

MONASH GRADUATE ASSOCIATION (MGA)

HDR SURVEY

MONASH SCIENCE

FACULTY REPORT 2019



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graduate
association

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

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(i) Executive Summary

In 2017, the Monash Graduate Association (MGA) conducted a survey of Monash HDR students. The main findings from respondents from the Faculty of Science at Monash University (Monash Science) are summarised below.

Supervision

The vast majority (82%) of HDR respondents in Monash Science indicated overall satisfaction with their supervision. Where problems were identified, the majority of students tried to either work around them themselves or sort them out directly with their supervisors.

Milestones

Feedback regarding milestones and, in particular, the confirmation process was varied. While some graduate students found the overall process helpful in getting themselves organised, others felt that it was difficult to find clear information regarding exactly what was required of them.

When asked specifically about termination of candidature based on milestone performance, respondents expressed mixed feelings. Fifty-nine percent (59%) were more likely to *agree* with this practice at the confirmation stage. However as candidature progressed respondents were more inclined to *disagree* with termination – especially at the pre-submission review stage.

Coursework

Comments relating to compulsory discipline-based coursework experiences were generally positive. Close to a third of Monash Science respondents felt that their research degrees were improved by the inclusion of compulsory discipline-based coursework units. Forty-four percent (44%) of Monash Science respondents stated that they *strongly agree* that, in terms of the discipline-based coursework component of their degree, *'the quality was of a high standard'*.

Despite this, 28% of respondents from Monash Science indicated that they experienced either *a lot* or *a great deal* of stress about compulsory discipline-based coursework.

Professional Development

Approximately half of Monash Science respondents felt that professional development units, as offered through *myDevelopment*, should not be a compulsory part of a research degree. Many respondents felt that these units were irrelevant and not a good use of their time. About a third of respondents indicated that they experienced either *a lot* or *a great deal* of stress about the professional development component of their degree.

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

Progress, delays and discontinuation

While 49% of Monash Science respondents indicated that they either *strongly agree* or *somewhat agree* that they had sufficient time to produce a quality research project, despite additional requirements of compulsory milestone/coursework/professional development, 49% also indicated that they felt either *a great deal* or *a lot* of stress regarding *'finishing my degree on time'*.

The most important thing the University could do to assist graduate students in achieving timely completions was overwhelmingly identified by respondents as reducing the number of mandatory hours of the professional development program.

School culture and facilities

Overall, Monash Science respondents were more satisfied (78%) with the level of resources and facilities provided to them than University-wide respondents (72%). More specifically, many respondents (88%) agreed with the statement that *'I am treated in a respectful manner by academic staff and general staff'*, while 73% of respondents indicated they agreed with the statement *'I feel included in my academic unit'*.

Stress and Wellbeing

The highest number of Monash Science respondents (49%) either felt *a great deal* or *a lot* of stress regarding *'finishing my degree on time'*, whereas 35% of Monash Science respondents stress levels were *none at all* regarding *'my relationship with my supervisors'*.

Monash Science respondents nominated *'help dealing with anxiety'* and *'help with stress management'* as the top two ways the University could help to support their wellbeing.

Overall comments

Belonging to a supportive environment or culture and access to the facilities and resources available, were identified by graduate students as the best aspects of being a Monash postgraduate.

Among the worst aspects were wellbeing issues such as student stress and self-doubt as well as campus issues such as the distance of the Clayton campus from the city, the constant construction and its sheer size.

Overwhelmingly, students identified that the research postgraduate experience could be enhanced by improving or removing the professional development component.

Despite responses that one of the best things about being at Monash was belonging to a supportive environment and culture, some postgraduates noted that improving opportunities for interaction, networking and discussions among postgraduate peers would lead to improved support structures and hence improve the postgraduate experience in general.

(ii) Introduction

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

A total of 668 responses were received. A preliminary report on the campus-wide quantitative data was published in March 2018 and is available from the MGA. Of the total number of responses received, ninety-two responses were from research graduate students enrolled through Monash Science, which equates to 15% of the total research graduate student population in that Faculty at the time the survey was taken.

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

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

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

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

All schools of Monash Science were represented in terms of responses. Overall respondents were skewed towards full-time, on-campus, scholarship receiving PhD students. Male and female genders were well represented, as were international and domestic students. Appendix 1 provides the demographics of Monash Science respondents.

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

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

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

(iii) Data

1. Supervision

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

Read the Code of Practice	Science	University
Yes	53 (57.6%)	386 (57.8%)
No, but I've heard about it	28 (30.4%)	169 (25.3%)
No, I didn't know it existed	11 (12%)	113 (16.9%)

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

Aware of supervisor's responsibility	Science	University
Yes	76 (82.6%)	533 (79.8%)
No	1 (1.1%)	22 (3.3%)
Not sure	15 (16.3%)	113 (16.9%)

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

Aware of own responsibilities	Science	University
Yes	86 (93.5%)	592 (88.6%)
No	1 (1.1%)	14 (2.1%)
Not sure	5 (5.4%)	62 (9.3%)

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

Conflict or misunderstanding with your supervisor	Science	University
Yes	10 (10.9%)	108 (16.2%)
No	82 (89.1%)	560 (83.8%)

Graduate student responses from Monash Science largely mirrored responses from the University-wide population in terms of having read the Code of Practice and being aware of their supervisors' and their own responsibilities. Monash Science respondents were slightly less likely to have reported having a conflict with their supervisors.

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

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

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Different and unrealistic expectations	2
Miscommunication and misunderstanding	2
Unsupportive – poor quality guidance and feedback	2
Inaccessible	1
Inappropriate behaviour – bullying/harassment/tone/intimidation	1
Lack of expertise and/or interest	1

Different and unrealistic expectations was referenced twice in responses from students from Monash Science who identified as having had conflict or misunderstanding with one or more of their supervisors. These included:

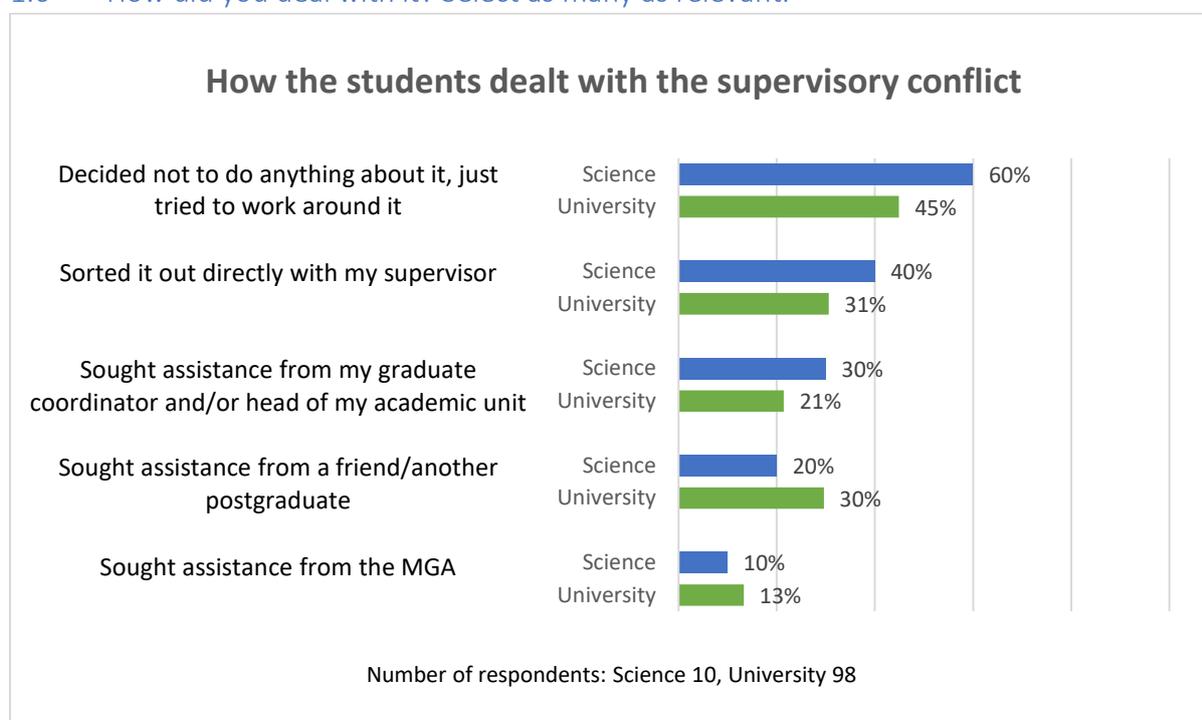
“I can’t follow what my supervisor expects me to do.”

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

“My supervisor is really busy and tends to ignore my emails. Meanwhile, I am [a] very shy and quiet person, so I’m really uncomfortable to ask and remind my supervisor [about] the same thing several times.”

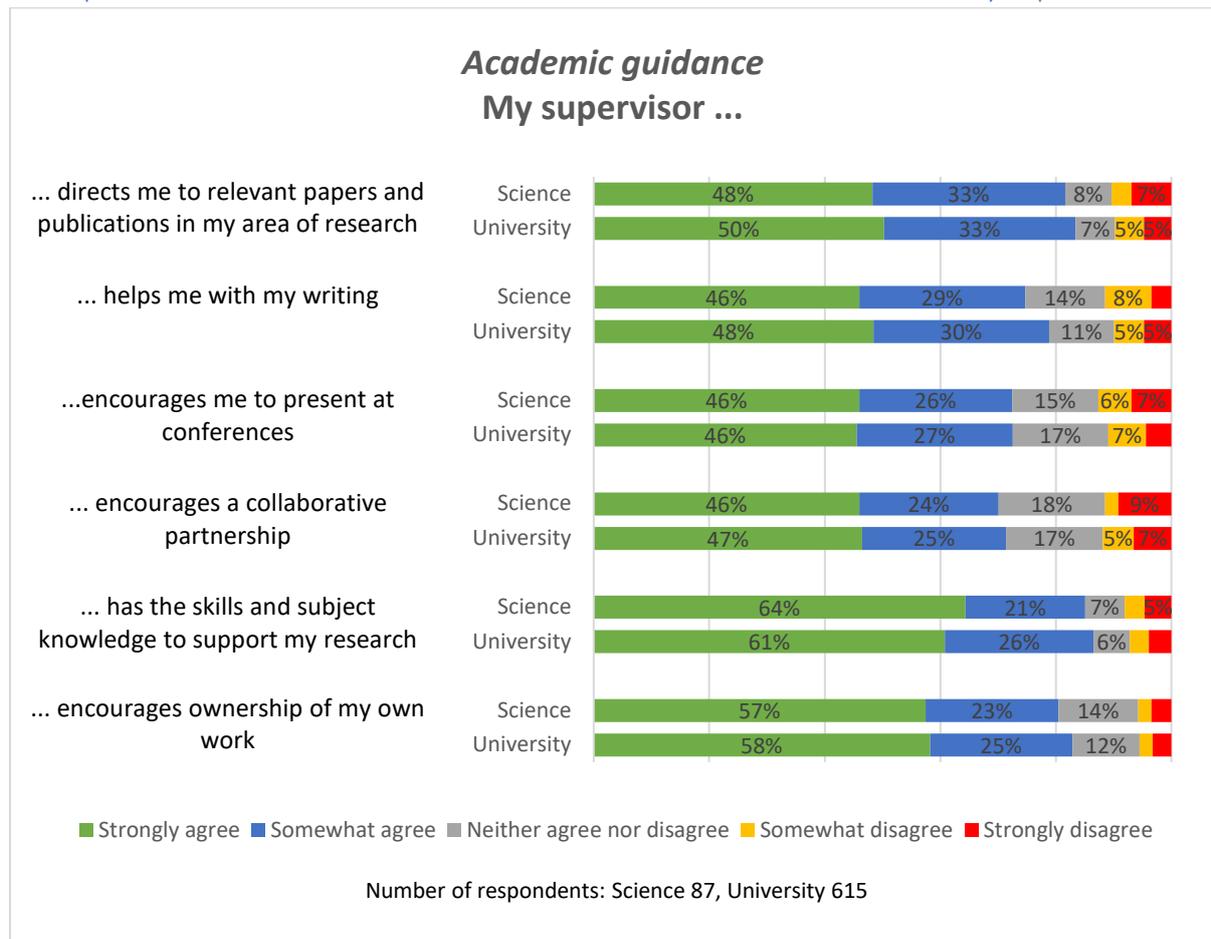
“A PhD supervisor ... is not a boss, but should be a mentor taking responsibility [for] cultivating a high-quality and friendly learning environment for the student.”

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



The table above shows that when Monash Science graduate students did experience conflict with their supervisors, most of them ‘*decided not to do anything about it, just tried to work around it*’. This was predominantly true for both Monash Science and University-wide respondents.

