



# Identifying HDR Student Satisfaction

Monash University 2022

The Monash Graduate Association would like to thank all those who assisted in the production and distribution of this survey. We would also like to thank our graduate students at Monash University who completed the survey.

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## Executive summary

In September and October of 2021, the Monash Graduate Association (MGA) conducted a survey of Monash Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students. A similar survey was conducted by the MGA in 2017, allowing for comparisons to be made in this report.

The main findings are summarised below:

### **COVID-19**

It is important to note that 2020 and 2021 were severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent domestic and international restrictions on in-person attendance and travel.

The pandemic presented substantial challenges for university administrators, supervisors and HDRs with study, communication, content delivery (Coursework and Professional Development), access to resources, research methodology and progress reviews among the factors directly affected.

When asked to reflect on the biggest impact COVID-19 had on their degree, the top five response themes were – data collection difficulty, mental health, isolation, lack of motivation and lack of networking.

### **Enrolment at Monash**

Meanwhile, in 2021, 81% of Monash HDRs had planned to spend the majority of study time on campus; however, local and international COVID restrictions restricted on-campus attendance to just 23% of HDRs.

### **Supervision**

Students were overwhelmingly satisfied with their supervision at Monash with overall satisfaction with one's course closely linked to overall satisfaction with supervision.

Respondents who did not choose their own supervisors were more likely than those who did to experience a conflict with their supervisors, while they were almost three-times as likely to be dissatisfied with their supervision overall.

### **Milestones**

Students were predominantly satisfied with each of the milestone processes, with students most satisfied with the behaviour and tone of the panel and most dissatisfied that the preparation was a good use of their time.

There were no major differences across demographic groups in relation to the milestone processes.

## **Coursework**

Just over half of those who had completed at least one unit found Coursework to be beneficial, while approximately one in five students did not.

Satisfaction with the quality, relevance and usefulness of Coursework had increased since 2017; however, satisfaction levels were all well below those recorded for supervision and milestones.

## **Professional Development**

Respondents were more likely to find Professional Development beneficial than not; however, almost a quarter of respondents were not sure.

International students (55%) were more likely than domestic students (39%) to feel that Professional Development was beneficial.

Satisfaction with the quality, relevance and usefulness of Professional Development remained largely on par with 2017 levels; however, satisfaction levels were all well below those recorded for supervision and milestones, while dissatisfaction levels were relatively high – even in comparison to Coursework.

While success rates for those applying for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) increased from 2017 levels, so too did the percentage of people not knowing that it was available (44%).

## **Progress delays and effect on enrolment**

The majority of respondents (58%) indicated that their research had been delayed, which represented a sizeable increase on 2017 levels. The COVID-19 pandemic was an almost ever-present factor in why research had been delayed with 91% of respondents suggesting it had played a role in their delay. Lack of motivation (36%), health issues (28%), change of project direction (28%) and family responsibilities (25%) rounded out the top five.

Despite these delays, 65% of respondents thought that they had a reasonable amount of time to complete their degree.

Meanwhile, just under a third of respondents (30%) had considered leaving their degree with COVID-19 (52%), lack of motivation (49%) and poor supervision (34%) the top three reasons given for this consideration. The top three reasons given for choosing to remain after considering leaving were “personal belief/drive/fear”, “supervisors/staff” and “time already invested”.

Finally, 31% of domestic students had made a change to their enrolment since commencing their degree, compared to 16% of international students.

## **Services, facilities and culture**

Over two-thirds (69%) of respondents were satisfied that they felt included in their academic unit. Respondents were consistently more satisfied than dissatisfied on the metrics of academic culture; however, those who had experienced conflict with a supervisor and those who had considered

leaving their degree were more likely to be dissatisfied than satisfied that they felt encouraged to pursue an academic career.

Over half of Monash HDRs (52%) had been given the opportunity to tutor during their degree. While most students (74%) were satisfied that they were paid appropriately for this work, 26% did not believe that they were paid appropriately.

The overwhelming majority of respondents (89%) believed that internships were beneficial to a research degree; however, several qualified their support by saying that they needed to be relevant, financially rewarding and the time they took needed to be factored into the length of the degree.

Three-quarters of HDRs were satisfied overall with the facilities and services provided by the University, while respondents were overwhelmingly satisfied with the library service.

### **Stress and wellbeing**

Monash HDR respondents were most-stressed in relation to their research progress and with finishing their degree on time, while they were least stressed in relation to the Coursework and Professional Development components of their degrees.

Meanwhile, over half of Monash HDRs reported that their mental health had declined in the last year, while just over one-in-five indicated that it had improved. In relation to what the University could do to help improve the mental health of HDRs, respondents' top three suggestions were improving/continuing the counselling service, providing social support and activities and amending/introducing new policies to address their situations e.g. extensions.

### **Overall experience**

Monash HDRs were widely satisfied with the quality of their degree (80%), likely to feel that they made the correct decision in choosing Monash (79%) and would recommend Monash to their peers (76%).

Meanwhile, respondents reported that Monash compared favourably rather than negatively to their previous institutions by a ratio of approximately 3:1.



## Introduction

The Monash Graduate Association (MGA) ran a survey of Monash graduate students in September and October of 2021. In relation to HDR students, the aim of the MGA's *Survey on Graduate Student Satisfaction at Monash 2021* was to measure the experiences that students had of their degrees by exploring their satisfaction levels with different elements of their programs. The survey was advertised in the MGA newsletter, the MGA website, through MGA social media channels and through contacts with Monash 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 50 gift cards worth \$100 in value) was used to assist in attracting a representative sample.

A total of 789 Monash HDR students completed the survey (see *Appendix 1: Demographics*), which is estimated to be between 15-20% of enrolled HDRs at the University.

This report presents both quantitative and qualitative data from Monash University HDR students as it relates to their satisfaction and experiences with their degree. For results specific to an individual faculty, please refer to the MGA's *Identifying HDR student satisfaction* report for that faculty.

The MGA HDR survey sought responses from Monash HDR students to multiple choice and *Likert*-scale questions to provide a general overview of how respondents viewed key components of their degree at the institutional and faculty level.<sup>1</sup> It also asked open-ended questions in order to provide a level of insight into the diversity of opinions and the challenges faced by graduate students.

In order to better comprehend the data and identify trends, a number of comparisons were run based on a student's characteristics, such as gender or citizenship, or responses to a specific question e.g. *Have you had any conflict or misunderstanding with any of your supervisors?* Details of the demographics of respondents are provided in Appendix 1.

Participants were regularly invited to make general comments within broad subject areas and/or respond to open-ended questions. Their answers were analysed and coded into common themes. Where relevant, responses were coded under multiple themes.

While the responses of graduate students have been taken at face-value, it is important to reflect on the positive-negative asymmetry (PNA) effect. The PNA effect is two-part: firstly, it incorporates the positivity bias, which refers to an individual's inclination towards favourable perceptions of phenomena that are novel or do not directly impact them;<sup>2</sup> and, secondly, it incorporates the negativity bias which, in part, relates to how individuals are more curious about negative than positive stimuli and therefore are more mobilised by negative events.<sup>3</sup> In the context of this survey, this may mean that answers to the quantitative questions are disproportionately positive, while the

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<sup>1</sup> Where responses were under 5% (e.g. the total number of students responding 'extremely dissatisfied to a question/statement was less than 5%), the figure has been removed from the tables to avoid them becoming incomprehensible.

<sup>2</sup> Maria Lewicka, Janusz Czapinski and Guido Peeters, "Positive-negative asymmetry or 'When the heart needs a reason'," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 22 (1992): 426.

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

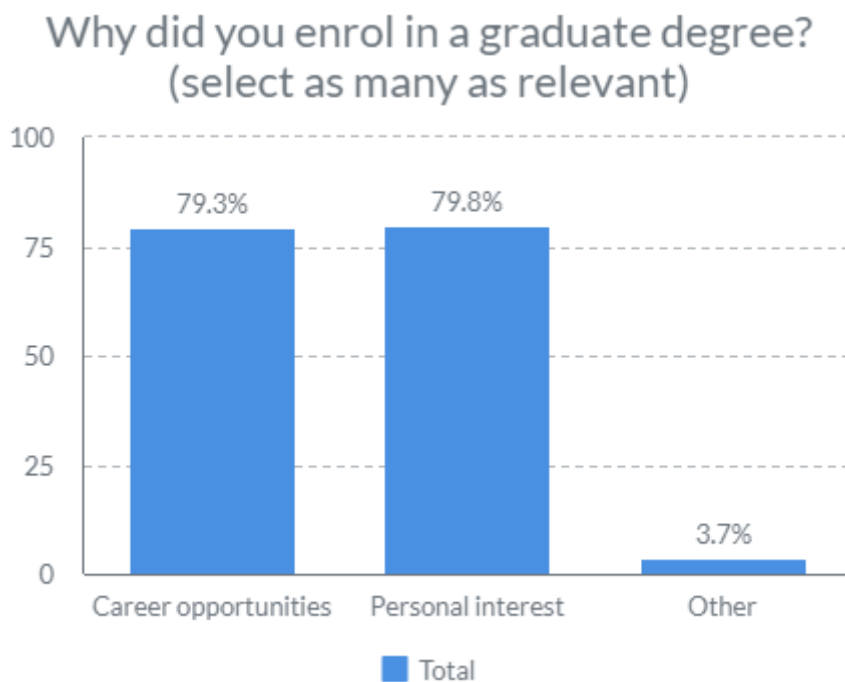
responses to the qualitative (open-ended) questions are disproportionately negative given that graduate students were not required to provide a response.

This research has been approved by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee.

## Enrolment at Monash

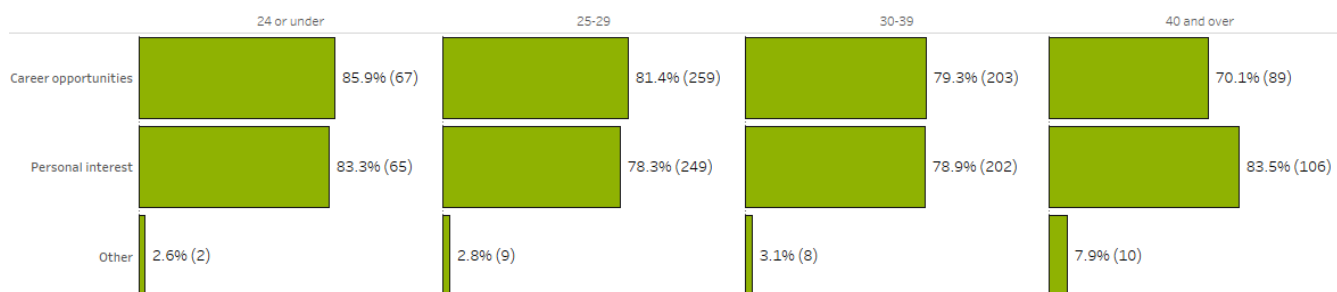
The following questions were asked in relation to HDR students' overall experience at the university.

### Reasons for enrolment

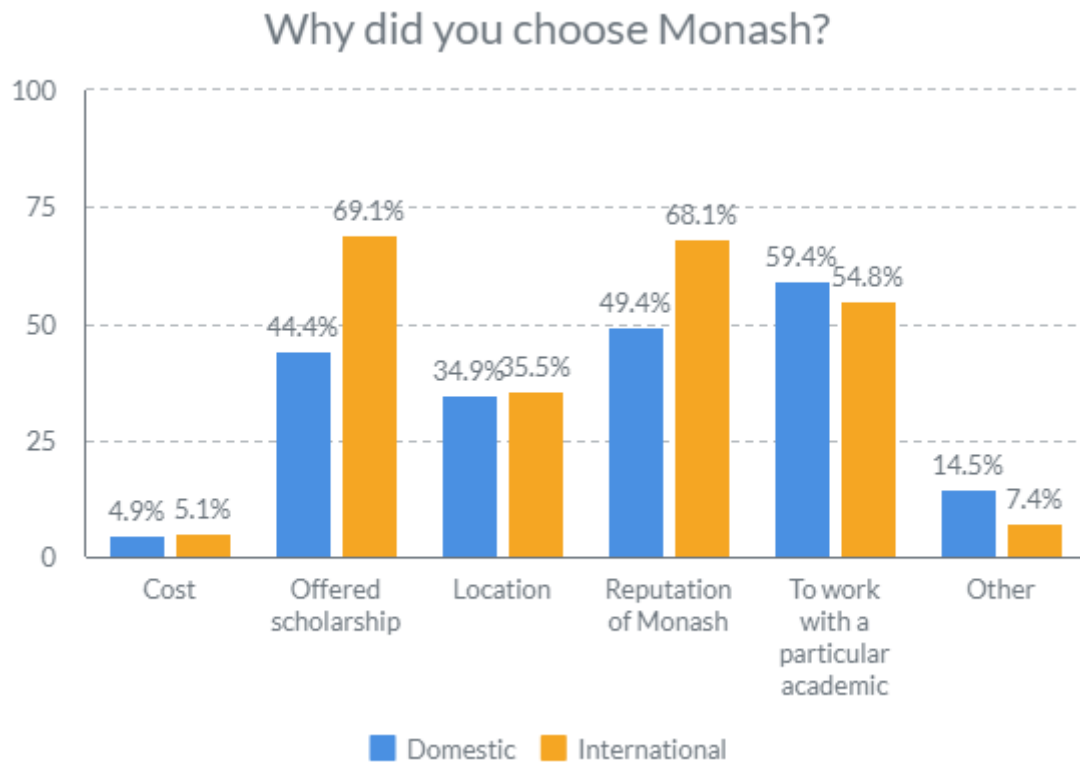


Respondents were as likely to be enrolling because they were pursuing something of personal interest to them as they were to be wanting to enhance their career opportunities; however, the younger they were the more likely it was that they were wanting to enhance their career opportunities:

### Age by reason for enrolling



## Choice of Monash University

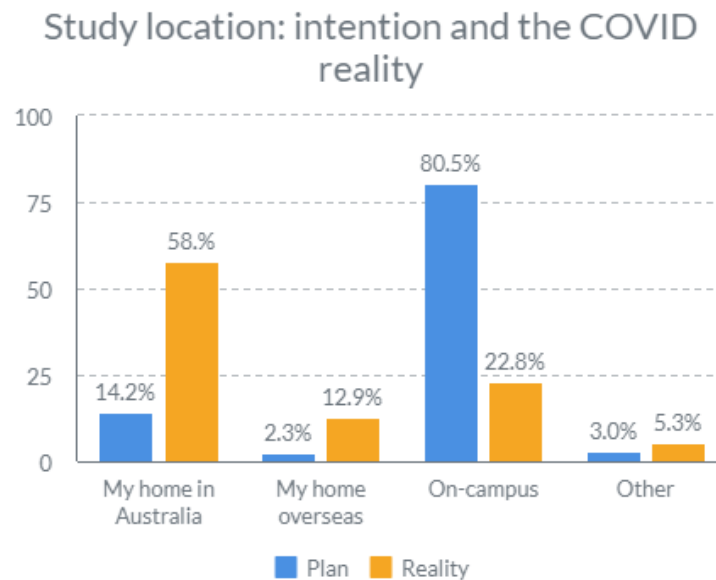


The reputation of the university was the primary reason given by HDR students as to why they chose Monash; however, both working with a particular academic and being offered a scholarship were close behind.

International students put greater emphasis on being offered a scholarship and the reputation of the university as reasons for choosing Monash than did domestic students, while location and working with a particular academic decreased in importance the older a respondent got.

## Location of study

HDR students were asked two questions in relation to their study location for 2021. Firstly, they were asked 'during COVID where did you mostly study?' Secondly, they were asked where they intended to study in 2021.



The majority of Monash HDR students had planned on predominantly studying on campus in 2021; however, only 23% of students said that this occurred.

Meanwhile, only 4% of international HDR respondents had planned on studying at their home overseas in 2021, but this ended up being the reality for 23% of them.

## Supervision

Respondents were asked a series of questions in relation to their supervision experience at Monash University.

### Choice of supervisor

Did you choose your supervisor?	Respondents
Yes	86.8%
No	13.2%

Previous studies have identified that doctoral students who choose their own supervisor are more likely to complete their degree than those assigned a supervisor.<sup>4</sup>

In the *MGA Survey on Graduate Student Satisfaction at Monash 2021*, those who had chosen their supervisor were half as likely as those who had not to have experienced conflict or misunderstanding with a supervisor, while they were also less likely to have made changes to their enrolment.

When it came to overall satisfaction with supervisors, those who had chosen their own supervisors were far less likely to be dissatisfied (7.8%) than those who had not chosen their own (21.4%).

Students who had studied at Monash previously were 10% more likely to have chosen their own supervisor.

Meanwhile, the younger a student was the more likely it was that they chose their own supervisor. Of those aged 30 and over, 19% did not choose their own supervisor, whereas only 8% of those under 30 did not choose their supervisor.

### Choice of topic

Did you choose your topic?	Respondents
Yes	75.8%
No	24.2%

Three-quarters of Monash HDRs chose their own topic of research. As was the case with those who chose their own supervisors, those who chose their own topic were less likely to experience conflict with a supervisor – although this was more marginal for topic choice.

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<sup>4</sup> Karen Hunter and Kay Devine, "Doctoral student's emotional exhaustion and intentions to leave academia," *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* 11 (2016): 40.

Meanwhile, when it came to overall satisfaction with supervisors, those who did not choose their own topic were twice as likely to be dissatisfied than those who did.

## Research policy

Have you read the Monash research policy? <sup>5</sup>	2017	2021
Yes	57.8%	70.0%
No, but I've heard of them	25.3%	19.7%
No, I didn't know about them	16.9%	10.3%

The majority of Monash HDRs had read the Monash research policy, while around one in ten students did not know about it.

HDR students were more familiar with the Monash research policy in 2021 than they were when this question was last asked of them in 2017.

Those who had read the research policy were less likely to report conflict with a supervisor.

## Supervisor's responsibility

Are you aware of your supervisor's responsibilities?	2017	2021
Yes	79.8%	85.4%
No	3.3%	2.6%
Not sure	16.9%	12.0%

The overwhelming majority of Monash HDRs were aware of the responsibilities that their supervisors had. This majority represented a slight increase on 2017 levels.

Those who had experienced conflict with a supervisor (73%) were less aware of the responsibilities of their supervisors than were those who had not experienced such a conflict (88%).

Meanwhile, those who had enrolled during COVID (92%) were more likely than those who had enrolled prior to COVID (83%) to be aware of their supervisor's responsibilities.

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<sup>5</sup> In 2017, the wording of the questions was slightly different and referred to the "Code of Practice for supervision of doctoral/research matters" rather than the "research policy."

## Personal responsibility

Are you aware of your own responsibilities?	2017	2021
Yes	88.6%	91.5%
No	2.1%	1.7%
Not sure	9.3%	6.9%

The overwhelming majority of Monash HDRs were aware of their own responsibilities.

## Conflict with supervisor

Have you had any conflict or misunderstanding with any of your supervisors?	2017	2021
Yes	16.2%	16.7%
No	83.8%	83.3%

The likelihood of experiencing conflict with a supervisor remained at approximately the same level in 2021 as it did in 2017 with 17% of HDR students indicating that they had experienced conflict with a supervisor.

In regard to the faculties, respondents from MADA (45%) were the most likely to have experienced conflict, while those enrolled through Engineering, Pharmacy and Science (12%) were the least likely.

Female respondents (18%) were more likely than male respondents (14%) to have experienced conflict with a supervisor; however, this gap was reduced in 2021 compared to 2017.

Likewise, females enrolled in a STEM faculty (17%) were more likely than males in STEM (14%) to have experienced conflict with a supervisor; however, this gap had drastically reduced from 2017 when female STEM respondents were more than three-times as likely as their male colleagues to have experienced conflict with a supervisor.

Age was relative to the likelihood of experiencing conflict with a supervisor – particularly if the student had not chosen their supervisor. Of those who had not chosen their supervisor, just over one in three respondents aged 30 and over reported conflict with a supervisor, compared to just under one in five aged less than 30.

Of those who had experienced conflict with a supervisor, 60% had considered leaving their degree.



## Type of conflict



One of the most-common themes in regard to conflict with supervisors was in relation to **communication** issues. These comments included:

*"I had mentioned I would do something after a certain aspect of my research was done but my supervisors forgot and thought that I would do that first and that led to a misunderstanding which made things a bit rough for a while as they felt I was disregarding them which was not the case."*

*"Poor communication among supervisors relating to my topic which impeded the clarity of feedback and led to delays. The minor supervisor also barely answered emails."*

*"We just seem to speak a different language. One of my supervisors often misunderstands me. I think it's because they are too busy with too many supervisees and can't remember the details of my project."*

The other most-common theme was in regard to HDR students feeling **unsupported** – largely because of **poor quality guidance and feedback**. Comments included:

*"Lack of supervision early on, was very much left to my own devices. When we did meet there was a tendency to focus on projects but not answer questions about framing my research or what I should be doing to progress the PhD, just projects for the department I was working on."*

*"They have not provided me with enough support or guidance. I feel like I have been left to fend for myself. I am behind on my work in part because of COVID lockdowns stopping me from coming to the lab. I have lost months of work and I feel as though they are not understanding at all."*

*"My first supervisor had a very fixed idea about what they thought I should be doing, which aligned with their research. When my reading started taking me in other directions they were very resistant and discouraged me from pursuing research in other directions. They were also very demanding and after each supervision meeting, I felt very flat and unmotivated."*

Several students complained about the **accessibility** of their supervision team. These included:

*"The previous co-supervisor not replying emails and refuse to communicate."*

*"COVID has been taxing on all of us, but I think supervisors are swamped with work that we don't get many meetings as we should."*

*"Lack of supervision. My main supervisors are as good as non-existent as far as the supervision of the project is concerned."*

Clashes over the **direction of research** were also relatively frequent among those who had experienced conflict. These included:

*"Being pushed in a research direction that wasn't really relevant to me."*

*"Differences in the importance of certain research points over other ones."*

*"I have had seven supervisors thus far, only one changing through my own choice. One had a personal dislike for my theoretical framework, although they agreed that it was the right one to use. Two have retired, one discovered that they were overworked, and one left by mutual agreement to simplify my team. It's been messy! Having so many changes has meant that new supervisors sometimes disagree strongly with the direction of previous supervisors."*

Several students accused their supervisors of **inappropriate and unprofessional behaviour**.

Comments included:

*"Abuse of power; sexual harassment; ethical processing of supervision and academic publishing."*

*"Misunderstanding about my financial situation. I was unnecessarily blamed as I could not pay a conference registration fee."*

*"How information shared in our supervision was used in places outside of supervision."*

**Other interesting comments** included:

*"More just a misunderstanding of expectations both ways and little face-to-face contact due to COVID felt like some missed opportunities for learning in the lab."*

*"I have had to complete an exorbitant amount of professional development, more than my peers in my cohort."*

*"Co-supervisor expected unpaid work on unrelated project."*

*"Supervisor telling me to do unpaid work on one of their research projects that was not part of my PhD. They made it seem compulsory."*

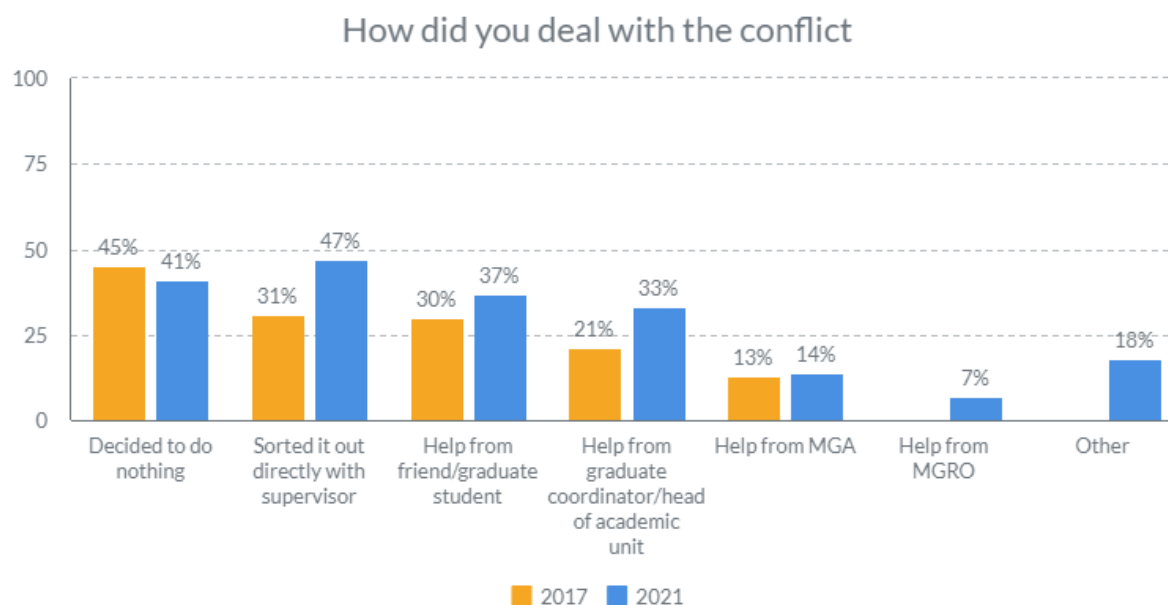
*"I have lost 4 supervisors along the way...all because of their change of university or retirement. I am currently working with Supervisor 2, 4 and 5."*

*"My supervisors have a unique way of "supporting" their students, it's very much every man for himself and there isn't a culture of being able to ask for help or seek advice. This led to*

*general conflict or dissatisfaction between my supervisors and myself. Students aren't made to feel like a priority in the lab and rather a burden, "costing" the lab money and funding - as opposed to postdocs who are writing grants etc."*

*"Unsupportive and limited understanding of challenges inherent to people of my background."*

## Dealt with conflict



The most-common response from Monash HDRs to the presence of conflict with a supervisor was to sort it out directly with the supervisor – 47% of respondents indicated that this was part of their course of action. This represented a 16% increase on 2017 levels.

However, doing nothing and trying to work around it (41%), seeking help from a friend/another graduate student (37%) or seeking assistance from a graduate coordinator/head of department (33%) were also common responses.

Those who selected “other” mentioned a range of responses, which included seeking help from another supervisor, changing supervisors or adding an additional supervisor. Seeking assistance from advisory panel members or health professionals were also listed in these responses.

Meanwhile, students under the age of thirty were 21% more likely than those aged thirty and above to sort out their conflict with their supervisors directly, while international students were 15% more likely than domestic students to do so.

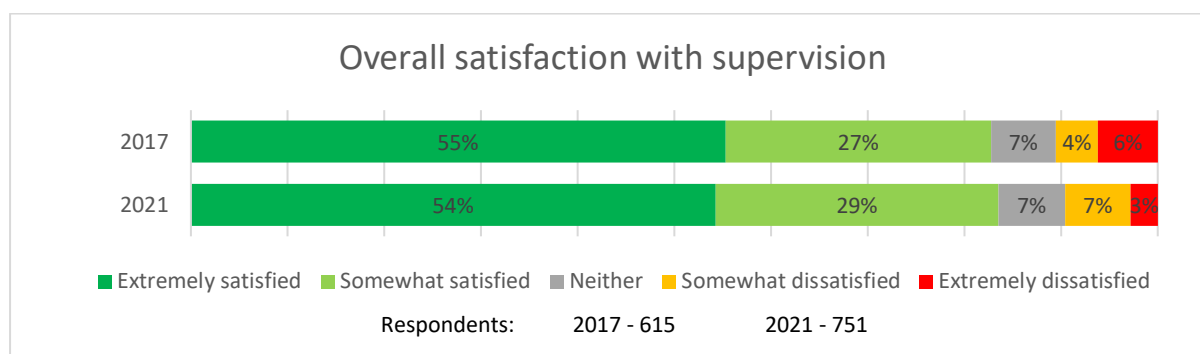
Those living with a disability were 20% more likely than those not living with a disability to decide to do nothing and try and work around the conflict.

Female students were 19% more likely than male students to seek assistance from the MGA.

## Supervisor satisfaction

Respondents were asked a series of questions relating to their satisfaction with the performance of their supervisors.

