

MONASH GRADUATE ASSOCIATION (MGA)

HDR SURVEY

MONASH ARTS

FACULTY REPORT 2019



mga monash
graduate
association

The MGA would like to thank the graduate students who participated in this survey.

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(i) Executive Summary

In 2017, the Monash Graduate Association (MGA) conducted a survey of Monash Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students. The main findings from respondents from the graduate students of Monash Arts are summarised below.

Supervision

The overwhelming majority (91%) of Monash Arts graduate students indicated overall satisfaction with their supervision. They were more satisfied with their supervision overall than were all University respondents (82%) and, likewise, tended to agree with positive statements relating to how supportive their supervisors were with greater frequency.

Milestones

While feedback regarding milestones was mixed, Monash Arts respondents tended to agree with positive statements about their milestone experiences; however, their overall agreement that the milestone experience was positive tended to drop off after confirmation (72%), with the same statement receiving less agreement in mid-candidature (63%) and pre-submission (64%). In comparison, across all faculties, overall agreement tended to increase after confirmation (Confirmation: 78%, Mid-candidature: 81%, Pre-submission 85%).

Monash Arts graduate students were frequently frustrated by what they perceived as unclear requirements in relation to milestones, while several complained that it was a time-consuming process that misdirected their energy.

When asked specifically about termination of candidature based on milestone performance, respondents generally disagreed that it was appropriate, with this disagreement increasing from confirmation (55%) to mid-candidature (63%) to pre-submission (73%).

Coursework

Graduate student responses relating to compulsory discipline-based coursework were generally mixed. Approximately two in five respondents from Monash Arts felt that their research degrees were improved by the inclusion of compulsory discipline-based coursework units. On the other hand, just under half (44%) of respondents stated that they disagreed that it was a good use of their time.

Respondents from Monash Arts (27%) were less likely than their University counterparts (34%) to express that they had experienced an uncomfortable level (*a lot or a great deal*) of stress in relation to the compulsory discipline-based coursework.

Professional Development

Just under half (46%) of Monash Arts graduate students responded that professional development units, as offered through *myDevelopment*, should not be a compulsory part of a research degree, while less than one in four (24%) indicated that they should be.

Many Monash Arts respondents felt that these units were irrelevant and not a good use of their time, while one in three expressed that they had experienced an uncomfortable level of stress due to the professional development component of their degree.

While some graduate students stated that they could see the potential benefit of professional development courses alongside their academic research training, significant issues with the number of hours, course relevance, flexibility of what is counted towards the requirement and the general execution of the program were cited throughout the responses.

Progress, delays and discontinuation

Monash Arts graduate students were just as likely to have experienced significant delay in the progress of their research as graduate students enrolled across all faculties; however, they were more likely to have considered discontinuing their enrolment than their University counterparts.

While 67% of Monash Arts graduate students agreed that they had sufficient time to produce a quality research project, despite additional requirements of compulsory milestones/coursework/professional development, 35% indicated they felt an uncomfortable level of stress about finishing their degree on time.

Improving administration (guidelines, information, communication and availability), access to funding and either improving or removing professional development were identified as the three most important things the University could do to assist Monash Arts graduate students in achieving timely completion.

School culture and facilities

Overall, Monash Arts graduate students were less satisfied (57%) with the level of resources and facilities than University respondents (71%).

Monash Arts student researchers (54%) were also less likely to agree with the statement '*I feel included in my academic unit*' than were their University peers (64%).

Stress and Wellbeing

The area in which Monash Arts respondents expressed they felt the highest level of stress (51% either *a lot or a great deal*) was in relation to '*finding work after completion of my degree,*' while the area associated with the least amount of stress (16%) was '*my relationship with my supervisor.*'

Monash Arts graduate students nominated '*more opportunities to share experiences/debrief with peers*' and '*help with stress management*' as the top two ways the University could help support their health and wellbeing.

Overall comments

Despite being less satisfied with the level of resources and facilities overall than University respondents, Monash Arts graduate students identified access to facilities, services and resources as the best aspect of being at Monash, while supervisors were a close second.

Among the worst aspects were Monash administration, feelings of isolation and issues with Monash's perceived priorities.

Monash Arts respondents wanted to see improvements in the community and culture at the University, with an emphasis on providing greater networking and discussion among their peers and with members of staff.

(ii) Introduction

The MGA ran a survey of HDR students in August – September 2017. The aim of the survey was to measure the experiences of HDR graduate students at Monash University. The survey was advertised in the MGA newsletter, the MGA website, electronic posters and through contacts with HDR faculty groups and associate deans, many of whom agreed to forward the advertising of the survey to their entire cohorts. Participants were self-selecting, so an incentive scheme (comprising the opportunity to win one of 20 x \$100 cash cards) was used to assist in attracting a representative sample.

A total of six-hundred and sixty-eight responses were received. A preliminary report on the campus-wide quantitative data was published in March 2018 and is available from the MGA. Of the total number of responses received, one-hundred and eight were from graduate research students enrolled through Monash Arts, which equates to 18% of the total graduate research student population of the Faculty in that year.

This report presents both quantitative and qualitative data from Monash Arts survey respondents.

In the quantitative analysis, some Monash Arts graduate student responses were compared to responses from graduate students in the University-wide population. Not all respondents answered every question.

The qualitative component comprised sections where participants were invited to make general comments within broad subject areas and/or respond to open-ended questions. There were eighteen such opportunities in the survey, and graduate students from Monash Arts responded to all of them. Answers were analysed and coded into common themes. Some responses were coded under multiple themes.

While the responses of graduate students have been taken at face-value, it is important to reflect on the positive-negative asymmetry (PNA) effect. The PNA effect is two-part: firstly, it incorporates the positivity bias, which refers to an individual's inclination towards favourable perceptions of phenomena that are novel or do not directly impact them;¹ and, secondly, it incorporates the negativity bias which, in part, relates to how individuals are more curious about negative than positive stimuli and therefore are more mobilised by negative events.² In the context of the MGA HDR Survey, this may mean that answers to the quantitative questions are disproportionately positive, while the responses to the qualitative (open-ended) questions are disproportionately negative given that graduate students were not required to provide a response.

All schools of Monash Arts were represented in terms of responses. Overall respondents were skewed towards on-campus (94%), full-time (79%), scholarship receiving PhD students. Domestic students (71%) and female (70%) and male (26%) genders were well represented, as were international (29%). Appendix 1 provides the demographics of Monash Arts respondents.

¹ Maria Lewicka, Janusz Czapinski and Guido Peeters, "Positive-negative asymmetry or 'When the heart needs a reason'," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 22 (1992): 426.

² Reanna M. Poncheri, Jennifer T. Lindberg, Lori Foster Thompson and Eric A. Surface, "A comment on employee surveys: negativity bias in open-ended responses," *Organizational Research Methods* 11, no. 3 (2008): 615-16.

This report has been produced for circulation to Monash Arts, the Graduate Research Committee and the Monash Graduate Research Office.

(iii) Data

1. Supervision

1.1 Have you read the Code of Practice for supervision of doctoral/research masters students?

Read the Code of Practice	Arts	University
Yes	68 (63.0%)	386 (57.8%)
No, but I've heard about it	26 (24.1%)	169 (25.3%)
No, I didn't know it existed	14 (13%)	113 (16.9%)

1.2 Are you aware of your supervisor's responsibilities towards you?

Aware of supervisor's responsibility	Arts	University
Yes	93 (86.1%)	533 (79.8%)
No	3 (2.8%)	22 (3.3%)
Not sure	12 (11.1%)	113 (16.9%)

1.3 Are you aware of your own responsibilities as a Monash research postgraduate?

Aware of own responsibilities	Arts	University
Yes	97 (89.8%)	592 (88.6%)
No	3 (2.8%)	14 (2.1%)
Not sure	8 (7.4%)	62 (9.3%)

1.4 Have you had any conflict or misunderstanding with any of your supervisors?

Conflict or misunderstanding with your supervisor	Arts	University
Yes	18 (16.7%)	108 (16.2%)
No	90 (83.3%)	560 (83.8%)

Graduate students from Monash Arts were slightly more likely than were all University respondents to have read the Code of Practice and to be aware of their supervisors' responsibilities towards them. Meanwhile, they were as likely as any University graduate student to have experienced conflict or misunderstanding with a supervisor or supervisors.

1.5 What was the general nature of the conflict/misunderstanding with your supervisor?

Fourteen graduate students from Monash Arts said that they had experienced conflict with one or more of their supervisors and elaborated on the nature of that conflict.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Unsupportive – poor quality guidance and feedback	8
Different and unrealistic expectations	7
Inaccessible	7
Supervision team issues	6
Inappropriate behaviour – bullying/harassment/tone/intimidation	2
Lack of expertise and/or interest	1
Administrative issues	1
Exploitation/IP authorship/research misconduct	1

Poor quality guidance and feedback was referenced by several of the graduate students from Monash Arts who identified as having had conflict or misunderstanding with one or more of their supervisors.

“My supervisor does not provide sufficient feedback on my work and is not supportive to my research.”

“One supervisor expressed no desire to see me, and then seemed to mainly enjoy tearing my work down ... without really listening to what I was trying to do or providing any constructive suggestions or advice.”

Of the fourteen respondents, seven were deemed to have **expectations of the supervisor/student relationship that seemed to differ** to that of their supervisor/s.

“Different expectations about how much draft material I could send for feedback: I wanted to send more drafts than s/he wanted to read.”

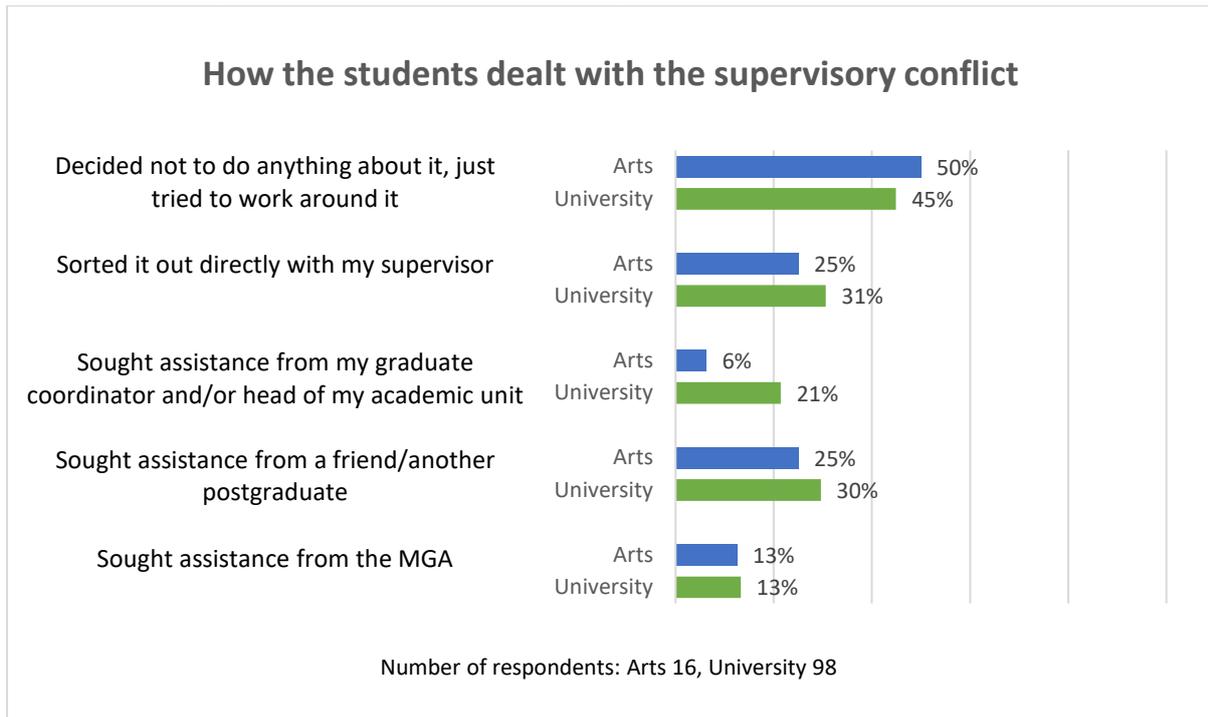
Likewise, seven respondents determined that the nature of their conflict or misunderstanding was related to the **inaccessibility** of their supervisors.

“Not responsive to emails, calls, meeting requests.”

“I have invited them to see practical stuff and they will just not show up. Meetings will be moved at [their] mercy, sometimes 3 times in a row. Once my co-supervisor just didn’t show up! I feel as if there is no respect.”

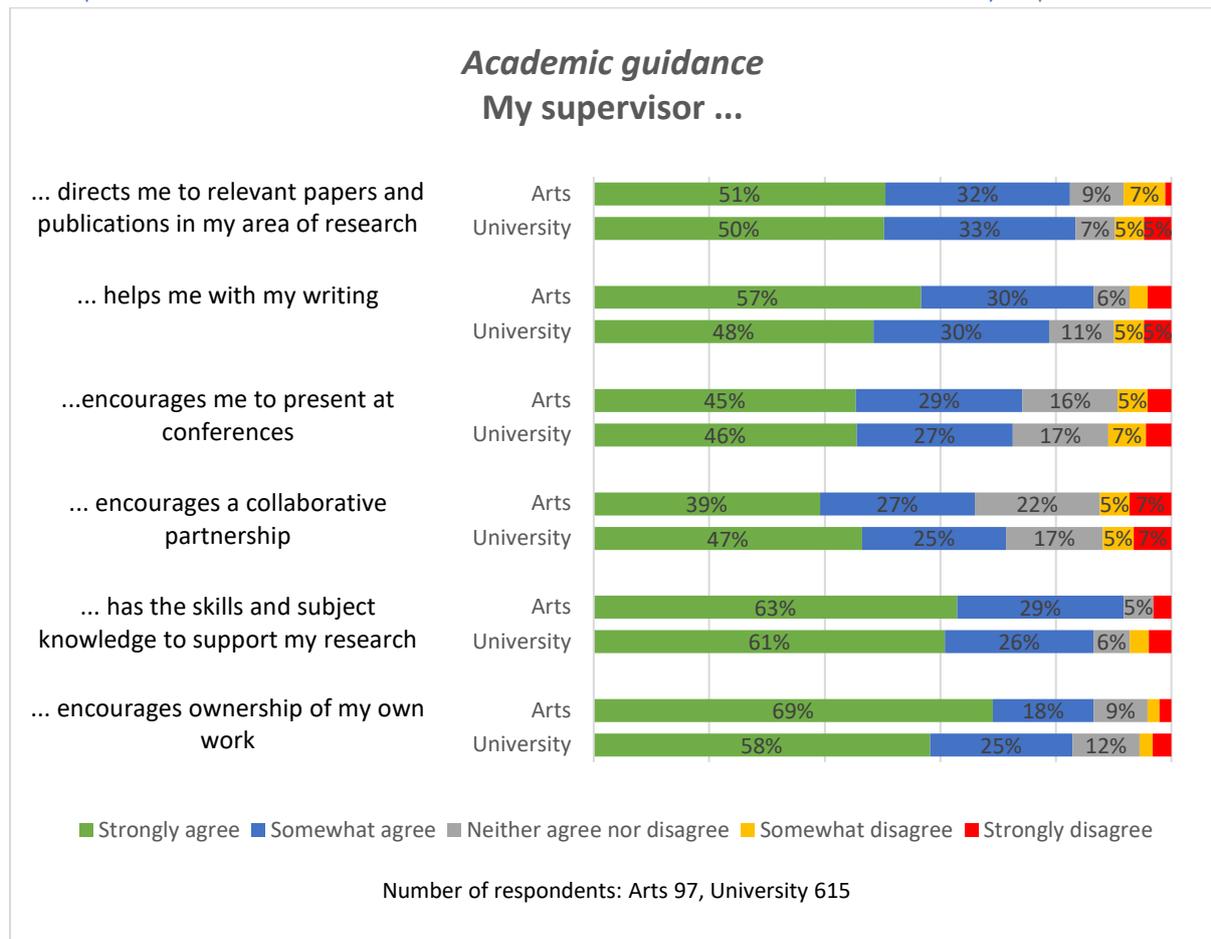
“My supervisors have become increasingly busy as my candidature has progressed, meaning that they are a lot less involved than they were at the beginning.”

1.6 How did you deal with it? Select as many as relevant.



Half of the Monash Arts graduate students who had experienced conflict or misunderstanding with their supervisors decided not to do anything about the issue and tried work around it.

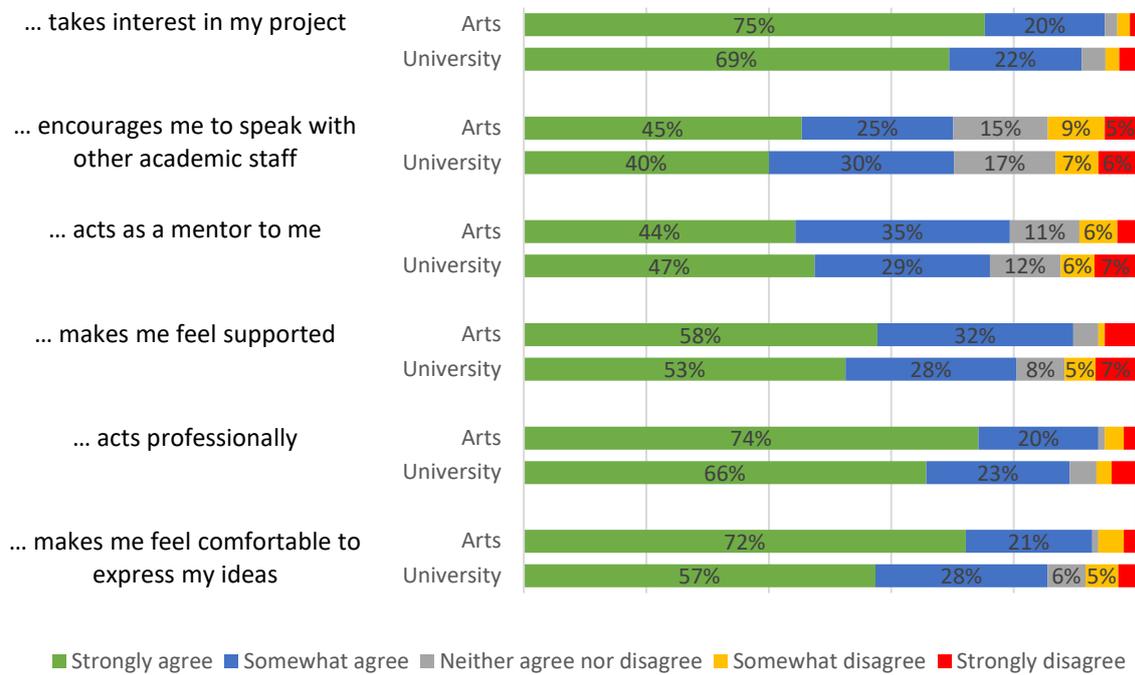
1.7 Please rate the following statements regarding your supervision experience. Select one option for each statement from the list below where "At least one of my supervisors..."³



Monash Arts graduate students (87%) were more likely to agree with the statement 'my supervisor helps me with my writing' than respondents from the University (78%). On the other hand, they were less likely (66%) than their University peers (72%) to agree that their supervisors encouraged a collaborative partnership.

