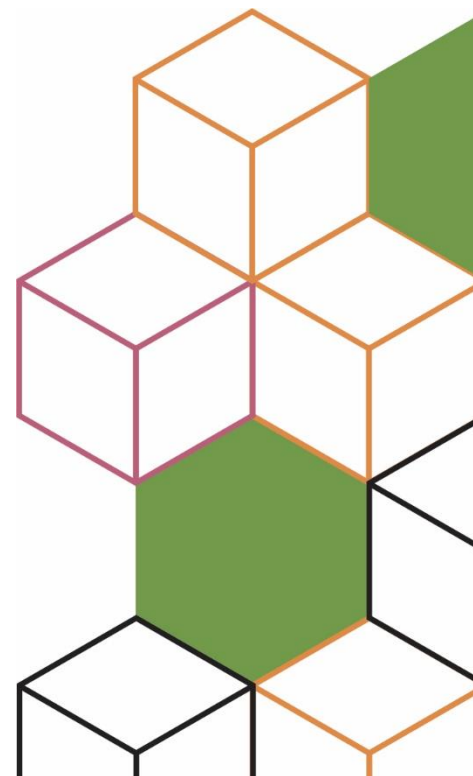


December
2021

Graduate Student
Association

**Graduate students in
coursework research
subjects**



Submission developed by Sean Mijares (GSA Graduate Policy & Advocacy Officer) with assistance from Rachna Muddagouni (GSA CEO) and Natasha Abrahams (GSA Manager – Policy & Advocacy)

Funded by University of Melbourne SSAF program

© Graduate Student Association University of Melbourne 2021

Background

The Graduate Student Association (GSA) is the independent representative organisation for all graduate coursework and research students at the University of Melbourne. We are led by 8 GSA Board members and 10 Representative Council members who are all elected University of Melbourne graduate students. On behalf of over 29,000 constituents, we represent graduate student interests to the University and wider community, provide student engagement events, activities, and information to the graduate student community, and support 160 affiliated graduate student groups.

GSA's vision is for inclusive, empowered graduate student communities that achieve meaningful and holistic university experiences. Our objectives are to achieve and support representation, academic support, transition to work, engaged and healthy communities, and organisational sustainability.

GSA plays a key role in supporting graduate students to participate in decision-making committees at the University. One of these committees is the Higher Degrees by Research Committee (HDRC), which provides advice to the university on matters relating to graduate research degrees. HDRC has recently expanded its scope to include issues relating to research subjects undertaken by graduate coursework students. These coursework research experiences include the minor thesis, research project, and research report, among others.

In order to enhance graduate coursework students' ability to achieve academic excellence, GSA has undertaken this report exploring issues affecting coursework students engaged in research subjects.

Summary

Overall, coursework students undertaking research experiences expressed that research enabled them to enhance their knowledge of their field and meet their desired learning outcomes. This report focuses on concerns raised by students in relation to course quality and the research experience and provides recommendations for improving coursework students' engagement with research.

The most common concern students expressed was that they did not receive enough research methods training in preparation for their research experiences. This could be addressed by a subject that teaches methodologies specific to their discipline in depth, and by offering more support to understand interdisciplinary methodologies. Many students interviewed wanted more opportunities to connect to research students to facilitate resource sharing and to support them to become better researchers. All students expressed that the relationship with their supervisor was critical to the outcome of the subject. While some students had incredibly helpful supervisors, others sought more support and guidance. Supervisors could be better resourced and trained to enhance how they support their students.

Additionally, students made the following suggestions to improve coursework research experiences:

- More support for International Students to enhance their academic English proficiency.
- Comprehensive information provision prior to enrolment, to enable students to prepare and understand learning outcomes.
- Greater distinction between the Master of Research and Master's by coursework degrees with significant research components.
- Consistency and clarity in thesis grading in Masters by Coursework degrees.
- A shorter ethics approval timeline as in the current process there are substantial delays experienced by coursework research graduates.

Summary of recommendations to the University

- Increase quality and structure of research methods training offered to all coursework students undertaking research.
- Provide various platforms and opportunities for Masters by coursework degrees with significant research components students to remain connected to enhance their academic outcomes and share useful resources.
- Ensure improved student and supervisor relationships by increasing the number of potential supervisors and offering professional development and support for supervisors to enhance the student supervision and mentoring skills.
- Offer professional writing and language skills support for International Students who may consider English as an Additional Language.
- Provide comprehensive information about research subjects' content, learning outcomes, and graduate outcomes at the time of enrolment.
- Clarify the distinction between the Masters by coursework degrees with significant research components and Masters by research degrees, and provide accurate information to students to make informed choices before their enrolment.
- Implement consistent and equitable assessment policies, with clarity provided to students on what is required to achieve each grade. This information must be provided to external markers or academic staff who are not familiar with the course content and expectations.
- Where discrepancies are identified in group project grading, implement a mechanism to ensure students' contributions are fairly evaluated.
- Make improvements to the ethics approval process to address timeliness, which may include investigating faculty-level ethics delegations.

