

# University of Sydney

## Student Research Experience Questionnaire Report: 2004 – 2008

Focus of written observations: an overview

Research higher degree current students

May 2010

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Data on research higher degree students' perceptions of their research training experiences are gathered each year using the Student Research Experience Questionnaire (SREQ). The purpose of the SREQ is to provide the University community with a basis for strategic, faculty level academic development and curriculum review to further enhance the quality of research higher degrees.

Analysis of this data provides a comprehensive picture of trends in the student experience, and the performance of the Faculty in relation to two of the University's Key Performance Indicators for Research: Supervision, and Overall Satisfaction with the research higher degree; and other related areas: Infrastructure; Research Climate; and Graduate Attributes.

Written observations, from respondents to the survey, about their experiences provide evidence to support the Faculty SREQ quantitative data results (percentage agreement scores), and provide detailed information about key issues in the areas of best practice and Areas needing improvement, during their research training experience.

The analysis of qualitative data reported in this document is based on written observations received from **all** respondents to the SREQ, and is presented in two sections:

- Focus of written observations: Summary of results: SREQ 2008
- Focus of written observations: Trends SREQ 2005 – 2008: Key areas of research training

### FOCUS OF WRITTEN OBSERVATIONS: SUMMARY OF KEY RESULTS FROM 2008

Current research higher degree students, who provided written observations in their responses to the 2008 SREQ:

- Appreciated the Quality of Supervision; the Research Climate; the development or enhancement of Graduate Attributes; and their overall experience (Overall Satisfaction)
  - Within Supervision, students appreciated the flexibility and independence afforded by their research higher degree, particularly the ability to choose their own topics, find their own pathways to results, and flexible working hours (i.e. compared to undergraduate study). However, some respondents expressed the opinion that more guidance in topic selection, literature review, and the provision of 'milestones' would have been welcomed.
  - Within Research Climate, opportunities to attend national and international conferences were appreciated, as well as interactions with fellow students. Whilst some students appreciated being part of a research community, and integration into the faculty or department; others experienced a feeling of isolation in this regard.
  - The further development of research skills, learning how to work independently, and expanding knowledge within their own and related fields, were considered valuable skills to acquire during a research degree. However, the lack of training in statistics was a constant area of concern.
  - Satisfaction with their research, including recognition that it may be contributing to the wider field of knowledge within the relevant field, made up the majority of comments within the area of Overall Satisfaction.
- Would appreciate improvements in the Quality of Infrastructure provided
  - The lack of funding for conference, travel, and resources was a main area of concern to research higher degree students.
  - Whilst some respondents appreciated the provision of an office, computer and related resources; others were dissatisfied with the infrastructure provided, particularly in terms of desk space, shared facilities, and computers.
- The experiences of domestic and international graduates are similar in all of the above aspects.

### FOCUS OF WRITTEN OBSERVATIONS: TRENDS SREQ 2004 – 2008: KEY AREAS OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

#### Quality of Supervision

- The percentage of written observations which mention aspects of Supervision as an area of best practice, and supplied by respondents to the 2005 – 2008 SREQ, has remained steady at an average of

45%. In contrast, an average of 25% of respondents each year, considered this to be an area in need of improvement.

- For domestic respondents the distribution of comments between areas of best practice (and suggested improvements is similar to the overall results.
- International students have proportionally fewer comments suggesting improvements than their domestic counterparts.

### **Quality of Infrastructure**

- Infrastructure is the only area of the research higher degree student experience, as shown through responses to the open questions in the SREQ, which received more written observations suggesting improvements, than those expressing satisfaction.
- An average of 20% of written observations received from respondents was satisfied with the quality of infrastructure between 2005 and 2008. In 2008, international respondents (26% of comments received) appeared more satisfied than their domestic counterparts (17%)
- Improvements in the area of infrastructure, particularly in relation to facilities and funding, have remained the most mentioned topic in respondents written observations since 2005, and are currently at their highest percentage (all respondents: 66%; domestic respondents: 65%; and international respondents: 68%)

### **Research Climate**

- Over the past three years (2006 – 2008), the percentage of comments received from respondents to the SREQ which mention Climate as an area of best practice has exceeded those suggesting improvements, thereby reversing the trend of previous years.
- An average of 47% of comments between 2005 and 2008, expressed satisfaction with the research climate, whilst an average of 40% suggested improvements.
- The experiences of domestic and international students, as evidenced by responses to the open questions in the SREQ, are similar.

### **Graduate Attributes**

- For all respondents, and for domestic respondents, the development or enhancement of graduate attributes, are commonly referred to in 39-40% of comments received for best practice, and 8-10% for areas of improvement.
- International respondents refer to graduate attributes in an average of 47% of comments received for best practice (2005: 41%; 2006: 49%; 2007: 54%; 2008: 44%); and 15% for areas of improvement.

### **Overall Satisfaction**

- Written observations which fall within the remit of Overall Satisfaction are received from approximately 22% of respondents each year for best practice and 7% for areas of improvement.
- Historically the majority of positive comments refer to satisfaction with the respondents' research, and its contribution the field of knowledge.
- Domestic and international respondents have similar experiences in this area.

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May 2010

## GLOSSARY

The following terms and phrases are used throughout the report

<b>SREQ</b>	Student Research Experience Questionnaire Administered to postgraduate research students annually, during second semester
<b>Quality of Supervision</b> <b>Quality of Infrastructure</b> <b>Research Climate</b> <b>Graduate Attributes</b> <b>Overall Satisfaction</b>	The University of Sydney Student Research Experience Questionnaire (SREQ) is based upon categories used in the SREQ Taxonomy: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Quality of Supervision</li><li>• Quality of Infrastructure</li><li>• Research Climate</li><li>• Graduate Attributes</li><li>• Overall Satisfaction</li></ul> Within the report, this naming convention is used as headings for each section of the report, and to identify information relating to the analysis of the qualitative data (written observations).
<b>Qualitative data</b> <b>Focus of written observations</b>	Students' written observations / comments received in response to open ended questions in the SREQ: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What are the <b>best</b> aspects of your research higher degree experience? Please explain why these aspects are good</li><li>• What aspects are most in need of <b>improvement</b>? Please explain why</li></ul>
<b>Percentage of comments received</b>	The number of times an aspect is mentioned within written observations of respondents received from respondents is presented as a percentage of the total number of comments received from respondents to the SREQ in any particular year.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### STUDENT RESEARCH EXPERIENCE QUESTIONNAIRE (SREQ)

In 2002 the Institute for Teaching and Learning (ITL) began collecting data for The University community on research higher degree students' perceptions of their research training experiences. This data is gathered each year using a survey specifically developed for this task, the "Student Research Experience Questionnaire" (SREQ). The purpose of the SREQ is to provide the University community with a basis for strategic, faculty level academic development and curriculum review to further enhance the quality of research higher degrees. The SREQ is based on a national survey of research higher degree students, the Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ). Some of the information gathered by the SREQ survey also contributes to two of the University's Key Performance Indicators for research. These KPIs are the quality of Supervision, and Overall Satisfaction with the research higher degree.

