

MONASH GRADUATE ASSOCIATION (MGA)

HDR SURVEY

FACULTY OF EDUCATION

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 Education are summarised below.

### **Supervision**

The overwhelming majority (85%) of Monash Education graduate students indicated overall satisfaction with their supervision. They were more satisfied with their supervision overall than were respondents from the entire University (82%), while they tended to agree with positive statements relating to how supportive their supervisors were.

### **Milestones**

Monash Education respondents tended to agree that the experience overall was positive at confirmation (92%), but agreement decreased over the course of candidature (Mid-candidature: 80%, Pre-submission: 75%). This was the opposite of what occurred in the responses of University graduate students, where overall agreement increased with each milestone (Confirmation: 78%, Mid-candidature 81%, Pre-submission: 85%).

As was the case with graduate students across the University, Monash Education respondents were less likely to agree with termination at milestones as candidature progressed.

### **Coursework**

Monash Education respondents (46%) were more likely than University graduate students (38%) to agree that the inclusion of compulsory discipline-based coursework improved research degrees.

Monash Education respondents were more positive about the quality (Edu: 72%, Uni: 58%) and relevancy (Edu: 82%, Uni: 51%) of discipline-based coursework than University graduate students, while they were also more likely to believe that it was a good use of their time (Edu: 63%, Uni: 46%).

### **Professional Development**

Just under half (49%) of Monash Education 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 (23%) indicated that they should be.

Only 44% of Monash Education respondents felt that these units were relevant, while 50% thought it was a good use of their time.

The majority of Monash Education graduate students experienced an uncomfortable level of stress because of the professional development component of their degree. They were more than twice as likely as University respondents to associate either *a lot* or *a great deal* of stress with professional development.

While some graduates 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 Education graduate students (43%) were slightly more likely to have experienced significant delay in the progress of their research as graduate students enrolled across all campuses (38%). They were also marginally more likely to have considered discontinuing their enrolment than their University counterparts (Edu: 31%, Uni: 29%).

While 60% of Monash Education graduate students agreed that they had sufficient time to produce a quality research project, despite additional requirements of compulsory milestones/coursework/professional development, 40% indicated they felt an uncomfortable level of stress about finishing their degree on time.

Improving supervision, access to funding (scholarships and financial aid) and changing or removing professional development were identified as the three most important things the University could do to assist Monash Education graduate students in achieving timely completion.

### **School culture and facilities**

Overall, Monash Education graduate students were considerably less satisfied (51%) with the level of resources and facilities provided to them than University respondents (71%).

They were also less likely (51%) to agree with the statement '*I feel included in my academic unit*' than were their University peers (64%).

Monash Education graduate students (29%) were over twice as likely as Monash graduate students (14%) to have experienced discrimination within the University.

### **Stress and Wellbeing**

The area in which Monash Education respondents expressed they felt the highest level of stress (43% either *a lot* or *a great deal*) was in relation to their finances, while the area associated with the least amount of stress (22%) was '*my relationship with my supervisor.*'

Monash Education graduate students nominated '*help with overcoming procrastination*' and '*help with stress management*' as the top two ways the University could help support their health and wellbeing.

### **Overall comments**

Monash Education graduate students identified Monash academics, faculties and staff as the best aspect of being at Monash.

Interestingly, while also being considered the second-best aspect, Monash Education respondents rated facilities, services and resources as the worst aspect of being at Monash.

Monash Education respondents most 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. Improving professional development was also rated as the most wanted improvement.

## (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 668 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, thirty-eight were from research graduate students enrolled through Monash Education, which equates to 10% of the total research graduate student population in the Faculty in that year.

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

In the quantitative analysis, some Monash Education 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 18 such opportunities in the survey, and graduate students from Monash Education 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;<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.

Overall respondents were skewed towards female (87%), on-campus (71%), full-time (71%), PhD students (79%). Male students were also represented (11%), while international (32%) and domestic students (68%) were well-represented. Appendix 1 provides the demographics of Monash Education 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 Monash Education, 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?

<b>Read the Code of Practice</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>University</b>
Yes	28 (73.7%)	386 (57.8%)
No, but I've heard about it	7 (18.4%)	169 (25.3%)
No, I didn't know it existed	3 (7.9%)	113 (16.9%)

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

<b>Aware of supervisor's responsibility</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>University</b>
Yes	32 (84.2%)	533 (79.8%)
No	1 (2.6%)	22 (3.3%)
Not sure	5 (13.2%)	113 (16.9%)

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

<b>Aware of own responsibilities</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>University</b>
Yes	35 (92.1%)	592 (88.6%)
No	0 (0%)	14 (2.1%)
Not sure	3 (7.9%)	62 (9.3%)

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

<b>Conflict or misunderstanding with your supervisor</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>University</b>
Yes	11 (28.9%)	108 (16.2%)
No	27 (71.1%)	560 (83.8%)

Monash Education respondents were more likely to have read the Code of Practice and be aware of their supervisor's responsibilities towards them than graduate students from across the University. They were also more likely to report that they have experienced conflict or misunderstanding with a supervisor.

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

Seven graduate students from Monash Education 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	5
Exploitation/IP authorship/research misconduct	3
Inaccessible	2
Inappropriate behaviour – bullying/harassment/tone/intimidation	2
Lack of expertise and/or interest	2
Supervision team issues	2
Administrative issues	1

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

*“Communications issues; lack of any supportive feedback and poorly expressed critical feedback.”*

*“Too authoritative, controlling and pessimistic.”*

Of the seven respondents, three expressed that they **felt exploited by their supervisor or supervisors**. Comments, included:

*“Sloppy writing style, and minimal input despite acting as co-author to a paper for publication.”*

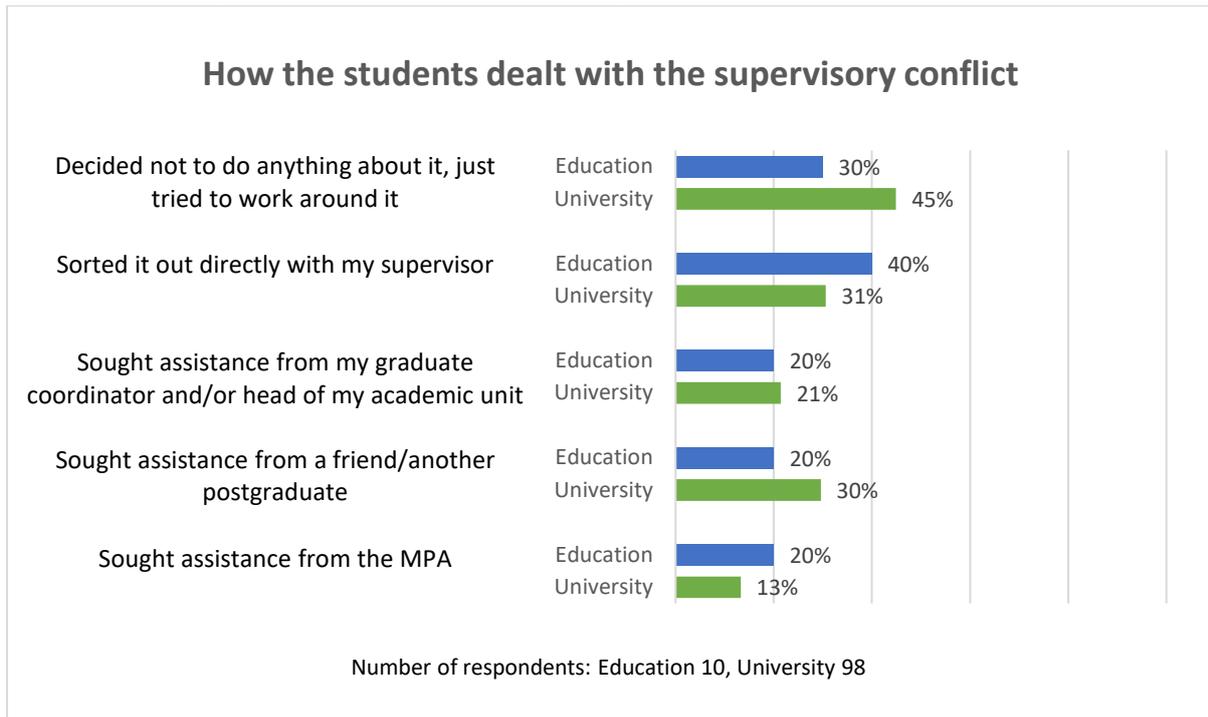
*“Promised future ‘employment’ as a Teaching Associate if I write the majority of his Masters Unit (did not happen).”*

**Other notable comments** relating to the conflict and misunderstanding between graduate students of Monash Education and their supervisors included:

*“Difficulty organising meetings and getting timely feedback on drafts.”*

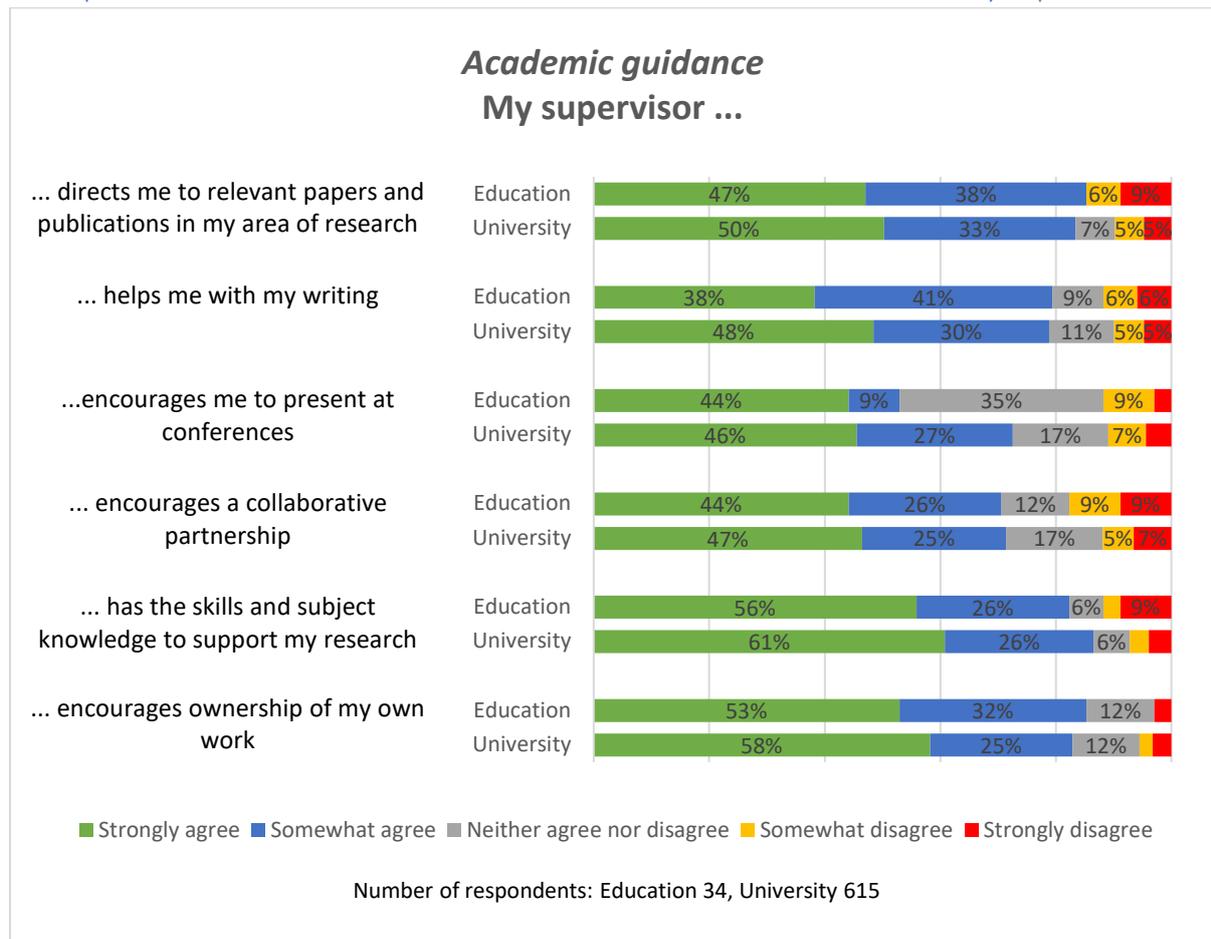
*“Inappropriate commenting on how I look (makeup) ... [and] think (like a man). [And] questionable advice on how to develop and report my research.”*

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



Monash Education respondents who experienced conflict were more likely to have *'sorted it out directly with their supervisor'* than the average Monash graduate student.