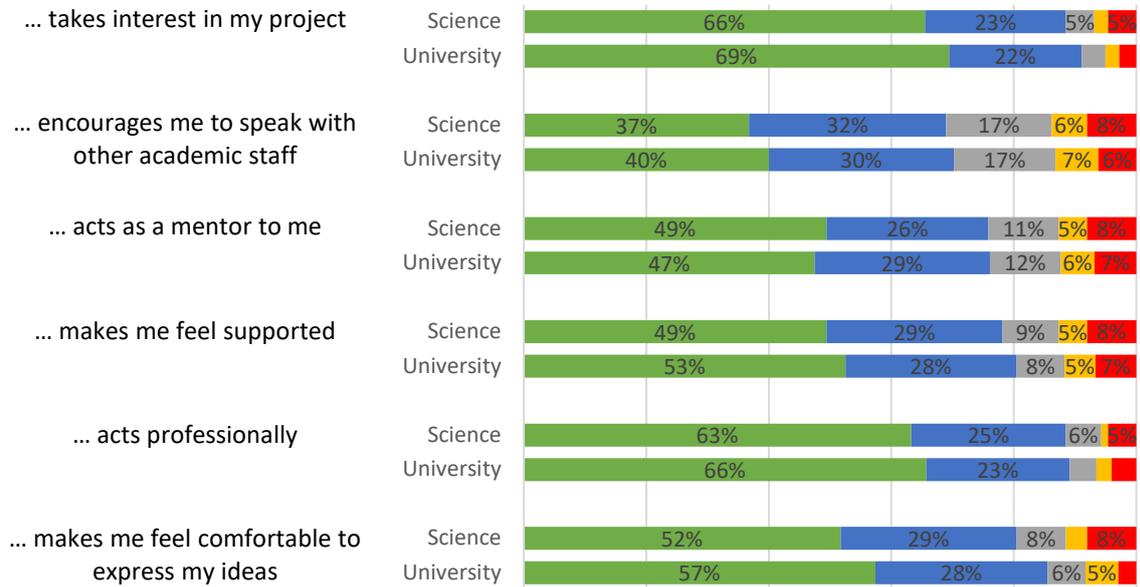
1.7 Please rate the following statements regarding your supervision experience. Select one option for each statement from the list below where "At least one of my supervisors..."³



Monash Science respondents were largely aligned with their University counterparts in how they tended to agree with positive statements related to the quality of the academic guidance provided by their supervisors.

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

Supportive role My supervisor ...

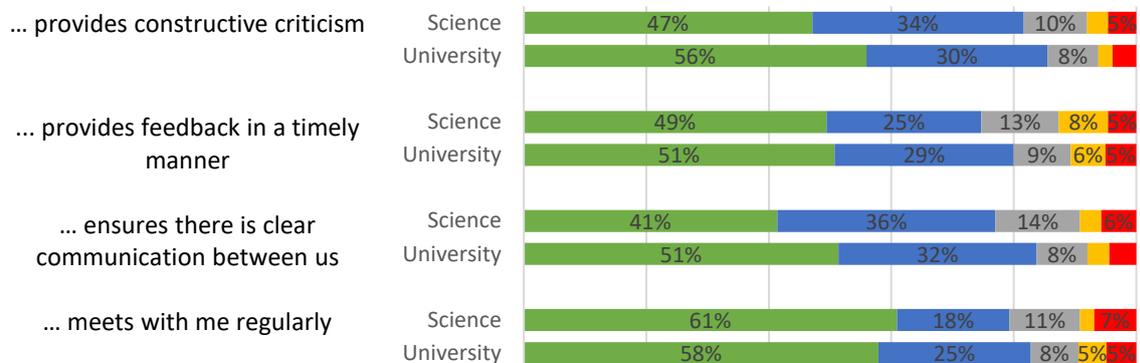


■ Strongly agree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Somewhat disagree ■ Strongly disagree

Number of respondents: Science 87, University 615

Monash Science respondents were largely aligned with their University peers in their personal satisfaction with the role their supervisor played. It was only in responses to the statement ‘my supervisor makes me feel comfortable to express my ideas’ that Monash Science graduate students (81% agreement) differed in any meaningful way University-wide respondents (85%).

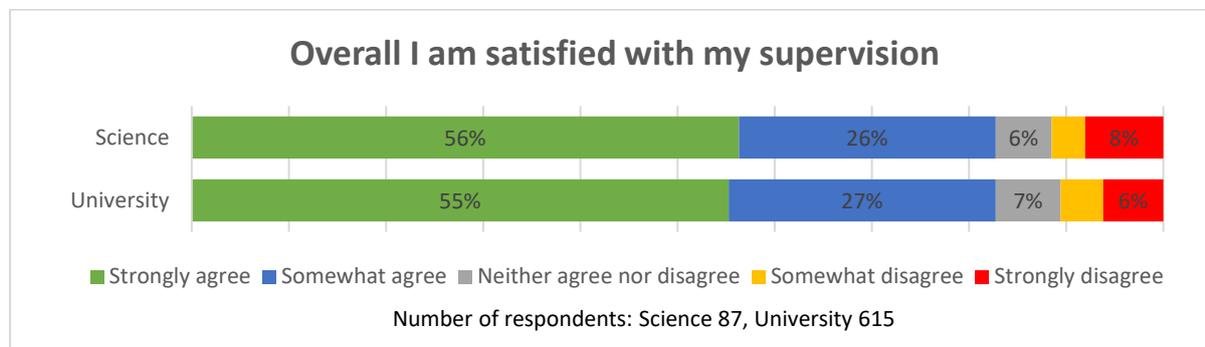
Appropriate feedback My supervisor ...



■ Strongly agree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Somewhat disagree ■ Strongly disagree

Number of respondents: Science 87, University 615

Graduate students from Monash Science, while still tending to agree, agreed marginally less than University respondents with positive statements in relation to the quality of feedback provided to them by their supervisors. This was especially visible in the total agreement to the statement ‘my supervisor ensures there is clear communication between us’ (Monash Science: 77%, University: 83%).



Over 80% of both Monash Science and University-wide respondents, indicated that they either *strongly agree* or *somewhat agree* that they were satisfied with their supervision in general.

1.8 Opportunity for comments regarding your supervision.

Fifteen graduate students from Monash Science responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Positive comments: 9 Negative comments: 5

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

Many respondents from Monash Science were **satisfied or positive** about an element of their supervision experience within their degrees. Some notable examples include:

“I really like my main supervisor’s approach. She’s giving me the opportunity to meet with her every week, or more often if I get stuck on stuff, particularly as I’m early on in my PhD.

She gives me a lot of support and suggestions, but is also pushing me to come up with my own direction of research."

"Very happy with [supervision]. [My] supervisor has an open-door policy and lets me follow my own idea without letting me go too far astray. And I've rarely met anybody in the field as knowledgeable as he is."

On the other hand, several of the respondents from Monash Science were **dissatisfied or negative** about an element of their supervision experience.

"My supervisor is useless. She has no knowledge to share and did not bother about my project the whole candidature. Every time I reach out, they only hear but do not provide a solution or even throw ideas around."

"I receive more support from other academics [and] ... lab groups, and yet feel I need to keep quiet, agree and avoid any confrontations ... I am not happy in my situation, but feel obligated to continue. I have lost respect for the whole supervisor/student relationship and don't see my supervisor as a leader :(I also feel that Monash's current system protects supervisors [from complaints]."

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

"I work in a large group, so supervision isn't always very hands on but the autonomy that comes with that is nice."

"Overall, it is really hard to say that I'm satisfied with [the] current situation. But probably this is how it works here, and I need to adapt to the situation. To become more proactive and independent."

1.9 Summary

Research supervision has become a vital process in the success of postgraduate studies.⁴ It plays a critical role in doctoral education, in particular, with links having been made between the quality of supervision and student progression and attrition rates.⁵ Increased government emphasis on 'timely completion' has led to the introduction of a range of measures for monitoring and managing PhD

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

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

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

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

The overall satisfaction with supervision among respondents from Monash Science (82%) was equal to what it was among all Monash graduate students (82%).

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

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

The expertise and knowledge of supervisors is instrumental to the successful completion of an HDR graduate student's thesis.¹⁰ Overall agreement with the statement '*my supervisor has the skills and subject knowledge to support my research*' was slightly lower in Monash Science (85%) than it was in the University (87%).

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

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

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

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

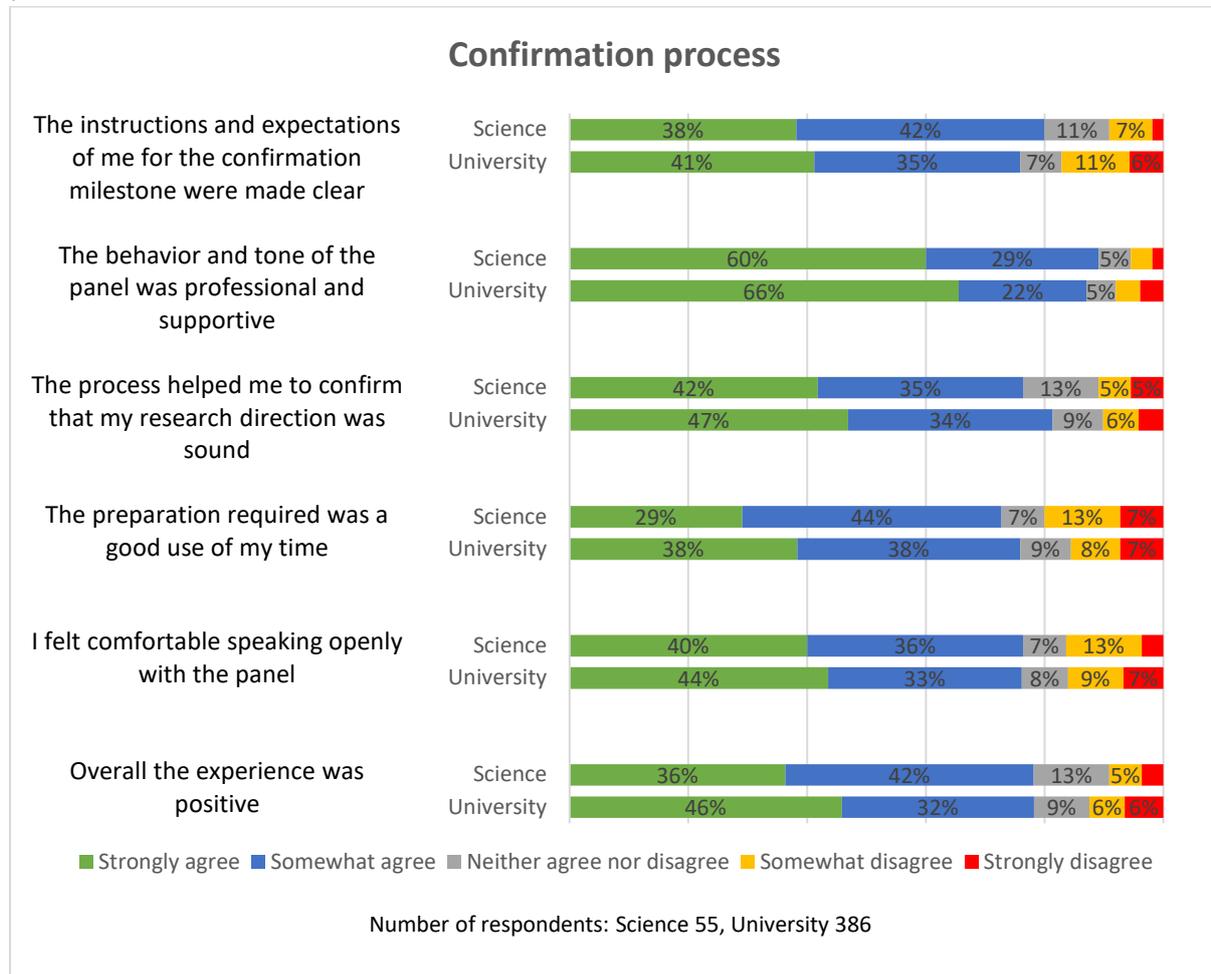
⁹ Karen Hunter and Kay Devine, "Doctoral student's emotional exhaustion and intentions to leave academia," *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* 11 (2016): 40.

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

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

2. Milestones

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



While 60% of Monash Science respondents *strongly agree* that ‘*the behaviour and tone of the panel was professional and supportive*’, less than one in three (29%) *strongly agree* that ‘*the preparation required was a good use of my time*’.

2.2 Opportunity for comments about the confirmation process.

Twelve graduate students from Monash Science responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 7

Positive comments: 6

General theme	Number of responses
Good and useful feedback from panel	4
Time-consuming process	3
Unsuitable/incompetent/inappropriate panel	3
Lack of trust in panel	2
Poor communication	1
Suggestions for improvements	1
Unclear requirements and bureaucratic/administrative issues	1

More than half of the responses of Monash Science graduate students were categorised as **negative**. Several of these comments were related to **unsuitable, incompetent, insular or inappropriate panels**.

“I spent six weeks preparing for the milestone (presentation and 10-page report) and it became clear during the milestone interview that the panel did not read the report at all.”

“My confirmation was filled with non-experts and I ended up having to explain the fundamentals of my project’s introduction rather than getting useful feedback for my methods and results.”

Similarly, the **time-consuming** nature of the confirmation process was mentioned by three students, with one writing:

“Preparing for confirmation took a lot of time away from research. It was helpful to sort out my priorities and organise my project, but I didn’t get any research done for 6 weeks while I was out preparing.”