The survey gathers data on students' perceptions of the quality and frequency of supervision, intellectual and social climate, infrastructure, approaches to research, and the development or enhancement of graduate attributes in their research higher degree, as well as their perceptions of the administration and student support services. The ITL analyses this data and provides a range of reports to staff and students of the university through this web site.

Students are asked to respond to statements using a five point Likert Scale to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with each statement. As part of the questionnaires, students are also asked to comment on the following questions:

- *What are the best aspects of your research higher degree experience? Please explain why these aspects are good.*
- *What aspects are most in need of improvement? Please explain why*

Quantitative and qualitative data from the SREQ provide evidence of the success of University and Faculty initiatives to improve the overall student experience in general and the student experience of research training in particular.

### FOCUS OF THE REPORT

The report is divided into two parts:

- **A summary of the research higher degree students' experience of research training**, based on written observations received in response to the 2008 SREQ, showing the distribution of comments between areas of best practice and suggested improvements for: Quality of Supervision; Quality of Infrastructure; Research Climate; Graduate Attributes; and Overall Satisfaction.
- **A four year comparison of trends in the research higher degree student experience from 2005 – 2008** for each the following areas: Quality of Supervision; Quality of Infrastructure; Research Climate; Graduate Attributes; and Overall Satisfaction

Each section of the report will include three graphs presenting the percentage of comments received for areas of best practice and suggested improvements for: all respondents; domestic respondents; and international respondents.

### FOCUS OF WRITTEN OBSERVATIONS FROM RESPONDENTS

By examining the foci of graduates' comments as received in their answers to the open questions in the SREQ, this report seeks to highlight areas that were of best practice in the research higher degree students' experience during their studies at the University of Sydney, together with those that have been suggested as areas of improvement.

The views of the research higher degree students, on their overall experience at the University, as received through the open response comments, are a valuable insight into what is important to them; what they consider to be areas of best practice; and what they consider are in need improvement.

It is important to remember, when looking at the results of the analysis of this data, 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, it could be interpreted that the students were happy with their experiences, and prefer to focus on commenting about areas in need of improvement.

## NOTES

### ANALYSIS OF QUALITATIVE DATA FROM THE SREQ

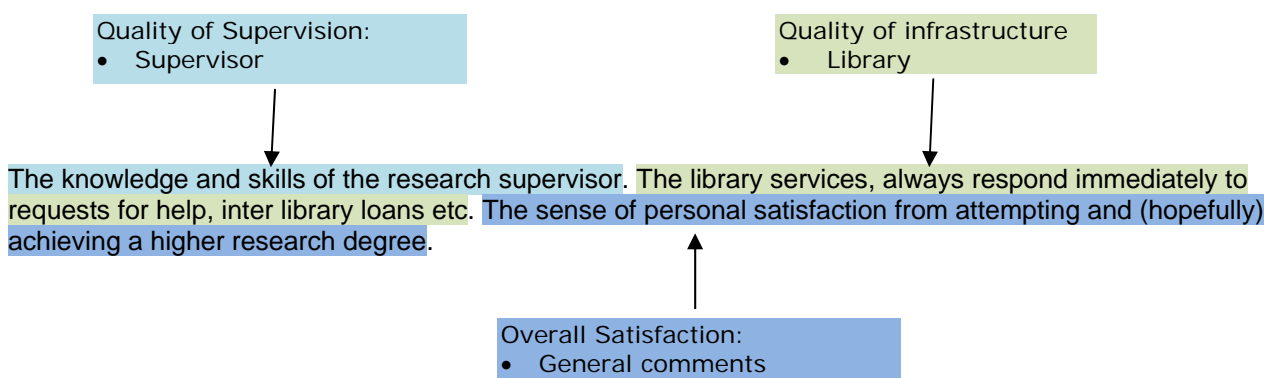
The components of categories and sub-categories used in the analysis of qualitative data are based on:

- Characteristics that define the area of the student experience
- SREQ survey items
- Recurring themes in students' comments and have been developed over many years of analysing qualitative data from students' surveys.

Together, they represent the range of features of each aspect which are considered to be essential to student satisfaction with their research training experience

Each comment is analysed according to the *Taxonomy for analysing qualitative data from the SREQ*, which is based on the Factors used in the SREQ. Based on the premise that a comment is what is written by an individual respondent in response to one of the open response questions, and a tally in the statistics being a specific phrase or sentence referring to one aspect of the student experience, the total number of times an aspect is mentioned in any one set of comments is calculated as a percentage of comments received in the year of the survey.

For example, the following comment is counted as ONE COMMENT RECEIVED; but as it is mentioned in Quality of Supervision (Supervisor); Quality of Infrastructure (Library); and Overall Satisfaction (General comments) the highlighted phrases within the comment are counted ONCE in each of the relevant categories i.e. 3 aspects in one comment.



### NUMBER OF WRITTEN OBSERVATIONS RECEIVED

The following table shows the number of respondents who provided written observations on their overall degree experience in the SREQ between 2005 and 2008.

	Date of survey	2005	2006	2007	2008
		n=	n=	n=	n=
<b>Areas of best practice</b>	Domestic students	1492	1338	1532	1664
	International students	87	279	302	355
	<b>Total</b>	<b>1579</b>	<b>1617</b>	<b>1834</b>	<b>2008</b>
<b>Areas of improvement</b>	Domestic students	1264	1225	1443	1496
	International students	78	262	277	314
	<b>Total</b>	<b>1342</b>	<b>1487</b>	<b>1720</b>	<b>1810</b>

n=the number of comments received in answer to the relevant 'open response' question

NB: In all years, the total number of respondents providing positive comments was greater than the number providing negative comments, thereby signifying a high level of satisfaction with their experiences

## 1 FOCUS OF WRITTEN OBSERVATIONS: OVERVIEW SREQ 2008

### 1.1 SUMMARY OF KEY RESULTS FROM SREQ 2008

Current research higher degree students, who provided written observations in their responses to the 2008 SREQ:

- Appreciated the Quality of Supervision; the Research Climate; the development or enhancement of Graduate Attributes; and their overall experience (Overall Satisfaction)
  - Within Supervision, students appreciated the flexibility and independence afforded by their research higher degree, particularly the ability to choose their own topics, find their own pathways to results, and flexible working hours (i.e. compared to undergraduate study). However, some respondents expressed the opinion that more guidance in topic selection, literature review, and the provision of 'milestones' would have been welcomed.
  - Within Research Climate, opportunities to attend national and international conferences were appreciated, as well as interactions with fellow students. Whilst some students appreciated being part of a research community, and integration into the faculty or department; others experienced a feeling of isolation in this regard.
  - The further development of research skills, learning how to work independently, and expanding knowledge within their own and related fields, were considered valuable skills to acquire during a research degree. However, the lack of training in statistics was a constant area of concern.
  - Satisfaction with their research, including recognition that it may be contributing to the wider field of knowledge within the relevant field, made up the majority of comments within the area of Overall Satisfaction.
- Would appreciate improvements in the Quality of Infrastructure provided
  - The lack of funding for conference, travel, and resources was a main area of concern to research higher degree students.
  - Whilst some respondents appreciated the provision of an office, computer and related resources; others were dissatisfied with the infrastructure provided, particularly in terms of desk space, shared facilities, and computers.
- The experiences of domestic and international graduates are similar in all of the above aspects.

