

**MONASH GRADUATE ASSOCIATION (MGA)**  
**HDR SURVEY**  
THE FACULTY OF BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS (BUSECO)  
FACULTY REPORT 2019





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

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## Table of Contents

<b>(i) Executive Summary .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>(ii) Introduction .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>(iii) Data .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>1. Supervision .....</b>	<b>10</b>
1.1 Have you read the Code of Practice for supervision of doctoral/research masters students?.....	10
1.2 Are you aware of your supervisor’s responsibilities towards you? .....	10
1.3 Are you aware of your own responsibilities as a Monash research postgraduate? .....	10
1.4 Have you had any conflict or misunderstanding with any of your supervisors? .....	10
1.5 What was the general nature of the conflict/misunderstanding with your supervisor? .	10
1.6 Please rate the following statements regarding your supervision experience .....	11
1.7 Opportunity for comments regarding your supervision.....	13
1.8 Summary .....	13
<b>2. Milestones .....</b>	<b>15</b>
2.1 Please rate the following statements regarding your experience of the confirmation process. ....	15
2.2 Opportunity for comments about the confirmation process. ....	15
2.3 Do you think it's appropriate to face termination of candidature if you fail any of the following milestones? .....	16
2.4 Opportunity for comments about milestones. ....	16
2.5 Summary .....	17
<b>3. Coursework.....</b>	<b>18</b>
3.1 Do you believe that research degrees are improved by the inclusion of compulsory discipline-based coursework?.....	18
3.2 Please rate the following statements relating to the discipline-based coursework component of your degree. ....	18
3.3 Please select the level of stress you have about the compulsory discipline-based coursework component of your degree. ....	19
3.4 Opportunity for comment regarding the inclusion of discipline-based coursework in research degrees.....	19
3.5 Summary .....	20
<b>4. Professional Development .....</b>	<b>21</b>
4.1 Do you believe that professional development units (as offered through "myDevelopment"), should be a compulsory part of a research degree? .....	21
4.2 Opportunity for comment regarding the inclusion of compulsory professional development units in research degrees. ....	21
4.3 Summary .....	21

<b>5. Progress delays and discontinuation .....</b>	<b>22</b>
5.1 Has anything significantly delayed the progress of your research degree? .....	22
5.2 Have you ever considered discontinuing your enrolment? .....	22
5.3 What made you decide to continue with your degree? .....	22
5.4 The amount of time I have to complete my research ... will allow me to produce a quality research project. ....	22
5.5 What are the three most important things the University could do for you to help you complete on time? .....	23
5.6 Opportunity for comments regarding your general progress. ....	24
5.7 Summary .....	24
<b>6. School culture and facilities .....</b>	<b>26</b>
6.1 Please rate the following statements in relation to your specific experience in your academic unit: .....	26
6.2 Have you ever experienced any discrimination due to gender, race, religion, family responsibilities etc., within the University? .....	28
6.3 Opportunity for comments regarding the way in which you are treated. ....	29
6.4 Does your academic unit provide any of the following facilities? .....	29
6.4 Overall, I am satisfied with the level of resources and facilities provided to me. ....	30
6.5 What additional facilities would help to support you through to completion? .....	30
6.6 Summary .....	31
<b>7. Stress and wellbeing.....</b>	<b>32</b>
7.1 Please select your level of stress regarding any of the following: .....	32
7.2 What kind of health and wellbeing support would you like to receive from the University? .....	33
7.3 Opportunity for comments regarding health and wellbeing.....	33
7.4 Summary .....	33
<b>8. Overall comments.....</b>	<b>35</b>
8.1 What are the best aspects of being a Monash research postgraduate? .....	35
8.2 What are the worst aspects of being a Monash research postgraduate?.....	36
8.3 How can the research postgraduate experience be improved?.....	36
8.4 Anything else you'd like to say?.....	37
8.5 Summary .....	37
<b>(iv) MGA Recommendations .....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>(v) Bibliography .....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>(vi) Appendix 1 .....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Demographics of respondents from Faculty of Business and Economics.....</b>	<b>41</b>

## (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 the Faculty of Business and Economics (BusEco) are summarised below.

### **Supervision**

BusEco graduate students were only slightly less satisfied with their supervision overall than University respondents (BusEco: 75%, University: 82%); however, their responses to individual statements relating to the guidance, role and feedback of their supervisors were considerably more negative than those of their University counterparts.

### **Milestones**

BusEco respondents were marginally less likely to agree that the confirmation process overall was a positive experience as compared to the University-wide respondents (BusEco: 75%, University 78%). They were more likely to disagree with the practice of termination at the confirmation stage (BusEco: 61%, University: 47%), while, like graduate students across the University, their tendency to disagree with termination at milestones increased after confirmation had been passed.

### **Coursework**

Graduate student responses relating to compulsory discipline-based coursework were generally mixed. Half of the respondents from BusEco 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.

Sixty-nine percent of respondents from BusEco expressed 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 (44%) of BusEco 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 (22%) indicated that they should be.

### **Progress, delays and discontinuation**

BusEco respondents (28%) were less likely to have experienced significant delay in the progress of their research as graduate students enrolled across all campuses (38%); while they were also less likely (50%) to believe that they had insufficient time to produce a quality research project than graduate students across the University (59%).

Changing or removing compulsory coursework, increasing access to funding (scholarship/other financial aid) and improving supervision were identified as the three most important things the University could do to assist BusEco graduate students in achieving timely completion.

### **School culture and facilities**

Overall, BusEco graduate students were more satisfied (83%) with the level of resources and facilities than University respondents (71%).

BusEco student researchers (50%) were 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 BusEco respondents expressed they felt the highest level of stress (50% either *a lot or a great deal*) was in relation to *'the milestones within my HDR program,'* while the area associated with the least amount of stress (0% either *a lot or a great deal*) was *'my relationship with my supervisor.'*

BusEco graduate students nominated *'help with stress management'* and *'help dealing with anxiety'* as the top two ways the University could help support their health and wellbeing.

### **Overall comments**

BusEco graduate students identified access to facilities, services and resources, as well as access to Monash academics, faculties and staff, as the best aspects of being at Monash.

Among the worst aspects were Monash administration, compulsory coursework, feelings of isolation, lack of support/value and issues with stress and wellbeing.

BusEco respondents identified refining coursework as the primary suggestion to improve their graduate research experience.

## (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, twenty-two were from research graduate students enrolled through the Faculty of Business and Economics, which equates to 9% of the total research graduate student population at the Faculty in that year.

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

In the quantitative analysis, some BusEco 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 BusEco responded to fourteen 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;<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.

Eight of the ten schools/departments of BusEco were represented in terms of responses. Overall respondents were skewed towards international (77%), on-campus (96%), full-time (100%), scholarship receiving (82%), PhD students (77%). Female (59%) and male (36%) genders were well represented. Appendix 1 provides the demographics of BusEco respondents.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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 the Faculty of Business and Economics, 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	BusEco	University
Yes	13 (59.1%)	386 (57.8%)
No, but I've heard about it	5 (22.7%)	169 (25.3%)
No, I didn't know it existed	4 (18.2%)	113 (16.9%)

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

Aware of supervisor's responsibility	BusEco	University
Yes	18 (81.8%)	533 (79.8%)
No	3 (13.6%)	22 (3.3%)
Not sure	1 (4.5%)	113 (16.9%)

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

Aware of own responsibilities	BusEco	University
Yes	18 (81.8%)	592 (88.6%)
No	1 (4.5%)	14 (2.1%)
Not sure	3 (13.6%)	62 (9.3%)

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

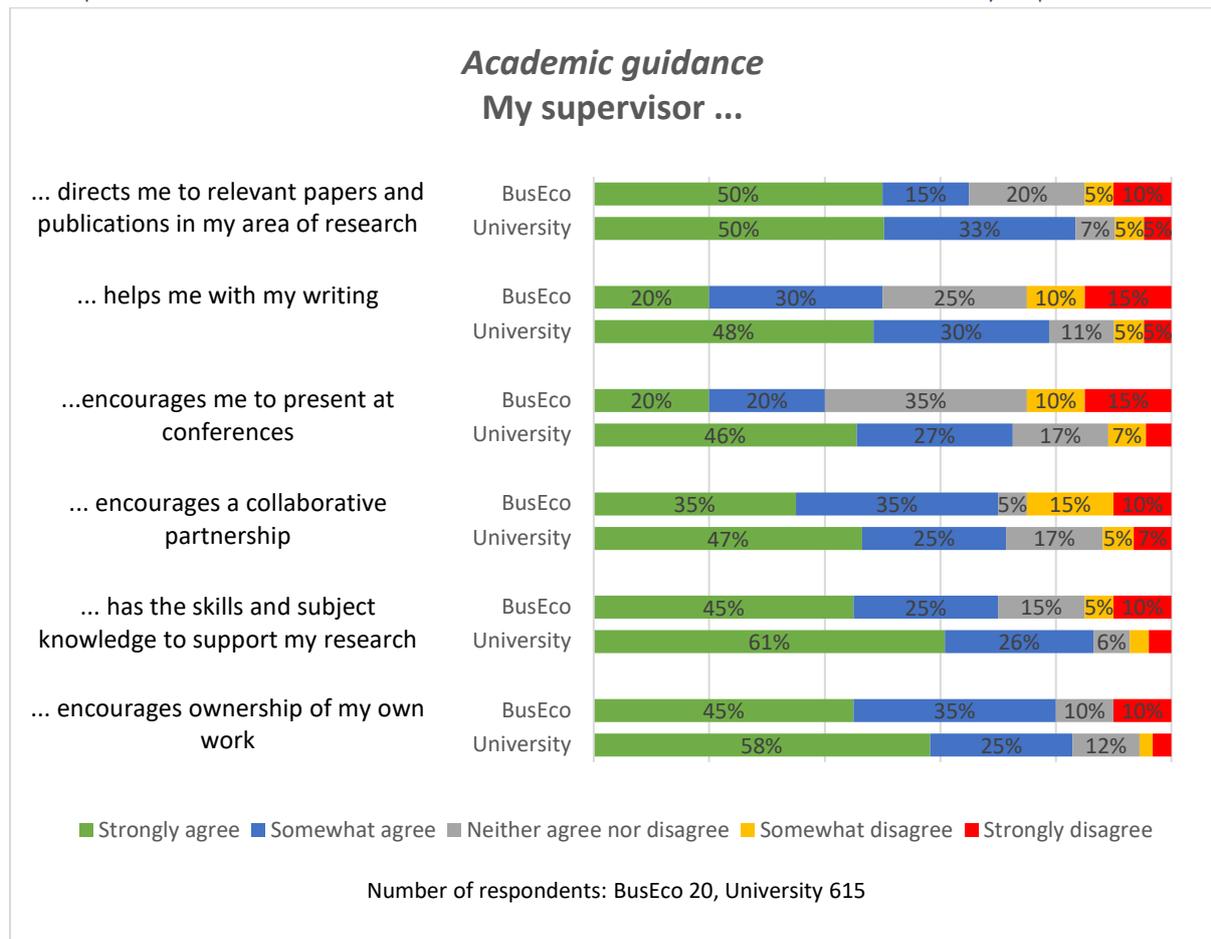
Conflict or misunderstanding with your supervisor	BusEco	University
Yes	1 (4.5%)	108 (16.2%)
No	21 (95.5%)	560 (83.8%)

