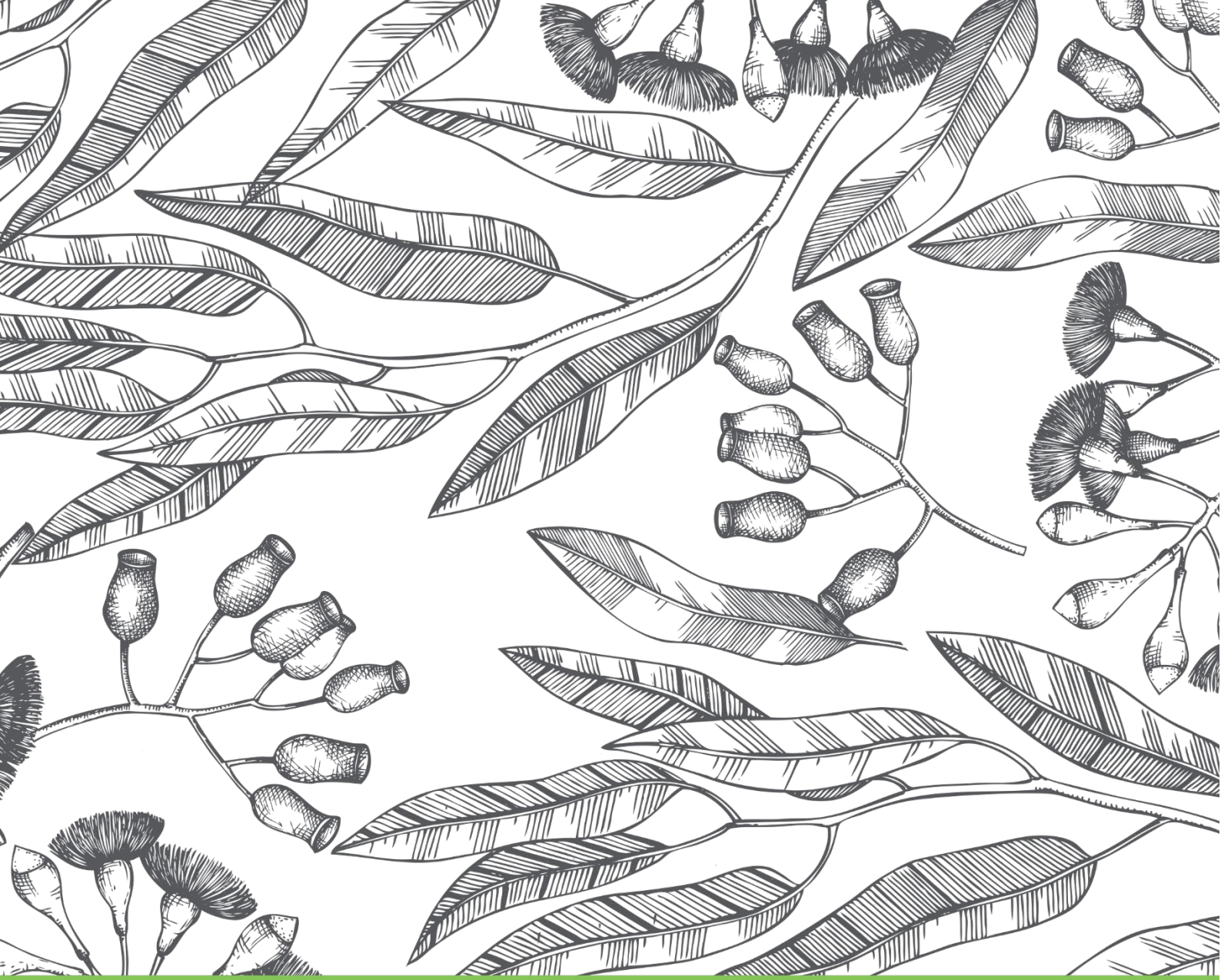


MONASH GRADUATE ASSOCIATION (MGA)

HDR SURVEY

FACULTY OF PHARMACY AND PHARMACEUTICAL SCIENCES

FACULTY REPORT 2019

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

For comments and enquiries please contact:
Jenny Reeder, MGA Executive Officer
jenny.reeder@monash.edu
Dina Galanopoulos, MGA Research Officer
dina.galanopoulos@monash.edu
Ryan Edwards, MGA Research Advocate
ryan.edwards@monash.edu

Table of Contents

(i) Executive Summary 8

(ii) Introduction 10

(iii) Data 12

1. Supervision 12

1.1 Have you read the Code of Practice for supervision of doctoral/research masters students? 12

1.2 Are you aware of your supervisor's responsibilities towards you? 12

1.3 Are you aware of your own responsibilities as a Monash research postgraduate? 12

1.4 Have you had any conflict or misunderstanding with any of your supervisors? 12

1.5 What was the general nature of the conflict/misunderstanding with your supervisor? 12

1.6 How did you deal with it? Select as many as relevant. 13

1.7 Please rate the following statements regarding your supervision experience 14

1.8 Opportunity for comments regarding your supervision. 16

1.9 Summary 17

2. Milestones 19

2.1 Please rate the following statements regarding your experience of the confirmation process. 19

2.2 Opportunity for comments about the confirmation process. 19

2.3 Please rate the following statements regarding your experience of the mid-candidature review process. 21

2.4 Opportunity for comments about the mid-candidature review process. 21

2.5 Please rate the following statements regarding your experience of the pre-submission review process. 22

2.6 Opportunity for comments about the pre-submission review process. 23

2.7 Do you think it's appropriate to face termination of candidature if you fail any of the following milestones? 23

2.8 Opportunity for comments about milestones. 24

2.9 Summary 25

3. Coursework 27

3.1 Do you believe that research degrees are improved by the inclusion of compulsory discipline-based coursework? 27

3.2 Please rate the following statements relating to the discipline-based coursework component of your degree. 27

3.3 Please select the level of stress you have about the compulsory discipline-based coursework component of your degree. 28

3.4 Opportunity for comment regarding the inclusion of discipline-based coursework in research degrees. 28

3.5 Summary 29
4. Professional Development 30
4.1 Do you believe that professional development units (as offered through "myDevelopment"), should be a compulsory part of a research degree? 30
4.2 Please rate the following statements relating to your overall experience of the professional development component of your degree offered by your faculty. 30
4.3 Please rate the following statements relating to your overall experience of the professional development component of your degree offered by MGE (central). 31
4.4 Have you applied for Recognition of Prior Learning in relation to the professional development component of your degree? 31
4.5 Please select the level of stress you have about the professional development component of your degree. 32
4.6 Opportunity for comment regarding the inclusion of compulsory professional development units in research degrees. 32
4.7 Summary 33
5. Progress delays and discontinuation 35
5.1 Has anything significantly delayed the progress of your research degree? 35
5.3 Have you ever considered discontinuing your enrolment? 35
5.4 Please select all relevant reasons regarding why you considered discontinuing your enrolment. 36
5.5 What made you decide to continue with your degree? 36
5.6 The amount of time I have to complete my research … will allow me to produce a quality research project. 37
5.7 What are the three most important things the University could do for you to help you complete on time? 37
5.8 Opportunity for comments regarding your general progress. 39
5.9 Summary 40
6. School culture and facilities 41
6.1 Please rate the following statements in relation to your specific experience in your academic unit: 41
6.2 Have you ever experienced any discrimination due to gender, race, religion, family responsibilities etc., within the University? 43
6.3 Opportunity for comments regarding the way in which you are treated. 44
6.4 Does your academic unit provide any of the following facilities? 44
6.5 Overall, I am satisfied with the level of resources and facilities provided to me. 45
6.6 Opportunity for comment regarding the adequacy of the facilities you receive. What additional facilities would help support you through to completion? 45
6.7 Summary 46
7. Stress and wellbeing 48

7.1 Please select your level of stress regarding any of the following: 48
7.2 What kind of health and wellbeing support would you like to receive from the University? 49
7.3 Opportunity for comments regarding health and wellbeing 49
7.4 Summary 50
8. Overall comments 51
8.1 What are the best aspects of being a Monash research postgraduate? 51
8.2 What are the worst aspects of being a Monash research postgraduate? 52
8.3 How can the research postgraduate experience be improved? 53
8.4 Anything else you'd like to say? 54
8.5 Summary 54
(iv) MGA Recommendations 55
(v) Bibliography 56
(vi) Appendix 1 58
Demographics of respondents from Pharmacy 58

(i) Executive Summary

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

Supervision

The overwhelming majority (84%) of Pharmacy graduate students indicated overall satisfaction with their supervision. They were marginally more satisfied with their supervision overall than were respondents from the entire University (82%), while they tended to agree with positive statements relating to how supportive their supervisors were.

Milestones

Pharmacy respondents overall total agreement (those selecting either *strongly agree* or *somewhat agree*) that milestones were a positive experience increased with each passing milestone (Confirmation: 74%, Mid-candidature: 80%, Pre-submission: 100%). This mirrored the responses of University graduate students (Confirmation: 78%, Mid-candidature 81%, Pre-submission: 85%).

The majority of Pharmacy respondents (72%) believed that termination for failing the confirmation of candidature review was appropriate; however, as candidature progressed, the majority disagreed that termination was appropriate with termination at mid-candidature (44%) and pre-submission (19%) receiving relatively little support.

Coursework

Only 37% of Pharmacy respondents believed that research degrees were improved by the inclusion of compulsory discipline-based coursework. This figure closely resembled the University-wide figure (38%).

Meanwhile, only 41% of Pharmacy respondents agreed that coursework represented a good use of their time.

Professional Development

Forty percent (40%) of Pharmacy respondents believed that professional development units, as offered through *myDevelopment*, should be a compulsory part of a research degree, which was substantially more than the University-wide figure (25%); however, only 54% of Pharmacy respondents felt that these units were relevant, while 43% thought it was a good use of their time.

Pharmacy graduate students (10%) were less likely than the average Monash graduate student (26%) to have experienced an uncomfortable level of stress (either *a lot* or *a great deal* of stress) because of 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

Pharmacy graduate students (37%) were as likely to have experienced significant delay in the progress of their research as graduate students enrolled across all campuses (38%); however, they were slightly more likely to have considered discontinuing their enrolment than their University counterparts (Pharmacy: 34%, University: 29%).

While 51% of Pharmacy graduate students agreed that they had sufficient time to produce a quality research project, despite additional requirements of compulsory milestones/coursework/professional development, 51% also indicated they felt an uncomfortable level of stress about finishing their degree on time.

Changing or removing milestones and improving administration were identified as the two most important things the University could do to assist Pharmacy graduate students in achieving timely completion.

School culture and facilities

Overall, Pharmacy graduate students were more satisfied (80%) with the level of resources and facilities provided to them than University respondents (71%).

They were also more likely (76%) to agree with the statement *'I feel included in my academic unit'* than were their University peers (64%).

Stress and wellbeing

The areas in which Pharmacy respondents expressed they felt the highest level of stress (51% either *a lot* or *a great deal*) was in response to the statements *'finishing my degree on time'* and *'finding work after completion of my degree.'*

Pharmacy 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

Pharmacy graduate students identified the intellectual stimulation and development that came with conducting research as the best aspect of being at Monash.

The worst aspect of being at Monash was a three-way tie between the course length and workload, professional development requirements, and finally, stress and wellbeing.

Monash Pharmacy respondents most wanted to see improvements in the facilities, services and resources on offer at the University.

(ii) Introduction

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

A total of six-hundred and sixty-eight responses were received. A preliminary report on the campus-wide quantitative data was published in March 2018 and is available from the MGA. Of the total number of responses received, forty-six were from research graduate students enrolled through the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, which equates to 23% of the total research graduate student population in the Faculty in that year.

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

In the quantitative analysis, some Pharmacy 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 Pharmacy 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 Pharmacy were represented in terms of responses. Overall respondents were skewed towards on-campus (100%), full-time (98%), PhD students (98%). Both female (72%) and male (26%) genders were well represented, as were domestic (63%) and international (37%) students. Appendix 1 provides the demographics of Pharmacy 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 the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, 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	Pharmacy	University
Yes	22 (47.8%)	386 (57.8%)
No, but I've heard about it	13 (28.3%)	169 (25.3%)
No, I didn't know it existed	11 (23.9%)	113 (16.9%)

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

Aware of supervisor's responsibility	Pharmacy	University
Yes	30 (65.2%)	533 (79.8%)
No	2 (4.3%)	22 (3.3%)
Not sure	14 (30.4%)	113 (16.9%)

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

Aware of own responsibilities	Pharmacy	University
Yes	39 (84.8%)	592 (88.6%)
No	2 (4.3%)	14 (2.1%)
Not sure	5 (10.9%)	62 (9.3%)

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

Conflict or misunderstanding with your supervisor	Pharmacy	University
Yes	8 (17.4%)	108 (16.2%)
No	38 (82.6%)	560 (83.8%)

Pharmacy respondents were less likely than their peers across the University to have read the Code of Practice and be aware of their supervisor's responsibilities towards them; however, they were equally as likely to have experienced conflict or misunderstanding with their supervisor.

