfied with my experience at the University of Sydney. It has been a privilege.
- The in-depth research I am able to undertake on a topic which I personally find extremely interesting

Research climate: supportive work environment

(2005: 16%)

(2004: 8%; 2003: 10%; 2002: 8%)

- The excellent supervisory support, the assistance with planning and research, support from other faculty/department members, very supportive contact from other students. In previous years while doing my MA I read in the SUPRA journal of students who felt isolated. I have plenty of support and communication and no concerns about isolation.
- Great deal of support from Religious Studies including encouragement to present at conferences and publish papers. All the staff in the department take an interest in students, not just my supervisor.
- The Ambience of the Department and the environment of support that the postgraduates have built around them with the support of the staff.
- My department (Gender Studies) motivates me as an individual and makes me feel part of a dynamic and supportive research culture.

² Number of comment received: 2005: 251; 2004: 269; 2003: 317; 2002: 239

Generic skills: working independently

(2005: 10%)

(2004: 12%; 2003: 16%; 2002: 14%)

- The ability to work independently on a project of my own choice and the opportunity to work with a very experienced supervisor, who is an expert in his field.
- Time to explore ideas independently and at length, this leads to thorough exposition of ideas not constrained by course work and personally, challenged all intellectual faculties.
- My research experience has been of autonomous, disciplined research in a collegial atmosphere. This is good because it allows me to independently pursue research interested, while also developing relationships with other researchers.
- I am left to independently research, and am free to pursue whatever avenues which are of interest to me. I do not feel pressured into entering into entering particular methodologies or ideologies.

Quality of infrastructure: Physical facilities

(2005: 10%)

(2004: 4%; 2003: 6%; 2002: 4%)

- PGARCII, having a working space at university makes research a writing easier
- Since getting access to PG-ARC (postgraduate arts resource centre) facilities, I feel my productivity has increased, especially with PG-ARC2
- PGARC has provided me with the space and equipment necessary to carry on my work, which would otherwise suffer. It has also provided me with contact of the other Arts postgraduate students who work there, lending research, intellectual, and moral support. These people show a respect for me as a fellow research academic and for my research project that I do not find many other places on campus.
- Department did not provide any postgrad study space, but I was provided with a great working space with students from other departments (PGARC). This is the greatest experience, which helped us with dealing with isolation, sharing information as a post grad.

Quality of infrastructure: research resources: library

(2005: 9%)

(2004: 12%; 2003: 14%; 2002: 15%)

- I have found out a good deal about research and library resources and had interesting experience of the National library and another university
- Access to materials through library and inter library loans, electronic databases.
- Fisher librarians have been particularly helpful with my research. I felt quite diffident about asking for help or advice at first; by now I have become so well accustomed to asking and receiving in a most positive and intellectually encouraging environment, that I welcome all such opportunities provided
- The library continues to offer excellent service, has a great collection for my research topic (Australian Literature) and the long loan periods available to postgrads are most helpful to an extended project like mine.

Other aspects mentioned included:

	<i>2005</i>	<i>2004</i>	<i>2003</i>	<i>2002</i>
Generic skills: generic graduate attributes	6%	9%	7%	10%
Generic skills: research skills	5%	6%	4%	9%
Research climate: interaction with other research students	7%	7%	9%	8%
Research climate: conferences: international	5%			

5 Analysis of comments suggesting improvements³

Quality of infrastructure: physical facilities: workspace, buildings etc (2005: 27%) (2004: 30%; 2003: 28%; 2002: 28%)

- I am not provided with a work space, except for the PG centre, which I find inconvenient and isolating. There is nowhere to work in an environment where I can access peers who actually understand what I'm doing. I am not provided with computing assistance. I am not provided anything, in fact, except good supervision.
- Lack of facilities. Lack of an office/shared office environment within the department means that research students miss out on interacting with members of staff and other academics, except on a 'token' basis, at occasional postgraduate/staff seminars.
- however in general there is a lack of appropriate space for postgraduate research students to work within this department. those that manage to find a space is merely on a 'I got here first' basis. PGARC is also not really appropriate as many students stake their own place, though technically this is not allowed, meaning that there is not really enough room. the question become whether I should also break the rules of PGARC by making a desk my own, or continue to be disadvantaged by not doing so, and so a) not having a certain place if I come to uni and b) having no place to leave library books or research notes.
- Working spaces for postgraduate students. If the faculty is serious about providing research work spaces there must be enough for each student to have their own desk at the very least

Research climate: interaction with other research students (study related) (2005: 14%) (2004: 11%; 2003: 14%; 2002: 12%)

- I have had little chance to meet and communicate with other post grads who may be doing something similar to what I am but who may be doing it in other departments
- Connections with postgraduates in other departments that may share similar topics and interests
- There seems to be relatively little camaraderie between postgraduate students in the department and faculty. Students do not seem very interested in each others research, or in socialising
- More interaction should take place between postgraduates in different departments, often especially in Arts there are a number of students working on the same time period/ theme and it would be useful and encouraging to share ideas

