Researching the researchers: the pilot Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire

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Abstract

This paper describes work undertaken by the Graduate Careers Council of Australia (GCCA) in conducting the pilot Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ). This questionnaire explores the experience of higher degree research graduates, aspects of whose university careers have not been examined previously on a national basis. Two versions of the pilot survey have been developed in this pilot stage and have been distributed. The paper explores why the new questionnaire was developed, the context in which it is being tested, the process by which the pilot instruments have been administered and the work still to be carried out.

As the project is not due for completion until May 1998 results given in the paper are of an interim nature but attention is given to the issues which graduates are indicating are important to them, for example, the supervisor-student relationship.

The expected outcomes of the pilot PREQ project include the establishment of the subscales’ validity and the development of a single and shorter version of the survey instrument. Proper use of data obtained by means of the PREQ will assist universities’ understanding of the educational experiences of higher degree research graduates.

Andreevna: Are you still a student?
Trofimov: I expect I shall be a student to the end of my days.
(Anton Chekhov: The Cherry Orchard, Act 1)

1. Objective and themes of paper

The objective of this paper is to describe the development of a new instrument aimed at assisting us all to a better understanding of the experience of higher degree research students – the Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ). We shall:

• explain the rationale for this new questionnaire
• examine the context in which the PREQ is being developed
describe the process by which the pilot instruments were administered

describe the remaining steps in the process.

The project is not due to be completed till May 1998 and therefore it is not possible to report in any detail on the analysis of the responses. However, some preliminary comments about the performance of the pilot instruments will be offered and attention will be also be given to the issues which graduates have been indicating are important to them.

2. Rationale for the development of the PREQ

Since 1992 the Graduate Careers Council of Australia (GCCA) has included with its Graduate Destination Survey (GDS) form, the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) which is intended to capture graduates’ perceptions of their higher education experience. The information gathered through the CEQ is used in a number of contexts and by a number of different authorities including universities (in order, for example, to identify areas of good teaching practice), the Good Universities Guide, and the Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA) who used data derived from the CEQ in their recent performance indicators report, Characteristics and Performance of Higher Education Institutions. (The GCCA has little control over the uses to which CEQ data are put by some users).

The CEQ has shown itself to be a robust and resilient instrument with wide acceptance. Its validity as a measurement of university teaching quality has been demonstrated by Australian and overseas researchers (Richardson, 1994; Wilson, Lizzio & Ramsden, 1997).

However, it has been recognised for a number of years that the CEQ, which was developed initially for bachelor degree graduates, is inappropriate in many ways for the growing number of postgraduate research students in Australia. The number of commencing research higher degree students grew by 6.1%, from 9,945 to 10,554, between 1996 and 1997. (DEETYA, 1997, p.8)

The CEQ went to all university students who completed university degrees in 1992 simply because the GDS goes out to all graduates as a matter of course. (It would have been uneconomical to try to separate the higher degree research graduates). Responses confirmed that many of the “course” and “teaching” oriented questions did not reflect the experience of higher degree research students and graduates. In the report of the 1994 CEQ Ainley and Long noted that:
The Course Experience Questionnaire was primarily developed for use with students undertaking studies for an initial qualification. Although the present survey involves all graduates, including those with postgraduate qualifications, most attention is given to first degree graduates. The concepts underlying the questionnaire are most appropriate to courses which they studied. (Ainley & Long, 1995, p. 1)

Similarly, those responsible within universities for student feedback or program review were reporting that the CEQ was not a suitable fit for research students. A new instrument seemed an appropriate development, especially in an environment which, as Marginson has noted, not only saw the development of quality mechanisms but the strengthening of a “consumer culture” within universities and the “encouraging [of] student evaluation of teaching” (Marginson, 1997, p.233). While many institutions had developed their own instruments, there was a need for a national data set in order to put these internally-gathered data into context.

In the 1996 CEQ Report Johnson noted that the “views of students completing higher degrees by research will be the subject of a separate publication, the Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire” (Johnson, 1997, p.1). By this time the GCCA had submitted a proposal for the PREQ pilot survey under the Evaluations and Investigations Programs of DEETYA and had received approval and funding.

Thus, the PREQ is a new survey (but based in many aspects upon the CEQ) which is intended to explore the experience of higher degree research graduates, an important body of exiting students, aspects of whose university careers have not been examined on a national basis in the past.

3. Context in which this development is taking place

The development of the PREQ takes place within a context where there is both considerable debate about performance measurement in Australian universities, and also considerable attention to “research” per se, whether the precise issue be the role of research versus the role of teaching in higher education, the development of so called research institutions, the Higher Education Review etc.

