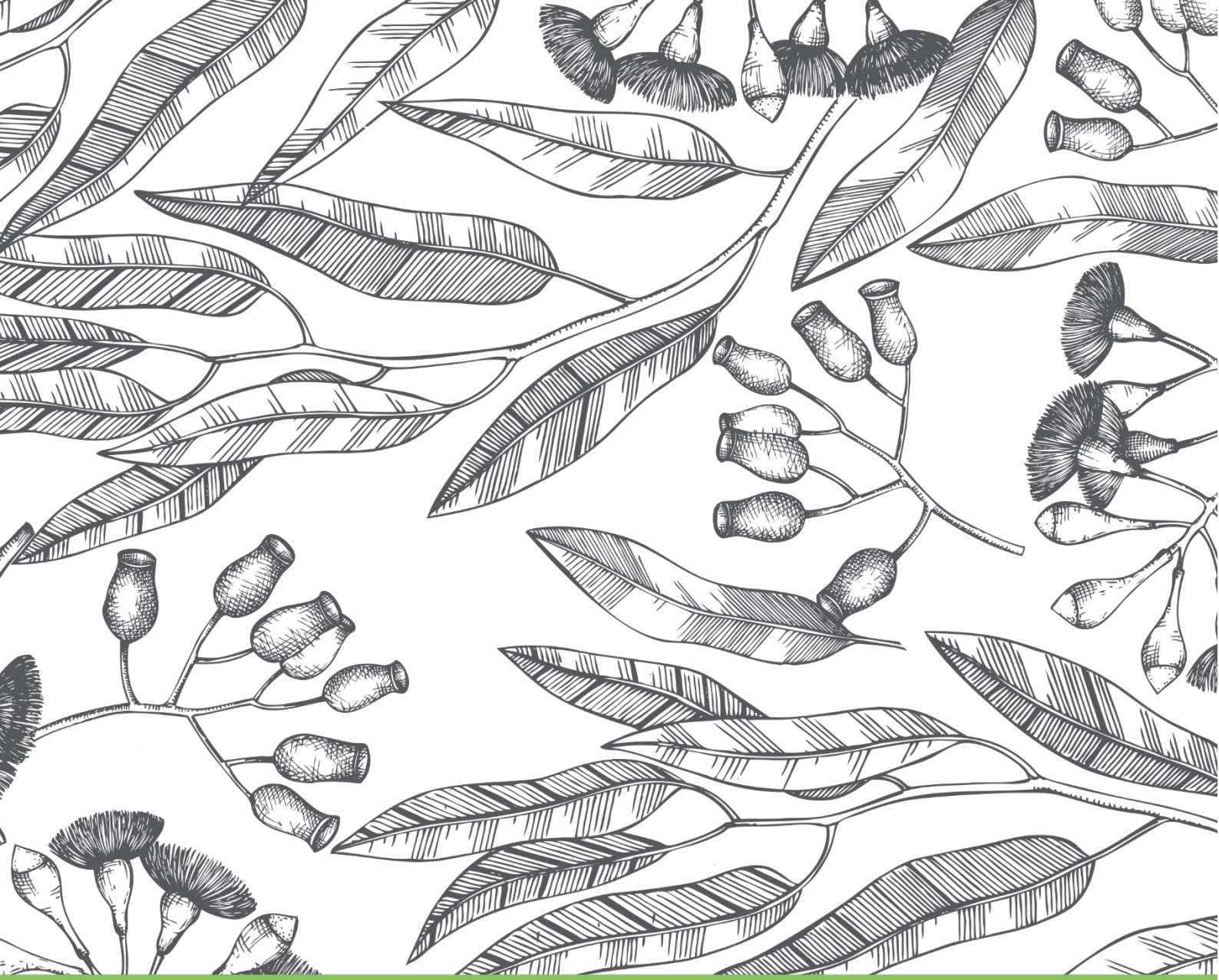

MONASH GRADUATE ASSOCIATION (MGA)

HDR SURVEY

FACULTY OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

FACULTY REPORT 2019

monash graduate association

The MGA would like to thank the graduate students who participated in this survey.

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Table of Contents

(i) Executive Summary 8

(ii) Introduction 10

(iii) Data 11

1. Supervision 11

1.1 Have you read the Code of Practice for supervision of doctoral/research masters students? 11

1.2 Are you aware of your supervisor's responsibilities towards you? 11

1.3 Are you aware of your own responsibilities as a Monash research postgraduate? 11

1.4 Have you had any conflict or misunderstanding with any of your supervisors? 11

1.5 What was the general nature of the conflict/misunderstanding with your supervisor? 11

1.6 Please rate the following statements regarding your supervision experience 12

1.7 Opportunity for comments regarding your supervision. 14

1.8 Summary 15

2. Milestones 17

2.1 Please rate the following statements regarding your experience of the confirmation process. 17

2.2 Opportunity for comments about the confirmation process. 17

2.3 Please rate the following statements regarding your experience of the mid-candidature review process. 18

2.4 Opportunity for comments about the mid-candidature review process. 18

2.5 Do you think it's appropriate to face termination of candidature if you fail any of the following milestones? 19

2.6 Opportunity for comments about milestones. 19

2.7 Summary 20

3. Coursework 21

3.1 Do you believe that research degrees are improved by the inclusion of compulsory discipline-based coursework? 21

3.2 Please rate the following statements relating to the discipline-based coursework component of your degree. 21

3.3 Please select the level of stress you have about the compulsory discipline-based coursework component of your degree. 22

3.4 Opportunity for comment regarding the inclusion of discipline-based coursework in research degrees. 22

3.5 Summary 23

4. Professional Development 24

4.1 Do you believe that professional development units (as offered through "myDevelopment"), should be a compulsory part of a research degree? 24

4.2 Please rate the following statements relating to your overall experience of the professional component of your degree offered by your faculty. 24
4.3 Please rate the following statements relating to your overall experience of the professional component of your degree offered by the MGE (central). 25
4.4 Have you applied for Recognition of Prior Learning in relation to the professional development component of your degree? 25
4.5 Please select the level of stress you have about the professional development component of your degree. 26
4.6 Opportunity for comment regarding the inclusion of compulsory professional development units in research degrees. 26
4.7 Summary 27
5. Progress delays and discontinuation 28
5.1 Has anything significantly delayed the progress of your research degree? 28
5.2 Please select all relevant reasons regarding the delay in progress of your research degree. 28
5.3 Have you ever considered discontinuing your enrolment? 28
5.4 Please select all relevant reasons regarding why you considered discontinuing your enrolment. 29
5.5 What made you decide to continue with your degree? 29
5.6 The amount of time I have to complete my research … will allow me to produce a quality research project 30
5.7 What are the three most important things the University could do for you to help you complete on time? 30
5.8 Opportunity for comments regarding your general progress. 31
5.9 Summary 32
6. School culture and facilities 33
6.1 Please rate the following statements in relation to your specific experience in your academic unit: 33
6.2 Have you ever experienced any discrimination due to gender, race, religion, family responsibilities etc., within the University? 35
6.3 Opportunity for comments regarding the way in which you are treated. 36
6.4 Does your academic unit provide any of the following facilities? 36
6.5 Overall, I am satisfied with the level of resources and facilities provided to me. 37
6.6 What additional facilities would help to support you through to completion? 37
6.7 Summary 38
7. Stress and wellbeing 39
7.1 Please select your level of stress regarding any of the following: 39
7.2 What kind of health and wellbeing support would you like to receive from the University? 40

7.3 Opportunity for comments regarding health and wellbeing. 40
7.4 Summary 41
8. Overall comments 42
8.1 What are the best aspects of being a Monash research postgraduate? 42
8.2 What are the worst aspects of being a Monash research postgraduate? 42
8.3 How can the research postgraduate experience be improved? 43
8.4 Anything else you'd like to say? 44
8.5 Summary 45
(iv) MGA Recommendations 46
(v) Bibliography 47
(vi) Appendix 1 49
Demographics of respondents from Faculty of Information Technology: 49

(i) Executive Summary

In 2017, the Monash Graduate Association (MGA) conducted a survey of Monash Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students. The main findings from respondents from the graduate students of the Faculty of Information Technology (IT) are summarised below.

Supervision

The overwhelming majority (83%) of IT graduate students indicated overall satisfaction with their supervision. They were as satisfied with their supervision overall as were all University respondents (82%) and, likewise, tended to agree with positive statements relating to how supportive their supervisors were.

Milestones

While feedback regarding milestones was mixed, IT respondents tended to agree with positive statements relating to their milestone experiences; however, overall agreement (62%) that *'overall the experience was positive,'* in relation to the confirmation process, was substantially less than the University-wide response (78%).

When asked specifically about termination of candidature based on milestone performance, IT respondents generally disagreed that it was appropriate, with this disagreement increasing as candidature progressed from confirmation (54%) to mid-candidature (65%) to pre-submission (70%).

Coursework

Graduate student responses relating to compulsory discipline-based coursework were generally mixed. Approximately two in five respondents from IT felt that their research degrees were improved by the inclusion of compulsory discipline-based coursework units. On the other hand, half (50%) of respondents stated that they agreed that it was a good use of their time.

Respondents from IT (25%) were less likely than their University counterparts (34%) to express that they had experienced an uncomfortable level (*a lot* or *a great deal*) of stress in relation to the compulsory discipline-based coursework.

Professional Development

IT graduate students were twice as likely to think that professional development should not be a compulsory part of a research degree than they were to think that it should; however, only 12% said they experience an uncomfortable level of stress because of professional development.

Progress, delays and discontinuation

IT graduate students (31%) were less likely to have experienced significant delay in the progress of their research as graduate students enrolled across all faculties (38%). They were also less likely to have considered discontinuing their enrolment than their University counterparts (IT: 25%, Uni: 29%).

While 57% of IT graduate students agreed that they had sufficient time to produce a quality research project, despite additional requirements of compulsory milestones/coursework/professional development, 50% indicated they felt an uncomfortable level of stress about finishing their degree on time.

Improving or removing compulsory coursework and increasing access to training and support services were identified as the two most important things the University could do to assist IT graduate students in achieving timely completion.

School culture and facilities

Overall, IT graduate students were more satisfied (85%) with the level of resources and facilities than University respondents (71%).

IT student researchers (85%) were far more likely to agree with the statement *'I feel included in my academic unit'* than were their University peers (64%).

Stress and wellbeing

The area in which IT respondents expressed they felt the highest level of stress (50% either *a lot* or *a great deal*) was in relation to *'finishing my degree on time,'* while the area associated with the least amount of stress (18%) was *'my relationship with my supervisor.'*

IT graduate students nominated *'help with stress management'* and *'more opportunities to share experiences/debrief with peers'* as the top two ways the University could help support their health and wellbeing.

Overall comments

Monash academics, faculties and staff were identified by IT respondents as the best aspect of being at Monash, while they wanted to see improvements in the community and culture at the University, with an emphasis on providing greater networking and discussion among their peers and with members of staff.

(ii) Introduction

The MGA ran a survey of HDR students in August – September 2017. The aim of the survey was to measure the experiences of HDR graduate students at Monash University. The survey was advertised in the MGA newsletter, the MGA website, electronic posters and through contacts with HDR faculty groups and associate deans, many of whom agreed to forward the advertising of the survey to their entire cohorts. Participants were self-selecting, so an incentive scheme (comprising the opportunity to win one of 20 x $100 cash cards) was used to assist in attracting a representative sample.

A total of 668 responses were received. A preliminary report on the campus-wide quantitative data was published in March 2018 and is available from the MGA. Of the total number of responses received, thirty-nine were from research graduate students enrolled through IT, which equates to 19% of the total research graduate student population of the Faculty in that year.

This report presents both quantitative and qualitative data from IT survey respondents.

In the quantitative analysis, some IT graduate student responses were compared to responses from graduate students in the University-wide population. Not all respondents answered every question.

The qualitative component comprised sections where participants were invited to make general comments within broad subject areas and/or respond to open-ended questions. There were eighteen such opportunities in the survey, and graduate students from IT responded to all of them. Answers were analysed and coded into common themes. Some responses were coded under multiple themes.

While the responses of graduate students have been taken at face-value, it is important to reflect on the positive-negative asymmetry (PNA) effect. The PNA effect is two-part: firstly, it incorporates the positivity bias, which refers to an individual's inclination towards favourable perceptions of phenomena that are novel or do not directly impact them;[1] and, secondly, it incorporates the negativity bias which, in part, relates to how individuals are more curious about negative than positive stimuli and therefore are more mobilised by negative events.[2] In the context of the MGA HDR Survey, this may mean that answers to the quantitative questions are disproportionately positive, while the responses to the qualitative (open-ended) questions are disproportionately negative given that graduate students were not required to provide a response.

Three of the four schools of IT were represented in terms of responses. Overall respondents were skewed towards on-campus (100%), full-time (97%), international (85%), scholarship receiving PhD students. Female (51%) and male (49%) genders were well represented. Appendix 1 provides the demographics of IT respondents.

This report has been produced for circulation to the Faculty of Information Technology, the Graduate Research Committee and the Monash Graduate Research Office.

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

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

(iii) Data

1. Supervision

1.1 Have you read the Code of Practice for supervision of doctoral/research masters students?

Read the Code of Practice	IT	University
Yes	14 (35.9%)	386 (57.8%)
No, but I've heard about it	14 (35.9%)	169 (25.3%)
No, I didn't know it existed	11 (28.2%)	113 (16.9%)

1.2 Are you aware of your supervisor's responsibilities towards you?

Aware of supervisor's responsibility	IT	University
Yes	31 (79.5%)	533 (79.8%)
No	1 (2.6%)	22 (3.3%)
Not sure	7 (17.9%)	113 (16.9%)

1.3 Are you aware of your own responsibilities as a Monash research postgraduate?

Aware of own responsibilities	IT	University
Yes	35 (89.7%)	592 (88.6%)
No	2 (5.1%)	14 (2.1%)
Not sure	2 (5.1%)	62 (9.3%)

1.4 Have you had any conflict or misunderstanding with any of your supervisors?

Conflict or misunderstanding with your supervisor	IT	University
Yes	4 (10.3%)	108 (16.2%)
No	35 (89.7%)	560 (83.8%)

IT respondents were substantially less likely to have read the Code of Practice than were University graduate students. Despite this, 90% of IT respondents felt that they were aware of their own responsibilities as a Monash research graduate student.