Quality of infrastructure: physical facilities: computing facilities and resources (2005: 10%) *(new topic in 2005: previously included in workspace)*

- The computer support system needs more staff as I often have to wait a long time for an answer to a technical problem and the person is so busy that I don't always manage to understand the problem.
- In my current department, gender studies, there is no dedicated space for post grads to work or meet. I have no access to a computer or printer, and have to work from home.
- The concentration on Mac computers is frustrating; I do not work on a Mac at home and I find the whole experience unsettling and less effective. We have some PC's in PGArc, but they are DINOSAURS, and therefore almost worse to manage than even the Macs!!!! Please invest in some???
- I think each of us needs a computer and a desk in our research centre (PGARC in the Faculty of Arts). The computer should have a good access to necessary texts and journals through the Internet, and it would be great if the research centre has more academic environment with newspapers, journals, and brochures, which are related to Arts.

³ Number of comment received: 2005: 164; 2003: 153; 2002: 108; 2001: 168; 2000: 95

Research climate: funding (not scholarships or PRSS) (2005: 10%)
(new topic in 2005: previously included in funding: all aspects)

- Finance. I'm expected to attend conferences (national and international) professor and peer reviewed journals multiple application for funds are required. This is no time consuming and disheartening when journals don't arrive
- Funding! There is considerable pressure from the Government and Faculty for research students to complete quickly, sometimes in ridiculously short timeframes for the research involved. In addition, lack of scholarships and funding from other sources (eg PG students are not eligible for Austudy) means that many students need to work in addition to the other pressures they face in the course of their studies. This is not an environment conducive to one's best work.
- the funding for research-related activities, and for opportunities for research students to present their work in a range of forums is too limited.
- Departmental support and funding for research trips, conference.

Quality of supervision: supervisor (2004: 15%; 2003: 17%; 2002: 18%) (2005: 9%)

- For me personally, my supervisions inadequate, the troubles I've had clarifying my project are not addressed, my field is not understood by my supervisor etc. My research topic was poorly chosen so the entire experience has been unpleasant. I know this is my fault. I don't know how to change it.
- Supervision! I had a hopeless supervisor who never makes time to see me, takes months to return work and has no engagement with my work. There was no safety net to stop this situation developing.
- My supervisors (3) are not helpful and do not feel obliged to help or provide support. The university exerts no pressure on high ranking supervisors to help students they supervise.
- Training should be insisted on for all supervisors, and students should be warned against being supervised by those supervisors with bad track records, and there should be facilities for students to make complaints about supervisors and for some academics to be banned from supervision. I am happy to be contacted about my supervision experience.

Research climate: seminars, workshops (2004: 9%; 2003: 5%; 2002: 10%) (2005: 8%)

- There should be a seminar programme designed to increase the depth and breadth of our knowledge in the discipline. Also seminars to hone our research and analytical skills.
- More department seminars for postgraduate students to discuss research topics and issues.
- The department just started postgraduate seminars. But it is not frequent enough and not regular. I would like to have a place to regularly interact with the fellow researchers.
- Would be good to have general postgraduate seminar in Philosophy department (at least from first year) just on method, how its going, point of contact, presenting ideas so far. Rather than just seminars once a month where an older postgraduate student presents whole paper.

Other aspects mentioned included:

	2005	2004	2003	2002
Quality of infrastructure: research resources: library	5%	8%	6%	8%
Research climate: supportive work environment	7%	6%	5%	8%
Administration and organisation: general	6%	6%	5%	4%

6 International students' comments

This year, for the first time, comments have been received as an Access database, which allows for interrogation under categories of students. The following is an analysis of the comments received from international postgraduate research students in the Faculty of Arts who responded to the SREQ in 2005. These comments have also been included in the overall analysis of comments from postgraduate research students in the Faculty of Arts.

NB: Due to the low number of response received, and to maintain student confidentiality, no comments are provided. It is statistically invalid to convert this low number into percentages. Therefore they are expressed as raw numbers.

6.1 Analysis of comments referring to the best aspects

(12 responses)

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>Number of times mentioned</i>
• Quality of supervision: supervisor	7
• Generic skills: research skills	2
• Generic skills: English language for NESB students: proficiency	1
• Quality of infrastructure: physical facilities: computing facilities and resources	1
• Quality of infrastructure: physical facilities: workspace, building	1
• Quality of infrastructure: research resources (non library)	1
• Research climate: supportive work environment	1
• Research climate: part of research community	1
• Research climate: practical aspects: field work	1
• Research climate: social contact with other research students	1

6.2 Analysis of comments relating to aspects that could be improved

(11 comments)

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>Number of times mentioned</i>
• Quality of infrastructure: physical facilities: computing facilities and resources	2
• Research climate: integration with other research students	2
• Research climate: integration faculty/ department	2
• Quality of infrastructure: physical facilities: equipment	1
• Quality of infrastructure: physical facilities: workspace, building	1
• Quality of infrastructure: funding: scholarships	1
• Quality of infrastructure: research resources: library	1
• Research climate: seminars and workshops	1
• Generic skills: technical skills	1