Given this background it is not surprising that there should be system-wide interest in postgraduate student feedback as one way of enhancing research offerings. The policy of the Federal Government has been to monitor more closely the outputs of universities, to seek for more detailed analysis of performance indicators. The DEETYA publication referred to
above, *Characteristics and Performance of Higher Education Institutions*, takes this level of analysis to a spectacular degree – 148 columns of data. As Paul Ramsden says after a time a reader might expect to see “a quantitative analysis of the hair colour of the vice-chancellor, the number of car parking spaces within a kilometre radius of the sports centre and the sexual preferences of the registrar” (Ramsden, 1998). The substantive point here is that one might reasonably expect in the future (and for better or worse) that one indicator in such a DEETYA collection might be “PREQ Good Research Score”, along the lines of the existing “CEQ Good Teaching Score”. (Incidentally, DEETYA’s term, not the GCCA’s.)

The significance of the PREQ in this context is that compared to the considerable body of research that now exists concerning student evaluation of undergraduate courses, or university courses per se, there is little research into the postgraduate student experience (Johnson, 1997, pp.2-10; Cameron, 1996). While this is certainly not to suggest that Australian universities have not picked up on the possibilities of postgraduate feedback and review, nothing has been done on a system-wide basis to date. Issues of immediate concern in the development of the PREQ included

- what questions to ask (what issues do the students consider significant, and what issues do institutions consider significant)
- how best to frame the questions both in terms of wording and modes of response
- how well will the PREQ reflect the postgraduate research experience.

It is to be hoped that the PREQ, like the CEQ and similar instruments, attracts detailed academic scrutiny.

4. Methodology

A PREQ Advisory Committee was formed in order to assist in the development of the instrument and oversee the project. The membership of the Advisory Committee was based on the GCCA’s Survey Management Group (SMG) with the addition of senior academics and Professor Paul Ramsden, who developed the original version of the CEQ. (The SMG advises on the conduct of the GDS and CEQ, and is made up of representatives from the AVCC, DEETYA, institutions and the GCCA).

A wider advisory group was developed via email. This group consisted largely of deans and directors of graduate education and institutional GDS/CEQ survey managers. Draft documents and questionnaires were circulated to this group for comment and information. A good deal of useful feedback resulted.
The item banks were developed after an examination of current surveys being run internally by institutions, and in consultation with the two advisory bodies. Two focus groups attended by current postgraduate research students were also conducted with a view to confirming the opinions of the advisory bodies and developing an understanding of the degree of importance placed on issues by research students.

The item banks were then further developed into two sets of questions which broadly reflected each other in content. One set required that subjects indicated their degree of agreement with statements, while the other required that subjects indicate their level of satisfaction with various aspects of their higher degree research experience.

The development of two versions was due to uncertainty on the part of the Advisory Committee (which was taking criticism of the CEQ into account) about which type of instrument would be most useful. A number of CEQ critics had noted the wording of questions and the mode of response (where respondents were asked to indicate level of agreement) and the Advisory Committee wanted to test these issues at the pilot stage. The GCCA also had the view that developments arising from the PREQ might eventually feed into the CEQ.

These two draft instruments were then presented to a third focus group made up of members of the first two. The students were asked to complete and comment on the draft forms. Following this, a further round of consultation with the advisory bodies was conducted, and final pilot versions of the PREQ were developed.

Copies of both versions of the pilot survey are attached to this paper. The “agree” version of the form uses a format similar to that used in the CEQ and seeks responses on a five-point agree-disagree scale with the addition of the option to indicate a “don’t know” response. The “satisfaction” version uses a four-point scale (“very satisfactory to very unsatisfactory”) also with the addition of a “don’t know” response option.

The aspects of research life touched upon in the questionnaire include:

- supervision
- the thesis examination process
- issues around student goals and expectations
- faculty/department ethos and intellectual climate issues
- infrastructure matters
• skills development issues

• and overall ratings

Twenty-eight universities agreed to participate in the conduct of the pilot PREQ survey in which questionnaires were distributed via mail to higher degree research graduates during October and November 1997.

By January 1998 responses were back with the GCCA and the process of data entry, analysis and report writing began. Much of this work is being performed on behalf of the GCCA by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) with a target date for the completion of the project of May 1998. The expected outcomes for this pilot stage of the new survey are:

• broad feedback on the PREQ

• the establishment of the subscales’ validity

• and the development of a final single (and shorter) version of the survey instrument.