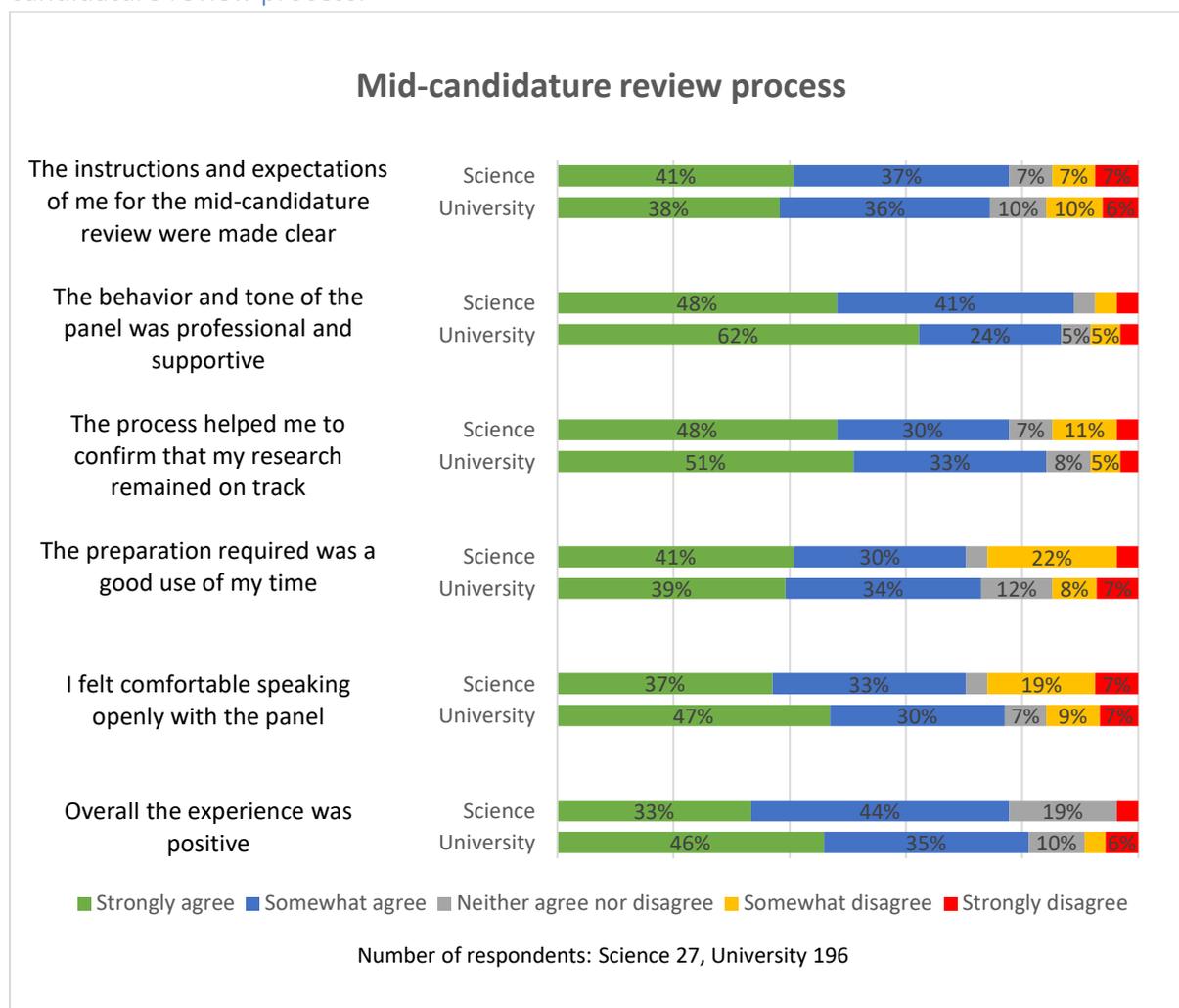
Other notable comments from Monash Science graduate students relating to the confirmation process, included:

“The milestones (especially confirmation) are a great time to reflect on and collect all of the work you have done over the last year. The process of writing a talk and/or report really helps to give structure and clarity to your work. You get a chance to step back and look at the ‘forest’ rather than the ‘trees’.”

“Confirmation was useful as it forced me to consolidate my ideas and gave me a much stronger foundation and future direction. Debatable as to whether I spent too long doing this.”

“The requirements of the written report were a bit vague.”

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



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

Five graduate students from Monash Science responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 4 Positive comments: 1

General theme	Number of responses
Time-consuming process	2
Unclear requirements and bureaucratic/administrative issues	2
Misdirects energy and focus from research	1
Suggestions for improvements	1
Unsuitable/incompetent/insular/inappropriate panel	1

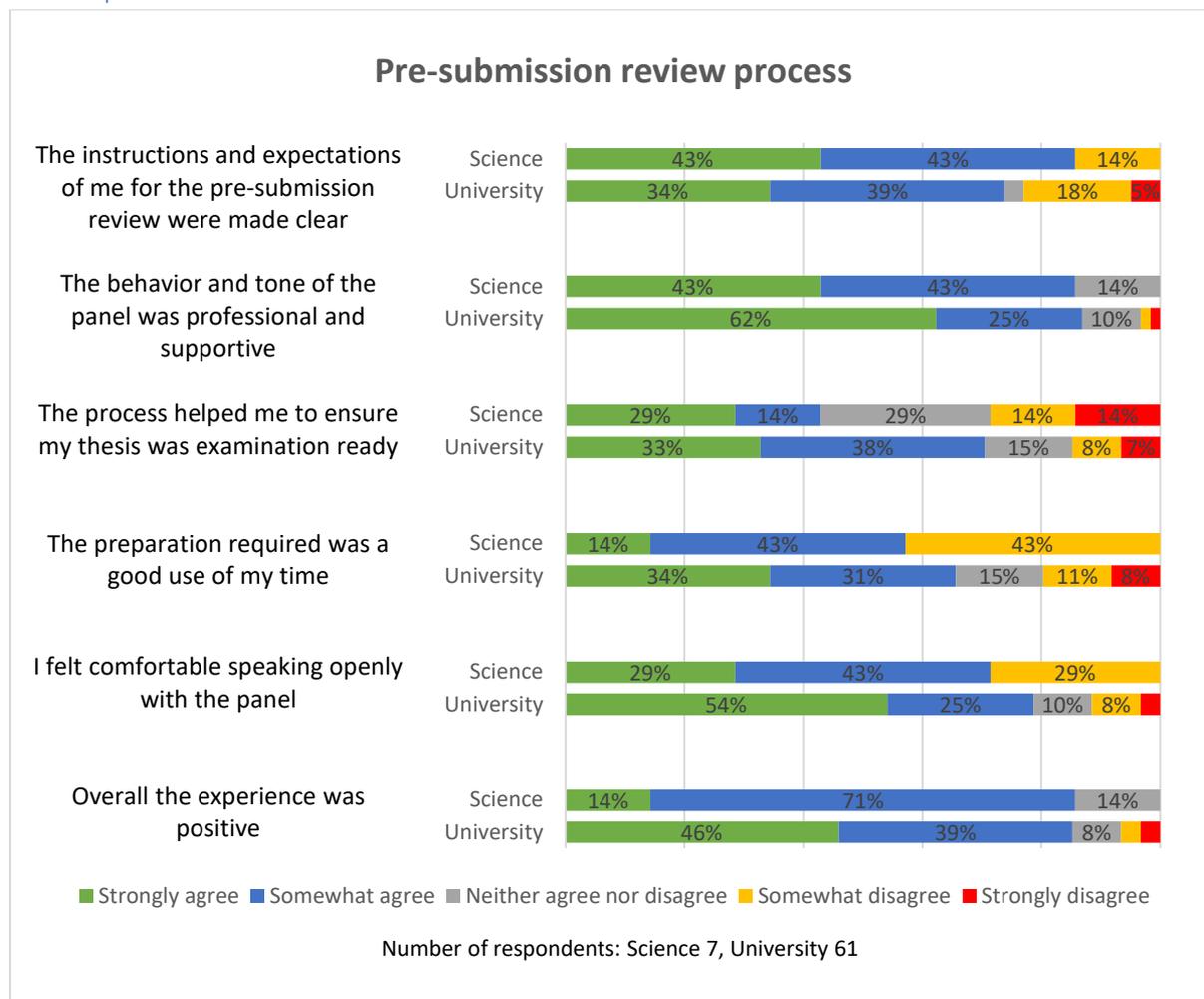
Four of the responses from Monash Science graduate students can be categorised as **negative**. These comments, included:

“Guidelines for this milestone were a lot more unclear and requirements seemed to depend more on the panel members than an overarching guideline.”

“Please do not waste students’ time with panels who have no idea [about] what we are doing.”

“The University website is very difficult to find any information on ... In addition, requirements change every year, as do acronyms and abbreviations used, which makes it even more confusing.”

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



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

Only **one graduate student from Monash Science** responded to this statement.

This comment, included:

“My pre-submission seminar was held months before I started writing my thesis, which I think is the case for almost everyone in my school. I don’t necessarily see this as a bad thing though.”

which stage termination of candidature was deemed acceptable and many students were quick to qualify their general agreement by suggesting that termination should only take place after a graduate student has been provided with sufficient time to reflect on feedback and make amendments to their research. Significant comments, included:

“It is appropriate to face termination; however, students should be given reasonable time and constructive feedback to address the short-comings with the potential to continue.”

“Should be terminated only if all other options are impossible. And certainly not at pre-submission – you are so close!”

Conversely, several graduate students expressed **general disagreement with termination at milestones**.

“Milestones should not be used to terminate candidatures. Failing a milestone and having to face that decision is extremely counterproductive for a project. Instead of correcting the direction of the candidature, too much time is spent evaluating the candidature itself. The decision to terminate should be made by the student with advice from the supervisors, not coming from self-doubt induced by milestone outcomes.”

“Instead of termination, a clear discussion between the student and the supervisors needs to be conducted by the admin/panel to determine the cause of unsatisfactory progress.”

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

“It’s good that there’s a check in place to make sure we’re not wasting our time on projects that won’t work, and it’s good that we get the opportunity for extra feedback.”

“The requirements and expectations of the milestones need to be stated more clearly in one single webpage ... and they should contain the same information consistently throughout to avoid confusion.”

“With all sorts of psychological pressure that you are under as a PhD [candidate], I don’t think kicking people out after 12+ months is appropriate. This just puts so much mental strain on a person, which Monash unfortunately doesn’t care about.”

2.9 Summary

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

Monash Science graduate students tended to agree with positive statements regarding their milestones. In regards to the confirmation process, 78% of those responding agreed that ‘*overall the experience was positive.*’

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

In 2014, the mid-candidature and pre-submission milestones were changed to “hurdles” and are now used as a way to terminate candidature when progress is unsatisfactory. With the exception of confirmation, for which 59% of respondents agreed it was appropriate to face termination, Monash Science graduate students tended to disagree that it was appropriate to face termination for failing a milestone (see 2.7) with this disagreement growing as candidates progressed through the milestones.

Given milestones can be quite stressful (45% of Monash Science graduate students experienced an uncomfortable level of stress because of milestones – see section 7.1), clear guidance on the requirements and expectations are essential to supporting students through the process. While clear guidance and communication have been found to be essential to timely completion, with their perceived absence shown to be fundamental in causing delays,¹³ it may also limit stress. The prevalence of comments highlighting uncertainty or inconsistencies in the milestone processes, within this context, can be considered cause for concern.

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

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

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

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

3. Coursework

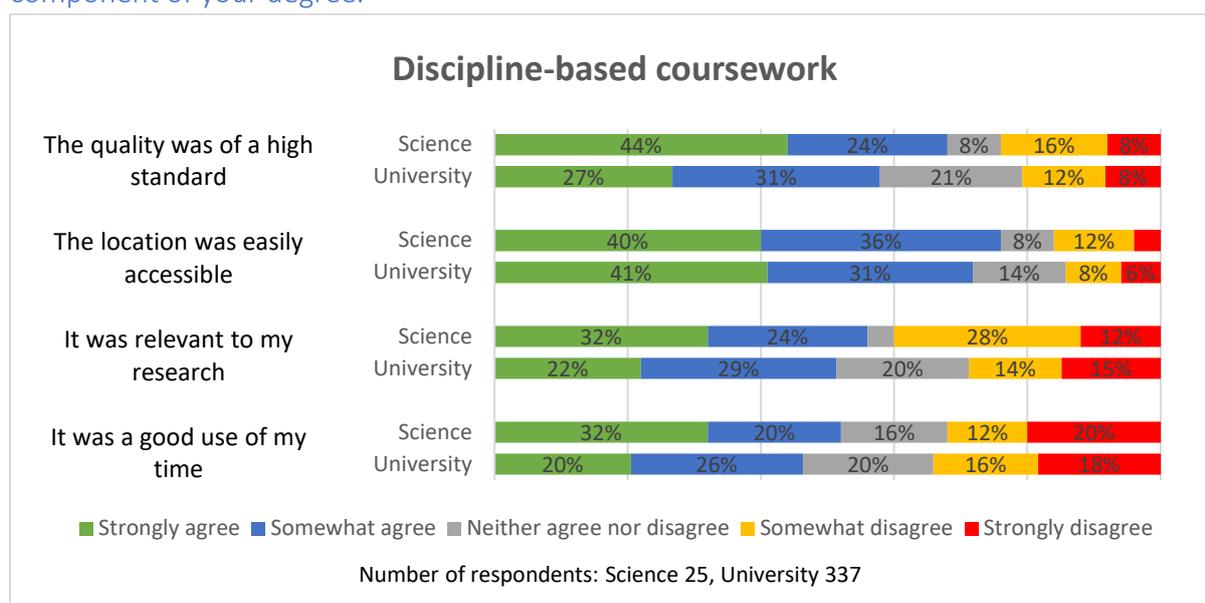
Coursework units are not a compulsory requirement within Monash Science; however, graduate students from the Faculty still provided responses to these questions.