³ Where responses were less than 5%, the figure has not been included due to lack of space.

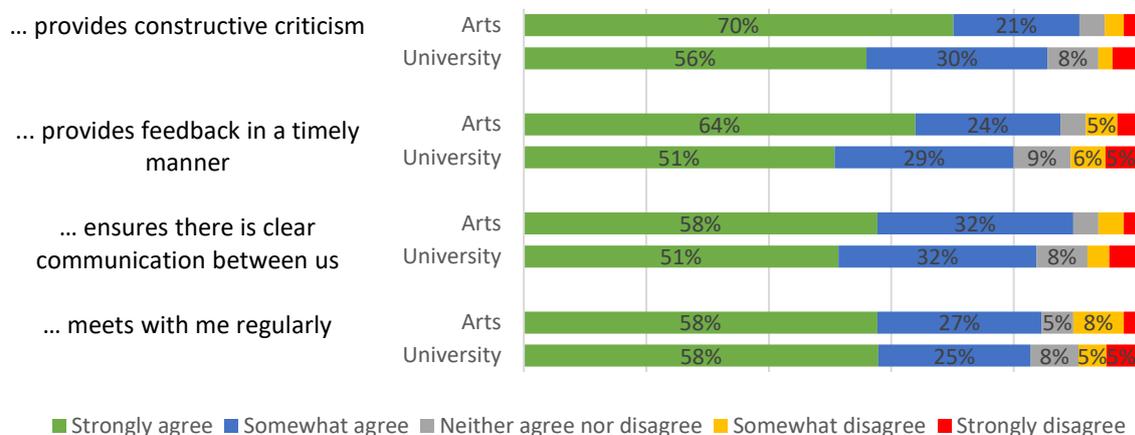
Supportive role My supervisor ...



Number of respondents: Arts 97, University 615

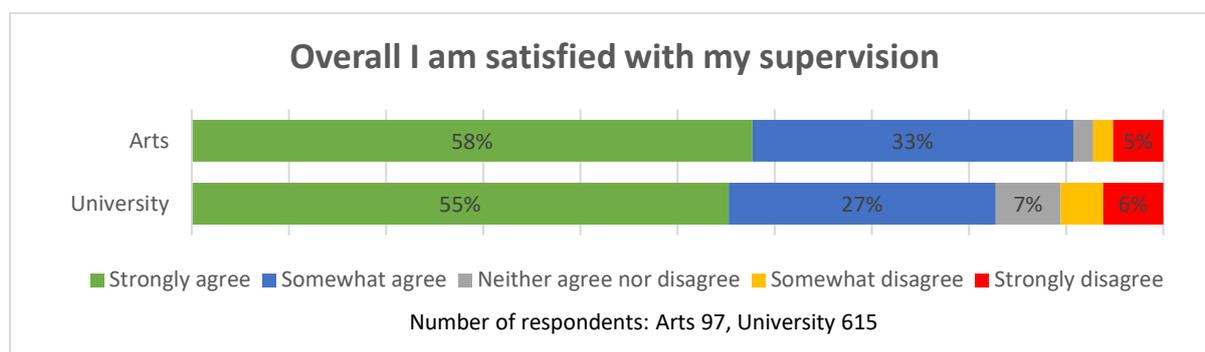
Respondents from Monash Arts tended to agree with positive statements relating to how supportive their supervisors were slightly more so than University graduate students. This was especially evident in the response to the statement *'my supervisor makes me feel supported'* (Arts: 90%, Uni: 81%).

Appropriate feedback My supervisor ...



Number of respondents: Arts 97, University 615

The responses of Monash Arts graduate students indicated that they were marginally more satisfied with the feedback provided to them by their supervisors than their University peers.



In the majority of cases, respondents indicated that they either *strongly agree* or *somewhat agree* that they were satisfied with their supervision in general.

1.8 Opportunity for comments regarding your supervision.

Thirty-eight graduate students from Monash Arts responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Positive comments: 20 Negative comments: 19

General theme	Number of responses
Incompetence/unsuitability and lacking appropriate skills/experience/knowledge	14
Mentoring - negative	13
Supportive/respectful/engaged/guidance/nurturing/encouraging	12
Suggested improvements	7
Changing supervisors	5
Inaccessibility	5
Time restraints and/or overworked (students and staff)	5
Administrative competence/incompetence	4
Communication and feedback – good and bad	4
Knowledgeable	4
Accessibility	3
Competing and differing expectations	2
Mentoring - positive	2
Bullying/dominating/exploitation/intimidation/abuse	1
Mental health concerns	1

Approximately half of respondents from Monash Arts were **positive** about an element of their supervision experience within their degrees. Some notable examples include:

“They’re wonderful, wonderful, wonderful supervisors!!! I am over the moon with the quality of supervision!!”

“My new supervisor is an excellent mentor, and I am fortunate to have had the ‘courage’ to change supervisors relatively early (prior to confirmation).”

“Very lucky to have a supervisor who is a leader in her field. Very supportive of me and while guiding ... does so with a light touch.”

“My supervisor was great ... They have given me not only professional and academic guidance, but also personal advice and supervision. They were easy to talk to and genuinely wanted me to succeed and help me improve.”

“Having the opportunity to meet with supervisors one-on-one is the best part of my degree. I find these meetings incredibly valuable and feel encouraged and respected by my supervisors.”

On the other hand, approximately half of respondents from Monash Arts were **negative** about an element of their supervision experience.

“Sometimes I think that my supervisor tries to make the project more their project than mine by pushing me to go in a particular direction or to do particular things that can compromise where I want to take my project and how it should be done.”

“Has been quite disjointed.”

Specifically, many of the negative comments were related to perceptions of supervisors as being **incompetent and unsuited to supervision**, as well as **lacking appropriate skills, experience and knowledge**.

“The most critical and useful feedback of my work I have received was from ... [an external] course ... My supervisors and review panels are not conducive to supporting or developing my research.”

“My main supervisor has no experience in my research field whatsoever ... and is also not very helpful when it comes to navigating the hellhole of Monash administration, which makes every single (frustratingly frequent) change to Monash administrative practices absolutely intolerable.”

“Overall, I feel that I have lost a lot of time and energy managing my supervisors, because of either a lack of enthusiasm/priority on their part or because of their general lack of knowledge of basic elements of social science. This is an extremely frustrating experience, since I am sure I would have made much faster progress had this not been the case.”

Other negative comments were based around what many graduate students perceived as **poor or no mentoring** within the relationship with their supervisors.

“My primary supervisor has been quite good on a professional front though hasn’t provided much in the way of mentoring. My secondary supervisor has given me nothing.”

“I fly blind in the wider academic field, unlike most of the postgraduates I talk to at Monash and elsewhere ... I have never been encouraged to co-author anything with my supervisor(s), which is again unlike the experience of many other students I’ve talked to about this aspect”

of the PhD process.”

Other notable comments relating to supervision, included:

“My department is criminally understaffed with all staff taking on far more supervisions and undergraduate teaching than is possible to do effectively. They are constantly battling the University itself to justify the department’s presence there, and buried under mountains of administration that other departments are funded for administrative staff to undertake. It is a significant and serious detriment to teaching and research at all levels and Monash should be censured for it.”

“The supervisor relationship, not only at Monash, but in general, is set up to be far from collaborative. The reliance on supervisors seems to hold back lots of students, including myself. Having said all of this, I want to acknowledge that ... [when] my supervisors do provide me with timely feedback, this can be very useful. I just wish this was the norm, rather than the exception.”

1.9 Summary

Research supervision has become a vital process in the success of postgraduate studies.⁴ It plays a critical role in doctoral education, in particular, with links having been made between the quality of supervision and student progression and attrition rates.⁵ Increased government emphasis on ‘timely completion’ has led to the introduction of a range of measures for monitoring and managing PhD candidature (see 2. *Milestones*),⁶ given completion rates now have reputational and financial implications for universities in the competitive higher education environment.⁷

To analyse supervision at Monash University, the MGA HDR survey sought responses from Monash graduate students to multiple choice (5) and Likert-scale questions (4), so as to provide a general overview of supervision at the institutional and faculty level, as well as open-ended questions (2), in order to provide a level of insight into the diversity of opinions and the challenges faced by graduate students.

The overall satisfaction with supervision among respondents from Monash Arts (91%) was higher than it was among all Monash graduate students (82%).

⁴ Melissa Ng Lee Yen Abdullah and Terry Evans, “The relationship between postgraduate research students’ psychological attributes and their supervisors’ supervision training,” *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences* 31 (2012): 788.

⁵ Glenice Ives and Glenn Rowley, “Supervisors selection or allocation and continuity of supervision: PhD. Students’ progress and outcomes,” *Studies in Higher Education* 30, no. 5 (2005): 535-55. Carolyn Richert Bair and Jennifer Grant Haworth, “Doctoral student attrition and persistence: a meta-synthesis of research,” in *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research, Vol. XIX*, edited by J. C. Smart (Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004), 495.

⁶ Alison Lee and Jo McKenzie, “Evaluating doctoral supervision: tensions in eliciting students’ perspectives,” *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 48, no.1 (2011): 70-71.

⁷ Christine Halse and James Malfroy, “Retheorizing doctoral supervision as professional work,” *Studies in Higher Education*, 31, no. 1 (2010): 79.

Previous studies have highlighted that **the strongest correlation with student progress was the amount of interaction that students had with their supervisors.**⁸ Monash Arts respondents tended to agree with positive statements regarding the accessibility of their supervisors.

Meanwhile, others have identified that **doctoral students who choose their own supervisor are more likely to complete their course than those assigned a supervisor,** while they are also less likely to experience emotional exhaustion or plan to leave academia.⁹ This was not tested in this survey, but should be considered for implementation nevertheless.

The expertise and knowledge of supervisors is instrumental to the successful completion of an HDR graduate student's thesis.¹⁰ Overall agreement with the statement '*my supervisor has the skills and subject knowledge to support my research*' was slightly higher in Monash Arts (92%) than it was in the University (87%).

While supervision is clearly important to the overall graduate student research experience, it is also the factor that students tend to rank as most satisfactory (or else amongst the top factors).¹¹ Therefore, in order to gain insight into the overall satisfaction of Monash graduate students, several other factors associated with their degrees were explored in the MGA HDR survey – starting with milestones (see 2. *Milestones*).

⁸ Allyson Holbrook, Sid Bourke and Robert Cantwell, "Using research candidate annual report data to examine supervision effectiveness," in *Quality in Postgraduate Research: Knowledge Creation in Testing Times Part 2 – Proceedings*, eds. Margaret Kiley and Gerry Mullins (Adelaide: Quality of Postgraduate Research Conference, 2006): 83.

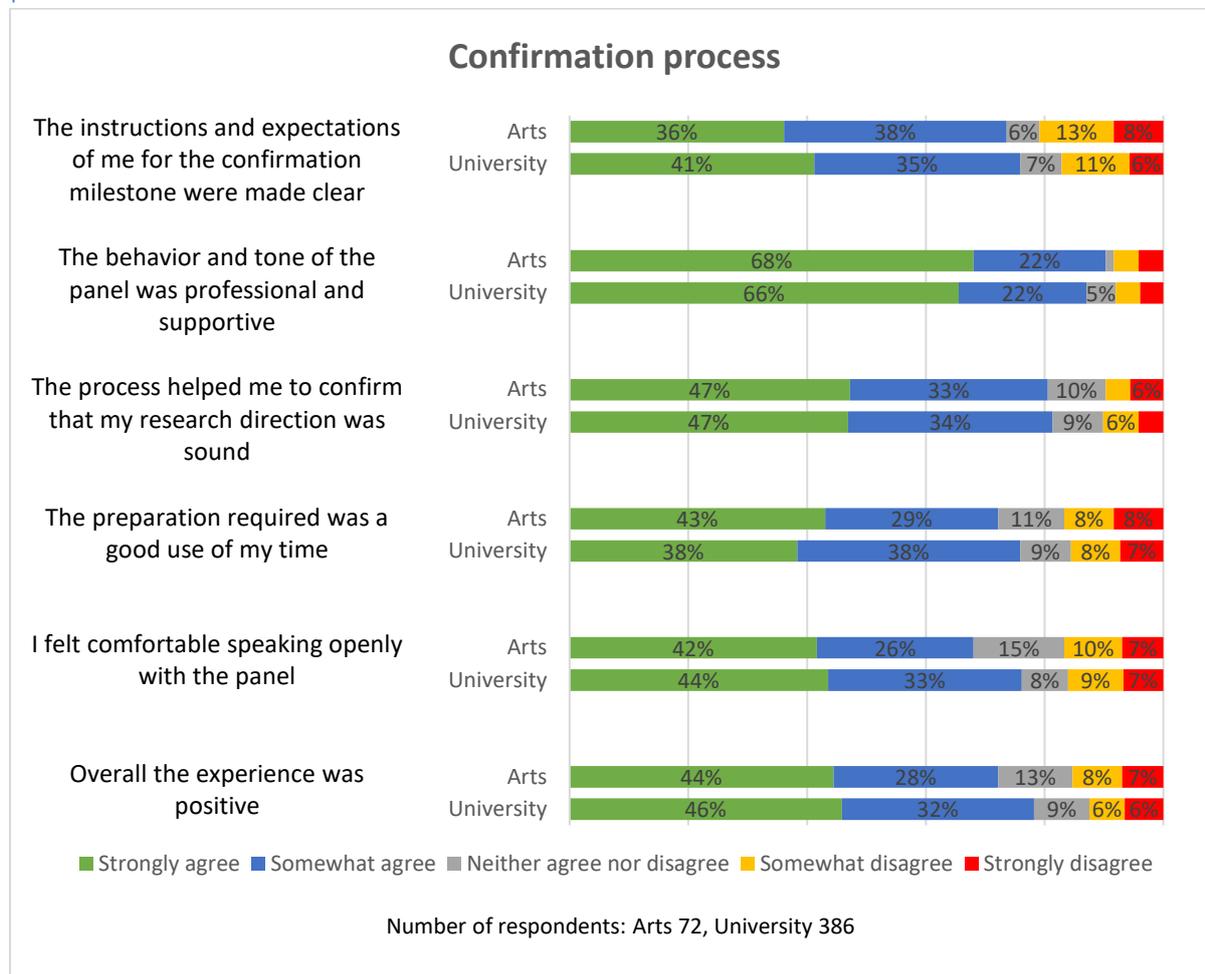
⁹ Karen Hunter and Kay Devine, "Doctoral student's emotional exhaustion and intentions to leave academia," *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* 11 (2016): 40.

¹⁰ Dharmananda Jairam and David H. Kahl, Jr., "Navigating the doctoral experience: The role of social support in successful degree completion," *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 7 (2012): 320.

¹¹ Bridget Juniper, Elaine Walsh, Alan Richardson and Bernard Morley, "A new approach to evaluating the well-being of PhD research students," *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 37, no. 5 (2012): 571. Clair Sight, *Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2017*, 12. Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, *2018 Graduate Outcomes Survey*, 106. Allyson Holbrook et al, "PhD candidate expectations: Exploring mis-match with experience," *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* 9 (2014): 339-40.

2. Milestones

2.1 Please rate the following statements regarding your experience of the confirmation process.



Monash Arts respondents tended to agree with positive comments relating to the confirmation process. They were particularly pleased with the behaviour and tone of the panel. Seventy-two percent (72%) of respondents agreed that overall the experience was positive.

2.2 Opportunity for comments about the confirmation process.

Twenty-six graduate students from Monash Arts responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 19

Positive comments: 8

General theme	Number of responses
Unclear requirements and bureaucratic/administrative issues	7
Unsuitable/incompetent/insular/inappropriate panel	6
Good and useful feedback from panel	5
Stress/anxiety/nervousness/poor health	5
Suggestions for improvements	5
Time-consuming process	5
Poor communication	4
Highlighted supervisor failures/flaws	2
Lack of trust in panel	1

The overwhelming majority of respondents from Monash Arts shared a **negative** experience in relation to the confirmation process. Their responses are summarised as follows: unclear, unhelpful, overly bureaucratic, stressful, time-consuming and inadequate.

Specifically, much of the negative feedback to do with the confirmation process was regarding frustrations relating to **unclear requirements** and **bureaucratic/administration issues**. Some of the notable comments are included below:

“The University’s guidelines were incredibly vague until recently. I had to rely on reading other students’ confirmation papers to find out what I was expected to submit.”

“Expectations for confirmation could have been clearer and more accessible.”

Likewise, many graduate students complained of **unsuitable, incompetent, insular or inappropriate panels**. Particularly revealing comments included:

“I found it difficult to highlight to the panel the concerns I had about my supervision, because I was well aware that they all knew and worked with each other. I did not want it to have negative consequences on me or my supervisors. Because of this, I did not raise my concerns with the panel.”

“Panel was openly derivative at times – demanding answers to questions completely unrelated to my thesis and outside my field of study ... The guests seemed more interested in pushing their own fields of study than engaging in mine.”

Unlike most of the other faculties, there was a sizeable difference between the number of negative and positive comments in Monash Arts with their graduate students tending to share more negative experiences. However, there were still eight **positive** responses regarding the confirmation process in Monash Arts. These included:

“I got constructive feedback from the panel. The confirmation process [was] very useful in my PhD journey.”

“Confirmation was a good experience and helped me to condense my findings into a presentable topic that can be accomplished.”