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

Seven graduate students from the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences 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
Different and unrealistic expectations	1
Inaccessible	1
Inappropriate behaviour – bullying/harassment/tone/intimidation	1
Lack of expertise and/or interest	1

Poor quality guidance and feedback was referenced multiple times in the responses of graduate students from the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences who identified as having had conflict or misunderstanding with one or more of their supervisors. Interesting comments, included:

> *"One supervisor was known to be quite unhappy in times of stress. They were known to have outbursts at students and other staff members if they had done something to displease them during times of high stress."*

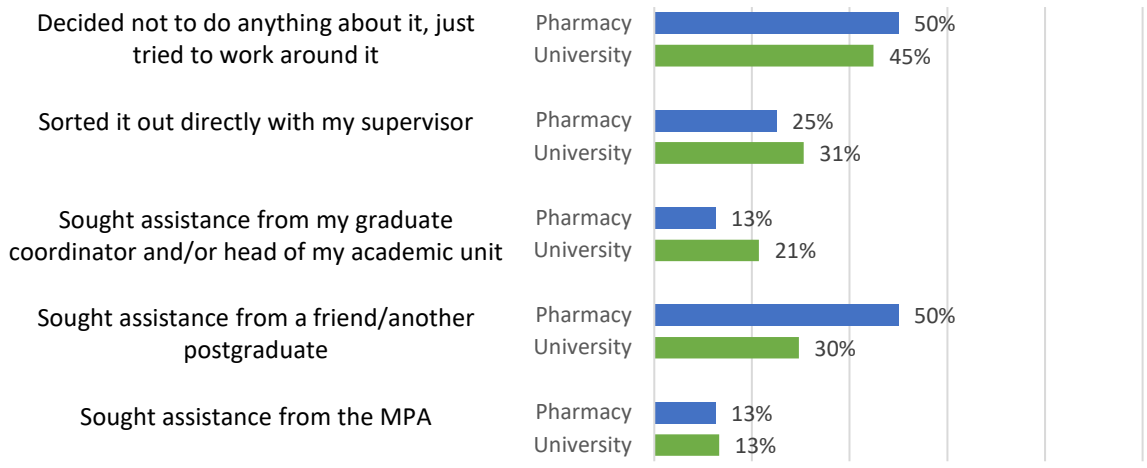
> *"Supervisors not doing what they said they would do, thus delaying research."*

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

> *"Using my work for a publication without my knowledge."*

> *"I sought to receive support from another academic within the faculty and was yelled at by my main supervisor."*

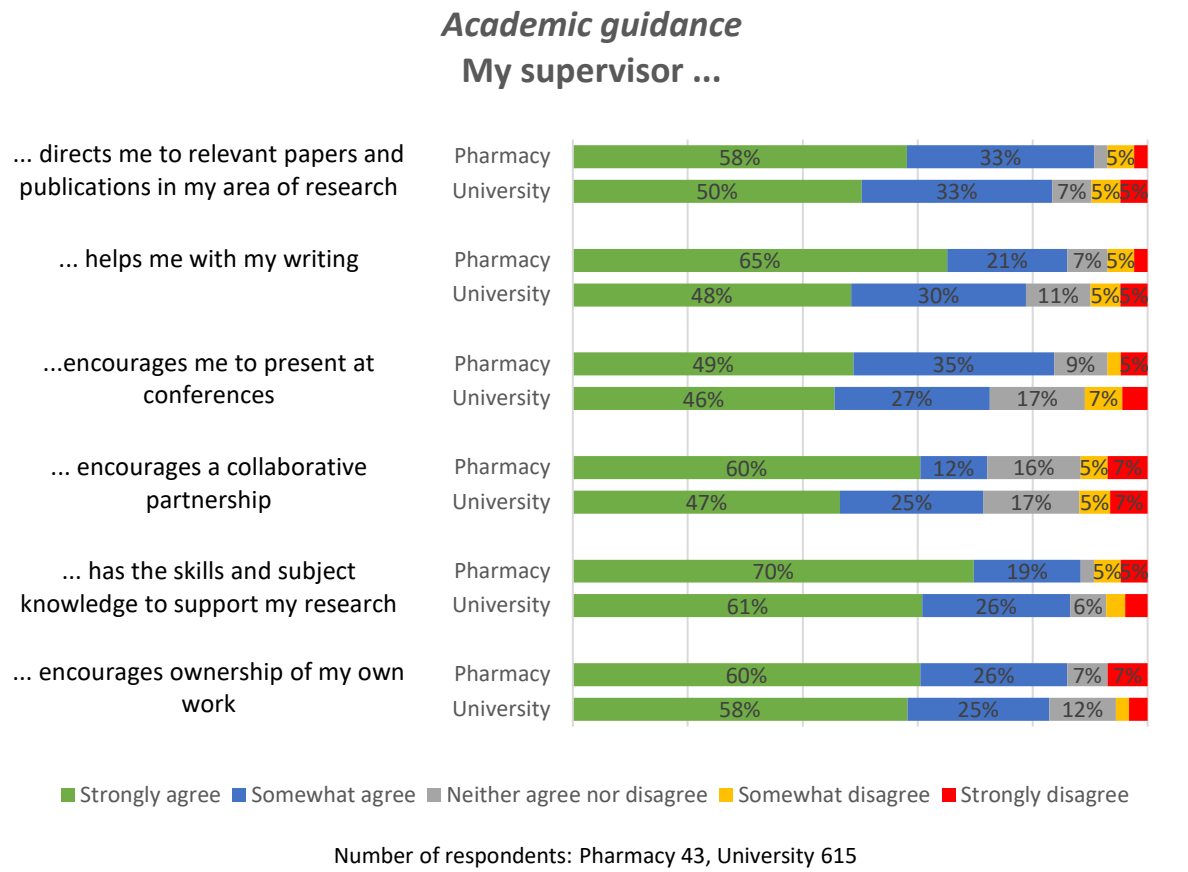
1.6 How did you deal with it? Select as many as relevant.



Number of respondents: Pharmacy 8, University 98

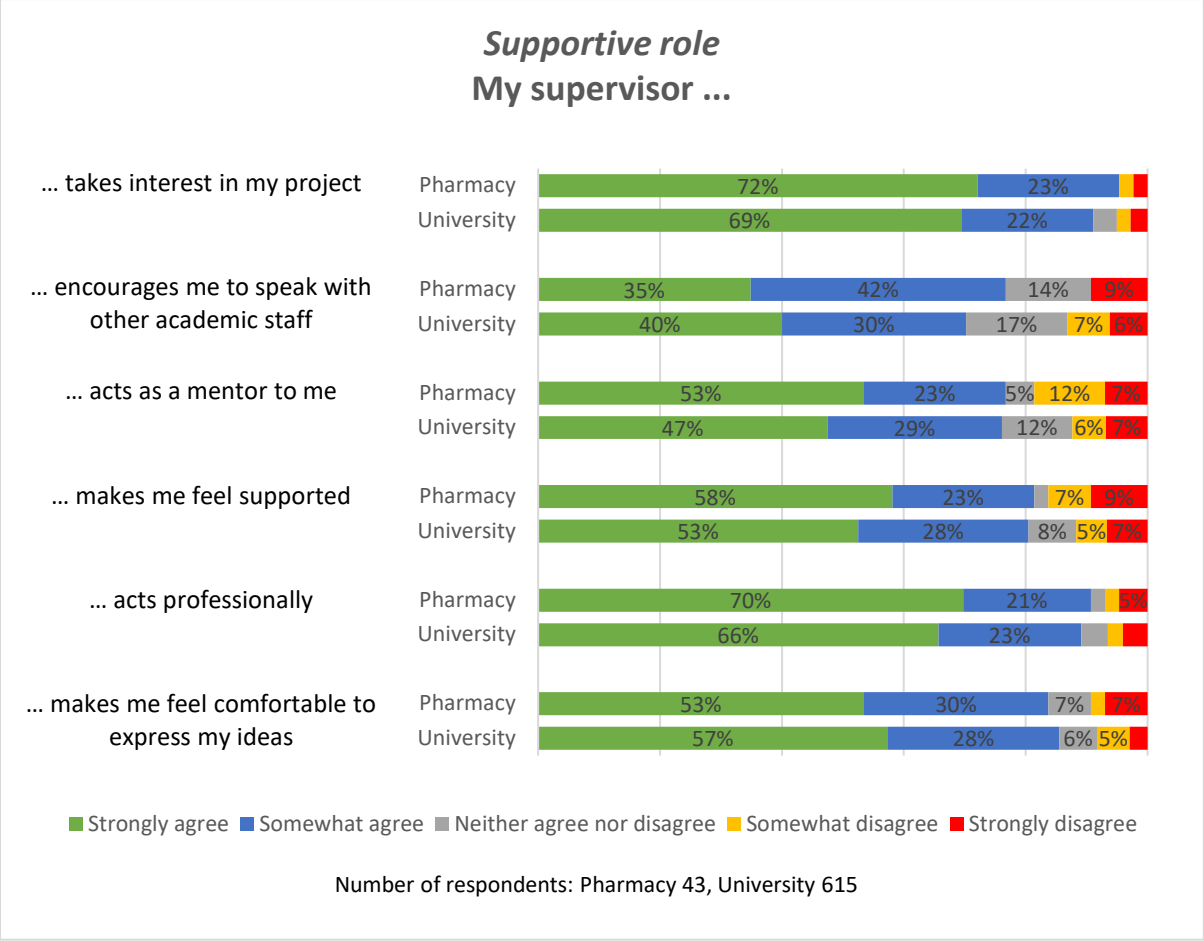
Pharmacy respondents were as likely to have decided not to do anything about their conflict/misunderstanding, and to work around it, as they were to seek assistance from a friend or peer.

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]

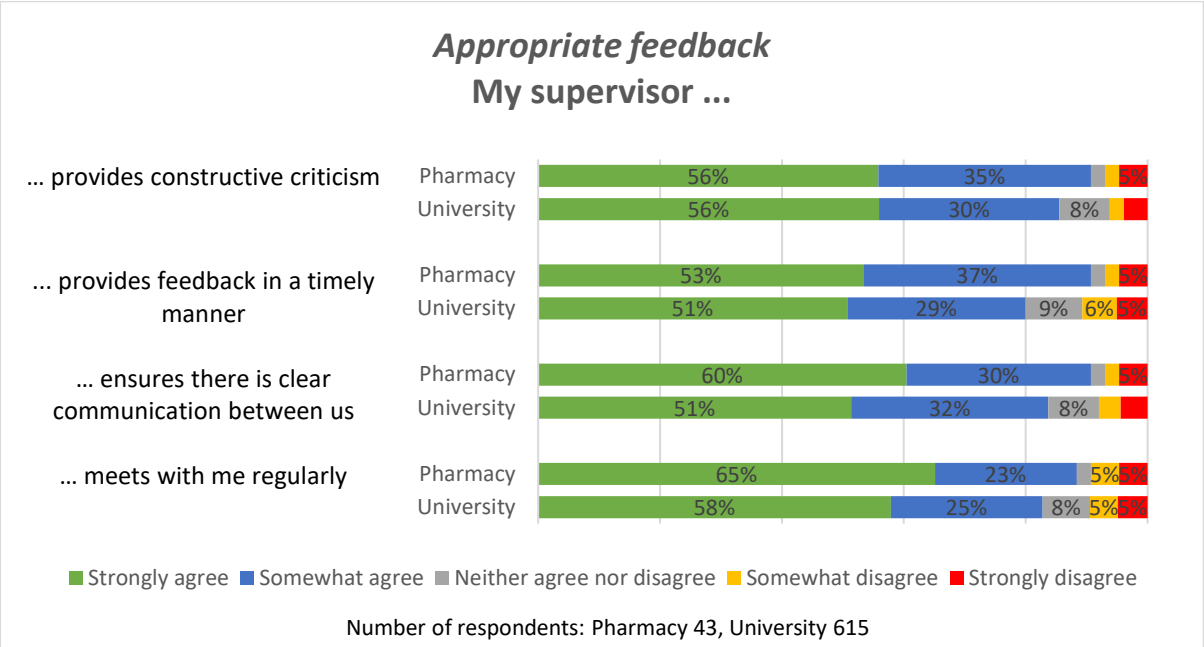


Pharmacy respondents tended to agree with positive statements regarding the academic guidance provided by their supervisor. Agreement was most convincing to the statement *'directs me to relevant papers and publications in my area of research.'*

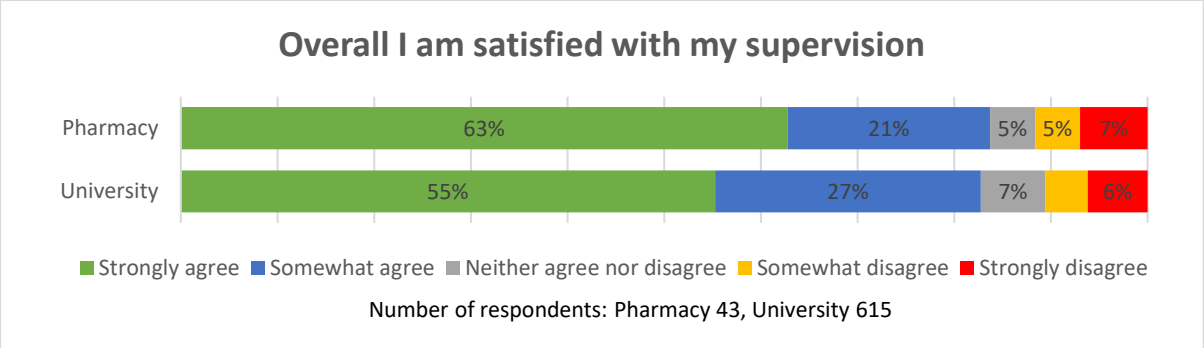
[3] Where responses were less than 5%, the figure has not been included due to lack of space.



Pharmacy respondents tended to agree with positive statements regarding the supportive role that their supervisor played. This is particularly true of the statements *'my supervisor takes an interst in my project'* and *'my supervisor acts professionally,'* which both received total agreement figures in the nineties.



More so than their University peers, Pharmacy respondents tended to agree with positive statements regarding the feedback provided by their supervisors.



Pharmacy respondents were more satisfied with their supervision overall than were graduate students across Monash.

1.8 Opportunity for comments regarding your supervision.

Nine graduate students from the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 5 Positive comments: 4

General theme	**Number of responses**
Incompetence/unsuitability and lacking appropriate skills/experience/knowledge	5
Supportive/respectful/engaged/guidance/nurturing/encouraging	4
Competing and differing expectations	2
Suggested improvements	2
Accessibility	1
Bullying/dominating/exploitation/intimidation/abuse	1
Changing supervisors	1
Mentoring - positive	1

Some of respondents from the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences were **dissatisfied or negative** about an element of their supervision experience within their degrees. Notable examples include:

> *"[I] think supervisors need further training. Many students in our department are dissatisfied with supervisors."*

> *"My supervision arrangements are politically advantageous to my main supervisor and not necessarily in my best interests."*

Alternatively, several respondents were **satisfied and positive** regarding part of their supervision experience.

> *"I have been very lucky to have three great supervisors. They have a good balance in terms of how much guidance/independence they give me for my project."*

> *"My supervisor has let me direct the research project – offering advice only when I ask for it. This has really boosted my independent research ability, but the impact of the research itself would have benefitted from more supervisor involvement in planning the project."*

Other notable comments from Pharmacy graduate students relating to supervision, included:

> *"This supervisor had not yet been a main supervisor for a PhD student. Perhaps a lack of experience may account for what occurred."*

> *"Sometime it becomes difficult to convince [my supervisor] on 'out of our skills' perspectives of our research projects and he tries to remain … confined within our group's already established research expertise and techniques."*

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.

