



**THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY**

**THE GRADUATE SCHOOL**

**THE PhD EXPERIENCE AT THE  
AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY**

R.H. Spear

OCCASIONAL PAPER GS 99/2

# THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

## THE PhD EXPERIENCE AT THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

R.H.Spear

(Department of Nuclear Physics, Research School of Physical Sciences)

### *Summary*

This paper presents an impression of the PhD-student experience at the Australian National University gained during my term as Dean of the Graduate School from 1990 to 1998. It is based mainly on comments made by individual students in 150 confidential “exit interviews” conducted from 1994 to 1998 inclusive, and, to a lesser extent, on matters raised in approximately 100 meetings requested by students throughout my term. Other activities arising from the role of Dean have also helped to mould my views, including, for example, 8 years as Chair of the University's Graduate Degrees Committee.

The picture which emerges is strongly positive. It is clear that for most students the PhD experience at the ANU has been satisfying, productive, stimulating and enjoyable.

Supervision is by far the matter of greatest concern to students. It appears that the overall quality of supervision provided for PhD students at the ANU is good, but there is variability, and “horror stories” are sometimes heard. Student concerns include slow or superficial reading of written material by supervisors, lack of regular contact with supervisors, lack of supervisory expertise in the thesis topic, problems arising from the limitation of scholarship duration to three and a half years, gender-related matters, and plagiarism.

From mid-1996 onwards, students were invited in the course of exit interviews to grade the quality of the supervision they had received. Although there is no suggestion that this “survey” is statistically watertight, the results are encouragingly positive. The average assessment of supervision quality is “good”; 87% of students consider that their supervision has been “satisfactory” or better; and only 4% consider it to have been “bad” or “disastrous”. The level of satisfaction is roughly the same for students in the

Institute of Advanced Studies and The Faculties; for science students and for humanities/social-science students; and for male and female students. The results are in remarkably good agreement with those from a more sophisticated survey conducted at the ANU in 1993.

There is both anecdotal and quantitative evidence suggesting that the supervisory-panel system introduced at the ANU in the early 1980s has contributed significantly to the generally high quality of supervision. I believe that residual difficulties could be further reduced by closer adherence to the operating procedures for supervisory panels as already specified by the University.

Apart from supervision, the issue of most concern to PhD students is the provision of resources, such as office accommodation, funding for fieldwork and conference attendance, computing facilities, library facilities, and access to photocopying, fax and telephone. The exit interviews indicate a considerable level of current satisfaction with resources provision. There can be little doubt that, although there is some variation across the University, taken on the whole the level of resources provision for PhD students at the ANU is very good – unsurpassed in Australia, and at least competitive internationally. The recent adoption by the University of a formal policy on the minimum allocation of resources for full-time research students will help reduce any residual inequities and will also enable the University to exploit its resources beneficence in its promotional material.

Students expressed strong approval of the ANU as an institution, although there were some critical comments on the attitude and performance of individual staff members. They also indicated their appreciation of the Graduate School and its various initiatives, and of support services such as the Counselling Centre and the Study Skills Centre. Other matters raised included examination procedures, coursework, induction procedures, and the Canberra environment.

The paper quotes numerous student comments (anonymously), and concludes with a number of specific recommendations aimed at further enhancing the quality of PhD education at the ANU.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper presents an impression of the PhD experience at The Australian National University gained during my term as Dean of the Graduate School from 1990 to 1998. It is based mainly on comments made by individual students in “exit interviews” from 1994 to 1998 inclusive, and, to a lesser extent, on matters raised in meetings requested by students (“student- initiated meetings”) throughout my term.

Other activities arising from the office of Dean have also helped to mould my views, including the following:

- meetings with students and staff from all of the University's Graduate Programs;
- many sessions with individual Program Convenors;
- monthly meetings with the President of PARSA (the Postgraduate and Research Students Association);
- regular meetings with the PARSA Representative Council;
- chairing the University's Graduate Degrees Committee for eight years, during which time I read all PhD examiners' reports;
- numerous informal discussions with individual students and staff members.

In addition, my views are inevitably influenced by my own experience in supervising PhD students in nuclear physics at the ANU from 1964 to 1991.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 describes the exit interviews; Section 3 does likewise for student- initiated meetings; Section 4 provides detailed information on matters raised by students; and the Conclusion (Section 5) includes some specific recommendations.