Even considering the limited number of responses (22), BusEco graduate students were just as likely to have read the Code of Practice and be aware of their supervisors' responsibilities as University respondents. They were slightly less likely (82%) to be aware of their own responsibilities compared to University respondents (89%) and were less likely to have experienced conflict or misunderstanding with their supervisors.

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

There were **no comments from Business and Economics graduate students** in response to this question.

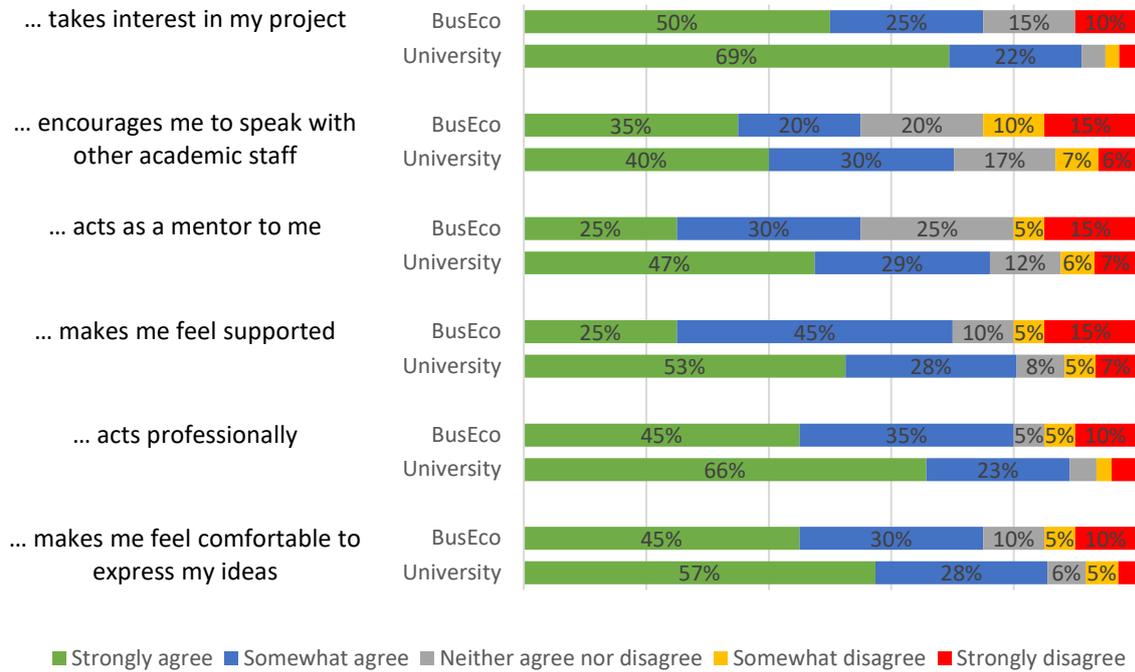
1.6 Please rate the following statements regarding your supervision experience. Select one option for each statement from the list below where "At least one of my supervisors..."<sup>3</sup>



With the exception of the statements *'my supervisor encourages a collaborative partnership'* and *'my supervisor encourages ownership of my own work,'* BusEco graduate students were less likely to agree with statements in the areas of academic guidance covered in the MGA HDR survey than their University counterparts. For instance, only fifty percent of BusEco respondents agreed with the statement *'my supervisor helps me with my writing,'* compared to seventy-eight percent of University-wide respondents.

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

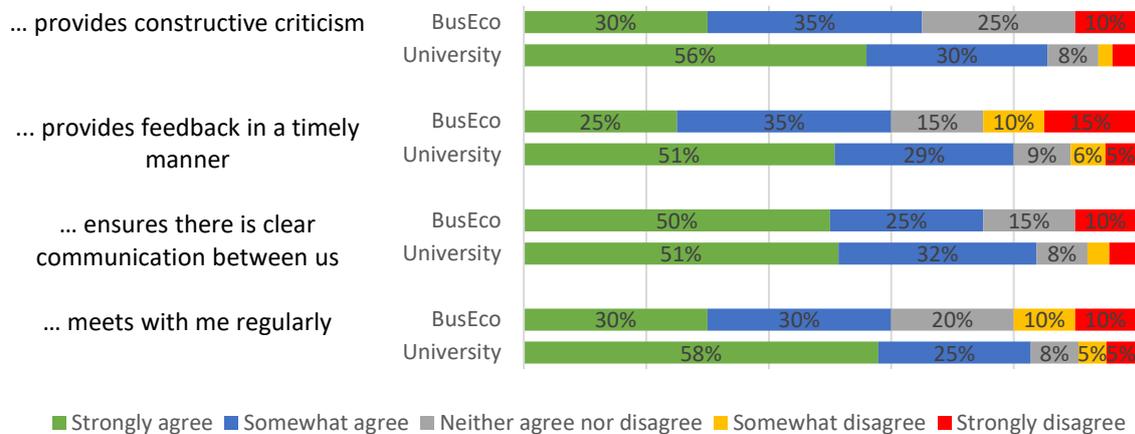
### Supportive role My supervisor ...



Number of respondents: BusEco 20, University 615

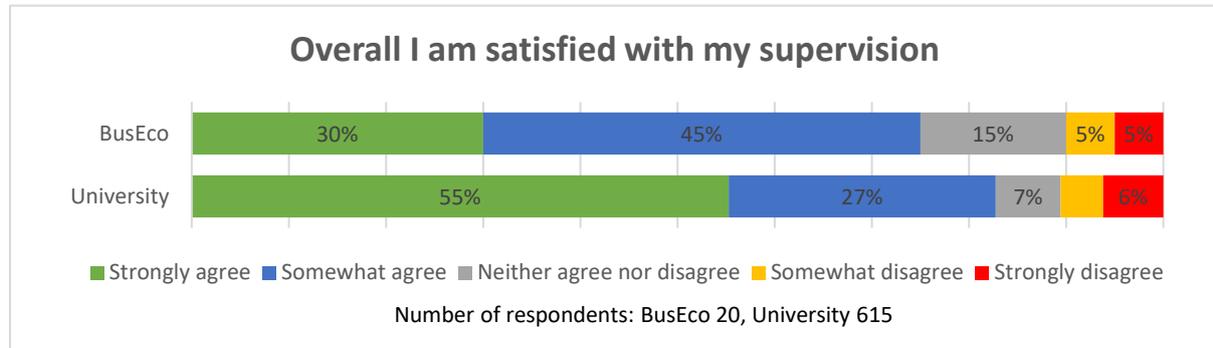
BusEco graduate students were generally less likely than University-wide respondents to agree with statements regarding the supportive role played by their supervisors.

### Appropriate feedback My supervisor ...



Number of respondents: BusEco 20, University 615

BusEco respondents were substantially less likely to agree with positive statements relating to the feedback they received than their University peers. This was particularly evident in the total agreement figures to the statements ‘my supervisor provides constructive criticism’ (BusEco: 65%, University: 86%) and ‘my supervisor meets with me regularly’ (BusEco: 60%, University: 83%).



Given BusEco respondents tended to agree with positive statements regarding the guidance, role and feedback of supervisors less so than their University counterparts, it is perhaps unsurprising that their overall satisfaction with supervision was also inferior (BusEco: 75%, University: 82%).

### 1.7 Opportunity for comments regarding your supervision.

Only **two graduate students from the Faculty of Business and Economics** responded to this statement.

These comments, included:

*“Difficult to answer these questions as I am still primarily focused on coursework.”*

*“Good so far.”*

### 1.8 Summary

Research supervision has become a vital process in the success of postgraduate studies.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> Increased government emphasis on ‘timely completion’ has led to the introduction of a range of measures for monitoring and managing PhD

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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 XIX*, edited by J. C. Smart (Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004), 495.

candidature (see 2. *Milestones*),<sup>6</sup> given completion rates now have reputational and financial implications for universities in the competitive higher education environment.<sup>7</sup>

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 BusEco (75%) was lower than it was among all Monash graduate students (82%). BusEco had the lowest overall supervisor satisfaction rate of all the faculties.