1.5 What was the general nature of the conflict/misunderstanding with your supervisor?

Two graduate students from the Faculty of Information Technology said that they had experienced conflict with one or more of their supervisors and elaborated on the nature of that conflict.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

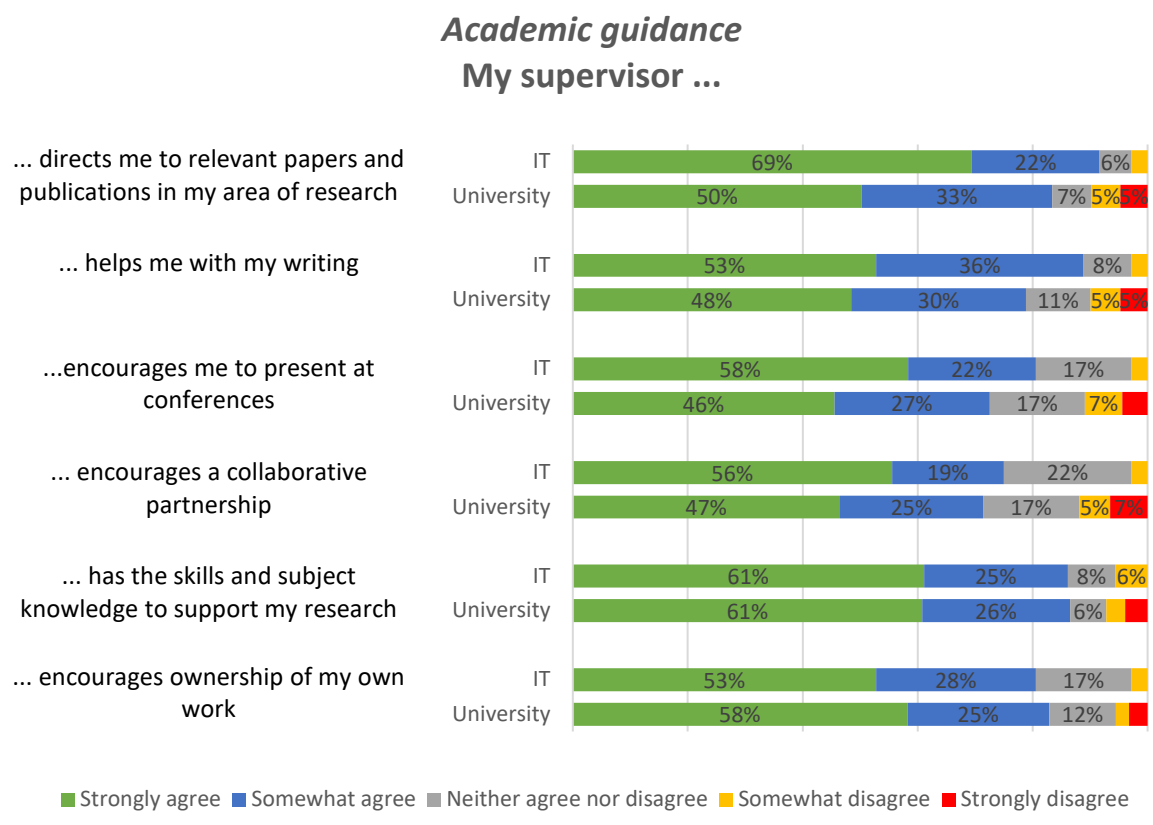
General theme	Number of responses
Administrative issues	1
Different and unrealistic expectations	1
Lack of expertise and/or interest	1
Supervision team issues	1

Notable comments relating to the conflict and misunderstanding between graduate students of the Faculty of Information Technology and their supervisors included:

> *"No actual issue with my supervisor, but it became clear that we really aren't working in the same area. While this isn't a huge issue, it is less than optimal."*

> *"Not a bad one! Just one of my three supervisors hasn't been pulling their weight, so will need to be asked to step down … But it's awkward as he's also the boss of my research assistant job."*

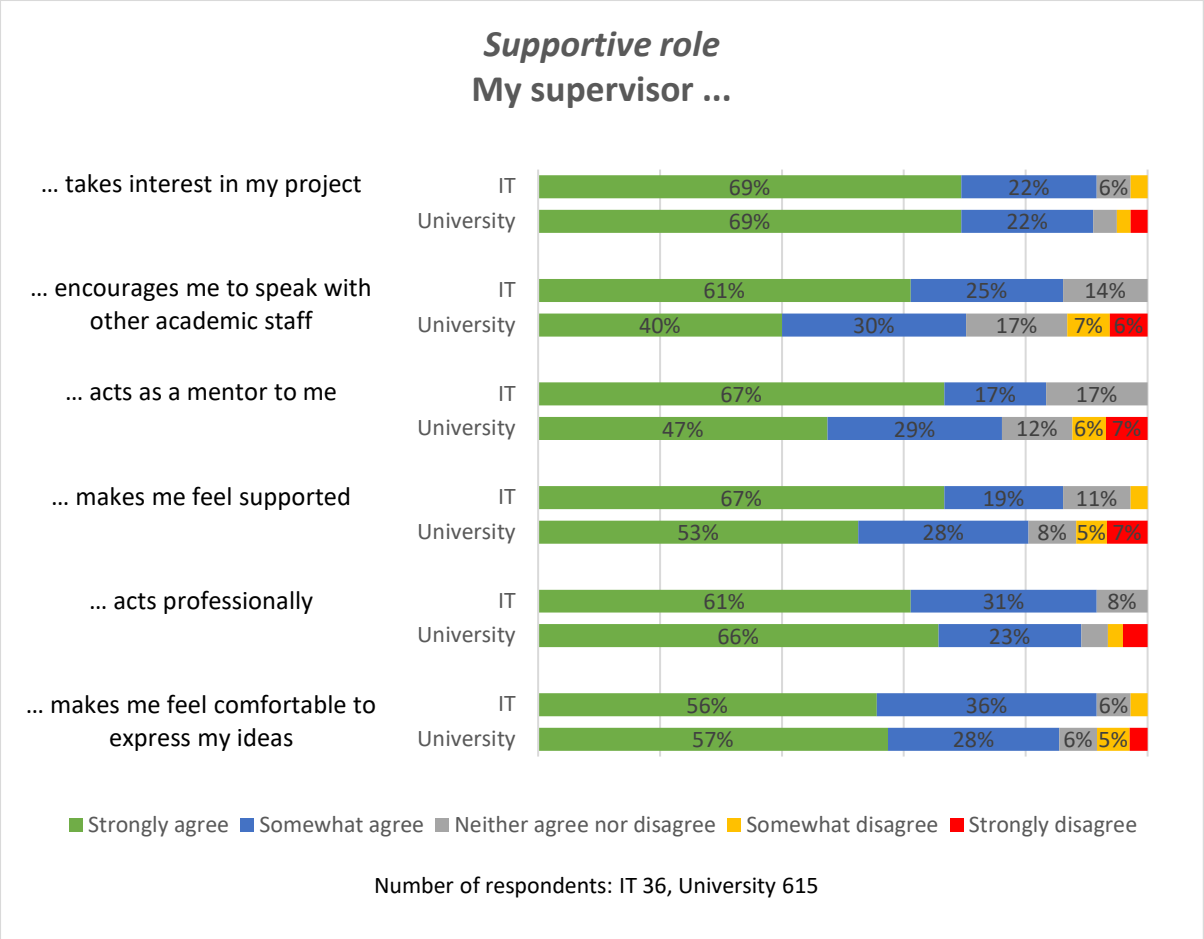
1.6 Please rate the following statements regarding your supervision experience. Select one option for each statement from the list below where "At least one of my supervisors..."[3]



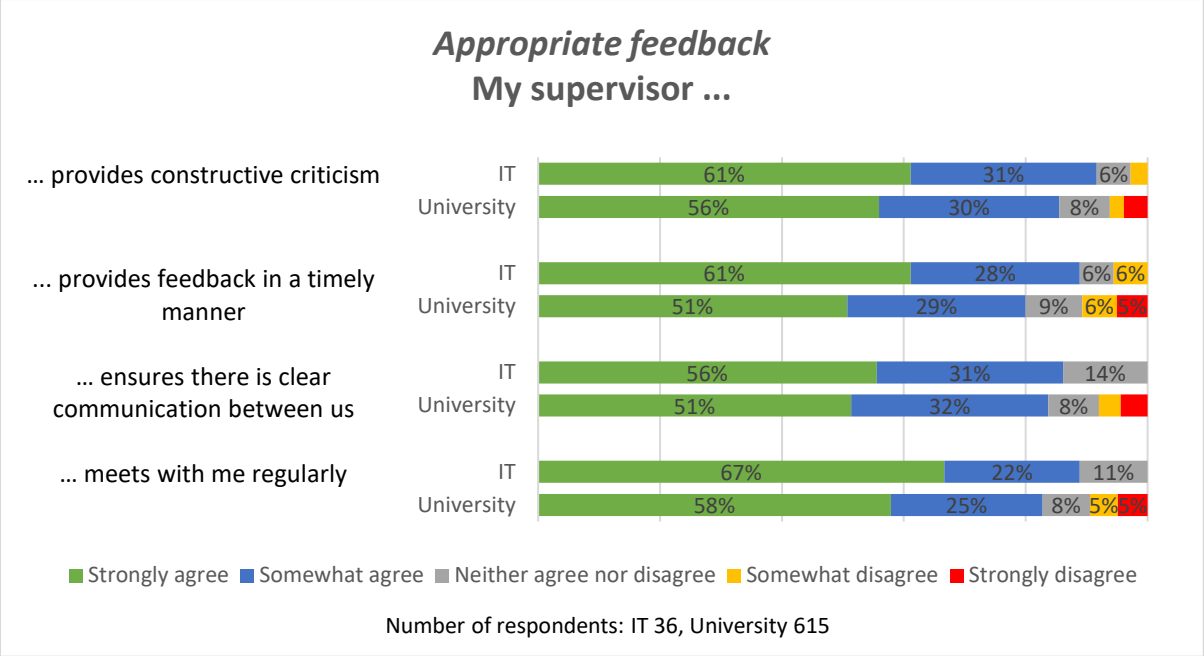
Number of respondents: IT 36, University 615

[3] Where responses were less than 5%, the figure has not been included due to lack of space.

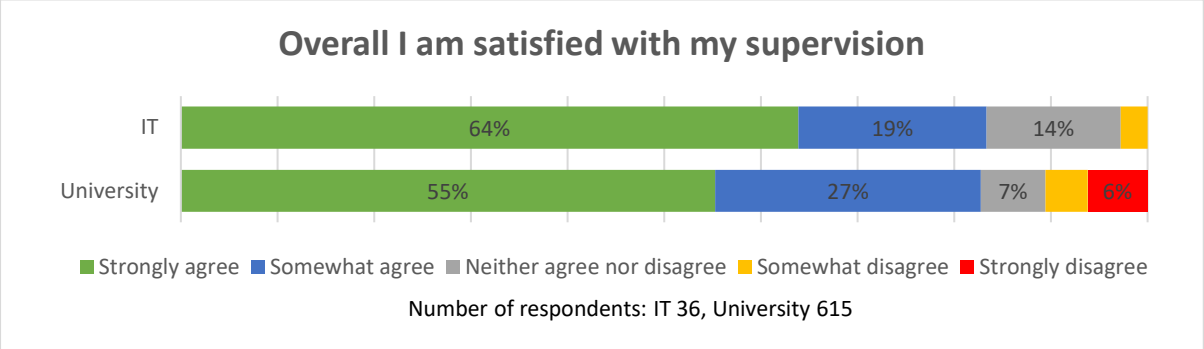
IT respondents tended to *strongly agree* with positive statements regarding the academic guidance provided by their supervisors. This was especially evident in the response to *'my supervisor directs me to relevant papers and publications in my area of research,'* to which 69% of IT graduate students said they strongly agreed.



All University graduate students tended to agree with positive statements relating to the supportive role of their supervisors; however, even within this context, the responses of IT graduate students were particularly positive. This was most evident in the response to the statement *'my supervisor encourages me to speak with other academic staff,'* where IT graduate students (86% total agreement) tended to agree more so than all University respondents (70%).



IT graduate students tended to strongly agree with positive statements regarding the feedback provided by their supervisor. For instance, 67% of IT respondents said that they strongly agree with the statement *'my supervisor meets with me regularly.'*



No IT graduate students strongly disagreed with the statement *'Overall I am satisfied with my supervision,'* while 83% either agreed or strongly agreed, which was on par with University-wide respondents.

1.7 Opportunity for comments regarding your supervision.

Seven graduate students from the Faculty of Information Technology responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Positive comments: 4 Negative comments: 2

General theme	Number of responses
Communication and feedback	2
Accessibility	1
Inaccessibility	1
Suggested improvements	1
Supportive/respectful/engaged/guidance/nurturing/encouraging	1

Many respondents from the Faculty of Information Technology were **satisfied or positive** about an element of their supervision experience within their degrees. Some notable examples include:

> *"Supervisors are extremely supportive and patient with timely guidance."*
>
> *"Having just submitted, I can say without qualification that my supervisors were both wonderful and I was incredibly lucky to have them."*

Other notable comments from IT graduate students relating to supervision, included:

> *"I picked my supervisors … based on their morality and ethics as opposed to their status. I also picked them based on perceived ability to make time for their students. I have been rewarded for this a thousand-fold and I do feel for those who picked their supervisors based on status."*
>
> *"Each supervisor has different styles and … ideas. I think the main point is communication among the graduate student and the supervisors. Things need to be clear and make sure [that] everyone is comfortable with how the research goes."*

1.8 Summary

Research supervision has become a vital process in the success of postgraduate studies.[4] It plays a critical role in doctoral education, in particular, with links having been made between the quality of supervision and student progression and attrition rates.[5] Increased government emphasis on 'timely completion' has led to the introduction of a range of measures for monitoring and managing PhD

[4] Melissa Ng Lee Yen Abdullah and Terry Evans, "The relationship between postgraduate research students' psychological attributes and their supervisors' supervision training," *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences 31 (2012)*: 788.

