

# PGT students' dissertation support report

## Foreword

UEA has nearly 3000 Postgraduate Taught (PGT) Students across 20 schools, making up around 20% of the student population<sup>1</sup>. As UEA Student's Union's<sup>2</sup> Postgraduate Education Officer, it is my responsibility to reflect the views of postgraduates and ensure that UEA is making their experience here the best possible.

This research was initiated because of comments and feedback relayed to me and Union colleagues from PGT students across a variety of schools. We therefore felt it vital to explore this in more detail.

As you will see from the report, there are a number of recommendations across a variety of themes relating to PGT students' dissertation experience. We would urge UEA to consider these recommendations carefully and respond to them appropriately to ensure that students on PGT programs are as supported well and consistently, particularly through their dissertation process.

**Maddie Colledge, Postgraduate Education Officer**



## Introduction

From the period of 24<sup>th</sup> July 2017 to 9<sup>th</sup> October 2017, uea(su) conducted a piece of research into the experiences of students on Postgraduate Taught (PGT) courses in relation to their dissertations. Research was conducted via an anonymous survey which was promoted through a number of ways:

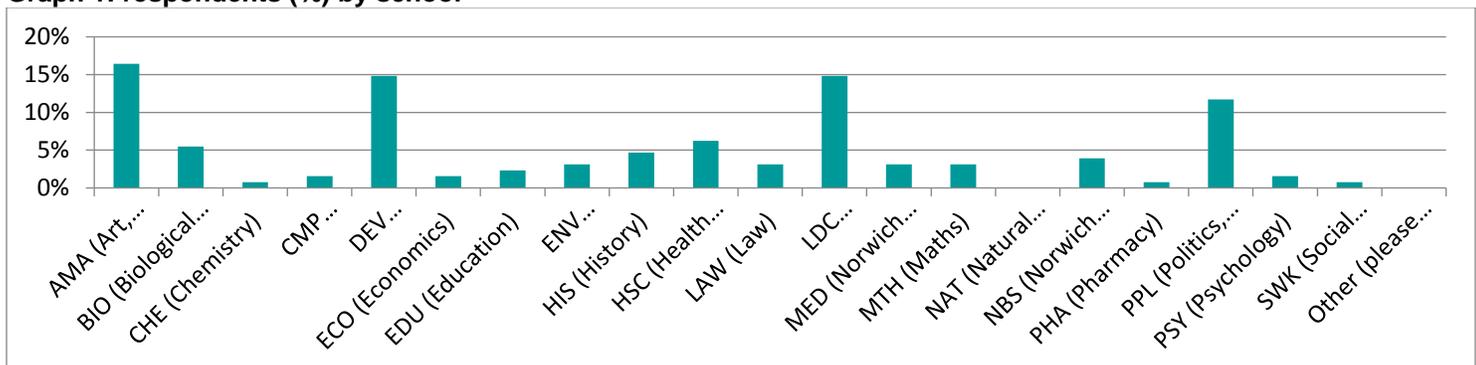
- uea(su)'s postgraduate newsletter, sent out via pre-existing opt-in mailing lists
- official uea(su) postgraduate social media group<sup>3</sup>
- flyers in Scholars, uea(su)'s postgraduate bar and lounge

A full list of the questions in the survey can be found as Appendix A.

We stated in the introduction to the survey that only students who had completed or were in the process of completing their dissertation this academic year should respond. This is to ensure that feedback and information is as up-to-date and relevant as possible.

We received 128 responses over the 10 week period from all UEA schools except Natural Science.

**Graph 1: respondents (%) by school**



<sup>1</sup> Figures obtained from <https://portal.uea.ac.uk/documents/6207125/7112761/Facts+and+Figures+External+Report.pdf/9c6f99e8-aead-444f-9a89-47c8e874b590>

<sup>2</sup> Referred to hereafter as uea(su)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/UEApostgraduatesu/>

## Chapter 1: expectation v reality of course length

Questions 2 to 5 of the survey were about the start and end dates of the course for students, to establish both a profile of the students taking part in the consultation and also to ascertain whether students' expectations of the time structure of their course matched up with the reality.

Students' start dates ranged from September 2014 to September 2016, indicating a range of part-time and full-time courses, and that some students may have had to retake some of their course.

