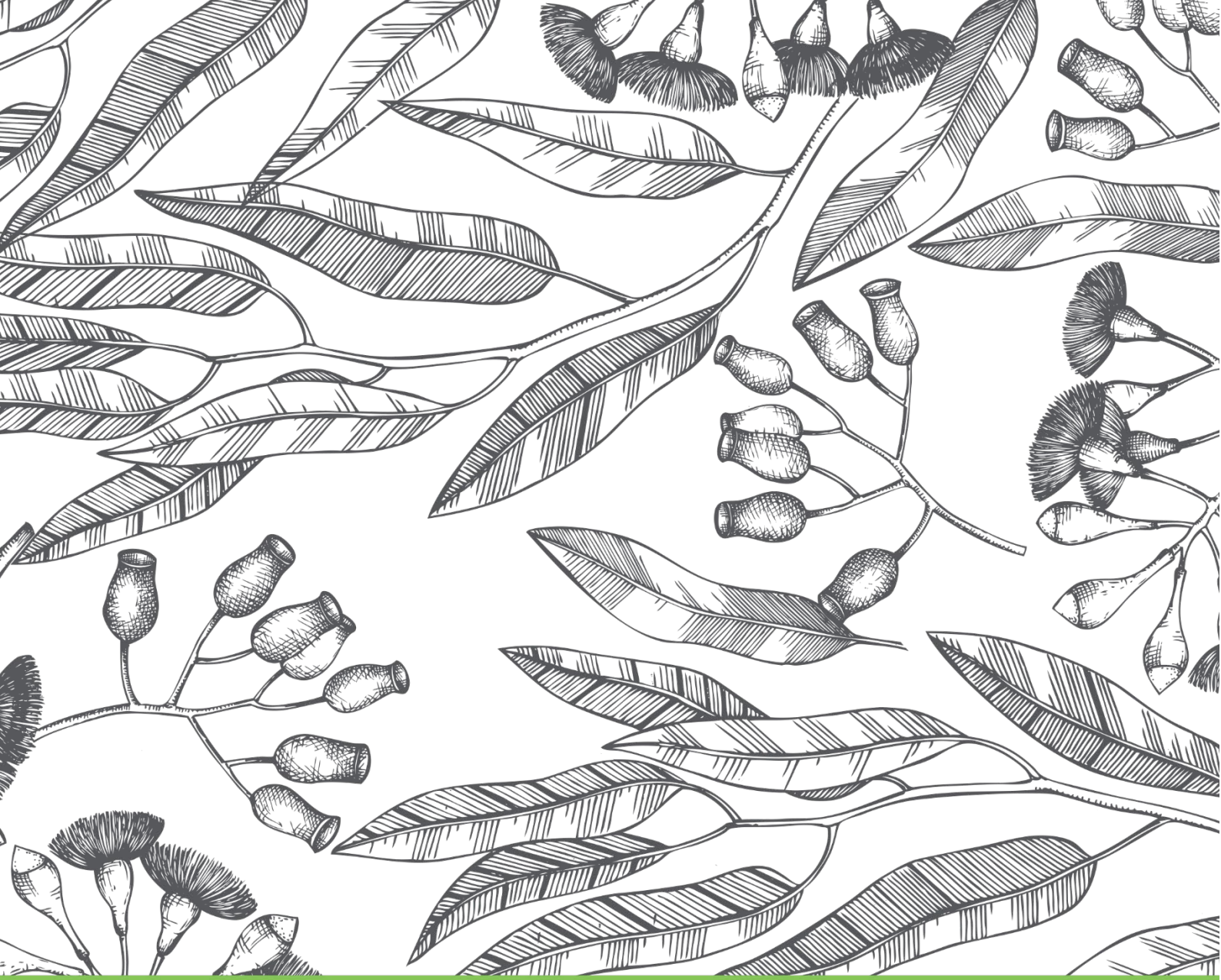

MONASH GRADUATE ASSOCIATION (MGA)

HDR SURVEY

MONASH LAW

FACULTY REPORT 2019

mga monash graduate association

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

For comments and enquiries please contact:
Jenny Reeder, MGA Executive Officer
jenny.reeder@monash.edu
Dina Galanopoulos, MGA Research Officer
dina.galanopoulos@monash.edu
Ryan Edwards, MGA Research Advocate
ryan.edwards@monash.edu

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(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 Monash Law are summarised below.

Supervision

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

Milestones

Monash Law respondents tended to agree with positive statements in relation to their confirmation experiences.

When asked specifically about termination of candidature based on milestone performance, more Monash Law respondents agreed than disagreed it was appropriate if you failed confirmation, but for subsequent milestones more disagreed than agreed.

Coursework

Graduate student responses relating to compulsory discipline-based coursework were generally mixed. Just under half of the respondents from Monash Law felt that their research degrees were improved by the inclusion of compulsory discipline-based coursework units.

Professional Development

Just under a third (30%) of Monash Law graduate students responded that professional development units, as offered through *myDevelopment*, should be a compulsory part of a research degree, while less than one in five indicated that they should not be.

Progress, delays and discontinuation

Monash Law respondents were slightly less likely to have experienced significant delay in the progress of their research as graduate students enrolled across all faculties.

While 70% of Monash Law respondents agreed that they had sufficient time to produce a quality research project, despite additional requirements of compulsory milestones/coursework/professional development, 30% indicated they felt an uncomfortable level of stress (*a lot* or *a great deal* of stress) about finishing their degree on time.

School culture and facilities

Overall, Monash Law respondents were less satisfied (50%) with the level of resources and facilities than University graduate students (71%), while they were also less likely to agree with the statement *'I feel included in my academic unit'* than were their University peers.

Stress and wellbeing

The area in which Monash Law respondents expressed they felt the highest level of stress was in relation to *'finding work after completion of my degree,'* while the area associated with the least amount of stress was *'my relationship with my supervisor.'*

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

Overall comments

Supervisors were the best aspect of being a Monash research graduate student according to Monash Law respondents, while a lack of community and socialising was the worst aspect.

Monash Law respondents 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, 11 were from research graduate students enrolled through Monash Law, which equates to 13% of the total research graduate student population of the Faculty for that year.

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

In the quantitative analysis, some Monash Law 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 Monash Law responded to fourteen 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.

All schools of Monash Law were represented in terms of responses. Overall respondents were skewed towards on-campus (82%), domestic (73%), full-time students (64%). Female (45%) and male (55%) genders were well represented. Appendix 1 provides the demographics of Monash Law respondents.

[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.

This report has been produced for circulation to Monash Law, the Graduate Research Committee and the Monash Graduate Research Office.

(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	Law	University
Yes	6 (54.5%)	386 (57.8%)
No, but I've heard about it	1 (9.1%)	169 (25.3%)
No, I didn't know it existed	4 (36.4%)	113 (16.9%)

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

Aware of supervisor's responsibility	Law	University
Yes	8 (72.7%)	533 (79.8%)
No	0 (0%)	22 (3.3%)
Not sure	3 (27.3%)	113 (16.9%)

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

Aware of own responsibilities	Law	University
Yes	10 (90.9%)	592 (88.6%)
No	0 (0%)	14 (2.1%)
Not sure	1 (9.1%)	62 (9.3%)

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

Conflict or misunderstanding with your supervisor	Law	University
Yes	2 (18.2%)	108 (16.2%)
No	9 (81.8%)	560 (83.8%)

Law respondents were more likely to have read the Code of Practice than not, while the overwhelming majority of them were aware of their own responsibilities as Monash research graduate students.

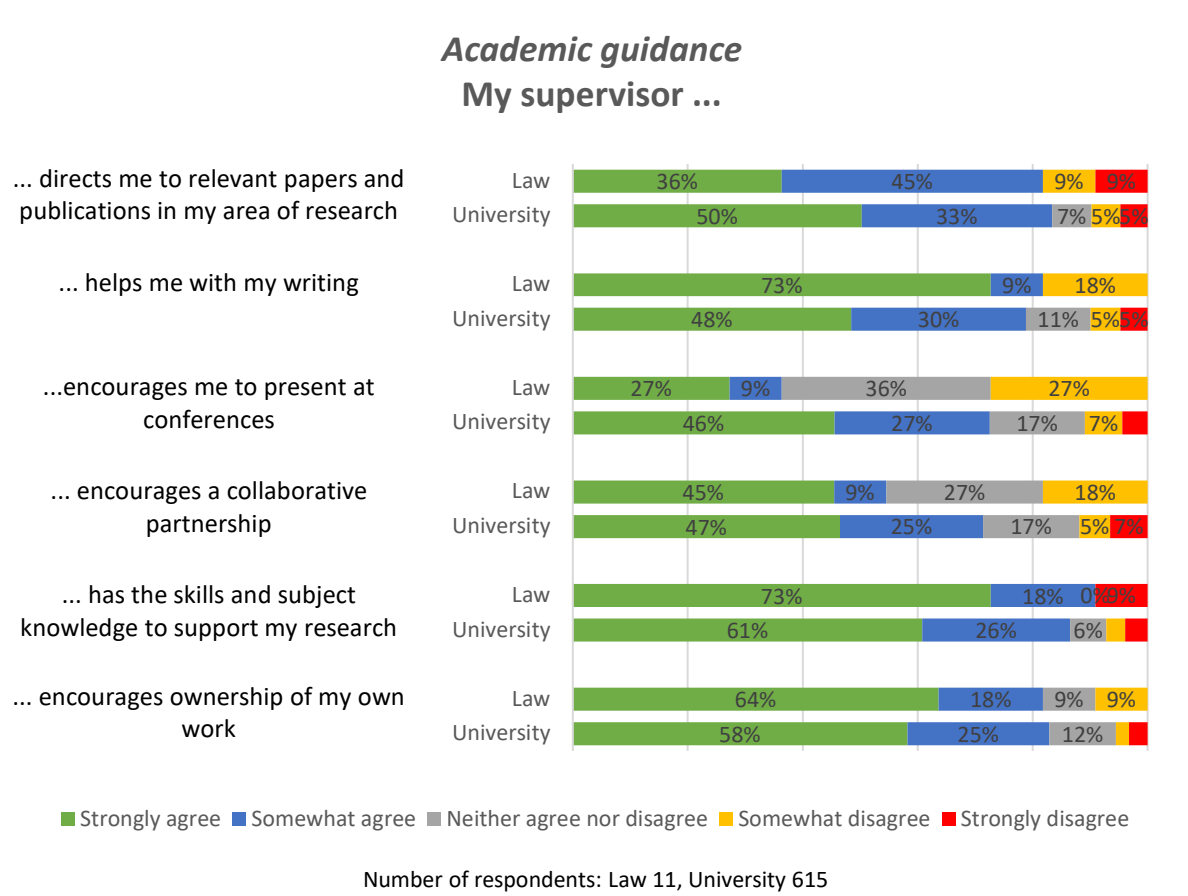
1.5 What was the general nature of the conflict/misunderstanding with your supervisor?