### Overall supervisor satisfaction



In regard to overall satisfaction with supervisors, 83% of Monash HDRs were satisfied while 10% were dissatisfied, with these numbers remaining on par with those recorded in 2017.

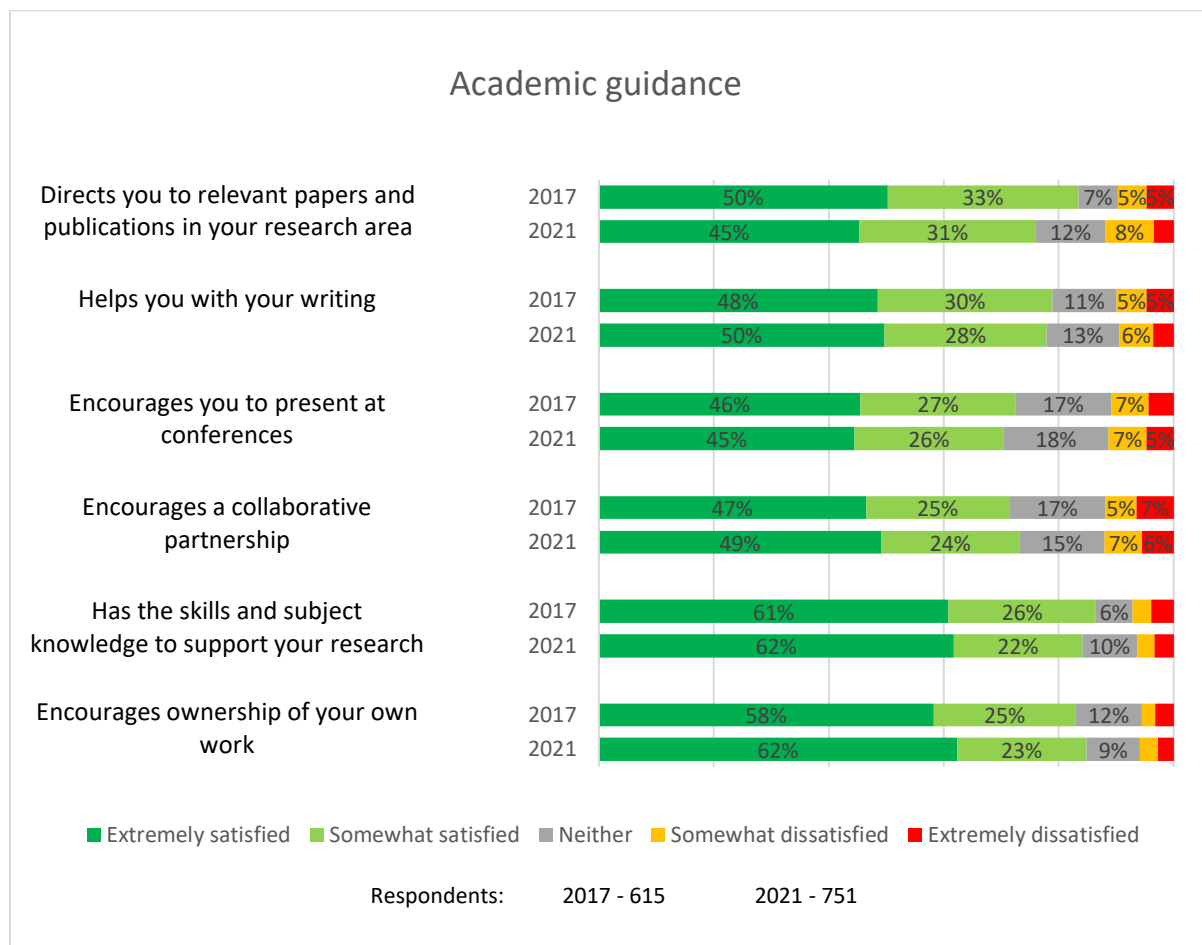
Overall satisfaction scores remained relatively consistent across demographic groups; however, those living without a disability were 20% more satisfied than those living with a disability, while those who had enrolled prior to COVID-19 were over two and half times more dissatisfied than those who enrolled during the pandemic.

Students who had experienced conflict with a supervisor were over seven times as likely to be dissatisfied with their supervision than those who had not experienced conflict, while those who had considered leaving their degree were over four times as likely to be dissatisfied than those who had not.

Overall satisfaction with one's degree was closely linked to overall satisfaction with supervision. For instance, of those who "strongly agreed" that they were satisfied with the quality of their degree, 98% were either strongly or somewhat satisfied with their supervision, while of those who "strongly disagreed" that they were satisfied with the quality of their degree, 55% were either strongly or somewhat dissatisfied with their supervision.

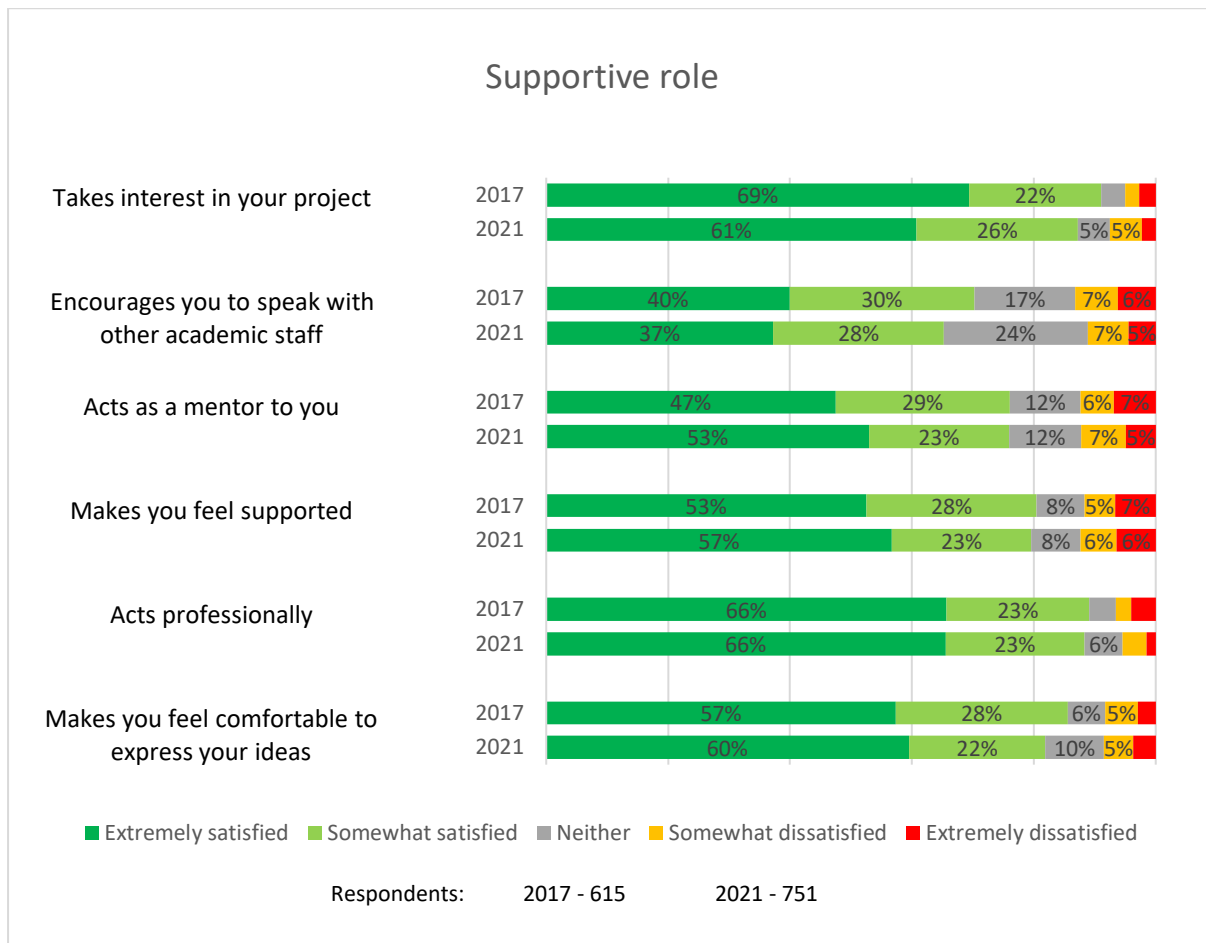
As mentioned previously, those who had not chosen their own supervisor were almost three-times as likely to be dissatisfied with their supervision overall, while those who had not chosen their own topic were twice as likely to be dissatisfied.

## Academic guidance



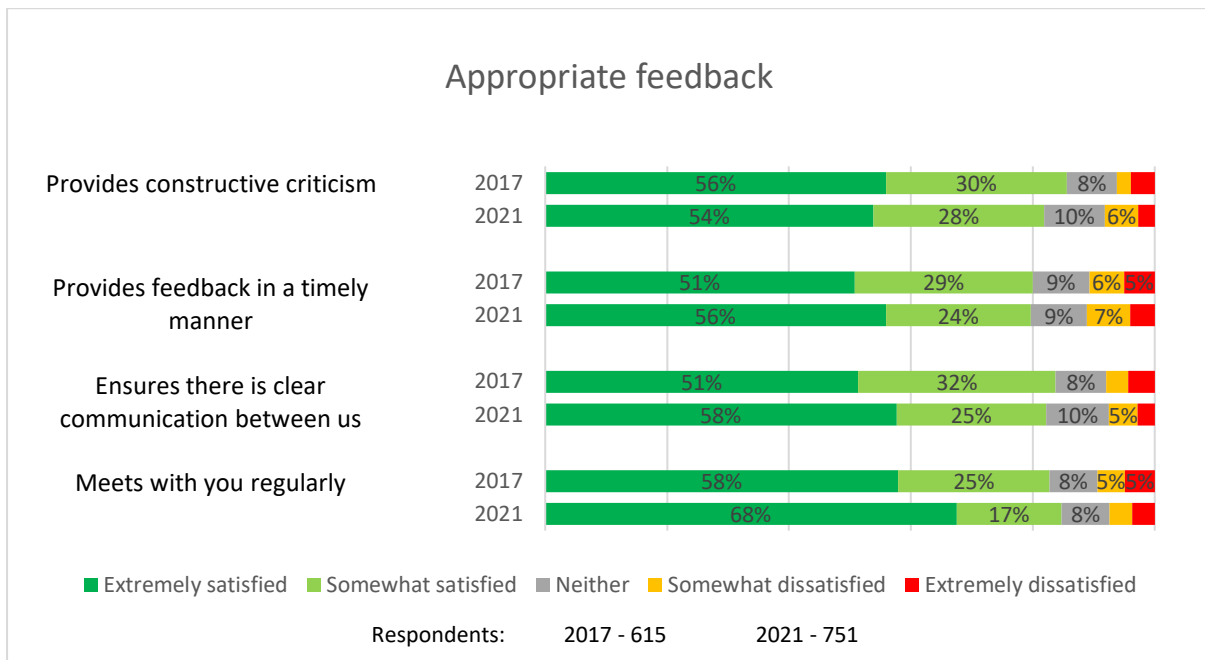
Satisfaction in regard to academic guidance remained fairly consistent with 2017 levels. Respondents remained most satisfied in regard to the skills and subject knowledge of their supervisors; however, in 2021 students were most dissatisfied with their supervisors' ability to direct them to relevant papers and publications in their research areas.

## Supportive role



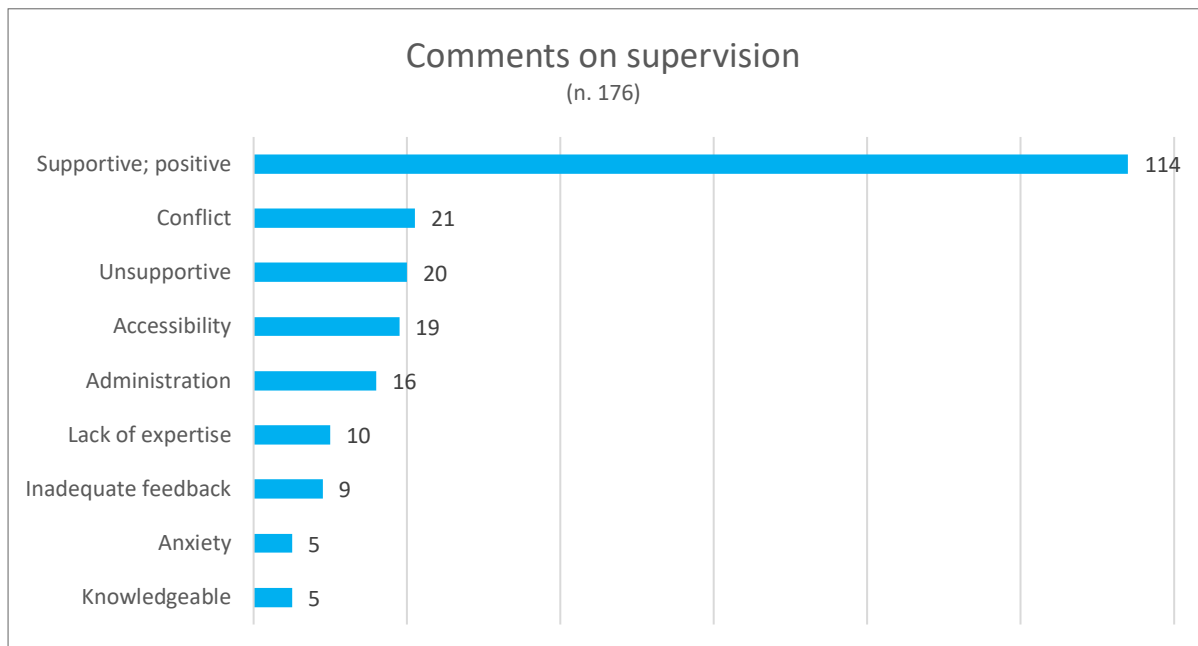
Respondents were marginally less satisfied with the supportive role of their supervisors in 2021 than they were in 2017. In 2021, students were most-satisfied that their supervisors acted professionally and, while dissatisfaction numbers were low, they were most-dissatisfied with the idea that they were made to feel supported.

## Appropriate feedback



Satisfaction with the nature of feedback remained on par with 2017 levels. Respondents were most satisfied with the regularity of supervisor meetings and, while dissatisfaction numbers were low, they were most-dissatisfied that supervisors' provided feedback in a timely manner.

## Comments on supervision



The majority of comments from HDRs were **positive reflections** on how **supportive supervisors** had been through their research. These included:

*“Things couldn't have been better in terms of my supervisors' support, encouragement, mentoring, pro-activeness, time-management, knowledge and the list goes on. Last year I had personal loss ... My supervisors supported me and made sure my mental health is OK. They checked on me regularly. They are so knowledgeable and yet so down to earth. I feel they are in every step of my journey. They encourage me to take up higher challenges and brings out the best in me. I feel truly blessed to have them as my supervisors.”*

*“My supervisors provide fantastic expert guidance, and have been very responsive to my needs as they change over the course of my studies - including time periods where I felt I needed more support or an increased number of meetings.”*

*“Since changing associate supervisor, I am very happy with the overall support and encouragement and understanding of my supervisors. Covid-19 restrictions have been hard to endure with respect to time for work and being home with primary school aged children. I feel very supported and encouraged by my current supervisors.”*

Several students took this opportunity to highlight a **conflict** that they had encountered with their supervisors. Comments included:

*“My supervisor has told me: “of all the students affected by the pandemic, you should be the least”; my project is not innovative enough to even win a student grant; “why are you stuck*



*in a rabbit hole" without giving any advice to unstuck myself; "I regret giving you this topic". Now, my GP told me that anxiety and stress might be causing my midnight panic attacks."*

*"It took me two years to finally be able to discuss issues with my supervisors. My main supervisor responded by shouting at me and blaming everything on me. I wanted to change both my supervisors but did not manage. I ended up getting a third supervisor after my second milestone. Now my third supervisor is the only one who understands my project and gives me constructive feedback."*

*"Relationship is improving with time, but required a lot of work. Main supervisor did not show a lot of trust and was critical of me a lot rather than being supportive. Did not feel comfortable expressing myself or ideas."*

Others reflected on how **unsupportive** they believed their supervisors to be. Interesting comments included:

*"My Supervisor is TERRIBLE at reading things and giving feedback and I'm genuinely terrified of when I have to finish and write up."*

*"Unfortunately, my supervisors have not been mentors in my research, and do not offer opportunities for me to develop further, for example, teaching opportunities, other projects that align with my research where I could contribute and collaborate, writing papers... I feel like many of us are in that same place and it makes the process even more isolating and overwhelming."*

*"I think my supervisors could be more engaged. I feel they are too busy and have taken on too many PhD students to be able to provide support. Especially at the beginning, I felt so completely lost and didn't really understand the expectations on me. I felt like I was always trying to figure out what the h\*ll I was supposed to do, and then rushed to perform. It became a double burden, because I also have family so time is limited. Both figuring out "the route" and walking it is too time consuming and I would have liked to have a clearer roadmap. I understand that a PhD is self-managed, but honestly this is too little. Especially since MyDevelopment is rather useless in terms of useful knowledge."*

**Other interesting comments** included:

*"I think my supervisors are amazing academics. But they sometimes seem so removed from what it is like to be new to this journey. Very rare contact in person (that was prior to c-19), no zoom meetings, no checking to see that we are surviving studying through lockdown, when they are busy - takes almost 2 months to return a chapter."*

*"I sometimes get the feeling they feel like they are doing me a favour when they meet with me."*

*"I think feeling supported and mentored is so important to me and I just perhaps don't have supervisors that conduct themselves in this manner."*

*"I think everyone should undergo training on how to identify subconscious bias."*

*“Supervisors should act as mentors to PhD students, provide enough guidance and encourage a good research culture in the lab. Supervisors must have relevant knowledge in order to give useful feedback. The grant requirement should be made clear upon signing the appointment. Supervisors should care about students' well-being.”*

*“Now later on in my PhD I feel that the support is limited to commenting on papers/written stuff. I have sent plans, interview guides, and other ideas to them without getting any feedback. When I sent my ethics I didn't get a single comment, and I then received a tonne of comments from the ethics committee. I try to get feedback when we meet, and it's just briefly commented on as 'it's all good'. I have a strong sense that none of these things have actually been looked at by the supervisors, at all! It's only the confirmation and chapters that they're interested (feel obliged) to look at. I also feel that they seem to think that PhDs should figure these things out by talking to other PhDs, but because of COVID those opportunities are really limited, and there is nothing to replace it. I also don't think supervisors/the faculty have realised that they need to rethink this kind of support and realise that the university actually needs to step up to provide actual knowledge, not just through peers.”*

*“I feel envious with other HDR students because their supervisors provide other opportunities like RA, TA jobs. I wasn't offered any, I wasn't encouraged to publish as well. I feel I am a terrible student because less opportunities for me than others.”*

## Milestones

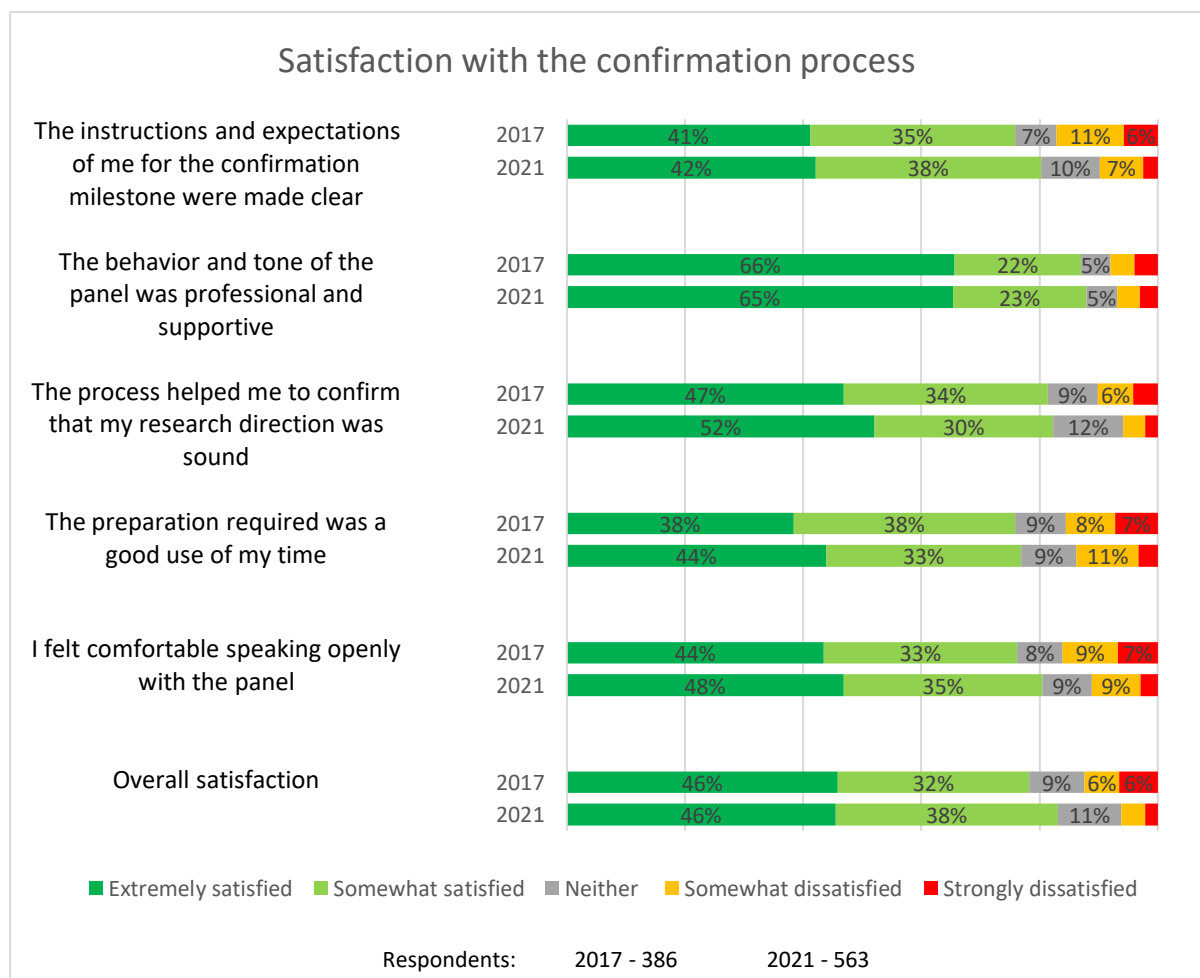
Respondents were provided with an opportunity to reflect on their experiences with the three milestone hurdles contained within their degree – confirmation, mid-candidature review and pre-submission review.

Only students for whom the milestone was relevant and who had completed the relevant milestone were asked to respond in regard to their satisfaction and experiences.

### Confirmation

Have you passed your confirmation?	Respondents
Yes	565 (75.4%)
No, I'm not at that stage yet	176 (23.5%)
No, I presented my research but was asked to make amendments	7 (0.9%)
No, I failed	1 (0.1%)

### Satisfaction with confirmation

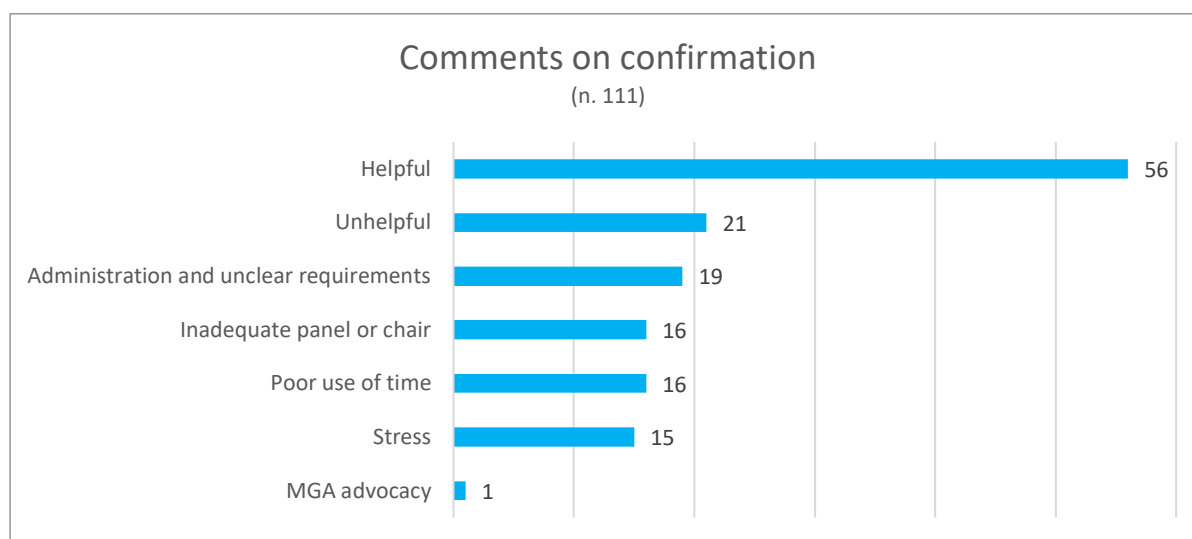


Students were predominantly satisfied with the confirmation process and were marginally more satisfied than they were in 2017.<sup>6</sup> Respondents were most satisfied with the behaviour and tone of the panel and most dissatisfied that the preparation was a good use of their time.

There were no major differences across demographic groups in relation to the confirmation process.

### Comments on confirmation

Respondents were provided with an opportunity to provide comments in relation to their experience of confirmation. One-hundred and eleven students took this opportunity and their comments are summaries below:



The majority of comments made by HDRs at Monash described how the confirmation process had been **helpful**. These included:

*“It was a scary process and I did not get through right away. But my primary supervisor assisted me in changing the focus of my research and I got in right in the reconvened panel!”*

*“The panel was a bit harsh on me, but later I realised that it only made my research better and corrected the direction. It helped me stay within my scope.”*

*“My milestones were the most encouraging part of my degree. I had fabulous panel members who I felt really were looking out for my success and helping me to identify my weaknesses. They were encouraging and constructively critical, and most importantly friendly and approachable.”*

Alternatively, several students described how they found the confirmation process **unhelpful**. These included:

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<sup>6</sup> In 2017, students were asked to rate the degree to which they agreed with the statements rather than the degree to which they were satisfied.