### 1.1 Submission dates

Submission dates were hugely varied, even within the same year. Of those whose submission dates were in the 2017 academic year, dissertation submission dates ranged from early May to mid September. Although these dates are reflective of all UEA schools, and we understand there will be some variation in submission dates, looking at the data at a school-based levels indicates large variation too, as exemplified below:

AMA: range of submission dates from 31.7.2017 to 4.10.2017.

DEV: range of submission dates from 30.8.2017 to 12.10.2017

BIO: range of submission dates from 7.8.2017 to 8.9.2017

Some schools had much more consistent hand-in dates, such as LDC where all 2017 hand-in students named their hand-in date as 5.9.2017, and PPL where all students said their hand in was either 31.8.2017 or 4.9.2017.

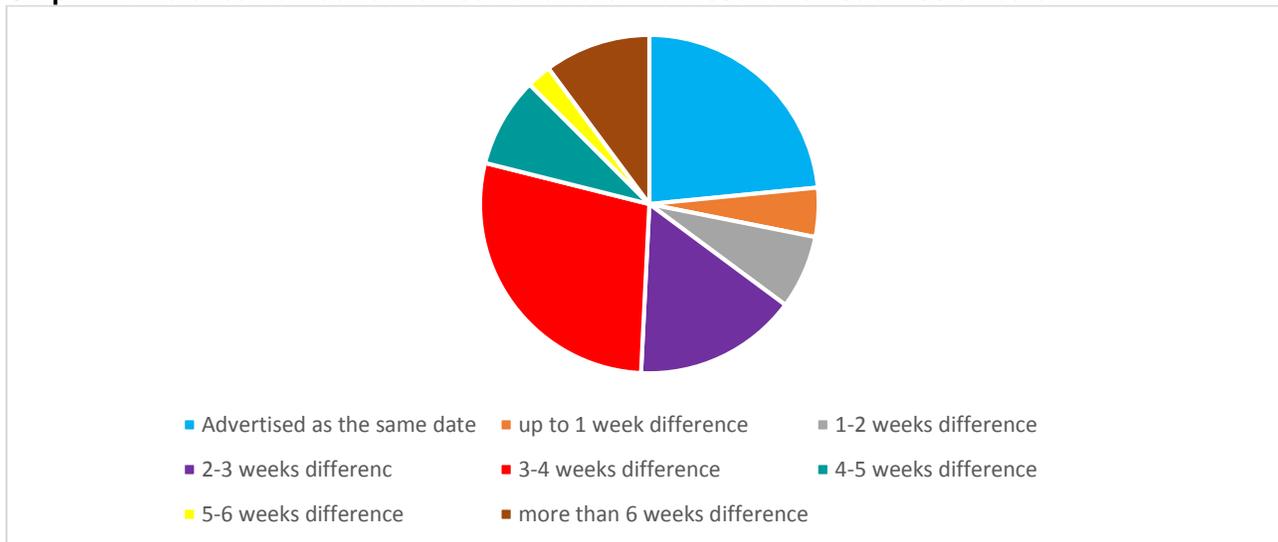
As can be seen, a range of schools with a variety of differences in submission dates exist at UEA. This indicates that PGT students may have varying experiences in terms of time to complete their dissertation and potential support available in that time.

Having more streamlined hand-in dates and policies to ensure consistency should sit alongside better administrative support. Separate uea(su) research has highlighted wider issues with the support and organisation of hubs<sup>4</sup> for UEA students generally. Whilst steps are being taken to improve the Hubs systems for Undergraduate administration, PGT students have very different schedules and submission dates. UEA should therefore consider reviewing the administrative support and organisation for PGT programmes specifically across all UEA hubs.

### 1.2 Difference between actual and advertised end date

We also understand that students may make accommodation or employment arrangements based on the advertised end-date for their course, but that their dissertation is often due in after this time. As such, we asked students the difference between the advertised end date for their course and the actual dissertation submission date. Graph 2 overleaf shows how many students had a difference between advertised and actual end-dates:

**Graph 2: difference between advertised end date and dissertation submission date**



<sup>4</sup> See [https://issuu.com/uea\\_su/docs/student\\_experience\\_report](https://issuu.com/uea_su/docs/student_experience_report), section 2 in particular

The graph shows that a high proportion of students – over 75% - experienced some kind of difference between advertised end date and dissertation submission deadline. Over half of respondents said that the difference was more than 3 weeks.