The overall satisfaction with supervision among respondents from Pharmacy (84%) was slightly higher than it was among all Monash graduate students (82%).

---

[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.

Previous studies have highlighted that **the strongest correlation with student progress was the amount of interaction that they had with their supervisors.**[8] Pharmacy 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 Pharmacy (89%) 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.

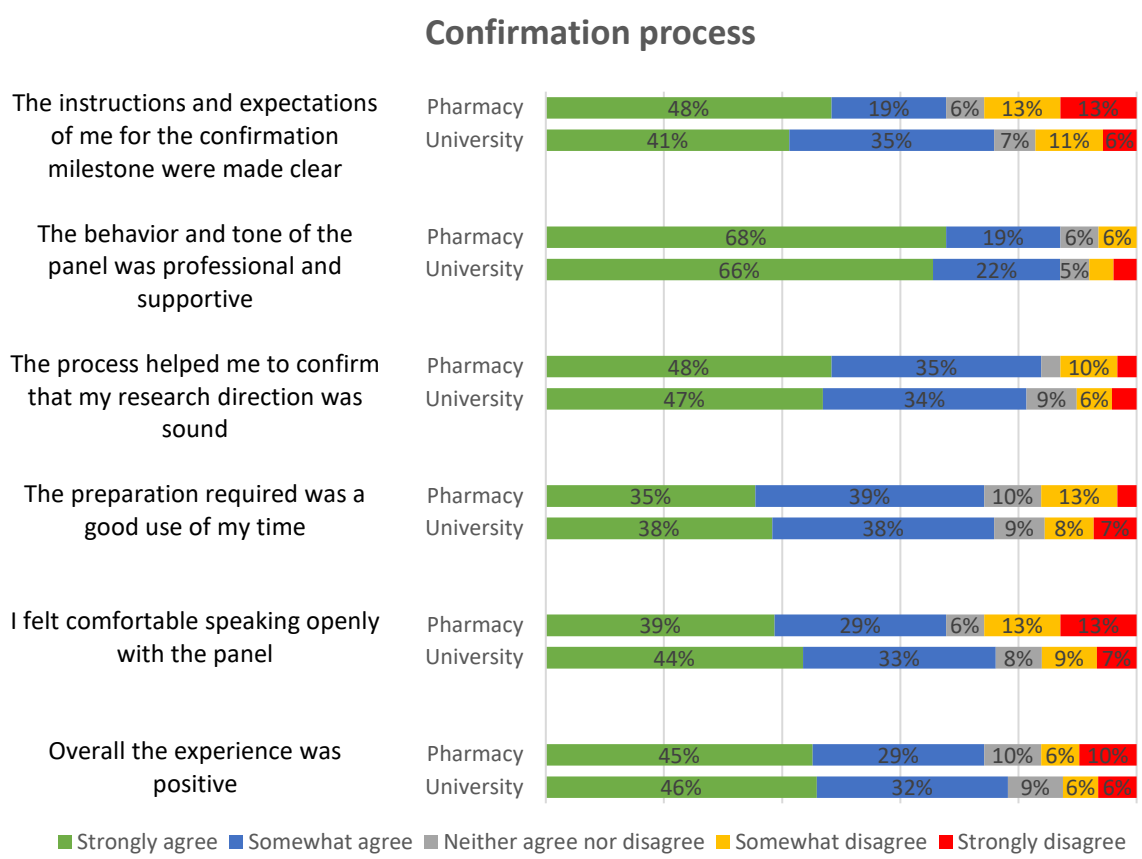
[9] Karen Hunter and Kay Devine, "Doctoral student's emotional exhaustion and intentions to leave academia," *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* 11 (2016): 40.

[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.



Pharmacy respondents tended to agree with positive statements regarding the confirmation process with *'the behaviour and tone of the panel was professional and supportive'* receiving the most overall agreement (87%), while 74% of respondents agreed that *'overall the experience was positive'*

Meanwhile, two in three participants agreed that the instructions and expectations for the confirmation milestone were clear.

2.2 Opportunity for comments about the confirmation process.

Eleven graduate students from the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 6 Positive comments: 1

General theme	Number of responses
Unsuitable/incompetent/insular/inappropriate panel	5
Stress/anxiety/nervousness/poor health	3
Highlighted supervisor failures/flaws	2
Time-consuming process	2
Highlighted supervisor strengths	1
Lack of trust in panel	1
Poor communication	1
Suggestions for improvements	1
Unclear requirements and bureaucratic/administrative issues	1

Although small in numbers, more than half of the responses of Pharmacy graduate students were categorised as **negative**. The majority of these comments were related to **unsuitable, incompetent, insular or inappropriate panels**. While these were also issues emphasised by the graduate students of other faculties, they were raised frequently by Pharmacy respondents.

> *"Panel members are supposed to be impartial but I felt unable to speak openly about the supervisor who I'd had conflict with [because of their relationship with panel members]."*

> *"Even when facing problems with one's project and/or supervisors, [a] student can be reluctant to discuss it with panel members as [they] are peers and colleagues [of supervisors] … All this puts students in a vulnerable position."*

Similarly, **stress and nervousness** accompanying the confirmation process was mentioned by three students, with one writing:

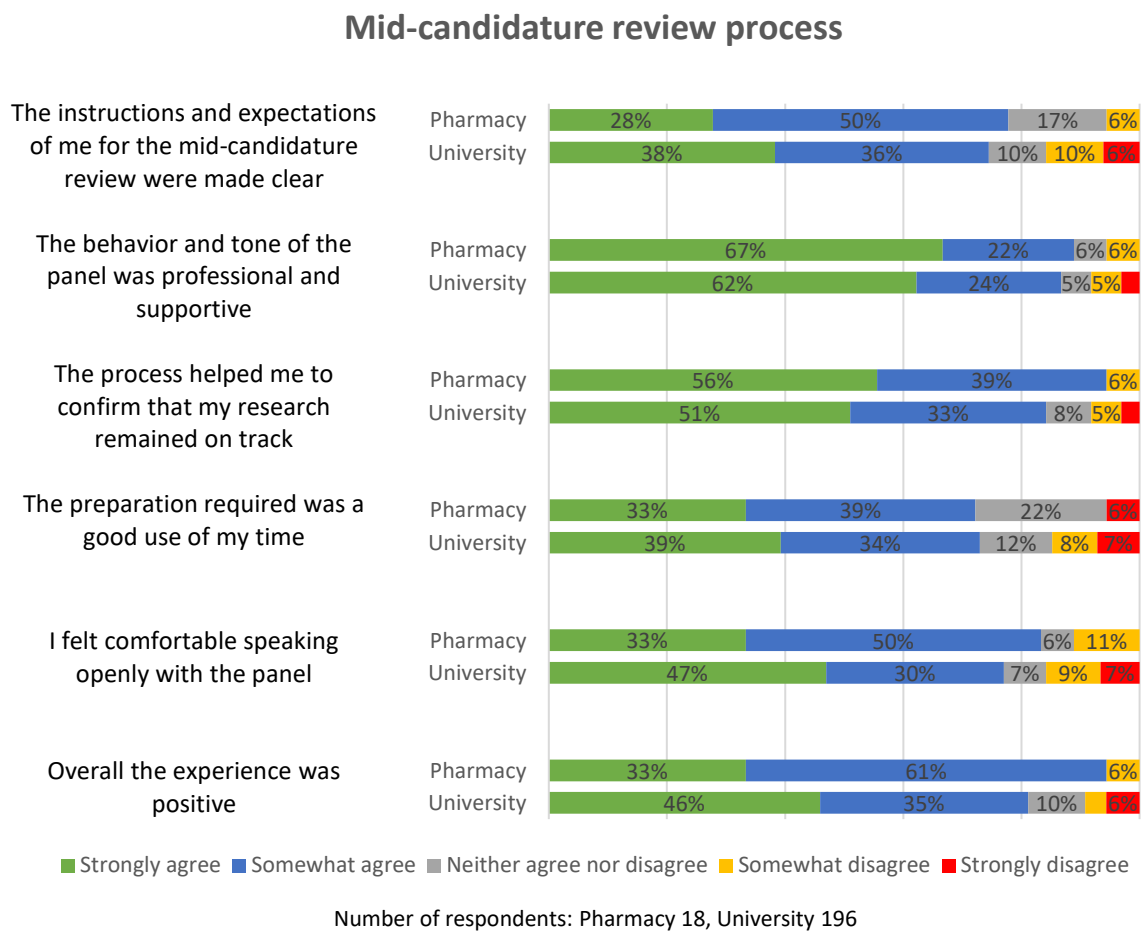
> *"At the time, I was unsure how much progress needed to be demonstrated – I was convinced that I hadn't done enough, that the panel would end my candidature. I found it the most stressful of all the milestones."*

Other notable comments from the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences graduate students relating to the confirmation process, included:

> *"Many different versions of the milestone requirements could be found online. And the GE/MIGR/MGE requirements changed every year, so I had to always refer to the Graduate Research Team to determine correct documentation."*

> *"Inadequate supervision leading up to confirmation and then panel members were [my] supervisors' friends … [So] I then struggled to get confirmed. And then throughout my candidature, this was constantly brought up to make me feel guilty."*

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



Ninety-four percent of Pharmacy respondents agreed that the overall experience of the mid-candidature review was positive, while the statement '*the process helped me to confirm that my research remained on track*,' received the most overall agreement (94%).

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

Seven graduate students from the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 3 Positive comments: 3

General theme	**Number of responses**
Time-consuming process	2
Unclear requirements and bureaucratic/administrative issues	2
Misdirects energy and focus from research	1
Stress/anxiety/nervousness/poor health	1

Three of the responses from Pharmacy graduate students can be categorised as **negative**. These comments, included:

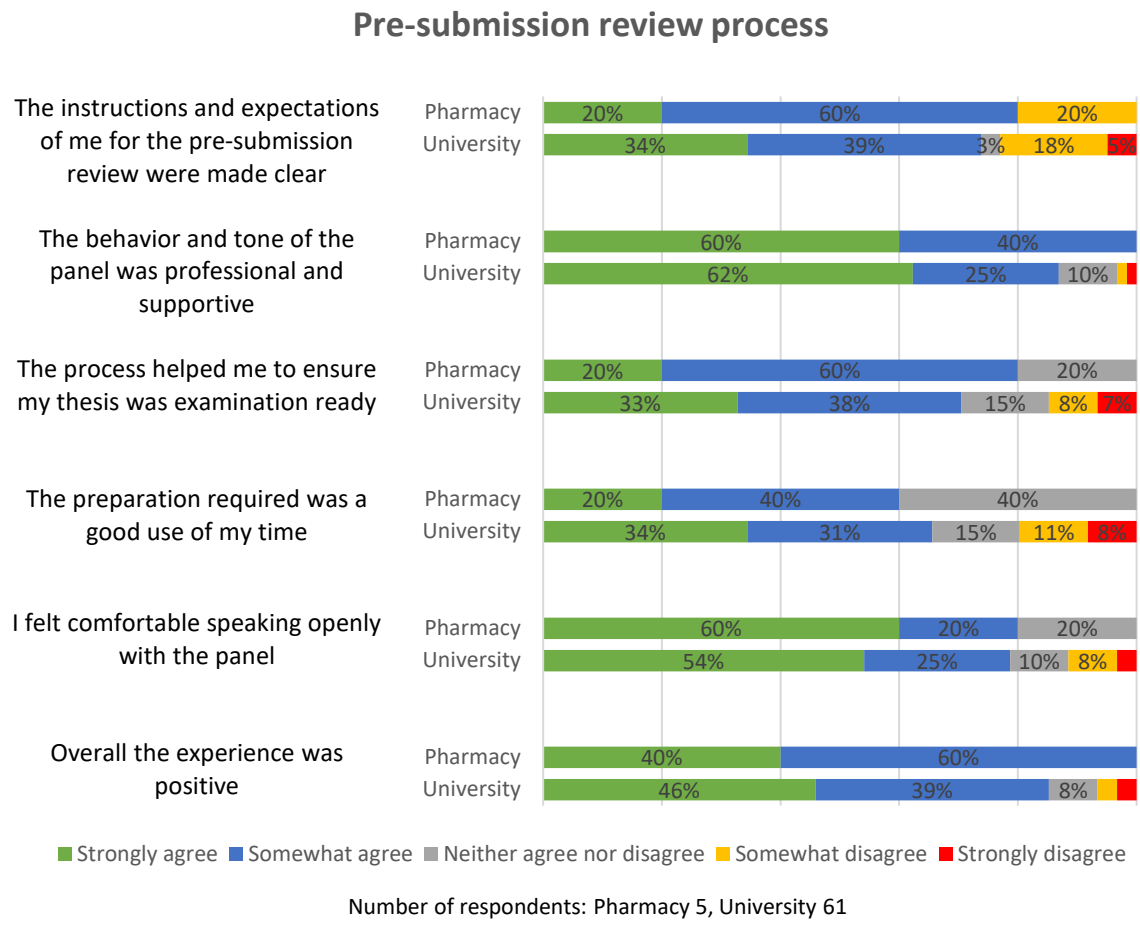
> *"I feel as though the mid-candidature review process completely stalled my work. Instead of concentrating on recruitment and actually doing research, I was organising diaries, worrying about IT, filling in more paperwork, chasing people for signatures etc."*

On the other hand, three of the responses from Pharmacy graduate students can be categorised as **positive**. These included:

> *"I think the length of the written mid-candidature report was good."*

> *"Mid-candidature review was about when we realised that I wasn't on track to complete the PhD, prompting the switch to Masters by Research. Going through the process did aid in that realisation."*

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



Although responses were limited, Pharmacy respondents tended to agree with positive statements

relating to their experience with the pre-submission review process; however, only three of the five graduate students to respond agreed that the preparation required was a good use of their time.