*“The confirmation process was a waste of time. The people on the panel were not qualified to review my research. One of the panellists behaved in what I would describe as 'institutionalised bullying', where she was given a platform to bully me. This was noted and acknowledged by my supervisor and other participants, but nothing was done.”*

*“One examiner was professional and supportive, the other clearly disliked my topic of research and asked if I was sure the PhD was the right thing for me, not an ideal comment when you are already exposed and insecure.”*

*“The report requirements were substantial and took time away from working on the PhD project. There is a lot of pressure around this milestone and like other students, I worked very hard in the lead-up and required recovery time on the other side. As a process, I don't think this is ideal.”*

A collection of students commented on the **administration** of the confirmation process and what they saw as **unclear requirements**. These included:

*“The scheduling procedure is a nightmare and is changing constantly. It's difficult to keep track of what the most update routine is because the information not included in the handbook and we need to dig into an old email.”*

*“There was a disconnect between the university and faculty expectations as outlined in the documentation, and the research unit expectations, which were higher. It took a lot of time to produce the submitted documents, and the supervisors and panel took very little notice of the document, though they were very engaged with the presentation, slides and panel meeting.”*

*“I like being able to speak with people outside my team, although it's hard to know how openly you can actually speak and what is shared on.”*

**Other interesting comments** included:

*“The confirmation milestone took an enormous amount of time to prepare, which I would have preferred spending in the lab.”*

*“To summarise, I have glaring gaps in my knowledge and ultimately spent my first year preparing a presentation for an interested and helpful but essentially lay audience (i.e. the panel), and developing a well-thought out plan that sits on a hard-drive as a reminder of misplaced optimism.”*

*“In hindsight, I think that the prospect of the Confirmation was one of the main contributing factors that has caused me to suffer from an even greater sense of imposter syndrome than usual, which is then also tinged with a feeling of guilt/regret because it feels that I didn't (couldn't) use the first year in the most useful way for my PhD/career/life in the longer-term.”*

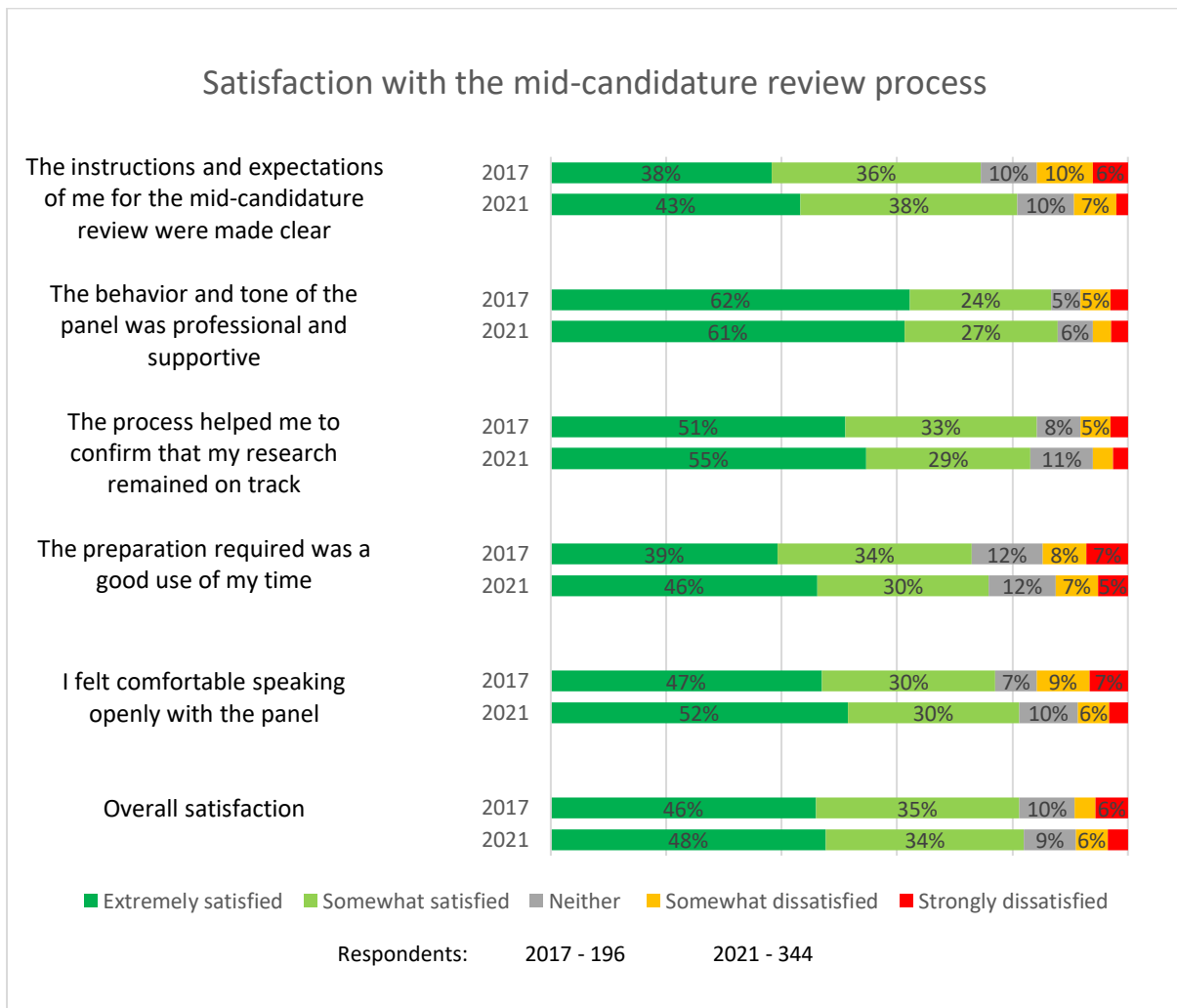
*“Thanks to the assistance of the MGA Advocate ... I was able to understand the way the systems worked and identify who I wished to have on the confirmation panel collaboratively with my supervisors. With some hiccups I was able to have my preferred supervisor on board who was then able to assist with smoothing out the previous supervisory*

*conflict/misunderstanding. Overall, this milestone was able to affirm that academically I was making good progress despite supervisory issues.”*

### Mid-candidature review

Have you passed your mid-candidature review?	Respondents
Yes	344 (62.1%)
No, I’m not at that stage yet	205 (37.0%)
No, I presented my research but was asked to make amendments	4 (0.7%)
No, I failed	1 (0.2%)

### Satisfaction with mid-candidature

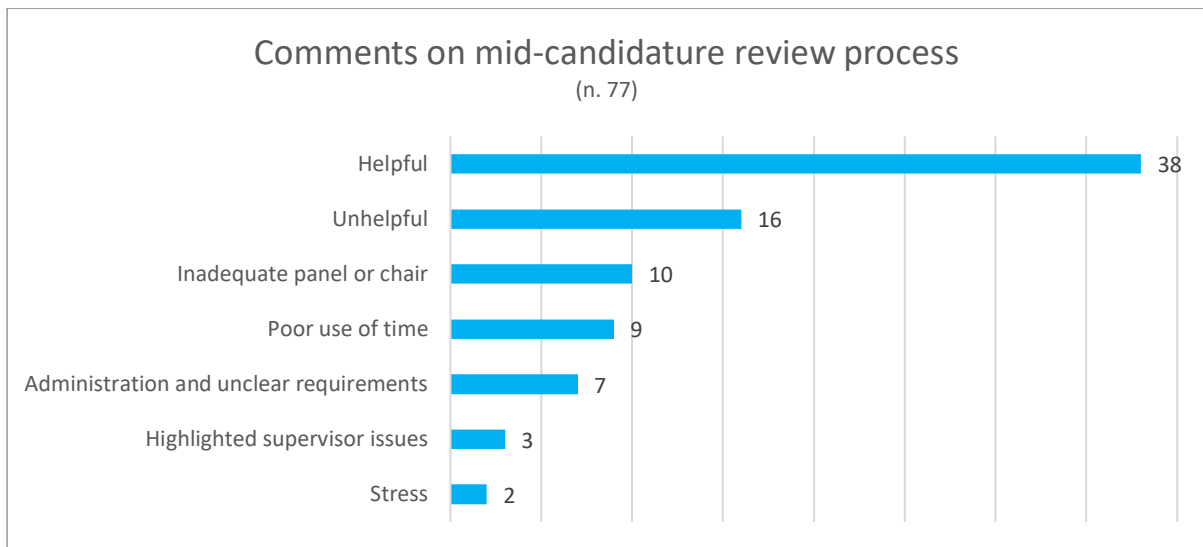


Students were predominantly satisfied with the mid-candidature process with satisfaction levels remaining on par with 2017 results. As with confirmation, respondents were most satisfied with the

behaviour and tone of the panel and most dissatisfied that the preparation was a good use of their time.

There were again no major differences across demographic groups in relation to the confirmation process.

#### Comments on mid-candidature review process



The majority of comments described how the mid-candidature review process had been **helpful**. These included:

*"The panel helped me address my concerns about my supervision arrangements."*

*"The documentation required was less onerous than for confirmation. The presentation and panel meeting went smoothly and as expected according to the guidelines."*

*"My mid-candidature review felt like it came too quickly, even with a three-month extension! With that said, the meeting ended up being very useful and helped me regain some more specific direction for my progress. I was also able to bring up several personal issues and circumstances that have affected my candidature over the past year (on top of COVID!), and the panel was very understanding and supportive regarding the impact this has had on my progress overall."*

Alternatively, several students described how they found the mid-candidature review process **unhelpful**. These included:

*"I don't think we need the mid-candidature review at all, and actually, it is a distraction. We can use that time preparing mid-candidature to do more research. I think it is quite a wasting time."*

*"Unfortunately, one of the panel members dominated and seemed to be pursuing her own agenda about theory driving research. She clearly had not read my report closely, as shown by her questions. I felt intimidated and disrespected by her approach (the opposite to the*

*way I usually feel at Monash) and became flustered, so could not respond as well as I would have liked. My supervisors were very supportive and reassuring after the process, which helped me resume my research and rebuild confidence. I was disappointed that the Chair of the Panel did not take the lead and return the conversation to appropriate discussion for my stage of candidature and my research approach.”*

*“During the defence, I was bombarded with questions without giving sufficient time to explain or defend myself. Next, the tone of the panel did not sound supportive at all. I have received depressing comments from the panels such as 'I do not need your opinions' and 'because you did not listen to our advice, this is why you can't finish your experiment on time'.”*

**Other interesting comments included:**

*“Panel was good but not able to speak freely about supervisor issues due to seniority of the person involved.”*

*“To have a whole thesis chapter completed or some form of manuscript submitted or written I think is not realistic for all students. I think the data you have collected and your ability to write a short report and speak about your work is more important.”*

*“MCR is often perceived as an opportunity to 'grill' students before the final milestone. This perception is rampant and needs to be changed.”*

*“As a student with a disability registered with DSS I experienced direct and indirect discrimination. There was zero contact between DSS and my panel and no reasonable adjustments.”*

*“As expected, I raised the same concerns as my confirmation in my mid-candidature milestone. The project and the progress both were suffering due to lack of supervision which the committee acknowledged (to their credit) but it failed to take the hard steps to change course and amend the situation. I am expecting my final year review to be no different. I am not sure about other students' experiences but for somebody coming from a country like USA and with a relatively solid academic background, the experience and training of a PhD at Monash has been a total failure thus far.”*

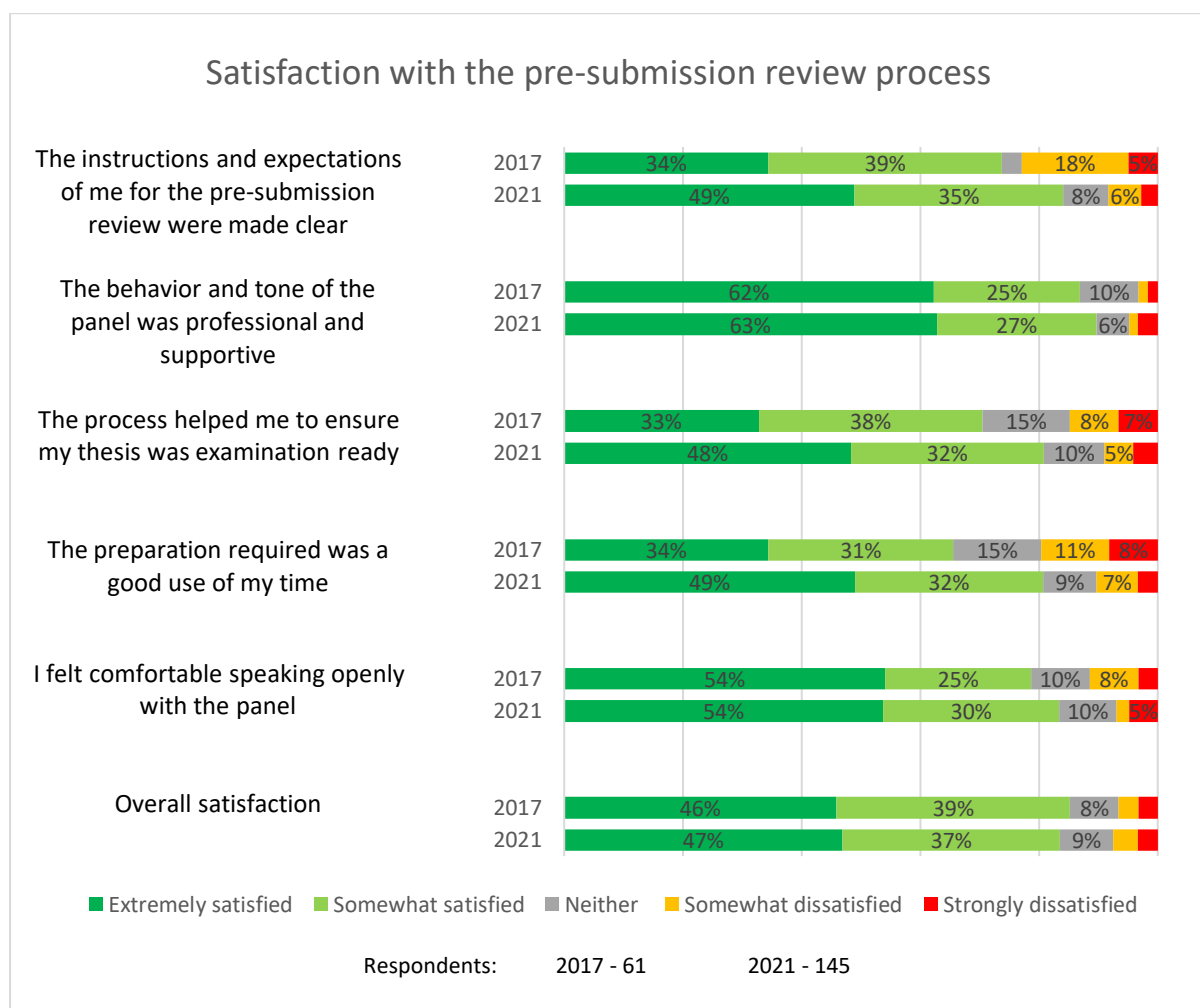
*“The instruction on what to present are so vague online- it would be helpful to have a template or even a workshop to prepare for this milestone 2-3 months before it is due, and with other PhD students.”*



## Pre-submission review

Have you passed your pre-submission review?	Respondents
Yes	146 (43.1%)
No, I'm not at that stage yet	193 (56.9%)

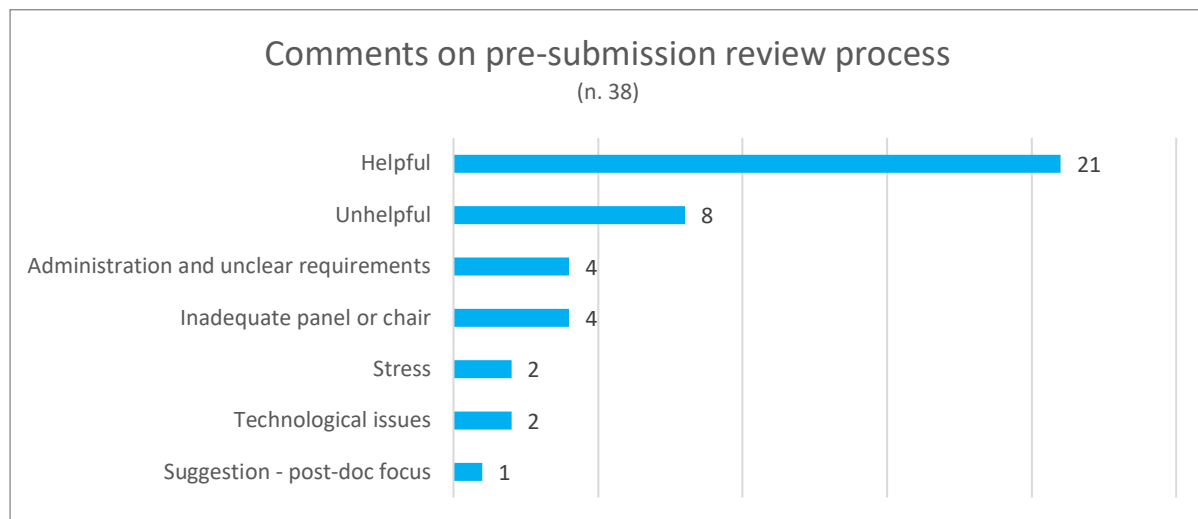
## Satisfaction with pre-submission



Students were predominantly satisfied with the pre-submission review process and while overall satisfaction dropped 1% from 2017 levels, respondents reported greater satisfaction scores in the other five metrics. As with both confirmation and the mid-candidature review, respondents were most satisfied with the behaviour and tone of the panel and most dissatisfied that the preparation was a good use of their time.

There were no major differences across demographic groups in relation to the pre-submission process.

## Comments on milestones in general



The majority of comments made for this question described how the pre-submission review process had been **helpful**. These included:

*“The pre-submission gives us an overall satisfaction that we are finally ready to complete our study. It is a wonderful opportunity to see how your work has impacted the audience and are you really ready to venture out widely into the research area of your interest.”*

*“This was the best & most helpful milestone. The report being made up of actual thesis chapters made it feel like a much better use of time. I had the most engaging & useful conversation w the panel& their feedback will be really useful in getting my thesis finalised in the next couple of months.”*

*“The professionalism of this panel reinforced my positive experiences at Monash and make timely, valuable comments that helped me make my thesis ready for submission. They had clearly read all the documentation I provided and added pertinent positive criticism.”*

Alternatively, several students described how they found the pre-submission review process **unhelpful**. These included:

*“The milestone felt forced and more like a box-ticking exercise. What was submitted was deleted from the thesis, and the thesis has taken a step backwards. This is partly due to the forced nature of the milestone, but also a need to change the thesis to be more consistent with the interests of one of my supervisors to prevent further tension/conflict and to conform with corporate expectations of how long a thesis should take to be completed.”*

*“I didn't know how much detail I was expected to go into, there was no format, no key criteria to fill. I had to send my panel some manuscripts after my panel meeting before they were happy to pass me. That left me feeling pretty rubbish after what was supposed to be a pretty massive achievement to celebrate.”*

*“The instructions were extremely vague and unhelpful for this milestone. Only talking to friends who'd already completed their milestones did I get an idea of what was required.”*

**Other interesting comments included:**

*“Need more details in what’s expected out of the review aside from the presentation.”*

*“School changed the chairperson of my panel for my final milestone despite requests to maintain same panel due to difficulties with candidate (eg. change of research project midway, difficulties with supervisors early on). I was able to bring chairperson on as a second panel member as a panel member was on maternity leave. Having the same panel has been hugely helpful throughout my candidature.”*

*“I received my feedback 5 months after I presented.”*

*“Panel didn't read any documents and there was (as you would expect) little to no accountability for this.”*

*“This milestone took place during the lockdown period. I felt the time between the second milestone and pre-submission was not sufficient mostly because there was a significant impact on the working environment. Moreover, it was a very stressful situation and being away from other PhD students and support groups, I could not explore options such as taking intermission or receiving counselling support before the pre-submission. Because, despite my regular meeting with my supervisors and my repeated communication regarding my discomfort and slow progress, my depression symptoms remained unnoticed by them.”*

*“There was no talk about post PhD and job and career prospects. At previous milestones there was talk about setting up with resources and training needed for the next year to do the research but nothing like that for this milestone in terms of next steps after completing. I found this really disheartening, like there is little care for the student once they complete.”*

## Coursework

Respondents were provided with an opportunity to reflect on their experiences of Coursework at the university.

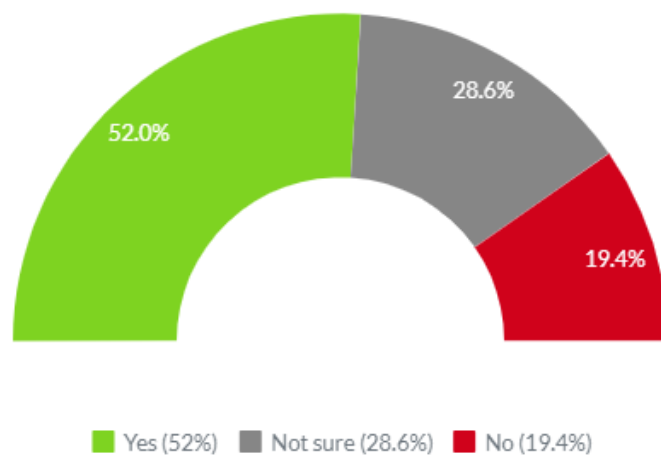
Only students for whom Coursework was relevant (i.e. included in their degree) and who had completed some Coursework were asked to respond in regard to their satisfaction and experiences.

### Coursework completed

Have you completed any Coursework?	Respondents
Yes	247 (65.5%)
No	130 (34.5%)

### Coursework useful

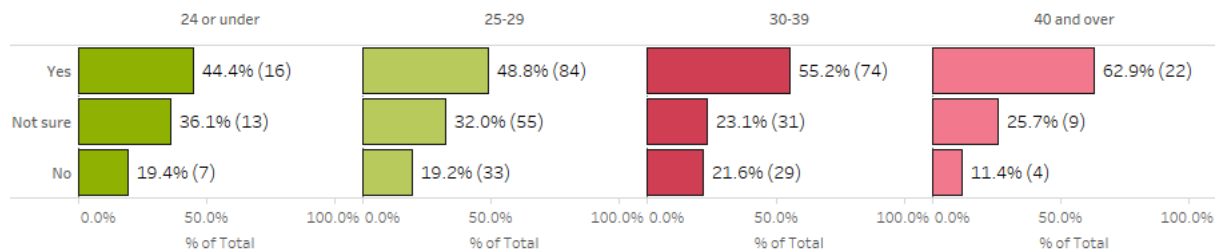
#### Is Coursework beneficial?



Just over half of those who had completed at least one unit found Coursework to be beneficial, while approximately one in five students did not.

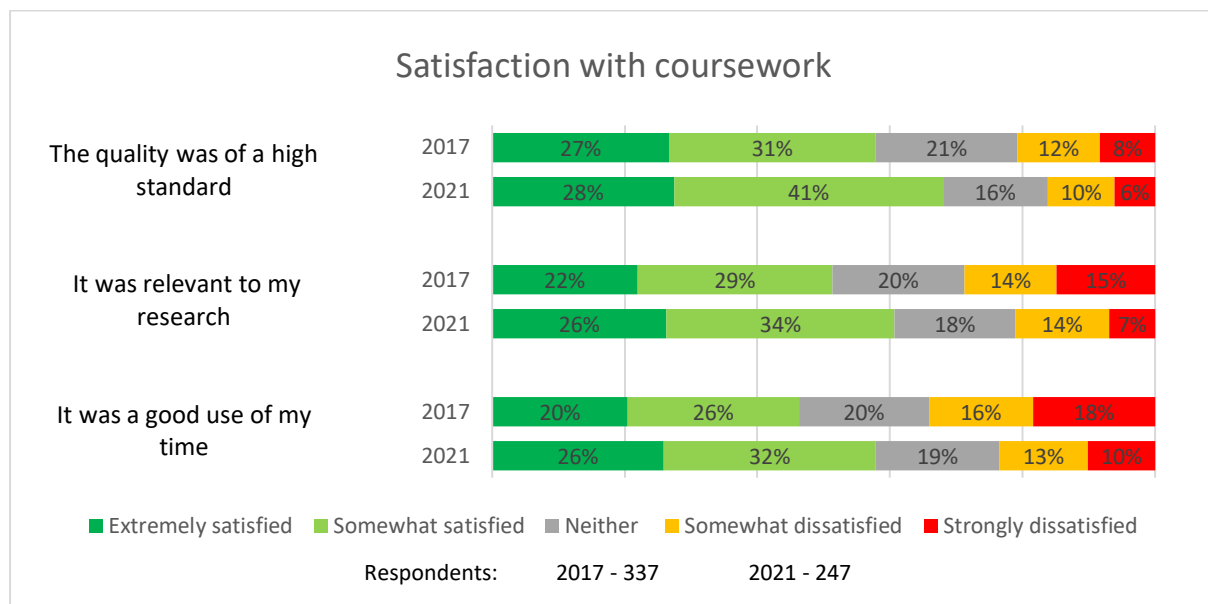
The older the respondent, the more likely it was that they found Coursework beneficial:

*Coursework beneficial rating by age*



Meanwhile, 70% of respondents with carer responsibilities found Coursework to be beneficial compared to 46% of those without carer responsibilities.

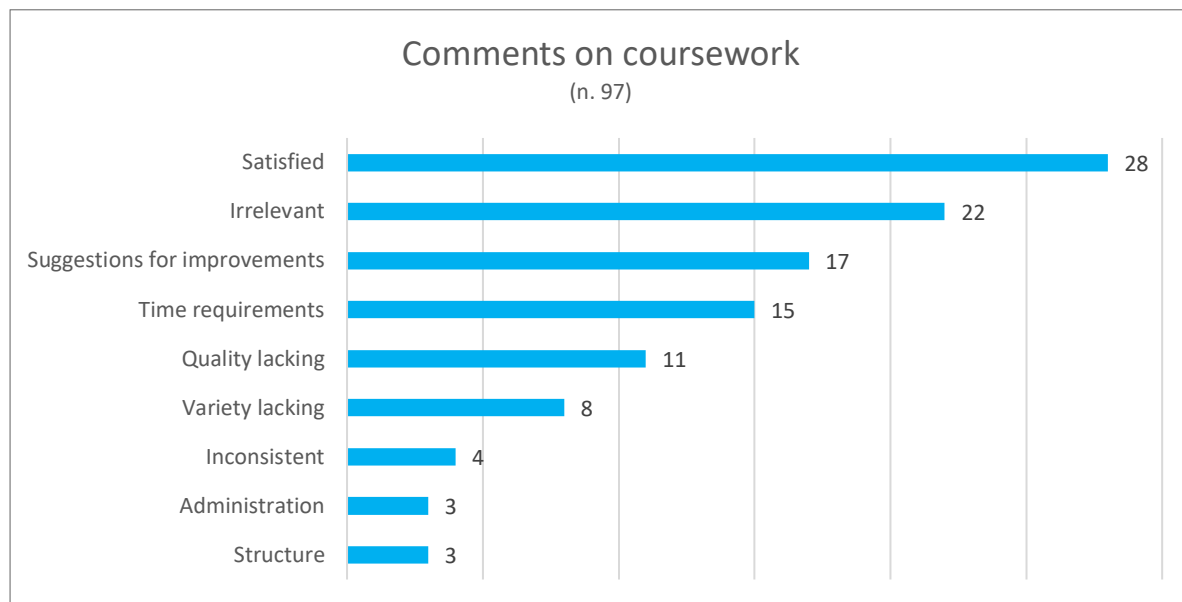
Satisfaction with Coursework



Satisfaction with Coursework has increased since 2017. Over two-thirds of respondents were satisfied that the quality of Coursework was of a high standard, while just under a quarter were dissatisfied that it was a good use of their time.

Those who had not chosen their own supervisors, those who had considered leaving and those who had experienced conflict with a supervisor were all groups more likely to be dissatisfied across the three metrics of Coursework satisfaction.

## Comments on Coursework



The most-common comment in relation to Coursework was students expressing that they were **satisfied**. These included:

*“Coursework assists with providing context for your research, in addition to providing more of a community feel than you get with pure research.”*

*“I’ve actually taken an extra unit! I found them so useful.”*

*“Pretty good to meet and network with other graduate students, especially from different departments.”*

*“While the course itself was interesting, the best aspect was being able to meet and connect with other HDR students across disciplines; Especially during COVID times.”*

However, many students instead commented on how **irrelevant** Coursework was to them and their research. For instance:

*“The time would be better devoted to other training events that are directly relevant to the field of research or the interest of the candidate.”*

*“Everyone had such different research topics it was hard to have a cohesive class.”*

*“There is very little offered by my school that is of benefit to my development as a researcher. I have attended some sessions but have not found them useful.”*

Many respondents took this opportunity to **make suggestions to improve how Coursework is administered** at Monash. These included:

*“Perhaps the option to take an undergraduate course (with extra requirements) that is more relevant to your research topic could be helpful. I have found that the units I took have made tutoring easier, but was not overall related to my PhD.”*

*"I believe it would be best to let students and supervisors decide if it is appropriate to take Coursework. In my case, my compulsory Coursework had literally no overlap with my PhD topic."*

*"Too many assignments and too much face to face teaching time required. Course more apt for masters as it wasn't customised for PhD students. Took so much time away from my research as I was completing three assessment pieces every week! Reduce the requirement for PhD students or make it pass grade only to take some pressure off. Not even sure if it needs to mandatory Coursework or any required info could be communicated in other ways."*

**Other interesting comments** included:

*"The topics covered were not even broadly related to my area of study and the course was poorly organised, with much confusion about the assignment details."*

*"Coursework was conducted through online modules and little to no guidance was provided."*

*"I do wish there was an opportunity to work with data relevant to my field. In the qualitative course, there was an opportunity to create a protocol specific to my research interests. However, for the quantitative statistics course, it was quite general."*

*"Two units: one was entirely necessary the other not so much."*

*"Delays in my enrolments have meant I am out of sync with the Coursework timing in relation to my milestone."*

## Professional Development

Respondents were provided with an opportunity to reflect on their experiences of Professional Development at the university.