The only schools with no respondents who had a difference of more than 3 weeks were CHE, CMP, PSY and SWK.

The 12% of students who stated a 5 week or more difference were from AMA, BIO, DEV, ENV, HSC, LDC, PHA and PPL.

The 23% of respondents who said that they were advertised as the same date came from a variety of schools: AMA, CMP, DEV, ECO, EDU, HSC, LAW, LDC, MTH, PPL, PSY and SWK.

There is no consistency or clear trends in the differences in submission dates, either within or between schools. This indicates that there is no central or school-based policies around submission dates and lead-in times for students, which could cause fluctuating experiences and satisfaction levels among students.

There was a trend in themes as to the way a difference in course end and dissertation submission dates effected PGT students experiences:

### 1.3 Implications of a difference between advertised end-date and actual submission date

Students were also asked: “if you experienced a difference between submission date and your course ending, were there any further implications for you?”

There were three main themes which arose from the comments left:

#### i. Accommodation

57% found the difference between submission date and the date their course ended impacted on their accommodation. Major concerns focused on the impact of the submission date being after the accommodation date and the implication this has had on their ability to complete the dissertation. Students reported that they found the accommodation end date stressful, anxiety inducing and having a negative impact on the quality of their work

*“Accommodation is given on a yearly contract, therefore I had to pay for the additional month although the course was already finished.” (DEV student, 3-4 weeks difference between advertised end date and submission date)*

*“The submission deadline date for my dissertation was three days after the end of my accommodation contract... Rather than travelling to UEA last minute on public transport or incurring the costs of staying in a B&B or hotel, I chose to hand my dissertation in before the end of my accommodation contract. I found the experience of packing up my room in time to meet the accommodation deadline... unfortunately had a negative impact on the overall quality of my dissertation.” (HIS student, 3-4 weeks difference between advertised end date and submission date)*

*“... We all have too much at stake and accommodation office did not allow any extension of the contract.” (DEV student, 4-5 weeks difference between advertised end date and submission date)*

*“I was not aware there would be a difference of 3 weeks between the submission deadline and the end of my course, so I signed my tenancy contract for 12 months when it could have been 11.” (PPL student, 2-3 weeks difference between advertised end date and submission date)*

*“postgraduates are required to vacate campus accommodation by 1 September. For me, this poses a particular challenge as I have to deal with moving while also trying to finish the dissertation” (LAW student, 3-4 weeks difference between advertised end date and submission date)*

A key sub-theme emerging is that of students being unable to stay in UEA accommodation past September 1<sup>st</sup> when, as highlighted in section 1.1, many submission dates go well into September or even extend to October. If students aren't aware of this when either applying for accommodation or signing onto a course it could have adverse implications.

#### ii. Employment:

22% of those who had issues said that theirs were to do with employment. Particular concerns were raised about the impact of the submission date on finding a job (3 answers). 2 answers raised concerns over the stress caused by having to balance a part time job/internship and the workload of a dissertation between the submission date and the course end date:

*“Did not have enough money to pay for accommodation for longer period and living costs, so had to work part time, along side doing an internship and writing my dissertation.” (DEV student, more than 6 weeks difference between advertised end date and submission date)*

*“This does make it more difficult to find a job and convert to a Tier 2 visa for those of us who wish to stay and work in the UK, as we cannot switch to the Tier 2 visa until our degrees have actually been granted.” (LAW student, 3-4 weeks difference between advertised end date and submission date)*

*“Had to extend my accommodation, meaning I'm having to work 10-20 hours per week this summer, alongside interning 16-24 hours per week and writing my dissertation in order to support myself” (DEV student, 5-6 weeks difference between advertised end date and submission date)*

### iii. Communication issues with UEA

- 16% felt that UEA had not clearly communicated the length of courses:
- Some were angry that the university had not made it clear that the accommodation date ended before the final submission date

*“The course was advertised as one year but it should have been more clear that you should book accommodation til mid-September” (BIO student, 1-2 weeks difference between advertised end date and submission date)*

*“the dissertation deadline was not decided until very late on (April time)” (AMA student, 3-4 weeks difference between advertised end date and submission date)*

Arguably all three of these themes link and can influence each other, making it difficult to solve any one of them independently. However, UEA should consider reviewing the information given to students when applying for accommodation to heighten awareness of the fact that their contract may expire before their submission date.

