JCU doctoral students' perceptions of their candidature experience

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**Executive Summary**

**Project scope**
The purpose of this project was to conduct an empirical qualitative study to investigate doctoral students’ perceptions of their candidature. The aim of the research was to use qualitative research findings to inform the JCU doctoral program delivery in order to improve the retention of doctoral students. The Higher Degree by Research Sub-Committee commissioned this project in place of the JCU Annual Survey because of the poor response rate (16.9%) of HDR students in 2008.

The participants of the study consisted of 123 doctoral students, 18 from the Cairns campus and 105 from Townsville, representing a 17.9% response rate. Most schools of the university were represented in the study. The research utilised a qualitative approach, implementing focus group interviews to explore students’ views and perceptions.

The following three research questions constituted the research framework and the interview schedule protocol:

- What are some of the positives of your experience since you enrolled in the doctoral program?
- What are some of the negatives of your experience since you enrolled in the doctoral program?
- What are some of your recommendations for the future?

The analytical framework adopted was content analysis of the interview transcripts. This was adopted in order to generate themes arising within each overarching research question and the frequency with which such themes were cited. The resulting themes were categorised by their incidence across the 18 schools represented in the study and across the whole sample of students to gain an insight into their prevalence.

**Summary of key findings**

*Most important themes identified in relation to each question and frequency of such themes across all schools and both campuses*

The themes most often generated by student comments relate to:

1. **generic skill courses**: most students thought these were excellent with no negative perceptions being noted. Recommendations in relation to this theme are
concerned with the frequency and timing of these generic skills courses and their availability across the two campuses.

2. personal office space: was rated positively in 10 schools and negatively in 9 schools. The optimum office space arrangement was considered to be two students sharing an office. Office space had ramifications on the perceptions of social and academic culture within the school.

3. supervision: this important theme was raised at each interview. In 18 instances (schools) it was perceived as a positive experience and in 14 instances (schools) it was cited as a negative experience. Students recommended that supervisors undergo supervisor training to improve matters. Perceptions of supervision are linked with communication issues.

4. social and academic/research culture: in its positive aspect this was viewed as a good research or social culture within the school where it was cited (6 instances). In its negative aspect it was described as social or academic isolation and a negative research culture by the students. This view outnumbered the positive view of the theme (17 negative references across schools). A seminar series across schools and faculties was recommended as the most appropriate intervention to circumvent this feeling of isolation.

5. communications: considered efficient in 2 schools and inadequate in 9 schools. Of all themes raised this has potentially the most serious ramifications upon the students’ doctoral experience and their retention in the doctoral program. A number of recommendations were suggested to improve communications, with streamlining and shifting the onus of communications from the supervisor to either the Graduate Research School or to a Research Support Officer within each school.

6. funding for conferences/travel: not unexpectedly, the students consistently raised the lack of funds for conference travel. This was raised in 10 schools.

7. administrative processes for a range of issues: students from 6 different schools reported frustration with the perceived waste of time in dealing with purchase, IT and travel requisitions. There were no positive attitudes about this issue in any school.

**Recommendations**

This research indicates that the PhD program is best delivered by a range of people, in addition to the supervisor. The GRS and administration staff of each school have pivotal
roles to play in the delivery and quality of the program. Administrative organisation, physical working space allocation, available resources, training courses and communications are all critical in supporting and enhancing the doctoral experience.

Another factor that seriously impacts upon the student’s doctoral experience is their colleagues. Isolation from other students can lead to an unsatisfactory, even unproductive, doctoral candidature. Schools need to recognise this aspect of collegiality and ensure that they promote its flourishing. One way to do this is to ensure that there are suitable office arrangements made for students and that there are series of seminars that promote interaction and discussion within the school and across schools/faculties.

The flow of information appears to be delivered best when a model such as the one the School of Education has is implemented. This model employs a designated member of staff as a Research Support Office whose duties include the efficient dissemination of correct information to students and supervisors.

Results of this study are broadly consistent with the JCU Annual Survey of HDR students in 2008, although comparison between the two is not methodologically appropriate.
**Introduction**

Research Higher Degree students are essential for JCU’s research reputation and income. These students’ perceptions of their experiences at JCU are important in order to inform policy and practice and to improve the PhD program. The purpose of this paper is to outline the findings of a research study which was designed to investigate the overall experience of students completing a doctoral program at JCU. This report is presented for the Higher Degree by Research Sub-Committee.

The Higher Degree by Research Sub-Committee commissioned this project in place of the JCU Annual Survey because of the poor response rate (16.9%) of HDR students in 2008. Instead, this research utilised a qualitative approach using focus group interviews in order to obtain richer data. One of the advantages of using a qualitative approach to investigate student perceptions is that it is possible to gather more detailed descriptive data about students’ experiences.

Focus group interviews were conducted across Townsville and Cairns campus, by School where possible. During the interviews students were asked to answer three basic questions about their doctoral candidature. These were:

- **What are some of the positives of your experience since you enrolled in the doctoral program?**
- **What are some of the negatives of your experience since you enrolled in the doctoral program?**
- **What are some of your recommendations for the future?**

**Methods**

Students were invited through each school’s research/ administrative officer to take part in voluntary hour-long focus interviews to discuss their PhD doctoral experience. They were offered a small incentive to participate (a book token). All invitations to students were sent via email. Ethics clearance was obtained (Ethics Number H3488) and an informed consent form was completed by students before attending the focus interview.

Qualitative descriptions of doctoral students’ experiences, both positive and negative, were obtained during October and November 2009. In addition, students were asked for their suggestions for improvements to the doctoral program following the interview schedule outlined above. Interview participants were grouped by School and by campus.
Interview transcripts were analysed by the chief investigator who also conducted all interviews for consistency.

Saturation of findings was reached early since the same ideas or themes appeared repeatedly. However, the focus interviews continued until all volunteer participants had been interviewed.

**Analysis**

The method of analysis used was content analysis. Content analysis is used to identify themes/topics. “Content analysis is a form of classifying content” (Burns, 2000, p.432). Themes are classified or coded using a coding system that relates to the theoretical framework or research question. In this project, the coding system employed was based on the 3 research questions: positive or negative student perceptions or experiences and recommendations for the future. Within these overarching categories, topics emerged and were sub-classified or coded into themes. The analytical procedure adopted followed four phases:

**Phase 1:**
Raw data (including student quotes) from the interview transcripts were tabulated verbatim into one of the three categories by School. Matters raised have been placed in the category stated by the students. For example if students raised the matter of supervision as a positive experience it is placed in the positive category. If the same matter is raised by different students as a negative, it is also placed in the negative category for the same school.

This is done so that all perceptions within schools are recorded and to honour the trust the students placed in the chief investigator to report back their views.

**Phase 2:**
The data under each of the three categories within each school was combined into themes. Appropriate student quotes were used to illustrate these themes. The themes included are representative of at least two or more students’ views.

**Phase 3:**
The number of times a theme appeared under each of the three categories across all schools was recorded to indicate their prevalence. For example, if the theme of generic skills training appeared under the positive category of, for example, the School of Education, it was given a count of one. If generic skills training also appeared within the positive category of the School of Law it was given an additional count. Thus generic skills training would have a count of two under the positive experiences. If generic skills
training also appeared under the negative category of the School of Law, Education and Business, then it also would have a score of three in the negative category. Overall, this hypothetical theme would have a count of two in the positive category and a count of three in the negative category. Further analysis is made possible by such treatment. One can examine a particular theme within a school of interest. The analysis can provide an overall indication of views surrounding a particular theme within a school, for example the issue of office space in the school of Education in Townsville. It is likely that students are satisfied with their office space because the theme appears only in the positive category and the response rate of students attending interviews in Townsville was 32.6%.

**Phase 4:**
Synthesis and interpretation of prevalent themes emanating from interviews.

**Participants**

A total of 123 PhD students participated in interviews, 18 students from Cairns, 105 from Townsville. Some interviews were individual face-to-face or telephone interviews (9), at the student’s request, however, most students took part in focus group interviews. Most focus groups consisted of 6 - 8 participants.

Participants were at various stages of their doctoral candidature, from those recently enrolled, to those close to submitting their thesis, to a few who had recently submitted their thesis. Included in the participants were 10 International students and a small number (3) of students who informed me that they had either recently discontinued their candidature or were on the point of doing so but were still formally enrolled in the PhD program. In this regard, the responses of the group who participated in this study are likely to be more comparable to those students who respond to the JCU annual survey rather than those who complete the national Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ) post graduation.

The participation rate of the focus group participants was 17.9% (123 participants of a possible 689 enrolled students across the two campuses). This is marginally higher than the response rate of the JCU 2008 Annual Survey which was 16.9 %. In addition, participation rates varied by School (Table 1). The majority were enrolled full-time into a PhD program, except for 5 from the School of Public Health who were enrolled part-time. Not all schools are represented in the table as students from some schools did not volunteer to participate. For example there were no participants who identified
themselves as being enrolled in the School of Indigenous Australian Studies or in the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Nutrition.

The highest rates of participation arose from the ARC Centre of Excellence Coral Reef Studies (53%), the Schools of Business (36%) and the School of Education (39%).

Table 1 Participation rates by Campus and School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Townville attendance (n)</th>
<th>Cairns attendance (n)</th>
<th>% participation by School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ARC Centre of Excellence Coral Reef Studies</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marine and Tropical Biology</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earth &amp; Environmental Science</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering &amp; Physical Sciences</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts and Social Sciences</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Health, Tropical Medicine and Rehabilitation Sciences</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterinary and Biomedical Sciences</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Arts</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine and Dentistry</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharmacy and Molecular Sciences</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A note regarding the nature of the pool of participants needs to be emphasised. They were all volunteers and volunteers are known to vary in important ways from a random sample of participants. Volunteers tend to be “better educated, higher socio-economically, more intelligent, more in need of social approval, more unconventional, less authoritarian, and less conforming than non-volunteers” (McMillan, 2008, p.122).

Results and discussion will be presented by focusing on:
  a) Prevalence of themes arising from the three questions of the interview schedule.
  b) Themes identified across all schools.
  c) Themes identified within particular schools.
Results and discussion

a) Themes identified in relation to each question and frequency of such themes across all schools and both campuses

The following tables lists the themes that arose from student interviews and the frequency with which such themes arose within the context of the question asked. The purpose of the following analysis is to indicate how prevalent these themes appear to be for this group of students.

