

A photograph of the University of Melbourne clock tower, a tall, ornate stone building with multiple clock faces, set against a blue sky with scattered white clouds. The tower is partially obscured by a large, dark blue curved shape that serves as a background for the text.

Engagement with Graduate Students and Graduate Researchers

University of Melbourne
Graduate Student
Association

Engagement Summary
Report

December 2022

Prepared by
Conversation Co

Conversation Co.

About this report

This report describes the design and delivery of an engagement program with graduate researchers and graduate students, to document their experiences and identify areas for improvement. It summarises the findings of activities conducted by both Conversation Co. and GSA.

Information summarised in this report will be considered by GSA in 2023 for use in their advocacy work.

Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners

Conversation Co proudly acknowledges and celebrates the First Peoples of Victoria and their ongoing strength in upholding some of the world's oldest living cultures. We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands throughout what is now Victoria, where we live and work, and pay our respects to their Elders, past, and present.

Conversation Co acknowledges Traditional Owners sovereignty has never been ceded. The strength, resilience and pride of First Peoples, their cultures, communities and identities continue to grow and thrive today despite the impact of colonisation and ongoing experiences of racism.

1. Executive Summary

This report describes the findings from an engagement program with graduate researchers regarding their research supervision experiences and identifies potential areas for improvement or change. More specifically the objectives of the engagement were to understand the impact of any low-quality supervision on graduate researchers and their feelings towards the University, the perception of research supervision by graduate students, and suggested improvements to research supervision. Information summarised in this report will be considered by the University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association (GSA) in 2023 for use in their advocacy work.

1.1 Participation

Community engagement was conducted from 24 October to 20 November 2022. The engagement activities involved 468 participants - 192 graduate researchers (41.0%), 274 graduate students (58.5%) and two supervisors. The engagement activities were an online survey, personal interviews with graduate researchers and supervisors, focus groups for graduate researchers and intercept surveys at GSA events.

The full online survey provided most of the feedback (308 participants, 65.8%) with a further 13.9% of participants answering the shorter intercept survey. Ninety-five students (20.3%) chose to provide more detailed feedback in a personal interview or a focus group.

Participation was highest by graduate researchers from the Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology (FEIT); Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences (MDHS); and Faculty of Science. Compared to the wider graduate researcher population, graduate researchers from the Engineering and Information Technology faculty were over-represented in the engagement program whereas students from Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences faculty were under-represented.

1.2 Engagement Findings

It is clear from the engagement findings that the supervision experiences of graduate researchers was mixed, with half of the graduate researchers reporting an issue or incident experienced during supervision (50.2%) with the remaining 46.4% reporting they had no issues and 3.4% indicating their experiences had been positive. Whilst most of the issues related to an individual supervisor's approach or personality, graduate researchers did suggest a range of improvements to the structure and processes of the research experience.

Supervision experience

When asked to review their supervision experience, participants were provided with a list of supervisor behaviours to comment on - time availability, communication, active listening, feedback and interest in the research. Participants were able to choose an option from the following measures of frequency: always, very often, sometimes, rarely or never. There was a total of 160 respondents to this question.

Overall, many of the graduate researchers reported satisfactory performance by their supervisors regarding the frequency of the communication patterns and supervision behaviours. Three out of every four graduate researchers and students reported their supervisors always/very often answered their emails/phone calls (84.1%), made time to discuss their research (80.9%), seemed interested in their research (78.2%) really listened (77.7%) and gave clear feedback or advice (76.3%). Reported supervisor performance was lowest for helping the student keep their research on track (68.2% always or very often).

However, for other graduate researchers there were reported supervisor behaviours that must be addressed to improve the graduate research experience:

- 22.3% said that their supervisor **sometimes** helped the student keep their research on track or **rarely** or **never** helped them (9.6%).
- 19.2% said that their supervisor **sometimes** seemed interested in their research.
- 7.7% said that their supervisor **rarely** or **never** gave clear feedback or advice.
- 6.4% said that their supervisor **rarely** or **never** answered their emails/phone calls.

Whilst some of these reported behaviours have affected a smaller percentage of graduate researchers, the impact on individual graduate researchers is likely to be profound.

For the four faculties where there were sufficient numbers of participants (Engineering and Information Technology, Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences, Science and Arts), there were some differences in reported supervisor behaviours.

In the Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences faculty, graduate researchers reported that:

- 39.4% of supervisors never, rarely or sometimes really listened to the student or helped keep their research on track.
- 33.3% of supervisors never, rarely or sometimes gave clear feedback or advice.
- 24.2% of supervisors never, rarely or sometimes seemed interested in their research.
- 21.2% of supervisors never, rarely or sometimes answered their emails/phone calls in a few days.

In the Engineering and Information Technology faculty, graduate researchers reported that:

- 38.3% of supervisors never, rarely or sometimes helped keep their research on track.
- 26.1% of supervisors never, rarely or sometimes gave clear feedback or advice.
- 23.9% of supervisors never, rarely or sometimes seemed interested in their research.
- 23.4% of supervisors never, rarely or sometimes made time to discuss their research.

In the Arts faculty, the major concerns were the supervisor not helping the student keep their research on track (42.9% said never, rarely or sometimes) and making time to discuss their research (21.4% said never, rarely or sometimes).

Comparable performance of supervisors from the Science faculty was more positive with much lower percentages of unsatisfactory behaviours (see Table 6 of this report).

Issues and challenges

For the 50.2% of graduate researchers who reported they had an issue or incident with research supervision, the most common issues were poor communication, lack of emotional support, poor or no direction and very limited availability of supervisors.

Other situations mentioned by the graduate researchers were the lack of peer learning opportunities, unrealistic expectations about their research skills or knowledge of the system and several specific incidents that caused the student considerable stress or distress.

One in five graduate researchers (21.7%) had wanted to make a complaint or to get extra support dealing with a supervisor issue. However, complaints were often not lodged as researchers were worried their supervisor would find out about it, or they were somewhat dealt with by advisory committee members or Chairs.

Positive experiences

Feedback collected in this engagement demonstrates both positive and negative insights into the supervision experience. Many graduate researchers could report both a concern or issue with one aspect of supervision but also acknowledge that other aspects of their research supervision worked well. When reflecting on what was working well, students described positive features such as good communication, emotional support, availability of time, providing direction and having multiple supervisors. Other positives mentioned by the graduate researchers were the self-driven learning, having realistic expectations of them and creating a positive team culture.

University reputation

Attachment or loyalty to the University was a theme GSA wanted to explore, with graduate researchers being asked if they would be pursuing an academic career at the University of Melbourne following their research. Just over a quarter (26.3%) had decided to pursue an academic career at the University with the majority still in the process of making a decision. Using a Net Promoter Score as another metric of brand loyalty, graduate researchers were mostly “Passives” with an average score of 8/10, which may be interpreted as being satisfied with the University but not happy enough to be considered “Promoters”.

Graduate coursework students were asked about their perception of the quality of research supervision at University of Melbourne. Half of the coursework students had not heard anything about research supervision whereas about a third of coursework students (36.1%) had heard positive reports. The remaining coursework students had heard mixed feedback (6.9%) or negative feedback (5.8%).

Just under a quarter of coursework students (24.1%) said they were likely to continue on at the University with a research-based qualification and cited the following factors for their decision - the good reputation of the University, facilities, relationships already developed in their faculty (other students or academics) and the familiar environment.

Areas for improvement

Over half of the graduate researchers (54.4%) made at least one suggestion to improve research supervision at University of Melbourne. The top five improvements suggestions (most commonly mentioned listed first) were:

- Ensuring there are detailed supervision agreements and agreed content about meeting frequency, addressing issues, timelines.
- Improving day-to-day supervisor availability by reducing their workload.
- Initiating formal peer/team learning activities.
- More empathetic, supportive communication by supervisors.
- Providing students with formal training in research skills/faculty-specific skills.

Graduate researchers who participated in the focus group were asked about their understanding of the role of a research supervisor. From their perspective the top three roles of a supervisor were to provide guidance over the lifetime of the research; to provide emotional support/wellbeing check in and to ensure the research progresses by keeping students on track. The perceived role of the supervisor to provide emotional support to students could be discussed further by the University, and expectations around this role communicated to both supervisors and students during the induction process.

1.3 Recommended areas for reform

The engagement findings support GSA's advocacy for improving graduate research experience. The following recommendations are the result of the feedback from graduate researchers and students and will inform more detailed recommendations made by the GSA to the University to be considered in future planning and reforms made by the University.

The engagement findings support the validity of the GSA's three proposed recommendations to measure supervisor performance annually, reviewing supervisor training and addressing conflicts of interest between supervisors and advisory chairs.

Conversation Co. also recommends the following actions based on the engagement findings:

1. That the University reframe their thinking of what a graduate researcher is, and the level of support they require.
2. That the University reviews the ways in which prospective graduate researchers can initially meet and choose their potential supervisors.
3. That the University ensures that supervision agreements are prepared, discussed in an open manner, signed off and adhered to by all parties.
4. That the University considers the feasibility of all feedback to graduate researchers being provided in a written form.
5. That a formal induction program for graduate researchers is developed with both universal content and minimum standards and faculty-specific content.
6. That the lack of trust in the complaints process be addressed by undertaking a review considering how to increase confidence for graduate researchers.

7. That the University establishes a sensible maximum number of graduate researchers for each supervisor based on the individual supervisor's availability and responsibilities for the research project.
 8. That GSA implements a communications plan promoting the role of the organisation to all graduate students.
 9. That GSA considers the inclusion of a peer learning space (or program) to encourage graduate students to socialise and collaborate.
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2. Introduction

The University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association (GSA) is an independent association that provides enrolled graduate students at the University of Melbourne with representation, events, training and support. The University of Melbourne has approximately 31,000 graduate students; 5,400 graduate researchers and 2,700 research supervisors.

In 2022, GSA funded an engagement program with graduate researchers and graduate students on the topic of research supervision. The agreed roles of research supervisors are to ensure students are connected with resources, to maintain an agreed schedule of individual meetings, and to provide mentorship for the students' research topic.

Conversation Co.'s role was to plan, design and deliver an engagement program with graduate researchers and graduate students, to document their experiences and identify areas for improvement. The primary target group was graduate researchers undertaking a higher degree by research, such as a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) or a Masters by Research.