Previous studies have highlighted that **the strongest correlation with student progress was the amount of interaction that they had with their supervisors.**<sup>8</sup> BusEco respondents tended to agree with most positive statements regarding the accessibility of their supervisors, but not as convincingly University graduate students.

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.<sup>9</sup> 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.**<sup>10</sup> Overall agreement with the statement '*my supervisor has the skills and subject knowledge to support my research*' was substantially lower in BusEco (70%) 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 among the top factors).<sup>11</sup> 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*).

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<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> Christine Halse and James Malfroy, "Retheorizing doctoral supervision as professional work," *Studies in Higher Education* 31, no. 1 (2010): 79.

<sup>8</sup> 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.

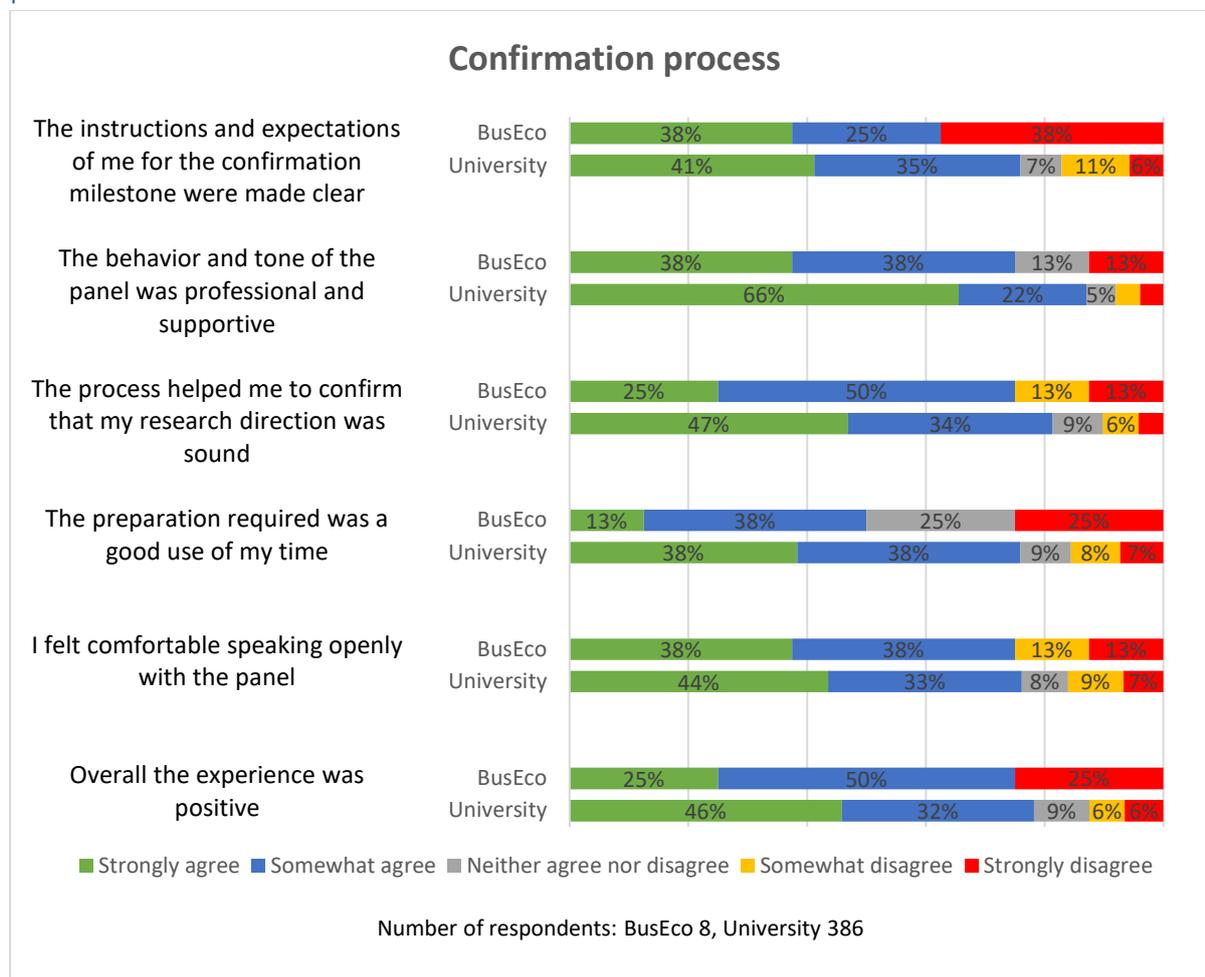
<sup>9</sup> Karen Hunter and Kay Devine, "Doctoral student's emotional exhaustion and intentions to leave academia," *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* 11 (2016): 40.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> 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.



While BusEco respondents tended to agree with positive statements relating to the confirmation process, only half of them thought that *'the preparation required was a good use of my time.'*

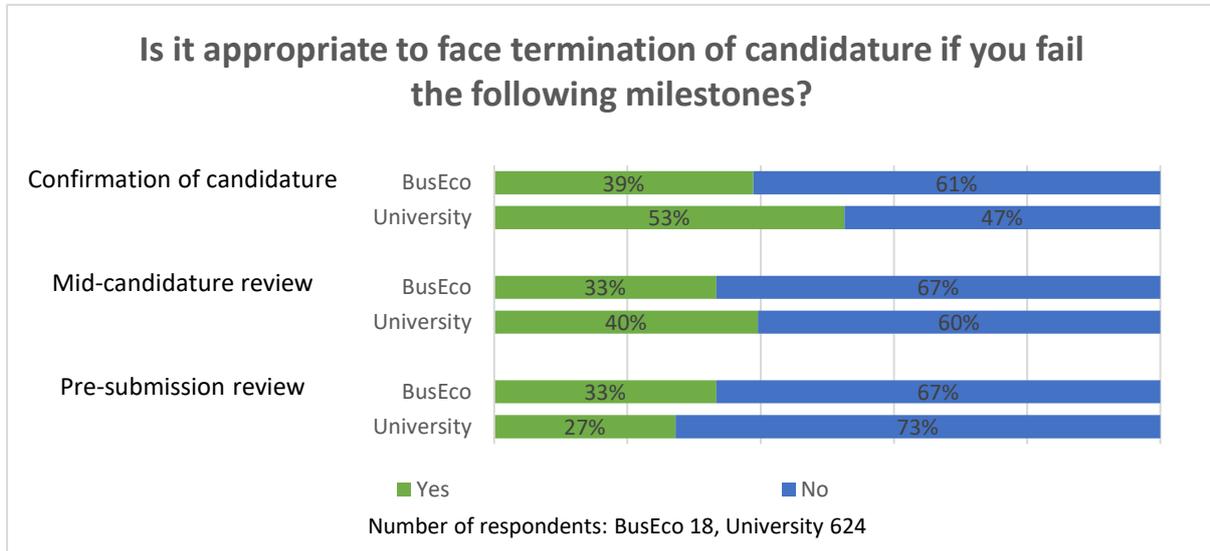
2.2 Opportunity for comments about the confirmation process.

Only **one graduate student from the Faculty of Business and Economics** responded to this statement.

This comment, included:

*"It's a terrible process. You have no idea what you're doing. It's super stressful ... I was so stressed out I could not even cope. It's an awful experience, there needs to be much more support, much more guidance and information available."*

2.3 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?



When asked about termination of candidature based on milestone performance, BusEco respondents were most likely to agree with this practice at the confirmation stage. As candidature progressed, respondents were slightly more inclined to disagree with termination. The BusEco results for this question closely reflected the University-wide trend.

#### 2.4 Opportunity for comments about milestones.

Three graduate students from the Faculty of Business and Economics responded to this statement. Their insightful comments are included below:

*“If you are good enough to be in the program, but can’t pass a milestone, there is obviously a problem with the program. It’s disgraceful that after more than a year of hard work in the program, including the coursework, that you can just get kicked out. It’s not motivating, it’s scary and stressful and makes you feel like Monash couldn’t care less about you.”*

*“I understand the need to encourage people to complete PhDs in a timely manner, and prepare people for a working environment that will assess progress with an annual review, but this feels like added stress to an already highly stressful situation, and once candidates have made it over halfway through their PhD it seems a waste of research to potentially throw them out.”*

*“I think the confirmation of candidature should not be appropriate to face termination of candidature ... Due to a heavy workload in the first year [coursework, literature review], I don’t support the idea that they face termination of candidature.”*

## 2.5 Summary

In 2010, Monash began to 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.<sup>12</sup>

BusEco graduate students tended to agree with positive statements regarding their milestones, but were not as convincing in their agreement as were University respondents. In regards to the confirmation process, 75% of those responding agreed that *‘overall the experience was positive.’*

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. BusEco 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.

Given milestones can be quite stressful (50% of BusEco 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,<sup>13</sup> clear guidance and communication may also 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 across the University 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.”<sup>14</sup> 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;<sup>15</sup> 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 highlight that some graduate students perceive proximity between University or Faculty staff as an obstacle to raising issues they potentially have with supervisors.

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

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

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

<sup>15</sup> Margaret Kiley, “Reflections on change in doctoral education,” 85.