The themes most often cited as either a positive or negative experience (Table 2) relate to:

- generic skill courses,
- personal office space
- supervision,
- social and academic/research culture,
- communications,
- funding for conferences /travel and
- administrative processes for a range of issues.
Table 2 Themes identified in relation to each question and frequency of such themes across schools and campuses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number of schools where theme was identified as a POSITIVE EXPERIENCE</th>
<th>Number of schools where theme was identified as a NEGATIVE EXPERIENCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adequate and helpful support/ IT staff</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generic skills courses</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal office space</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal and academic support for International students</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervision</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel grant assistance and work experience provided</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social and academic/research (isolation) culture</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School seminar series</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library resources</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laboratory resources</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Induction processes</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding for field trips</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate booklet produced by the School</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding for conference travel</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School culture</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSM support</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual property issues</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative processes for a range of issues</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial relations between JCU and CSIRO</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPSS support</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity issues (student with disability needing additional language support)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Where these themes are reported as negative experiences, they are often paralleled by students’ recommendations to ameliorate the situation. In some instances the recommendations to attend to an issue, for example “communications”, appear even if those within the particular school have not raised the theme as a negative experience (see Table 4). Therefore, in reviewing these results it is important to consider the recommendations suggested (Table 3) in conjunction with experiences cited as negative.
A summary of student recommendations for the future is presented in Table 3. Also shown in the table is the number of times the recommendation was offered, representing the number of schools wherein the recommendation arose.

### Table 3 Recommendations for the improvement of the doctoral program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendations for the future</th>
<th>Number of schools where the recommendation was made</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Improve Communications</strong></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminar series to take place</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor training to occur</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSM role to be strengthened</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Increase generic skills courses’ frequency and improve their timing</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPSS support/training to be increased</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formalise Supervision protocols</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inductions – increase timing and frequency</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy for unexpected pregnancies to be defined</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>More lecturing and work experience opportunities to be offered</strong></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer Practical Experimental Techniques Training in handling small mammals</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer Generic Human Resource Management courses</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Each school to supply a policies and information Booklet for HDR students (“PhD for Dummies”)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve liaison between CSIRO and JCU</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRS to maintain a website with HDR student directory including school/research topic, contact details and updated details seminars that take place across Schools</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve infrastructure and administrative process so they are less time consuming</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilities- include a HDR student common room for networking</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

b) Themes identified across all schools.
An inspection of Tables 2 and 3 suggests that the most often identified themes were:

1. Generic skills courses
2. Personal office space
3. Supervision
4. Social and academic/research culture
5. Communications
6. Funding for conference travel
7. Administrative processes
From the list of recommendations (Table 3) a set of requests which link with the perceptions recoded in Table 2 becomes evident:

a) Improve Communications  
b) RSM role to be strengthened  
c) Seminar series to take place  
d) Increase generic skills courses' frequency and improve their timing  
e) Supervisor training to occur (and “Formalise supervision protocols”)  

These recommendations augment the positive and negative perceptions reported and provide additional insights about the doctoral experience of these students.

**Discussion**

The discussion that follows pertains to the issues that have been raised by a number of students in diverse schools. Illustrative student quotes are included. These quotes are not ascribed to particular schools because to do so minimises their prevalence.

Within school issues are listed in Table 4, section (c).

1. **Generic skills courses**  
   **Positive perceptions**

The Generic skills program was generally endorsed as very good by the doctoral students.

“Statistics courses (SEM) provided by visiting expert organised by the school of Business was excellent”.

“GRS courses are very good- especially Jeff Patrick’s course”.

The annual JCU survey for 2008 reports that 74% of students were satisfied or very satisfied with their “Access to relevant skills training (e.g. IT, lab safety, generic skills program)”. Findings here suggest broad alignment with the 2008 survey results overall.

**Negative perceptions**

There were no negative perceptions about these courses from any student.

**Recommendations**

Some students were disappointed to have missed particular courses because they had either been cancelled due to interest or they were offered at a time when they could not attend.

“Generic skills courses run twice a year as a template is a good default but if there are enough requests in between, courses should be run on an ad-hoc basis. At this stage courses are only run based on demand anyway, so there are only minor logistical issues to consider implementing this. As PhD students can start at any time, they would be the ones most disadvantaged by the current system”.


Moreover it seems that some courses are perceived as not being offered in Cairns when in fact they are offered across the two campuses.

"Indigenous research ethics courses are not offered in Cairns only in Townsville – this needs to change"

This could be an issue of ineffective communications. The booklet “Research Skills Program” available on the GRS website for 2009 lists the available Induction Programs and the Generic Skills Courses offered. However, when this document was downloaded by the chief investigator during March 2010, there were only single dates listed in the booklet for the Induction Program in Townsville and Cairns and also for the various Generic Skills course, though these were unevenly presented. For example, Research Conduct and Ethics was listed as taking place 17 April, 7 July and 7 October, in Cairns and 15 April, 1 July and 5 October in Townville but some course had a single date for Townsville and no date for Cairns (s Plus, 16-17 Feb). Most courses were listed with a single date for each of the two campuses. Notably, the Research Skills Program for 2010 was only accessible through the eGRS portal.

If the website is not regularly updated and an email from the GRS announcing a forthcoming course is missed by the supervisor, the student or both, the course availability is missed by the student. Such a situation can lead to the student perceptions noted above. Moreover, the same perception can arise in regards to the Induction Program (which was twice cited as “having been missed” or being “offered only once a year” to students).

“Induction day or week should be offered to all PhD students not only some and should be offered more regularly so that if students are enrolled at odd times in the year they can access it. Alternatively, ensure that PhD students only enrol at 2 times in the year”.

Even if a supervisor is extremely watchful and wishes to provide the best program support for their student they cannot do so easily by accessing the GRS website for information. A designated Research Support Officer in the school also sending the same email announcements for Generic Skills Courses (as in the School of Education) can act as an additional conduit of information. However this model, while successful, was only reported in the School of Education.

A suggestion which might prove useful for some generic skills course is to put them online so that students can access them whenever they are able to devote the time to the course.
“…An idiot’s guide to statistics with an online tutorial system provided by GRS, maths department or JCU”. “Put generic courses on-line so that students can engage with them whenever they have available time- this would be cost-effective”.

Finally, a recommendation was put forward that shows generic skills courses are very well received:

“…some generic skills courses should be made mandatory -7 successful habits of PhD students?. If perpetual funding is available to run the course, it should be made compulsory as this will really help students understand the tools they need to plot their journey and finish”.

2. Personal office space

Positives

A number of students within particular schools reported that their personal work space was good, elaborating that it provided the ideal level of privacy and social support.

“Sharing an office …is better than having own office as it helps minimise social isolation”.

“… just 2 sharing is optimal”.

From the wide range of responses that were offered (Table 4) it seemed that the most suitable office arrangements involved a quiet space to write which was close enough to other students to get social and academic support.

“…if the student is working on their own in a single occupancy office they may not have access to other PhD students “in the know” to inform them”.

Therefore office allocation to two students per room appears to be the preferred arrangement. An office with more than two students was generally deemed to be not ideal as there would be at least someone who was talking on the phone or to someone and thus disturbing the working atmosphere.

Findings from this study appear to indicate a split in the responses to office facilities with students from 10 schools reporting office space as a positive while students from 9 other schools (or the same school in another campus) reported negatives surrounding their working space. The results from the JCU 2008 Annual Survey report indicate 81% of students were satisfied or very satisfied with their access to adequate working space. However, this question could be interpreted in terms of adequacy of an office or a laboratory space or both whereas during the focus interviews students only talked about the office spaces allocated to them. Laboratory facilities appeared as a separate theme. Hence the results are not strictly comparable.
Negatives

The number of schools where office space was reported to be adequate was almost counterbalanced by reports of inadequate working spaces.

“Physical office space inadequate... lacks basic facilities (e.g., air con, telephones, and computers). No kitchen facilities near-by making getting a drink difficult”.

“Sometimes the office space is too crowded for writing”.

“...office space is too cramped- too many sharing and this means that when tutoring, student consultations become difficult”.

It is important to note that although the matter of the office space can stand alone, it has important ramifications in terms of social and academic isolation and the perceived culture of the school, an area which is cited as being, on balance across schools, more negative than positive.

Recommendations

Students offered no recommendations however, it was clear from the negative comments arising in particular schools (e.g., School of Arts and Social Sciences, Townsville) that they hoped their facilities would be improved as a result of registering their concerns within this research project.

One way that might help the office facilities’ situation in the short term is to designate a student common room in close proximity to the office space of HDR students so that they have a place to network and socialise. In this way the working environment of those who wish to write or read is less likely to be disturbed. This was raised as a recommendation to help networking, distinct from alleviating the pressure of crowded offices.

“...to build a sense of cohesion in PhD students, which in turn gives them additional support”.

Such an intervention while not immediately alleviating office space pressures in some schools, (e.g., in the School of Marine and Tropical Biology, Cairns) might at least help develop a sense of community for those students who feel socially isolated because of office arrangements (in single office occupancy away from academic offices). This sort of intervention not only benefits a student’s morale but can also have a positive effect on information flow through interaction with fellow students.

“Some (supervisors) are well informed about administrative matters and generic courses, conference grants and other funding, others are not. If students are isolated
from other students and their only point of contact is their supervisor this becomes a big problem’.

3. Supervision

Supervision and some allied themes, such as intellectual property, were raised by students in each focus group interview. On balance the positive perceptions of supervision outnumbered the negative ones. Supervision was deemed a positive experience by students 18 times across schools and a negative one 14 times. The balance between positives and negatives in this area appears to be slightly more skewed towards the negatives than the responses obtained in the JCU 2008 Annual Survey (81% of students reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their overall supervision). However, it is possible that some quieter satisfied students did not comment on their supervision during the focus interviews and thus the misalignment might be a result of the methodology and processes involved in focus interviews. It is a well known phenomenon of group dynamics that dominant individuals can often inadvertently suppress the voices of those with opposing views. A strong negative view with its impassioned pleas can have a greater influence upon an audience than a number of neutral or positive views, particularly among colleagues often sharing office facilities.

