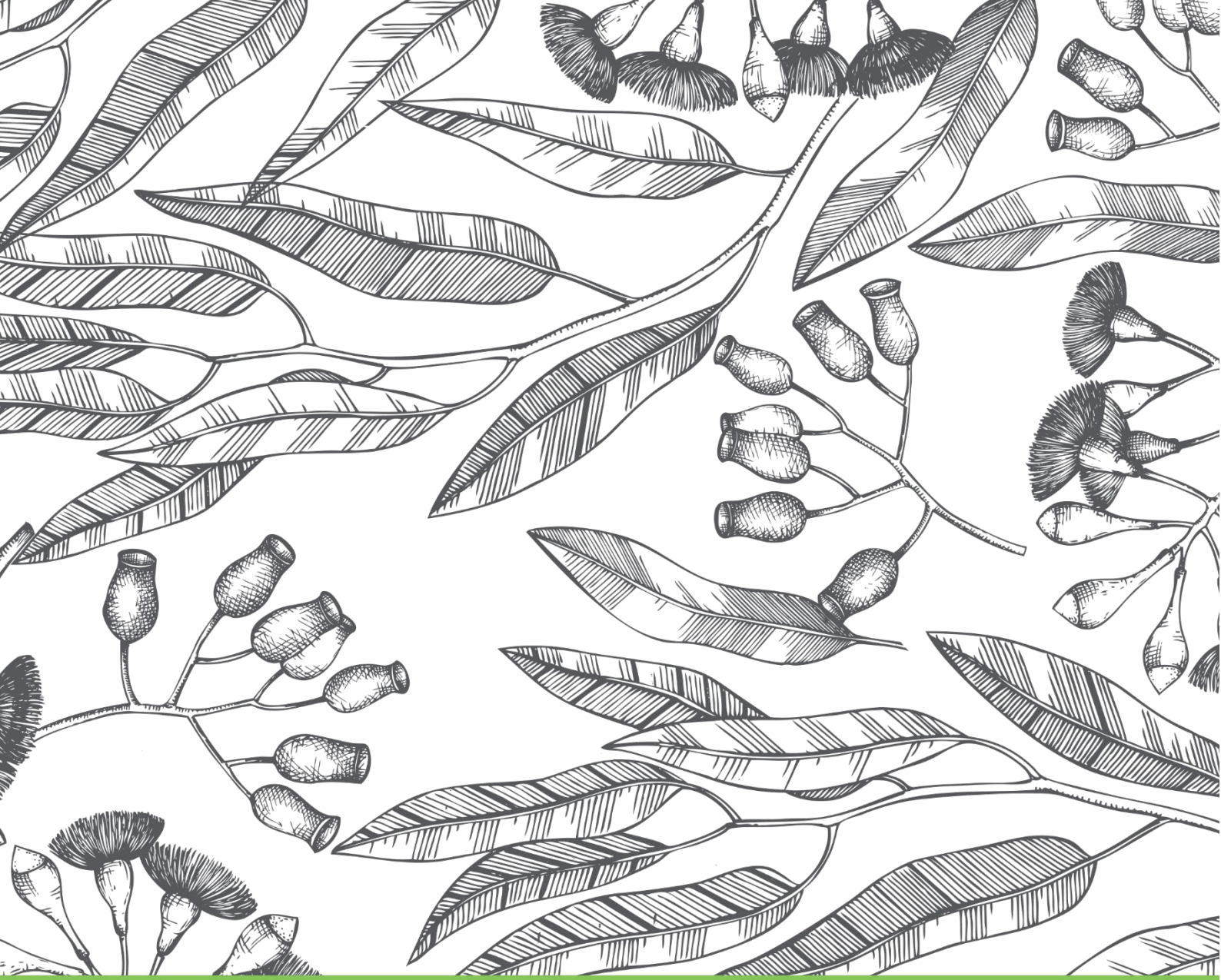

MONASH GRADUATE ASSOCIATION (MGA)

HDR SURVEY

MONASH ENGINEERING

FACULTY REPORT 2019

monash graduate association

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

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(i) Executive Summary

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

Supervision

The majority (81%) of Monash Engineering graduate students indicated overall satisfaction with their supervision. They were as satisfied with their supervision overall as all University respondents (82%) and, like their peers, tended to agree with positive statements relating to how supportive their supervisors were.

Milestones

Monash Engineering respondents predominantly agreed with positive statements relating to their milestone experiences.

When asked specifically about termination of candidature based on milestone performance, respondents generally disagreed that it was appropriate, with this disagreement increasing from confirmation (48%) to mid-candidature (65%) to pre-submission (70%), which followed the University-wide trend.

Coursework

Monash Engineering respondents were significantly less likely than all graduate students to believe that research degrees are improved by the inclusion of compulsory discipline-based coursework.

Just over a quarter (28%) of graduate students from Monash Engineering felt that their research degrees were improved by the inclusion of compulsory discipline-based coursework units. On the other hand, just under half (43%) of respondents stated that they disagreed that it was a good use of their time.

Respondents from Monash Engineering (35%) were as likely as their University counterparts (34%) to express that they had experienced an uncomfortable level (*a lot* or *a great deal*) of stress in relation to the compulsory discipline-based coursework.

Professional Development

While more Monash Engineering respondents tended to strongly agree with positive statements regarding professional development units than disagree, the disparity between the two was not as pronounced as it has been in previous areas (e.g. supervision, milestones).

Just under half (49%) of Monash Engineering graduate students responded that professional development units, as offered through *myDevelopment*, should not be a compulsory part of a research degree, while just over one in five (21%) indicated that they should be.

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

While some graduate students stated that they could see the potential benefit of professional development courses alongside their academic research training, significant issues with the number

of hours, course relevance, flexibility of what is counted towards the requirement and the general execution of the program were cited throughout the responses.

Progress, delays and discontinuation

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

While 44% of Monash Engineering graduate students agreed that they had sufficient time to produce a quality research project, despite additional requirements of compulsory milestones/coursework/professional development, 55% indicated they felt an uncomfortable level of stress about finishing their degree on time.

Improving facilities, labs, equipment and software, improving or removing compulsory coursework and improving supervision practices, were identified as the three most important things the University could do to assist Monash Engineering graduate students in achieving timely completion.

School culture and facilities

Overall, Monash Engineering graduate students were more satisfied (81%) with the level of resources and facilities than University respondents (71%). They were also more likely (72%) to agree with the statement *'I feel included in my academic unit'* than were their University peers (64%).

Stress and wellbeing

The area in which Monash Engineering respondents expressed they felt the highest level of stress (55% either *a lot* or *a great deal*) was in relation to *'finishing my degree on time,'* while the area associated with the least amount of stress (16%) was *'my relationship with my supervisor.'*

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

Overall comments

Monash Engineering graduate students identified access to facilities, services and resources as the best aspect of being at Monash.

The worst aspect was issues with stress and wellbeing.

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

(ii) Introduction

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

A total of 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, 99 were from research graduate students enrolled through Monash Engineering, which equates to 10% of the total research graduate student population of the Faculty in that year.

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

In the quantitative analysis, some Monash Engineering 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 Engineering 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 Engineering were represented in terms of responses. Overall respondents were skewed towards on-campus (95%), full-time (98%), scholarship receiving PhD students. Female (34%) and male (66%) genders were well represented, as were international (71%) and domestic students (29%). Appendix 1 provides the demographics of Monash Engineering 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 Engineering, 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	Engineering	University
Yes	54 (54.5%)	386 (57.8%)
No, but I've heard about it	24 (24.2%)	169 (25.3%)
No, I didn't know it existed	21 (21.2%)	113 (16.9%)

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

Aware of supervisor's responsibility	Engineering	University
Yes	75 (75.8%)	533 (79.8%)
No	3 (3%)	22 (3.3%)
Not sure	21 (21.2%)	113 (16.9%)

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

Aware of own responsibilities	Engineering	University
Yes	82 (82.8%)	592 (88.6%)
No	2 (2%)	14 (2.1%)
Not sure	15 (15.2%)	62 (9.3%)

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

Conflict or misunderstanding with your supervisor	Engineering	University
Yes	12 (12.1%)	108 (16.2%)
No	87 (87.9%)	560 (83.8%)

Graduate students from Monash Engineering were marginally less likely than all University respondents to have read the Code of Practice and to be aware of their supervisors' responsibilities towards them. They were also slightly less likely to have experienced conflict or misunderstanding with a supervisor or supervisors.

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

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

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	**Number of responses**
Unsupportive – poor quality guidance and feedback	5
Administrative issues	2
Different and unrealistic expectations	2
Inappropriate behaviour – bullying/harassment/tone/intimidation	2
Lack of expertise and/or interest	2
Inaccessible	1
Inexperience (supervisor)	1
Supervision team issues	1

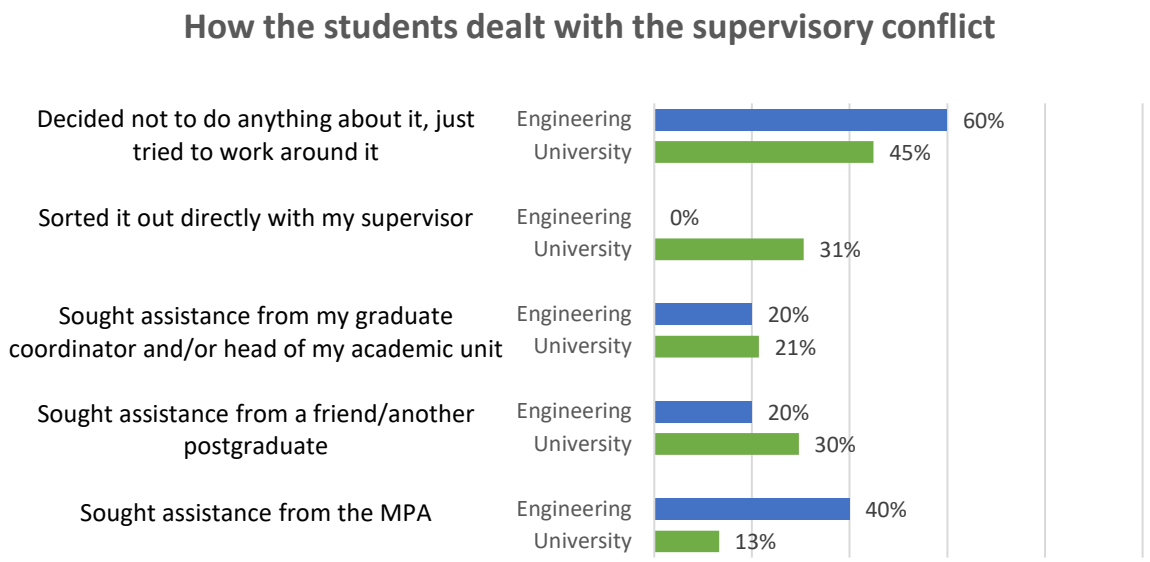
Poor quality guidance and feedback was referenced by several of the graduate students from Monash Engineering who identified as having had conflict or misunderstanding with one or more of their supervisors.

> *"Supervisor not listening to my ideas and forcing his ideas on us."*
>
> *"I believe that if I had received some direction from my supervisors and some considered advice I could have completed my thesis in less time with a lot less stress and anxiety. I thought about quitting many times and I worry for the welfare of other students … [because] the outcome had the potential to be a lot worse."*
>
> *"My main supervisor and I have never had clear communication between each other … I found out from someone outside the University that my main supervisor was going on sabbatical for 6 months of my first year."*

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

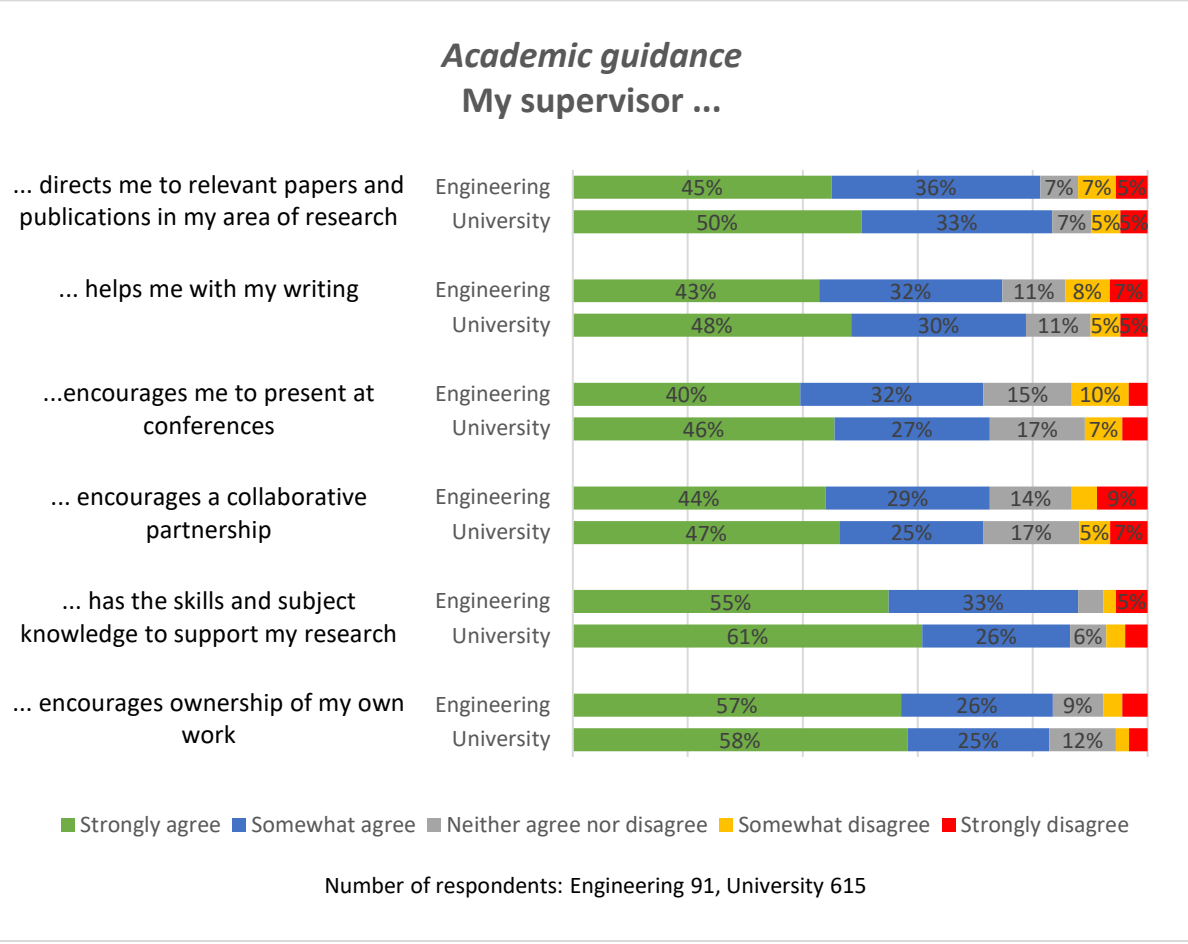
> *"His behaviour in meetings and his language … while having meetings with other students and supervisors [caused conflict].*
>
> *"My supervisor wanted me to work on a topic which I didn't want to."*