## 2. EXIT INTERVIEWS

Since August 1994 a letter has been sent to all PhD students when they give notice of intention to submit their thesis (usually about three months before the actual submission date), inviting them to an “exit interview” with the Dean of the Graduate School. A copy of the form letter is shown at Attachment A. Between August 1994 and March 1998, a total of 150 students accepted the invitation (91 from the Institute of Advanced Studies (IAS) and 59 from The Faculties); this represents approximately 16% of submissions during the period. It should be noted that students frequently submit

without giving prior notice, and hence fall through the exit interview net; that many students leave Canberra immediately after submission, or even before; and that the last few months of thesis preparation are invariably hectic and in many cases interviews with Deans don't rate as a high priority!

The main purpose of the interviews was to obtain student opinions on the strengths and weaknesses of PhD education at the ANU, with a view to improving the University's performance where appropriate, and perhaps exploiting the University's strengths more effectively. The interviews also provided a measure of recognition to students for their achievement in completing a PhD thesis. In some cases students used the interviews as an opportunity to "let off steam". Sometimes the interviews revealed ways in which the University could provide specific practical assistance to students as they moved into the next stage of their career.

Students were usually invited to comment on their experiences at the ANU, both good and bad; to suggest ways in which the University could improve the quality of its PhD education; to state why they chose to come to the ANU; and to indicate their plans for the future. However, the structure of the discussion was by no means rigid, and it often became quite free ranging, following the student's inclination. For example, there were occasions when almost the whole interview was occupied by discussion of the student's research project. Interviews usually lasted about three quarters of an hour.

Students were assured that the discussions would be completely confidential. This confidentiality has never been breached. Assurances were also given that if matters arose which seemed to warrant some action by the Dean, nothing would be done without the express permission of the student. I was often surprised by the frankness and openness of students' comments. I kept notes of the discussion, in each case with the student's permission. Most student quotations in this paper are extracted verbatim from these notes, sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third. The few exceptions are taken from student letters written in lieu of or after interviews.

For me, the interviews were abundantly worthwhile. They provided a unique overview of PhD education at the ANU, of great value for subsequent policy formulation and for the development of new initiatives by the Graduate School. It was a great privilege to learn at first hand about a fascinating range of research projects performed by very

competent young people (and some not so young!). Usually students indicated their appreciation of the invitation to an interview and the opportunity to express their views. For example, one subsequently wrote:

*–Thank you for the opportunity to discuss my experience of a PhD at the ANU with you. It is encouraging to be listened to and to have your ideas and concerns taken seriously.*

### 3. STUDENT-INITIATED MEETINGS

Graduate students are advised that the Dean of the Graduate School is always available for consultation should they wish to raise specific problems, although an approach to some other source of advice might sometimes be more appropriate. For example, the following statement is extracted from the 1998 Graduate School Handbook (p.26, “Sources of Advice”):

The Graduate School framework increases the range of options available for students in seeking advice. For example, when difficulties arise during a research course, the first person to consult is normally the supervisor or head of department... If the circumstances are such that neither of these people is appropriate, the relevant Program Convenor could be approached. In some situations students might wish to consult the Dean of the Graduate School, who is always willing to talk with students. For matters of a personal nature, the Dean of Students might be more appropriate.

From June 1990 to March 1998, approximately 100 student-initiated meetings took place, almost always with individual students, but occasionally with groups of two or three. In addition, I was frequently consulted by individual staff members.

By far the most common concerns of students related to problems with supervision. Often they sought advice on procedural matters, e.g. appointment of examiners, and scholarship arrangements. Other matters raised included sexual harassment (some quite serious – two ended up in the courts), resources allocation, and specific problems of international students. When appropriate, individual cases were referred to the University authority with executive power, e.g. the relevant Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Dean or Director.

Sometimes students would complain about the behaviour of a supervisor, but would ask that no action be taken in the matter, because they did not wish to “rock the boat” and feared reprisals during the remainder of their course or in the writing of references (even

and it is often not easy to solve individual problems, although generic aspects can be addressed through appropriate policy formulation.

#### 4. MATTERS RAISED BY STUDENTS

This section covers most of the matters raised by students in exit interviews. There is inevitably some overlap between topics. It should be borne in mind that the matters listed were raised spontaneously by students. Thus, the fact that a given matter was not mentioned by a given student does not necessarily mean that the particular matter was of no concern to that student. Supervision is an exception: as will be described below, from August 1996 onwards students were specifically asked to evaluate the quality of supervision provided.

##### 4.1 Supervision

As with student-initiated meetings, supervision was by far the most common matter raised in exit interviews.

Some comments were remarkably positive. Individual supervisors were described as “*really terrific*”, “*fantastic*”, “*wonderful*”, “*the best teacher I have ever had*”, “*fabulous*”, “*impeccable*”, “*second to none as a supervisor*”. One student commented that he had “*absolutely no complaints with supervision*”.

