

Student Research Experience Questionnaire (SREQ) Reports

2010 Faculty responses

Summary report 4

Overall response to the report

## 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/](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: Overall response to the report.**

Arrangement is by name of faculty (2010 nomenclature<sup>1</sup>). 14/16 faculties provided information in this section of their response report.

### **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'.

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<sup>1</sup> Changes to some faculty names occurred in 2011. Since these reports were based on 2010 data, the 2010 nomenclature and construct of faculties is used in this summary.

## **Overall response to the report**

The following comments were provided by faculties as their overall response to the report. Not all faculties completed this section.

### **Faculty of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources**

The Faculty is pleased to read that overall satisfaction is steadily increasing towards 80%, returning to the ratings of the 2005 to 2006 period. This is also mirrored with a continuing steady improvement in the Supervision scale increasing over 10% in this period. Generally, students stated that when working with their supervisors they were given the freedom to pursue their research, but requested the opportunity to enrol in programs or units of study that further develop research skills or their knowledge. The Faculty does recognise that infrastructure and research climate is still a great challenge and the rankings have not changed significantly over the last 5 years. These two areas also comprised a larger percentage of comments received. Concerns of infrastructure relate to appropriateness of work space and quality of instrumentation. The Faculty and University are currently investing heavily in all three campuses, Australian Technology Park (ATP), Cobbitty and Narrabri. Equally concerns are raised about the lack of funding to support attending conferences and research costs. Commenting on research climate, students from selected disciplines noted that collaboration and interaction between their colleagues was great while others felt isolated. Students are encouraged to have an international experience (conferences and placements) and are supported by their supervisor and staff, both through contacts with institutions and help with funding. There is a cohort that feel their geographical location (ATP, Cobbitty and Narrabri) hamper their ability to interact and discover what their colleagues are researching. Although generic skills score favourably, students did note that skills in speaking and writing are areas of concern.

### **Faculty of Architecture, Design and Planning**

The SREQ report is regarded as having real value as a summary of student research experiences, especially in terms of their written observations. However, given that there is no external reference point or benchmark provided for the percentage agreement values reported in the 2010 SREQ Report, it provides only relative information, and results give an uncertain indication of how absolutely good or bad the student experience might be considered to be. It would be good to provide this report regularly to allow enable the Faculty of Architecture, Design and Planning (FADP) and others to track changes in the quality of research experience over time. It is also worth noting that factors particular to the FADP, such as the uneven distribution of student numbers enrolled, and more particularly the variety of students distributed across our diverse disciplines (internal to the FADP), make it difficult to represent student responses fairly and generally due to the heterogeneity of their experiences.

### **Faculty of Arts**

The Arts and Social Sciences Postgraduate Research Student Committee (PGRSC) reviewed the Faculty SREQ reports for 2006-2010 at its meeting on March 29 2011. Quantitative and qualitative data indicated an overall increase in satisfaction, with quality of infrastructure remaining the category with which candidates express least satisfaction. The committee felt that the quantitative data were at times difficult to interpret (even for representatives from economics and the social sciences well versed in quantitative analysis). The associate Dean proposed emailing the report to postgraduate students to obtain a second level of feedback. This was done via the postgraduate representative: however the number of responses received (4) was disappointing. The respondents also complained that the survey was 'a little disappointing in terms of interpretation of data. The tables were presented as though data could speak for themselves.' [See Report 4 for actions suggested to address concerns and improve interpretation of data]

## **Conservatorium of Music**

The SREQ provides a vital snapshot of research student experience. As a forum within which research students can safely identify areas of strength and weakness, it generates data that is complementary to that received through other channels. We very much welcome the rich set of responses received and are grateful to the students for their high level of engagement in this process, and for their individual perspectives on our performance.

The 2010 response set is the best response rate we have in the years on record, representing 63% of the students eligible to take part. Perhaps as a result of this improved substance, in 2010 we achieved a higher grade in each category on the quantitative scale (Fig. 1) than in any previous year in the data set, and are performing an average of 6.2% than in 2006 across the five areas on enquiry as a whole. It's rewarding to see that research students recognise the programme of ongoing improvement that has been taking place. Interestingly, in the qualitative data (Fig. 2) we have some scores that are lower than preceding years but also a far higher overall satisfaction rating: here the data is more complex to interpret, but it might be taken to suggest that overall the 2010 students have (appropriately) higher specific expectations than those in previous cohorts and are meanwhile better able to see how the respective components of their degrees fit into a larger, and generally much appreciated whole. The detailed results and the open responses are particularly useful in reaching an understanding of the nuances behind these overall trends. In Fig. 3 (areas in need of improvement) we are generally scoring lower than the average of the preceding years, which is a good sign, although it is also useful that students have identified the potential for further improvement in some areas.

