2009 Forum on the Postgraduate Experience
4th December 2009
Building M, Level 0
Footscray Park Campus

1. Welcome and report from Professor Helen Borland, Director of Postgraduate Research
Professor Helen Borland welcomed students, supervisors and staff to the forum. She expressed how important the end of year forum is as it provides an opportunity for everyone to come together and reflect on the year’s experience. Professor Borland discussed a few of the major new initiatives that were integrated this year in order to improve the postgraduate experience including:

- **Website re-development**: There is a new OPR research website that has proven to be useful to students and supervisors. Further online enhancements will continue to be introduced in 2010. These enhancements will include flexible learning modules on research ethics and integrity as well as other areas of skill development which includes how to write a literature review and how to develop a research proposal. Any feedback to improve and enhance the website is welcome and encouraged.

- **Revamping Training and Support Programs**: The OPR Training Programs are extremely popular and therefore in 2009, the OPR offered nearly double the amount of workshops compared to previous years. In order to more clearly link the training offered to differing research development stages, a new matrix was used. This year NVivo and SPSS training were introduced.

2. Presentation by Professor Michelle Towstoless, Chair of PRC
Professor Borland introduced Michelle Towstoless, Chair of Postgraduate Research Committee (PRC). Professor Towstoless announced that this was her 7th year as Chair of PRC. Michelle explained to those who were new to the University that PRC has the responsibility of maintaining standards of programs which includes tasks such as:

- Recommending approval of theses;
- Recommendation on the awarding of scholarships and prizes;
- Reviewing quality of student satisfaction;
- Developing policies and streamlining processes.

Professor Towstoless elaborated on some recent policies developed such as:

- **Research Facilities and Infrastructure Policy**: This policy sets out what research students can expect to have provided by the university to support them in conducting their research including access to study space and other facilities. It was noted that the Current Research Experience Questionnaire (CREQ) had been modified this year to obtain more information about student’s knowledge of the policy and satisfaction of their support from facilities.

- **External Supervisors Policy**: The University now has a policy to appoint external supervisors where appropriate.

- **Classification and Conferral of Doctoral Degrees Policy**: This policy means that the process of thesis classification is more streamlined and the title of “Dr” can now be used once a student has been classified by the Education and Research Board and has submitted the hardbound copies.
Professor Towstoless then mentioned that the university now has increased opportunities for student excellence to be recognised. Professor Towstoless acknowledged the winners of the University Medal, for the June graduation ceremonies, which were Dr Robert Bozinovski from the Faculty of Arts, Education and Human Development and Dr George Hanna from the Faculty of Health, Engineering and Science. In addition, she announced the winners of the Vice - Chancellors citations for research excellence; Dr Gali Weiss, Dr Guandong Xu and Ms Margaret Trail.

In closing, Professor Towstoless affirmed that any feedback given at the forum would be treated seriously and confidentially. She hoped the forum and social function would be enjoyed by all.

3. Presentation by Ms Reni Suwarso, Vice President (VUPA) and Ms Yuhanis Adnan, President (VUPA)

Professor Borland introduced the new vice president of the Victoria University Postgraduate Association (VUPA), Ms Reni Suwarso, elected last month. Professor Borland declared that there had been a greater focus on student involvement this year and that VU had committed additional funding for student organisations.

Ms Suwarso proceeded to introduce the new committee of VUPA; Yuhanis Adnan, Iwan Juwan, Muhammad Ali, Paul Bronson, Nilantha Gamage, Mohammadreza Pourakbar and Thomas D'Souza. Following the introductions, the President of VUPA, Ms Yuhanis Adnan welcomed students and supervisors and thanked the Office for Postgraduate Research. Ms Adnan gave an update on the various activities and field trips that had been organised by VUPA in 2009, including a trip to hanging rock and a badminton tournament.

Ms Adnan stated that VUPA was aware of students being from different backgrounds/cultures and at different stages of their research and that they were trying to bridge the gap. She believes that if everyone works together they can make VU a better place. Yuhanis concluded by inviting students to the VUPA end of year party at Crown Casino on 10 December 2009.

Professor Borland advised that she would be working next year with VUPA and briefly explained the “three minute thesis” competition that will be instigated at VU next year.

Professor Helen 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.