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

Two graduate students from the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Positive comments: 2 Negative comments: 1

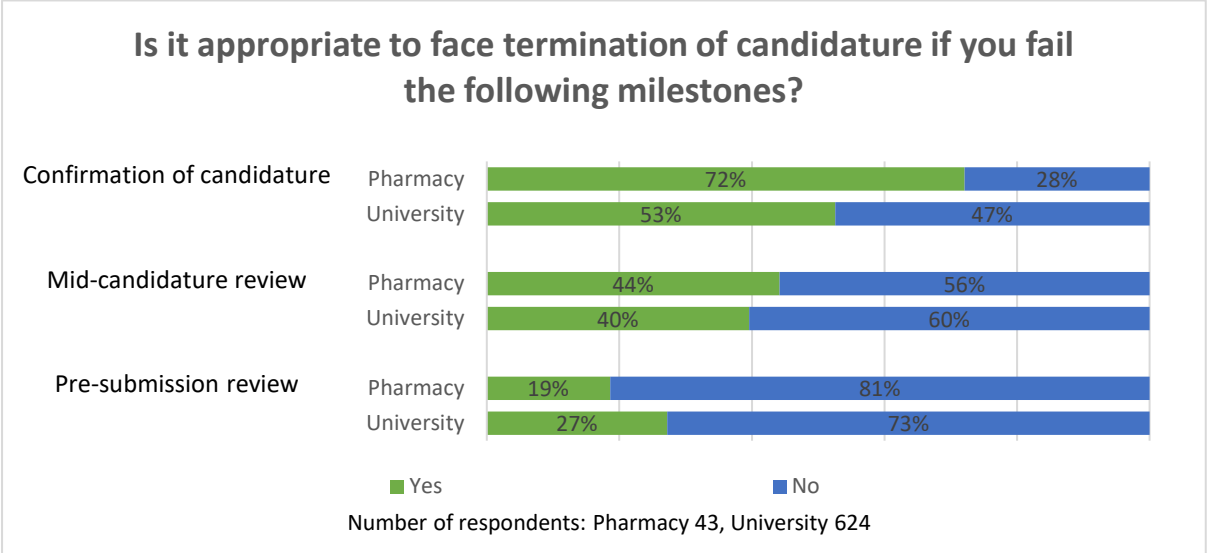
General theme	Number of responses
Good and useful feedback from panel	1
Suggestions for improvements	1

Both of the comments from Pharmacy students were insightful. They were:

> *"A helpful discussion that I don't think should be left to the 3.5-year mark. I did my panel at 3 years to ensure that I had communicated where the endpoint to my research would be and a thesis layout plan outlining how all bodies of work would be incorporated into the final thesis."*

> *"Since my thesis was still mostly unwritten at the time of the pre-submission review, I didn't find it very helpful in preparing my thesis for examination. The milestone did encourage me to prepare a thesis plan, which has been helpful in writing the thesis since the milestone."*

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?



The majority of Pharmacy respondents believed that termination for failing the confirmation of candidature review was appropriate; however, as candidature progressed, the majority disagreed that termination was appropriate – especially at the point of the pre-submission review.

2.8 Opportunity for comments about milestones.

Seven graduate students from the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 4 Positive comments: 2

General theme	**Number of responses**
Stress/anxiety/nervousness/poor health	2
Unsuitable/incompetent/insular/inappropriate panel	2
General disagreement with termination at milestones	1
Rigid/inflexible system	1
Time-consuming process	1
Unclear requirements and bureaucratic/administrative issues	1

Some Pharmacy graduate students expressed **negative** opinions on the milestone requirements. Insightful comments, included:

> *"Research work includes too many challenging and risk factors – especially those very creative projects. So, the decision of termination of candidature should not depend only on the milestone review meetings. The overall performance of the student should be considered as well."*

> *"The milestone system is a good idea and I enjoyed the process each time. However, the powers that be continuously change the requirements for milestones on a seemingly yearly (or more frequent) basis, and this is just extremely irritating to myself and many other HDR students that I know."*

> *The value of milestones seems to diminish the further into candidature you are. Confirmation is important, but the others seem to suck up time that could be better spent researching."*

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

> *"Milestone presentations can be a collegial opportunity for feedback if done in the right spirit and the tone of the room is appropriately set by the academics present. Making the milestones a pass/fail hurdle can easily contribute to making the experience feel like an exam, where the academics in the room are in control and can push you to breaking point if they are so inclined."*

"It seems that it would be a waste of time for both the student and the University had the issues not been picked up on earlier in a student's candidature and for them to face termination after 3 years of doing a PhD."

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]

Pharmacy graduate students tended to agree with positive statements regarding their milestones. In regards to the confirmation process, 74% 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. With the exception of confirmation, for which 72% of respondents agreed it was appropriate to face termination, Pharmacy 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 (42% of Pharmacy 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.

---

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

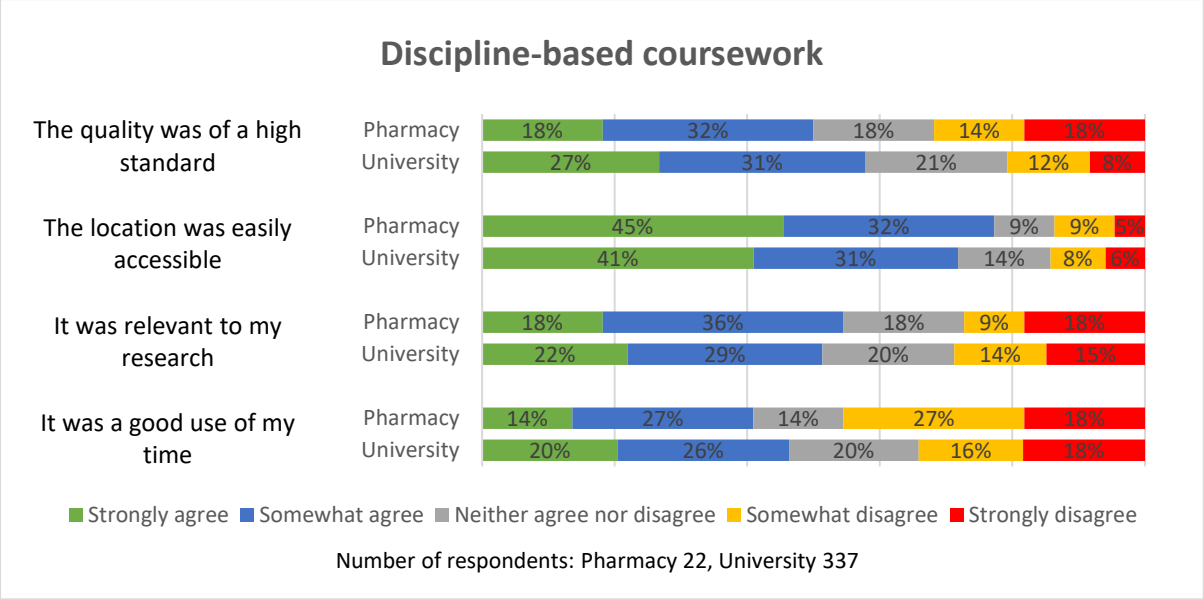
Coursework is not a requirement of the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences; however, several graduate students from the faculty still provided answers to these questions.

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

Research degrees improved by compulsory coursework units?	**Pharmacy**	**University**
Yes	16 (37.2%)	236 (37.9%)
No	11 (25.6%)	178 (28.6%)
Not sure	16 (37.2%)	209 (33.5%)

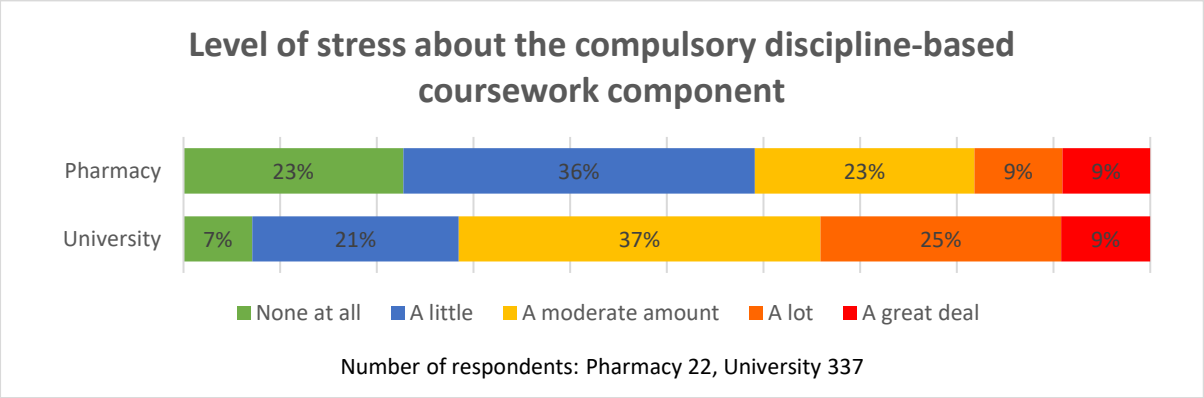
Pharmacy respondents were as likely as graduate students from across Monash to believe that their degrees would be improved by the inclusion of discipline-based. Approximately a quarter of Pharmacy graduate students disagreed.

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



Only two in five Pharmacy respondents believed that discipline-based coursework represented a good use of their time, while half of the respondents agreed that the quality of the units were of a high standard.

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



Pharmacy respondents were less likely than their University counterparts to experience an uncomfortable amount of stress as a result of compulsory discipline-based coursework.

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

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

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 9 Positive comments: 4

General theme	Number of responses
Irrelevant/discipline-specific	4
Administrative issues/inconsistencies/solutions	2
Time-consuming/waste of time/misdirected energy	2
Inconsistent quality (unit/course)	1
Low/poor-quality unit	1

Notable comments from the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences graduate students relating to the inclusion of discipline-based coursework in research degrees, included:

> *"Coursework can be beneficial, but it must be relevant and not a distraction."*
>
> *"I can see the value of coursework, but at the postgrad level everyone's project is so different that no technical subject can be applicable to all. Training in writing, presenting and research methodology are valuable, but that is covered by MyDevelopment."*
>
> *"I do think [coursework] would be useful if delivered by an academic who works actively in the field. Most of the additional training and coursework is not very useful or relevant."*
>
> *"[I] had a coursework component to my Honours degree and it was incredibly stressful trying to balance [that] with research. Honestly, leave coursework in undergrad where it belongs."*

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] Pharmacy 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.

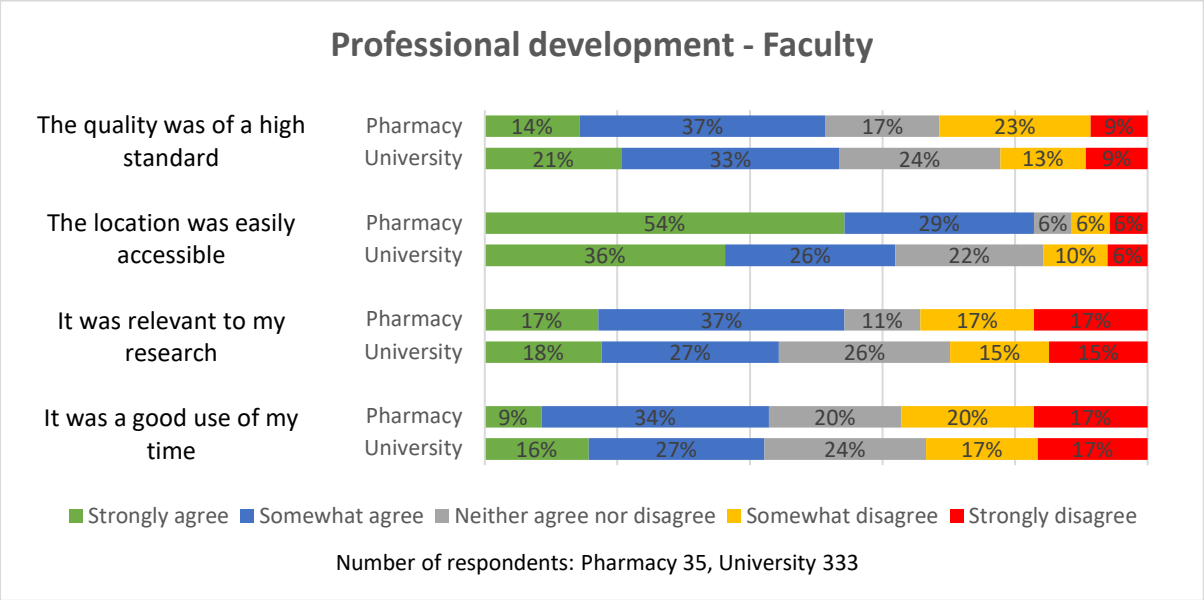
4. Professional Development

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?	Pharmacy	University
Yes	17 (39.5%)	157 (25.4%)
No	17 (39.5%)	283 (45.9%)
Not sure	9 (20.9%)	177 (28.7%)

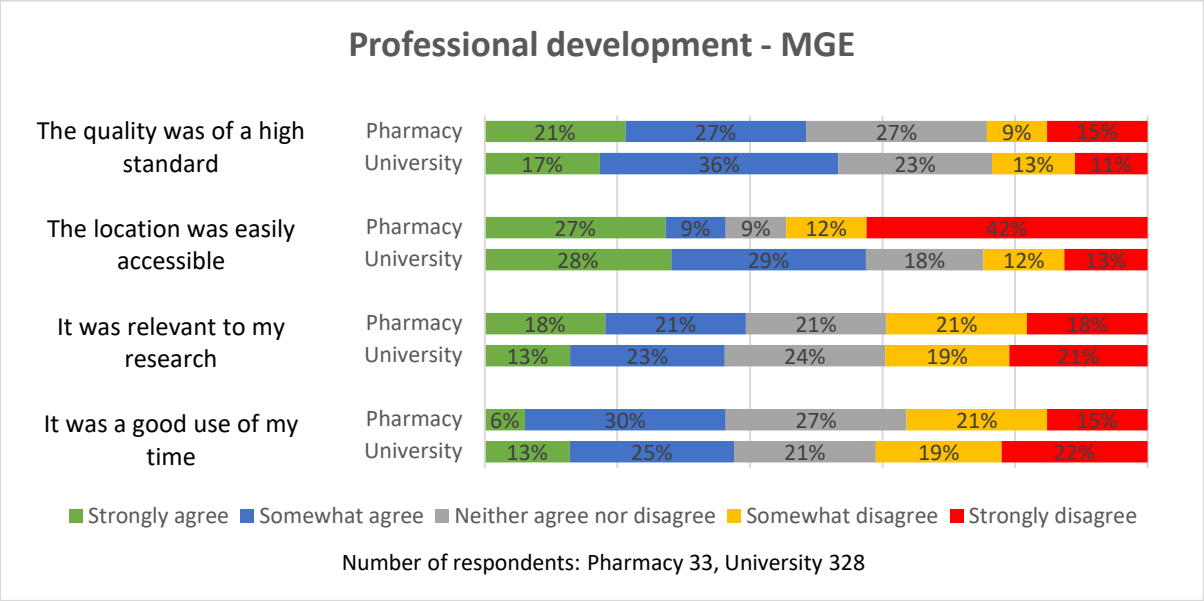
Pharmacy graduate students were equally split on whether professional development units, as offered through *myDevelopment*, should be compulsory or not; however, overall, they were substantially more likely than their University counterparts to believe that it should be.

