

Monash Postgraduate Association response to the review of HDR programs in the Faculty of Education

April 2018

The Monash Postgraduate Association Inc (MPA) is pleased to have the opportunity to participate in the review of HDR programs in the Faculty of Education.

This submission explains the role of the MPA and addresses areas in which the MPA has had contact with Faculty of Education staff and HDR postgraduates, in relation to the following two areas from the Terms of Reference:

“The academic quality of the courses, particularly evidence of quality supervision and course structures, including quality of any coursework and Faculty and program delivered training where applicable.”

“The academic resources required to support graduate research students undertaking the courses, particularly when delivered across multiple teaching locations and including: information technology; library programs, resources and services; including professional staff or technical staff resourcing. Is there sufficient evidence that resources are adequate to continue to offer the courses at Monash’s high quality standards? What are the challenges and opportunities where students enrolled in a single course are dispersed across multiple locations?”

Contents	Page
1. About the MPA	2
2. Orientation	2
3. Local postgraduate representation	2
4. MPA casework data	3
5. Faculty of Education responses from the MPA HDR survey	4
6. Space	5
7. Access to computers	6

Attachment A: Preliminary data from the MPA HDR survey, October 2017

1. About the MPA

The Monash Postgraduate Association (MPA) is an independent, incorporated body recognised by University Council as the representative body for all research and coursework postgraduates enrolled at Monash University. The MPA represents over 22,000 postgraduate students at Monash University across all Australian campuses and off-campus sites.

The MPA delivers a range of services including social and academic activities, representation, advocacy and student support. One of the main functions of the MPA is to represent postgraduate interests to the University.

The MPA receives feedback from a range of sources. Our representatives are nominated to over 40 University Committees and the MPA runs over 200 postgraduate events each year including social and academic activities and fora.

The MPA is governed by an annually elected postgraduate committee, and employs professional staff to manage the association.

2. Orientation

A good quality, targeted orientation is an important service that provides postgraduates with information on resources and services available to support them through their degrees. Monash University is an enormous institution, and postgraduates often comment that information is difficult to find. This is evidenced by the fact that many of the resources and services that postgraduates suggest should be provided, are in fact already in existence.

The MPA runs a number of events and activities for postgraduates during orientation periods. The Faculty of Education has always been willing to include the MPA in their formal faculty-level HDR orientations, thus providing their cohort with important information about the MPA and its advocacy service, along with other service-providers.

Because HDRs enrol all year round, other social events can also act as de-facto orientations where postgraduates informally share information with each other. The Faculty has been supportive of social events organised by the MPA for their postgraduates.

The MPA commends the faculty on its efforts to provide a postgraduate-specific orientation, targeted at providing their HDR cohort with the information they need.

3. Local postgraduate representation

The Faculty has a very effective and well-run research postgraduate group, the Monash Education Research Committee (MERC). The MPA donates an annual funding grant to this group. MERC provide an opportunity for HDRs to gain experience in running research-related events and offer seminars that enhance the academic experience of HDRs.

The importance of creating postgraduate community and enabling peer support should not be underestimated in relation to its contribution to a positive HDR experience and the timely completion of degrees.

The MPA would recommend that this group continue to be well-supported by the faculty.

4. MPA casework data

The MPA provides a free, confidential and independent advocacy service to assist postgraduates to resolve issues and complete their degrees.

When a postgraduate approaches the MPA for assistance they are given advice on their situation, including information on the processes open to them to resolve their situation. The decision as to how a case is pursued is driven by the postgraduate, and the MPA Advocates then provide support to the postgraduate to pursue their chosen path. Sometimes postgraduates choose not to follow the advice of the MPA Advocates, and often postgraduates choose not to take any action for fear of reprisals.

Our advocacy services provide some insight into the HDR student experience. A brief summary of the casework data for Education has been included below.

MPA casework data for the Faculty of Education

From January 2016 to March 2018, the MPA advocates saw a total of 47 HDR cases from Education.

Nationality: 24 Domestic, 23 International

Gender: 42 Female, 5 Male

Issues (some postgraduates presented with more than one issue):

14 Supervision

12 Milestones

9 General candidature

5 Fees & Scholarships

2 Course quality

2 IP

1 Resources

1 Plagiarism

5 Other

The number of cases from Education represented 10% of the total HDR cases seen by the MPA advocates from all faculties during this period.

For the period January 2016 to May 2017, when the number of HDR cases is expressed as a percentage of the faculty HDR population, the faculties rank as follows: A&D 8.0%; BusEco 7.5%; Arts 7.3%; Law 6.3%; Edu 6.9%; Eng 5.7%; Med 5.5%; Pharm 5.5%; IT 5.1%; Sci 2.9%.

Supervision

For the majority of faculties, supervision was the main source of complaint.

Across the university, the most difficult, complex and protracted problems seen by MPA staff are those caused by a breakdown in the supervisor/student relationship. The ability to quickly resolve these cases depends to a great extent on the faculty/school's response when the issue is first broached. Simply being willing to acknowledge serious problems when they arise is the first step to improving the HDR experience.

Faculty staff need to be willing to discuss and attempt to resolve differences between students and supervisors if they want to grow a culture where postgraduates can be assured that any legitimate concerns they may have about their HDR experience will be taken seriously and acted on.