Positives
A majority of students reported very good supervision experiences.
“High expectations were fulfilled…Able to do independent research”.  
“…supervisor guidance and flexibility to allow me to find my own way”.  
“Easy access to supervisors in Townsville and Cairns…”

Demonstrating that a student can do independent research was deemed to be very important particularly by some more mature aged students.  
“…it is a bad move if the supervisor over-supervises”.

Negatives
Some students who reported a negative supervision experience appeared distressed. In five instances they emailed their views to maintain privacy and guarantee confidentiality. A sense of powerlessness in relation to their supervisors underscored those students’ experience; this was especially acute in some cases. Such views tended to leave an impression of an overwhelmingly negative supervisory experience which saturated the whole theme of supervision.
“No feedback for drafts from supervisor. No adherence to meeting schedule by
supervisor...Six months of candidature wasted due to lack of supervision”.

“Supervisor is very difficult- will not give feedback, gives threats to student. Student –
supervisor relationship is very unbalanced – student has no power to do anything when
supervisor is not responsive...When the supervisor threatens you, says that they can
destroy your career, they don’t let you go to conferences, won’t give you funding... Even
the colour of the slides for my confirmation seminar was determined by my supervisor.
We students have no power against an unreasonable supervisor.”

“I was harassed by my supervisor ... he did not believe that I had the skills to complete a
PhD”.
“...extremely unprofessional supervisor behaviour...rudeness and unprofessional attitude
towards students”.

Students interpreted some supervision issues to be related to overwork:

“Too few supervisors for the number of students and this means not enough time for
supervisory meetings....Feeling that you are on the clock – not given enough individual
time. Emails are not very useful in solving more pressing problems”.
“...no time for meetings. No feedback from supervisors on written submissions. No
encouragement to present papers or publish...”

Or lack of expertise:

“Staff in the school are not as up in the latest research”

Such negative perceptions colour the school culture with an unfavourable light and make
the students feel unsupported in their doctoral program.

**Recommendations**

In response to the perceived ambiguities of the supervision protocol it was suggested to
conduct and publish a parallel study examining supervisors’ positive and negative
perceptions of the doctoral program. This was a gentle plea to perhaps provide a way to
smooth the student-supervisor relationship.

“Do a similar research to this to get feedback...from supervisors (those 3 questions you
asked us). It would be very useful to familiarize us PhD students with expectations of
supervisors”.

Given that students may not be aware that supervisors are allocated 26 hours of
teaching relief per year for every full-time PhD student they supervise, it could be a
useful strategy to inform students about their supervisor’s work commitments.

A similar request, to formalise the supervision protocols, points to student attempts to
gain control or have some safeguard against infrequent supervision meetings,
communications and feedback about their work. Students seemed to be unaware of the
student/supervisor checklist available on the GRS website. In the School of Education
this checklist is rarely, if ever, put into place. Other schools might also neglect this simple agreement document.

The JCU 2008 Annual Survey results show that 71% of students reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied for the item “Availability of supervisors’ when needed”. It is impossible to compare results from the focus interviews with those of the annual survey with any certainty beyond saying that the balance was just tipped in favour of positive endorsements.

The recommendation for supervisors to undergo training (expressed in 6 different schools) is another expression of dissatisfaction.

“…and induction needs to be conducted for supervisors so they are aware of all policies and regulations for PhD students and financial issues”.

Students do not appear to be aware that supervisors now have to undergo training to be registered for PhD supervision. The adequacy of this training however, might need to be examined and the program updated in light of supervisors’ needs. Supervisors who have been supervising students before this became a formal requirement to be on the supervisor register might welcome such a course to assist them with new regulations and inform them of the availability of grants and other financial awards for their students. Electronic communications have a limited impact and can often be missed among other “more pressing” emails.

The possibility also exists that a small number of supervisors are not taking their supervisory role as seriously as they might or alternatively, that they have been under pressure to take on too many PhD students to supervise.

It would be a very useful investigation to examine all supervisors’ workload, and evaluate whether more teaching relief than is currently allocated is in order. Moreover, a document outlining the professional code of conduct and research ethics as they apply to the supervisor-student relationship needs to be easily accessible to supervisors and students alike. Currently, very brief sections are available on the GRS website outlining supervisor responsibilities:  [http://www.jcu.edu.au/grs/handbook/JCUDEV_015527.html](http://www.jcu.edu.au/grs/handbook/JCUDEV_015527.html)  and [http://www.jcu.edu.au/policy/research/practices/JCUDEV_009786.html](http://www.jcu.edu.au/policy/research/practices/JCUDEV_009786.html) . These guidelines are broad and need to be refined and put into a booklet that is easily accessible under one web address.

“…there are no real guidelines about how a supervisor should behave- just like the PhD students themselves”
Adding weight to the importance of students’ perceived negative experiences of supervision are their recommendations to expand the Research Student Monitor (RSM) role. The rationale is that an RSM can be involved in initial mediation processes required when conflicts arise in supervision matters. These recommendations arose in the context of 10 schools.

“…to help resolve conflicts between students and supervisors, including rates of meetings, feedback etc”.
“…RSM to be available throughout candidature and to have some idea of methodology and area of research…RSM to keep informal contact with the PhD student”.

The role of the RSM is described at: http://www.jcu.edu.au/grs/handbook/JCUDEV_015527.html. It does not appear to include a mediatory role currently.

4. Social and academic/research (isolation) culture

This theme was raised a total of 23 times across schools so it is an important aspect of the doctoral experience. It was perceived as a positive social/academic culture in 6 instances. The rest of the times it was cited as a negative, social/academic isolation. It is difficult to know how views about this issue overlap with the item on the JCU Annual survey “Integration in to the school’s community”. In response to this item in 2008, 60% of students reported being satisfied or very satisfied. If students attending the focus interviews generally felt isolated, as the raised issue appears to suggest, then it is very likely that one of the samples presents a skewed population.

Positives

Student comments suggest that a PhD program based on laboratory work appears to reduce the academic and social isolation. Laboratory work and meetings tend to force students together and so there is a natural flow of information about academic, research, and administrative issues which allows students to participate more fully in the PhD program and to have a more positive PhD experience.

“Good organised lab meetings that let you know what is going on… (in research)”.
“…the social life”.

Moreover, the personal office space allocated to students also influences their sense of connectedness and minimises perceived isolation.

“…is better than having own office as it helps minimise social isolation”.
Negatives

Social and academic isolation this was the most strongly felt negative aspect of the doctoral experience. It was particularly felt by those in the social sciences and humanities where the research involved long hours of solitary work.

“Social and academic isolation in physical office environment”

“Don’t know what research is being carried out in the school either by academics or students”.

Students perceived the isolation to be one of the hardest aspects of the doctoral experience to adapt to. Whether they were in transition from undergraduate studies or entering research from the work place, for local or international students, the sense isolation was deemed to be detrimental and serious.

“Socialisation of PhD student is really important and so morning teas should be a regular feature of the school to help student isolation (in these non-experimental disciplines). Also should have staff student functions so that the students feel a bit more supported…- the current feeling is that the students are here only to make money for the university not to be part of the academic community”.

From a retention point of view, students saw isolation as adding to the risk of dropping out of the program.

“Increase student activities so that students meet more regularly… their support mitigates against drop-out”.

Recommendations

The recommendations suggested were wide ranging. Some suggested more funding to attend conferences because the field of research was in an area with a dearth of academic expertise:

“Academic isolation can only be solved by attending conferences as there are too few IPT academics at JCU. Since there is no funding for conference travel the academic isolation is insurmountable”

More persistent pleas centred around the issue of more school and cross faculty seminars that would draw students and academics together, increasing social contacts, academic and research activity awareness and networking.

“Cross school and cross faculty functions that could draw students together to enrich the academic and social life of the post-grads”

“…build a sense of community for all PhD students and decrease the academic and social isolation”.

There were also repeated references to enhancing the effectiveness of communications for such events:
“Better communication of events/seminars that occur in other schools that might be of interest to students across JCU to help resolve the academic isolation”.

Other students have suggested a single web-page (for each school) in the GRS website that contains every HRD student’s name, enrolment type (e.g. Masters, PhD), one paragraph description of their project and their contact details. Students have added that this approach could be easily maintained if:

“A yearly reminder to all PhD students to check their details on this page are still correct should cover maintenance issues. …possibly can even be made part of the yearly reporting requirements…”.

A related suggestion offered to help develop a better sense of research community was to construct a dedicated online web page for emailing the GRS. This was viewed as a way to identify common issues or concerns, giving the students a chance to be “in the loop” about offering their suggestions. In response it would be possible for the GRS to direct them to existing resources if available.

In the short term, a helpful intervention might be to examine the office space allocated to doctoral students. A single occupancy-office far from other PhD students and school academics might need to be re-assessed by administrative personnel and supervisors. Some highly satisfied doctoral students have been located in an office in close proximity to their supervisor in the School of Education, Townsville.

5. Communications

Communications are inexorably linked to students’ sense of isolation, academic and social. Conversely effective communications promote the positive sense of integration to a school’s community. Effective communications also link with students’ perceptions of the quality of their supervision. As such appropriate communications can potentially address a number of related concerns.

Positives
Communication was raised as a positive experience twice, once in the context of the Economics discipline which was deemed to have excellent communications and one other time as a general comment:

“If you are on the email aliases that are available you can get all the information that is about”.

Negatives
A range of comments from students focus on various perceptions about communications highlight the importance of this theme:
“Communications not adequate for participation into JCU and school activities and processes”.
“Emails are not getting to post-grads….No information to access external funding bodies or other grants”.

“Little focused communication to highlight important grant information or other administration issues that could be of help during the candidature… Communication is …diffuse so that we don’t bother to check the myriad of emails that we get…”

“lack of information about thesis-by-publication”.
“No list of the current PhD students studying in the school”.
“No administrative follow- up on progress even after dropping out of PhD program!”

Perhaps the most pertinent comment is the following:

“Communication comes from too many different email aliases and unless students are particularly attentive to these they miss out because they believe that it is useless information”.