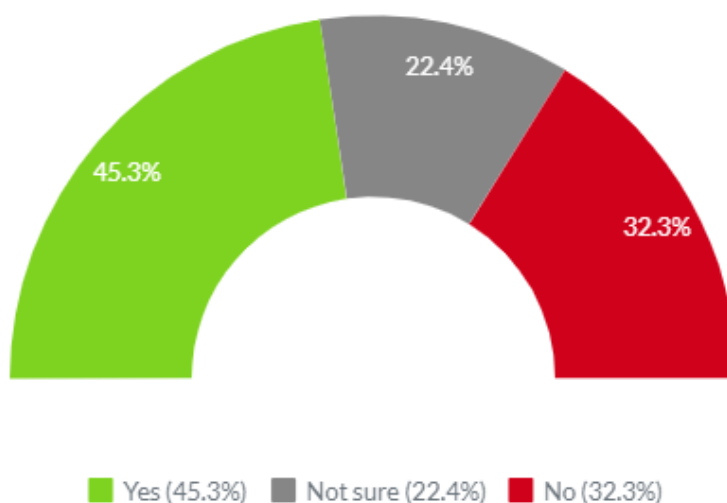
Only students for whom Professional Development was relevant (i.e. included in their degree) and who had completed some Professional Development units were asked to respond in regard to their satisfaction and experiences.

### Professional Development completed

Have you completed any Professional Development units?	Respondents
Yes	452 (91.3%)
No	43 (8.7%)

### Professional Development useful

#### Is Professional Development beneficial?

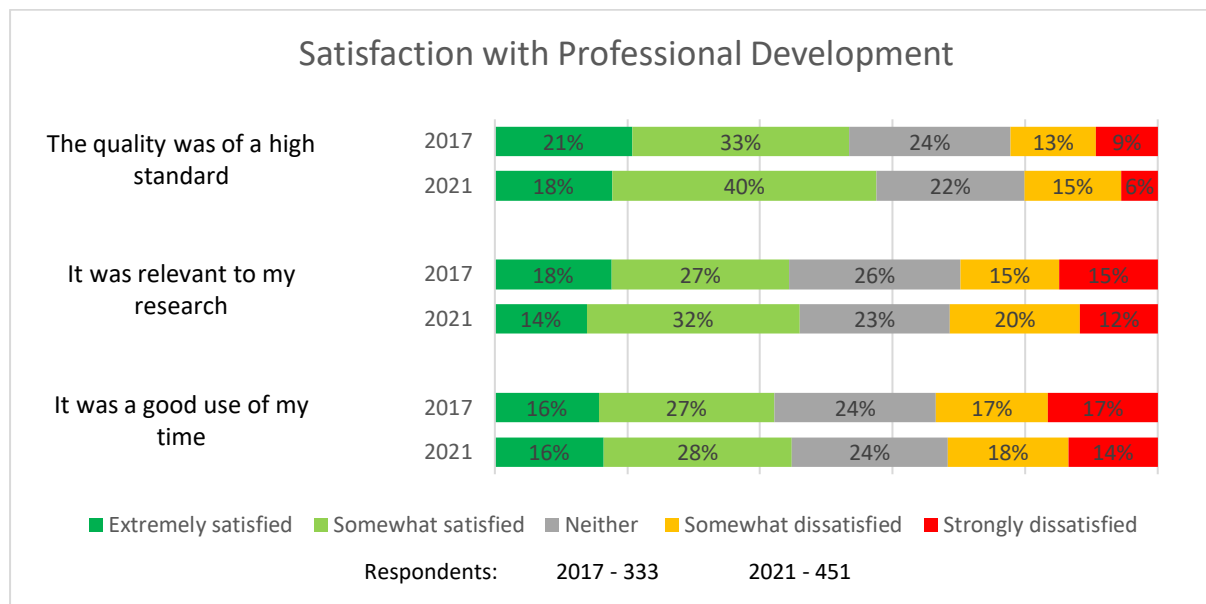


Respondents were more likely to find Professional Development beneficial than not; however, almost a quarter of respondents were not sure.

International students (55%) were more likely than domestic students (39%) to feel that Professional Development was beneficial, as were those who enrolled during the COVID-19 pandemic (55%) compared to those who enrolled prior (41%) and those who had not experienced a research delay (51%) compared to those who had (41%).



## Satisfaction with Professional Development

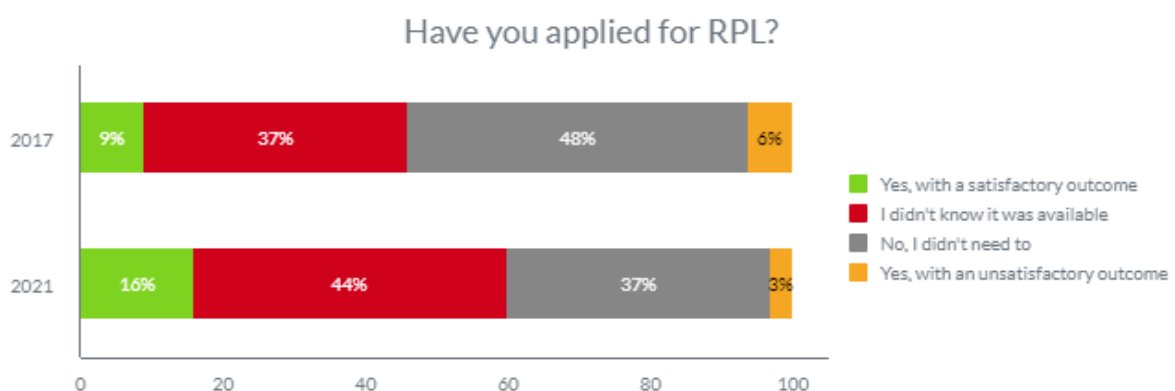


Professional Development satisfaction levels remained largely on par with those of 2017.

While 58% of respondents were satisfied that the quality of Professional Development was of a high standard, 32% were dissatisfied that it both represented a good use of their time and was relevant to their research.

International students were more satisfied than domestic students across the three metrics with the biggest gap (21%) being in relation to relevance.

## Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

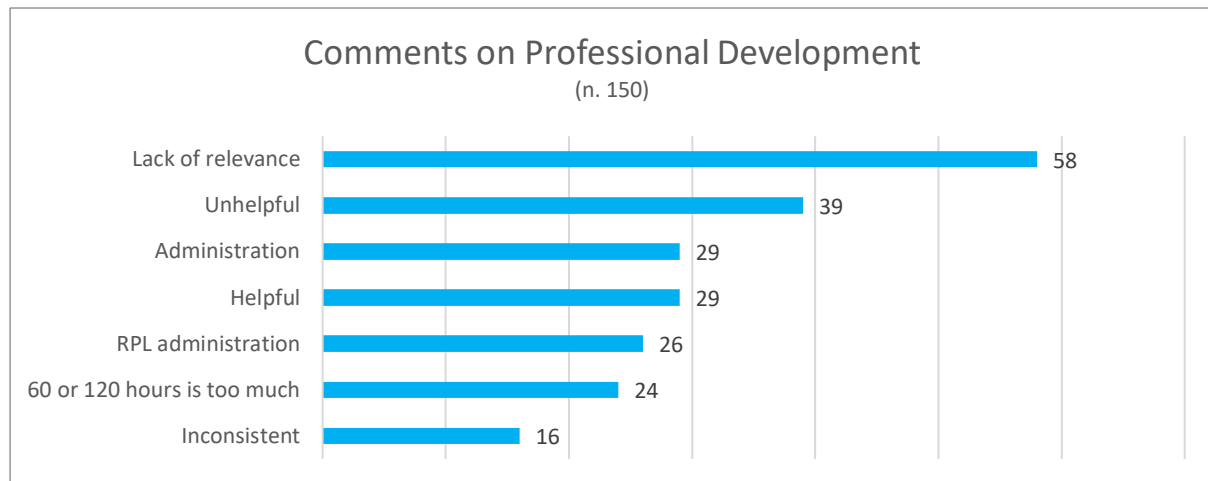


While more students had successfully applied for RPL in 2021 than had in 2017, respondents were also more likely to not know that RPL was available.

Respondents in 2021 had an 85% success rate when applying for recognition of prior learning (RPL); however, most students did not know that RPL was an option for them. Those for whom English was not their primary language were 16% more likely than those for whom English was their primary

language to not know RPL was available. Similar gaps existed for international students (51%) in relation to domestic students (40%) and those who had enrolled during the COVID-19 pandemic (52%) and those who enrolled prior (41%).

## Comments on Professional Development



The most common response in regard to Professional Development related to its **lack of relevance**. Comments included:

*“I could see the possibility of it being useful, but the amount of hours I'm required to do and the lack of relevant units means I'm stuck slogging through hours of irrelevant content.”*

*“I think the idea is good... but it needs to be relevant to our studies. I'm a 51 year old academic that just never had the opportunity to do a PhD. I've run my own business, I've lead large teams, I've done a heap of professional development over the years. What I really need is a writing boot camp, or a dedicated session on ... methodologies. It certainly hasn't been all negative. I've enjoyed much of what I have done - although it hasn't been particularly helpful to me, I have to say. I'm glad I'm able to do them online because when I had to go into campus - that was hard. I live 30km away (60km round trip) - no transport except car and I'm a mum, I care for an elderly parent who has significant disability and I work 3 days a week. Really hard to carve out the space... and harder when I'm learning how to present myself in a job interview, or write a resume, when I've done that for a good 30 years...”*

*“A complete waste of time -- there needs to be more material that is specific to my area of study, rather than vague masterclasses or reading groups that don't even work properly. We need classical graduate seminars, structured like actual units with expertise to supplement our research.”*

Similarly, many students wrote of how **unhelpful** Professional Development had been to them. These included:

*“In theory it's a good idea to have an opportunity to develop further skills in addition to research for my thesis. However, the need to complete training can feel cumbersome at*

*times and lead to enrolling in courses that are not useful and wastes my time (particularly as I am a part-time student)."*

*"I found them really vague and impossible to integrate cleanly into my research progress. Some units were more help than others. I can imagine they would be more of use in other faculties."*

*"I slept through most of them. I want those 120 hours of my life back."*

On the other hand, several graduate students wrote that Professional Development had been **helpful** to them. Comments included:

*"There are some amazing programs on offer but I find it unfair that some courses are only credited once you have completed the whole series rather than giving you credit for attending a particular session. That's when I feel it is wasting my time."*

*"I loved being able to meet and connect with other students from other faculties and research streams. I think the cross-faculty/student opportunities to meet and discuss work in context to the PDevelopment should be encouraged more."*

*"The PD offered is fantastic. Excellent facilitators who are experts in their fields. I think the PD is helpful to both my PhD and my future career."*

Many respondents complained about how Professional Development was **administered**. These included:

*"I had to do a number of courses that were not in My Development and the process of getting those recognised was unfeasible. I agree with the idea of professional development but I do not agree that the university is best placed to determine what each candidate needs within their research - and the current process assumes this."*

*"The whole myDevelopment system seems extremely clunky and is a chore to use."*

*"The lack of options due to COVID this year has made it really hard to develop my skills. Lots of in person workshops do not seem to have made the transition online. A self-study online unit is just not the same."*

**Other interesting comments** included:

*"The university should recognise the workshop or online courses students attend. They are much more relevant and useful for PhD students, rather than force students to waste time on Lynda (courses provided by LinkedIn). The courses provided by the LinkedIn can be a supplementary but should not be compulsory."*

*"I am a mature age candidate and so most of the PD activities do not apply. I think there should be RPL for this component."*

*"The number of hours was very high. After about 60 hours I had taken most of the courses that were relevant or interesting to me. Making up the remaining hours was difficult."*

*“I could see the possibility of it being useful, but the amount of hours I'm required to do and the lack of relevant units means I'm stuck slogging through hours of irrelevant content.”*

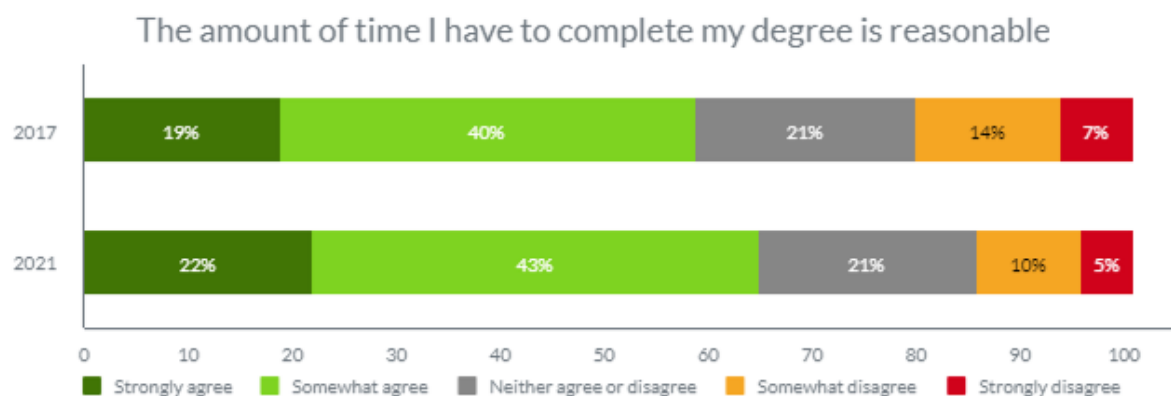
*“The professional development is extremely hit-and-miss. Some are good and some are terrible, I wish it was a little more consistent.”*

*“I think there should be greater inclusion of unit audits for example, rather than tick box myDevelopment courses.”*

## Progress delays and effect on enrolment

The following questions were asked in relation to the progress of a student's research degree.

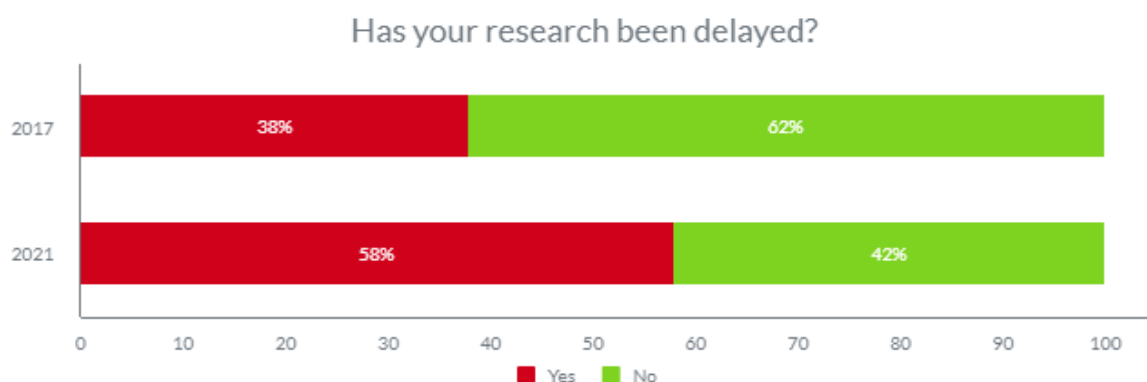
### Time requirements



Just under two-thirds of respondents felt that the amount of time they had to complete their degree was reasonable, which represented a slight increase on 2017 levels.

Meanwhile, students with a disability were 20% more likely than those without a disability to disagree that the amount of time they had was reasonable, while students who had experienced conflict with a supervisor were 17% more likely than those who had not to disagree their time requirements were reasonable.

### Research delay



The majority of respondents indicated that their research had been delayed, which represented a sizeable increase on 2017 levels. The COVID-19 pandemic was prevalent among reasons for delay in 2021 (see next page - *Reasons for delay*), which was obviously not the case in 2017.

With the exception of MNHS (45%), in every faculty the majority of students said that their research had been delayed, with Law (82%) and Science (74%) having the highest rates.

Meanwhile, those with a disability were 24% more likely to have experienced a delay than those who did not have a disability, while those who had commenced their degree prior to COVID were 29% more likely to have experienced a delay than those who started during the pandemic.

Among those who had considered leaving their degree, 80% said that their research had been delayed, while among those who had experienced conflict with a supervisor, this figure was at 81%, and among those who were dissatisfied with their supervision, this figure was 79%.

## Reasons for delay



The COVID-19 pandemic was a factor in the research delay of 91% of respondents, while lack of motivation (36%) and health issues (28%) rounded out the top three.

Those with a disability were 37% more likely than those who did not to say that health issues were a factor in their delay; however, with the exception of COVID-19 (-8%), every one of the listed reasons was more of a factor for those with a disability relative to those without.

Those with carer responsibilities (55%) were more likely than those without carer responsibilities (11%) to mention family responsibilities as a factor in their delay. The likelihood of family responsibilities being a factor in delaying research increased with age.

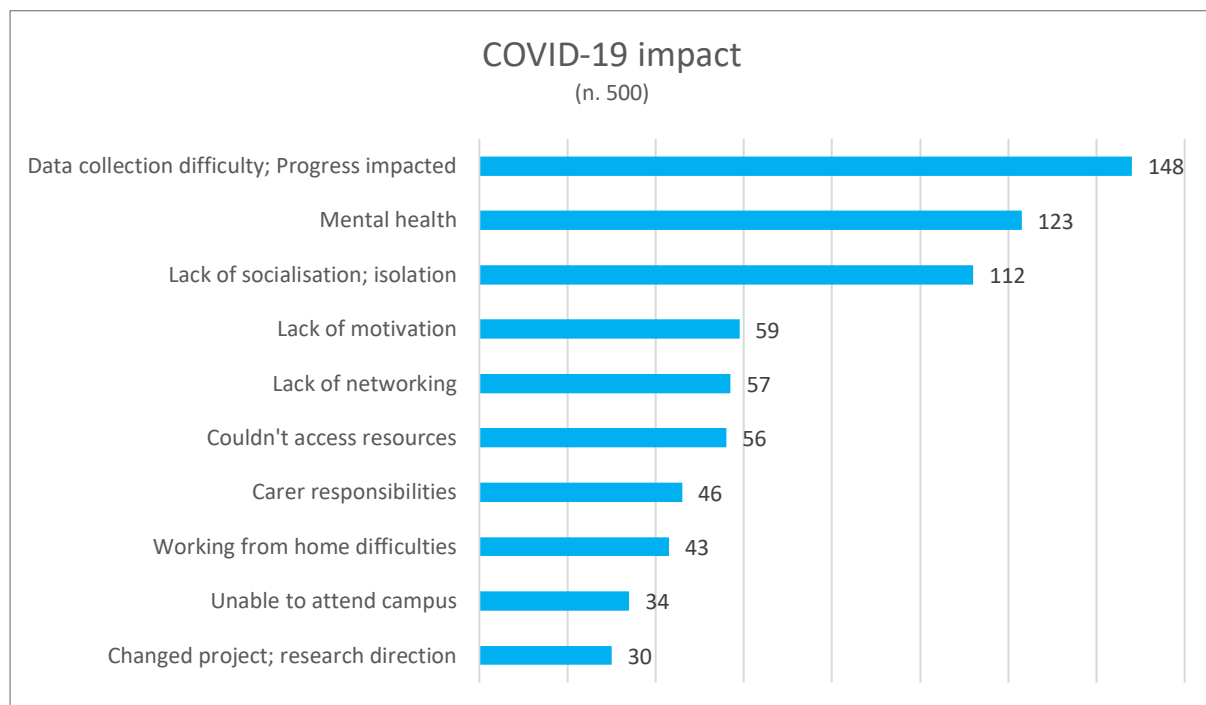
Poor supervision was a factor in delaying the research of 53% of those who had experienced conflict with a supervisor, while a change in research project direction (20%) and preparing for hurdles/milestones (18%) were both more likely to be a factor in delayed research for those who had experienced conflict with a supervisor relative to those who had not.

Monash alumni were 14% more likely than those who had not previously studied at Monash to indicate a lack of motivation was delaying their research.

Finally, the responses of those who had been given the opportunity to tutor at Monash did not differ in any meaningful way from those who had not been provided with that opportunity.

## COVID-19 impact

Respondents were invited to 'reflect on the biggest impact COVID-19 has had on your degree'. The top 10 response themes from Monash HDR students who answered are summarised below:



The most-commonly referenced impact of COVID-19 on HDR students was **data collection difficulty**. Comments included:

*"It extended my data collection. It took 9 months instead of the 3 months planned."*

*"COVID-19 related lockdowns limited my access to lab-based facilities and equipment for several months (on and off) throughout the past two years of my candidature. Even when I was permitted to return to the lab, I did not always feel safe travelling in to campus, or needed to limit my lab-based work in order to comply with distancing requirements. Several aspects of my project had to be put aside until restrictions eased again, or had to be re-worked in order to prioritise the experiments I was able to carry out, in order to try and maintain an appropriate level of progress."*

*"Had to completely change the direction of my PhD research. The majority of my plans had to be discarded as they relied on interstate/international travel."*

*"Huge delays in data collection due to lockdown 6 (restricted movement, access to research sites) which has severely impacted on my ability to progress to the next milestone."*

**Mental health** concerns were also frequently cited by HDR respondents as one of the major impacts of COVID-19. Comments included:

*“Mental health issues due to inability to leave home and a lot of screen time.”*

*“Just feeling tired and over it. This pandemic is going on forever so it is hard to stay motivated.”*

*“Mental health struggles with working from home (when not in the lab) and the feelings of isolation and anxiety which reduces my productivity.”*

*“I had multiple mental breakdowns and seek support for counselling and special considerations for some assessments. Going through this phase has also taught me to self-care skills, self-advocate skills and capacity to empathise with myself and others. Covid also meant my job opportunities were limited so I struggled financially quite a bit - I sought free grocery and food from some food bank and applied for Covid financial help organised by Monash so that definitely helped me to go through this phase.”*

The **isolation** and **lack of socialisation** that came with COVID and repeated lockdowns was mentioned by many HDRs at Monash. Interesting comments included:

*“Not being able to communicate and understand Australian culture.”*

*“Working from home (living alone) without 'watercooler' chat with my colleagues and peers. I found I picked up more from these chats in my few months before covid than I have in the entire 1.5 years since covid began.”*

*“WFH means I miss out on community and collaboration. Motivation is extremely difficult at home - I much prefer being able to 'go to work' and leave the house.”*

**Other interesting comments** included:

*“Lack of motivation/will to continue my research.”*

*“Lack of connection with peers and opportunities to disseminate research findings to people outside Monash.”*

*“Isolation and reduced opportunity for collaboration.”*

*“The closure of a primary school has resulted in me having to support my two-primary school-aged sons with their home learning. This has cut into my own research time significantly.”*

*“33 weeks of closed schools and home schooling my child.”*

*“I have lost so much (x2 family members to cancer, study time non-existent in lockdowns due to having a Prep/then Grade1 child and kinder child) and it has impacted me significantly. I feel like no one I have asked for support from Monash has been able to alleviate what I am feeling. I am due to submit in Dec, but definitely will not be doing so. I have been told I am not eligible for the Covid19 extension that was offered. I feel so lost.”*



*"Inability to access critical software for data extraction and analysis. The software being extremely expensive, there is only one license in the lab and it cannot be accessed remotely."*

*"I cannot receive my scholarship when I was overseas even I have enrolled. Even Monash didn't provide any financial support. This is not the case in other Universities like Melbourne University. That makes me very disappointed."*

*"Lack of financial support to provide the freedom to pursue my PhD. I am constantly worried whether I'll be able to make ends meet for the day."*

*"I was always going to be online. Covid just made it easier because everyone had to be online so there was more awareness of online students."*

*"The positive impact of removing unnecessary commuting to campus (1hr 20mins each way) when I can mostly work from home anyway."*

*"Work from home which gives flexibility but it turns out that I overworked and less physical activity."*

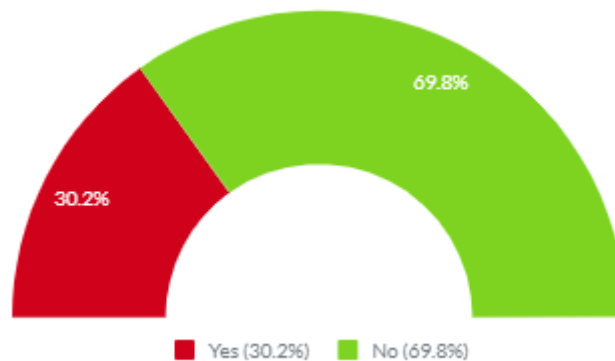
*"Pretty big impact. As an international student it has been pretty grim being stuck here. By that I mean, if I left Australia, I have no idea when I could get back in (never mind the cost of flights and quarantine). It has therefore been a tough decision between stay and be able to work and be with my partner, or leave and see my family and friends, but not see my partner and not know when I can return to the country. Not the nicest time."*

*"It has highlighted how much supervisors rely on peer-to-peer learning, as it has been removed because of the lockdowns. And there is nothing there to replace it. I feel my degree/learning is reduced to books and articles."*

*"I experienced a half year of remote study in China before I could travel to Australia in August."*

## Considered leaving

Have you considered leaving your degree?



Just under a third of respondents had considered leaving their degree.

Those with a disability were more likely than not to have considered leaving their degree and over twice as likely as those without a disability to have considered leaving.

Respondents who had enrolled prior to the COVID-19 pandemic were almost twice as likely to have considered leaving as those that enrolled during the pandemic.

Two-thirds of students who were dissatisfied with their supervision had considered leaving their degree compared to 24% of those who were satisfied with their supervision, while 60% of those who had experienced conflict with a supervisor indicated that they had considered leaving.

Domestic students were 10% more likely than international students to have considered leaving their degree, while the more precarious a student's employment situation, the more likely it was that they had considered leaving.

## Why HDRs considered leaving

Those who had considered leaving were then asked to select their reasons why. They could select multiple reasons from the list below:



Domestic students were four-times as likely as international students to have considered leaving because of work commitments, while international students were twice as likely as domestic students to have considered leaving because of an unpleasant environment in their research workplace.

Women were twice as likely as men to have considered leaving because of work commitments, while men were twice as likely as women to have considered leaving because of milestone preparation.

Students with a disability were three-times as likely as those without a disability to have considered leaving because of health issues, while students who identified as LGBTIQ+ were twice as likely as those who didn't to have considered leaving because of health issues.

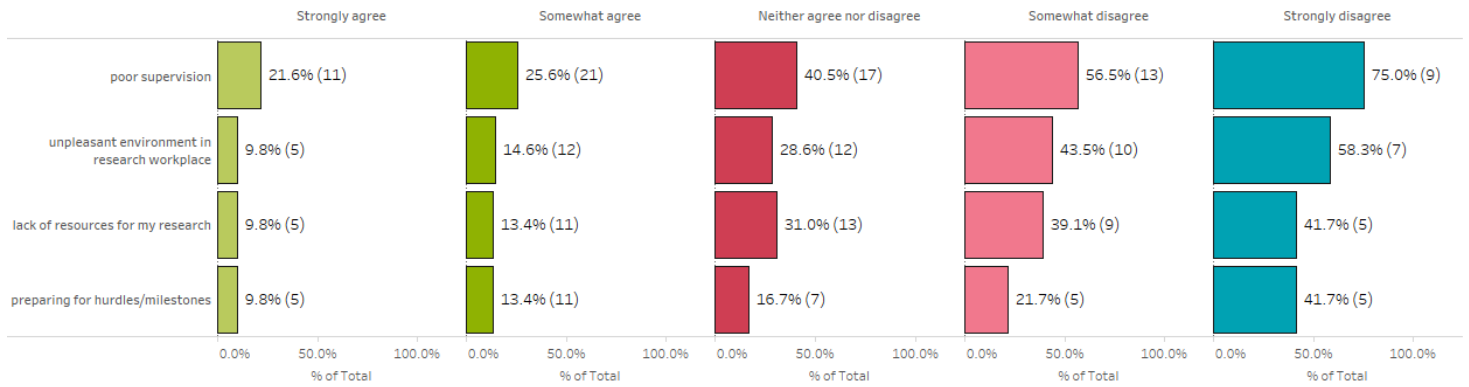
The COVID-19 pandemic was more likely to be a factor in considering leaving for those who were younger – particularly those aged 24 and under – while work commitments become a stronger factor as age increases.