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

Research degrees improved by compulsory coursework units?	Science	University
Yes	28 (31.8%)	236 (37.9%)
No	22 (25%)	178 (28.6%)
Not sure	38 (43.2%)	209 (33.5%)

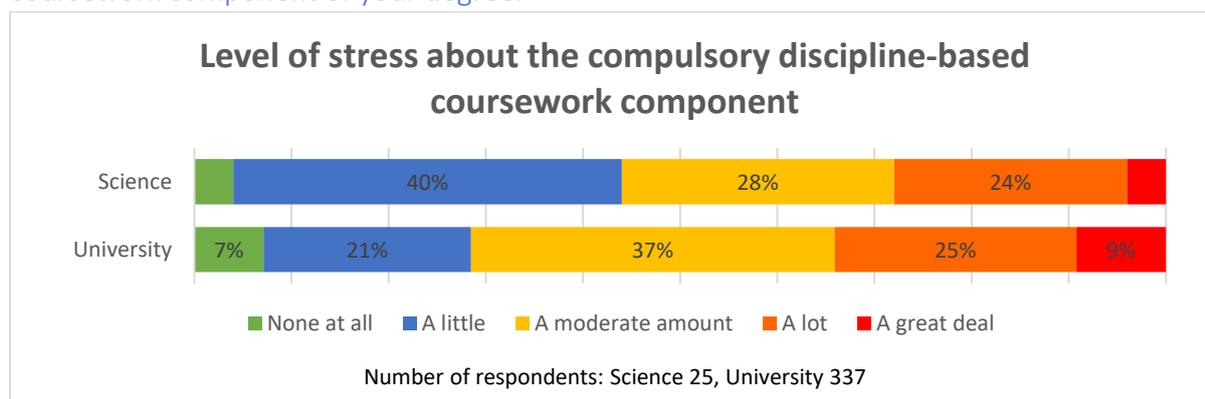
Thirty-two percent (32%) of respondents from Monash Science felt that their research degrees would be improved by the inclusion of compulsory discipline-based coursework units. This was slightly less than the University-wide result (38%).

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



Forty-four percent (44%) of Monash Science respondents *strongly agree* that, in terms of the discipline-based coursework component of their degree, 'the quality was of a high standard'.

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



Twenty-eight percent (28%) of respondents from Monash Science indicated that they experienced either *a lot* or *a great deal* of stress about compulsory discipline-based coursework whereas for the University-wide respondents this figure was 34%.

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

Twenty-one graduate students from Monash Science responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 12 Positive comments: 9

General theme	Number of responses
Irrelevant/discipline-specific	10
Time-consuming/waste of time/misdirected energy	2
Administrative issues/inconsistencies/solutions	1
Networking – relationships and support	1
Low/poor-quality unit	1

Approximately half of respondents from Monash Science held **negative opinions** on the prospect of coursework in their degrees. A large proportion of these comments were related to how **irrelevant or discipline-specific** units could be. Notable objections are included below:

“It needs to be directly applicable, or additional time to the overall PhD needs to be included (i.e. US system). Adding to the workload, without adding time, is poor planning.”

“I think it works for certain degrees, but may not be as necessary or useful for others. Some graduate development modules could easily be repackaged as discipline-based coursework.”

On the other hand, just under half of students had something **positive** to say about the prospect of coursework.

“I believe that a small amount of coursework is beneficial in giving a broad understanding of a particular subject area to all students in the same discipline and helps facilitate discussion between colleagues in related but different areas of research.”

“Discipline-based coursework has been useful for myself, which I undertook voluntarily. In my case this consisted of a scientific writing course and an introductory programming course.”

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

“Most PhD students are at University to do research, not to spend three weeks of their time listening to bureaucrats talk about nothing. If Monash wants to broaden the skillset of PhDs, something like industry internships would be a useful way to do this.”

“Australia lacks a culture of coursework masters in the physical sciences, which can leave some individuals slightly under-prepared coursework-wise when going into their PhD ... The introduction of significant discipline-based coursework would require a substantial restructuring of the timeline of the degree as well as an expansion of the teaching capacity of the schools.”

3.5 Summary

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

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

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

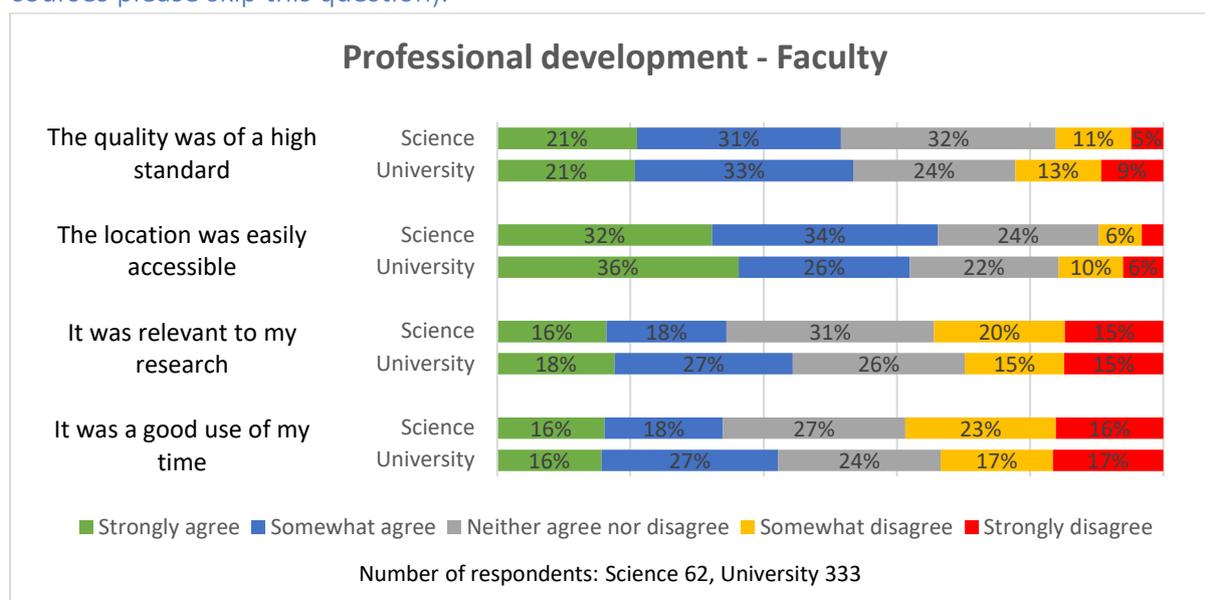
4. Professional Development

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

Should professional development be compulsory?	Science	University
Yes	23 (26.4%)	157 (25.4%)
No	43 (49.4%)	283 (45.9%)
Not sure	21 (24.1%)	177 (28.7%)

Just under half of Monash Science respondents felt that professional development units should not be a compulsory part of a research degree, while just over a quarter indicated that they should be compulsory.

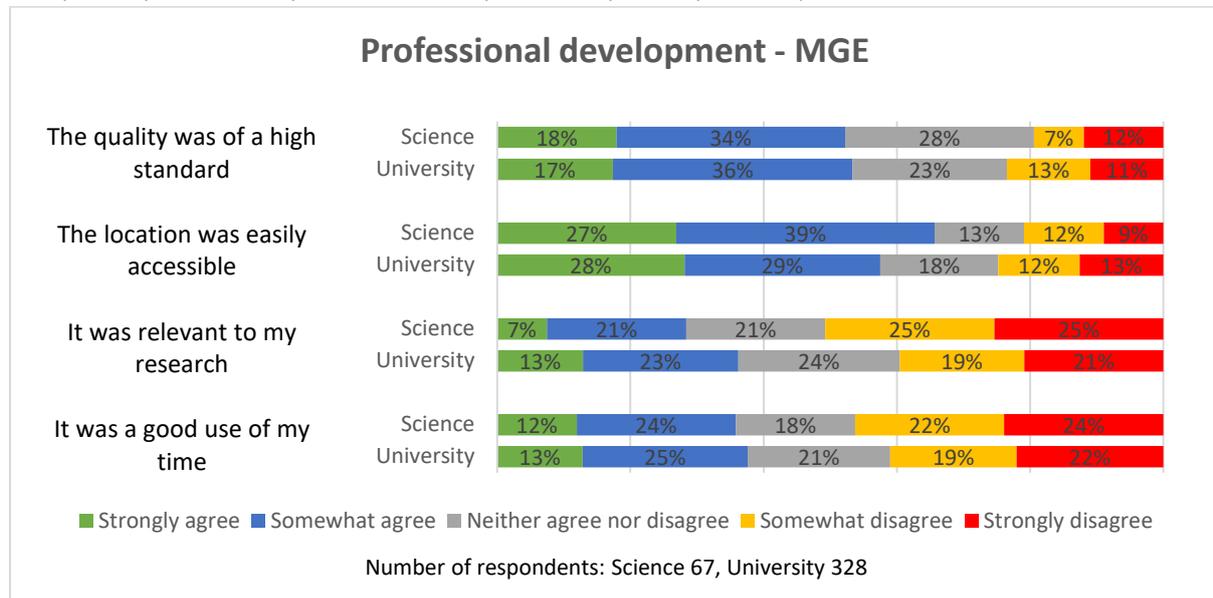
4.2 Please rate the following statements relating to your overall experience of the professional development component of your degree offered by your faculty. (If your faculty does not offer any professional development or you have not participated in any such courses please skip this question).



Monash Science respondents were split on whether undertaking faculty-run compulsory professional development 'was a good use of my time.' Thirty-four percent (34%) of respondents agreed with this statement, while 39% disagreed.

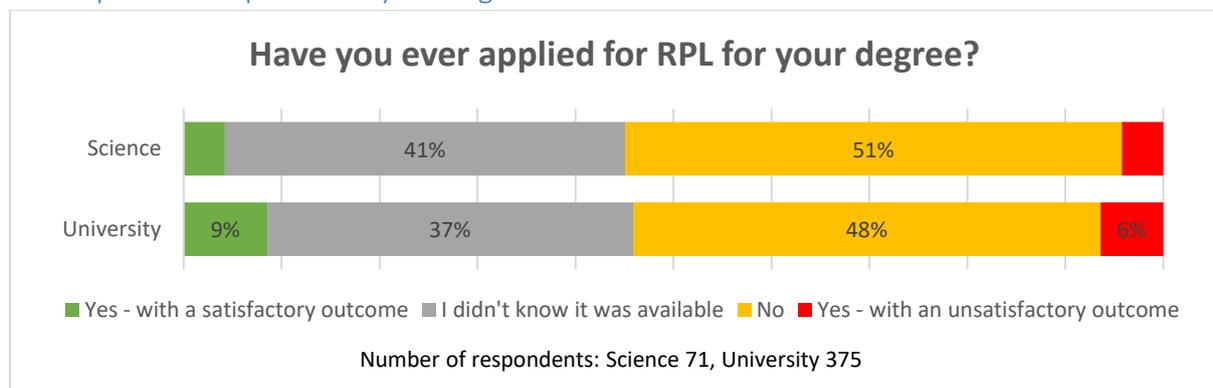
Similarly, 34% agreed that professional development 'was relevant to my research,' while 35% disagreed.

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



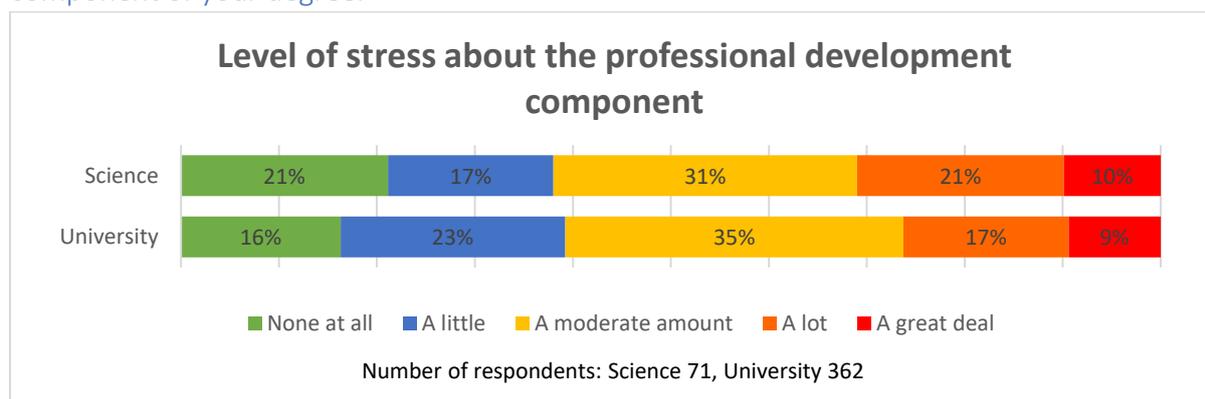
Half of the Monash Science respondents disagreed with the statement that the MGE-run professional development ‘was relevant to my research,’ while 46% disagreed that it represented ‘a good use of my time.’

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



The overwhelming majority of Monash Science respondents (92%) either did not apply for Recognition of Prior Leave from professional development or did not know it was available.

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



Thirty-one percent (31%) of respondents from Monash Science indicated that they experienced either *a lot* or *a great deal* of stress about the professional development component of their degree, while for the University-wide respondents this figure was 26%.

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

Twenty-four graduate students from Monash Science responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 35 Positive comments: 5

General theme	Number of responses
Irrelevant/discipline-specific/lack of options	18
Administrative issues/inconsistencies/unit availability	16
Time-consuming/waste of time/misdirected energy	10
Low/poor-quality units	7
Campus attendance issues (time/travel)	1
Excessive corporate feel/focus	1

Even though responses to this statement were **overwhelmingly negative** across all ten faculties surveyed, the responses of Monash Science graduate students stood out as particularly negative. Indeed, there were thirty-five individual references to negative elements of the students' experiences with compulsory professional development units across the twenty-four responses.

For instance, several students commented on how **irrelevant** the units were to individual students and how there was a **lack of options and choices**. Revealing comments, included:

"Very low-quality classes with little to no relevance, managed through cumbersome online systems."