2.1 Project background

The University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association (GSA) had identified several challenges for some graduate researchers, relating to their research supervision:

- Lack of communication and support from supervisors.
- Conflicts of interests between supervisors and advisory chairs.
- Unclear processes for raising issues or providing feedback.
- Indeterminate guidelines around supervisorial agreements.

The intended outcome from the 2022 engagement program is GSA advocacy focusing on three themes:

1. The current experiences and needs of graduate researchers regarding their supervision.
2. The reputation of the graduate research program amongst graduate students, regarding academic supervision and support.
3. Highlighting the role of GSA as an advocacy organisation.

This engagement was supported by preliminary work that has been done by GSA regarding potential recommendations for GSA's advocacy work. It is expected that this engagement summary report will explore these key features and potential recommendations that GSA may build upon to develop detailed recommendations for the University. A conscious decision was made to include research supervisors in the engagement program to provide them with the opportunity to identify their own challenges and experiences.

3. Methodology

Conversation Co.'s initial engagement proposal nominated a potential 1,000 engagement participants based on the large student population of predominantly graduate students. However, once the engagement scope was redefined as focusing on the smaller target group of graduate researchers and learning about their time commitments and associated stressors, a more realistic target was set at 300-500 engagement participants.

An engagement plan was prepared to guide Conversation Co and GSA project teams with the delivery of the engagement activities needed to understand students' experiences and future needs regarding their supervision. A mixed-method community engagement program consisting of online and face-to-face activities was used to reach graduate researchers, graduate students and research supervisors. The project plan included a mid-point review to look at overall and faculty-specific participation rates and any changes needed to project communications or engagement methods.

3.1 Engagement objectives

The objectives of the research and engagement program were to improve the GSAs and the University's understanding of:

- The impact of (suspected) low-quality supervision on graduate researchers and their feelings towards the University.
- The way (suspected) low-quality supervision has impacted graduate researchers and their career trajectory.
- The ways (suspected) low-quality supervision manifest.
- What works well in the supervision program.
- How graduate researchers raise and feel about the avenues available for reporting issues about supervisors and seeking support.
- Perception of the graduate research program from the point of view of graduate students - what they have heard about the graduate researcher experience, the quality of supervision and support available and whether that information has encouraged or discouraged them to pursue academic research in future years.
- Relevant issues and challenges raised by supervisors who elect to participate in the project, which intersect with the quality of supervision provided.

3.2 Engagement activities

Community engagement was conducted from 24 October to 20 November 2022. The engagement activities are shown in Table 1 and were based on the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum under Inform and Consult (refer to [Appendix 1: IAP2 Spectrum of Participation](#)) and the available project budget. Where possible a core set of engagement questions were replicated across the different activities.

Table 1: Engagement activities

Technique	Rationale	Target group
Online survey	Provided an opportunity for participants to provide confidential information at their convenience, without having to attend face-to-face engagement in Parkville.	Graduate students, Graduate researchers, Supervisors
Personal interviews (n=30) 20 minutes duration each	Provided an opportunity for participants to provide confidential information at their convenience, without having to attend face-to-face engagement in Parkville. Provided ability to probe and clarify answers.	Graduate researchers, Supervisors
Focus Groups (n=4) 90 mins duration each 2 online 2 on campus	Provided an opportunity for participants to hear other points of view and exchange ideas. For participants who were comfortable with sharing their experiences with others.	Graduate researchers
Intercept surveys at GSA events (n=4) 2-3 hours duration each	Participants visiting the 26 October GSA event provided answers to a shorter version of the survey questions. At following events, participants were invited to do the full version of the survey and/or provide feedback in other ways.	Graduate students, Graduate researchers

Note: the symbol “n” is used throughout this report to represent “number of”.

Given the modest project budget, GSA staff and student representatives contributed a significant number of hours to the project including project promotions (digital and on campus), additional in-person interviews on campus (using materials provided by Conversation Co.), funding of catering and student incentives, focus group/interview registrations and online survey hosting.

3.3 Engagement questions

The engagement questions for each of the target groups are shown in Table 2. These are sourced from the list of negotiable topics as specified in the engagement plan.

Table 2: Engagement questions for different target groups

Target group	Engagement questions	Engagement activity
Graduate researchers	Rating of supervisors' performance on key indicators (clarity, responsiveness, interest) Any issues experienced with supervision Any experience with formal complaints What works well with program structure Suggested improvements Past decisions to dropout, change supervisors Future intention to do pursue academic career at University of Melbourne Net Promoter Score Additional questions (focus groups only)	Online survey Personal interview Intercept surveys Focus Group
Graduate students	Perception of research supervision quality Future intention to progress to research project Future intention to do research at University of Melbourne	Online survey Personal interview Intercept surveys
Supervisors	Rating of own performance on key indicators (clarity, responsiveness, interest) What works well with program structure Suggested improvements Rating of supervisor training	Online survey Personal interview

3.4 Project promotion

There was extensive promotion of the engagement project through the GSA and University of Melbourne channels. The GSA created a dedicated webpage for graduate students to find information about the project and how they can get involved. Information was also disseminated through the GSAs monthly newsletter, social media channels, and networks of student representatives. GSA staff also regularly engaged students through popular programs such as the Healthy Breakfast Program.

Conversation Co. promoted the engagement project to its own mailing list with two articles published as blogs and Facebook posts, on 26 October and 14 November 2022.

3.5 Strategies to support participation

Student and supervisor participation was supported through the following initiatives:

- **Dedicated project page:** A dedicated project page was created on the GSA website at <https://gsa.unimelb.edu.au/policy-and-advocacy-graduate-researcher-and-supervisor-working-relationships/> which advertised both the online survey, focus groups and interview opportunities.
- **Going to the students on campus:** Face-to-face activities were conducted inside the GSA building on campus and at GSA-specific events outside the building. Students were also approached at specific University buildings where graduate researchers were known to study and meet.
- **Variety of engagement methods:** Multiple methods were offered, allowing participants to participate in their own time through the online survey or as they were going about their day on campus. The multiple methods enabled students with different time commitments, locations, and interest levels to find out about the project and provide feedback.
- **Incentives:** GSA provided generous incentives for student participation including free food and snacks, \$75 Coles voucher for a focus group, \$20 Coles voucher for a personal interview and a prize draw of 50 \$20 Coles vouchers from survey respondents.
- **Anonymity and confidentiality:** No personal details were linked to the individual student and supervisor feedback. Only University faculty was recorded alongside the feedback, with this data able to be removed on request of the student. Student details were recorded separately for the purposes of checking student type and administration of incentives. Only the focus group participants saw or heard other students' feedback.
- **Engagement fatigue, low awareness of GSA role or student apathy:** Frequent communications from the GSA about the organisation and its role were planned. Also, it was important to provide clear communications from the GSA about the difference between this engagement and previous annual student surveys.
- **Involvement of students from a range of faculties:** Targeted emails from the GSA to under-represented faculties were planned following the mid-point review.

3.6 Barriers to participation

An important part of our practice is to reflect on any barriers that might have reduced student participation:

- **Location:** Because of the nature of graduate research, potential participants are spread out, with many not using the University Campus. Locating potential participants and finding suitable times may have been a barrier.
- **Time-poor students:** Time availability of students to participate in optional engagement activities, which are lower priorities compared to their research, their paid work and other University commitments.
- **Lifestyle stressors:** Additional lifestyle stressors for the graduate researchers were likely to be food insecurity, poor mental wellbeing, low income, overwork/fatigue.

- **Low levels of awareness of the GSA amongst the target group:** Awareness of GSA itself was thought to be about 50% of all graduate researchers engaged in the project.
- **Timing of the project for graduate students:** Graduate students were likely to have disengaged from the University after the exam period (November 2022).

3.7 Capacity building for engagement techniques

Conversation Co provided capacity building and support for the GSA project team to undertake engagement activities in an unbiased and impartial manner. The GSA project team (including student representatives) who would be undertaking intercept surveys and interviews were briefed on engagement techniques and ethics, in particular avoiding leading questions, how to probe for further details and providing affirming responses. The GSA project team were also provided interview and focus group guides and materials to support meaningful participation in line with IAP2 principles and the project engagement questions.

3.8 Reflections from Facilitators

Participants engaged across all engagement activities showed a willingness to take part and give their feedback, with many participants commenting on the benefits of direct engagement and reflecting on other aspects of university life they would like to give feedback on. Overall, participants felt their feedback could improve the quality of graduate research for their colleagues and future researchers and were thankful for the opportunity.

The use of incentives for participation was crucial for the engagement project however the eagerness of students to take up the incentives confirmed the cost-of-living concerns and food insecurity which could be further investigated.

Participants in the focus groups varied in their levels of engagement, with more interactive and positive engagement in the on-campus sessions. The two in-person sessions involved detailed discussions between participants with a good representation of faculties. The Conversation Co facilitators noted that there was “amazing engagement between the (first) group. We went over time and didn’t have a break because everyone was so into it. We also got asked if we could share some of our engagement techniques and advice for a woman’s PhD project” and “lots of engagement ... good at realising what the issues were but not so good at following through and thinking about how they could be resolved”.

Online (Zoom) sessions had less discussion amongst participants, but they did provide detailed feedback for the session notes. The second online session involved older students who were more engaged and participated in a good discussion.

4. Who Participated?

4.1 Participation by engagement activity

Table 3 and Figure 1 show a summary of the engagement activities which involved a maximum of 468 participants. It should be noted that some students may have participated in multiple activities (completed a survey and attended a focus group).