There was only **one comment from a Faculty of Law graduate student** in response to this question.

This comment, included:

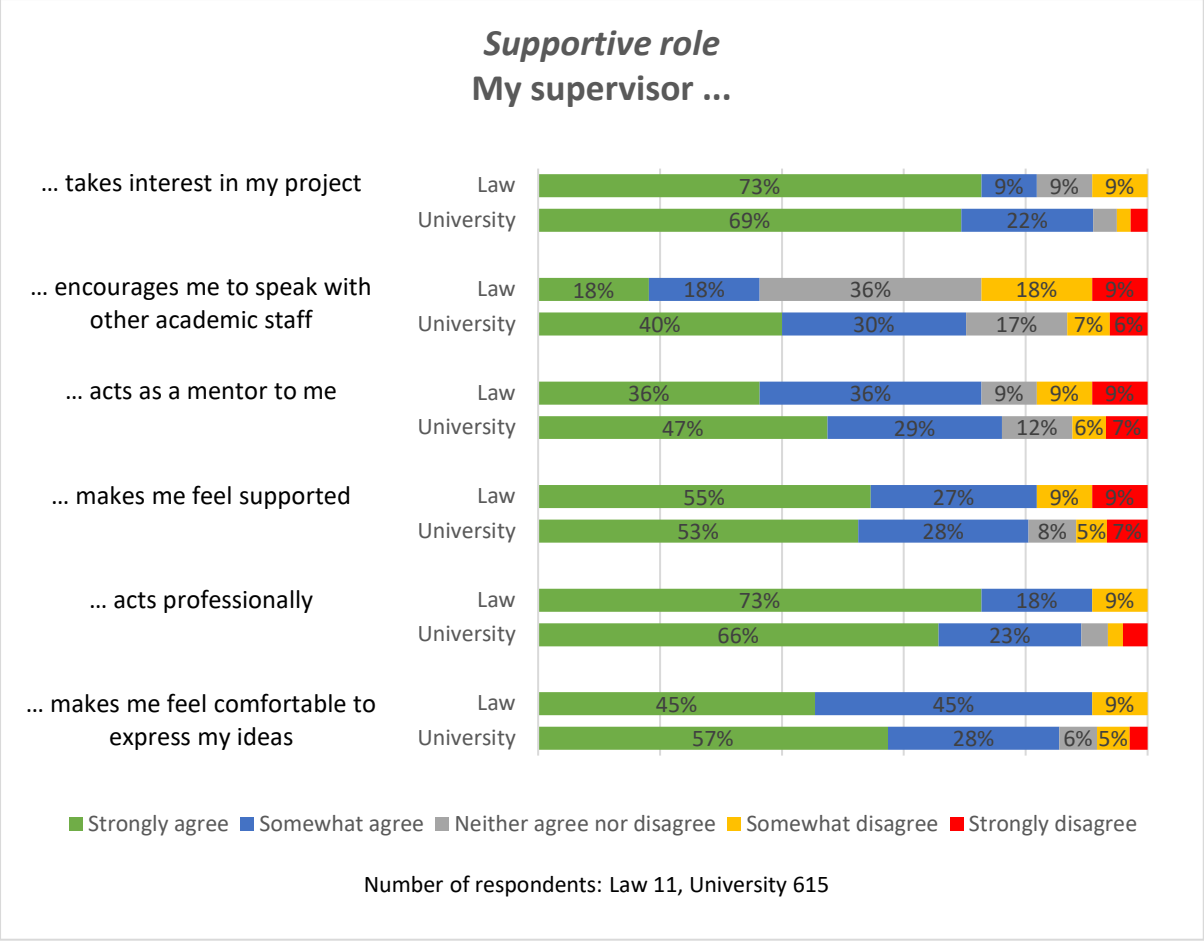
> *"Inaccurate information provided re. word limit on assignment."*

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]

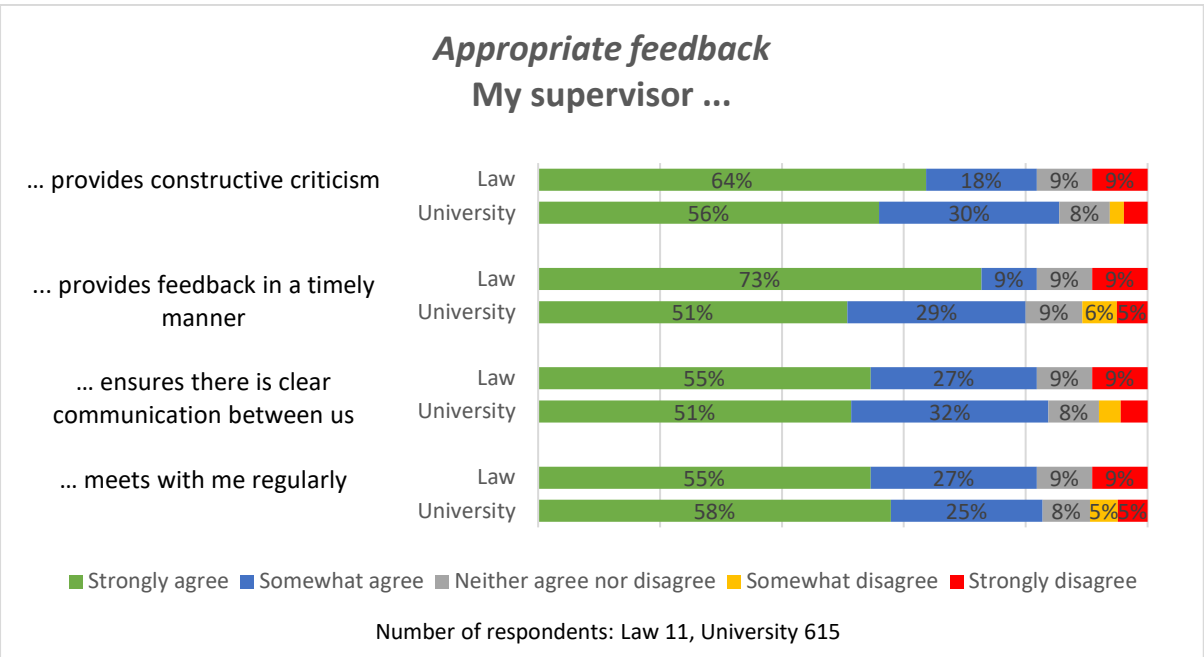


Except for feeling encouraged by their supervisors to present at conferences, Monash Law respondents tended to agree with positive statements relating the academic guidance provided by their supervisors.

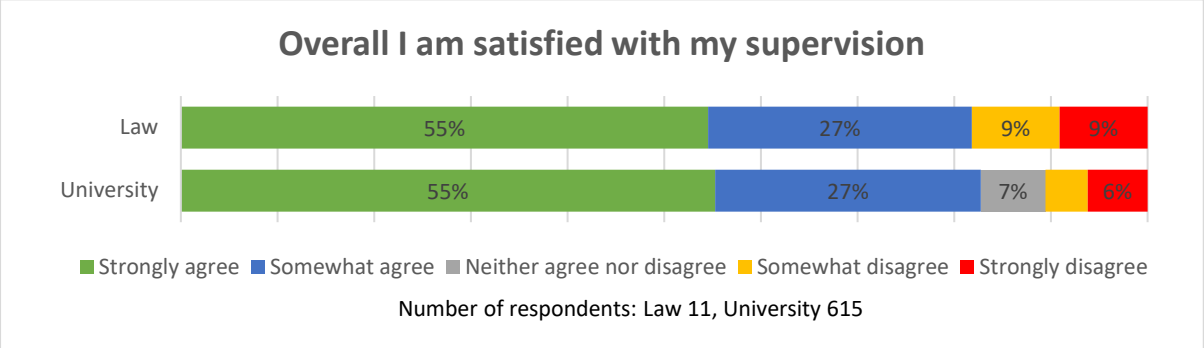
[3] Where responses were less than 5%, the figure has not been included due to lack of space.



Except for feeling encouraged to speak to other academic staff, Monash Law respondents tended to agree with positive statements relating to the supportive role played by their supervisors. This was especially true in response to the statement *'my supervisor acts professionally.'*



Eighty-two percent (82%) of Monash Law respondents agreed with each of these positive statements relating to the feedback provided by their supervisors.



Eighty-two percent (82%) of Monash Law respondents were satisfied with their supervision.

1.7 Opportunity for comments regarding your supervision.

Four graduate students from the Faculty of Law responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 2 Positive comments: 1

General theme	Number of responses
Communication and feedback – good and bad	2
Changing supervisors	1
Inaccessibility	1
Incompetence/unsuitability and lacking appropriate skills/experience/knowledge	1
Mentoring - negative	1
Suggested improvements	1

Notable comments to emerge from Faculty of Law graduate students relating to supervision, included:

> *"Supervisors should offer alternative means for meetings e.g. Skype."*
>
> *"A PhD … is not just the research work. It is a period of time when one prepares him/herself for an academic career (barring some exceptions). Mentoring is important and should be encouraged."*
>
> *"It would sometimes take [my supervisor] close to four to five months to [give] feedback. Furthermore, the area I am working on is not in his area of specialisation, but he takes no interest in finding a suitable supervisor to support in the supervision."*

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 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 Monash Law (82%) was the same as 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] Monash Law respondents tended to agree with most 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 slightly higher in Monash Law (91%) than it was in the University (87%).