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



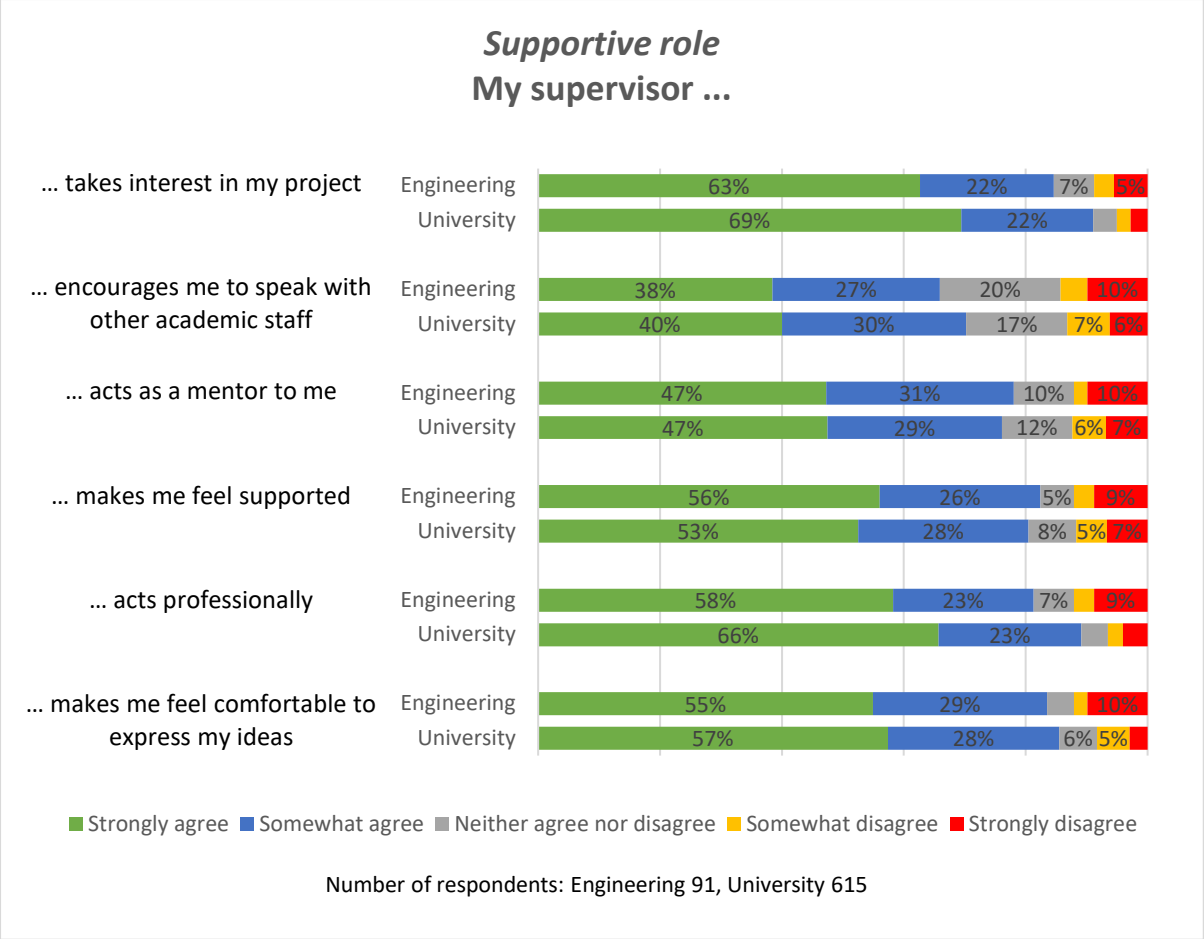
Number of respondents: Engineering 10, University 98

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]

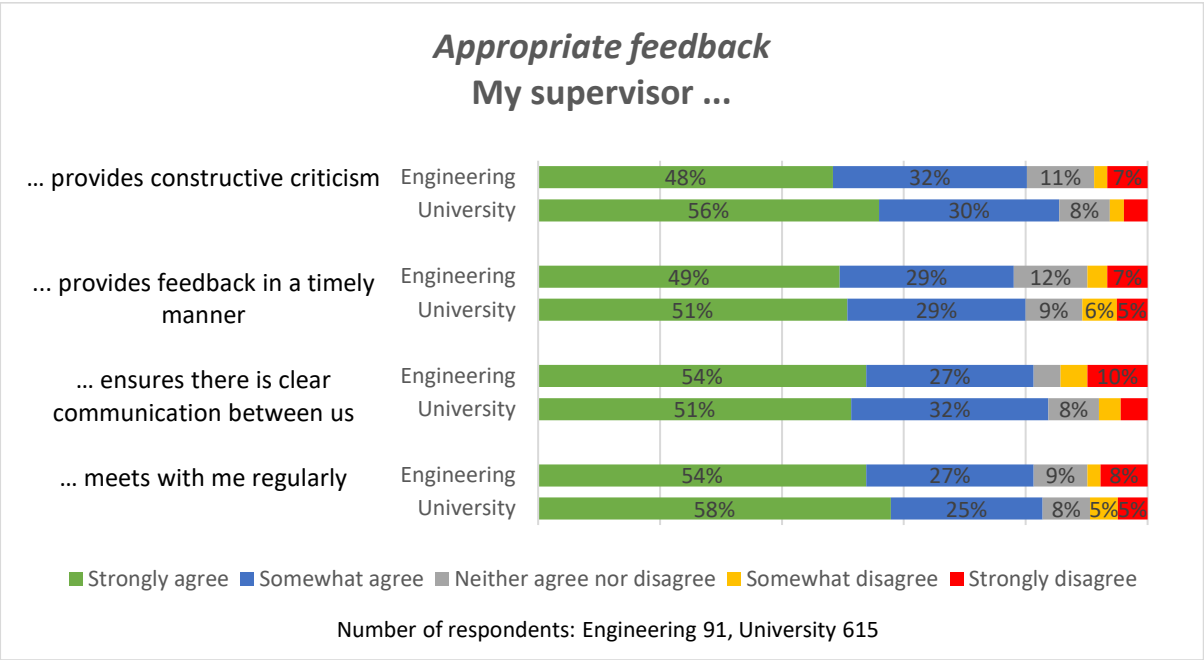


Monash Engineering respondents tended to agree with positive statements regarding the academic guidance provided by their supervisors to the same degree as University graduate students. There was widespread agreement (88%) that their supervisors had the skill and subject knowledge to support their research.

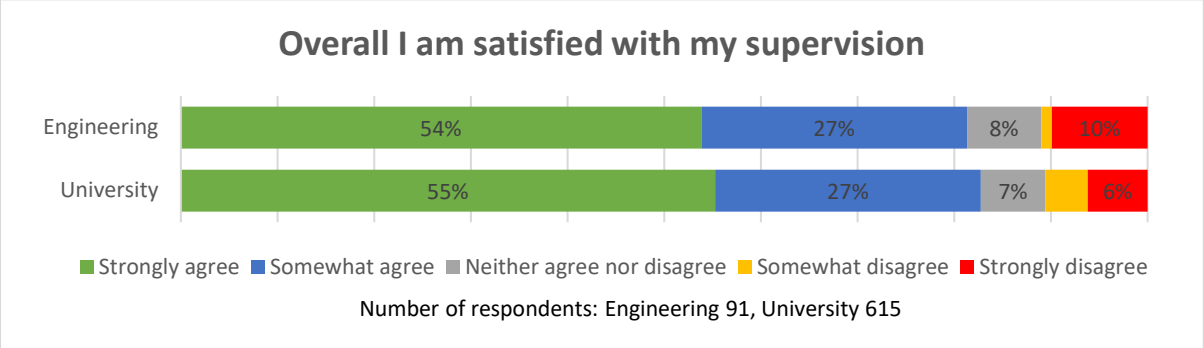
[3] Where responses were less than 5%, the figure has not been included due to lack of space.



Monash Engineering respondents tended to agree with positive statements regarding the supportive role played by their supervisors; however, there was less agreement among them than there was among University-wide respondents when it came to the statements *'my supervisor takes interest in my project'* (Eng: 85%, Uni: 91%) and *'my supervisor acts professionally'* (Eng: 81%, Uni: 89%).



Graduate students of Monash Engineering tended to agree with positive statements relating to the feedback received from their supervisors to a marginally lower degree than did University graduate students.



Monash Engineering respondents were predominantly satisfied with their supervision overall.

1.8 Opportunity for comments regarding your supervision.

Eighteen graduate students from Monash Engineering responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Positive comments: 8 Negative comments: 6

General theme	Number of responses
Supportive/respectful/engaged/guidance/nurturing/encouraging	4
Communication and feedback – good and bad	3
Suggested improvements	3
Changing supervisors	2
Incompetence/unsuitability and lacking appropriate skills/experience/knowledge	2
Bullying/dominating/exploitation/intimidation/abuse	1
Inaccessibility	1
Knowledgeable	1
Time restraints and/or overworked (students and staff)	1

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

> *"Both my main and co-supervisors are very professional supervisors who always give constructive advice to students. They always take full responsibility to guide and support students throughout the whole PhD journey."*

> *"My supervisor encourages students to think independently, she allows me to express my ideas and opinions but always critically pointed out my problems. I appreciate the way she questions me to make me think in a more comprehensive way."*

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

> *"My supervisor is there in person, but [is] not paying the blindest bit of attention to the work I'm doing."*
>
> *"I feel supervisors should be kept accountable by the faculty of MGE. For example, my supervisor has too many students and does not delegate responsibility adequately to deal with the workload."*

Upon reading the responses of Monash Engineering graduate students, it becomes clear that several do not feel empowered to make changes and could benefit from an **improved process for changing supervisors**. The following comments provide some insight into this:

> *"I am not happy, but unfortunately I have spent more than one year in this group [and] I don't have the courage to leave."*
>
> *"If I have [a] huge disagreement with [my supervisor], basically I have to end the PhD and leave. Or even if I'm planning to complain after graduation, I can't because he has to give me a recommendation letter for a good job. So, I have no option but to do whatever he wants me to work on and tolerate his very rude behaviour at times."*

1.9 Summary

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

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

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[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.

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

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

The overall satisfaction with supervision among respondents from Monash Engineering (81%) was slightly lower than it was among all Monash graduate students (82%).

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

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

The expertise and knowledge of supervisors is instrumental to the successful completion of an HDR graduate student's thesis.[10] Overall agreement with the statement '*my supervisor has the skills and subject knowledge to support my research*' was slightly higher in Monash Engineering (88%) 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*).

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

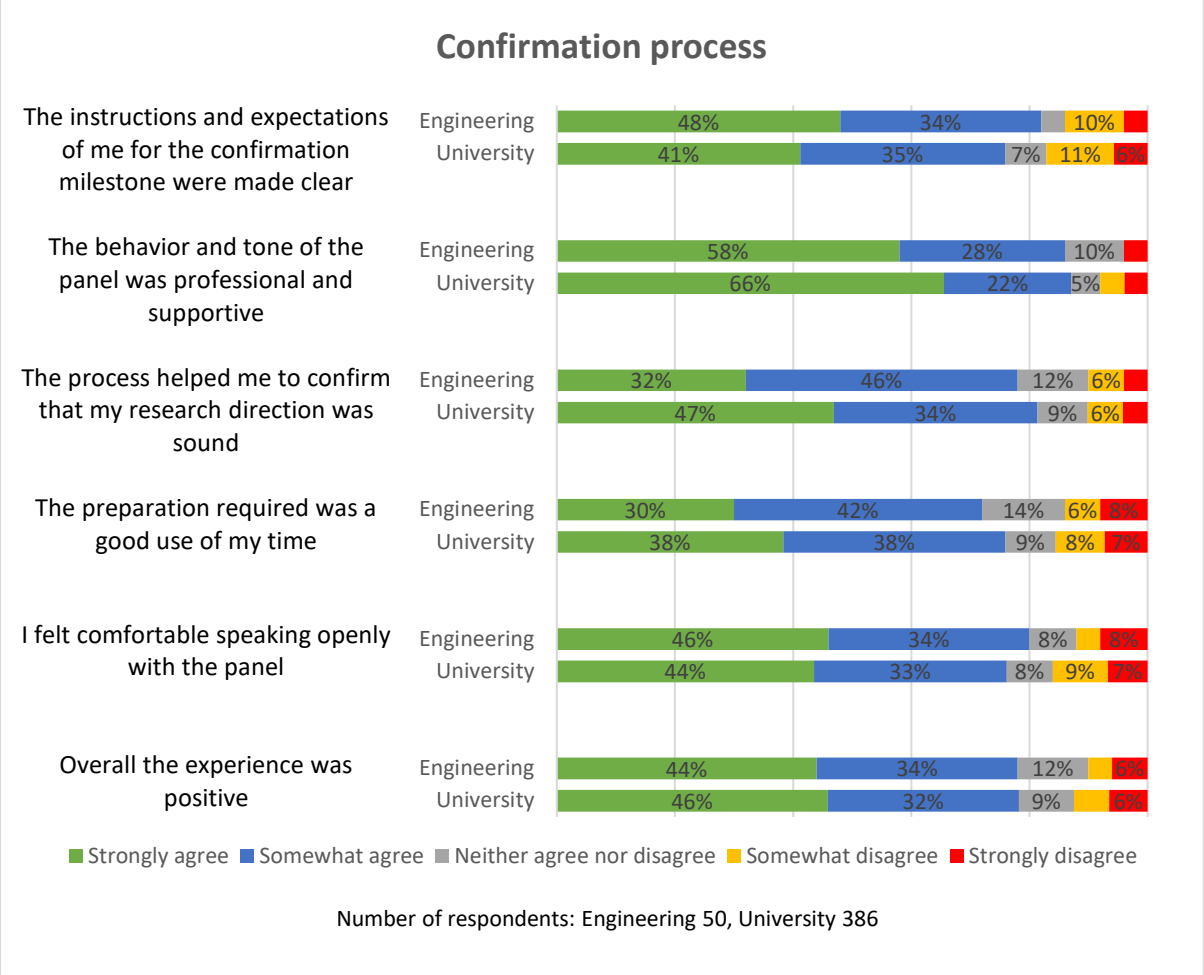
[9] Karen Hunter and Kay Devine, "Doctoral student's emotional exhaustion and intentions to leave academia," *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* 11 (2016): 40.

