

# PhD Candidature Experience Survey – Semester II, 2014

---

## 1. Introduction

PhD candidature contributes to increased research outputs and improved human resource availability for USP member countries. The University wants to improve the PhD candidature experience and increase and encourage completions for its students by focussing on academic supervision, the orientation and integration of candidates in relevant research environment and by providing relevant research training.

The PhD Candidature Experience Survey was design by the Research Student Coordinator with consultation with the Deputy Vice-Chancellor. The purpose of the survey was to understand the dynamics of PhD candidature at USP and to use the information gathered from the survey to direct improvements in the infrastructure and facilities at USP to improve the overall PhD candidature experience.

## 2. Data

The survey was sent out via email to all registered PhD students at USP on the 9<sup>th</sup> of October, 2014. A reminder was sent on a weekly basis to students who had not responded to the survey. Of the 113 registered PhD students, only 37 [33%] had responded by the 20<sup>th</sup> of November, 2014.

The number of respondents per faculty varies. However, all the responses have been included in this report as the result may provide useful information.

<b>Faculty/Section</b>	<b>Total</b>
Faculty of Arts, Law & Education	11
Faculty of Business & Economics	10
Faculty of Science, Technology & Environment	8
PACE-SD	8
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>37</b>

*Table 2.1: Number of respondents per faculty/section*

A summary of the respondents' gender is provided below.

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Total</b>
F	17
M	20

*Table 2.2: Number of respondents by gender*

### 3. Evaluation of Candidature

A total of 65% of the responded stated that they are planning to be on full-time candidature in Semester I, 2015, while 16% said that they will be on part-time candidature. Another 16% said they were likely to have completed by semester I, 2015. Only 3% said that they would withdraw in the following semester.

What do you expect your registration status to be in Semester 1, 2015?	Total
Completed	6
Full-time PhD student	24
Part-time PhD student	6
Withdrawn	1
Grand Total	37

*Table 3.1: Respondents expected registration in semester I, 2015*

More than half of the respondents stated that they spend between 31-60 hours per week on their thesis work, while 6 spent less than 30 hours per week on their thesis. A total of 5 respondents stated to spend between 61-90 hours, 3 between 91-120 hours and 1 more than 120 hours per week on their thesis.

How Many Hours Do You Study Per week	Total
0-30 hours	6
31-60 hours	20
61-90 hours	5
91-120 hours	3
121+ hours	2
No response	1
Grand Total	37

*Table 3.2: Number of hours spent studying per week*

### 4. Relevance of Potential Courses

The PhD Candidates were asked to answer the following question: "If USP offered it, which courses might be the most relevant to you?" A total of 11 potential courses were listed. The average ratings per course are presented in Figure 4.1 and Table 4.1. The most relevant courses are "Efficient literature searches and use of sources", "Getting Started with PhD" and "Academic writing".