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).



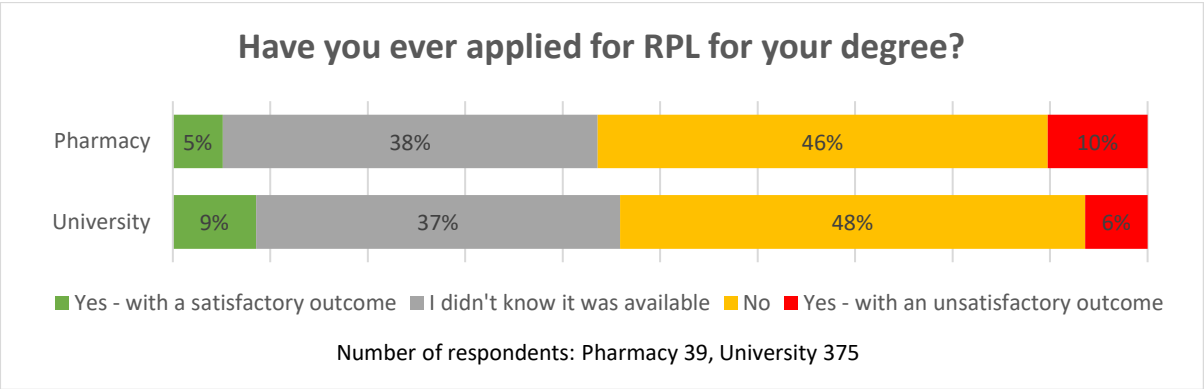
While Pharmacy graduate students tended to agree more than disagree with positive statements regarding professional development offered by their faculty, levels of overall agreement paled in contrast to other areas surveyed, such as supervision. Only 43% of Pharmacy respondents believed that these units represented a good use of their time.

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).



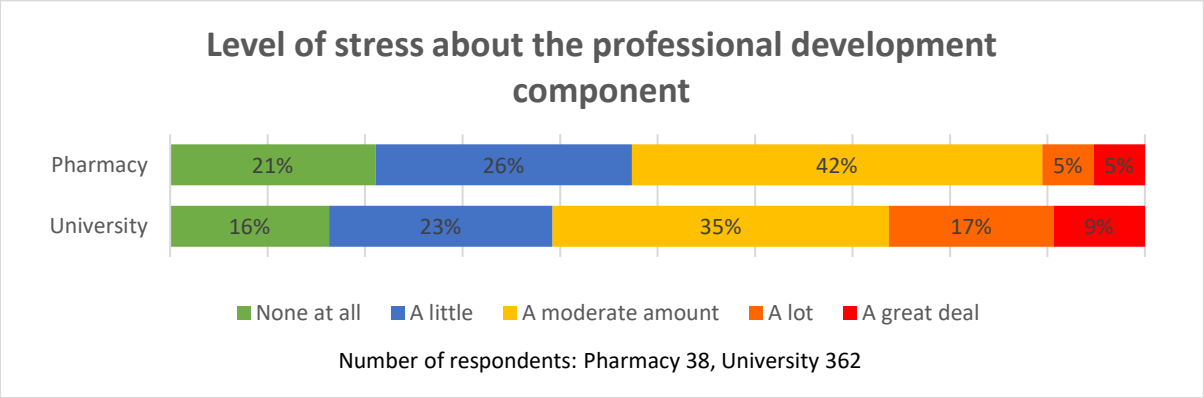
Overall agreement with these positive statements in relation to professional development offered by MGE was less than was the case to units offered by the Faculty. Only 36% of Pharmacy respondents thought these units were a good use of their time, while 56% disagreed with the statement that the location was accessible.

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



According to the Pharmacy respondents, for every three graduate students who applied for Recognition of Prior Learning, only one received a satisfactory outcome. This was not the case for University graduate students more broadly, who were more likely to receive a satisfactory outcome than not if they applied for RPL.

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



Despite relatively poor results to positive statements relating to professional development units, only 10% of Pharmacy respondents said that they experienced an uncomfortable amount of stress as a result of this component of their degree. The responses to the following question may provide some insight into why this was the case.

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

Eleven graduate students from the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 12 Positive comments: 1

General theme	Number of responses
Administrative issues/inconsistencies/unit availability	5
Irrelevant/discipline-specific/lack of options	4
Time-consuming/waste of time/misdirected energy	4
Campus attendance issues (time/travel)	2
Excessive corporate feel/focus	2
Low/poor-quality units	2

Responses from Pharmacy graduate students were **overwhelmingly negative**. Indeed, there were twelve individual references to negative elements of the students' experiences with compulsory professional development units across the eleven responses.

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

> *"I have learned today that Recognition of Prior Learning is possible … it would have been nice to have been told this before third year, when I am almost finished my hours."*

> *"The 'number of hours' quota required by the rules is hard to evaluate when the program never displays your total properly. In the space of a week, my total went from 68 to 115 to 80*

hours. No idea how many I've actually done."

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

> *"[Professional development] could be useful if they delivered specific and useful skills. As it is, they are largely unfocused and irrelevant. The professional development modules were sold as being valuable from the perspective of prospective employers; it seems unlikely that employers will care whether a postgraduate has received five hours of training in how to give feedback."*

> *"IT IS SO STUPID. Let me develop my presentation skills by, oh I don't know, presenting at a conference where it is actually a good use of my time? Or develop my writing skills by actually writing a journal?"*

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

> *"The fact that I have to scrape the barrel and attend these seminars which all give you the same information just to finish my hours is not only detrimental to my busy schedule, but also just to my general levels of sanity. By all means give people the option, because it really does help some students, but don't pressgang everyone into doing this."*

> *"Really did not like that it was literally entire days' worth of sitting in rooms with forced participation. This severely impacted my ability to go about my lab work and made my days extremely long (up to 14 hours in one case, 10-12-hour days in the others)."*

Finally, given the location of the Pharmacy campus (Parkville) in relation to the other Monash campuses, a couple of graduate students also complained about the **travel and costs associated with cross-campus attendance**.

> *"I would love to attend some of the sessions offered at Clayton, but it is too far and costs too much money and time (no concessions fares for postgrads, difficult parking situations) to travel to Clayton. It would often mean taking a whole day to attend a 1-2-hour session."*

> *"Many interesting programs only seem to run at the Clayton campus, which is inconvenient. That said, Parkville staff have arranged for several sessions to be run on our campus, which is fantastic."*

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 11 responses from Pharmacy graduate students were 12 individual negative reflections compared to only 1 positive reflection.

As with coursework, Pharmacy 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, Pharmacy 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 under two in every five (39.5%) Pharmacy graduate students thought that professional development units, as offered through *myDevelopment*, should be compulsory.

Pharmacy 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

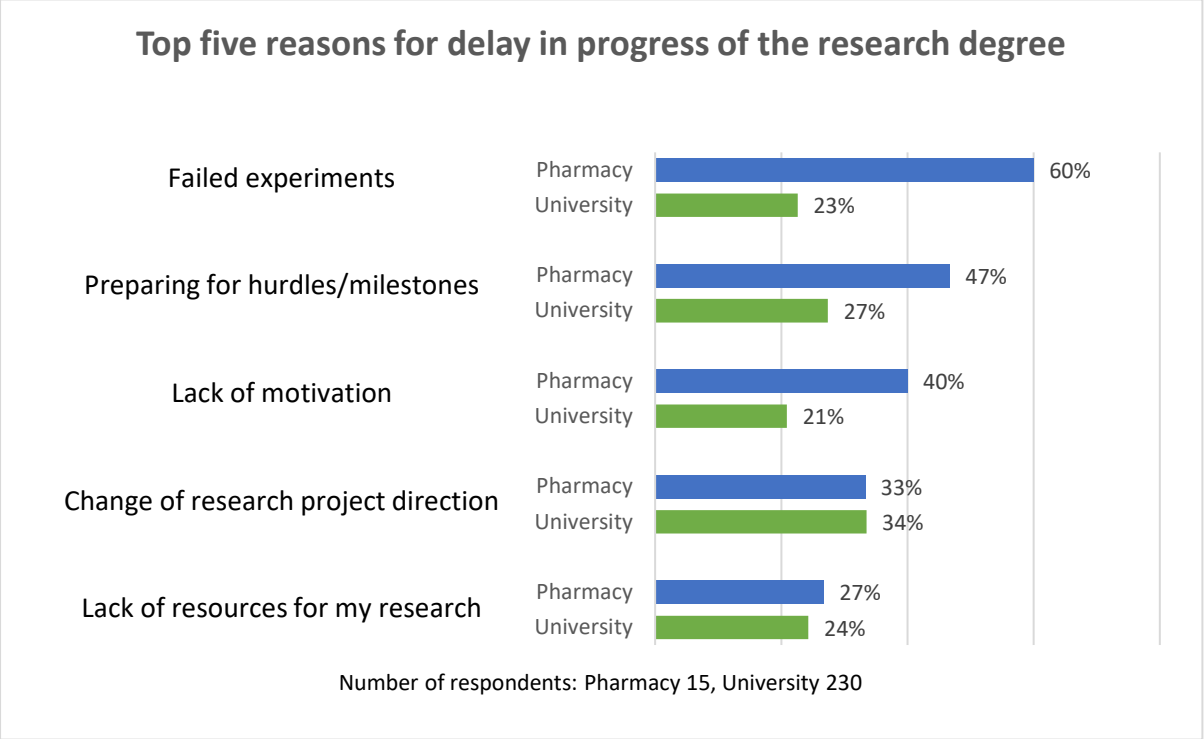
5.1 Has anything significantly delayed the progress of your research degree?

Has your research degree progress been delayed?	Pharmacy	University
Yes	15 (36.6%)	231 (37.8%)
No	26 (63.4%)	380 (62.2%)

Pharmacy respondents were as likely as University graduate students to have experienced a significant delay in their research degree.

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

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



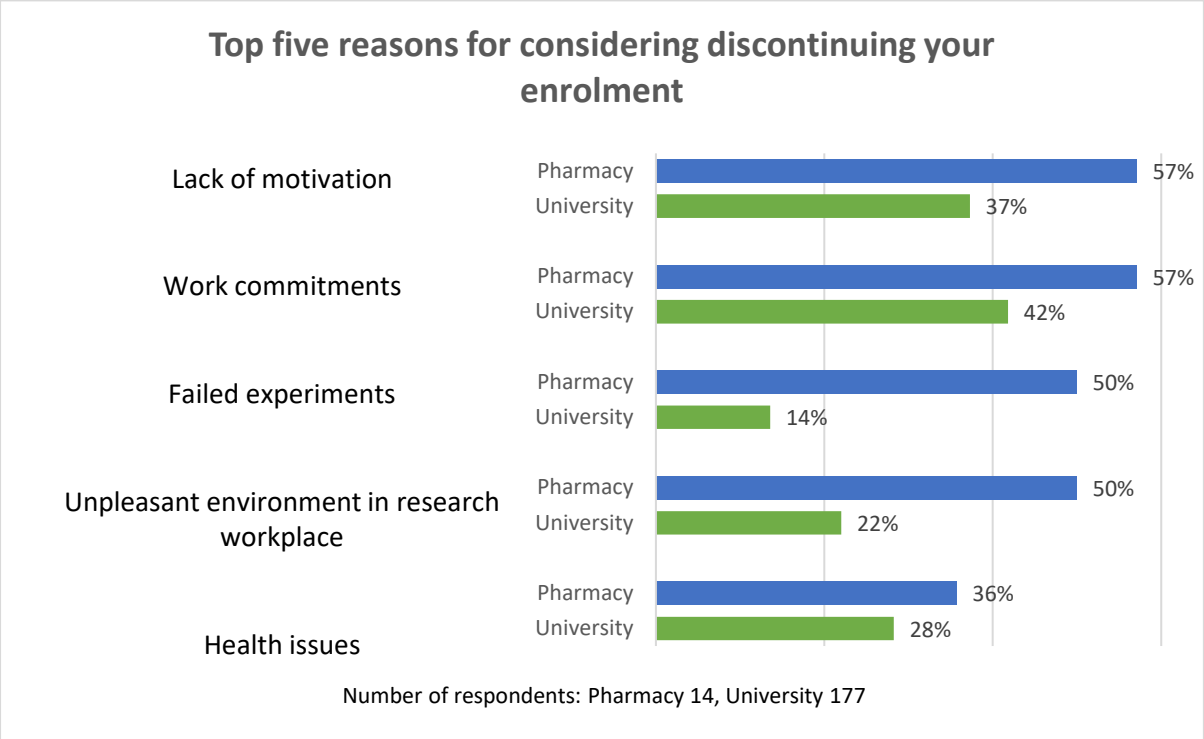
Failed experiments were the number one reason for delay among Pharmacy respondents.

5.3 Have you ever considered discontinuing your enrolment?

Have you considered discontinuing your enrolment?	Pharmacy	University
Yes	14 (34.1%)	179 (29.3%)
No	27 (65.9%)	431 (70.7%)

Pharmacy respondents were marginally more likely than University-wide respondents to have considered discontinuing their enrolment. Approximately one in three had considered doing so.

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



Lack of motivation and work commitments were the two most frequent reasons provided by Pharmacy respondents for why they considered discontinuing their enrolment.