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

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

2. Milestones

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



Monash Engineering respondents tended to agree with positive statements regarding their confirmation process. Seventy-eight percent of Monash Engineering graduate students agreed that the overall experience was positive.

2.2 Opportunity for comments about the confirmation process.

Eight graduate students from Monash Engineering responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 5 Positive comments: 3

General theme	Number of responses
Stress/anxiety/nervousness/poor health	5
Unclear requirements and bureaucratic/administrative issues	3
Good and useful feedback from panel	2
Highlighted supervisor failures/flaws	2
Poor communication	1
Time-consuming process	1
Unsuitable/incompetent/insular/inappropriate panel	1

Stress, anxiety, nervousness and poor health relating to the confirmation process received far greater emphasis in the responses of Monash Engineering graduate students than those of any other faculty. Notable comments, included:

> *"As an international student, I had no idea about it. [I] didn't know the level of expectations and exact requirements. It was also my first presentation in English. I didn't get enough support from my second supervisor and at that time my first supervisor was not aware of that. It was a very stressful time."*

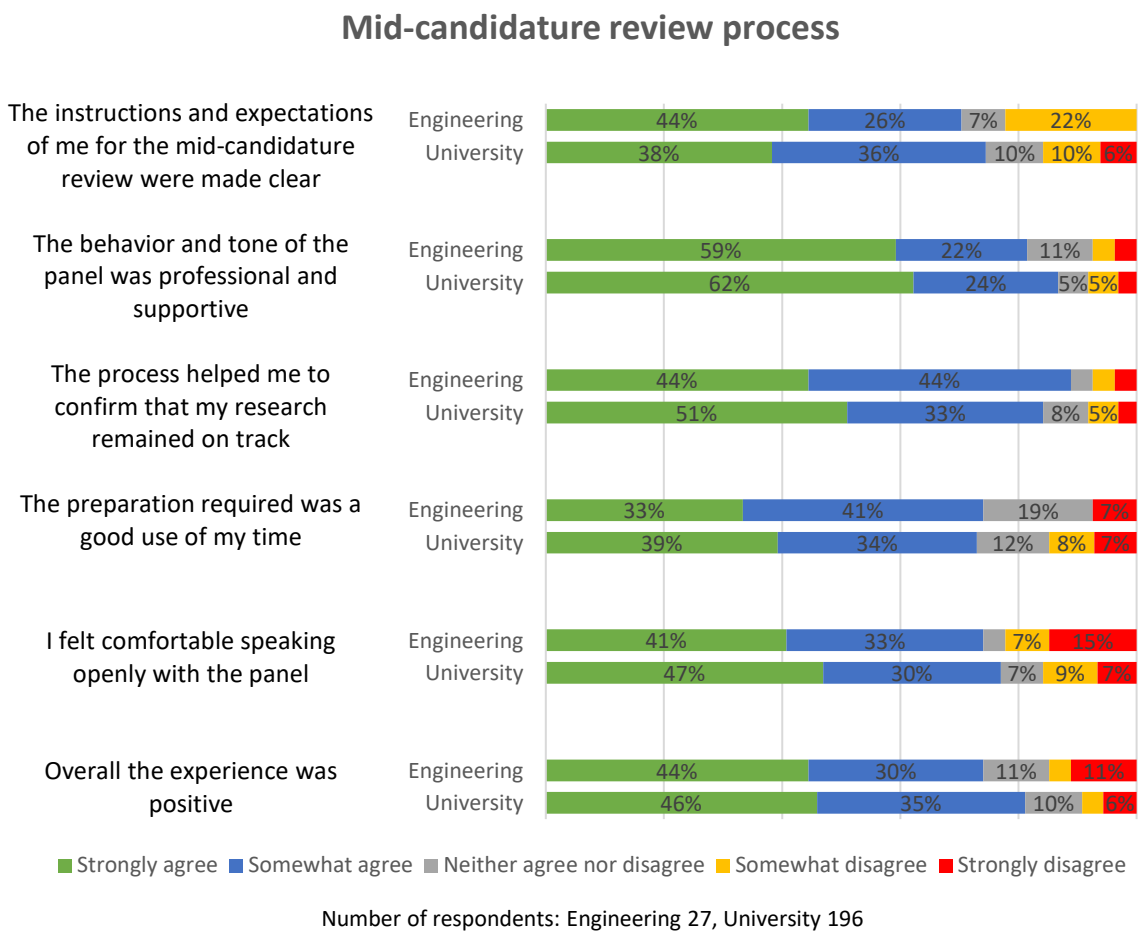
> *"While it is important to have milestones, the confirmation process was overly stressful and artificial. I did a lot of work and planning towards confirmation, however, a lot of that was thrown away only to be replanned after my confirmation was finished."*

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

> *"It was good, but stressful. I didn't have many results after a year due to the large amounts of training I was required to undertake … Fortunately, the panel was understanding and recognised that, but a different panel could rightfully have argued that I had not made enough progress."*

> *"It went well, but my supervisor said my report was not good and I am going to fail [on the] last night before my presentation."*

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



Monash Engineering respondents were slightly less satisfied overall with their experience of the mid-candidature review compared to the confirmation process, while they were also 7% less satisfied than all graduate students.

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

Three graduate students from Monash Engineering responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 3 Positive comments: 1

General theme	Number of responses
Unsuitable/incompetent/insular/inappropriate panel	3
Highlighted supervisor failures/flaws	1
Highlighted supervisor strengths	1
Suggestions for improvements	1
Unclear requirements and bureaucratic/administrative issues	1

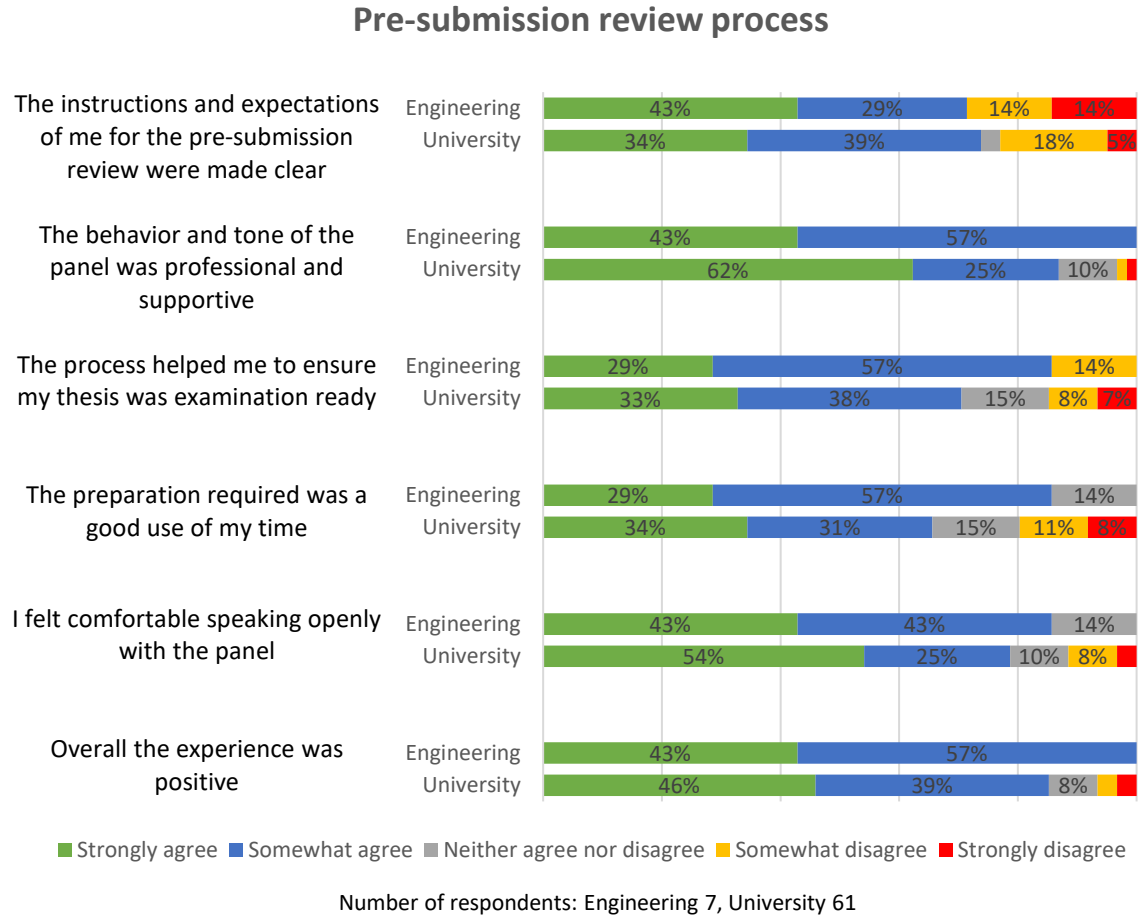
Part of all three responses from Monash Engineering graduate students can be categorised as **negative** and were related to **unsuitable, incompetent, insular or inappropriate panels**. These comments included:

> *"The chair of the panel told me he was not going to support me [on an issue I had with one of my examiners] while I raised these complaints during the mid-candidature review, so I went into it feeling completely on my own. My supervisors did not say a word during the whole thing and I was left fighting against two established academics … until my second examiner stepped in."*
>
> *"My mid candidature was delayed and very stressful [and was] made worse by the retrospectively applied new rules that were very confusing."*

One of the graduate students provided a **notable comment** regarding changes to the mid-candidate review processes. They wrote:

> *"The panel examiners from my confirmation to my mid-candidature review were changed as an external examiner was no longer required … Although an internal review can provide good advice, an external review from an external examiner could provide good insights into the research topic relevant in their field. Although I do understand that cost would be high when getting an external examiner for every milestone review."*

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



The 7 students who responded to this question all strongly agreed that the overall experience was positive and that the behavior and tone of the panel was professional and supportive.

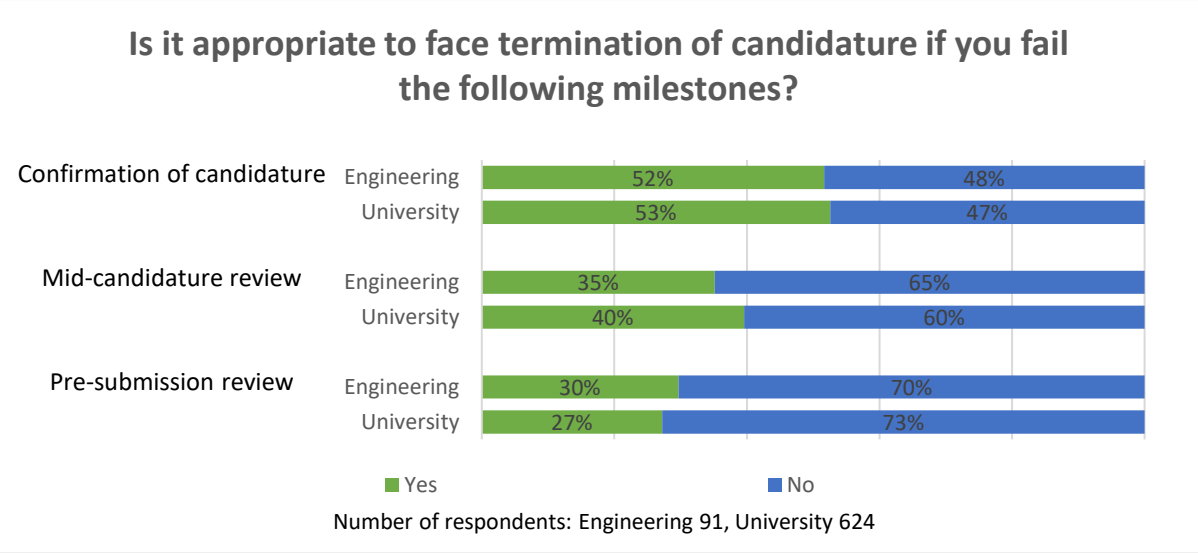
2.6 Opportunity for comments about the pre-submission review process.

Only **one graduate student from the Faculty of Engineering** responded to this statement.

