

Student Research Experience Questionnaire (SREQ) Reports

2010 Faculty responses

Summary report 3

Improving the usefulness of the report

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Introduction

In response to the position paper *Closing the Loop: disseminating the results and reports of the Student Research Experience Questionnaire* (http://sydney.edu.au/graduate_studies_office/staff/) the SEG Research Training Committee endorsed the importance of ensuring that students were informed that their comments in these reports were being listened to, and acted upon. Accordingly, every faculty were asked to respond to their SREQ reports, and address the following issues:

- 1 Strategies and initiatives to improve the research higher degree student experience
- 2 Communication strategies for disseminating the SREQ reports to academic staff, research higher degree students and postgraduate administrative staff
- 3 Suggestions for improving the usefulness of the report
- 4 Overall response to the report

The aim of the reports was to provide the University with a range of strategies and initiatives that are being put in place to improve the research higher degree student experience.

All faculties provided responses to their SREQ reports, and these are available on the ITL SREQ website. In addition four summary reports have been compiled and made available on the Graduate Studies Office website.

This report is

Number 3: Suggestions for improving the usefulness of the report.

The Graduate Studies Office has taken on board all of the suggestions for improving the usefulness of the report, and where applicable, has provided their response in this document. To this end, similar observations are grouped together and an overarching response provided.

Note

This was the first year in which reports were distributed beyond the Dean and Associate Dean within each faculty to include all academic staff, including postgraduate coordinators, all research higher degree students, and all administrative staff who were involved with research higher degree students. The response is rewarding and confirms the value of 'closing the loop'.

1 Sharing of initiatives and strategies

The Faculty believes that the report is useful and will continue to be a centre piece to stimulate discussion at the Faculty's annual Postgraduate Forum. The Faculty also hopes that once the responses from Faculties are received by the DVC Education a strategy is developed to share the concerns, ideas and best practice promoted by the Faculties. (*Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources*)

Consideration should be given to sharing all faculty actions to common issues e.g. infrastructure, etc (*Dentistry*)

Suggested action

Reports which summarise issues, ideas and best practice across all faculties will be made available on the Graduate Studies Office Website. Faculty response reports are available through the ITL SREQ website (http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/sreq/sreq_faculty.htm)

2 Confidentiality of student responses

Occasionally, there are potentially useful observations in the open comment data that cannot be followed up because the comment itself appears to specify a single tutor, course or unit, but there is insufficient identification of that tutor, course or unit to allow us to look further into the comment or take action. Is there space on the SREQ to explicitly remind students to provide exact specifics where those would be needed in order to identify the course, year or pathway for which an improvement is suggested? It may be that some students are unaware of what their comments will look like when extracted and aggregated. (*Conservatorium of Music*)

It would be interesting to evaluate changes in student perceptions and/or experience within a student's candidature. Is there any scope in the SREQ development to note the duration within the students candidature at the time of completing the SREQ? This information could lead to Faculty specific improvements in developing the postgraduate and preparing them for employment. Traceability of student development may lead to improved identification of temporal specific weakness in managing candidatures within Faculty for attention. (*Veterinary Science*)

The two Schools from which responses to the survey results were requested both experienced degrees of frustration regarding the resolution of issues raised. Anonymity in the survey is both a strength and weakness. (*Science*)

Suggested action

Further action is possible on either of the above issues. However, since students are assured in the SREQ that "The confidentiality of your responses is assured: you will not be identified in any reporting of the results of the survey" this is dependent on the size of the faculty and/or the number of students who respond to the SREQ and PREQ at either faculty or school/department level.

The idea of providing comparative data across the lifecycle of a student's candidature has merit, and is possible through the refining of data collection by year of study. However, whilst this is feasible for faculties with high numbers of candidates, for smaller faculties it raises the issue of confidentiality of response. Reporting at a "year of candidature" level, where numbers are likely to be small, is therefore not possible without breaching confidentiality.

Faculties can request sets of comments by school/ discipline from the Graduate Studies Office. Unsorted comments are provided to Associate Deans when the analysis of the survey items is completed and available on the ITL website.

3 Making report data easier to interpret

We recognise that Sydney is the only University in Australia to analyse qualitative comments, and that this fact is indicative of a commitment to listening to student feedback. Both students and committee members commented that they found aspects of the data difficult to interpret. (*Arts and Social Sciences*)

A number of staff mentioned having difficulties interpreting the 2006-2010 SREQ report for two reasons. Firstly, due to a lack of understanding of the structure of the survey itself i.e. people commented that it would be handy to know what the students were asked – I know this is available on the website but I guess people only knew this if they investigated further. The second is that the summary provides an overview of issues and without the detail it can be difficult to know what issues within each category are a concern given the categories are quite broad. (*Health Sciences*)