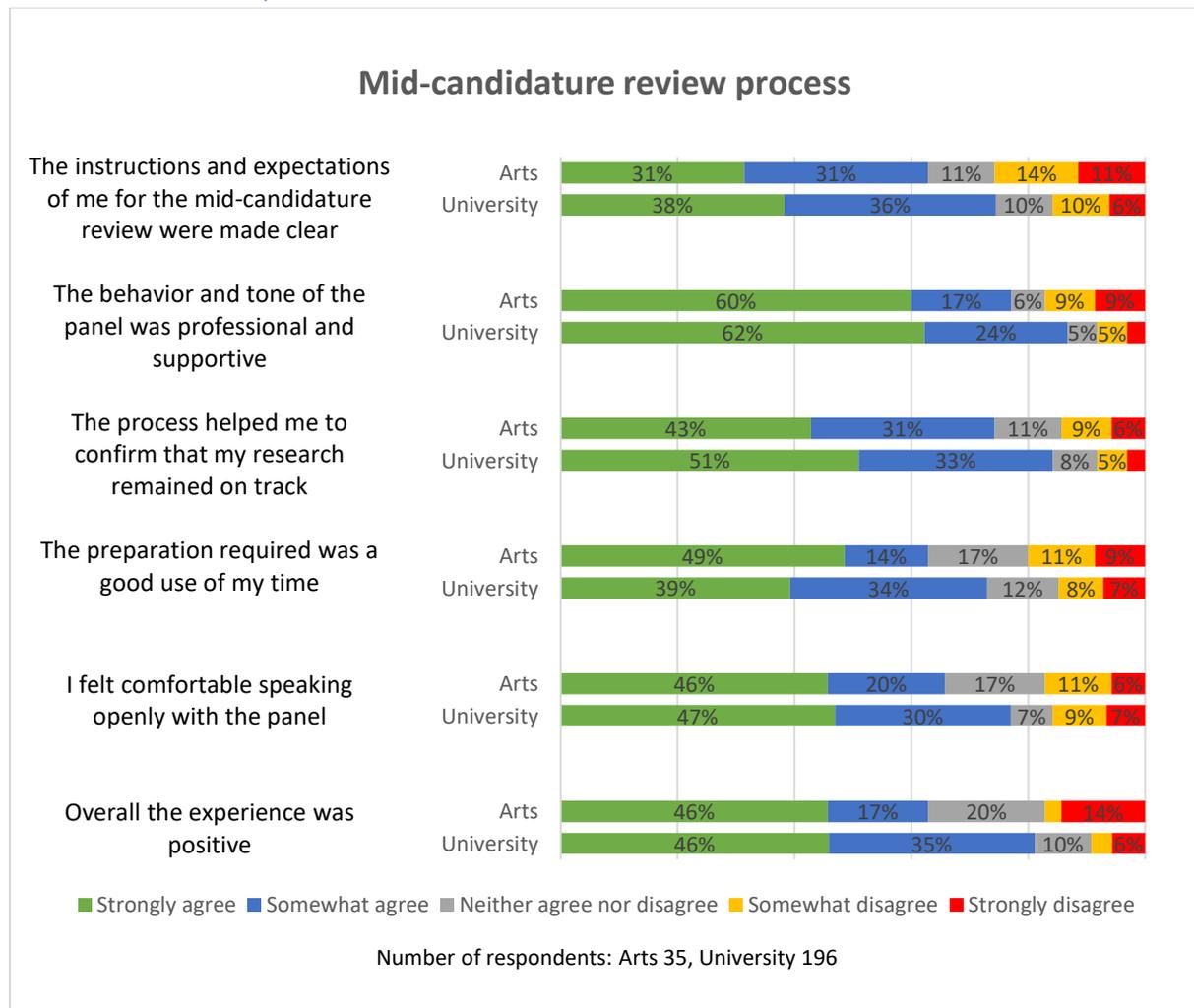
“Confirmation was a great experience for me overall. It really gave me new ideas for my work and confirmed the direction of my research.”

Other notable comments from Monash Arts graduate students relating to the confirmation process, included:

“I was quite stressed about the consequences of failing the milestone. My supervisors were able to calm me down by saying that it does not play out as it is described in the MGE policies. My supervisors were correct about this.”

“I did not get adequate feedback in terms of supervision in revising my objectives and methodology. The supervisor was simply continuing to provide feedback on my drafts, but never sitting back and having an honest discussion about my research objectives and methodology. This lack of clarity made me suffer during confirmation of candidature, which [could have been] clearly avoided if handled well by the supervisors.”

2.3 Please rate the following statements regarding your experience of the mid-candidature review process.



While still tending to agree with positive statements about the mid-candidature review process, Monash Arts respondents tended to agree less than did their University peers. This was most

evident in the total agreement to the statement: ‘Overall the experience was positive’ (Arts: 63%, University: 81%).

2.4 Opportunity for comments about the mid-candidature review process.

Fifteen graduate students from Monash Arts responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 12 **Positive comments: 6**

General theme	Number of responses
Stress/anxiety/nervousness/poor health	6
Unsuitable/incompetent/insular/inappropriate panel	6
Good and useful feedback from panel	5
Suggestions for improvements	5
Highlighted supervisor failures/flaws	3
Unclear requirements and bureaucratic/administrative issues	2
Highlighted supervisor strengths	1
Inconsistent experiences	1
Misdirects energy and focus from research	1

The overwhelming majority of Monash Arts graduate student respondents had something **negative** to share regarding their experiences with the mid-candidature review process. Their objections can be summarised as follows: unqualified panel, unhelpful, distressing, superficial, unprofessional panel and time-wasting.

Specifically, **stress, anxiety, nervousness and poor health** were issues that several graduate students associated with the mid-candidature reviews. Monash Arts graduate students were far more likely to reference this theme in their comments on mid-candidature processes than those of other faculties. Some notable comments, included:

“I waited an hour for my panel to finish deliberations as to whether I had passed or not ... This was extremely upsetting and made me very anxious, and I was left with the impression that I had passed by the skin of my teeth – even though my supervisors seemed happy with my progress.”

“I did not know what I had to do to complete this milestone until only a couple of months before my deadline. This was rather distressing as I am usually a very organised person.”

Furthermore, several graduate students complained of **unsuitable, incompetent, insular or inappropriate panels**. Particularly revealing comments, included:

“I selected one of the panellists because I knew s/he could help me address gaps in my research. The other panellists were allocated because s/he was not available [and] not because [they] had any particular expertise relevant to my research. Their feedback turned out to be helpful, but it’s a limitation of the process that you don’t always get panellists with relevant expertise/insight.”

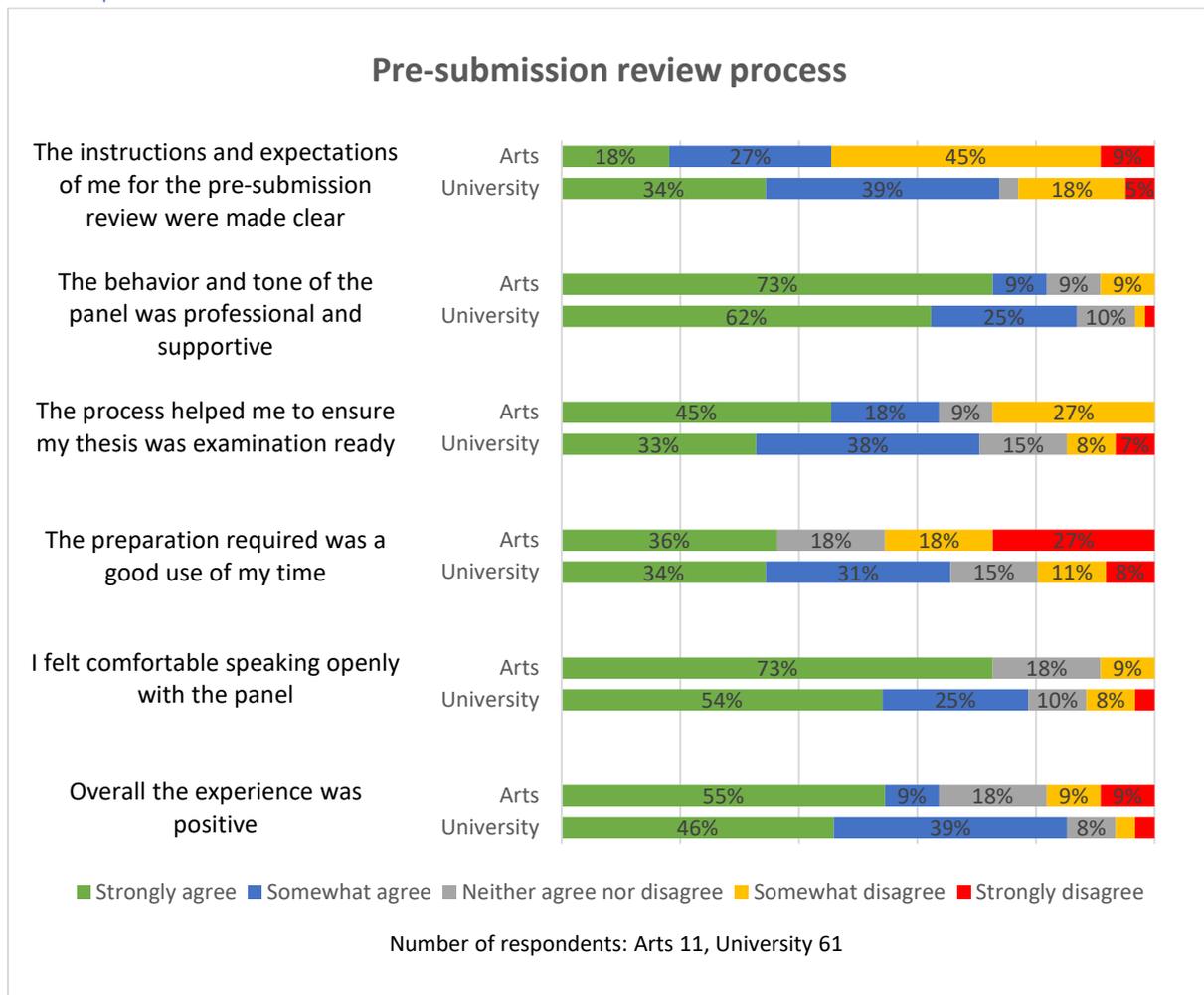
“The appointed panellist gave somewhat superficial feedback.”

On the other hand, over one-third of respondents spoke **positively** about an element of their mid-candidature review. Positive comments often referred to **good and useful feedback from the panels**, including:

“I got constructive comments from the panel. The panel members helped clear away some of the confusion about my research.”

“This was an expert panel in my area of study. Their advice was helpful and encouraging – including providing further reading. My supervisor took special care to ensure my panel understood my research and the critical area in which it was based. Plus, the panel included a creating practice person with excellent creative process input. The chair [was] also generous and supportive in the conduct of the panel session. I felt very lucky to have the attention of these experts and their input.”

2.5 Please rate the following statements regarding your experience of the pre-submission review process.



Monash Arts respondents tended to disagree rather than agree that the preparation time required for the pre-submission review process was a good use of their time and that the instructions and

expectations were made clear.

2.6 Opportunity for comments about the pre-submission review process.

Four graduate students from Monash Arts responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 4

Positive comments: 2

General theme	Number of responses
Unsuitable/incompetent/insular/inappropriate panel	3
Unclear requirements and bureaucratic/administrative issues	2
Good and useful feedback from panel	1
Highlighted supervisor strengths	1
Misdirects energy and focus from research	1

All four responses from Monash Arts graduate students contained a reference that could be categorised as **negative**, while three were related to **unsuitable, incompetent, insular or inappropriate panels**. These comments included:

“The pre-submission seminar was a needless interruption during a crucial writing period. One of my panel members was in a different area of discipline, was entirely indifferent to my topic, and did not engage with my presentation at all.”

“At every stage at least one staff member has never done a panel like this before, because the last one was entirely different. This is a negative outcome for all students and staff.”

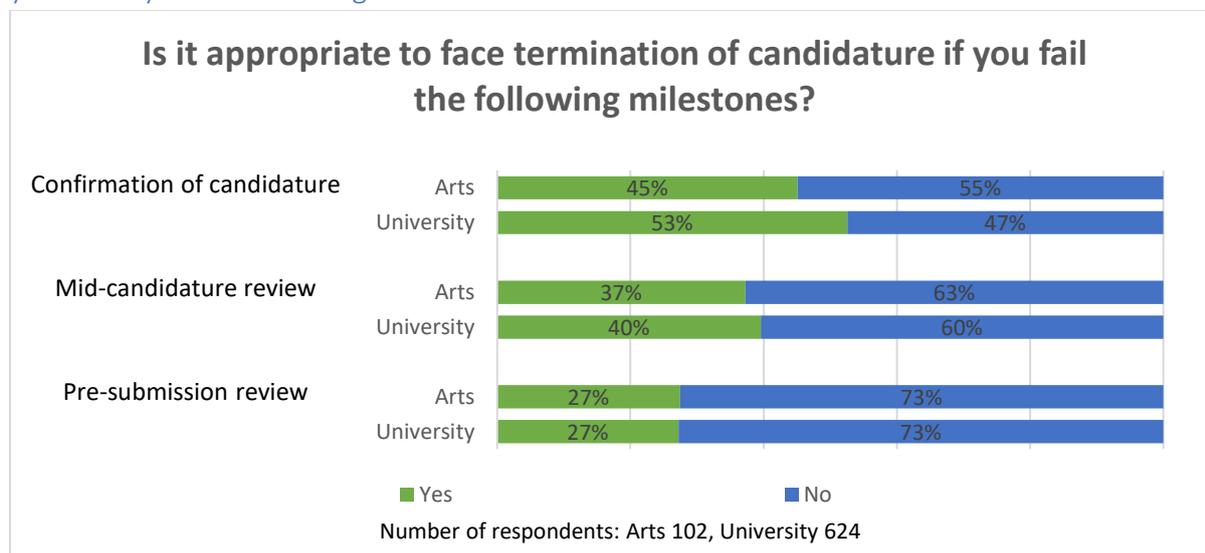
Other negative comments were related to **unclear requirements** and **bureaucratic/administrative issues**.

“I have been through a different version of the review panel process at every stage of my candidature. It has been confusing and stressful, as I have not been able to follow the same system twice, and the requirements are poorly articulated.”

One **positive** experience from a Monash Arts graduate student relating to the pre-submission review process was:

“Overall, it was a positive experience.”

2.7 The mid-candidature and pre-submission milestones were originally introduced to identify problems and determine appropriate actions to address these. In 2014 all milestones were changed to "hurdles" and are now used as a way to terminate candidature when progress is unsatisfactory. Do you think it's appropriate to face termination of candidature if you fail any of the following milestones?



Monash Arts graduate students were more likely to disagree than agree that it was appropriate to face termination at milestones. As was the case with University graduate students, disagreement with this grew exponentially with each passing milestone.

2.8 Opportunity for comments about milestones.

Forty-three graduate students from Monash Arts responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 17 Positive comments: 7

General theme	Number of responses
General disagreement with termination at milestones	24
General agreement with termination at milestones	11
Termination at confirmation, but not at other milestones	9
Stress/anxiety/nervousness/poor health	7
Unclear requirements and bureaucratic/administrative issues	4
Unsuitable/incompetent/insular/inappropriate panel	4
Highlighted supervisor strengths	3
Rigid/inflexible system	3
Highlighted supervisor failures/flaws	2
Termination punishes students, not supervisors	1
Time-consuming process	1

Several Monash Arts graduate students took this as an opportunity to elaborate on their responses to the preceding questions regarding termination of candidature. As such, many expressed **general disagreement with termination at milestones**. Significant comments, included:

“Pretty sure a thesis can be fixed. Being terminated seems a bit extreme.”

“Having judges outside of the field of study make judgements on ... your thesis, based on a short meeting is irresponsible and poor judgement ... [by] the administration.”

“If someone can’t pass confirmation, then I can understand [termination]. But by mid-candidature you most-likely have a first draft of your thesis – so there should be a bit more leeway!”

“I think termination of candidature is an extreme response to the confirmation and mid-candidature panels, though if a student had underperformed at both and failed to take advice into account, then termination at pre-submission might be warranted.”

On the other hand, many Monash Arts graduate students were in **general agreement with termination at milestones**. However, opinions varied substantially on at what stage termination of candidature was deemed acceptable and many students were quick to qualify their general agreement by suggesting that termination should only take place after a graduate student has been provided with sufficient time to reflect on feedback and make amendments to their research.

“Whilst I agree [with termination], there needs to be a strong system in place that allows for transparency, accountability, right of reply, official warnings or second/third chances, and appeal.”

“Termination is appropriate ... when little to no progress has been made on a project that is of questionable viability – but termination should be a last resort and ought to require multiple failures to overcome a hurdle before the trigger is pulled.”

Compared with the responses to the three milestones, the number of **positive** responses from Monash Arts to this statement are comparably low. The comments suggest that this is because students are considering the concept of milestones rather than a specific milestone experience from which they can reflect. As such, while the responses to the three milestones are littered with positive comments about panels providing good and useful feedback, the positive comments to this statement are less-specific. Notable comments, include:

“Milestones are a useful way to track progress.”

“These milestones are [a] valuable way to check progress and obtain feedback. So, they are important, but they shouldn’t be focused on so strongly and punitively.”

“The milestones are useful in a way that keeps you focused and also gives you opportunity to get feedback from people other than your supervisor.”

Other notable comments from Monash Arts graduate students relating to the milestones, included:

“Candidates should be told CLEARLY and at the very beginning of each year what they are expected to present to the panel during the milestones.”

“In our faculty, there seems to be little capacity for the attendees to ask questions. Time always runs out before this is possible. This is a shame since the attendees often have greater knowledge of the fields being presented than do the panellists. More time should be allotted for this.”

2.9 Summary

In 2010, Monash began to formally monitor candidature through multiple milestones – confirmation of candidature, mid-candidature review and pre-submission review. This can be seen as being consistent with changes made at other universities across Australia.¹²

Monash Arts graduate students tended to agree with positive statements regarding their milestones. In regards to the confirmation process, 72% of those responding agreed that *‘overall the experience was positive.’* Although total agreement with this statement dropped-off for the subsequent milestones (Mid-candidature review: 63%, Pre-submission review: 64%).

In 2014, the mid-candidature and pre-submission milestones were changed to “hurdles” and are now used as a way to terminate candidature when progress is unsatisfactory. Monash Arts graduate students tended to disagree that it was appropriate to face termination for failing a milestone (see 2.7) with this disagreement growing as candidates progressed through the milestones.

The **two recurring criticisms of the milestone process** in the comments of graduate students broadly related to **unclear requirements** and **inappropriate panels**.

Given milestones can be quite stressful (46% of Monash Arts graduate students experienced an uncomfortable level of stress because of milestones – see section 7.1), clear guidance on the requirements and expectations are essential to supporting students through the process. While clear guidance and communication have been found to be essential to timely completion, with their perceived absence shown to be fundamental in causing delays,¹³ clear guidance and communication may also serve to limit stress. The prevalence of comments highlighting uncertainty or inconsistencies in the milestone processes, within this context, can be considered cause for concern.

Perhaps the most concerning element of criticism relating to the suitability of panels was how some graduate students expressed that they were reluctant to share feedback with their panel members because of a fear that what they said may get back to their supervisors. As the Graduate Research Progress Management Procedures state, “Milestones provide an opportunity for students to raise any issues that are affecting progress, so that action to address these issues can be considered and implemented where appropriate.”¹⁴ The introduction of candidate committees or chairpersons to Australian HDR degrees was designed to develop a more open structure in relation to the supervisory relationship;¹⁵ however, the existence of these comments suggest that this is a developing area. This is not to question the professionalism of University staff; rather to simply

¹² Margaret Kiley, “Reflections on change in doctoral education: an Australian case study,” *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education* 8, iss. 2 (2017): 85.

¹³ Rens van de Schoot et al., “What took them so long? Explaining PhD delays among doctoral candidates,” *PLoS One* 8, no. 7 (2013), 8.

¹⁴ Monash University Procedure, *Graduate Research Progress Management Procedures* (Melbourne: Monash University, 2017), 4.

¹⁵ Margaret Kiley, “Reflections on change in doctoral education,” 85.

highlight that some graduate students perceive proximity between University or Faculty staff as an obstacle to raising issues they potentially have with supervisors.