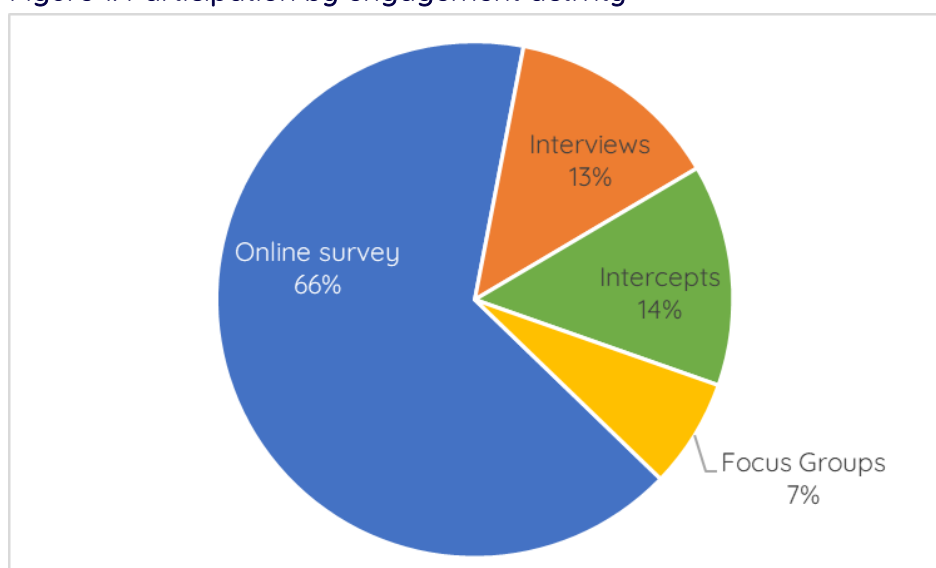
The majority of the feedback came via the full online survey (308 participants, 65.8%) with a further 13.9% of participants answering the shorter version of the survey at the 26 October event. Ninety-five students (20.3%) chose to provide more detailed feedback in a personal interview or a focus group.

Table 3: Participation by engagement activity

Engagement activity	No.	%
Online survey	308	65.8%
Personal interviews	63	13.5%
Intercept surveys (26 October)	65	13.9%
Focus Groups	32	6.8%
TOTAL PARTICIPATION	468	100%

Note: an additional 23 persons commenced the online survey but did not answer any questions.

Figure 1: Participation by engagement activity



4.2 Participation by faculty

[Appendix 2](#) shows the graduate researcher student population by faculty. By targeting particular buildings on the Parkville campus, it was planned that engagement participation would be higher for graduate researchers from the Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences faculty. Actual participation by faculty was monitored at the engagement's mid-point review meeting by the project team.

Table 4 compares the graduate researcher population and their engagement participation for each faculty. Participation was highest by graduate researchers from the Engineering and IT; Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences; and Science faculties. The graduate researchers who attended the on-campus focus groups did not provide their faculty details and some other students did not provide their faculty due to a request for anonymity.

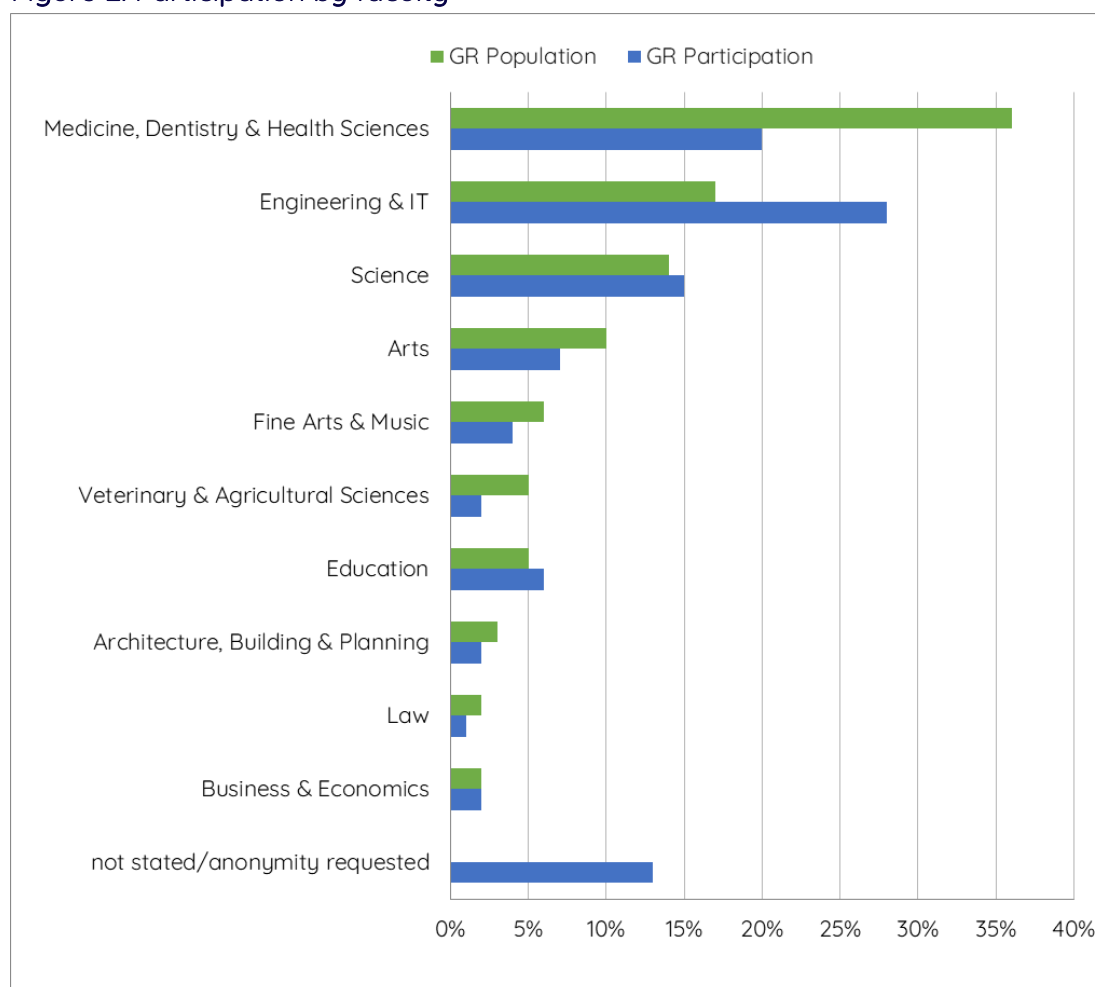
Compared to the wider graduate researcher population, students from the Engineering and IT faculty were over-represented in the engagement program whereas students from Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences were under-represented.

Table 4: Graduate researcher participation by faculty

Owning Organisational Unit	Number of graduate researchers		Graduate researcher participants
		%	%
Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences	1,979	36%	20%
Engineering and IT	937	17%	28%
Science	762	14%	15%
Arts	570	10%	7%
Fine Arts and Music/VCA and MCM	303	6%	4%
Veterinary and Agricultural Sciences	259	5%	2%
Education	249	5%	6%
Architecture, Building and Planning	146	3%	2%
Law	119	2%	1%
Business and Economics	97	2%	2%
not stated/anonymity requested	-	0%	13%
TOTAL	5,421	100%	100%

Notes: Some percentages were rounded to sum to 100%

Figure 2: Participation by faculty



Notes: Chart sorted in descending order by faculty with the highest number of graduate researchers. The “Education” faculty is the Melbourne Graduate School of Education and the Melbourne School of Professional and Continuing Education. The Fine Arts and Music faculty includes the Victorian College of the Arts and the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music.

4.3 Participation by student type/supervisor

Of the 468 engagement participants, 192 (41.0%) were graduate researchers, 274 (58.5%) were graduate students and 0.4% were Supervisors. Table 4 shows the participation in each engagement activity for the three target groups. Participation in the focus groups was restricted to graduate researchers only. Supervisors were invited to complete the survey or be interviewed.

Table 4: Participation by student type/supervisor

Engagement activity	Graduate researchers	Graduate students	Supervisors	Total
Online survey	109 (56.8%)	198 (72.3%)	1	308 (65.8%)
Personal interviews	35 (18.2%)	27 (9.9%)	1	63 (13.5%)
Intercept surveys	16 (8.3%)	49 (17.9%)	0	65 (13.9%)
Focus Groups	32 (16.7%)	0	0	32 (6.8%)
TOTAL PARTICIPATION	192 (100%)	274 (100%)	2	468 (100%)

The engagement plan set a target of 70% of total participants being graduate researchers and 30% being graduate students, notionally 350 graduate researchers and 150 graduate students out of a total number of 500 participants (refer to [Appendix 2 Targets for overall participation and graduate researchers by faculty](#)). As expected, engaging with time-poor graduate researchers proved to be challenging with the split being 41% graduate researchers/59% graduate students.

5. Key Findings

This section first discusses the perceived roles of research supervisors at the University of Melbourne. Subsequent sections look at concerns and issues experienced by students and then their suggested improvements. Graduate researchers were asked to answer based on their experiences with their principal supervisor if they had more than one research supervisor.

Participant quotes are shown in *italics* in this section, to demonstrate student sentiment and tone. Where comparisons are made by faculty, please note those faculties with small numbers of engagement participants and interpret the feedback with caution.

5.1 Graduate researchers' feedback

Focus group participants were asked how they found their supervisors initially, with students listing a wide variety of methods used to identify and choose supervisors

Perception of the roles of a supervisor

Focus group participants were asked about their understanding of the role of a research supervisor. Outside of the actual supervisor training and any written supervision agreements, these aspects were mentioned by the graduate researchers with the most commonly mentioned listed first:

1. Guidance over the lifetime of the research
2. Emotional support/wellbeing check in
3. Ensuring progress, keeping student on track

4. Encourage independent thinking and decision making
5. Teach students practical skills and research techniques
6. Schedule and set agenda for meetings
7. Answer questions and provide feedback
8. Be interested in the research.

“Guide student to the correct direction- right analysis, right experiment

My supervisor is not my therapist or my mum, not my teacher or boss but some aspects of all of those - it's like an apprenticeship

Provide regular check in and know where you are with your study

Make room for independence and encouragement to make our own decisions

Teaching me how to do the methods/how to do a lit review

The supervisor should arrange the meetings and timelines

Be there to answer questions and give good feedback

Get excited about my research”

Reflections on communication and relationships

Graduate researchers were asked to reflect on six statements, answering based on a scale of frequency - Always, Very Often, Sometimes, Rarely or Never. Frequency is a relevant metric given the length of the supervisor-student relationship being between three and five years.

The six statements were:

- My supervisor makes time to discuss my research.
- My supervisor answers my emails/phone calls in a few days.
- My supervisor really listens to me.
- My supervisor helps me keep my research on track.
- My supervisor gives clear feedback or advice.
- My supervisor seems interested in my research.