4. Faculty Breakout Sessions

4.1 Faculty of Arts, Education and Human Development

Facilitator: Associate Professor Michelle Grossman, Faculty Associate Dean (R&RT)

Minute Taker: Grace Schirripa

The following items were raised and discussed:

a. Direct Funding and Conference Funding:
• Funding available should be universally known and the process transparent.
• Create opportunities for: expanding library network, more direct links to e-journals and conference papers, flexible and increased funding for attending conferences (especially as joint authors) and increase the internet download and photocopying limit.
• The faculty are committed to this and will hold a 10 week series titled “Postgraduate Researches in Print” in the second half of 2010.

b. Increase Student IT Support:
• Postgraduates require access to PD on computer packages such as advanced Word, Excel and PowerPoint with a particular focus on thesis writing (e.g. data analysis) so that these packages can be utilised to their full potential.
• Improved access to sound and recording equipment for research projects.
• University website requires updating.

c. Arts Supplies Required at Bookshop for Teaching:
• Noted as a recommendation.

d. Improving the Faculty Research Culture and Intellectual Climate:
• Create a relaxed environment for students (new & experienced) to meet and learn about each other’s research projects. Suggestion to list projects on the web.

e. Support Offered by OPR for Thesis Writing, Academic Literacy:
• Increase awareness of programs offered by the OPR, including the target audience.
• Request for online forms to be made available for download in word format.

f. Joint Supervision:
• Protocols for managing Policy of Joint Supervision by students.
• Training for supervisors to enhance student/supervisor relationships is required.
• It was suggested that the Negotiating the Joint Supervisor Relationship program run by the OPR in 2009 should be held for both supervisors and students so that the tasks and responsibilities are clearly defined.
• It was noted that full-time students should aim to meet with their supervisor an hour every fortnight and part-time students should have face-to-face contact plus email.

g. Space:
• It was raised that the space allocated to postgraduate students was insufficient and work stations need to be upgraded.

h. Faculty Graduate Studies (FGS) Committee:
• It was suggested that one of two students on the FGS Committee should be an international student. There are currently 2 student representatives but no requirement that one should be an international student.

4.2 Faculty of Business and Law
Facilitator: Associate Professor Santina Bertone, Faculty Associate Dean (R&RT)
Minute Taker: Tina Jeggo

Associate Professor Bertone reported that the Faculty are working towards an increase in internet download quotas for research students and availability of workstations. It was further suggested that the Chair of the Faculty Research Committee facilitate a seminar to educate students on the importance of the ethics application process. The Faculty will review the possibility of simplifying the process whilst maintaining its integrity, given the low risk rating of the majority of the faculty research projects.

The following items were raised and discussed:
  a. How can research students become more involved in research centres and units? The Chair indicated that data was now available on research clusters within the Faculty and that the postgraduate committee could highlight relevant areas for the student at the candidature approval stage.
  b. Research students to be more involved in staff gatherings and school life (morning teas, ‘meet and greet’, research seminars).
  c. Need to ensure that candidature presentations are organised on a regular basis either through Schools or the Faculty.
  d. Ensure that research students receive regular notification of all seminars and conferences.
  e. More in depth training desirable; may be helped by development of PhD coursework units.
  f. Specific training for law research required.
  g. Statistical support required, e.g. SPSS.

4.3 Faculty of Health, Engineering and Science
Facilitator: Professor Chris Perera, Faculty Associate Dean (R&RT)
Minute Taker: Sue Davies

Professor Perera reported on the following research outcomes for 2009.
  ● Training programs offered including writing and theses project management workshops.
  ● Increase in timely completion of theses.
  ● Faculty Postgraduate Research Seminar attracted 105 Responses (85 attendees for the morning session).
  ● VPAC computer Facilitation.
  ● Candidature guidelines have been updated.
  ● 52 scholarship applications received for the Faculty of Health, Engineering and Science (92 applications received across the university).

The following items were raised and discussed:
  a. Lack of Technical Support in Faculty:
     ● It was noted that there had been a decline in technical support and maintenance of equipment as well as staff availability and skills for equipment usage. The equipment is also in need of an upgrade.
  b. Grants Submissions and Grants Writing:
• It was recommended that the OPR establish a specialized unit consisting of several skilled people to support researches with administration of grant applications and financial reporting.

c. Human Ethics Applications:
• It was noted that people are co-opted onto the committee for limited timeframes, therefore there is limited training/education and members are unaware of policies.
• The process of approving human ethics applications is improving however some applications are being returned 2/3 times for administrative review.

d. Postgraduate Training for Students:
• The group agreed that the OPR offered a variety of programs however requested that there be a re-run at different times/campuses. It would be useful if the OPR could facilitate an ethics application workshop.

e. Library Supports:
• Professor Perera introduced Jenny Fafeita, Faculty Librarian from St Albans Campus. It was requested that recommendations for faculty budgets for periodicals and books be directed to Jenny.
• There was some negative feedback in the survey of Library Services which the library is attending to.
• E-Books have not received positive responses from students as it is not user friendly.
• Subscriptions and renewals usually occur August-September and it was suggested that the cost for renewals be shared across faculties.

f. Candidature/ Oral Presentations:
• It was reported that applicants can have the oral presentations scheduled earlier than six months if they are ready and that clearer guidelines are now available from the Faculty Advice Officer.
• Research Methodology and Ethics should be compulsory subjects via coursework prior to commencing a PhD.
• From an academic perspective – attract staff with skills for Sustainability of research and succession planning. Better future planning in critical areas is required.

i. Issue Based Sessions
Following the Faculty based 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.

