

Out of sight, out of mind:
the trials & tribulations of distance
education postgraduates

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This report is available online at

<http://mpa.monash.edu.au/downloads/DEpostgrads.pdf>

Table of contents

1	Executive summary	1
2	Introduction	2
3	Acknowledgement	3
4	Terminology	3
5	Summary of recommendations	4
5.1	HDR	4
5.2	GPG	5
5.3	MPA	7
6	Enrolment information	8
7	Literature review	10
7.1	Postgraduate students	10
7.2	Part-time study	10
7.3	Teaching support	10
7.4	Information access	11
7.5	Student support	11
7.6	Academic support	11
7.7	Library	12
7.8	HDR	12
8	Practice at other universities	13
8.1	Information access	13
8.2	Library services	14
8.3	Student associations	15
8.4	Regulations	16
8.5	Teaching support	16
9	Monash University	17
9.1	Student experience	17
9.2	Teaching support	17
9.3	Information access	17
9.4	Student associations	18
9.5	Library services	18
9.6	HDR	19
9.7	HDR Scholarships	19
9.8	Seminars	19
9.9	Software access	20

10	The MPA	21
11	Monash HDR student feedback	23
11.1	Academic assistance	23
11.2	Supervision	23
11.3	Administrative and financial support	24
11.4	Student support	25
11.5	Peer interaction.....	25
11.6	Residentials	26
11.7	Library services	26
11.8	Seminars	27
11.9	Software and technical access.....	28
11.10	Information access	28
11.11	Contacting Monash	29
11.12	Scholarships.....	29
12	Monash GPG student feedback	30
12.1	Academic assistance.....	30
12.2	Academic contact	32
12.3	Administrative and financial support	33
12.4	Student support	35
12.5	Peer interaction.....	35
12.6	Weekend schools	36
12.7	Library services	36
12.8	Lectures	36
12.9	Software and technical access.....	37
12.10	Information access	37
12.11	Contacting Monash	38
12.12	Scholarships.....	38
13	Final comment.....	39
14	References	40
15	Appendix A Enrolment information.....	42
16	Appendix B Excerpts from 'Handbook for Doctoral and MPhil Degrees'	53
16.1	Chapter 3: Conditions of candidature.....	53
16.2	Appendix F:	55
17	Appendix C Email request for feedback	60

1 Executive summary

In 2007 there were 4,191 postgraduate students enrolled by distance education (DE) mode at Monash University. These comprised nearly a third (32%) of the GPG enrolment and 8% of the higher degree by research (HDR) enrolment. Of the DE postgraduate students at Monash, 81% of HDR and 89% of GPG students were studying part-time.

The MPA had received feedback from some DE postgraduate students concerning problems encountered at Monash. This project aimed to ascertain the support DE postgraduates received from the University and from the MPA, and to make recommendations to both the University and the MPA to improve the delivery of services and support to DE postgraduates.

A brief review of the literature on DE and postgraduate students showed that studies of DE rarely examined postgraduate and particularly research students, while studies of research student issues conversely seldom scrutinised DE issues. Some of the studies examined the experiences of students enrolled in a DE course, rather than students studying individually through DE mode.

Australian university websites were examined for examples of best practice, and all DE postgraduates were invited to submit feedback on their experiences.

Student feedback suggested that many students had enjoyed a positive experience as a DE postgraduate. However, any problems arising were compounded by the DE environment. While some of the issues for DE HDR and GPG postgraduates differed, the problems of communication and access to information and appropriate resources applied to both groups.

Significant issues for HDR students were communication problems with supervisors and inadequate access to exPERT seminars. Key issues for GPG students were communication problems regarding staff utilisation of Blackboard, return of assignments, access to lectures, and response to emails. Inflexibility in the provision of resources and the perceived 'value for money' of the course were also major concerns.

A number of recommendations were made to address all the specific issues raised by DE postgraduates. In general, the needs of DE students should be catered for in all programs and initiatives at Monash University. Information would be more accessible if it was located in the one place with a clear link from the main website.

Further to this scoping study, it was recommended that a central student feedback process should be facilitated including an initial comprehensive survey of postgraduate DE students. The results of this survey would lead to the development of targeted and appropriate student and academic support initiatives.

2 Introduction

The Monash Postgraduate Association Inc. (MPA) is the representative body for all higher degree by research (HDR) and graduate postgraduate (GPG) students enrolled through Monash University's Victorian campuses. Postgraduate distance education (DE) enrolment in 2007 was 4,191 or 26.5% of the total 15,817 postgraduate enrolment.

The MPA had received feedback from DE postgraduate students concerning problems encountered at Monash. A brief examination of the issues suggested that postgraduate-specific DE services may need to be developed by both the MPA and Monash University. A decision was taken to conduct a scoping study of the issues.¹

The aims of the study were to:

- ascertain the support DE postgraduates receive from the University
- ascertain the support DE postgraduates receive from the MPA
- make recommendations to the University to improve the experience of DE postgraduates
- make recommendations to the MPA to improve services to DE postgraduates

Methodology:

- define terms
- ascertain the demographic characteristics of the DE postgraduate population
- conduct a brief literature review
- examine other university websites for examples of good practice
- ascertain Monash practice
- ascertain MPA practice
- collate feedback from interested students
- develop recommendations

¹ Note: The study was conducted over several months; some findings and recommendations contained in this report may already have been acted on.

3 Acknowledgement

The MPA would like to thank:

- the 144 postgraduate DE students who responded to the call for feedback
- the Monash Research Graduate School (MRGS) for authorising the HDR global email call for responses
- Professor Adam Shoemaker, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education), for authorising the GPG global email call for responses

4 Terminology

In the literature, students studying by external mode are variously referred to as 'off-campus', 'distance education', 'DE' and 'external'. Monash University uses the term 'off-campus' to refer to 'distance education':

Off-Campus Learning is a flexible mode of study. Most commonly it is based on a combination of print study material and electronic communication. Each unit studied in the Off-Campus Learning mode has the same content and assessment as the equivalent on-campus unit.²

Most Australian academic studies use the term 'distance education' or 'DE'. The term 'DE' will be used in this study to refer to distance education (external mode) enrolment.

² <http://www.monash.edu.au/offcampus/about.html>

5 Summary of recommendations

5.1 HDR

Student experience

Conduct a comprehensive survey of the needs of all HDR DE students

Academic assistance

Investigate the feasibility of providing webcasts of confirmation presentations

Supervision

Provide greater support for and recognition of supervisors of DE students

Fund regular phone calls between supervisor and student

Administration

Include DE-specific arrangements for all administrative procedures and the lodgement of forms

Conduct an audit of the DE administrative processes to stop 'silos'

Include web links for all seminars and other information releases

Develop a portal for DE HDR students – including information on services, support, library, regulations, software, wiki, Blogs

Student support

Provide free international call numbers to all support services

Establish reciprocal use of facilities and services with other universities (counselling, medical services, postgraduate study rooms)

Peer interaction

Investigate the feasibility of holding HDR regional meetings

Facilitate communication between DE and on-campus students

Facilitate participation of DE students in University community

Record departmental seminars for online access

Residentials

Review availability of funding assistance for residentials

Library services

Provide free return postage of library loans

Increase library loan periods for DE students to allow for postage time

Facilitate interlibrary loans for DE students

Seminars

Ensure all academic and student support seminars are available on DVD, online or in an appropriate interactive format. Students should have access to handouts and PowerPoint slides.

Increase online library tutorials to cover HDR-relevant topics such as utilising databases

Software and technical access

Provide access to required software, including purchase of individual licences if required

Provide appropriate technical support

Provide clear information about the level of accessible resources available to DE students prior to enrolment

Information access

Clearly refer HDR students to the MRGS DE webpage/portal

Ensure websites are current with consistent and easy to locate information

Contacting Monash

Provide all supervisors and IT support personnel with access to international calls

Scholarships

Provide clear scholarship information

5.2 GPG

Student experience

Conduct a comprehensive survey of the needs of all GPG DE students

Extract DE GPG data from 2008 MSEQ

Academic assistance

Investigate alternatives to current exam requirements

Mandate return timeframe for all assignments

Review and recommend process for development and update of readers and course guides

Develop a universal assignment submission process that is suited to all circumstances

Academic contact

Mandate staff response times for Blackboard and email queries

Ensure all voicemail and email communication complies with University protocols

Administrative and financial support

Ensure a revised contact list is sent to all students at the start of each semester

Make readers and course guides available in hardcopy format on request

Review availability of DE units

Ensure readers and course guides are distributed 3 weeks prior to start of semester

Review timing of unit evaluations

Ensure consistent support for students regardless of their physical location

Student support

Review timing of student support sessions to facilitate participation of local DE students

Investigate feasibility of running student support seminars online

Peer interaction

Review on-line forum use

Investigate feasibility of study groups in accessible major centres

Weekend schools

Review organisation of weekend schools to optimise experience

Investigate feasibility of running weekend schools simultaneously to increase viability of opening student services and food outlets

Library services

Negotiate reciprocal borrowing rights at overseas universities

Promote the role of subject librarians

Lectures

Ensure all lectures are available online and by podcast

Improve quality of recorded lectures

Software and technical access

Provide SMS acknowledgement of assignment receipt

Ensure all units remain available in Blackboard until course completion

Provide written instructions for new students regarding online enrolment and use of other online systems

Information access

Review email communication with DE students to ensure appropriate content

Contacting Monash

Distribute orientation package to all DE students detailing units, resources available, introduction to lecturers and administrative staff, contact details and general information about Monash

Scholarships

Investigate feasibility of providing DE GPG scholarship

5.3 MPA

Ensure the MPA is included in any University listing of support services for DE postgraduate students

Create DE representative position on the MPA Executive Committee

Allow for participation of DE postgraduates in AGM

Publicise advocacy service to DE postgraduates

Publicise availability of online forum and create a DE section

Include updates for DE postgraduates in the *MPA Email News*

Create a DE postgraduate orientation webpage

Include DE specific information in *The MPA guide to Postgraduate Programs* and *The MPA guide to Postgraduate Facilities and Services*

Use terminology consistent with the University

Provide a 1800 number

Include interstate and international dialing information with the contact phone numbers on the website

Provide a clock listing local time, displayed next to the opening hours on the website

Extend lead time on student participation events, such as Supervisor of the Year

6 Enrolment information³

See Appendix A for full details.

In 2007 there were a total of 4,191 postgraduate students enrolled in an award course by DE-only mode (table 1).⁴ These comprised 26.5% of the postgraduate population. They comprised nearly a third (32%) of the GPG enrolment and 8% of the higher degree by research (HDR) enrolment.

Table 1. 2007 postgraduate students by attendance mode

Student Enrolments		
Course - Type Grouped	Course Enrolment - Course Attendance Mode	Total
Higher degree research	Internal	3152
	External	276
	Multi-modal	27
Higher degree research Total		3455
Graduate/Postgraduate	Internal	7679
	External	3915
	Multi-modal	768
Graduate/Postgraduate Total		12362
Grand Total		15817

³ The statistical data used to make the following conclusions are derived from the Monash University Planning and Statistics Unit. The data is based on the full year enrolment for 2007. Available at: <http://www.ups.monash.edu.au/statistics/stats-pivot-tables/>

⁴ Monash University Planning and Statistics use the term 'external' which: 'Refers to a course enrolment pattern in which all units of study involve special arrangements whereby lesson materials, assignments, etc. are delivered to the student, and any associated attendance at the institution is of an incidental, irregular, special or voluntary nature.'