---

[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.

[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.

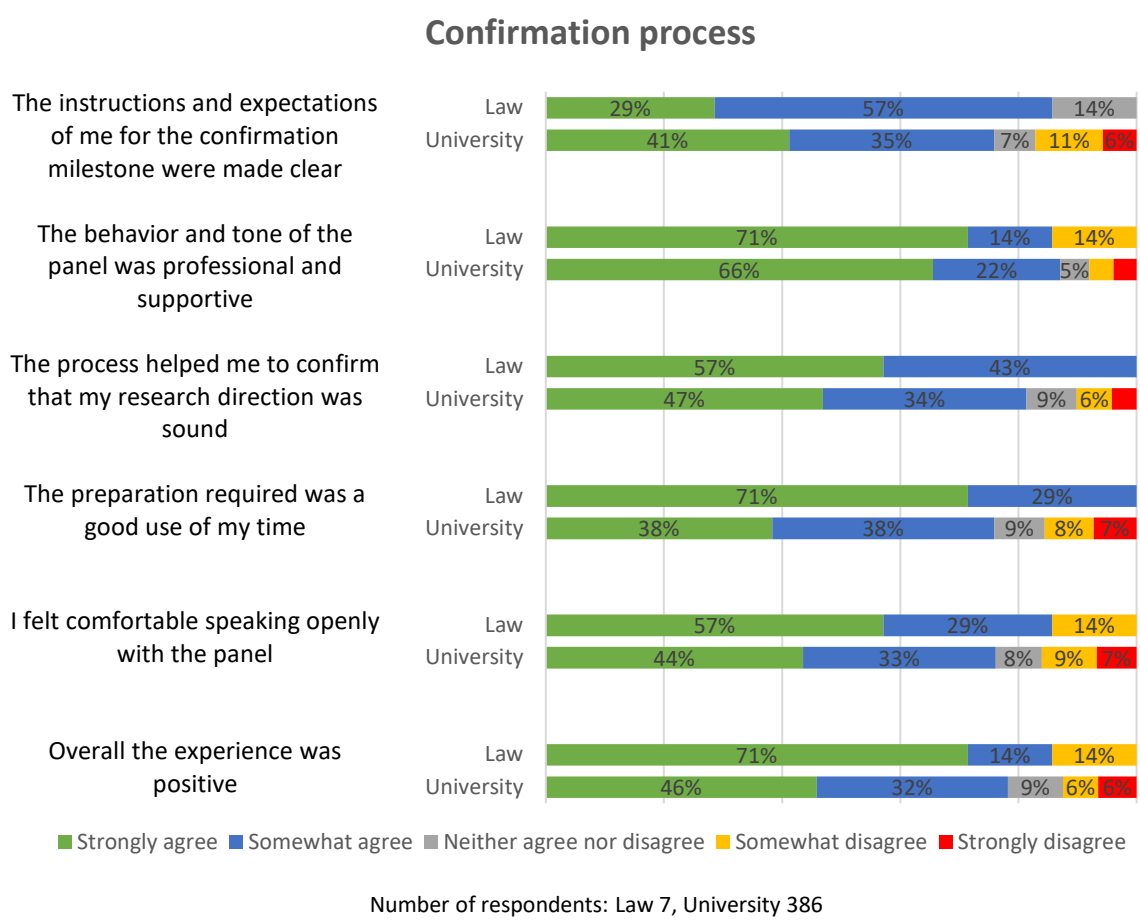
[10] Dharmananda Jairam and David H. Kahl, Jr., "Navigating the doctoral experience: The role of social support in successful degree completion," *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* 7 (2012): 320.

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*).

[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.

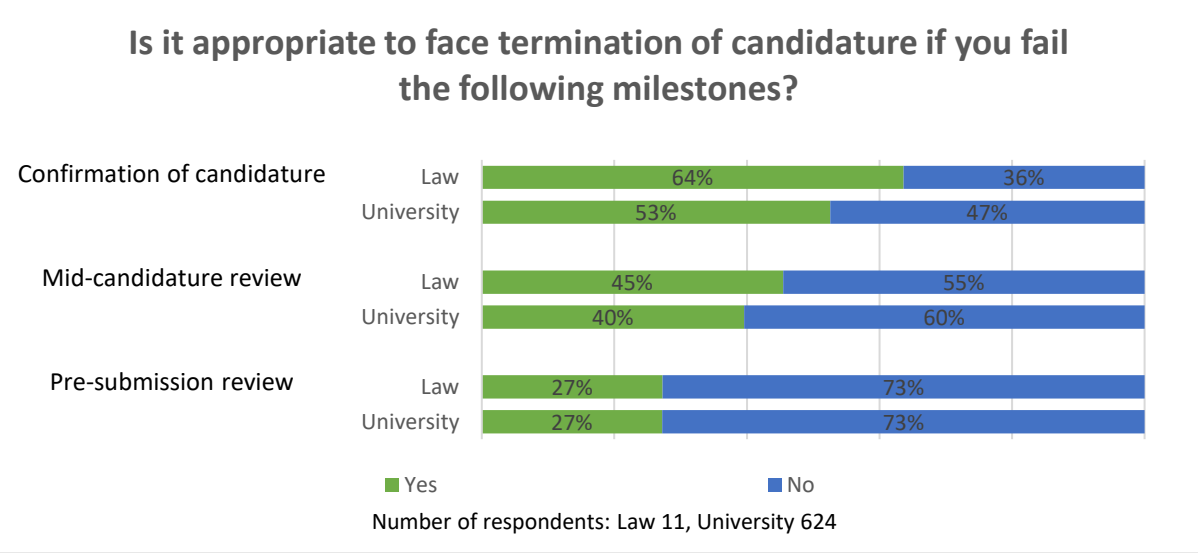


Monash Law respondents tended to agree with positive statements relating to the confirmation process. This was especially true in relation to the statement *'The preparation required was a good use of my time,'* which received total agreement.

2.2 Opportunity for comments about the confirmation process.

There were **no comments from Faculty of Law graduate students** to this statement.

2.3 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?



Approximately two in three Monash Law respondents agreed it was appropriate to face termination at confirmation of candidature; however, as candidature progressed, they become more likely to disagree with the practice.

2.4 Opportunity for comments about milestones.

Three graduate students from Monash Law responded to this statement. Their insightful comments are included below:

> *"[Termination] is a great idea – incompetent students should not continue to receive ultra-competitive scholarships, thereby depriving really committed and talented students of scholarship funds."*

> *"The faculty in charge should be in contact regularly with students to get feedback on how they are being supervised. I have not been given any chance to do so at any stage. It is difficult for students to do this on their own. There are irresponsible supervisors, who do not supervise their students properly. The irresponsibility is sometime gross."*

> *"If these milestones are hurdle requirements, more attention should be given to the selection of panel members, who should be capable of understanding the subject matter of the candidate's research and also have a genuine interest in it. Otherwise, the assessment – and possibly the termination process – would seem unfair to the candidate. The instruction guides should also be clearer. In the past, I have received very generic and unhelpful 'samples' of writing and only managed to find better examples through communication with other successful PhD candidates."*

2.5 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]

Monash Law graduate students tended to agree with positive statements regarding their milestones. In regards to the confirmation process, 85% 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. While the majority of Monash Law graduate students (64%) agreed that it was appropriate to face termination for failing the confirmation milestone (see *2.7*), they were more likely to disagree it was appropriate at subsequent 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

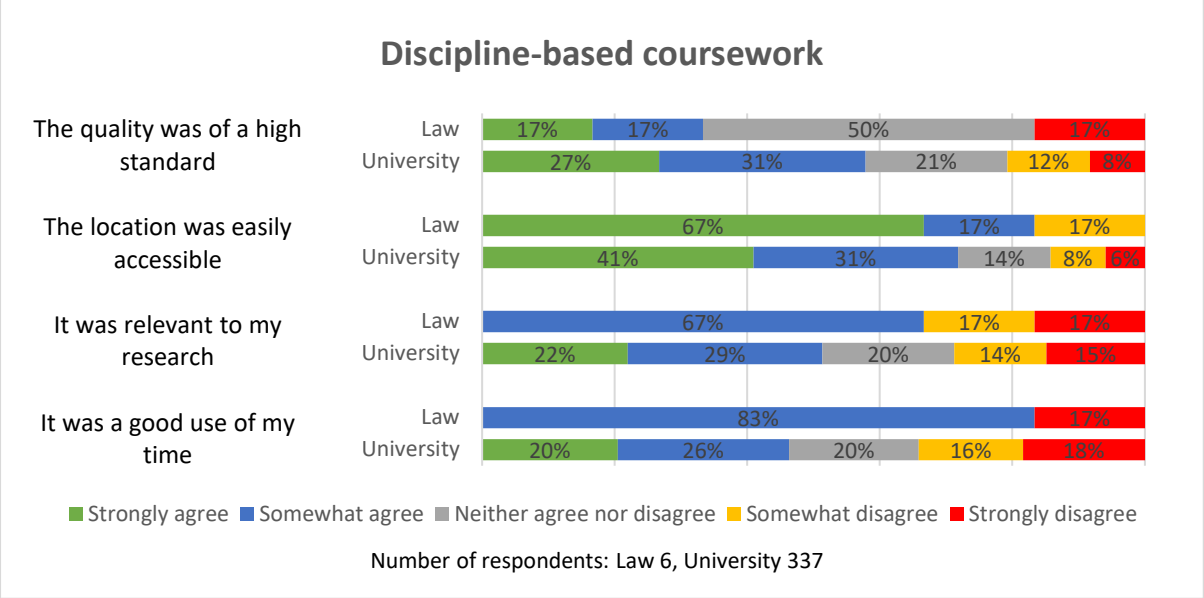
Coursework units are not a compulsory requirement for graduate students of Monash Law; however, several students still provided responses to these questions.