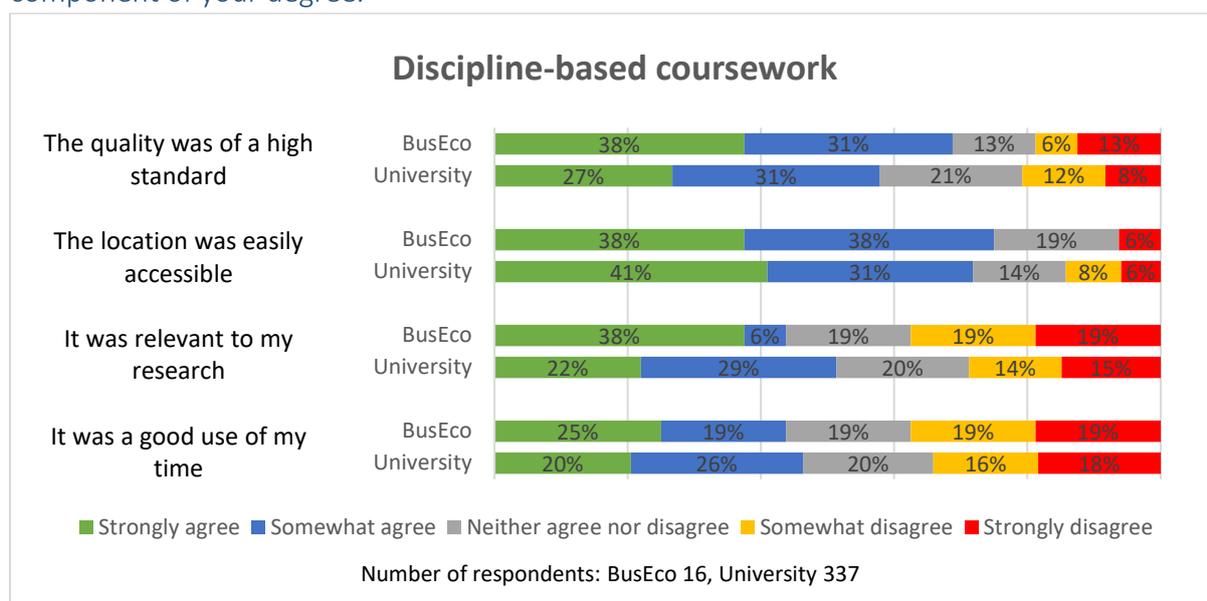
### 3. Coursework

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?	BusEco	University
Yes	9 (50.0%)	236 (37.9%)
No	4 (22.2%)	178 (28.6%)
Not sure	5 (27.8%)	209 (33.5%)

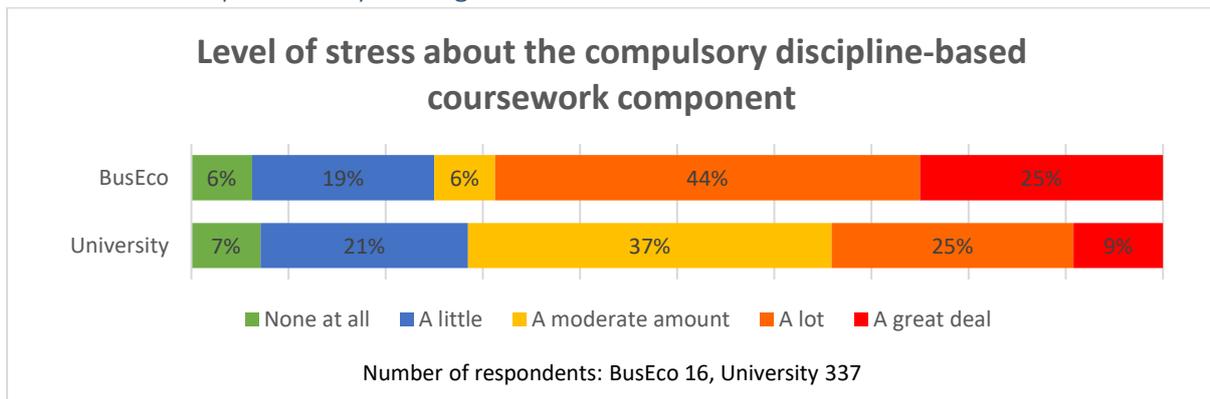
BusEco graduate students were more likely than University-wide respondents to believe that research degrees were improved by compulsory coursework units.

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



BusEco graduate students tended to agree that the quality of discipline-based coursework units were of a high standard more so than their University counterparts; however, they did not find the units as relevant to their research.

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



BusEco respondents were far more likely to experience an uncomfortable level (*a lot or a great deal*) of stress than their peers in other faculties. Sixty-nine percent of BusEco graduate students expressed that they associated an uncomfortable amount of stress with compulsory discipline-based coursework compared to thirty-four percent of overall University respondents.

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

Seven students from the Faculty of Business and Economics responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 6      Positive comments: 0

General theme	Number of responses
Irrelevant/discipline-specific	5
Time-consuming/waste of time/misdirected energy	5
Low/poor-quality unit	2
Administrative issues/inconsistencies/solutions	1
Inconsistent quality (unit/course)	1

All but one of the graduate student respondents from the Faculty of Business and Economics held **negative opinions on coursework** in their degrees. Some notable objections are included below:

*“It’s run like a joke ... I have never had such a bad experience at Monash.”*

*“Although they are useful, the fact that the entire degree is only 3 years (with the option to extend it for 6 months) is extremely stressful and quite frankly worrisome. I am worried about the quality of the research papers that have to be written and reviewed within just two years ... If they want to include high intensity coursework in the program, that is all well and good, just give us enough time after coursework to focus on our research.”*

Of those Faculty of Business and Economics graduate students responding negatively, there were a handful of 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**.

*"The course runs only once a year and is currently running directly over the time I'm preparing for confirmation, making everything a bit more stressful."*

*"Having come from the honours program, the unit was absolutely a huge waste of time. The assignments are huge and you spend half of your first year doing coursework and getting nothing done on your PhD."*

Likewise, several graduate students complained the units were **irrelevant** to their areas of study **and too-specific to particular disciplines** which they were not focused on.

*"The compulsory coursework component within [the] Business school includes some units that are not really relevant to [my area]."*

*"Choice of units not available, compulsory unit is not relevant to me at all."*

### 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,<sup>16</sup> the concept of coursework has received a mixed reception in Australia.<sup>17</sup> BusEco graduate students were no different in this regard with respondents split over its relevance and usefulness.

Only 44% of BusEco 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 5 mentions.

Only 44% of BusEco graduate students agreed with the statement that discipline-based coursework was *'a good use of my time.'* The majority of negative comments (5) 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.

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

<sup>17</sup> Margaret Kiley, "Reflections on change in doctoral education," 85.

## 4. Professional Development

Compulsory professional development units are not a requirement of the Faculty of Business and Economics; however, BusEco graduate students still provided answers to these questions.

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?	BusEco	University
Yes	4 (22.2%)	157 (25.4%)
No	8 (44.4%)	283 (45.9%)
Not sure	6 (33.3%)	177 (28.7%)

BusEco graduate students were marginally less likely to believe that professional development units should be compulsory than University respondents.

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

Two graduate students gave their opinions on the prospect of professional development being included in their research degrees.

**Notable comments** relating to compulsory professional development units in BusEco, included:

*"People should have the choice to do these or not. Some of us already don't have enough time to do everything we need to do so being forced to spend time on these courses is unnecessary ... I have attended some of these courses and they are usually too long and the information provided really could be condensed into an hour. Some of them are also not very useful."*

*"I support the idea that professional development should be compulsory if, and only if, the content of these sessions are considerably useful in terms of employability [and] skill development ... If the information from the professional development is quite ordinary, I would be opposed to making these compulsory."*

4.3 Summary

Compulsory professional development units are not a requirement of BusEco, which meant that few graduate students from the Faculty provided detailed responses to these questions; however, with only 22.2% of respondents stating that they thought these units should be compulsory, it is reasonable to suggest that the majority of BusEco respondents were happy the units were not compulsory.

## 5. Progress delays and discontinuation

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

Has your research degree progress been delayed?	BusEco	University
Yes	5 (27.8%)	231 (37.8%)
No	13 (72.2%)	380 (62.2%)

### 5.2 Have you ever considered discontinuing your enrolment?

Have you considered discontinuing your enrolment?	BusEco	University
Yes	5 (27.8%)	179 (29.3%)
No	13 (72.2%)	431 (70.7%)

### 5.3 What made you decide to continue with your degree?

Two graduate students from the Faculty of Business and Economics responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

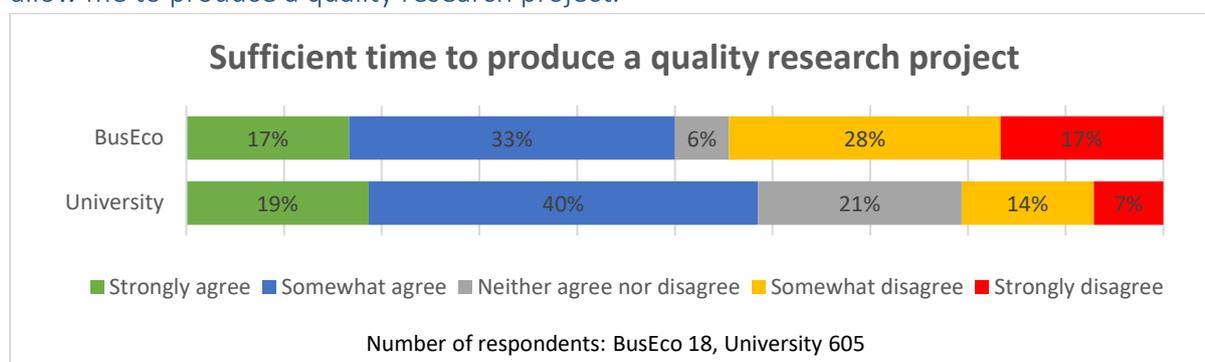
General theme	Number of responses
Support from University staff/services	1
Time, money and effort already invested	1

These comments, included:

*“I’ve put so much work in already [and] I don’t want to waste it. Keep my eyes on the prize!”*

*“Admin in Monash is so poor; coursework is [at] baby level with so much homework; computers in the office [are] very slow ... but my supervisors are super ... I cannot say no to them.”*

5.4 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.