Recommendations
There were many recommendations to improve the communication system operating at present in JCU showing that the issue of communication is important and has many ramifications, including financial, social, academic and administrative.

Suggestions include:

“Fix up the email aliases so that PhD students belong to only one email group to be informed of important events/administrative information”.

“Centralise the process of disseminating the information necessary for PhDs to the GRS and away from the supervisor to ensure that correct and up-to-date information is given to candidates in regard to, for example, the thesis structure, administrative procedures for financial and travel process, IT support and resources.”

“Only one email system to inform students should be set up as the current situation leads to a deletion of the myriad of emails arriving and with that, loss of sometimes useful information. Communications about awards/prizes are often missed for example”.

A suggestion was proposed to provide a short guide to internal online resources provided by the GRS.

“…highlighting the existence of the undergrad/post-grad bulletins and the JCU computing bulletins. PhD students aren’t all necessarily graduates of JCU and might not know of this useful resource, especially if they need to do things like get furniture/sell furniture when moving in/out or if they have a computer connection problem…”

Given that effective communication is essential so doctoral students know exactly what is on offer (generic skills, financial help, awards, grants writing courses, seminars etc) and all policies, including those pertaining to international students and intellectual
property, possible errors in the communication system must be addressed. Anecdotal evidence from the School of Education suggest that students seem to fall off their e-mail list every year, some not even receiving requests for end-of-year reports.

This multiplicity of web addresses for related documents is another potentially frustrating element of communications for students as well as their supervisors. The 2009 Research Skills Program is found at a different web page from the 2010 version of the document which is located within the eGRS site. The eGRS site and its use appeared to be known by only a handful of students. This is a clear indication of communications not filtering through to important end users.

“…the e-GRS portal covers some information, but is not widely disseminated to PhD students how to log into it. The GRS page had a pretty graphic at the bottom with “e-GRS” on it, but it is not clear what it is”.

Even if it was methodologically appropriate to compare results from the JCU Annual Survey for 2008 with perceptions here, items are not analogous with the issues raised under the theme of communication so it is difficult to know how these students’ perceptions compare with previous years.

6. Funding for conference travel

Positives
This theme was considered to be a positive for IPT doctoral students before they were incorporated into the school of Business (Townsville).

Negatives
A fairly widespread perception was a lack of funding for conference travel. It was reported across 10 different schools.

“No funding for conference travel if you have already used the funds (IRA) for field work. GRS funding comes up only once a year and that is not sufficient and not very flexible… Can’t collaborate unless you go to conferences”.

Recommendations
Students offered no recommendations other than a hope that things would improve.
They appear to be aware of IRA funds for conference travel. Perhaps it is important to inform them of other potential sources of funding for conference travel.

7. Administrative processes

Positives
No positive perceptions of administration processes were cited.
Negatives
Administration was generally perceived as a burden that took up much time due to perceived continual changes. This was the case even in the context of the ARC Centre of Excellence Coral Reef Studies who had a participation rate of 53%.

“Fieldwork necessitates purchasing certain resources but administrative rules do not facilitate the process”.

“Getting signatures from supervisors and HOS for administrative paper work for travel and resources/supplies is difficult particularly if there are time contingencies with a field trip which needs to be carried out promptly because of the nature of the research”.

“Bureaucracy in JCU is becoming a real time consuming issue – paper pushing and several chains of command being involved before issues such as IT or travel (field trips) are approved/dealt with”.

“Unnecessary burden of JCU regulations and bureaucratic paperwork for field trips and safety issues. Diving research becomes almost impossible. It needs to be streamlined as it is very time consuming and cumbersome. Maybe employ someone to do it?”

“Having to log into several different pages to do various things- should only have log in once in one area. Needs to be streamlined and overhauled for all sorts of administrative issues”.

Recommendations
The frustrations encountered by students when preparing travel requisitions and purchases are experienced by many at JCU, including academic staff. The general feedback from students urged the need to streamline processes so they are less time consuming.

There is probably no easy rectification of the system but one recommendation was to have a short guide in the GRS website to assist students with administrative paper work for travel and resources.

“While the ideal solution would be to change the administrative-driven processes to be user-driven, … a centralized page on the GRS website that contained how-to guides would be invaluable. The most efficient method would be a generic document, and then a list on the webpage for each contact point in the appropriate school”.

It is likely that the frustration some students perceive with administration processes would be alleviated through clearer communication systems.

c) Themes identified within particular schools
Table 4 contains summaries of the themes identified within each school.
Themes are highlighted and appropriate student quotes appear below in quotes. Many of the themes are general and appear under several schools, others are only relevant for an individual school or the school in a particular campus.

Quick perusal of each school listed will give an impression of the balance between positive and negative perceptions and an indication of how satisfied students appear to be in the school. It is important to consider the participation rate for each school contained in Table 1 in conjunction with this exercise as this might suggest how prevalent cited views are among doctoral students of the particular school.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School (and Tourism)</th>
<th>Cairns</th>
<th>Themes Raised</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive Perceptions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Uni support staff are really helpful”.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>GRS courses very good</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Good when supervisors attend the conference with the student”.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Statistics courses (SEM) provided by visiting expert organised by the school of Business was excellent”.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“The IT staff do their best given the difficulties they have to work under”.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Office spaces are adequate.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Easy to begin the candidature and speak to supervisors in Townsville through skype each week”. (INTERNATIONAL student).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Negative perceptions</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>School culture</strong></td>
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<td>“…a lack of cooperation within the school of Tourism and across the schools of School of Environmental Sciences and Tourism”.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Conflict amongst supervisors and other staff members within the faculty”.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Bickering and the scrooge like attitudes of supervisors (Tourism), affects not only well-being of students but also their progress”.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Big divisions between the school of Tourism and Environmental Science and as they both have PhD students...”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
involved in tourism topics it would be beneficial for the students' progress for them to co-operate”.

“School of Business needs to be able to work with the school of Environmental Sciences as they are both putting out PhD students with tourism-related topics thus compete with each other for money and students which leads to a variety of conflicts at all levels”.

**Funding**

“Conference ($) support is not forthcoming in the disciplines of Tourism/ Business”.

**Facilities**

“Sometimes the office space is too crowded for writing”.

**Supervision**

“Supervisors need to ask permission to share unpublished work with others. My supervisor shared one of my works with another person writing on a similar subject so she could use my references”.

“PhD progress reports are not completed by the two supervisors in the same room with the student. Only in 3 1/2 years have my supervisors been in the same room together to discuss my work; Need more intellectual diversity; I feel like I am boxed in except when I attend and present at conferences”.

“Too few supervisors too many students”.  
“PhD students with initiative across the school are looked at warily and not supported, nurtured or applauded for their initiative; There is a lack of opportunities to receive recognition for achievements i.e. number of publications, self-initiative, scope & nature of project. Need awards, prizes within the department to add to our resumes to help build them. This is a school culture issue. Supervisors don’t turn up to student’s presentations at conferences they both attend”.

“Academic staff in the school are not up in the latest research (Tourism). There is a lack of encouragement to try for publications in top journals”.

“….serious concerns about abilities of supervisor”.

“EXTREMELY unprofessional supervisor behaviour...rudeness and unprofessional attitude towards students”.

“The PhD theses are not vetted for grammar before being submitted to examiners...no encouragement to try for publications in top journals”.

“PhD Progress Report paperwork tick boxes may be inaccurate as some supervisors tick boxes to make themselves look good. Hard for the student to comment on this situation while being evaluated on progress”.

**Academic isolation**

“School of Tourism is poor at bringing in speakers and conducting seminars to enhance academic connections and diminish academic isolation. Also to get extra support for own study from other experts in the field- conferences are really helpful for this”. “…there is a lot of research going on that we have no access to because the supervisor and the school are not keeping us informed”. “Academic isolation because of nature of particular research projects within a school, because student projects are in a field where the staff have no expertise” (IT).

**Recommendations - Wish list**

**Supervisor training**

“All supervisors (no matter how experienced they are) should be pulled into regular workshops and a set of principles that follow should be kindly but firmly communicated to them”.

“A research design discussion group that can assist students with their research design in initial stages of their candidature”.

“Supervisory committees should be designed around what is best for the student instead of what is best for the department....a middle ground perhaps”

“The school culture needs to be changed to be more supportive not only giving negative feedback”.

“Long distance videoconferencing classes to share academic expertise”

“Place travel posters in the JCU Cairns School of Business Staff Room; place student posters summarizing research in the School of
“Business hallways; more social events with all the tourism students on campus”.

Enhance networking opportunities.
“When well known academics are on campus could we ask them to participate in an informal tea event or present a talk during lunch to post-graduate students”

“…we need better communication within the School of Business between staff and students about staff movements…”

“Could we have a postgraduate student as a mentor/ombudsman for Honours students, Masters students and other PhD students to help them through the process. X and I are doing it informally at the moment; have lunch seminars or brown bag lunches; Could we exchange staff across campuses so each student body may benefit from the quality academics on both campuses”.

Professional development opportunities
“…more opportunities for casual lectureship positions and course development activities”.

“Keep one’s JCU web addresses and profile on the JCU website after graduation. Maybe make it as a bonus if you are an alumni? For a minimum of three years after graduation”

“Research monitor RSM or a dedicated person, not the supervisor, needs to be more involved to oversee the safety issues that are inherent in Tourism research”.

“Assist post-graduate student find jobs or find post-doc opportunities”.

“Need awards, prizes within the department to receive recognition for achievements ie number of publications, self-initiative, scope & nature of project to add to our resumes”.

Infrastructure/administration issues
“School of Business needs a safety officer to review plans for field work and ensure basic safety protocols are in place. This needs to be an individual not a supervisor; For example, to have a mobile phone that students can borrow while conducting their field research, make sure there is a first aid kit in their car, that where they are going to conduct their research is safe, especially when it is overseas. Require that they have appropriate vaccinations, emergency numbers
to call, have appropriate health insurance”.

**Offer SEM courses on a regular basis**
“… not occasionally”.

**Communications**
Improve communications at all levels e.g., administrative reminders for fees and so on. “Sciences are very good about advertising seminars and so other faculties are informed”.

“New Head of Business needs to show more leadership and be more proactive to smooth working relationships amongst his staff”.