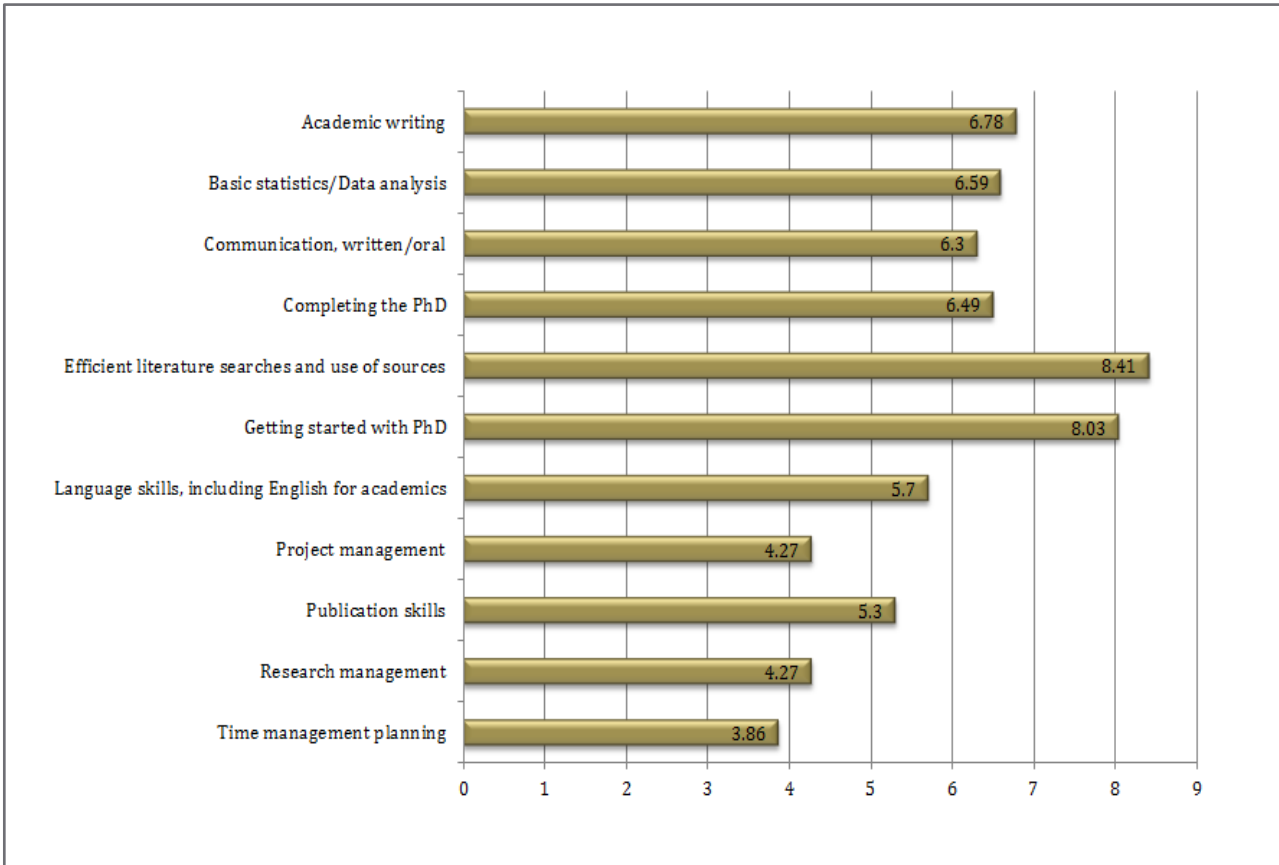


Figure 4.1: Ranking of potential courses at USP

<b>If USP offered it: which courses might be most relevant to you?</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>Rating Average</b>
Time management planning	0.00% 0	2.70% 1	5.41% 2	2.70% 2	5.41% 2	5.41% 2	5.41% 2	13.51% 5	21.62% 8	35.14% 13	2.70% 1	3.86
Research management	8.11% 3	8.11% 3	5.41% 2	0.00% 0	5.41% 2	5.41% 2	8.11% 3	2.70% 1	8.11% 3	13.51% 5	35.14% 13	4.27
Publication skills	2.70% 1	5.41% 2	13.51% 5	5.41% 2	2.70% 1	5.41% 2	10.81% 4	35.14% 13	2.70% 1	10.81% 4	5.41% 2	5.3
Project management	0.00% 0	5.41% 2	5.41% 2	2.70% 1	0.00% 0	2.70% 1	13.51% 5	21.62% 8	37.84% 14	8.11% 3	2.70% 1	4.27
Language skills, including English for academics	2.70% 1	2.70% 1	5.41% 2	8.11% 3	21.62% 8	24.32% 9	10.81% 4	2.70% 1	2.70% 1	10.81% 4	8.11% 3	5.7
Getting started with PhD	45.95% 17	8.11% 3	8.11% 3	5.41% 2	8.11% 3	0.00% 0	2.70% 1	2.70% 1	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	18.92% 7	8.03
Efficient literature searches and use of sources	10.81% 4	27.03% 10	16.22% 6	10.81% 4	18.92% 7	10.81% 4	2.70% 1	0.00% 0	2.70% 1	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	8.41
Completing the PhD	13.51% 5	24.32% 9	5.41% 2	2.70% 1	2.70% 1	13.51% 5	2.70% 1	2.70% 1	10.81% 4	8.11% 3	13.51% 5	6.49
Communication, written/oral	0.00% 0	2.70% 1	13.51% 5	32.43% 12	8.11% 3	5.41% 2	8.11% 3	13.51% 5	5.41% 2	10.81% 4	0.00% 0	6.3
Basic statistics/Data analysis	13.51% 5	5.41% 2	10.81% 4	2.70% 1	10.81% 4	13.51% 5	29.73% 11	5.41% 2	0.00% 0	2.70% 1	5.41% 2	6.59
Academic writing	2.70% 1	8.11% 3	10.81% 4	27.03% 10	16.22% 6	13.51% 5	5.41% 2	0.00% 0	8.11% 3	0.00% 0	8.11% 3	6.78

*Table 4.1: Respondent ranking of potential courses at USP*

## 5. Academic Supervision

Academic supervision is a key component of the PhD candidature. The candidates were asked about the number of supervisors assigned to them and the responses are provided in Table 5.1. The most common supervision structure is one internal and one external supervisor per students.