Postgraduates constituted 58.6% of the total DE course enrolment of 7157 (table 2).⁵

Table 2. 2007 DE award course students

Student Enrolments	Course Enrolment - Course Attendance Mode
Course - Type Grouped	<i>External</i>
Higher degree research	276
Graduate/Postgraduate	3915
Undergraduate	2966
Grand Total	7157

Of the HDR students, 79 were located overseas and 197 in Australia. Of those in Australia, 16 were in inner Melbourne, 97 in wider Victoria, and 84 outside Victoria. Of the GPG students, 949 were located overseas and 2966 in Australia. Of those in Australia, 199 were in inner Melbourne, 1850 in wider Victoria, and 917 outside Victoria.⁶

⁵ Does not include non-award enrolment

⁶ Data on 'term residence' and 'home residence' combined to derive specific location information

7 Literature review

Rapid advances in information and communication technologies and the take-up of these technologies by universities and students have implications for the relevance of the findings and recommendations of previous studies. This is particularly so for issues around communications and access to library and other resources. Consequently, the examination of the literature focused on articles written in recent years. A '... trend towards blended learning in higher education'⁷ also means that some issues are now very similar for internal and DE students.

7.1 Postgraduate students

A brief review of the literature on DE and postgraduate students demonstrated a number of specific issues. While studies of DE rarely examined postgraduate and particularly research students, studies of research student issues conversely seldom scrutinised DE issues:

*... distance education is rarely overtly considered in the doctoral education policy or scholarly literature, and for that matter, as noted previously, doctoral education is not often considered in the distance education literature.*⁸

Some of the studies examined the experiences of students enrolled in a DE course, rather than students studying individually through DE mode. This has implications for the relevance of recommendations arising from these studies, particularly those related to peer support and academic feedback. For example, the literature discusses group learning initiatives but many DE research students are not part of a DE education group.

7.2 Part-time study

The reasons for studying via DE are similar to the reasons behind decisions to study part-time. These are primarily related to flexibility to accommodate employment and family responsibilities.⁹ In fact most DE postgraduates are also studying part-time. Of the DE postgraduate students at Monash, 81% of HDR and 89% of GPG students are studying part-time. (Of the internal postgraduate students, 32% of HDR and 40% of GPG students are studying part-time):

*Being part time or full time is probably more significant than being on-campus or off-campus.*¹⁰

7.3 Teaching support

Through DE 'the teaching process splits into separate components: course design, media design and production, and student support'.¹¹ The literature discussed the

⁷ Stacey & Wiesenbergs 2007, p.19

⁸ Evans 2005

⁹ Cain et al 2003

¹⁰ Evans 2005

¹¹ Bilodeau & Pettigrew 2007

need for training the academics delivering DE courses. Moore¹² found that training tended to focus on the use of technology and software rather than curriculum development and teaching techniques. He also raised the issue that such training is not compulsory.¹³ The need for appropriate training was raised by several studies:

*The push to have instructors use an online collaborative mode has also meant that processes for professional development of academic instructors must be established as institutions of higher education seek to ensure instructors are equipped to meet this new market demand.*¹⁴

*Respondents in this study called on their universities to develop a 'strategic plan for distance education' by increasing production staff, improving training facilities, and providing faculty with more assistance and incentives. They also believed training should be better coordinated to provide faculty with more exposure to distance education teaching methods. If distance education is to succeed at universities, in the words of one respondent, 'Distance education training must become a priority of top university administrators and be integrated into the institution's infrastructure and operating procedures more fully.'*¹⁵

7.4 Information access

While information about the range of services available is crucial, how students received the information influenced their knowledge of services. If too much information is provided it may not be read which could adversely affect take up of services.¹⁶

7.5 Student support

A survey of the literature by Cain et al¹⁷ found that many studies tended to look at academic support including library access, but paid less attention to 'psychosocial support' such as mentoring and orientation. They also found that support programs must be developed in response to a demonstrated need or there was a risk they would be too time-consuming for student participants.¹⁸

7.6 Academic support

The issue of availability of assistance was examined by Cain et al:

*... most of the participants felt that the instructor was a primary source for academic support. Therefore, students had high expectations for the timing and promptness of the professor's responses to questions and inquiries.*¹⁹

They found that students had expectations that assistance would be available 24 hours every day. This was particularly so for students in different time zones to their

¹² Moore 2005

¹³ Moore 2005

¹⁴ Stacey & Wiesenbergs 2007 p.22

¹⁵ Irani and Telg 2002

¹⁶ Cain et al 2003 p.48

¹⁷ Cain et al 2003 p.43

¹⁸ Cain et al 2003 p.44

¹⁹ Cain et al 2003 p.50

institution. 'This probably crosses the boundary of identifying what a true service need is versus a service desired'.²⁰

Class sizes and competing workload priorities influence the range and extent of academic involvement.²¹ Cain et al recommended that '... faculty members should design a system or protocol that informs students of when they are likely to respond to their questions or concerns.'²² This recommendation would apply to online communication generally, as blended learning becomes more prevalent.

7.7 Library

The provision of library services to DE students is well covered in the library and information science literature²³ and in national library association working groups and policies.²⁴ The relevant division of the American Library Association states that:

*Every student, faculty member, administrator, staff member, or any other member of an institution of higher education, is entitled to the library services and resources of that institution, including direct communication with the appropriate library personnel, regardless of where enrolled or where located in affiliation with the institution. Academic libraries must, therefore, meet the information and research needs of all these constituents, wherever they may be.*²⁵

7.8 HDR

Some universities do not accept DE research students:

*Because external students are mostly part time and more likely not to complete, some universities have shied away from enrolling them and given preference to on-campus, full-time students.*²⁶

²⁰ Cain et al 2003 p.52

²¹ Stacey & Wiesenbergs 2007 p.36

²² Cain et al 2003 p.53

²³ Dew, Stephen H. 2007, 'The role of academic libraries' in Handbook of Distance Education 2nd ed, Michael Graham Moore (ed), Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, New Jersey: p.205-215

²⁴ <http://www.alia.org.au>

²⁵ Association of College and Research Libraries 2008, 'Standards for Distance Learning Library Services', available at: <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/guidelinesdistancelearning.cfm>

²⁶ Evans 2005

8 Practice at other universities

The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) has identified examples of best practice in DE. These include a program at Deakin University 'aimed at providing academic staff with an opportunity to engage in the development of online teaching and learning environments'²⁷ which has led to the development of a website of case studies.²⁸ Charles Sturt University is also identified for best practice in providing support services to DE students.

The websites of a number of universities that offer DE were examined during July and August 2008.

8.1 Information access

Even at universities with a long history of DE, information specifically for these students can be difficult to locate on the university website. For example, the University of New England (UNE) webpage for current students has a very comprehensive list of services but information for DE students consists of one paragraph of additional information and associated links located towards the end of the page:

Additional support services are provided for off-campus, indigenous, and international students, with support for off-campus students being provided through the University's Access Centres, Library and Teaching and Learning Centre which distributes learning material packages; Timetabling provides information about residential and weekend schools; see also the Correspondence Class List.²⁹

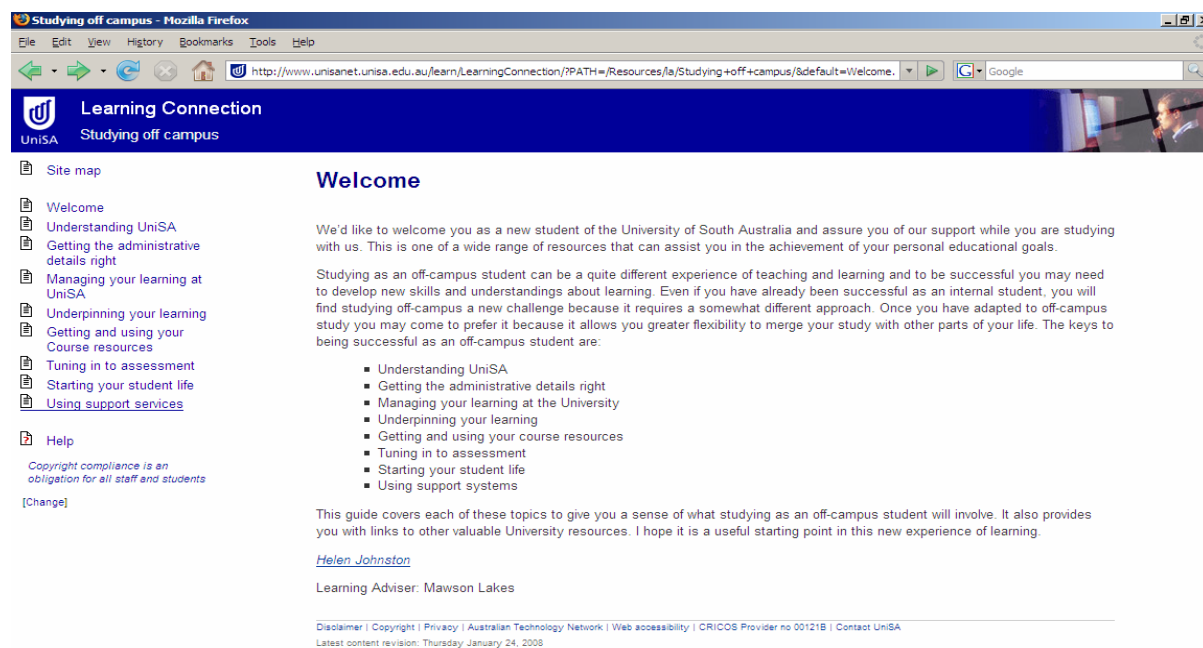
The University of South Australia (UniSA) does have a wide-ranging website dedicated to DE students (fig.1).

²⁷ <http://www.auqa.edu.au/gp/search/index.php>

²⁸ <http://www.deakin.edu.au/itl/teach-learn/cases/index.htm>

²⁹ <http://www.une.edu.au/for/current-students/>

Figure 1. University of South Australia³⁰



8.2 Library services

The UNE library has a dedicated webpage for DE students (fig.2). UNE charges for return postage of loans.

The UniSA³¹ and Curtin University³² libraries also have comprehensive dedicated webpages. They pay return postage (in the case of UniSA through the provision of a prepaid parcel) within Australia. UniSA requires students located overseas to pay return postage and insurance. Curtin University library does not send hardcopy books overseas.³³

³⁰

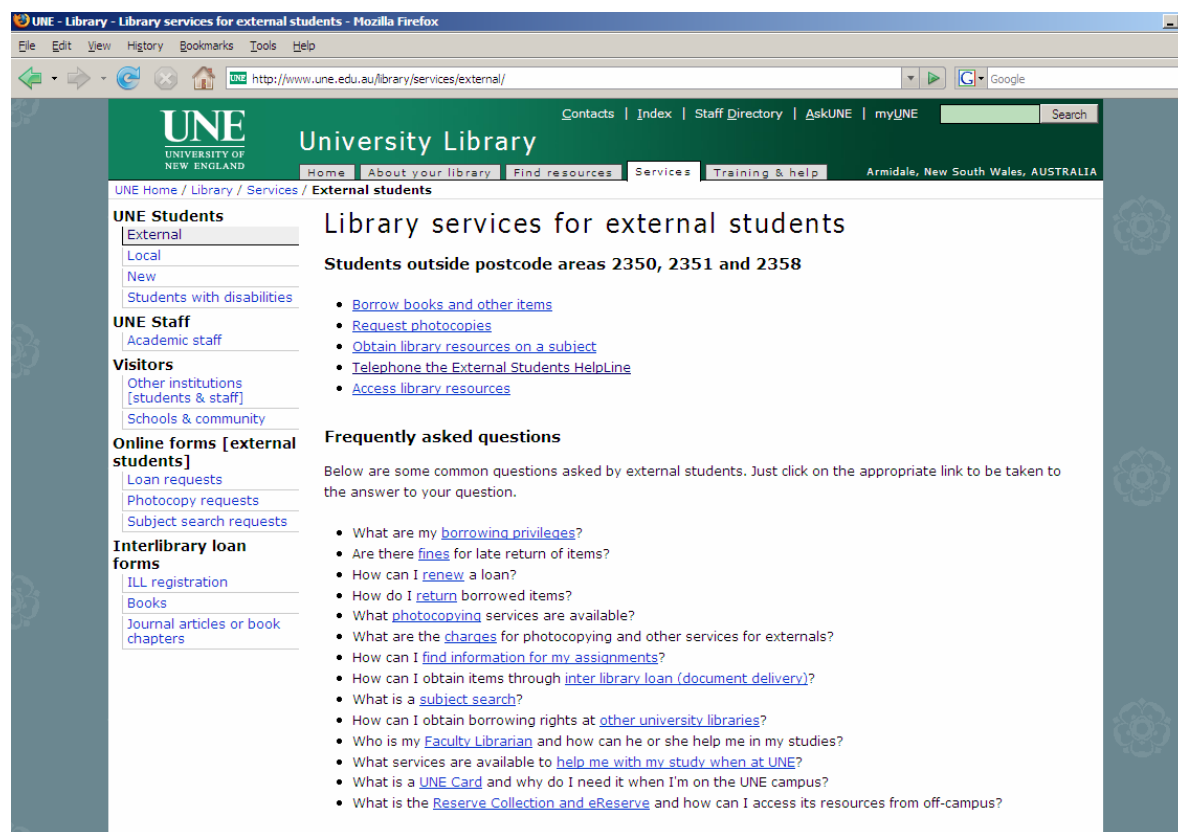
<http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/learn/LearningConnection/?PATH=/Resources/la/Studying+off+campus/&default=Welcome.htm>

³¹ <http://www.library.unisa.edu.au/fds/>

³² http://library.curtin.edu.au/services/services_for_groups/off_campus/index.html

³³ <http://www.csu.edu.au/division/library/how-to/faq/borrow.html>

Figure 2. University of New England³⁴



8.3 Student associations

An examination of websites suggests that most student associations and postgraduate student associations include DE in their list of services but the web links go to the on-campus service. This then necessitates a trawl through the list of services to find something applicable. Often the specific DE links are not working, suggesting that updates are not a priority.