### 1.2 FOCUS OF WRITTEN OBSERVATIONS SREQ 2008

The following charts provide an overview of the research higher degree students' experience of learning and teaching, as indicated in their responses to the open questions in the 2008 SREQ.

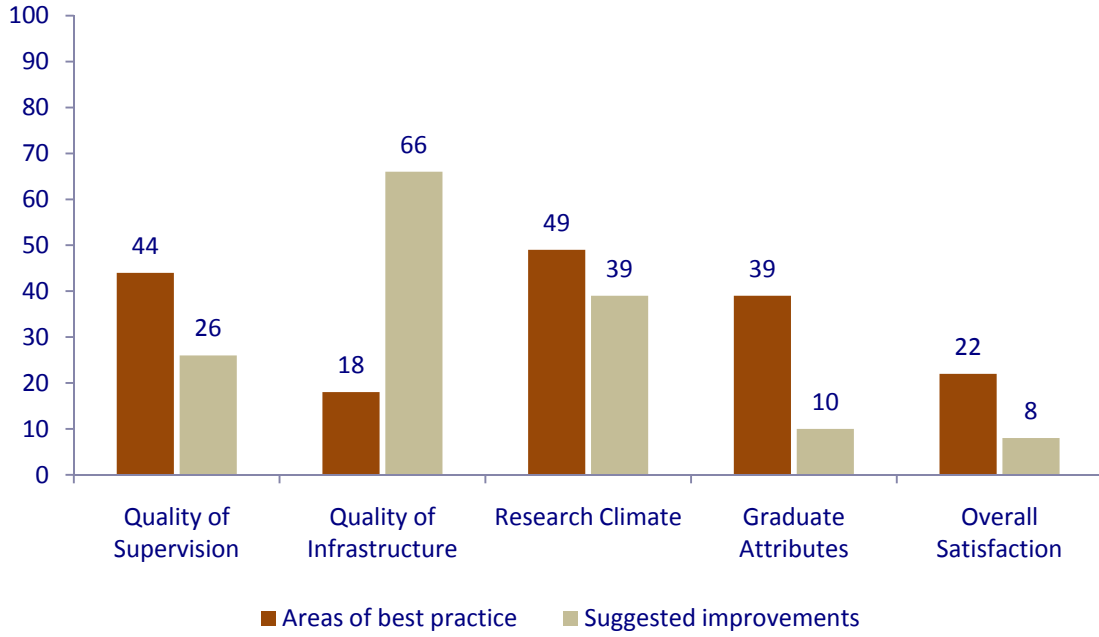
Each chart demonstrates the relationship between areas of best practice, and areas in need of improvement for the following areas, which taken together comprise the whole graduate experience of research training: Quality of Supervision; Quality of Infrastructure; Research Climate; Graduate Attributes; and Overall Satisfaction

**Figure 1** shows the focus of all written observations received from **all respondents** to the 2008 SREQ

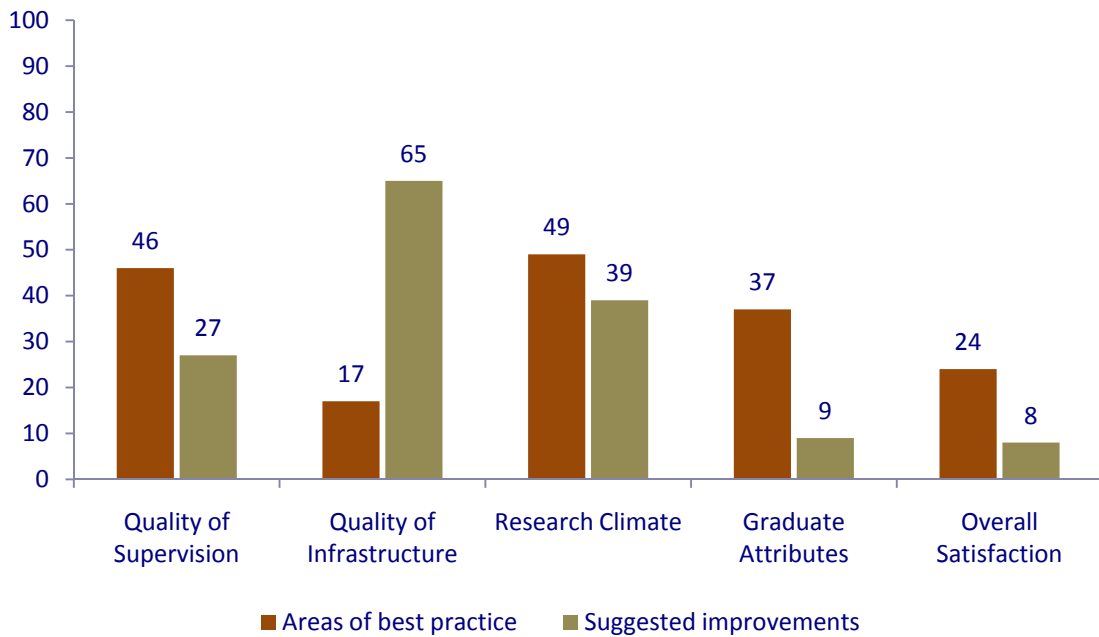
**Figure 2** shows the focus of all written observations from **domestic respondents**

**Figure 3** shows the focus of all written observations from **international respondents**.

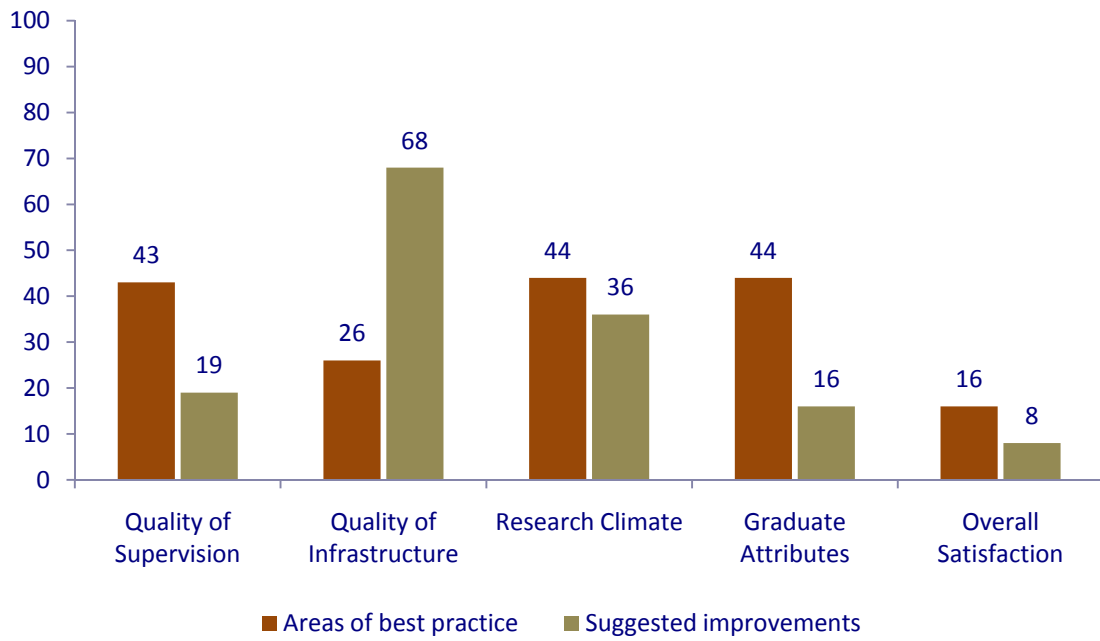
**Figure 1: Focus of written observations: SREQ 2008: All respondents**



