

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

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	2
1 INTRODUCTION	3
2 ARRANGEMENT.....	3
3 ANALYSIS OF THE COMMENTS: TAXONOMY AND PROCESS	3
4 ANALYSIS OF COMMENTS REFERRING TO THE BEST ASPECTS	4
5 ANALYSIS OF COMMENTS SUGGESTING IMPROVEMENTS.....	6

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 Science 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	23%	25%
Generic skills: working independently	20%	19%
Overall satisfaction: satisfaction with research	18%	13%
Generic skills: graduate attributes	12%	12%
Quality of infrastructure: physical facilities: workspace, building, office	12%	11%
Research climate: supportive work environment	8%	8%

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	15%	27%
Quality of supervision: supervisor	14%	15%
Quality of infrastructure: funding (not scholarships/ PRSS0	13%	14%
Quality of infrastructure: physical facilities: Computing facilities and resources	8%	
Quality of supervision: management of candidature: guidance	7%	3%
Administration and organisation: general comments	6%	11%

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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 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 Science in 2005.

In 2005 78% of students who responded to the SREQ provided comments on the best aspects of their degree experience, and 66% 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 Science.

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

Within each section, 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.

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.

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 services. This taxonomy is under constant revision as the need to sub-divide categories and create new ones becomes apparent.

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 learning and teaching 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.

4 Analysis of comments referring to the best aspects¹

Quality of supervision: supervisor

(2005: 23%)

(2004: 25%; 2003: 23%; 2002: 28%)

- My supervisor is happy to discuss and encourage research ideas that I have no matter how unrelated they are to my actual PhD while still being able to remind me where my research priorities should be. This keeps me interested in the general field that my work fits into and helps broaden my experience within this field.
- supervision - I have the best supervisor! She understands helped me develop my project from scratch and guided me through all the planning stages, helped me in the field actually doing the work, and has guided me with analysing and writing the work up for publication. I know not all supervisors are like this, but you should know you have some really good ones at this university.
- My supervision is quite good. I can pop in to see my supervisor(s) whenever I need to and they are more than happy to listen to me and make suggestions. I get along really well with them
- My supervisors and their support are very helpful and are making my research easier. They provide great guidance and have the ability to make me think in other, new, more useful ways about my research.

Generic skills: working independently

(2005: 20%)

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

- Independent research with great supervision. It allows me to expand intellectually and creatively, exploring the topic in my own way while still getting expert guidance.
- The freedom to organise and plan my own work, as it gives me a good indication of what I'm capable of doing.
- Ability to work independently and not necessarily confined to working solely at the University campus.
- I feel it is the freedom to work independently and the availability of resources. I feel these aspects are good because that reduces a lot of stress on the researcher yielding better and faster results.

Overall satisfaction: satisfaction with research

(2005: 18%)

(2004: 13%; 2003: 16%; 2002: 11%)

- Being able to have time to carry out research on a topic that I am interested in and that I can make a contribution to. This is good because of the freedom and independence in how the research develops.
- To get an opportunity to study the topic I have undertaken. Without being enrolled in a PhD I wouldn't get the opportunity to spend time doing research.
- The best aspect is to be allowed to propose my own research project, is good because I don't have to be forced to mould my ideas to someone else's concepts.
- The research itself: the discovery & learning aspect, of course otherwise I wouldn't be here. Also, simple, regular and easy access to the research facilities I use makes data gathering easy.

¹ Number of comment received: 2005: 265; 2004: 261; 2003: 292; 2002: 227

Generic skills: graduate attributes

(2005: 12%)

(2004: 12%; 2003: 11%; 2002: 15%)

- Independent research has enabled me to increase my problem solving skills and ability to plan my own research too. Group meeting presentations has greatly improved my oral communication skills.
- Improved my problem solving skill. Although the higher degree experience also helped me sharpen other skills like writing, communication, etc. I feel problem solving is mostly important.
- Opportunity to develop in depth analytical skills and oral communication skills necessary for clinical work in career and appreciation of how research can inform clinical work.
- It improves my analytical and communication (both oral and written) skills. Those skills are crucial for dealing things and people in daily life and in a commercial environment.

Quality of infrastructure: physical facilities: workspace, buildings, offices

(2005: 12%)

(2004: 11%; 2003: 9%; 2002: 10%)

- Also the facilities available - I basically have an office with a computer for the whole degree, which has been very helpful.
- Great facilities - well maintained, updated as necessary, easy access to learning and use of.
- The facilities - office space, desk, operational computer with technical support. Rather conducive to work.
- Good access to research facilities and equipment. This allows me to work condusively. A large, strong and supportive research group. This makes working a pleasure.

Research climate: supportive work environment

(2005: 8%)

(2004: 8%; 2003: 10%; 2002: 9%)

- The opportunity to pursue the research I am interested in within a fairly supportive environment.
- Friendships with other academics and postgraduates which are supportive and motivating. Mental stimulation and challenge that doing a PhD provides.
- Very supportive lab, in a very supportive department. Everyone is willing to share resources and expertise. Makes my research much easier.
- I'm in a good department that actively supports the research students. There are plenty of available facilities for my research.