3. Coursework

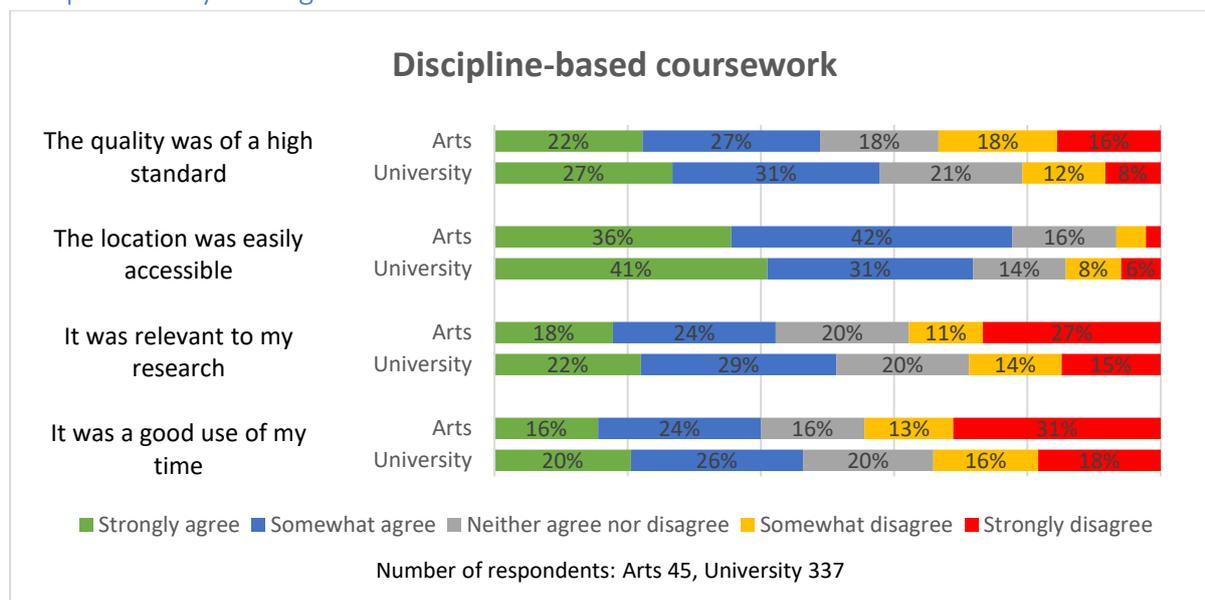
Coursework units are only a compulsory component of research degrees in the School of Film, Media and Communications within Monash Arts; however, graduate students from other schools still provided responses to these questions.

3.1 Do you believe that research degrees are improved by the inclusion of compulsory discipline-based coursework?

Research degrees improved by compulsory coursework units?	Arts	University
Yes	42 (41.2%)	236 (37.9%)
No	33 (32.4%)	178 (28.6%)
Not sure	27 (26.5%)	209 (33.5%)

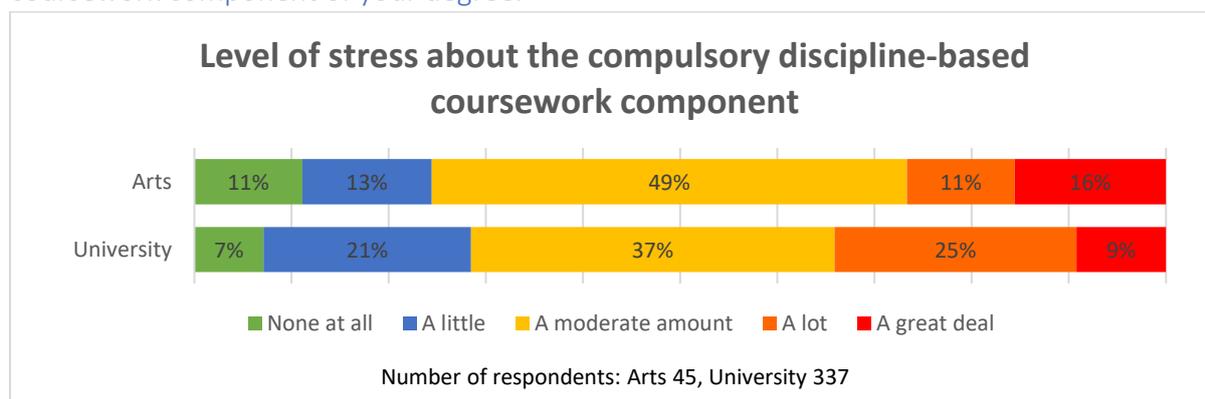
Approximately two in five respondents from Monash Arts felt that their research degrees were improved by the inclusion of compulsory discipline-based coursework units.

3.2 Please rate the following statements relating to the discipline-based coursework component of your degree.



Aside from accessibility, Monash Arts respondents tended to respond less favourably to positive statements regarding coursework than those from the University overall. This was especially true in response to the statement *'the quality was of a high standard.'*

3.3 Please select the level of stress you have about the compulsory discipline-based coursework component of your degree.



Respondents from Monash Arts were less likely than their University counterparts to express that they had experienced an uncomfortable level (a lot or a great deal) of stress in relation to the compulsory discipline-based coursework.

3.4 Opportunity for comment regarding the inclusion of discipline-based coursework in research degrees.

Forty-five graduate students from Monash Arts responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 31 Positive comments: 20

General theme	Number of responses
Time-consuming/waste of time/misdirected energy	19
Irrelevant/discipline-specific	14
Networking – relationships and support	12
Administrative issues/inconsistencies/solutions	4
Lack of academic staff enthusiasm	4
Low/poor-quality unit	4
Inconsistent quality (unit/course)	2

Over two-thirds of respondents from Monash Arts held **negative opinions on coursework** in their degrees. Some notable objections are included below:

“My coursework ... did not contribute in any meaningful way to my research.”

“Unless they are radically improved, I believe [coursework units] could be cut, and save considerable energy to both students and faculty.”

On the other hand, just under one-half of students also had something **positive** to say about their experiences with coursework.

“It was enjoyable, and the assignments were related directly to improving my candidature/presentation skills/adding to my research.”

“The activities offered [in] my program are very helpful and professional.”

Of those Monash Arts graduate students responding negatively, there were many references to how coursework was considered **time consuming and a waste of time**, and how it unnecessarily **directed the student’s energy away from their research/thesis**.

“It put my research back 6 months ... [A] waste of time.”

“I thought most of the time in class was not especially relevant and felt like it was taking me away from valuable research and writing time.”

“Like the milestones, we ended up writing assessments that took time away from our thesis, instead of supporting it. Literally HALF our full-time study load, to do random coursework for no necessary reason, in a 100% research degree.”

More so than in any other faculty, Monash Arts graduate students emphasised the value of coursework for **initiating and encouraging network and support opportunities for graduates**. Monash Arts graduate students accounted for the majority of the comments overall in the survey related to this theme. The comment below summarises what many of the students were feeling:

*“We were ‘required’ as a group of students to meet monthly (or weekly?) for the duration of the coursework to provide feedback on each other’s work. We all complained about it at the time. However, this turned out to be the *best* impact of the coursework component, i.e. getting to know fellow PhD (and MA) students. As a result, four of us formed a ‘study buddies’ group, which has continued to meet throughout our candidature ... to provide moral and intellectual support.”*

Other notable comments relating to the inclusion of discipline-based coursework in research degrees, included:

“I was an informal representative of students speaking to the faculty who ran the coursework. The staff seemed like they really wanted us to do something useful, and they seemed embarrassed that we were angry and found the requirements unhelpful and very diverting from our thesis.”

“I’m not against the idea of discipline-based coursework components, but I only support the idea if it’s specifically relevant to the students who take the subject, and if it’s actually properly managed. Don’t waste everyone’s time cobbling some nonsense together and then insist on the students completing coursework that in no way contributes to their research project. And for heaven’s sake, MAKE SURE THE STUDENTS ARE ADEQUATELY COMPENSATED FOR THIS LOSS OF RESEARCH TIME.”

3.5 Summary

While there is general support for greater structure within graduate research studies, and there is evidence to suggest that receiving training in rigorous academic writing or any other research skill correlates with successful completion,¹⁶ the concept of coursework has received a mixed reception in Australia.¹⁷ Monash Arts graduate students were no different in this regard with respondents split over its relevance and usefulness.

Only 42% of Monash Arts graduate students agreed with the statement that discipline-based coursework was *'relevant to my research,'* and when given the chance to comment on coursework, respondents re-iterated their frustration with irrelevancy and complaints that the units were discipline-specific receiving 14 mentions.

Only 40% of Monash Arts graduate students agreed with the statement that discipline-based coursework was *'a good use of my time.'* The majority of negative comments (19) regarding the inclusion of discipline-based coursework were in relation to how it was a waste of time, time-consuming and misdirected energy away from their research.

¹⁶ Rens van de Schoot et al., "What took them so long?" 9.

¹⁷ Margaret Kiley, "Reflections on change in doctoral education," 85.

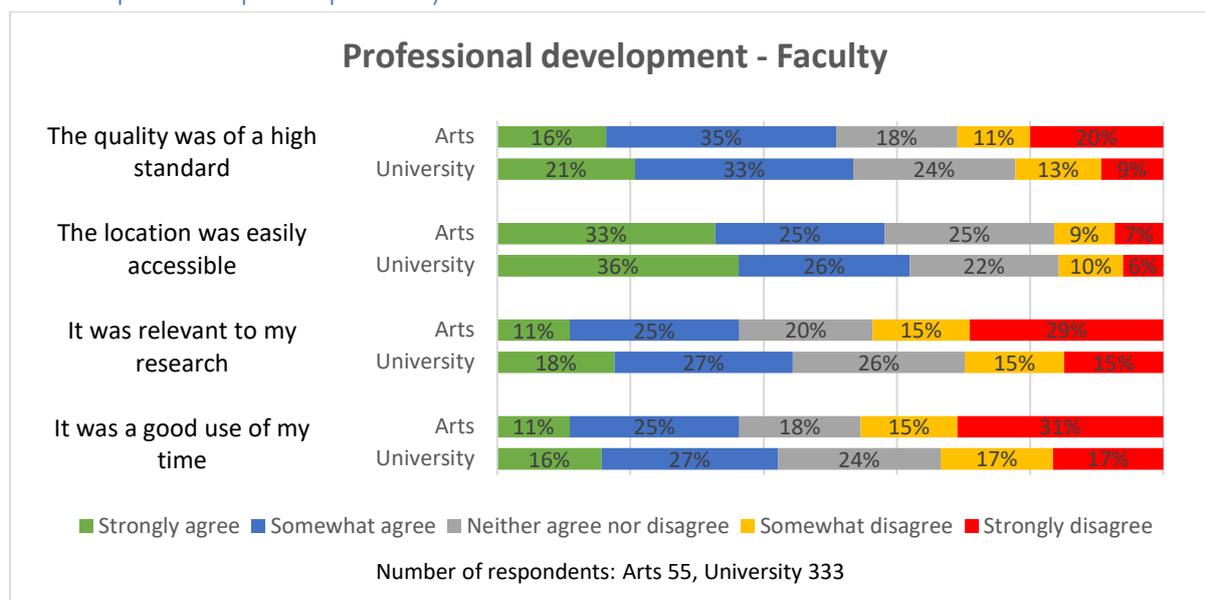
4. Professional Development

4.1 Do you believe that professional development units (as offered through "myDevelopment"), should be a compulsory part of a research degree?

Should professional development be compulsory?	Arts	University
Yes	24 (23.5%)	157 (25.4%)
No	47 (46.1%)	283 (45.9%)
Not sure	31 (30.4%)	177 (28.7%)

Monash Arts graduate students who had opinions tended to disagree rather than agree that professional development units should be a compulsory part of a research degree at a ratio of approximately 2:1.

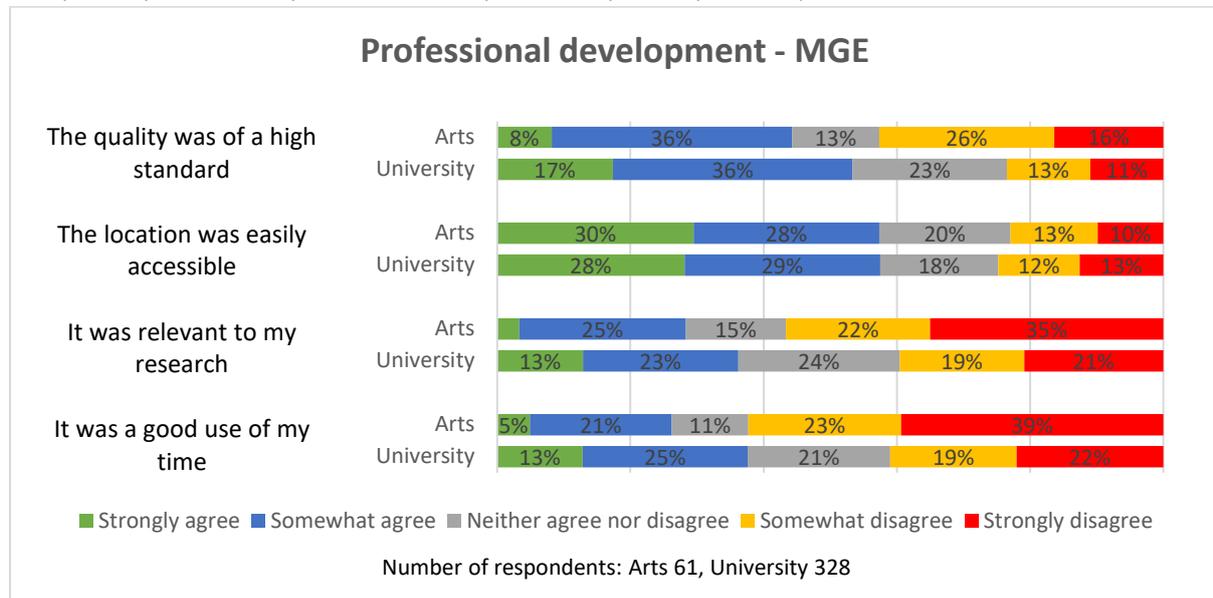
4.2 Please rate the following statements relating to your overall experience of the professional development component of your degree offered by your faculty. (If your faculty does not offer any professional development or you have not participated in any such courses please skip this question).



Compared to most other areas covered in this survey, graduate student responses to statements related to professional development were particularly negative. Even within this context, the responses of Monash Arts graduate students can be deemed as especially negative.

For instance, 46% of Monash Arts respondents disagree that professional development units provided by their faculty were a good use of their time compared to 34% of University respondents. Meanwhile, Monash Arts graduate students were more likely (44%) to disagree that it was relevant to their research than their University counterparts (30%).

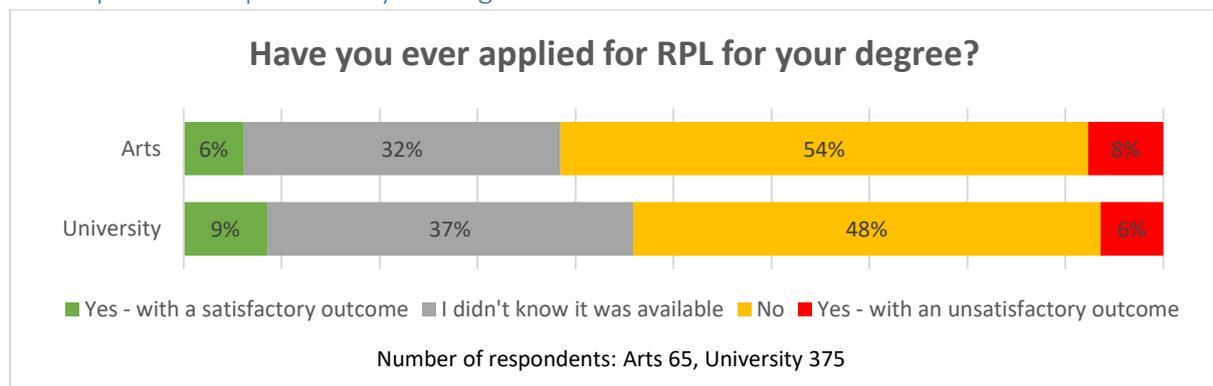
4.3 Please rate the following statements relating to your overall experience of the professional development component of your degree offered by MGE (central). (If you have not participated in any such courses please skip this question).



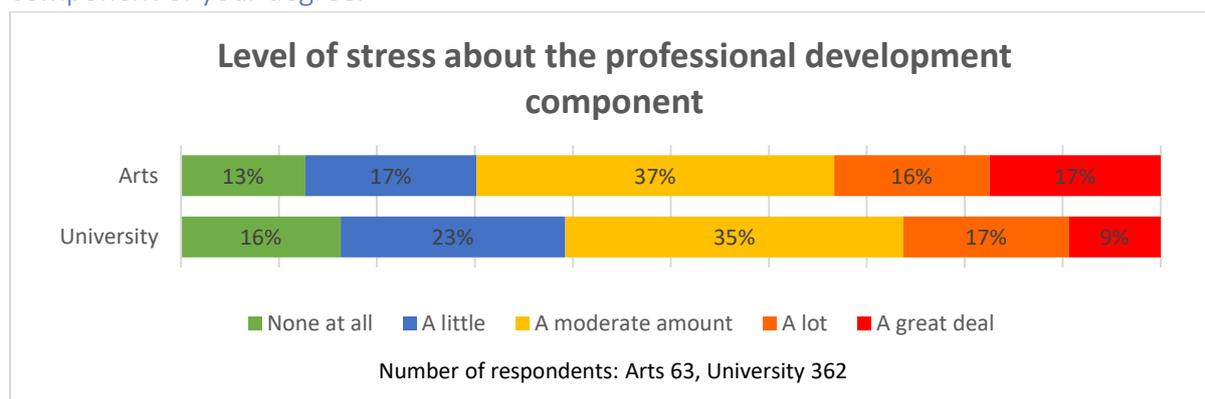
As was the case with University graduate students, Monash Arts respondents tended to agree less with positive statements about the professional development units provided by the MGE than they did with the faculty units.

With the exception of accessibility, Monash Arts respondents tended to disagree with these statements more so than their University peers. Monash Arts graduate students were particularly negative about the relevancy of these units, with 57% disagreeing they were relevant, as well as whether they were a good use of time (62% disagreeing).

4.4 Have you applied for Recognition of Prior Learning in relation to the professional development component of your degree?



4.5 Please select the level of stress you have about the professional development component of your degree.



Respondents from Monash Arts were more likely than their University counterparts to express that they had experienced an uncomfortable level of stress in relation to the professional development component of their degree. Only one in three respondents indicated they had experienced either none or a little stress.

4.6 Opportunity for comment regarding the inclusion of compulsory professional development units in research degrees.

Forty-six graduate students from Monash Arts responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 43 Positive comments: 14

General theme	Number of responses
Irrelevant/discipline-specific/lack of options	23
Time-consuming/waste of time/misdirected energy	15
Administrative issues/inconsistencies/unit availability	14
Low/poor-quality units	5
Inconsistent quality of units	2
Networking – relationships and support	2

The responses of Monash Arts graduate students to compulsory professional development units within their research degrees were **overwhelmingly negative**. Their complaints can be summarised as such: time-consuming, confusing, irrelevant, bad, disappointing and useless.

Approximately half of the negative comments relating to compulsory professional development units included references to how **irrelevant** the units were to individual students and how there were a **lack of options and choices**. Revealing comments, included:

“I was thrilled initially by declarations that seemed to indicate that the goal of professional development was to help students along their chosen path. The courses offered through MyDevelopment did not match with what I had identified as key areas where I wished to develop in relation to my past skills and future career choices.”