Some other comments, however, were disturbingly negative. One student stated that her supervisor

*– was away too much, showed very little interest in her work, and was very difficult to contact – she felt frustrated and directionless all the way through, and considered that for many students in her area supervision is so poor that they would be better off without it – the attitude is sink or swim.*

Another described his supervision as a “*nightmare*”; another stated that his supervisor was

*– hopeless – really a politician, not a scientist – dead wood – even malicious in his treatment of students.*

One student described his supervisor as a “*loveable rogue*”!

Obviously, some negative experiences arise from personality conflicts, and certainly students are not always faultless in the supervisory relationship. The experience of most students lies somewhere between the two extremes.

#### 4.1.1 Supervision Problems

##### Slow or superficial regains of written material

One of the two most common complaints (20 students) was slow or superficial reading of thesis drafts, e.g.

- *six months without response on draft, and no significant comments when eventually returned;*
- *drafts not read properly – only two or three marks on 160 pages of text;*
- *still hadn't read first draft of thesis after 10 months;*
- *five chapters of thesis still not read by supervisor after five months – advisor read the whole thing in two weeks!*
- *took seven months to read thesis – didn't read final draft;*
- *supervisor took three months to read thesis draft, and delay cost student a job.*

##### Lack of regular contact

The second of the two most common complaints (20 students) concerned infrequent or erratic contact with supervisors, due to supervisors being too busy with administrative or teaching responsibilities, or having too many students (25 is the record!), or being away from the University too often, or simply giving low priority to graduate students compared to their own research, e.g.

- *faculty tend to consider students something of an afterthought – students to be “tolerated” rather than given high priority;*
- *supervisor “always away” – not much help when he is here;*
- *rarely got to see supervisor – about 10 minutes every couple of months – intentions good but overcome by realities of directorship;*
- *student rates supervision as bad – basically because it didn't exist! – no communication with supervisor.*



An interesting comment made by some students was that supervision should not be so close that students cannot make mistakes, since learning to recover from the consequences of mistakes is an essential part of research training.

*Lack of expertise in thesis topic*

A surprisingly large number of students (14) commented on their supervisor's lack of expertise in their thesis subject (10 of the 14 were from science areas, and 10 of the 14 were based in The Faculties). In some cases students were aware of this at the outset, and knew “what they were getting into”; in other cases the problem arose because their initial supervisor was the sole academic expert in the subject and left the University during the student's course.

*Problems with the 3-year PhD*

Fourteen students, all from science areas, complained about the manner in which their supervisors handled the “3-year PhD”; some of these complaints were quite vehement. In order to appreciate the students' concerns, it is necessary to rehearse the relevant constraints on scholarship- and course-length.

Australian Postgraduate Awards with stipend allocated before 1989 were for a period of three years, but extension up to a maximum of a further 12 months was easily arranged.

From 1989 onwards, the maximum extension was reduced by the Australian Government to six months, and much more stringent conditions were imposed. The ANU applies the same conditions to its own scholarships as those applying to APAs.

However, the “3-year PhD” was established a decade earlier by the ANU itself, from concern that PhD completion times were becoming excessive. Rule 20(a) of the PhD Rules provides that to qualify for the degree the candidate is required

to carry out independent research involving a comprehensive study of a scope and size that could normally be expected to be completed in the equivalent of 3 years full time study.

Thesis examiners are advised of this requirement. Policy paper 2988B/1987, prepared by the Graduate Degrees Committee and approved by both academic boards, states that:

It is the duty of the supervisors) to advise the candidate and the prescribed authority whether or not the topic proposed to be selected and the course to be pursued would be commensurate with the requirements of a thesis as set out in rule 20 of the PhD rules.

The PhD course length itself was set at 4 years (PhD Rule 10(2)) to allow for the fact that in some disciplines it is necessary to do preparatory work before commencing thesis research, e.g. learning a language. If candidates have not completed their course after 4 years, they then go “off course”, and have a further 3 years in which to submit a thesis. During this time they are not formally enrolled students, and do not have access as of right to facilities and supervision; however, departments are encouraged to continue to provide a measure of support, and this is normally done.