BusEco respondents were more likely to believe that they had insufficient time to produce a quality research project than graduate students across the University.

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

Ten students from the Faculty of Business and Economics responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Compulsory coursework – changing or removing	3
Funding – scholarship/other financial aid	3
Supervision	3
Access to training/support services	2
Extending length of degree/candidature	2
Professional development – changing or removing	2
Wellbeing – encouragement/motivation/trust/care	2
Facilities/labs/equipment/software	1
Family-friendly initiatives/support	1
Reducing bureaucratic requirements	1
Research environment – networking/mentoring/support groups	1
Staff	1

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.

Business and Economic 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.

One of the most frequently highlighted areas of Business and Economics graduate students was **supervision**. Interesting comments, included:

*“I think support from supervisors is the most important thing.”*

*“Good supervisor relationship.”*

Likewise, **funding** was another area that was raised by several graduate students. Memorable comments, included:

*“Increase in funding so I can afford to pay my rent, not work so much and pay for my data collection.”*

*“The availability of small, easy-access grants for postgrad students. The fact that some research needs to do [a] pilot study, for example, which needs not [a] very big amount to test.”*

The prevailing theme in the limited responses to *Section 3: Coursework* was that Business and Economics graduate students tended to have issues with the administration, requirements and purpose of these components of their degree. This sentiment was again reflected in graduate student responses to this question. Comments reflective of the wider sentiment, included:

*“Please NO irrelevant compulsory activities like GRAMS.”*

*“Make coursework elective (perhaps let supervisors pick courses for their students).”*

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

*“Family support (childcare is very costly).”*

*“Support for collection of data.”*

*“Opportunity to get to know experts of my field.”*

## 5.6 Opportunity for comments regarding your general progress.

Five students from the Faculty of Business and Economics responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

**Negative comments: 3**

**Positive comments: 2**

General theme	Number of responses
Coursework	1
Health	1
Slow progress	1

Interesting comments from Business and Economics graduate students, included:

*“It’s going well ... However, since the start of this program, I have had anxiety about the quality of the research papers I can complete in the time set aside for research. I would hate to end up having to just produce some mediocre papers so as to keep to the time limit, but I can already imagine that that’s just what a lot of people end up having to do having spent all of their first year on tedious and time-consuming coursework.”*

*“I had to join at an odd time of the year ... This has meant I’ve been out of sync with the semesters and has [also] meant [I have] additional work nearer to confirmation time.”*

## 5.7 Summary

More than a quarter of BusEco respondents (27.8%) had experienced a delay in their research degree, while the same number 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.<sup>18</sup> 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.

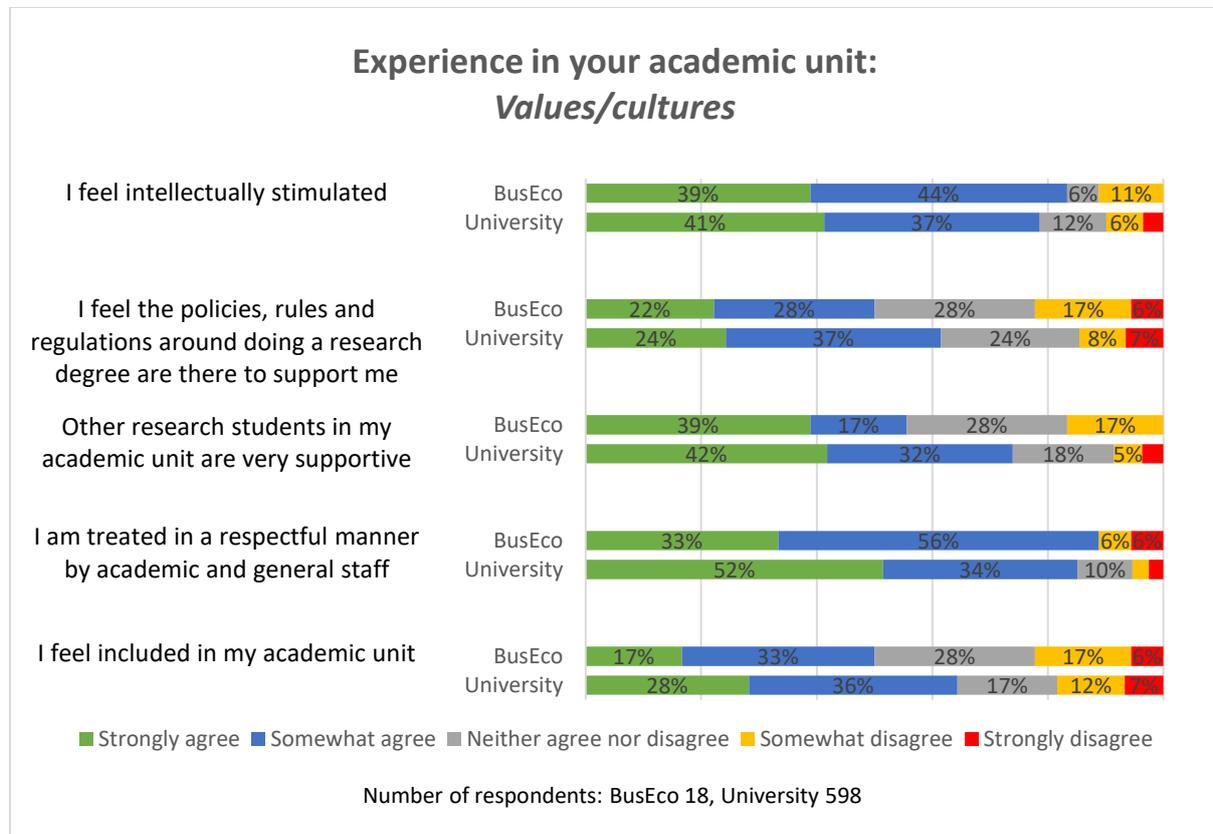
The feedback in *3. Coursework* revealed that there was widespread dissatisfaction with the attachment of compulsory requirements to this offering, and this was supported in this section with *changing or removing compulsory coursework* being the equal most popular suggestion (alongside improving *administration* and *funding*) on the list of *the most important things the University could do for you to help you complete on time*.

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<sup>18</sup> Glenice Ives and Glenn Rowley, "Supervisor selection or allocation and continuity of supervision," 535.

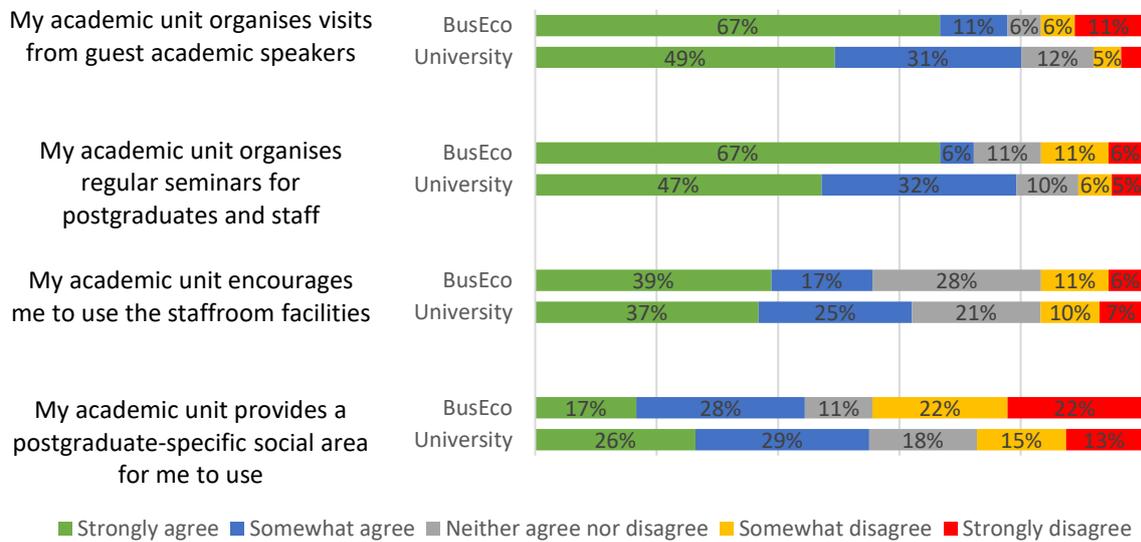
## 6. School culture and facilities

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



The vast majority of BusEco graduate students feel intellectually stimulated and are treated in a respectful manner by academic staff; however, only fifty percent of BusEco respondents agreed with the statement 'I feel included in my academic unit.'