#### Recommendations: expectations v realities of course length

1. A review of all PGT programmes' advertised end dates and actual submission dates should take place, and any literature or information given to students should be reviewed to ensure transparency.
2. UEA should ensure that there is consistency in submission dates, enabling improvement in administrative capacity to support.
3. UEA accommodation should review provision available to PGT students to ensure that the contract end date is not significantly beyond the students' hand-in date.

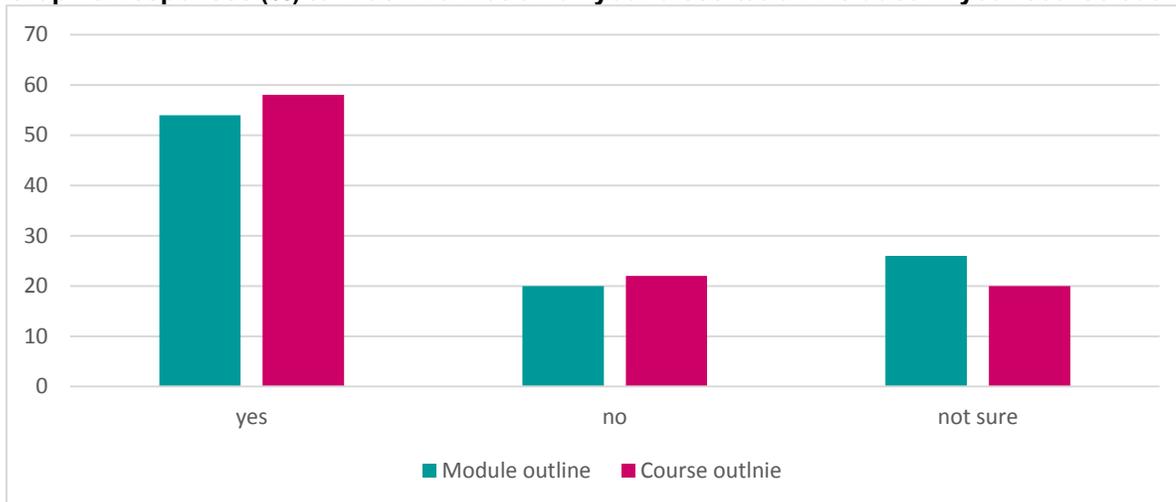
## Chapter 2: information and communication

Some of the questions in the survey were around the theme of information, both amount / quality, and timeliness / communication. Student responses indicate both inconsistency and dissatisfaction with information relayed to students before and during their PGT dissertation, across and within a variety of schools.