“There’s a tangible undercurrent of neoliberalism operating in most of these sessions about seizing opportunities, networking and selling oneself – it’s gross. We aren’t social pariahs; give us some credit. We’re here to research, not tick boxes and impress important people.”

“The courses offered as part of ‘professional development’ in the Arts faculty have absolutely zero relevance to my research or my potential future professional fields. And, speaking to other postgrads, I have found this to be true across the board.”

More so than in the other faculties, Monash Arts graduate students tended to express that they were **opposed to having to attend the compulsory professional development units** set by the faculty. Although some did say that they were beneficial, notable comments expressing dissatisfaction, included:

“Many of the units were a complete waste of time – especially the compulsory ones. Like online ethics? Just awful.”

“The compulsory hours were completely useless talks by creative writers (I was in ... [a] completely different stream).”

Monash Arts graduate students also regularly complained about how **time-consuming** it was to complete professional development units and how it unnecessarily, in their opinions, **drew their focus away from their research**.

“The amount of hours necessary to complete may be too high, which means students attend development that is not very useful to them just to accumulate enough hours to fulfil that requirement.”

“The Monash Doctoral Program is 80% useless to me and VERY time consuming. 120 hours is absolutely ridiculous when I have research, teaching, writing and a social life to balance.”

“They are a total waste of time and detract from the quality of my research and the time I need to put into it.”

Furthermore, there were many individual references to **administrative issues**, such as problems with MyDevelopment, and complaints about **unit availability**.

“I had been told I had completed it. Now I just received an email telling me I had to do more. WTF. It was a waste of time when I did it, and now I’m 8 weeks from submission and they tell me I’m not done ... Soooo pissed off.”

“I actively engaged with [my] supervisor, faculty and the MGE, to try and identify a set of options and pursue professional development through other areas of Monash, through peer-learning activities and externally. None of these were accepted. As a result, I have attended only a very small number of hours of development – most of which were not satisfactory. This has caused me quite a lot of stress ... as I have invested quite a bit of energy to engage with the University in order to develop the right professional development program and have not received any satisfactory or helpful guidance.”

“It is hard to enrol this year as classes are constantly full or only offered on the same weekday every time.”

Despite the overwhelmingly negative response from Monash Arts graduate students, several **positive** references to the professional development units were also present. These included:

“It’s important for postgraduates to have skills other than just writing a thesis when they graduate and compulsory professional development units can help this happen.”

“The only units of value are the monthly sessions run in-faculty on thesis chapter writing and journal article writing. These are a great way to interact with peers and also improve the quality of the work.”

Included across the responses of the forty-six Monash Arts graduate students were a number of revealing and insightful suggestions on ways to improve the professional development component of higher education degrees at Monash University. The following table identifies some of the more popular ideas:

Suggested changes	Number of responses
Include or improve Recognition of Prior Learning process and external PD	12
Should be optional/voluntary/decided case-by-case	9
Bring back/introduce more ‘how to do the work’ library classes	2
Extend HDR course length to account for PD	2
Should be compulsory	2
Students and supervisors to construct PD portfolio	2
Audit existing units as an alternative	1
Greater focus on methodology	1
Greater focus on providing network opportunities	1

Several Monash Arts respondents advocated for **an improvement in the processes from which Recognition of Prior Learning is granted**. Graduate students argued that the procedure through which credit is given for prior experience should be more accessible and that it should also be easier to complete professional development units external to Monash University during their candidature. Interesting comments, included:

“I am undertaking a PhD in creative writing and would love the opportunity to meet with publishers and other people in the industry. If Monash is not able to provide these types of courses, I would be happy to attend external courses and have my attendance count towards the professional development component of my degree.”

“In my program there is a dearth of discipline-specific MGE-recognised PD activities available to candidates, who are forced to take irrelevant ‘core’ MGE PD activities instead. The previous system wherein PD activities/hours could be approved by supervisors for discipline-specific activities relevant to a candidate’s intended career path was greatly preferable [as it provided] the necessary flexibility.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the overwhelmingly negative response to professional development requirements of graduate students, many advocated for a **change from compulsory to optional**. Noteworthy comments, included:

“The professional development offered by MGE is really rubbish. I don’t think it should be considered as compulsory for a research degree. I just attended them for the sake of filling my hours.”

“I think that it just adds more pressure to the degree. People should be encouraged to [attend] them, not forced. That way, if people were always voluntarily going to a certain session, the Uni would know which sessions were worthwhile and which ones were not.”

“Making training hours mandatory is NOT helpful, because students inevitably wind up participating in classes and workshops that are utterly irrelevant to their research, which both wastes their time and also potentially stops other students who could have benefited from attending them.”

4.7 Summary

Compared to the other elements of the HDR course experiences explored in this survey, the negativity surrounding professional development stood out. When given the chance to comment on ‘the inclusion of compulsory professional development units in research degrees,’ within the 46 responses from Monash Arts graduate students were 43 individual negative reflections compared to only 14 positive reflections.

As with coursework, Monash Arts respondents seemed particularly frustrated by the lack of relevance of professional development units – be they faculty or MGE-run – as well as how their attendance did not represent a *good use of time*. This was reflected both in the quantitative (see 4.2 and 4.3) and qualitative data (see 4.6).

Furthermore, Monash Arts respondents were also frustrated by the administration of professional development. Several raised issues regarding inconsistencies and errors in the online management system, while others complained about units filling up too quickly. Clear guidance and communication have been found to be essential to PhD candidates completing on time, with their perceived absence shown to be fundamental in causing delays.¹⁸

Fewer than a quarter (23.5%) of Monash Arts graduate students thought that professional development units, as offered through *myDevelopment*, should be compulsory.

Monash Arts graduate students were not necessarily opposed to the concept of professional development; however, there was a general consensus that in its current form, it was unworkable, and that likely skewed results regarding whether it should be compulsory.

¹⁸ Rens van de Schoot et al., “What took them so long?” 8.

5. Progress delays and discontinuation

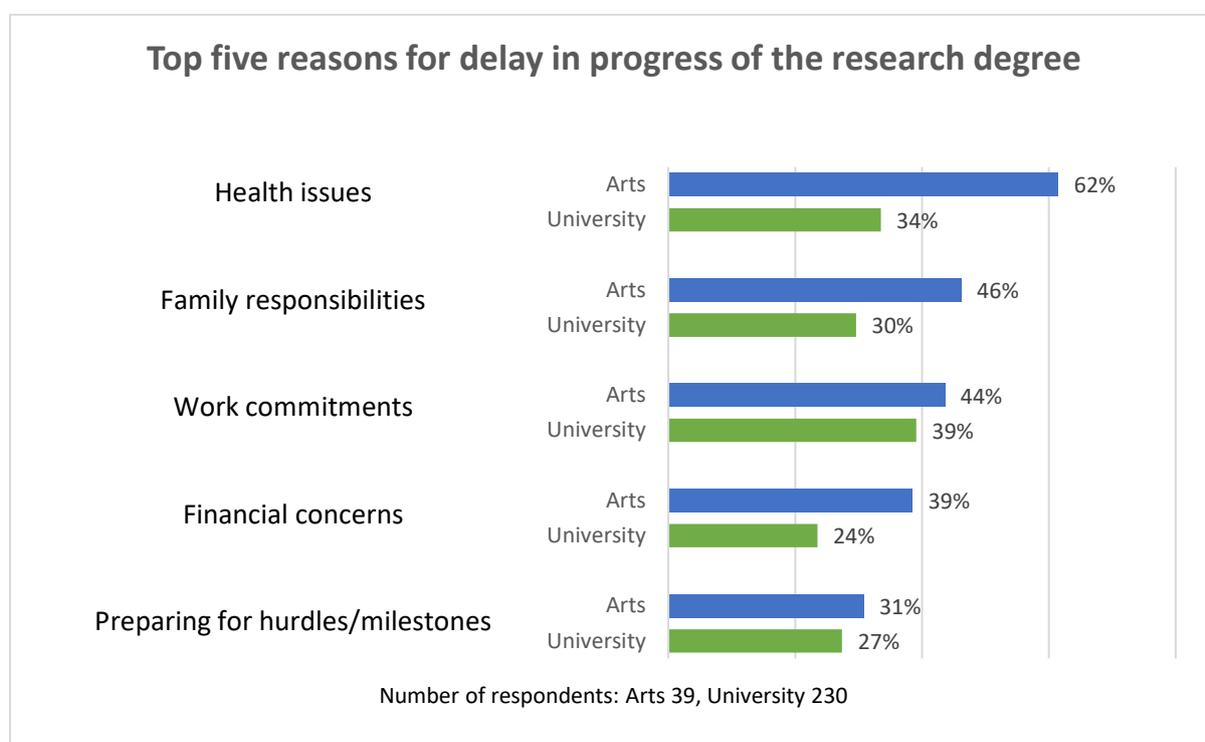
5.1 Has anything significantly delayed the progress of your research degree?

Has your research degree progress been delayed?	Arts	University
Yes	39 (38.2%)	231 (37.8%)
No	63 (61.8%)	380 (62.2%)

Monash Arts graduate students were just as likely to have experienced significant delay in the progress of their research as graduate students enrolled across all campuses.

5.2 Please select all relevant reasons regarding the delay in progress of your research degree.

Where respondents indicated that the progress of their research was significantly delayed the following reasons were identified:



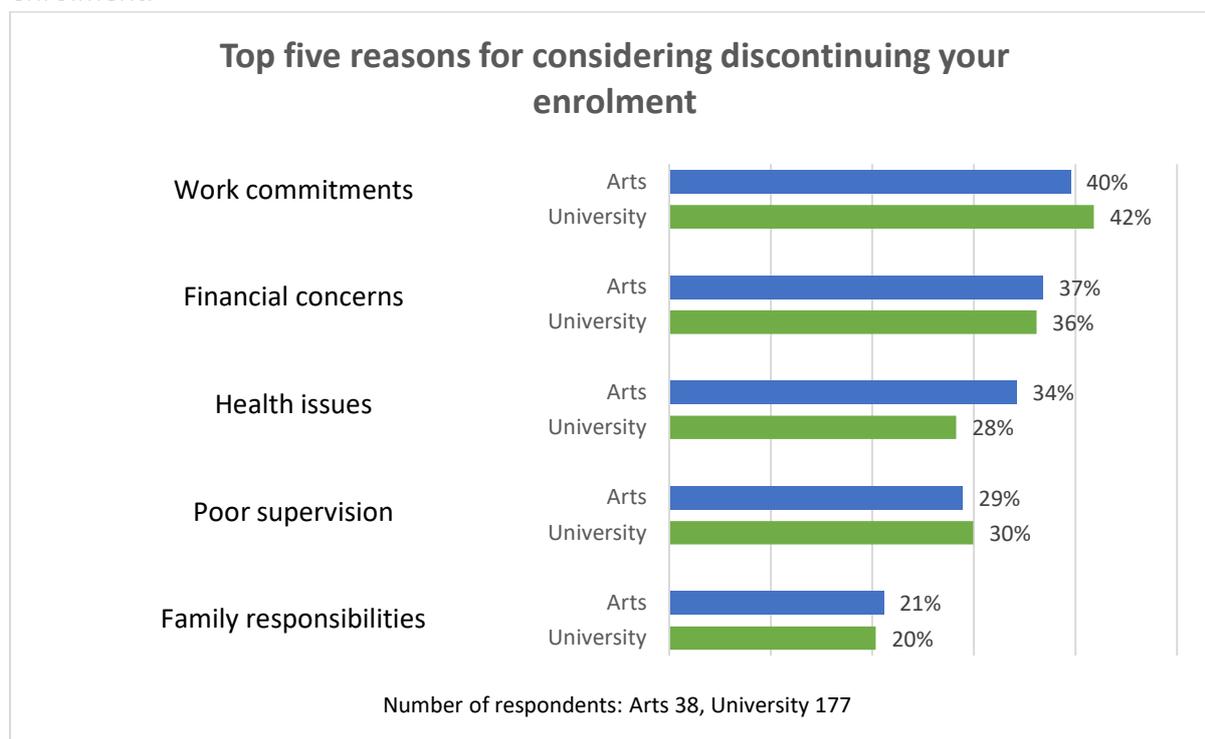
The primary reason for delay in the progress of Monash Arts research degrees were health issues.

5.3 Have you ever considered discontinuing your enrolment?

Have you considered discontinuing your enrolment?	Arts	University
Yes	38 (37.3%)	179 (29.3%)
No	64 (62.7%)	431 (70.7%)

Monash Arts graduate students were more likely to consider discontinuing their enrolment than students from the whole University.

5.4 Please select all relevant reasons regarding why you considered discontinuing your enrolment.



Work commitments were the most common reason Monash Arts respondents considered discontinuing their enrolment, followed closely by financial concerns.

5.5 What made you decide to continue with your degree?

Thirty-five graduate students from Monash Arts responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Personal characteristics – commitment/determination/passion/fear/stubbornness	12
Support from University staff/services	7
Career prospects	6
Scholarship and financial incentives	5
Support from peers, friends and family	5
Interest in research	4
Time, money and effort already invested	3
Changed to part-time	2
Personal development	2
Success/milestone in research	2
Changed supervisor	1
Convenience	1
Improved mental health	1
Still uncertain	1

Graduate students from Monash Arts outlined a range of factors and/or motivations for choosing to continue with their enrolment after considering discontinuation.

Personal characteristics were the most prevalent factor and/or motivation referenced by respondents. For Monash Arts graduate students, these included: passion, responsibility, determination, stubbornness, drive, ambition, dedication and desperation.

Seven graduate students credited **support** they had received **from their supervisors or from other members of Monash University staff** as playing a major role in their decision to continue in their course. Memorable comments, included:

“Firm support and flexibility from my supervisor strongly encouraged me to continue with my enrolment.”

“I have an excellent supervisor who fought for me and helped me navigate the hurdles.”

Alternatively, six Monash Arts graduate students credited their motivation to impact and advance their **career prospects** as being key to their motivation to continue. This was a relatively high number of people in comparison to other faculties.

“Ultimately, I realised that the PhD is a stepping-stone, not a destination. The project and the competencies it affords me, including those related to managing difficult supervisors, will make me a more resilient and competent researcher.”

“I was offered a fantastic and unexpected professional opportunity [that] perfectly aligned with my long-term goal after a year of enrolment ... I discontinued for a period of five months ... [but] this confirmed my very strong desire to pursue the PhD.”

Financial incentives, such as scholarships, were also credited by five graduate students as being a factor in their decision to continue. Revealing comments, included:

“My scholarship was my only source of income, and if I quit the program it would be cut permanently.”

“Scholarship payment is better than no payment.”

Also receiving five references from Monash Arts graduate students was the **support of peers, friends and family**.

“I thought I would have to give up my scholarship if I wanted to go part-time. However, I found out through a friend that it was possible to study part-time and retain the scholarship if you have had a baby.”

“My family ... encouraged me to keep going.”

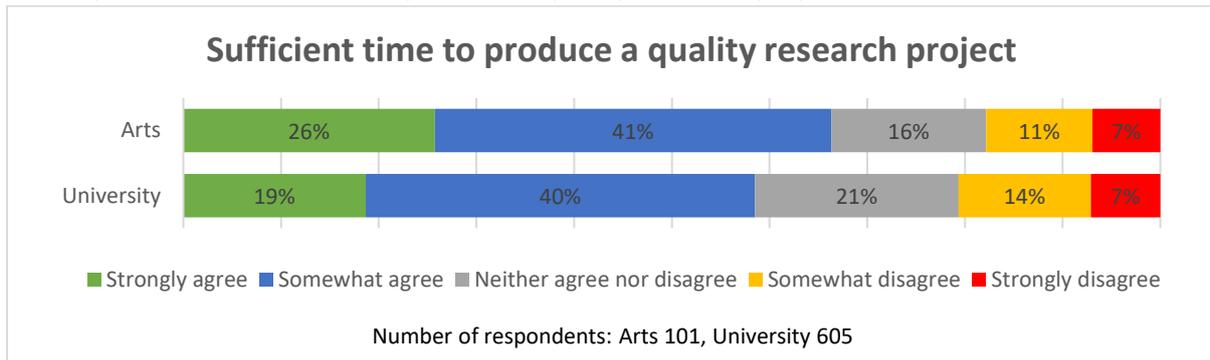
Other notable comments from Monash Arts graduate students regarding their reasons for continuing with their course, included:

“The support of my supervisor and my own personal determination to complete. This was reinforced by excellent conference experiences overseas, where my research was valued far more than it is in Australia – or at Monash.”

“My obsession with my topic and writing is my strong point in life.”

“I went part time to manage the financial stress.”

5.6 The amount of time I have to complete my research, after preparing for and completing compulsory milestones/discipline-based coursework units/professional development, will allow me to produce a quality research project.



Two in every three Monash Arts respondents agreed that they had sufficient time to produce a quality research project.

5.7 What are the three most important things the University could do for you to help you complete on time?

Seventy-four students from Monash Arts responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Administration – guidelines/information/communication/ availability	24
Funding – scholarship/other financial aid	22
Professional development – changing or removing	16
Offices and workspaces	14
Research environment – networking/mentoring/support groups	14
Supervision	13
Milestones – changing or removing	12
Wellbeing – encouragement/motivation/trust/care	9
Access to training/support services	8
Extending length of degree/candidature	7
Improving online/cross-campus service delivery	7
Reducing bureaucratic requirements	7
Access to research material/resources	6
Compulsory coursework – changing or removing	6
Career and work opportunities	4
Facilities/labs/equipment/software	4
Family-friendly initiatives/support	3
Staff	3
Time/time management	3
Ethics approvals	2

When considering graduate student responses to this question, it is important to emphasise that comments assigned to each theme are not necessarily negative (although the majority of comments are indeed highlighting perceived flaws, failures or areas for improvement); however, disregarding whether they can be considered positive, neutral or negative reflections, the comments do provide direct insight into what Monash University graduate students think the primary role/s of the University should be in helping them complete their degrees on time.

Monash Arts graduate students provided a wide range of suggestions regarding what they thought were the most crucial things that the University could do to help with the timely completion of their degrees.

The most frequent aspect highlighted by Monash Arts graduate students was **university administration**. These comments predominantly related to the following suggestions: provide clear requirements/instructions in relation to milestones, supervisor/student relationship, coursework and professional development; consistency in relation to coursework/professional development requirements; improve communication e.g. send reminders, accessible websites; and improve records management.

Another area that was referred to frequently in the comments of Monash Arts graduate students was **funding**. Insightful comments included:

“Extension [including scholarship] up to four years ... since they instituted compulsory coursework.”

“Small grants for study materials (even for basic things such as books).”

“Divert some of the exorbitant sums of money being paid to senior management and [that is] thrown at public work ‘upgrades’ that are then demolished within years [and] reinvest these funds in the educational aspect of the university. Hire more staff, reduce class sizes, provide a better educational experience at all levels. Go back to being an institution that’s focused on learning, not enrolment volume.”

The prevailing theme in both *Section 3: Coursework* and *Section 4: Professional Development* was that Monash Arts graduate students tended to have issues with the administration, requirements and purpose of these components of their degrees. This sentiment was again reflected in graduate student responses to this question. Comments reflective of the wider sentiment, included:

*“Sort out their f***ing compulsory units and stop changing it [and] once done, don’t ask us to do another.”*

“Remove coursework from my program – BIGGEST WASTE OF TIME!”