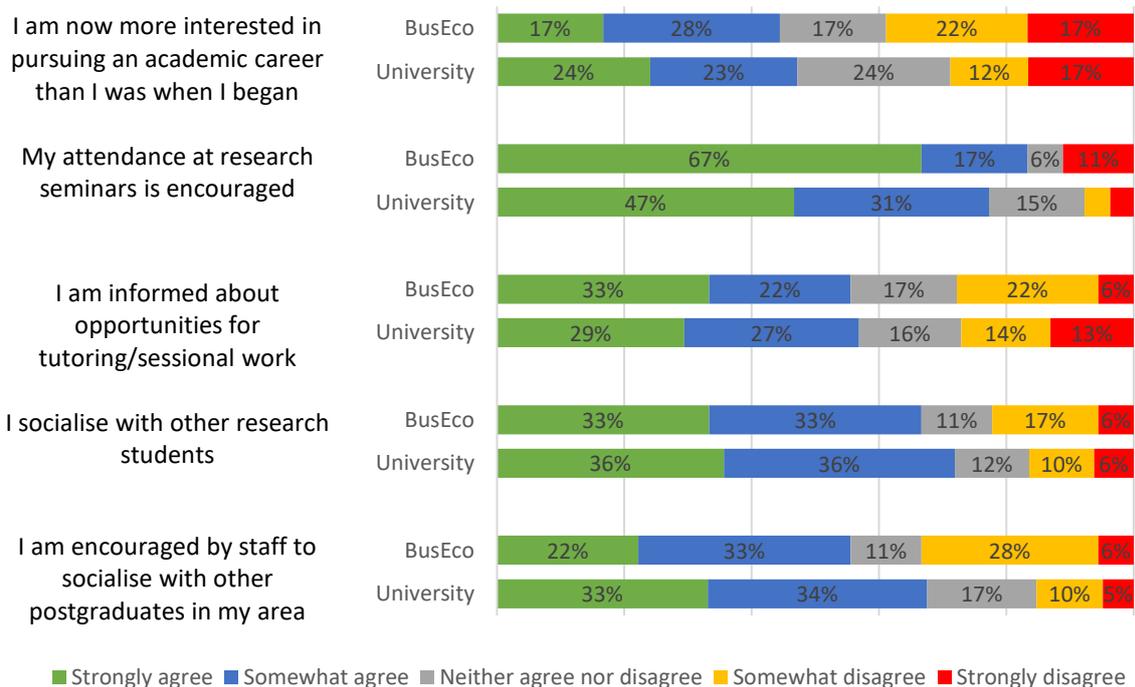
### Experience in your academic unit: *Facilities/resources*



Number of respondents: BusEco 18, University 598

In relation to the facilities and resources made available to them, BusEco respondents most agreed that their academic unit organises visits from guest academic speakers, while they least agreed that they were provided with a postgraduate-specific social area.

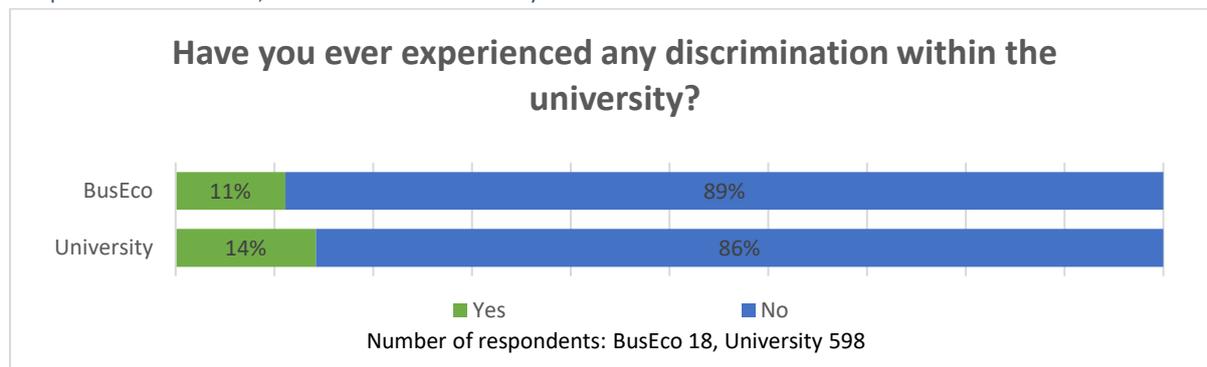
### Experience in your academic unit: *Opportunities*



Number of respondents: BusEco 18, University 598

In relation to the opportunities provided by their faculty, eighty-four percent of BusEco respondents agreed that their attendance at research seminars was encouraged, while only fifty-five percent agreed that they were encouraged by staff to socialise with their peers within the faculty.

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



Number of respondents: BusEco 18, University 598

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

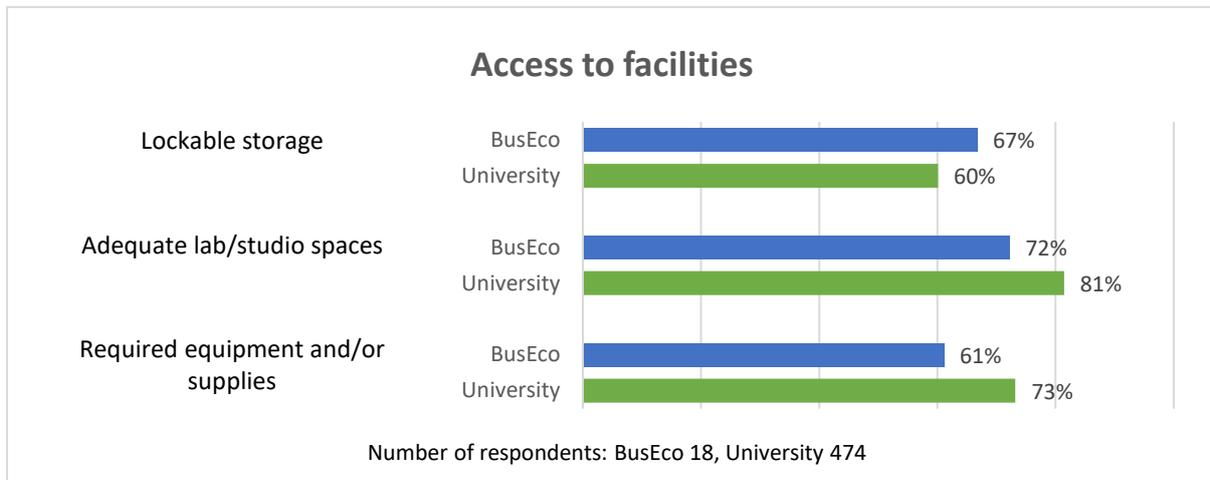
Only **two graduate students from the Faculty of Business and Economics** responded to this statement.

These comments, included:

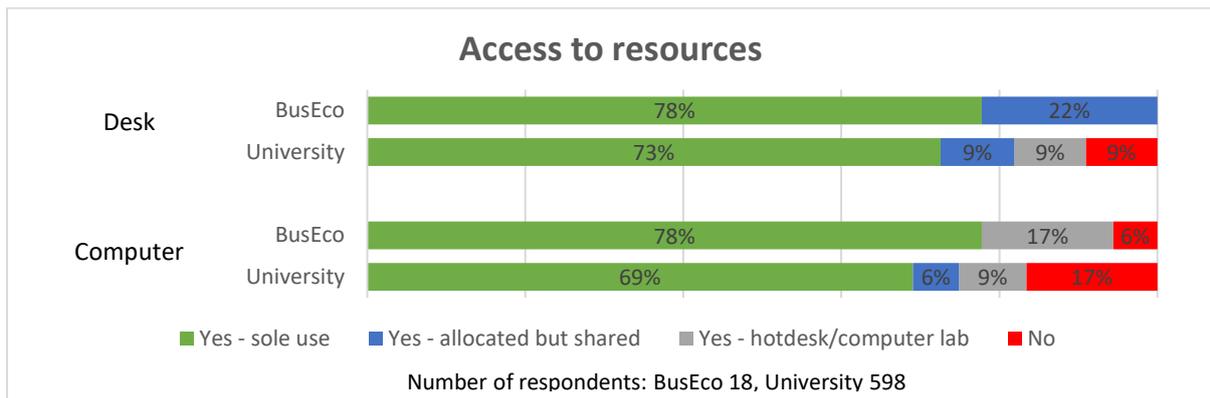
*“I am treated with respect.”*

*“Okay.”*

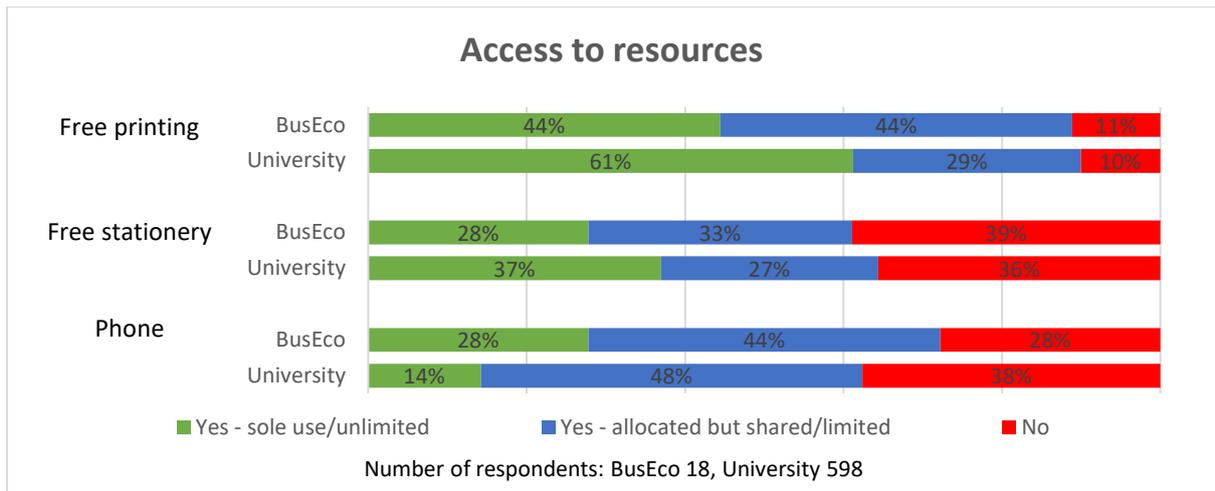
### 6.4 Does your academic unit provide any of the following facilities? Please select as many as relevant.