Table 5 shows that overall, many graduate researchers reported satisfactory performance by their supervisors regarding the frequency of the communication patterns and supervision behaviours. Three out of every four students reported their supervisors **always** or **very often** answered their emails/phone calls (84.1%), made time to discuss their research (80.9%), seemed interested in their research (78.2%) really listened (77.7%) and gave clear feedback or advice (76.3%). Reported supervisor performance was lowest for helping the student keep their research on track (68.2% **always** or **very often**).

On the negative side students reported inconsistent behaviours from their supervisor/s with 22.3% **sometimes** helping the student keep their research on track and 19.2% **sometimes** seeming interested in their research. A small percentage of students reported that supervisors **rarely** or **never** helped them keep their research on track (9.6%), gave clear feedback or advice (7.7%) or answered their emails/phone calls (6.4%). Whilst these percentages are relatively small, the impact on individual graduate researchers is likely to be profound.

Table 5: Supervision communication and relationships

Behaviour	Always	Very Often	Some-times	Rarely	Never	TOTAL
Makes time to discuss my research	45.9%	35.0%	14.0%	4.5%	0.6%	100%
Answers my emails/phone calls in a few days	56.7%	27.4%	9.6%	5.7%	0.6%	100%
Really listens to me	50.3%	27.4%	16.6%	5.1%	0.6%	100%
Helps me keep my research on track	38.9%	29.3%	22.3%	7.0%	2.5%	100%
Gives clear feedback or advice	41.7%	34.6%	16.0%	6.4%	1.3%	100%
Seems interested in my research	56.4%	21.8%	19.2%	1.3%	1.3%	100%

Note: n=157-158 graduate researchers

Figure 3: Supervision communication and relationships

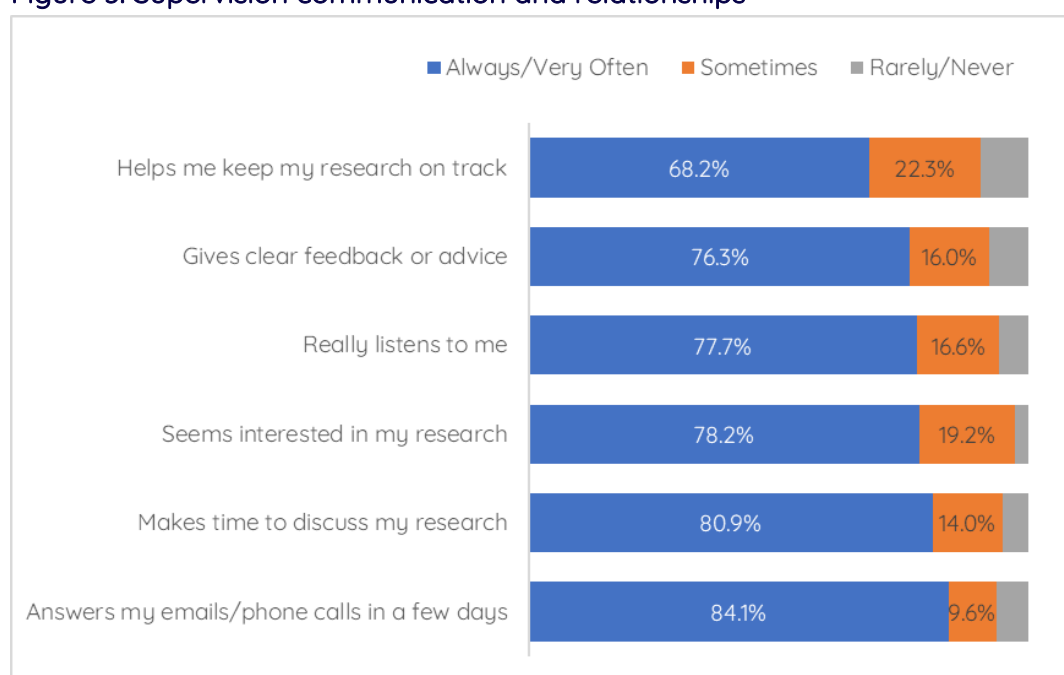


Figure 3 shows the Table 5 data combined into three categories of frequency and sorted in ascending order, to clearly show both positive and negative behaviours as perceived by the students.

For the faculties where there were sufficient numbers of participants, the breakdown of responses to these behavioural questions is shown in Table 6. There were some faculty differences in the percentage of students who reported poor communication or supervision in relation to “**never**”, “**rarely**” or only “**sometimes**” demonstrating these behaviours:

- Supervisor makes time to discuss my research - Engineering and IT (23.4% said never, rarely or sometimes), Arts (21.4%).
- Supervisor answers my emails/phone calls in a few days - Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences (21.2% said never, rarely or sometimes).
- Supervisor really listens to me - Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences (39.4% said never, rarely or sometimes).
- Supervisor helps me keep my research on track - Arts (42.9% said never, rarely or sometimes), Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences (39.4%), Engineering and IT (38.3%).
- Supervisor gives clear feedback or advice - Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences (33.3% said never, rarely or sometimes), Arts (28.6%), Engineering and IT (26.1%).
- Supervisor seems interested in my research - Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences (24.2% said never, rarely or sometimes), Engineering and IT (23.9%).

Table 6: Graduate researchers reported supervision behaviours by faculty

Faculty	Responses to behavioural questions
Engineering and IT 47 participants	<p>Answers emails/phone calls 89% always/very often, 4% sometimes, 6% rarely/never</p> <p>Really listens to me 83% always/very often, 13% sometimes, 4% rarely/never</p> <p>Helps keep my research on track 62% always/very often, 32% sometimes, 6% rarely/never</p> <p>Makes time to discuss my research 77% always/very often, 21% sometimes, 2% rarely/never</p> <p>Gives clear feedback or advice 72% always/very often, 21% sometimes, 4% rarely/never</p> <p>Seems interested in my research 76% always/very often, 22% sometimes, 2% rarely/never</p>

Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences 34 participants (1 did not answer any of these questions)	Answers emails/phone calls 79% always/very often, 12% sometimes, 9% rarely/never Really listens to me 61% always/very often, 33% sometimes, 6% rarely/never Helps keep my research on track 61% always/very often, 33% sometimes, 6% rarely/never Makes time to discuss my research 91% always or very often, 9% rarely/never Gives clear feedback or advice 67% always/very often, 15% sometimes, 18% rarely/never Seems interested in my research 76% always/very often, 24% sometimes
Science 24 participants	Answers emails/phone calls 96% always/very often, 4% rarely/never Really listens to me 92% always/very often, 4% sometimes, 4% rarely/never Helps keep my research on track 92% always/very often, 4% sometimes, 4% rarely/never Makes time to discuss my research 92% always or very often, 4% sometimes, 4% rarely/never Gives clear feedback or advice 96% always/very often, 4% rarely/never Seems interested in my research 96% always/very often, 4% sometimes
Arts 14 participants	Answers emails/phone calls 86% always/very often, 14% sometimes Really listens to me 86% always/very often, 7% sometimes, 7% rarely/never Helps keep my research on track 57% always/or very often, 14% sometimes, 29% rarely/never Makes time to discuss my research 79% always/very often, 14% sometimes, 7% rarely/never Gives clear feedback or advice 71% always/very often, 21% sometimes, 7% rarely/never Seems interested in my research 79% always/very often, 14% sometimes, 7% rarely/never

Note: Only those faculties with 10 or more graduate researcher respondents are shown in this table. A small number of Fine Arts and Music graduate researchers gave particularly negative feedback about their supervisors.

Supervision issues and incidents

Overall, 207 graduate researchers and two supervisors answered the question: Are there any other incidents/issues you have experienced with your research supervision? Half of the graduate researchers reported some issue they had experienced during supervision (50.2%) with the remaining 46.4% reporting they had no issues and 3.4% indicating their experiences had been positive.

Table 7 shows the issues and incidents reported by the 50.2% of graduate researchers. Poor communication, lack of emotional support, poor or no direction, unavailability of supervisors were the common issues and negative incidents for graduate researchers.

Other situations mentioned by the graduate researchers were the lack of peer learning opportunities, unrealistic expectations about their research skills or knowledge of the system and several specific incidents that caused the student considerable stress or distress. For one of the supervisors, their issue was having to supervise students who they believed should not have been offered their research place in the course.

Table 7: Issues experienced with research supervision

Major themes	Participant quotes or interview/focus group notes
<p>Communication (n=41)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● General poor communication (20) ● Cultural misunderstandings/ lack of empathy (7) ● Unresponsive (7) ● Did not communicate absences (4) ● No Advisory Chair (2) 	<p><i>Interview notes - difficulty understanding feedback from 1 of 2 supervisors. Gives feedback at one session then contradicts herself at next session and students work is wasted. Needs a few more meetings to really clarify project direction. Second supervisor needed to explain same feedback given by primary supervisor</i></p> <p><i>Interview notes - During COVID was restricted to email/Zoom or telephone contact. Now restrictions lifted nothing has changed re contact method, have not met in person since. Too difficult to collaborate or discuss things on paper.</i></p> <p><i>"My supervisor started off being very welcoming and kind at the beginning of the PhD. Now I am in my second year and our relationship has completely flipped. I often don't get any responses to emails... I asked questions about the ethics application, but they never read it before I submitted. When I have issues and ask the supervisor gives me answers I already have. I wonder why they are supervising at all if they almost have nothing new to add to the conversation. The second year has been so lonely and almost no support."</i></p>
<p>Lack of emotional support (n=28)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Difficult to deal with, creates stress ● Neglect ● Does not consider mental health 	<p><i>"It's a struggle to be confident to know that my research is worth 4 years of my life - I want genuine reassurance so I don't feel like an imposter and that I can contribute something worthwhile"</i></p> <p><i>Focus Group notes - Lack of support for personal issues</i></p> <p><i>Interview notes - Wanted some interest from supervisor in his career or life circumstances ... Thought it relevant to the supervision experience to understand him as a person more. Be more of a mentor.</i></p> <p><i>"My co-supervisor is very condescending and rude to me."</i></p>
<p>Poor or no direction (n=28)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Assumed knowledge ● Unclear direction, wasted time 	<p><i>"My supervisor has left the project decisions with me which is both a boon and bane."</i></p> <p><i>Focus Group notes - Need more assistance, guidance about lab/technical equipment</i></p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Sought help from others 	<p><i>"Wasting weeks and sometimes months on what I needed to be working on."</i></p> <p><i>"When I came in there was an assumed level of knowledge, but I wasn't sure how I was going to structure my PhD chapters. I had to do a lot of research. Luckily someone recommended a book. The supervisor assumed I knew what I was doing."</i></p>
<p>Supervisor not available (n=19)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Long absences ● Missed meetings ● Feel like a burden 	<p><i>"At the beginning of the project I feel that we didn't spend much time working side by side to train me on the wet labs. Later, while troubleshooting a method, I felt quite lonely trying to figure it out as they were never around due to their time-schedules. I had to draw guidance and expertise from other sources and people in the lab to stay afloat."</i></p> <p><i>"He has gotten exponentially busier throughout my candidature, which is great for him, but can leave me feeling a little neglected. I feel like I am less of a priority than I used to be."</i></p> <p><i>"Sometimes my supervisors are too busy right at the time when I need their feedback the most. I'm not sure that there are easy ways to resolve this issue, since certain times of year are just very busy for academics"</i></p> <p><i>"Their time is always at a premium and its difficult for them to be timely."</i></p>

Note: n=106 (104 Researchers, 2 Supervisors). Themes sorted in descending order of frequency. Multiple themes were identified in some of the individual comments.