“Relieve me of pressure to complete unnecessary professional development modules.”

“Organise professional training that are relevant to research (e.g. interview skills, survey skills, data analytics).”

“Get rid of the professional development hours or significantly adjust the criteria by placing trust and responsibility in the hands of students and their supervisors to select appropriate tasks to count towards these hours.”

Providing better office and work spaces was something that several Monash Arts students determined would be helpful in their pursuit to complete their degree on time. Some were grateful for the spaces they had, while others thought that there should be more available and that systems governing their use should be better administered.

Several graduate students emphasised that improving the Monash **research community and network** would serve their pursuit of their academic and professional goals. Comments to this effect related to the following areas: more opportunities to get feedback from faculty/department staff and colleagues; support groups; and, an inclusive social environment.

Other notable areas frequently discussed in the comments of Monash Arts students, included:

- **Supervision** – while references to supervision from graduate students in Monash Arts were marginally lower than in other faculties, the issue still received several mentions. These comments were mixed and related to several aspects of the supervision experience, including frequency of meetings, overall guidance, workload and expectations.
- **Milestones** – responses were mixed. Some wanted more milestones – others wanted less. See *Section 2: Milestones* for a more-detailed analysis of graduate student opinions concerning milestones.
- **Wellbeing** – several graduate students placed emphasis on supporting student mental health and ensuring students felt supported, encouraged and motivated to complete.

Other comments related to things identified as most crucial to graduate student course completion, included:

“Offer more assistance for students who have children to care for.”

“While administration and regulation are, of course, necessary and important, the current system means admin is by far the most time-consuming part of my degree and makes me feel that I will have finished my PhD in spite of MGE and the regulations, coursework and milestones, not because of the support they provide.”

“I’d like to have events, courses, help sessions etc. that ... consider part-timers who have work commitments and can’t always be available [at] midday for 2 hours.”

5.8 Opportunity for comments regarding your general progress.

Twenty-three students from Monash Arts responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 17

Positive comments: 9

General theme	Number of responses
Good supervision	4
Slow progress	4
Health	3
Financial issues	2
Good stuff	2
Office and workspace	2
Research environment	2
Access to resources	1
Administration	1
Career development and advice	1
Coursework	1
International student issues	1
Professional development	1

The overwhelming majority of graduate student comments to this statement contained **negative** reflections. Comments that were particularly negative, included:

“Doing my PhD at Monash has not been a positive experience, which has surprised me as I expected really good things. I feel there is a disparity with the public image and the reality of Monash’s PhD program and would advise others to go elsewhere.”

“I have strongly discouraged a number of people from enrolling in a PhD, not just at Monash, but in general. This process has been so exhausting and soul-crushing, it has left me so broken that I cannot, in good conscience, recommend it to anyone. While individual members of my faculty and the administration staff ... have all been helpful and kind, institutionally I feel that Monash is extremely hostile to anyone who encounters difficulty during their

candidature ... As a whole, Monash is not the same institution that I began my undergraduate studies at many year ago, and I wished I had pursued my PhD research at another institution.”

“When I finish this PhD, it will be because I’m strong as hell, not because I was supported or helped by the University and its new postgrad structures.”

However, some Monash Arts students shared **positive** reflections on their course progression at Monash University. Noteworthy comments, included:

“Despite the various challenges that I have been facing so far – both personal and uni-related – I have achieved very good results and I still feel blessed to have the opportunity to be part of the PhD project here at Monash.”

“My own progress is fine. I have a wonderful supervisor and the academic staff ... have been excellent.”

Other **notable comments**, included:

“A lot of energy going into individual publications at the expense of the overall thesis. This is over-emphasised, in my opinion.”

“I think that 3.5 years is already a limited amount of time to achieve my goals, and having to engage in compulsory sessions that may not be of direct relevance is frustrating. It also means [that] I am less likely to attend potentially more relevant activities, such as faculty conferences, on the basis that I am already under a heavy workload and will not receive credit.”

“The office space provided is much, much appreciated. I think other Uni’s don’t provide this, but it would be better to have an individual ‘private’ space or room, as there are times that sharing a big office space ... can be difficult in terms of adjusting to each person’s cultural sensitivities and personality quirks.”

5.9 Summary

More than one-third of Monash Arts respondents (38.2%) had experienced a delay in their research degree, while a similar number (37.3%) had considered discontinuing their enrolment.

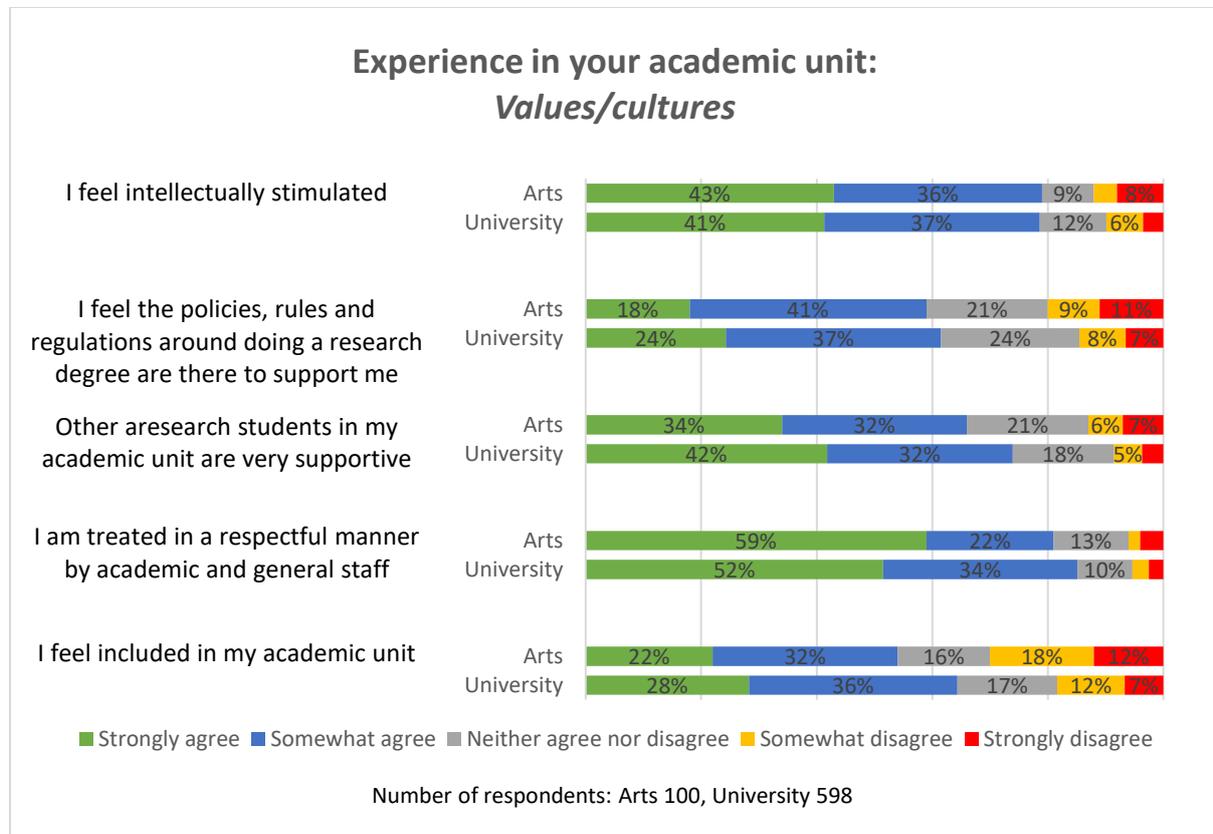
Though it was not directly tracked in this survey, it is interesting to note that there is evidence of a correlation between choosing one’s own supervisor and good and timely progress.¹⁹ Presumably this is because prospective students have taken time to consider who is best placed to support their research, in terms of availability, subject knowledge, personality and so on. The data explored in *1. Supervision* supports the premise that those who had good working relationships with their supervisors were more satisfied and less likely to experience delays and think about discontinuing their degrees.

¹⁹ Glenice Ives and Glenn Rowley, “Supervisor selection or allocation and continuity of supervision,” 535.

The feedback in 4. *Professional Development* revealed that there was widespread dissatisfaction with the attachment of compulsory requirements to this offering, and this was supported in this section with *changing or removing professional development* being the third most popular suggestion (behind *administration* and *funding*) on the list of *the most important things the University could do for you to help you complete on time*.

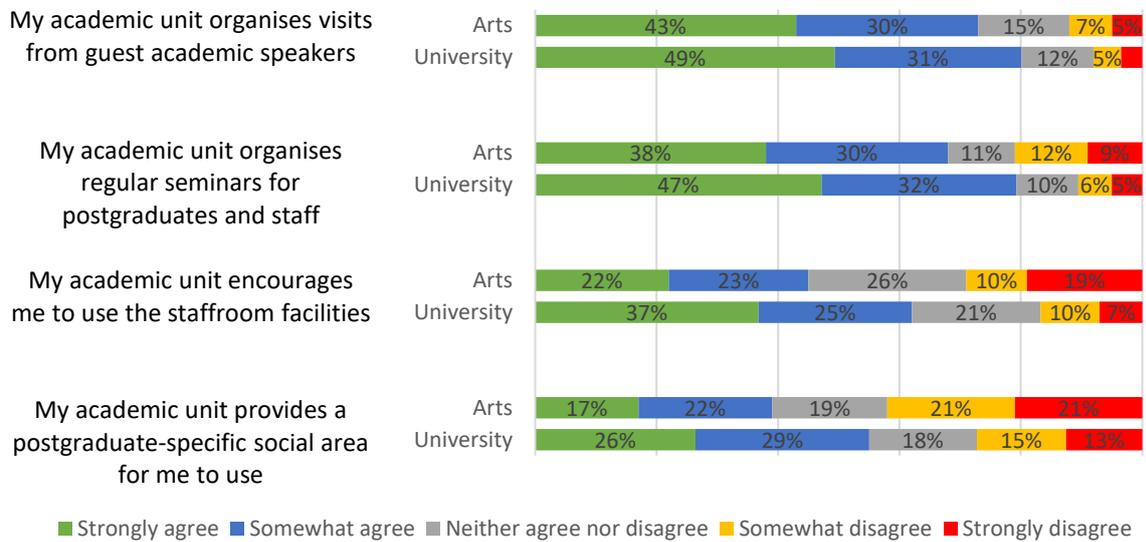
6. School culture and facilities

6.1 Please rate the following statements in relation to your specific experience in your academic unit:



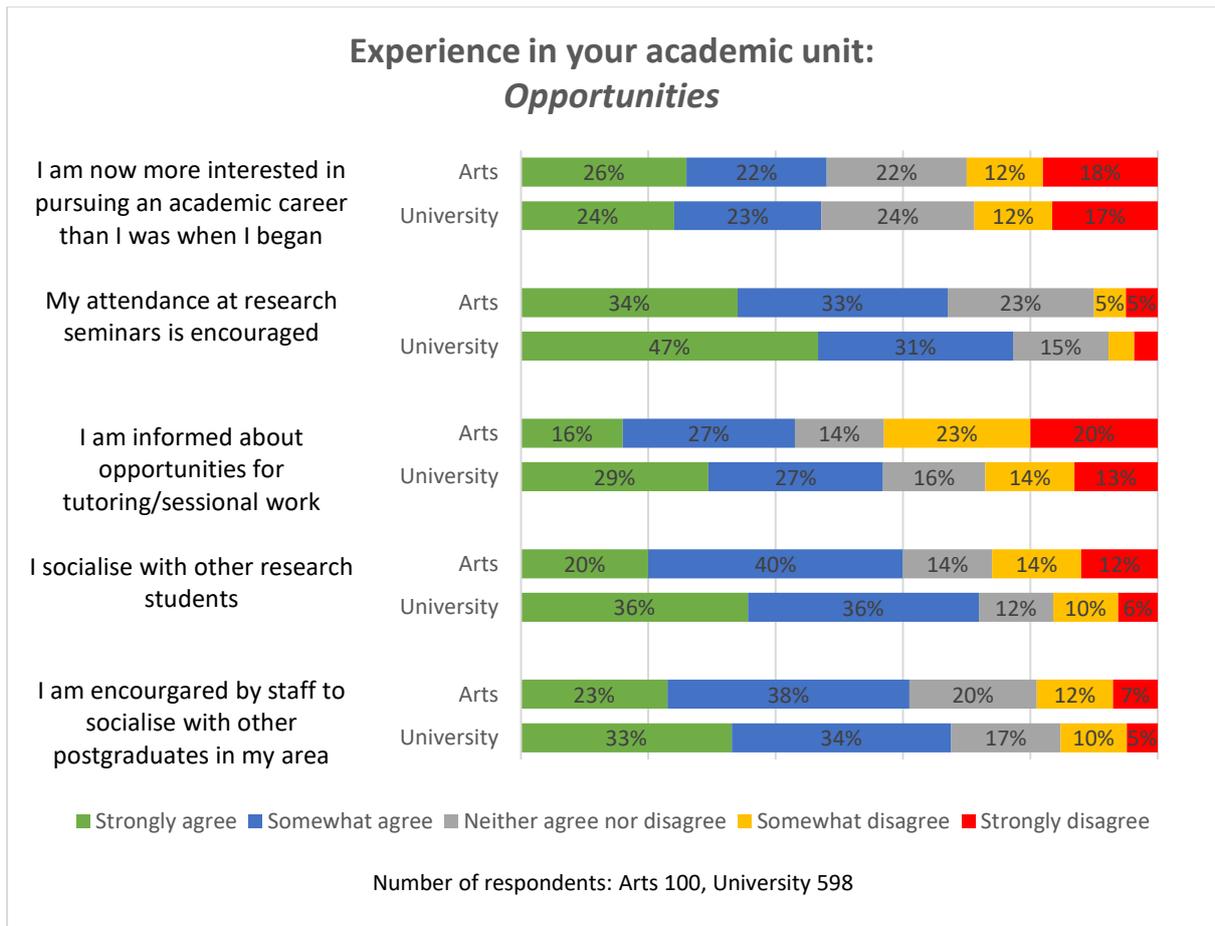
Monash Arts graduate students predominantly felt treated in a respectful manner by academic and general staff; however, only 54% expressed they felt included in their academic unit.

Experience in your academic unit: *Facilities/resources*



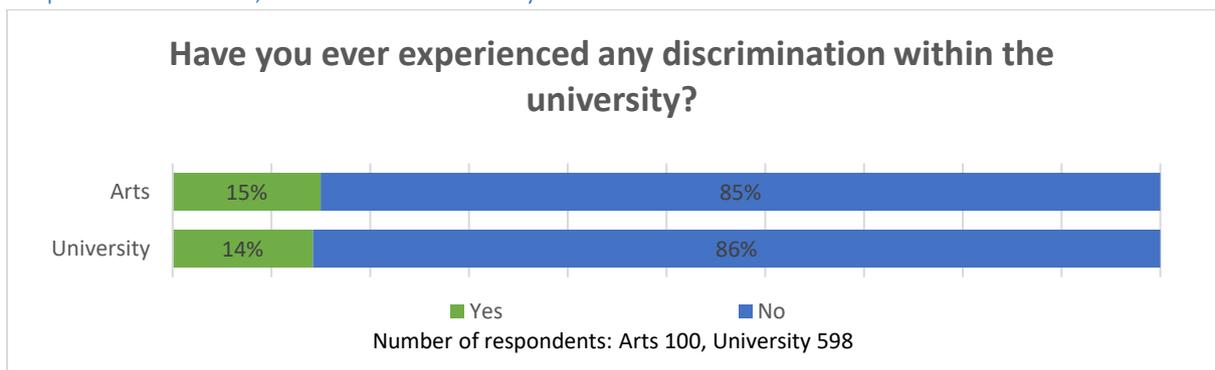
Number of respondents: Arts 100, University 598

Monash Arts graduate students, while still quite positive overall, tended to agree less with positive statements in regards to the facilities and resources provided to them than their University counterparts. This is also evident in their overall satisfaction (see 6.5).



Monash Arts graduate students tended to socialise less with their peers than respondents from other faculties. Meanwhile, they were relatively frustrated with the limited amount of information they received regarding tutoring and sessional work opportunities.

6.2 Have you ever experienced any discrimination due to gender, race, religion, family responsibilities etc., within the University?



Fifteen percent (15%) of Monash Arts respondents had experienced discrimination within the University.

6.3 Opportunity for comments regarding the way in which you are treated.

Twenty-seven graduate students from Monash Arts responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 21 Positive comments: 7

General theme	Number of responses
Research and workplace environment	9
Discrimination – gender	6
Discrimination – culture/religion/nationality	3
Discrimination – families	2
Bad supervisors	1
Discrimination – disability	1
Good supervisors	1
Off-campus issues	1

Responses from Monash Arts graduate students to this statement were predominantly negative. One issue of particular relevance was a perceived poor **research and workplace environment**. Revealing comments, included:

“My academic unit is so diverse and PhD students are housed in several different offices across multiple buildings, so socialising and meeting new intakes is hard. It would be great if we were brought together in one place.”

“Socialisation is an issue in our unit, as the unit does not in itself host regular events for HDRs to get to know one another and so this falls to the postgrads themselves, who a) are very busy but b) don't have the same access to resources as staff do, meaning things like booking rooms are much harder/more time consuming than if events are organised by staff and c) don't know all the other people to invite.”

An alarming six responses from Monash Arts graduate students referenced **gender discrimination**. Insightful comments, included:

“I was very disappointed that Monash does not include a gender-neutral option on any of the official forms I have been required to fill in for my degree – especially enrolment documents. There should be a ‘transgender’ and ‘I prefer to specify myself’ and a ‘I prefer not to specify’ section, as this survey provides. Either that or eradicate the need to ask for people’s sex or gender on these forms. Most official forms, including enrolment documents at Monash also require you to select a title and there is no gender-neutral option. It is now common practice to offer ‘Mx’ as an option on forms like this.”

“Female HDRs are not offered the same opportunities (e.g. co-authorship, lecturing, conference support, office space etc.) as male students.”

Other **notable comments**, included:

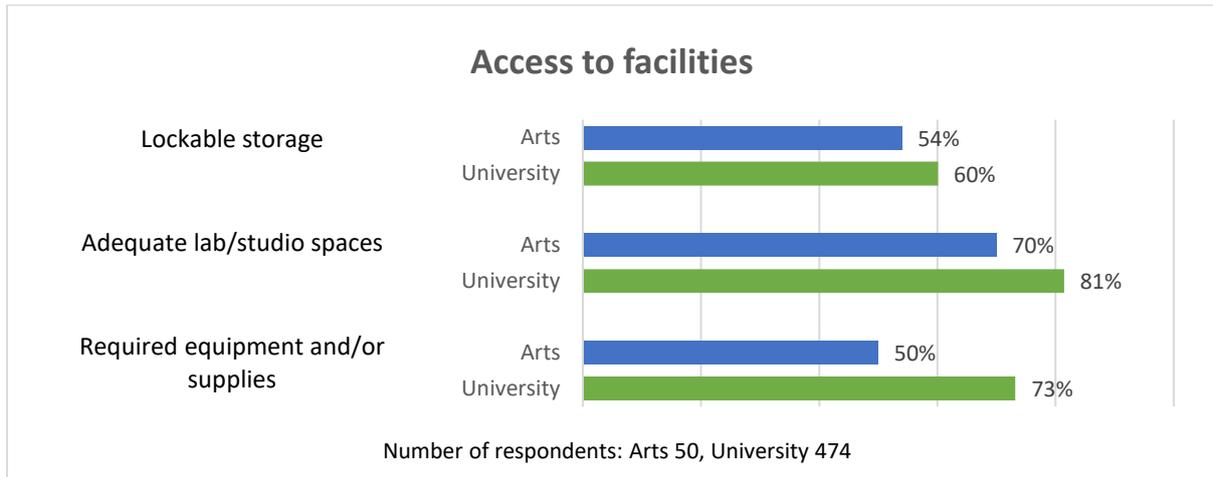
“I think there is a kind of silent discrimination towards Christianity.”