### 2.1 Information in course and module outline

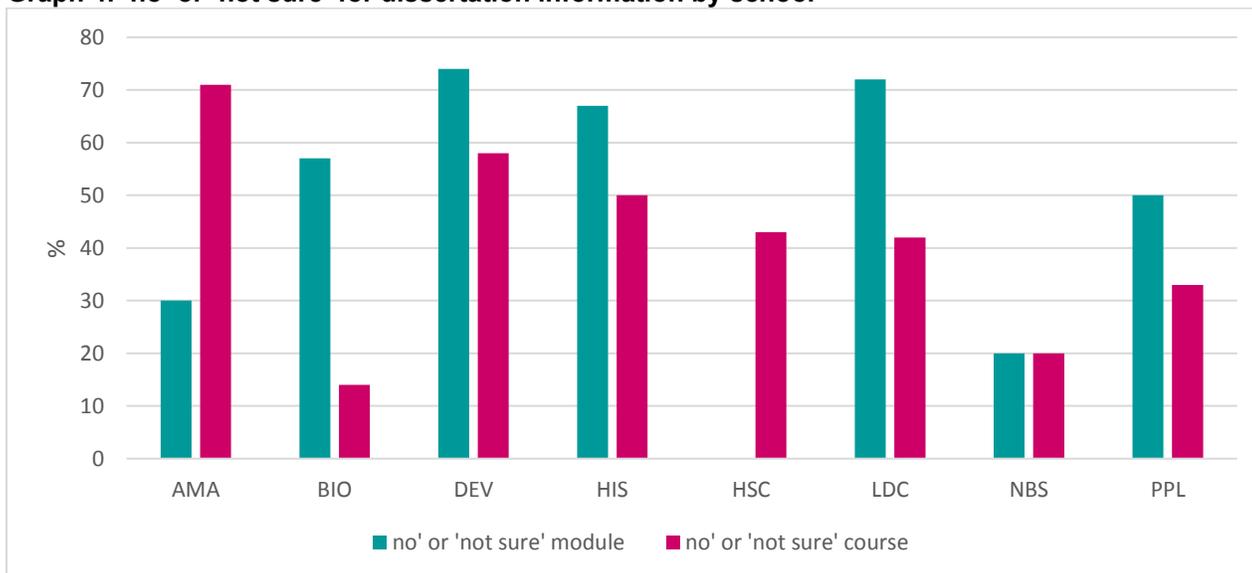
Graph 3 below shows the percentages of students' responses to whether information on their dissertation was included in either course or module outline.

**Graph 3: responses (%) to 'was information on your dissertation included in your course outline or module outline'**



As can be seen, a total of 46% (module) and 42% (course) of students answered 'no' or 'not sure'<sup>5</sup> to whether information on their dissertation was outlined to them. There is, however, huge variance between schools, as indicated on graph 4 overleaf:

**Graph 4: 'no' or 'not sure' for dissertation information by school<sup>6</sup>**



The majority of schools saw higher 'no' or 'not sure' answers for module content than course content, with the exception of AMA and HSC. This indicates a UEA-wide trend of information about dissertation being made clearer in course content than in the dissertation module content. However, even between schools there is inconsistency and students having varying experiences. DEV in particular has incredibly high percentages for both module and course content not including dissertation information, with over half of students not receiving or being unsure as to whether they have received information on their

<sup>5</sup> NB: 'Not sure' in this instance should be regarded negatively, as it implies that information has not been sufficiently clear so as to allow students to be certain of what they have been told.

<sup>6</sup> NB: only schools with 5 or more respondents were used in this graph to ensure the data is valid

dissertation.

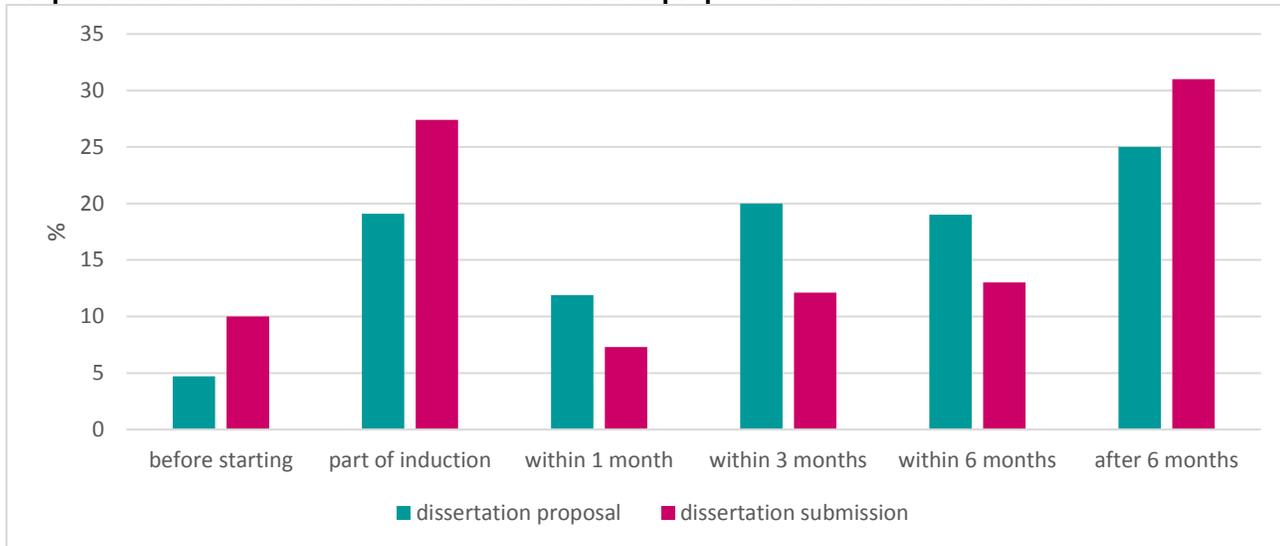
These hugely varied results indicate that UEA should consider implementing a policy on information that should be included in both course and module content. Students have the right and need to know information about their dissertation in advance.