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?	**Law**	**University**
Yes	5 (45.5%)	236 (37.9%)
No	3 (27.3%)	178 (28.6%)
Not sure	3 (27.3%)	209 (33.5%)

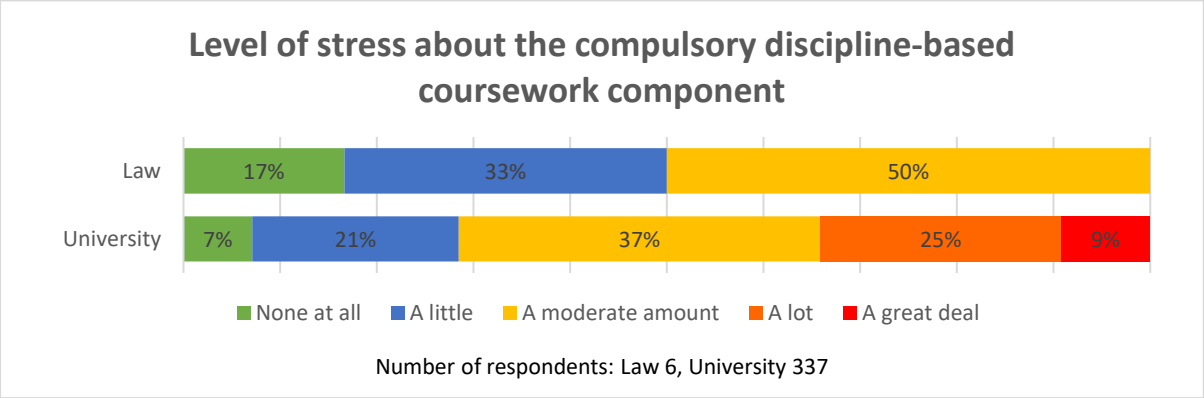
Monash Law respondents were more likely to agree that their degrees would be improved by compulsory coursework units than they were to disagree.

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



The majority of Monash Law graduate students responded that they *somewhat agree* that the discipline-based 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.



None of the Monash Law respondents expressed that they had felt an uncomfortable (*a lot* or *a great deal*) level of stress because of discipline-based coursework.

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

Four students from the Faculty of Law responded to this statement.

Their comments, included:

> *"It's a waste of time [and] poorly designed. Basically, you can't get anything useful out of 3 hours of seminars in which you are forced to discuss an area of your discipline … that's entirely unrelated to your research."*
>
> *"It should be voluntary."*

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] Monash Law graduate students were no different in this regard with respondents somewhat split over its relevance and usefulness.

4. Professional Development

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

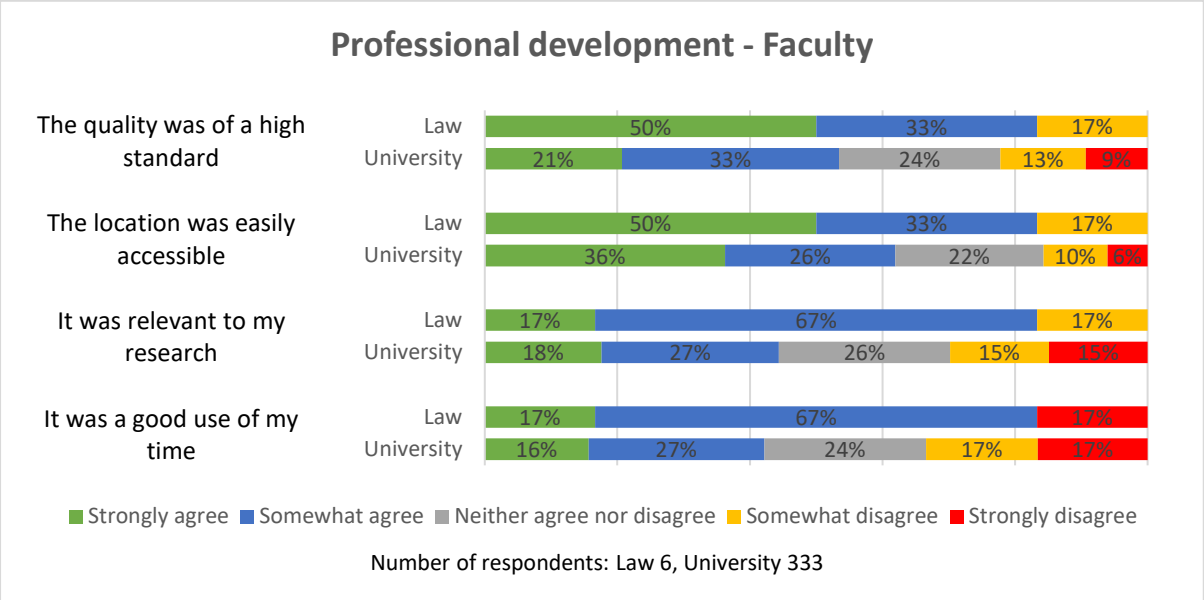
Should professional development be compulsory?	**Law**	**University**

[13] Rens van de Schoot et al., "What took them so long?" 9.
[14] Margaret Kiley, "Reflections on change in doctoral education," 85.

Yes	3 (30%)	157 (25.4%)
No	2 (20%)	283 (45.9%)
Not sure	5 (50%)	177 (28.7%)

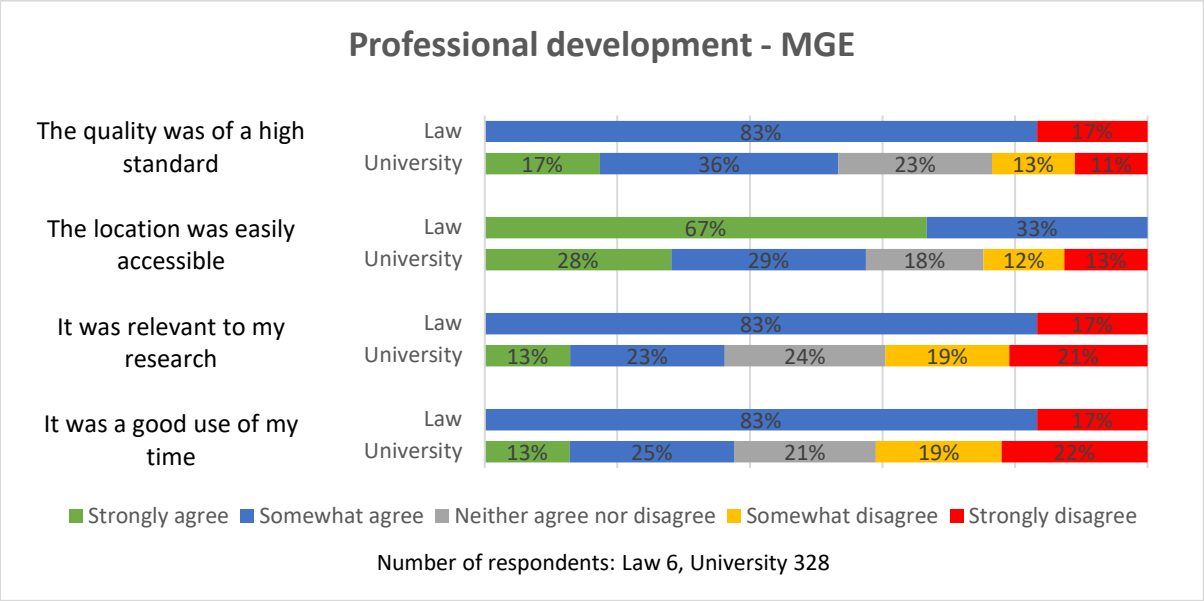
Half of Monash Law respondents were not sure if professional development units should be a compulsory part of a research degree.

4.2 Please rate the following statements relating to your overall experience of the professional development component of your degree offered by your faculty. (If your faculty does not offer any professional development or you have not participated in any such courses please skip this question).



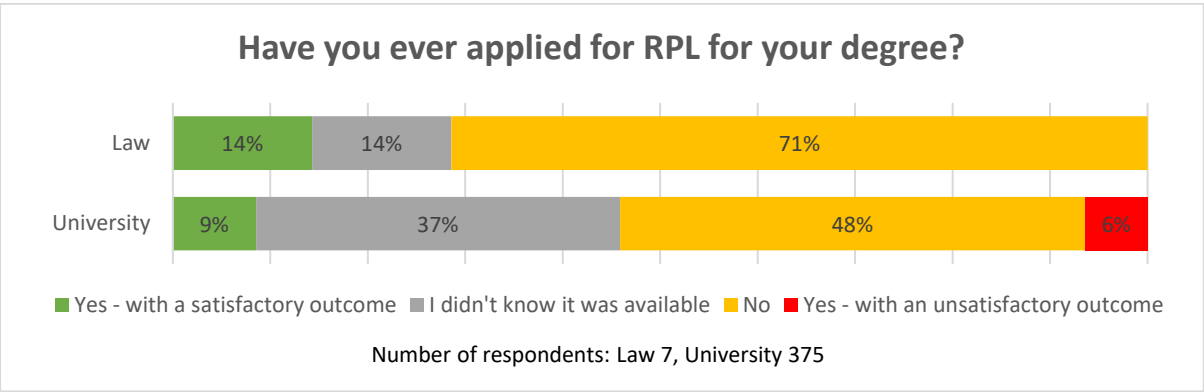
Monash Law respondents tended to agree with positive statements regarding the professional development units offered by their faculty.

4.3 Please rate the following statements relating to your overall experience of the professional development component of your degree offered by MGE (central). (If you have not participated in any such courses please skip this question).