[5] Glenice Ives and Glenn Rowley, "Supervisors selection or allocation and continuity of supervision: PhD. Students' progress and outcomes," *Studies in Higher Education* 30, no. 5 (2005): 535-55. Carolyn Richert Bair and Jennifer Grant Haworth, "Doctoral student attrition and persistence: a meta-synthesis of research," in *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research* XIX*,* edited by J. C. Smart (Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004), 495.

candidature (see *2. Milestones*),[6] given completion rates now have reputational and financial implications for universities in the competitive higher education environment.[7]

To analyse supervision at Monash University, the MGA HDR survey sought responses from Monash graduate students to multiple choice (5) and Likert-scale questions (4), so as to provide a general overview of supervision at the institutional and faculty level, as well as open-ended questions (2), in order to provide a level of insight into the diversity of opinions and the challenges faced by graduate students.

The overall satisfaction with supervision among respondents from IT (83%) was marginally higher than it was among all Monash graduate students (82%).

Previous studies have highlighted that **the strongest correlation with student progress was the amount of interaction that they had with their supervisors.**[8] IT respondents tended to agree with positive statements regarding the accessibility of their supervisors.

Meanwhile, others have identified that **doctoral students who choose their own supervisor are more likely to complete their course than those assigned a supervisor**, while they are also less likely to experience emotional exhaustion or plan to leave academia.[9] This was not tested in this survey, but should be considered for implementation nevertheless.

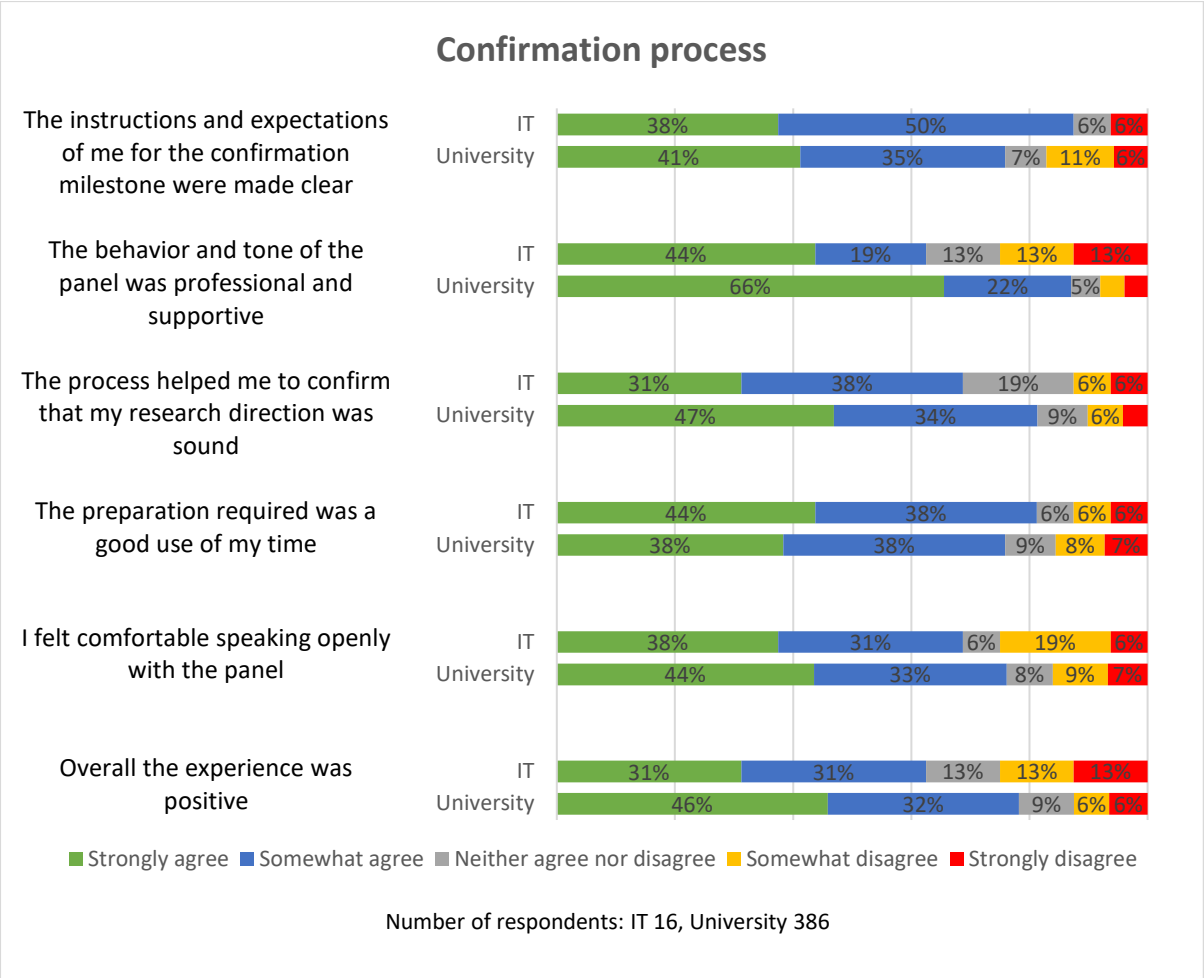
The expertise and knowledge of supervisors is instrumental to the successful completion of an HDR graduate student's thesis.[10] Overall agreement with the statement '*my supervisor has the skills and subject knowledge to support my research'* was marginally lower in IT (86%) than it was in the University (87%).

While supervision is clearly important to the overall graduate student research experience, it is also the factor that students tend to rank as most satisfactory (or else among the top factors).[11] Therefore, in order to gain insight into the overall satisfaction of Monash graduate students, several other factors associated with their degrees were explored in the MGA HDR survey – starting with milestones (see *2. Milestones*).

[6] Alison Lee and Jo McKenzie, "Evaluating doctoral supervision: tensions in eliciting students' perspectives," *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 48, no.1 (2011): 70-71.
[7] Christine Halse and James Malfroy, "Retheorizing doctoral supervision as professional work," *Studies in Higher Education* 31, no. 1 (2010): 79.
[8] Allyson Holbrook, Sid Bourke and Robert Cantwell, "Using research candidate annual report data to examine supervision effectiveness," in *Quality in Postgraduate Research: Knowledge Creation in Testing Times Part 2 – Proceedings*, eds. Margaret Kiley and Gerry Mullins (Adelaide: Quality of Postgraduate Research Conference, 2006): 83.
[9] Karen Hunter and Kay Devine, "Doctoral student's emotional exhaustion and intentions to leave academia," *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* 11 (2016): 40.
[10] Dharmananda Jairam and David H. Kahl, Jr., "Navigating the doctoral experience: The role of social support in successful degree completion," *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* 7 (2012): 320.
[11] Bridget Juniper, Elaine Walsh, Alan Richardson and Bernard Morley, "A new approach to evaluating the well-being of PhD research students," *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 37, no. 5 (2012): 571. Clair Sight, *Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2017,* 12. Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, *2018 Graduate Outcomes Survey,* 106. Allyson Holbrook *et al*, "PhD candidate expectations: Exploring mis-match with experience," *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* 9 (2014): 339-40.

2. Milestones

2.1 Please rate the following statements regarding your experience of the confirmation process.



While IT respondents tended to agree in significant numbers that the instruction and expectation for the confirmation milestone were clear (88% total agreement) and the preparation required was a good use of their time (82%), there was less agreement with the statement *'the behaviour and tone of the panel was professional and supportive'* (63%) and *'overall the experience was positive'* (62%).

2.2 Opportunity for comments about the confirmation process.

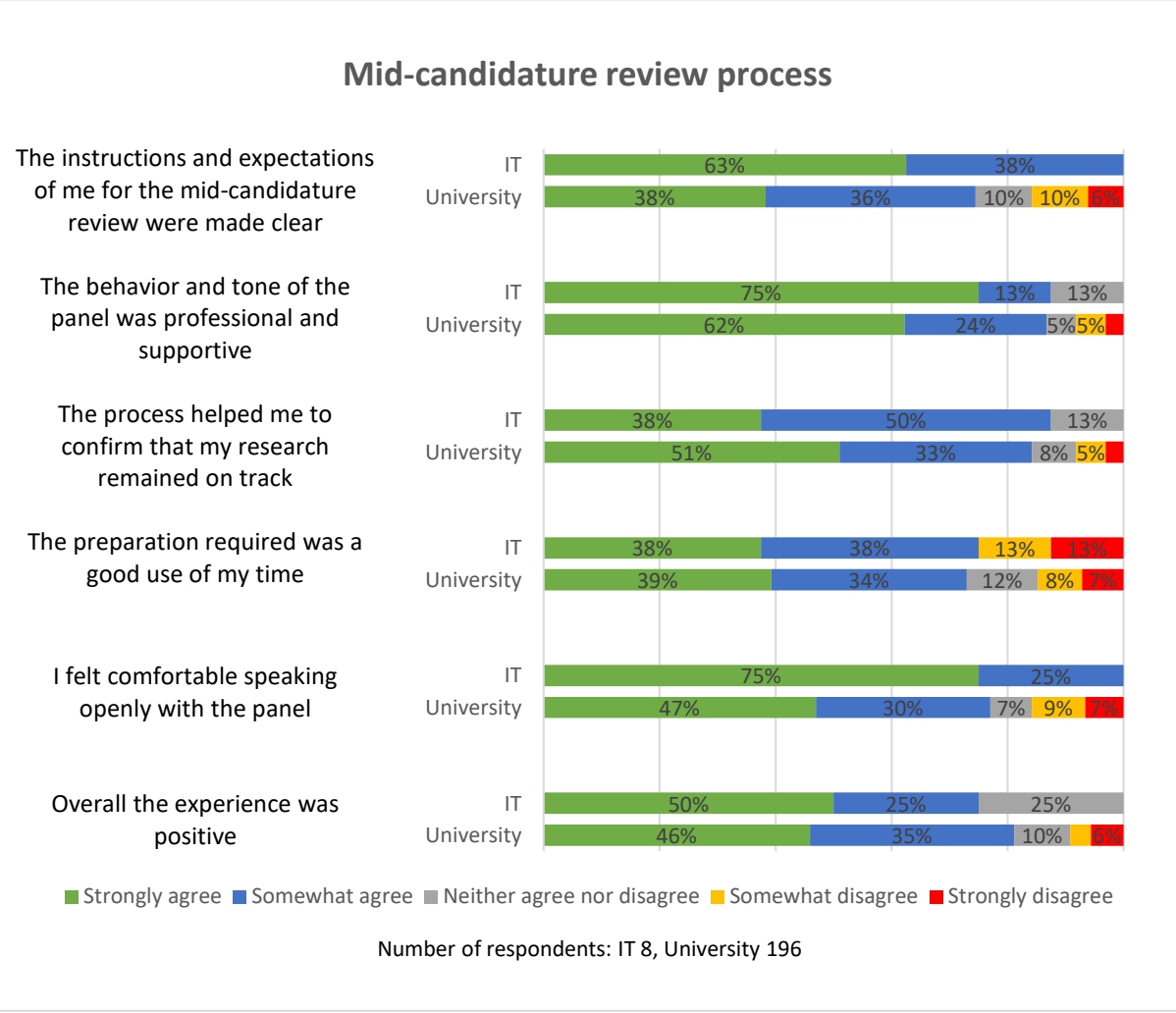
Only **two graduate students from the Faculty of Information Technology** responded to this statement.

These comments, included:

> *"The milestone process was made less stressful, thanks to my supervisors and timely assistance from course coordinators. The comments from [the] panel have helped me establish a sound base for future work."*

"My initial confirmation report was deemed insufficient by the fill-in HDR coordinator, but the other members of the panel disagreed and wanted me to proceed to confirmed status … [Chaos ensued]."

2.3 Please rate the following statements regarding your experience of the mid-candidature review process.



As with confirmation, IT graduate students tended to agree with positive statements related to the mid-candidature review process.

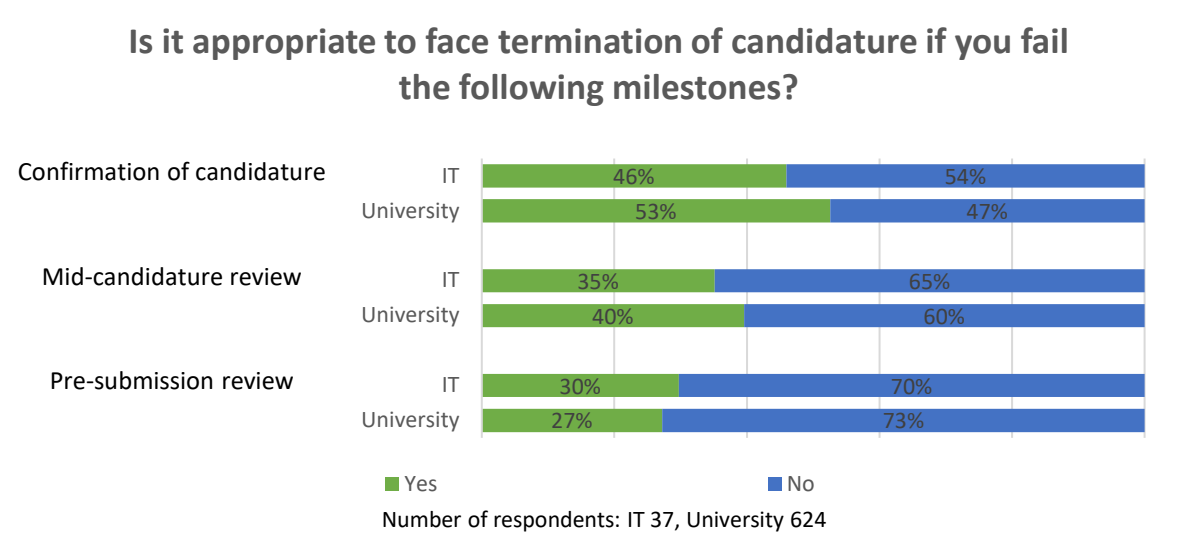
2.4 Opportunity for comments about the mid-candidature review process.

Only **one graduate student from the Faculty of Information Technology** responded to this statement.