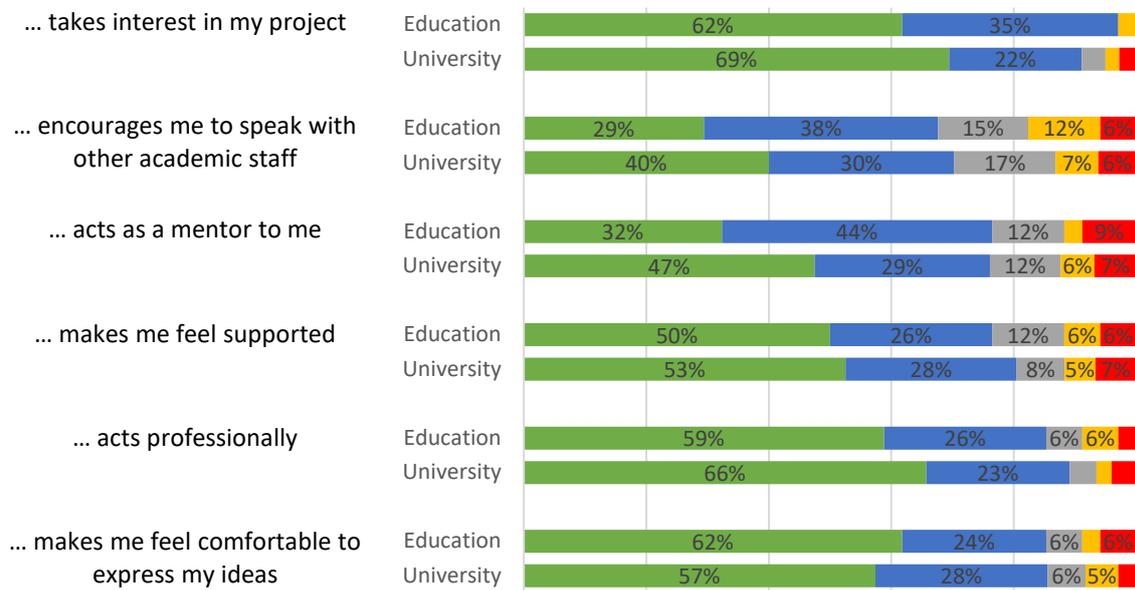
1.7 Please rate the following statements regarding your supervision experience. Select one option for each statement from the list below where "At least one of my supervisors..."<sup>3</sup>



With the exception of feeling encouraged to present at conferences (Edu: 53% total agreement, Uni: 73%), Monash Education respondents tended to agree with positive statements relating to the guidance provided by their supervisors with the same frequency as University graduate students.

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

### Supportive role My supervisor ...

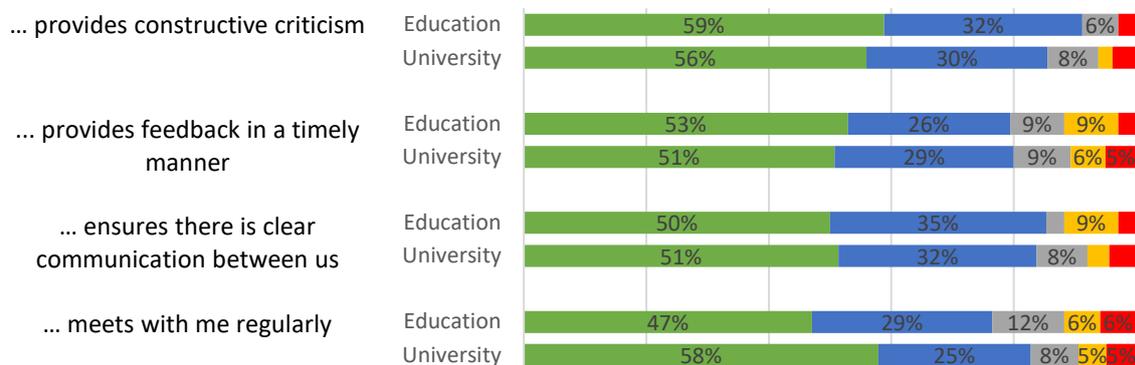


Legend: Strongly agree (green), Somewhat agree (blue), Neither agree nor disagree (grey), Somewhat disagree (yellow), Strongly disagree (red)

Number of respondents: Education 34, University 615

Monash Education respondents tended to agree with positive statements about the supportive role their supervisors played; however, agreement was particularly convincing with the statement 'my supervisor takes interest in my project.'

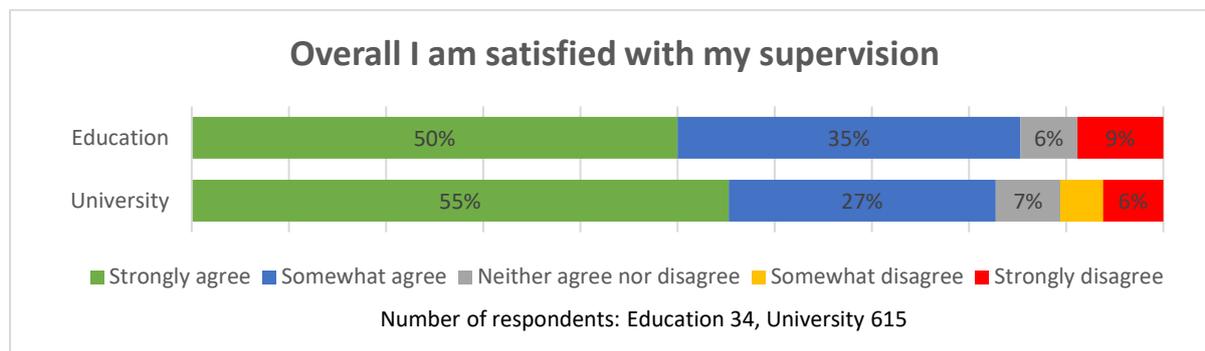
### Appropriate feedback My supervisor ...



Legend: Strongly agree (green), Somewhat agree (blue), Neither agree nor disagree (grey), Somewhat disagree (yellow), Strongly disagree (red)

Number of respondents: Education 34, University 615

Graduate students from Monash Education overwhelmingly agreed with positive statements about the feedback provided by their supervisors.



The graduate students of Monash Education (85%) were slightly more satisfied than University respondents (82%) with their supervision overall.

### 1.8 Opportunity for comments regarding your supervision.

Ten graduate students from Monash Education responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Positive comments: 6

Negative comments: 5

General theme	Number of responses
Changing supervisors	3
Administrative competence/incompetence	2
Communication and feedback – good and bad	2
Inaccessibility	1
Incompetence/unsuitability and lacking appropriate skills/experience/knowledge	1
Knowledgeable	1
Mentoring - positive	1
Suggested improvements	1
Supportive/respectful/engaged/guidance/nurturing/encouraging	1

The majority of respondents from Monash Education were **positive** about an element of their supervision experience within their degrees. Some notable examples include:

*“My supervising team have been outstanding in every way. I value our relationship and have learnt a great deal from them.”*

*“My supervisors try their best to help me with my research overall. I am very much satisfied with them. They are professional and, at the same time, very kind by nature, which encourages me to move on with [the] tough journey of a PhD.”*

On the other hand, half of the respondents from Monash Education were **negative** about an element of their supervision experience. Interesting comments, included:

*“As an off-campus student, it is difficult to find appropriate supervision, since I have limited contact with staff.”*

*“I think supervisors may need further or better training in giving feedback. I have had issues that I know other students also have in terms of supervisors being solely focused on negative feedback ... Knowing what is right is as important as what is a weakness. How to phrase negative feedback is also important ... I am not saying supervisors need to baby their students, but be a little more considerate.”*

One theme that appeared particularly relevant to respondents from Monash Education was **changing supervisors.**

*“Supervisor retired halfway through, but is staying on as an adjunct ... I would rather have a new supervisor, but he won’t relinquish his role or let others supervise, despite rarely being available to meet/review my work/attend my milestones. Another supervisor was also allocated from the start but he is overseas and I don’t work with him – his name was put down as a supervisor ... so my main supervisor could keep control of the work, but satisfy University requirements.”*

*“My present supervisor is the second one since enrolling for the PhD. The first supervisor was extremely poor in all departments and when I protested, she invited me to withdraw my candidacy. I went to the MPA postgrad advocate instead, made some enquiries, and signed up with my present supervisor.”*

## 1.9 Summary

Research supervision has become a vital process in the success of graduate 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 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

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<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.

<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.

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 Education (85%) was higher than it was among all Monash graduate students (82%).

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> Monash Education 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.<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 slightly lower in Monash Education (82%) than it was in the University (87%), but it was still a convincing result.

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>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.

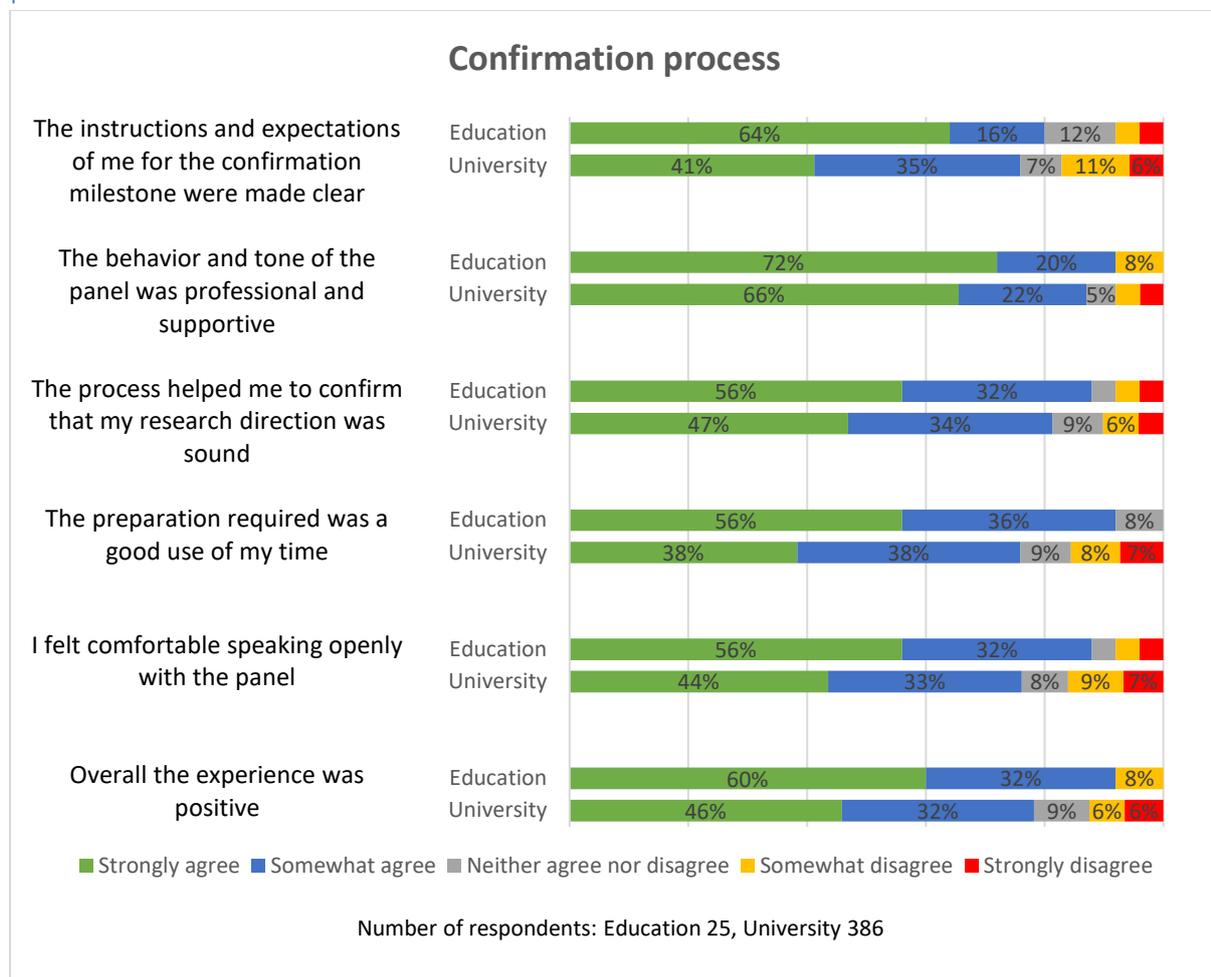
<sup>9</sup> Karen Hunter and Kay Devine, "Doctoral student's emotional exhaustion and intentions to leave academia," *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* 11 (2016): 40.

<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.



On each of the statements rating the confirmation process, Monash Education respondents tended to agree more so than their University peers. They were substantially more likely to believe that the preparation required was a good use of their time (Edu: 92%, Uni: 76%), while overall, they valued the experience to a greater degree (Edu: 92%, Uni 78%).

## 2.2 Opportunity for comments about the confirmation process.

Six graduate students from Monash Education responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 3

Positive comments: 3

General theme	Number of responses
Good and useful feedback from panel	3
Suggestions for Improvements	3
Unclear requirements and bureaucratic/administrative issues	2
Highlighted supervisor failures/flaws	1
Unsuitable/incompetent/insular/inappropriate panel	1

Half of the responses of Monash Education graduate students were categorised as **negative**. These comments included:

*“The milestone requirements have continually changed throughout my degree, making it very confusing [for me] and ... for faculty academic staff as well. Rules should be set into place for a longer period of time and ... much more advanced warning of any changes [is required] before they are actually made.”*

*“The only problem I have is when they ask about your relationship with your supervisor. I feel we are somewhat powerless to honestly describe this relationship in front of our supervisor’s peers.”*

In Monash Education, all three positive comments regarding confirmation were in relation to **good and useful feedback from panel**.