Results from the PREQ are somewhat less positive for the SCM in 2010 than 2009, but we note the very tiny sample (7 students one year, 9 the next) which makes the graphing of results much less meaningful. Again, the open comments are useful and add data to those received under SREQ.

## **Faculty of Economics and Business**

The apparently good rate of *Overall Satisfaction* (80-82% over 2006-2010) is welcome and is likely to increase further with the emphasis that the School is putting into its HDR program. The other broad measures are also apparently quite satisfactory, and generally improving, over the data period, apart from that of "*Climate*". We have taken fundamental action to improve this score, details of which are found below [see Reports 1 and 2]. We are reasonably satisfied with the satisfaction rate on supervision, which along with *Overall Satisfaction*, seems to be a most important indicator. There has been a great emphasis on improving Supervision in the Faculty. In the last three years we have run regular workshops for new and existing supervisors, and also for new students in "Managing Your Supervisor". We expect our supervision approval rate to continue to improve.

## **Faculty of Education and Social Work**

Generally, we are pleased with this report. Our place in each of the scales is improving. These improvements are, in part, due to the attention we are able to give to RHD students through the formation of the Division of Doctoral Studies. The continued improvement of annual progress reviews and follow up from these, as well as an improved way of allocating work space to RHD students have contributed it this. Areas that still need improvement however are facilities and conference funding for RHD students. SREQ data also shows the need to further improve research climate in areas such as opportunities for social contact with other postgraduate students, integration into the school/department community, and opportunities to become involved in the broader research culture.

## **Faculty of Engineering and Information Technologies**

The feedback is generally positive and shows the Faculty is on an upward trajectory.

## **Faculty of Health Sciences**

The SREQ results provided objective data to support the Faculty's strategic plans to enhance the climate for HDR students in the Faculty. Some areas for improvement were highlighted as well as several examples of good practice within the Faculty. The qualitative statements in response to the open ended questions and the quantitative data related to specific questions were helpful in refining the Faculty's strategies to improve the student experience.

The Faculty is pleased with responses to questions related to the quality of Supervision, which was listed as an area of best practice by many students. However, there is still much scope for improving supervision across the Faculty and this issue is clearly embedded in its 2011-2015 Strategic Plan.

The major area for improvement in the Faculty relates to the Research Climate. A number of steps have already been taken in 2011 to improve the quality of the student experience. The intention to enhance the Research Climate by providing a world-leading environment for students to develop core research competencies and generic skills is integral to the Faculty's 2011-2015 Strategic Plan.

The Faculty's response to each of the key areas and the steps it is taking to improve areas of weakness are detailed below [see Reports 1 and 2].

## **Faculty of Law**

The first point to make about the feedback received from postgraduate research students in the Faculty of Law is that the latest survey shows a marked increase against every indicator. This is pleasing but not entirely unexpected given the move to a new building on campus which offers research students unprecedented access to the rich research resources on campus as well as an opportunity to really engage with life in the mainstream of the University. This was simply not possible while the Law School was at a physical distance from the central campus.

Having said this, there is always room for improvement. In response to the feedback received, the Faculty has taken a number of steps to address concerns raised by the students and to generally improve their experience. These are addressed below [see Reports 1 and 2]

## **Sydney Medical School**

The results of the 2010 SREQ are consistent with those from preceding years (2006---2009). The following positive features of the report persist;

--- High response rate among SMS students (78%) reflecting an adequate sample of HDR candidates --- In general the level of overall satisfaction is high (83%)

--- Rankings relative to other faculties are high. SMS ranked first for infrastructure scores, third for climate, equal third for generic skills, equal fifth for overall satisfaction and equal sixth for supervision.

--- Some 550 students (60% on enrolled cohort; 77% of respondents) provided comments about the best aspects of their experience.

While bearing in mind these positive attributes, the SMS Research Committee sought to examine ways to further improve the experience of HDR candidates. A thematic analysis of the responses to Q52 ("What aspects are most in need of improvement? Please explain why") was performed. This yielded two major themes, Supervision and Research Culture, which formed the basis of the Research Committee's discussions and planned strategies (see below).