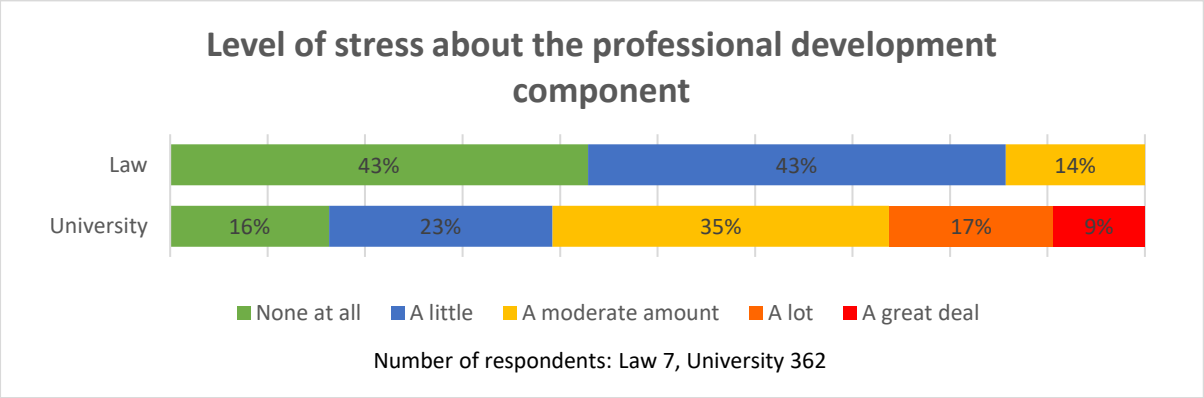


As with the professional development units offered by the Faculty, Monash Law respondents tended to agree with the positive statements regarding the MGE professional development units.

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



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



None of the Monash Law respondents expressed that they had felt 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.

Four graduate students from the Faculty of Law responded to this statement.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

Negative comments: 3 Positive comments: 2

General theme	Number of responses
Irrelevant/discipline-specific/lack of options	2
Time-consuming/waste of time/misdirected energy	1

Notable comments relating to compulsory professional development units in the Faculty of Law, included:

> *"It's boring, condescending 'corporate team building' stuff, which is useless to me. Maybe other students with less work experience find it useful though."*
>
> *"A good idea, but 120 hours is too much. Some more document management courses like Endnote should be offered. I've been to some excellent courses and some duds."*
>
> *"The compulsory essays are a real pain. They take me away from my thesis and I've already proved myself and do not need to write them … Some courses, like the law ones, are informative. Some of the general HDR ones are great too; others are of very poor quality [and are] really suited to undergrads. I think 120 hours is too much."*

4.7 Summary

Compared to the other elements of the HDR course experiences explored in this survey, the negativity surrounding professional development stood out; however, there were too few respondents from Monash Law to truly understand the experiences of Monash Law graduates.

5. Progress delays and discontinuation

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

Has your research degree progress been delayed?	Law	University
Yes	3 (30%)	231 (37.8%)
No	7 (70%)	380 (62.2%)

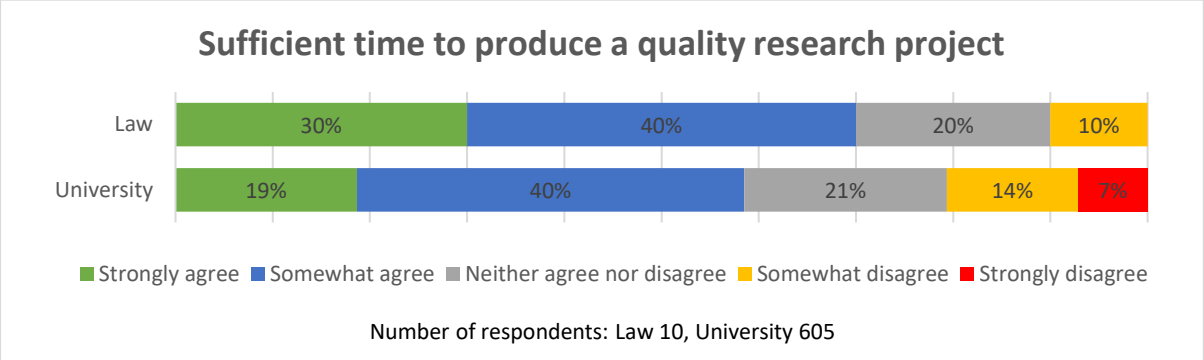
Monash Law respondents were less likely to have experienced significant delay in their research degrees than University graduate students.

5.2 Have you ever considered discontinuing your enrolment?

Have you considered discontinuing your enrolment?	Law	University
Yes	1 (10%)	179 (29.3%)
No	9 (90%)	431 (70.7%)

Monash Law respondents were substantially less likely to have considered discontinuing their enrolment than their peers across the University.

5.3 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



Seventy percent (70%) of Monash Law respondents agreed that they had sufficient time to produce a quality research project.

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

Six students from the Faculty of Law responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Facilities/labs/equipment/software	3
Supervision	3
Research environment – networking/mentoring/support groups	2
Access to research material/resources	1
Administration – guidelines/information/communication/ availability	1
Family-friendly initiatives/support	1
Reducing bureaucratic requirements	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.

Law 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.

One of the most frequently highlighted areas of Monash Law graduate students was **supervision**. Interesting comments, included:

> *"Timely feedback."*
>
> *"Regular meetings with supervisors."*

Another area highlighted by Law graduate students was **facilities, labs, equipment and software**.

> *"Better computers that are not constantly breaking down."*
>
> *"Better Endnote [software] that doesn't crash all the time."*

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

> *"Allow me to access printing from normal terminals. Every time I want to print, I have to book a carrel with a computer in it."*
>
> *"Free tea and coffee."*
>
> *"Lessen administrative responsibilities."*

5.5 Opportunity for comments regarding your general progress.

There was **only one comment from Faculty of Law graduate students** in response to this statement.

> *"None – all good."*

5.6 Summary

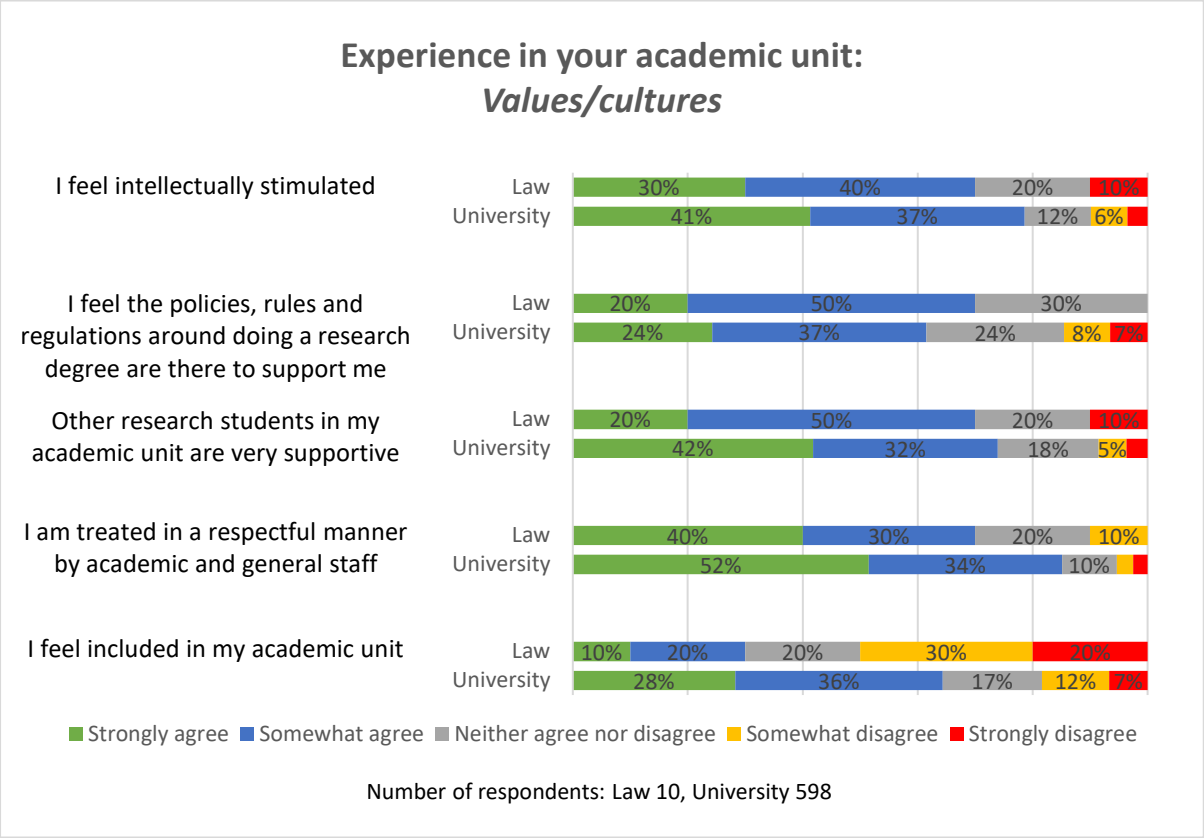
Just less than one-third of Monash Law respondents (30.0%) had experienced a delay in their research degree, while only 10% had considered discontinuing their enrolment.

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.