Students complained that some supervisors appeared to ignore University policy on course length, and the problems met by students when their scholarship expires:

- *in general, supervisors have not yet learned to focus on three years;*
- *staff still haven't adjusted their demands to the three- year scholarship regime;*
- *staff do not accept three- year PhD – department encourages students to convert to part-time and go on the dole – degrading;*
- *psychological effect of being classified as a non-student is considerable;*
- *supervisors have little idea of what can be done in three years, or if they do they pay it only lip service.*

One student complained that he was still doing experimental work after 6 years full-time, in spite of receiving “satisfactory progress” assessments in each of his annual reports. Another stated that “*three of the four students in his office are now over five years*”. It was even suggested that some staff “*have a vested interest in students staying around a long time*” as a cheap source of expert labour.

Some academic staff contend that in their discipline it is not possible to produce an internationally competitive thesis in three and a half years. Many students would agree with this. However, they would argue that if a supervisor intends that a student should continue to work substantially beyond the point of scholarship expiry, then this should be stated clearly at the outset so that the student can consider other options.

*Gender- related problems*

Eleven students related instances of sexual discrimination and harassment. Two of these involved physical violence. One student claimed that problems arose because a supervisor had formed a sexual liaison with another student in the supervisor's research group, leading to perceptions of preferential treatment and breaches of student/supervisor confidentiality. Another student reported similar difficulties arising because the supervisor's spouse was also a member of the supervisor's research group.

*Inadequate guidance in first year of course*

Ten students suggested a need for closer supervision and guidance during the early stages of their course, particularly in view of the “3-year PhD” constraints described above. One reported that he “*spent 18 months trying to think of a problem*”, and another considered that he “*wasted a year due to insufficiently close supervision in first year*”.

*Plagiarism and authorship of publications*

Seven students alleged plagiarism of their work by supervisors, or that supervisors had unjustifiably inserted their names on publications, e.g.

*– he gets his name on all papers published in the group, even when he has made no contribution – other students are cheated off at this too.*

*4.1.2 Supervision Survey*

From August 1996 onwards, students were invited during the course of exit interviews to grade the overall quality of the supervision they had received, on a scale of 1 to 6:

1. Excellent
2. Good
3. Satisfactory
4. Less than satisfactory
5. Bad
6. Disastrous.

It was suggested that their assessment could refer to a single individual or to the collective efforts of a group. By March 1998, a total of 80 students had contributed. The numerical distribution of responses is shown in Table 1. Three comparisons are made:

IAS/Faculties, Science/Humanities-Social Sciences, and Male/Female. Also shown are the mean grades for each group, and for all students. The data are expressed as percentages in Table 2.

**TABLE 1** Results of supervision survey: numbers of responses in each category for the comparisons IAS/Faculties, Science/Humanities-Social Sciences, and Male/Female, and for all students.

Grade	1	2	3	4	5	6	Mean Grade
IAS	17.5	15.5	8.5	6.5	0	1	2.2
Fac	18	5	5	1	2	0	1.8
Science	19	11	10.5	5.5	1	1	2.2
Hum/SS	16.5	9.5	3	2	1	0	1.8
Male	19.5	12.5	9	6	2	1	2.2
Female	16	8	4.5	1.5	0	0	1.7
All	35.5	20.5	13.5	7.5	2	1	2.0

**TABLE 2** Percentage distributions for supervision survey.

Grade	IAS	Fac	Science	Hum/SS	Male	Female	All
1. Excellent	36	58	40	52	39	53	44
2. Good	32	16	23	30	25	27	26
3. Satisfactory	17	16	22	9	18	15	17
4. Less than satisfactory	13	3	11	6	12	5	9
5. Bad	0	6	2	3	4	0	3
6. Disastrous	2	0	2	0	2	0	1

There is no suggestion that this survey is statistically watertight – the numbers are small, and the sample does not include students who for one reason or another discontinued their course before submitting a thesis. Nevertheless, the data are encouragingly positive:

- the average assessment of supervision quality is “good”;
- 87% of students consider that their supervision has been “satisfactory” or better;
- only 4% of students consider their supervision to have been “bad” or “disastrous”.

The differences between mean grades in each of the 3 comparisons are suggestive, but not really statistically significant. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that the level of student satisfaction in The Faculties is at least as great as that in the IAS.

Although the survey is restricted to “successful” students, i.e. those who actually submit a thesis, such students represent the majority of ANU PhD enrolments. An analysis made in 1993 showed that of all PhD students enrolled at the ANU between 1979 and 1992, only 16% failed, lapsed or were discontinued for some reason (Ref.1).

The “encouragingly positive” results of the present limited investigation are in remarkably good agreement with those from the more sophisticated survey reported by Cullen et al. in 1994 (Ref.2). The latter work was based upon responses from 363 PhD students from all parts of the ANU and at all stages of their course, and used the same grading scale as the present survey. The percentage of students who rated their overall supervision as “satisfactory” or better was 85%, with 5% opting for “bad” or “disastrous” (Table G8, *ibid.*, p. 175). The mean grade was 2.4.