*“A worthwhile process to both support and question my thinking and the validity of my research. Feedback was invaluable and much appreciated.”*

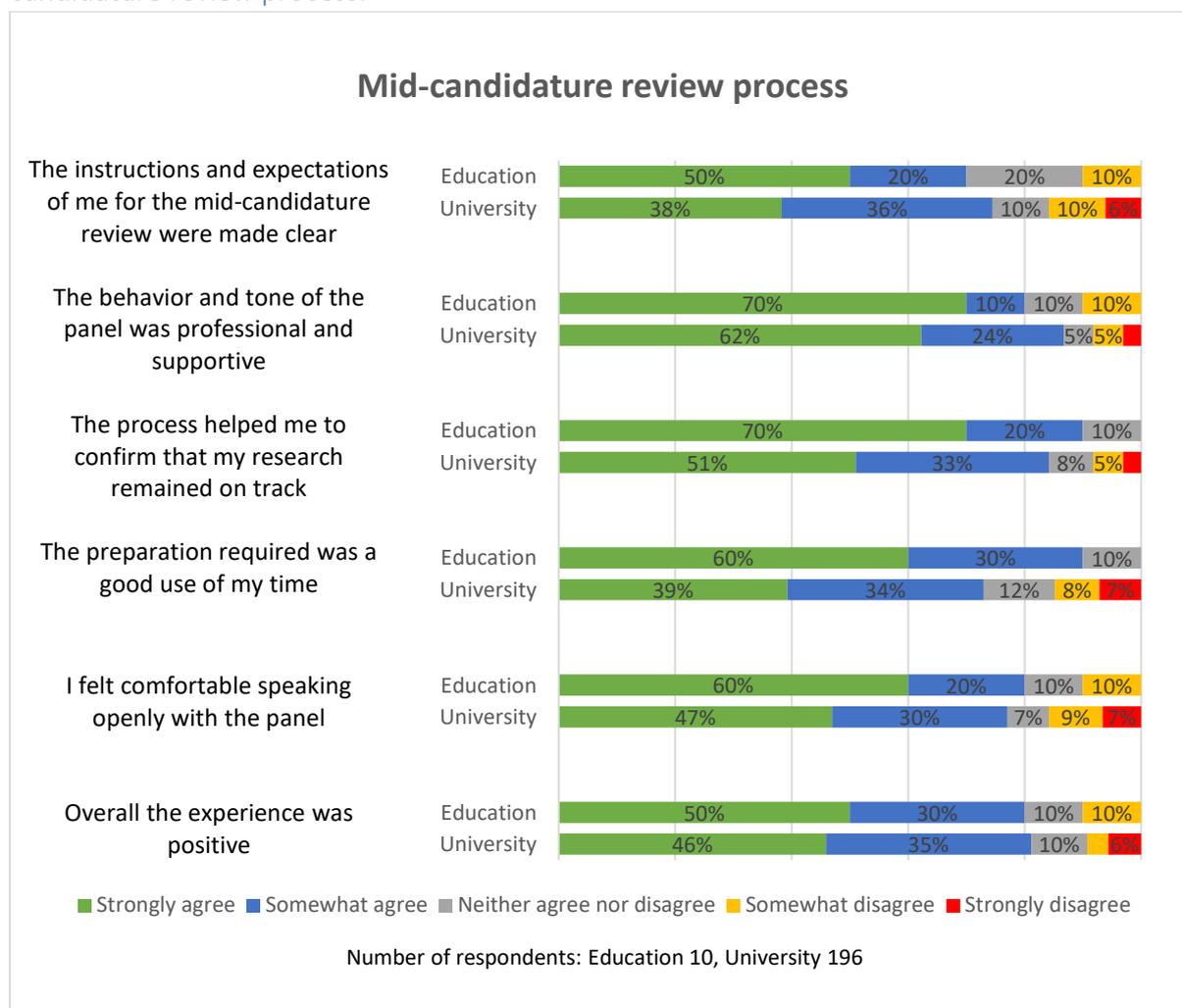
*“The panel was very positive about my work and offered useful tips about how to proceed.”*

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

*“In one respect, it was absolutely wonderful to have academics read my work and provide me with feedback. In another, I felt like I was in some strange courtroom. If you haven’t got people who are acting fairly, I can see how the process could be extremely, and unnecessarily, painful for students.”*

*“My supervisor’s support during the confirmation was minimal. My second supervisor was not even informed [of the confirmation], to the best of my knowledge.”*

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



While still tending to agree with positive statements, overall agreement levels among Monash Education respondents for the mid-candidature review process were slightly lower than for confirmation in most of the categories surveyed. This was most evident in responses to the statement ‘*overall the experience was positive*’, which dropped by 12% from confirmation to mid-candidature review.

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

Four graduate students from Monash Education responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 2      Positive comments: 0

General theme	Number of responses
Unsuitable/incompetent/insular/inappropriate panel	2
Highlighted supervisor failures/flaws	1
Inconsistent experiences	1

Three of the four responses from Monash Education graduate students can be categorised as **negative** and were related to **unsuitable, incompetent, insular or inappropriate panels**. These comments included:

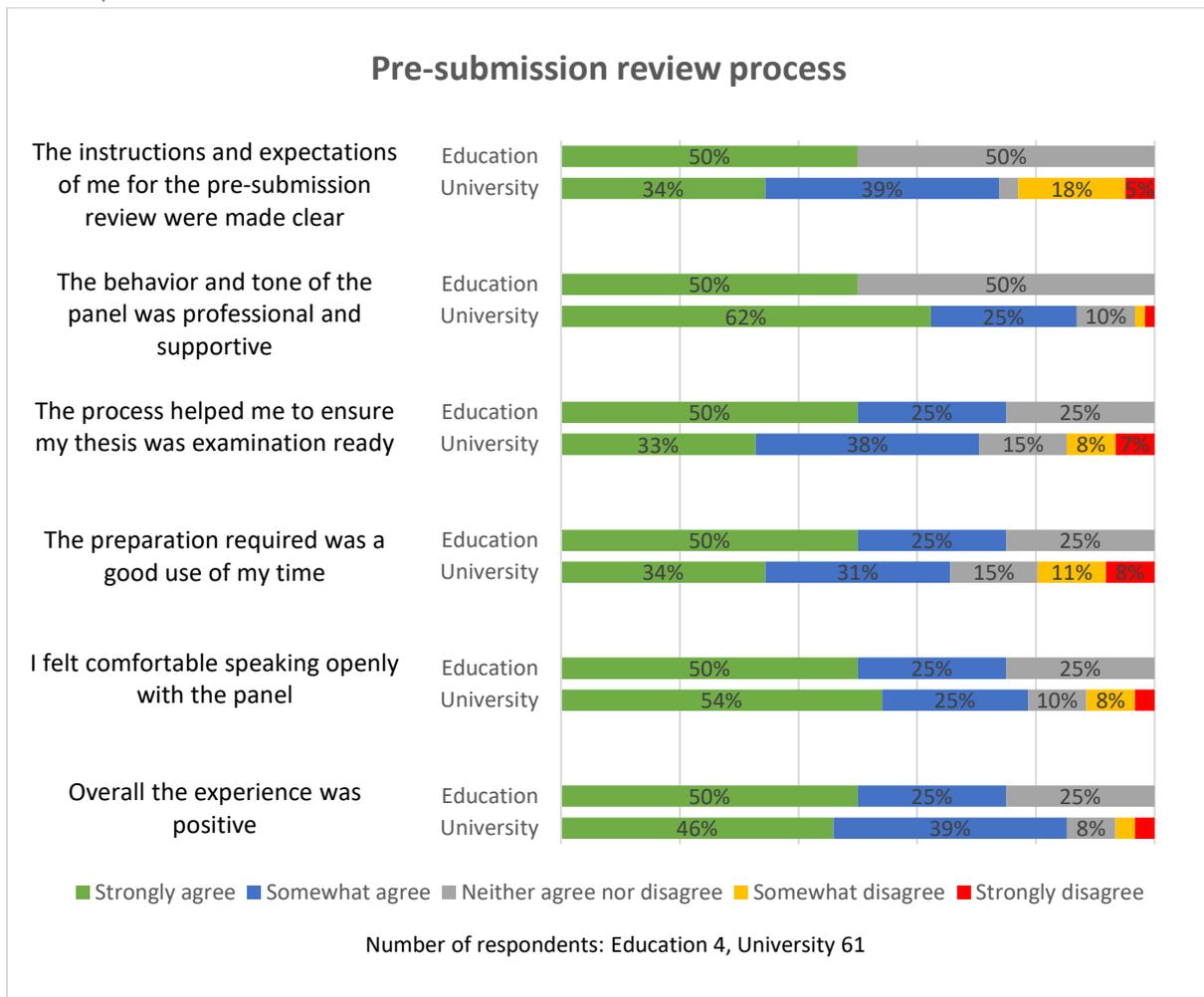
*“This was difficult because the three panel members were so at odds with each other in their approach to me and my work. There was no problem about my passing [of] the milestone, but one panel member behaved most unprofessionally ... and had to be pulled up by my supervisor.”*

*“Each of my milestone panels has consisted of different members of staff due to availability, which I felt was a disadvantage.”*

**Other notable comments** from Monash Education graduate students relating to the mid-candidature review process, included:

*“My main supervisor did not attend or help in any preparations for my mid-candidature review – despite my efforts to involve him. The panel became aware of this and were very supportive in helping me plan [the] next stops.”*

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



Satisfaction with the experience overall dropped again among Monash Education graduate students for the pre-submission review process to 75%.

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

Only **two graduate students from the Faculty of Education** responded to this statement.

These comments, included:

*“As previously, there were different members of staff on my panel (apart from my supervisors).”*



*“I have seen many panels now where the panellists take this new ‘hurdle’ requirement too seriously and see it as a way to denigrate and humiliate the students and their work ... These milestones should be about support and accountability, helping students to refocus or refine their work [and] not about tearing it to shreds and wanting to fail them.”*

Several graduate students expressed that the milestone component of their research **highlighted failures or flaws** in their supervisors. Interesting comments, included:

*“My supervisor used the milestone to threaten me that I will fail and bully me to do whatever they wanted.”*

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

*“International students face many challenges to get settled in the new country and this settlement has its own stress. The process of termination after confirmation adds to their other challenges and affects their efficiency to complete [a] PhD with [a] sound mind.”*

*“I have attended many milestones. I felt that some academics were very subjective whereas others were very objective and supportive. Therefore, I think that it is important for some academics to have a proper training for participating in milestones to reduce their biases. In my opinion, biases were related to students’ sensitive research topics or their nationalities.”*

## 2.9 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>

Monash Education graduate students tended to agree with positive statements regarding their milestones. In regards to the confirmation process, 92% of those responding agreed that *‘overall the experience was positive.’* Total agreement with this statement dropped-off for the subsequent milestones (Mid-candidature review: 80%, Pre-submission review: 75%).

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 Education 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 (37% of Monash Education 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

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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.

perceived absence shown to be fundamental in causing delays,<sup>13</sup> clear guidance and communication may also limit stress.

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<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.

### 3. Coursework

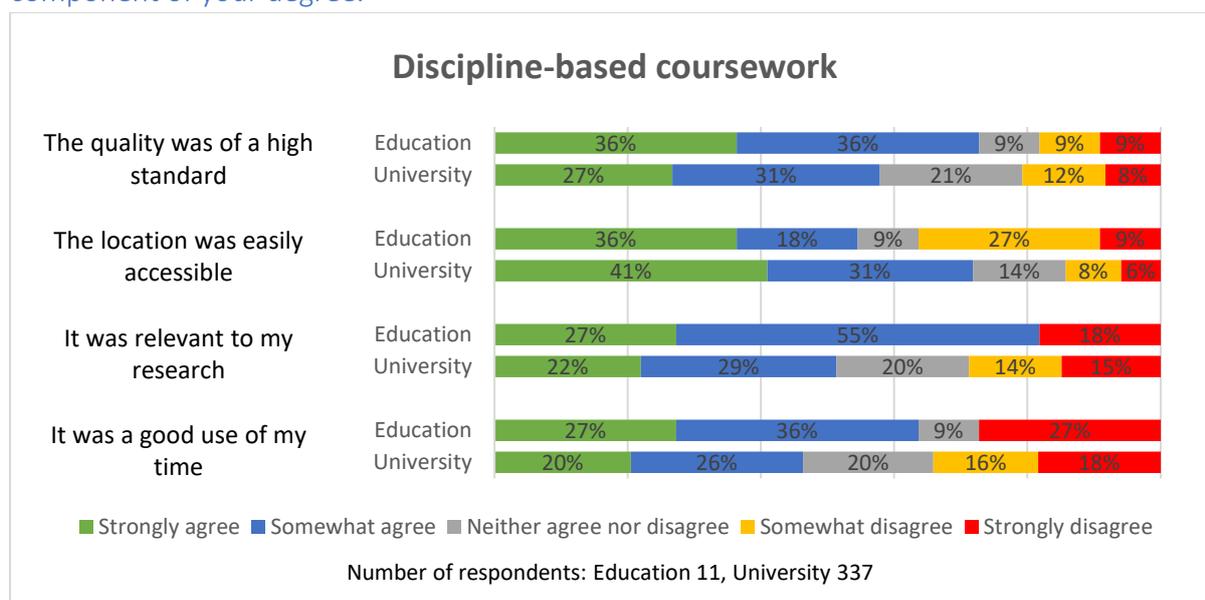
Coursework is not a requirement of Monash Education; however, several graduate students from the faculty still provided answers to these questions.