5.1 Postgraduate Training Programs (What programs would you like to see offered?)
Facilitator: Lenora Sundstrom
Support Facilitator: Associate Professor Jeffrey Faux

The Group agreed that the following areas in regards to research training are working well:
• OPR and Library sessions;
- OPR—especially Jim Sillitoe’s sessions (Literature Review, Finding a Theory, etc.);
- Library—‘how to’ seminars (web/database searches; NVivo/SPSS programs);
- Demystifying the Thesis—high demand - Offer more sessions;
- International/ESL students—skill-building worships;
- Finding a voice;
- Avoiding plagiarism;
- Writing support.

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

- Program Schedule - The program schedule doesn’t line up with the candidature process (especially if student starts second semester). It was suggested that seminars be recorded by Lectopia and be made available on the web.
- Candidature/Budgets – Students require clarification on entitlements and a seminar on this topic is required. Some students are affected by policy changes and do not receive all entitlements.
- Candidature/Methodology - It was recommended that forums be organised for supervisors to present their own methodologies. Students need more assistance on deciding the most appropriate methodology and who to contact for support.
- IT Support - It was suggested that the OPR offer basic ‘how to’ seminars—Table of Contents, Master Document as many students struggle with basic computing.
- Workshop registration - When students fail to turn up for seminars, others miss out. The group recommended having a waiting list or the ability to relocate to a larger room if demand justifies it.
- OPR Programs - Although there is good coverage for first-year students, there is limited programs offered for ‘continuing’ students (second, third year). It would be great to see a discussion-based program offered for established students.

5.2 Attending Conferences
Facilitator: Lesley Birch
Support Facilitator: Leonie Lockstone-Binney

The Group agreed that conferences:

- Are good for networking;
- Allow you to find out about future directions and new methodologies;
- In particular the Doctoral colloquium was beneficial for beginning researches.

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

- Travel – Secomb funding is not enough and more funding opportunities are required. There are also delays in funding approval. The travel policy needs to be renewed.
- Conferences – Students need to be made more aware of their entitlements and whether this differs across Schools/Faculties.

5.3 Developing Networks
Facilitator: Eder Kikianty
Support Facilitator: Professor Akhtar Kalam
The Group commented on the following in regards to networking:
- Students can meet and support each other;
- Informal small group discussions with key people are invaluable;
- Important to develop networks between commercial interests and with other universities;
- Networks may result in invitations to participate in presentation forums.

The Group agreed that networking at Victoria University could be improved by:
- Developing a website for research students where students can post their curriculum vitae, photo, and research interests;
- Bursory Program CEOs can shape careers and provide pathways to employment and establish links;
- Increase social functions as well as presentations amongst peers.

### 5.4 Building a Strong Research Culture/Climate

*Facilitator: Susan Bird*

*Support Facilitator: Professor John Breen*

The Group commented that the following avenues are currently in place to help build a stronger research climate at Victoria University:
- Opportunity to attend workshops and training programs facilitated through the OPR enables students to meet other students across different disciplines;
- CAPA Road show - attending other universities to meet research students;
- Attending the faculty postgraduate research seminars for both students and staff.

The Group agreed that areas in need of attention are as follows:
- Connecting with other universities more often;
- Family based seminars;
- Early career researcher’s network should be open to postgraduate students;
- More to be done at grass roots/faculty based level – combination of social and research get-togethers;
- PhD students’ webpage where all seminars are advertised and where students can upload information about themselves and about their research;
- Include contact with VUPA on all postgraduate study guides and course templates;
- Global emails about seminars happening university-wide – many students are doing multi-disciplinary research;
- Forming small groups where people with similar interests can support each other – this could be facilitated by the website i.e. some universities have lists of PhD students in schools and their research topic;
- OPR to establish a message board for communication;
- Facilitate the getting together of people.

The Group suggested the following initiative:
- Establishing a research review magazine based on faculties which provides useful information and motivation for students.

### 5.5 Student Participation and Leadership
Facilitator: Reni Suwarso  
Support Facilitator: Dr Paul Adams

The following suggestions were made:
- VU had had many characteristics adulterated due to Australian Government action and as a consequence leadership quality had suffered profound affects. Particularly the number of student positions available to develop leadership characteristics;
- It was suggested to create less informal student leadership opportunities to accompany the branches of formal student leadership adding significant input to the diverse characteristics the student populations has to offer;
- VUPA and student representation mechanisms could be the first direct point to structure student initiatives and involvements in building school visions and goals to provided peer to peer intellectual support and stimulation.

5.6 Improving Campus Culture
Facilitator: Doris Testa
Support Facilitator: Dr Gitesh Raikundalia

The Group suggested the following to improve campus culture:
- Buses should operate between campuses;
- Organise Student markets;
- More general shops – chemist, post office, improve bookshop and a community kitchen.

j. Closing
After the drawing of the raffle which included three prizes for students and one prize for a supervisor, Professor Borland thanked and recognised the staff that had organised the event. A social function concluded the very successful forum.

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