Graduate researcher complaints

Graduate researchers were asked: Have you ever wanted to make a complaint about your supervisor or get extra support dealing with a supervisor issue? And if yes, what happened? Overall, 163 graduate researchers answered this question with an additional 29 students discussing related issues* at the focus groups (15.3%).

About two-thirds of the graduate researchers (63.0%) had not wanted to make a supervision complaint or to get extra support dealing with a supervisor issue. However, 21.7% of graduate researchers (n=41) had wanted to pursue this and they experienced a range of different outcomes:

- 10.1% (n=19) didn't pursue their complaint, mostly because they were worried their supervisor would find out about it.
- 6.9% (n=13) pursued their complaint by speaking to an advisory committee member or Chair but reported that only some of their issues were dealt with
- 4.8% (n=9) reported other scenarios that occurred.

Table 8: Complaints and outcomes

Complaints about supervision	No.	%
Wanted to make a complaint/get extra support with supervision	41	21.7%
➤ Didn't pursue it - didn't know where to go or how to approach the situation	5	2.6%
➤ Didn't pursue it - was worried my supervisor/Chair would find out about it	14	7.4%
➤ Emailed-spoke to advisory committee member/Chair, some of it was dealt with	11	5.8%
➤ Emailed-spoke to advisory committee member/Chair, it was not addressed	2	1.1%
➤ Other outcomes (quotes follow Table)	9	4.8%
Not needed	119	63.0%
Not answered directly (focus groups only) *	29	15.3%
TOTAL	189	100%

Note: Focus group discussions covered suggestions for improvement and positive aspects.

"In my first year ... thinking was related to cultural barriers at the beginning of my candidature

*I spoke to the chair of my committee after my confirmation, and altered supervision
Complained after my 2-year review to my chair. Then had a couple of meetings with the
Head of School to determine mitigation measures. Some were resolved (i.e., I had to
manage the difficult supervisor and their behaviour with no 1-1 meetings, and limited
contact)*

*Advisory panel not yet established. Went outside the university to colleagues. Very unclear
where to go for assistance.*

Emailed and spoke with random people with (faculty) but there was never an outcome.

*Needed extra support: 1. Spoke to UOM Counselling Service - no empathy or understanding
from counsellor. At the time there were no telehealth appointments so had to travel from
rural Victoria. 2. Sought help from another student and they encouraged (me) to go to
Research Group Leader who is Assoc. Prof. Was told by AP "none of your business" and that
a student couldn't tell them what to do. 3. Did not approach Advisory Committee Chair."*

Changes considered regarding research supervision

Graduate researchers were asked these two questions about their past experiences with their research:

1. Have you ever considered changing your topic or field of study because you've had difficulties with your research supervision?
2. Have you ever considered changing universities because you've had difficulties with your research supervision?

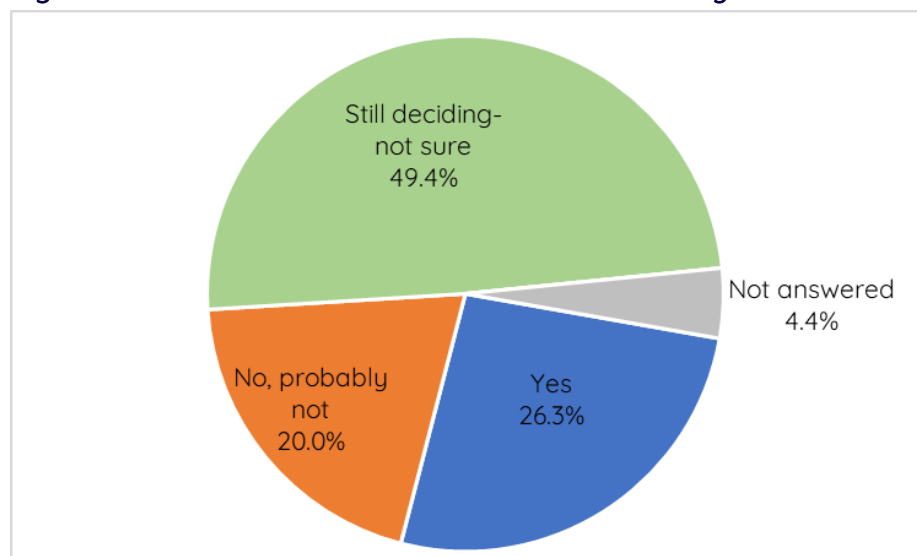
Of the 160 researchers, 21 (13.1%) had considered changing their topic or field of study because they had experienced difficulties with their research supervision, with 71.9% saying "No" and 15.0% not answering the question. Similarly, 17 (10.6%) had considered changing universities because they had experienced difficulties with their research supervision, with 74.4% saying "No" and 15.0% not answering the question.

Graduate researchers were then asked if they had ever considered dropping out of their research project (related or unrelated to their supervision). Only a small number ($n=4$) said they wanted to "switch to coursework", 32 students (20.0%) said they wanted to leave university with the remaining 77.5% saying "No" or they did not answer the question.

Future academic career at University of Melbourne

Attachment or loyalty to the University was a theme GSA wanted to explore, with graduate researchers being asked: Will you be pursuing an academic career at the University of Melbourne when you have finished your research? Overall, 160 graduate researchers answered this question with half of the researchers still in the process of making a decision (49.4%). About a quarter of the researchers (26.3%) had decided to pursue an academic career at the University of Melbourne whilst 20% had decided not to do so.

Figure 4: Pursuit of academic career at the University of Melbourne



Whilst there were a range of individual circumstances involved, some of the more common themes are shown in Table 9.

Table 9: Factors influencing future academic career at University of Melbourne

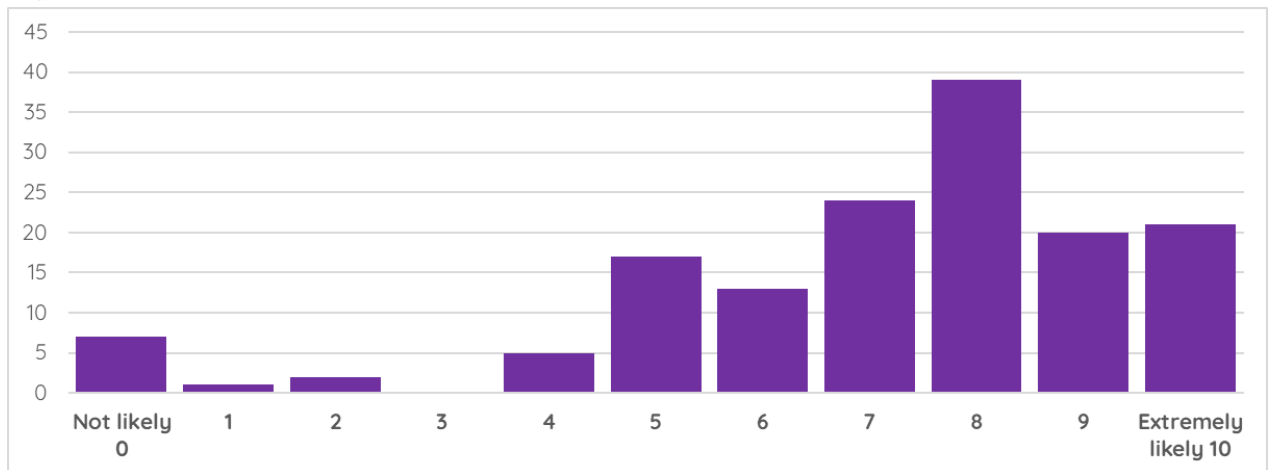
Decision	Participant quotes or interview/focus group notes
<p>Still deciding about future career (n=79)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Unsure about availability of positions or options (19) ● Observed negative aspects of academia (12) ● Decision years away (6) ● Work in industry (5) ● Relocate away from Melbourne (4) 	<p><i>"I want to pursue an academic career at the University of Melbourne but I'm not sure that there will be vacancies"</i></p> <p><i>"I'm not sure what the opportunities are like, I have concerns about the work/life balance based on my perception of academic stress levels, and I've seen some people let go or pushed out who I really did not think should have been"</i></p> <p><i>"I'm still in my first year of research, so I'm unsure, but I do get the impression that research jobs often require hours well beyond a normal work week. I'm uncertain I could sustain both a research career and my own health and wellbeing."</i></p> <p><i>Interview notes - Has observed poor work-life balance of academics. High stress, time-poor. Does not relate to academic priorities of talking about need to research rather than doing research. Doesn't like admin and bureaucracy. Publishing overrated and old-fashioned compared to value and content of actual research.</i></p>
<p>Want to pursue academic career (n=42)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Want to teach ● Having an enjoyable research experience ● Passionate about field 	<p><i>"I am very passionate about business and economics health, making me want to do a career out of it"</i></p> <p><i>"Because the upcoming project in my collaborated lab is interesting and I really would love to pursue it here. I am happy about other opportunities, seminars, conferences that happen here at uni."</i></p> <p><i>"I would like to pursue and economic career, I want to give back to the community, I see myself doing teaching and research here"</i></p> <p><i>"My positive experience with supervisor has inspired to pursue academia as a possibility"</i></p>
<p>Will not pursue academic career (n=32)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Disenchanted with faculty/academia (n=13) ● Moving away from Melbourne (n=6) ● Working in industry ● Other reasons 	<p><i>"There is no reason why I would want to stay here. One is I don't want to continue to be part of a system that does not help students at all. Second my supervisor is making me hate academia."</i></p> <p><i>"Well because UOM clearly treat the staff poorly - milking them for everything they can. Few people are permanent, and they all seem really stressed. I don't believe the university cares about its staff or students. It's disappointing."</i></p> <p><i>"I see what my supervisors go through and the sacrifices they make for research and I'm not willing to make the same sacrifices"</i></p>

Note: n=160 Researchers. Multiple themes were identified in some of the individual comments.