"I haven't had to go through this myself, but 99% of the feedback I hear from other people ... is negative. I heard that almost all of the units are pointless, and/or aren't targeted specifically enough (good advice for an Arts student isn't necessarily good advice for a Science student)."

“There seems to be a level of confusion and indifference across all levels of the University as to the goals of the professional development units. The research related units are poorly targeted, while seeking relevance to all faculties they fail to be useful to any ... Generally, there appears ... to be a devaluing of the skills I gain implicitly in my training as a researcher ... (I cannot emphasise enough how stupid it is that attending conferences does not count towards hours) ... The whole purpose of introducing professional development seems rooted in the ‘myth’ that academia lives in its own bubble – removed from the realities of working life in industry. Without disputing the differences in culture, the soft skills like communication, project management, collaboration and office politics are still prevalent.”

Similarly, several students raised **administrative issues**, such as problems with MyDevelopment, as well as complaints regarding **unit availability**.

“I’ve heard that MyDevelopment is an improvement on GRAMS, but still has major issues. My school was involved in the initial trials of MyDevelopment, and the students who took part in the trial were annoyed to find out that none of their suggestions to improve the website were implemented. Apparently, it’s difficult to even check how many hours you’ve done on MyDevelopment.”

“I can see the potential benefit of taking professional development courses, but MyDevelopment in its current state is poorly organised – staff do not respond to emails and there are perhaps two or three hours’ worth of activities that are appealing to me.”

“While there are some useful courses, many of them fill up quickly and are not offered regularly.”

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

“Whoever came up with the compulsory professional development units was either too lazy to think them through before implementing them or has never sat in one of them and seen his/her precious lifetime pass by.”

“Between teaching assistant work (which a lot of HDR students must do to make ends meet), development hours and milestones, a lot of time is taken up which makes it increasingly difficult to finish on time.”

“I’ve rarely done anything that felt as much of a waste of time as these professional development thingies.”

Despite the overwhelmingly negative response from Monash Science graduate students, there were a handful of **positive** references to the professional development units present. These included:

“I see the value in PD and I am a big fan. However, most of my colleagues seem to not grasp the importance of this kind of training (especially the Australian folks).”

“Some of the modules were certainly helpful in a general sense, as well as for future career [prospects].”

4.7 Summary

Compared to the other elements of the HDR course experiences explored in this survey, the negativity surrounding professional development stood out. When given the chance to comment on ‘*the inclusion of compulsory professional development units in research degrees,*’ within the 24 responses from Monash Science graduate students were 35 individual negative reflections compared to only 5 positive reflections.

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

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

Just over a quarter (26.4%) of Monash Science graduate students thought that professional development units, as offered through *myDevelopment*, should be compulsory.

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

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

5. Progress delays and discontinuation

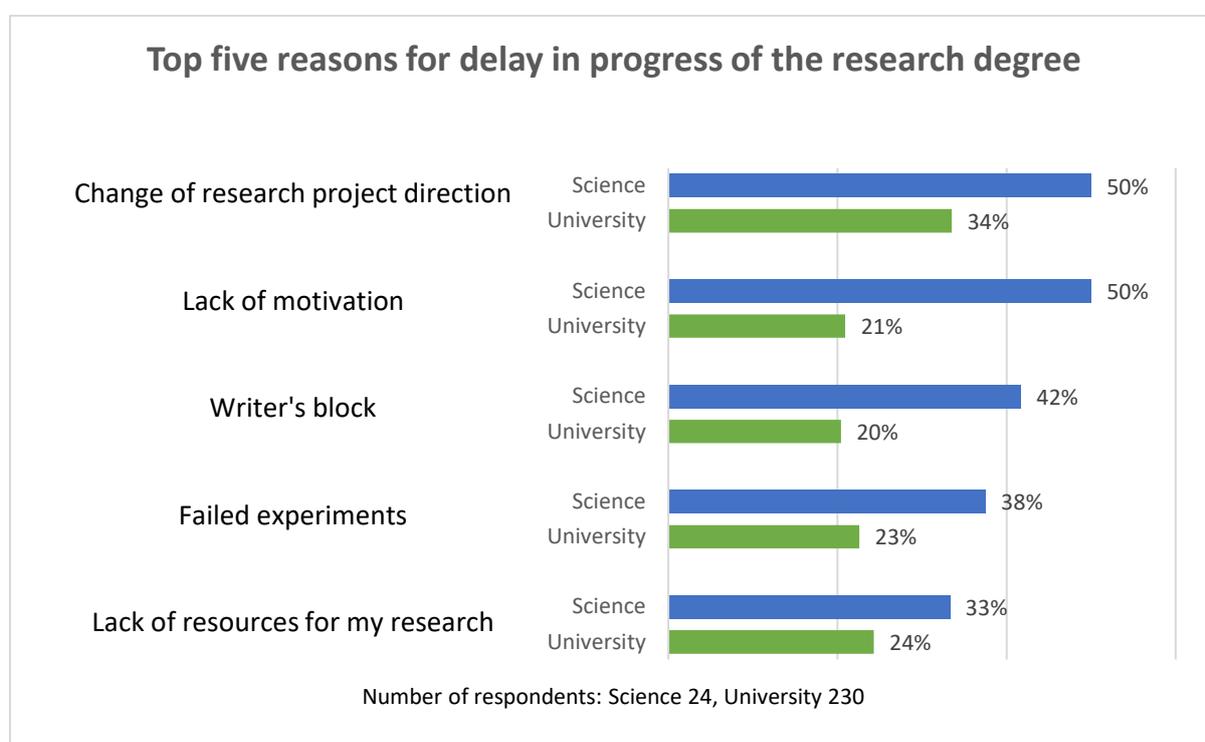
5.1 Has anything significantly delayed the progress of your research degree?

Has your research degree progress been delayed?	Science	University
Yes	24 (27.6%)	231 (37.8%)
No	63 (72.4%)	380 (62.2%)

Monash Science graduate students were less likely (28%) to have experienced (or be willing to report) significant delay in the progress of their research as compared to University-wide graduate student respondents (38%).

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

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

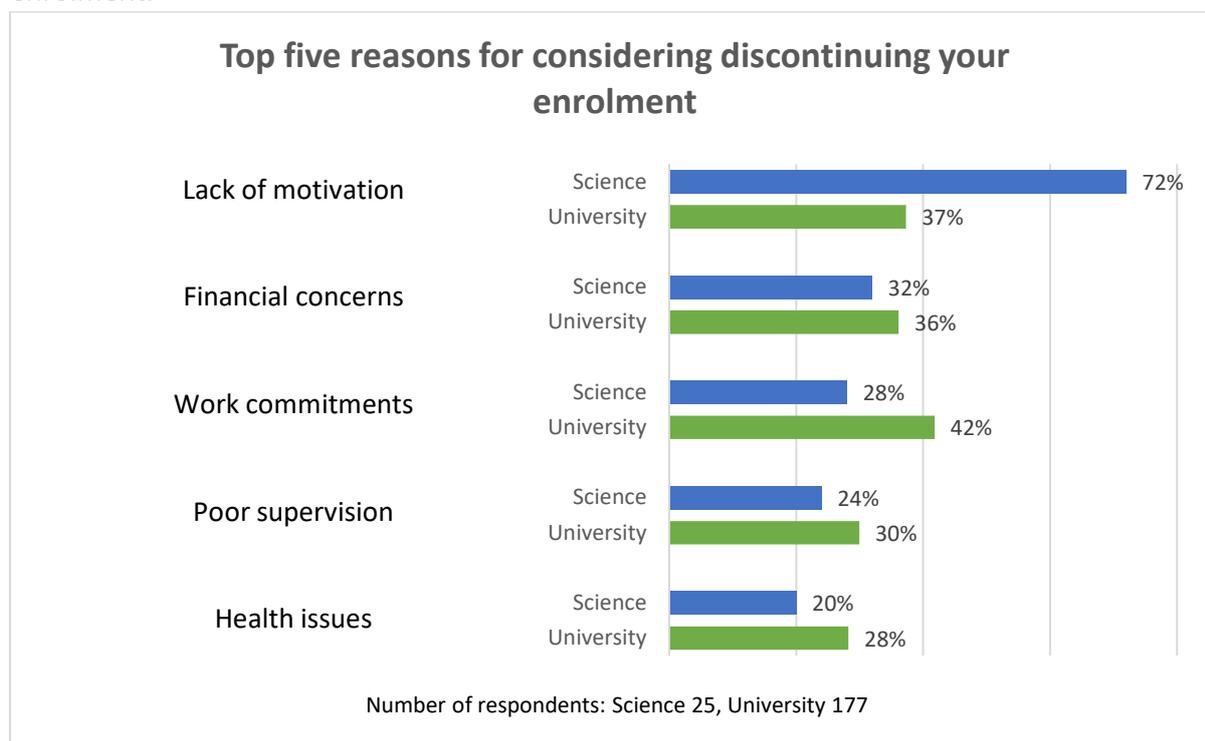


5.3 Have you ever considered discontinuing your enrolment?

Have you considered discontinuing your enrolment?	Science	University
Yes	25 (28.7%)	179 (29.3%)
No	62 (71.3%)	431 (70.7%)

Twenty-nine percent (29%) of Monash Science and University-wide respondents indicated that they had considered discontinuing their enrolment.

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



5.5 What made you decide to continue with your degree?

Nineteen graduate students from Monash Science responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Personal characteristics – commitment/determination/passion/fear/stubbornness	9
Interest in research	3
Career prospects	2
Improved mental health	2
Success/milestone in research	2
Time, money and effort already invested	2
Prospect of termination of visa	1
Support from University staff/services	1

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

Personal characteristics were the most prevalent factor and/or motivation referenced by respondents. For Monash Science graduate students, these included: willpower, desire, perseverance, fear of failure, commitment and stubbornness.

Some of the **notable comments** from Monash Science graduate students regarding their reasons for continuing with their course, included:

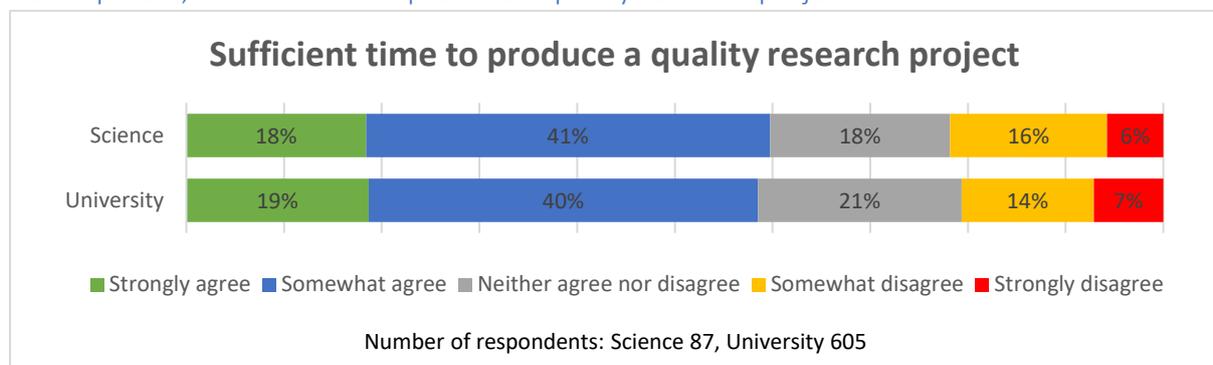
“Belief in the value of my research and not wanting to abandon years of work with nothing to show for it.”

“Ultimately, it might not be perfect, but what project is. And my PhD doesn’t lock me into the same research for the rest of my life.”

“I believe that I only considered discontinuing at a specific low point.”

“Everyone will be depressed sometimes, but I usually will recover after a certain time – especially when you have something good to celebrate (paper accepted etc.).”

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



Fifty-nine percent (59%) of Monash Science respondents indicated that they either *strongly agree* or *somewhat agree* that they had sufficient time to produce a quality research project, despite additional requirements.

It is also interesting to note that in *Section 7: Stress* of this report, 49% of Monash Science respondents, either felt a *great deal* or a *lot* of stress regarding ‘*finishing my degree on time*’.

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

Fifty students from Monash Science responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Professional development – changing or removing	22
Wellbeing – encouragement/motivation/trust/care	14
Facilities/labs/equipment/software	13
Milestones – changing or removing	12
Funding – scholarship/other financial aid	10
Administration – guidelines/information/communication/ availability	8
Supervision	8
Access to training/support services	6
Research environment – networking/mentoring/support groups	6
Compulsory coursework – changing or removing	5
Extending length of degree/candidature	5
Reducing bureaucratic requirements	5
Time/time management	4
Access to research material/resources	3
Career and work opportunities	1
Offices and workspaces	1
Improving online/cross-campus service delivery	1
Staff	1

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

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

The prevailing theme in the limited responses to *Section 4: Professional Development* was that Monash Science graduate students tended to have issues with the administration, requirements and purpose of this component of their degree. **Professional Development** was again a prevalent theme in graduate student responses to this question. Comments reflective of the wider sentiment, included:

“Reduce and improve compulsory development coursework.”

“Stop the compulsory 120 hours and replace with 120 hours of supervisor approved courses or activities (with MGE courses/seminars included).”

Likewise, **milestones** also received substantial emphasis across the responses of Monash Science graduate students to this question. See *Section 2: Milestones* for a more in-depth analysis of these issues and concerns.