5. The remaining steps of the development process

After the analysis of the returned data is complete, the Advisory Committee will re-convene to consider the report and agree on a final form for the PREQ. The wider advisory group will also feed into this task.

Once the development process is complete, the PREQ will be attached to the GDS form for general use with research degree graduates.

6. What do students find important?

At the time of writing this paper it was not possible to present a complete analysis of our results given that, as noted above, the project is not due for completion until May. However, it is possible to present some interim comments and data which will be of interest and which touch upon some of the themes of this conference.

A total of 2,336 questionnaires were distributed to students who had completed their postgraduate research degrees in the last 12 months, with the two versions being used in approximately equal proportions. There were 1,068 forms returned which yielded a response rate of 45.7%. The researchers were disappointed with the relatively low figure, but felt that the timing of the distribution of forms over the November-December period,
while necessary for meeting the research completion deadline, was probably not optimal for institutional administrators or subjects.

Both versions of the survey contains spaces for general comments under two headings.

The first states:

Please use this space to comment on this pilot questionnaire. As this is the first time this questionnaire has been tried we would value your comments. Were there questions you did not understand, or ones in which the meaning seemed ambiguous? Were there issues not addressed that you feel should have been included?

The second states:

Please use this space to comment on your higher degree research experience.

An analysis of these general comments enables us to make some provisional observations concerning the data flowing from the PREQ survey. In both versions of the survey a considerable proportion of the questions were allocated to the topics which most notably arose in the focus group and consultation stage

- the standard of supervision (or the supervisory relationship)
- the thesis examination process
- and infrastructure issues (provision of services and facilities).

For example, in the ‘satisfaction’ version of the questionnaire, 21 of the 65 questions are devoted to the topic of supervision.

It appears that the survey is tapping into concerns shared by a large percentage of the target population, as the majority of respondents’ general comments also fell under those three headings identified above.

The incomparably brilliant and generous supervision of X has to be experienced to be believed! Such thoughtful attention, support – and a sharp, critical mind! The ethic of caring nurtured by Prof.Y in the culture of the Institute – so supportive, collaborative and committed – is a wonderful way to support postgraduate research. I was doubly blessed.
The process of submitting my research thesis became a bad joke. By the end of the day I had 8 different versions of how this should be done and left my thesis with the secretary, who put it on the window ledge...a sad denouement to a long and serious commitment, which had been well supported by the department.

This is comforting information for the survey designers, perhaps predictable, and certainly something institutional administrators might even think was self-evident. However, as noted previously, this will be the first time that national data are available against which institutions can compare their own figures.

When pushed a little harder these responses, especially those that are concerned with supervision, reveal some interesting features. A strong trend that emerges in the qualitative analysis is that the survey should cater for multiple supervision more effectively than it does now. Respondents often wish to distinguish between the supervision they received from one person and that which they received from a later (or simultaneous) academic. While a difficult task, the advisory bodies will have to consider ways in which this can be done (if it can be done within the context of the PREQ).

A typical response on this aspect is:

With two supervisors you need a way to discriminate, within the questions, as in some cases one was outstanding and the other was bloody awful

Also of interest is the number of part-time or distance postgraduate students who felt that the survey, while of relevance, could be extended to incorporate facets of their experience. Thus while the provision of resources (or the failure to provide them) by the host department is of great interest to many students, it is of less interest to external students used to finding or developing their own resources while researching in comparative isolation.

As a part-time external student many of the issues raised were not applicable. There was very little student/supervisor contact unless initiated by the student. This is generally appropriate but not a very supportive approach. It should be made clear that postgraduate studies as an external student are “up to you” so there are no false expectations of support.

This issue somewhat reflects the nature of the pilot instruments, which concentrated on the actual items and not on supporting demographic items. When the PREQ is attached to the
GDS, breakdowns and analysis by aspects such as part-time and/or external enrolment will be possible. However, the number of such comments indicates that these students have some real concerns and that these should be addressed fully in PREQ data analysis.

7. Conclusion

As with the CEQ, it is not expected that the data gathered by the PREQ will supplant institutions’ own research into this area. It is hoped that the PREQ data will add to institutions’ data by giving them national figures which will offer context and comparability. Sensible and thoughtful use of such data will assist institutions’ understanding of the experience of research higher degree graduates and this can only be of benefit to all parties, and to higher education in general.

Then future PREQ responses may mostly be along the following lines:

My higher degree research experience was excellent - some of the best years of my life! The support from the department (animal science) was tremendous. I developed analytical, critical and general research skills that are essential to my professional work. I developed personally, which is an important part of the process.

References


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