#### 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?	Education	University
Yes	16 (45.7%)	236 (37.9%)
No	7 (20%)	178 (28.6%)
Not sure	12 (34.3%)	209 (33.5%)

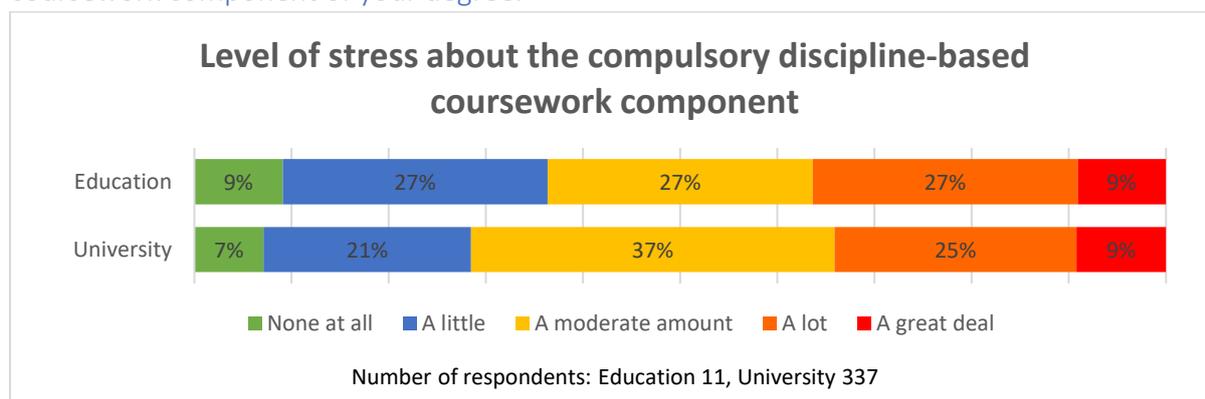
Monash Education respondents were more likely than University graduate students to agree, and less likely to disagree, that the inclusion of compulsory discipline-based coursework would improve research degrees.

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



Monash Education respondents tended to agree with positive statements about the quality and relevancy of discipline-based coursework more so than University graduate students, while they were also more likely to believe that it was a good use of their time.

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



Despite generally being more positive about the quality, relevancy and usefulness of coursework, Monash Education graduate students were slightly more likely to experience an uncomfortable level (*a lot or a great deal*) of stress as a result of coursework than their University counterparts.

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

Thirteen graduate students from Monash Education gave their opinions on the prospect of discipline-based coursework being included in their research degrees.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 6      Positive comments: 6

General theme	Number of responses
Time-consuming/waste of time/misdirected energy	6
Administrative issues/inconsistencies/solutions	2
Irrelevant/discipline-specific	2
Inconsistent quality (unit/course)	1
Lack of academic staff enthusiasm	1
Low/poor-quality unit	1
Networking – relationships and support	1

**Notable comments** from Monash Education graduate students relating to the inclusion of discipline-based coursework in research degrees, included:

*“Coursework regarding research principals, methodologies and practices would greatly benefit students new to research. It would also provide an opportunity for students to make connections and friendships with other PhD students, which can be difficult to achieve without ongoing interactions. I believe that including coursework units would help students to make a running start into their research.”*

*“Based on the voluntary discipline-based session I’ve attended, I think some coursework might be helpful, but I think that the competing demands of assignments etc. could be tricky – especially for part time students.”*

*“These courses could be really good. They could be something that students enjoy [and which] helps build a research community and contributes to research.”*

*“Though not part of my study requirements, I continuously seek out opportunities available to me to learn. I’m not sure if making them compulsory makes for better researchers.”*

### 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>14</sup> the concept of coursework has received a mixed reception in Australia.<sup>15</sup> Education graduate students were no different in this regard with respondents split over its usefulness.

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<sup>14</sup> Rens van de Schoot et al., “What took them so long?” 9.

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

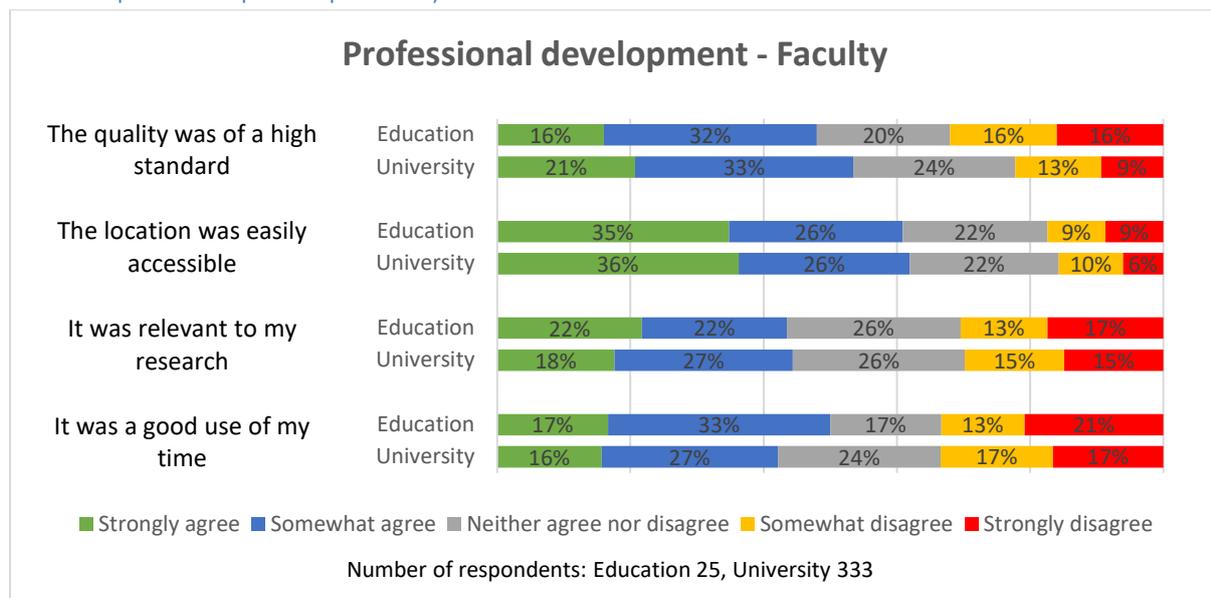
## 4. Professional Development

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?	Education	University
Yes	8 (22.9%)	157 (25.4%)
No	17 (48.6%)	283 (45.9%)
Not sure	10 (28.6%)	177 (28.7%)

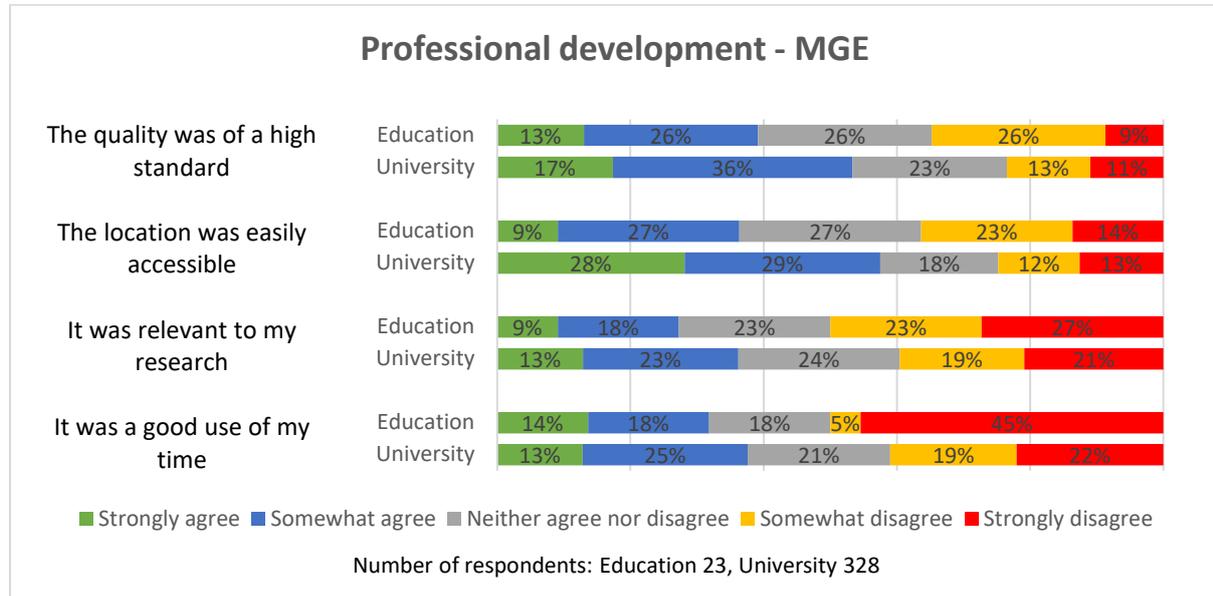
Monash Education respondents were marginally less likely than University graduate students to agree, and marginally more likely to disagree, that the inclusion of professional development improved research degrees.

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).



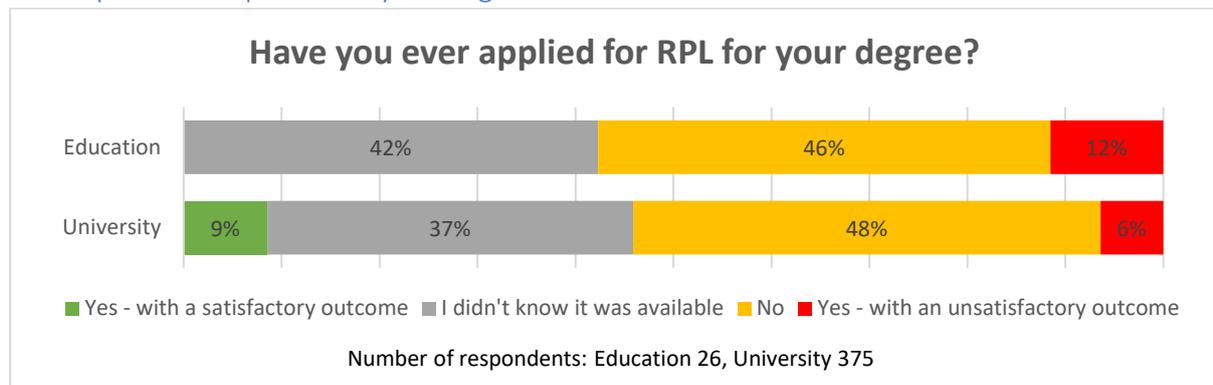
With the exception of *'it was a good use of my time'* (Edu: 50% total agreement, Uni: 43%), Monash Education respondents' opinions on professional development offered by their faculty tended to align with those of their University counterparts to their respective faculty offerings – especially in relation to accessibility and relevancy.

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).



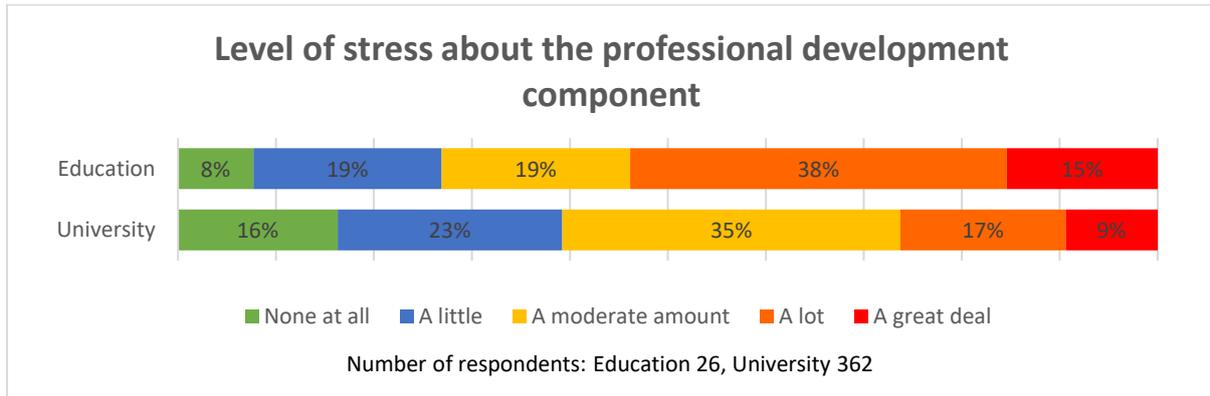
While agreement with these statements relating to professional development units offered by MGE was generally infrequent among University respondents, the table above indicates that Monash Education graduate students were particularly unlikely to agree.

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



None of the Monash Education respondents had successfully applied for Recognition of Prior Learning compared to 9% of University respondents.

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



The majority of Monash Education graduate students experienced an uncomfortable level of stress because of the professional development component of their degree. They were more than twice as likely as University respondents to associate either *a lot* or *a great deal* of stress with professional development.

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

Fifteen graduate students from Monash Education responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 14      Positive comments: 3

General theme	Number of responses
Irrelevant/discipline-specific/lack of options	7
Time-consuming/waste of time/misdirected energy	6
Administrative issues/inconsistencies/unit availability	4
Low/poor-quality units	2
Campus attendance issues (time/travel)	1
Excessive corporate feel/focus	1
Inconsistent quality of units	1

The responses of Monash Education graduate students to compulsory professional development units within their research degrees were **overwhelmingly negative**. Their complaints can be summarised as follows: time-consuming, poor quality, inconvenient, irrelevant, misguided and rigid.

Revealing comments relating to how **irrelevant** the units were to individual students and how there was a **lack of options and choices**, included:

*"I had to complete the MGE professional development regarding general research conduct, ethics etc. after already completing all my research (during final thesis editing stage). This was frustrating, as this was being applied to me retrospectively, despite my starting in 2013*

*when this was not part of my PhD program. I also thought the program was too generalist to be that useful and the format had many issues.”*

*“The MyDevelopment program is extraordinarily misguided ... I have completed numerous courses in software programming that have absolutely no relevance to me, my proposed career or my research. It is really annoying and feels like a complete waste of my time.”*

As the above statements allude to, Monash Education 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**.