Net Promoter Score for University of Melbourne research supervision

Graduate researchers were asked to rate the supervision at the University of Melbourne using a Net Promoter Score (NPS) - How likely would you be to recommend graduate researcher supervision at University of Melbourne, to students who are studying at other universities? Students could rate their likelihood to recommend between 0 (not at all likely) and 10 (extremely likely). In summary the NPS measures the loyalty of “customers” to a company or organisation with 10 (or 100) being the desirable outcome¹.

Figure 5: Net Promoter Scale Scores



Note: n=149 graduate researchers

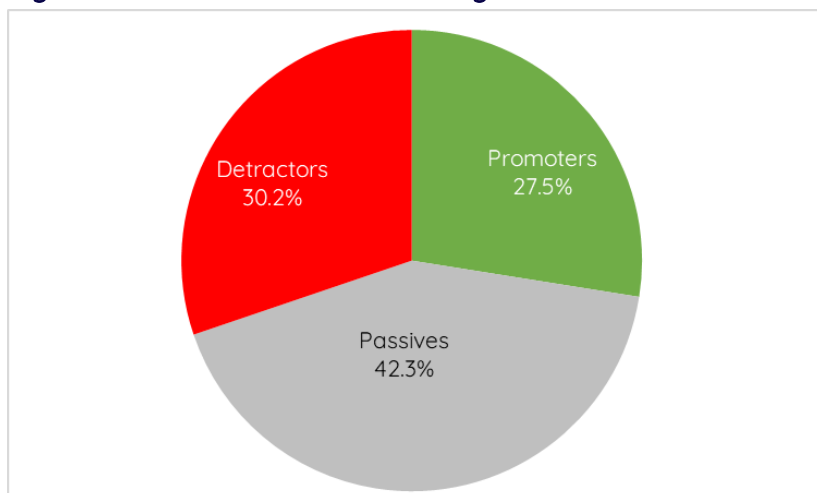
The standard interpretation of the NPS scale scores have been amended here to suit this University example:

- “Promoters” respond with a score of 9 or 10 and are typically loyal and enthusiastic students.
- “Passives” respond with a score of 7 or 8. They are satisfied with the University but not happy enough to be considered promoters.
- “Detractors” respond with a score of 0 to 6. These are unhappy students who are unlikely to deal/enrol with the University again and may even discourage others from dealing/enrolling with the University.

The most frequent score given by the graduate researchers was an eight, interpreted as “Passive”. Figure 6 shows the share of Promoters (27.5%), Passives (42.3%) and Detractors (30.2%). Subtracting the percentage of Detractors from the percentage of Promoters yields the Net Promoter Score, which can range from a low of -10 (if every student is a Detractor) to a high of 10 (if every student is a Promoter). Overall, the NPS from this question was - 2.7%.

¹ “What is NPS? Your ultimate guide to Net Promoter Score”, Qualtrics Customer Experience Management, Qualtrics, Accessed Dec 2022, <<https://www.qualtrics.com/au/experience-management/customer/net-promoter-score/>>.

Figure 6: Net Promoter Score Categories



Note: n=149 graduate researchers

Table 10: Net Promoter Scores by faculty

Faculty	Average (mean) score/10	No. of graduate researchers
Faculty not stated/anonymity requested	8.3	11
Education	8.0 [#]	9
Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences	7.5	30
Science	7.3	23
Engineering and IT	7.3	44
Arts	5.6	14
Fine Arts and Music*	2.6 [#]	8
Veterinary and Agricultural Sciences	not calculated	2
Architecture, Building and Planning	not calculated	4
Law	not calculated	1
Business and Economics	not calculated	3
OVERALL AVERAGE	7.1	149

Note: NPS scale scores are not shown for faculties with a very small number of student participants.
Table sorted in descending NPS score order.

* Five of the six students from this faculty gave a score of zero.

[#] Small number of participants so interpret NPS score with caution.

Looking at this NPS data by faculty (refer to Table 10), the faculty with the highest average NPS scale score was Education however this result was from only 9 students. Students from the Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences; Science and Engineering and IT faculties provided average scores of 7.5 and 7.3, higher than the overall NPS of 7.1.

Other feedback from graduate researchers

Graduate researchers were given the opportunity to make any closing comments in the online survey and personal interviews. Overall, 45 graduate researchers provided feedback, with both positive and negative comments.

Table 11: Other feedback from graduate researchers

Sentiment	Participant quotes or interview/focus group notes
Positive feedback (n=19)	<p><i>"It is so important to have a positive relationship with your supervisor. We have an open and honest relationship that is genuinely positive, that has made my time here while challenging, stimulating and enriching. My co-supervisor and chairperson have both been supportive and available if required."</i></p> <p><i>"My advisory chair was great-without that role I'd have no idea who to talk to."</i></p> <p><i>"I recognise that my relationship with my supervisor and committee is really good, and that this is not the case for every student. I think different supervision styles suit different students, and it is important for future students to speak to other students/lab members about the supervisor they are considering to determine if the lab will be a good fit for them."</i></p>
Negative feedback (n=21)	<p><i>"It's been s***t. Qualified; my secondary is a lovely person and great supervisor. My primary is crap and not helpful at all. The chairs of the committees have been sympathetic to the situation, but because my supervisor is a known difficult person, they tend to place dealing with them, at the lower end of their to-do list. At no point have I felt that anyone in a position of greater power than I, has taken them aside and told them their behaviour is poor."</i></p> <p><i>"Supervision is alright, very loose. The transition from coursework to Research (even through Research pathway) was poorly handled making us disorientated and distressed. I suffered mentally and emotionally to go through this pathway. Supervisors were supportive but not really what I expected."</i></p> <p><i>"I think overall more support. There is also lots of assumed knowledge about university or the department that is hard to find unless you just know"</i></p>

Mixed or neutral feedback (n=5)	<p><i>"I'm in my first year. so far, it's been good. I wish I could have more contact with the staff and supervisors but other than this I am satisfied. I feel sometimes if I approach them for something other than with concrete research I feel like a burden because they are very busy."</i></p> <p><i>"I dunno. I think it's a me problem. Too anxious"</i></p>
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5.2 Graduate student feedback

Graduate coursework students were asked to provide feedback on the following questions:

- What have you heard about the quality of research supervision from other students here at the University of Melbourne?
- Are you considering doing a Masters or PhD by Research sometime in the future?
- Do you plan to conduct your research at the University of Melbourne? Why is that?

Of the 274 graduate students, 140 (51.1%) had not heard anything about research supervision from other students at the University. About a third of graduate students (36.1%) had heard positive reports with a further 6.9% saying the feedback was mixed or negative (5.8%).

Table 12: Graduate students' perceptions of research supervision

Perception	Participant quotes or interview/focus group notes
Positive perception (n=99) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generic positive comments • Referred to University reputation • Some specific references to supervision 	<p><i>"It's good and supervisors really care about students publishing papers."</i></p> <p><i>"Most students are very happy with the supervision. Sometimes supervisors are not supportive but mostly they are."</i></p> <p><i>"It is very good, supervisor is tolerant"</i></p> <p><i>Interview notes - Heard from PhDs that they are happy with the supervision structures, supervision experience is better at PhD level than at Masters Research level.</i></p>
Mixed perception (n=19) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Directly related to supervisor as an individual 	<p><i>"I've heard that its highly variable depending on the supervisor and institute that you research with."</i></p> <p><i>"Highly variable - some students have had excellent supervisor experiences, while others have had extremely challenging experiences with their supervisors."</i></p>
Negative perception (n=16) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stressful, difficult • Supervisors busy 	<p><i>"I heard it is tough doing a PhD at UoM"</i></p> <p><i>"I'm a student representative, so I've heard many complaints from students"</i></p>

Note: Multiple themes were identified in some of the individual comments.

Future research projects at University of Melbourne

Attachment or loyalty to the University was a theme GSA wanted to explore with graduate students, based on their perceptions of research supervision. Graduate students were first asked if they were considering doing a PhD or Masters by Research sometime in the future - and if so, if they planned to conduct their research at the University of Melbourne.

Overall, 274 graduate students answered this question with 42.3% reporting that they would not be doing a PhD or Masters by research, with the remaining 57.6% saying either “Yes” or that they were still deciding. Table 13 shows the breakdown of graduate students who would be continuing at the University of Melbourne, those who were unsure and those who would not be staying.

Just under a quarter of graduate students (24.1%) said they were likely to continue on at the University and noted the following factors for their decision - good reputation of the University, facilities, relationships already developed in faculty (other students or academics), familiar environment.

About a quarter of graduate students (24.1%) were unsure about their future at the University and mentioned the following factors at play:

- It was too early in their study path or genuinely undecided (n=14).
- Were open to all opportunities but not clear on the future (n=7).
- Weren't sure if they would be eligible/achieve the required study scores (n=7).
- Would be reliant on scholarships or funding (n=4).
- Were international students considering moving overseas/home (n=4).

Table 13: Graduate students' future plans

Future intent to study Masters/PhD by research	No.	%
Yes	85	31.0%
Still deciding	73	26.6%
➤ At the University of Melbourne	66	24.1%
➤ Not sure about University of Melbourne	66	24.1%
➤ Not at University of Melbourne	17	6.2%
➤ Not answered	9	3.3%
No, probably not	116	42.3%
TOTAL	274	100%

Note: Intention to conduct research at University of Melbourne only asked of those who intended to do a research qualification in the future.