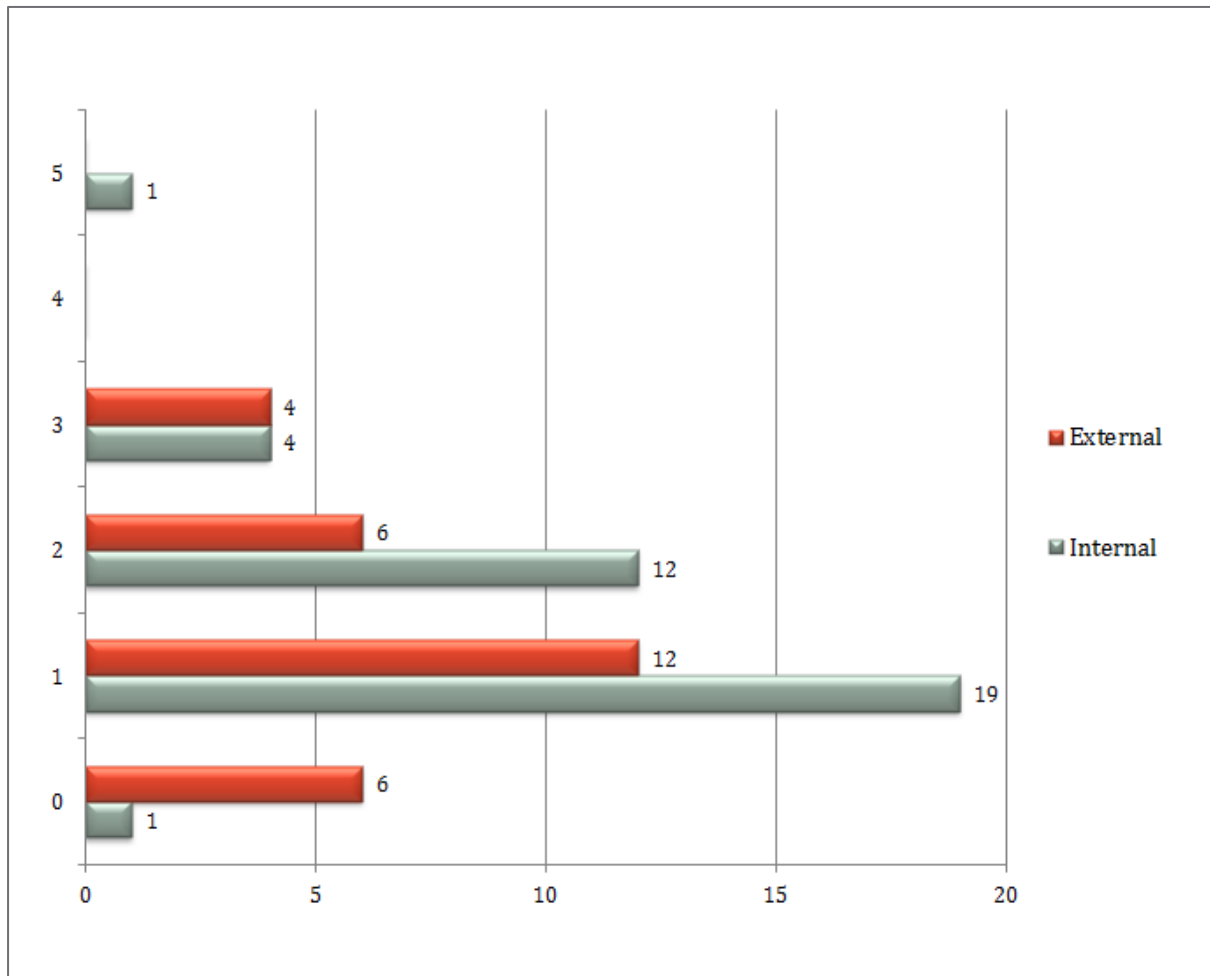


Figure 5.1: Internal and external supervisors assigned to PhD students

Total Number of Supervisors	Count of Students
1	6
2	17
3	7
4	3
5	2
6	1
7	1

Table 5.1: Total number of supervisors per candidate

In response to the question regarding the frequency and length of supervision the students receive, a majority of the students received supervision between 1-3 times on a monthly basis. The most common duration of the meetings were between 11-30 minutes. Figure 5.2 and Table 5.2 provide the candidate responses.

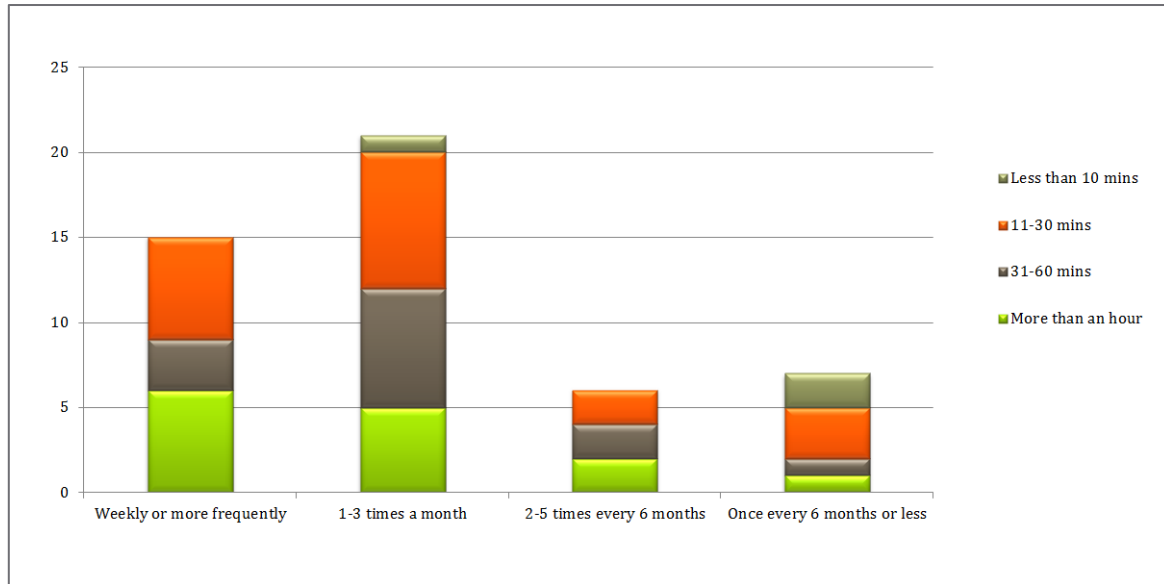


Figure 5.2: The frequency and the length of supervision received by PhD students

Answer Options	Less than 10 mins	11-30 mins	31-60 mins	More than an hour	Response Count
Weekly or more frequently	0	6	3	6	15
1-3 times a month	1	8	7	5	19
2-5 times every 6 months	0	2	2	2	4
Once every 6 months or less	2	3	1	1	5

Table 5.2: Supervision frequency and duration for PhD candidates

In response to the question: "Are you satisfied with the supervision?" 40.5% of the respondents were satisfied to some extent and 37.8% were satisfied to a large extent while 13.5% found their supervision to be satisfactory and 8.15 were not satisfied with their supervision.

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes, to a large extent	37.8%	14
Yes, to some extent	40.5%	15
Satisfactory	13.5%	5
Not satisfied	8.1%	3