*“Attending professional development units as an off-campus student is EXTREMELY DIFFICULT and COSTLY. I’m not opposed to the idea in general, but it is so difficult to earn enough hours. I have completed as many online units as possible and try to attend full-day [classes] or do multiple sessions when I do come to campus, but these are limited as well and not always helpful to my research.”*

*“Professional development is a complete waste of time.”*

Furthermore, there were several individual references to **administrative issues**, such as problems with MyDevelopment, and complaints about **unit availability**. Notable comments, included:

*“I can’t understand why we need to do more generic development than faculty-based development. Also, the sessions fill up so quickly that it’s hard to get into many of them. You get a notification and, even if you respond immediately, the session is full.”*

*“I have not yet had a reply on my submission of RPL, which took months and the cooperation of many faculty members to compile.”*

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

*“Some of [the professional development units] have been very helpful, for instance, units for new international students and publication tips.”*

*“Professional development at the beginning of a course has the possibility of getting all students concentrating on certain aspects of the course they are about to research.”*

Included across the responses of the fifteen 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	4
Audit existing units as an alternative	1
Extend HDR course length to account for PD	1
Should be compulsory	1
Should be optional/voluntary/decided case-by-case	1

The predominant suggestion from Monash Education’s graduate students was for **an improvement in the processes from which Recognition of Prior Learning is granted**. Many 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:

*“The professional development courses seem to assume that the bulk of students are young and come to the PhD directly from Honours and without any work experience. The average age of a domestic PhD student in Australia is 35. The reality is that most students have relevant work experience prior to undertaking a PhD.”*

*“[Doesn’t] take into account the many years of research training we have already undertaken as part of our undergraduate and master’s degrees.”*

*“I have completed coursework on project management – even though I have work experience in project management – just to tick off some professional development hours.”*

**Other notable suggestions**, included:

*“We must do 60+ hours of professional development as part of the degree, but we are not allowed to co-enrol in courses that are useful – like a grad cert in teaching – or some other kind of professional qualification. Why not let students complete courses that count towards an additional professional qualification upon graduation rather than wasting time on professional development activities when the bulk of students in PhDs already have work experience.”*

## 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 15 responses from Monash Education graduate students were 14 individual negative reflections compared to only 3 positive reflections.

Monash Education 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 Education 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.<sup>16</sup>

Under a quarter (22.9%) of Monash Education graduate students thought that professional development units, as offered through *myDevelopment*, should be compulsory.

Monash Education 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.

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<sup>16</sup> Rens van de Schoot et al., “What took them so long?” 8.

## 5. Progress delays and discontinuation

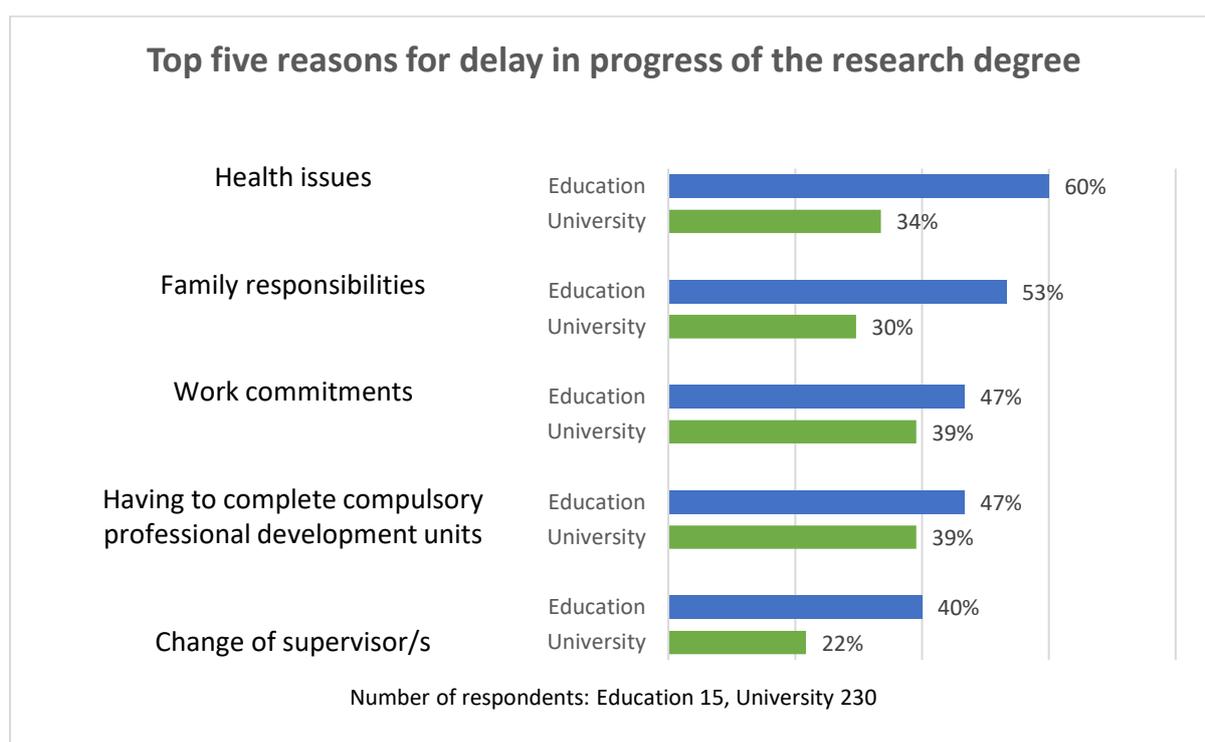
### 5.1 Has anything significantly delayed the progress of your research degree?

Has your research degree progress been delayed?	Education	University
Yes	15 (42.9%)	231 (37.8%)
No	20 (57.1%)	380 (62.2%)

Monash Education respondents were more likely than their peers across the University's faculties to have experienced a significant delay in their research degree.

### 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.

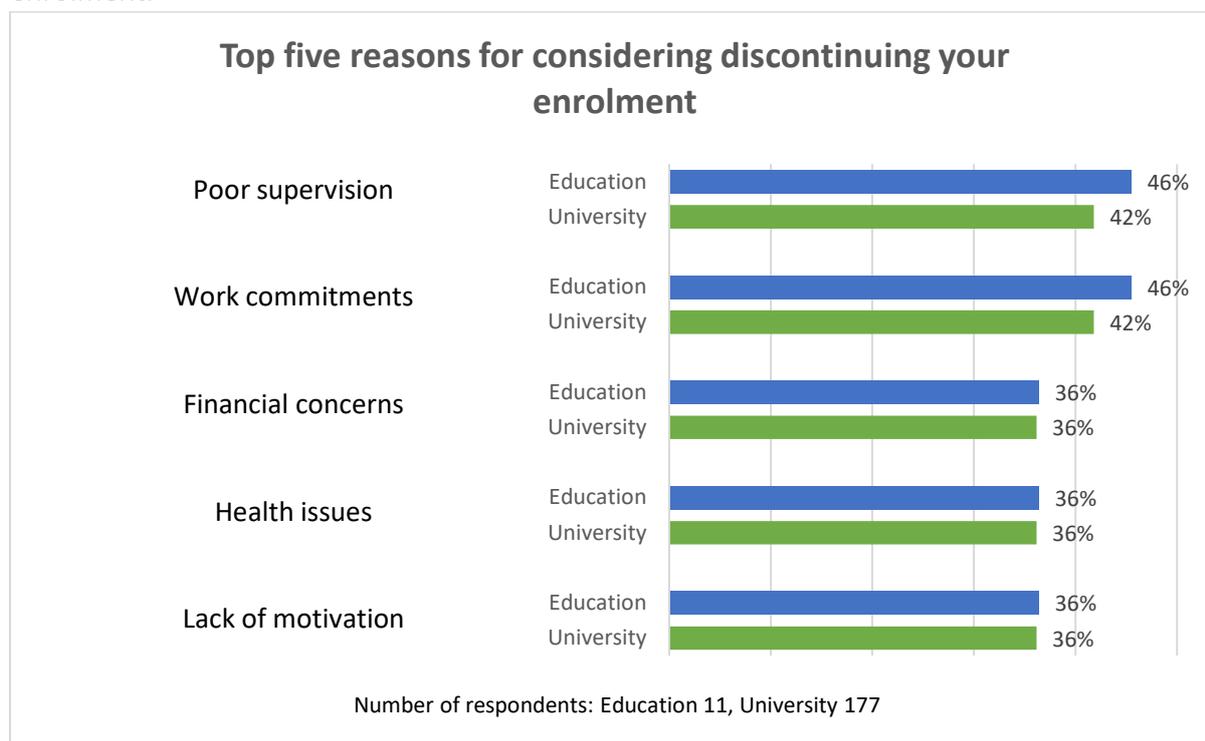


### 5.3 Have you ever considered discontinuing your enrolment?

Have you considered discontinuing your enrolment?	Education	University
Yes	11 (31.4%)	179 (29.3%)
No	24 (68.6%)	431 (70.7%)

Graduate students from Monash Education were marginally more likely to have considered discontinuation than their University counterparts.

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



5.5 What made you decide to continue with your degree?

Ten graduate students from Monash Education responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Personal characteristics – commitment/determination/passion/fear/stubbornness	3
Still uncertain	2
Support from peers, friends and family	2
Support from University staff/services	2
Time, money and effort already invested	2
Scholarship and financial incentives	1

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

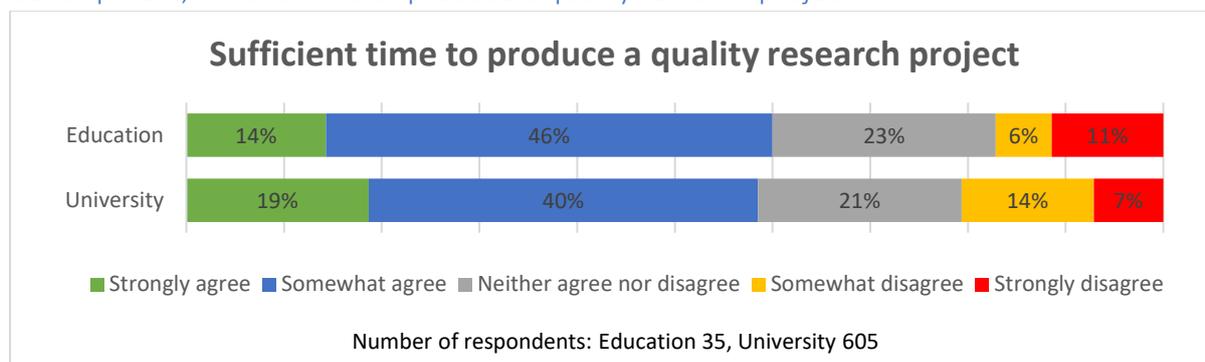
**Personal characteristics** were the most prevalent factor and/or motivation referenced by respondents. In the context of Monash Education graduate students, these comments were predominantly related to **determination** and a sense of **responsibility**.

**Notable comments**, included:

*“The effort I had already put in, family support, and my supervisor’s belief in me and my study.”*

*“Talking to the Associate Dean and gaining support from other PhD colleagues. Being proactive in sourcing other support in the University, including locating a new secondary supervisor with the appropriate skills required to take me through to completion.”*

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



Approximately three in five Monash Education graduate students believed 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?

Twenty-nine students from Monash Education responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Supervision	9
Funding – scholarship/other financial aid	6
Professional development – changing or removing	6
Access to training/support services	5
Administration – guidelines/information/communication/ availability	5
Facilities/labs/equipment/software	4
Extending length of degree/candidature	3
Offices and workspaces	3
Wellbeing – encouragement/motivation/trust/care	3
Compulsory coursework – changing or removing	2
Milestones – changing or removing	2
Access to research material/resources	1
Improving online/cross-campus service delivery	1
Research environment – networking/mentoring/support groups	1
Staff	1
Time/time management	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.

Monash Education 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 area highlighted by Monash Education graduate students was **supervision**. Interesting comments, included:

*“Relieve my supervisors of SOME of their tremendous workload.”*

*“Keep supervisors accountable.”*

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

*“Offer scholarships of higher value equity stipends to students likely to experience financial stress.”*

The prevailing theme in the responses to *Section 4: Professional Development* was that Monash Education graduate students tended to have issues with the administration, requirements and purpose of this component of their degree. This sentiment was again reflected in graduate student responses to this question with comments suggesting professional development should be removed, is irrelevant or has limited options.

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

- **University Administration** – several graduate students wanted more from the University’s administrative services, including more online content/processes, clearer communication and quicker response times.
- **Facilities, labs, equipment and software** – better transport facilities, free printing and more on-campus writing retreats.
- **Wellbeing** – pastoral care, mental health leave protocols and support capabilities.