Wellbeing was emphasised substantially more in the responses of Monash Science students than those of other faculties. Insightful comments, included:

“Have a PhD coordinator liaise with the disability liaison unit ... and let the students know that mental health issues can be valid reasons to delay milestones or completion dates.”

“Allowing short intermissions during times of great stress (caused by research impediments).”

Another area highlighted by Monash Science graduate students was **facilities, labs, equipment and software**. References to this area were marginally more frequent in Monash Science than in most other faculties (excluding Monash Engineering). Interesting comments, included:

“Less restriction to the use of facilities and equipment.”

“[Don’t] house staff and students in buildings being constructed (my whole PhD has been in a construction zone).”

“Continue getting good lab equipment.”

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

- **Funding** – several graduate students said that they would benefit from greater access to financial assistance.
- **Administration** – several wanted a more efficient and effective administration system that maintains records and communicates better.
- **Supervision** – these comments were mixed and related to several aspects of the supervision experience, including frequency of meetings, overall guidance, workload and expectations.

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

“More interaction with other students/support groups.”

“Better communication between the school and student body.”

5.8 Opportunity for comments regarding your general progress.

Twelve students from Monash Science responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 12

Positive comments: 3

General theme	Number of responses
Research environment	4
Professional development	4
Financial issues	2
Career development and advice	1
Coursework	1
Poor supervision	1
Slow progress	1
Timeframe too short	1

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

“In the last year or so, Monash has made (and is still making) a transition from a University to [a] business-oriented corporation. Research and acquiring knowledge have become less important than raising student numbers.”

“The three-year timeline being a strict thing ... is, I believe, detrimental to the PhD’s quality and to the student’s well-being. And asking ‘what can the University do to help me complete on time’ isn’t the right question – me completing in exactly three years shouldn’t be the focus. Me completing in only a few years with a good barrel of work should be. The time limit should not be the focus – and it definitely feels like it is.”

Other **notable comments**, included:

“I am stressed and disappointed in my progress this past year, and feel that my growing apprehensions towards my supervisor has contributed towards my current state.”

“Leaving ‘holes’ in knowledge for the sake of saving time, and completing a PhD within the very brisk Australian model, is dangerous. It leads to lower quality doctorates that cannot compete with overseas completions.”

“It is hard to know whether I am progressing quickly enough or not. It would be good to have more social interaction with other PhD students to destress and compare academic ‘war stories’ to get an idea if I am working well enough to get the encouragement to work harder.”

5.9 Summary

More than a quarter of Monash Science respondents (27.6%) had experienced a delay in their research degree, while a similar number (28.7%) had considered discontinuing their enrolment.

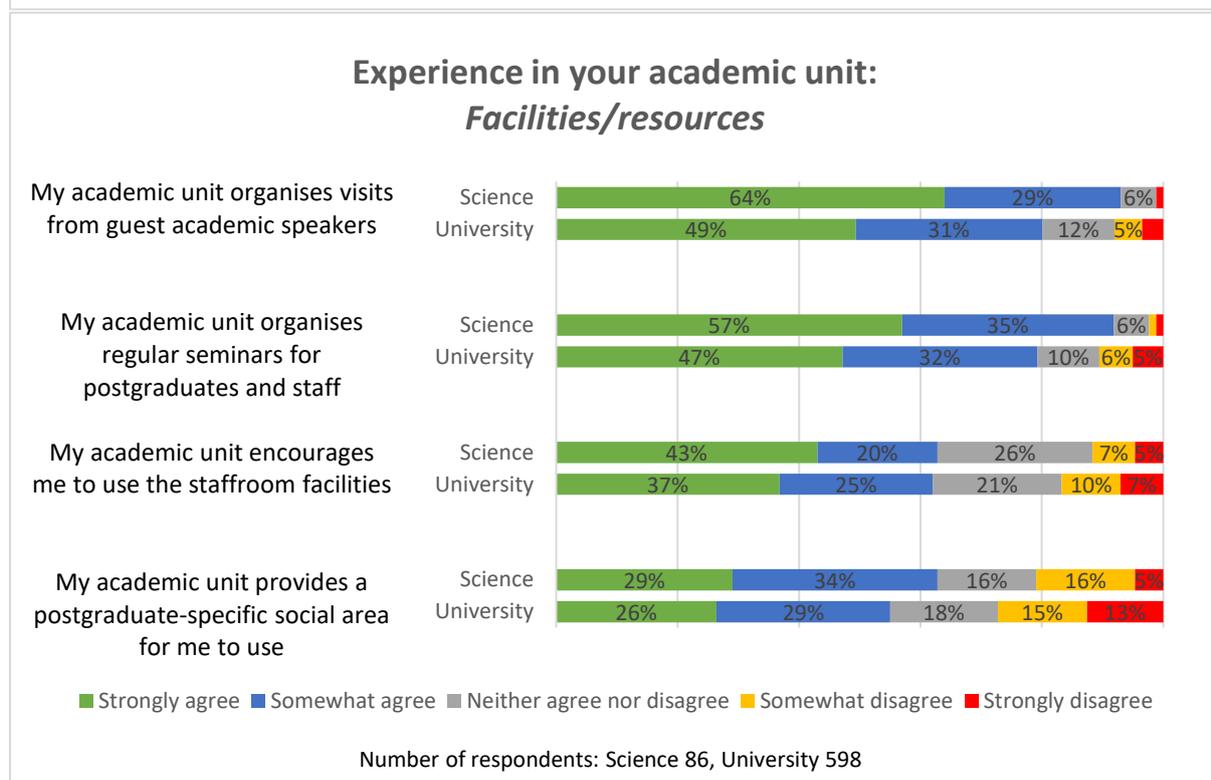
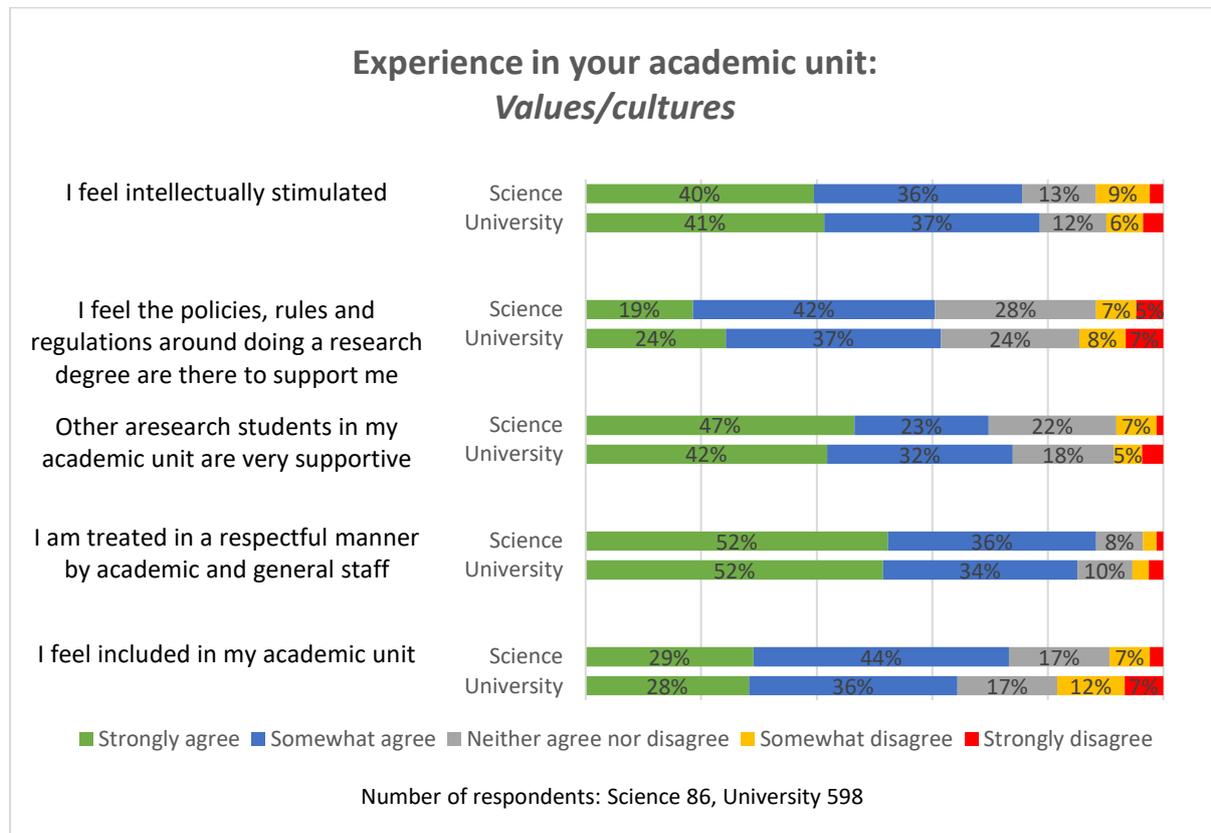
Though it was not directly tracked in this survey, it is interesting to note that there is evidence of a correlation between choosing one’s own supervisor and good and timely progress.¹⁹ Presumably this is because prospective students have taken time to consider who is best placed to support their research,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

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

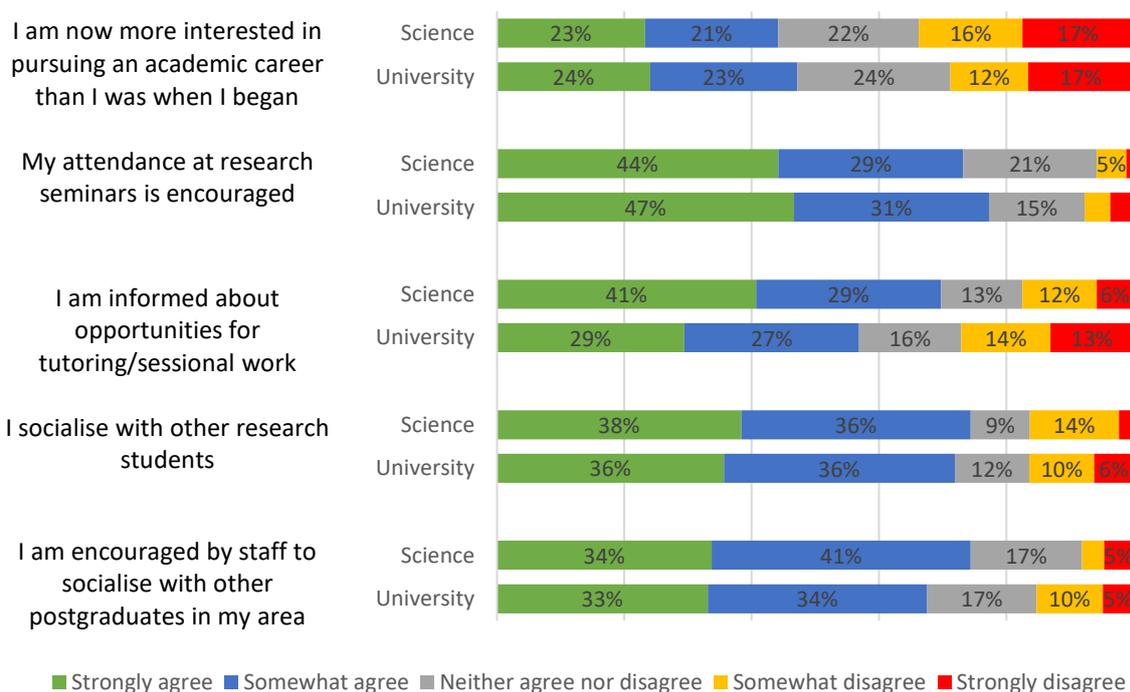
¹⁹ Glenice Ives and Glenn Rowley, “Supervisor selection or allocation and continuity of supervision,” 535.

6. School culture and facilities

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



Experience in your academic unit: *Opportunities*

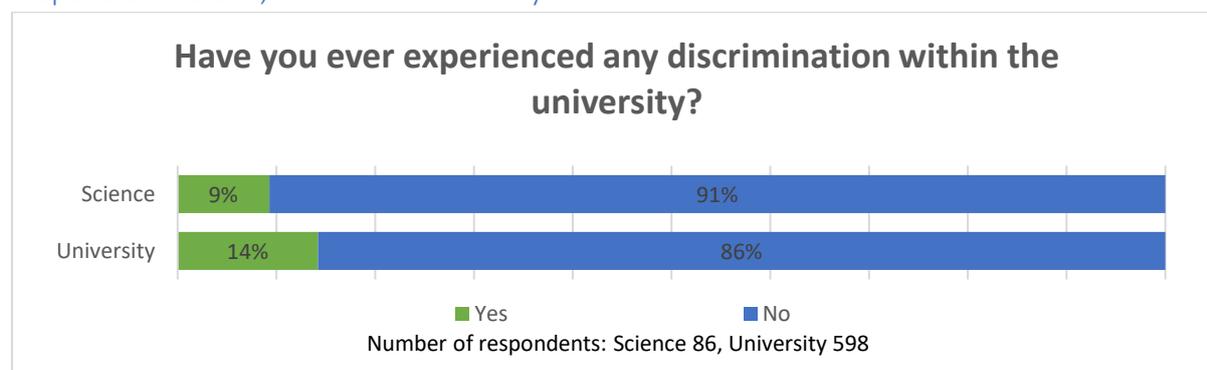


Number of respondents: Science 86, University 598

Overall, Monash Science responses tended to reflect those of the University-wide population in terms of graduate student culture. The greatest proportion of Monash Science respondents (93%) indicated that they either *strongly agree* or *somewhat agree* that ‘my academic unit organises visits from guest academic speakers’.