#### 4.1.3 Supervisory Panels

Each PhD student at the ANU is allocated a “supervisory panel”, “comprising not fewer than 3 persons, of whom at least one shall be a supervisor” (PhD Rule 5A(1)), the other members being “advisors”. The roles of supervisors and advisors are set out in paper 2998B/1987:

In general, the purpose of appointing advisors is to afford the candidate wider contacts, both academic and personal, and opportunities for access to additional expertise.

The panel system was introduced following the Wang Gungwu review of ANU PhD education in 1977. In paper 2988B/1987, the University has specified that, in addition to occasional consultations as required, formal meetings between the full panel and the candidate

should be held before the detailed research proposal is considered, at the time of submission of the annual report, before the mid-term review of progress, and towards the end of the course before the thesis is finalised.

In the exit interviews, 26 students spontaneously expressed approval of the panel system, e.g.

- can't speak too highly of supervisory panel;*
- lots of valuable support from advisors;*
- my supervisory panel were all accessible and helpful – they gave up their time when I needed it, and quality of supervision was top class;*
- panel system has been very effective;*
- have used panel members very successfully;*
- panel a big success;*
- varied expertise of panel members was terrific;*
- supervisor nice, but not much help – advisor really pulled her out.*

However, many students indicated that their panels had not met at the prescribed times. Indeed, it seems that it is exceedingly rare for the frequency of panel meetings to approach the prescribed level. One student commented that her panel had “*never met*”. I am convinced that, although the level of serious supervision problems at the ANU is relatively low, even those problems could be greatly diminished if supervisory panels met with students at the prescribed times.

It is also desirable that the membership of a given panel should not consist entirely of staff from the supervisor's own research group.

The Cullen et al. survey provided quantitative evidence for the effectiveness of the panel system. As indicated above, 85% of students rated the overall effectiveness of their supervision as satisfactory or better. Students were then asked whether their supervisory panel was functional, or whether their supervision was still conducted essentially by a single supervisor. For those with a functioning panel, the level of

satisfaction rose to 92%, for those with essentially a single supervisor, satisfaction fell to 71%.

It is interesting to note that following the suicide of a fifth-year PhD student at Harvard in 1998, there has been pressure at that university to institute a supervisory committee system with a proposed *modus operandi* that would be very similar to that of the ANU panel system (Ref. 3).

#### 4.1.4 Supervision Summary

In my 1993 Report on the Graduate School (Ref.1), I stated my belief that the supervision provided for graduate students at the ANU is generally of high quality, although it is variable, and “horror stories” are sometimes heard. My subsequent interactions with students, as described above, have substantially reinforced this view. There is evidence, both anecdotal and quantitative, suggesting that the supervisory panel system has contributed significantly to the generally high quality of supervision. I believe that residual difficulties could be further reduced by closer adherence to the operating procedures for supervisory panels as already specified by the University.

Since the establishment of the Graduate School in 1990, the University has introduced a number of initiatives aimed at enhancing the quality of supervision. For example, twice each year the Graduate School collaborates with CEDAM to present a half-day workshop for academic staff on “Supervising Research Students”. The program includes an outline of University policy and expectations, a presentation by experienced staff and students of their perspectives on supervision, and discussion sessions exploring the supervisory process. Although intended primarily for newly appointed staff, a significant number of “old hands” also attend. These workshops have been well attended (average attendance 40 to 50) and favourably received.

Many Graduate Programs arrange seminars and discussions on supervision, involving both academic staff and students. An excellent example is a detailed survey of student/supervisor relationships undertaken by the Graduate Program in Ecology, Evolution and Systematics in 1996, resulting in a comprehensive report and the publication of a booklet entitled “PhD Supervision: A Guide for Students and Supervisors”. This project was largely conducted by students. The booklet has been

very successful and has been widely used both within the ANU and elsewhere. Almost 5000 copies have been distributed – approximately 1000 free within the ANU and the remainder by sale to universities throughout Australia. Copies may be obtained from Audra Johnstone in the Division of Botany and Zoology, Faculty of Science.