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

*“Provide a permanent desk space located amongst peers completing similar/same higher degree [courses].”*

*“Being interstate at the moment, I would really appreciate online lecture/tutorials on a weekly basis to help keep up with the weekly content.”*

*“I would say its probably impossible for most people to produce a really high level thesis in 3.5 years.”*

## 5.8 Opportunity for comments regarding your general progress.

Eleven students from Monash Education responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 8

Positive comments: 5

General theme	Number of responses
Health	2
Slow progress	2
Administration	1
Financial issues	1
Good stuff	1
International student issues	1
Poor supervision	1
Professional development	1
Research environment	1

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

*“I believe I am doing the best I can, but working part-time means constant juggling. It’s impossible to survive without an income, so I have to work. Scholarships are not enough to pay the bills.”*

*“The 3.5 years scholarship time was definitely not enough for me; I am set to submit in [the] next couple of weeks, which will be close to 4.5 years.”*

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

*“At the University, everything has been great. I have not had any problems for working on my research and the University-related things.”*

*“I have been blown away by what I have learnt and the support I have received.”*

Other **notable comments**, included:

*“More support for off-campus students. I have no real idea how my progress is going – I always feel behind, but I don’t have much contact with other PhD students.”*

*“Having this forum to express my concerns has been very cathartic. I’m grateful – thank you.”*

*“GRAMS and MyDevelopment are a complete waste of time and I feel that the whole reason they were included as compulsory/hurdle requirements was so the University can avoid any legal repercussions related to the unemployability of graduates.”*

## 5.9 Summary

A significant number of Monash Education respondents (42.9%) had experienced a delay in their research degree, while just under a third (31.4%) 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>17</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.

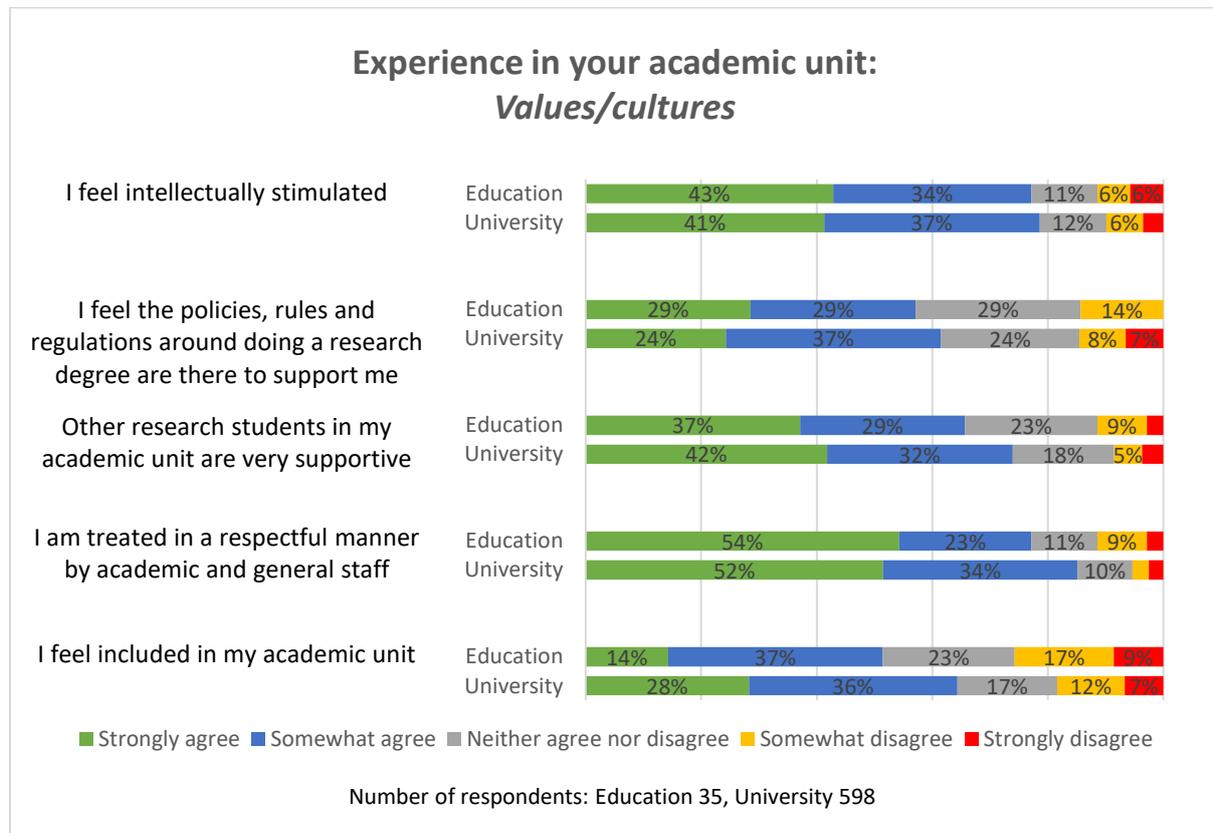
The feedback in *4. Professional Development* revealed that there was widespread dissatisfaction with the attachment of compulsory requirements to this offering, and this was supported in this section with *changing or removing professional development* being the equal second most popular suggestion (alongside *funding*, but behind *supervision*) 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>17</sup> Glenice Ives and Glenn Rowley, "Supervisor selection or allocation and continuity of supervision," 535.

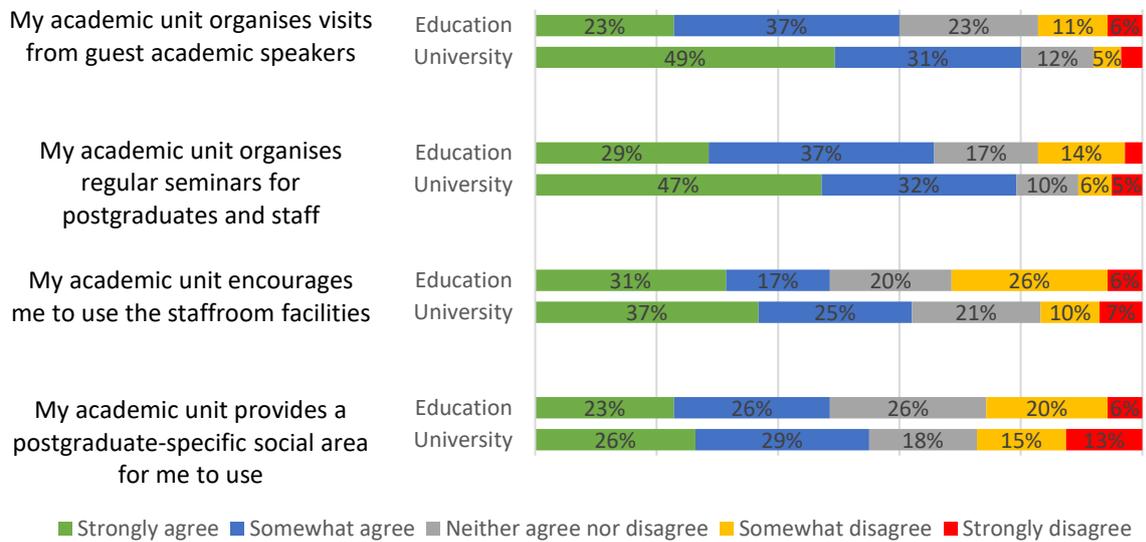
## 6. School culture and facilities

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



While still tending to agree with positive statements, Monash Education respondents did so less than their University counterparts in responses to the values and culture within their academic unit. Specifically, in their responses to the statement *'I feel included in my academic unit,'* they expressed that they felt less included in their academic unit than University graduate students (Edu: 51% total agreement, Uni: 64%).

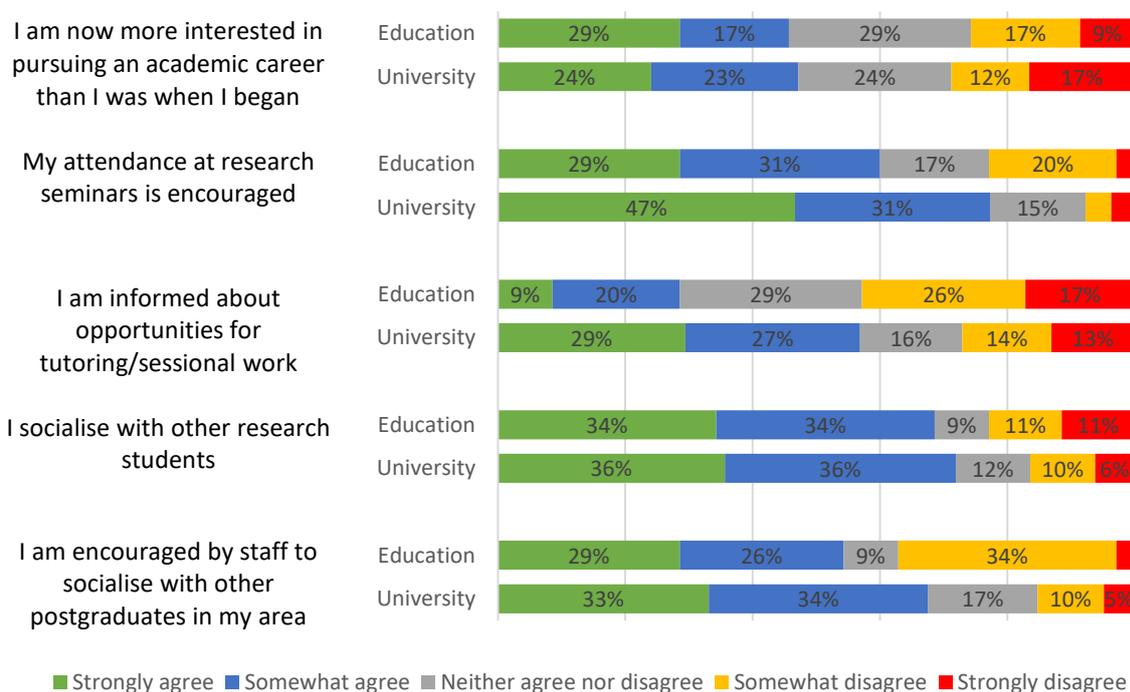
### Experience in your academic unit: *Facilities/resources*



Number of respondents: Education 35, University 598

Regarding their experiences of their academic unit’s facilities and resources, Monash Education respondents expressed less satisfaction than University graduate students. This was especially evident in their response to the statement ‘*my academic unit organises visits from guest academic speakers,*’ which received 20% less agreement among Monash Education respondents than University respondents.

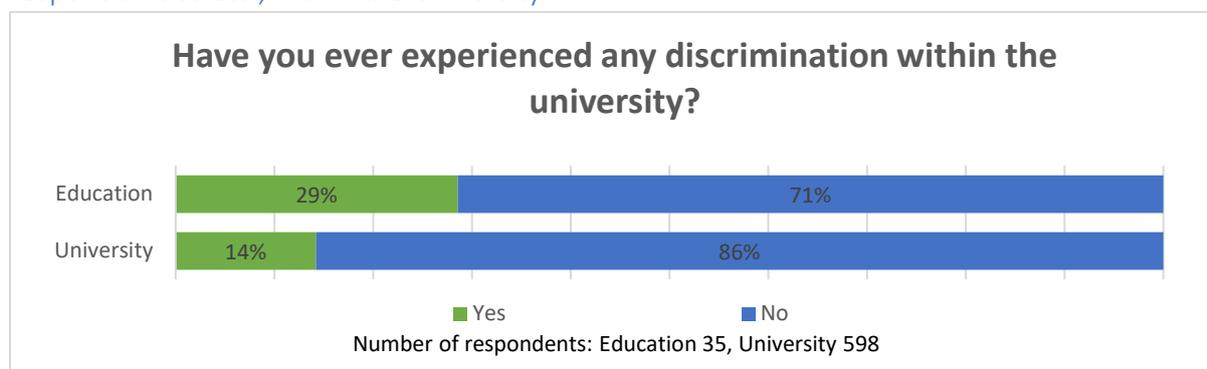
### Experience in your academic unit: *Opportunities*



Number of respondents: Education 35, University 598

Monash Education respondents were less positive regarding the opportunities provided to them by their faculty than were University graduate students. This was particularly evident in the statement, *'I am informed about opportunities for tutoring/sessional work,'* wherein only 29% of Monash Education respondents agreed compared to 56% of University graduate students.

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



Number of respondents: Education 35, University 598

Monash Education graduate students were over twice as likely as Monash graduate students to have experienced discrimination within the University.