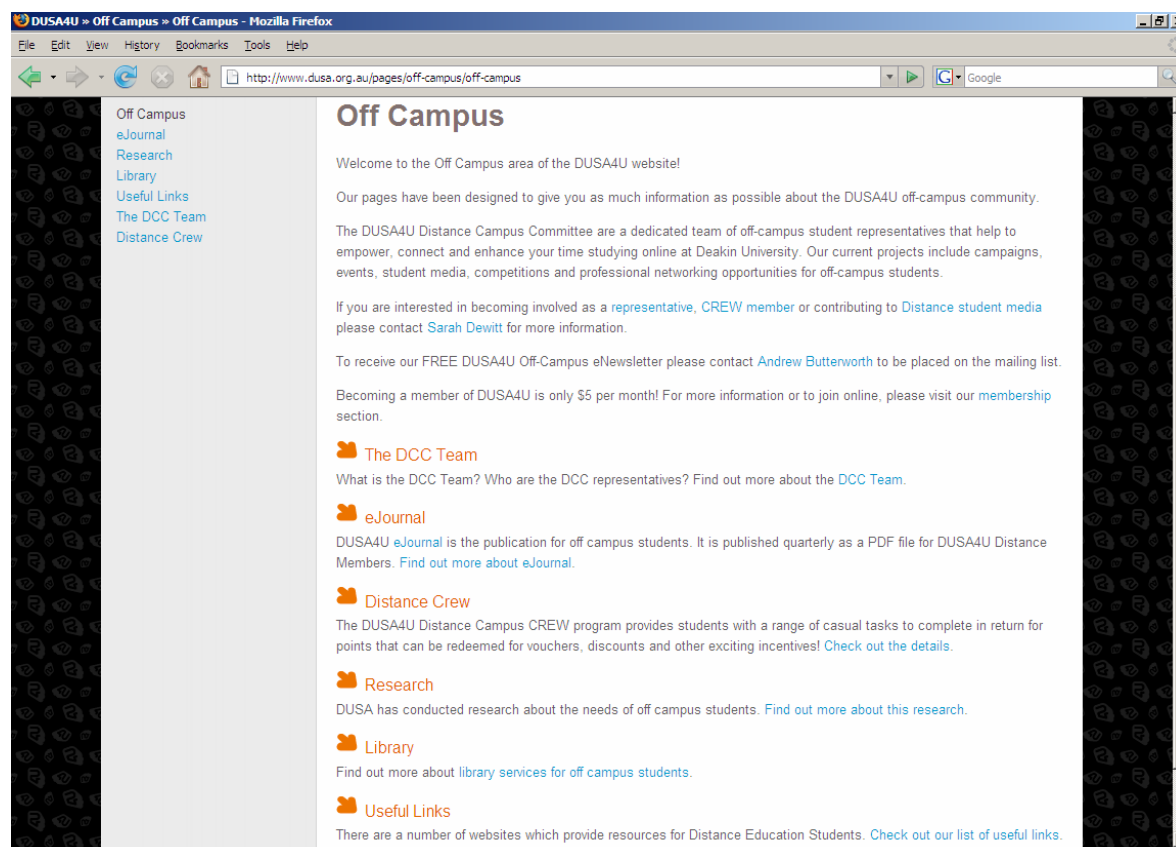
There are however some particular initiatives. Many offer a 1800 number for interstate students. The James Cook University Student Association (JCUSA) organises local coffee groups in regional Queensland.³⁵ Deakin University Student Association (DUSA)³⁶ has a comprehensive DE website (fig.3). However, many of the potentially useful university links go to the generic service website. DUSA also has a DE student journal, DE representatives and suitable projects for DE students who want to volunteer with DUSA.

³⁴ <http://www.une.edu.au/library/services/external/>

³⁵ <http://www.jcu.edu.au/studentassoc/remote/index.html>

³⁶ <http://www.dusa.org.au/pages/off-campus>

Figure 3. Deakin University Student Association³⁷



8.4 Regulations

The University of Melbourne does not allow DE enrolment for HDR students:

The Research Higher Degrees Committee will not approve entirely distance supervision or entirely on-line supervision for research higher degree students.³⁸

8.5 Teaching support

The University of South Australia has created staff positions of Online Advisers because:

There is a need to have support staff who can bridge the gap between the technological and the pedagogical.³⁹

Online Advisers are part of the Online Education Support team. They provide training and support to UniSA staff who are developing online learning and teaching environments to manage course delivery, assessment and evaluation.⁴⁰

³⁷ <http://www.dusa.org.au/pages/off-campus/off-campus>

³⁸ <http://www.gradstudies.unimelb.edu.au/current/phd/bk/admission.html#residency>

³⁹ Reid & Pedder 2007

⁴⁰ <http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/learningconnection/about/teams/online.asp>

9 Monash University

9.1 Student experience

DE postgraduate students are included in student surveys administered at Monash but data specifically derived from their responses cannot be distinguished. The 2008 Monash Support Experience Questionnaire (MSEQ), which assesses satisfaction with support services, will have the ability to distinguish DE GPG students.⁴¹

9.2 Teaching support

The Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching (CALT) 'was established in 2006 to coordinate the university's goal of advancing excellence in education at Monash by providing high quality, systematic, strategic and targeted learning and teaching support'.⁴² CALT advises and supports staff and provides 'high quality learning and teaching support to target [student] markets'.⁴³

9.3 Information access

Information for DE students is difficult to identify on the Monash University website. A search on the term 'off-campus' retrieved information for off-campus/distance education students⁴⁴ but also for 'undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled at the Clayton campus who attend 75% of their classes at least 1km away from Clayton campus'.⁴⁵

The University has a central unit responsible for DE education (fig.4):

*The Off-Campus Learning Centre (OCLC) is a Monash University service unit which liaises with Schools and Faculties across the university, provides student and academic support, manages student assignments; provides a range of advice on university contacts, online learning, weekend and residential school arrangements, and produces and despatches student study material.*⁴⁶

The Off-Campus Learning Centre has links to useful information including 1800 contact numbers for OCLC and some other services. But the generic 1800 number for OCLC is not listed on the main contact page.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Correspondence received from the Centre for Higher Education Quality, Monash University

⁴² <http://www.calt.monash.edu.au/>

⁴³ http://www.calt.monash.edu.au/leadership/core_services.html

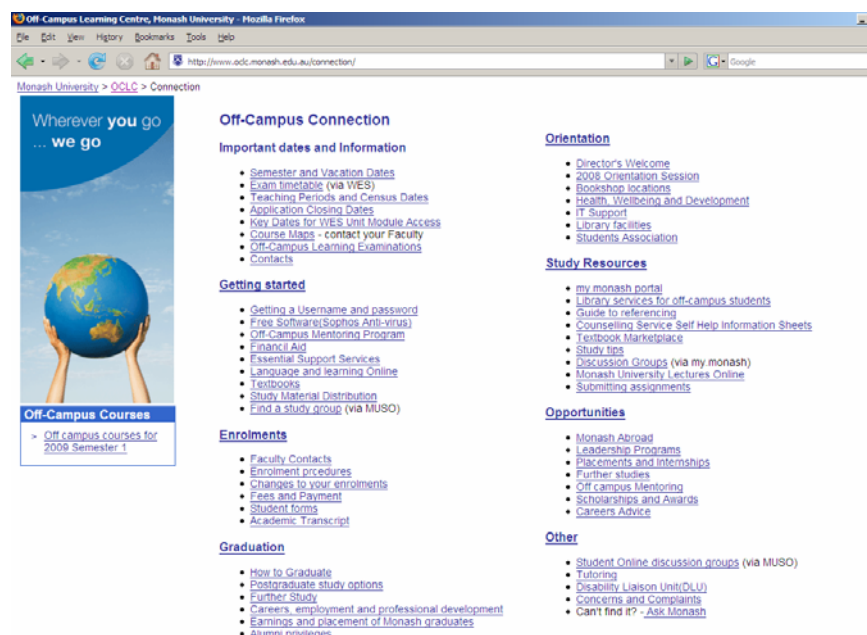
⁴⁴ <http://oclc.monash.edu.au/>

⁴⁵ <http://www.monash.edu.au/offcampusliaison/>

⁴⁶ <http://www.oclc.monash.edu.au/about/>

⁴⁷ <http://www.oclc.monash.edu.au/about/studentssupport.html>

Figure 4. Monash Off-Campus Learning Centre⁴⁸



The University has a website for 'Learning support for off-campus learners'.⁴⁹ However, this is not linked directly from the OCLC website.

9.4 Student associations

The Monash University Gippsland Student Union (MUGSU) has a DE student association:

The Off Campus Students' Association (OCSA) is an important part of MUGSU and represents off campus students and their concerns within MUGSU and to Monash. MUGSU offers dedicated off campus services including campaigns around issues ...⁵⁰

The OCSA has a 1800 number and a DE newsletter. There is no specific postgraduate information on the website. The Monash University DE orientation website lists MUGSU/OCSA as the student association for DE students.⁵¹

9.5 Library services

The library delivers loans to students within Australia. Limitations apply to sending loans overseas. All students are required to pay the return postage.⁵² The library currently is investigating the potential to fund the return of items within Australia.⁵³

⁴⁸ <http://www.oclc.monash.edu.au/connection/>

⁴⁹ <http://www.monash.edu.au/lls/OffCampus/>

⁵⁰ <http://mugsu.org.au/content/blogcategory/15/78/>

⁵¹ <http://www.oclc.monash.edu.au/connection/orientation.html>

⁵² <http://www.lib.monash.edu.au/services/offcampus/post.html>

⁵³ Correspondence

9.6 HDR

The Monash Research Graduate School (MRGS) information for HDR students enrolled via DE is contained in the Handbook for Doctoral and MPhil Degrees⁵⁴ and not specifically identified or linked on the MRGS website.