“Post-graduate mentors for post-grads to help support new PhD candidates. This could save a lot of time for new post grads”.

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<tr>
<th>Townsville</th>
<th><strong>Positive Perceptions</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>International student experience was very good, in terms of personal and academic support.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Travel grant assistance and outside work experience provided.</td>
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**Good supervision**
Within the **economics sub-discipline**
- Good access to statisticians in the school.
- Good diversity of specialists to help with various issues.
- Within the economics discipline the experience is very positive – 8 post-grads.
- Friday seminars (“with expected and recorded attendance”).
- Great communications.
- The research culture is very good.

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>Negative perceptions</strong></th>
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<td></td>
<td>Library resources (books) are limited.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Resources not always available and the process of getting resources a bit cumbersome (paperwork) from the library”.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Verification needed to obtain personal copies of software like SPSS (…which is administratively cumbersome)”</td>
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<td>Field</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communications</td>
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<tr>
<td>Within the economics sub-discipline</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recommendations – wish list</td>
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<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>Townsville</td>
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“Flexi time”.
“Easy access to supervisors in Townsville and Cairns and good access to resources (literature) and IT resources”.

**Generic skills courses.**

**Library resources and staff.**

**Access to writing group.**

**Adequate resources and office space.**

**Negative perceptions**

“Expectations that PhD students must all find something out of the ordinary/ original”.

“Learning the technology (time), getting used to it (time), was it all that necessary in the end? Debatable”.

**Resources**

“Many resources (lab equipment) are based in Townsville so that necessitates travel to access them”.

**Journal writing expectations.**

“Students are expected to publish first before PhD is submitted. Pressure is put upon students to write chapters in a journal style so that they can publish and university gets credits for that. Universities do not care if students do not get their dissertation finished in time as long as they have something published”.

“Pressure from JCU to publish …and at the same time PhD students are used as lab assistants by JCU instead of paying for research assistants”.

**Industrial relations: not well integrated between CSIRO and JCU.**

“JCU in charge of CSIRO’s cash but they do not honour CSIRO’s & JCU’s contract with me”.

**Administrative processes** for purchasing need simplifying.

“Fieldwork necessitates purchasing certain resources but administrative rules do not facilitate the process”.

“Feeling cheated by supervisors, who do not providing us with conference details or ideas”.

**Administration burden.**
“Continual changes taking place with admin and technology take up 80% of students’ time”.

**Perceptions of conflict of interest between supervisor’s research interests and PhD student’s research.**

“The unprofessional, unethical conduct by supervisors needs to be stopped. Using my unpublished data to update their own publications…. Supervisor plagiarism of my work”

**Recommendations – wish list**

**Supervision**

“Do a similar research to this to get feedback interviews/surveys with supervisors (those 3 questions you asked us). It would be very useful to familiarize us PhD students with expectations of supervisors”.

“Check list for candidate and supervisors to be adhered to and re-visited throughout candidature”.

**More ancillary staff/IT staff support needed.**

“More IT support as there is not enough man-power to conduct all the IT support required- software and hardware, e.g., Endnote and Word malfunctions”.

**Better collaboration between JCU and CSIRO when students are based between the two sites.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Townsville</th>
<th>Positive Perceptions</th>
<th>Supervision</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>MIXED</strong></td>
<td><strong>RESULTS</strong></td>
<td><strong>DEPENDING ON sub-discipline within the school</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Positive Perceptions** | “High expectations were fulfilled… Good resources for the PhD research… Impressed with the high quality of the program. Able to do independent research”.
| **Very good international student experiences.** | “Intellectual freedom compared to other countries where the research is specified by the supervisor”.
| **Good facilities and resources.** | **Generic skills courses.** |
| **Library (Endnote) courses.** | |
Good office space and computer equipment.
Sharing an office space with another student/s and regular meetings initiated by supervisor/s and maintained by students is seen to help build a sense of cohesion in PhD students, which in turn gives them additional support.
“If you are on the email aliases that are available you can get all the information that is about”.
“Supervisor provides a good source of funding and other opportunities available”.
“You can enrol in subjects that are run by this and other schools for free”.
“Supervisor had enough money to buy lab software/equipment for my research”.

Good library resources.

Positive research culture.
Field work is well supported by particular supervisor’s funds.
“Good organised lab meetings that let you know what is going on”.
Networking opportunities with other students.

Negative perceptions

Administrative processes surrounding field trips, travel and purchasing.
“Knowing the process to follow when needing to organise field trips – administration procedures which are centralised have not been communicated very well”.
“Bureaucracy in JCU is becoming a real time consuming issue – paper pushing and several chains of command being involved before issues such as IT or travel (field trips) are approved/dealt with”.
“Getting signatures from supervisors and HOS for administrative paper work for travel and resources/supplies is difficult particularly if there are time contingencies with a field trip which needs to be carried out promptly because of the nature of the research”.
“Office space is cramped- if people are quiet it is OK but if people are noisy it is difficult to work in with so many sharing”.

Funding for field trips/research and conferences is limited.

Supervision
“Meetings with supervisor are too formal and so it is not possible to have informal meetings to answer individual
problems. Meetings are too infrequent”.
“Too few supervisors for the number of students and this means not enough time for supervisory meetings….Feeling that you are on the clock – not given enough individual time. Emails are not very useful in solving more pressing problems”.
Supervisor expertise in the requirements of a PhD candidature is perceived to be uneven.
“Supervisor was not aware of the requirements for the confirmation seminar …thought that proposal was the only thing that had to be included, not aware that a lit review had to be included”.
“Communication about what is going on and what is needed for successful candidature is too dependent on the expertise and knowledge of the supervisor”.
No access to SPSS when needed, either tuition or the software.
Academic isolation:
“Don’t know what research is being carried out in the school either by academics or students”.
“Second supervisors are not aware of what their students are researching”.
Limited access to travel grants.
“Resources can be difficult to get and there is no induction to tell students how to get resources unless the supervisor is able to help”.
Communications
“Not enough interschool, or cross – discipline communication… Information should be being passed between schools with similar research fields/interests such as marine biology to enrich the research output and experience of PhD students here”.
Not enough IT support:
“We have an archaic IT system. For example, backing up of data in a school does not ensure that data is backed up in a central JCU repository across JCU as a whole. Networking needs to be done across the university not in each school. Should streamline the financial and IT systems across the university, not in a school by school basis … which should be uniform across JCU. At the moment it is done by each school and is not uniform across JCU”.
“Outsourcing services for example for IT is a problem as it takes more time but if it can be done within the group it works very well”.
**Recommendations – wish list**

“GRS school needs to manage and organise the financial affairs of the PhD students”.

“Create a small fund for obtaining journal articles/books that are not available at the library as it is expensive for students to purchase each time. Perhaps on the understanding that they would be returned to the library at the end?”

**Cross school/faculty seminars**

“A broad based community of research should be developed to enhance the students’ PhD experience”.

**Opportunities for cross-school research and networking.**

**Policy needs to be implemented in regards to unexpected pregnancies and where that leaves the candidate.**

Induction/orientation to be run at more than one time a year.

“At the moment induction is a problem- too dependent upon when the student starts their candidature- if at the start then inductions and orientation is secured but not if the student stars mid-year”.

**A taster of the research methodologies available (quantitative and/or qualitative) in a generic skills seminar run 2x a year.**

**Six-monthly meetings or reports with the Student Research Monitor (SRM) to support candidature.**

Work-experience in a relevant field.

**Generic skills: human resource management course.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marine &amp; Tropical Biology</th>
<th>Cairns</th>
<th>Positive Perceptions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Excellent resources in library (electronic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Supervision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Being able to access academic support from both campuses when academics are travelling through Cairns”.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Generic courses</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Negative perceptions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Induction</td>
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</table>
“…not uniformly received”.
Generic courses “…get cancelled due to low numbers – this is disappointing for those who want to attend”.

Facilities
“Office space allocation inadequate, poor quality, too small- too crowded, no insulation, and inadequate ventilation”.
“No computer issued to work from after 3 years!”
“Funding for laboratory facilities (genetics research) is not available and when facilities become available post grads are not allowed to use them”.

Supervision
“Communication with “overworked” supervisor is difficult and this has held up research”.
“Unprofessional behaviours by supervisors which …would be unacceptable /unprofessional in industry”.
“Supervisory feedback too little too late – waiting for response for months. So something that might take 1-2 days takes months because of lack of communication and clarification with supervisor”.
“Expertise in particular topic is missing… supervision is only helpful in process rather than substantive issues”.
“Conflicts are not resolved even when communicated to the Grad Research Office. Students (2-3) involved with a particular supervisor have recently dropped out because of such issues”.

Recommendations – wish list

Supervisor training
“Supervisors to attend a supervisors’ training workshop and update with professional development on project management and educational issues on a regular basis”.
“Supervisors to be mentored by more experienced supervisors”.
“Administrative issues arising when a student is studying in 2 sites (CSIRO and JCU) need to be smoothed and clarified”.

Communications
“Too many emails about irrelevant information- need a server which will only send emails that are relevant to post-grads or someone needs to tell students to subscribe to list-servers which will inform them of relevant information”.

38
“Target specific information of courses like “skills training for international students” more strategically.”
Have more opportunities for lecturing as well as tutoring.
**RSM needs to have a stronger mediatory role** “…to help resolve conflicts between students and supervisors, including rates of meetings, feedback etc”.

**Facilities**
“Ensure that the policy for non-smoking is adhered to”.
“Spraying for cockroaches needs to happen….Welfare health and safety officer must be pro-active…. Also some communication needs to be sent to post grads to inform them of what is going on and what is going to happen in the facilities”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Townsville</th>
<th><strong>Positive Perceptions</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Induction</strong> was very good.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Good <strong>supervisory</strong> guidance.</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Funding</strong> for field trips.</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Journal resources</strong> easily accessible.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Good office space</strong> – “… just 2 sharing is optimal”.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School BBQs.</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>School research seminars</strong>.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>Negative perceptions</strong></th>
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</table>
|            | **Supervision** “No feedback for drafts from supervisor. No adherence to meeting schedule by supervisor...Six months of candidature wasted due to lack of supervision”.
|            | “Supervisor is very difficult- will not give feedback, gives threats to student. Student –supervisor relationship is very unbalanced – **student has no power to do anything when supervisor is not responsive**…When the supervisor threatens you, says that they can destroy your career, they don’t let you go to conferences, won’t give you funding. Even the colour of the slides for my confirmation seminar was determined by the supervisor. We students have no |
power against an unreasonable supervisor.”

