

**2010 Forum on the Postgraduate Research Experience**  
**15th December 2010**  
**Building M, Level 0**  
**Footscray Park Campus**

**1. WELCOME AND REPORT FROM PROFESSOR HELEN BORLAND,  
DIRECTOR OF POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH**

Professor Borland welcomed students, supervisors and staff to the forum and stated it was great to see such a positive response. Professor Borland then acknowledged the Elders, families and forebears of the Wurundjeri tribe of the Kulin Nation who were the custodians of the University. Professor Borland expressed how important the end of year forum is as it provides an opportunity for everyone to come together and report back on what has been happening throughout the year and also to close the loop on the previous year's forum.

Professor Borland emphasized that the postgraduate experience is something that is co-created by both students and staff to create a community of practice that works together. It was reported that research students had been involved in the planning and running of the Forum. Professor Borland informed the students and supervisors that they would later be given the opportunity to engage in group based discussions in the Faculty Breakout Sessions and Issue Based Sessions. She mentioned that all of the Issue Based sessions (with the exception of the supervisor session) are facilitated by students and co-facilitated by supervisors.

Professor Borland advised that a key change in 2010 was the appointment of a new Pro Vice Chancellor in Research and Research Training, Professor Warren Payne.

**2. REPORT FROM PROFESSOR WARREN PAYNE,  
PRO VICE CHANCELLOR RESEARCH AND RESEARCH TRAINING**

Professor Borland introduced Professor Payne, Pro Vice Chancellor of Research and Research Training.

Professor Payne reported that Victoria University is working towards becoming a research active university and outlined the following areas of focus:

- There is a need and obligation for academics to teach and also to conduct research
- The university should have clearly identified focus areas and use these areas as a catalyst
- Working towards encouraging Schools, Faculties and Supervisors to promote and encourage teams of research
- Need to engage in having quality supervisors
- Research to be linked into community and industry
- Research questions, although may be locally focussed need to be internationally recognised (research questions should be relevant to the rest of the world)

- Promote a collegial approach
- The university should have a 'buzz' around research

### **3. REPORT FROM ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR COLLEEN VALE, CHAIR OF THE POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH COMMITTEE**

Associate Professor Vale advised that as the Chair of PRC her role is to improve the outcomes of students' experiences and to develop policies and streamline processes.

Associate Professor Vale reported on some of the recent policy developments including the following:

- Changed OHS policy and procedures to make sure postgraduate research students are safe
- Ensuring staff conform to the OHS policies and that students are aware and have necessary training
- New ideas for formats of theses – have a common format across disciplines
- Thesis by publication policy finalised and to be implemented in 2011
- Procedures put in place to ensure the quality of theses are of high standard

Professor Borland thanked Professor Vale and other members of PRC and encouraged people who are not involved in PRC to look at becoming a member.

### **4. REPORT FROM MS SUSAN BIRD, PRESIDENT (VUPA) AND MR PAUL BRONSON, TREASURER (VUPA)**

Professor Borland introduced the new president of the Victoria University Postgraduate Association (VUPA), Ms Susan Bird.

Ms Bird explained that VUPA is a body that was established to address the needs of postgraduate students and that the association acts primarily as a contact point for postgraduates. She advised that VUPA's committee members meet with other university bodies and external organisations to ensure postgraduate student's needs are widely represented. Ms Bird mentioned that in order to bridge the gap among postgraduates, VUPA regularly organises events for students.

Mr Bronson introduced the VUPA committee members that were present at the forum. Following the introductions, Mr Bronson recapped some of the events that VUPA had organised and contributed to throughout the year, including workshops, the 3 Minute Thesis Competition, the Postgraduate Forum and a badminton tournament. Mr Bronson stated that VUPA was aware that the journey for some research students can be lonely and thus encouraged students to participate in these events to help them unite with other students.

### **5. REPORT FROM MS JENNY CAMERON, RESEARCH LIBRARIAN**

Ms Cameron highlighted some important developments of the year including the new postgraduate study lounge and the extensive training program offered by the Library.

Ms Cameron advised students that the study lounge is a collegial space whereby postgraduate students can come together to study. As there is restricted access, all students who wish to utilise the study lounge must apply for a FOB. She informed students that she would be distributing forms at the forum for any students who were interested in applying for access to the lounge.