#### 4.2 Provision of Resources

Apart from supervision, the issue of most concern to PhD students is the provision of resources, such as office accommodation, funding for fieldwork and conference attendance, computing facilities, library facilities, and access to photocopying, fax and telephone. Indeed, in meetings with groups of students from each Graduate Program during my first year or so as Dean, it seemed that the allocation of resources was the major issue. However, unsolicited comments made during exit interviews indicate a considerable level of current satisfaction with resource provision. Of the 48 students who commented positively, no less than 19 used the word “*excellent*”; one resorted to “*incredible*”! Some examples:

- *very enthusiastic about resources and facilities – ANU a wonderful university;*
- *attendance at two international conferences provided excellent top-level international contacts.*

Some students who had worked at other Australian universities offered explicit comparisons:

- *facilities for graduate students are excellent – best in Australia – had no office accommodation in Melbourne;*
- *library facilities are best in Australia;*
- *superior to Sydney – better equipment, better space, and better resource allocation, e.g. computing;*
- *resources incomparably better than at other Australian universities known to her;*
- *facilities at ANU much better than Sydney.*

Some students with experience at leading overseas universities offered comparisons with the ANU:

- *computing facilities excellent – better than North America – even Princeton;*
- *facilities beyond anything an American student would expect;*
- *level of support excellent – beyond anything possible in US;*
- *didn't expect conditions and resources at ANU to be so good, e.g. computer access;*



- *resources good – office, computer, fieldwork – don't know of any place that is even comparable, including Canada, US and Europe;*
- *far superior to UBC – conference attendance, staff access, study skills support, etc;*
- *postgraduates have better life here than almost anywhere else – computer access, travel, office facilities, attention by University.*

Of students who commented negatively on resources provision, 8 indicated that they would have liked more financial support for attendance at conferences, both in Australia and overseas, although none of them suggested that this lack had adversely affected the completion of their PhD. Other negative concerns related to inequity of resources allocation across the University (5); problems with instrumentation development and technical support (4); photocopying and stationery (2); library closure at weekends (1); and funding for fieldwork (1).

There can be little doubt that, taken on the whole, the level of resources provision for PhD students at the ANU is very good – unsurpassed in Australia, and at least competitive internationally. However, there is some unevenness, and hitherto this has prevented the ANU from exploiting its beneficence in its promotional material. Recently, the University, at the instigation of the Graduate School, adopted a “Policy on the minimum allocation of resources for full-time research students” (1573B/1998).

This policy states that

students admitted to a full-time research course at the University are assured that the sponsoring area undertakes to provide the following minimum resources: sufficient laboratory or office space, infrastructural equipment and facilities to complete the agreed program of research, these items to be available from the outset and throughout the course

and goes on to state explicit minimum standards for accommodation, storage, computing support, stationery, postage, photocopying and fax, telephone, fieldwork and conference support, and the particular requirements of students in the Institute of the Arts. Apart from the benefit to students, this policy will enable the University to capitalise on its resources generosity in its recruitment and promotional material.

### 4.3 Overall Appreciation of ANU

Forty three students explicitly expressed appreciation of their overall experience at the ANU, including some students who had been quite critical of specific aspects of the University's performance, e.g.

- *ANU is a great place – best university in Australia;*
- *ANU a great place for research – will recommend her students to come to ANU [from a staff member of an Asian university];*
- *my experience at the ANU was in every way a positive one;*
- *spent three months at MIT – found ANU in no way inferior;*
- *experience at ANU overwhelmingly positive – intellectual environment stimulating;*
- *a good place – nowhere better;*
- *less strait-jacketed than Harvard – more intellectually challenging.*

### 4.4 Academic Environment

Thirty two students commented on what can best be described as the “academic environment”. They referred to the intellectual quality of staff, their general behaviour, and in particular their attitudes to graduate students.

Positive comments (a total of 17 : 11 from the IAS and 6 from The Faculties) included the following:

- *department exceptionally friendly, and staff, both academic and administrative, all welcoming and always helpful – intellectual environment stimulating;*
- *research group works well – nothing but gratitude, thanks and praise to staff;*
- *a great place for research – people friendly – visitor flowthrough terrific;*
- *some great people – passionate about their work.*

There were 15 negative comments (interestingly, 14 from the IAS, with all Research Schools represented, and 1 from The Faculties), including the following:

- *very critical of staff and intellectual environment – culture of not coming in but working from home – rows of empty offices – intellectual environment in School is sclerotic – stark contrast to Oxford;*
- *very critical of School – isolationist, self-satisfied, too fragmented, atmosphere of old-boys club;*

– *uncaring and unfriendly attitude by staff in School – felt isolated – academic staff make you feel stupid – alleges clonism, sexism and racism (unconscious but real);*  
 – *not a happy place – School politics had affected her PhD – students should not be caught up, used, exploited in staff's political battles.*

It is interesting to note that negative and positive comments were sometimes made about the same School or Department; this applies for some of the comments quoted above.