This comment, included:

> *"Finding the instructions for pre-submission and mid candidature was very difficult. I had to read through all the procedures and policies on the MGE to work out what applied to me and what didn't. The panel was good, and helped guided me about what I needed to include in my thesis and what wasn't needed (which later was disputed by my supervisors). I understand the need for periodic checks and balances, but overall, other than getting to practice my public speaking, I can't say it helped me write my thesis other than cutting it down a bit - but that could have been achieved during a friendly chat with some of the department's academics."*

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



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

2.8 Opportunity for comments about milestones.

Seventeen graduate students from Monash Engineering responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 8 Positive comments: 2

General theme	Number of responses
General disagreement with termination at milestones	4
Termination at confirmation, but not at other milestones	2
Unsuitable/incompetent/insular/inappropriate panel	2
General agreement with termination at milestones	1
Highlighted supervisor failures/flaws	1
Highlighted supervisor strengths	1
Quality compromise – risk of students selecting easy projects	1
Rigid/inflexible system	1
Stress/anxiety/nervousness/poor health	1
Termination punishes students, not supervisors	1
Time-consuming process	1

Many Monash Engineering graduate students expressed **negative** opinions on the milestone requirements. Insightful comments, included:

> *"They are a waste of time. They are box-ticking exercise."*
>
> *"The milestones are very rigid and do not seem to take [the] individual situation … into consideration … Particularly the rigid requirements for having a chapter of [your] thesis or equivalent written was hard since the nature of my research was aimed on a year of training and then getting results. The milestone did not take that into consideration."*

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

> *"I do not support any form of termination during PhD candidature. Research progress cannot be quantified since it's relative, but it is the responsibility of the student and supervisor together to reach the milestone."*

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

> *"I understand terminating someone halfway through their project for the appropriate reasons, but I don't see how someone could get the pre-submission stage and it result in their candidature being terminated. It just seems very unfair to make this a hurdle."*
>
> *"I believe the panel always judges differently. If they fail you, there is a chance that another panel could have passed you."*
>
> *"[The] growth of a PhD student is not linear."*

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 Engineering 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*.'

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. While just over half (52%) of Monash Engineering graduate students agreed that it was appropriate to face termination for failing the milestone confirmation milestone (see *2.7*), substantially more disagreed termination was appropriate for the subsequent milestones.

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

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

Given milestones can be quite stressful (51% of Monash Engineering graduate students experienced an uncomfortable level of stress because of milestones – see section *7.1*), clear guidance on the requirements and expectations are essential to supporting students through the process. While clear guidance and communication have been found to be essential to timely completion, with their perceived absence shown to be fundamental in causing delays,[13] clear guidance and communication may also 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.

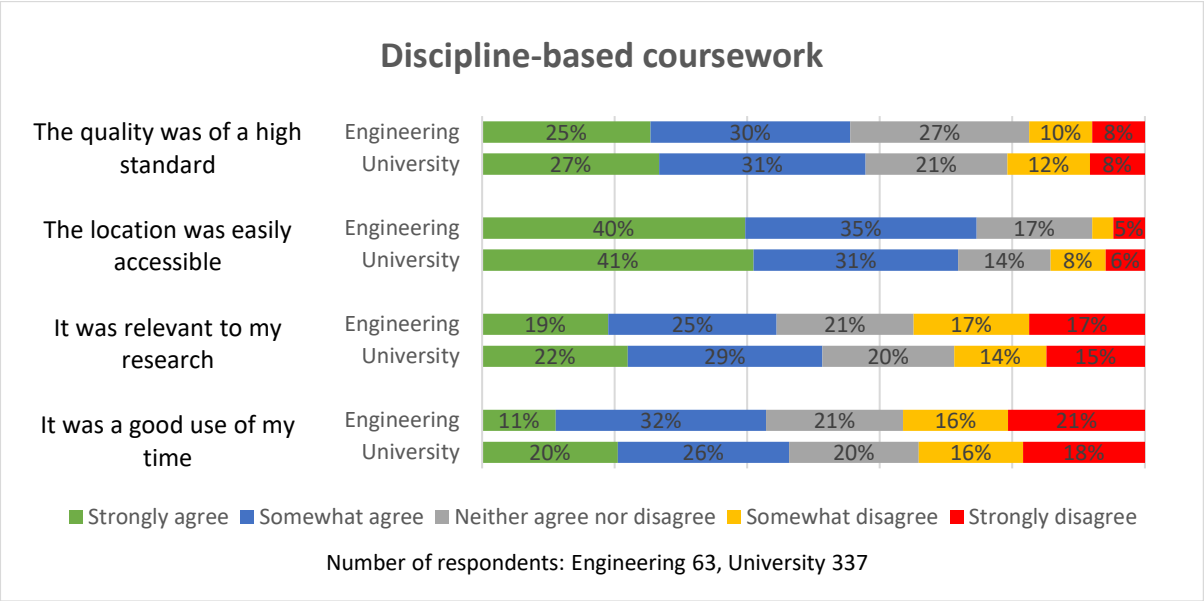
3. Coursework

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?	Engineering	University
Yes	25 (27.5%)	236 (37.9%)
No	40 (44%)	178 (28.6%)
Not sure	26 (28.6%)	209 (33.5%)

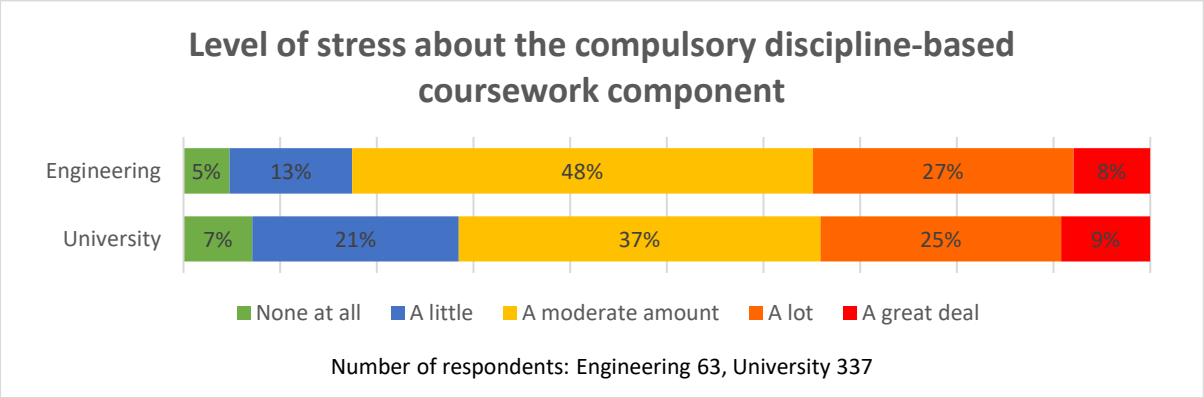
Monash Engineering respondents were significantly less likely than all graduate students to believe that research degrees are improved by the inclusion of compulsory discipline-based coursework.

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



Aside from accessibility, Monash Engineering respondents tended to express marginally less agreement with positive statements related to discipline-based coursework than those from the University overall. Only 43% of Monash Engineering graduate students thought that coursework was a good use of their time.

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



Thirty-five percent (35%) of Monash Engineering respondents had experienced an uncomfortable level of stress related to their coursework.

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

Thirty-one graduate students from Monash Engineering responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 20 Positive comments: 7

General theme	Number of responses
Irrelevant/discipline-specific	15
Time-consuming/waste of time/misdirected energy	9
Administrative issues/inconsistencies/solutions	2
Low/poor-quality unit	1

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

> *"Of no use. Totally [a] waste of my time."*
>
> *"The coursework is [a] relative burden when the students have assignments, teach and research at the same time."*
>
> *"Coursework takes a great deal of time from my research work. It hinders with my experimental work which might need a whole day, but [can't be done] because I have to attend [coursework] tutorials."*

The predominant complaint about coursework that Monash Engineering graduate students had was that units were frequently **irrelevant** to their areas of study **and too-specific to particular disciplines** which they were not focused on. Just under half the respondents referred to this in their comments. Some of the more insightful comments are included below:

"The coursework component was really useless as none of the provided courses were actually relating to my research area. It was a waste of time. Everyone only did it because we had to. No one benefitted … The fact that not every faculty has to complete the coursework component was unfair. The students should be able to choose whether they want to do coursework … The graduate school was being unhelpful regarding this as well."

"Spending time to do coursework which is not relevant to the research area in the first year is a time-wasting task and many of the students face this problem since there are no units related to their research area."

"A good idea, in theory, but the subject offering is too limited, and therefore it can easily become a 'tick the box' exercise. They should expand the subject offering to external courses … [that are] relevant to [the] project and delivered by a renowned expert in that field."

On the other hand, just under one-quarter of graduate students also had something **positive** to say about their experiences with coursework. Most of these comments were positive about the concept of coursework, but less so regarding how it was functioning in Monash Engineering.

"I think it … [has] great possibility to expose postgraduates to other disciplines and further their knowledge, but should not be used … to [tick boxes]."

"If course work is related to research, then it's a good use of time … If there are no subjects particularly related to [their] research, then coursework is of no use for that person."

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

"Research students are busy enough as it is and although discipline may provide some background the truth is, if you need the information/training, in most cases, you can do it anyways outside the confines of a taught course and it will be more tailored to one's needs. Equipment manufactures provide training seminars and workshops, postgraduate associations often put on seminars regarding networking, writing skills or basic stats and, in terms of getting exposure to work maybe a little bit removed from your field, conferences and department seminars do an ample job."

"[The University should] provide financial support to take relevant [external] courses."

"The course should be optional, and supervisors should encourage students … if it's related to their research or [is] going to help them to gain their research objectives. On the other hand, students themselves will be interested to be enrolled in these courses if they feel these courses will help them."

"Coursework shouldn't be compulsory for a PhD scholar whose highest degree is [a] Masters. However, for an undergrad who has directly opted [for a] PhD, I would recommend coursework."

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 Engineering graduate students were no different in this regard with respondents split over its relevance and usefulness.

Only 44% of Monash Engineering graduate students agreed with the statement that discipline-based coursework was *'relevant to my research,'* and when given the chance to comment on coursework, respondents re-iterated their frustration with irrelevancy and complaints that the units were discipline-specific receiving 15 mentions.

Only 43% of Monash Engineering graduate students agreed with the statement that discipline-based coursework was *'a good use of my time.'* Many of the negative comments regarding the inclusion of discipline-based coursework were in relation to how it was a waste of time, time-consuming and misdirected energy away from their research.

[16] Rens van de Schoot et al., "What took them so long?" 9.
[17] Margaret Kiley, "Reflections on change in doctoral education," 85.

4. Professional Development

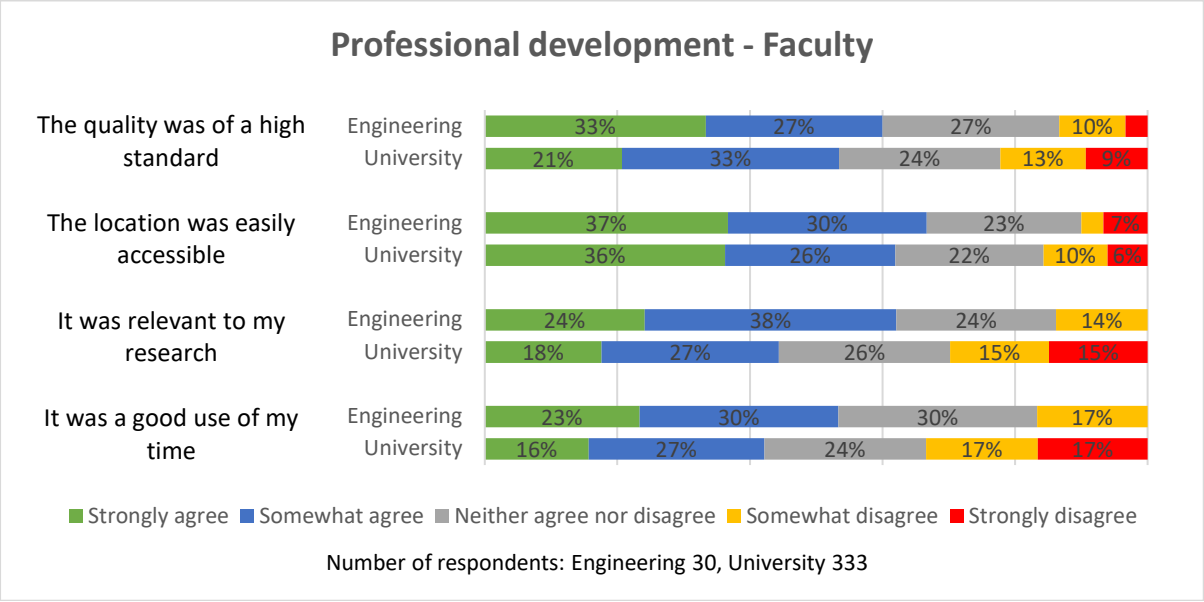
Compulsory development units are not a requirement of Monash Engineering; however, graduate students from the faculty did provide responses to these questions.

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

Should professional development be compulsory?	Engineering	University
Yes	19 (21.1%)	157 (25.4%)
No	44 (48.9%)	283 (45.9%)
Not sure	27 (30%)	177 (28.7%)

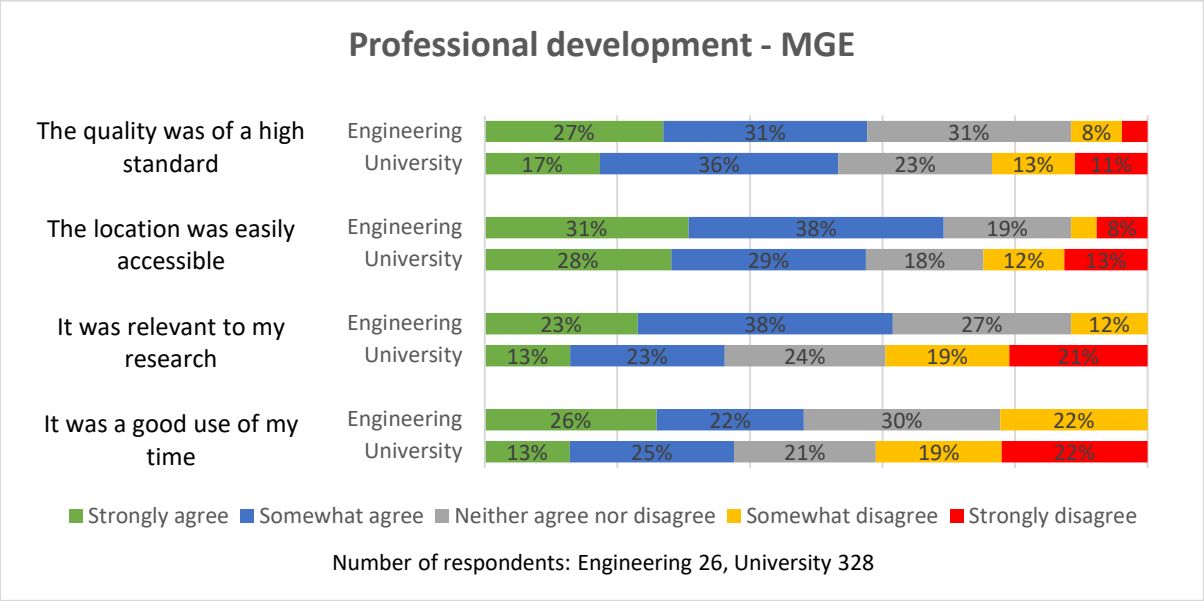
Monash Engineering respondents were slightly less likely than University graduate students to agree, and marginally more likely to disagree, that the inclusion of professional development improved research degrees.