Half of those with carer responsibilities who had considered leaving selected family responsibilities as a factor in why they were considering leaving.

In relation to the COVID-19 pandemic being a factor for those considering leaving, it made little difference if the student had started prior to or during the pandemic; however, financial concerns were twice as likely to be a factor for those who enrolled before the pandemic, while an unpleasant research environment was a factor for consideration for one-quarter of pre-COVID enrollees compared to 5% of those who enrolled during the pandemic.

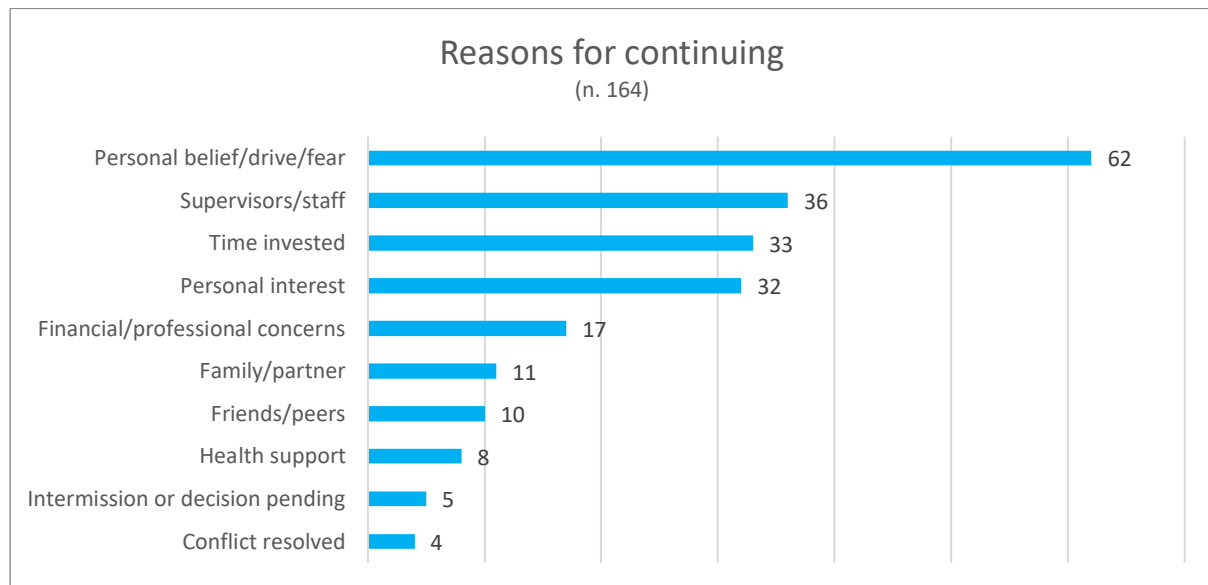
Meanwhile, dissatisfaction with supervision and the work environment was linked to dissatisfaction with the degree and an increased likelihood of having considered leaving. This was also true of a lack of resources for research and milestone preparation (see table below)

*‘Do you agree you are satisfied with your degree?’ versus ‘Why have you considered leaving?’*



Why HDRs decided to continue?

Those who had considered leaving were also asked to elaborate on their reasons for continuing. Their comments have been summarised below:



**Personal belief, drive and fear** were the primary reasons given for continuing by Monash HDRs who had considered leaving their degree. These comments included:

*“I had already put a lot of time into it. Had no other options financially (I was receiving a scholarship). Didn't want to 'fail' by quitting.”*

*“After all I've been through so far, I deserve it.”*

*"I'd always regret leaving and feel ashamed thinking back that I couldn't finish it."*

*"I wanted to see what the PhD experience was really like without the complications of COVID-19, even though it was not an enjoyable experience for much of the first year. It was also stubbornness that made me continue."*

The support of **supervisors and staff** was one of the reasons that many students gave for continuing. These included:

*"A fantastic co-supervisor who made me feel supported and got my research back on track."*

*"Finally found another supervisor that I got along well with. During low motivation times (often during lockdowns), my supervision team have also helped get me back on track."*

*"I managed to avail counselling support from Monash health after finishing pre-submission, it helped me to calm down and handle my depression. Some workshops organized by MGA and career connect were super useful where mindfulness, resilience building as a part of leadership building were discussed. Being a goal-oriented person, leaving the degree would have been a total failure, so I could not let it happen to myself. One of my supervisors were very kind and helped me to pass through difficult times."*

*"Talking to my supervisors and taking some time off during one of the lockdowns."*

The **time invested** already was a reason that many HDRs gave for continuing. Comments included:

*"I had already put a lot of time into it. Had no other options financially (I was receiving a scholarship). Didn't want to 'fail' by quitting."*

*"Already put almost 2 years in at that point, seemed like such a waste, and I was past the point of mastering out."*

*"I am nearing the end and I've managed to deal with the poor supervision for a long period of time. I might as well continue and finish it off."*

Many students decided to continue because of their passion and **personal interest** in their research. Comments included:

*"I have a passion for my chosen field and don't want to give up on my dream to work in the field."*

*"I think my project is important and I love studying. I also feel it is important for my life, career and general security in a professional path forward."*

*"Ultimately I love doing the work of my PhD, and at the moment that outweighs the politics and uncaring culture of the university. I want to stress that the staff are fantastic, they are clearly working against the university's culture though."*

**Other interesting comments included:**

*"I was lucky enough to have a stipend and scholarship and felt guilty that taxpayer dollars would have been wasted if I didn't deliver. I also felt like I would be letting down my supervision team and the person who invited me to the position. Counselling services, amazing colleagues and a prescription helped me get through to the end but I would be hesitant to suggest this to any else"*

*"Encouragement from others, support from family, access to mental health services/medical services. I worked really hard to get here to do this degree (I am international) and I know it is the right decision, I just became overwhelmed with the covid situation at the time. Getting awarded research funding and passing my confirmation also helped me realise I was on the right track with my research and that my work is important."*

*"Issues with supervisors and within lab were resolved."*

*"To be honest, my life outside of my degree. As an international student, if I left the degree I would also have to leave the country (most probably) and thus also leave my partner and life here."*

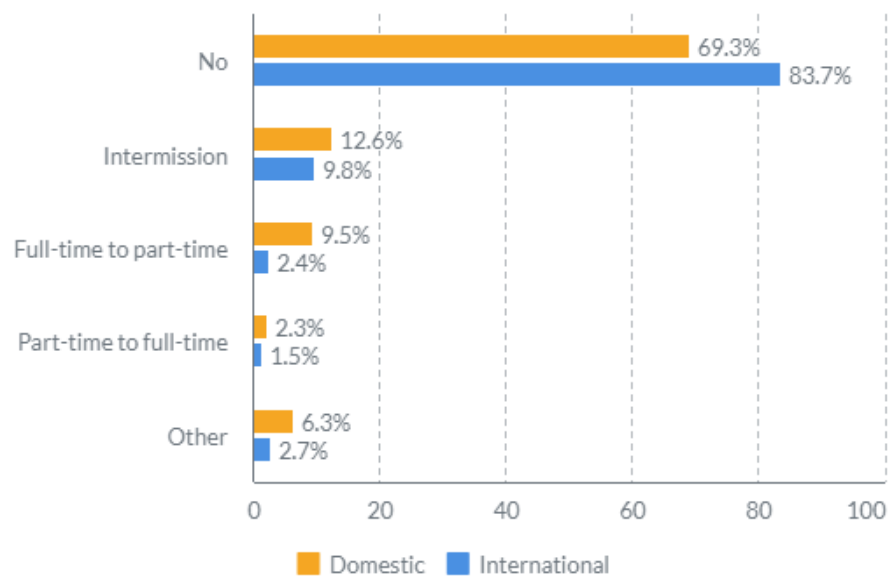
*"My supervisory support and getting better medical care."*

*"I believe the lifting of covid-19 restrictions will improve motivation."*

*"I didn't. I am withdrawing tomorrow."*

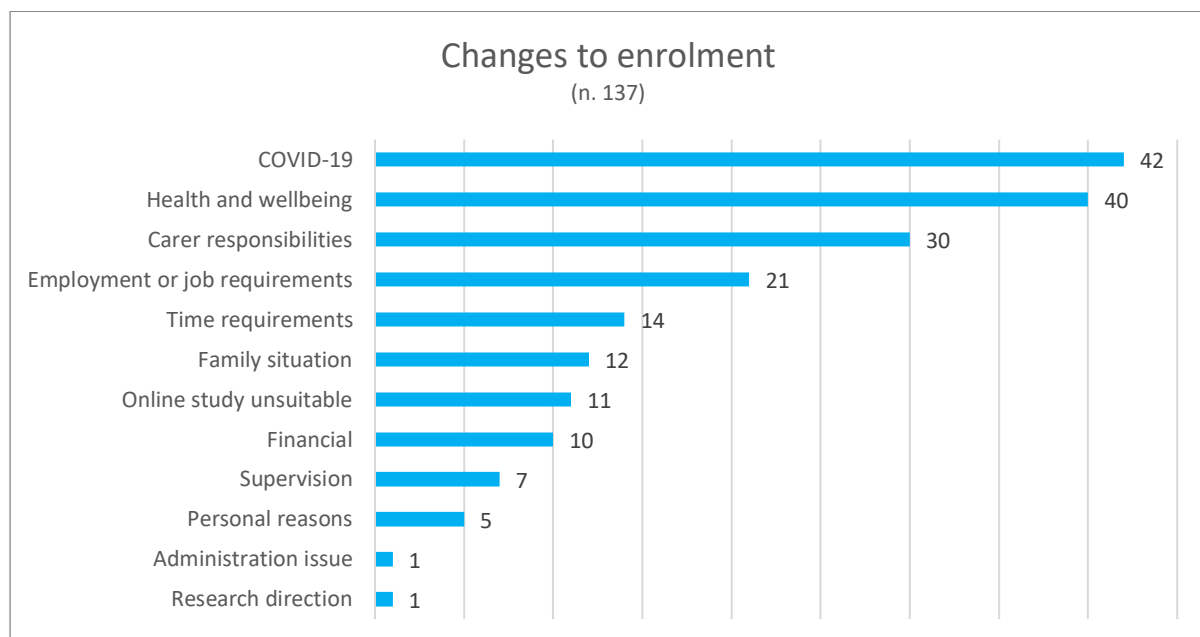
## Changes to enrolment status

### Have you made changes to your enrolment?



Domestic respondents were more likely than international respondents to have made changes to their enrolment. This is particularly true of changing from full-time to part-time study, where domestic students were four-times as likely to have made this change.

Those who had made a change to their enrolment were given the opportunity to provide their reasons for doing so. The top five responses are included in the following table:



**COVID-19** was the primary reason why HDRs made changes to their enrolment in 2021. Comments included:

*“COVID19 and the inability to access the labs at the time forced me to change enrolment.”*

*“We got sent home for one of the COVID lockdowns last year and I felt I couldn't effectively work at home, Centrelink was paying about the same as my scholarship so I took time off and had a break.”*

*“To not waste my candidacy during COVID lockdowns and interruptions.”*

**Health and wellbeing** was another reason why many respondents made changes to their enrolment. Many of these comments were also linked to COVID; however, several were not. Comments included:

*“To try and get some space to heal after last lockdown.”*

*“I needed to take a step back from my enrolment. I felt I wasn't being supported well throughout my final years in particular and it felt very lonely to be where I was at. I felt like a "burden" to the lab and particularly my main supervisor.”*

*“I went on intermission twice to recover my health and use the time to catch up on my research.”*

Many students referenced **carer responsibilities** as the reason why they made changes to their enrolment. These included:

*“Family commitments during Covid lockdowns - 3 school aged children.”*

*“Illness and Family situation I.e., caring for 92 year old father in law.”*

*“Resigned from my employment due to needing to provide care for my children due to lockdown.”*

*“I tried to juggle the caring without childcare for 1 month but it was impossible, so the next month I applied for leave.”*

**Employment and job requirements** were also referenced by many as a reason for changing their enrolment. Comments included:

*“A job opportunity came up.”*

*“Without a scholarship I needed to be part-time so that I could tutor more. Since receiving a scholarship, I have moved to full-time.”*

*“As soon as I got in without a scholarship I realised I would have to work. Then the pandemic hit a week later anyway. There is no way I could afford to study full time the way it is now, and even if I did, I don't know how I would conduct the actual research component.”*

**Other interesting comments** included:

*“I am not able to enter AU and have to commerce my studies remotely, which may delay my research progress.”*



*“I wanted to complete my PhD faster, plus FT is eligible for a scholarship while PT is not.”*

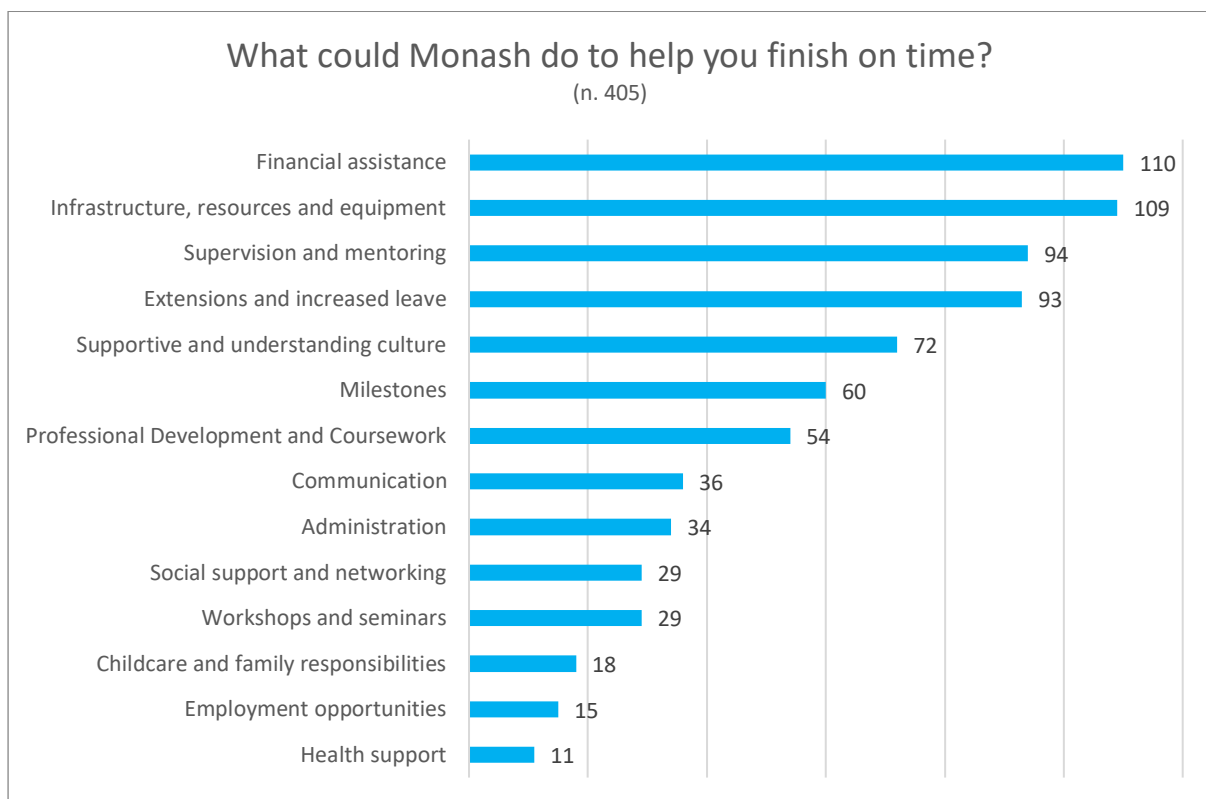
*“Nothing to present for my upcoming milestone.”*

*“I needed time off after a family bereavement.”*

*“I had to change my lab and look for a new supervisor.”*

*“Having the opportunity to extend the work from MPhil to PhD.”*

## University improvements



**Financial assistance** was marginally the most-common suggestion from Monash HDRs in regard to improvements the University could make to help them finish on time. These comments included:

*“Support students financially whenever possible so that they can focus and continue on their research without having to worry about their financial needs.”*

*“Ensure smooth and non-delayed release of grant funds as this is the only problem I faced.”*

*“Increase scholarship allowance. PhD students are like underpaid worker. We work nearly 24/7, but the rate is less than 20ph.”*

Improvements to **infrastructure, resources and equipment** were also high on students’ priority list. Comments included:

*“Allow us to take some computing resources home as some of us don't own fancy computers but need them to do their research.”*

*“Provide access to a better personal working space.”*

*“Availability of certain software which are currently confined to Labs.”*

Improving the nature of **supervision and mentoring** was also raised by many respondents.

Comments included:

*“Hold my supervisors more accountable to their responsibilities towards me (and vice versa, I suppose).”*

*“Supervisors do annual online training to remind them of responsibilities.”*

*“Foster mentorship between new students and those further along in their research.”*

Given the impacts of COVID-19, requests for **extensions and increased leave** were plentiful. These included:

*“Allow me an extension due to covid and the months of study I have lost due to lockdowns (having to teach 2 little children via remote learning, and my high school classes via remote teaching; and having to be my dad's palliative carer for 3 months of 2020 + mum's carer after dad's passing). I was told I was not eligible for an extension as I started before the cut-off date.”*

*“I think it's not the fault of the university that I am not completing on time. It's mostly on me (having motivation issues, got involved in other projects or demonstrating, etc). I really like how the university extended the scholarship automatically at the start of COVID, but with the situation still looking down, I'm not sure when I'll be able to conduct my experiments.”*

*“Acknowledge that we may not finish on time and continue to support students to complete - monitoring the progress of our cohort will probably be needed to work out the extent to which we're still off track. The standard 3-month extension offered to all students back in April 2020 has not been revised, although we have had more than a year of additional disruption since then.”*

**Other interesting comments** included:

*“Get rid of the Coursework - not fit for purpose, too generic, suited to undergrads, too many assignments, very time consuming - biggest thing.”*

*“When you take carer's leave you are entitled to 10 days per year. I have two small children, due to COVID I could no longer send them to day-care and my parents who also help with caregiving got stuck in NSW. So, I took carer's leave over a 5-week period (I am currently part time, so 2 days per week). I was extremely disappointed to discover that taking this leave made no difference on my mid-can milestone date. This really increased the pressure/stress I felt. My supervisors have told me it's not a problem, when it comes to January 2022 (when*

*my mid-can is due) just to wait and not nominate until March when I will have had more time with more childcare arrangements in place (fingers crossed). But this did not really help reduce my stress levels. I feel there should be an option to allow for students to request an extension to their milestone date due to extenuating circumstances. If this does exist, my supervisors are not aware of it and I have not seen it anywhere online when looking. This is my main suggestion."*

*"Streamline the milestone process so it's not as confusing and time consuming. Reduce requirements of Coursework."*

*"Provide preparation lectures for milestones, have student-based days to get together and write/vent etc., provide a top-up scholarship or little bonus in the last few months to encourage writing time so students don't have to work during thesis writing."*

*"Abolish milestones and replace them with something that requires less preparation."*

*"Reduce PD hours, simplify procedures (e.g. milestones/leave applications, designate someone to check in on each PhD student (well-being and progress/advice)."*

*"Give greater opportunities for paid leave (particularly with covid); pay more for the actual PhD work, so I didn't have to also work three other jobs to get by; reduce MyDevelopment hours."*

*"Help me to be aware of resources and learning opportunities as they are available. Break down the barriers to knowing what the university - ideally with a single office where I could find out everything I need to know. It is very bureaucratic currently."*

*"Improve communication of course-related information - it is very hard to get answers sometimes about specific requirements, or resources available. For eg, I have never been told about photocopying and how that works. And I have been passed from dept to dept to answer questions about PD available. And communication between departments on campus has been very poor - eg PSTs assigned to schools when they have not enrolled into the practicum subject."*

*"More proactively promote understanding of relevant policies and procedures, whether through the MGA or other avenues."*

*"Better administrative processes - more support and clear guidance from the Faculty."*

*"Funding and greater opportunities to collaborate within and between faculties."*

*"Provide greater interaction between PhD students (Need more community)."*

*"Organize more events to make us know more students from other departments."*

*"Provide more training and expertise in research knowledge, whether it's methods or field research insights - there is nothing and I would be very much supported if this existed."*

*"Provide other financial support e.g. tutoring."*

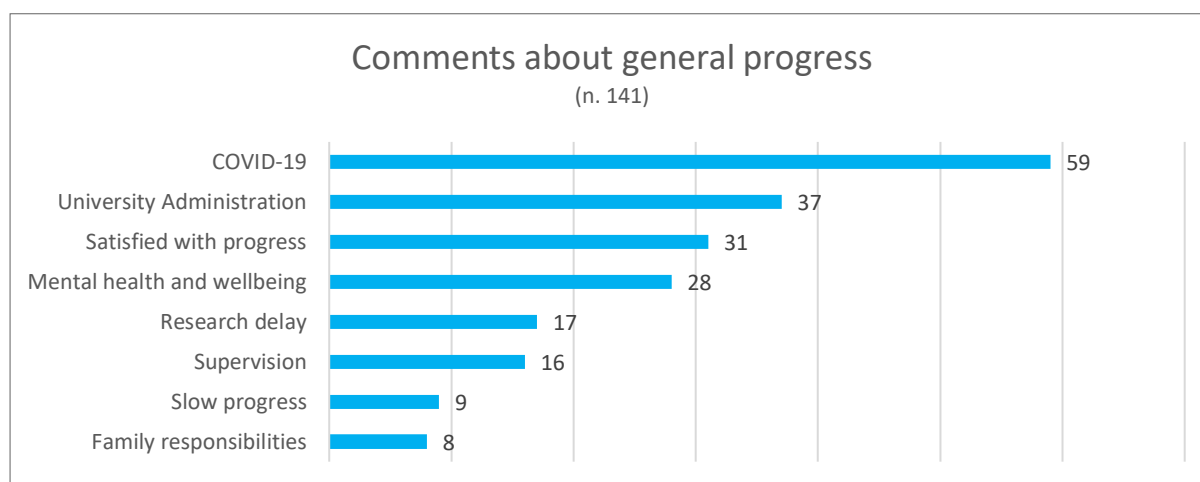
*"Make counselling sessions with someone like advocates from MGA compulsory for the first year so if there's a problem students can see early and prepare better."*

*"More programs/seminar towards "what's after PhD", so we have something to look forward to."*

*“Perhaps some 1 on 1 career coaching towards the end to assist in the transition to post-doc career options.”*

*“Increased networking and career opportunities for postdoctoral graduates (given the state of the academic job market).”*

## General HDR comments



The most frequent comment to do with HDR students' general progress was in relation to the **COVID-19** pandemic. These included:

*“Delayed due to COVID restriction, progress is below average in my opinion.”*

*“During my final year, we were mostly in lockdown which already took away a lot of hours in the lab. Especially in the second half of my final year, while I should be completely focussed on finalising my experiments and writing my thesis, I spend a lot of time on preparing for my milestone and applying for my GRCA and PPA. I do have to say that receiving the GRCA and PPA have helped me a lot and I am very grateful to be lucky enough to gotten both. I just wish I could have applied for them earlier.”*

*“I am particularly struggling to work from home, so am not progressing through my final year as consistently as I and my supervisors would like. I am getting very concerned about my ability to finish on time.”*

Several students took this opportunity to comment on the **University's leadership and administrators**. These included:

*“The university's complete disregard for the welfare and support of HDR students in this pandemic has all but completely alienated me from the institution. Were it not for my personal love of this project, I would have quit in disgust in 2020, and to date I have yet to completely discount this course of action. Moreover, their inaction has done at least as much damage to my mental health and wellbeing as the wider effects of the lockdowns and pandemic itself - though, the University gets no such excuse as 'necessary for Public Health'. They have been grossly negligent in their care for HDR candidates, and others, in pursuit of a profit margin.”*

*"I'm committed to completing my degree but I have a very distant relationship with the University in which I'm completing the degree. It's very strange."*

*"Given that supporting scholarships are granted for a limited time, it could lead to a low-quality research. Scholarship policies of the university should be flexible enough for projects which might need more extended time to conclude properly."*

Several respondents commented on how **satisfied with their progress** they were. Such comments included:

*"I think I'm progressing adequately. My supervisors don't appear concerned which is reassuring."*

*"I have progressed well with my research, thanks to the support from the faculty and supervisors."*

*"Overall, I am enjoying the work I have completed towards my degree and look forward to finishing my thesis soon. The people on campus, from librarians to professors to MGA, have been wonderful and very helpful along this academic journey."*

**Mental health and wellbeing** were the focus of several respondents' comments. These included:

*"Often feel torn in different directions as part-timer, between need to look after my daughter (especially while childcare is closed) and need to keep making progress with my research. At the moment, research has taken a back seat and I feel quite stressed that I won't be able to make up for lost time."*

*"I live in Melbourne and the never-ending nature of the lockdowns paired with the never-ending nature of a PhD can be mentally exhausting. I don't know that the university understands that COVID doesn't just affect our ability to collect data for our research, but it also takes a huge mental toll. Things like easier access to milestone or candidature extensions would be useful."*

*"I am currently suffering from anxiety disorder which is affecting my progress. Moreover, I am not IT savvy and need help ... I paid someone to type my thesis and seek help from PhD colleagues to help me access information."*

**Other interesting comments** included:

*"Conducting literature review in isolation without a research community and within the confinement of four walls can be dull, discouraging, demotivating and mess up our circadian rhythm. However, I would attribute my slow progress to the topic difficulty. The 20% experimental work component in my research project is also delayed indefinitely until the campus reopens."*

*"General progress has been impeded by relationships with supervisors and feeling unmotivated as a result of it."*

*"I am just hoping I pull this through. It's hard, I am just dragging my feet to get to the finish line. Good thing my supervisors are always ready to pull my hands and walk me forward at every time I am about to turn my back to finishing my doctorate."*

*“No studio access for most of two years is a lol.”*

*“I absolutely have no confidence in finishing the PhD with all the catch-up work to do within the limited amount of time. I’ve already extended by a year and I am still at the same stage I was in march 2020 when the pandemic began. It’s becoming tiring to drag the PhD that long.”*

*“Although I have a number of other things to juggle along with my research - for most of my degree, a role as primary carer to my child, and now also a demanding part-time position (outside my research field )- I have been in the fortunate position to be a domestic student and to have the support financial, caring, and emotional support of my partner; and to be undertaking study principally out of interest in my topic and for personal enrichment.”*

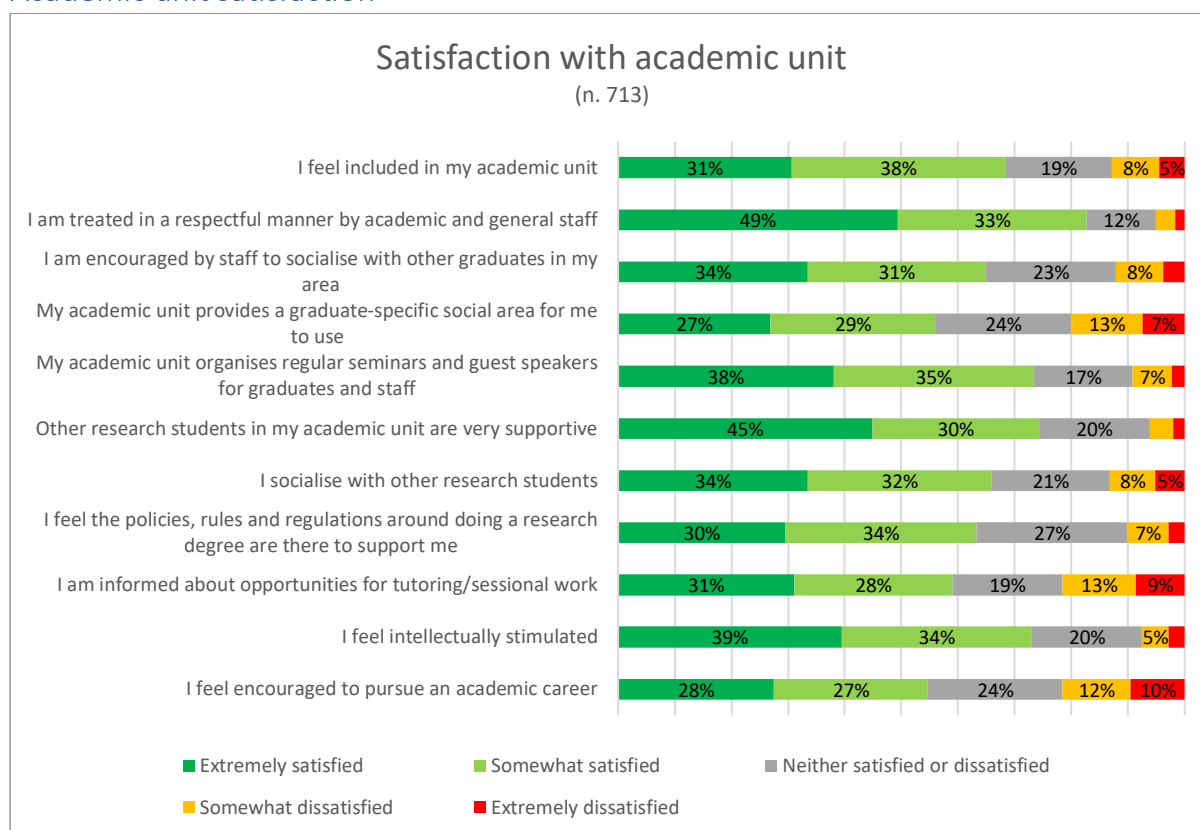
*“There has been a lot of stress through having to hunt for accurate information about aspects of my PhD. e.g. conflicting information about what constitutes Thesis including published works, for example e.g. speaker at the official workshop about it directly contradicting the handbook on multiple points.”*

*“The only reason I have time to do the research degree is that, despite being part-time, I actually spend an immense amount of time each week working on it. Most weeks I work what I imagine to be “full time” research degree hours. (I probably took on too ambitious a project.)”*

## Services, facilities and culture

The following questions were asked in relation to the culture of academic units and the University, the opportunities provided to students through tutoring and internships, and the services and facilities available.