**Figure 2: Focus of written observations: SREQ 2008: Domestic respondents**



**Figure 3: Focus of written observations: SREQ 2008: International respondents**



## 2 FOCUS OF WRITTEN OBSERVATIONS: TRENDS SREQ 2005 - 2008

### 2.1 QUALITY OF SUPERVISION

#### 2.1.1 Summary of trends: 2005 - 2008

- The percentage of written observations which mention aspects of Supervision as an area of best practice, and supplied by respondents to the 2005 – 2008 SREQ, has remained steady at an average of 45%. In contrast, an average of 25% of respondents each year, considered this to be an area in need of improvement.
- For domestic respondents the distribution of comments between areas of best practice (and suggested improvements is similar to the overall results.
- International students have proportionally fewer comments suggesting improvements than their domestic counterparts.

#### 2.1.2 Categories used in analysis of written observations (qualitative data)

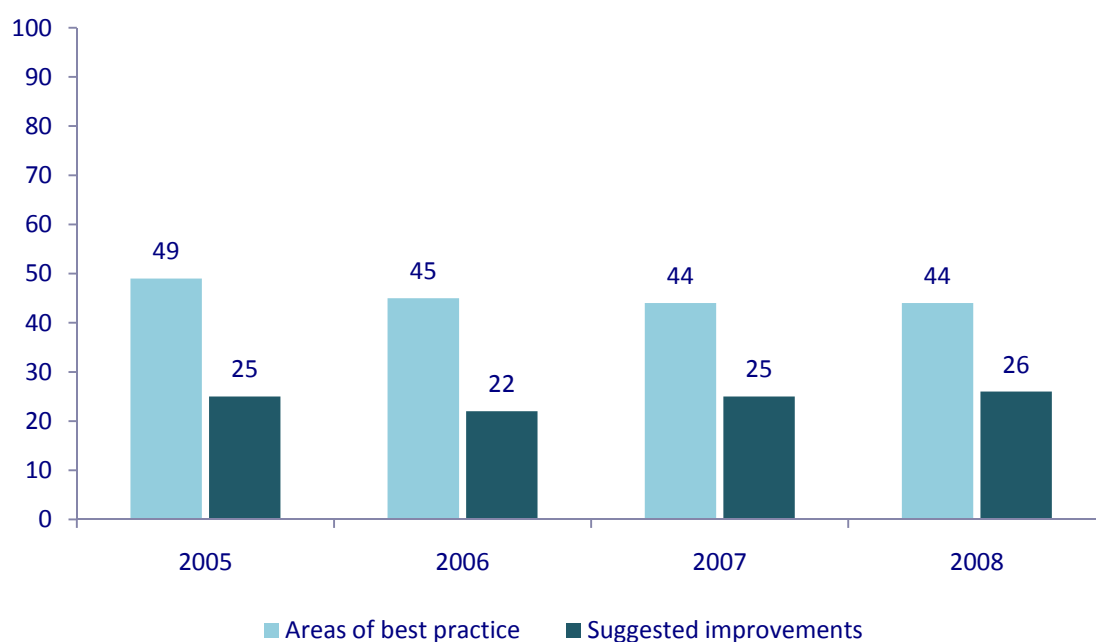
There are 5 sub-categories within *Quality of Supervision*, against which students comments are analysed. Each of these sub-categories may be further broken down into relevant aspects (or components) of the research student experience of Supervision. The components of these sub-categories are based on the SREQ survey items together with recurring themes in students' comments

- Supervision (Supervisor/ Associate Supervisor; availability and frequency; evaluation of supervisor by student; feedback on work)
- Management of Candidature (guidance on thesis, literature review; topic etc; workload)
- Progress reports (value of process; structure)
- Flexibility of program
- Pressure to complete (e.g. within set time frame)

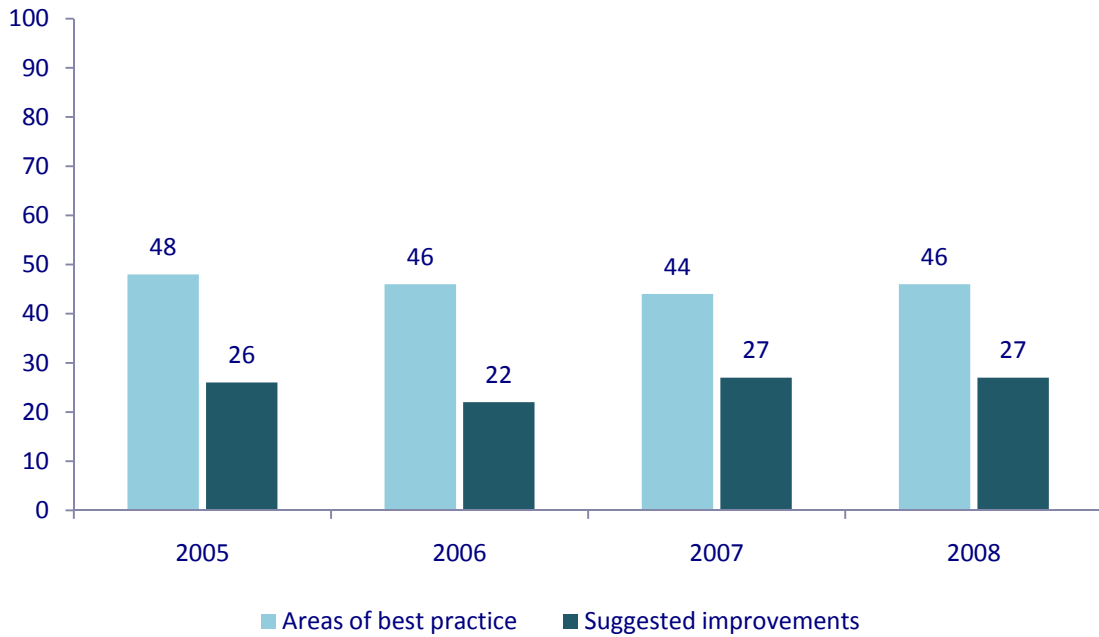
#### 2.1.3 Trends in the focus of written observations: 2005 - 2008

The following charts shows the percentage of comments received from respondents to the SREQ (all, domestic and international), that can be classified as areas of best practice or areas in need of improvement, thereby providing an indication of trends in the focus of the students' comments relating to the Quality of Supervision between 2005 and 2008