Ms Cameron reported that in 2010 the Library offered a total of 65 workshops (of which 25 were Endnote) to students and supervisors. Two highlights from the 2010 training program were the new “Where to Publish” workshop and “Managing Information Chaos” workshop.

Ms Cameron introduced the five library staff members that were present at the forum and advised that they would be attending the “Issue based Sessions” in order to take note of the feedback.

## **6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF STUDENT ACHIEVEMENTS, PROFESSOR HELEN BORLAND**

Professor Borland reported on the following key achievements in 2010:

- The 3 Minute Thesis Competition
- VC Medallist – based on thesis quality
- Citation winners
- New WRAPP initiative
- Health Engineering and Science Postgraduate Research Conference

## **7. REPORT FROM DR EDER KIKIANTY, VU 2010 GRAND FINAL WINNER OF 3 MINUTE THESIS COMPETITION**

Dr Kikianty provided a detailed report on the 3 Minute Thesis Competition and shared her personal experience. The following was reported:

### **What is the 3MT?**

- Exercise in developing academic and research communication skills
- (Strictly) three minutes to present a compelling oration on their thesis topic and its significance in language appropriate to an intelligent but non-specialist audience
- It is not an exercise in trivialising or “dumbing-down” research
- The oration should engage the audience without reducing research to purely entertainment

### **Rules of 3MT**

- A single static PowerPoint slide is permitted - no slide transitions, animations or
- Movement is permitted
- No additional electronic media (e.g. sound and video files) are permitted

- No additional props (e.g. costumes, instruments [musical, laboratory etc]) are permitted
- Presentations are limited to 3 minutes maximum and competitors exceeding 3 minutes will be disqualified

### **Judging Criteria**

- Communication style: was the thesis topic and its significance communicated in language appropriate to an intelligent but non-specialist audience?
- Comprehension: did the presentation help the audience understand the research?
- Engagement: did the oration make the audience want to know more?

### **Benefits of doing 3MT for students**

- The prize
- A crystallised thought about your thesis – it pushes students to really think of the essence of their research
- Learning about other students' research topics
- Networking
- Learning to communicate complex ideas

### **How it helped Eder as a student**

- Realised it was possible to communicate mathematics without jargons
- Better ways to communicate mathematics to non-specialists, including the undergraduate students that she teaches
- Networking
- Communicating complex ideas is a good exercise for preparing grant applications
- Finally be able to answer the question: "What exactly are you doing?"

Professor Borland then asked students and supervisors to attend their faculty breakout sessions. Feedback gathered from the sessions was collated and is reported on in the following sections.

## **8. FACULTY BASED SESSIONS**

### **8.1 Faculty of Arts, Education and Human development**

The group agreed that the following areas are working well:

- OPR Seminars
- Library support
- WRAPP program – extremely valuable
- Access to Postgraduate research lounge in Library
- Quick response from administration
- SSP students from various schools can use office space in the School of Education
- Education staff support through enrolment
- Network working through shared activities i.e. writing
- Smaller, more tailored OPR training for software

The group agreed the following areas need some improvement:

- Lighting, signage and air-conditioning in postgraduate research lounge – not always working
- Reliability of Faculty photocopying/printing services at Footscray Park and St Albans campuses
- SSP – could be more active - perhaps put on a few events for the students
- Confusing with the amount of different passwords that are required - lack of password integration for VU
- Software, need smaller and more tailored class support for Nvivo and SPSS
- Lack of specialist postgraduate training – no film study areas, creative arts work across 3 schools in the Faculty, resource issue and expertise issue
- Students wanting to use multimedia approaches to research tools
- Look at shared arrangement in terms of resources and look at schools that have those needs

The following recommendations were made:

- Where students think they need training this must be built into the proposal and budget
- Card for photocopying to be explored for students – may be possible for schools to develop a system like a credit card
- Adopt a system that other schools have in train that schools can provide support through a card system
- Compliance process
- Reinstate medical support to postgraduate students

## **8.2 Faculty of Health, Engineering and Science**

Stephen Collins highlighted the following within the Faculty for 2010:

- Summer Scholarships
- Research Conference
- VPAC
- Postgraduate Information Session
- 3 Minute Thesis competition
- Trivia Night (possibly to be re-scheduled)

The following issues were raised for further discussion or information.