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

Ten graduate students from Monash Education responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 8

Positive comments: 2

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

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

*“As a mature adult undertaking a PhD, I believe that the level of supervisor-student engagement needs to be addressed to promote positive supervisor-student relationships.”*

Likewise, **discrimination** was raised in a variety of contexts, including **family, gender, disability, culture, religion and nationality**. Noteworthy comments, included:

*“I have no space on campus where I can bring my child and work.”*

*“Some students have been questioned by their supervisors regarding whether they are going to get married or have babies halfway through their PhD. I have also had one staff member comment on ‘time for me to think about when to have babies’.”*

*“I was a bit disturbed by the racist posters on campus at the beginning of this semester. I am happy that Monash reacted very quickly to it and made a formal statement. Meanwhile, I would love to see actual actions initiated by the University to support diversity and [encourage] respect for each other.”*

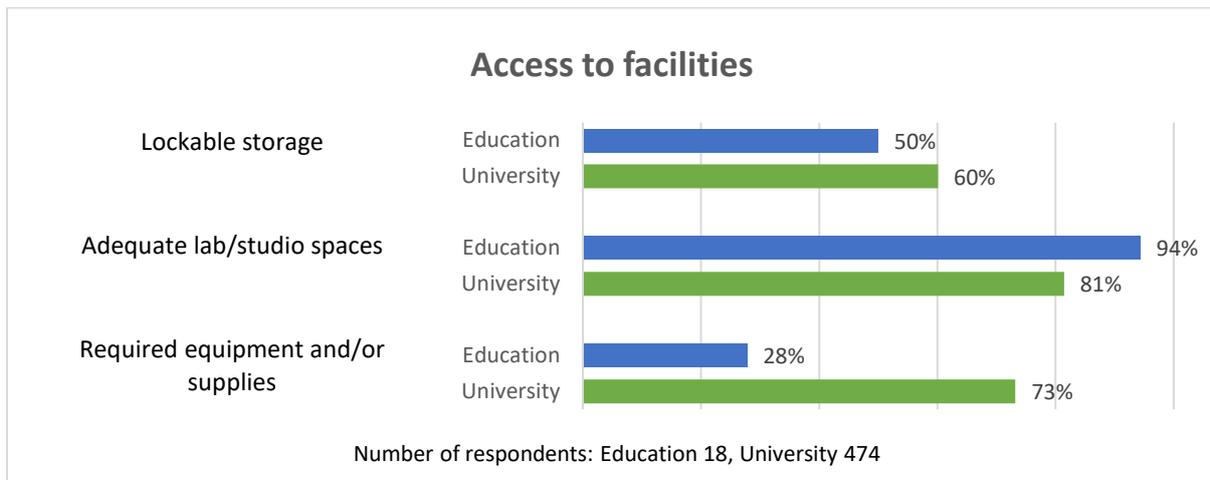
*“The University needs to examine how it values and assesses merit and diversity when selecting and ranking students.”*

Other **notable comments**, included:

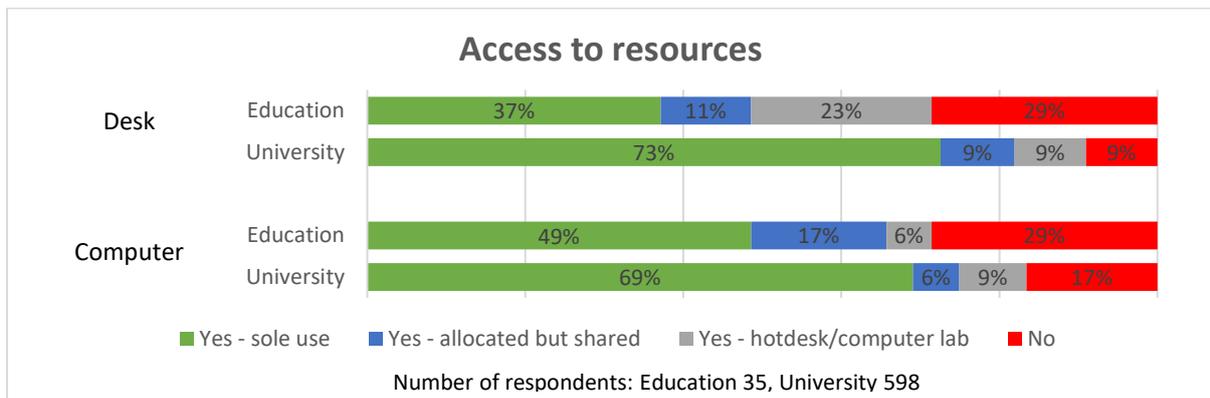
*“I feel forgotten as an off-campus student.”*

*“No complaints – no ageism is in evidence!”*

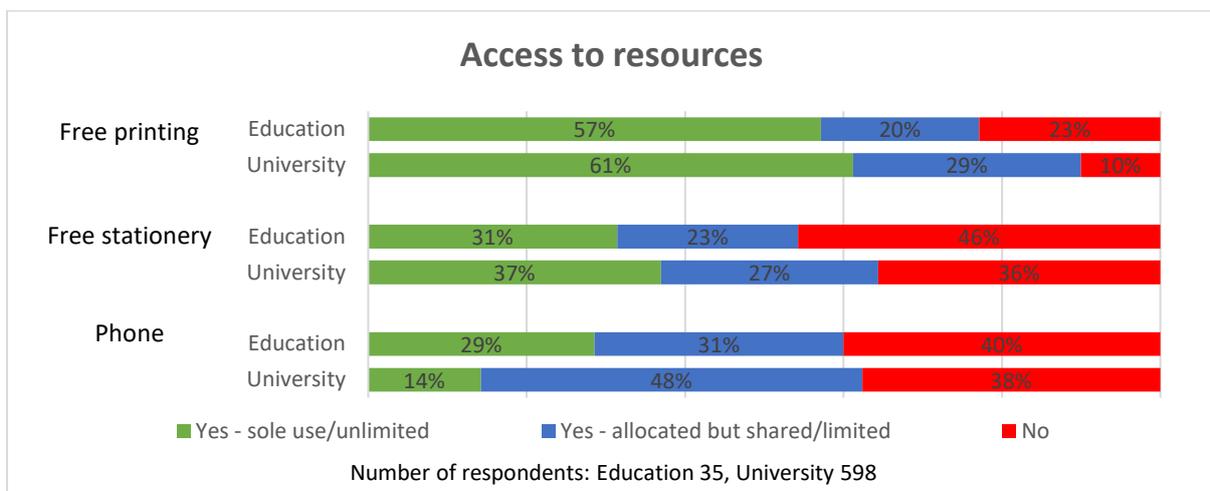
6.4 Does your academic unit provide any of the following facilities? Please select as many as relevant.



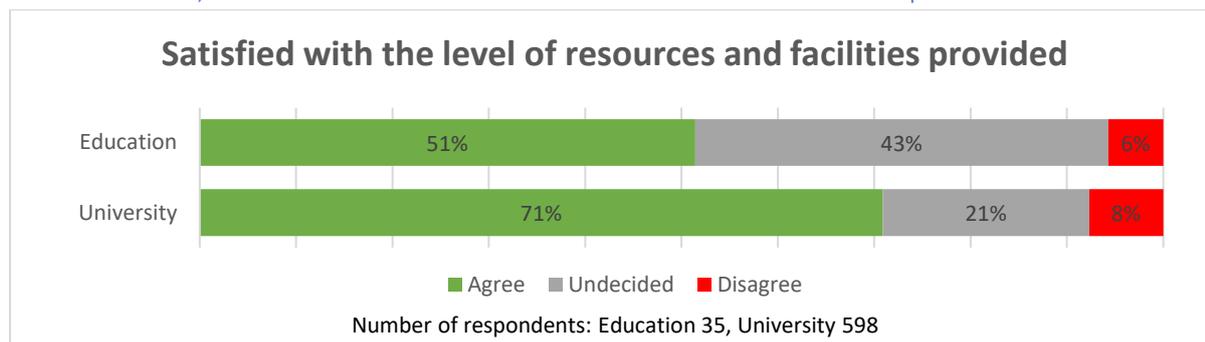
Monash Education respondents were alarmingly less likely than their peers to consider that they have access to required equipment and/or supplies.



Desk and computers were less accessible for Monash Education respondents than University graduate students, according to their responses.



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



Monash Education graduate students were considerably less satisfied with the level of resources and facilities provided to them than were their University counterparts.

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

Thirteen graduate students from Monash Education responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 3      Positive comments: 2

General theme	Number of responses
Personal desk	4
Phone	2
Private office/studio	2
Work at home	2
Computers/laptops/monitors	1
Lockers and storage space	1

Three graduate students from Monash Education reflected negatively on the adequacy of the facilities they receive at Monash University, compared to two graduate students who reflected positively.

Regarding facilities that would help support Monash Education graduate students complete their degrees, there was a range of suggestions made. The primary suggestion involved the University providing **personal desks**.

*“I prefer a dedicated space in which to work, however, as I have a laptop provided to me, I am assigned a hot desk.”*

*“Hopefully the addition of the new education building will not equate to a loss of permanent desk/computer/phone access.”*

*“A permanent desk and work space would be great – where I can store books and notes etc. for daily work.”*

**Other notable comments, included:**

*“I am in a large room with a total of 12 desks. Sometimes it is very noisy and distracting.”*

*“Hot desk is okay, but we need to have access to phones and lockers.”*

## 6.7 Summary

Arguably the most direct insight into Monash Education graduate students' sense of belonging is provided through the responses to the statement *'I feel included in my academic unit.'* **Monash Education 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 51% agreed with the statement, which was the third 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>18</sup> with PhD students who find themselves well-integrated in their research environments experiencing less stress and burnout.<sup>19</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*.

While 77% 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 of the comments were negative. One of the most frequent negative comments was in reference to the research and workplace environment with several respondents reflecting that socialising in this environment was difficult.

The results of this survey indicate a correlation 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.**

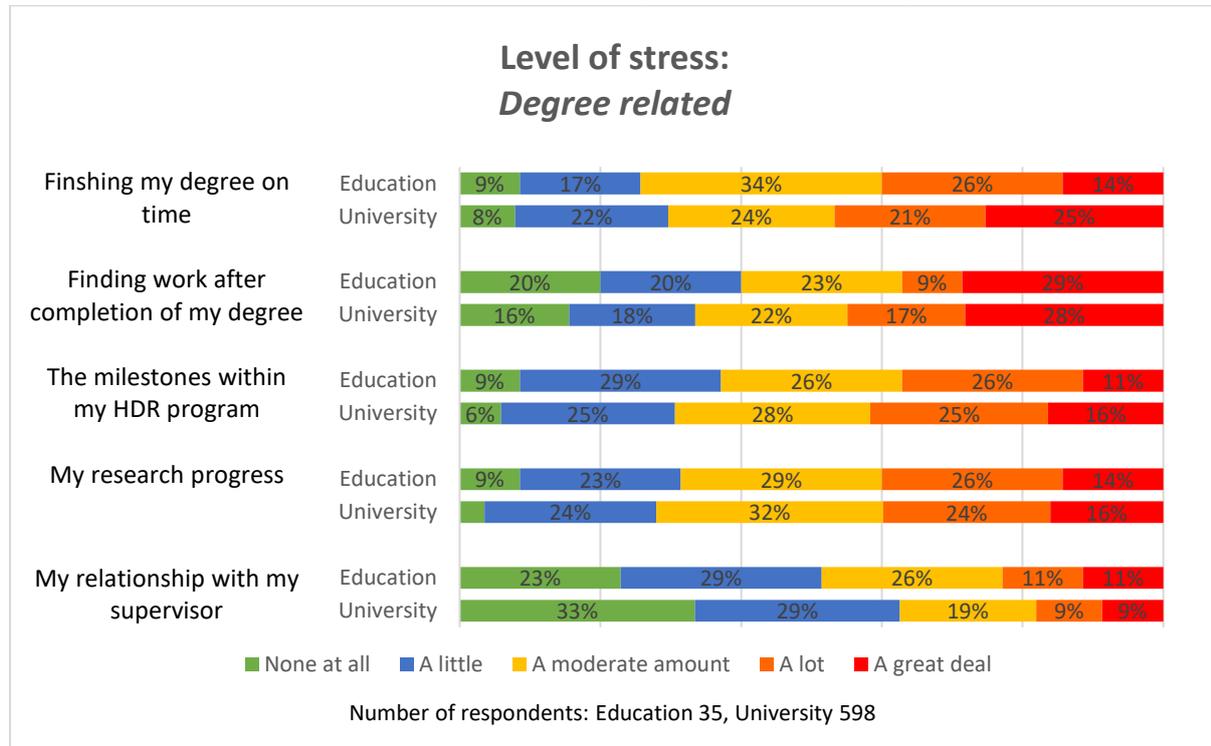
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<sup>18</sup> Jon Cornwall, Elizabeth C. Mayland, Jacques van der Meer, Rachel A. Spronken-Smith, Charles Tustin and Phil Blyth, “Stressors in early-stage doctoral students,” *Studies in Continuing Education* 41, no. 3 (2019): 367.

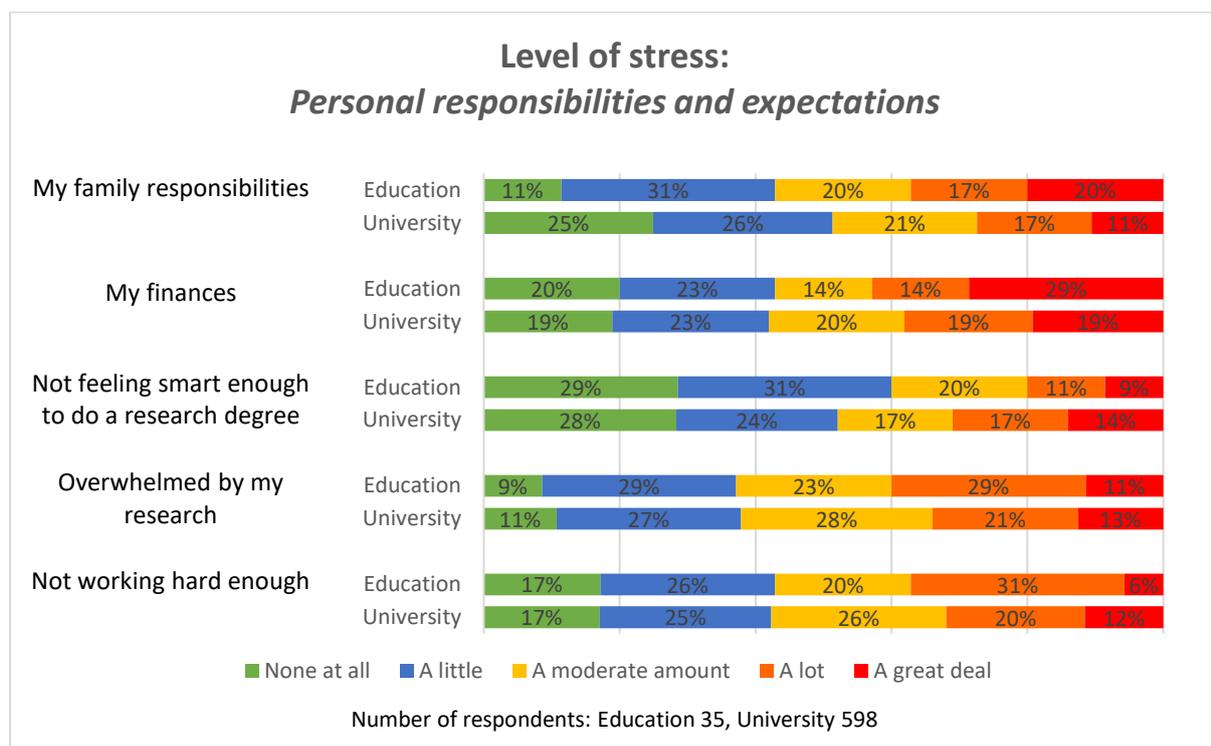
<sup>19</sup> Kim Jesper Herrmann and Gitte Wichmann-Hansen, “Validation of the quality in PhD processes questionnaire,” *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education* 8, no. 2 (2017): 192.