**Equity issues**

“…no information given by my supervisor about available help for a student with a disability”.

“I was harassed by my supervisor … he did not believe that I had the skills to complete a PhD”.

“Little help offered with English (for a non-native English speaker) or for my learning disability”.

**Funding**

“No funding for conference travel if you have already used the funds for field work. GRS funding comes up only once a year and that is not sufficient and not very flexible. Can’t collaborate unless you go to conferences”.

“Not enough human resources to maintain the laboratory equipment and aquariums – management of the laboratories needs attention so that there is someone available to check experimental set up at all times. There is too much pressure on the PhD students to attend the laboratory management”.

“Biological stores need to have more friendly opening hours”.

**Administration**

“Centralised online administrative system is very painful for lab work and travel”.

“Access to IT services is not efficient”.

**Recommendations – wish list**

GRS to keep a catalogue or data page/webpage to find out what other students are researching across schools/faculties.

RSM (Student monitor)

“… needs to have a more central role to support the PhD program and the student-supervisor relationship. A stronger mediatory role”.

**Intellectual property issues**

“…need to be clarified at the beginning of the candidature, during the induction, to protect the student”.

**Supervisor training**.
“Better training and some sort of contract for supervisors to bridge the issues of turn-around for feedback, integrity and ethics that are breached by some supervisors”. “Maybe an online official submission admin system centralised by each school whereby there is evidence of when a draft was submitted to the supervisor for feedback, and they are reminded that they need to give feedback. Students then also have recourse if there is no feedback but also supervisors can keep track of their students’ progress. To be used by ALL students so there is no discrimination against students who use the online system compared to those who simply hand in hard copy drafts”.

Need more funds for conference travel.

More opportunities for lecturing and tutoring.

A generic skills’ course on human resource management.

Post-grad sports club.

Communications

“… of research, confirmation and other seminars that take place across the different schools of JCU to find out what is going on across JCU. Should not be by invitation only”.

Laboratory equipment

“An inventory of all the equipment that schools have across JCU so that, say a freeze drier that is in Aquaculture, can be used by other school’s PhD students... Equipment should be shared and perhaps a mutual maintenance fund could be raised to maintain the equipment. …Have a booking system to use the equipment”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arts and Social Sciences</th>
<th>Cairns</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive Perceptions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary supervision</td>
<td>helpful (anthropology)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent Library</td>
<td>resources   (sociology discipline)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library excellent</td>
<td>– excellent endnote and software support is excellent (Education)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generic skills courses</td>
<td>including SPSS courses are very good (except for their timing which often falls at inconvenient times) (Education)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervision</td>
<td>is OK (Psychology).</td>
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<tr>
<td>IT staff support</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
**Negative perceptions**

**Sociology Discipline**

**Facilities**

“Post grad office room is very dirty and there is a person who lives there (not a JCU student)… the person has a car that is parked there as well. The university is turning a blind eye to this situation. This situation has alienated the student from the JCU work space.”

**Financial support**

“Conference support is not forthcoming”

**Supervision**

“Staff in the school are not as up in the latest research”

**Anthropology:**

**Supervision**

“One word feedback on written pieces….Lack of supervision arrangements, unavailability of supervisors. No induction offered; no generic guidance offered on orientation of PhD students or structures and procedures. Primary supervisors know nothing about the substantive area; No structural guidance by primary supervisor”

“Communications not adequate for participation into JCU and School activities and processes”.

**Facilities**

“Social and academic isolation in physical office environment”

**Library resources inadequate (books)**

“..lack of support because of bad school management”.

**Whole School**

**Administration**

“Lack of cooperation between Education and Psychology and Education and Sociology at admin levels in funding issues causes funding problems for us and level of supervision provided by supervisors. Students are not made aware of who is providing expertise and how much. “What is the pecking order of primary and secondary supervisor?”
This issue has ramifications on the expertise provided – e.g., the psych staff are better qualified to supervise a PhD with a substantive area within the psych area. There are impacts upon the ultimate quality of the PhD thesis…".

**Recommendations – wish list**

**Induction**

“…is always run on the w/e and only once a year, hence poorly attended”.

**Generic courses’ timing**

“Many generic courses need to be offered to the students before they are formally enrolled in the PhD program to prepare them for their candidature. As they are open to the public…?(?)… prospective students need to attend them before they formally enrol. Especially one on research design”.

“Indigenous research ethics courses are not offered in Cairns only in Townsville – this needs to change”.

“Help with editing and proof reading of theses whose authors have English as a second language”.

**RSM, STUDENT MONITOR**

“A mediator (not supervisor, RSM, STUDENT MONITOR?) to discuss progress to prevent the student from falling too far behind”.

**Communications**

“Better communication about generic courses, available facilities and functions of benefit to students; particularly for those who are new to JCU.”

“More cooperation and liaison between TSV and Cairns campuses within schools”.

**Administration/Management**

“Research fellows would help to bridge the gap between PhD students and academic supervisors”.

“Career guidance specific for PhD students-during candidature”.

“Pooling of students (or research projects) about to begin PhD programs so they can be allocated to the best qualified supervisor for their project BEFORE a SUPERVISOR is appointed for them”.
| Arts and Social Sciences | **Townsville (Humanities Discipline)** | **Positive Perceptions**  
Good sense of community.  
The ancillary staff are very pleasant.  
Sharing an office (“…is better than having own office as it helps minimise social isolation”).  
**Supervision**  
Generic skills courses  
School seminars. | **Negative perceptions**  
**Resources**  
“…financially poor school”  
“No money for conferences”.  
“No offers of tutorial work or other work to help support PhD students who need money”.  
**Supervision**  
“…no time for meetings. No feedback from supervisors on written submissions. No encouragement to present papers or publish…”  
**Facilities**  
“Physical office space inadequate… lacks basic facilities (e.g., air con, telephones, and computers). No kitchen facilities near-by making getting a drink difficult”.  
“…post relocation of school from eastern to western campus... not conducive to a positive PhD experience”.  
“Transition from eastern to western campus very disruptive and led to loss of books and papers..”  
**Communication**  
“Emails are not getting to post-grads….No information to access external funding bodies or other grants”.  
“No list of the current PhD students studying in the school” |
“Little focused communication to highlight important grant information and or other administration issues that could be of help during the candidature… Communication is …diffuse so that we don’t bother to check the myriad of emails that we get.”
“No administrative follow-up on progress even after dropping out of PhD program!”

### Academic and social isolation

“Don’t feel valued by the academic staff.”
“…post relocation of school from eastern to western campus... not conducive to a positive PhD experience”.
“Transition from eastern to western campus very disruptive and led to loss of books and papers.”

### Recommendations – wish list

#### Seminar series

“Socialisation of PhD student is really important and so morning teas should be a regular feature of the school to help student isolation (in these non-experimental disciplines). Also should have staff student functions so that the students feel a bit more supported. The staff should not be isolated from students- the current feeling is that the students are here to make money for the university and they are not being groomed for an academic career or to be part of the academic community”.

#### Supervision

“Ensure that supervisors who take on students actually have the time to adequately supervise their students”.

#### Communications

“Set up a website within LearnJCU only for Post grads. Through this web site we can connect with other school’s activities, other research projects and also network… Find out what is going on at a social level as well as research and academic levels across campuses. Advertise seminars that are being presented, research methodologies which are being used by other students, problem solve. Advertise leadership activities that students can use for their resumes as well as mentoring activities. Have blogs on there too to generate discussions for research problems. Find out who to contact when problems arise for IT, candidature, how to use library resources, what generic skills are being offered and when, what the student association is doing for students and how they can be involved. Explain who and what the duties of the Student Monitor are. Have all the requirements of the PhD written up in the website so students can access it. Make the navigation of the website a requirement for enrolling”.
“A booklet – PhD for Dummies that contains everything that a candidate needs to know. It could be on the website for post-grad/PhD students”.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anthropology Discipline</th>
<th>Positive Perceptions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The people: good social networks.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Good orientation program.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Generic skills.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>School seminars.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative perceptions</th>
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<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>“...For conferences. Economic cutbacks seem to affect the functioning of the school and that impacts upon the PhD students”.</td>
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<tr>
<td>“No offers of tutorial work or other work to help support PhD students who need money”.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supervision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Expectations for the PhD are not well explained”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communications</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Little focused communication to highlight important grant information and or other administration issues that could be of help during the candidature, eg., Awards that are given for recognition of student work, prizes etc”.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendations – wish list</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Fix up the email aliases so that PhD students belong to only one email group to be informed of important events/administrative information”.</td>
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<tr>
<td>RSM, Student Monitor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Expand the role of the RSM to be more accessible to the student in case of arising issues. So that the HOS does not have to be involved”.</td>
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<tr>
<td>PLO Role</td>
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“Make the PLO more visible and accessible to students so they can contact them in times of need and to disseminate important information. The example that is given by the GRS for the yearly progress report is not easily adaptable to a social sciences PhD. It is geared towards the sciences and there needs to be an alternative presented...better matched to the social science candidature progress”.

**Social isolation**

Social events-picnics across campus to network with other PhD students from other areas.

**Generic skills**

“EnVivo workshop- maybe train an academic to the level required to teach PhD students so that the external contractor does not need to be brought up each time, which is more expensive”.

<table>
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<th>Education</th>
<th>Townsville</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Positive Perceptions</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</table>
| The supervision. | “Supervisors meetings are regular and can be informal”.
| The facilities (office space). | “Own office in block of student offices enhances collegiality without compromising on privacy”.
| Generic skills courses. | |
| Orientation day by GRS and induction day by School. | Booklet produced by the School of Education and Research Support Officer with all relevant information for candidature. Research Support Officer disseminates important information to PhD students, whether it is travel grant money, forthcoming seminars, or research funds or conferences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative perceptions</th>
<th>Funding</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“No resources for training workshops, travel or more than one conference”.</td>
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</table>
| **Academic and social isolation.** | “Hardly see other post grads either for academic or social purposes”.
| “No opportunity to come together with members of staff in the school and present papers in our areas of studies or any other related studies”.