### Academic unit satisfaction



Over two-thirds (69%) of respondents were satisfied that they felt included in their academic unit, which represents a slightly better result than in 2017 when 64% of HDRs responded this way.

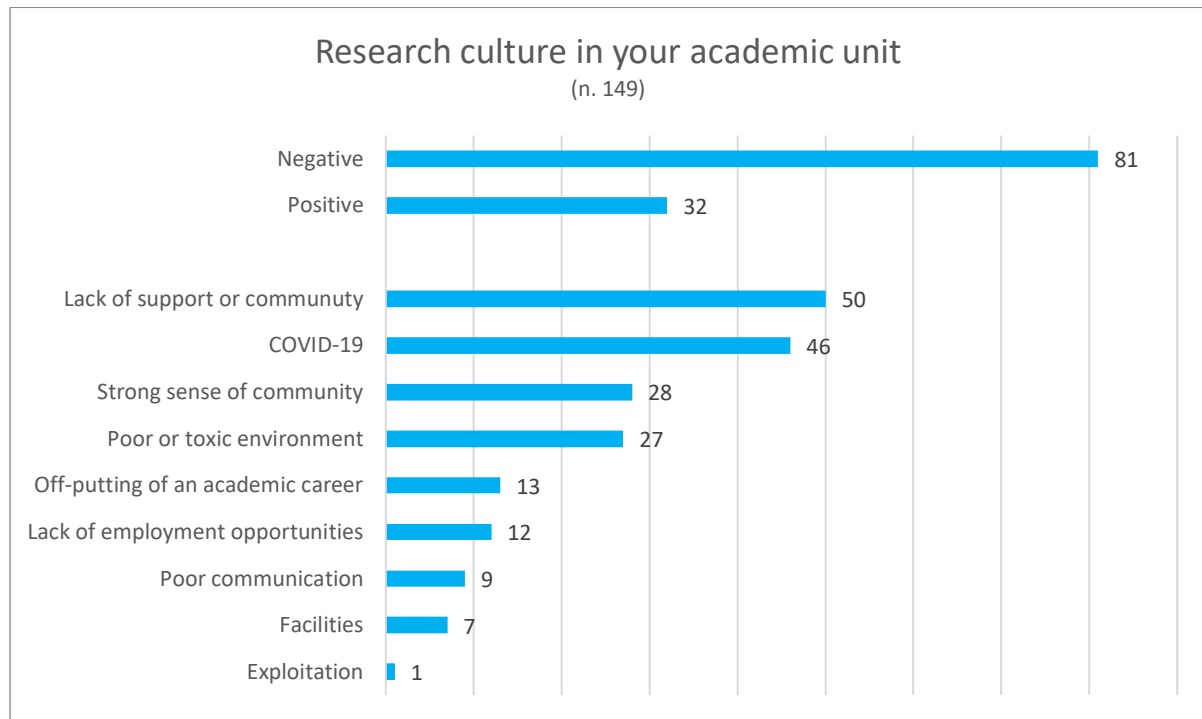
In regard to their academic unit, respondents were most-satisfied in relation to being treated in a respectful manner by academic and general staff, while they were least-satisfied in relation to being informed about opportunities for tutorial/sessional work.

Respondents with a disability were widely less-satisfied with their academic unit than those who did not have a disability. This was particularly true in regard to being informed of tutoring/sessional work opportunities.

Respondents were consistently more satisfied than dissatisfied; however, those who had experienced conflict with a supervisor and those who had considered leaving their degree were more likely to be dissatisfied than satisfied that they felt encouraged to pursue an academic career. Indeed, those who had experienced conflict with a supervisor were far more likely to be dissatisfied on the metrics tested than were those who had not experienced conflict with a supervisor.

Meanwhile, the older a respondent was the more likely they were to feel included in their academic unit.

## Research culture in academic unit – comments



Comments left in regard to the research culture in academic units were more likely to be negative (81 comments) than positive (32 comments).

The most frequently cited response related to a perceived **lack of support or community**. Comments included:

*“Any friendships I have made have been through sheer force of will, my own organisation and my own outgoing nature. Most people I talk to state that they feel isolated, especially if they're not on campus.”*

*“I feel included as a student not as an academic colleague.”*

*“I think HDR students should be more involved in the faculty, specially PHD students. We should be encouraged to pursue teaching in the faculty to progress and form a good curriculum for life after the PhD (plus, economically saving our lives from anxiety!)”*

*“Extreme dissonance between discourse and practice. All talk about collaboration and community building, zero action towards it. Everyone is too busy and stretched out because of staff cuts and overload of teaching hours. Everyone only cares about their own research.”*

*“I think overall the research culture in my academic unit was good; but at the time I didn't really know what was available to me and my research group didn't encourage you to attend or utilise any of those resources. In my lab it was very much, students should report to our lab and our lab only, and there is no time for socialising etc.”*



**COVID-19** was referenced consistently as well in relation to the research culture of academic units. Comments included:

*“It has become extremely hard for HDR students who started last year/this year to find sessional tutoring work outside the units their supervisors are teaching because of the lack of communication and interaction opportunities with other faculty members due to covid-19.”*

*“The staff and students that I have contact with are great, but the university makes it difficult for students and staff to support each other. Very little has been done to provide online spaces during covid, and excessive workloads mean that supporting other students (for example, going to milestones/panel discussions) is at the expense of your research progress.”*

*“I think there could be more done during Covid. Guest seminars etc have all but died. I think that my academic unit could do more to help the students to network, go to conferences etc. I feel the academic faculty is more interested in securing opportunities for themselves, rather than for their students.”*

*“The only reason I'm less satisfied is because of COVID - we joined the department just as COVID hit so I feel like I haven't had much chance to do social activities, but that's not the faculty's fault.”*

The majority of positive comments related to a **strong sense of community**. These included:

*“Wonderful. Really liked the work environment. I Will miss this in the future. Hopefully I find this culture elsewhere too.”*

*“Research culture in our department is excellent. Sets up very healthy competition yet students have their own path to follow. Best of two worlds. Staffs, admin and peers are very supportive.”*

*“My school culture is very good. General conditions for academic staff have dissuaded me from pursuing an academic career. This is not a reflection of my department, but of Monash and the academic system more generally.”*

Many respondents commented on a perceived **poor or toxic environment** existing within their academic units. These included:

*“Politics among researchers at Monash discourage collaboration, this made me steer away from pursuing academic career.”*

*“The research culture at Monash is highly politicised and often students feel expected to do extra work for nothing, or to need to constantly prove ourselves as worthy. My experiences with the Coursework side of Monash have been extremely positive, however, I have been heavily discouraged by the research side and would be very unlikely to pursue a research career at Monash.”*

*“Academia is not a place for people wanting to get pregnant and start families. It has been demonstrated to me through the actions of the department head that academia is not a safe place for this.”*

**Other interesting comments** included:

*“I think that so many of the academics are burnt out to such a level that there is no way any HDR student could look at our seniors and say, wow that's the life I want to lead.”*

*“Many people over-work and make the culture feel stressful, which puts me off pursuing an academic career.”*

*“How can I consider an academic career when there is no guarantee of job security? I'm not prepared to waste my life working as a casual academic.”*

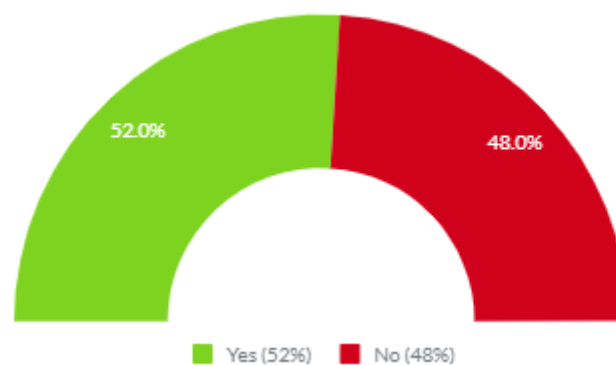
*“More spaces open for entry level master or PhD students should be available, in my unit there are more post-docs than PhD students.”*

*“My academic unit feels like it is a relic of the past, the main faculty in the unit just spin out slight variations of the same research from over 20 years ago. The faculty care little for graduate student experience or training, instead using them as cheap labour. The intellectual stimulation and cross pollination of ideas is laughable, we have had 3 seminars in almost 2 years and initiatives such as journal clubs only offer token attempts at rigour. In general, it feels as if Monash treats PhD students as after thoughts. We do not qualify as ECR for the majority of events or mentorship opportunities. There is no attempt to produce a cohort from the graduate students.”*

*“I am very disappointed that the old research offices were replaced with the current open-office hot desking arrangements. I (and many other students) find it very difficult to work in this environment. This has caused me to try and work from home, which has also been difficult. I was really looking forward to having a desk and space to work from at the university and believe my experience has been significantly weakened by its loss.”*

**Tutoring**

Were you given the opportunity to tutor?



Just over half of Monash HDRs had been given the opportunity to tutor during their degree.

Of those who were casually employed, 73% had tutored at Monash, while those with a scholarship were over twice as likely to have tutored as those without a scholarship.

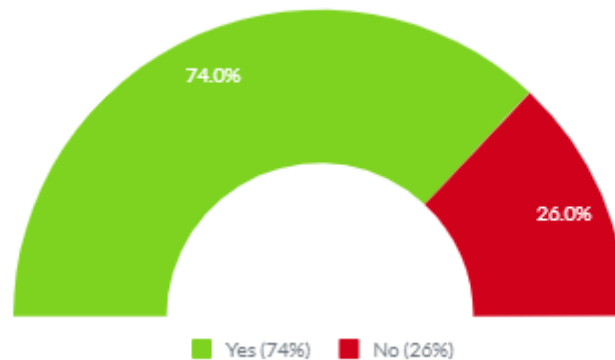
Meanwhile, 58% of those who had enrolled prior to the COVID-19 pandemic had tutored compared to 38% of those who had enrolled during the pandemic.

Only 27% of respondents aged forty and over were given the opportunity to tutor, while 57% of those aged 39 or under were provided with this opportunity.

There was not a strong link between supervisor satisfaction and being provided with an opportunity to tutor.

### Tutoring pay

Were you paid appropriately for your tutoring?



Over one-quarter of Monash HDRs who had tutored thought that they had not been paid appropriately for their work.

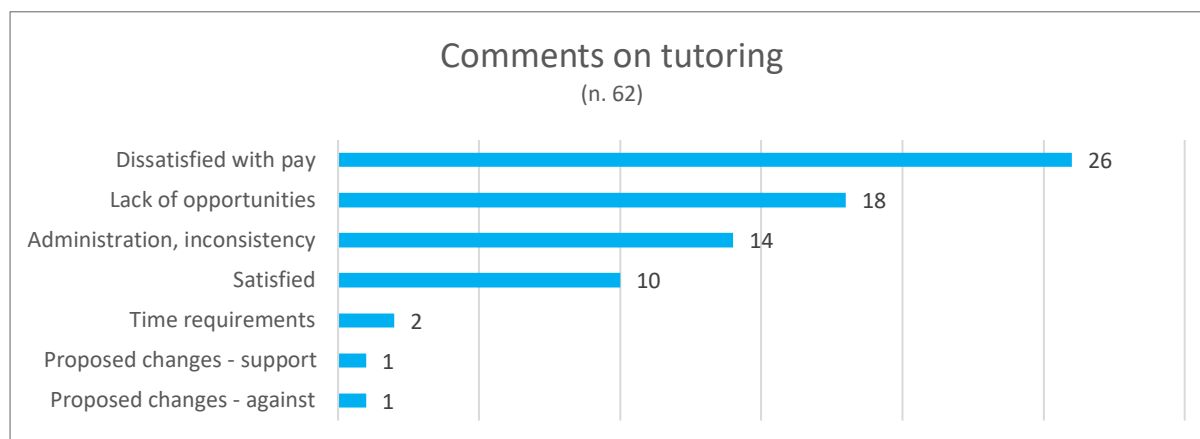
Respondents from Arts (42%), Education (39%) and Science (31%)<sup>7</sup> were the most-likely to feel that they were underpaid, while respondents from Pharmacy (13%), BusEco (13%) and IT (21%) were the least-likely to feel that they were underpaid.

Of those who would not recommend Monash to their peers, 37% felt they were not paid appropriately for their tutoring work, compared to 21% of respondents who would recommend Monash. Meanwhile, domestic students were 12% more likely than international students to feel that they were not paid appropriately.

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<sup>7</sup> Law was excluded as only 3 respondents from the faculty had tutored.

## Comments on tutoring



The most-frequent comment on tutoring was in regard to HDR students being **dissatisfied with pay**. These included:

*“One unit I teach pays me for all of the work I put in, whereas another does not - I am underpaid for preparation and marking. This unit is run by my research group so I feel uncomfortable fighting this issue and I feel expected to participate.”*

*“I enjoyed my time demonstrating/tutoring, and felt like the hourly rate was quite generous. However, the amount of time required to complete marking and feedback tasks to a high standard far exceeded the amount of time we were told we could claim - I was able to timesheet 10 minutes per student for most marking tasks, and often found that I needed closer to 30 minutes per student. In some weeks, I found I spent two or three full evenings (~5-8 hours) making sure I had completed my marking work in time for the next class, but was only able to claim ~ 2.5 hours of this.”*

*“The exploitation, below-minimum wage pay, and wage theft that is rampant led to me hating teaching (which I was once passionate about), and caused injuries. I never want to teach again as a casual, especially at this university.”*

*“A lot of the time spent is also unpaid, especially the time spent corresponding with or about students while they are on placements. This is not covered by the time allotted to tutorial preparation, which can vary a lot itself depending on what materials are provided by the unit coordinator.”*

*“Marking also always takes more than half an hour per student per assignment when the assessment is qualitative, as it is in the Faculty of Education. This appears to be a universal experience, even for those who have been teaching in academia for decades.”*

*“In my first semester I spent at least twice as many hours preparing for teaching or marking assignments than I got paid for. I can accept that I didn't get paid to do the training but I think that tutors should be allowed more time for marking assignments as we either have the choice of not getting paid enough or not marking the assignments thoroughly enough.”*

*“The amount of hours we are told we are allowed to claim and the actual amount of hours we need for preparation and marking are very off. We end up working for free or not taking*

*the proper time to grade, which leads to dishonest and inconsistent grading for the students.”*

*“It is called tutoring. We tutor students. BUT the department prefers to call it 'Demonstrating practicals' so they do not have to pay us the full tutoring rate. Instead, we are only allowed to claim 'Other required activity', which is only worth a third of the full tutoring rate. Underpayment!!!”*

Several respondents complained about a perceived **lack of opportunities** to tutor. Comments included:

*“Never offered any tutoring despite having vast experience in the field.”*

*“Tutor opportunities are mostly via word-of-mouth and restricted to most students.”*

*“Tutoring isn't something readily available to HDRs. It should be noted to students that it is about who you know and not your particular skills that get you tutoring work. It should also be highlighted that a student (with or without a scholarship) can't not work but tutoring isn't something that is handed out by supervisors or other academics in the faculty.”*

**Other interesting comments** included:

*“The criteria for hiring a tutor are not transparent at all.”*

*“Some students are given 8-10 tutoring sessions while others are given none. Should bring a uniformity.”*

*“Tutoring opportunities seem gender-biased, and racially-biased.”*

*“The proposed "Periodic PhD Employment Program" is another example of efforts by an organisation (in this case the university itself) to give work to a more insecure, high turnover workforce for the benefit of lower wages, disguised by promises of 'training'. It should be opposed at every step.”*

*“Tutoring is helpful. I support the proposal for PhD student to be given a teaching contract over the course of their degree.”*

*“Other universities seem to classify "tutoring" work differently and this is confusing. Many tutes are full on teaching tutorials however you are instructed you are only "facilitating" regardless of the level of teaching you actually need to do, for lazy unit chairs this gets very out of hand.”*

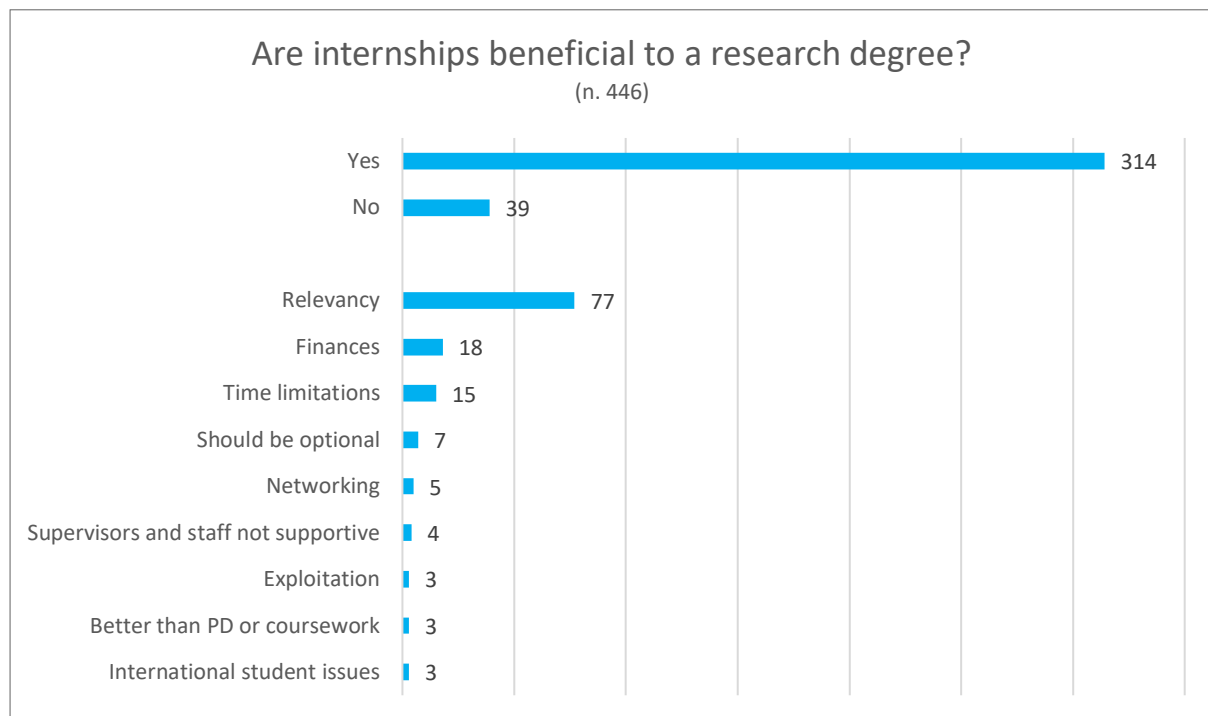
*“The opportunity to work in the university has been excellent.”*

*“Tutoring was highly valuable to me as it let me realise I have a passion for teaching.”*

*“Tutoring was a great outlet for HDRs as a distraction from stressful work. Teaching younger students can be rewarding, at least for me.”*

*“Tutoring is great, I love meeting my students and watching them grow over a semester. Their 'ah ha!' moments are very gratifying.”*

## Internships



The overwhelming majority of respondents (89%) believed that internships were beneficial to a research degree. However, these positive responses were occasionally qualified by comments relative to **relevancy**, **finances** and **time limitations**.

Interesting comments included:

*“Sometimes, as long as they are very targeted and not mandatory (especially when pay is non-existent or minimal).”*

*“Depends on the candidate and their field of interest. Would need to be directly relevant.”*

*“Internships can be useful if they are adequately paid. My concern is that internships will impact on my ability to do my research. Monash seems to increase the PhD workload constantly without providing extra time to do that work.”*

*“Perhaps for younger students but [I’ve been] a consultant for most of my career, I doubt I would benefit much from an extra load and the resultant time pressures.”*

*“Yes - particularly for people without prior work experience and who are interested in industry. I think in the final year(s) of a candidature, the opportunity to intern with an organisation/institute could be extremely beneficial.”*

*“Yes, many are undecided to follow through to the academic pathway and internships provide a bridge out of the academic pathway.”*

*“Yes, they could be depending on the area of research, project or student’s own wants/needs.”*

*“Yes, but it shouldn't be forced on students; candidature must be longer; interns must be paid a living wage at the very least; and should be a transparent process that conforms with normal hiring practices that exist in the "real world"”*

*“Hard to say because it is not something I am seeking out. I'm not sure where I would find the time to do an internship when I have so many other commitments.”*

*“Yes, but the opportunities are limited and being an international student it was overwhelming to explore options. Someone from the Faculty could play a mentoring role in guiding students to explore such opportunities.”*

*“Not for students who have come from a professional/industry background. Please remember we are not all undergrads-honours-PhD students. SO many different pathways and experience that should be recognised.”*

*“It should definitely be more encouraged, with clear communication of the credit process and lowering the barriers to finding internship opportunities. But it should still be optional.”*

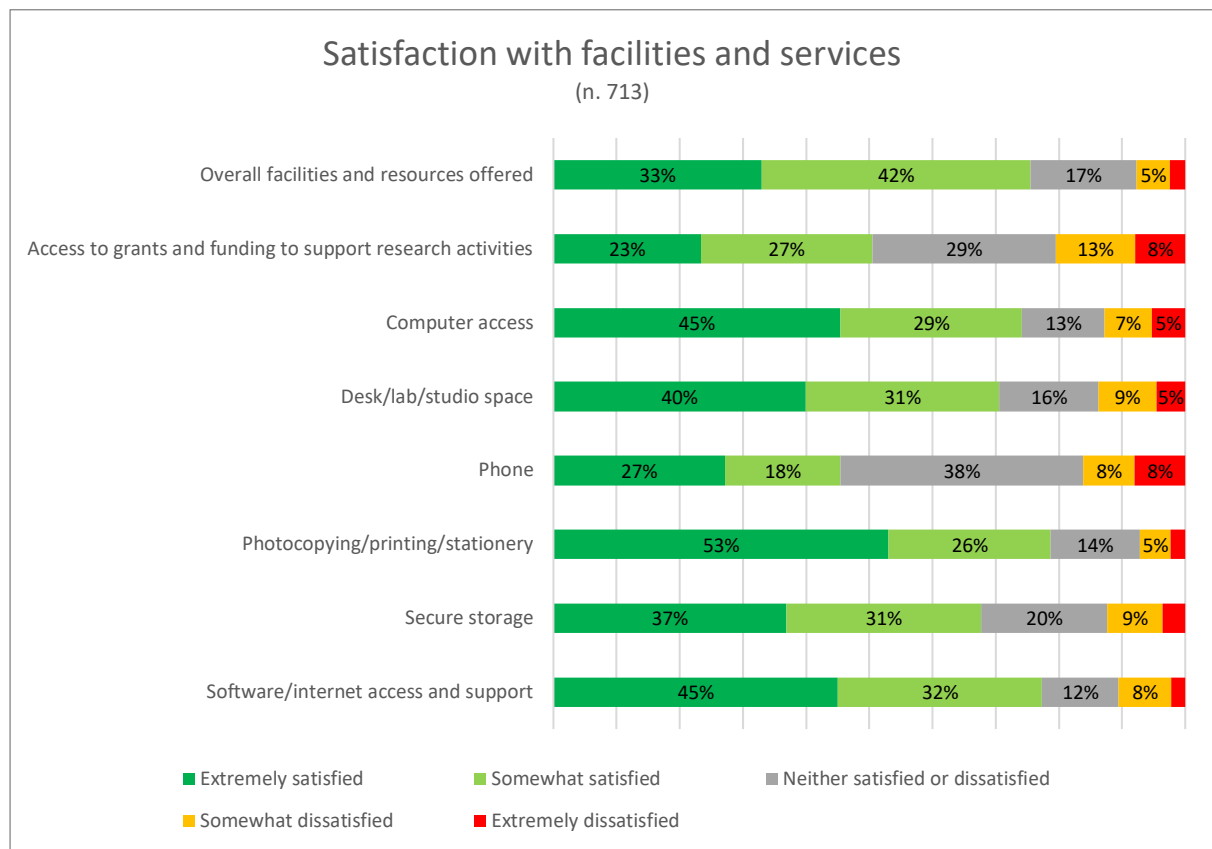
*“Absolutely, I will love the opportunity to build industry connections.”*

*“I didn't do an internship during my HDR, but I think it would be beneficial to give more students the opportunity to do one in industry. Most HDRs will eventually end up in industry, so having relations there is important for the rest of our career. This internship should be funded separately with no time taken from the student's project. We already have little time to complete our PhDs.”*

*“I think it is a very important part. It helps students widen their scope for future career and build networks in academia, industry, education, journalism and other areas that can utilise their specialties.”*

*“Yes, but often supervisors are not encouraging - likely due to pause in research progress.”*

## Facilities and services

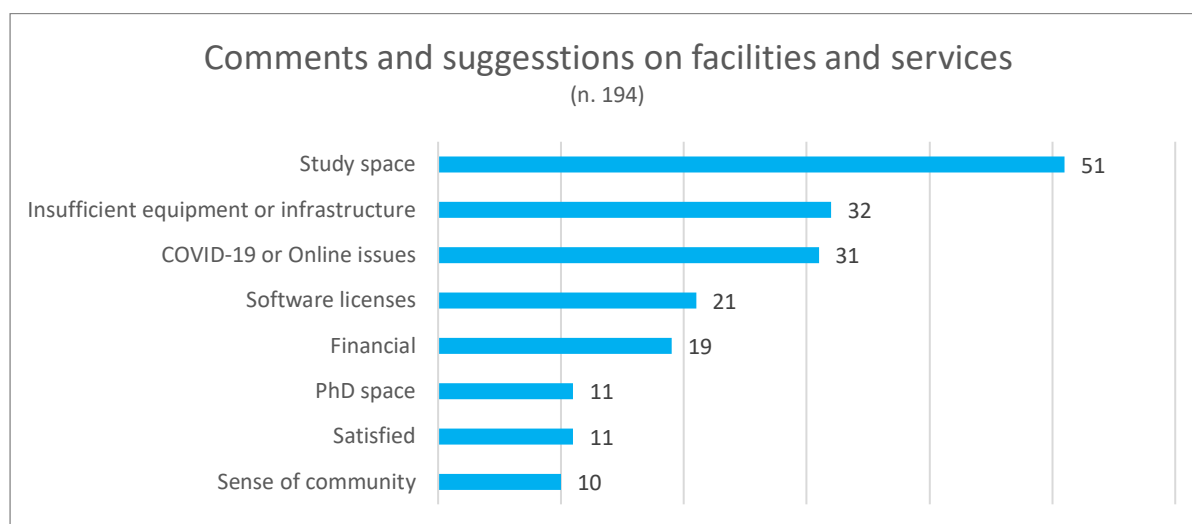


Three-quarters of students were satisfied with the overall facilities and resources offered. Respondents were most-satisfied with photocopying/printing/stationery and most-dissatisfied with access to grants and funding to support their research activities.