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



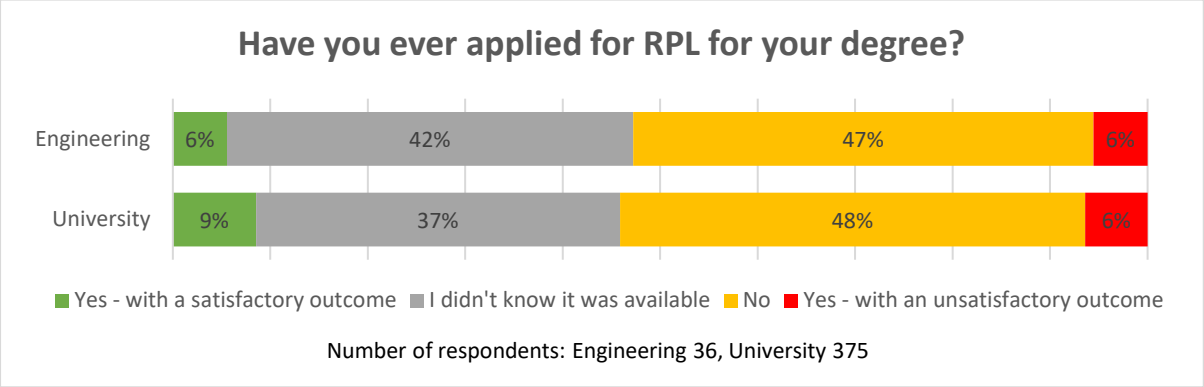
Monash Engineering respondents tended to agree more so than disagree with positive statements regarding the quality, accessibility, relevancy and usefulness of professional development units offered by their faculty, and they did so to a greater degree than their University peers did.

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).



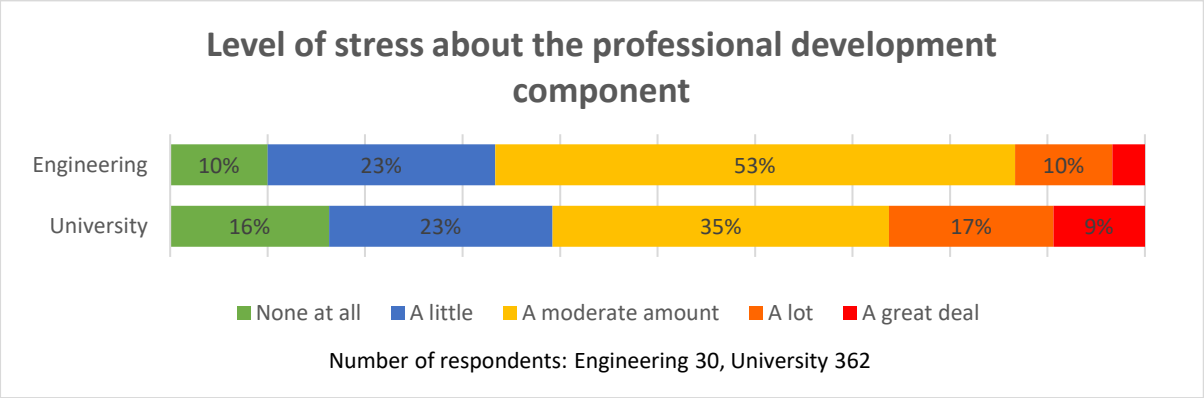
Monash Engineering graduate respondents tended to agree with these positive statements regarding professional development units by MGE less so than they did to professional development units run by the faculty; however, the difference was not substantial.

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



Six percent of the Monash Engineering respondents had successful applied for Recognition of Prior Learning compared to 9% of University respondents.

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



Monash Engineering respondents were half as likely as a University graduate student to have experienced an uncomfortable level of stress as a result of the professional development component of their course.

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

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

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Positive comments: 6 Negative comments: 3

General theme	Number of responses
Administrative issues/inconsistencies/unit availability	3
Irrelevant/discipline-specific and lack of options	1
Networking – relationships and support	1

Monash Engineering was the only faculty from which graduate students provided more positive than negative comments in relation to professional development; however, given the faculty is one of the four surveyed that does not have a professional development component in their research degrees, this may be reflective of their thoughts on professional development as a concept or due to the fact that any units they took were optional and thus considered by the student to be relevant and worthwhile.

Positive references to the prospect of professional development being included in Monash Engineering research degrees, included:

> *"It is necessary as it may improve the interpersonal skills of the students."*
>
> *"The inclusion of compulsory professional development units in research degrees would be useful for graduate research students in the pursuit of professional skills which are relevant to employment in the industry."*

"*I can see the benefit in a few very well executed and directed units.*"

Other notable comments, included:

"It should be a choice as not everyone would want to undergo professional development."

"The professional development is great, although I have only really started using it in my final year. I was simply not aware of it being there earlier. Maybe some more advertising for it would be good."

"It is important for the professional development module to include more hands-on modules. For example, if project management skills are not executed and monitored via execution, then the unit is not effective. Students should be exposed and encouraged to undertake small projects, for example, organising a workshop, which can cultivate the skills of project management and this can be considered as hours gained in the program."

4.7 Summary

Compulsory professional development units are not a requirement of Monash Engineering, which meant that few graduate students from the Faculty provided detailed responses to these questions; however, with only 21.1% of respondents stating that they thought these units should be compulsory, it is reasonable to suggest that the majority of Monash Engineering respondents were happy the units were not compulsory.

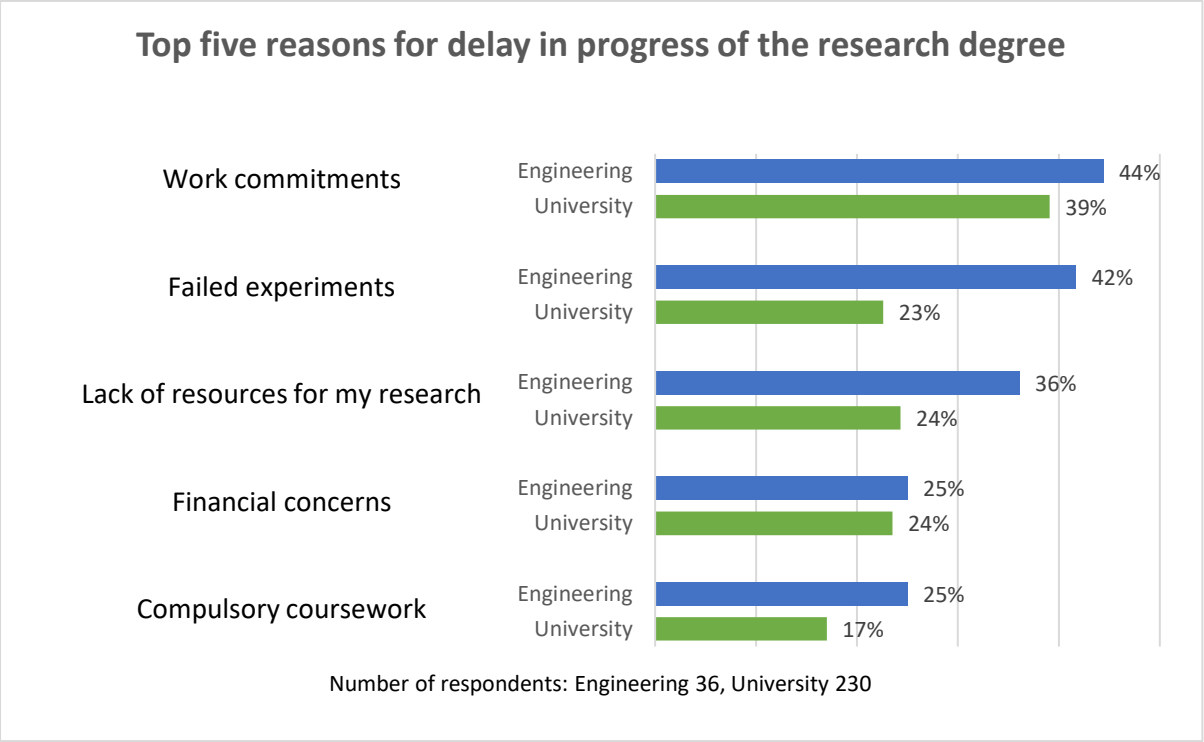
5. Progress delays and discontinuation

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

Has your research degree progress been delayed?	Engineering	University
Yes	37 (41.1%)	231 (37.8%)
No	53 (58.9%)	380 (62.2%)

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.



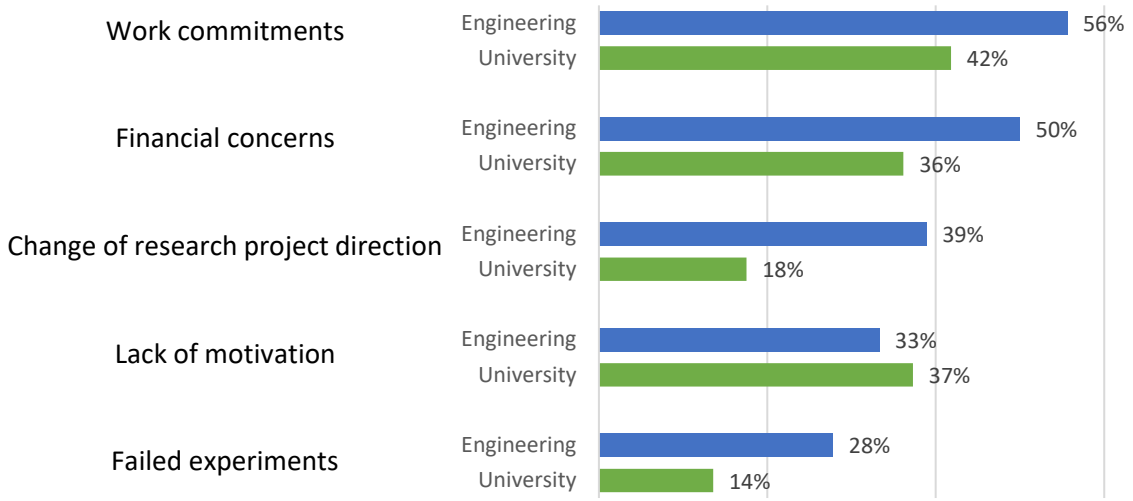
Work commitments were the primary cause of delay for those having experienced a delay in the progress of their research degree.

5.3 Have you ever considered discontinuing your enrolment?

Have you considered discontinuing your enrolment?	Engineering	University
Yes	18 (20.2%)	179 (29.3%)
No	71 (79.8%)	431 (70.7%)

Monash Engineering respondents were less likely to have considered discontinuing their enrolment than were all Monash graduate students.

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



Number of respondents: Engineering 18, University 177

For those Monash Engineering graduate students who had considered discontinuing their enrolment, work commitments were the primary reason given, followed closely by financial concerns.

5.5 What made you decide to continue with your degree?

Twelve graduate students from the Faculty of Engineering responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	**Number of responses**
Personal characteristics – commitment/determination/passion/fear/stubbornness	4
Still uncertain	3
Interest in research	2
Changed supervisor	1
Personal development	1
Scholarship and financial incentives	1
Time, money and effort already invested	1

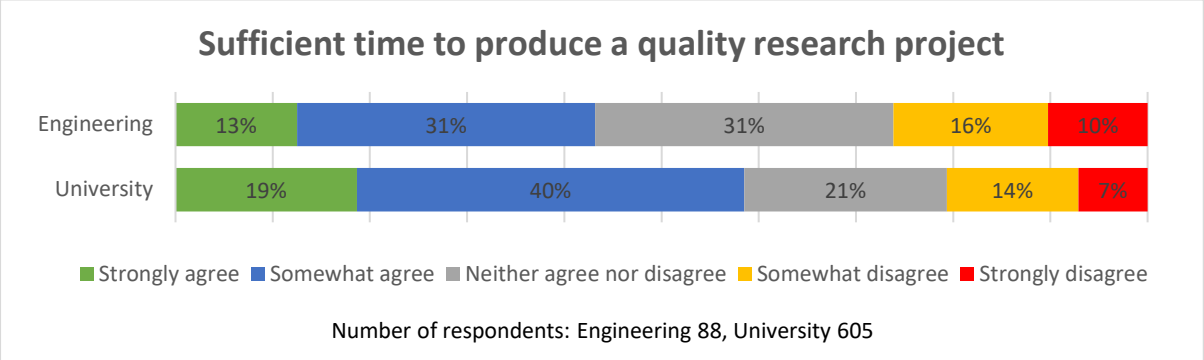
Graduate students from Engineering outlined a range of factors and/or motivations for choosing to continue with their enrolment after considering discontinuation.

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

Notable comments, included:

> *"I worked hard to get this PhD position, I did not want to regret discontinuing my enrolment. I decided to do my best and see what will happen next."*
>
> *"I like to do research and even [though] the topic was not my favourite one, I decided to continue."*
>
> *"I am still considering quitting my PhD. I'm waiting to see if having the MPA and faculty monitor my supervision improves things. If it doesn't, I will leave."*

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



Forty-four percent (44%) of Monash Engineering graduate students agreed that that they had sufficient time to produce a quality research project. This was substantially less than the 59% of University respondents who agree with this statement.