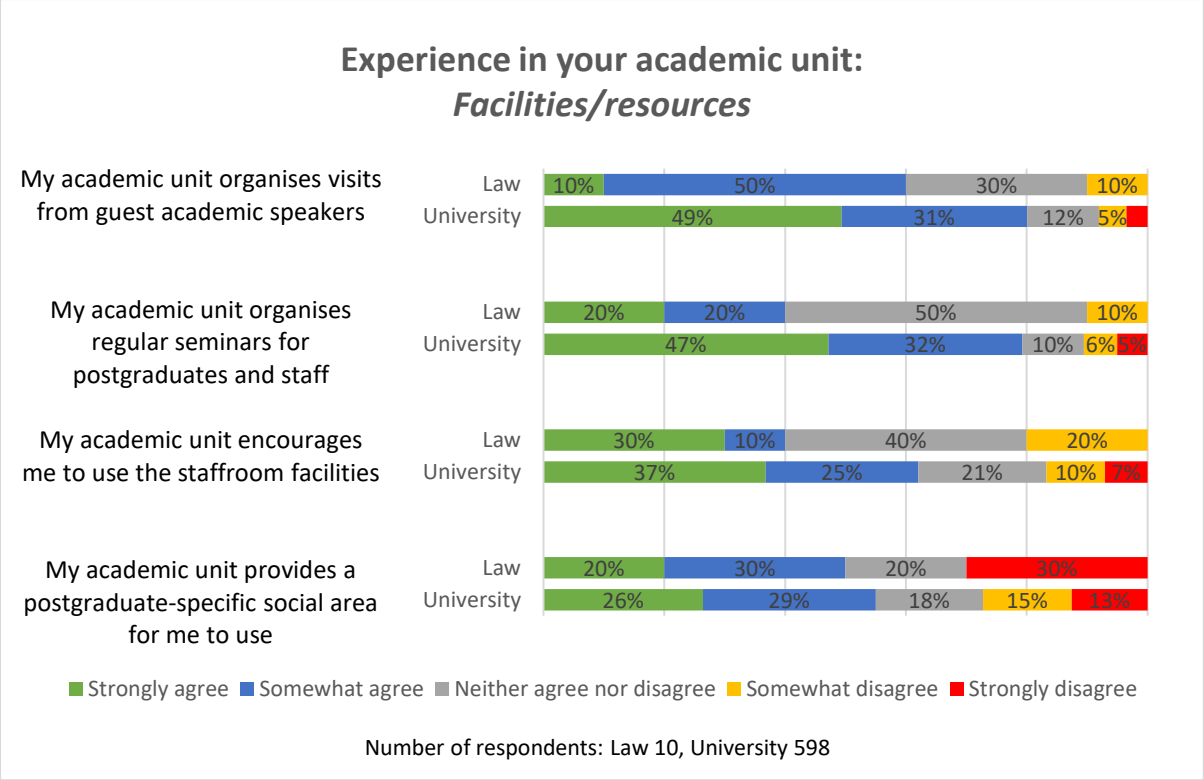
[15] Glenice Ives and Glenn Rowley, "Supervisor selection or allocation and continuity of supervision," 535.

6. School culture and facilities

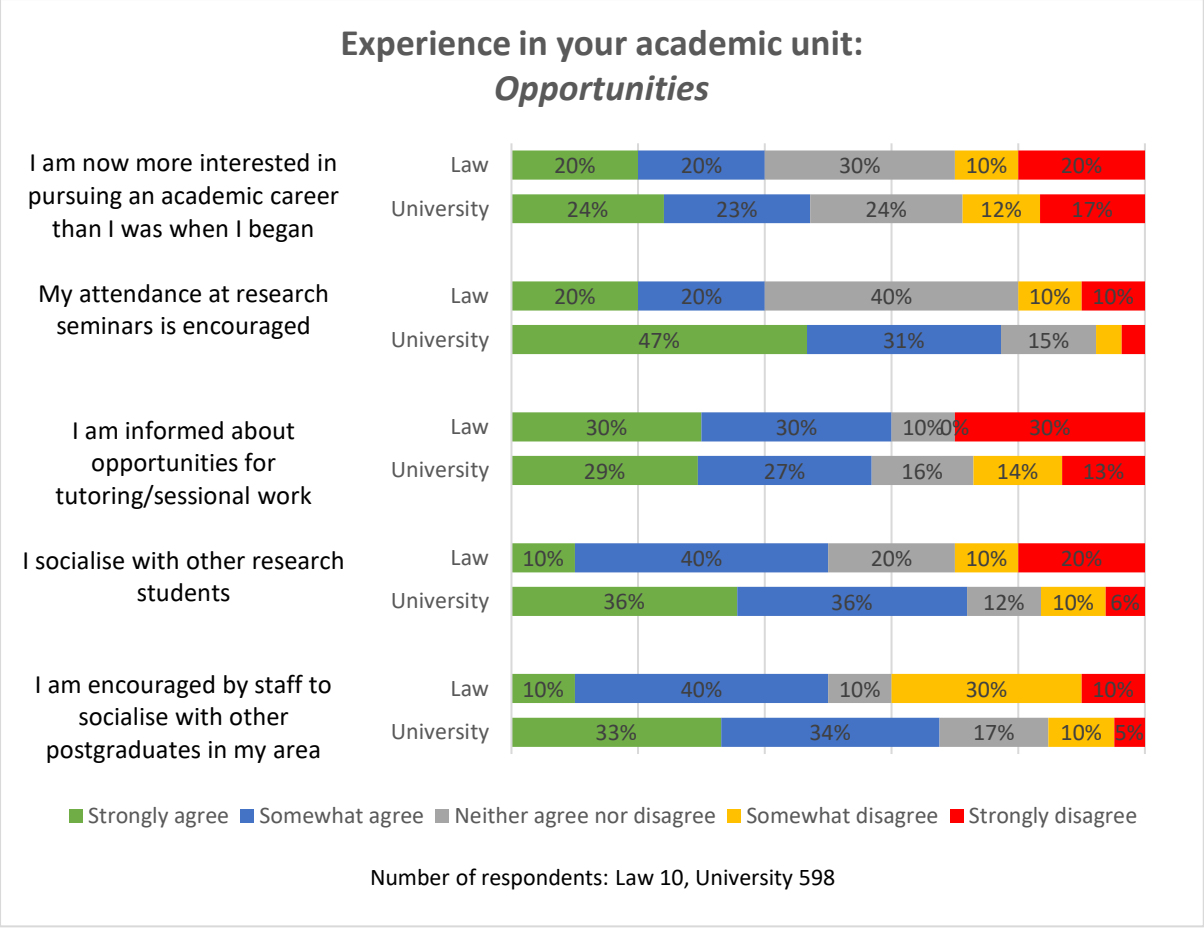
6.1 Please rate the following statements in relation to your specific experience in your academic unit:



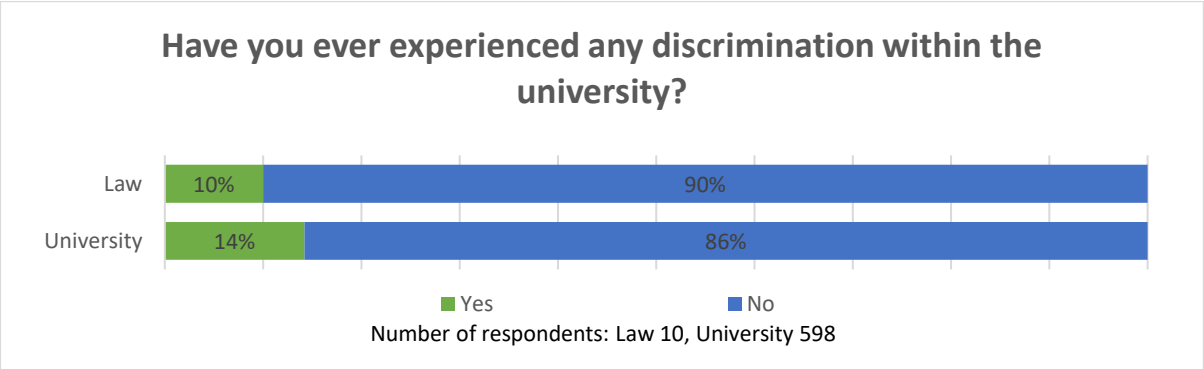
Monash Law graduate students tended to agree with positive statements regarding the values and culture of their academic unit; however, only 30% agreed with the statement *'I feel included in my academic unit,'* which was substantially less than the University-wide result.



On average, Monash Law respondents were less likely to agree with positive statements relating to facilities and resources.



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



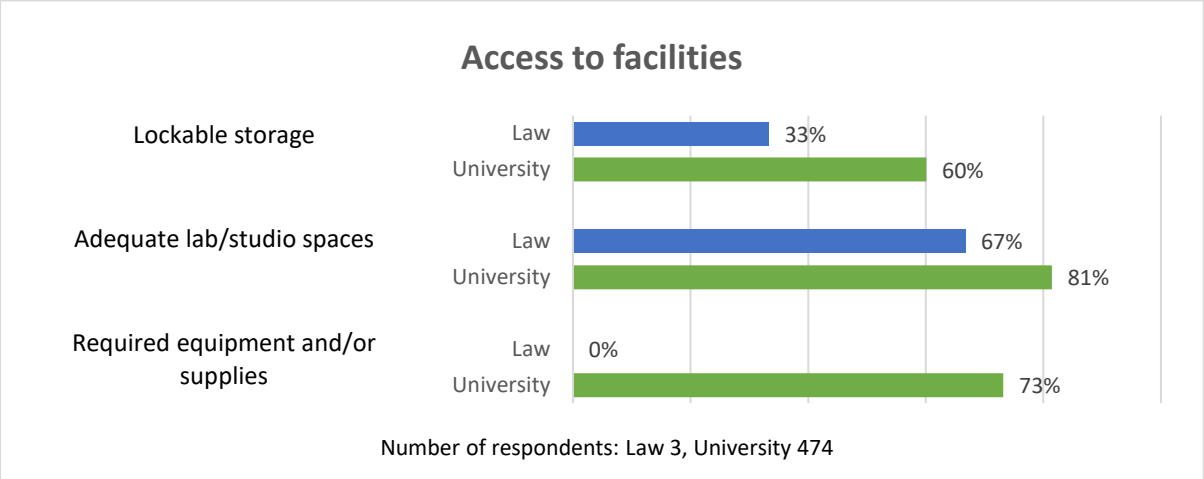
6.3 Opportunity for comments regarding the way in which you are treated.