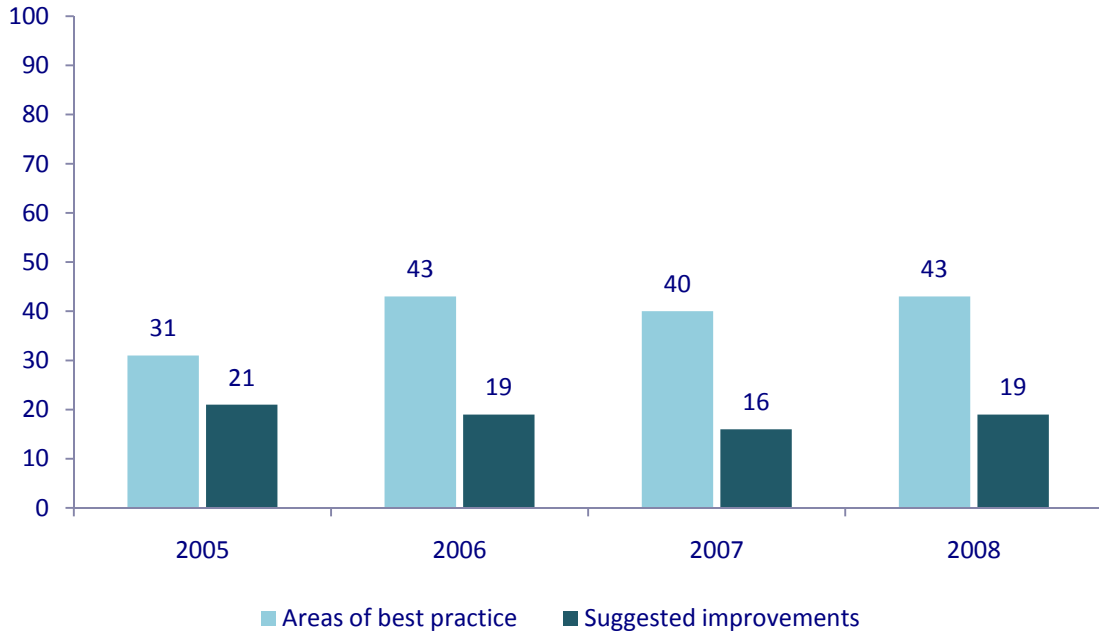
**Figure 4: Quality of Supervision: Focus of written observations: SREQ 2005 – 2008: All respondents**



**Figure 5: Quality of Supervision: Focus of written observations: SREQ 2005 – 2008: Domestic respondents**



**Figure 6: Quality of Supervision: Focus of written observations: SREQ 2005 – 2008 International respondents**



## 2.2 QUALITY OF INFRASTRUCTURE

### 2.2.1 Summary of trends: 2005 - 2008

- Infrastructure is the only area of the research higher degree student experience, as shown through responses to the open questions in the SREQ, which received more written observations suggesting improvements, than those expressing satisfaction.
- An average of 20% of written observations received from respondents was satisfied with the quality of infrastructure between 2005 and 2008. In 2008, international respondents (26% of comments received) appeared more satisfied than their domestic counterparts (17%)
- Improvements in the area of infrastructure, particularly in relation to facilities and funding, have remained the most mentioned topic in respondents written observations since 2005, and are currently at their highest percentage (all respondents: 66%; domestic respondents: 65%; and international respondents: 68%)

### 2.2.2 Categories used in analysis of written observations (qualitative data)

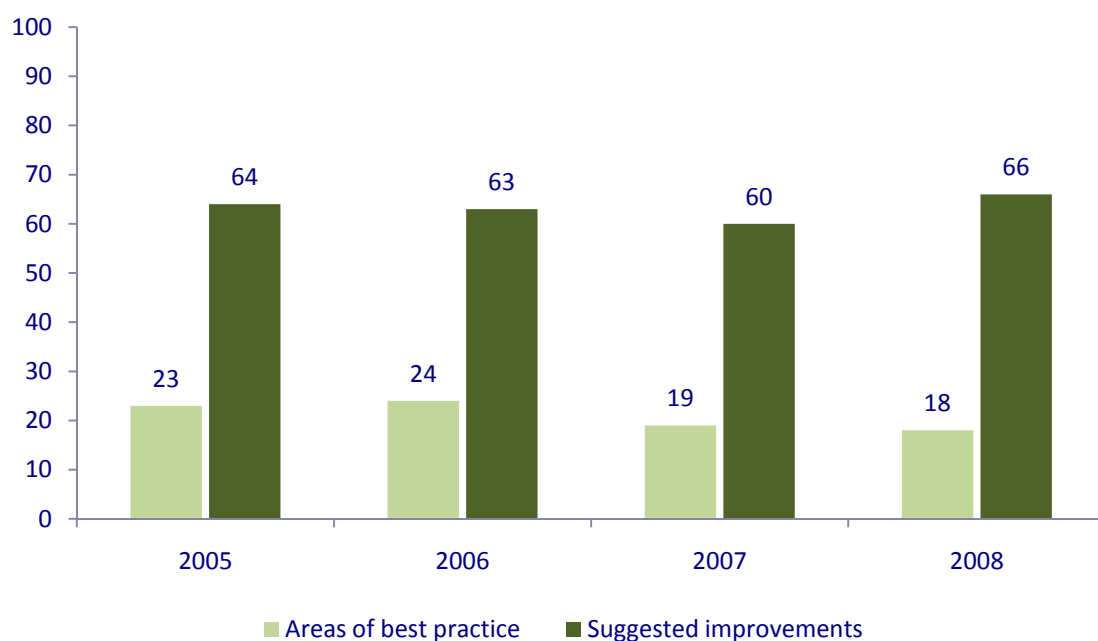
There are 6 sub-categories within *Quality of Infrastructure*, against which students comments are analysed. Each of these sub-categories may be further broken down into relevant aspects (or components) of the research students' perceptions of the quality of infrastructure. The components of these sub-categories are based on the SREQ survey items together with recurring themes in students' comments.

- Finance and funding (funding for resources, equipment etc; scholarships, PRSS, APA etc)
- Facilities (computer hardware and software; equipment; workspace, building, parking etc)
- Research resources (provided by faculty; provided by library)
- Support (IT; technical; laboratory)
- Administration (enrolment and admission; communication between faculty and students; general comments on administration (faculty and university)
- Student support services (International Office; Ethics Office; Research Office etc)

### 2.2.3 Trends in the focus of written observations: 2005 - 2008

The following charts shows the percentage of comments received from respondents to the surveys, (all, domestic and international) that can be classified as areas of best practice or areas in need of improvement, thereby providing an indication of trends in the focus of the students' comments relating to the Quality of Infrastructure between 2005 and 2008

**Figure 7: Quality of Infrastructure: Focus of written observations: SREQ 2005 – 2008: All respondents**



**Figure 8: Quality of Infrastructure: Focus of written observations: SREQ 2005 – 2008  
Domestic respondents**



**Figure 9: Quality of Infrastructure: Focus of written observations: SREQ 2005 – 2008  
International respondents**



## 2.3 RESEARCH CLIMATE

### 2.3.1 Summary of trends: 2005 - 2008

- Over the past three years (2006 – 2008), the percentage of comments received from respondents to the SREQ which mention Climate as an area of best practice has exceeded those suggesting improvements, thereby reversing the trend of previous years.
- An average of 47% of comments between 2005 and 2008, expressed satisfaction with the research climate, whilst an average of 40% suggested improvements.
- The experiences of domestic and international students, as evidenced by responses to the open questions in the SREQ, are similar.