It is also interesting to note that 88% of respondents indicated that they either *strongly agree* or *somewhat agree* that ‘I am treated in a respectful manner by academic staff and general staff’ and another 73% also *strongly agree* or *somewhat agree* that ‘I feel included in my academic unit’.

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



Number of respondents: Science 86, University 598

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

Ten graduate students from Monash Science responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 6

Positive comments: 5

General theme	Number of responses
Discrimination – culture/religion/nationality	2
Discrimination – gender	2
Bad supervisors	1
Research and workplace environment	1

Responses from Monash Science graduate students to this statement were marginally more negative than positive.

Interesting **negative** comments, included:

“I’ve never felt discriminated against, but I also don’t feel comfortable discussing my mental health issues with any staff in my academic unit – except one [of] my supervisors. When it causes issues with my output or response to criticism and other things, I just have to take it in stride with everyone else – and that can be difficult.”

“I am not sure whether I am too sensitive, but I feel like some people here [are] not that friendly to help someone like me who’s native language is not English.”

On the other hand, revealing **positive** comments, included:

“The environment in my school is great.”

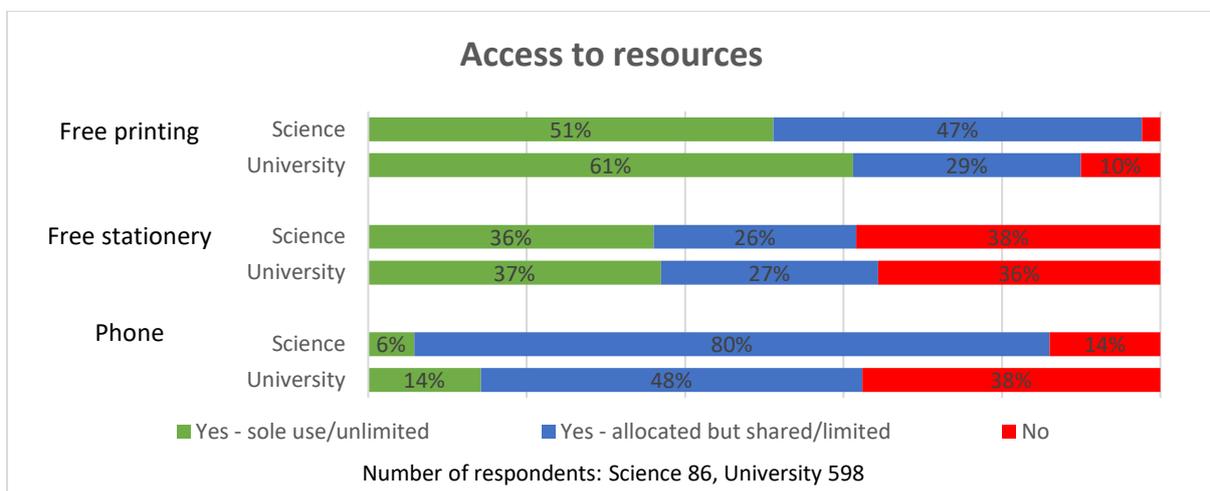
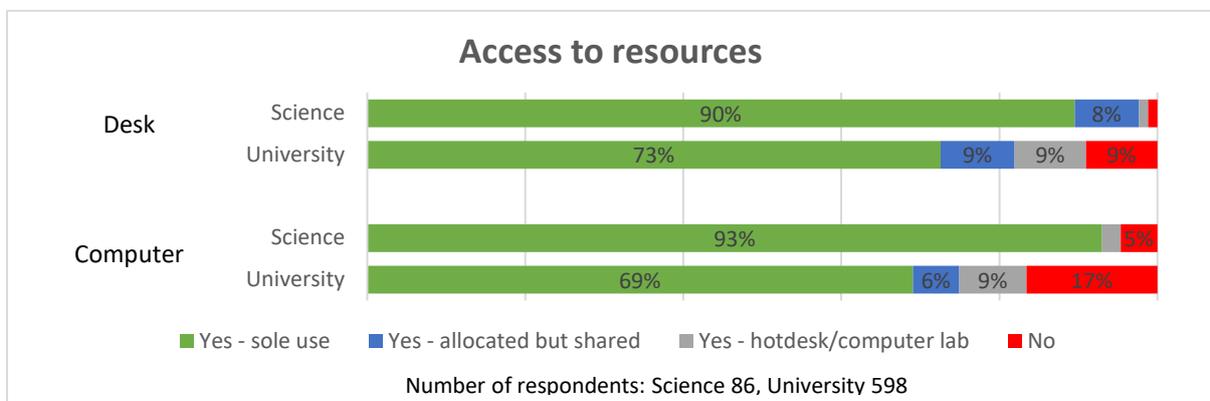
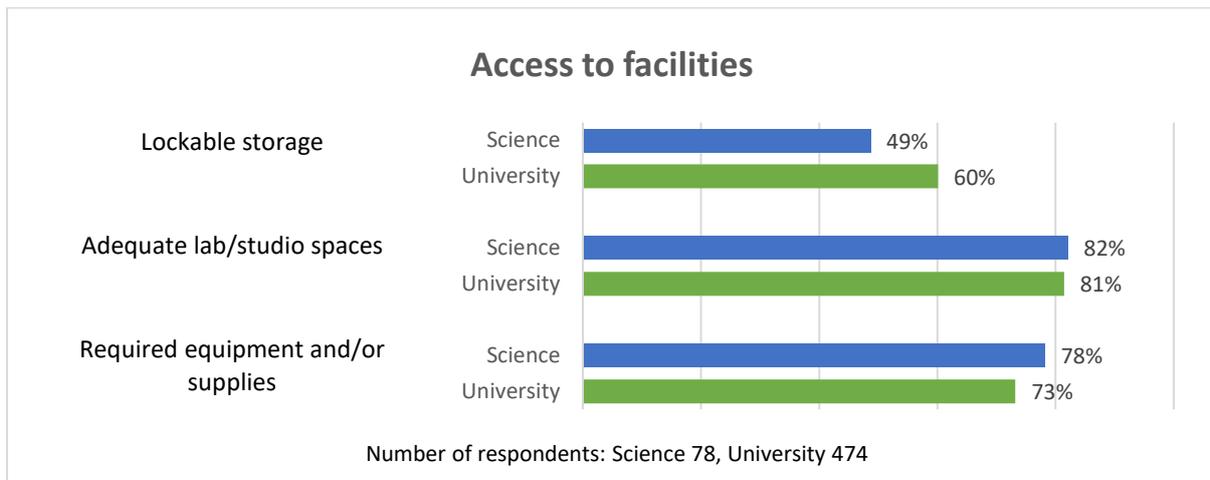
“The staff and students ... are all really polite and friendly.”

Other **notable comments**, included:

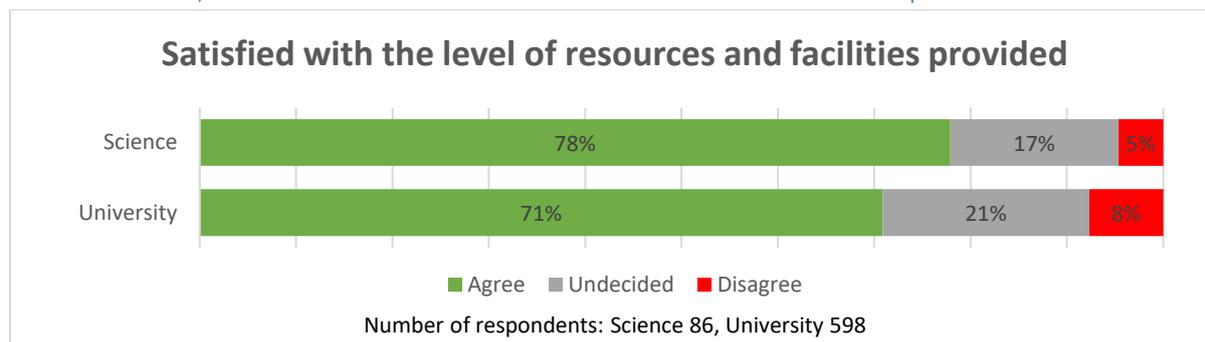
“Compared to male colleagues, when giving a seminar, I am questioned and doubted much more frequently. The same for other women students. Most staff are generally switched on about this, but there are a few staff and students who create a very toxic ‘boys club’ environment.”

“Certain comments by certain staff members have been noted by myself about my ... heritage.”

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



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



Overall, Monash Science respondents were more satisfied (78%) with the level of resources and facilities provided to them than University-wide respondents (71%).

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

Fourteen graduate students from Monash Science responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 5 Positive comments: 4

General theme	Number of responses
Printer	3
Private office/studio	2
Lockers and storage space	1
Maintenance	1
Phone	1
Stationery	1
Unique requests	1
Workshop/lab/studio	1

Five graduate students from Monash Science reflected negatively on the adequacy of the facilities they receive at Monash University, compared to four graduate students who reflected positively.

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

“Unlimited printing or maybe at least higher than existing limit.”

“Who decided to cap the amount of copies I can make? \$50, really? ... It feels kind of unfair that it is only capped for postgrad students, and not for general staff. Why the distinction?”

Other notable comments, included:

"[I] would like to mention that the staff at our general office have been VERY supportive when it comes to the facilities!"

"The office space we use is a very large shared PhD office known as the PhD Farm. I find it a disruptive and negative environment in which to work."

"My 'lab' ceiling has leaked water and rained down ceiling matter the entire few years I have been here. I do PCRs. This is not okay."

"The school of chemistry at Monash is excellent and generally a very supportive environment to undertake research; however, one criticism is that mental health issues are somewhat trivialised with terms like 'second year blues' used to describe depression and feelings of futility around people's research."

6.7 Summary

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

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

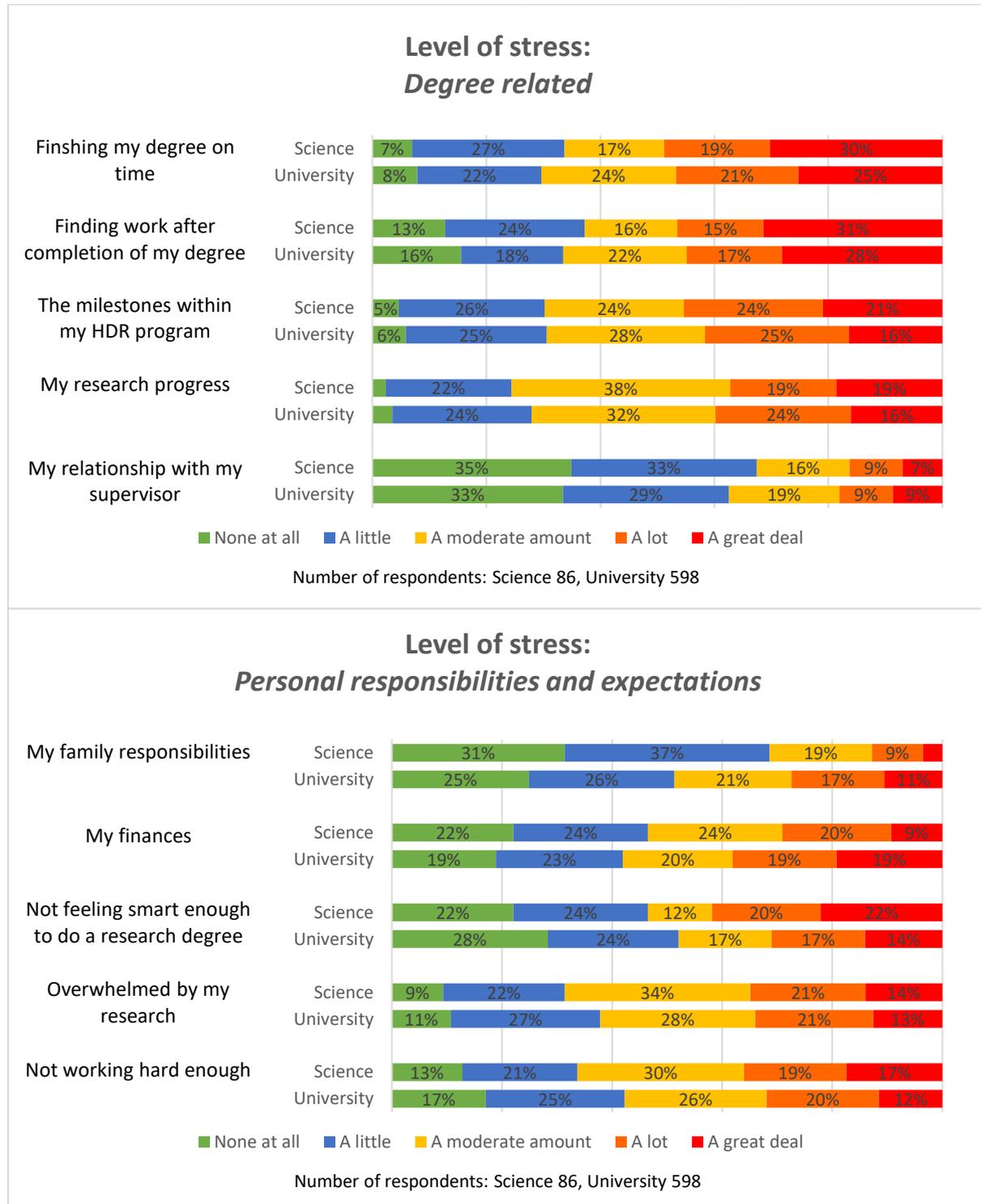
The results of this survey indicate a correlation between the absence of a sense of belonging and academic and social isolation. **These results emphasise the importance of encouraging graduate students to socialise and develop professional relationships with their peers.**