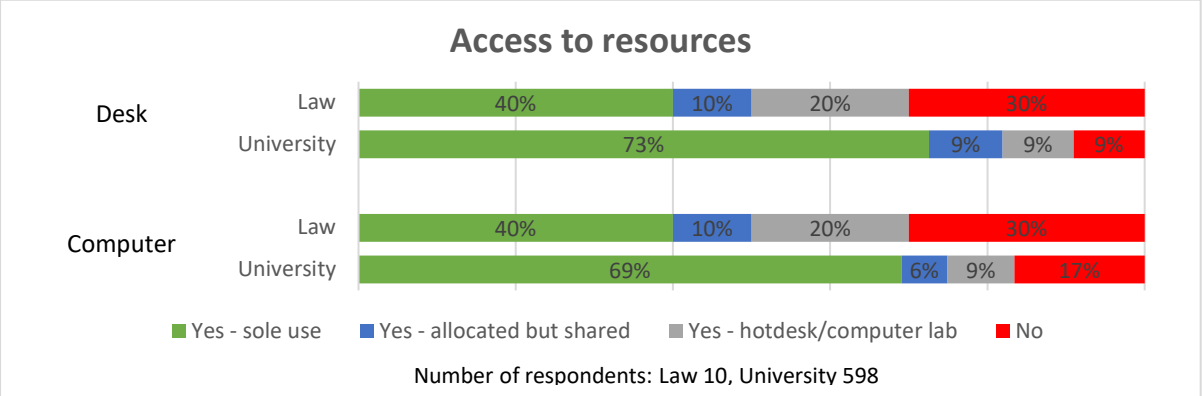
Only **one graduate student from the Faculty of Law** responded to this statement.

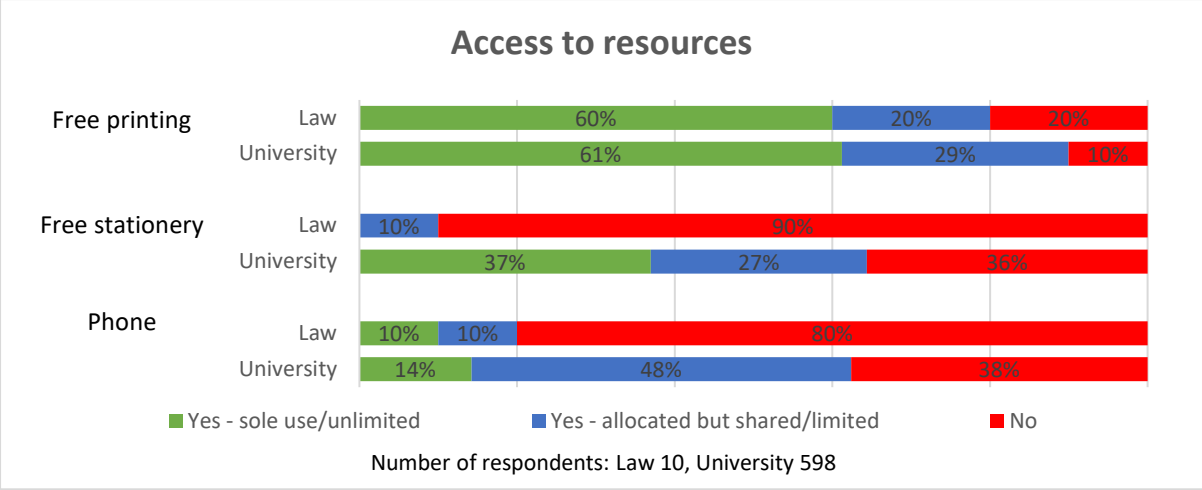
This comment, included:

> *"A horribly sexist and antagonistic facilitator at an MGE coursework module."*

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

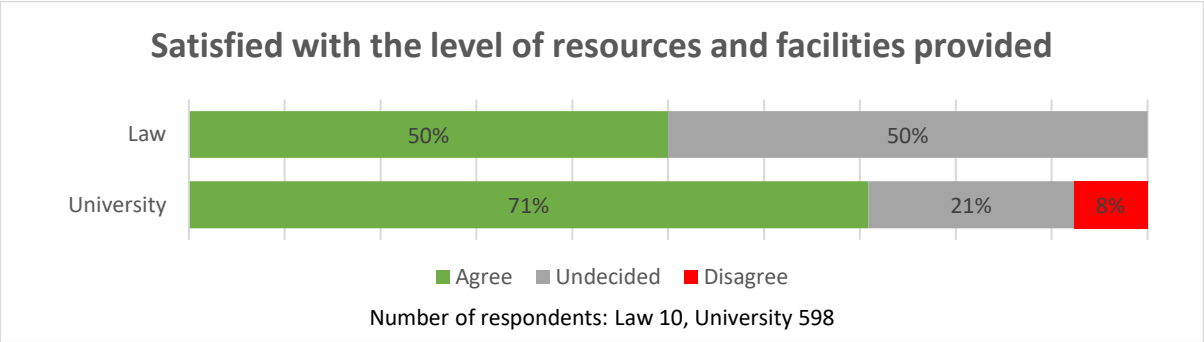






Law graduate students were substantially less likely to have access to desks, computers, free printing, free stationery and a phone than were respondents from the University.

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



Only half of Monash Law respondents were satisfied with the level of resources and facilities provided to them, while the other half were undecided.

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

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

These comments, included:

> *"Access to printer without having to book a computer in a carrel."*
>
> *"Although I have been fortunate to have a carrel in the law library, I am aware that there is a very limited number of carrels. Many PhD students are unable to work on campus in a convenient manner because of a lack of allocated space. There should be at least one level or a section outside the law library where all/a majority of the PhD students are located and can work together and discuss their research."*

6.7 Summary

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

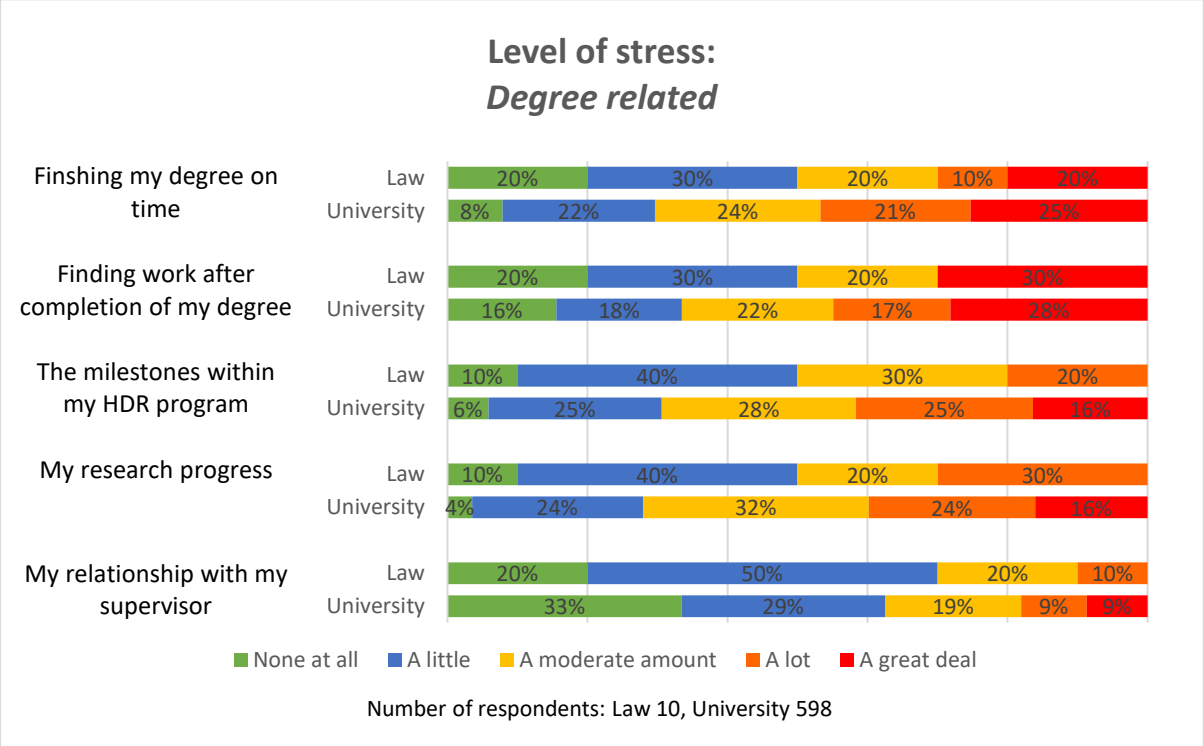
The absence of a sense of belonging in the research/faculty/scholarly community has been identified as a key cause of stress in postgraduate studies,[16] with PhD students who find themselves well-integrated in their research environments experiencing less stress and burnout."[17] This was reflected 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*.

[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.

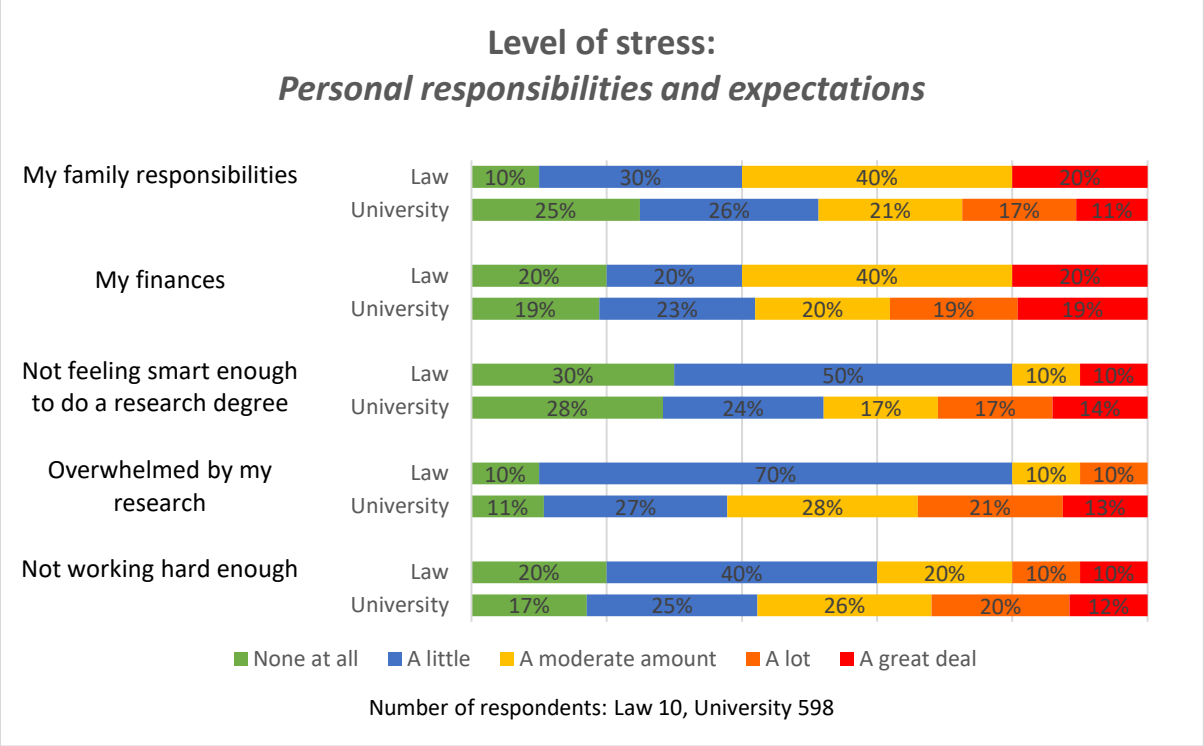
The results of this survey indicate a correlation between the absence of a sense of belonging and academic and social isolation. **These results emphasise the importance of encouraging graduate students to socialise and develop professional relationships with their peers**.