The HDR Candidature Research Supervision Accreditation Procedures include a level 2 module in 'External supervision and supervision in teams'.⁵⁵

9.7 HDR Scholarships

The MRGS scholarships website is confusing with regard to DE HDR students:

*Students proposing to undertake a research degree by external mode are not eligible for these awards. An APA award may be made available for enrolment as a research candidate under Monash's external mode regulations, however the support of the relevant academic unit and faculty will be required.*⁵⁶

*Generally scholarships are not available for study under Monash's external mode regulations. An APA may be awarded to an applicant proposing to undertake studies as an external student, however the support of the relevant academic unit and faculty will be required. If successful, the awardee must reside in Australia in order to receive the award.*⁵⁷

DE candidates are not eligible for MRGS scholarships. APA guidelines do allow DE enrolment.⁵⁸

9.8 Seminars

The University runs on-campus postgraduate-specific academic and student support seminars. These seminars are detailed in *The MPA guide to Postgraduate Programs*.⁵⁹

Only a few of these seminars are available in a format accessible to DE students.

The MRGS has developed the exPERT seminar program to deliver research training sessions. These are held on-campus but are also publicised as being available on DVD. The University received a commendation for its exPERT program in the most recent Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) audit report:

*AUQA commends Monash University for its support mechanisms for Higher Degree Research students, such as the exPERT program, which are aimed at providing a high quality research training experience.*⁶⁰

⁵⁴ <http://mrgs.monash.edu.au/research/doctoral/chapter3c.html> and <http://mrgs.monash.edu.au/research/doctoral/appendf.html> (see Appendix B)

⁵⁵ <http://www.mrgs.monash.edu.au/research/staff/supervision/policy/accredpolicy.html>

⁵⁶ <http://mrgs.monash.edu.au/scholarships/selection/proc1.html>

⁵⁷ <http://www.mrgs.monash.edu.au/scholarships/apply/>

⁵⁸ Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2008, Commonwealth Scholarships Guidelines, available at: http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/policy_issues_reviews/key_issues/scholarship/

⁵⁹ Sent to all postgraduate students each semester and also available online at: <http://mpa.monash.edu.au/>

⁶⁰ Australian Universities Quality Agency 2006, *Report of an Audit of Monash University*, AUQA Audit Report Number 48, available at: http://www.auqa.edu.au/qualityaudit/reports/auditreport_monash_2006.pdf

The MRGS page does not have a link to the library exPERT DVD collection. When attempting to locate these DVDs through the main catalogue, there was no obvious search term available. A search by author field for the term 'Monash Research Graduate School' retrieved 6 records. Only 3 exPERT seminars are directly available online⁶¹ and 3 by podcast.⁶² Some of these duplicate the titles available on DVD. This level of accessibility for DE students contrasts with the 62 individual titles that have been offered to on-campus students.⁶³

An example of more inclusive practice is the Tricks of the Trade seminar series conducted by the Faculty of Arts. 'These seminars provide practical information and tips on how to progress within candidature.'⁶⁴ Audio recordings and handouts for these seminars are available online.

9.9 Software access

Software that is not licensed for student home use is not available for DE students. Faculties would need to buy individual licences for these students.⁶⁵ This applies to some widely used research software including SPSS. The lack of information about this issue prior to enrolment and the confusion about responsibility for access and support is a significant problem for DE HDR students.

⁶¹ http://radio-ftp.mapa.monash.edu.au/podcasts/mrgs/MRGS/MRGS_Podcast/Archive.html

⁶² <http://mrgs.monash.edu.au/seminars/online-presentations/index.html>

⁶³ Some of these titles may not be suitable for DVD format as they are interactive workshops

⁶⁴ <http://arts.monash.edu.au/research/graduate-research/current-students/seminars/index.php>

⁶⁵ Correspondence

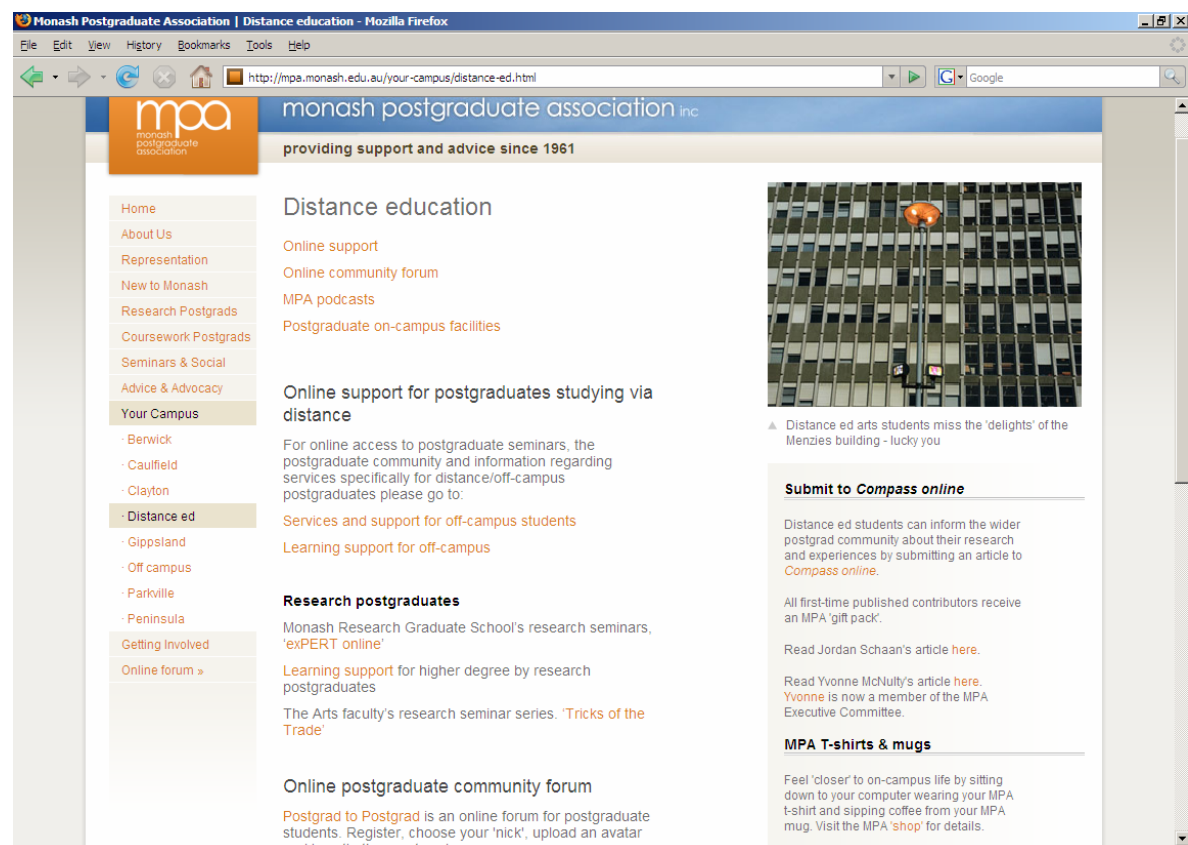
10 The MPA

The MPA ensures contact with DE students through a hardcopy mailout each semester of *The MPA guide to Postgraduate Programs*. The MPA also utilises the University global email facility to call for nominations for the annual MPA Executive Committee elections. Elections are conducted by mail and voting does not require on-campus attendance.

The MPA has a comprehensive website with information relevant to all postgraduate students. Information specifically for DE students is located on the MPA website under campus information (fig.5).⁶⁶ This page is currently being updated and provides direct links to University postgraduate DE resources. The MPA website also hosts an online forum where students can interact. The MPA contributes advice and information to forum discussion threads.

Only local contact phone numbers are provided on the website. These do not include a regional prefix or international dialing information.

Figure 5. Monash Postgraduate Association⁶⁷



⁶⁶ <http://mpa.monash.edu.au/your-campus/distance-ed.html>

⁶⁷ <http://mpa.monash.edu.au/your-campus/distance-ed.html>

The MPA uses the term 'off-campus' to refer to students 'enrolled through one of the main Monash campuses but undertake 75% or more of their course load at a location more than one kilometre away from that Campus'.⁶⁸ Students based at the Alfred Hospital, Monash Medical Centre, or any of the teaching hospitals, Bourke St. Law premises, and 30 Collins St. are referred to as 'off-campus' by MPA. The use of the term 'off-campus' in a different context to the University is potentially confusing for students and may impact on locating information. It may also lead to miscommunication between the MPA and the University.

While the student feedback discussed in the next two chapters rarely mentioned the MPA, the following recommendations are based on the issues raised by the students:

- Ensure the MPA is included in any University listing of support services for DE postgraduate students
- Create DE representative position on the MPA Executive Committee
- Allow for participation of DE postgraduates in AGM
- Publicise advocacy service to DE postgraduates
- Publicise availability of online forum and create a DE section
- Include updates for DE postgraduates in the *MPA Email News*
- Create a DE postgraduate orientation webpage
- Include DE specific information in The MPA guide to Postgraduate Programs and The MPA guide to Postgraduate Facilities and Services
- Use terminology consistent with the University
- Provide a 1800 number
- Include interstate and international dialing information with the contact phone numbers on the website
- Provide a clock listing local time, displayed next to the opening hours on the website

⁶⁸ <http://mpa.monash.edu.au/your-campus/off-campus.html>

11 Monash HDR student feedback

The Monash Research Graduate School (MRGS) forwarded an email⁶⁹ to research students requesting feedback on DE issues. The forward did not explicitly state that the report was being conducted by MPA, and some respondents appeared to be under the impression that it was a MRGS initiative. This may have deterred some students from responding. The 26 students who did respond provided comprehensive feedback and suggestions. All feedback was acknowledged by email. All quotes used are with the permission of the student.

Many respondents identified university staff for praise; usually the supervisor but also faculty administrators and library staff. The concerns summarised in this section are as expressed by the students, the accuracy of any claims has not been verified. The summary covers all areas of concern, regardless of the numbers of students expressing that concern.

Recommendations arising from the feedback are listed under each subheading. A follow-up Monash survey of DE students is now required to ensure representation of all students.

Conduct a comprehensive survey of the needs of all HDR DE students

11.1 Academic assistance

On-campus students have many informal means open to them to talk through concerns about their course or results. These options are not available to DE students, magnifying concerns:

As a distance student, there is no one in your class or tutorial that you can talk to, compare results, etc so you really do all of the work on your own. During my undergraduate [on-campus] degree if I had been this affected by results I would have immediately spoken to fellow classmates, either in person or by phone, or physically gone to the lecturer's room and waited in the hall until they went back to their office. As a distance student, feeling this way only makes the isolation more profound and hopeless.

Research student interstate

DE research students do not have the opportunity to attend their peers' confirmation of candidature presentations and so are less prepared to know what to expect when they present their own. Students suggested that presentations should be webcast.

Investigate the feasibility of providing webcasts of confirmation presentations

11.2 Supervision

Many students stressed the vital role of their supervisor in making the entire DE experience work. Many singled out their supervisors for praise, particularly in sorting out administrative problems, calling and emailing regularly, and general support:

⁶⁹ See Appendix C

I have a great supervisor. I can ring her, email her anytime and she is very helpful and gets back to me quickly.

Research student interstate

However, some students were concerned that, as they were not visible in their department, their supervisory needs were not given priority. Emails were not answered for over a week and one student was not aware of when the supervisor was away on leave. The student-supervisor relationship was difficult to establish and maintain when most communication was by email.

Some students pointed out that greater care needs to be taken in writing comments on assignments and that the content and writing style of email correspondence can give the wrong impression.

Communications by email were also prone to misunderstandings. Students felt that impromptu informal support was needed as well as formal sessions. This should be available by phone and email. Regular phone calls and semester face-to-face meetings should be funded by the University.

Another suggestion was to hold an on-campus orientation for DE students including workshops on issues faced by DE students and the expectations of the University.

Provide greater support for and recognition of supervisors of DE students

Fund regular phone calls between supervisor and student

11.3 Administrative and financial support

While some students were satisfied with the level of administrative support, several problems were identified. Administrative procedures, especially involving finance, were complex and lengthy. Reimbursement for costs incurred in data collection was so time consuming some students did not bother to pursue a refund.

