

Media Release: **Postgraduates' Experience**

Embargoed until 11:30 pm, Tuesday, 13 September, 2011

10 Years of Postgraduates' Research Experience

A new Graduate Careers Australia (GCA) report, *Postgraduate Research Experience 2010*, documents the recent experiences of research higher degree graduates of Australian universities and charts those experiences over the last decade. The data come from the Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ) which forms part of the annual Australian Graduate Survey (AGS).

In 2010, 85.5 per cent of PhD graduates expressed overall satisfaction with their research experience in higher education. The report also shows that PhD graduates' levels of satisfaction have increased with all aspects measured by the PREQ since it was first used in 1999 (see Table 5).

Research degree graduates who were non-Australian residents expressed greater overall satisfaction (89.3 per cent) than those who were Australian citizens or permanent residents (83.7 per cent – see Table 12). Similarly, those from a non-English speaking background (89.2 per cent) reported greater satisfaction than their colleagues with English as a first language (83.3 per cent – see Legacy Table 3).

One of the major determinants of satisfaction for research students at Australian universities is the field of education in which they conducted their research. For example, 88.7 per cent of PhD graduates who had researched in the engineering and related technologies area expressed overall satisfaction with their experience. On the other hand, this figure was 80.0 per cent for those who had conducted their research in the area of agriculture, environmental and related studies (see Table 6).

However, GCA Research Manager Bruce Guthrie said that results for various fields of education were not strictly comparable as the research methods employed across fields could differ notably.

“These research results do not lend themselves to simplistic comparisons and rankings,” he warned, adding that “when institutions make use of their PREQ results, they generally compare their results with previous years' figures and also benchmark themselves against like institutions and like fields.”

All Australian universities and many private higher education providers participate in the AGS in order to monitor feedback from their graduates, both coursework and research. They do so in order to ensure their graduates have a voice in the continual improvement of the educational experiences they offer.

Copies of the recently released report, *Postgraduate Research Experience 2010*, can be downloaded from the GCA website at

www.graduatecareers.com.au/Research/ResearchReports/PostgraduateResearchExperience

For further information please refer to the attached Media Backgrounder or call Bruce Guthrie on (02) 6367 5347 or David Carroll on (03) 9605 3713.

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The Survey

The Australian Graduate Survey (AGS) is conducted annually with all Australian universities, along with a number of smaller private institutions, participating. In the 2010 AGS, over 6,662 new research degree graduates were invited to respond to the Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ) after they had completed requirements for their awards and 4,100 did so, giving a national PREQ response rate of 61.5 per cent.

The PREQ

The PREQ is a psychometric survey instrument that asks respondents to indicate their level of disagreement or agreement with a range of questions concerning their experience of completing a research degree. These questions can be grouped together to form 'scales' which combine the responses to the constituent questions and increases the validity of the data. The scales include

- **Supervision**
- **Intellectual Climate**
- **Skill Development**
- **Infrastructure**
- **Thesis Examination**
- **Goals and Expectations**

There is also a single **Overall Satisfaction Item** which is used by all participating institutions

Caveats

PREQ results come from a psychometric instrument via complex statistical analysis and they are not suitable for simplistic rankings and comparisons. The higher education sector has worked with GCA to produce a Code of Practice governing the suitable uses of the PREQ data, which are, in short

The greatest value of ... [PREQ] data is likely to be derived when the data are used to examine change in outcomes over a period of years, within an institution, for the same field of education. Analysis over a period of time for a similar group of graduates can also be an effective use of the data ...

[PREQ] data are not suitable for making simplistic (i.e. unqualified) inter-institutional comparisons. Institutions can have vastly different histories, missions, geographic/socio-economic situations, enrolment profiles (including high percentages of mature-aged, part-time or employed students) and course mixes.

GCA does not release institutional results as we believe that institutions should have the responsibility to do so. Institutions are best placed to assess and examine their PREQ results, as an understanding of the particular study environment from which the data were gathered is vital in analysis of the survey data.

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In line with the Code of Practice, GCA discourages the production of single PREQ figures that total the results for an institution. There are too many important explanatory variables which can mediate PREQ response and these can be hidden in such simplistic calculations.

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