A small sub-group of graduate students (6.2%) had decided not to continue their study at the University due to a range of life circumstances, including having to/wanting to return home to an overseas country.

5.3 Supervisor feedback

Supervisors were asked to reflect on six statements, answering using an agree-disagree scale. The six statements were:

- I regularly make time with the students to discuss their research.
- I answer their emails/phone calls in a few days.
- I really listen to my students I keep their research projects on track.
- The University values the work I do with my students.
- I give my students clear feedback and advice.
- I'm genuinely interested in their research.

The two supervisors both answered either “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” to all six statements.

Their views on the supervisor training program were more prudent. The statements posed to supervisors about their training were:

- The training I received clearly outlined the role and responsibilities of a supervisor.
- The training gave me more confidence to be a supervisor.
- I feel like I have good support from the University, in my supervisor role.

The two supervisors answered “Agree” or “Neutral” to the first two statements and both agreed with the third statement.

5.4 Suggested improvements to research supervision

As noted in [2.1 Project background](#), GSA has developed three preliminary recommendations for an advocacy work in 2023. These improvement recommendations have been listed in Table 14 marked as “GSA”, in addition to the improvement suggestions from the graduate researchers and supervisors.

Improvements suggestions were made by graduate researchers and supervisors in the online survey, in the personal interviews or focus groups. Overall, 213 graduate researchers answered this question, with 97 of these (45.5%) stating they had no improvement suggestions to make (or making generic positive statements). Table 14 shows the most common themes that arose from the suggestions made by the remaining 54.4% of graduate researchers.

Table 14: Suggested improvements to research supervision

Improvement themes	Participant quotes or interview/focus group notes
Detailed supervision agreements and agreed content - meeting frequency, addressing issues, timelines (n=38)	<p><i>"More fail-safes should be put in place for when a supervisor goes on leave for extended periods of time. These should be set systems rather than relying on the person going on leave to organise something."</i></p> <p><i>"Develop a structured approach for supervisors to support and monitor student progress."</i></p> <p><i>"Better communication and agreement about meeting expectations and regularity."</i></p> <p><i>"Clearer guidelines on what should be discussed at the beginning of candidature."</i></p> <p><i>"During my first year, I was a bit lost on what exactly is expected to be done. While I like the fact that we are supposed to drive our PhD ourselves, a heads up on what sort of expectations there are would have been good."</i></p> <p><i>"Expectations of what a supervisor should provide are not really discussed or understood (supervision agreement form not signed off)"</i></p> <p><i>"More formal requirements and expectations from supervisors to comply with the supervision agreement"</i></p>
Improve day-to-day supervisor availability by reducing their workload (n=28)	<p><i>"Ensure the staff have time to properly supervise us. Often staff just don't turn up to meetings or go away for extended periods of time without notice."</i></p> <p><i>"Hire more academics, so that each academic has a smaller cohort of graduate researchers."</i></p> <p><i>"The grad supervisors don't have enough time for the students. I would only recommend it if they were committed to changing the workloads of the academic staff, so they weren't so stressed. People are scared of losing their jobs, it seems like a toxic workplace for a lot of them so it's hard to criticise them when that's going on. Research students need more time allocated, the value of supervising each student should be higher. "</i></p>
Initiate formal peer/team learning activities (n=25)	<p><i>"Need to universally develop a sense of team/community/department for students - some very isolated from each other, siloed unlike science students who see each other every day. Now COVID restrictions lifted need to develop a more team-oriented feeling."</i></p> <p><i>"GSA should be used as the academic convening space to meet others who are using the same research designs, theoretical frameworks etc -</i></p>

	<p><i>e.g., sessions to talk about messy methods etc useful to know were not alone & problematise together.”</i></p> <p><i>“Supervisors should facilitate more social interactions between other students, academics and groups.”</i></p> <p><i>“I feel like there has been a lack of community around graduate researchers, there is no connection. I don’t know if there needs to be some kind of process or buddy system to bring us all together a bit more. My supervisors tried to connect me with other students which was good, but if the uni opened it up with other faculty to bring us all together, that would be cool and helpful.”</i></p>
More empathetic, supportive approach by supervisors (n=23)	<p><i>“Unsafe working hours should not be expected of students. Puts people at risk for injury.”</i></p> <p><i>“We need them to act in a way that respects us as students, I feel like right now there is a bit of a culture where you are just thrown in the deep end but it has had significant impacts on my mental health. I don’t feel that supported generally. There needs to be mechanisms to check in on students, right now there are none.”</i></p> <p><i>Interview notes - Improve supervisor and student awareness of Disability and Equity service... Improve supervisor training to incorporate diversity, disability and inclusion strategies. Supervisors and staff say they are providing support, but it is not meaningful or helpful.</i></p>
Provide students with formal training in research skills/ faculty-specific skills (n=14)	<p><i>“Better explanation of how to undertake tasks, I did everything on my own.”</i></p> <p><i>“More training on how supervisors can support students on specific faculty and disciplinary needs, e.g. Conservatory of Music students need to learn how to book rooms and studio spaces.”</i></p> <p><i>Interview notes - Says education sector has specialised research methods and he needed more hands-on teaching and workshops about those methods. Was told to go and do another quantitative research course and pay for it.</i></p>
Improve quality of supervisor feedback (n=11)	<p><i>“Feedback needs more detail; it is hard at times to understand the point my supervisor is trying to make.”</i></p> <p><i>“I spent too much time on my second research question, and I feel like I did not get proper feedback from my supervisors to help stop that.”</i></p> <p><i>“Fewer students per supervisor. More time to read the students work and give insightful feedback.”</i></p>
Ensure supervisor has content knowledge (n=11)	<p><i>“My supervisor doesn’t know a lot about the specific field I’m working in- they don’t connect me to literature”</i></p>

	<p><i>"Need a balance between subject specialisation and thesis/research preparation - felt both could be better here"</i></p> <p><i>"Not always confident that we will get the right feedback from my supervisor. They are available but not always across the subject"</i></p>
Ensure face-to-face meetings occur post-COVID (n=11)	<p><i>"Would be nice if they could sit down and work through showing me how to do the thing rather than sending papers."</i></p> <p><i>Interview notes - Communication is the key - anything that maximises f2f opportunities for writing up research and discussing research methods and process. Difficult to understand UOM life and culture without it.</i></p> <p><i>Interview notes - Return to campus plans need to also accommodate rural students and those with illness e.g., immuno-compromised. F2F learning cannot occur for these students. UOM must enforce the mask rule inside buildings on campus.</i></p>
Provide formal induction training for students (n=10)	<p><i>"More Orientation activities that are faculty-specific."</i></p> <p><i>Interview notes - Better pre-application and Induction process for PhDs - need to know what a PhD is, how it works, what the program of work would be. A lot of assumed knowledge.</i></p> <p><i>Interview notes - More support for students outside the supervision. More structured program of support not related to research content, lot of assumed institutional knowledge. Induction wasn't effective as did it online during COVID. Don't know things exist therefore can't ask for them to help you.</i></p> <p><i>Interview notes - Have a designated person to guide the new graduate researcher in the workplace (to show where things are/ how to do things for the first time).</i></p>
GSA: Supervisor training (n=9)	<p><i>Interview notes - Supervisors need more/better training on student needs - emotional support, career support. Continuous PD via modules or topics over 4-year period. They are so important to the success of the research, carry a lot of influence so should be more accountable. Older supervisors don't understand that students now are working and studying full-time.</i></p> <p><i>"More training to supervisors. I especially believe that training in soft people skills can be quite valuable for people in science. I think it is key to establish a solid supervisor-student-team relationship, not just academically but at the human level too."</i></p> <p><i>"Pastoral care, language is important, interaction can often be corporatized. Useful for sups to do training in re-humanising leadership. Important in an online world"</i></p>

	<p><i>Interview notes - Supervisor training is a generic program across all faculties. Content seems weighted towards Arts students not Science. Believes the training should be split into two streams - Science supervision is daily and hands-on whereas Arts supervision is 6/12 or 3/12. Very different relationship with GRs in Science - work alongside them every day."</i></p>
GSA: Measuring performance (n=4)	<p><i>"A meeting with all supervisors and students in one room to discuss this (engagement project) survey."</i></p> <p><i>"Have channel/avenue for students to feedback supervisors during the study or at least at the end of the degree"</i></p> <p><i>"Mandatory training and review of performance for supervisors, statements from past students is one example that might inform whether a university endorses a supervisor taking on students."</i></p> <p><i>Interview notes - Annual review by Advisory Chair includes the choice by student not to re-appoint supervisor. That way poor performance would be documented e.g. poor track record.</i></p>
GSA: Conflicts of interest (n=7)	<p><i>"Addressing conflicts of interests between supervisors & Chairs" (especially within small faculties)</i></p> <p><i>"Have an unbiased Chair from a different faculty, particularly seeing as the Chairs workload is low anyway."</i></p> <p><i>"It might be helpful to offer additional support outside the supervisory team, perhaps even from another department at the university, to offer a fresh perspective in the case where problems might arise."</i></p>

Note: Themes sorted in descending order of frequency. Multiple themes were identified in some of the individual comments.

Other improvement themes suggested by smaller numbers (<10) of graduate researchers were:

- Providing/promoting more social opportunities, particularly for international students.
- Providing more funding for students and for the costs of their deliverables (publishing papers).
- Supervision time to be staged throughout the lifecycle of the research (more at the start).
- Improve understanding of cultural barriers faced by international students and access issues for students with a disability and chronic illness.
- Provide more confidential avenues for students with supervisor/Chair complaints.
- Provide more information for students seeking to change supervisors/find a first supervisor.
- Agreements need to outline how multiple supervisors work together and not provide conflicting advice.
- Provide online learning resources throughout the year.

Focus group participants were asked how they worked with multiple supervisors, and about their peer learning experiences - these focus group notes are available on request. Focus group participants were also asked: What would be your best advice for a student starting next semester? A selection of their advice regarding supervision is shown in Table 15.