Other aspects mentioned included:

	<i>2005</i>	<i>2004</i>	<i>2003</i>	<i>2002</i>
Research climate: interaction with other postgraduate research students (Study related)	7%	10%	11%	10%
Research climate: conferences: Australian	6%	8%	8%	4%
Research climate: conferences: international	6%			

5 Analysis of comments suggesting improvements²

Quality of infrastructure: physical facilities: workspace, buildings, offices (2005: 15%)
(2004: 27%; 2003: 31%; 2002: 32%)

- The space. Most students have their desks inside the labs. This means all day we have to breath in chemicals, and don't have a 'clean space' to research or write.
- The working facilities are not great because there is no decent space to work. Due to the combined nature of the course we feel like second-class citizens. The clinical psychology facilities available compared to the rest of the psychology department is not good at all.
- I feel cramped in my facilities, I share a small office with 7 other people including the director. The traffic in the room is often distracting and is hard to focus on my activities at times. The university should provide more space... there isn't enough room!!
- Also, the work environment is too noisy. In particular, very loud conversations (non-work related or on mobile phones) and music from other students that causes lack of productivity (they are so loud that they can be easily heard through headphones). It is very hard to tell other students to keep the noise down in this regard, so it would be good if some official policy prevented such behaviour. This has caused me to do most 'serious' work at other places, such as at home or in quiet libraries, and to only delegate 'mindless' work in my lab. Alternatively, I have to come to my lab at strange times (weekends or at night) in order to do serious work

Quality of supervision: supervisor (2005: 14%)
(2004: 15%; 2003: 19%; 2002: 18%)

- My supervisor is rather heavily committed, and regular contact is therefore difficult. I am a part time PhD student, but think it is necessary for the University to have some rules/guidelines about frequency of contact with supervisors
- Supervision. I feel that the time allocated to each postgraduate student is seriously reduced by the amount of student and other activities of the supervisors, in addition to certain degree of misunderstanding in concepts and approaches.
- My supervisor is a very poor manager of his staff and particularly his students. Great projects go to waste and good students leave without recognition of their work in the literature.
- I'm finding it difficult in regard to my supervisor understanding/seeing things from students point of view. I think that when supervisors first arrive at Sydney University they should be informed (perhaps attend a seminar) about their role as a supervisor at Sydney University. This should be compulsory before taking on Honours/postgraduate students.

² Number of comment received: 2005: 231; 2004: 228; 2003: 263; 2002: 200

Quality of infrastructure: funding (not scholarships/ PRSS) (2005: 13%)
(2004: 14%; 2003: 13%; 2002: 18%)

- Financial supports for research students - this is because studying a research degree is a long term process, which the students are typical unable to work on a full-time basis and studies at night time (similarly to the coursework degrees). Having sufficient support will help the students while completing their degrees.
- I think financial support needs improving as I am doing a combined research and coursework course and no financial support is available until final year.
- The money we are allocated to pay for research costs do not come close to covering the actual costs of research. I understand not all projects have the same costs, but a review of the costs of a biological project is required, especially if you want your students to produce high quality theses in three years.
- I believe there is more funding available than most students are aware, but we must search these out ourselves - often finding them in obscure places & after the application deadline. A more comprehensive listing of funding & scholarships including funding form sources outside the university would be helpful.

Quality of infrastructure: physical facilities: computing facilities and resources (2005: 8%)
(new topic: previously counted with all physical facilities)

- I had to buy my own computer or be forced to share with four other students in the lab. a computer is a basic requirement that should be provided by the university for a research student to complete their research. and we need computers to run statistical software and other specialised programs, as well write a thesis, submit papers online to journals, communicate with supervisors via email, search the library databases ... you can't possibly expect a research student on a three year deadline to share a computer or go to a computer lab in another building everyday whilst trying to perform all of these activities. there are administrative staff that have better computers than us, and they don't have to share!
- Access to reliable and up to date computing technology. Also provision of It support has been unsatisfactory, with a failure to respond to problems unless repeatedly asked. Simply I do not have access to the computing facilities and support I require to complete my research in as timely and productive manner as possible.
- The number of computers used in the department need to be increased because undergrads and postgrads access them
- Computer access. It currently is extremely poor. PG computer rooms are open odd hours and no where near my building.

Quality of supervision: management of candidature: guidance (2005: 7%)
(2004: 3%; 2003: 4%; 2002: 4%)

- when I started, I didn't really have a project. So it was hard to choose/design an interesting project that was suitable for a PhD. Since I'm doing a cross disciplinary project, it was quite difficult to design the project. So, having a few more project suggestions and guidance at the beginning of the PhD would have been good.
- More safeguards to stop students falling too far behind. Otherwise one can find that they are 2 years into a postgraduate degree and are still settling into a topic.
- For me, more guidance needed in the initial development of hypothesis.
- Project planning prior to commencement of research degree needs improvement for other students as it should be unacceptable for students to have their project planned as you go through it.

Administration and organisation: general comments

(2005: 6%)

(2004: 11%; 2003: 9%; 2002: 2%)

- There is too much administration. Between writing reports for the department (for interviews) for the Science Faculty and also for the sup up scholarship provider, as well as publication approval (for School of CRC) and surveys, there is no time left for research!
- Awareness within the school administration and international office about the rules/regulations that apply for international students. Often I have been misguided and confused which led to unnecessary time waste.
- The schools admin and support staff are often very rude and unhelpful. This often means that one has to wait a long time for services which should be simple and easily available.
- Admin for final year has too much red tape, everything is too much hassle, to get extensions etc

All other aspects were mentioned in less than 6% of comments received.