7. Stress and wellbeing

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

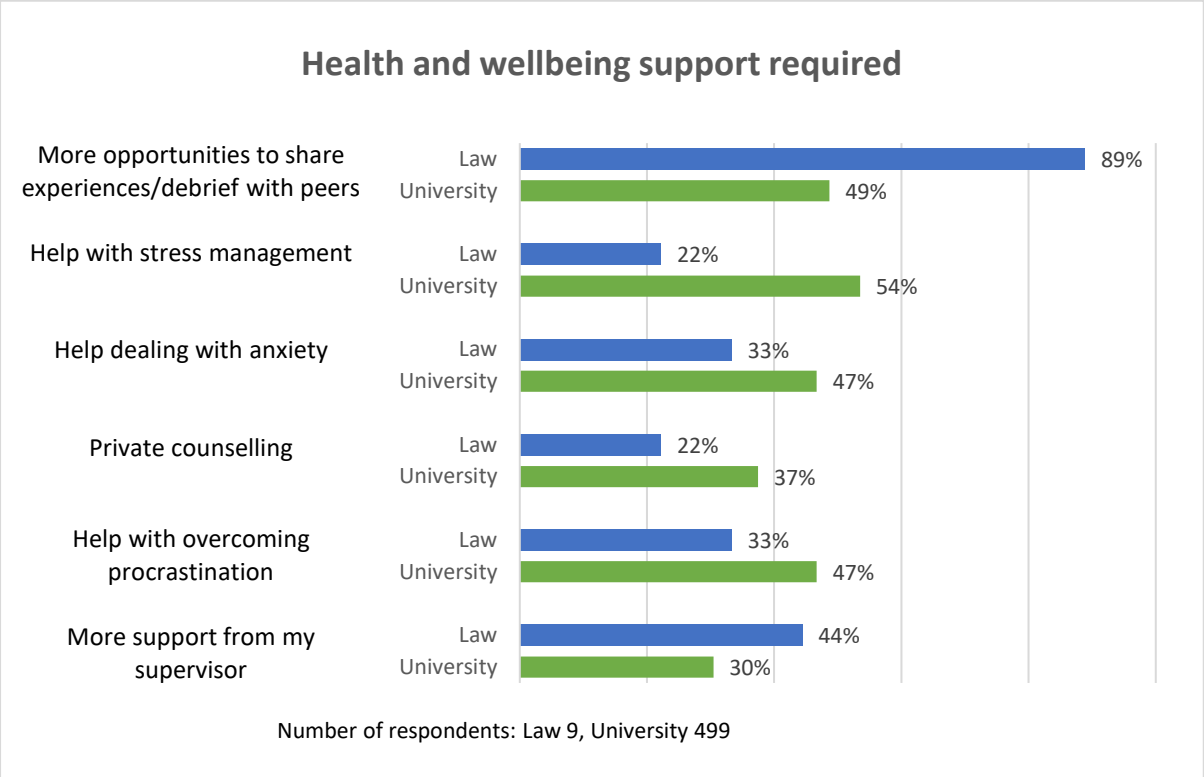


Monash Law respondents tended to experience an uncomfortable level of stress because of their degrees less so than did University-wide respondents.



Monash Law respondents tended to experience an uncomfortable level of stress because of their personal responsibilities and expectations less so than did University-wide respondents.

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



Overwhelmingly, Monash Law respondents wanted the University to provide more opportunities to share experiences and debrief with peers more than any other kind of health and wellbeing support.

7.3 Opportunity for comments regarding health and wellbeing

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

These comments, included:

> *"All good – I take care of these things myself as it is in my own interest area and I'm well accomplished in this."*
>
> *"As an international student, I wonder if currently there is any well-defined plan for supporting students with stress/anxiety or to prevent stress, even when it is a well-known fact that PhD students do experience stress/anxiety. International students, who are not familiar with the Australian culture and do not have families around to share their concerns, may find it very hard to cope with stress. However, it seems that the University leaves it for the students to figure out a support system. It should not be very difficult to organize 30-minute student meet [ups] every 2 months or whenever a new student joins, so the new student can meet his peers. It is better to have these meetings at the Faculty level because it gives an opportunity for close interaction compared to a University level meeting with a large*

number of students. It is better if some staff members could also join such meetings. A few words from someone who is used to the way of life in Melbourne can make a new student feel much [more] comfortable. Interactions with the supervisors are generally limited to discussions on the research topic/work. There may be time-constraints that prevent supervisors from engaging with a student in discussing matters other than the core research. But supervisors may be in a unique position to advise students on avoiding stress, by simply having an occasional general chit chat. The University should encourage it."

7.4 Summary

In relation to their degrees, Monash Law respondents were most-stressed about finding work after the completion of their degree and least-stressed about their relationship with their supervisor, while in relation to their personal responsibilities and expectations, they were most-stressed about their family responsibilities and least-stressed about being overwhelmed by their research.

'More opportunities to share experiences/debrief with peers' was identified as the support that Monash Law respondents most wanted to receive from the University.

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 **Monash Law 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?

Ten graduate students from the Faculty of Law responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

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

Supervisors were more likely to be rated as one of the best aspects of their courses by Faculty of Law graduate students than those in most other faculties. Noteworthy comments, included:

> *"Best supervisors in my field."*
>
> *"The access to high quality supervision."*
>
> *"Expert supervisors."*

There were a handful of Law 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 resources, materials and resources, law library and electronic resources.

Other notable comments, included:

> *"The opportunity to produce independent work in a supportive environment."*
>
> *"Quality University with excellent staff."*
>
> *"Monash is a Uni with a nice vibe too."*
>
> *"The University's reputation."*

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

Nine graduate students from the Faculty of Law responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Lack of community and socialising	3
Facilities/services/resources	2
Lack of support/value	2
Isolation	1
Lack of international student support	1
Lack of teaching/career opportunities	1
Location	1
Stress and wellbeing	1
Supervisors	1

The primary complaint from Law graduate students related to a sense there was a **lack of community** and limited socialising opportunities. Memorable comments, included:

> *"No community."*
>
> *"Lack of support for PhD candidates, low level of collegiality, communication and socialisation with other members of the faculty, inadequate work opportunities for PhD candidates."*

Other notable comments, included:

> *"Feeling alone and overwhelmed."*
>
> *"Horrendous parking situation at Clayton."*

8.3 How can the research postgraduate experience be improved?

Seven graduate students from the Faculty of Law responded to this question.

Their responses can be categorised as follows:

General theme	Number of responses
Community and culture	4
Facilities/services/resources	3
Training	2
Coursework	1
Supervisors	1

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

> *"More interaction, feeling part of the faculty [and] a space of our own to share in the faculty."*
>
> *"More interactions may help and it does not need any major time or resource commitment."*

"Fostering [a] better postgrad community."

Other notable comments, included:

"A follow up on how each student is being supervised and pointing to options available if this is not the case."

"Early on there has to be more external oversight of the direction of the PhD structure, research etc. [and] there should be online access or recording of seminars for external students or for the benefit of students [who] cannot attend a particular seminar."

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.

Three graduate students from the Faculty of Law responded to this question. Their comments, included:

"I'm highly satisfied due to the most important things – high quality supervision and administrative support."

"External students do not get the same access as on-campus students."

"Faculty's should really make efforts to see how supervision of students is progressing and take the necessary steps as appropriate. Some supervisors are grossly negligent."

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.

Supervisors ranked highest in '*the best aspects of being a Monash research postgraduate'* responses, while the lack of a sense of community/socialising was voted the worst.

When it came to the question *'How can the research postgraduate experience be improved?'* the primary suggestion from Monash Law 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 Law 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.'*

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(vi) Appendix 1

Demographics of respondents from the Faculty of Law

Faculty (Schools)	Count	Percentage
Australian Centre for Justice and Innovation	1	9.1%
Castan Centre for Human Rights Law	5	45.5%
Centre for Commercial Law and Regulatory Studies	5	45.5%

Mode of attendance	Count	Percentage
Internal (on-campus)	9	81.8%
External (off-campus)	2	18.2%

Nationality	Count	Percentage
Domestic student	8	72.7%
International student	3	27.3%

Attendance type	Count	Percentage
Full-time	7	63.6%
Part-time	4	36.4%

Gender	Count	Percentage
Female	5	45.5%
Male	6	54.5%

Enrolled Program	Count	Percentage
PhD	7	63.6%
Masters by research	3	27.3%
Other	1	9.1%

Scholarship	Count	Percentage
Receives Scholarship	6	54.5%
No scholarship	5	45.5%