Some administrative requirements were unrealistic or inflexible, such as needing to submit original forms (not downloaded), or having to send a minor payment from overseas when the student would be on campus the following week. Multiple emails and phone calls to sort out an issue often entailed the student having to explain the same issue to different people several times over:

Fix the Byzantine bureaucratic processes we are exposed to ... Does anyone talk to anyone else? Does anyone actually join the dots, and place themselves in the position of the end user, in this case the distance education student? My experience suggests that the answers are no.

Research student interstate

Many students suggested that an online space is needed that includes discussions, conference information, and networking opportunities. However, others felt that the distances involved made personal communication more important:

Distance education students need to talk to people, not only disembodied websites – and we are not all IT nerds who love facebook and the like.

Research student interstate

Students in remote areas felt there was not enough assistance and finance to find appropriate placements. They had to drive long distances and stay in accommodation at their own expense.

Administrative problems can occur when there are delays in receiving mail. Problems can also arise when inadequate information is provided:

Communication must be consistent in terms of content, it must be accurate, it must be specific to the issue/s that the student has raised (direction to a generic web site is not adequate), and it must be timely, i.e. a response within 24 hours in the working week.

Research student interstate

Include DE-specific arrangements for all administrative procedures and the lodgement of forms
Conduct an audit of the DE administrative processes to stop 'silos'
Include web links for all seminars and other information releases
Develop a portal for DE HDR students – including information on services, support, library, regulations, software, wiki, Blogs

11.4 Student support

The length of HDR part-time candidature means that it is very likely students will need to access a counselling service at some point. Monash should establish reciprocal counselling arrangements with other universities.

Provide free international call numbers to all support services
Establish reciprocal use of facilities and services with other universities (counselling, medical services, postgraduate study rooms)

11.5 Peer interaction

Students missed peer interaction and support. While residential were effective, they were not enough:

This is what I miss ... I do feel a lot of the time that I am all alone with my studies.

Research student interstate

All graduate meetings and research seminars should be recorded and available to DE students. Current recordings are often poorly done and do not pick up audience questions. Lecturers frequently walk away from the microphone while speaking:

I only wish that I had the opportunities that the campus-based students have and simply can't understand why it is so difficult, in this technical age, to offer more distance-linked sessions and support.

Research student overseas

Departments should put students with similar interests in touch with each other. Online discussion forums should archive threads so new students can read previous discussions.

Networks for faculty and departmental peer interaction, such as the Monash Education Research Community (MERC), need to provide for DE student participation. Similarly, programs that encourage student involvement in the research community need to take into account the needs of DE students, as current processes can preclude participation:

Remember that long lead times are needed for distance students. For example, the totally inadequate time frames for nomination of supervisor of the year. I wanted to nominate my supervisor this year (and last), yet with a four week turn around time in 2008, it was impossible to co-ordinate the requirements of the form by distance and still maintain privacy for other students – it's not fair or equitable to do that.

Research student interstate

Students were proud to be enrolled at Monash and in their specific schools. More could be done to foster this sense of belonging:

I am very proud of being a Monash student and use my Monash mouse pad, bag, coffee cup etc to advertise the fact.

Research student overseas

Investigate the feasibility of holding HDR regional meetings
Facilitate communication between DE and on-campus students
Facilitate participation of DE students in University community
Record departmental seminars for online access

11.6 Residentials

Some compulsory residentials did not make good use of the time available. Students felt that sessions should include information about support services and as many exPERT sessions as possible. Last minute timetable changes meant that students with airline bookings missed crucial sessions. The Education Faculty winter school should include specific DE sessions.

The costs incurred by the students to attend the residencies varied, but were several thousand dollars per trip for interstate students. Although some departments provided financial assistance, others did not. Some departments only provided assistance once per student. The availability of assistance was not well publicised.

Strict residential attendance requirements were not always appropriate as some students arranged to meet their supervisors at other locations and times. Accommodation at Gippsland needs to be more appropriate for mature age students, and should include internet access, television and laundry facilities. Students attending residencies at Clayton were not informed about accommodation options (such as Colleges), leading to the use of expensive motel accommodation.

Information about accommodation and travelling to campus is not specific enough. A reference to a generic transport website is insufficient for students who are unfamiliar with Melbourne.

Review availability of funding assistance for residentials

11.7 Library services

The library received extensive praise and many positive comments, particularly in relation to 'ask a librarian', subject librarians, document delivery and the range of online journals available:

This is the best library in the world! ... It is so easy to use and you are subscribed to so many more journals. I have recently found that I can get

books delivered as well and that was really really fast! I've had a few queries and the library staff were really helpful. I love the library – it's great for distance education.

Research student interstate

However, students were concerned at the requirement to pay for the return postage of books and DVDs. They also queried the restriction on borrowing overseas, pointing out that the distances and times involved to send books to the other side of Australia would be similar to sending overseas. They also felt that reciprocal borrowing rights should be available interstate and overseas. They would like inter-library loans to be available to DE students.

The loan period was sometimes too short to allow for postage time. The loan period should be extended because the implications of late returns and the subsequent library suspension or general encumbrance were greater for DE students who depend on online access.

Provide free return postage of library loans

Increase library loan periods for DE students to allow for postage time

Facilitate interlibrary loans for DE students

11.8 Seminars

Students were concerned that very few exPERT and triple E seminars were available on DVD or online:

I feel like I've missed so many great opportunities to enhance my skills in my research career ... If anything could be improved for distance students in general, in terms of services and resources, it would be access to these sorts of training sessions and materials handed-out.

Research student interstate

This lack of resources was made harder to tolerate by receiving regular emails advertising what was available on-campus:

The whole programme is really set up for face to face and the constant emails telling us what is available on campus, with very little offered on DVD etc, are very very difficult to read.

Research student overseas

Some exPERT seminars, such as those dealing with motivation, would be particularly useful for DE students.

A student suggested holding seminars adjacent to weekends so more students can travel to campus for these sessions and not have to take extensive leave from their employment.

Library training seminars, such as the effective use of search engines and using databases, could be webcast so DE students logged into the electronic resources could participate in hands-on sessions.

Ensure all academic and student support seminars are available on DVD, online or in an appropriate interactive format. Students should have access to handouts and PowerPoint slides.

Increase online library tutorials to cover HDR-relevant topics such as utilising databases

11.9 Software and technical access

Students had experienced significant difficulty in acquiring access to appropriate software, including SPSS, NVivo, Sophos and EndNote. Confusion over access to iFolder was also an issue. Access to software that was licensed for home use was difficult to organise. Some software was not available for DE students at all. This was apparently a licensing issue as the University licence does not extend overseas. Students felt it was unfair that on-campus staff and students had easier access to software and technical equipment:

I have had no support from Monash to meet my technical needs - yet I discover that staff and face to face students can borrow all sorts of equipment and software. I believe that Monash should meet all the students study needs - not just those who are on campus.

Research student overseas

One student provided copies of emails going back several years demonstrating unsuccessful attempts to access vital statistical and referencing software. The student felt that the lack of a coordinated approach to software provision had wasted considerable time, cost money and after many complaints had still not been resolved:

Negotiating access to and support for computer applications has continued to cause frustration, time and resources for myself and my supervisor. Should Monash be unable to support off-campus or part-time students in any manner that differs from the norm, clarification as to what is and is not supported would alleviate these problems and allow departments, supervisors and HDR candidates to put in place planned and systemic alternative solutions.

Research student overseas

There was a need for online tutorials for NVivo and SPSS similar to those available for EndNote. A student complained about the lack of flexibility in not allowing communication technologies such as Skype.

Provide access to required software, including purchase of individual licences if required

Provide appropriate technical support

Provide clear information about the level of accessible resources available to DE students prior to enrolment

11.10 Information access

Students felt that there was no effective central coordination of DE services and information. They found it difficult to locate DE information and assistance. The DE learning website does not cater for postgraduate needs:

There needs to be a dedicated and knowledgeable support unit for all distance education students – one that is run by someone who will ensure stability of staff and someone who knows that we are not all the same.

Research student interstate

Some of the complaints were about requirements that have changed or are no longer mandatory. One response consisted of a series of questions about access rights, and location of information. Another complained of a Monash ban on the use of Skype, which has in fact been overturned for some time. These responses suggest an underlying problem in communicating new or amended information to current DE students.

Clearly refer HDR students to the MRGS DE webpage/portal

Ensure websites are current with consistent and easy to locate information

11.11 Contacting Monash

Students complained of having to pay for calls to their supervisor, student administration and support services. Students stated that some supervisors and all IT support did not have international access, and so could not return calls. However, one student praised the IT support staff for calling her overseas to sort out an access problem.

Provide international call access for all supervisors and IT support

11.12 Scholarships

There was confusion about scholarship eligibility. HDR students believed that they were ineligible for scholarships. In fact, while this is the case for MRGS scholarships, Australian Postgraduate Award (APA) guidelines allow for DE enrolment. Lack of access to scholarships and other awards also had possible career implications, as scholarship success is relevant for academic job applications.

Provide clear scholarship information

12 Monash GPG student feedback

The Student and Community Services Division forwarded an email to 3624 GPG DE students.⁷⁰ Feedback was received from 118 GPG students. From the responses, it appears that some Open Universities Australia students and also mixed-mode students were included in the request for feedback.

All feedback was acknowledged by email. All quotes used are with the permission of the student. Students whose feedback included specific problems were advised about the MPA advocacy service. Students with particular questions relating to their course or other University matters were provided with the details of appropriate contacts.

Several students praised the Monash DE experience and compared it favourably with their experiences of other university DE courses. They were appreciative that DE allowed them to study courses that they would not otherwise be able to undertake. Many respondents identified university staff for praise; usually the course coordinator but also faculty administrators and library staff.

The concerns summarised in this section are as expressed by the students, the accuracy of any claims has not been verified. The summary covers all areas of concern, regardless of the numbers of students expressing that concern.

Recommendations arising from the feedback are listed under each subheading. A follow-up Monash survey of DE students is now required to ensure representation of all students.

Conduct a comprehensive survey of the needs of all GPG DE students

Extract DE GPG data from 2008 MSEQ

12.1 Academic assistance

Exams caused problems for some students. Many DE students are studying part-time because they are in full-time employment. Exams are held during business hours, meaning that some students need to take annual leave to sit these exams. Other students are working in locations, such as on oil rigs, where sitting an exam at a specified time is difficult and also an unfair expectation on their work supervisor:

Monash does not have an off-campus centre here, and so I had to find and specify an invigilator for both examinations. While I understand this is likely an unavoidable issue, I had a lot of trouble finding someone that:

- *was not a friend, family member, or a party with any interest in my passing the unit*
- *was employed in a recommended profession as specified (accountant, lawyer, teacher etc)*
- *could speak and read English, and*
- *was happy to watch me take two exams, each running for around three hours, during weekday business hours in consecutive weeks, without*

⁷⁰ See Appendix C

compensation ... People here are very busy to begin with, without a supposed stranger asking them to spend 6+ precious hours watching over a test.

GPG student located overseas

Students suggested that online exams would save the university money and be more convenient for students.

Assessment requirements, including group work and weekly assessment, generally caused problems for some students as these requirements did not take into account the likely circumstances of DE students:

It is important that the learning is flexible - eg. requiring the submission of a weekly task may not be practical for a full time employee working a fly in fly out roster arrangement where they are away for a considerable period and not working to a regular schedule. Consideration should be given to these and similar circumstances when designing coursework and assessment schedules as these circumstances would be the reasons behind selecting an off-campus mode of study in the first instance.

GPG student

The slow return of assignments was a problem encountered by some students. They complained that assignments were returned after the next assignment was due, or very close to the exam. Consequently students had no opportunity to improve in subsequent assessment.

The content of readers and course notes was a source of many complaints. Some readers and guides were not updated from the previous semester or year and contained earlier dates and assignment information. References were not current, meaning that the most relevant articles were not included. This was a particular problem for students studying in disciplines where information can date quickly.