Student comments as follow:

- A student advised that he had attended a conference in Pakistan and it made the papers and radio

- A document supply from the library is currently off-line and needs to be rectified ASAP. In turn, Jenny (library rep) advised students to email her the journal they are after and she will forward them the information. As part of the library strategic plan, it aims to support research. A quarterly library newsletter is emailed out to the Faculties.
- Endnote tutorial video on the library website would be useful. In response, Jenny advised she will speak to the research librarian re this matter.
- Lack of computers at Werribee campus. Currently 3 computers available for 15 students in the research room and the students have to access the library computers but this can only be done 1 month at a time. This issue appears to only affect the Biomed students.
- Air conditioning a problem in a room which has 7 research students

Deanna Horvath, Student Representative on the Faculty of Health, Engineering and Science PRC, gave an overview of her role on the committee. Deanna recommended that the Faculty have more opportunities for research students to “get together” and also have a “welcome” for new students.

Furthermore, Deanna noted that currently research students have nowhere to house animals and currently use the University of Melbourne’s facilities which is unacceptable as they do not have access to the animals after hours/weekends. Also, students have to transport the animals in their own cars and thus is an OHS issue.

### **8.3 Faculty of Business and Law**

The following was raised for further discussion at the aforementioned session:

#### **Staff**

- Will the RAI scheme continue to view DBA and PhD completions in the same way?

#### **Research Culture**

- More student discussion groups
- More seminars, conferences and academic gatherings within the Faculty
- Unaware of what other students are doing; organise group discussions within related areas/topics after candidature to exchange ideas on progress/methodology/etc
- Provide opportunities for collaboration with different schools/faculties and other universities

#### **Training Opportunities**

- Hold more workshops at the City campus, especially academic writing
- Better access to postgraduate writing support; difficult to get appointments at City Flinders campus
- Training in SEM, SPSS without needing to attend external conferences

## **Facilities**

- Availability of workstations
- Better access hours for Queen Street research student offices
- Intercampus buses once an hour between Footscray Park campus and City Flinders campus

## **Other**

- Meetings with supervisors seem to be less than in other Faculties. Do policies stipulate or recommend meeting frequency? Are there minimum standards?
- Ethics: unclear what is needed to get through VUHREC process and very time-consuming; info session did not really provide the answers
- Is the proposed Faculty restructure likely to affect PhD students?

## **9. ISSUE BASED SESSIONS**

Following the Faculty Breakout Sessions, students and supervisors were asked to attend their nominated 'Issue Based Session' (part of registration involved signing up to attend a session in an area of which they would like to see improvements to the postgraduate research experience). Students were assigned to facilitate these sessions and were given a template to complete. Each student was assigned a Supervisor who acted as a support facilitator.

### **9.1 Academic Development Needs**

Facilitator: Lenora Sundstrom

Support Facilitator: Rob Hess

The group agreed that the following areas are working well:

#### **Library**

- Librarians – especially follow up by workshop presenters (available to meet individually after sessions)
- Facilities and databases/document access
- Workshops – No limit to number of workshops students can attend; frequency of EndNote training sessions
- Postgraduate study lounge – it is a quiet place to work (and should be maintained as such)

#### **OPR Workshops and Support**

- Jim Sillitoe sessions
- Ethics application workshops (primarily research with human participants/subjects)
- Qualitative software training, e.g. NVivo
- Qualitative data analysis training sessions, e.g. interviewing, focus groups

- Pre-candidature information and training, including networking opportunities for newly enrolled students
- Workshops/seminars in general (especially language and writing support workshops)
- On-campus programs

### **Supervision**

- Supervisor meetings and quick turnaround on drafts, etc. (overall positive feedback)

The group agreed that areas in need of attention are as follows:

### **Library**

- Double booking of Library and OPR training workshops forces students to choose/miss out
- Students cannot access toilet on level 4 of Library
- Printing/copying is an issue (have to pay in the library)

### **OPR Workshops and Support**

- C301 room is not big enough
- Timing/scheduling of seminars (students who enrol mid-year miss out on early developmental/pre-candidature workshops)
- The workshop for human participants do not address issues specific to researches working with animals
- Training for other software packages, including quantitative analysis programs and general Microsoft Office programs
- Quantitative data analysis workshops are needed
- Budgeting in candidature
- Sometimes presenters speak too quickly or move through the material too fast for non-native English speakers
- Off-campus/external students have limited access to induction and workshop programs