Method

For this report, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 coursework students who had either completed or were completing a research subject. To help identify key issues to explore in the student interviews, preliminary discussions were held with 10 university staff members involved in supporting the delivery of coursework research subjects. These students and staff belonged to a variety of degrees and faculties, which are listed in Table 1.

Table 1 – Coursework degrees and faculties of the students and staff interviewed for this report

Faculty	Degree	Students/ staff
Architecture Building & Planning	Master of Urban & Cultural Heritage	1
Arts	Master of Criminology	1
Arts	Master of Cultural Materials & Conservation	2
Arts	Master of Development Studies	2
Arts	Master of International Relations	1
Arts	Master of Marketing Communication	2
Arts	Master of Public Policy & Management	1
Business and Economics	Master of Economics	2
Education	Master of Teaching (Secondary)	2
Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences	Doctor of Medicine	4
Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences	Doctor of Physiotherapy	1
Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences	Master of Public Health	7
Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences	Master of Speech Pathology	1
Science	Master of Science (Chemistry)	1
Veterinary & Agricultural Sciences	Master of Food Science	2

Interviews were scheduled for 30 minutes to an hour and included questions to understand:

- Why they chose to do the research subject?
- Did the subject meet their goals?
- What issues they thought impacted coursework issues?

Strategies for participant recruitment included searching coursework degrees for programs with a research component and contacting the relevant coordinator, networking through GSA's graduate student representatives, and asking participants for recommendations on who to follow up. Participants were offered a gift card in appreciation of their participation.

In some cases, it was difficult to delineate between research subjects and non-research subjects for coursework students. While research subjects typically had a grade entry requirement, other features were not always consistent. For example, some research subjects are year-long while others are short semester-long experiences, and some projects have dedicated supervisors while others do not. For some coursework research experiences, it is difficult to distinguish if they were collaborative research projects or group assignments as is common in coursework subjects. This ambiguity was reflected in student interviews as students reflected on whether their research experiences were considered coursework or research.

Key issues and recommendations

Enhance research methods training

Students reported that their research methods subjects were either too short or too broad and did not provide in-depth training on methods used in their discipline. Students reported being uncertain about which methods they could use and feeling underprepared for designing and conducting a research project in their discipline.

Case study:

Coursework students undertaking research in the Faculty of Arts found that they did not have the resources or support to help them discover and understand methodologies for their research area.

Recommendation: Increase quality and structure of research methods training offered to all coursework students undertaking research.

Communities of research students

Many coursework students expressed they felt isolated while completing their research and would have benefitted from being more connected with other

students. This was exacerbated by Covid-19 restrictions further limiting opportunities to interact.

Case study:

Some students found there were very few peers they could talk to about their work. One student did not know whether there was anyone else doing their subject and that this gave them the sense that their program was not considered important by others the University.

Students who were able to connect with peers typically found that this helped them progress their work and discover valuable resources they would not have found otherwise. These sentiments were also echoed by University staff, some of whom expressed actively supporting students by encouraging resource sharing. Some staff suggested that one way to address students having few peers and connect students to people outside of their specific discipline would be to encourage cross-disciplinary cohorts with shared methodological interests.

Students also added that it would be helpful to see projects from students who had completed coursework research subjects in the past, but that the opportunities currently are very limited. This would help them find resources such as articles on methodologies.

Recommendation: Provide various platforms and opportunities for Masters by Coursework degrees with significant research components students to remain connected to enhance their academic outcomes and share useful resources.

Enhance professional training for supervisors to support students

Students expressed that their relationship with their supervisor was critical to their learning and the success of their research.

Students who received limited support thought that this resulted in them making less progress on their research. One student, who only met with their supervisor twice during their research subject, was unmotivated to continue research in future. Some students reported that their supervision meetings were unstructured with no meeting agenda – an approach that some students found helpful if their supervisors were generous with their time at frequent meetings and with encouragement for them to come to the meeting with lists of questions.

Case study:

Some students found that their supervisor selection and therefore their potential research topics were constrained due to limited availability of supervisors. This was the case for students of the Master of Cultural Materials & Conservation.

In disciplines that utilised supervisors outside the University, some staff worried that some supervisors were “more interested in a research assistant than a student”. According to some of these reports, supervisors who believed their student would not be able publish dedicated less time to supporting the student.

Some staff suggested supervision issues could be addressed by creating more opportunities for students to provide feedback to staff and supervisors. An additional suggestion was that the number of students that external supervisors can support simultaneously should be limited, to mitigate the issues students may experience with such arrangements. They also believed that allowing master’s supervision to count towards staff teaching workloads could enable staff to dedicate more time to master’s students and maximise internal supervision opportunities.