Some articles in readers were in the format of poorly scanned copies, even though the same articles were available through the library in PDF format. Students also identified guides that were poorly written, with spelling and grammatical errors. Complaints then focused on lack of value for money:

The unit/ course outlines often tend to be poorly structured (and hence, confusing), varying a great deal between courses. As a distance student, that one document is absolutely vital in understanding what is expected of us. If pieces of information are missing, ambiguous, repeated on different pages of the document but with different information, or - as happens A LOT - has left over information or dates from previous semesters (where it is evident the academic has invested all of about 3 minutes in updating it) - this is a huge source of frustration, anxiety, and a silly and avoidable waste of valuable time - and frankly, insulting to receive for our \$2,500 per unit investment.

GPG student

Lack of clarity on assessment requirements and lack of timely notifications were a problem. This may be a general issue for all students, but DE students have fewer opportunities for clarification. In some units, additional requirements for readings were distributed too close to the assessment task or exam for DE students to obtain the required books and articles. One unit had required readings that were not supplied in the reader or available online, the student was forced to withdraw from the unit.

Assignment submission requirements were a source of confusion and annoyance. These varied among units. Submission in Blackboard was not used by many units. Assignments were not allowed to be emailed and most students were required to fax or post assignments. However fax machines often have page limits and airmail or international courier was expensive and unreliable. One student had circumvented the problem by emailing their assignment to OCLC, who then printed the assignment and submitted it for the student.

Some units offered assistance in reviewing drafts of assignments, but this service was only available to on-campus students. The extent of academic comments on assignments varied. Some returned assignments contained few comments and, as the only source of feedback, this was inadequate.

Investigate alternatives to current exam requirements

Mandate return timeframe for all assignments

Review and recommend process for development and update of readers and course guides

Develop a universal assignment submission process that is suited to all circumstances

12.2 Academic contact

Significant variation in the academic staff use of Blackboard [previously called MUSO] was a significant source of frustration and generated many complaints in the feedback. Some unit coordinators and tutors utilised this tool effectively but others seemed not to want to use the technology or know how to:

For me the most important things are: Regular interaction through MUSO - only 2 of my subject coordinators have done this regularly and they are the subjects that I enjoyed the most and got the most out of ...

GPG student

Whilst MUSO can be a wonderful tool, if your lecturer does not bother to respond to ANY postings from off campus students then it is completely useless.

GPG student

Response times to queries also varied. Some students had very good experiences:

My experiences were all extremely positive. Support from the unit advisor and lecturers were all fantastic. Any issues were answered promptly and efficiently. Pre-readings and coursework were delivered on time. Discussion and on line tutes were lengthy and beneficial. Library and MUSO were easily navigated. I have and will continue to praise Monash for a highly efficient and well co-ordinated external study unit. Congratulations to you all!!

GPG student

Other students claimed that their enquiries were not answered at all or very late. Some felt that they were given low priority because they were less visible. These students eventually gave up trying to make contact:

There were three co-ordinators nominated for this course - how could none of them find the time to reply to simple questions posted using the required Blackboard system in anything under a week?

GPG student located overseas

I look at messages sent as a kind of one way communication the archive of which would (if I were unfortunate enough to find myself in "borderline fail territory") support my appeal for a passing grade (a kind of "Well I asked but you didn't respond" argument). I'm not sure how successful I (or other students) would be with this strategy.

GPG student

Attempts to make contact by phone were seldom effective and one student complained that some staff voicemail systems were not set up. Other academic staff refused to communicate by phone, meaning that a complex question took multiple emails to resolve. The communication problem was exacerbated because the tutors marking assignments were often employed part-time.

Mandate staff response times for Blackboard and email queries

Ensure all voicemail and email communication complies with University protocols

12.3 Administrative and financial support

Students experienced difficulty in knowing who to contact, particularly as administrative staff changed positions regularly. Students suggested that a revised contact list be sent to all students at the start of each semester.

The administrator is the face of the University to distance ed students.

GPG student located overseas

Many students complained that readers were not available in hardcopy format. These readers were difficult to read on screen. But students often could not print them out because of the time involved, slow or limited internet access, the cost to print or because printing companies were concerned about copyright issues. One student pointed out that students located in difficult environments overseas may have limited access to photocopy paper. Lack of hardcopy notes made completing the course almost impossible and yet the course fees were the same as for on-campus students:

I objected to the trend to having all readings on line. This lands the high cost of printing out documents onto the student.

GPG student located in Victoria

The electronic version was also difficult to read. Bad reproduction of too many articles, and copies of books were difficult to read as they have to be scanned as portrait. Difficult to keep head tilted for long periods reading these versions.

GPG student

Some students complained about the inconsistent availability of core units in each semester. Others felt that the range of elective units on offer was quite limited compared with that available for on-campus students. Students enrolled in a DE course based at Gippsland were not allowed to choose units offered at other campuses. Course advice regarding unit selection was also difficult to access.

Many students suggested that readers and guides should be available several weeks prior to the commencement of the semester. Not only are students keen to make a

start, but slow arrival of readers significantly disrupts tight study plans. In one unit an incorrect reader was sent out and, in several, the readers arrived late:

The subject wasn't set up for on line delivery, the reading packages weren't delivered to any of the students in my subject group until 3 weeks into the semester, the hurdle requirements were unable to be completed by any of us due to the subject not being 'live' and the person listed as delivering the subject had recently retired ... There was little interaction with the other students and the lecturer didn't check in with us via email once during the semester. Very disappointing and I just paid \$1,300 odd dollars to be sent a reading package and to have someone mark a 6,000 word assignment for me. Hmm value for money??

GPG student

These issues combined with lack of interaction with lecturers created an impression for the students that they were not receiving value for money:

The academic staff did not respond to my email enquiries at all on two occasions during the last year - indeed the only two times that I made an enquiry or gave feedback. Apart from receiving the written assignment feedback sheets this was the only true interaction (or at least potential interaction!) that I had with academic staff all year. Not good enough for the \$7500 that the year cost me?

GPG student located overseas

Another student felt that the course fees should be much less than those for on-campus students as the DE students seemed to get little or no lecturer contact:

... the off-campus student body represents an important cohort paying the same fees as those on-campus, and if issues of communication time in response to questions, student interaction and debate, feedback and course content could be addressed from a point of view more compassionate and informed about the off-campus student experience I think it would be positive both for students and the university as a whole.

GPG student located overseas

One student suggested that unit evaluations should be conducted later in each semester so that the extent of problems could be more accurately reflected.

A student complained that there was little administrative support for interstate students needing to go on placement. Information supplied by Monash was only relevant to those students located in Victoria. There was no support for the process of arranging insurance or police checks interstate.

Ensure a revised contact list is sent to all students at the start of each semester

Make readers and course guides available in hardcopy format on request

Review availability of DE units

Ensure readers and course guides distributed 3 weeks prior to start of semester

Review timing of unit evaluations

Ensure consistent support for students regardless of their physical location

12.4 Student support

One student praised the Disability Liaison Unit as being invaluable. They stated that they could not have studied without this assistance.

Some students felt they missed out on learning support seminars and careers sessions as they were held at times local DE students could not attend. An opportunity to have CVs submitted to prospective employers apparently was not offered to DE students.

The bookshop website and ordering system was not particularly accessible.

For some students, it was unclear who to contact for support, and they felt they received 'the run around'.

Review timing of student support sessions to facilitate participation of local DE students

Investigate feasibility of running student support seminars online

12.5 Peer interaction

Although units offered in Education were identified as having extensive online student discussion, many students in other faculties were disappointed at the lack of student postings and discussion with their peers:

I realise that being isolated from the university community is part of distance education. However, I feel the university does very little to help students feel connected and get the assistance they require. Instead, the [graduate] diploma is simply a collection of course notes and books/articles – “read all this and we'll give you your degree”.

GPG student located in Victoria

However, two students liked not having to interact with other students as this only added to their workload.

Students were disappointed that the University did not facilitate direct contact among students. Apparently other universities arrange weekly hook-ups by phone and circulate email contact lists.

A formal system for helping students get in touch with each other would be useful. When I began this course I was asked about whether I would like to be in contact with other students and I had answered “yes” and yet nothing came of it.

GPG student located in Victoria

For whatever reasons, the university's unwillingness to identify course participants and their geographic locations impedes the chances of study groups emerging spontaneously.

GPG student located interstate

Students suggested that face-to-face study groups should be facilitated in major centres. They pointed out that holding such study groups at Gippsland was not convenient for most students, including those located in Melbourne.

Review on-line forum use

Investigate feasibility of study groups in accessible major centres

12.6 Weekend schools

Several students commented that the weekend schools had been reduced to one day. As face-to-face opportunities are rare, this reduction was of concern. Sessions were also then rushed. Additionally, because no handouts were available, time was wasted copying notes from whiteboards and overheads.

Facilities at weekend schools were inadequate, including a lack of air-conditioning. Campus facilities were not open or they opened with only limited hours:

I got to the campus only to find that all student services were closed (even food outlets) and there was very little signage as to where I was expected to be. Considering this is my only chance to be on the campus wouldn't it make sense to have some of the services available to me? ... I couldn't even get an orientation tour of the library & their services for external students as they were only open whilst I was in class & then closed!

GPG student located interstate

Public transport on weekends was also limited, adding the cost of a hire car to the expenses of the weekend.

Review organisation of weekend schools to optimise experience

Investigate feasibility of running weekend schools simultaneously to increase viability of opening student services and food outlets

12.7 Library services

There was considerable appreciation of the library services offered to DE students. One student singled out particular staff as being caring as well as providing an excellent service. Access to journals was considered excellent by most who commented. Students appreciated the courtesy email notices regarding due items.

Some areas for improvement were suggested. The cost and difficulty of returning loans was raised. Even receiving loans was a problem for one working student as book packages were often too big to fit in their home letterbox, so they were taken to the postal depot and the student then had to arrange pickup or re-delivery. This cut into the loan period.

Reciprocal borrowing rights at overseas universities were suggested. More promotion of the role of subject librarians in locating appropriate information for assignments was also recommended. One student had experienced difficulty in finding help on the website.

Negotiate reciprocal borrowing rights at overseas universities

Promote the role of subject librarians

12.8 Lectures

The unavailability of online lectures was a major complaint from GPG DE students. Students queried why all lectures were not available and said that they felt

disadvantaged and less a part of the University as a result. They pointed out that streamed lectures would enable students to hear questions and answers they might not have thought of.

Those lectures that were available online were often poorly recorded, with bad sound quality and incorrect labelling. The recording was timed for a start and finish, but invariably lectures started and finished late, meaning that the end of the lecture was missed from the recording.

Students requested that lectures be available as podcasts. This would enable them to be heard while students were travelling or when they did not have ongoing access to the internet.

Ensure all lectures are available online and by podcast

Improve quality of recorded lectures

12.9 Software and technical access

Some students had experienced problems with their Monash email account not sending to non-Monash addresses. This was an issue because some of the academic staff used non-Monash email addresses.

Some assignments submitted via Blackboard had not been received correctly by the academic staff member. The lodgement page did not have any instruction on format or software compatibility issues. One student said there was also a problem that Blackboard could not cope with large documents. Instead of telling the student that the assignment had not been correctly received, the lecturer marked the assignment based only on what had been transmitted.

Several students commented that Blackboard access to units was removed as soon as the units were completed. Yet many units contained references and links that would be useful for the entire course.

Local DE students complained that computer labs were not open outside business hours. Working in these labs was the only option for DE students who needed to access SPSS or other software with restricted licensing conditions.

Several students experienced problems with the web enrolment system. They found it difficult to navigate and felt that it 'went round in circles'. Other students returning to study after many years were unfamiliar with recent developments in information communication technologies and would have liked more assistance.

Provide SMS acknowledgement of assignment receipt

Ensure all units remain available in Blackboard until course completion

Provide written instructions for new students regarding online enrolment and use of other online systems

12.10 Information access

Global emails were a source of annoyance for some students. These emails were not tailored to the DE student location, for example advertising events at Clayton. There was no facility for students to select email topics. Some felt that these emails constituted spam and often meant that they failed to notice important information relevant to them among all the Monash email correspondence. Similarly, global

reenrolment notices were confusing and time wasting for students who had already re-enrolled.