“When I told my supervisor that I was pregnant, one of them informed me that I wouldn’t be able to undertake a PhD with a baby as, in his opinion, it would be too onerous. He advised me that I might want to think about dropping the PhD.”

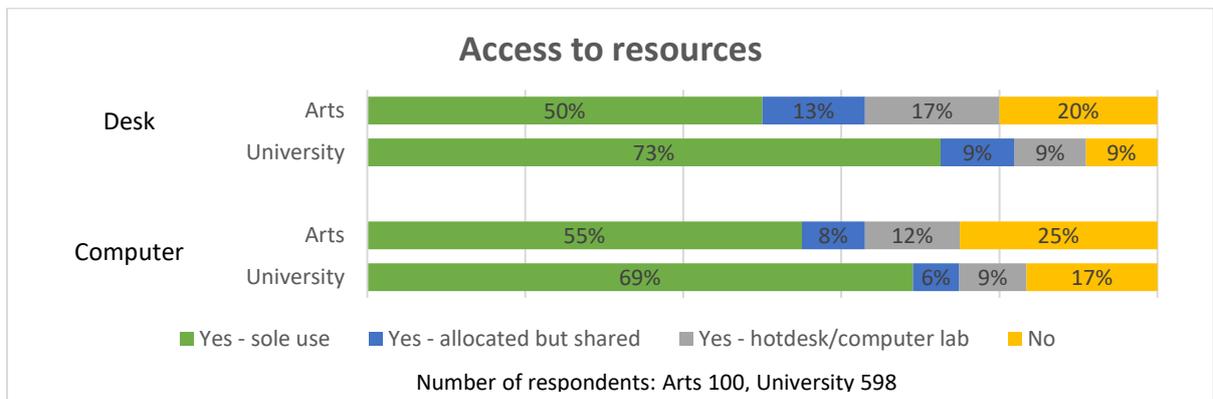
“Everyone – staff, professors and students, are extremely friendly and welcoming.”

“Monash is an incredibly supportive and inclusive university.”

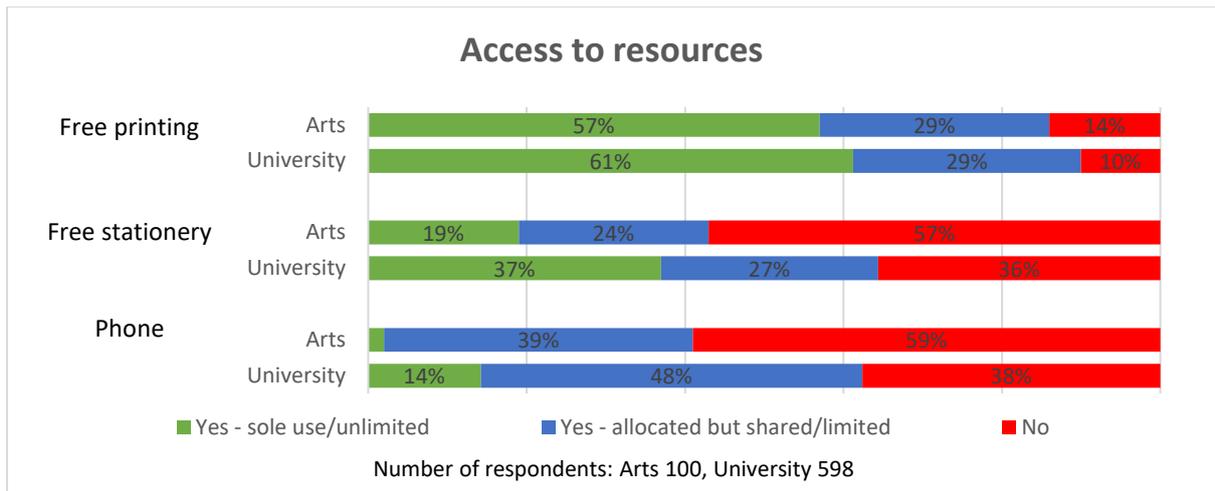
6.4 Does your academic unit provide any of the following facilities? Please select as many as relevant.



Monash Arts respondents indicated that they were less likely than their University counterparts to have access to lockable storage, adequate lab/studio spaces and required equipment and/or supplies.

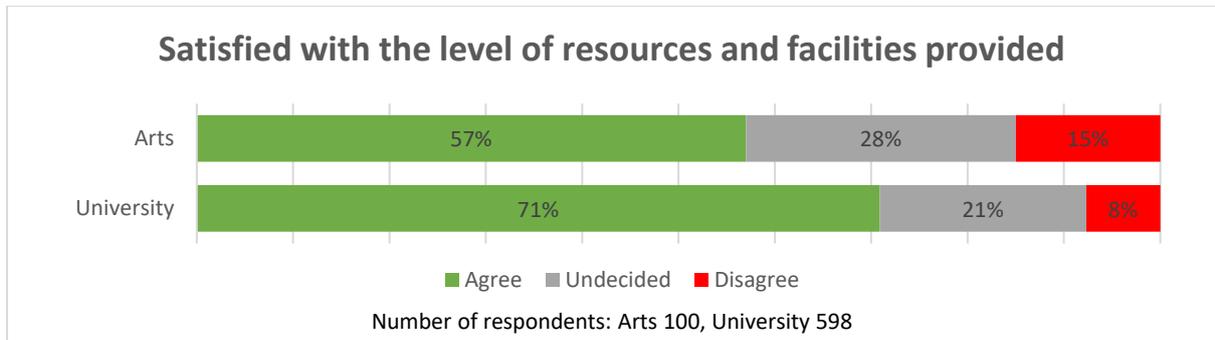


One in every five Monash Arts respondents did not have access to a desk, while one in every four did not have access to a computer.



The majority of Monash Arts graduate students did not have access to free stationery or a phone.

6.5 Overall, I am satisfied with the level of resources and facilities provided to me.



Monash Arts respondents were less likely than their University counterparts to be satisfied with the level of resources and facilities provided.

6.6 Opportunity for comment regarding the adequacy of the facilities you receive. What additional facilities would help support you through to completion?

Forty graduate students from Monash Arts responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 16 Positive comments: 7

General theme	Number of responses
Computers/laptops/monitors	8
Orientation – What resources are available to me?	7
Personal desk	7
Private office/studio	7
Faculty-specific HDR office	6
Social spaces	4
Unique requests	4
Chairs	3
Stationery	3
Work at home	3
Phone	2
Printer	2
Coffee and tea	1
Construction issues	1
Maintenance	1
Workshop/lab/studio	1

Sixteen graduate students from Monash Arts reflected positively on the adequacy of the facilities they receive at Monash University, compared to seven graduate students who reflected negatively.

Regarding facilities that would help support Monash Arts graduate students complete their degrees, there was a range of suggestions made. The primary suggestion involved improving **computer/laptop/monitor** access.

“Extremely disappointed with the facilities available – expected use of a dedicated desk (computer, phone etc.) in a lockable office (even if shared with a limited number of others), with access to [a] proper printer and stationary etc.”

“My faculty provided a desktop for my research work ... However, as a social science researcher, I am not working in a direct lab environment ... So, a computer that is personally moveable (like a laptop) might work better than a desktop, so that it can be used for home academic work as well.”

Unique requests of Monash graduate students, included: meeting rooms; split keyboard/vertical mouse; the formation of a central university body responsible for advising students on administration requirements; and, an introductory course for international students explaining how research works here in Australia.

Other notable comments, included:

“A dedicated social area ... would be great ... to encourage socialisation so that we have emotional support from each other through the tough times.”

“Quite study room. All of the postgraduate rooms are in shared spaces and quiet individual spaces available on request would help when work that requires concentration needs to be done.”

“It would be good to have some relaxed space to go with more cushions, sofas etc. Sometimes you want to read a book but not at your desk.”

“Many students have desks allocated but they sit empty a lot of the time.”

6.7 Summary

Arguably the most direct insight into Monash Arts graduate students' sense of belonging is provided through the responses to the statement *'I feel included in my academic unit.'* **Monash Arts graduate students were less likely than their University counterparts to express that they were positive about their sense of inclusion in their academic units.**

The absence of a sense of belonging in the research/faculty/scholarly community has been identified as a key cause of stress in postgraduate studies,²⁰ with PhD students who find themselves well-integrated in their research environments experiencing less stress and burnout.²¹ This was reflected in the MGA HDR survey with those agreeing with the statement *'I feel included in my academic unit'* being less likely to associate an uncomfortable level of stress with all of the stress-related statements in 7. *Stress*.

While 81% of respondents agreed that they were treated *'in a respectful manner by academic and general staff,'* when given the chance to comment on the way in which they were treated, the majority (21) of the comments were negative. The most frequent negative comments were in reference to the research and workplace environment with several respondents reflecting that socialising in this environment was difficult.

Monash Arts graduate students were less likely than their University counterparts to have access to a desk or computer. Limiting access to these facilities increases the likelihood that students will not study at the Faculty and, as such, can have a detrimental effect on a student's sense of belonging and ability to develop valuable relationships with peers and staff.

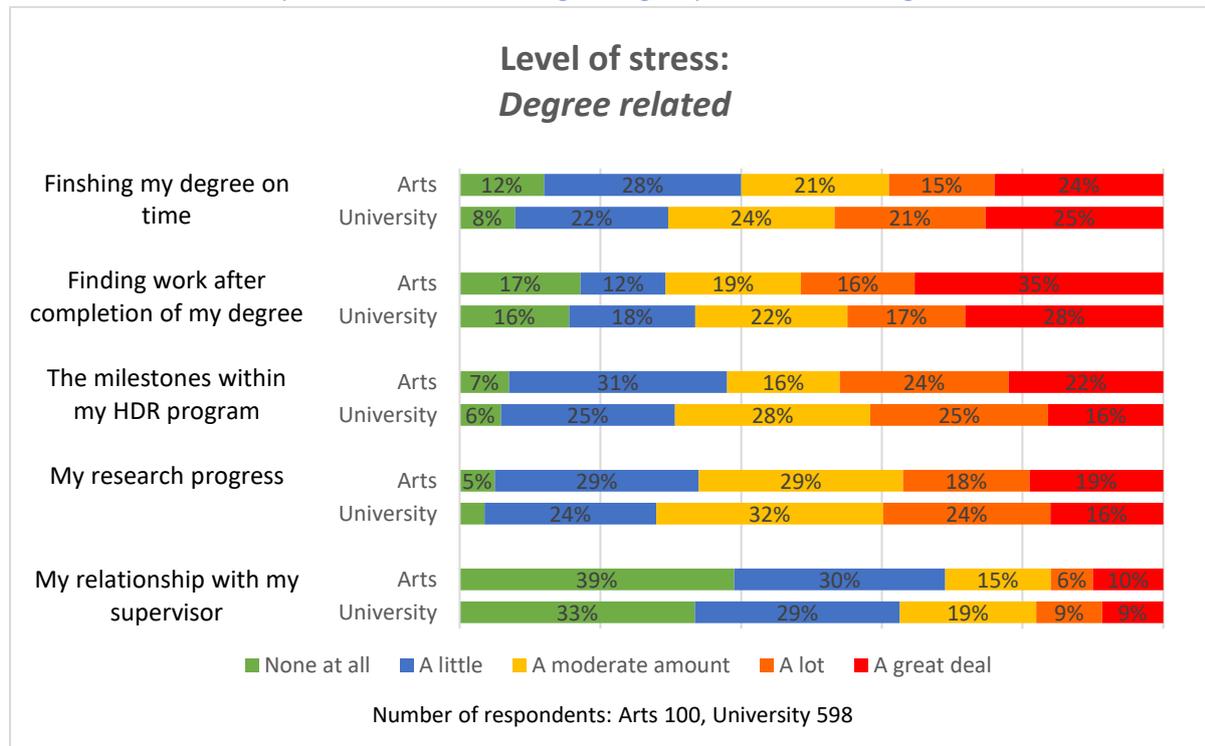
The results of this survey indicate a link between the absence of a sense of belonging and academic and social isolation. **These results emphasise the importance of encouraging graduate students to socialise and develop professional relationships with their peers.**

²⁰ Jon Cornwall, Elizabeth C. Mayland, Jacques van der Meer, Rachel A. Spronken-Smith, Charles Tustin and Phil Blyth, “Stressors in early-stage doctoral students,” *Studies in Continuing Education* 41, no. 3 (2019): 367.

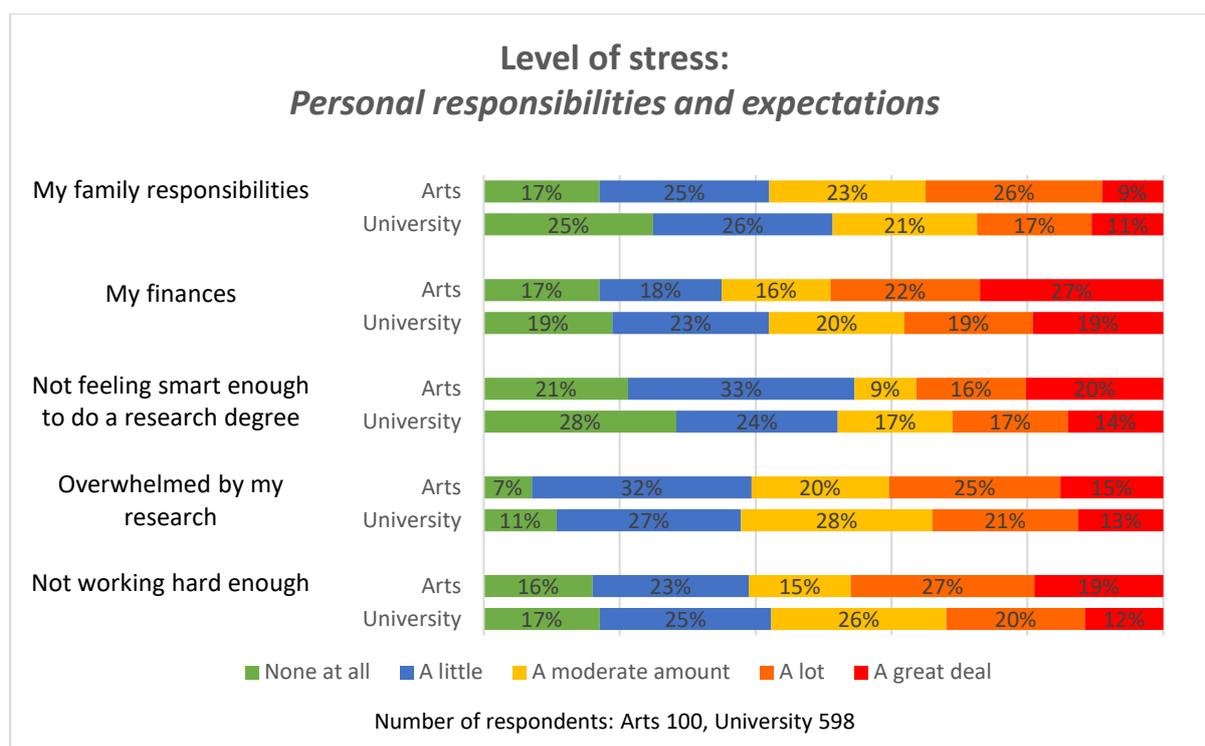
²¹ Kim Jesper Herrmann and Gitte Wichmann-Hansen, “Validation of the quality in PhD processes questionnaire,” *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education* 8, no. 2 (2017): 192.

7. Stress and wellbeing

7.1 Please select your level of stress regarding any of the following:



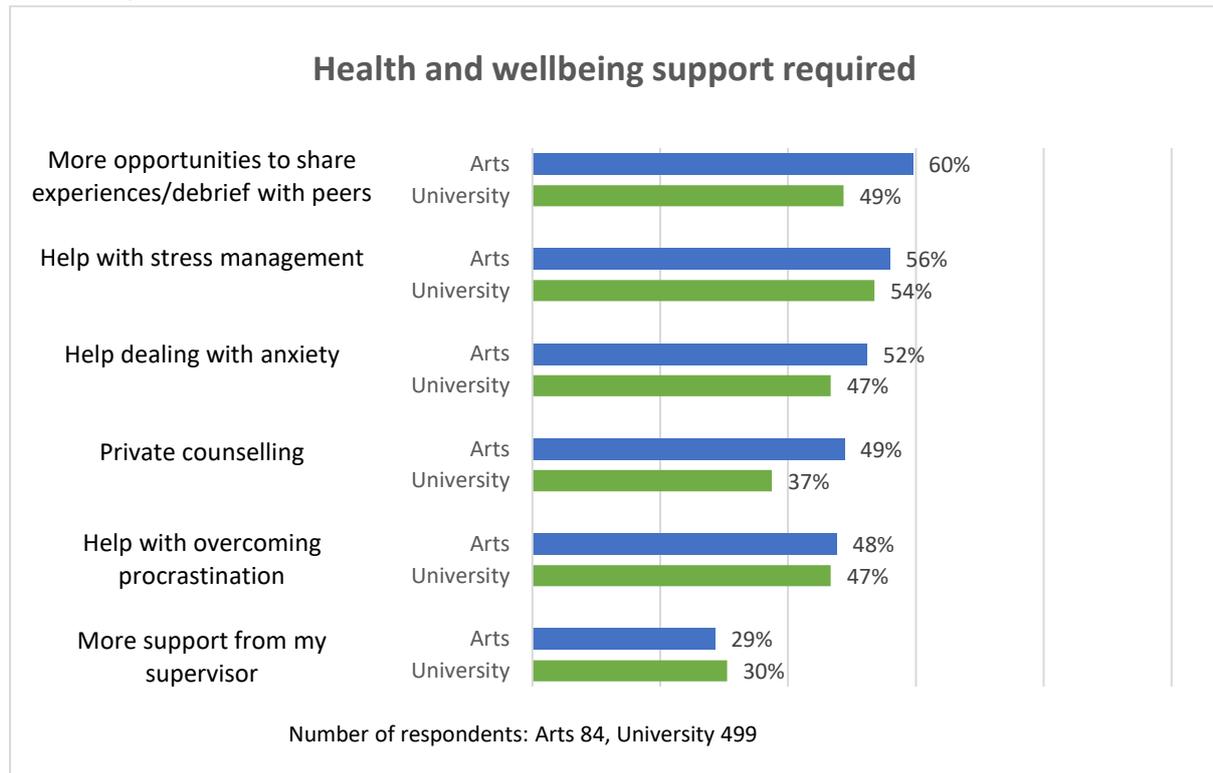
Finding work after competing their degree was uncomfortably stressful for the majority of Monash Arts graduate students, while only 16% experienced an uncomfortable level of stress because of their relationship with their supervisor.