BusEco respondents were more likely to have access to lockable storage than their counterparts across the University, while they were less likely to have access to adequate lab/studio spaces and required equipment and/or supplies.

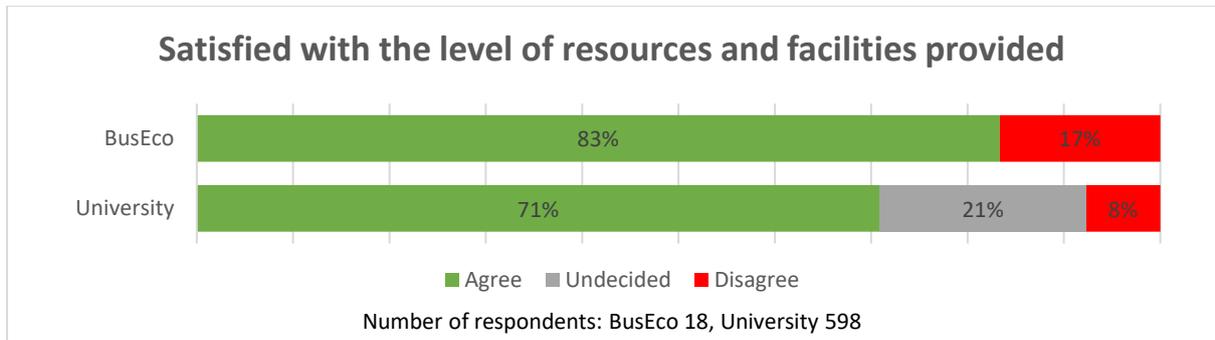


All BusEco respondents had access to a desk, with seventy-eight percent also assigned a personal computer.



The overwhelming majority of BusEco respondents had access to free printing, while most had access to either limited and unlimited free stationery and a phone.

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



BusEco respondents were more satisfied with the level of resources and facilities provided to them than their University counterparts.

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

Three graduate students from the Faculty of Business and Economics responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 3

Positive comments: 0

General theme	Number of responses
Computers/laptops/monitors	1
Private office/studio	1
Unique requests	1

All three graduate students from the Faculty of Business and Economics who responded to this question reflected negatively on the adequacy of the facilities they receive at Monash University.

Regarding facilities that would help support Business and Economics graduate students complete their degrees, there was a range of suggestions made. These included:

*“A laptop – I have a desktop that is getting progressively slower and if I need to go to a conference/study whilst away, I have to borrow a laptop from the centre, which won’t have everything that I need on it.”*

*“My office has mould, and I have been sick for a year.”*

*“Ventilation ... outside of office hours.”*

## 6.6 Summary

Arguably the most direct insight into BusEco graduate students’ sense of belonging is provided through the responses to the statement *‘I feel included in my academic unit.’* BusEco graduate students were less likely than their University counterparts to express that they were positive about their sense of inclusion in their academic units. Only 50% agreed with the statement, which was the second worst faculty result.

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,<sup>19</sup> with PhD students who find themselves well-integrated in their research environments experiencing less stress and burnout.”<sup>20</sup> This was reflected in the MGA HDR survey with those agreeing with the statement *‘I feel included in my academic unit’* repeatedly being less likely to associate an uncomfortable level of stress with all of the stress-related statements in 7. *Stress*.

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.**

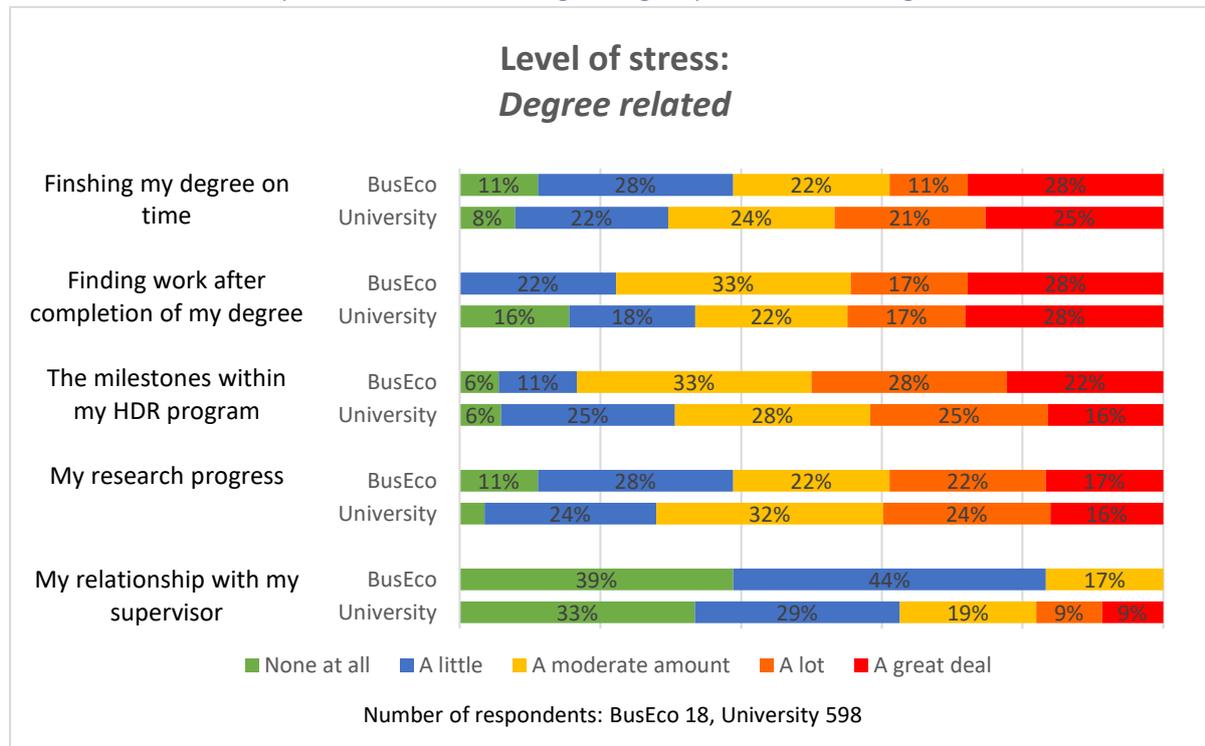
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<sup>19</sup> Jon Cornwall, Elizabeth C. Mayland, Jacques van der Meer, Rachel A. Spronken-Smith, Charles Tustin and Phil Blyth, “Stressors in early-stage doctoral students,” *Studies in Continuing Education* 41, no. 3 (2019): 367.

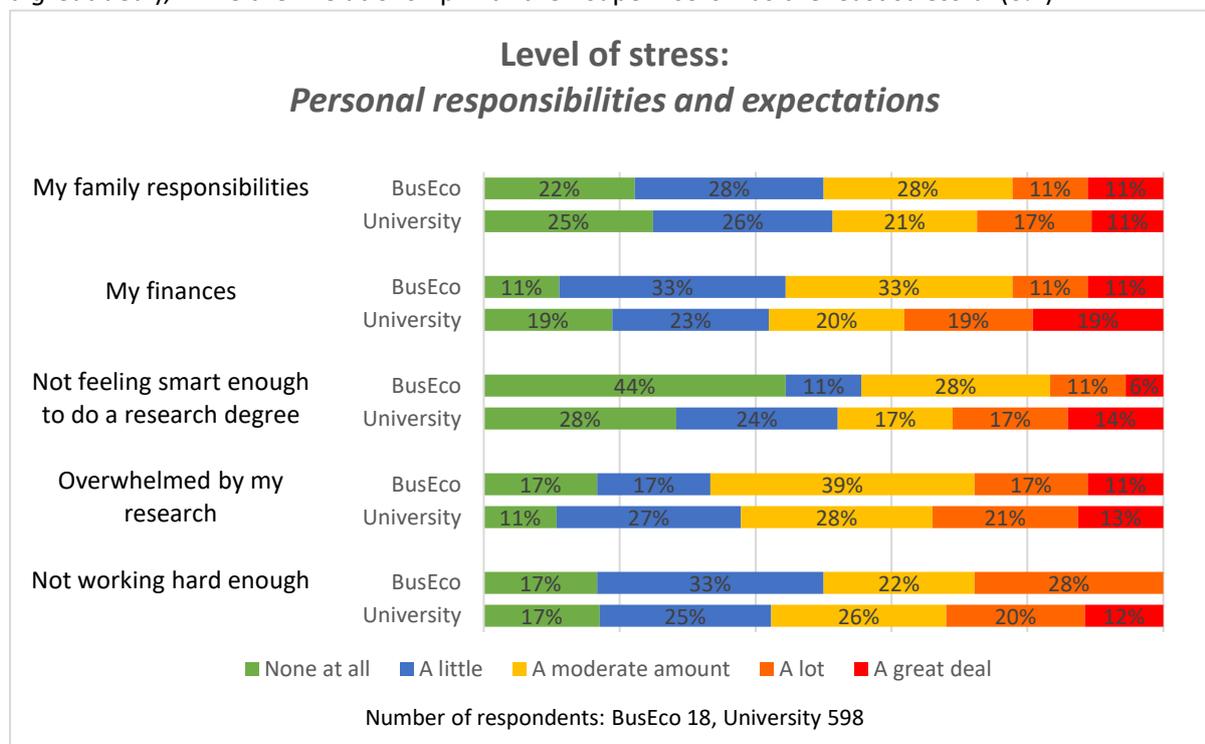
<sup>20</sup> Kim Jesper Herrmann and Gitte Wichmann-Hansen, “Validation of the quality in PhD processes questionnaire,” *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education* 8, No. 2 (2017): 192.