### 2.3.2 Categories used in analysis of written observations (qualitative data)

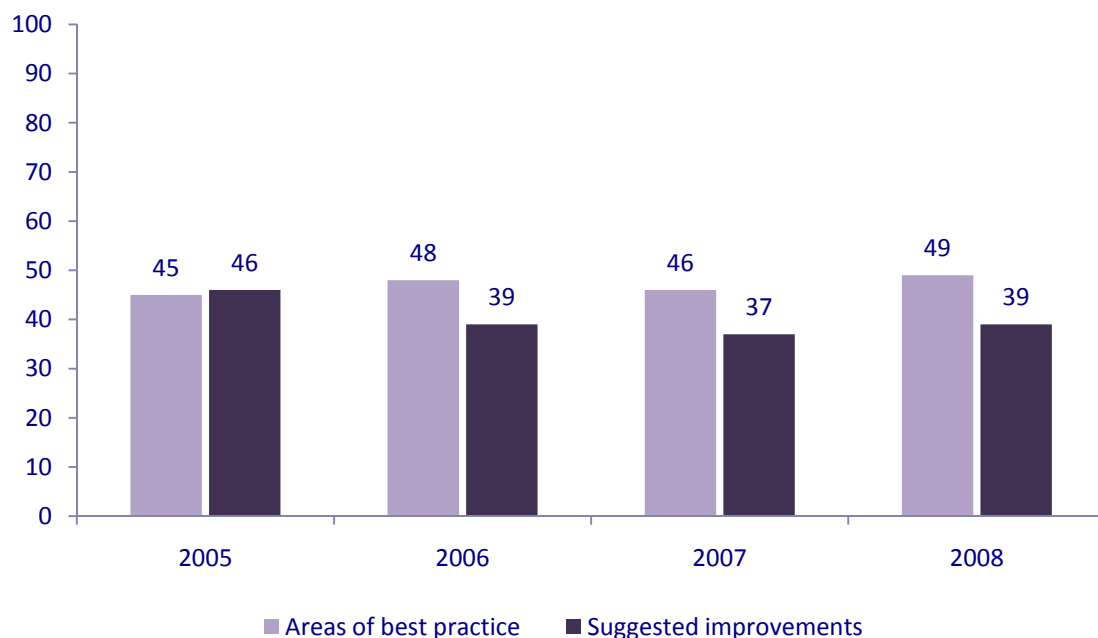
There are 5 sub-categories within *Research Climate*, against which students comments are analysed. Each of these sub-categories may be further broken down into relevant aspects (or components) of the student experience of the prevailing research climate within the faculty. The components of these sub-categories are based on the SREQ survey items together with recurring themes in students' comments.

- Interaction with other research higher degree students (study related; social; support of peers)
- Research culture (part of research community; conference participation; networking)
- Work environment (integration into faculty/ department/ school; supportive environment; stimulating; induction/ orientation programme; respect as fellow researcher; support for students)
- Preparation for academia (e.g. availability of tutoring, lecturing)
- Location and physical environment

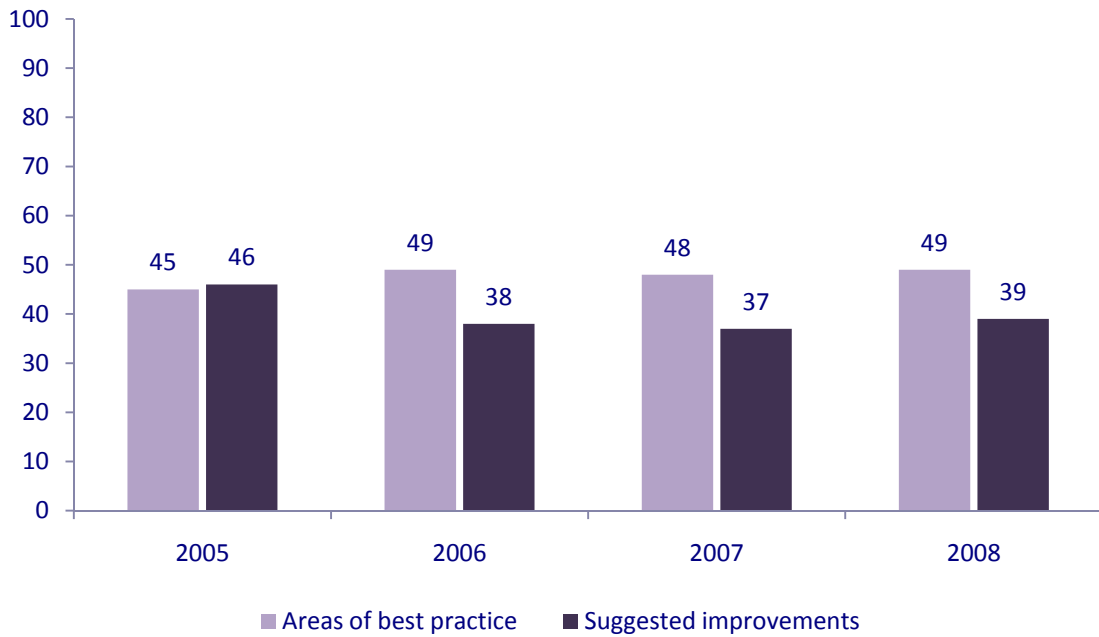
### 2.3.3 Trends in the focus of written observations: 2005 - 2008

The following charts shows the percentage of comments received from respondents to the surveys (all, domestic and international), that can be classified as areas of best practice or areas in need of improvement, thereby providing an indication of trends in the focus of the students' comments relating to the Research Climate between 2005 and 2008

Figure 10: Research Climate: Focus of written observations: SREQ 2005 – 2008: All respondents



**Figure 11: Research Climate: Focus of written observations: SREQ 2005 – 2008: Domestic respondents**



**Figure 12: Research Climate: Focus of written observations: SREQ 2005 – 2008 International respondents**



## 2.4 GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES

### 2.4.1 Summary of trends: 2005 - 2008

- For all respondents, and for domestic respondents, the development or enhancement of graduate attributes, are commonly referred to in 39-40% of comments received for best practice, and 8-10% for areas of improvement.
- International respondents refer to graduate attributes in an average of 47% of comments received for best practice (2005: 41%; 2006: 49%; 2007: 54%; 2008: 44%); and 15% for areas of improvement.