5.5 What made you decide to continue with your degree?

Ten graduate students from the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	**Number of responses**
Personal characteristics – commitment/determination/passion/fear/stubbornness	6
Interest in research	4
Time, money and effort already invested	2
Support from University staff/services	1

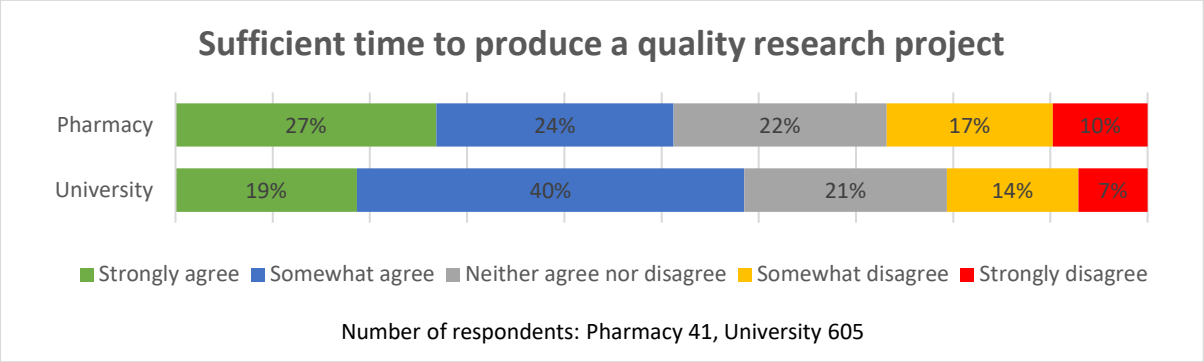
Graduate students from Pharmacy outlined a range of factors and/or motivations for choosing to continue with their enrolment after considering discontinuation.

Personal characteristics were the most prevalent factor and/or motivation referenced by respondents. For Pharmacy graduate students, these included: motivation, determination, fear of failure and dedication.

Other notable comments from Pharmacy graduate students regarding their reasons for continuing with their course, included:

> *"Interest in the project, and motivation to finish the project."*
>
> *"Supervisor convinced me to stay."*
>
> *"Sunk costs. We've come so far, we can go a little further and get the shiny piece of paper."*
>
> *"I love my research."*

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



Approximately half of Pharmacy respondents agreed that they had sufficient time to produce a quality research project.

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

Twenty-two students from the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Milestones – changing or removing	9
Administration – guidelines/information/communication/ availability	8
Funding – scholarship/other financial aid	5
Professional development – changing or removing	5
Supervision	5
Wellbeing – encouragement/motivation/trust/care	3
Access to training/support services	2
Career and work opportunities	2
Ethics approvals	2
Extending length of degree/candidature	2
Facilities/labs/equipment/software	2
Improving online/cross-campus service delivery	2
Reducing bureaucratic requirements	2
Staff	2
Time/time management	2
Access to research material/resources	1
Compulsory coursework – changing or removing	1
Offices and workspaces	1
Research environment – networking/mentoring/support groups	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.

Pharmacy 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 Pharmacy graduate students was **milestones**. Interesting comments, included:

> *"Shorter written reports for milestones."*
>
> *"Improve assessment for whether proposed PhD project is feasible within 3 years."*

Another area frequently highlighted by Pharmacy graduate students was **University administration**. These comments predominantly related to the following suggestions: provide clear and consistent requirements/instructions in relation to milestones, supervisor/student relationship and professional development, improve communication and improve records management.

Other notable areas frequently discussed in the comments of Pharmacy graduate students, included:

- **Funding** – several graduate students outlined that they wanted greater financial resources/support from the University.

- **Professional development** – changes to the professional development requirements were numerous.
- **Supervision –** several identified supervision as being central to their ability to finish on time.

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

> *"Availability of resources at Parkville campus or at least free transport system to Monash Clayton for access to resources."*
>
> *"Set more realistic goals for students in a 3-year period."*
>
> *"Extend enrolment times for experiment/lab-based degrees."*

5.8 Opportunity for comments regarding your general progress.

Five students from the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 5 Positive comments: 1

General theme	Number of responses
Timeframe too short	2
Health	1
Professional development	1
Slow progress	1

Comments from Pharmacy graduate students, included:

> *"Overall, I am passionate about my project; however, there were a lot of complications with the experiment that has led to me having absolutely no data until 1.5 years into my candidature. This is not uncommon when doing a science research-based PhD … I would recommend having lab-based PhDs as a 4-5-year program (it is much more realistic)."*
>
> *"The overall progress for research is limited by time-consuming and lengthy inductions for instruments and techniques. Out of 3 years of PhD, almost 1 year is totally consumed by finding the instruments [and] getting trained on the instruments. In order to be able to freely use an instrument … first you need to locate the instrument, which most of the time is available at another campus or University. Then you have to get [an] induction on the campus, building, specific floor, lab, and then final induction and training … and you will be able to use [the instrument]."*
>
> *"[The University] could stop changing everything to do with the PhD course every year (e.g. milestone times and requirements). Every student each year seems to have a different opinion on what their requirements are and where to find the correct requirements and where and how to submit them."*

5.9 Summary

More than one-third of Pharmacy respondents (36.6%) had experienced a delay in their research degree, while a similar number (34.1%) had considered discontinuing their enrolment.

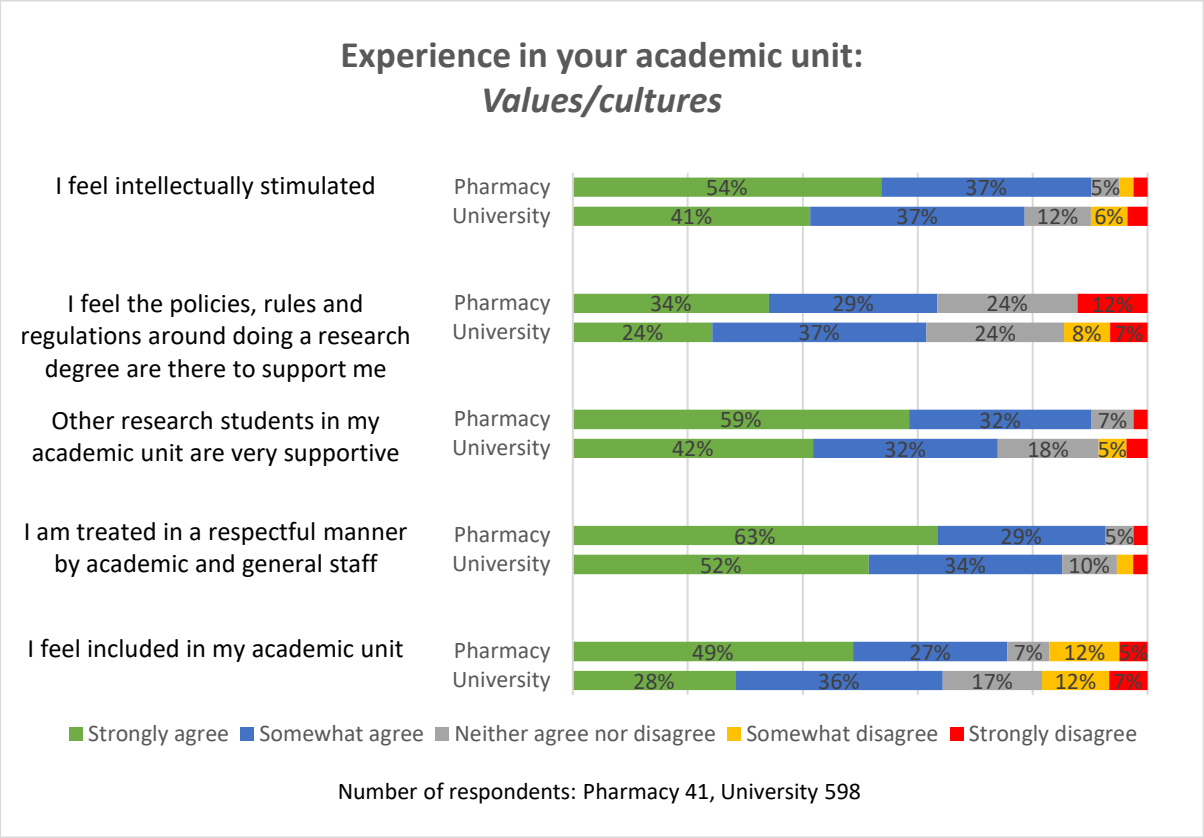
Though it was not directly tracked in this survey, it is interesting to note that there is evidence of a correlation between choosing one's own supervisor and good and timely progress.[19] Presumably this is because prospective students have taken time to consider who is best placed to support their 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 degree, and this was supported in this section with *changing or removing professional development* being the equal-third 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*

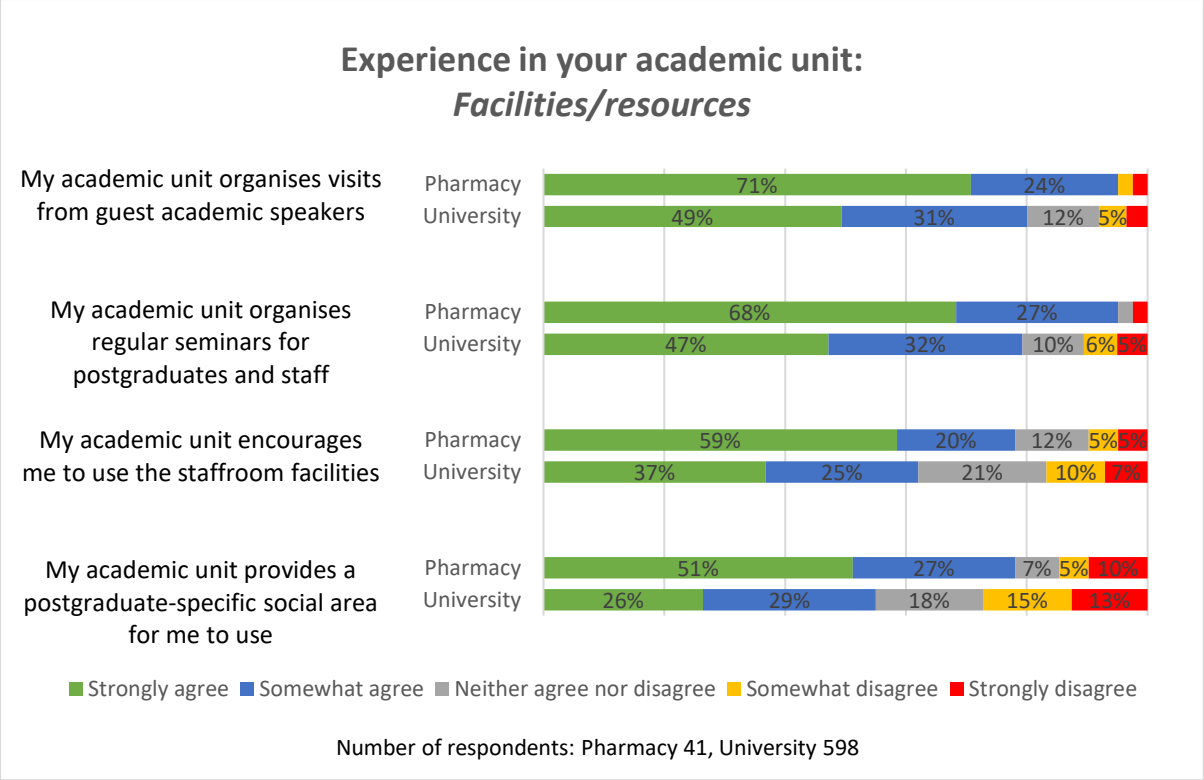
[19] Glenice Ives and Glenn Rowley, "Supervisor selection or allocation and continuity of supervision," 535.

6. School culture and facilities

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

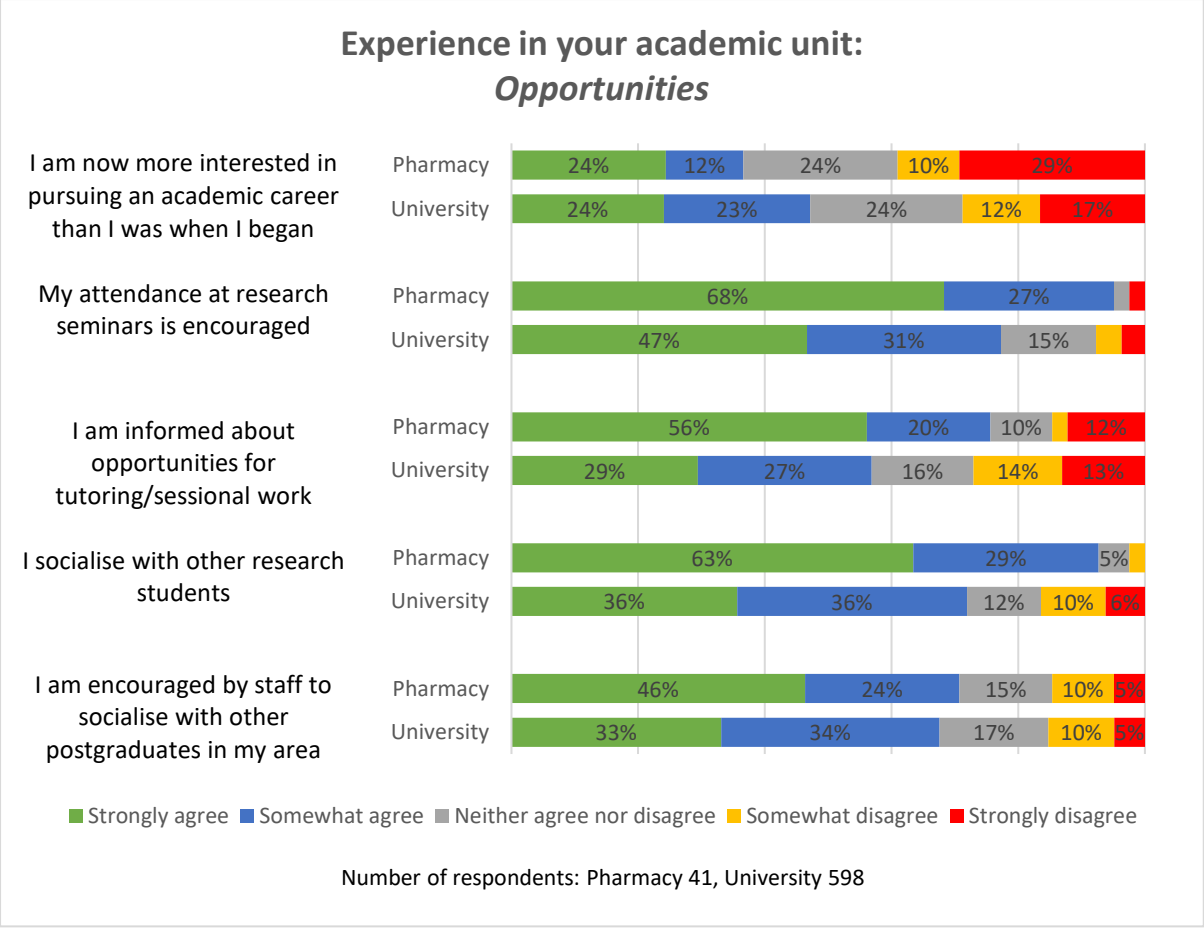


Pharmacy respondents tended to agree with positive statements relating to the values and culture of their academic unit. Overall agreement to each of these statements was higher among Pharmacy respondents than it was for University graduate students.