Changes to regulations and requirements were not communicated to DE students. Some students struggled throughout their course to meet requirements that had been changed since their initial enrolment but of which they had not been notified.

Review email communication with DE students to ensure appropriate and consistent content

12.11 Contacting Monash

Students complained that there was no toll free number. Others complained that the toll free number was difficult to find. Many students were not in a position to contact the University during local business hours.

Distribute orientation package to all DE students detailing units, resources available, introduction to lecturers and administrative staff, contact details and general information about Monash

12.12 Scholarships

Students were not aware of any scholarships for DE students, particularly as most students were studying part-time. Feedback suggested that some students were studying under extremely difficult personal financial circumstances.

Investigate feasibility of providing DE GPG scholarship

13 Final comment

Student feedback suggests that many students have enjoyed a positive experience as a DE postgraduate. However, when things go wrong the problems are compounded by the DE environment. Questions arising in the feedback about where to find information and complaints about issues that had in fact been addressed by the University some time ago, confirm the claims of many students that communication is a pressing problem.

While some of the issues for DE HDR and GPG postgraduates may differ, the problems of communication and access to information and appropriate resources apply to both groups. Accordingly, some recommendations listed under one group may be relevant for all students.

Significant issues for HDR students were communication problems with supervisors and inadequate access to exPERT seminars. Key issues for GPG students were communication problems regarding staff utilisation of Blackboard, return of assignments, access to lectures, and response to emails. Inflexibility in the provision of resources and the perceived 'value for money' of the course were also major concerns.

The needs of DE students should be catered for in all programs and initiatives at Monash University. Information would be more accessible if it was located in the one place with a clear link from the main website. A central student feedback process should be facilitated including an initial comprehensive survey of postgraduate DE students. The results of this survey would lead to the development of targeted and appropriate student and academic support initiatives.

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15 Appendix A Enrolment information

Note: There are 50 HDR and 15 GPG external students enrolled through overseas campuses, and therefore not represented by the MPA. However, these 65 students are included in the figures.

Note: Totals may vary due to unavailability of information for some students

Table 3. 2007 DE postgraduate students by award course and attendance type

Course - Type Grouped	Student - Student Attendance Type	Total
Higher degree research	Full-time	51
	Part-time	225
Higher degree research Total		276
Graduate/Postgraduate	Full-time	437
	Part-time	3478
Graduate/Postgraduate Total		3915
Grand Total		4191

Table 4. 2007 DE postgraduate students by award course and Faculty

Course - Type Grouped	Course - Faculty Managing (Current)	Total
Higher degree research	Art & Design	18
	Arts	30
	Bus & Eco	34
	Education	110
	Engineering	7
	Info Tech	9
	Law	11
	MNHS	46
	Pharmacy	2
	Science	8
	T & R	1
Higher degree research Total		276
Graduate/Postgraduate	Art & Design	23
	Arts	96
	Bus & Eco	550
	Education	1006
	Engineering	321
	Info Tech	216
	Law	3
	MNHS	1399
	Pharmacy	271
Science	30	
Graduate/Postgraduate Total		3915
Grand Total		4191

Table 5. 2007 DE postgraduate students by award course and sex

Course - Type Grouped	Student - Sex	Total
Higher degree research	Female	175
	Male	101
Higher degree research Total		276
Graduate/Postgraduate	Female	2475
	Male	1440
Graduate/Postgraduate Total		3915
Grand Total		4191

Table 6. 2007 DE HDR students by Faculty and sex

Course - Type Grouped	Course - Faculty Managing (Current)	Student - Sex	Total
Higher degree research	Art & Design	Female	12
		Male	6
Art & Design Total			18
	Arts	Female	18
		Male	12
Arts Total			30
	Bus & Eco	Female	18
		Male	16
Bus & Eco Total			34
	Education	Female	76
		Male	34
Education Total			110
	Engineering	Female	2
		Male	5
Engineering Total			7
	Info Tech	Female	5
		Male	4
Info Tech Total			9
	Law	Female	7

	Male	4
Law Total		11
MNHS	Female	32
	Male	14
MNHS Total		46
Pharmacy	Female	2
Pharmacy Total		2
Science	Female	3
	Male	5
Science Total		8
T & R	Male	1
T & R Total		1
Higher degree research Total		276

Table 7. 2007 DE GPG students by Faculty and sex

Course - Type Grouped	Course - Faculty Managing (Current)	Student - Sex	Total
Graduate/Postgraduate	Art & Design	Female	19
		Male	4
Art & Design Total			23
	Arts	Female	66
		Male	30
Arts Total			96
	Bus & Eco	Female	317
		Male	233
Bus & Eco Total			550
	Education	Female	682
		Male	324
Education Total			1006
	Engineering	Female	44
		Male	277
Engineering Total			321
	Info Tech	Female	95
		Male	121
Info Tech Total			216
	Law	Female	2
		Male	1
Law Total			3
	MNHS	Female	1017
		Male	382
MNHS Total			1399
	Pharmacy	Female	216
		Male	55
Pharmacy Total			271
	Science	Female	17
		Male	13

Science Total	30
<i>Graduate/Postgraduate Total</i>	3915

Table 8. 2007 DE HDR students by country of term residence

Course - Type Grouped	Student - Term Residence Country	Total
Higher degree research	Australia	197
	Canada	4
	Germany	1
	Hong Kong (SAR of China)	5
	India	1
	Indonesia	1
	Israel	1
	Japan	7
	Kenya	1
	Luxembourg	1
	Macau (SAR of China)	2
	Malaysia	11
	Mexico	1
	Netherlands	1
	New Zealand	11
	Oman	1
	Pakistan	1
	Philippines	1
	Saudi Arabia	1
	Singapore	8
South Africa	2	
Switzerland	1	
Thailand	2	
United Arab Emirates	3	
United States of America	11	
Higher degree research Total		276

Table 9. 2007 DE GPG students by country of term residence

Graduate/Postgraduate	Andorra	1
	Argentina	1
	Armenia	1
	Australia	2966
	Bermuda	1
	Brunei Darussalam	2
	Cambodia	1
	Canada	16
	Chile	1
	China (excl SARs and Taiwan)	13
	Colombia	2
	Costa Rica	1
	East Timor	1
	Egypt	1
	England	5
	Estonia	1
	Ethiopia	1
	Fiji	5
	France	2
	Germany	2
	Ghana	2
	Hong Kong (SAR of China)	329
	Iceland	1
	India	5
	Indonesia	11
	Ireland	1
	Israel	1
Italy	0	
Japan	15	
Kenya	1	
Korea, Democratic People's Rep (Nth)	1	
Korea, Republic of (South)	4	

Kuwait	2
Lebanon	1
Macau (SAR of China)	10
Malaysia	24
Malta	1
Mauritius	1
Netherlands	1
New Zealand	29
Nigeria	1
Norway	2
Papua New Guinea	3
Puerto Rico	2
Qatar	6
Samoa	4
Saudi Arabia	30
Scotland	1
Seychelles	1
Sierra Leone	1
Singapore	318
Slovakia	1
Slovenia	2
Solomon Islands	1
South Africa	3
Sri Lanka	1
Switzerland	2
Syria	1
Taiwan	3
Thailand	8
Trinidad and Tobago	1
Turkey	2
United Arab Emirates	9
United Kingdom nfd	18

	United States of America	27
	Vanuatu	1
	Viet Nam	1
	Zimbabwe	1
Graduate/Postgraduate Total		3915

Table 10. 2007 DE non-Victorian domestic postgraduate students by award course and state of home residence

Course - Type Grouped	Student - Home Residence Place	Total
Higher degree research	Australian Capital Territory	8
	New South Wales	26
	Northern Territory	6
	Queensland	15
	South Australia	18
	Western Australia	11
Higher degree research Total		84
Graduate/Postgraduate	Australian Capital Territory	65
	New South Wales	363
	Northern Territory	29
	Queensland	182
	South Australia	80
	Tasmania	73
	Western Australia	125
Graduate/Postgraduate Total		917
Grand Total		1001

Table 11. 2007 DE Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander postgraduate students by award course

Course - Type Grouped	Student - ATSI Status	Total
Higher degree research	Both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin	1
Higher degree research Total		1
Graduate/Postgraduate	Of Aboriginal origin but not Torres Strait Islander	12
	Both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin	1
Graduate/Postgraduate Total		13
Grand Total		14

Table 12. 2007 DE postgraduate students by citizenship group

Course - Type Grouped	Student - Citizenship Group	Total
Higher degree research	Domestic	235
	International	41
Higher degree research Total		276
Graduate/Postgraduate	Domestic	3097
	International	818
Graduate/Postgraduate Total		3915
Grand Total		4191

Table 13. DE postgraduate students by award course and enrolment year

Student Enrolments		
Course - Type Grouped	Course Enrolment - Reference Year	Total
Higher degree research	2003	212
	2004	244
	2005	267
	2006	267
	2007	276
Graduate/Postgraduate	2003	3955
	2004	4331
	2005	4124
	2006	4068
	2007	3915

Table 14. All postgraduate students by award course and enrolment year

Student Enrolments		
Course - Type Grouped	Course Enrolment - Reference Year	Total
Higher degree research	2003	3081
	2004	3135
	2005	3199
	2006	3356
	2007	3455
Graduate/Postgraduate	2003	12318
	2004	13349
	2005	12678
	2006	12280
	2007	12362

16 Appendix B Excerpts from 'Handbook for Doctoral and MPhil Degrees'⁷¹

16.1 Chapter 3: Conditions of candidature

3.3 Attendance and residency for part-time, full-time and external/off-campus candidature

The attendance and residency requirements have a dual purpose. They relate to the need for both regular and sustained periods of time available for research, and seek to ensure there is continuous interaction between the candidate and the community of scholars at Monash.

Please Note: These are Monash University's minimum requirements and each faculty may impose more rigorous requirements as appropriate. The supervisor and head of academic unit must certify on the annual progress report that the attendance requirements have been met.

3.3.1 Level of enrolment: part-time or full-time

The candidate's academic unit and the Research Graduate School Committee will need to be satisfied that any intending candidate has sufficient time available during the week to devote to study and research and to attend departmental activities.

The academic year for doctoral and MPhil candidates is 48 weeks with 4 weeks (20 days) annual leave. Candidates must negotiate annual leave with their academic unit and supervisor and annual leave entitlement cannot be accrued beyond 6 weeks (30 days). Candidates wishing to take further leave must access their special leave or intermission leave entitlements. Further information on special leave and intermission is available in Chapter 4 of this handbook.

All doctoral and MPhil candidates, with the exception of those stipulated below, may enrol on a full-time or a part-time basis.

External EdD candidates must enrol on a part-time basis.

DPsych candidates must commence candidature on a full-time basis, but may transfer to part-time candidature after 24 months of full-time candidature.

International candidates studying within Australia on a student visa must enrol on a full-time basis to meet visa requirements.

3.3.1.1 Full-time candidature

In order to undertake full-time candidature, a candidate must be able to devote a minimum of four week days to the pursuit of the research project.

⁷¹ 'Handbook for Doctoral and MPhil Degrees' available at:
<http://mrgs.monash.edu.au/research/doctoral/chapter3c.html> and
<http://mrgs.monash.edu.au/research/doctoral/appendf.html>

3.3.1.2 Part-time candidature

In order to undertake part-time candidature, a candidate must be able to devote a minimum of two days per week to the pursuit of the research project. At least one day must be a week day so that a candidate may attend the University to meet with the supervisor or attend seminars or workshops etc. Where the candidate's research work involves systematic use of University facilities, such as for lab-based disciplines, the faculty may require that at least one and a half days be week days.

In the case of professional doctorate students, part-time candidates must devote the equivalent of one-and-a-half days a week to thesis preparation. The half-day should normally be a week day. This time will allow the candidate to attend the University to meet with a supervisor and to participate in departmental activities.