### 2.4.2 Categories used in analysis of written observations (qualitative data)

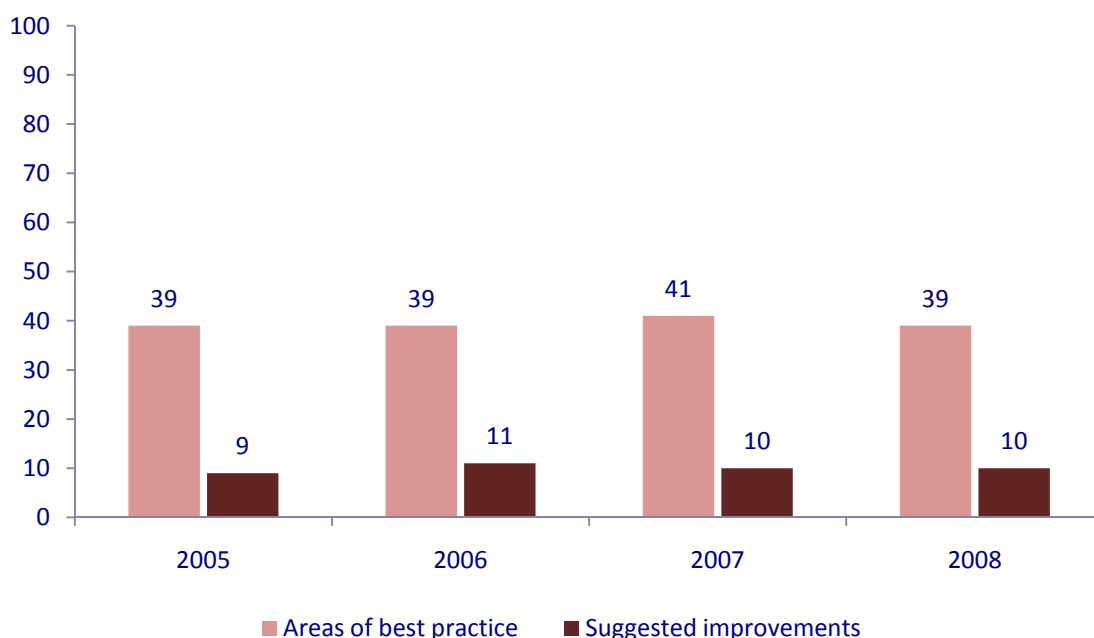
There are 5 sub-categories within Graduate Attributes, against which students comments are analysed. These match the five main University Graduate Attributes. The components of these sub-categories are allied to the skills and abilities for each attribute provided in the University policy framework for Graduate Attributes<sup>1</sup>.

- Communication (oral communication; written communication; language skills, including English for NESB students)
- Ethical, social, professional understanding (collaboration/ team work; ethical, social, cultural understanding; professional skills including academic)
- Information literacy (retrieval and use of information; computing skills e.g. using endnote, searching databases etc; referencing)
- Personal and intellectual autonomy (independent learning; planning own work; intellectually curious; new ways of thinking, etc)
- Research and inquiry (analytical, critical, problem solving; expanding knowledge base; creativity and imagination; statistical skills; research skills)

### 2.4.3 Trends in the focus of written observations: 2005 - 2008

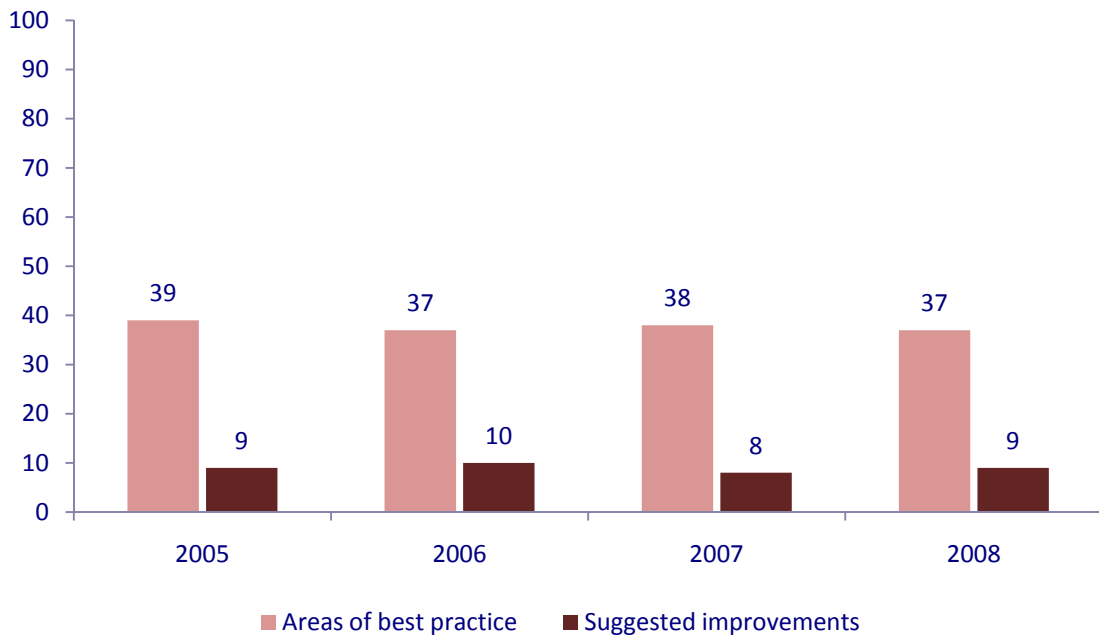
The following charts shows the percentage of comments received from respondents to the surveys (all, domestic and international), that can be classified as areas of best practice or areas in need of improvement, thereby providing an indication of trends in the focus of the students' comments relating to Graduate Attributes between 2005 and 2008

**Figure 13: Graduate Attributes: Focus of written observations: SREQ 2005 – 2008: All respondents**

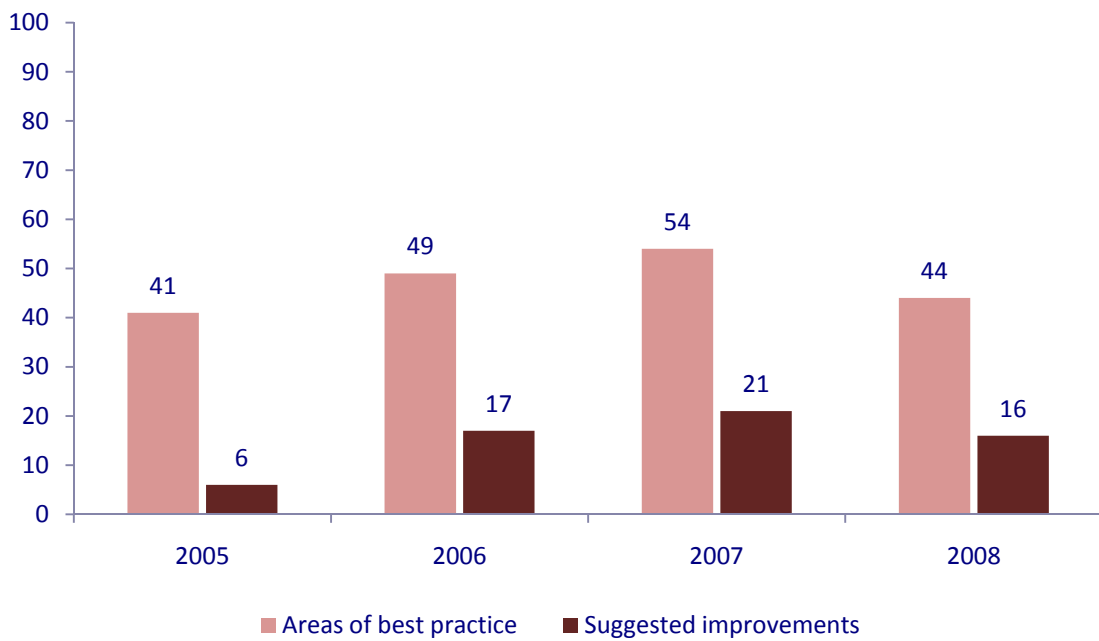


**Figure 14: Graduate Attributes: Focus of written observations: SREQ 2005 – 2008 Domestic respondents**

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/graduateAttributes/policy\\_framework.pdf](http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/graduateAttributes/policy_framework.pdf)