Table 5.3: Level of supervision satisfaction among PhD candidates

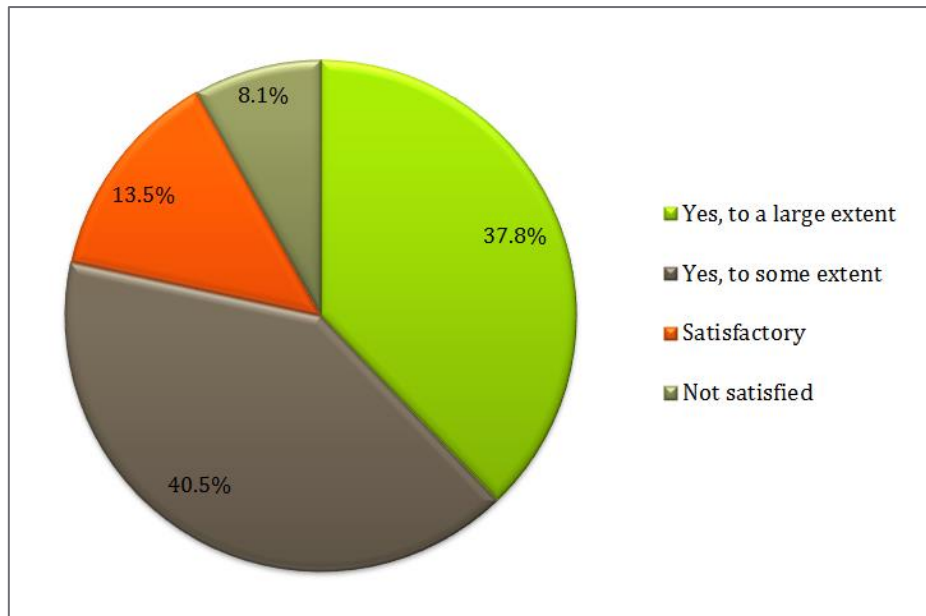


Figure 5.3: Level of supervision satisfaction among PhD candidates

A total of 32 candidates have not had any form of disagreements with their supervisor. Two respondents stated that they have had disagreements regarding the theory/scientific methods for the dissertation, 1 had disagreement regarding the training/workshop to attend and 1 had had some personal disagreements with their supervisor(s).

<b>Have you had any substantial disagreement with your supervisor?</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
No	86.5%	32
Yes, regarding theory/scientific methods, the dissertation	5.4%	2
Yes, regarding required training/workshop	2.7%	1
Yes, regarding co-authorship of academic publication	0.0%	0
Yes, personally	2.7%	1
Other (please specify)	2.7%	1

Table 5.4: Reasons for disagreement with the supervisor

## 6. Completion of PhD Studies

Table 6.1 shows the reasons why the PhD candidates have not or will not submit their dissertation within the candidature period. Overall slightly higher than 37% said it was due to problems with infrastructure/facility. Followed by this were problems relating to combining work on dissertation with other work, family issues, and financial problems. Only a few said it was due to the fact that they had lost interest in research or received another job offer. Those

who had specified their reasons for delay under “Other” mainly stated supervision issues as the cause of delay.

<b>What are the most important reasons why you have not submitted/will not submit your dissertation within the candidature period?</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
My own health	8.1%	3
Family issues	27.0%	10
Problems with the dissertation	16.2%	6
Problem with infrastructure/facility	37.8%	14
Problems with supervision	18.9%	7
Workload	35.1%	13
Delay in equipment/material order	18.9%	7
Financial problems	27.0%	10
Lost interest in research	2.7%	1
Have had to combine dissertation work with other jobs	13.5%	5
Received another job offer	2.7%	1
Other (please specify)	35.1%	13

*Table 6.1: Reasons for delays with PhD candidature*

## 7. Research Facility at USP

More than half of the respondents were satisfied to some extent with the research facilities provided by the university; almost 22% were satisfied only to a limited extent with 16<sup>th</sup> not satisfied with the research recourses at the university.

<b>Are you satisfied with the research facilities provided by the university?</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Yes, to a large extent	8.1%	3
Yes, to some extent	54.1%	20
Neither	0.0%	0
To a limited extent	21.6%	8
No	16.2%	6