Table 15: Graduate researcher advice to other students regarding supervision

Broad topic	Participant advice (summarised from quotes)
Peer learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Find yourself a good group of GR friends - they will support and understand you in ways your non-research friends and family cant. ➤ Make sure the lab you go to has other PhD students/ collaborators.
Dealing with your supervisor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Understand your rights and set your boundaries on paper, at the very beginning of your degree. ➤ Make sure to ask your supervisor about their expectations of a PhD for first six months and then at one year stage ➤ Keep asking supervisors for meaningful targeted feedback ➤ You don't have to agree to everything from your supervisors
Supervisor choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Make sure your supervisors are good people that are compatible to show to work and what you want to get out of the PhD. ➤ As much as it's in your control, try to work in a department/lab/area that has a good culture. They vary so much within the Uni of Melb as well as between different universities. ➤ Ask previous PhD student about their relationship with the supervisor

5.5 Positive features of research supervision

Participants were asked: What works well with graduate researcher supervision at the University of Melbourne? with 163 graduate researchers and two Supervisors providing comments. A small number of students commented that they could not think of anything specific (n=3).

Table 16 shows the major themes of what is working well with research supervision. Most of the themes related to individuals' approach and personalities rather than any structural issues with supervision. Communication, emotional support, availability of time, providing direction and having multiple supervisors were the positive features of research supervision. Other positives mentioned by the graduate researchers were the self-driven learning, having realistic expectations, creating a positive team culture.

One supervisor mentioned the rewarding nature of their academic jobs when the relationship is positive, and the other supervisor acknowledged the important role of the graduate researcher liaison officer in the Medical faculty.

Table 16: Positive features of research supervision

Major themes	Participant quotes or interview/focus group notes
Communication (n=64) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Feedback provided in timely way (36) ● Regular/weekly meetings (29) ● Supportive communication (10) ● Advisory committees (4) ● Links in peers or other academics (4) 	<i>"Being able to schedule regular meetings and meet over Zoom when necessary. Knowing that I will get a timely response when I send them an email, and that they will make time to help me resolve issues and review my work"</i> <i>Interview notes - Has a weekly meeting. Involved another PhD student to join discussion. Supervisor listens and is keen to help when needed</i> <i>Interview notes - Advisory Chair support was invaluable. Could have confidential discussions about supervisors. Was independent, female and empathetic. Supportive. Listened. Documented any difficulties student experienced. Appreciated the difficulties expressed.</i>
Emotional support/personal style (n=40) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Friendly/nice ● Caring ● Interested/invested 	<i>"They really care a lot, I know there's supervisors out there that don't, but hard to get that support in terms of meeting goals. They have made it clear that they've committed to finding a way to make it work better. They're very helpful with finding opportunities for me. They really care about me and my research."</i> <i>"That the supervisors are kind and caring people. They are just horribly overworked, and the system is broken."</i>
Availability (n=30) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Make the time ● Accessible 	<i>"They always had time for me and the flexibility of the work"</i>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Flexible 	<p><i>"I like that I am situated close to my supervisors, I can just walk over at any time, and they can come to me at any time and allows that easy flow of conversation."</i></p> <p><i>"My supervisors are on the same floor and always accessible. they create a community of learners and researchers"</i></p>
<p>Direction and expert advice (n=28)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Experts in their field ● Provide resources ● Give autonomy 	<p><i>"They give me a lot of autonomy to work independently. I don't feel pressure to be productive, I have my own schedule and deadlines."</i></p> <p><i>"My supervisors are experts in the field and have multiple collaborators both academic and industry."</i></p>
<p>Multiple supervisors (n=14)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Different perspectives ● Different skill sets ● Can approach one if other is busy 	<p><i>Interview notes - Having 2 supervisors gives 2 different perspectives, 2 different backgrounds/knowledge.</i></p> <p><i>Focus group notes - One supervisor is specialised in the field, the other is more reporting focused</i></p> <p><i>"My supervisors generally respond to my emails and are encouraging, and it's helpful to have multiple people for ideas"</i></p>

Note: n=165 (163 Researchers, 2 Supervisors). Themes sorted in descending order of frequency. The number of comments is shown in brackets and note that each student may raise numerous themes in their feedback.

6. Recommendations

6.1 Preliminary recommendations by the GSA

Measure supervisory performance - annual student survey

Whilst graduate researchers did not directly identify this tool as the primary solution, there is certainly support for a new University-wide process to enable students to provide confidential feedback about supervisor performance to an independent person (not within faculty) or have the formal opportunity to not re-appoint supervisor/s at the annual review with their Advisory Committee Chair. Clear communication of these options will need to be implemented to all graduate researchers at induction.

Shaping and resourcing supervisory training

This recommendation is supported by this graduate researcher feedback and should be further developed by the GSA. There is a need for a more tailored approach by faculty, with different scenarios impacting training needs - examples are using faculty-specific equipment, the level of day-to-day contact with students, communicating faculty-specific ways of preparing documents and conducting research, and ways to encourage peer learning.

Whilst it is acknowledged that there are a range of personal communication styles and personality clashes will inevitably occur, a clear source of discomfort for graduate researchers was the overly officious, impersonal communication styles of supervisors. Some graduate researchers spoke of a lack of empathy from supervisors in times of illness, bereavement or distress. More hands-on training (such as role playing) in empathetic communication should be explored for inclusion in supervisor training. Supervisors also need to be given clear information about the available support services within/outside the University, so they can refer graduate researchers to these services.

Address conflicts of interest between supervisors and advisory chairs

This was not a common issue mentioned by graduate researchers in this engagement process, but it had a huge impact on the small number of students who did mention experiences with conflicts of interest. Their perception was that the issue was too difficult to deal with as an individual, given that supervisors and Chairs were often personal friends as well as close colleagues. Again, a more confidential and independent process needs to be developed and then communicated to all graduate researchers at induction.

6.2 Recommended areas for reform

Based on the key findings from the community engagement conducted during October-November 2022, the following areas for reform and improvement are as follows:

1. That the University reframe their thinking of what a graduate researcher is and the level of support they require. Graduate researchers spoke of operating in the unclear space between being a student (receiving support and resources) and an employee (where rights are protected, and processes exist). Their transition from student to graduate researcher is often a negative experience, with previous support systems removed and no induction process. Some spoke of being treated like employees but without the workplace protections.
2. That the University reviews the ways in which potential graduate researchers can initially meet and choose their potential supervisors, including GSA-coordinated events such as expos or faculty-specific presentations of research interest areas.
3. That the University ensures that supervision agreements are prepared, discussed in an open manner, and signed off by all parties including secondary supervisors. That supervision agreements clearly specify the types of meetings that will occur (face-to-face and/or online), their expected frequency throughout the lifetime of the research and agreed processes to follow when meetings are skipped or deferred, or lengthy absences are likely to occur.

4. That the University considers the feasibility of all feedback to graduate researchers being provided in a written form, even where the feedback is initially delivered at a face-to-face meeting between supervisor/s and the graduate researcher. That secondary supervisors consult with the principal supervisor before providing written feedback to the graduate researcher.
5. That a formal induction program is developed with both universal content and faculty-specific content. Graduate researchers referred often to being thrown in the deep end in their first year with a lot of knowledge assumed by their supervisors. Content examples could be communicating the University of Melbourne “way” of doing things, support services or resources within the University, introductions to all academic staff in their faculty, information about regular conferences or external learning opportunities and formal peer learning opportunities. At its most basic, induction should include information about the structure of a PhD, what the typical development process is and what the thesis document should look like.

For international or regionally based students, this issue was magnified even more. International students spoke of needing an introduction to Australian culture, Melbourne culture and University culture before starting their research.

6. That the University reviews its complaints process and considers how to increase confidence in the process for graduate researchers regarding confidentiality and “being heard”.
7. That the University establishes a sensible maximum number of graduate researchers for each supervisor based on the individual supervisor’s availability and responsibilities for the research project.
8. That GSA implement a communications plan promoting the role of the organisation to all graduate students.
9. That GSA consider the inclusion of a peer learning space (or program) to encourage graduate students to socialise and collaborate.

7. Next Steps

7.1 Feedback to participants

It is recommended that the GSA prepares and implements a communications plan across all channels to provide an update on the project, the next steps for the GSA and to thank the students for sharing their views and time. In addition, the GSA should publish and promote the infographic summary to help students and University stakeholders to digest the engagement feedback in an easy-to-understand format.

7.2 GSA advocacy

The GSA has indicated that it intends to publish this engagement summary report on its website and distribute it to University stakeholders. The report content will be summarised into a presentation (and speaking notes) for advocacy to be conducted during 2023.

7.3 Future engagement

The graduate researchers were keen to discuss their experiences and issues in a focus group activity or a personal interview, given appropriate financial incentives. On the assumption that future engagement is likely to problem solve or explore implementation options, it is recommended that small group activities are used to bring students together socially and facilitate peer relationships.



8. Appendices

Appendix 1: IAP2 Spectrum of Participation

Increasing impact on the decision					
	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Goal	To provide you with the information to understand how and why we made the decision.	To understand the range of views and perspectives to inform our decision making.	To work closely with you throughout the process to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are understood and considered.	To partner with you at each step of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To support you to make the final decision by giving you the time, space and information to understand the task at hand.
Promise	We will keep you informed and answer your questions.	We will listen to your concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how your input influenced our decision.	We will work with you to ensure your concerns and aspirations are reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how your input influenced our decision.	We will look to your advice and innovation to create solutions. We will incorporate your advice within the alternatives and recommendations to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide or build your capacity to deliver.

Based on the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum 2007

Appendix 2 Targets for overall participation and graduate researchers by faculty

Student Type	Number of Admitted students	%	Target N=300 Engagement Participants	Target N=500 Engagement Participants
Graduate researchers	5,421	15%	210	350
Graduate students	31,365	85%	90	150
Grand Total	36,786	100%	300	500
PRIMARY TARGET GROUP (Graduate researchers) - aim for 70% of total participants				
SECONDARY TARGET GROUP (Graduate Students) - aim for 30% of total participants				

Owning Organisational Unit	Number of graduate researchers	%
Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences	1,979	37%
Engineering and IT	937	17%
Science	762	14%
Arts	570	11%
Fine Arts and Music/VCA and MCM	303	6%
Veterinary and Agricultural Sciences	259	5%
Melbourne Graduate School of Education/ Melbourne School of Professional and Continuing Education	249	5%
Architecture, Building and Planning	146	3%
Law	119	2%
Business and Economics	97	2%
Grand Total	5,421	100%