Postgraduates in the Faculty of Education report a range of experiences with supervisors, which is true for all faculties. There are some outstanding supervisors. In 2017, Associate Professor Jane Southcott was awarded the MPA Supervisor of the Year award, having been nominated by her HDR students. Dr Helen Watt received the same award in 2013.

Resolutions

MPA Advocates report that in working with the faculty to resolve cases, faculty staff commonly exhibit the following behaviours:

- lack of knowledge of policies and procedures
- failure to adhere to procedures
- lack of interest, empathy and compassion
- reluctance to genuinely negotiate with HDRs

5. Faculty of Education responses from the MPA HDR survey

The MPA ran a survey of HDR students in October 2017 (see attachment A). Participants were self-selecting, so an incentive scheme was used to assist in attracting a representative sample. A total of 668 responses were received. Thirty-eight responses were received from the Faculty of Education.

Graduate Research Progress Management Procedures

Overall, postgraduates reported that they liked the milestones. However, most students were surprised to learn that they could be terminated at the pre-submission seminar point. The constant changes to the milestones has left many postgraduates (and staff) confused.

The MPA's position is that the mid-candidature review milestone and, particularly the pre-submission seminar, should be an opportunity for a student to fine tune their research. If postgraduates fail a mid-candidature or pre-submission milestone they ought not, at this late stage of candidature, face termination but rather receive extra support to assist them to meet the milestone. The MPA believes that these two milestone processes should be remedial not punitive. The MPA opposes the mid-candidature review and pre-submission seminar milestones being used as points of termination; where termination is required, it should be conducted through the unsatisfactory academic progress procedures which provide students with the option to be represented and supported by an advocate.

Professional Development Training

Postgraduates in general were scathing about the professional development training delivered by the faculty and MGRO (MGE). They did not see attending the courses as a good use of their time, and many admitted to 'working around the system' in order to find shortcuts to comply with the required number of hours. This is because they felt that the courses were of poor quality, did not take into account prior learning and were simply taking away valuable research time. This response is true across all other faculties where the PhD model includes compulsory professional development training.

Length of time available for research

Postgraduates highlighted concerns about the amount of time available to complete their research project. While candidature length has remained the same, postgraduates are now required to include additional compulsory professional development training units and increased preparation time to accommodate the change of mid-candidature and pre-submission milestones from an academic supportive process to potential termination points. As a result, postgraduates are experiencing more pressure in attempting to complete the same quality research project in less time.

Some postgraduates in Education have expressed concern at the time needed to prepare for the milestones, and have indicated that they consider this investment of time to be detrimental to their primary goal of producing a high quality thesis. Postgraduates are also very aware that their research is being judged by international standards, and that with less time to commit to the research project (than for example, HDR candidates from the USA), they are at a distinct disadvantage because overseas examiners expect a similar quality thesis without taking into account the reduced time available to Monash HDRs.

Access for equity groups

A concern was raised with the MPA that professional development training sessions may not be sufficiently tailored to groups who traditionally encounter barriers to learning and research. These groups include part-time students, those with carer responsibilities, those enrolled through Peninsula campus and distance students. It has been reported that professional development training sessions are being delivered at major campuses during business hours only. Those who are unable to get to major campuses are disproportionately part-time students, from smaller campuses, those who work and those who have carer responsibilities. Distance students also require support through online learning resources and there have been reports of a scarcity of online programs and use of learning capture technologies to enable remote access.

6. Space

With the move of the faculty in 2017 to the Learning and Teaching building, space has become a major problem for HDRs. Postgraduates moved from shared office spaces with allocated desks to an open-plan space with hotdesks. This is extremely unsatisfactory for HDRs, especially those who are full-time, as they now need to secure a desk and set up all their research resources each day before starting work. Additionally, the HDR space is no longer 24/7 during the working week and postgraduates have reported having difficulty accessing their workspace on the week-ends.

Reducing access to study space has had a detrimental effect on HDRs who are known to work many hours outside the regular working week.

The failure of the faculty to provide a permanent desk space for their full-time HDRs is a breach of the *Code of practice for supervision of doctoral and research masters students*¹ which directs that the university must provide a furnished dedicated office/studio space for full-time postgraduates and a shared space for part-time and external postgraduates.

¹ Section 5.2.3.6 of the Code of practice for supervision of doctoral and research masters students
<https://www.monash.edu/graduate-research/faqs-and-resources/content/chapter-five/5-2>

A group of HDRs are currently in discussion with the faculty but having had no satisfactory resolution to date, are likely to move this complaint to a formal grievance, given the negative impact it has had on their research progress.

The MPA is concerned about this trend to hotdesking which may be suitable for coursework students but is highly disruptive for HDRs. More concerning is that it indicates a lack of understanding on the part of the faculty decision-makers of the nature of research, and sends a message of indifference to the HDR cohort.

7. Access to computers

Postgraduates have complained that only full-time students have been issued with laptops, resulting in part-time students having to provide their own computers.

The failure of the faculty to provide access to a shared computer for their part-time HDRs is a breach of the *Code of practice for supervision of doctoral and research masters students* which directs that the university must provide “personal computer access (sole for full-time, oncampus students)”.

The MPA is concerned with this move by the faculty to place the onus on students to provide the essential resources they need to complete their theses.

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