This comment, included:

"This is the only one I think is really worth the effort, and again, giving a talk is really what matters. All I did was give them my thesis draft for the report … It was sufficient. :)"

2.5 The mid-candidature and pre-submission milestones were originally introduced to identify problems and determine appropriate actions to address these. In 2014 all milestones were changed to "hurdles" and are now used as a way to terminate candidature when progress is unsatisfactory. Do you think it's appropriate to face termination of candidature if you fail any of the following milestones?



More IT graduate students disagreed than agreed that termination of candidature was appropriate if a candidate failed a milestone. As was the case for University-wide respondents, disagreement expanded as candidature progressed.

2.6 Opportunity for comments about milestones.

Ten graduate students from Information Technology responded to this statement, while a handful of students provided comments on the preceding questions relating specifically to confirmation, mid-candidature review and pre-submission.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 5 Positive comments: 0

General theme	Number of responses
Negative	5
General disagreement with termination at milestones	3
General agreement with termination at milestones	1
Quality compromise – risk of students selecting easy projects	1
Stress/anxiety/nervousness/poor health	1
Termination at confirmation, but not at other milestones	1

Many Information Technology graduate students expressed **negative** opinions on the milestone requirements. Insightful comments, included:

> *"Panel should be more helpful to [a] candidate."*

"Adds a lot of stress."

Several graduate students took this as an opportunity to elaborate on their responses to the preceding questions regarding termination of candidature. As such, a few expressed **general disagreement with termination at milestones**. Significant comments, included:

> *"Milestones should be used as a point in time of reflection for the student – they have no meaning outside Monash University and should not obstruct a PhD thesis. Their significance here is effectively turning this PhD degree into a process, which can be terminated at any point. This process might drive students to take on a less-risky and less-promising projects in order to pass milestones – very unattractive."*

Other notable comments from IT graduate students relating to the milestones, included:

> *"Getting to the point of pre-submission review, one will have worked for more than two years and will have passed two milestones. After that point, I think it should be very hard to face termination."*
>
> *"Why not just let supervisors decide [about termination] like they did before?"*
>
> *"One more chance can help the student. It is not always true that [a] student did not do well because he/she did not study. There might be other reasons. So, it [is] better to give the student one more chance and find out the problem."*
>
> *"The [confirmation] milestone process was made less stressful thanks to my supervisor and [the] timely assistance from course coordinators."*
>
> *"I generally found these milestones to be a waste of time. I quite like giving talks, so the presentation portion seems valuable, but the reports are time-consuming and largely redundant. They strike me more as bureaucratic ass-covering than anything else."*

2.7 Summary

In 2010, Monash began to monitor candidature through multiple milestones – confirmation of candidature, mid-candidature review and pre-submission review. This can be seen as being consistent with changes made at other universities across Australia.[12]

IT graduate students tended to agree with positive statements regarding their milestones. In regards to the confirmation process, 88% of those responding agreed that *'overall the experience was positive*.'

In 2014, the mid-candidature and pre-submission milestones were changed to "hurdles" and are now used as a way to terminate candidature when progress is unsatisfactory. IT graduate students tended to disagree that it was appropriate to face termination for failing a milestone (see *2.7*) with this disagreement growing as candidates progressed through the milestones.

[12] Margaret Kiley, "Reflections on change in doctoral education: an Australian case study," *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education* 8, iss. 2 (2017): 85.

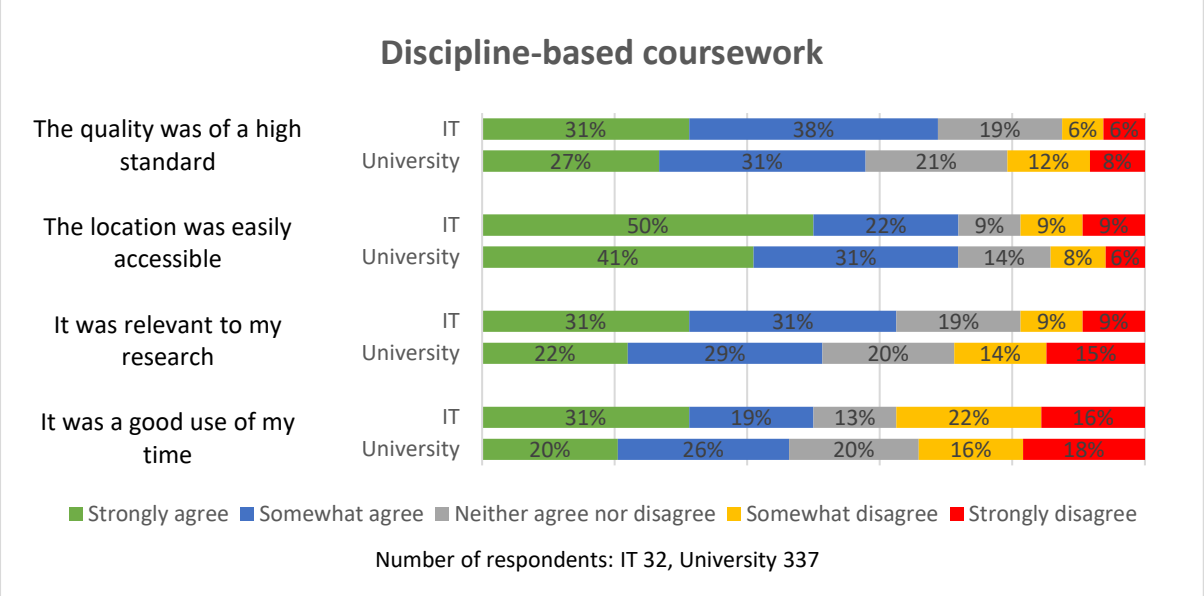
3. Coursework

3.1 Do you believe that research degrees are improved by the inclusion of compulsory discipline-based coursework?

Research degrees improved by compulsory coursework units?	IT	University
Yes	16 (43.2%)	236 (37.9%)
No	11 (29.7%)	178 (28.6%)
Not sure	10 (27%)	209 (33.5%)

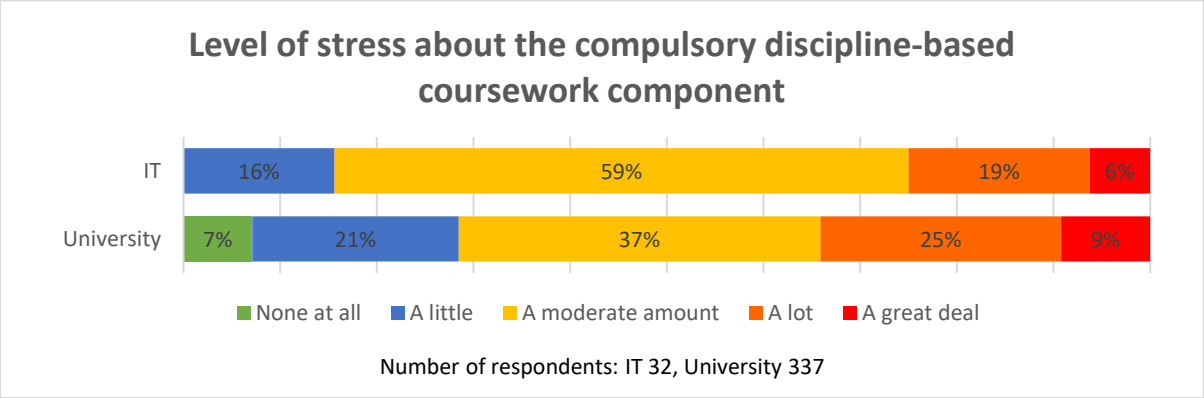
IT graduate students were more likely to express that the inclusion of compulsory coursework improved their research degree (43%) than they were to disagree (30%).

3.2 Please rate the following statements relating to the discipline-based coursework component of your degree.



IT graduate students tended to agree more so than disagree with positive statements regarding discipline-based coursework; however, only half of IT respondents agreed that coursework was a good use of their time.

3.3 Please select the level of stress you have about the compulsory discipline-based coursework component of your degree.



A quarter of IT respondents experienced an uncomfortable level of stress (*a lot* or *a great deal*) as a result of compulsory discipline-based coursework.

3.4 Opportunity for comment regarding the inclusion of discipline-based coursework in research degrees.

Eight students from the Faculty of Information Technology responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 7 Positive comments: 3

General theme	Number of responses
Time-consuming/waste of time/misdirected energy	5
Administrative issues/inconsistencies/solutions	2
Irrelevant/discipline-specific	1

All but one graduate student respondent from the Faculty of Information Technology held **negative opinions on coursework** in their degrees. One notable objection is included below:

> *"What an utter farce. Being threatened with failing a PhD because of useless coursework requirements while I was trying to publish papers was so incredibly stupid."*

Of those Faculty of Information Technology graduate students responding negatively, there were a handful of references to how coursework was considered **time consuming and a waste of time**, and how it unnecessarily **directed the student's energy away from their research/thesis**. For instance, one student wrote:

> *"I think the compulsory discipline-based coursework should not require any workload outside the class. For example, we have 4-hour lectures for one unit and 3-hour workshops for another. Together with the assessments and the time spent for commuting in between campuses, these two units take quite a lot of time."*

Other notable comments relating to the inclusion of discipline-based coursework in research degrees, included:

> *"Some of my courses are located in Caulfield [and] it always takes me lots of time travelling between two campuses, which I think is a waste of my time."*
>
> *"I think most of the material of this course is not related to my research and is not a good way to spend my time."*

3.5 Summary

While there is general support for greater structure within graduate research studies, and there is evidence to suggest that receiving training in rigorous academic writing or any other research skill correlates with successful completion,[13] the concept of coursework has received a mixed reception in Australia.[14] IT graduate students were no different in this regard with respondents split over its relevance and usefulness.

Sixty-two percent of IT graduate students agreed with the statement that discipline-based coursework was '*relevant to my research,'* while only half agreed with the statement that discipline-based coursework was *'a good use of my time*.'

[13] Rens van de Schoot et al., "What took them so long? Explaining PhD delays among doctoral candidates," *PLos One* 8, no. 7 (2013), 9.
[14] Margaret Kiley, "Reflections on change in doctoral education," 85.

4. Professional Development

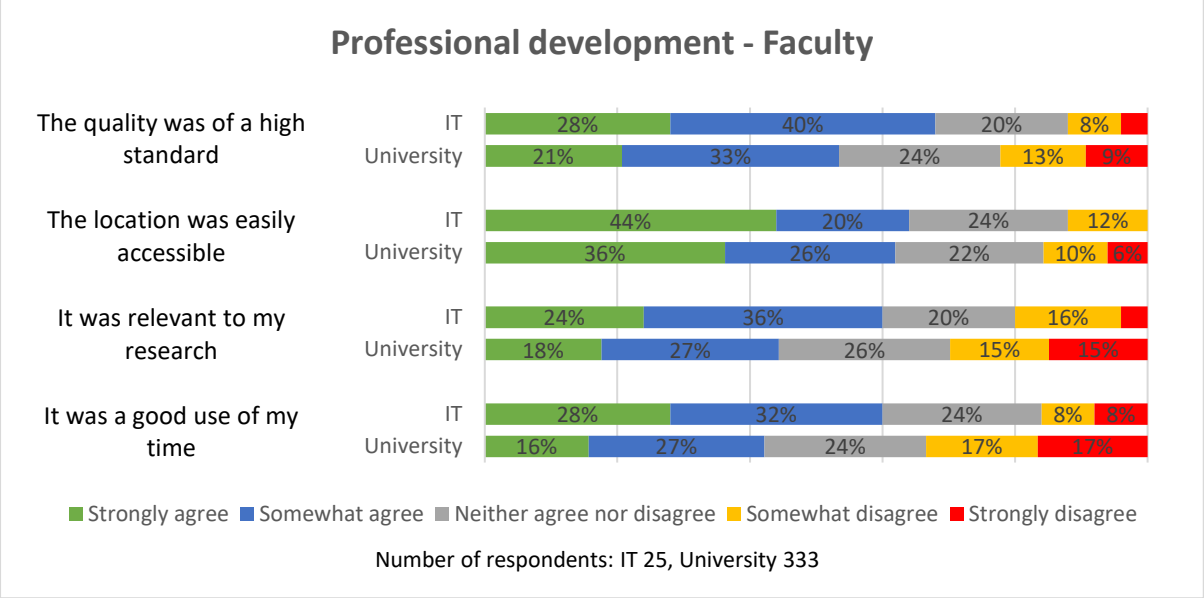
Compulsory development units are not a requirement of the Faculty of Information Technology; however, IT graduate students did provide responses to these questions.

4.1 Do you believe that professional development units (as offered through "myDevelopment"), should be a compulsory part of a research degree?

Should professional development be compulsory?	IT	University
Yes	7 (19.4%)	157 (25.4%)
No	14 (38.9%)	283 (45.9%)
Not sure	15 (41.7%)	177 (28.7%)

IT graduate students were twice as likely to think that professional development should not be a compulsory part of a research degree than they were to think that it should.

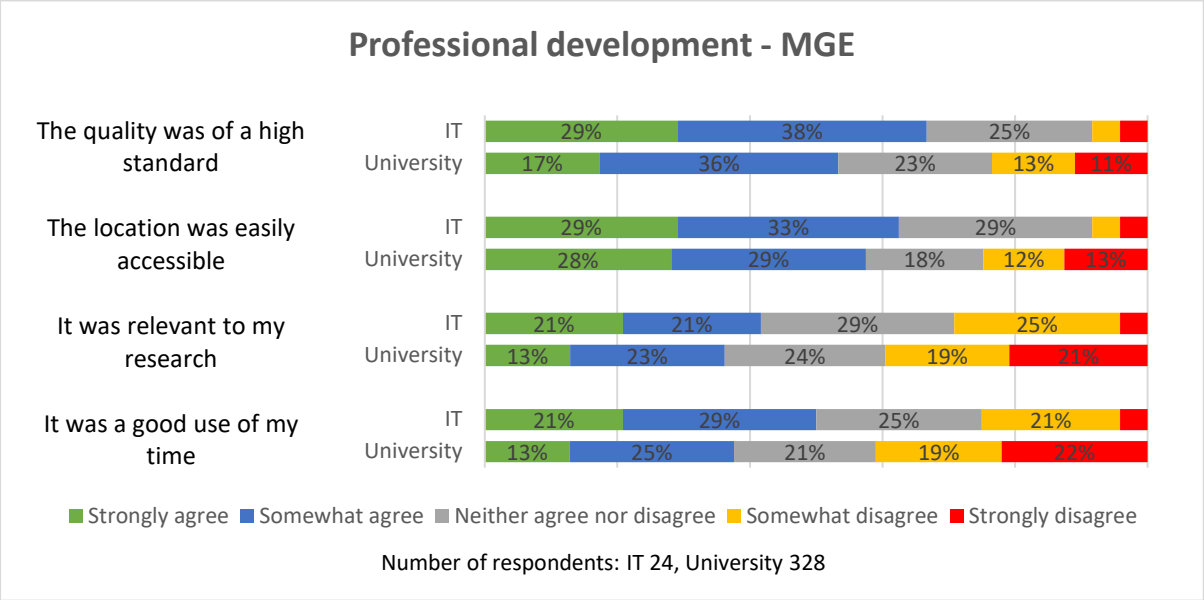
4.2 Please rate the following statements relating to your overall experience of the professional component of your degree offered by your faculty.