**Education**
“No research culture in the school”.

**Communication**

“No communication after orientation from GRS”.

**Recommendations – wish list**

**RSM, Student Monitor**

“Increase the role of the Student Monitor to help students negotiate difficulties with supervisors or candidature”.

**Generic skills**

“A generic skills course on the different research paradigms used in social science research…”

“Make some generic skills methodology course (EnVivo, SPSS) not only accessible but also mandatory”.

“A block of methodology courses offered during induction and made mandatory because we don’t know what they involve unless we attend”.

“Media training to be able to respond to outsiders about our research”.

**Graduate Student Association Involvement**

“Postgraduate common room in the centre of the campus to encourage post grads to drop in and have a coffee and meet others from other schools in an informal manner even when the campus is closed…”

“More activities to be organised by the graduate students association”.

“Create some kind of a forum that would enable us postgraduate students to occasionally meet regardless of our different schools or faculties”.

“Increase student activities so that students meet more regularly and formally so that their support mitigates against drop out if supervisor relationship collapses/is not good”.

**School Research Seminars and Forums**

“Increase the research culture of the school by putting on more seminars that staff and students attend and present-sharing the research. Also meetings to teach and reflect on problems in the school. Maybe students to be taught by academics and maybe vice-versa? Maybe the PLOs role?”

“Provide more opportunity for interdisciplinary research and awareness of research across schools”.

<p>| Law     | Townsville | Positive Perceptions |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Creative Arts</th>
<th>Townsville</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Supervision</strong></td>
<td>Very good support for International students.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Very good guidance”.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Quiet environment with three PhD students.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Negative perceptions</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Human resources</strong></td>
<td>“Because of low numbers of supervisors, if one leaves/retires (as is likely) the students will be left stranded with no support in the area of their research”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social isolation</strong></td>
<td>“…no functions available to mix with lecturers or students”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive Perceptions</strong></td>
<td>Excellent supervision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-development and learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Negative perceptions</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Supervision</strong></td>
<td>Mixed to very negative experiences with supervisors especially in the visual arts area.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“No help within the school to write the thesis as no one there in visual arts who could help with the traditional structure of the thesis”.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Confirmation seminar held up by supervisors several times”.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Resources</strong></td>
<td>“Students have to pay for the ink for the printer for visual arts”.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Uneven distribution of funds across School of Creative Arts”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Had to buy own computer because the JCU ones kept breaking down and they were not being fixed on time”.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Communications</strong></td>
<td>“I was not informed that they had an APA and place in the program for 6 moths post the award of the APA”.</td>
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</table>
“Not being on email list makes communication very difficult and increases social and academic isolation in Visual Arts”.

**Research Student Monitor (RSM)**
“RSM was ineffective and blocked the confirmation seminar. ….completely unaware of substantive area (methodology) thus not able ask appropriate questions and this led to blocking of confirmation”.

### Recommendations – wish list

**RSM, Research Student Monitor**
“RSM to be available throughout candidature and to have some idea of methodology and area of research…RSM to keep informal contact with the PhD student”.

**Generic Courses**
“A course on conflict resolution”

“Put **generic courses on-line** so that students can engage with them whenever they have available time- this would be cost-effective”.

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<tr>
<th>Veterinary Science</th>
<th>Townsville</th>
<th>Positive Perceptions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supervision</td>
<td></td>
<td>“…supervisor chosen based on previous experience. The level of guidance decreased as the student moved through the candidature- good way to be…”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Good structure of lit review, confirmation seminar, exit seminar</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Generally friendly environment</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Flexible working structure.</td>
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<td>• Flexible working arrangements for P/T student/academic</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Well informed with administrative issues/guidance, feedback and milestones.</td>
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**School culture**
“Colleagues and students in the school and other support staff all very collegial”

**Generic skills courses.**

<table>
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<th>Negative perceptions</th>
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<tr>
<td>Human resources</td>
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</table>
“Use of the PhD student as a laboratory assistant rather than permitting the student to do their own work. Feeling exploited”.
“Not enough technicians in the school.”

**Administrative issues**
Limited flexibility on changing of topic/supervisor if they do not match the student's requirements. Lack of support from school in facilitating such changes.
“Partisan approach to the supervision process-very protective of the staff/supervisors”

**Academic isolation**
Lack of contact with students from other schools.
“Lack of commitment by certain schools to be involved in inter-disciplinary research between schools. (i.e., Tropical vet and molecular sciences)”.

**Resources**
Lack of funding for equipment/travel
“School model used means that the supervisor gets the money for spending for his/her PhD students and their own travel/conference requirements. This has some benefits/undesirable effects”.

**Supervision**
“Poor balance between guidance and supervision from supervisor. Too rigid; no space for flexibility. Unapproachable supervisors…”

**Recommendations – wish list**

**RSM, Student Monitor Role**
“…no monitor that is unbiased to problems experienced by students”.
“More support from an external ‘neutral’ source”.
“Mediation processes need to be more evident and accessible as at present they are not easily accessible”.
**Supervision**

“A more remote mentoring supervisor to act as a neutral advisor for problems that arise”.

“A familiarisation period within the school before being formally attached to a particular supervisor - up to confirmation seminar. To make supervisor selection easier and more successful”.

**More school seminars**

“(weekly) across the science disciplines”.

“Regular meetings with other PhD students on a more formal basis”.

**Professional development**

“More opportunity for inter-disciplinary research”.

“More opportunity for experience to be gained in lecturing”.

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<th>Medicine and Dentistry</th>
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<td><strong>Positive Perceptions</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Supervision is good though infrequent.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support from the supervisor</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Collaboration between JCU and the professional bodies across medicine.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Generic skills courses</strong></td>
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<th><strong>Negative perceptions</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Resources</strong></td>
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<td>“…must find own money to fund research and clinical trials. No funds for conferences (except for IRA), or the money and process are not transparent”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Intellectual property</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Supervisors want their name on student papers/publications whether they have contributed to the project or not.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Supervision</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>“Supervisors are not always aware of administrative matters related to the PhD program”</td>
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</table>
Academic and social isolation.
“Supervisors are very precious about their research- they don’t want to share their ideas”.

Recommendations – wish list

Supervisor training
“…and induction needs to be conducted for supervisors so they are aware of all policies and regulations for PhD students and financial issues”.

Administration
“Postgraduate handbook needs to be made available to all PhD students not only some/none”.

Communications
“Better communications about the various grants that are available for students –we shouldn’t have to hunt for the information, it should be sent to us”.

JCU wide seminar series
“..for all students- not just within faculties, to build a sense of community for all PhD students and decrease the academic and social isolation, especially for international students and those who are by nature more reserved”.

Facilities
“A Postgraduate common room to help unite students and to reduce the sense of isolation, and to provide a good cup of coffee”.

Public Health Townsville
Positive Perceptions
Very good supervision.
Good networking;
Good office space because most are a member of staff.
Generic skills courses.
Negative perceptions

Resources
“No funds for conferences (except for IRA)…must find own money to fund research”.

Office space
“Office space is poor if not a staff member …“the dungeon””.

For P/T PhD
Part time PhD enrolments have immense difficulties balancing work and study commitments.
The work-load is not decreased to accommodate the study commitments; in fact the pressure continues to be piled up.

Academic isolation
“(…for some even if a staff member because we need to focus on our study which is unique”.

Recommendations – wish list

Include a course structure to the program to enhance various aspects of the PhD candidature.
“PhD students are treated as if they are much more autonomous than the undergraduates yet many enter the program straight after their undergraduate training through which they are nurtured to an extraordinary degree. As a consequence they are not sufficiently self-motivated and self-propelling to benefit from the PhD program as it stands. So perhaps include a course structure to the program to enhance various aspects of the PhD candidature”.

“GRS clear up the confusion with regard to the structure of an acceptable thesis- is it a collection of published papers and if so, how and what relationship they have to the thesis chapters? More information on this matter would be helpful.”

More SPSS support.
“(…An idiot’s guide to statistics with an online tutorial system provided by GRS, maths department or JCU”.

Communications
“Enrolment clarification from GRS has not always been clear or forthcoming”.

“Information from GRS not always obtained so improve communications with GRS and PhD student”.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pharmacy and Molecular Sciences</th>
<th>Townsville</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Resources</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>“The Head of Faculty needs to liaise with the GRS to make provision for the non-standard PhD enrolments that are the norm in schools like Public Health and Medicine and ensure that students/staff are given time off to complete their research. As long as they are making progress in their studies develop a retention strategy that allows PhD students to get this time off. Because in this school a PhD involves clinical trials and/or lab work so the student cannot simply complete their research in their “spare time. This is a human resource issue”.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Supervision</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>“Ensure that there are written protocols for the supervisory relationship. Give adequate training to supervisors and more teaching relief for supervising a PhD student”.</td>
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| **Positive Perceptions**       |            |
| “The independence and being able to approach any staff member and discuss things with them” |

| **Resources (laboratory)**    |            |
| Funding: “…money was available for special materials I might need however, the issue of spending was left unexplained” |
| Friendly **staff** (library and at the GRS). |
| The social life. |
| Good **supervision**. |

| **Negative perceptions**       |            |
| **Supervision**                |            |
| “The lack of guidance overall; many aspects of my work could have been improved if someone was more attentive to what was going on. The confirmation seminar at 6 months is not effective as there is very little data you can provide on your project after 6 months, so in effect it becomes more of a lit review of the project and is rubber stamped nearly automatically. Should occur at 1.5 years so more guidance can be given by academics”. |

| **Recommendations – wish list** |            |
| **Generic courses**             |            |
“As a Dr. I might one day head a team or a lab, it would have been very nice to be offered a course on management or human relations”.

**Practical Experimental Techniques Training**

“In working with lab animals, need training but it was not provided: if there is an animal house on campus, there should be someone providing training”.

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<tr>
<th>Engineering and Physical Sciences</th>
<th>Townsville</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Positive Perceptions</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Supervision available when needed;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Good supervisory relationship.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Good generic skills courses.</td>
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**Negative perceptions**

**Communication**

“. . .no communication of academic issues and research”

**Supervision**

“Virtually no meetings with overworked supervisors”.