Three minor themes (quality of infrastructure, funding for research and travel, and administrative procedures) were also identified. The variable quality of research infrastructure is recognised as a University-wide problem which applies equally to many of the on-campus facilities of SMS as to other faculties. Similarly, the complaints about administrative procedures, while in overall numbers were quite small, stemmed from the need to complete forms for variations or undergo annual review early in the candidacy. The apparent mismatch in timing between the annual progress reviews (APRs; Sept--Oct) and semester dates (March & August) is well recognised by the Academic Board's Graduate Studies Committee but necessary because of time required to review all HDR candidates, process scholarship renewals and manage any remedial actions identified at APR. Concerns regarding allocation of funding for research and travel have been addressed in 2011 (see below).

## **Sydney Nursing School**

### **1. Trends and key issues**

Sydney Nursing School research students scored 81% agreement on the Overall Satisfaction Item of the SREQ in 2010. It is noted that Research Degree Student Load by EFTSL has increased from 13.5 in 2006 to 32.5 in 2010. Sample size has impacted significantly on the analysis and interpretation of SREQ results over this period.

In 2009, 23 (82%) of students responded to the SREQ. In 2010, 34 responses were received (78% of students). A slightly higher percentage of respondents offered comment on Areas of Best Practice (87%) than on Areas for Improvement (77%). We believe the high response rate and number of comments captured by the SREQ represent a high level of engagement in the research student experience at Sydney Nursing School.

Sydney Nursing School percentage agreement on the Supervision Scale is again the highest (87% agreement) across all faculties of the University in 2010. Quantitative data is also tracking similarly to 2009, when improvement was demonstrated across all scales.

Items within the Quality of Infrastructure and Research Climate Scale of the SREQ are identified as most in need of improvement. Overall satisfaction as expressed by percentage agreement is 81% in 2010, down from 86% in 2009.

### **2. Qualitative responses**

Funding to support research and research training, and balancing life, work and study are areas of concern for all research students. Research students in the Faculty of Nursing and Midwifery can be distinguished by the fact that they have already completed a period of training in their profession (all of our students are registered health professionals), most have spent at least some time in the workforce and many hold senior clinical roles. Because of the staging of their research training (mid-career), most have family or other caring commitments. Very few of our students enter a HRD directly from an honours program and their profile is largely uncompetitive for APA/UPAs. The research support team do work directly with students to maximise chances of success for students who wish to apply under a different category.

Student qualitative responses are reflective of two major events that occurred in 2010: re-branding of the Faculty of Nursing and Midwifery to Sydney Nursing School and a major refurbishment which has changed research space from housing a small number of PhD students in individual offices, to housing a larger number of research students in an open-plan space. In the past three years, the Faculty has made considerable efforts to improve both the physical space and the workplace culture. It is therefore of great concern to us that the re-branding exercise has disenfranchised one student who identifies as a midwife. The Faculty remains a faculty of Nursing AND Midwifery, this has not changed.

Offshore students have expressed frustration with central university services for the management of employment outside Australia and library borrowing. These services are facilitated as much as possible within university policy guidelines. While separating individual responses would likely identify our international students, it would be of interest to undertake this analysis.

The relocation of students into 'open-plan' areas has been especially difficult for those students who previously occupied a single office, however, this level of accommodation is no longer sustainable nor practical. The Mallett Street campus is currently unable to accommodate full-time members of staff in reasonable conditions. Students have been given priority and have a bright, clean open space in which to work.

### **Faculty of Science**

The Faculty of Sciences strongly supports this initiative by the Graduate Studies Office, in seeking a written response to the SREQ. It is pleased observe a strong positive improvement in the 2010 HDR perception of research climate, though disappointed with the high negative perception of infrastructure quality, sustained from the previous four surveys. The Faculty notes that overall satisfaction of HDR Science candidates has been progressively rising, and will act in an effort to improve students' quality of supervision and assess gaps in graduate attributes. The clustering of survey responses by Schools presents the Faculty with an opportunity to identify academic units implementing best practice in facets of HDR candidature, and units where support may be required. As a first step, Schools implementing best practice will be invited by the Faculty to communicate to post-graduate coordinators across the Faculty mechanisms they associate with these positive responses. Schools identified by the survey as requiring support will be asked for a response concerning negative responses presented in the survey, including actions they will take to address issues raised in the survey. Faculty will work with the Schools to resolve issues, and assess effectiveness in subsequent surveys.

### **Faculty of Veterinary Science**

The Faculty of Veterinary Science greatly appreciates the feedback provided from the 2010 SREQ. The Faculty is gratified to see improvements in quantitative data in all categories (except for generic skills which maintained the same @ 85%) and an increase in overall post-graduate student satisfaction of 88%. Qualitative data has illustrated areas of student welfare, supervision and support that need improvement. The Faculty Postgraduate Education Research and Training Committee (PERTc) believes we can address these issue to enhance our students overall RHD performance and experience.