As with coursework, IT graduate students tended to agree rather than disagree with positive statements regarding professional development offered by their faculty.

Sixty percent of IT respondents thought that their faculty's professional development units were a good use of their time.

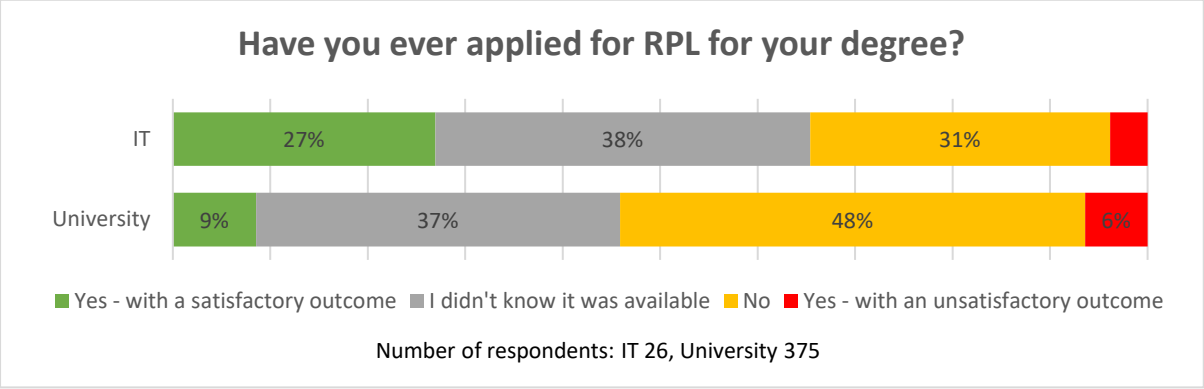
4.3 Please rate the following statements relating to your overall experience of the professional component of your degree offered by the MGE (central).



Total agreement levels with positive statements regarding professional development units offered by the MGE were slightly less than they were for professional development units offered by the Faculty; however, agreement with the statement *'it was relevant to my research,'* was substantially lower for MGE units (Faculty: 60%, MGE: 42%).

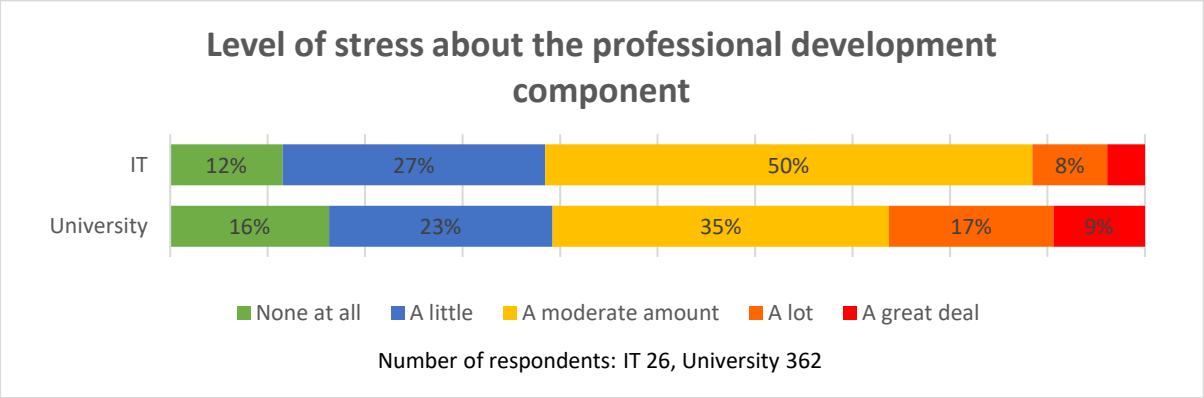
Fifty percent of IT graduate students agreed that these units were a good use of their time.

4.4 Have you applied for Recognition of Prior Learning in relation to the professional development component of your degree?



Graduate students from IT were three-times more likely to have applied for RPL with a satisfactory outcome as were University-wide respondents.

4.5 Please select the level of stress you have about the professional development component of your degree.



IT graduate students were less likely than their peers across the University to experience an uncomfortable level of stress because of the professional development component of their course.

4.6 Opportunity for comment regarding the inclusion of compulsory professional development units in research degrees.

Six IT graduate students gave their opinions on the prospect of professional development being included in their research degrees.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 3 Positive comments: 1

General theme	Number of responses
Irrelevant/discipline-specific/lack of options	1
Time-consuming/waste of time/misdirected energy	1

Notable comments relating to compulsory professional development units in IT, included:

> *"PhD in Australia is just three years [so] I think we do not have enough time to do 120 hours of development. I think it [would be] good if it was just for 30-40 hours. In that case, I [can] just attend what I need, when I need [to]. But, now I should attend some unrelated workshops just to complete 120 hours … If duration of PhD was 4-5 years (like USA or Canada) it [would be] okay, but [for] 3, I do not think so."*

> *"I strongly believe that if the workshops are useful and high-quality, students are eager to attend them [and] they recommend them to each other. As it … happens [for] me e.g. I have gotten some advice to attend useful units."*

> *"For professional development, it is of more use if the student [attends] by their choice [and] according to their requirement."*

4.7 Summary

Compulsory professional development units are not a requirement of IT, which meant that few graduate students from the Faculty provided detailed responses to these questions; however, with only 19.4% of respondents stating that they thought these units should be compulsory, it is reasonable to suggest that the majority of IT respondents were happy the units were not compulsory.

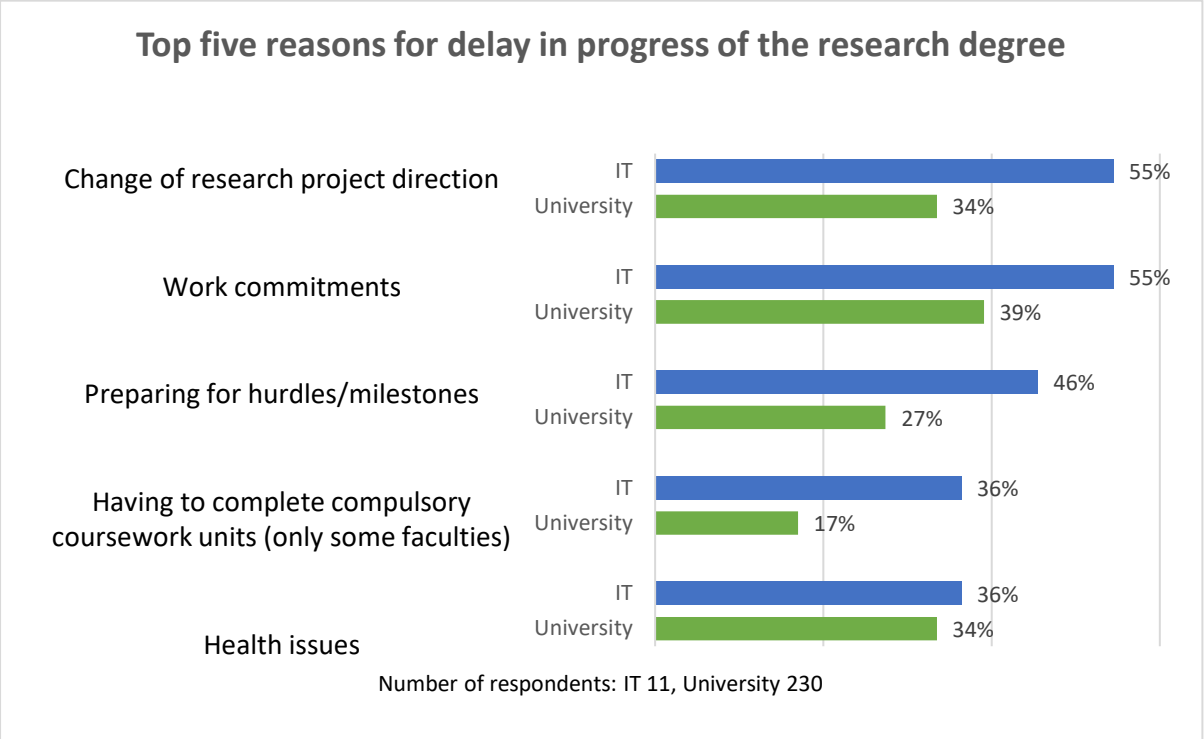
5. Progress delays and discontinuation

5.1 Has anything significantly delayed the progress of your research degree?

Has your research degree progress been delayed?	IT	University
Yes	11 (30.6%)	231 (37.8%)
No	25 (69.4%)	380 (62.2%)

IT respondents were less likely to have experienced a significant delay in their degree than their University counterparts.

5.2 Please select all relevant reasons regarding the delay in progress of your research degree.

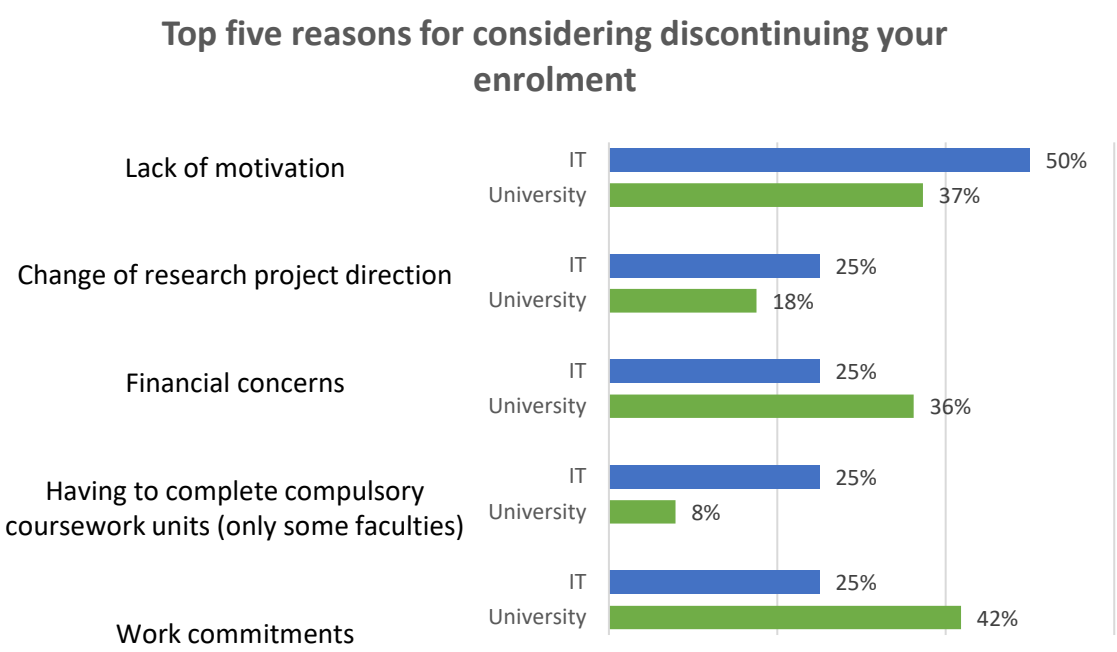


5.3 Have you ever considered discontinuing your enrolment?

Have you considered discontinuing your enrolment?	IT	University
Yes	9 (25%)	179 (29.3%)
No	27 (75%)	431 (70.7%)

While indicating that they were less likely to experience a significant delay in their research degrees, IT graduate students were also less likely to have considered discontinuing their enrolment than their peers across the University.

5.4 Please select all relevant reasons regarding why you considered discontinuing your enrolment.



Number of respondents: IT 8, University 177

5.5 What made you decide to continue with your degree?

Four graduate students from the Faculty of Information Technology responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

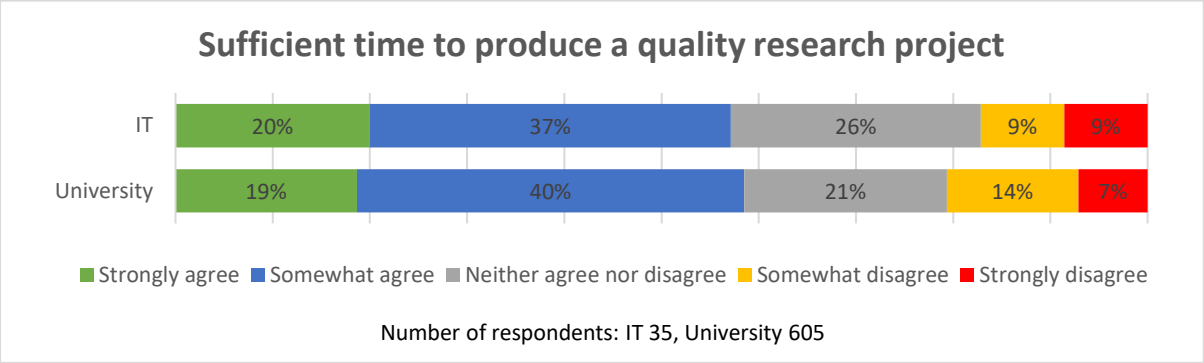
General theme	**Number of responses**
Personal characteristics – commitment/determination/passion/fear/stubbornness	2
Support from University staff/services	2
Changed supervisor	1
Support from peers, friends and family	1

Graduate students from the Faculty of Information Technology outlined a range of factors and/or motivations for choosing to continue with their enrolment after considering discontinuation.