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

Forty-seven students from Monash Engineering responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	**Number of responses**
Facilities/labs/equipment/software	17
Compulsory coursework – changing or removing	14
Supervision	13
Funding – scholarship/other financial aid	11
Extending length of degree/candidature	9
Access to training/support services	8
Milestones – changing or removing	7
Access to research material/resources	6
Reducing bureaucratic requirements	6
Research environment – networking/mentoring/support groups	5
Wellbeing – encouragement/motivation/trust/care	5
Administration – guidelines/information/communication/ availability	4
Professional development – changing or removing	3
Staff	3
Offices and workspaces	2
Time/time management	2
Career and work opportunities	1
Family-friendly initiatives/support	1
Improving online/cross-campus service delivery	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 Engineering graduate students provided a wide range of suggestions regarding what they thought were the most crucial things that the University could do to help with the timely completion of their degrees.

The most frequent area highlighted by Monash Engineering graduate students was **facilities, labs, equipment and software**. References to this area were substantially more frequent in Engineering than in most other faculties. Interesting comments, included:

> *"Granting after-work access to facilities at the laboratory."*
>
> *"Safe environment."*
>
> *"Provide backup batteries for these workstations in case of power failures, which happened frequently during my candidature."*

Monash Engineering graduate students tended to have issues with the administration of the coursework component of their degree. Comments reflective of the wider sentiment, included:

> *"No compulsory coursework or at least reduce the requirements to pass coursework."*
>
> *"Coursework units needs a lot of attention and dealing [with] them together with research is too tough."*

Another area highlighted by Monash Engineering graduate students was **supervision**. Comments related to: strong supervision, regular meetings, regulating/monitoring supervisors and limiting PhD candidates per supervisor.

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

> *"More scholarships for travel opportunities and conferences."*
>
> *"Pay me more so I don't have to sell my weekends to casual work to make enough money to have a life! The PhD salary here is absolutely awful … The hourly wage is about $12, which is a disgustingly low salary for highly skilled work."*

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

- **Extending length of degree** – several graduate students believe the timeframe for PhD completion was too short.
- **Access to training/support services** – several had rather specific requests regarding their skill development requirements.
- **Milestones –** changes to milestone frequency and requirements were sought.

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

> *"Collaboration opportunities with foreign research labs."*
>
> *"The amount of bureaucracy required to get anything done is by far the most time-consuming aspect of completing a PhD at Monash."*
>
> *"Provide consultations in case of difficulties such as stress and insomnia."*

5.8 Opportunity for comments regarding your general progress.

Thirteen students from Monash Engineering responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 6 Positive comments: 4

General theme	Number of responses
Slow progress	3
Coursework	1
Financial issues	1
Health	1
Office and workspace	1

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

> *"Experiments are delayed due to lack of space and delays in risk assessment."*
>
> *"I just wish I didn't have to work 6-7 days a week to make a living. I'm very much looking forward to getting out of here so I can stop being poor and I won't recommend anyone to do a PhD in Australia – mainly based on the poor salary."*
>
> *"I have this feeling that I am putting a lot of effort towards this PhD completion, but I am not seeing the results."*

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

> *"Monash is providing a good environment for research. Mainly, when it comes to 'freedom of thoughts' related to research."*
>
> *"It is proceeding well."*

Other **notable comments**, included:

> *"Lack of personal [desks] makes it a little hard to concentrate. The common spaces have not been upgraded [after] the recent surge in research students."*
>
> *"The workshop has limited staff, which puts them under pressure … [from] different departments … [and means] the students can't do experiments within the setup. Increasing the workshop staff … can help in reducing their pressure."*

5.9 Summary

Many Monash Engineering respondents (41.1%) had experienced a delay in their research degree, while less than half of that number (20.2%) had considered discontinuing their enrolment.

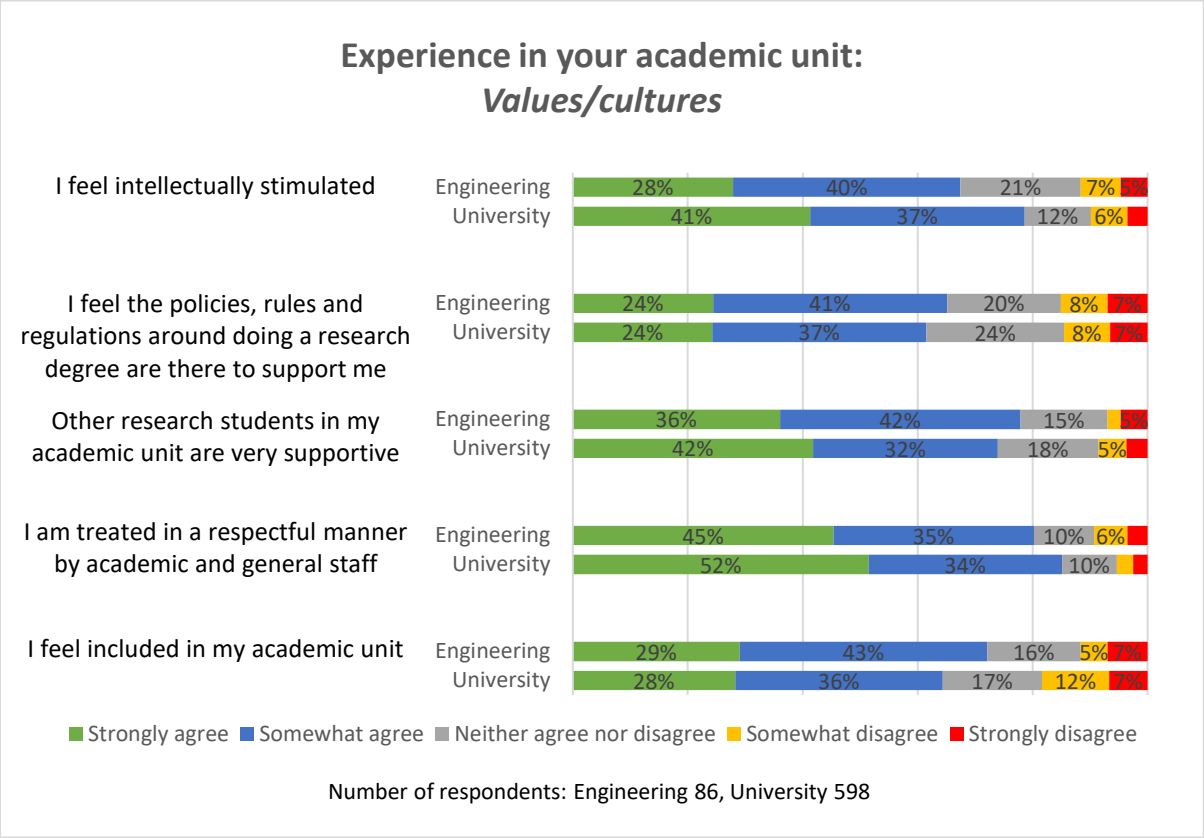
Though it was not directly tracked in this survey, it is interesting to note that there is evidence of a correlation between choosing one's own supervisor and good and timely progress.[18] Presumably this is because prospective students have taken time to consider who is best placed to support their research, in terms of availability, subject knowledge, personality and so on. The data explored in *1. Supervision* supports the premise that those who had good working relationships with their supervisors were more satisfied and less likely to experience delays and think about discontinuing their degrees.

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

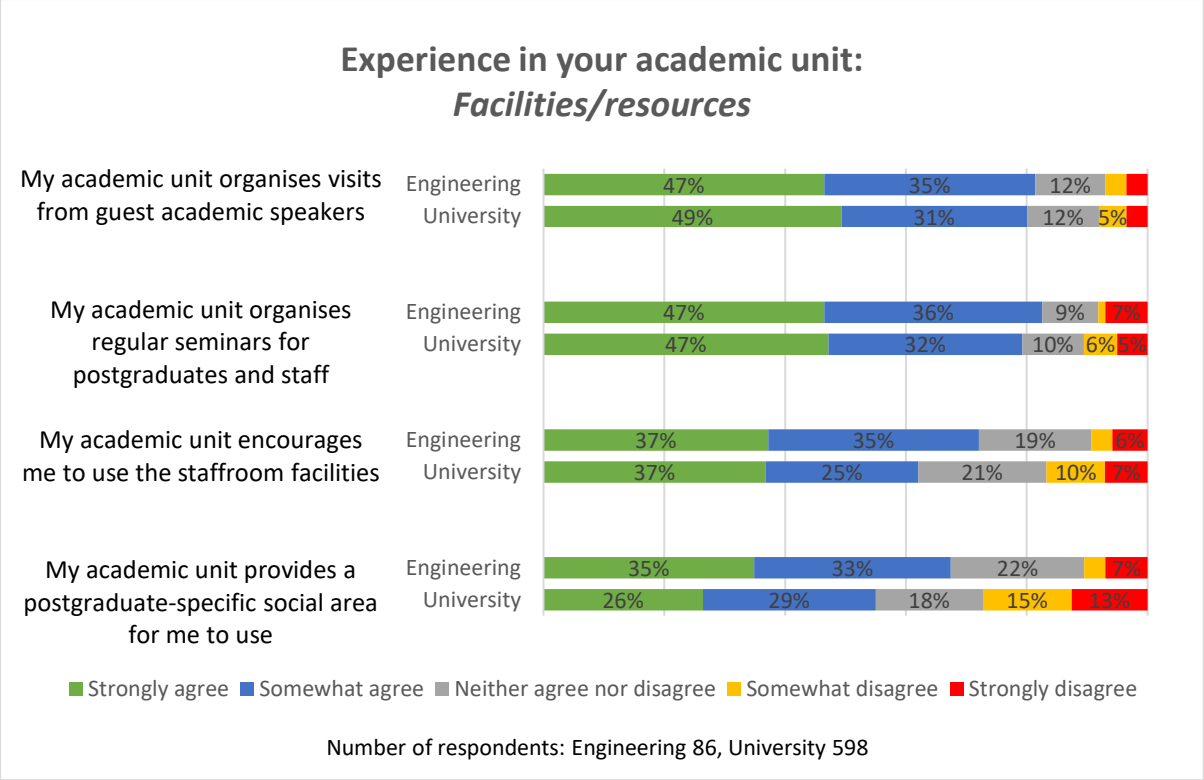
[18] Glenice Ives and Glenn Rowley, "Supervisor selection or allocation and continuity of supervision," 535.

6. School culture and facilities

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



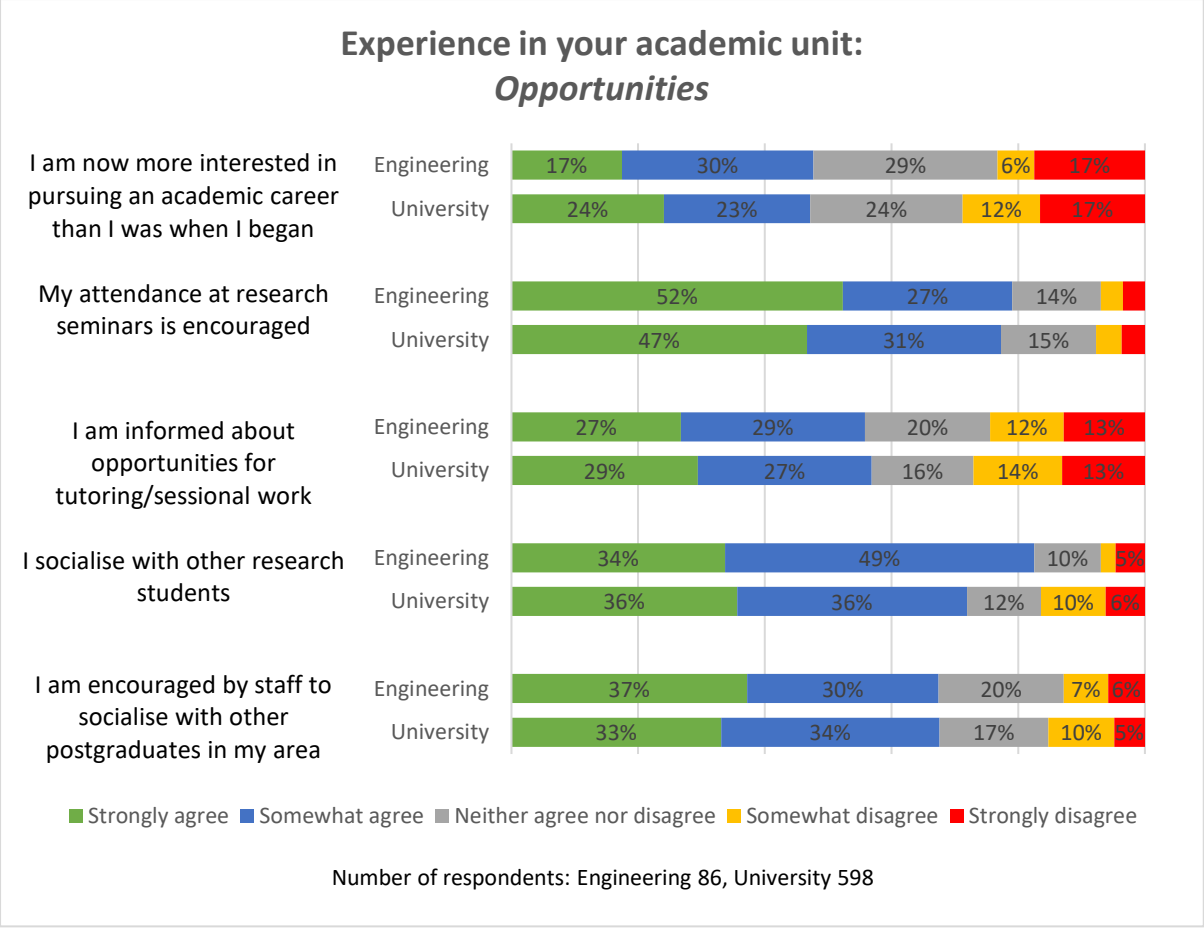
In regards to positive statements about the values and culture of Monash Engineering, the statement that graduate students most agreed with was *'I am treated in a respectful manner by academic and general staff.'*



Number of respondents: Engineering 86, University 598

Monash Engineering respondents tended to agree with these positive statements regarding the facilities and resources on offer at the Faculty. The statement which graduate students most agreed with was *'my academic unit organises regular seminars for postgraduates and staff.'*

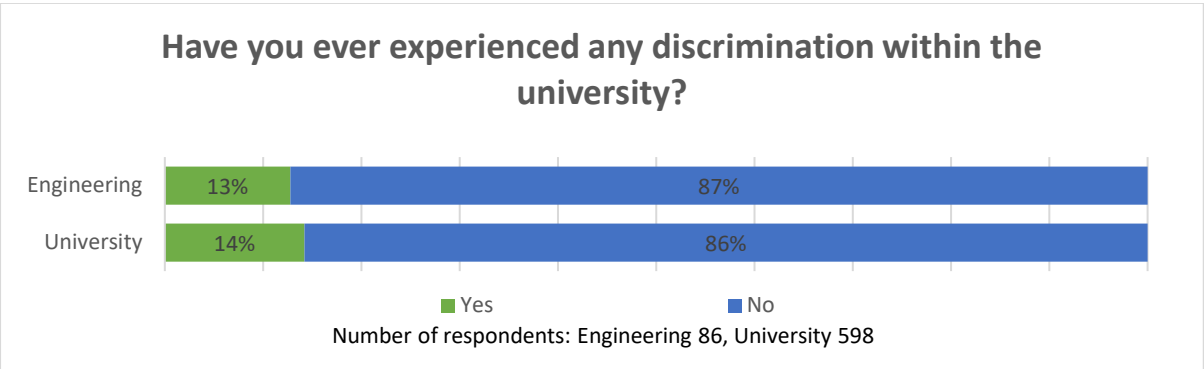
Monash Engineering respondents tended to agree with these statements slightly more than University-wide graduate students.