**Figure 15: Graduate Attributes: Focus of written observations: SREQ 2005 – 2008 International respondents**



## 2.5 OVERALL SATISFACTION

### 2.5.1 Summary of trends: 2005 - 2008

- Written observations which fall within the remit of Overall Satisfaction are received from approximately 22% of respondents each year for best practice and 7% for areas of improvement.
- Historically the majority of positive comments refer to satisfaction with the respondents' research, and its contribution the field of knowledge.
- Domestic and international respondents have similar experiences in this area.

### 2.5.2 Categories used in analysis of written observations (qualitative data)

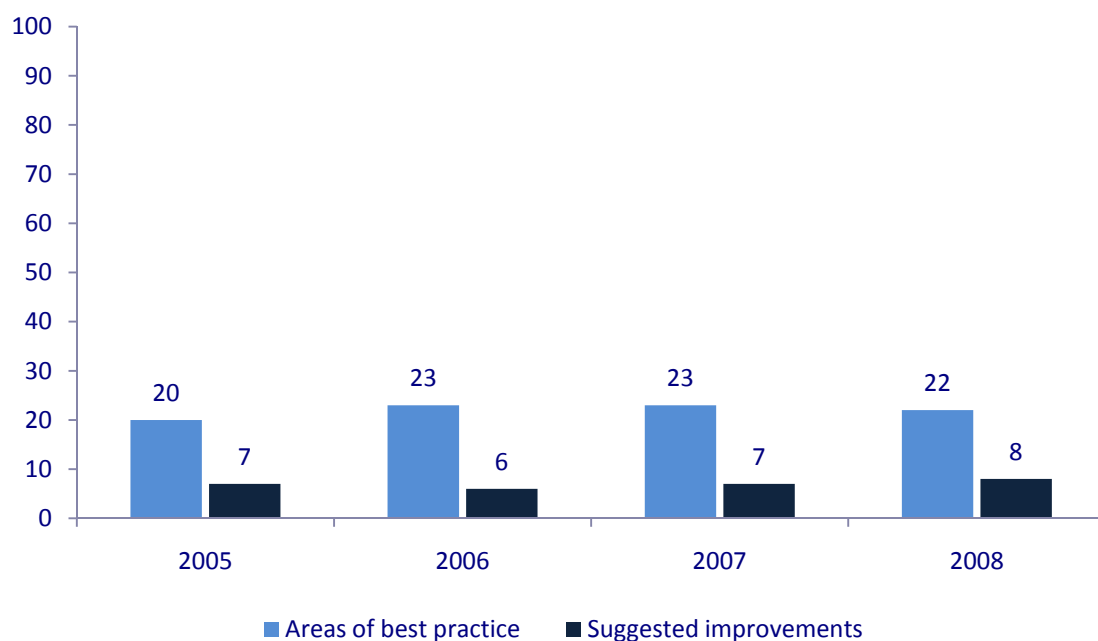
There are 3 sub-categories within Overall Satisfaction. They represent the range of aspects of the postgraduate research student experience which are considered to have a major influence on the quality of the research degree experience, and which are not covered elsewhere.

- General comments
- Quality of degree
- Satisfaction with research (topic, contribution to field)

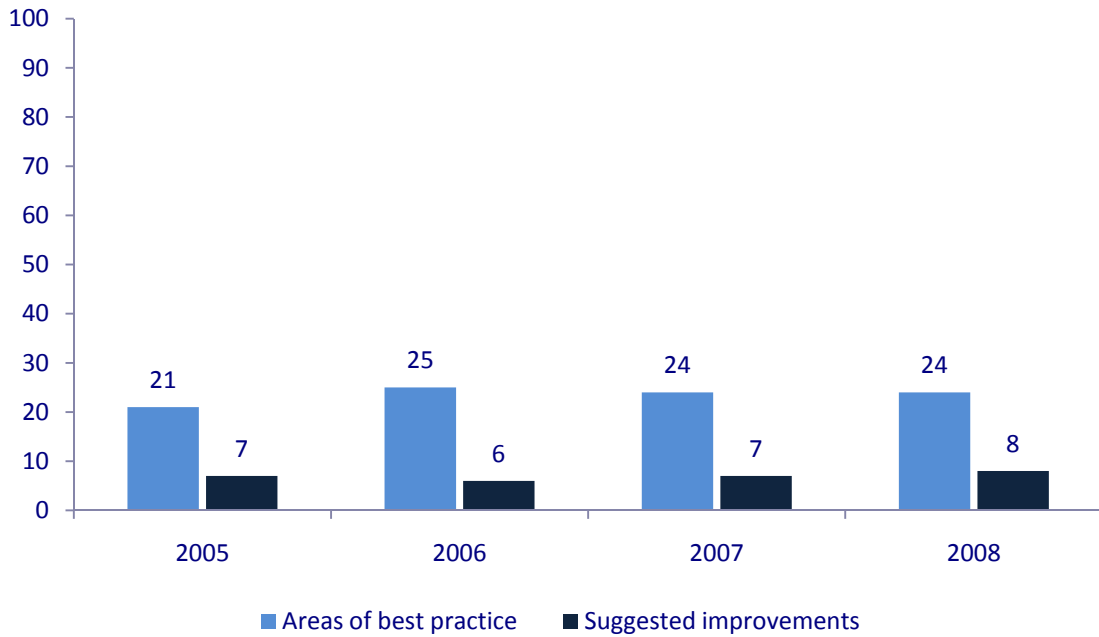
### 2.2.3 Trends in the focus of written observations: 2005 - 2008

The following charts shows the percentage of comments received from respondents to the surveys (all, domestic and international), that can be classified as areas of best practice or areas in need of improvement, thereby providing an indication of trends in the focus of the students' comments relating to Overall Satisfaction between 2005 and 2008

**Figure 16: Overall Satisfaction: Focus of written observations: SREQ 2005 – 2008: All respondents**



**Figure 17: Overall Satisfaction: Focus of written observations: SREQ 2005 – 2008  
Domestic respondents**



**Figure 18: Overall Satisfaction: Focus of written observations: SREQ 2005 – 2008  
International respondents**