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

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

7. Stress and wellbeing

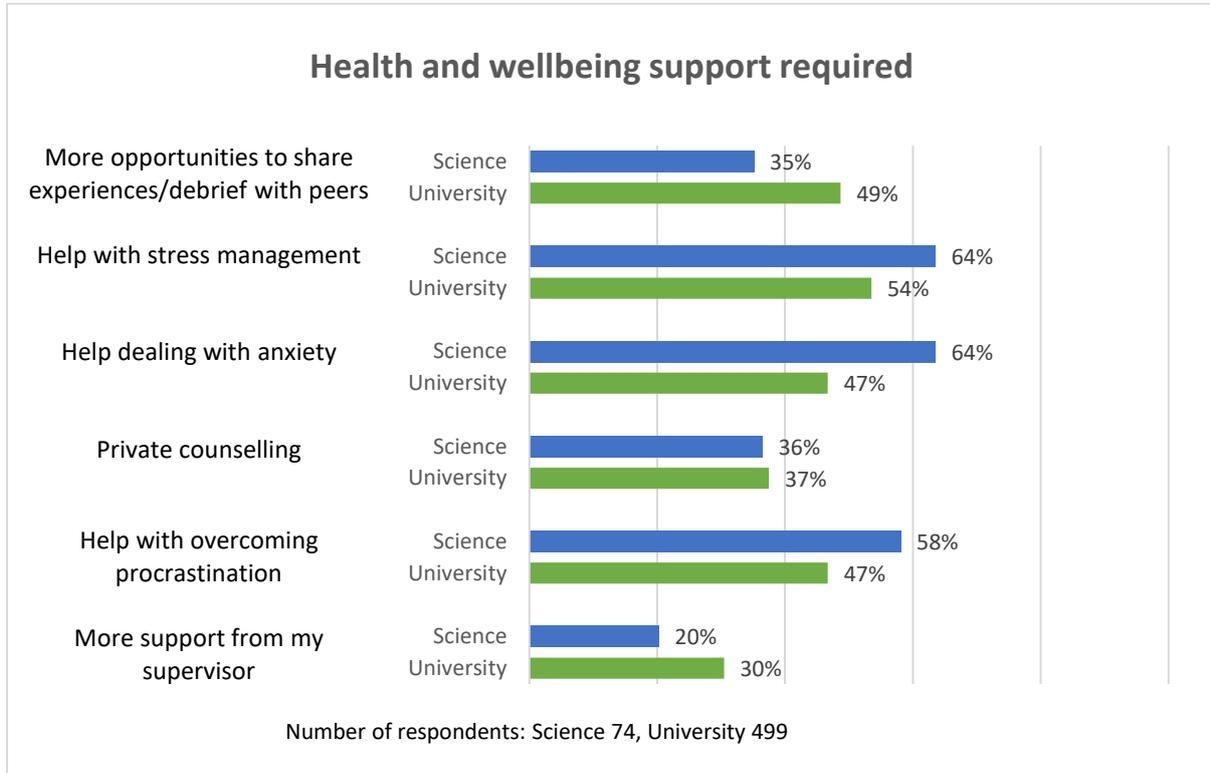
7.1 Please select your level of stress regarding any of the following:



Overall, Monash Science respondents tended to reflect those of the University-wide population in terms of levels of stress. The highest number of Monash Science respondents (49%) either felt *a great deal* or *a lot* of stress regarding ‘*finishing my degree on time*’. It was also interesting to note that 46% of Monash Science respondents felt *a great deal* or *a lot* of stress regarding ‘*finding work after the PhD*’ and 45% regarding ‘*the milestones within my HDR program*’.

For 35% of Monash Science and 33% of University-wide respondents, stress levels were **none at all** regarding 'my relationship with my supervisors'.

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



Overall, Monash Science respondents nominated 'help dealing with anxiety' and 'help with stress management' as the top two ways the University could help to support their wellbeing.

The most popular health and wellbeing support nominated by University-wide respondents were 'help with stress management' and providing 'more opportunities to share experiences/debrief with peers'.

7.3 Opportunity for comments regarding health and wellbeing

Eight graduate students from Monash Science responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 6

Positive comments: 4

General theme	Number of responses
Stress/anxiety/depression/isolation	4
Financial pressures	2
Physical health issues	1

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

“I’d love to be comfortable disclosing my mental health issues with staff in my academic unit, but even when I tell them they don’t always understand.”

“Taking no action [and] waiting for complaints is not managing mental health. Monash gives the impression of a lot of talk, with little action. Students with complaints are required to put themselves out of their comfort zones and prove their point, and prove their worthiness. Not okay.”

Other notable comments to emerge, included:

“It would be good to see some support in relation to physical health e.g. having resources available to discuss diet, lifestyle exercise etc. These can often be neglected when completing a postgraduate research degree, resulting in difficulties performing to the best of your ability.”

“Stronger community support enabled by better awareness and education around mental health is important in academia where nearly everyone seems to have some problems ... [It] would be more helpful than just offering resources to help with mental health after the damage is done.”

“I am aware of the support the University provides and make use of it regularly.”

7.4 Summary

In relation to their degrees, Monash Science respondents were most-stressed about finishing their degree on time and least-stressed about their relationship with their supervisor, while in relation to their personal responsibilities and expectations, they were most-stressed about not feeling smart enough to do a research degree and least-stressed about their family responsibilities.

‘*Help dealing with anxiety*’ was identified as the support that Monash Science respondents most wanted to receive from the University alongside ‘*help with stress management*.’ This was reflected in the open comments with stress/anxiety/depression/isolation being consistently brought up and again when several respondents suggested more peer-support groups and mindfulness and wellbeing services should be available.

Doctoral candidate attrition has been linked to feelings of social isolation that can stem from confusion about program expectations and a lack of meaningful communication with peers and Faculty/University staff.²² Peers (such as fellow graduate students or postdoctoral researchers) can be crucial as, for example, they can be a source of emotional, social and intellectual support which can replace or complement supervisory guidance.²³

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

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

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

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

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

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

8. Overall comments

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

Fifty-one graduate students from Monash Science responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Facilities/services/resources	18
Research – intellectual stimulation and development	17
Supportive environment and culture	12
Monash academics/faculties/staff	10
Student peers and colleagues	10
Social events/environment	6
Supervisors	6
Career opportunities	4
Monash reputation	3
Networking opportunities	3
Financial support/funding	2
MGA	2
Training/coursework/professional development	2

Many Monash Science graduate students were particularly pleased with the **facilities, services and/or resources** provided to them as students of the University. Relative comments covered a range of areas, including: access, specialist equipment, personal desk/computer, world-class infrastructure, counselling and library databases.

Furthermore, several Monash Science graduate researchers referenced **research and intellectual stimulation and development** as being one of the best aspects of their Monash experience.

Insightful comments, included:

“The challenge of completing a PhD and the feeling when you succeed.”

“I sometimes feel like I’m getting really good science done, I get to see cool people every day, and I get to learn cool stuff.”

“The opportunity for new and exciting research.”

Other notable comments, included:

“It is a great place to do research and the overall community is supportive.”

“The feeling of inclusion in my faculty/school.”

“I do feel we have lots of support and I have a really good set of office mates.”

“I can’t say enough good things about my supervisors. They’re so helpful and encouraging and available, even when their time is completely oversubscribed.”

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

Forty-eight graduate students from Monash Science responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Facilities/services/resources	7
Stress and wellbeing	6
Financial issues	5
Lack of community and socialising	5
Professional development	5
Course length and workload	4
Location	4
Administration	3
Staff	3
Lack of international student support	1
Lack of support/value	1
Milestones	1
Unclear requirements	1

Several Monash Science graduate students were particularly displeased with the **facilities, services and/or resources** provided to them as students of the University. Relative comments covered a range of areas, including: lack of facilities, shared facilities/equipment, machines breaking, inadequate resources, construction and public transport issues.

Another of the primary complaints of Monash Science graduate students related to the **stress and wellbeing** issues they associated with their studies. Interesting comments, included:

“Stressful and a general feeling of existential dread.”

“The almost constant sense of self-doubt and ignorance.”

Other notable themes to emerge, included:

- **Professional development** – graduate students from Monash Science were largely negative about professional development requirements with complaints largely focused on how irrelevant units were and how they were a waste of time.
- **Course length and workload** – as with responses to some previous questions, Monash Science researchers were frustrated by the expected completion timeframe and workload.
- **Lack of community and socialising** – some graduate students protested the lack of a sense of community at Monash or that socialising and social events were not plentiful or encouraged.
- **Location** – a few complained about the location of campuses in relation to Melbourne or their homes.
- **Finances** - a few respondents were frustrated by limited access to funding and scholarships.

Other notable comments, included:

“Dealing with MGE. Also, Monash websites seem to be universally terribly designed and hard to navigate – especially when looking for forms we need to fill out.”

“Heavily fluctuating workload.”

“Public transport to campus is difficult.”

“Lack of open/friendly/stimulating academic discussion.”

8.3 How can the research postgraduate experience be improved?

Forty-five graduate students from Monash Science responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Professional development	15
Community and culture	10
Facilities/services/resources	7
Funding/finances	6
Supervisors	5
Course length and time	3
Health and wellbeing support	3
Administration/communication	2
Career opportunities/development	2
Orientation/induction	2
Milestones	1
Training	1

The primary suggestion that Monash Science graduate students made related to improving **Professional development**. Relative comments, included:

“Improve or remove professional development hours. Put the required hours on standby until this system is improved.”

“Remove mandatory training and allow us to focus on research, or implement it in a way where it is actually useful e.g. internships.”

Improving the **sense of community and culture** within the University was another popular suggestion within Monash Science. Relevant comments, included:

“A stronger community feeling amongst postgrad students.”

“More interactions with other students and staff to motivate [us] to move forward.”

Other notable themes, included:

- **Course length** – extending the length of degrees was raised numerous times with students often expressing concern that expected completion timelines had not been adjusted to factor in compulsory coursework and/or professional development.
- **Funding/finances** – Monash Science graduate students suggested their course experience would be improved by greater access to scholarships and grants (travel, study).
- **Health and wellbeing** – improvements to the way mental health is approached and supported was a common theme.
- **Supervision** – several Monash Science respondents wanted improvements to supervision that would empower the student and identify and penalise poor or inadequate supervisors.
- **Facilities/services/resources** – improving the facilities, services and/or resources on offer was raised by several respondents.

Some of the **notable comments** from Monash Science graduate students, included:

“More frequent (and perhaps mandatory?) external and independent input into monitoring student-supervisor relationships (external meaning from outside the faculty, i.e. not close colleagues). I myself feel that any action I take ... can be interpreted as ‘dobbing’ rather than seeking assistance, whereas independent and mandatory checks takes that responsibility away and may ... pick up problems before [they] become unmanageable.”

“Things that sound like fun (for example, 3-minute thesis and overseas conference travel) are only available to students who have completed their confirmation – but by then you are even busier with research. There should be more opportunities for students who just started.”

“Maybe some additional support at the beginning of the PhD about time management, setting goals, structure etc. There seems to be some courses in myDevelopment but they are not always available and not at the right time.”

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

Four graduate students from Monash Science responded to this question. Their comments, included:

“I’ve noticed a few students have found it harder to settle in because they felt lonely and isolated. At least one nearly quit in their first month because of this feeling. I really think ... a bigger emphasis on the grad research community is important.”

“I think the way academics conduct themselves in this school leaves much to be desired ... Many of them act unprofessionally, skirt their teaching responsibilities, treat post-graduates with an outdated disciplinary attitude, and generally act a little too [like a] boys-club for my taste.”

8.5 Summary

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

The intellectual stimulation and development of conducting research ranked high in '*the best aspects of being a Monash research postgraduate*' responses, as did the overall University supportive environment and culture.

Stress and wellbeing issues were ranked among the worst aspects of being a Monash research graduate student.

When it came to the question '*How can the research postgraduate experience be improved?*' the primary suggestion from Monash Science graduate students related to improving or removing professional development.

(iv) MGA Recommendations

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

Supervision:

1. *That the Faculty consider encouraging and supporting prospective and incoming HDR students to choose their own supervisor.*

Milestones:

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

Professional Development:

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

School culture and facilities:

4. *That the Faculty improve opportunities for interaction, networking and discussions among postgraduate peers.*
5. *That graduate students are offered seminars or workshops relating to 'preventing procrastination,' 'dealing with anxiety,' 'help with stress management' and 'finishing my degree on time.'*

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

(v) Bibliography

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(vi) Appendix 1

Demographics of respondents from Monash Science

Faculty (Schools)	Count	Percentage
Malaysia School of Science	14	15.2%
School of Biological Sciences	17	18.5%
School of Chemistry	19	20.7%
School of Earth, Atmosphere and Environment	15	16.3%
School of Mathematical Sciences	12	13.0%
School of Physics and Astronomy	15	16.3%

Mode of attendance	Count	Percentage
Internal (on-campus)	91	98.9%
External (off-campus)	1	1.1%

Nationality	Count	Percentage
Domestic student	48	52.2%
International student	44	47.8%

Attendance type	Count	Percentage
Full-time	92	100%
Part-time	0	0%

Gender	Count	Percentage
Female	40	43.5%
Male	51	55.4%
Prefer not to answer	1	1.1%

Enrolled Program	Count	Percentage
PhD	88	95.7%
Masters by research	4	4.3%

Scholarship	Count	Percentage
Receives Scholarship	88	95.7%
No scholarship	1	1.1%
No, but I have previously held a scholarship	3	3.3%