In regards to their personal responsibilities and expectations, Monash Arts graduate students were most stressed about their finances, while they were least stressed about their family responsibilities.

The biggest discrepancy between Monash Arts and University respondents overall was in the response to the statement *'not working hard enough.'* Forty-six percent (46%) of Monash Arts graduate students associated an uncomfortable amount of stress with this statement compared to 32% of all respondents.

7.2 What kind of health and wellbeing support would you like to receive from the University?



Overall, graduate students of Monash Arts nominated *'more opportunities to share experiences/debrief with peers'* and *'help with stress management'* as the top two ways the University could help to support their wellbeing.

7.3 Opportunity for comments regarding health and wellbeing.

Twenty-two graduate students from Monash Arts responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments (inadequate support): 15

Positive comments (adequate support): 3

General theme	Number of responses
Stress/anxiety/depression/isolation	10
Career anxieties	3
Physical health issues	3
Financial pressures	1
Overwhelmed and overworked	1

The majority of Monash Arts graduate students felt that the current services offered by the University in relation to health and wellbeing were **inadequate**; however, opinions ranged on the extent of this inadequacy. Insightful comments, included:

“Counselling is offered, but the one time I accessed counselling [it] was really unhelpful. The counsellor was judgmental, had an aggressive conversational style, and turned nasty when I declined her offer of a follow-up visit. The encounter actually created more stress. I did consider lodging a formal complaint about this, but was too upset. Poor quality counselling is worse than none.”

“In terms of the university support, I often feel they do not understand the PhD process and therefore struggle to understand the situation and provide relevant advice.”

An alarming number of Monash Arts graduate students referenced **stress, anxiety, depression or isolation** in their responses. Noteworthy comments, included:

“Knowing the stereotype of the perpetually stress/exhausted/anxious grad student is very different from living it.”

“This can be a very overwhelming process, which at times feels like it has no end with no progress being made. It’s hard. It does affect your mental health because it [is] never far from your mind.”

“I feel like my anxiety levels are moderate, but manageable at this stage of my candidature, but my anticipation is that they will grow and change over the next couple of years. At that point, being able to seek assistance (at my own campus) will be beneficial.”

While the majority of Monash Arts respondents believed services were inadequate, a small number did believe that health and wellbeing services offered at Monash were **adequate**.

“I am currently using the counselling service provided at Monash and it works well. I am grateful for this opportunity.”

Other notable comments to emerge, included:

“My department only hires from top American and UK universities. This indicates that the Monash PhD is not good enough for employment at Monash. If I can find work in my field after completion of my degree, I am sure it will not be in my department at Monash.”

“The OSHC does not cover physiotherapy, however, nowadays excessive work in desk-based jobs [creates] a considerable [amount] of back pain ... Therefore, if Monash considers this support to students suffering back pain, [it] may help them to reduce the stress of financial concerns regarding back pain.”

Included across the responses of the Monash Arts graduate students were a number of suggestions on health and wellbeing services that they would like to see introduced or improved. Interesting comments in relation to **suggestions for services**, included:

“I would particularly love more opportunities to meet with fellow postgraduates. I have been at Monash for a year and a half and I’ve only met two other postgraduate students.”

“I would have been more productive in a supportive environment which encouraged me without the addition of stress and pressure.”

“It would be good to have a mentor who isn’t my supervisor, who I can go to.”

7.4 Summary

In relation to their degrees, Monash Arts respondents were most-stressed about finding work after the completion of their degree and least-stressed about their relationship with their supervisor, while in relation to their personal responsibilities and expectations, they were most-stressed about their finances and least-stressed about their family responsibilities.

‘More opportunities to share experiences/debrief with peers’ was identified as the support that Monash Arts respondents most wanted to receive from the University, followed closely by ‘help with stress management.’ This was reflected in the open comments with stress/anxiety/depression/isolation being consistently brought up and again when several respondents suggested more peer-support groups and mindfulness and wellbeing services should be available.

While there was some infrequent support for existing University services related to stress and wellbeing, graduate students were substantially more likely to comment on how inadequate existing services were.

Doctoral candidate attrition has been linked to feelings of social isolation that can stem from confusion about program expectations and a lack of meaningful communication with peers and faculty/university staff.²² Peers (such as fellow graduate students or postdoctoral researchers) can

²² Dharmananda Jairam and David H. Kahl, Jr., “Navigating the doctoral experience,” 312.

be crucial as, for example, they can be a source of emotional, social and intellectual support which can replace or complement supervisory guidance.²³

PhD candidates isolating themselves is one of the most important factors in determining delay.²⁴ Peer interaction has been found to be related to persistence (with HDR degrees), insofar as degree completers are more likely to be involved with their academic peers than those who drop out.²⁵ Peer support initiatives are also useful in creating a positive research community and facilitating a sense of belonging,²⁶ so increasing the opportunities for graduate students to socialise with each other should also result in a greater rate of retention. As such, the results of the MGA HDR survey suggest that **Monash Arts graduate students could certainly benefit from an increase in social support and wellbeing services.**

²³ Lilia Mantai and Robyn Dowling, "Supporting the PhD journey: insights from acknowledgements," *International Journal for Research Development* 6, no. 2 (2015): 106-07.

²⁴ Rens van de Schoot et al., "What took them so long?" 3.

²⁵ Carolyn Richert Bair and Jennifer Grant Haworth, "Doctoral student attrition and persistence," 491.

²⁶ Jon Cornwall et al, "Stressors in early-stage doctoral students," 367.

8. Overall comments

8.1 What are the best aspects of being a Monash research postgraduate?

Seventy-four graduate students from Monash Arts responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Facilities/services/resources	27
Supervisors	23
Monash academics/faculties/staff	15
Student peers and colleagues	15
Research – intellectual stimulation and development	14
Financial support/funding	12
Monash reputation	12
Supportive environment and culture	11
Career opportunities	4
Networking opportunities	2
Location	1
Social events/environment	1
Training/coursework/professional development	1

Many Monash Arts graduate students were particularly pleased with the **facilities, services and/or resources** provided to them as students of the University. Relative comments covered a range of areas, including: access, infrastructure, library facilities/collections, campus facilities, free printing, private study spaces, library support and on-campus experience.

Supervisors were more likely to be rated as one of the best aspects of their courses by Monash Arts graduate students than in most other faculties. Noteworthy comments, included:

“Outstanding supervisors. Frankly, they’re absolute rock stars.”

“My supervisor – international expert in her field ... and very smart and supportive.”

“The quality of supervisors.”

Also receiving several references were **Monash academics, staff and faculties**. Praise was directed at academic staff, specific faculties and schools, library staff, IT services and administrative staff.

Interesting comments, included:

“Amazing services such as ESolutions.”

“I have been greatly supported by the administrative staff in the Faculty of Arts.”

“Lots of supportive staff in general.”

Likewise, support, engagement and friendship with **student peers and colleagues** were credited by several graduate students as being a highlight of their degrees. Noteworthy comments, included:

“Meeting with other fabulous postgraduates.”

“The support of my peers has been extremely valuable.”

Other notable comments, included:

“The whole experience of studying for a PhD is a privilege – an amazing opportunity.”

“The experience of working with the best in the field and belonging to a top-100 international university.”

“Being on a scholarship that enables me to pursue research of my choice with fairly low financial stress.”

“That you complete your research and progress in an independent manner with the support and advice from your supervisors.”

8.2 What are the worst aspects of being a Monash research postgraduate?

Seventy-four graduate students from Monash Arts responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Administration and communication	15
Isolation	11
Monash priorities	11
Professional development	10
Stress and wellbeing	10
Facilities/services/resources	9
Lack of community and socialising	9
Course length and workload	8
Compulsory coursework	6
Lack of support/value	6
Financial issues	5
Lack of teaching/career opportunities	3
Location	3
Staff	3
Supervisors	3
Unclear requirements	3
Off-campus issues	2
Lack of international student support	2
Milestones	2
Campus issues	1

The primary complaint of Monash Arts graduate students related to the University’s **administration systems and management**. Notable comments, included:

“State of flux: [My faculty] seems to have had about 5 name changes, changes in IT systems etc. during my 3.5 years [of] candidature. Policies have changed at short notice, e.g. expectations associated with milestones. Lack of clarity about [the] purpose of milestones, coursework and professional development requirements.”

“Terrible administration management and communication, awful website with unhelpful staff, too many administrative roadblocks.”

Similarly, feelings of **isolation** were raised by several respondents.

“The feeling of isolation for doing research on a topic that no other student could relate to.”

“I feel like I’m just kind of doing it by myself with my supervisor, and I don’t feel like the university wants to build a relationship with me, work with me, use my skills etc.”

“Social alienation (inherent in a research degree, but also self-imposed), constant doubts about the viability of the project or one’s capacity to complete it on time, or at all.”

Several Monash Arts respondents had issues with what they perceived as **Monash’s priorities**. Insightful comments, included:

“I have felt like the university is so concerned with providing an innovating PhD program (in my case the GRIP) that they rolled it out without adequately designing it and preparing staff for its administration and the training required for students to succeed.”

“There seems to be very little focus on actually supporting the next generation of public intellectuals – it feels like it’s just a money-making venture for the university.”

“Monash can be a monstrous, soulless, neoliberal machine only interested in churning out ‘degrees’, often of dubious worth or quality.”

Issues with **stress and wellbeing** were also high on the list of worst aspects related to graduate students’ degrees at Monash Arts. Interesting comments, included:

“I think the work/study life balance isn’t the best.”

“It is incredibly stressful and I often felt ill-equipped to finish my degree.”

Other notable themes, included:

- **Professional development** – Monash Arts graduate students were largely negative about professional development requirements with complaints largely focused on how irrelevant units were and how they were a waste of time.
- **Lack of community and socialising** – some graduate students protested the lack of a sense of community at Monash or that socialising and social events were not plentiful or encouraged.
- **Facilities, services and resources** – several Monash Arts respondents were dissatisfied with university infrastructure and offerings.
- **Course length and workload** – as with responses to some previous questions, Monash Arts researchers were frustrated by the expected completion timeframe and workload.

8.3 How can the research postgraduate experience be improved?

Seventy graduate students from Monash Arts responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Community and culture	17
Facilities/services/resources	13
Administration/communication	11
Professional development	11
Coursework	7
Training	7
Career opportunities/development	6
Funding/finances	6
Milestones	6
Supervisors	6
Course length and time	4
Monash priorities	4
Health and wellbeing support	2
Orientation/induction	2
Mentoring	1
Myki discount	1
Off-campus	1

The primary suggestion from Monash Arts graduate students related to improving the **sense of community and culture** within the University. Notable comments, included:

“More opportunities to bring students together to build rapport.”

“By guiding a postgraduate research community to form.”

“Genuine collaboration with a representative sample of postgrads regarding support needed.”

Several Monash Arts graduate students wanted to see improvements made to the **facilities, services and/or resources** provided to them as students of the University. Relative comments covered a range of areas, including: better resources in rooms, international student support, private offices, ethics application support, personal desks and administrative guides.

Professional development was an area where a substantial number of students wished to see improvements made.

“Better professional development infrastructure.”

“Relax requirements around PD such that, if a certain quantity of PD is required, there is more scope to acquire these hours via engagement in meaningful activities.”

An improved **administrative service** with the capability to **communicate better** was another popular suggestion. Memorable comments, included:

“Personalise the service. Don’t lump everyone under the same banner. Don’t call professionals undertaking a PhD ‘students’ and stop changing things.”

“Ensure stability and consistency within postgraduate administration.”

Other notable themes, included:

- **Funding/finances** – Monash Arts graduate students suggested their course experience would be improved by greater access to scholarships and grants (travel, study).
- **Coursework** – respondents from Monash Arts wanted to see coursework improved or removed.
- **Course length** – extending the length of degrees was raised numerous times with graduate students often expressing concern that expected completion timelines had not been adjusted to factor in compulsory coursework and/or professional development.
- **Milestones** – some suggested milestones be scrapped, while others wanted greater flexibility in how, when and in front of whom they are run.
- **Training** – certain graduate students suggested a range of specific- or discipline-focused training should be offered.
- **Supervision** – several Monash Arts respondents wanted improvements to supervision that would empower the student and identify and penalise poor or inadequate supervisors.

Some other **notable comments** from Monash Arts graduate students, included:

“Proactively embrace the fact that PhD students may not – [and] most likely will not – embrace an academic career.”

“Support – both for current students and leaving students i.e. where do I get work now that I’m finishing? No one seems to help out here.”

“PhD students are extraordinarily ambitious, dedicated, focussed and self-driven. They do NOT need to be forced to take compulsory programs to increase their employability skills. They need to be listened to and to have policies enacted that they have chosen and that are most relevant to them. They also need much higher government and university financial aid, longer candidature times, and more flexible performance reviews/milestones.”

8.4 Anything else you'd like to say? This is an opportunity to make any comment that is pertinent to your experience as a research student at Monash. We want to hear it so fire away!

Sixteen graduate students from Monash Arts responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Monash general dissatisfaction	5
Monash appreciation	4
MGA appreciation	4
MGA events	4
Monash staff and services dissatisfaction	3
Monash staff and services appreciation	2
Financial dissatisfaction	1

Marginally, comments from Monash Arts graduate students most frequently related to **general dissatisfaction with Monash University**. These were predominantly in reference to the University's models and systems, as well as the general nature of the University. Noteworthy comments, included:

"Monash is very research-heavy and sometimes a tone of disdain for students and teaching creeps into the postgrads via the academic staff. It's selfish and flat-out stupid, because you have to give back to the next generation in any way you can to sustain any entity, including academia."

"The department in which I study is a ghost town with no network of relationships whatsoever. This contributes to aliment the isolation and stress that characterises a PhD journey."

On the other hand, several Monash Arts graduate students were **generally appreciative of Monash University**. Comments, included:

"All good. Very pleased to study at a big 8 university. My experience of all academics at Monash has been hugely positive. Generous and knowledgeable group of people."

"Just thank you! I'm very grateful for this opportunity and it has been a deeply enriching and rewarding experience."

Other notable themes, included:

- **MGA appreciation** – several Monash Arts graduate students were appreciative of the role the Monash Graduate Association play in supporting them through their candidature/course.
- **MGA events** – some were pleased with the range of activities and events that the MGA offered.

- **Monash staff and services dissatisfaction** – several respondents had issues with their supervision, interactions with Monash staff and with the services offered by the University.

Some **other notable comments** from Monash Arts graduate students, included:

“I’m extremely happy with the thesis writing and [the] relationship with my supervisor – this is pure bliss – but overall ... would rather not recommend a degree at Monash.”

“Keep up the good work MGA, your team has supported us in so many ways.”

“The cost of food and drink on campus is too expensive. The supermarket prices are obscene and need addressing.”

“Please keep up the monthly social nights as this has been the only time that my little cohort has managed to get together. These are very much appreciated!”

8.5 Summary

Perhaps in part because it is a broad theme, and also one that is principally subjective, *facilities, services and resources* came up repeatedly when graduate students were considering the best and the worst aspects of their degrees, as well as how they could be improved. These statements often related to the respondent’s infrastructure and learning expectations and requirements.

Academics, faculties, support staff and supervisors ranked high in ‘*the best aspects of being a Monash research postgraduate*’ responses, as did the overall University supportive environment and culture.

Administration and communication were ranked as the worst aspects of being a Monash research graduate student, while *isolation* (see 7. *Stress*) and *Monash priorities* were second.

When it came to the question ‘*How can the research postgraduate experience be improved?*’ the primary suggestion from Monash Arts graduate students related to improving the sense of community and culture within the University.

(iv) MGA Recommendations

Based on the findings of this survey and direct contact with the Monash Arts graduate student community, the MGA proposes the following recommendations:

Supervision:

1. *That the Faculty consider encouraging and supporting prospective and incoming HDR students to choose their own supervisor.*
2. *That the MGA, faculties and the University emphasise to graduate students the importance of resolving any conflict that may arise with a supervisor/s.*

Milestones:

3. *That graduate students are provided with thorough and consistent information regarding milestone requirements. That the Faculty review internal administration and communication channels between the Faculty, Schools and graduate students.*

Coursework:

4. *That coursework units become more relevant to graduate students' research degrees.*

Professional Development:

5. *That MGRO consider making changes to myDevelopment, such as:*
 - *making the program optional or reducing the number of compulsory hours;*
 - *increasing the course offerings so that more relevant courses are available;*
 - *increasing flexibility of what can be counted towards the required hours;*
 - *improving guidelines and processes relating to Recognition of Prior Learning;*
 - *improving information and communication between students and MGRO regarding the program, registration, keeping track of completed hours etc.; and,*
 - *creating an easier, more user-friendly online navigation system.²⁷*

Progress delays and discontinuation:

6. *That the Faculty minimise graduate students' reliance on external income streams by improving access to funding, scholarship and grants.*

School culture and facilities:

7. *That the Faculty improve opportunities for interaction, networking and discussions among graduate peers.*
8. *That graduate students are offered seminars or workshops relating to 'preventing procrastination,' 'dealing with anxiety' and 'help with stress management. They should also consider offering additional career seminars.*
9. *That the Faculty provide graduate students with access to:*
 - *A work space, such as a desk, and access to appropriate laboratory or studio space as required.*
 - *A mail box and secure storage space.*
 - *Computer access (sole use for full-time, on-campus students).*
 - *Appropriate level of access to photocopying, printing and IT support.*

²⁷ We note that the data in this report is from 2017 and acknowledge that efforts have since been made to tackle some of these issues.

- *Access to unlimited local and internal telephone and facsimile calls for work purposes, and access to interstate and international calls as determined by the academic unit/program.*

(v) Bibliography

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(vi) Appendix 1

Demographics of respondents from Monash Arts

Faculty (Schools)	Count	Percentage
Film, Media and Communications	21	19.4%
History	11	10.2%
Linguistics and Applied Linguistics	12	11.1%
Literary and Cultural Studies	27	25.0%
Philosophy	10	9.3%
Social and Political Sciences	19	17.6%
Theatre, Performance and Music	8	7.4%

Mode of attendance	Count	Percentage
Internal (on-campus)	102	94.4%
External (off-campus)	5	4.6%
Multi-modal	1	0.9%

Nationality	Count	Percentage
Domestic student	77	71.3%
International student	31	28.7%

Attendance type	Count	Percentage
Full-time	85	78.7%
Part-time	23	21.3%

Gender	Count	Percentage
Female	76	70.4%
Male	28	25.9%
Transgender	1	0.9%
Prefer to self-describe	2	1.9%
Prefer not to say	1	0.9%

Enrolled Program	Count	Percentage
PhD	88	81.5%
Masters by research	20	18.5%

Scholarship	Count	Percentage
Receives Scholarship	72	66.7%
No scholarship	30	27.8%
No, but I have previously held a scholarship	6	5.6%