We suggest that rather than concentrating largely on the rates of overall satisfaction, the report does more to draw out the specific points of concern of the most dissatisfied students. We are likely to learn greater lessons from these than from students who are successful and happy (and who are often generous in their assessments through for example loyalty to the institution or to a supervisor). We feel that part of what would come out of this added focus is that we would learn in more detail and with more examples regarding what matters to warn students of in the first place, so as to assist them not to end up in a “not so well satisfied” minority. In tables where you currently have one column giving percentages, it would be better to provide two columns giving both the raw number and the percentage. It is possible to roughly work out the number by flipping back and forth between the tables and the response number attachments, but it would be much easier and more informative if this were given in the tables. Clearly, $n=2 \text{ } \%=20\%$, has a different interpretation to $n=8 \text{ } \%=20\%$, and could lead to quite different action. Since many tables only have one column of results, adding the raw numbers would not clutter the tables and should pose no challenge to formatting of the report. It would also be very useful to have the percentage of enrolments as well as the percentage of respondents in the tables. (*Sydney Business School*)

More discussion need occur regarding survey method and outcome interpretation. (*Science*)

The problem that no external reference is provided for values reported in the 2010 SREQ Report is reiterated here. Matching these results to those of the USE reports is problematic... Perhaps there should be some attempt at cross validation? (*Architecture, Design and Planning*)

Suggested actions

Attachment Two of current faculty and institutional SREQ and PREQ reports: *Analysis and counting of comments*, which provides information which would help faculties interpret the qualitative data is to be expanded and moved to the front of reports for ease of reference. Future reports, both SREQ and PREQ, will also include more information relating to the components of each sub-category e.g. Facilities will be further broken down into types of facilities; Working environment will indicate the spread of comments for each aspect mentioned. A wider range of comments for both best practice and areas of improvement will be included in future reports. These will be aligned to sub-categories where the number of comments on the topic makes this viable without breaching student confidentiality (see number 2 above).

In relation to the quantitative data, or response to the survey items, each report will now include a copy of the related SREQ detailed report, which provides data for individual survey items, including responses for each level of agreement. Since the USE is a coursework unit of study survey, cross validation with SREQ quantitative data is not possible.

The system of having both raw numbers and percentages has been in use in previous years, where reporting was at the faculty level only. Reporting number and percentage detail at school/ discipline level was not considered for the 2011 reports as it was considered that it would make the tables too cluttered. However, we will endeavour to incorporate this level of detail for the 2012 PREQ reports, and future SREQ reports.

Regarding the percentage of enrolments and respondents – the SREQ is distributed to every enrolled research higher degree student in the University, whilst the PREQ is sent to all graduands. A statement to this effect will be incorporated into all future reports (SREQ and PREQ)

4 Improving information at school/ discipline/ department level

It has been commented by schools that they would find it very useful to have more detailed information on the comparative results by year (i.e. from 2006 to 2010) for their particular school. (*Engineering and IT*)

Better coding of location & discipline of student so areas of best practice and those requiring improvement can be more easily identified across a large faculty with multiple sites. (*Sydney Medical School*)

There are a number of questions which do not allow students to qualify why they have answered a question in a particular way. For example, the fact that they may not live in Sydney or even in Australia. It would be useful to breakdown the report into non-NSW, international student responses if this is possible to achieve without revealing identity. (*Sydney Nursing School*)

Uneven distribution of student numbers enrolled, and more particularly the variety of students distributed across our diverse disciplines (internal to this Faculty), also makes it difficult to represent student responses fairly and generally due to the heterogeneity of their experiences. (*Architecture, Design and Planning*)

Suggested actions

In relation to the inclusion of comparative discipline and school level data, 2010 was the first time that qualitative data was made available at this level for the SREQ, and this will now be included as part of the standard reporting mechanism. It is also hoped to include this level of reporting for the PREQ reports from receipt of the 2011 data. Quantitative data is reported at degree level, so it is not possible to compare results by school or discipline.

Currently, coding of location and discipline relies on information located in FlexSis, which records the school or discipline in which the student is enrolled. However, a number of students are enrolled at faculty rather than school/ discipline/department level, making it difficult to identify their location or discipline.

Separation of qualitative data by Field of Study, gender, and mode of study (full time or part-time) will become available commencing with the 2011 PREQ results (2012 reports).

Although there is no facility for students to qualify why they have answered individual questions in a particular way, students across the university often use the open questions to explain their responses.

Perhaps faculties could suggest to their students that, when the SREQ is next administered, they use the open questions to explain their responses to the closed questions.

At the moment answers to the open responses, or qualitative data, are only identified as either domestic or international students. Further breakdown into state will be investigated prior to the next reiteration of the SREQ.

5 General comments

Post-graduate student representatives in one School were unaware of factors influencing student responses, in part due to the severity of issues. This left them bemused with respect to commentary. In another School, discussions derivative of the survey results have resolved some candidature management concerns. In several instances, actions to redress concerns raised in the survey were being enacted. (*Science*)

The quantitative and qualitative data are most useful especially when compared over time. (*Pharmacy*)

The report for each faculty is generally easy to interpret and well presented. (*Sydney Law School*)