It is also noteworthy that in student-initiated meetings 5 separate students complained about the behaviour of one particular staff member, alleging bullying, intimidation, insulting and embarrassing behaviour, discrimination, and inadequate supervision, with the department being run “*like a concentration camp*” or “*a Dickensian schoolroom*”. This particular case was referred to the relevant authorities for action.

#### 4.5 The Graduate School

Thirty nine students expressed approval of the Graduate School and its various initiatives. Specific mention was made of seminars arranged by Graduate Programs; the Statistical Consulting Unit; the Computer Loan Pool; the Graduate Teaching Program; the “Is There Life After a PhD?” seminars; induction and orientation sessions; help provided by the Study Skills Advisor (Dr Gail Craswell); and the activities of specific Program Convenors. For example:

- *(convenor) has done a great job in making sure that all postgraduates are kept informed about everything which could affect them – the seminars within the Program have been extremely helpful;*
- *the Statistical Consulting Unit courses provided the skills that were to become vital for a major part of my thesis;*
- *the Graduate Teaching Program was a rewarding and very informative experience;*
- *particularly impressed with the Graduate School and the services and courses it has provided;*
- *Graduate Teaching Program was fantastic;*
- *Statistical Consulting Unit very helpful -just brilliant;*
- *Computer Loan pool has been wonderful;*
- *the Graduate School has made an enormous difference – was here “before and after”.*

#### 4.6 Support Services

Comments on the Counselling Centre (6) were all complimentary, e.g.

- *would give Counselling Centre 10 out of 10 -fantastic;*
- *great help from Counselling Centre.*

Students were also very appreciative of support from the Study Skills Centre, and particularly from Dr Gail Craswell, the graduate student advisor, e.g.

- *very grateful to Study Skills Centre, especially Gail Craswell, for help with English.*

Comments on University housing were mixed. Eleven students considered that accommodation provided by the University was satisfactory or better, e.g.

- *some problems with accommodation – eventually moved to University House – it's the best – great.*

Four students made negative comments – three considered rents to be too high, and one was critical of the housing administration.

With regard to ANU administration in general, 2 students made complimentary remarks and 13 made negative comments; 8 of the latter were international students. There was no consistent pattern to the complaints: 3 students complained about the administration of one particular department (“*chaotic*”), and 5 reported problems with the provision of information on such matters as resources provision, insurance arrangements, fees and scholarship arrangements.

#### 4.7 Induction and Orientation

At the beginning of each year the Graduate School conducts a half-day orientation and welcome session for new graduate students. In addition, each year since 1996 the School has presented 2 full-day induction programs for research students, arranged by Dr Gail Craswell, in which experienced academic and administrative staff contribute under the general theme “Managing your research degree”. These programs address global or generic interests and needs of research students, and thus are designed to complement induction activities conducted at the local level by various departments and Graduate Programs. They have been extremely well attended.

In exit interviews, 8 students expressed appreciation of the University's induction and orientation initiatives.

#### 4.8 Coursework

Ten students advocated the inclusion of coursework in the ANU PhD, feeling that the present system results in “*narrow specialisation*”, although some felt that it should be non-examinable, e.g.

- *would have liked coursework as part of PhD – for many students first year not well organised and could be just as well off doing coursework;*
- *need for more organised lectures (not examinable) to give broader background in subject.*

On the other hand, 4 students stated that they had been attracted to the ANU by the research-only PhD, e.g.

- *research-only PhD offers an attractive alternative to the North American system.*

#### 4.9 Examination Procedures

Most of the students participating in exit interviews had not yet submitted their thesis, or had only done so recently. Nevertheless, 8 of them commented on the University's PhD examination procedures. One was concerned with problems in choosing examiners. The others were all concerned with the adverse consequences arising from the “*very drawn out*” process. Several students maintained that the “*long delay*” between thesis submission and award of the degree caused difficulties in obtaining a job, e.g.

- *need for rapid examination of PhD thesis – very large opportunity cost in delay.*

#### 4.10 Canberra

Eleven students (9 from overseas and 2 from interstate) commented on the physical environment of Canberra and the ANU. Only one of these was negative. Most found Canberra to be initially too quiet, but they became accustomed to it, and eventually enjoyed it as a good place to study, e.g.