Where the candidate is engaged in full-time employment, the head of the academic unit will be required to certify that he/she is satisfied that the candidate is able to spend the stipulated time in pursuit of the research project. The candidate will also need to provide a letter from his/her employer, which details the time the candidate has available to undertake the research.

3.3.2 Regular attendance

Throughout their candidature, all candidates must regularly attend their department, school, centre or faculty and participate fully in the intellectual, research and academic life of their academic unit. To this end, a range of orientation programs, research seminars and training workshops etc are normally organised on a regular basis. All candidates are therefore required to:

discuss progress with the supervisor at least once every calendar month (part-time candidates) and every two weeks (full-time candidates). This contact may occur using forms of interactive communication;

hold a minimum of two 'in person' meetings with the supervisor each year (for example at confirmation of candidature time and during completion of annual progress reports);

attend the University frequently and on a regular basis; and

attend all courses, seminars, workshops etc as are deemed necessary by the head of the academic unit. (For example, in the case of a regular seminar or lecture series, a minimum of 80% attendance may be deemed adequate.)

3.3.3 Candidature by external/off-campus mode

In the case of applicants proposing to enrol by external mode, the relevant faculty must be convinced that the prospective applicant has the personal maturity and research experience to pursue independent, sustained and structured research off-campus. Such evidence might include previous study/research completed in a timely manner, publications or relevant work experience (see Appendix F).

Where the external candidate is pursuing research at another institution, a joint agreement on the research program must be negotiated between Monash and the host institution. This may include arrangements regarding intellectual property and ethics approval.

3.3.3.1 External PhD candidature, MPhil candidature and MD (with supervision) candidature

The conditions that apply to enrolment level and time available for research also apply to external candidates. In addition there is an annual five-day on-campus attendance requirement each year, or equivalent over the period of candidature.

A portion of this attendance may be off-campus, provided that the candidate is able to interact with the principal or associate (university) supervisor during this time (for example, where the candidate and supervisor(s) both attend a conference).

When a candidate transfers from internal to external candidature during the latter stages of enrolment, the academic unit may wish to make a special case for a part of the 5 day residency requirements to be waived.

Note: Regular interactive communication should take place between candidate and supervisor at least once every two weeks, via telephone, video conference, email or other interactive communication. Daily communication should also be possible, as required.

3.3.3.2 External EdD candidature

External EdD candidature is only available to students enrolled on a part-time basis.

In the commencing year, candidates will be required to attend a two-week orientation summer school at the Clayton campus. In third and subsequent years, when the thesis stage commences, candidates will be required to attend a compulsory three-week residential summer school.

Note: Regular interactive communication should take place between candidate and supervisor throughout the program. The Faculty of Education Research Degrees Committee must be satisfied that at least fortnightly communication can take place via telephone, video conference, email or other interactive communication.

The EdD program is not presently available to commencing students.

3.3.3.3 External DBA and SJD candidature

DBA and SJD candidates may only transfer to external candidature at the completion of the coursework component of their degree. External DBA and SJD candidates are required to meet the same requirements as indicated for PhD candidates.

The DBA degree is no longer offered to new students.

16.2 Appendix F:

Executive summary and recommendations of Research Graduate School Committee Working Group on external candidature

1. Preamble

1.1 The Monash postgraduate research environment: changes and challenges

Monash is committed to maintaining “a vigorous postgraduate program in which new scholars and researchers learn the principles of fine scholarship and research ... [and] ... collaborate nationally and internationally in the pursuit and application of knowledge”.

Monash is determined to maintain the closest possible relationship between graduate students and their supervisors and academic units, and to ensure that graduate

students are seen as contributing to the intellectual life of the academic unit and to the University's overall research effort.

The postgraduate research environment is now changing quite dramatically, with the electronic revolution in particular remoulding our perceptions of supervisory style and candidature procedures.

The Research Graduate School Committee acknowledges issues of equality of access, and the need to encourage international postgraduate collaborative research programs, especially in the Asian region, should opportunities arise.

The development of professional doctorate programs which tend to attract people with considerable professional and employment experience is also generating a new type of doctoral candidate who is often an older, more independent researcher who may have only limited time available for the pursuit of the doctoral program.

The University has responded to these matters in a way that shows a proper balance between flexibility and prudence.

1.2 The underlying objectives of the Monash postgraduate research program

The basic philosophy underlying the University's approach to postgraduate research candidature is that a candidate should be exposed to the University, national and international research cultures. Candidates should be given the opportunity to attend workshops on a range of matters pertaining to their research including:

- orientation/induction
- research methodology and skills, codes of conduct and protocol
- occupational health and safety
- ethics practices and procedures
- intellectual property, and
- publication protocol.

As part of their interaction not only with the nominated supervisor but also with members of the academic unit and wider University research community, candidates should attend and present departmental research seminars in order to challenge the research of peers and in turn defend their own work.

Candidates should be encouraged to move beyond the University to the broader Australian and international research community through participation at conferences and the preparation of papers for publication. Successful articulation and crystallisation of one's ideas, and their presentation before a critical audience of peers, is considered an integral and essential component of any postgraduate research program.

Two related questions then arise. How may external candidature (1) meet these objectives, and (2) support and enhance the integrity and cohesion of the on-campus graduate community within the academic unit?

2. Recommendations

2.1 Proportion of external candidates permissible within total doctoral cohort

Quotas do not apply.

2.2 Admission

Given the nature of external mode candidature, faculties will need to convince the Research Graduate School Committee that the prospective candidate has the personal maturity to pursue independent, sustained and structured research off campus. Such evidence might include previous successful and timely completion of a postgraduate research degree, publications, or relevant work experience particularly in a research-oriented institution.

2.3 External candidature requirements

2.3.1 Primary location of research

Where the research is principally being undertaken at another research site (eg archives repository, field site, laboratory, commercial or governmental research station, another university etc), the Committee must be assured by the relevant academic unit that the site provides a research environment which offers appropriate resources, facilities and research expertise for the duration of the candidature.

While the majority of external candidates are expected to reside outside the Melbourne metropolitan area, a case must be made for admission to external candidature for a person living in Melbourne.

2.3.2 Attendance of 15 days per year

The 'residency' and attendance requirements assume that an academic unit has a rigorous and healthy research postgraduate culture which includes for example, an on-going program of seminars, workshops etc.

A minimum 15 days of attendance per year for doctoral candidates (10 days for MPhil) is a reasonable requirement and reflects current practice in other Australian universities. Apportionment of these days would be determined on a case by case basis (eg a single period or the equivalent in several smaller blocks of time).

A portion of this attendance could be off-campus, provided that the candidate was able to interact with the principal or associate (University) supervisor during this time (eg attending a conference). Proposals for programs considered equivalent to 15 days of residency would be considered by the Committee as they arose.

A reduction in the 15 days (10 days for MPhil) 'attendance' requirement after the first year may be considered on the grounds that candidates are expected to demonstrate a greater level of independence as their candidature progresses. Factors that faculties might cite as grounds for a reduction of residency requirements in the second and subsequent years might include:

- strong performance in the confirmation examination or seminar presentation(s)
- an impressive publication record
- prior completion of a research masters at Monash or other clear evidence of a capacity to pursue independent research, and
- a supportive on-site research environment, including opportunities for presenting work at research seminars and the presence of effective on-site mentoring/supervision.

These are minimum requirements only; some faculties may set additional attendance guidelines.

2.3.3 Effective means of rapid communication

It must be established that there are appropriate means by which the candidate may communicate with the supervisor on a daily basis, eg by email, fax or telephone.

2.3.4 Effective interactive communication

Regular interactive communication between candidate and supervisor should take place at least every two weeks (full-time candidates) and every month (part-time candidates) via telephone, video conference, or other interactive communication.

Note: Email communication is not necessarily an interactive form of communication.

2.3.5 Regular conference and seminar involvement

The candidate is required to participate in research-related seminars, conferences and special events at academic unit, faculty, university, national and international level, as appropriate.

2.3.6 Appointment of an associate supervisor or supervisors

The primary responsibility for supervision of the candidate must always rest with the main Monash supervisor.

Nevertheless, because the quality and continuity of supervision are so particularly critical in the case of external candidature, it is suggested that all external candidates have at least one associate supervisor. Some academic units may wish to give serious consideration to a form of team supervision headed by the principal supervisor.

In the case of laboratory-based candidature, the appointment of an external associate who is generally on site would be mandatory.

External associate supervisors need to be briefed on the University's codes of practice and other requirements pertaining to candidature.

The nature and extent of the associate supervisor's contribution to the candidature should be determined at the outset; it should not be a token appointment.

2.3.7 Articulation between standard and external candidature

Candidates may be permitted to transfer between standard and external candidature, as assessed on a case-by-case basis.

For candidates who have already completed three full-time equivalent years of on-campus attendance, further periods of residency will normally not be required.

2.3.8 Assessment of progress

All external candidates must be admitted as probationary candidates.

The confirmation process required for external candidates at approximately the 12 months full-time equivalent mark is more rigorous for most candidates with a 2000 word rather than a 1,000-word proposal required. The proposal is to include thesis title, statement of research problem, research procedures, timetable for completion, bibliography, and list of publications completed during probationary candidature. Some faculties have additional requirements (see confirmation form on website).

As part of the confirmation process an oral presentation on the research project should be given at a departmental seminar and/or viva voce, at which members of the review panel are in attendance. The oral presentation should explore the research to date, anticipated future directions and a time line for completion.

Members of the review panel should normally comprise three members (eg. departmental graduate studies coordinator or head's nominee, as convenor, candidate's supervisor(s) and another member conversant with general area of research but not directly involved with the candidate's specific project.

External candidates should present at least one departmental seminar after the confirmation of candidature, preferably in the latter stages of the research.

A yearly progress report will be required including detailed logs on the frequency and length of on-campus attendance, and the nature and quality of the candidate's interaction with the academic community of the academic unit and broader research community. Faculties have the option of distributing a half yearly report to supplement the current centrally-administered annual report.

2.3.9 Additional requirements for laboratory-based disciplines

It is acknowledged that external candidature within the laboratory or science and technology disciplines in particular, may have special requirements.

2.3.9.1 Joint agreement on the research project

Where the external candidate is pursuing research at another institution/research station, a joint agreement on the research program needs to be negotiated between the University and the external site.

2.3.9.2 Occupational health and safety procedures

Occupational Health and Safety issues should not be restricted to concerns about liability, but should be viewed in the context of broader research training issues.

2.3.9.3 Ownership of intellectual property

These matters are governed by Statute 11.2 and regulations pertaining to that statute. An agreement would need to be reached before the candidature began.

2.3.9.4 Ethics approval from both the university and the host institution

Every effort should be made to rationalise the ethics approval process when there is duplication.

2.3.10 Fees and scholarships

Consideration may need to be given to a reduction in the amenities fee, as appropriate.

Recommendations with respect to appropriate course fee discounts for international students may be submitted by the faculties.

External candidates will not be eligible for centrally allocated MGS, IPRS or MIPRS awards.

17 Appendix C Email request for feedback

FEEDBACK WANTED FROM DISTANCE EDUCATION POSTGRADUATES

Do you have suggestions for improvements to services for distance education students?

Over a quarter of Monash University postgraduates are studying by distance education (also called 'off-campus' or 'external') and rarely attend a Monash campus. The MPA is preparing a report about the experiences of these coursework and research postgraduates.

We would like to hear about your experience of distance education study. Issues you might like to tell us about include: academic assistance, supervision, student support, learning support, financial costs, peer interaction, technical support, library services, communication technologies, information coordination, residencies, access to scholarships and software access.

In your email please let us know if you are a research student or a coursework student.

Your anonymity is assured. Your de-identified responses may be quoted in our report but we will ask your permission before doing so.

Please reply by email to:

Sally Skinner

MPA Research Officer

sally.skinner@adm.monash.edu.au