## 7. Stress and wellbeing

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

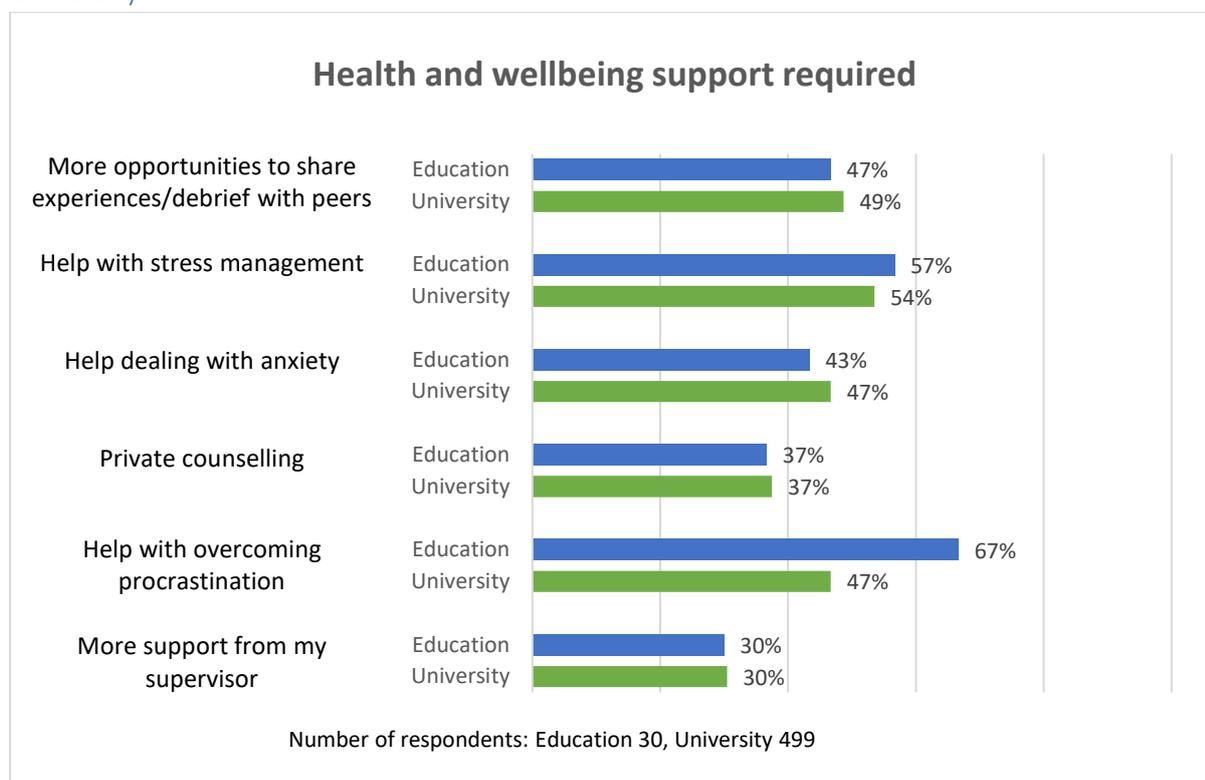


Monash Education respondents were slightly less likely (40%) than University graduate students (46%) to express that they associated an uncomfortable level of stress with finishing their degree on time.



With the exception of *'not feeling smart enough to do a research degree,'* Monash Education respondents were slightly more likely than their peers across the University to experience an uncomfortable amount of stress related to their personal responsibilities and expectations.

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



The health and wellbeing support service that Monash Education graduate students most wanted the University to introduce was *'help with overcoming procrastination.'* There was also sizable interest in support focused on *'stress management.'*

## 7.3 Opportunity for comments regarding health and wellbeing

Six graduate students from Monash Education responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

**Negative comments: 3**

**Positive comments: 1**

General theme	Number of responses
Course flexibility improvements	1
Family pressures	1
Financial pressures	1
Stress/anxiety/depression/isolation	1
Supervision issues	1

Half of the Monash Education graduate students felt that the current services offered by the University in relation to health and wellbeing were **inadequate**. Insightful comments, included:

*"In my experience, Uni counselling (at any Uni) is inadequate. Long waiting times, short appointment times [and] not very useful advice. I no longer bother with Uni counselling. If needed, I go private."*

*"I think the Monash Clayton health centre could deal a bit better with emergency mental health issues."*

**Other notable comments** to emerge, included:

*"I have all the support I need from my supervisor and office staff, and I am used to working independently and prefer to do so,"*

*"My health issues have caused a great deal of stress, but [I] jumped the hurdle and [am] on the road to recovery. Feeling enthused to battle on!!"*

## 7.4 Summary

In relation to their degrees, Monash Education respondents were most-stressed about their research progress and finishing their degree on time 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 feeling smart enough to do their degree.

*'Help overcoming procrastination* was identified as the support that Monash Education respondents most wanted to receive from the University, followed by *'help with stress management.'*

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.<sup>20</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>21</sup>

PhD candidates isolating themselves is one of the most important factors in determining delay.<sup>22</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>23</sup> Peer support initiatives are also useful in creating a positive research community and facilitating a sense of belonging,<sup>24</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

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<sup>20</sup> Dharmananda Jairam and David H. Kahl, Jr., "Navigating the doctoral experience," 312.

<sup>21</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>22</sup> Rens van de Schoot et al., "What took them so long?" 3.

<sup>23</sup> Carolyn Richert Bair and Jennifer Grant Haworth, "Doctoral student attrition and persistence," 491.

<sup>24</sup> Jon Cornwall et al, "Stressors in early-stage doctoral students," 367.

that **Monash Education graduate students could benefit from an increase in social support and wellbeing services.**

## 8. Overall comments

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

Twenty-five graduate students from Monash Education responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Monash academics, faculties and staff	9
Facilities, services and resources	8
Research – intellectual stimulation and development	7
Supportive environment and culture	4
Monash reputation	3
Supervisors	3
Career opportunities	2
Student peers and colleagues	2
Financial support/funding	1
MGA	1
Training/coursework/professional development	1

The aspect of Monash University most frequently referenced by Monash Education graduate students was **Monash academics, faculties and staff**. Revealing comments, included:

*“Proud to be part of an excellent faculty.”*

*“Most staff that I have associated with are friendly and supportive.”*

*“I get to study from the best in the field.”*

Several Monash Education 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: off-campus learning, general facilities, free printing, library resources, library sessions and learning resources.

Another aspect of Monash University that was frequently referenced by Monash Education graduate students was **research and intellectual stimulation and development**. Comments, included:

*“The learning – I am feeling as though I see the world differently now.”*

*“The opportunity to do the research with stimulating help and some oversight.”*

**Other notable comments**, included:

*“I am proud to say that I am a student at Monash University as it has a very good reputation.”*

*“Positive environment in my faculty [and] great supervisors.”*

*“Being provided enough facilities to make our PhD journey smooth and rewarding.”*

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

Twenty-six graduate students from Monash Education responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Facilities/services/resources	7
Administration and communication	5
Financial issues	5
Stress and wellbeing	4
Isolation	3
Location	3
Course length and workload	2
Professional development	2
Supervisors	2
Compulsory coursework	1
Lack of community and socialising	1
Lack of support/value	1
Monash priorities	1
Unclear requirements	1

The primary complaint of Monash Education graduate students related to the University's **facilities, services and resources**. Notable comments, included:

*"The complicated computer programs/systems that are used at Monash are frustrating at times."*

*"Lack of adequate hot desks in PhD hub."*

Issues with the University's **administration systems and management** were also high on the list of the worst aspects related to graduate students' degrees at Monash Education. Interesting comments, included:

*"The response time for queries from the graduate research office. A number of times my questions have been ignored or never answered."*

*"Constant change in policies and procedures with no clear communication."*

**Financial issues** were also referenced with relative frequency in the responses of Monash Education graduate students.

*"Scholarships are inadequate for those with families to support."*

*"Limited opportunities for PhD scholarships."*

**Other notable comments**, included:

*“Being stressed due to the shortened length of time to submit thesis.”*

*“Feeling isolated in my faculty as a local PhD student, rather than international. Feeling isolated from other faculties, which my research aligns with.”*

*“[Monash is] far from everywhere.”*

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

Twenty-three graduate students from Monash Education responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Community and culture	5
Professional development	5
Administration/communication	4
Health and wellbeing support	4
Supervisors	4
Training	3
Funding/finances	2
Career opportunities/development	1
Course length and time	1
Facilities/services/resources	1
Orientation/induction	1

One of the primary suggestions from Monash Education graduate students related to improving the **sense of community and culture** within the University. Interesting comments, included:

*“More social activity for PhD students.”*

*“Regular social morning-teas (no food supplied, just arranged) with other HDR students.”*

*“More inclusion in the faculty.”*

The other primary suggestion for improvement from Monash Education respondents related to **professional development**. Insightful comments, included:

*“[Provide] useful professional development activities – especially those that count towards gaining additional qualifications.”*

*“Relevant (but optional) research training.”*

**Other notable themes**, included:

- **Administration** – improve the way administrative services operate and communicate with graduate students.
- **Health and wellbeing** – improvements to the way mental health is approached and supported was a common theme.

- **Training** – certain graduate students suggested that a range of specific- or discipline-focused training should be offered.
- **Supervision** – several Monash Education respondents wanted improvements to supervision that would empower the student and identify and penalise poor or inadequate supervisors.

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

*“There needs to be less bureaucracy and it should be easier for doctoral students to talk to someone on the phone rather than emailing and receiving an automatic answer saying a reply will come in three working days (it takes longer than that usually).”*

*“Organising some compulsory stress management activities as most of the students face the stress but are reluctant or ignorant to do something to manage their stress.”*

*“Offer new students – especially those who come in the middle of the semester – support in a systematic way, instead of a bit here and a bit there.”*

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.

Seven graduate students from Monash Education responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
MGA appreciation	3
Monash staff and services appreciation	2
Monash appreciation	1
Monash general dissatisfaction	1
Survey criticism	1

Some **notable comments** from Monash Education graduate students, included:

*“The eSolutions staff [have] been extremely helpful and make life a little bit easier.”*

*“Thanks for asking our opinions.”*

*“The supervisors are great; [however], I would like more interaction and focus on the unit than just online content that we work through though.”*

*“It’s been wonderful.”*

## 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. These statements often related to the respondent's infrastructure and learning expectations and requirements.

*Academics, faculties, support staff and supervisors* ranked highest in responses to *'the best aspects of being a Monash research postgraduate.'*

*Administration and communication* ranked high in the worst aspects of being a Monash research graduate student, as did *financial issues*.

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

## (iv) MGA Recommendations

Based on the findings of this survey and direct contact with the Monash Education 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.*

### **Milestones:**

2. *That graduate students are provided with clear, thorough and consistent information regarding milestone requirements.*

### **Professional Development:**

3. *That MGRO consider making changes to myDevelopment,<sup>25</sup> 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.*

### **School culture and facilities:**

4. *That the Faculty improve the sense of inclusion and belonging by increasing opportunities for interaction, networking and discussions among postgraduate peers.*
5. *That graduate students are offered seminars or workshops relating to 'preventing procrastination,' 'dealing with anxiety' and 'help with stress management.'*
6. *That the Faculty improve access to facilities such as desks, relevant equipment and supplies.*
7. *That more grants and better scholarships are made available to graduate students within the Faculty.*

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<sup>25</sup> 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.

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(vi) Appendix 1

Demographics of respondents from Monash Education

<b>Faculty (Schools)</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Education	38	100%

<b>Mode of attendance</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Internal (on-campus)	27	71.1%
External (off-campus)	5	13.2%
Multi-modal	6	15.8%

<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Domestic student	26	68.4%
International student	12	31.6%

<b>Attendance type</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Full-time	27	71.1%
Part-time	11	28.9%

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Female	33	86.8%
Male	4	10.5%
Prefer not to say	1	2.6%

<b>Enrolled Program</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
PhD	30	78.9%
Masters by research	6	15.8%
Other	2	5.3%

<b>Scholarship</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Receives Scholarship	16	42.1%
No scholarship	18	47.4%
No, but I have previously held a scholarship	4	10.5%