Only 47% of Monash Engineering graduate students agreed that they were now more interested in pursuing an academic career than when they began their degree, which was the same result as received from University-wide respondents.

Monash Engineering respondents tended to socialise with other research students more than their University counterparts.

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



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

Nine graduate students from Monash Engineering responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 7 Positive comments: 3

General theme	Number of responses
Discrimination – culture/religion/nationality	3
Research and workplace environment	2
Discrimination – gender	1

Responses from Monash Engineering graduate students to this statement were predominantly negative. One issue of particular relevance was **discrimination**, which was raised in a variety of contexts, including **gender** and **culture, religion and nationality**. Noteworthy comments, included:

> *"I feel some prejudice about myself as an international coming from a Middle-Eastern Muslim country which is totally annoying. It is not a very clear thing, but it exists."*

> *"As a female working in engineering, I regularly encounter men that think I cannot possibly know what I'm talking about because I am a woman."*

On the other hand, there were several **positive** reflections on how Monash Engineering graduate students felt the University treated them.

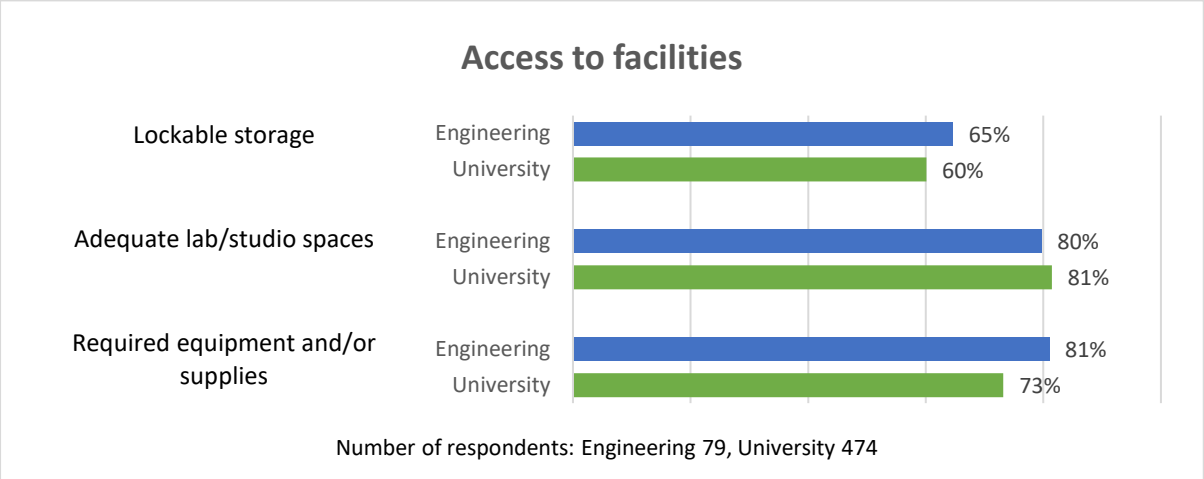
> *"So far, it's been a fantastic experience for me."*

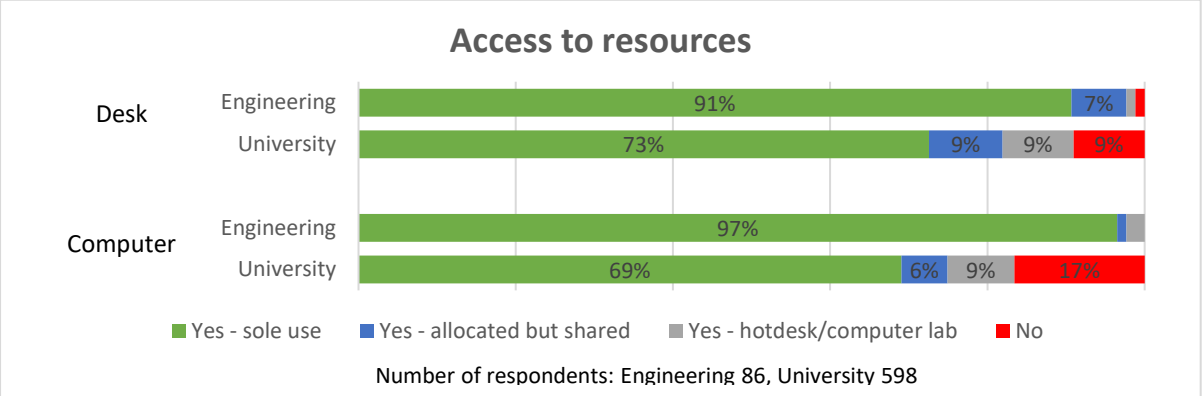
> *"I have family responsibilities, although I have not experienced any discrimination due to that."*

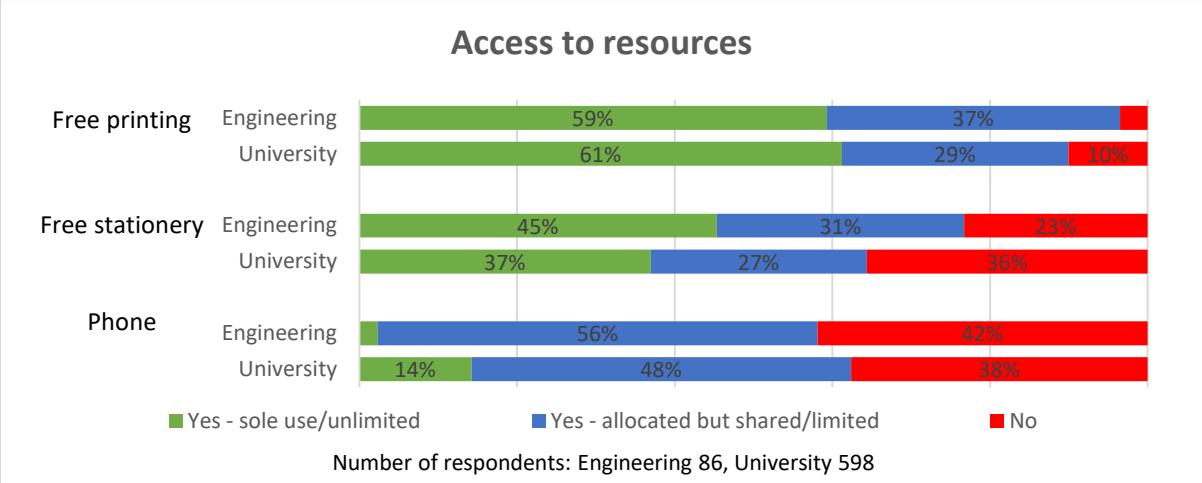
Other **notable comments**, included:

> *"University/faculties should conduct learning programs for international students to improve their English and research writing."*

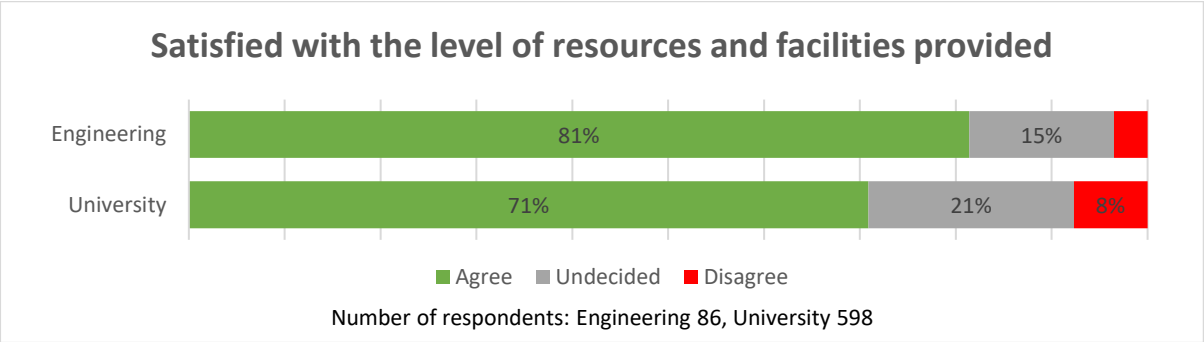
6.4 Does your academic unit provide any of the following facilities? Please select as many as relevant.







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



Monash Engineering respondents were predominantly satisfied with the level of resources and facilities provided, and they were also more satisfied than University graduate students.

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

Nine graduate students from Monash Engineering responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Positive comments: 3 Negative comments: 1

General theme	Number of responses
Computers/laptops/monitors	3
Private office/studio	1
Software and licensing agreements/access	1
Stationery	1
Workshop/lab/studio	1

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

Regarding facilities that would help support Monash Engineering graduate students complete their degrees, there was a range of suggestions made. The primary suggestion of these graduate students related to the University providing **computers, laptops and monitors** for their use.

> *"A computer lab with high performance workstations solely used for heavy computations and modelling."*
>
> *"A better computer."*

Other notable comments, included:

> *"More accessible software. Less concurrent license."*
>
> *"The facilities provided are excellent."*

6.7 Summary

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

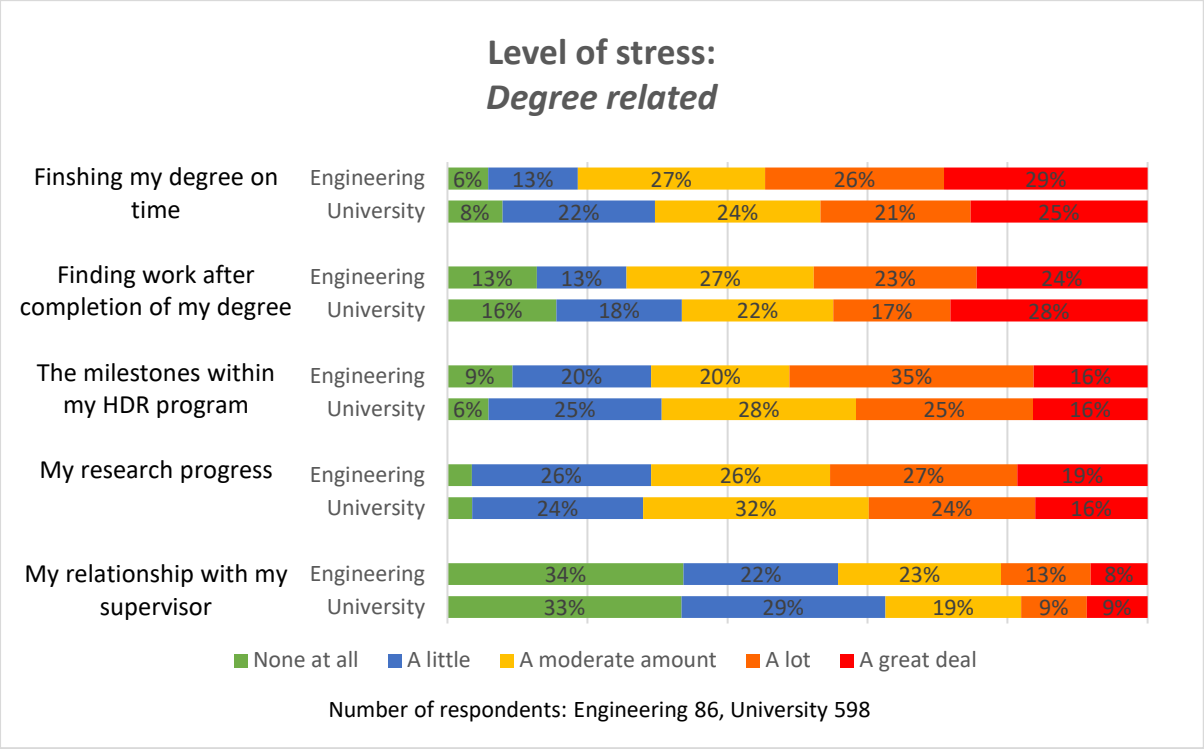
The absence of a sense of belonging in the research/faculty/scholarly community has been identified as a key cause of stress in postgraduate studies,[19] with PhD students who find themselves well-integrated in their research environments experiencing less stress and burnout."[20] This was reflected in the MGA HDR survey with those agreeing with the statement *'I feel included in my academic unit'* being less likely to associate an uncomfortable level of stress with all of the stress-related statements in *7. Stress*.