## Comments on facilities and suggestions for improvements

Respondents were provided with the opportunity to comment on the adequacy of the facilities that they receive and to state what additional facilities would help support them through to completion.



The most-common request in relation to additional facilities that the University could provide to support completion was **study spaces**. These included:

*“My lab is quite large and needed more desk space for students and has struggled to obtain this despite my lab head fighting really hard for it.”*

*“Open spaces like a hub may suit to some students, but I need a quiet place to work. I need to use earphones to block the noise, because I need a quiet space. There are some quiet rooms but not enough.”*

*“There are a lot of people in the area that my desk is in (open plan concept) so it's not an ideal workspace, so I prefer to work from home.”*

*“The lack of having a designated space is a significant loss. I would caution anyone considering studying at Monash that they will need to be prepared to work in an open-office hot desking environment.”*

**Insufficient equipment or infrastructure** was also a common response with notable comments including:

*“I have found it challenging as my desk space was cleaned out without my permission whilst I was working at home during Covid-19. I found this particularly disappointing and unnerving. The new desk space I have been provided with does not have appropriate computer equipment as the previous students have taken it home to use during Covid-19.”*

*“I have been refused access to a computer/laptop, so I am expected to have my own personal laptop. As it was quite old, I couldn't download statistical packages I needed to use. I had to make do for 6 months while I saved up to buy a new one to do my research.”*

*“The height of the desk in my office cannot be adjusted, sometimes it is too low, I would feel pain in my back and neck after one day long sitting and watching my computer. Also, the printer often run out of paper which could be a bit annoying.”*

Issues relating to working from home because of **COVID-19** were also relatively frequent. These included:

*“There are currently not any facilities available to me? My internet is terrible at home and I'm not allowed on campus.”*

*“The desk situation isn't great. Luckily the centre that my PhD falls in offered me a desk that I could use when I am on campus. I have been frustrated that when working from home I have to pay for a printer, paper etc.”*

*“I am stuck overseas and I got no support from Monash University during this period. My application to get COVID related support also rejected because I was in Pakistan and not in Australia at time of applying.”*

**Software licences** were mentioned by several students. Comments included:

*“Facilities are adequate. Some software licenses are limited and they cannot be accessed through remote login and that makes it difficult to analysis during lockdowns.”*

*“All the licensing issues with big software (e.g. Photoshop and Adobe and even Google maps...) has created some inconveniences, but for the most part it's been ok. When it comes to storage I have 10s of thousands of camera trap images that I need to upload to store and it's so slow, I don't know what the solution is. But I ended up getting myself an external hard drive to deal with it temporarily.”*

*“Monash no longer providing Adobe means I have to fork out \$40 per month for something that is necessary for my postgraduate work.”*

**Other interesting comments** included:

*“Grant or support for physical disabled international students.”*

*“Claim approvals and grant requests should be processed faster. There were times where I had to wait for more than 2 months for my chemicals to arrive.”*

*“I really appreciate the timely response of our e-Solutions. Thumbs-up!”*

*“The facilities I received on campus is top notch. There is no second opinions on that. Even the technicians and other associated staff members helped in facilitating me and many of my HDR colleagues with all sorts of resources to ensure quality research.”*

*“I think a dedicated mental health series or counselling for HDR students is a must. Also, instead of treating other students as competition, nurturing collaboration should be encouraged!”*

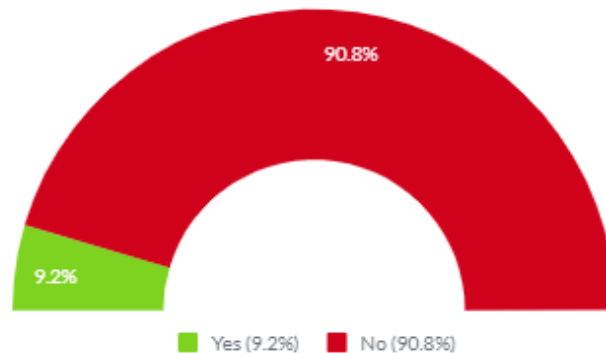
*“I think I'm well supported in terms of reaching completion. I am however, a little worried that after completion I will feel a little alone and lost given there is limited opportunities to form alliances or collaborate with other organisations/departments while undertaking the PhD. I feel like doing a PhD sometimes makes you feel like you are in a tunnel and I am worried that I won't know what to do once I make it to the other side. Maybe it's no body's responsibility to help you once you finish but it would be nice to know that there will be opportunities after you finish.”*

*“I don't understand why scholarships are not available to part-time students. If we were part-time because of work responsibilities, we would have some money... but not as much as if we weren't studying. But when studying part time and not working (due to care responsibilities or other things), why are we not eligible for part-time scholarship money?”*

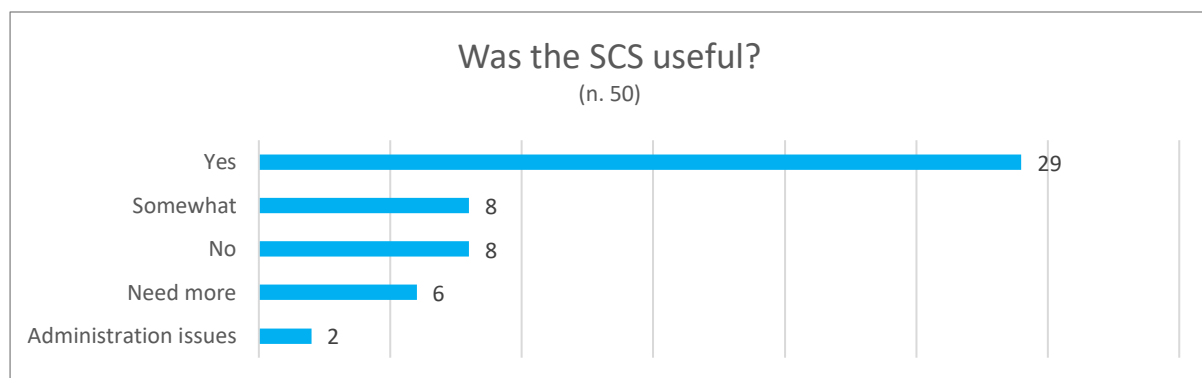
*“As a part-time graduate student, before covid, often made to feel like a second-class citizen. Told our lockers might be taken off us if more full-timers enrolled. Not given discounted parking despite only being able to attend campus one day per week. Not given a laptop like every full time graduate student.”*

## Statistical Consulting Service

### Have you used the Statistical Consulting Service?



Those who had used the Statistical Consulting Service (SCS) were given an opportunity to comment on whether they found it useful. The table below summarises responses to this question:



The majority of respondents found the service useful; however, others thought that it was only partially or not useful. Interesting comments included:

*"Yes, it helps students have better understanding of theories and what steps need to be undertaken to get the outcomes of data analysis."*

*"Yes, indeed. please increase the free hours of statistical support."*

*"Yes, the person who runs it was very knowledgeable and helped put me at ease about statistics. I think that most students must be very nervous about doing their stats because he seemed used to it and deliberately tried to make me less nervous about it which in hindsight really helped me."*

*"Absolutely brilliant. I would have given my PhD away if it was not for Tim Powers statistical support. He is excellent. Originally my school provided support from a statistician who was difficult to contact."*

*"Yes it was helpful, but was rather self-directive after giving advice."*

*"It took a long time to get a response, and then I met with someone who I wasn't sure was part of the service as advertised. The discussion was helpful, however I didn't have all of my questions answered. This may have been due to the presentation I have of my data, I don't feel as though it was the fault of the consultant."*

*"Yes, to an extent. I had a good first session which gave me some direction for some complicated data I was analysing. The consultant asked to schedule a two hour follow-up, which I did, but by the time that came around the consultant had quit working for the university (within two weeks of the original appointment). I scheduled another appointment with new consultant a month later where we covered the same things, and I have a good idea of what I need to do now."*

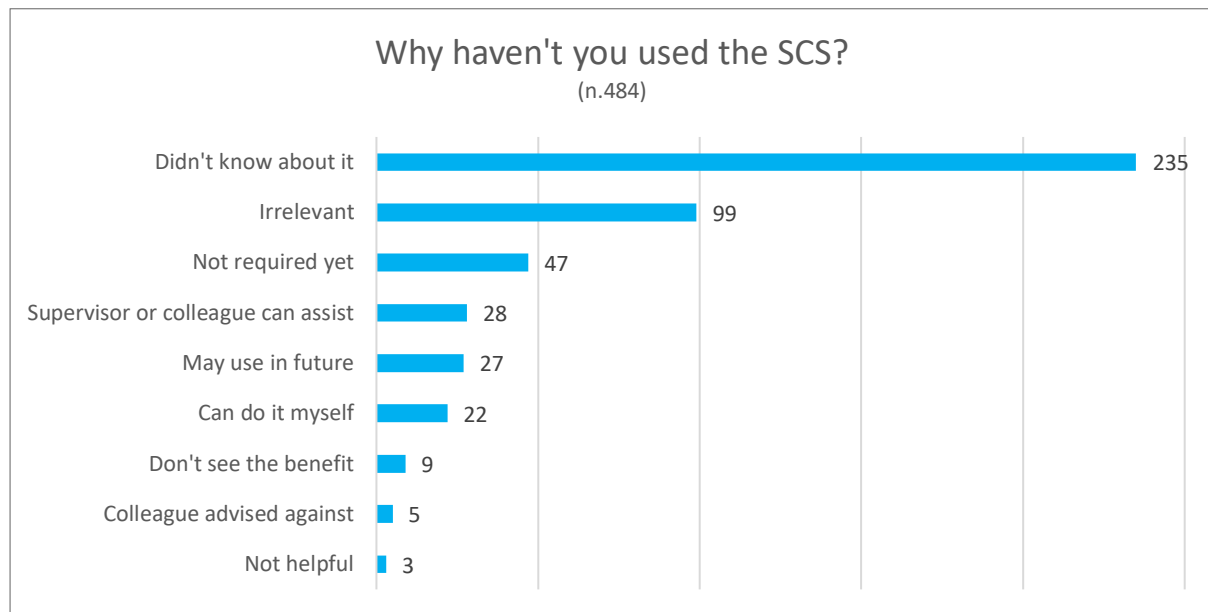
*"Difficult to tell as I didn't end up pursuing that aspect of research but the person allocated to me was also a PhD candidate at the time (albeit in stats) and they weren't certain of the approach either, but couldn't offer any alternatives or firm advice."*

*"Not really. The consultant didn't understand the project enough to be really useful, and 5 hours isn't enough to familiarise them with it. Perhaps there could be a more detailed document to be submitted at the start, that gave an overview of the project and the particular areas where the student needs help?"*

*"Not really. I needed more assistance to complete the statistical analysis, and without the appropriate support about how to do it, this area of my project was forfeited."*

*"No. The support person was not versed in the software I wanted to use. They could not provide an alternative method to analyze my data and did not help me understand my data at all."*

Meanwhile, those who had not used the Statistical Consulting Service (SCS) were given the opportunity to outline why that was the case. Their responses are summarised in the table below:



While there were a variety of reasons provided for why respondents had not used the SCS, the primary reason was that they had not known about it. However, other common themes were that it was irrelevant to their research, had not been required yet or they had a supervisor or colleague who could assist. Interesting comments included:

*“Never heard of it.”*

*“I have no need. Also, I don't know anything about it.”*

*“My research didn't include data gathering.”*

*“Do not have a statistical/quantitative component to my research.”*

*“Haven't needed to complete complex statistics yet, and thus haven't felt I needed to consult with this service. A representative from the Statistical Consulting Services ran a great MyDevelopment session which I attended though, so I feel positively towards the service and can appreciate its value / would be likely to consult with them if I felt it was required.”*

*“I have not yet reached a point in my research that requires statistical analysis.”*

*“Currently, we are not in that stage which need the help from the statistical consulting team.”*

*“Consulted supervisor instead as he is expert in it.”*

*“I have managed to self-learn and get relevant advice from my supervisors.”*

*“First point of call is supervisors, and they're very good at stats.”*

*“Woo, I didn't know it before. I did simple research online just now, and it's interesting. I may give it a try.”*

*“I hadn't heard of it until a friend used the service but I intend to use it.”*

*"I have never heard of this service until now. Now that I am aware of it, I will research further into it."*

*"I have the resources to do my own statistical analysis, and support for working out statistical problems is always available within my school."*

*"I went to a stats session hosted by that group at the start of my candidature and it wasn't very helpful."*

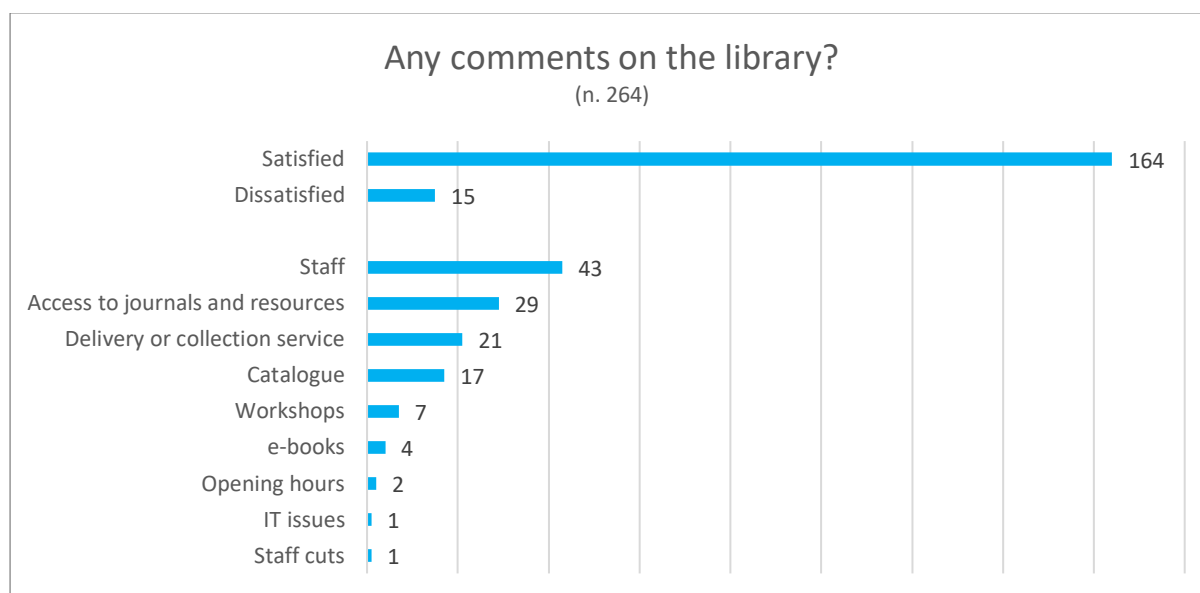
*"I have heard from other HDR students that it was a waste of time."*

*"I went once to a workshop at that start of the PhD that was hosted by the same team that do the stats counselling. They went way too fast and I came out of it feeling worse than when I went in."*

*"Limited number of consultations available and therefore wanted to leave it for later. Was also informed by colleagues that the services were not offered in a timely manner and that the consultant took 2/5 available sessions just to get an understanding of the project which is not the best use of resources! The available consultant for that colleague was not at all familiar with general concepts relating to the field of research my colleague was engaged in."*

## Comments on library

Respondents were provided with an opportunity to comment on the library service if they wished. The responses of those who left a comment is summarised below:



The overwhelming sentiment from Monash HDRs in relation to the library was **positive**. Some of the more generic positive comments included:

*"I enjoy our library services and would not want to change much there."*

*"The library services have been perfect for me."*

*“Brilliantly supportive, particularly at the Ian Potter library at The Alfred.”*

*“I have found the library service to be exceptional throughout my degree.”*

Many of the positive statements related to **staff** at the library. These included:

*“Library staff are amazing and always helpful.”*

*“I got assistance from a librarian with my systematic review search strategy and she was so helpful.”*

*“Library service was all good. Booked some meetings with librarian he was helpful.”*

*“The subject librarians are the absolute best. So supportive, they go above and beyond and are a strength of Monash.”*

Many students were impressed with their **access to journals and resources**. Comments included:

*“I mostly use the library services through the online systems, but these seem to predominantly work well! The most valuable part of this service is the integrated access across many different databases or journals - I usually search for relevant papers via Google or PubMed, then use the library links to access the full text versions.”*

*“Library collection online is fantastic, I don't think there is a single journal article that I haven't been able to access.”*

*“Monash online library is amazing! Access to the newest journal articles, multidisciplinary databases, library training, etc. It's just great!”*

Several students commented on how impressed they were with the **delivery/collection service**. These included:

*“Library collection and services are awesome. I am as extensive user of library. They are doing a great work even during pandemic.”*

*“Excellent. I have used document delivery extensively. Digital and hard copy books have been purchased when requested. I very much appreciated access to the book delivery service during two lockdowns.”*

*“Due to covid haven't been able to physically access the library but they have delivered borrowed books to my house. Great service.”*

Some students were **dissatisfied** with the library service. Comments included:

*“There are quite a few journals that the library does not subscribe to which makes it quite difficult. My colleague has already put in a request but it was never followed up.”*

*“Pretty good so far although the subject matter librarian lost her job and I'm not sure there is one now - I haven't seen any information about this from the faculty.”*

*“One exception being notice to return long term book loans, a number of times I received a notice to return and reborrow books when I was in lockdown. I understand the Library needs to make sure books are not lost and is very generous for long term loans, but being told to return books when it is not possible is annoying.”*

*“Very grateful for the library service! I believe that librarians are no longer able to offer assistance with literature searching, which is disappointing to hear.”*

**Other interesting comments** included:

*“It is good enough. But we need more training in search strategy development. Currently, there is only a small 3-hour session which is not enough to understand the search strategy well.”*

*“The research sessions run by the library were brilliant and the support provided by the libraries, particularly during lockdown, was magnificent.”*

*“They need to have more hard cover books. I just cannot read the same online and it frustrates me that the University is not more inclusive of multiple access to resources.”*

*“With regards to the online services - it would be super useful for a plugin for my browser that allowed me to access databases directly from first pass searches on things like google scholar (I have no idea if this exists at Monash, I did have it at Melbourne).”*

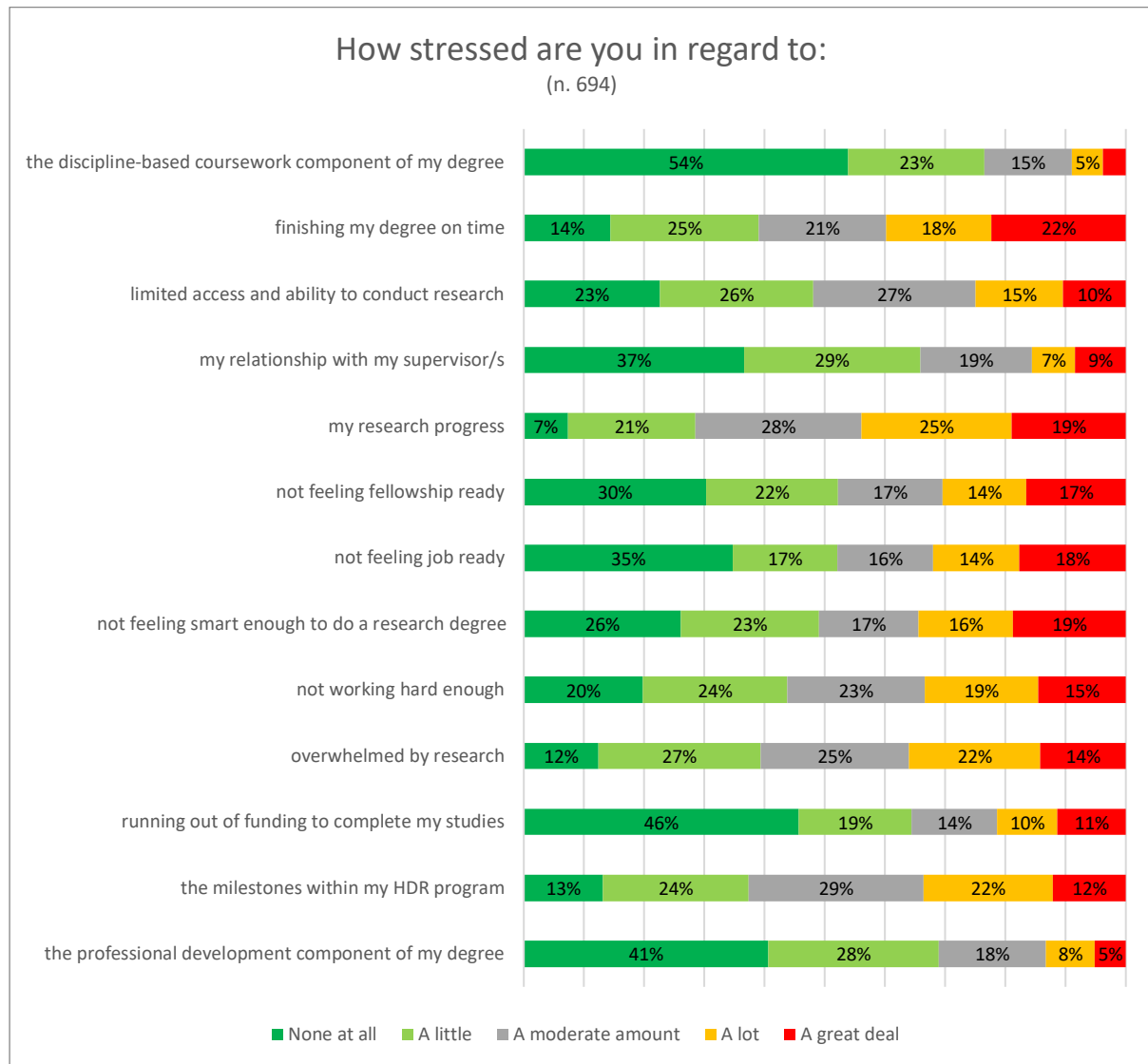
*“Libraries must be open on weekends, for longer hours, and should be adequately resourced. Due to my disabilities, the library's purchase of ebooks rather than or in addition hard copy books adds unnecessary barriers to research and timely completion.”*



## Stress and wellbeing

The following questions were asked in regard to the mental health and wellbeing of HDR students at Monash University.

### HDR stress



Monash HDR respondents were most-stressed in relation to their research progress and with finishing their degree on time; these were the only two areas where more students expressed that they had either ‘a great deal’ or ‘a lot’ of stress than said that they had ‘none at all’ or ‘a little’. Respondents were least-stressed in relation to the Coursework and Professional Development components of their degrees.

Across the board, those who had considered leaving reported higher levels of stress in relation to the metrics outlined above. This was prominent in relation to ‘finishing my degree on time’ and ‘my

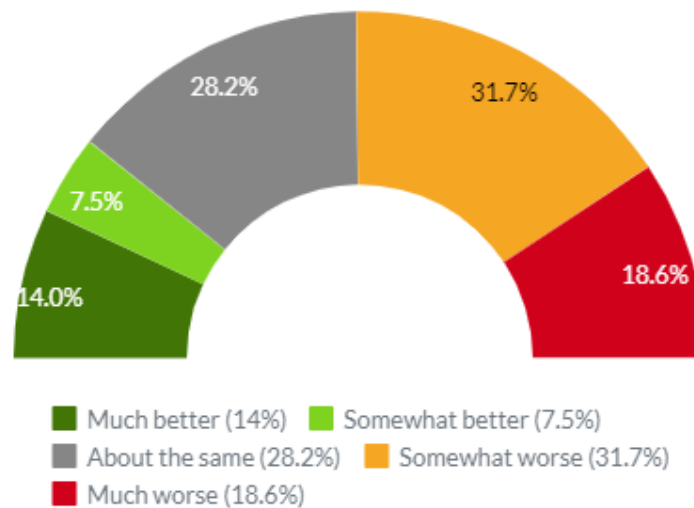
research progress'. As such, those who had experienced a delay in their research reported slightly elevated levels of stress across these metrics.

Furthermore, students with a disability also reported elevated stress levels relative to those without. This was particularly noticeable in relation to the milestones, research progress and completing on time.

## Mental health

Monash HDR students were asked to reflect on how their mental health in 2021 compared to their mental health during 2020.

### How would you rate your current mental health compared to last year?



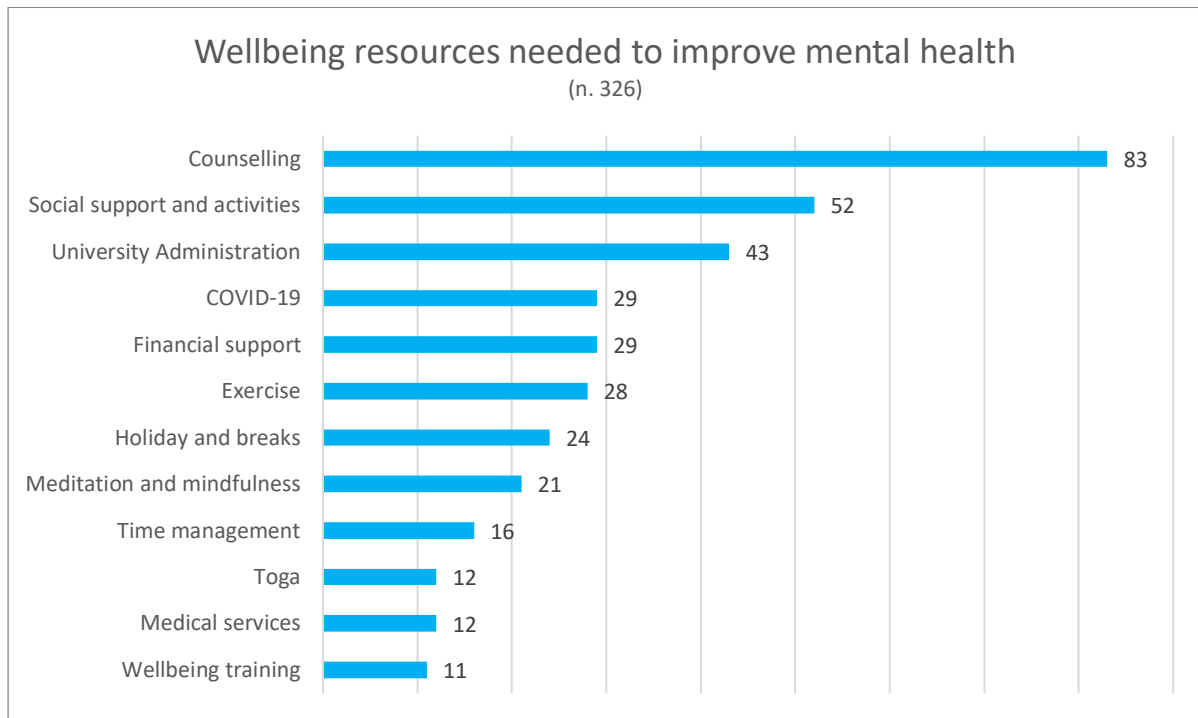
Over half of Monash HDRs reported that their mental health had declined in the last year, while just over one-in-five indicated that it had improved.

Mental health decline correlated with consideration of leaving a degree. Those who had reported that they were considering leaving were 21% more likely to report that their mental health had declined than those who had not considered leaving.

Respondents who had experienced a delay in their research were 17% more likely than those who had not to report that their mental health had declined, while students with a disability were 10% more likely than those who did not to report mental health deterioration.