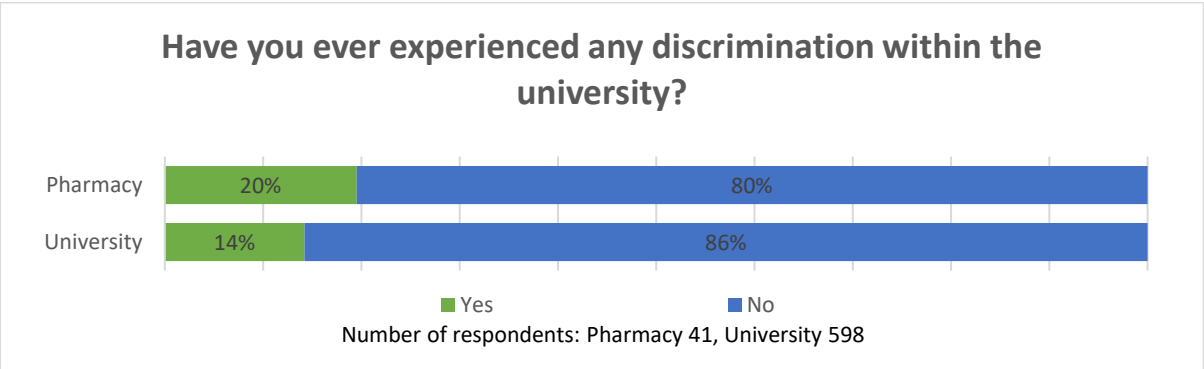
Number of respondents: Pharmacy 41, University 598

Overall agreement with positive statements relating to the facilities and resources available to Pharmacy graduate students was convincing. This was especially true in relation to the statements *'my academic unit organises visits from guest academic speakers'* and *'my academic unit organises regular seminars for postgraduates and staff,'* both of which received 95% total agreement.



Pharmacy graduate students felt that they were encouraged to attend research seminars, while they also socialised with other research students; however, only 36% considered themselves more interested in pursuing a career in academia than when they started their degrees.

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



One in five Pharmacy graduate students had experienced discrimination within Monash University.

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

Nine graduate students from the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 6 Positive comments: 3

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

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

> *"Not treated very nicely or respectfully by the upper members of the administration. These people seem to carry a class prejudice that belongs in the last century."*

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

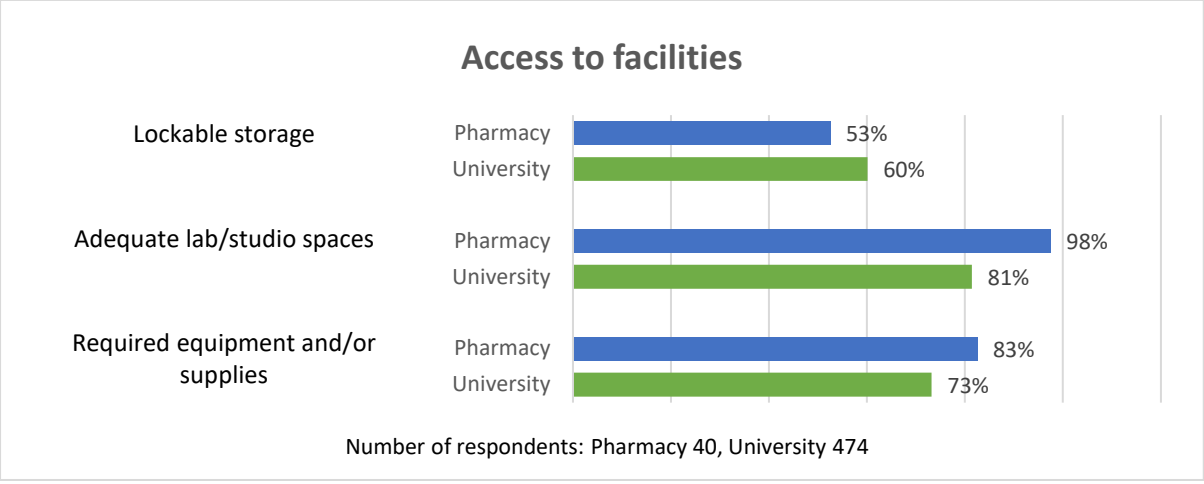
> *"Everyone is very open and respectful."*

Other **notable comments**, included:

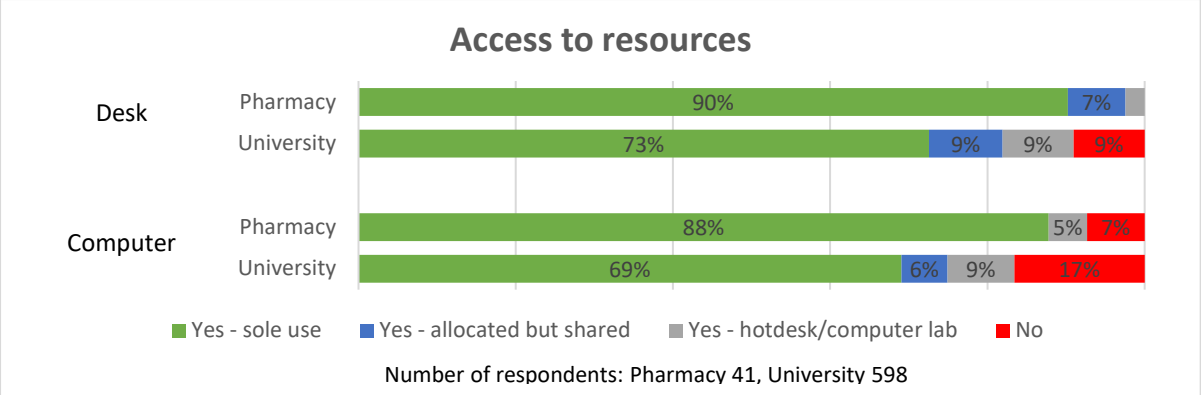
> *"I've experienced casual sexism at the hands of some male scientists, but as far as I know it has not made any major impact on my career progression at this point."*

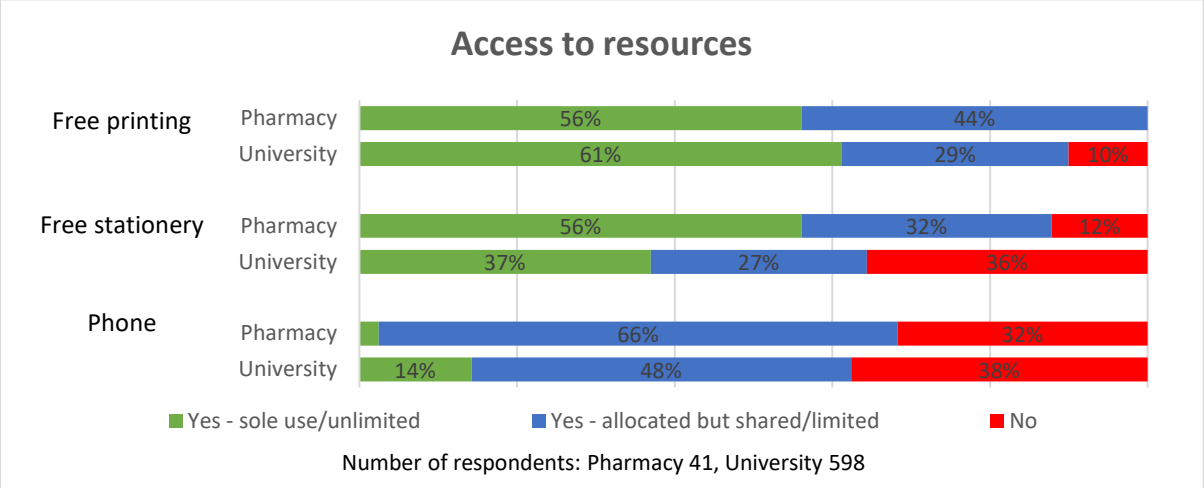
> *"I felt discriminated [against] when I am unable to speak English fluently."*

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

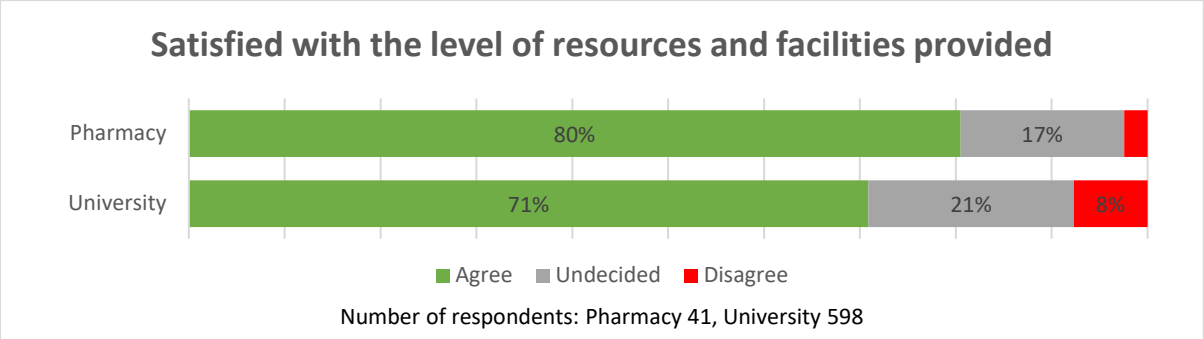


Number of respondents: Pharmacy 40, University 474





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



Four in every five Pharmacy graduate students were satisfied with the level of resources and facilities provided. This made them more satisfied than the average Monash graduate student.

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

Seven graduate students from the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 2 Positive comments: 2

General theme	Number of responses
Chairs	1
Coffee and tea	1
Computers/laptops/monitors	1
Orientation – What resources are available to me?	1
Personal desk	1
Phone	1
Social spaces	1
Standing desks	1
Workshop/lab/studio	1

Two graduate students from the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences reflected positively on the adequacy of the facilities they receive at Monash University, while two reflected negatively.

Regarding facilities that would help support Pharmacy graduate students complete their degrees, there was a range of suggestions made.

Notable comments, included:

> *"Wireless telephone for postgrads in the department to use. There is a telephone room, but if there are any IT issues etc. then we need to call via our mobile phones."*
>
> *"Nicer PhD student room … The one we have now is small and the people who use it tend to not look after it well."*
>
> *"Larger desk space, improved ergonomics with chair and desk height for taller people."*
>
> *"The little kitchenette [in] my office is not supplied with milk for my tea. I have to go to the main tearoom instead. That is my biggest complaint. The facilities are great!"*
>
> *"I have access to all the facilities I could need to complete my doctoral studies."*

6.7 Summary

Arguably the most direct insight into Pharmacy graduate students' sense of belonging is provided through the responses to the statement *'I feel included in my academic unit.'* **Pharmacy 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-

[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.

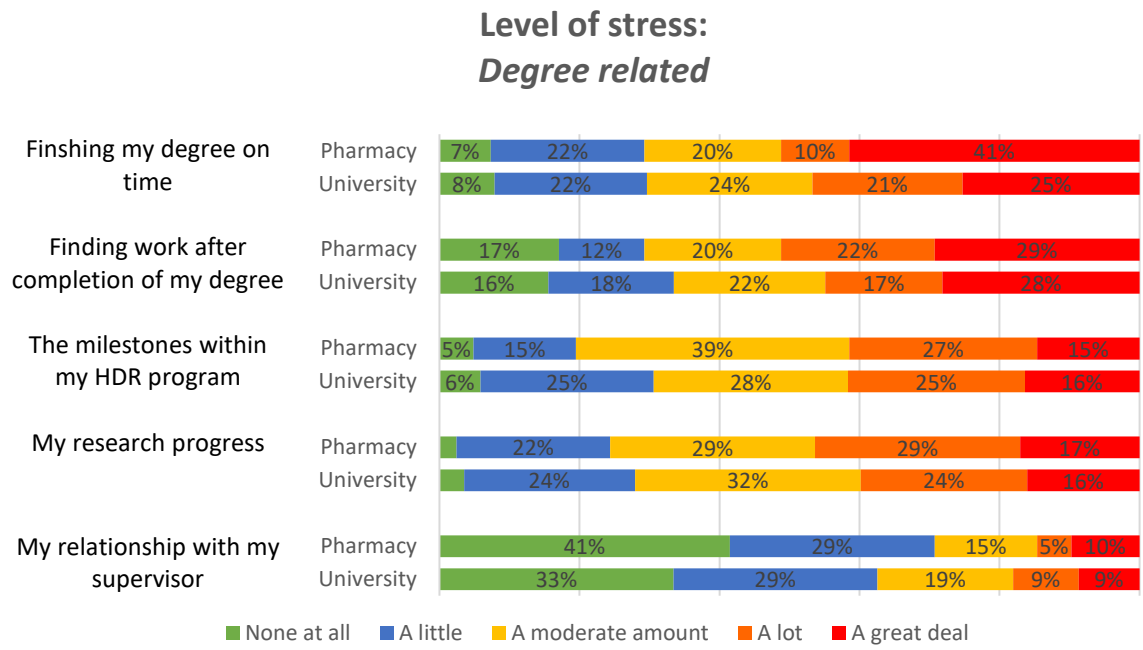
integrated in their research environments experiencing less stress and burnout."[21] This was reflected in the MGA HDR survey with those agreeing with the statement *'I feel included in my academic unit'* repeatedly being less likely to associate an uncomfortable level of stress with all of the stress-related 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**.