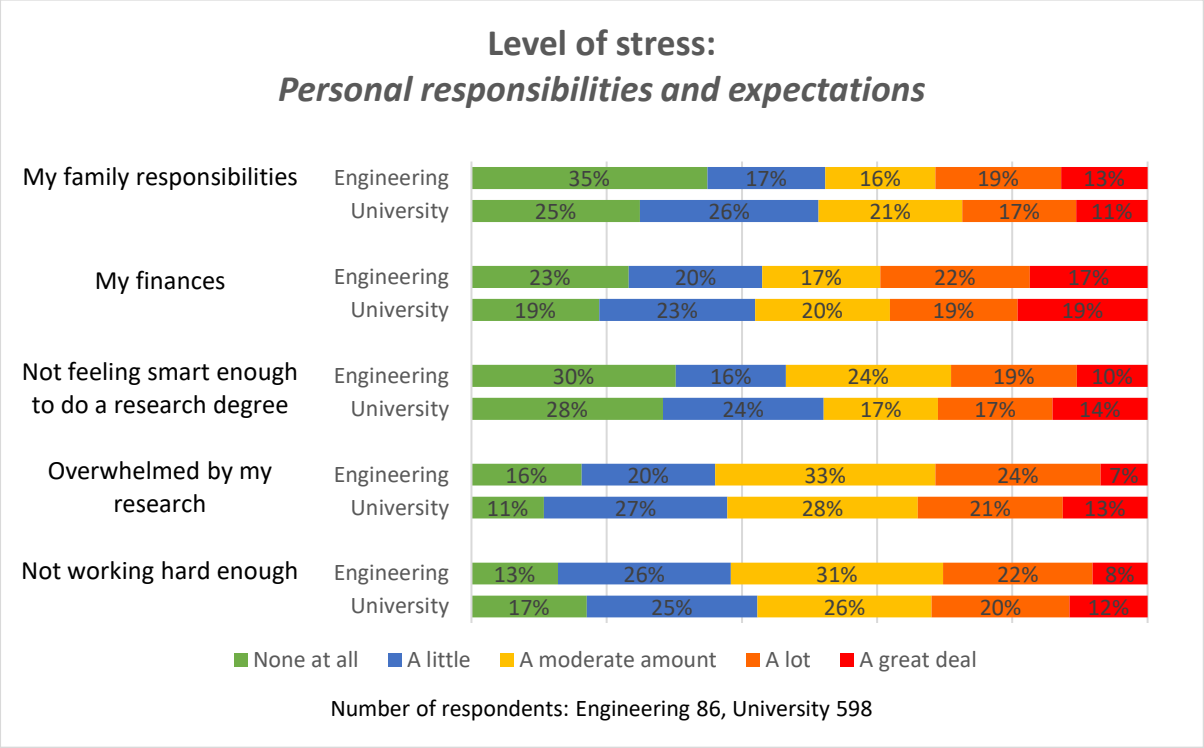
The results of this survey indicate a link between the absence of a sense of belonging and academic and social isolation. **These results emphasise the importance of encouraging graduate students to socialise and develop professional relationships with their peers**.

[19] 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.
[20] Kim Jesper Herrmann and Gitte Wichmann-Hansen, "Validation of the quality in PhD processes questionnaire," *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education* 8, no. 2 (2017): 192.

7. Stress and wellbeing

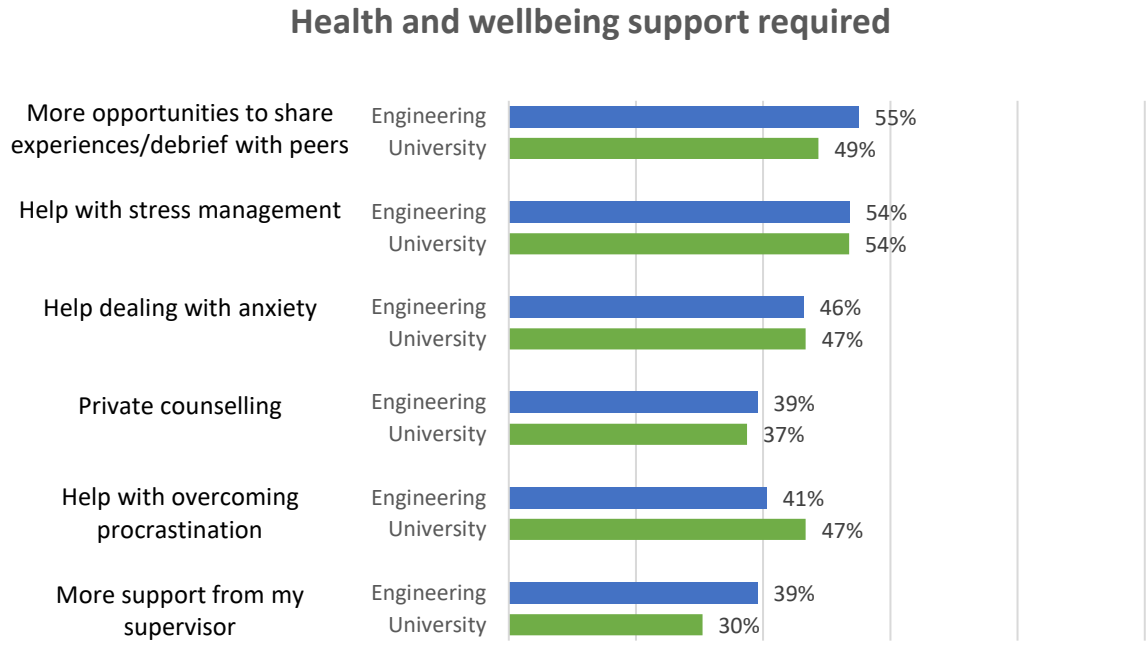
7.1 Please select your level of stress regarding any of the following:





Monash Engineering respondents were most stressed about finishing their degrees on time, while they were least stressed with their relationship with their supervisor.

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



Number of respondents: Engineering 69, University 499

Monash Engineering graduate students most wanted to see the University offer greater opportunity to share experiences and debrief with peers, as well as help with stress management.

7.3 Opportunity for comments regarding health and wellbeing

Eight graduate students from Monash Engineering responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 7 Positive comments: 1

General theme	Number of responses
Stress/anxiety/depression/isolation	4
Family pressures	2
Financial pressures	2
Career anxieties	1
Course flexibility improvements	1
Supervision issues	1

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

> *"Student morale [is] very bad in my department. Students should feel free and encouraged to take their leave to help with stress. I worked hard and as consistently as possible during my candidature. Towards the end, I was encouraged to work 24 hours a day. [This was] not a helpful sentiment in a stressful time."*

Other notable comments to emerge, included:

> *"More team building activities may be conducted to build a healthy relationship among the HDR students."*
>
> *"More mindfulness sessions."*
>
> *"Special sessions for young parents. Setting up a community of PhD students with young children. Providing child-care subsidies would go a long way in taking some pressure off."*

7.4 Summary

In relation to their degrees, Monash Engineering 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 their finances and least-stressed about feeling smart enough to complete a research degree.

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

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

Doctoral candidate attrition has been linked to feelings of social isolation that can stem from confusion about program expectations and a lack of meaningful communication with peers and Faculty/University staff.[21] 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.[22]

PhD candidates isolating themselves is one of the most important factors in determining delay.[23] Peer interaction has been found to be related to persistence (with HDR degrees), insofar as degree

[21] Dharmananda Jairam and David H. Kahl, Jr., "Navigating the doctoral experience," 312.
[22] Lilia Mantai and Robyn Dowling, "Supporting the PhD journey: insights from acknowledgements," *International Journal for Research Development* 6, no. 2 (2015): 106-07.
[23] Rens van de Schoot et al., "What took them so long?" 3.

completers are more likely to be involved with their academic peers than those who drop out.[24] Peer support initiatives are also useful in creating a positive research community and facilitating a sense of belonging,[25] 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 Engineering graduate students could benefit from an increase in social support and wellbeing services**.

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

Forty-seven graduate students from Monash Engineering responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Facilities, services and resources	23
Supportive environment and culture	13
Research – intellectual stimulation and development	11
Supervisors	7
Monash academics, faculties and staff	6
Monash reputation	5
Social events/environment	5
MGA	3
Career opportunities	2
Financial support/funding	2
Networking opportunities	2
Student peers and colleagues	2

Many Monash Engineering 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: library resources, general facilities, instruments, infrastructure, printing services and work environment.

Several of the respondents perceived Monash as a **supportive environment** with a **supportive culture**.

> *"It is a very supportive environment, we are not treated like anonymous workers."*
>
> *"The School/University shows its concerns [for] the students' thoughts and tries to provide improvements from time to time."*

Furthermore, several Monash Engineering graduate researchers referenced **research and intellectual stimulation and development** as being one of the best aspects of their Monash experience. Insightful comments, included:

> *"Freedom to explore and pursue your own research."*
>
> *"I am able to do world-leading research in a field that matters to me and allows me to make new discoveries."*

Other notable comments, included:

> *"Supervisors and resources are world class."*
>
> *"The brand name – MONASH."*

"Diverse student body."

"The Monash Graduate Association (MGA) have always been supportive of students in their candidature. They are the best aspects of being a Monash research postgraduate."

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

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

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	**Number of responses**
Stress and wellbeing	7
Facilities/services/resources	5
Administration	4
Course length and workload	4
Financial issues	4
Lack of community and socialising	4
Lack of support/value	4
Campus issues	3
Compulsory coursework	2
Isolation	2
Milestones	2
Supervisors	2
Lack of international student support	1
Lack of teaching/career opportunities	1
Location	1
Staff	1

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

"Overwhelmed by tonnes of work."

"The only disappointing and concerning aspect of being a Monash research postgraduate is the level of importance the School … has towards student welfare and wellbeing."

Several Monash Engineering 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 space, insufficient sporting facilities, poor transportation between campuses and lack of equipment.

Other notable themes, included:

- **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 enough.

- **Course length and workload –** as with responses to some previous questions, Monash Engineering researchers were frustrated by the expected completion timeframe and workload.
- **Lack of support/value** – several respondents complained that they did not feel valued by the University and/or adequately supported.
- **Financial issues** – a few Monash Engineering respondents were frustrated by limited access to funding and scholarships.
- **Administration** – several graduate students expressed that there was too much unnecessary paperwork associated with their research.

8.3 How can the research postgraduate experience be improved?

Thirty-nine graduate students from Monash Engineering responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Community and culture	10
Facilities/services/resources	7
Funding/finances	7
Health and wellbeing support	5
Supervisors	4
Coursework	3
Career opportunities/development	2
Milestones	2
Monash priorities	2
Orientation/induction	2
Administration/communication	1
Course length and time	1

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

> *"Encourage students to share difficulties that they face during their research and ways that they have used to overcome those problems related to their research."*

> *"Encourage interaction between different groups [and] arrange department tours."*

Several Monash graduate students wanted to see improvements made to the **facilities, services and/or resources** provided to them as students of the University. Relative comments covered a range of areas, including: free transport between campuses, networking opportunities, more leisure activities and lab facilities.

Other notable themes, included:

- **Funding/finances** – Monash Engineering 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 Engineering respondents wanted improvements to supervision that would empower the student and identify and penalise poor or inadequate supervisors.
- **Coursework** – respondents wanted to see coursework either improved or removed.

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

> *"More collaboration with universities abroad. Monash has very little or no collaboration with universities in the US and UK."*
>
> *"Provide more guidance to students at the start of their PhD [and] give guidelines to follow when things start to go wrong."*
>
> *"I believe that the management and leadership within the School of Engineering need to be more focused on enhancing student welfare and well-being."*

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

Sixteen graduate students from Monash Engineering responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Monash general dissatisfaction	5
Financial dissatisfaction	3
Monash staff and services dissatisfaction	3
Monash appreciation	1
Monash staff and services appreciation	1
MGA appreciation	1
PhD challenges	1

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

> *"The Uni is spending a lot on building and their beautification, spend that on the students instead. Provide that funding to the labs which are still using old equipment due to lack of funding."*
>
> *"I will actively be encouraging people not to enrol in research degrees at Monash."*

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

> *"[The MGA] do a great job!! Thanks =) It is difficult to provide services for such a wide range of students from different faculties, interests and backgrounds."*
>
> *"There is a good base, but there are a lot of things that need to be improved for this to be a world-class place to work and/or study."*
>
> *"As a single mother of a 6-year-old, I joined Monash in my pursuit of [a] PhD … There was very little personal support when it came to searching for a decent place to stay and to find a school for my son. I did not know whom to contact and what to do … This is my own problem, but it will be very helpful if somebody is there to guide [us] through … rather than face it all alone."*

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

Stress and wellbeing were ranked as 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 Engineering graduate students related to improving the sense of community and culture within the University.

(iv) MGA Recommendations

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

Coursework:

3. *That coursework units are improved and become more relevant to graduate students' research degrees.*

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' and 'help with stress management.'*

(v) Bibliography

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(vi) Appendix 1

Demographics of respondents from Monash Engineering

Faculty (Schools)	Count	Percentage
Chemical Engineering	17	17.2%
Civil Engineering	30	30.3%
Electrical and Computer Systems Engineering	12	12.1%
Material Science and Engineering	20	20.2%
Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering	14	14.1%
School of Engineering Malaysia	6	6.1%

Mode of attendance	Count	Percentage
Internal (on-campus)	94	94.9%
External (off-campus)	4	4.0%
Multi-modal	1	1.0%

Nationality	Count	Percentage
Domestic student	29	29.3%
International student	70	70.7%

Attendance type	Count	Percentage
Full-time	97	98.0%
Part-time	2	2.0%

Gender	Count	Percentage
Female	34	34.3%
Male	65	65.7%

Enrolled Program	Count	Percentage
PhD	90	90.9%
Masters by research	9	9.1%

Scholarship	Count	Percentage
Receives Scholarship	93	94.0%
No scholarship	1	1.0%
No, but I have previously held a scholarship	5	5.1%