Meanwhile, students who were casually employed were more likely to have seen their mental health deteriorate than were any other employment group.

Respondents were then asked **what wellbeing resources do you need to help you improve your overall mental health?** The top 12 themes are summaries below:



The primary resource referred to by Monash HDRs was **counselling**. Interesting comments included:

*“We have counselling service and it is awesome! I took this service.”*

*“More free counselling - I've already used all my sessions at the university counselling.”*

*“Counselling support. I think the supervisors need to be oriented in identifying some obvious symptoms of stress and mental wellbeing issues of a student and direct them to get counselling support.”*

*“The university promotes its own counselling services but does not provide guidelines about how a student can approach a GP and set up a mental health plan etc. Students need to be guided as to how they are able to find long-term mental health support, not just a few counselling services or calling headspace.”*

*“More awareness of the mental health support services available to students, e.g. 6 free counselling sessions through the Monash Counselling Service.”*

Many students identified **social support and activities** as a means of improving mental health. Comments included:

*“More connection to the university generally. The only social programs are run by the student associations and when there are any they tend to be big events rather than just day to day things like meeting the other students or staff.”*

*“More time building relationships and creatively socialising with other HDRs and ECAs.”*

*“The main thing that would be helpful to support my mental health at uni would be more opportunities for collegiality with other HDR students especially during lockdowns.”*

**University Administration** was referenced by many students in the sense that they wanted Monash to amend existing policies or introduce new policies to address their situations. Interesting comments included:

*“Meaningful extensions to relieve the stress of the pandemic and impending deadlines. Meaningful financial support to ensure I can pay my bills and rent in the meantime. Actual compassion.”*

*“University provide just phone contacts etc and I do not know how they can help mental health.”*

*“The boxes of goodies from MGA do actually help. It is an exciting game between students where we all try to sign up and then talk about and share our excitement of what's in the boxes. Please keep the fruit/mindful etc boxes coming. In addition, some reassurance that I will be able to eventually have access to resources, and thus will be supported to complete my PhD (even if its late).”*

**Other interesting comments** included:

*“Having the flexibility to travel back home and to come back to Australia.”*

*“None needed, when the lockdown lifts we will be back to normality and feel better.”*

*“Extensions to both candidature and scholarship for mental health related reasons.”*

*“I wish the sport centre would re-open, that was a big stress relief.”*

*“Mostly all the things that aren't possible due to lockdown right now! Like a place to do the exercise that makes me happy, face to face socialising over a beer, being able to be with my family. But other than that I have access to counselling and meditation and some green spaces, so I'm ok, I just could be better but will have to wait for restrictions to ease.”*

*“Mindfulness podcasts and meditation. Trying to exercise and sleep well (hard with children though).”*

*“Opportunity to have a regular monthly leave even for 1 day to be refreshed. During PhD and doing lots of laboratory works we need a time to break and this should be supported by supervisors and University. It is better to make it a fixed rule for all PhD researchers.”*

*“More frequent days off to decompress, similar to the 'recharge days' the university conducted on the Monday and Tuesday after the Grand Final weekend.”*

*“Routine. It is particularly difficult as I have to also home-school my children and juggle other work commitments all from home.”*

*“Nothing. Just need to progress in research and whatsoever fear, anxiety and frustration will go away by itself.”*

*“I love mindfulness, yoga and walks in nature.”*

*“The Monash team of GPs and psychologists and the Employee Assistance Program have been helpful.”*

*“I don't know honestly, maybe consistent promotion of healthy work habits to everyone.”*

*“I see a psych outside of Monash but I think compulsory mental health training for supervisors would be helpful.”*

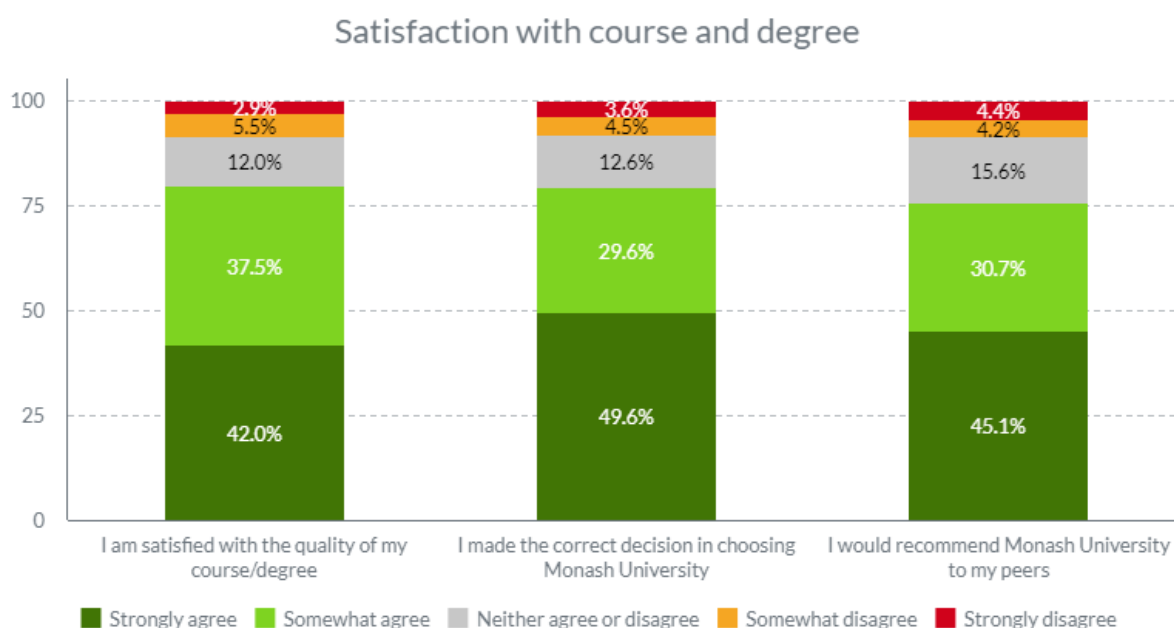
*“Journaling.”*

*“I need my children to go back to school and when their lives get back to normal and their mental health improves so will mine.”*

## Overall experience

The following questions were asked in relation to HDR students' overall experience at the university.

### General satisfaction



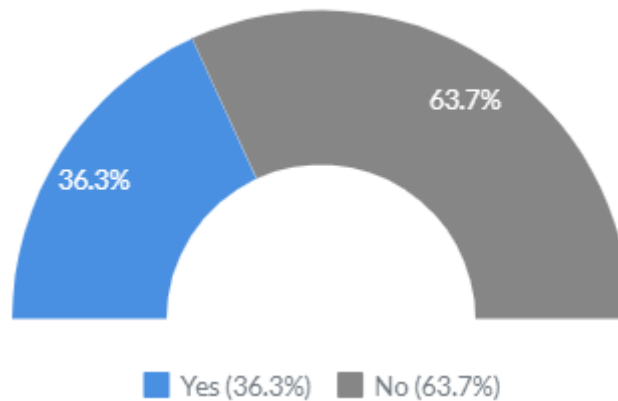
Respondents were widely satisfied with the quality of their degree (80%), likely to feel that they made the correct decision in choosing Monash (79%) and would recommend Monash to their peers (76%).

Students with a disability were approximately three-times as likely as those without a disability to disagree with each of the metrics above. In particular, 23% of respondents with a disability did not think they made the correct decision in choosing Monash.

Those who had considered leaving were over four-times as likely as those who had not to disagree that they had made the correct decision in choosing Monash or that they would recommend Monash to their peers, while they were three-times as likely to be dissatisfied with the quality of their degree.

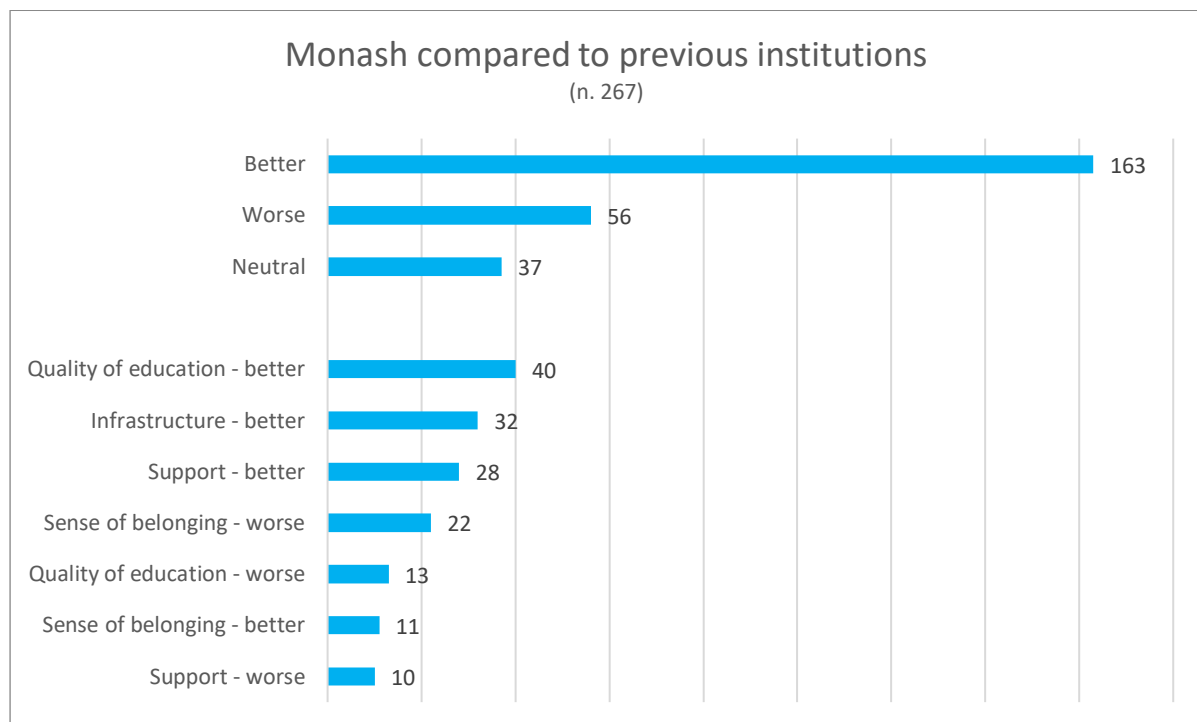
## Comparisons to previous institutions

### Previously studied at Monash



Participants who had studied at a tertiary institution other than Monash were asked **how does Monash compare to your previous institution?**

Respondents reported that Monash compared favourably rather than negatively to their previous institutions by a ratio of approximately 3:1. The top response themes are summarised below:



In regard to those who thought Monash was **better** than their previous institution/s, the three most common reasons provided related to **quality of education, infrastructure and support**. Comments included:

*“Absolutely awesome experience for me over the last 2 years. I have various opportunities to meet, work and collaborate with well-known Professors, practitioners. A heaps of chances to*

*work as a TA, and huge supports from my Supervisors, professional staff and my fellow PhDs.”*

*“Friendlier! Lecturers are easier to approach and discuss things with. People are more open to having chats about research.”*

*“My previous institution is considered one of the best and toughest to get in my country, only 1% of population makes it to that university. So benchmarks are different. Having said, I have thoroughly enjoyed the openness, inclusive culture and equally high standards of Monash. I am very happy that I made a decision to study at Monash.”*

*“I think Monash is great. I have access to all the resources I need and staff have been really helpful when I have had questions - so I would say these things are better than my previous institutions.”*

*“I think Monash is a wonderful large university with great opportunities and worldwide recognition. It has a wonderful library and resources and supportive staff.”*

*“Monash provided much of the facilities and resources (equipment, library resources etc.) not often seen in most other public and private institutions in the country.”*

*“Great campus, very inclusive, highly stimulating, feeling of be supported (quite a bit more than in my previous one).”*

*“Overall, I found Monash as an academic institution has been very supportive to students, particularly to international students. I loved being at the campus, the library was the best place - access to resources is significantly better compared to any other academic institution in my home country.”*

*“Monash greatly encourage student support and the well-being of students is always their priority.”*

On the other hand, in regard to those who thought that Monash was **worse** than their previous institution, the three most common responses related to **sense of belonging, quality of education and support**. Comments included:

*“Maybe is because of the nature of the degree, but in Monash I feel more isolated. I don't feel I belong to anything. I don't even know what is my academic unit. Also my previous institution was more interested about my career after graduation.”*

*“Less intellectually stimulating and felt more pragmatic in a lot of sense. I feel like being pushed for the sake of job, not for the knowledge itself.”*

*“In Monash I felt that I was self-taught.”*

*“Well, comparing Monash to a University in a third-world country is unfair. My previous uni was shit, but at least I had a lab family and good support system, and people are genuine when they ask you ‘how are you?’”*

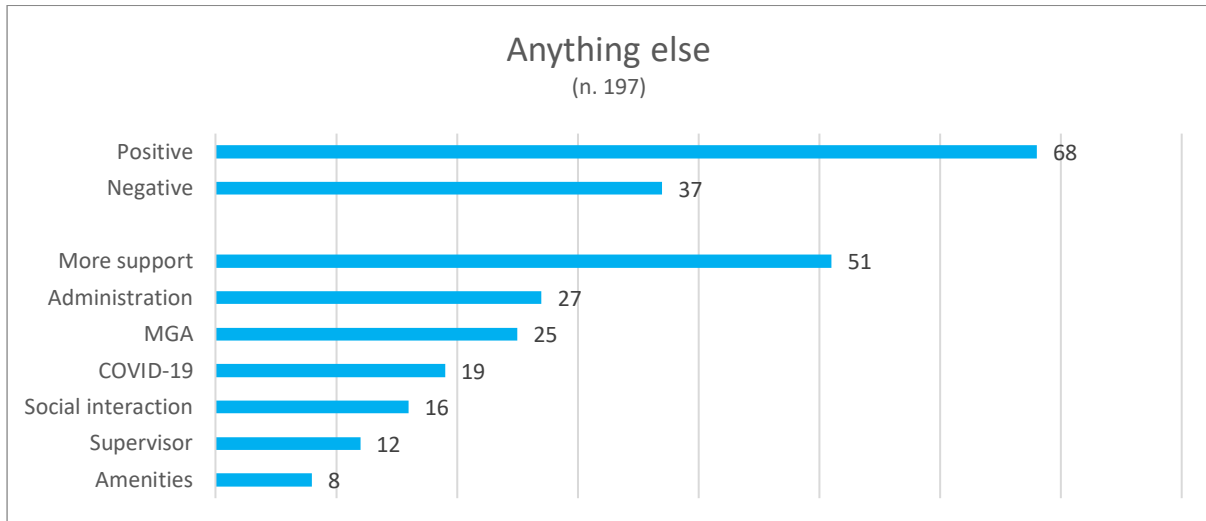
*“I don't feel as supported at Monash as my previous uni. Sometimes my faculty seems to care more about their global ranking than about the actual people who do the research.”*



## Anything else?

The final question of the survey provided an opportunity for final comments or **anything else you would like to tell us?**

The top responses of Monash HDR students are provided below:



The most common response to this question was a **positive** reflection. These included:

*"Well, it has been a really wonderful place to do my research. Honestly, very satisfied."*

*"I am extremely happy with overall Monash Uni's inclusive and diverse community. It's had best in class resources and faculties. There is a lot of opportunity to excel and supervisors are very supportive. MGA is doing a great work by connecting research students connected, bringing in a lot of opportunities to keep our moods up. Thank you from the bottom of my heart."*

*"My experience was great. My supervisors are supportive and facilities are available."*

*"I appreciate very much having had the opportunity to study here - to expand my knowledge and skills, and get to meet people some of whom I may encounter in my career."*

*"I love Monash University, for all positive and negative experiences. I am happy that I chose it."*

On the other hand, several students took this opportunity to comment on a **negative** element of their experience. These comments included:

*"Monash is not a good environment and the teaching staff are exceptionally unsupportive."*

*"I believe that my less-than-satisfactory experience is not an isolated incident. Some of my PhD colleagues have faced similar and other issues, incl. those from other institutes/departments."*

*"Monash decision making feels solely aimed at management and the undergraduate cash cow with HDR students being an irritating afterthought. Even the recent vaccine deadline date to enter campus highlights this - PhD students who are largely young will not have*

*received their second dose of AZ, even if they accessed it as soon as it was available on campus by the deadline. Meaning, we were able to attend campus during lockdown as essential workers but will not be able to attend for a 2 week period following this deadline.”*

*“I love Monash. I have been part of it as a student since my BA days in 1998. But I'm in a state of anxiety over my PhD and am struggling to feel that sense of connection and happiness with Monash after being given misleading info about an extension, only to find I was not eligible.”*

Many students took this opportunity to raise that they wanted **more support** from the University. Comments included:

*“This is important to assure students at the very first stage that it is okay to change supervision if it does not match with students' interest and doesn't help in progress.”*

*“Students should be appreciated more within departments and that would help students feel more motivated and work better. Rather than the focus being only on academic staff and their career development.”*

*“I think PhD students are left on their own too much. I did expect it, though not this much. I have no contact with the department at all. It would be good to have an optional refresher induction course, as I would get a lot more out of it now.”*

*“The university should hold seminars targeting mental wellbeing for both the students and the staff.”*

*“I feel like when you're studying at Monash you're basically on your own. This has been made worse because of COVID but it was also like this beforehand to a lesser degree. You barely meet any other students as a HDR or when you're studying off campus and it's a very alienating experience.”*

*“I wish Monash uni have affordable childcare services for international students who are not eligible for Child Care Support from the government. I mean I love my kids, but having some days in a week without them would be a great help for my mental wellbeing and the progress of my thesis as well. I remember how productive I was in the afternoon before I have baby. So in my case, an affordable daycare provided by the uni is the primary support I am hoping I can get at the moment.”*

**Other interesting comments** included:

*“I could never solve any of my problems with Monash connect.”*

*“I think the newish LTB is a very interesting building but I feel the hot desking imposed has been a retrograde step.”*

*“My supervisors are fantastic, but over several years my worst issue with Monash is poor communication, and that part time HDR students are treated very differently.”*

*“I think overall Monash does a pretty good job but there is definitely a lot of onus on the students to find out about options/opportunities/what is required of them. In my experience,*

*it is having the support of fellow postgrads who are further ahead than you that is invaluable as they are the ones who can actually give you all the information you need. For people who don't come into campus (or who started during COVID) and don't have that network of postgrads, I think it would be extremely difficult to know everything you need to know."*

*"MGA offered amazing support and advice when I was experiencing difficulties with my supervisors however I don't feel like all HDR students are aware of this service and know of lots of students who would have benefitted from it."*

*"Thank you for checking in!"*

*"Really appreciate the support MGA provides to HDR students. I've never had to use your services, but knowing you're there has been awesome. Thanks!"*

*"Thanks for MGA for your support during lockdowns."*

*"More physical events and opportunities at Parkville - feels like we are neglected as compared to the main campuses."*

*"I would love to volunteer when things go back. Some more opportunities to socialise with PhD students would be nice. Current ones are after 5 I can't stay back as I have childcare pickup - try to organise events at different times to cater to diverse needs."*

*"A formal research meeting with other PhD fellow students would be a good way to expand the network and learn from their different perspectives."*

*"Make it mandatory for supervisors to be mental health first aiders. My supervisor told me that I'm just having recurring mood swings when I tell them I felt disappointed or down."*

*"My main gripe with the PhD set-up is this weird place we find ourselves between students and staff. For example, we are classed as students, so don't need to be payed minimum wage. Instead we get a stipend. This feels pretty unfair, seeing as most PhD students work a 40-hour week, and our research isn't just for ourselves- it greatly benefits the university, and our supervisors/other academics involved. To therefore receive pay that is almost half of minimum wage is quite insulting and unfair. It is tough to motivate yourself knowing you could earn almost double doing the same amount of hours at almost any other job. The stipend is right on the edge of being enough to 'get by'. Australia is an incredibly expensive country to live in, so a stipend of so little brings financial stress which is so unnecessary given the stressful nature of the PhD itself. Obviously, we can work alongside the PhD (as I and many others do), but we are then putting ourselves under increased stress and have less time to reset outside of the PhD. No wonder burnout is such an issue."*

*"It is difficult when you first start because there is no one way to know what is the best way to organise your research. I think the library sessions have been the best to start with although you need to wait until they are being run. I would also have liked there to be sessions on software use. I have just discovered NVivo but the MyDevelopment session is outdated through LinkedIn and is for Windows not Mac. You need to be prepared to find what you need to know yourself and sometimes it is just a comment that someone has made that can lead you in the right direction."*

*"More collaboration between Monash Malaysia and Australia would be beneficial."*

## Conclusion

The results of the MGA's *Survey on HDR Satisfaction at Monash 2021* have provided insights into what Monash HDR students value in regard to their educational experience, as well as how satisfied they are with the structure and delivery of their degrees.

### Key findings

#### **Monash HDRs had planned to study on campus in 2021**

In 2021, 81% of Monash HDRs had planned to predominantly study on campus; however, local and international COVID restrictions restricted on-campus attendance to just 23% of HDRs.

Meanwhile, while only 4% of international HDR respondents had planned to spend the majority of their study time at their home overseas, COVID restrictions meant that this was the reality for 23% of international HDRs.

#### **Overall satisfaction with a degree was high**

Monash HDRs were widely satisfied with the quality of their degree (80%), likely to feel that they made the correct decision in choosing Monash (79%) and would recommend Monash to their peers (76%). Meanwhile, respondents reported that Monash compared favourably rather than negatively to their previous institutions by a ratio of approximately 3:1.

#### **Students with a disability were consistently less satisfied**

Students with a disability were consistently less satisfied than those without a disability across a variety of metrics including supervision overall (-20%) and time requirements (-20%). They were also 24% more likely to have experienced a delay in their research, twice as likely to have considered leaving their degree, reported elevated stress levels, and they were three-times as likely to report that they made the wrong choice in choosing Monash.

#### **Overall satisfaction with a degree was closely linked to overall satisfaction with supervision**

Of those who "strongly agreed" that they were satisfied with the quality of their degree, 98% were either strongly or somewhat satisfied with their supervision, while of those who "strongly disagreed" that they were satisfied with the quality of their degree, 55% were either strongly or somewhat dissatisfied with their supervision.

Getting supervision right remains key to a positive and fruitful HDR experience. Poor supervision was a factor in delaying the research of 53% of those who had experienced conflict with a supervisor, while 60% of those who had experienced conflict had considered leaving their degree.

Furthermore, allowing students to choose their own supervisors was also important in increasing the likelihood of positive outcomes given that those who chose their own supervisors were half as likely to have experienced conflict with a supervisor.

### **Students were more likely to directly sort out a conflict with a supervisor in 2021 than 2017**

In 2021, 47% of those who had experienced conflict with a supervisor indicated that they had sorted their issue out directly with their supervisor, which represented a substantial increase from the 31% who answered the same in 2017.

### **Coursework and Professional Development a mixed bag**

Just over half (52%) of those who had completed at least one unit found Coursework to be beneficial, while 45% of respondents found Professional Development useful.

Satisfaction with the quality, relevance and usefulness of Coursework and Professional Development remained largely on par with 2017 levels; however, satisfaction levels were lower and dissatisfaction levels higher than were recorded in other areas such as supervision and milestones.

### **Research delays were more likely than not**

The majority of respondents (58%) reported that their research had been delayed, which represented a substantial increase on the 38% that reported delays in 2017. The COVID-19 pandemic was an almost ever-present factor in why research had been delayed with 91% of respondents suggesting it had played a role in their delay.

### **Over a quarter of tutors at Monash felt they were not paid appropriately for their tutoring work**

While most HDRs thought that they were paid appropriately for their tutoring work, 26% disagreed. Respondents from Arts (42%), Education (39%) and Science (31%) were the most-likely to feel that they were underpaid, while respondents from Pharmacy (13%), BusEco (13%) and IT (21%) were the least-likely to feel that they were underpaid.

Domestic students were 12% more likely than international students to feel that they were not paid appropriately.

### **Mental health deteriorated for HDRs in 2021**

Over half of Monash HDRs reported that their mental health had declined in the last year, while just over one-in-five indicated that it had improved.

Respondents were most-stressed in relation to their research progress and with finishing their degree on time; those who had considered leaving, in particular, reporting higher levels of stress in these two areas.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of the MGA's *Identifying HDR Student Satisfaction at Monash 2022*, the MGA has recommended actions that would potentially improve the HDR student experience and increase satisfaction.

### Scholarships and awards

1. Provide more scholarships.
2. Provide and advertise more part-time scholarships.
3. Extend GRCA to support HDR Covid-cohort through to completion.

### Supervision

4. Encourage and facilitate potential graduate students to choose their topic and supervisor.
5. Introduce a system that allows students to evaluate supervisors and include the results in supervisor performance appraisals.

### Milestones

6. Ensure milestone requirements are clear, easily accessible and consistent across faculties and schools.

### Coursework

7. Ensure compulsory coursework is relevant to research.

### Professional Development

8. Remove compulsory minimum hours from professional development.
9. Broaden recognition of professional development to include courses and academic experiences relevant to the student's area of research.

### RPL

10. Promote the option to apply for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

### Tutoring

11. Ensure tutoring opportunities are offered in a consistent, transparent and equitable manner.

### Study spaces

12. Provide on-campus study spaces with designated desks that are shared or sole use.

### Social opportunities

13. Provide HDR-specific social spaces within schools and/or faculties.
14. Encourage and support social opportunities for graduate students to socialise.

### Support services

15. Promote access to EAP.
16. Promote the HDR THRIVE portal.
17. Promote access to the development of a health care plan via a GP and counsellor.
18. Develop programs targeting and addressing lack of motivation for HDRs.
19. Improve promotion of the MGA advocacy service.
20. Encourage students to access the MGA advocacy service before problems become serious.

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## Appendix 1: Demographics

<b>Campus</b>	<b>Respondents<sup>8</sup></b>
Clayton (including AMREP, MMC, Law Chambers and affiliated institutions)	492 (62.4%)
Caulfield	78 (9.9%)
Parkville	62 (7.9%)
Peninsula	8 (1.0%)
Malaysia	103 (13.1%)
Online	13 (1.6%)
Other	33 (4.2%)

<b>Faculty</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
Art, Design and Architecture	20 (2.5%)
Arts	77 (9.8%)
Business and Economics	60 (7.6%)
Education	70 (8.9%)
Engineering	130 (16.5%)
Information Technology	39 (4.9%)
Law	13 (1.6%)
Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences	164 (20.8%)
Pharmacy	69 (8.7%)
Science	126 (16.0%)
Monash Sustainable Development Institute	14 (1.8%)
Monash University Accident Research Centre	6 (0.8%)
other	1 (0.1%)

<b>Domestic/International</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
International student	397 (50.3%)
Local student (Australian or New Zealand citizen/permanent resident)	392 (49.7%)

<b>English primary language</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
Yes	413 (52.3%)
No	376 (47.7%)

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
Female	469 (59.4%)
Male	304 (38.5%)
Prefer to self-describe	7 (0.9%)
Prefer not to say	9 (1.1%)

<sup>8</sup> Not every respondent answered every question; hence, total respondents vary between questions.

<b>LGBTIQA+</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
Yes	90 (11.4%)
No	657 (83.3%)
Prefer not to disclose	42 (5.3%)

<b>Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
Yes	8 (1.0%)
No	774 (98.1%)
Prefer not to disclose	7 (0.9%)

<b>Disability</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
Yes	34 (4.3%)
No	743 (94.2%)
Prefer not to disclose	12 (1.5%)

<b>Age</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
24 or under	79 (10.0%)
25-29	325 (41.2%)
30-39	257 (32.6%)
40 and over	128 (16.2%)

<b>Employment status</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
Full-time	241 (30.5%)
Part-time	96 (12.2%)
Casual	237 (30.0%)
Not employed	215 (27.2%)

<b>Scholarship</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
Yes	617 (78.2%)
No	115 (14.6%)
No, but I previously held a scholarship	57 (7.2%)

<b>Carer status</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
Yes	229 (29.0%)
No	560 (71.0%)

<b>Enrolment date</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
Prior to COVID-19 (on or prior to 29 February 2020)	563 (71.4%)
During COVID-19 (on or after 1 March 2020)	226 (28.6%)