Notable comments, included:

> *"I want to have a go and aiming to graduate on time."*
>
> *"My supervisors are great people; my research group is also wonderful. As I see it, I finished my thesis on time (and 3 first author publications) in spite of Monash constantly throwing spanners in the works. The people I worked with made it worth staying, but Monash made the process unnecessarily stressful by piling on all this garbage."*

5.6 The amount of time I have to complete my research, after preparing for and completing compulsory milestones/discipline-based coursework units/professional development, will allow me to produce a quality research project



Fifty-seven percent of IT respondents indicated that they believed they had sufficient time to complete a quality research project.

5.7 What are the three most important things the University could do for you to help you complete on time?

Nineteen graduate students from the Faculty of Information Technology responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	**Number of responses**
Compulsory coursework – changing or removing	5
Access to training/support services	4
Professional development – changing or removing	3
Supervision	3
Access to research material/resources	2
Emphasis on thesis	2
Facilities/labs/equipment/software	2
Milestones – changing or removing	2
Reducing bureaucratic requirements	2
Staff	2
Administration – guidelines/information/communication/ availability	1
Career and work opportunities	1
Extending length of degree/candidature	1
Funding – scholarship/other financial aid	1
Improving online/cross-campus service delivery	1
Research environment – networking/mentoring/support groups	1
Wellbeing – encouragement/motivation/trust/care	1

When considering graduate student responses to this question, it is important to emphasise that comments assigned to each theme are not necessarily negative (although the majority of comments are indeed highlighting perceived flaws, failures or areas for improvement); however, disregarding whether they can be considered positive, neutral or negative reflections, the comments do provide

direct insight into what Monash University graduate students think the primary role/s of the University should be in helping them complete their degrees on time.

Information Technology graduate students provided a wide range of suggestions regarding what they thought were the most crucial things that the University could do to help with the timely completion of their degrees.

The prevailing theme in both *Section 3: Coursework* and *Section 4: Professional Development* was that IT graduate students tended to have issues with the administration, requirements and purpose of these components of their degrees. This sentiment was again reflected in graduate student responses to this question. Comments reflective of the wider sentiment, included:

> *"Get rid of the coursework/professional development requirements as they are not even enforced and only used as a threat while simultaneously wasting *everyone's* time."*
>
> *"Allow students to choose the professional development units that suite them."*

Concurrently, several IT graduate students also stressed that they wanted more **training and support services**.

> *"Better induction/orientation processes."*
>
> *"Organise more writing classes and review sessions to get some feedback on the written work."*

Other notable areas frequently discussed in the comments of IT graduate students, included:

- **Supervision** – three graduate students emphasised how crucial supervisors were to submitting on time.
- **Emphasis on thesis** – two students wanted greater focus on the actual production of their thesis.

Other comments related to factors identified as most crucial to graduate student course completion, included:

> *"An effective point of contact where we can come to ask about who to come to when something comes up."*
>
> *"Mindfulness sessions to keep stress at bay during the course."*

5.8 Opportunity for comments regarding your general progress.

Five students from the Faculty of Information Technology responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 4 Positive comments: 2

General theme	Number of responses
Coursework	1
Health	1
Poor supervision	1
Professional development	1
Slow progress	1

Comments from IT graduate students, included:

> *"Finishing my thesis on time, and doing so with publications, was achieved despite repeated attempts by the surrounding PhD coursework/oversight mechanisms that constantly threatened to derail the whole thing. I have on many occasions warned younger, bright students to consider other universities before Monash for HDR, because of my (and other's) experiences. Get rid of it or lose more students."*

> *"Working in industry seems more appealing than research in terms of financial and health issues … For female students, there isn't any organisation in the University to facilitate having [a] baby … These factors encourage PhD students to think about quitting research."*

5.9 Summary

Just under one-third of IT respondents (30.6%) had experienced a delay in their research degree, while one in every four (25.0%) had considered discontinuing their enrolment.

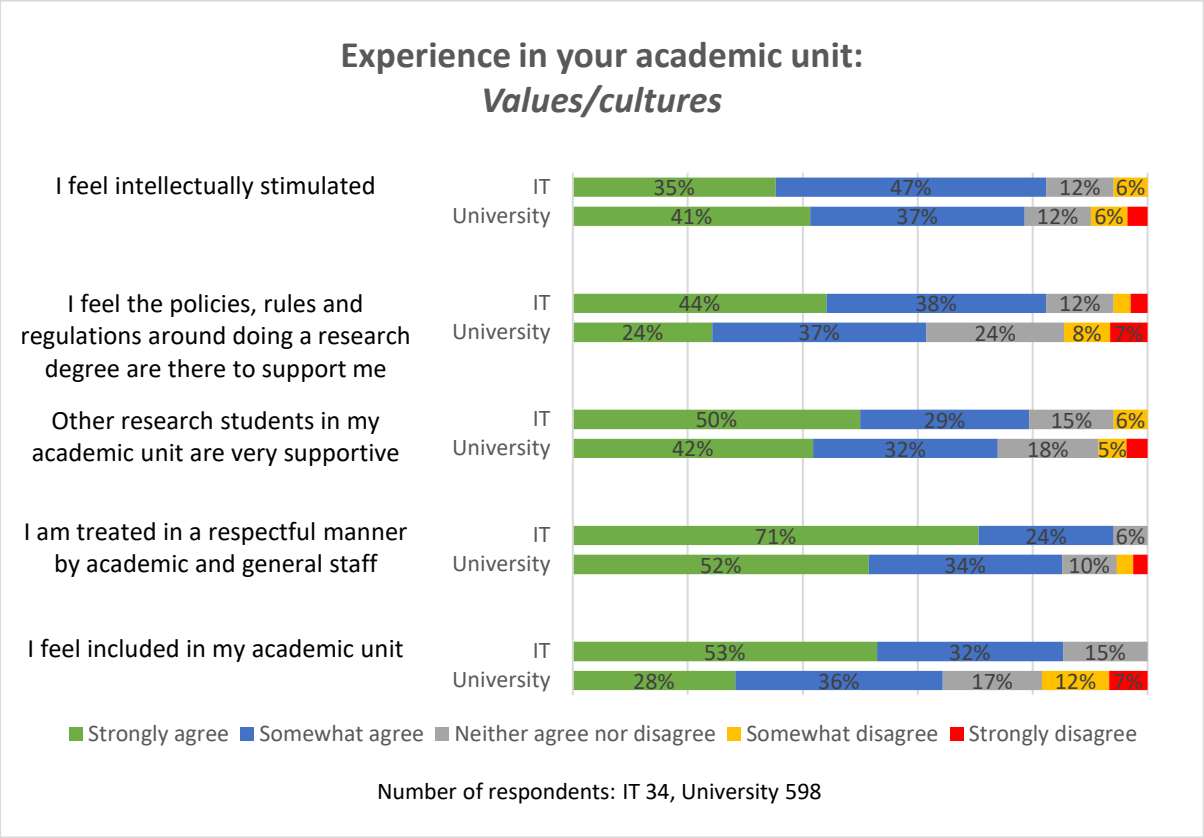
Though it was not directly tracked in this survey, it is interesting to note that there is evidence of a correlation between choosing one's own supervisor and good and timely progress.[15] Presumably this is because prospective students have taken time to consider who is best placed to support their research, in terms of availability, subject knowledge, personality and so on. The data explored in *1. Supervision* supports the premise that those who had good working relationships with their supervisors were more satisfied and less likely to experience delays and think about discontinuing their degrees.

The feedback in *3. Coursework* revealed that there was widespread dissatisfaction with the attachment of compulsory requirements to this offering, and this was supported in this section with *changing or removing coursework* being the most popular suggestion on the list of *the most important things the University could do for you to help you complete on time.*

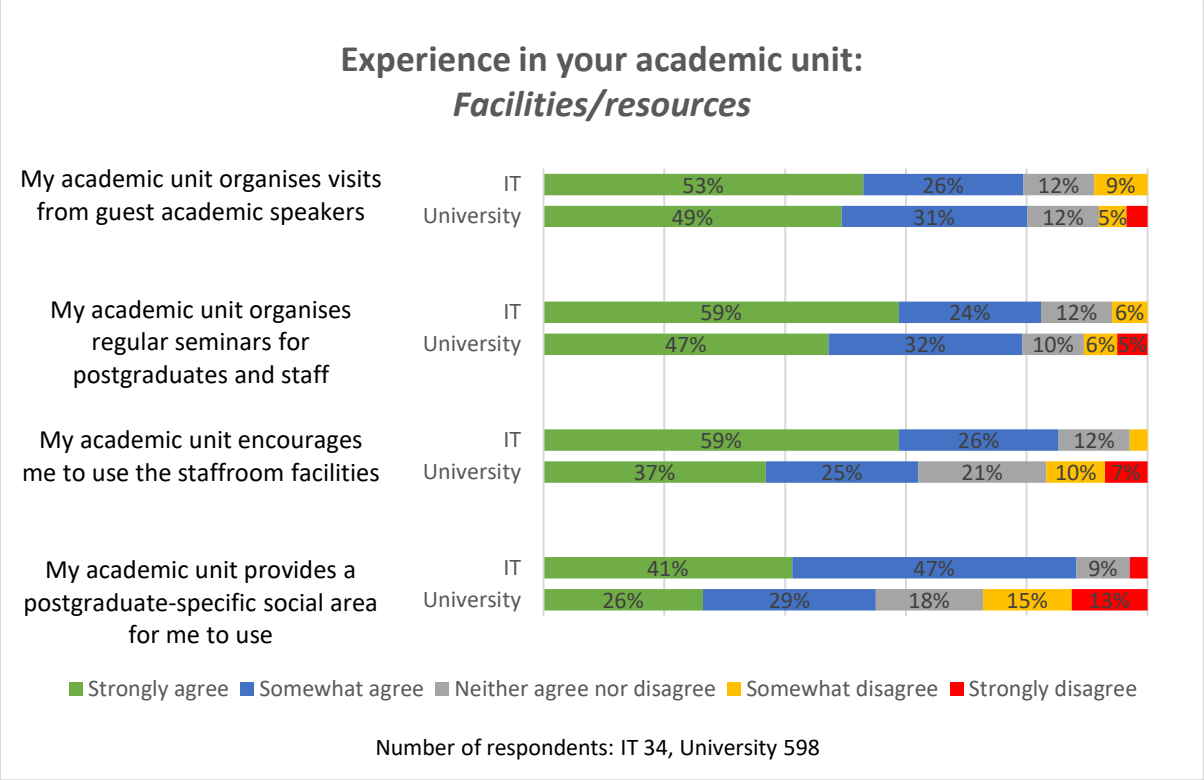
[15] Glenice Ives and Glenn Rowley, "Supervisor selection or allocation and continuity of supervision," 535.

6. School culture and facilities

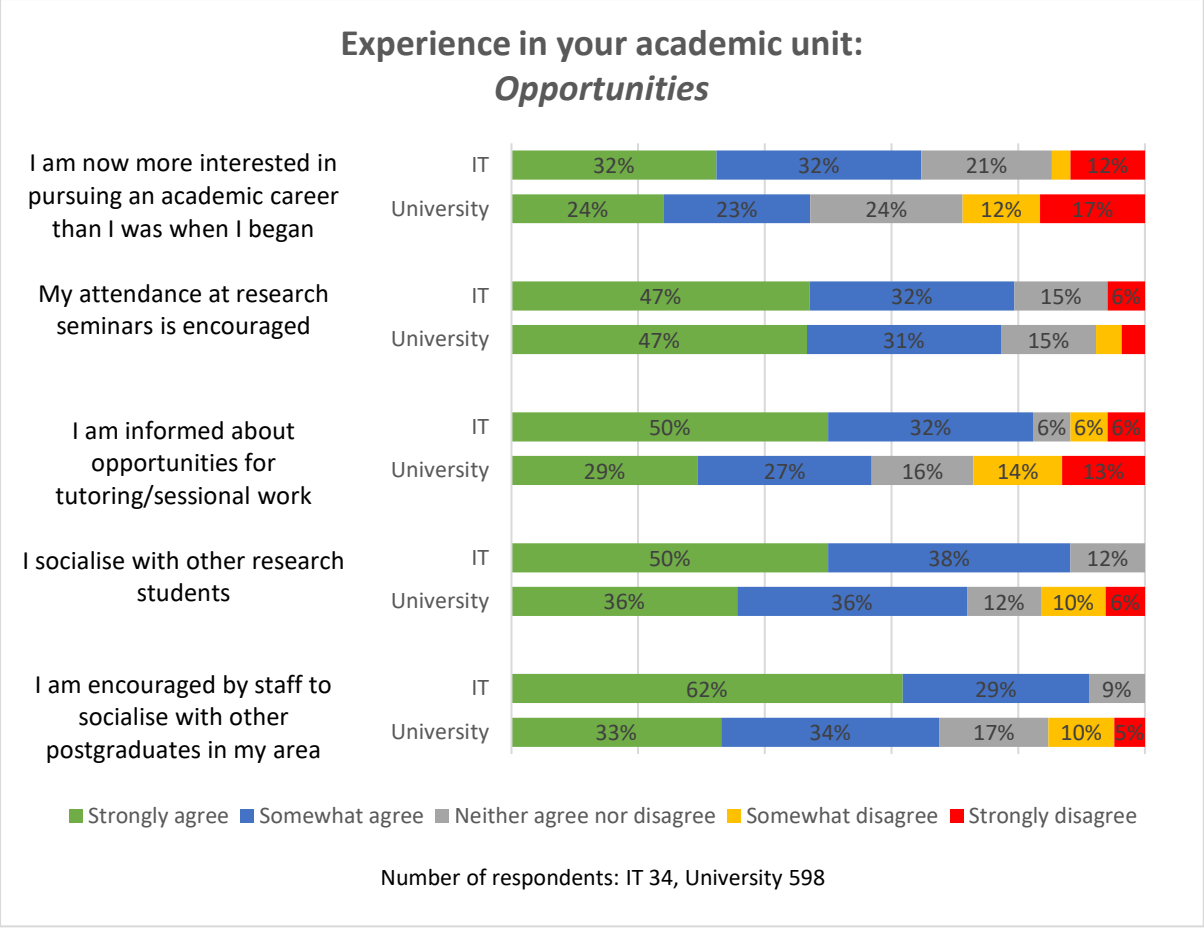
6.1 Please rate the following statements in relation to your specific experience in your academic unit:



IT respondents tended to agree with positive statements relating to the values and culture of their academic unit. Responses to the statement *'I am treated in a respectful manner by academic and general staff,'* were particularly positive with ninety-five percent (95%) agreeing to some extent.