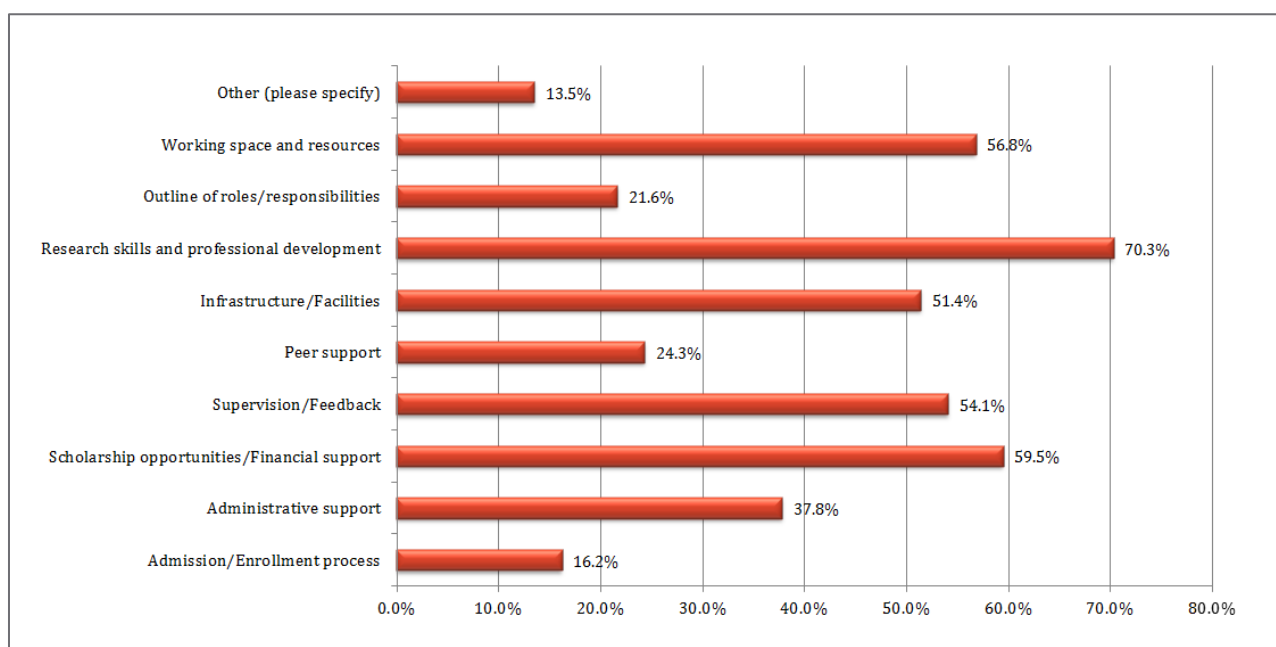
*Table 7.1: Level of student satisfaction regarding research resources at USP*

When asked about the key areas which need to improve at the university, more than 70% of the respondents ranked “Research skills and professional development” as needing the most improvement followed by “Scholarship opportunities/Financial support”, “Working space and resources” and “Supervision/Feedback”.



<b>What are the key areas which need to improve in order to improve postgraduate research experience at USP?</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Admission/Enrolment process	16.2%	6
Administrative support	37.8%	14
Scholarship opportunities/Financial support	59.5%	22
Supervision/Feedback	54.1%	20
Peer support	24.3%	9
Infrastructure/Facilities	51.4%	19
Research skills and professional development	70.3%	26
Outline of roles/responsibilities	21.6%	8
Working space and resources	56.8%	21
Other (please specify)	13.5%	5

*Table 7.2: Ranking of key areas for improvement at USP*



*Figure 7.1: Ranking of key areas for improvement at USP*

Candidates who had specified their reasons for delay under “Other” stated the need for data analysis software and institutional attachment/exchange overseas.

## **8. Conclusion**

The results from the survey provide a basis for some reflections on PhD candidature at The University of the South Pacific. They also provide possible areas to explore in improving the candidature experience at USP. Briefly summarised, these are as follows:

#### Research Training:

The survey provides some indication as to which areas the university could focus on to improve PhD candidature across the faculties. The respondents indicated that training on efficient literature and use of sources are highly relevant for them followed by getting started with PhD and academic writing. This is an important finding as it provides the relevant offices which areas to focus on during PhD trainings and workshops.

#### Academic Supervision:

On balance, candidates show satisfaction with supervision with very few who have had disagreements with their supervisors. However, supervision feedback ranks among the top five areas needing improvement at USP with a ranking of 54%. It is noted that a majority of the candidates are assigned only one internal supervisor. Perhaps the need for increased feedback is a result of singular internal supervisors' workload. Shared internal supervision would normally reduce the responsibility distribution per supervisor.

#### Areas of Improvement:

The top 5 areas which the candidates indicated needs improvement were research skills and professional development, scholarship opportunities, working space and resources, supervision feedback and infrastructure/facilities in descending order. The results are important in planning for improved PhD completions.