### **Supervision**

- Difficulties for supervisors who have off campus/external students

The group agreed that these areas could be improved by:

### **Library**

- Workshops scheduled in the evenings for students who are part-time or who work during business hours
- Swipe card or similar arrangement for printing to be charged to the school rather than the students
- Port-a-loo in back corner

### **OPR Workshops and Support**

- Bigger room or smaller group size in C301; offer sessions more frequently or make available in alternate format, e.g. DVD from library or WebCT)
- Include information for applications that deal with researching animals in general seminars, or provide a separate workshop/seminar specifically for students conducting research on/with animals
- Workshops required in SPSS; saver; advanced features of Word, Excel, etc.
- Increase number of workshops offered to provide access to external/non-VU training programs
- Training for online survey design; structural equation modelling (SEM)
- Advice on budgeting in candidature, e.g. what can be requested and how much can be requested
- Presenters to speak slowly and provide handouts of seminar topics/information

### **Supervision**

- Additional funding/workload points for supervisors to travel/meet with off campus/external students

## **9.2 Supervisor Needs and Support**

Facilitator: Associate Professor Colleen Vale

Note Taker: Rita D'Souza

The group agreed the following was working well:

- Quality of supervision in performance students research projects
- Completion rates are good – Can see the performance of the students, very enthusiastic
- A large number of students are doing a PhD in a range of areas
- Physical Education is presently the focus
- Students using surveys to collect data or mix method collection – quantitative methods classes
- Students are very positive and enthusiastic before they enrol and the student's supervisor has plotted out where the student should commence
- The formalisation of having two supervisors for each student is working well i.e. the Principal Supervisor and Associate Supervisor – Much better supervisory expertise for students, more professional and better managed
- Good support for new supervisors from the Associate Supervisor and Principal Supervisors
- The two-hour professional requirement for supervisors is working well. Supervisors feel that they have to attend and gain further knowledge and learning indirectly. It has been suggested that the professional requirement for supervisors be increased to more than two hours per year
- The Associate Supervisors are active and share the workload and the points – Positive Development is noticed and equal contribution because of having two supervisors involved with a student

- International students are working well with each other and this helps with the supervision as the students are not relying a lot on supervisors i.e. re-establish reading groups
- Selection of Innovative Projects
- Require Joint Supervision in extended meetings with students
- VU more open to 'CREATIVE' projects
- Recent establishment (again) of reading groups/seminars for students/supervisors to interact and hear/see each other's work – Assist in communication at school level of any difficulties.
- Require more information sessions and development workshops
- The range of sessions/training provided by the Office for Postgraduate Research has been beneficial
- The support in the School (CATA) for new supervisors (e.g. experienced supervisors co-supervising with new supervisors) has been good
- Large number of students interested in completing PhDs which is positive
- International students finding others that are engaged in similar doctoral experiences, less pressure on supervisors
- More Supervisor training required

The group suggested the following ideas for new initiatives and improvements in this area:

- Provide mental health awareness training to supervisors and students
- Link the student aims with the supervisors skills to ensure appropriate supervision is provided
- Provide advice to supervisors with regard to external supervision e.g. what to pay and how to pay external supervisors
- Strengthen industry relationship – When students complete their thesis, promote what students have done – Increase how media can help industry and attract more funding – Increase and strengthen relationship with community/research and the student's employment once the thesis is completed to promote completed research. Possible interest in continuation/extension of research for student i.e. employment opportunities, VU industry recognition and community knowledge of VU's research and abilities
- Creative work or electronic submission – Does not allow video files into a pdf. What the Library can do is limited. Look at ways in which this can be done
- Suggestion was made to limit the number of times an examiner can be used over a period of time. A register should be kept to see how many times the examiner is used
- Choosing examiners is difficult – require assistance
- Shift in expectation of supervision, major focus on undergraduate – What are the expectations of a supervisor? Recognise the flexibility and time. Majority of the time all the focus is on the student rather than on the supervisor
- Part-time enrolments are problematic
- Pushing for publication as much as possible – Some supervisors may require support and industry contact