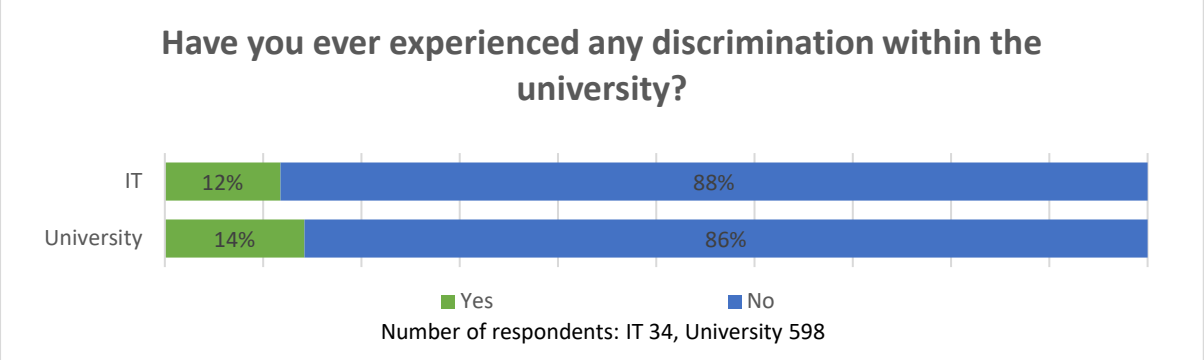


IT respondents tended to agree with positive statements relating to their experiences with the facilities and resources offered by their academic unit.



Sixty-four percent (64%) of IT respondents agreed that they were more interested in pursuing an academic career than they were when beginning their course, which was significantly more than University respondents (47%). Ninety-one percent (91%) of IT graduate students felt encouraged by staff to socialise with other graduate students, which was also significantly more than their peers from across Monash (67%).

6.2 Have you ever experienced any discrimination due to gender, race, religion, family responsibilities etc., within the University?



IT respondents were marginally less likely to have experienced discrimination within the University than their counterparts.

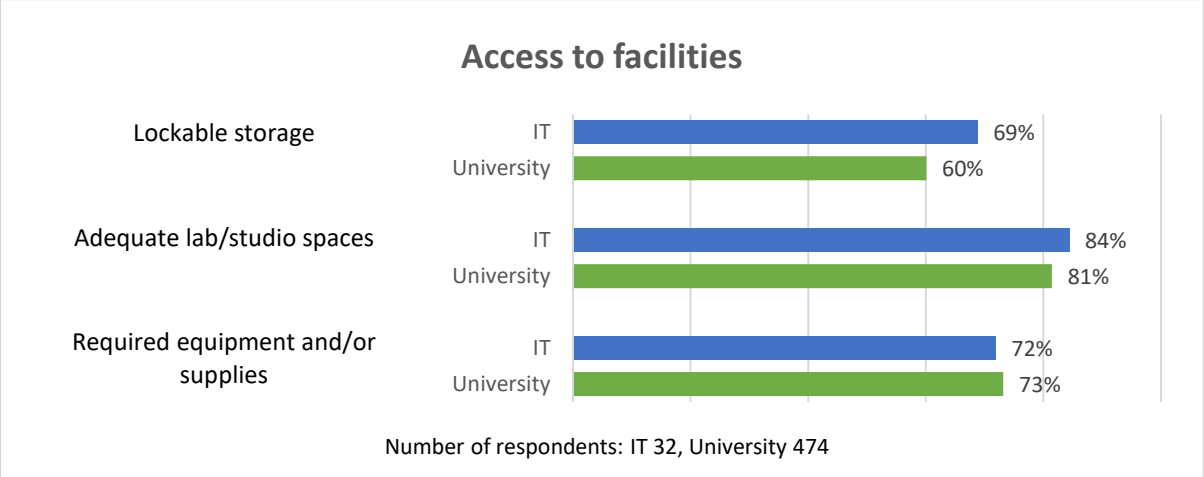
6.3 Opportunity for comments regarding the way in which you are treated.

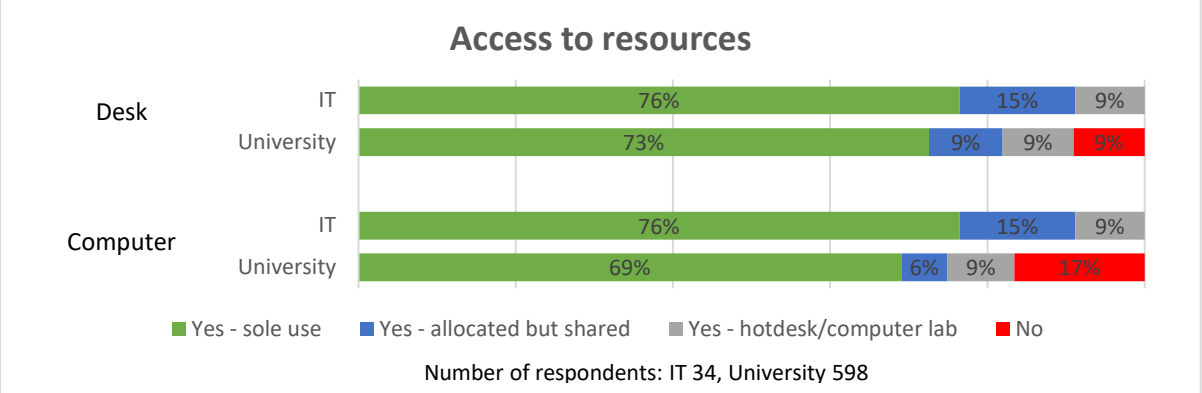
Only **three graduate students from the Faculty of Information Technology** responded to this statement.

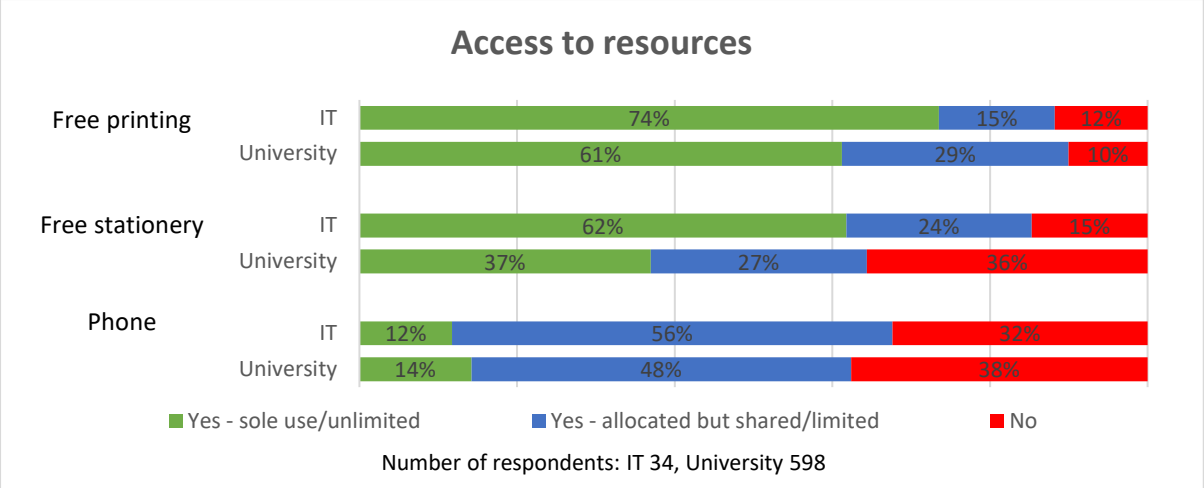
These comments, included:

> *"Just being a fairly attractive … female in the IT faculty – I keep being asked if I'm lost."*
>
> *"I'm a girl, I've been doing and teaching computer science at Monash FIT for a decade … I have never felt discriminated against for being female."*
>
> *"It is [a] really nice experience to study [at] Monash."*

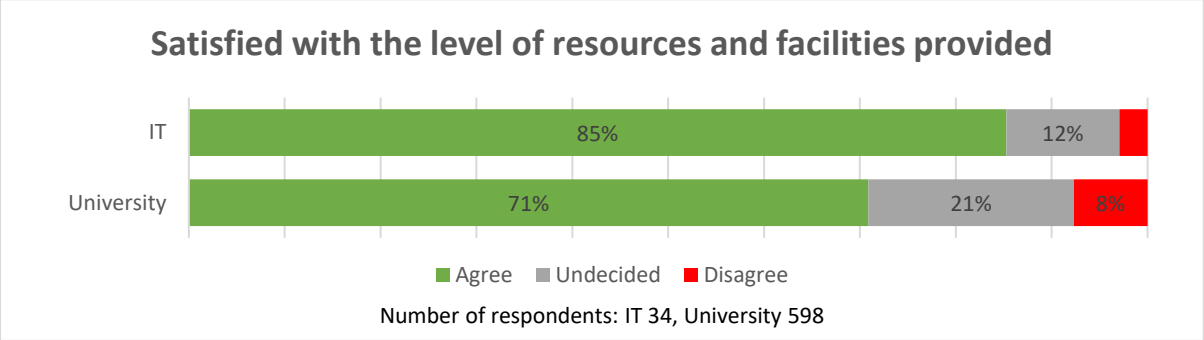
6.4 Does your academic unit provide any of the following facilities? Please select as many as relevant.







6.5 Overall, I am satisfied with the level of resources and facilities provided to me.



IT graduate students were more satisfied with the level of resources and facilities provided to them than were their University counterparts.

6.6 Opportunity for comment regarding the adequacy of the facilities you receive. What additional facilities would help to support you through to completion?

Five graduate students from the Faculty of Information Technology responded to this question. Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 3 Positive comments: 1

General theme	Number of responses
Computers/laptops/monitors	2
Social spaces	2
Coffee and tea	1
Stationery	1

Three graduate students from the Faculty of Information Technology reflected negatively on the adequacy of the facilities at Monash University, compared to one graduate student who reflected positively.

Regarding facilities that would help support IT graduate students complete their degrees, there was a range of suggestions made. **Notable comments**, included:

> *"I think our building is too small. Our faculty has to remove lots of leisure space for staff and students."*
>
> *"My chair is not comfortable and the height of the desk is not suitable for my height, so having worked several hours with my computer, I feel pain in my arm and back."*
>
> *"In IT, we need more powerful machines … [The] machines we have are not enough for our experiments."*

6.7 Summary

Arguably the most direct insight into IT graduate students' sense of belonging is provided through the responses to the statement *'I feel included in my academic unit.'* **IT graduate students were more likely than their University counterparts to express that they were positive about their sense of inclusion in their academic units**. Indeed, they were the best performing faculty in relation to this statement.

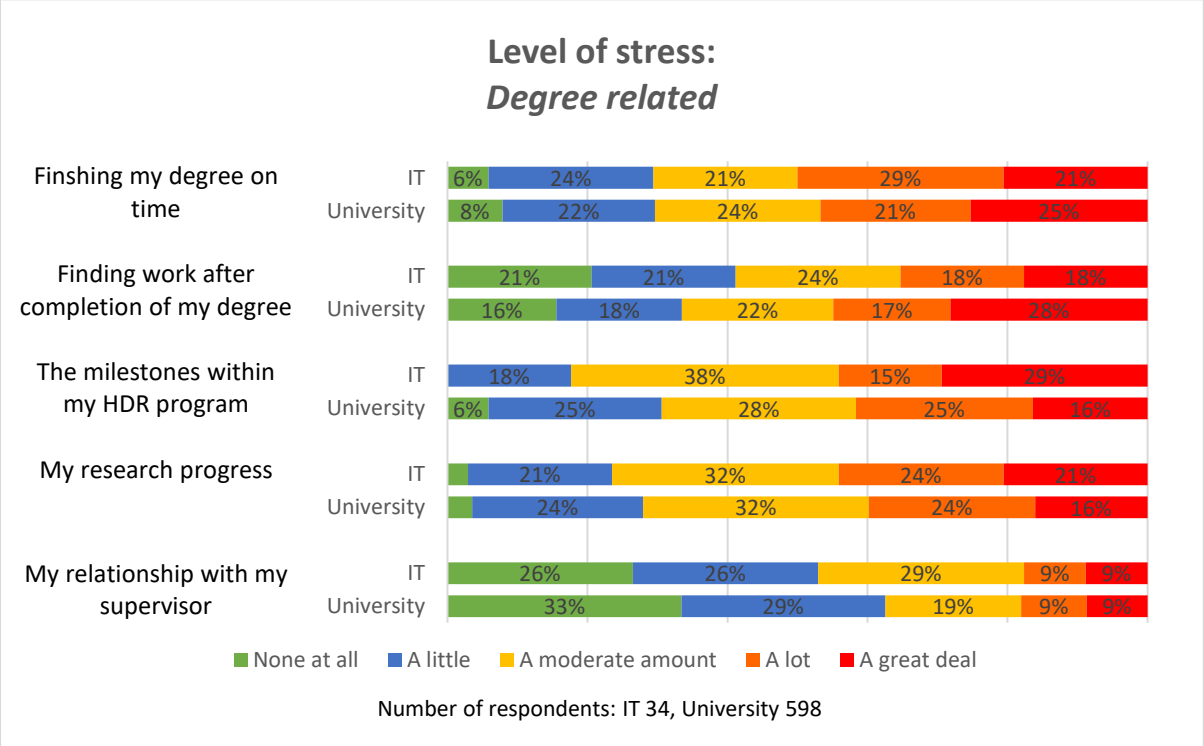
The absence of a sense of belonging in the research/faculty/scholarly community has been identified as a key cause of stress in postgraduate studies,[16] with PhD students who find themselves well-integrated in their research environments experiencing less stress and burnout."[17] This was reflected in the MGA HDR survey with those agreeing with the statement *'I feel included in my academic unit'* repeatedly being less likely to associate an uncomfortable level of stress with all of the stress-related statements in *7. Stress*.