Recommendation: Ensure improved student and supervisor relationships by increasing the number of potential supervisors and offering professional development and support for supervisors to enhance the student supervision and mentoring skills.

Strengthen foundational skills

International Students can enrich their experiences in graduate coursework degrees by undertaking research experiences. All International Students demonstrate academic English proficiency as part of the admission process. However, most International Students interviewed for this report identified that they would benefit from more support with reading and writing in English. International Students informed us that their level of English meant spending significantly more time reading and understanding papers.

The currently available English language support at the University does not meet International Students’ needs. Students reported being unable to access the support they needed from Academic Skills due to limited appointment availability. This echoes the finding of a previous GSA submission in which students provided feedback that there was a lack of available appointments, resulting in some students waiting up to two weeks to receive support (Graduate Student Association, 2021). Suggestions from International Students to support their development of academic English skills included more Academic Skills appointment availability and reviewing the timing and content of English skills workshops to make them more accessible.

Recommendation: Offer professional writing and language skills support for International Students who may consider English as an Additional Language.

More information about research subjects

Students in some disciplines reported that prior to enrolment, they knew very little about the content and learning outcomes for their research subject. They added that if they had received more guidance before enrolling, they would have been able to put more thought into a feasible research project that aligned with their interests and had more time to connect with a supervisor.

However, this experience was not shared by all students interviewed for this report. Students in other disciplines reported that they received detailed information about the research subject at the beginning of their degree, were invited to meet with staff in the semester prior and were given a list of potential topics and supervisors. This information helped to support them in meeting with various supervisors, which students found helpful in determining whether they would work well with the supervisor. This approach supported students to ultimately deliver a successful project. We believe these practices should be extended to all cohorts to enable their academic success.

Students also expressed a desire for more information about graduate outcomes in relation to employment and further education prospects after completing coursework research. This would enable future students to decide whether to enrol in research subjects.

Recommendation: Provide comprehensive information about research subjects' content, learning outcomes, and graduate outcomes at the time of enrolment.

Lack of clarity on the University's classification of coursework and research master's degrees

Our interviews found that there is a lack of information or an anomaly in how some programs are classified as coursework. Students in degrees consisting mostly of research - such as the Master of Science - were confused about why their program was considered coursework rather than research. These students expressed that their program was identical to Master of Research, and they therefore were concerned about being disadvantaged by the fee structure.

According to the University of Melbourne's tuition fees for 2022, the total course fee for a Master of Science that is not a Commonwealth supported place is \$66,059 (University of Melbourne, 2021, p. 27). Conversely, Master of Research and Master of Philosophy fees are covered by funding from the government through the Research Training Program, which instead offsets students fees, may provide them with a stipend to support general living costs and/or funds other costs associated with students conducting their research (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2021).

Recommendation: Clarify the distinction between the Masters by coursework degrees with significant research components and Masters by research degrees, and provide accurate information to students to make informed choices before their enrolment.

Improve marking process

Students have raised that they were not provided enough information about the assessment process to ensure they get a fair outcome in grading. Students expressed concerns about external markers and their grading outcomes, with an example provided by the Master of Public Health. Students noted the importance of grades for their future work and study prospects.

Recommendation: Implement consistent and equitable assessment policies, with clarity provided to students on what is required to achieve each grade. This information must be provided to external markers or academic staff who are not familiar with the course content and expectations.

Similar concerns were raised in relation to grading of group work, in which students may be disadvantaged by others' lack of contribution to the project.

Recommendation: Where discrepancies are identified in group project grading, implement a mechanism to ensure students' contributions are fairly evaluated.

Ethics approval process takes too long for coursework research subjects

Some students found that the research approval process was inappropriately long for their research project, which only spanned one to two semesters. According to these students, ethics approvals could take around six weeks. This limited what work students could do as they often only established what they would be researching in week four of the program.

Some staff worried that this process forced students to submit ethics approvals long before they understood what form their research would take, as this was the only way to obtain approval in the short time frame. Some staff suggested that one way to reduce the wait for approval could be to allow faculties to handle their own ethics.

Recommendation: Make improvements to the ethics approval process to address timeliness, which may include investigating faculty-level ethics delegations.

References

Department of Education, Skills and Employment. (2021). *Research Training Program*. <https://www.dese.gov.au/research-block-grants/research-training-program#toc-overview->

Graduate Student Association. (2021). *Submission to the University of Melbourne on Academic Skills Division change proposal*. <https://gsa.unimelb.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/20210428-Academic-Skills-Submission-v4.pdf>

University of Melbourne. (2021). *The University of Melbourne Tuition Fees - 2022*. https://study.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0017/291140/2022-tuition-fees-tuition-fee-tables-for-australian-fee-paying-students.pdf