“No guidance from supervisors or school about the PhD process – no induction and orientation”

“Communication with supervisor very slow because supervisor is always away and email contact not always possible. Co-supervisors not “active” – more an administrative formality”.

**Resources/Funding**

No travel grants.

“No resources (chemical and all other engineering areas), human, time, books, journals, equipment, workshop technician time to make experimental artefacts for project… takes months to get necessary resources-equipment and books”

“Undergrads get the highest priority for workshop materials, PhD students have least priority”.

**More help with SPSS.**

**Social and academic isolation across all engineering disciplines.**

“No community interaction, instead a school focus, protective of self-interest.”
“No research culture that is accessible to students- no networking / or seminars available”.

**Administration**

“Seven levels in administration to get to the VC- too administratively heavy. Flexibility is lost to be able to react quickly say to set up travel”.

**Recommendations – wish list**

**More SPSS assistance**

“…SPSS time allocation for PhD students to access”.

“More SPSS courses to be offered in more regular intervals through the year”.

**Communication**

“Better communication of courses, generic and otherwise, that are available for PhD students. Maybe coordinated via the GRS.

“Tasters” of quantitative and qualitative research methods should be offered /made mandatory to PhD students to help them kick off their PhDs. Some generic skills courses need to be mandatory and should run more frequently so all students can take advantage of them as they enrol. Also the library courses for using resources”.

**RSM, Research Student Monitor**

“Accessible and available independent individual to oversee the candidature and to assist with any conflicts/issues”.

**Seminar series**

“School seminars to discover what research is being conducted by other students/ academics in the school to counter the academic and social isolation that exists”.

“Cross school and cross faculty functions that could draw students together to enrich the academic and social life of the post-grads, (such as the Socrates’ Café)”.  

“Seminar series to help build the research culture within the school and across schools”.

**Communications**

“A central repository for PhD information. Having a single web-page (for each school) that contains every PhD student name, enrolment type (eg Masters, PhD), one paragraph description of their project and their contact details should
exist. Also, each entry should have keywords (just like is necessary to add in the original PHD candidature application, and on any papers written) so it is possible for someone to search the page for an area of interest. This should be held under the GRS website, not at a school level”.
“A yearly reminder to all PHD students to check their details on this page are still correct should cover maintenance issues (possibly can even be made part of the yearly reporting requirements). This provides a simple and efficient way for current and potential PhD students to see what other people are doing, to
1. get ideas on who they could talk to (for existing students), or
2. get ideas for research projects (prospective students)”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IPT (formerly School of Engineering Maths and Physical Sciences now School of Business)</th>
<th>Townsville</th>
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</table>
| **Positive Perceptions**<br>Very good supervision and support for IPT PhD students, in terms of conference travel, financial support, guidance for thesis and publication while under the school of Engineering and Maths and Physical Sciences, then support lost within the School of Business. | **Negative perceptions**
**Resources-library, conference travel**
“No access to IPT publications to JCU PhD students, and this covers 30% of all publications relevant to IPT”.
“Move to School of Business a big negative”
“Academic isolation can only be solved by attending conferences as there are too few IPT academics at JCU. Since there is no funding for conference travel the academic isolation is insurmountable”.
“School of business don’t want to know about the IPT PhDs – told that they are a financial disaster. Students told that no IPT PhD student (5 in total) would be given any financial support by the school of Business”.
“Problem with IPT is that we need to be going to conferences to get publications as that is how all the IPT publications take place”.
**Communications**
“Poor to non-existent communications in School of Business.” |
Administration
“Had to find own RSM due to lack of human resources to do this task!”

**Recommendations – wish list**

**Seminar series**
“… need to take place to support the research culture of the school, to include the 3rd year undergraduates and mentor them as well. This happened at the School of Engineering and PS but does not happen in the School of Business”.

**Generic skills course**
“… to correctly fill in internal grant application forms”.

**Communication**
“Want to have clarity about the expectations for PhD students with regard to research publications in the school”.

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<tr>
<th>ARC Centre of Excellence Coral Reef Studies</th>
<th><strong>Positive Perceptions</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Townsville</strong></td>
<td>Good resources library and laboratory (marine biology, conservation biology)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Good supervision;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“We have written formal guidelines, agreement about the supervisor-student relationship”.</td>
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<td>Good office facilities;</td>
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<td>Good cross-disciplinary contacts.</td>
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<td>“Strong mechanisms (culture?) to get help if things go wrong compared to overseas universities”.</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Negative perceptions</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Supervision</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>“More guidance about what a PhD involves… guidance using previous work in the field to expedite the attainment of background so the student can move forward with their research quicker…. more content specific guidance”.</td>
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</table>
| “Better communication of the structure of the PhD to help students to manage the PhD project and the supervisory
Office space
“Physical office space is limited”.

Administration
“Unnecessary burden of JCU regulations and bureaucratic paperwork for field trips and safety issues. Diving research becomes almost impossible. It needs to be streamlined as it is very time consuming and cumbersome. Maybe employ someone to do it? Having to log into several different pages to do various things- should only have log in once in one area. Needs to be streamlined and overhauled for all sorts of administrative issues”.

Communications
“Unclear information during induction about the possibility of doing free courses in own and other schools”.

Recommendations – wish list
Generic Courses
“A short induction course on the history and philosophy of science”.
“Generic skills like endnote should be offered early on in the year (candidature)”.
“Free diving courses to enable the diving research without having to jump through so many bureaucratic loops”.
“Management generic skills course offered near the end of one’s candidature”.

Facilities
“Maintenance of (diving + plus) equipment is a big problem”.

Communications and seminar series
“Better communication of events /seminars that occur in other schools that might be of interest to students across JCU to help resolve the academic isolation”.
“More examples of past research work /seminars in the various context areas in the early phases of candidature”.
“Problem solving and innovative research seminars to be discussed by academic community including the PhD
students- should be on a regular basis and maybe across schools”.
“Student – organised sport across campus… swimming pool hours are too limited”.

**Resources**

“Employ a contact person with IT skills who can be accessed to give quick help on issues related to desktop publishing, paper presentations and diagram formatting etc.”

**Website for HRD students**

“A website that contains all the information that pertains to post-grads. Also one that can act as a repository of your work which is safe and always accessible from remote sites if necessary”.
Summary and Recommendations

This report presents themes identified by doctoral students across two JCU campuses, in various schools during the months of October and November in 2009. On the whole the research indicates that the PhD program is best delivered by a range of people, not just the supervisor. The GRS and administration staff of each school have pivotal roles to play in the delivery and quality of the program. Administrative organisation, physical working space allocation, available resources, training courses and communications are critical in supporting and enhancing the doctoral experience.

An important factor that also has bearing upon the student’s doctoral experience is their colleagues. Results from this project indicate that isolation from other students can lead to a very unsatisfactory and perhaps even unproductive candidature. Schools need to recognise this aspect of collegiality and ensure that they promote its flourishing.

Some school models appear to be better able to maintain the flow of information that is cited as critical in assisting students and, by implication, supervisors. For example, the School of Education employed a Research Support Officer (P/T) whose duties included:

- Providing administrative support for the Director of Research and Research Training
- Keeping updated spreadsheet of research student candidatures (name, topic, supervisors, RSM, date of enrolment, confirmation and pre completion; this included all research students, from Hons to Doctoral candidates
- Maintaining and distributing a School of Education Postgraduate Research Student Handbook
- Organising confirmation and pre-completion seminars
- Administrative support for processing funding applications (SOE internal grants, conference travel, GRS)
- Supporting HDR students with administrative queries – this was probably the most significant task involving direct working with students themselves, but also covered many issues arising for students concerning confirmation and pre-completion, and funding applications
- Informing HDR students and academic staff of upcoming conferences.
As a result, students who participated in this research from the School of Education seemed more satisfied with the doctoral experience than students in some other schools (for example, the School of Business). Nonetheless, this satisfaction did not extend to perceiving less academic/social isolation, or negating the view that the research culture in the school was not what they had hoped. These other factors are likely to be more closely related to a seminar series a school provides, an often requested “wish” from the students in this research.

The model employed by the School of Education is successful for another reason. Although effective communication can be delivered by electronic means, some students actually prefer to be able to speak to a designated person within their school about issues regarding their candidature, finance and so on. This could be simply because they need a break from their research and some human interaction, because they need clarification of issues arising from electronic communications or because they are unable to access their supervisor for a range of reasons. The supervisor might be unavailable and the issue is pressing, they may feel it is too trivial to bother their supervisor, or they may believe the supervisor is equally unclear about the issue. Having an accessible and efficient staff member in a school able to dispense accurate information is a very effective strategy from the students’, and perhaps the supervisors’, point of view.

The student-supervisor relationship remains a very important factor in the perceived quality of the doctoral experience. The best possible relationship between supervisor and student results in the student developing into an independent and confident researcher. If this is not articulated by the supervisor, if it occurs by default rather than by design, then the student is likely to feel the supervision was not adequate for their needs. Hence, appropriate communication is vital to consolidate the supervisor-student relationship.

Since student needs vary throughout their candidature, surveys or focus group interviews need to ensure that they are focusing on students at the same stage of their candidature, comparing views of students at the same point in the developmental trajectory of their doctoral program. A student in the final year of their candidature will evaluate the quality of their supervision quite differently from those just beginning, just as the more mature students in this study expressed the need to be allowed to find their own way rather than be “over supervised”.
The themes identified here need to be validated by means of a new survey to investigate how extensively they are held and to what degree respondents, grouped by their stage on the doctoral program, perceive their relevance. It is not methodologically appropriate to extensively compare results here with those obtained from the 2008 JCU Annual Survey because of confounding factors. These include the dynamics of focus group interviews which are different from those operating when a person is responding to a survey. Persuasive, eloquent individuals are known to sway the views of whole groups (e.g., Zimbardo, 2007), while the interviewer affects responses no matter how neutral they maintain their stance. Further, the wording of survey items is fixed, whereas in a focus group interview students can elaborate, clarify and seek elaboration and clarification, which can alter meaning and interpretation. Finally, the JCU Annual Survey included students enrolled in a Master's by research program; in this research only doctoral students were interviewed.