The results of this survey indicate a link between the absence of a sense of belonging and academic and social isolation. **These results emphasise the importance of encouraging graduate students to socialise and develop professional relationships with their peers**.

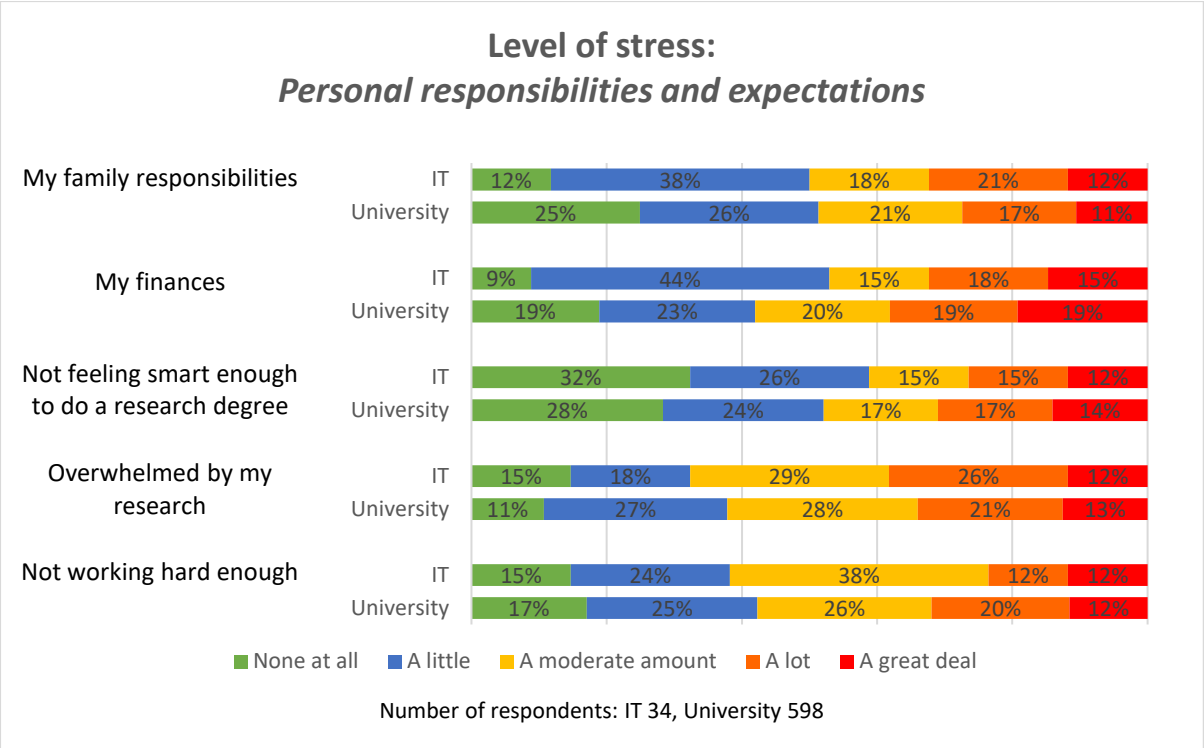
[16] Jon Cornwall, Elizabeth C. Mayland, Jacques van der Meer, Rachel A. Spronken-Smith, Charles Tustin and Phil Blyth, "Stressors in early-stage doctoral students," *Studies in Continuing Education* 41, no. 3 (2019): 367.
[17] Kim Jesper Herrmann and Gitte Wichmann-Hansen, "Validation of the quality in PhD processes questionnaire," *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education* 8, no. 2 (2017): 192.

7. Stress and wellbeing

7.1 Please select your level of stress regarding any of the following:

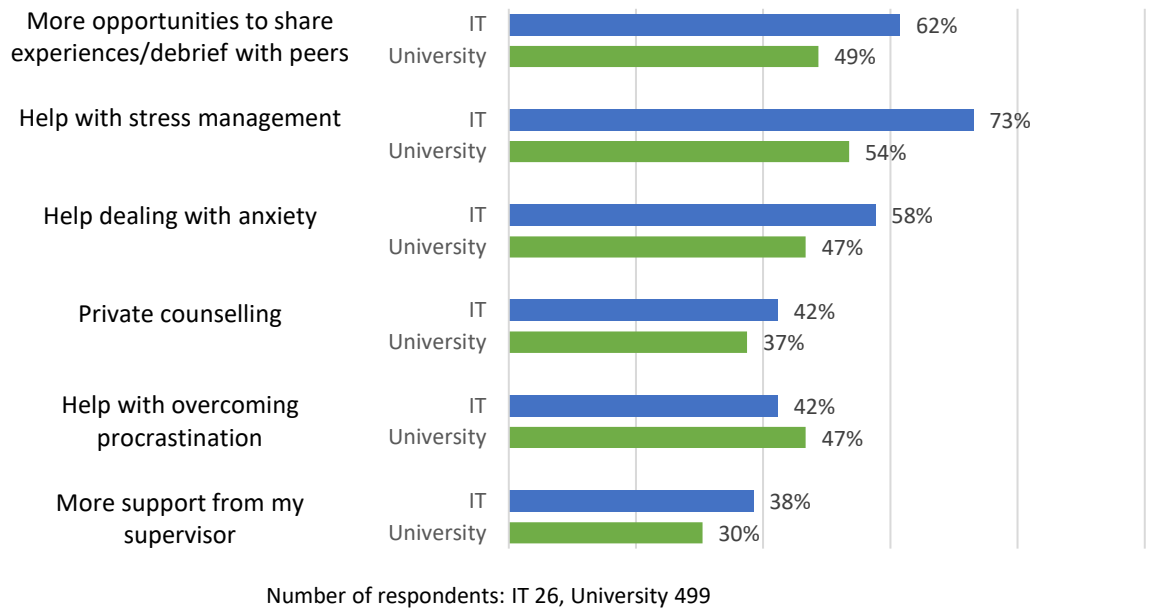


Half of the respondents from IT expressed that they had experienced an uncomfortable level of stress relating to finishing their degree on time, while only 18% expressed the same level of stress in relation to their relationship with their supervisor.



Thirty-eight percent (38%) of IT graduate students associated an uncomfortable level of stress with the feeling of being overwhelmed with their research, while only 24% associated the same level of stress with the feeling that they were not working hard enough.

7.2 What kind of health and wellbeing support would you like to receive from the University?



Number of respondents: IT 26, University 499

Help with stress management was the primary health and wellbeing support service that IT graduate students wanted to receive from the University, followed by more opportunities to share experiences and debrief with peers.

7.3 Opportunity for comments regarding health and wellbeing.

Only **two graduate students from the Faculty of Information Technology** responded to this statement.

These comments, included:

> *"The Uni already provides heaps! I just need to take advantage."*
>
> *"University students are already the most coddled class on earth. Please allow them to get on with their work/relationship like adults."*

7.4 Summary

In relation to their degrees, IT respondents were most-stressed about finishing their degree on time and least-stressed about their relationship with their supervisor, while in relation to their personal responsibilities and expectations, they were most-stressed about being overwhelmed by the research and least-stressed about not working hard enough.

'Help with stress management' was identified as the support that IT respondents most wanted to receive from the University, followed by *'more opportunities to share experiences/debrief with peers.'*

Doctoral candidate attrition has been linked to feelings of social isolation that can stem from confusion about program expectations and a lack of meaningful communication with peers and Faculty/University staff.[18] Peers (such as fellow graduate students or postdoctoral researchers) can be crucial as, for example, they can be a source of emotional, social and intellectual support which can replace or complement supervisory guidance.[19]

PhD candidates isolating themselves is one of the most important factors in determining delay.[20] Peer interaction has been found to be related to persistence (with HDR degrees), insofar as degree completers are more likely to be involved with their academic peers than those who drop out.[21] Peer support initiatives are also useful in creating a positive research community and facilitating a sense of belonging,[22] so increasing the opportunities for graduate students to socialise with each other should also result in a greater rate of retention. As such, the results of the MGA HDR survey suggest that **IT graduate students could certainly benefit from an increase in social support and wellbeing services**.

[18] Dharmananda Jairam and David H. Kahl, Jr., "Navigating the doctoral experience," 312.
[19] Lilia Mantai and Robyn Dowling, "Supporting the PhD journey: insights from acknowledgements," *International Journal for Research Development* 6, no. 2 (2015): 106-07.
[20] Rens van de Schoot et al., "What took them so long?" 3.
[21] Carolyn Richert Bair and Jennifer Grant Haworth, "Doctoral student attrition and persistence," 491.
[22] Jon Cornwall *et al*, "Stressors in early-stage doctoral students," 367.

8. Overall comments

8.1 What are the best aspects of being a Monash research postgraduate?

Seventeen graduate students from the Faculty of Information Technology responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Monash academics/faculties/staff	6
Facilities/services/resources	5
Research – intellectual stimulation and development	4
Student peers and colleagues	3
Supportive environment and culture	3
Social events/environment	2
Supervisors	2
Monash reputation	1

The aspect of Monash University most frequently referenced by IT graduate students was **Monash academics, faculties and staff**. Revealing comments, included:

> *"Very helpful and friendly administrators – especially [having] a graduate student coordinator to work with."*
>
> *"Full support from faculty."*

There were a handful of IT graduate students who were particularly pleased with the **facilities, services and/or resources** provided to them as students of the University. Relative comments covered a range of areas, including: good facilities, green (environment) areas, good resources, aesthetically pleasing campus, managements systems and study spaces.

Other notable comments, included:

> *"A great platform to learn constantly and grow, meet experts in the field and fellow students who share equal passion [for] research."*
>
> *"The support we get from supervisors and other academics."*
>
> *"Sense of pride in trying to do something challenging and potentially worthwhile."*
>
> *"Friendly and encouraging environment to do research."*

8.2 What are the worst aspects of being a Monash research postgraduate?

Seventeen graduate students from the Faculty of Information Technology responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Facilities/services/resources	3
Compulsory coursework	2
Course length and workload	2
Milestones	2
Administration	1
Financial issues	1
Isolation	1
Lack of support/value	1
Location	1
Professional development	1
Staff	1
Stress and wellbeing	1
Supervisors	1
Unclear requirements	1

The primary complaint of Information Technology graduate students related to the **facilities, services and resources** offered to them by the University. Interesting comments, included:

> *"[Do not have] much access to useful facilities."*
>
> *"Not great orientation/regular inductions."*

Other notable comments, included:

> *"There is extremely limited visibility into what completing a degree via research entails, until you are actually fully enrolled and committed to it."*
>
> *"Non-stop stress about how well I'm doing."*
>
> *"It is hard to look after a family with the scholarship we get. Hence, we have to do tutoring that sometime takes a lot of time and leads to not finishing PhD on time."*

8.3 How can the research postgraduate experience be improved?

Sixteen graduate students from the Faculty of Information Technology responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Community and culture	4
Course length and time	2
Coursework	2
Facilities/services/resources	2
Orientation/induction	2
Professional development	2
Administration/communication	1
Health and wellbeing support	1
Milestones	1
Monash priorities	1
Training	1

The primary suggestion from Information Technology graduate students related to improving the **sense of community and culture** within the University. Notable comments, included:

> *"If there's regular gatherings and people could share different information on campus [that] would be good."*
>
> *"A more interactive environment."*

Other notable comments, included:

> *"I feel the most recurring problem students face is self-sabotage in [a] PhD. It would be extremely helpful for new and old recruits alike to sit down and chat about what makes them anxious and go home knowing there are solutions to every problem they face – be it personal or professional."*
>
> *"More information about the available resources in the campus at the very beginning (library facilities etc.)."*
>
> *"Reducing the amount of mandatory units and professional development hours."*

8.4 Anything else you'd like to say? This is an opportunity to make any comment that is pertinent to your experience as a research student at Monash. We want to hear it so fire away!

Five graduate students from the Faculty of Information Technology responded to this question. Their comments, included:

> *"Love being a Monash postgraduate! Looking forward to more adventures."*
>
> *"Thank you [MPA] for advocating for students. God knows we need it."*
>
> *"Very happy that you are listening to us. Thank you."*
>
> *"Overall, I enjoy being here."*

8.5 Summary

Perhaps in part because it is a broad theme, and also one that is principally subjective, *facilities, services and resources* came up repeatedly when graduate students were considering the best and the worst aspects of their degrees, as well as how they could be improved. These statements often related to the respondent's infrastructure and learning expectations and requirements.

Academics, faculties, support staff and *supervisors* ranked highest in '*the best aspects of being a Monash research postgraduate'* responses, as did the overall University supportive environment and culture.

Compulsory coursework, course length and workload and *milestones* were ranked among the worst aspects of being a Monash research graduate student.

When it came to the question *'How can the research postgraduate experience be improved?'* the primary suggestion from IT graduate students related to improving the sense of community and culture within the University.

(iv) MGA Recommendations

Based on the findings of this survey and direct contact with the Faculty of IT graduate student community, the MGA proposes the following recommendations:

Supervision:

1. *That the Faculty consider encouraging and supporting prospective and incoming HDR students to choose their own supervisor.*

Milestones:

2. *That graduate students are provided with clear, thorough and consistent information regarding milestone requirements.*

School culture and facilities:

3. *That the Faculty improve opportunities for interaction, networking and discussions among postgraduate peers.*
4. *That graduate students are offered seminars or workshops relating to 'preventing procrastination,' 'dealing with anxiety' and 'help with stress management.'*

(v) Bibliography

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(vi) Appendix 1

Demographics of respondents from Faculty of Information Technology:

Faculty (Schools)	count	percentage
Caulfield IT	15	38.5%
Clayton IT	22	57.9%
Malaysia	2	5.3%

Mode of attendance	count	Percentage
Internal (on-campus)	39	100%
External (off-campus)	0	0%

Nationality	Count	Percentage
Domestic student	6	15.4%
International student	33	84.6%

Attendance type	Count	Percentage
Full-time	38	97.4%
Part-time	1	2.6%

Gender	Count	Percentage
Female	20	51.3%
Male	19	48.7%

Enrolled Program	Count	Percentage
PhD	30	76.9%
Master by research	8	20.5%
Other	1	2.6%

Scholarship	Count	Percentage
Receives scholarship	34	87.2%
No scholarship	4	10.3%
No, but I have previously held a scholarship	1	2.6%