- Updating 'absent' supervisors or supervisors that are away for an extended period of time. Also updating them with 'new' area/topics, re: workshop, new policies, the past year activities etc.
- Shift in expectations of supervisor – External Supervision not clear in terms of arrangements
- Online rehearsal booking sheet for studio space that automatically informs security and can be accessible from home
- Continue reading/group seminars, make information on sessions online – Open up to other creative postgraduate research students and supervisors
- Information required for electronic copy of thesis and how to lodge a creative work
- Maintenance of studio space and the issue of no technical support
- Encourage candidate to attend Office for Postgraduate Research seminars/school or education seminars/undertake Library training courses especially endnote and WRAPP programs
- Facilitate TAFE candidate's participation in at least two conferences as presenter in early stage (Australia)
- Facilitate candidate's participation in at least one overseas conference as presenter – gain VU/other travel funding
- The discipline specific postgraduate writing group has been very successful and it was recommended that for other disciplines, one lecturer running a two hour workshop per month for students. This takes some emphasis and pressure off supervisors and encourages peer support amongst students
- Increasing opportunities for students to undertake quantitative statistics training
- More emphasis on bureaucratic processes associated with submission of thesis

### **9.3 Managing Time and Keeping Motivated**

Facilitator: Reni Suwarso

Support Facilitator: Eva Dakich

The group agreed the following areas are working well

- In general there is no substantial problem in managing study time
- Supervisor feedback is timely
- Supervisors challenge students academically and hence, keep them motivated
- Timeline project plan

The group agreed that areas in need of attention are:

- Work, study and family life balance
- Students (especially part-time students) not engaging in academic and non-academic campus activities
- Students feeling anxious and frustrated at not knowing if they are on track
- Availability of the supervisor

The group agreed on the following suggestions to improve these areas:

- Organising a well-being forum (advanced issues rather than the safety/security workshops)
- Develop support groups among peer postgraduate students who have similar research topics/interests (possibly in collaboration with VUPA)
- Faculty study group
- OPR to provide a short session on strategic time management and discipline in postgraduate works

#### **9.4 Professional Networking and Career Development Support**

Facilitator: Alice Robinson

Support Facilitator: Beverley Lloyd Walker

The group commented and made suggestions on the following issues:

- Need more information prior to candidature about attending conferences (particularly the cost) so that students can build into their candidature application the necessary funds for conference attendance
- A conference skills group/training session would be useful
- Information covered on what is required as both a participant and a presenter at a conference
- Participant: information on which conferences to attend, how to behave at a conference to maximise the experience, how best to approach and network with other academics(dos/don'ts), what questions to ask, other tips
- Presenter: presentation skills, creating a good slideshow, how to answer questions in question time, what to include in a conference paper
- More funding to attend conferences
- A website/database with information about upcoming conferences
- More student seminars where students can practice delivering their papers and answering, prior to the 'real' presentation

#### **9.5 Student Collegiality and Peer Support**

Facilitator: Paul Bronson

Support Facilitator: Adrian Thelfall

The group agreed that the following is working well in this area:

- Training sessions for peer support
- WRAPP
- C204 POD helps to create a good atmosphere within the School of Education

The group suggested the following ideas for new initiatives and improvements in this area:

- Formalise the small writers' groups and have individuals meet on a regular basis – once a month for research students

- The postgraduate study lounge in the library to host regular get-togethers, e.g. 'happy hour' with nibbles, drinks etc.
- Facilitate the getting together of students – faculty wide or university wide instead of individual schools
- Research newsletter to be sent to all, including research students

## **9.6 Building a Strong Research Culture/Climate**

Facilitator: Deanna Horvath

Support Facilitator:

The group agreed that the following is working well in this area:

- 3 min thesis
- IT is improving
- Writing skills and other workshops offered by PRC

The group agreed the following areas need improvement:

- Database of who is researching what - can usually only access this information once a thesis is published rather than in progress. Biographies of staff and research students.
- Physical spaces- many feel isolated from other students and researchers as they are spread across different buildings, rooms and sometimes campuses.
- Computer access. Makes it difficult to do research – in some cases there are 10 students to 1 computer.
- Seminars available to the schools. Make sure that this is compulsory and that staff attend. Most seminars have very few people attending so they seem not important to students.

The following minimal cost idea was recommended:

- Poster boards displaying research in the areas.

## **10. CLOSING**

Following the drawing of the raffle which included three prizes for students and one prize for a supervisor, Professor Borland thanked everyone for their passion and enthusiasm and recognized the students and staff who had helped to organize the event. A social function concluded the very successful forum.