- *usual experience of Canberra – too quiet at first, but eventual appreciation and enjoyment – will be sorry to leave [student from Asia];*
- *liked Canberra – initially shocked at small size, but now likes it – clean, fresh, quality of life [student from Indonesia].*

## 5. CONCLUSION

The exit interviews conducted by the Dean of the Graduate School, supplemented by student-initiated meetings, have provided a comprehensive overview of the PhD experience at the ANU. It is clear that for most students this experience has been satisfying, productive, stimulating and enjoyable. Extreme positive experiences are represented by the following:

- *have had a ball – happiest years of my life – a wonderful experience* [from a mature-age student];
- *expected good things at the ANU, but expectations exceeded – have had a wonderful time – am fat and happy!*
- *ANU PhD definitely the best decision I have made in my life;*
- *experience at ANU overwhelmingly positive.*

Nevertheless, for a small minority of students, the experience has been less than satisfactory. Some extreme negative comments:

- *only one regret in this life - that I chose to do a PhD;*
- *experience at ANU awful – has tried to talk other people out of coming here – can't think of anything good to say about her experience – coming here was the biggest mistake in her life.*

It is true that students' negative comments as presented here and elsewhere in this report present only “one side of a story”; nevertheless, they are made by “successful” students who have submitted a PhD thesis and presumably have nothing to gain by expressing them in an exit interview, and they therefore need to be taken seriously. Even if the students' negative views are unjustified, the fact that they do hold these views as they leave the University is a cause for concern.

It is also true that in any enterprise conducted by human beings there will inevitably be some negative experiences. The purpose of rules and set procedures is to minimise these consequences of human fallibility. The following recommendations are made as a response to the student experiences presented in this report.

1. That the Dean of the Graduate School continue to offer exit interviews.

2. That interviews be offered to students who, for whatever reason, terminate their course without submitting a thesis.
3. That should the Dean's workload permit, consideration be given to inviting students to an interview near the mid-point of their course, e.g. at the time of the mid-term review.
4. That, in order to provide a continuous and systematic assessment of the University's PhD education, an exit questionnaire be prepared for completion by all students at the end of their course.
5. That the appropriate University authorities take steps to ensure that supervisory panels function substantially as required by the University in paper 2988B/1987; in particular, that meetings with candidates are held at the specified times; if this is deemed to be impracticable, then the University should amend its policy paper.
6. That the University encourage all PhD supervisors to ensure that, at the outset of each student's course, student and supervisor clarify their mutual expectations concerning the supervisory process.
7. That the Dean of the Graduate School consider the feasibility of introducing a system by which PhD students provide evaluations of their supervision in a manner analogous to undergraduate students' regular evaluation of their lecturers, e.g. as part of each annual report.
8. That all new members of academic staff, and as far as practicable all external supervisors, be required to attend one of the CEDAM/Graduate School workshops on "Supervising research students".
9. That the University do its utmost to at least maintain the present level of resources provision for research students.
10. That the University exploit the existence of its minimum resources policy for research students in its promotional and recruitment activities.

*Acknowledgments*

In preparing this report, I have greatly appreciated comments and advice from Val Spear, John Hooper, John Clanchy, Brigid Ballard, Gail Craswell, Ross Cunningham, John Ballard and Rod Peakall.

*References*

1. R.H.Spear, "A Report on the Graduate School (March 1993)", GS93/1, p.38.
2. David J. Cullen, Margot Pearson, Lawrence Saha and R.H. Spear, "Establishing Effective Supervision", DEET Report, Canberra 1994 (ISBN 0644 34901 8).
3. Nature 395, 826 (1998).





THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

CANBERRA ACT 0200 AUSTRALIA

TELEPHONE: +61 2 6249 5922

FACSIMILE: +61 2 6249 4829

EMAIL: Graduate.School@anu.edu.au

Dean

Professor R H Spear

RHS:JCL

lr\leaving\1103lr.doc

11 March 1998

Mr [REDACTED]  
Demography Program  
RSSS  
ANU

Dear [REDACTED],

I understand that you are approaching the end of your PhD course. It would be most helpful to the University to know how you feel about your PhD experience at the ANU. Therefore I would be pleased to hear any suggestions and comments (both positive and negative) that you may have. Perhaps the best way to do this would be over a cup of tea or coffee in my office some time. If you would like to take up this invitation, would you kindly ring my secretary, Lorraine Lewis, on ext 5922 to arrange a suitable time?

I assure you that anything you say to me will be treated in absolute confidence. However, a general knowledge of the experiences of students will be of great value in assessing and improving the quality of PhD education at the ANU. I would hope that such meetings would also be helpful to the individual students involved.

I very much hope that you will accept this invitation. If the present time is not convenient, please feel free to contact me at any time in the future.

Yours sincerely,

Ray Spear

Attachment A: Sample of letter inviting student to  
an exit interview