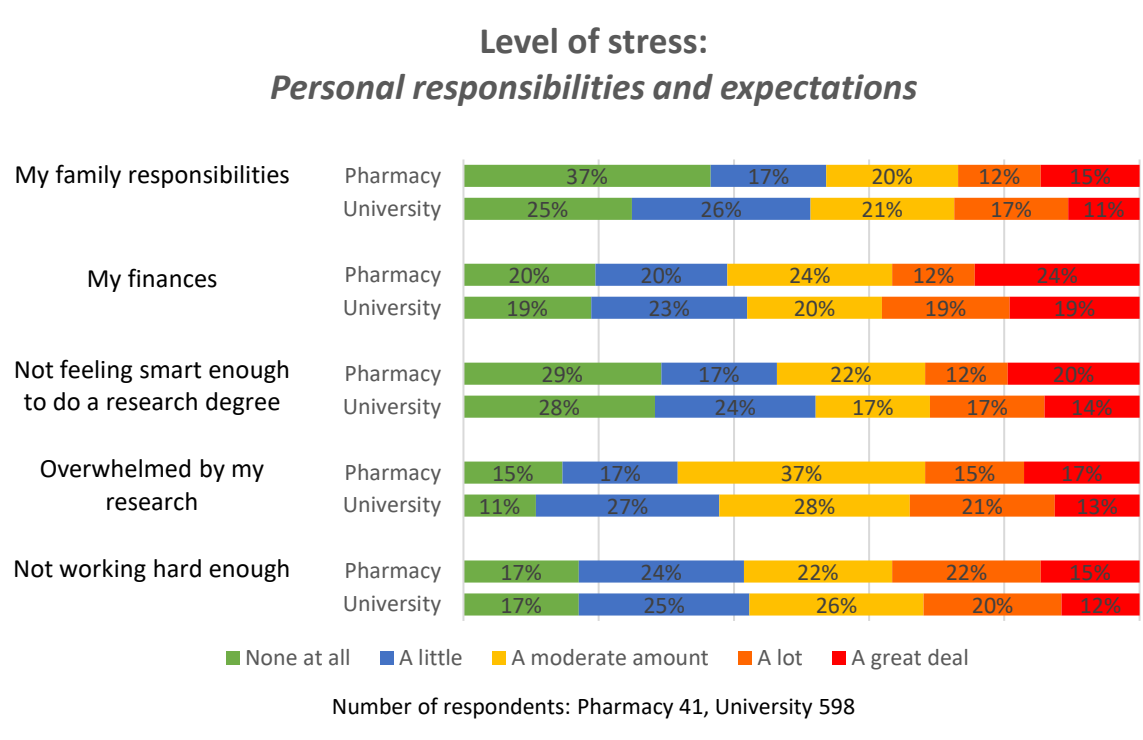
[21] Kim Jesper Herrmann and Gitte Wichmann-Hansen, "Validation of the quality in PhD processes questionnaire," *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education* 8, no. 2 (2017): 192.

7. Stress and wellbeing

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

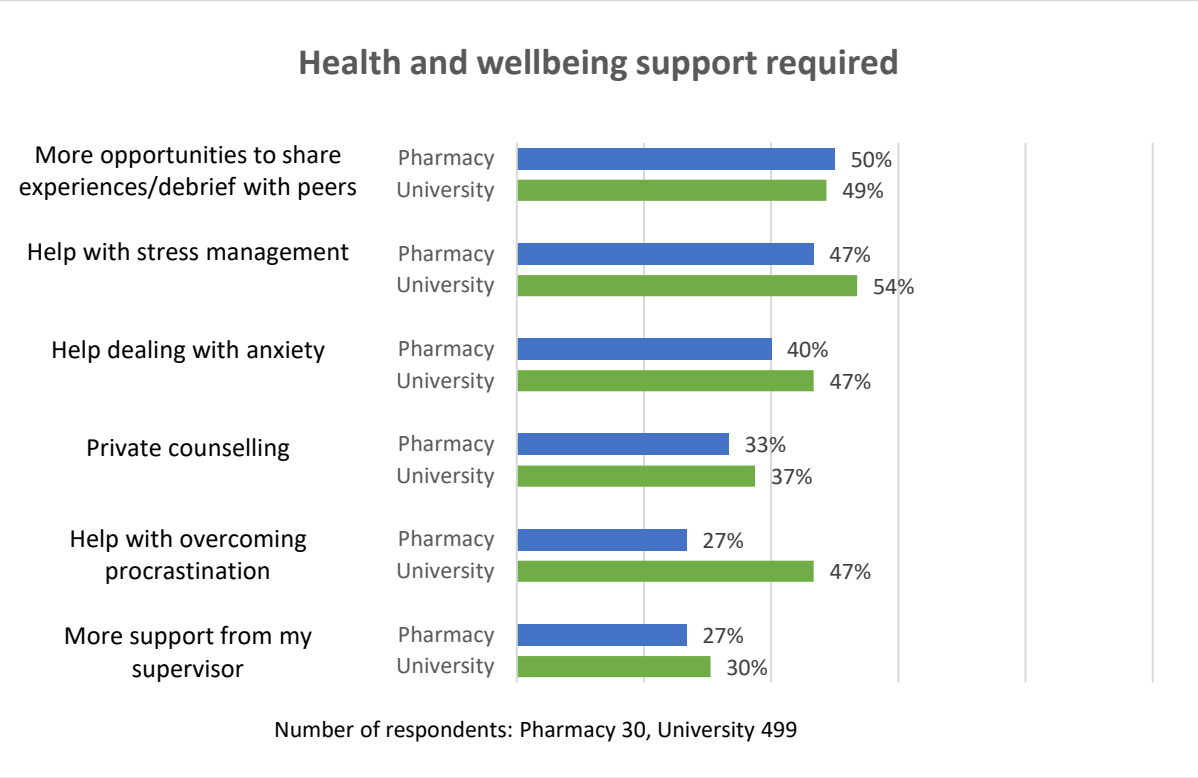


Forty-one percent (41%) of Pharmacy respondents associated *a great deal* of stress with finishing their degree on time; however, only 15% experienced an uncomfortable level of stress when considering their relationship with their supervisor.



Thirty-seven percent (37%) of Pharmacy respondents experienced an uncomfortable level of stress because they thought they were not working hard enough.

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



Having more opportunities to share experiences and debrief with peers was the most popular support service Pharmacy students wanted to receive from the University.

7.3 Opportunity for comments regarding health and wellbeing

Four graduate students from the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Positive comments: 2 Negative comments: 1

General theme	Number of responses
Stress/anxiety/depression/isolation	3

Notable comments to emerge from Pharmacy graduate students, included:

> *"I think we are quite lucky here in Parkville. We do have access to a counsellor and I have been many times. My supervisors, and other academics in the department actively*

encourage students to speak to the counsellor – though perhaps only when issues arise. I think it would be great if we had a seminar on health and wellbeing during our Winter School."

"The current on-campus counselling service is helping and could act as a gateway to further resources should I need them."

"It's definitely a stressful experience!"

7.4 Summary

In relation to their degrees, Pharmacy 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 working hard enough and least-stressed about their family responsibilities.

'More opportunities to share experiences/debrief with peers' was identified as the support that Pharmacy 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.

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]

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 **Pharmacy graduate students could certainly benefit from an increase in social support and wellbeing services**.

[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.
[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?

Twenty-seven graduate students from the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Research – intellectual stimulation and development	9
Facilities/services/resources	7
Student peers and colleagues	6
Supportive environment and culture	6
Monash academics/faculties/staff	5
Monash reputation	4
Financial support/funding	3
Location	2
Supervisors	2
Networking opportunities	1
Social events/environment	1

The aspect of Monash University most frequently referenced by Pharmacy graduate students was **research and intellectual stimulation and development**. Revealing comments, included:

> *"Getting a chance to do research that is translational and collaborative."*
>
> *"Learning and sharing exciting research."*

Several Pharmacy 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: workplace, labs, general facilities, journal access, equipment and world-class facilities.

Other notable comments, included:

> *"Made great friends, who helped me get through my degree."*
>
> *"Monash provides the best research support, including the supervisor, the facility, the database, the staff and peers. Resources are the best."*
>
> *"A stimulating environment with great facilities (in the lab and elsewhere) and a robust culture of excellent people."*
>
> *"Social events in the year."*

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

Twenty-six graduate students from the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	**Number of responses**
Course length and workload	5
Professional development	5
Stress and wellbeing	5
Administration	4
Supervisors	3
Financial issues	2
Milestones	2
Unclear requirements	2
Facilities/services/resources	1
Isolation	1
Lack of support/value	1
Location	1

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

> *"Too much stress and pressure; While spending most of the time in my lab trying to fix experiments, I feel stressed about doing other activities and coursework."*
>
> *"The stress of not finishing before my scholarship ends (3.5 years)."*

Other notable themes to emerge, included:

- **Professional development** – graduate students from Pharmacy 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, Pharmacy researchers were frustrated by the expected completion timeframe and workload.
- **Administration** – several graduate students expressed that there was too much unnecessary paperwork associated with their research.
- **Supervisors** – several students had general issues with the quality of their supervision.

Other notable comments, included:

> *"Feeling like I don't belong in a particular research group courtesy of supervisor behaviour."*
>
> *"I believe [the] PhD experience should include both intellectual and professional development; however, due to very strict time constrains of the Monash PhD, I feel like there is not enough time to accommodate quality thesis completion on time."*

"Research talent is more valued than supervisory talent. Often superstar researchers are the WORST PhD supervisors. More slave owning than tutoring the next generation of scientists."

8.3 How can the research postgraduate experience be improved?

Twenty-one graduate students from the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

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

The primary suggestion that Monash Pharmacy graduate students made related to improving the **facilities, services and/or resources** provided to them as students of the University. Relative comments covered a range of areas, including: food options in Parkville, personal research consultations, shared graduate student facilities and affordable parking.

Other notable themes, included:

- **Administration** – improve the way administrative services operate and communicate with graduate students.
- **Course length** – extending the length of degrees was raised a few times with students often expressing concern that expected completion timelines had not been adjusted to factor in compulsory coursework and/or professional development.
- **Professional development** - respondents from Pharmacy wanted to see professional development improved or removed.

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

"Extending the enrolment back to 4 years so that students don't feel so pressured into the unhealthy work habits (weekends, late nights or both)."

"More focus on health and wellbeing, encouragement to have good work-life balance, nicer facilities, more food options on-campus at Parkville."

"Sort out a plan for the PhD course and then stick to it for a while before updating it."

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

Seven graduate students from the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences responded to this question. Their comments, included:

> *"Overall, I think it's mostly positive."*
>
> *"Keep up the good work MPA!"*
>
> *"I've really grown – personally and professionally – as a result of studying a research degree. I just hope that it will be useful employment-wise in future."*

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 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 research was ranked highest in 'the *best aspects of being a Monash research postgraduate'* responses, while course length and professional development were ranked as the worst.

When it came to the question *'How can the research postgraduate experience be improved?'* administration and communication was a popular suggestion, as were course length and professional development.

(iv) MGA Recommendations

Based on the findings of this survey and direct contact with the Pharmacy 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

Abdullah, Melissa Ng Lee Yen, and Terry Evans. "The relationship between postgraduates research students' psychological attributes and their supervisors' supervision training." *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences* 31 (2012): 788-93.

Bair, Carolyn Richert, 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, 481-534. Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004.

Cornwall, Jon, 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): 363-80.

Halse, Christine, and James Malfroy. "Retheorizing doctoral supervision as professional work." *Studies in Higher Education* 31, no. 1 (2010): 79-92.

Herrmann, Kim Jesper, and Gitte Wichmann-Hansen. "Validation of the quality in PhD processes questionnaire," *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education* 8, no. 2 (2017): 189-204.

Holbrook, Allyson, 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*, edited by. Margaret Kiley and Gerry Mullins, 83-98. Adelaide: Quality of Postgraduate Research Conference, 2006.

Ives, Glenice, 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.

Jairam, Dharmananda, 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): 312-29.

Juniper, Bridget, 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): 563-76.

Kiley, Margaret. "Reflections on change in doctoral education: an Australian case study." *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education* 8, iss. 2 (2017): 78-87.

Lee, Alison, and Jo McKenzie. "Evaluating doctoral supervision: tensions in eliciting students' perspectives." *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 48, no.1 (2011): 69-78.

Lewicka, Maria, Janusz Czapinki and Guido Peeters. "Positive-negative asymmetry or 'When the heart needs a reason'." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 22 (1992): 425-34.

Mantai, Lilia, and Robyn Dowling. "Supporting the PhD journey: insights from acknowledgements." *International Journal for Research Development* 6, no. 2 (2015): 106-21.

Monash University Procedure. *Graduate Research Progress Management Procedures.* Melbourne: Monash University, 2017.

Poncheri, Reanna M., 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): 614-630.

Sight, Clair. *Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2017: Experiences and personal outlook of postgraduate researchers.* Heslington (UK): The Higher Education Academy, 2017.

Van de Schoot, Rens, Mara A. Yerkes, Jolien M. Mouw, and Hans Sonneveld. “What took them so long? Explaining PhD delays among doctoral candidates.” *PLos One* 8, no. 7 (2013).

(vi) Appendix 1

Demographics of respondents from Pharmacy

Faculty (Schools)	Count	Percentage
Centre for Medicine Use and Safety	6	13.0%
Drug Delivery Biology	10	21.7%
Drug Delivery, Disposition and Dynamics	23	50.0%
Medicinal Chemistry	7	15.2%

Mode of attendance	Count	Percentage
Internal (on-campus)	46	100%
External (off-campus)	0	0%

Nationality	Count	Percentage
Domestic student	29	63.0%
International student	17	37.0%

Attendance type	Count	Percentage
Full-time	45	97.8%
Part-time	1	2.2%

Gender	Count	Percentage
Female	33	71.7%
Male	12	26.1%
Prefer not to answer	1	2.2%

Enrolled Program	Count	Percentage
PhD	45	97.8%
Masters by research	1	2.2%

Scholarship	Count	Percentage
Receives Scholarship	42	91.3%
No scholarship	3	6.5%
No, but I have previously held a scholarship	1	2.2%