## 7. Stress and wellbeing

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



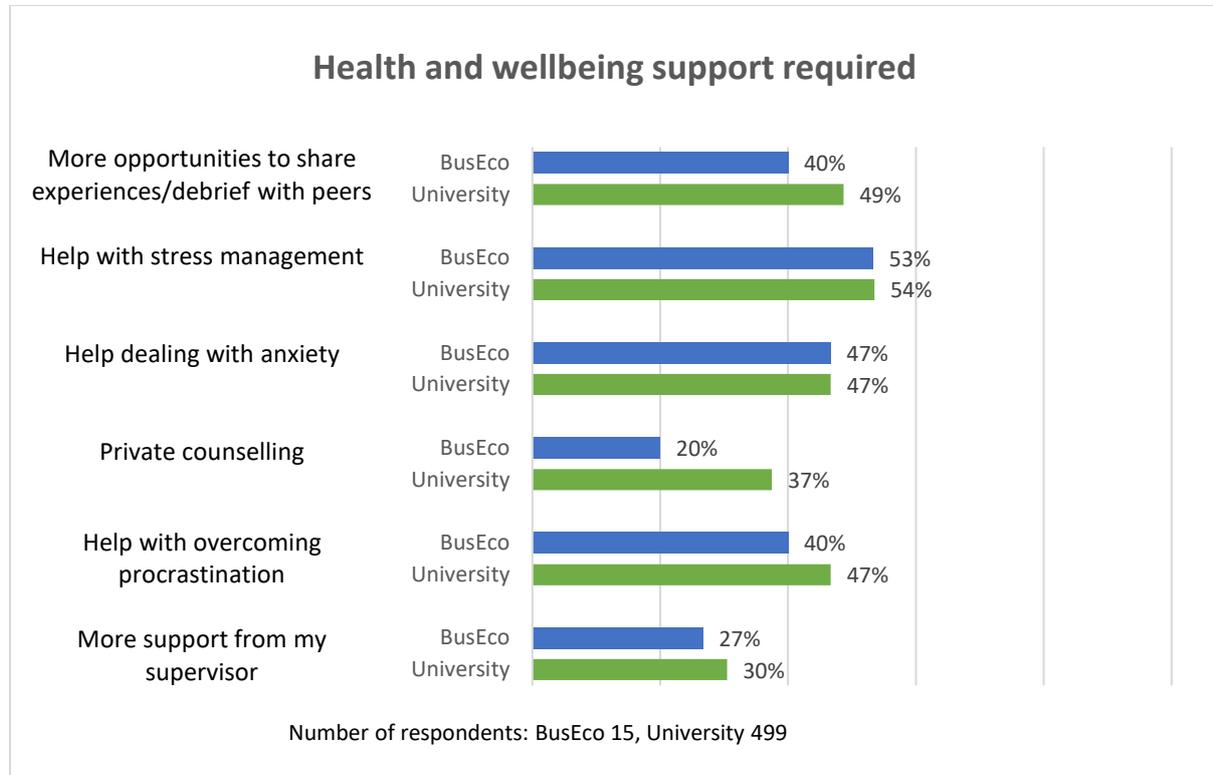
The greatest cause of degree-related stress for BusEco students was milestones (50% either *a lot* or *a great deal*), while their relationship with their supervisors was the least stressful (0%).



Not working hard enough and feeling overwhelmed by the research were the most-stressful of the personal responsibilities and expectations stresses for BusEco respondents, while *'not feeling smart'*

enough to do a research degree' was the least.

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



Help with stress management was the primary health and wellbeing support service that BusEco graduate students wanted Monash University to provide.

## 7.3 Opportunity for comments regarding health and wellbeing.

Only **one graduate student the Faculty of Business and Economics** responded to this statement.

This comment, included:

*“It’s super stressful. The other day, I had a migraine, but [had] work to do, so I lay on the floor in my office until I felt better to keep working. Students sleep under their desks, there is nowhere we can go to lie down.”*

## 7.4 Summary

In relation to their degrees, BusEco respondents were most-stressed about their milestones and least-stressed about their relationship with their supervisor, while in relation to their personal responsibilities and expectations, they were most-stressed about feeling like they were not working hard enough and being overwhelmed by the research and least-stressed about not feeling smart enough to do a research degree.

'Help with stress management' and 'help dealing with anxiety' were identified as the support services that BusEco respondents most wanted to receive from the University.

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.<sup>21</sup> Peers (such as fellow graduate students or postdoctoral researchers) can be crucial as, for example, they can be a source of emotional, social and intellectual support which can replace or complement supervisory guidance.<sup>22</sup>

PhD candidates isolating themselves is one of the most important factors in determining delay.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> Peer support initiatives are also useful in creating a positive research community and facilitating a sense of belonging,<sup>25</sup> 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 **BusEco graduate students could certainly benefit from an increase in social support and wellbeing services.**

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<sup>21</sup> Dharmananda Jairam and David H. Kahl, Jr., "Navigating the doctoral experience," 312.

<sup>22</sup> Lilia Mantai and Robyn Dowling, "Supporting the PhD journey: insights from acknowledgements," *International Journal for Research Development* 6, no. 2 (2015): 106-07.

<sup>23</sup> Rens van de Schoot et al., "What took them so long?" 3.

<sup>24</sup> Carolyn Richert Bair and Jennifer Grant Haworth, "Doctoral student attrition and persistence," 491.

<sup>25</sup> 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?

Eleven graduate students from the Faculty of Business and Economics responded to this question. Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Facilities, services and resources	4
Monash academics, faculties and staff	4
Research – intellectual stimulation and development	3
Supportive environment and culture	3
Career opportunities	2
Supervisors	2
Financial support/funding	1
Monash reputation	1
Social events/environment	1
Student peers and colleagues	1
Training/coursework/professional development	1

Several Business and Economics 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: good facilities, lots of resources, allocated offices and workspace.

Also receiving several references were **Monash academics, faculties and staff**. Revealing comments, included:

*“Working with people who really know what they’re doing.”*

*“Access to intelligent researchers.”*

*“Qualified academic environment.”*

**Other notable comments**, included:

*“I love my research!! It’s so great! I also get to teach undergrads, which I also love!”*

*“Being part of [a] top-100 ranked university.”*

*“The chance to interact with a lot of students.”*

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

Ten graduate students from the Faculty of Business and Economics responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Administration and communication	2
Compulsory coursework	2
Isolation	2
Lack of support/value	2
Stress and wellbeing	2
Course length and workload	1
Financial issues	1
Lack of international student support	1
Location	1

**Notable comments** to emerge from Business and Economics graduate students, included:

*“Feeling a bit isolated.”*

*“Overwhelming amounts of research.”*

*“No idea what the hell you’re doing most of the time, stress and limited support, no one to ask about information, options for support ... no one face-to-face – we need that.”*

*“Only having three years funding to complete coursework and research.”*

## 8.3 How can the research postgraduate experience be improved?

Six graduate students from the Faculty of Business and Economics responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Coursework	3
Administration/communication	1
Community and culture	1
Course length and time	1
Funding/finances	1
Milestones	1
Monash priorities	1
Professional development	1

The primary suggestion for improvement that Business and Economics graduate students had related to **coursework**. Noteworthy comments, included:

*“Sort out the coursework.”*

*“Lessen coursework or increase duration of funding.”*

**Other notable comments**, included:

*“I wish there could be more social events organised for research students in my department. I wish it could be more flexible for me to [go] back [to] my home country.”*

*“More useful and practical professional development sessions.”*

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!

There were **no comments from Business and Economics graduate students** in response to this question.

8.5 Summary

*Facilities, services and resources and Monash academics, faculties and staff* ranked highest in ‘the best aspects of being a Monash research postgraduate’ responses.

The worst aspect was a five-way tie between *administration and communication, compulsory coursework, isolation, lack of support/value and stress and wellbeing*.

When it came to the question ‘How can the research postgraduate experience be improved?’ the primary suggestion from BusEco graduate students related to improving coursework.

#### (iv) MGA Recommendations

Based on the findings of this survey and direct contact with the BusEco 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 clear and consistent information regarding milestone requirements.*

**Coursework:**

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

**School culture and facilities:**

5. *That the Faculty improve opportunities for social and academic interaction, networking and discussions among graduate students.*
6. *That graduate students are offered seminars or workshops relating to 'preventing procrastination,' 'dealing with anxiety' and 'help with stress management.'*

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(vi) Appendix 1

Demographics of respondents from Faculty of Business and Economics

<b>Faculty (Schools)</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Accounting	2	9.1%
Banking and Finance	2	9.1%
Business Law and Taxation	2	9.1%
Centre for Health Economics	2	9.1%
Econometrics and Business Statistics	1	4.5%
Economics	4	18.2%
Management	5	22.7%
Marketing	4	18.2%

<b>Mode of attendance</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Internal (on-campus)	21	95.5%
External (off-campus)	1	4.5%

<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Domestic student	5	22.7%
International student	17	77.3%

<b>Attendance type</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Full-time	22	100%
Part-time	0	0%

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Female	13	59.1%
Male	8	36.4%
Prefer not to answer	1	4.5%

<b>Enrolled Program</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
PhD	17	77.3%
Master by research	4	18.2%
Other	1	4.5%

<b>Scholarship</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Receives scholarship	18	81.8%
No scholarship	4	18.2%