## 2.2 Communication about deadlines

We asked students about the timings around when they were informed of their deadlines which, again, prompted hugely varied responses:

Graph 5, below, indicates that MA students across UEA are being told different deadlines at very different times, with a worrying percentage being told after 6 months after starting the course:

**Graph 5: when students were told their dissertation proposal and submission deadlines**



A combination of 65% of students were told the deadline for their proposal and 55% told the deadline from their final submission more than 3 months into the course. Given that many PGT students are only on one year courses, this then leaves very little time for them to organise themselves and plan out their workload in relation to these deadlines.

There are some very clear trends between schools and Faculties as to the amount of notice that students get for their deadlines, as illustrated on graph 6:

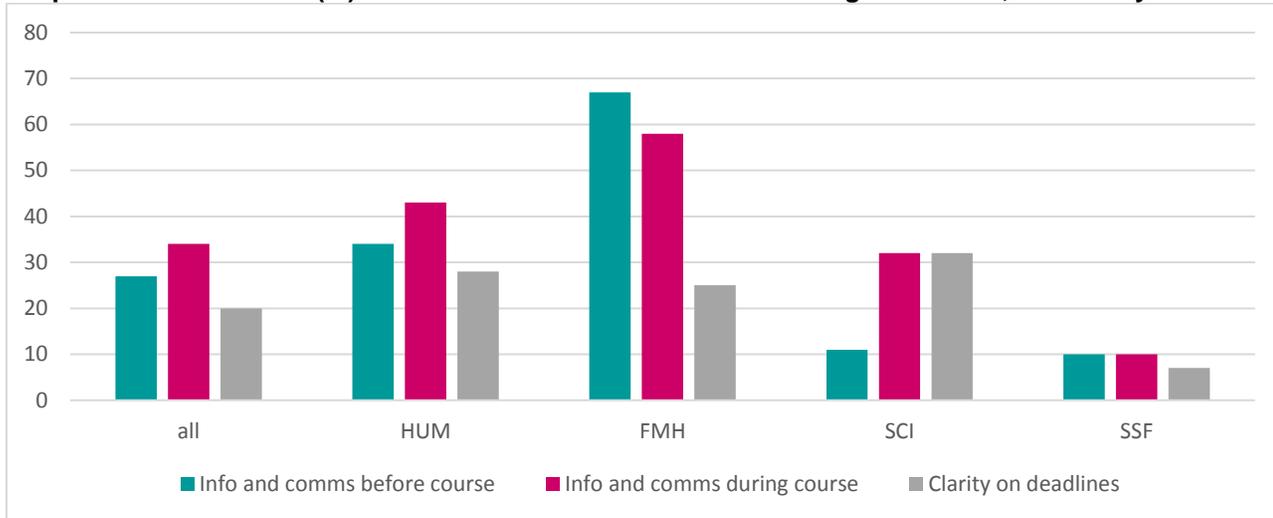


**Graph 6: percentage of students by Faculty who received their deadlines 3 months or more after starting the course**

As can be seen, HUM students had by far the highest proportion of later notice given for proposal and final submission deadlines, although all Faculties saw at least 20% of students experiencing information given at 3 months or more notice.

These results are also reflected in students' satisfaction with communication around their course, both in general and on deadlines specifically, as illustrated in graph 7 below:

**Graph 7: dissatisfaction (%) with info and comms before and during the course, and clarity on deadlines.**



Surprisingly, FMH has the highest dissatisfaction despite having one of the lower scores as illustrated in Graph 6. This indicates perhaps varying expectations of different students regarding information: that those in HUM may be receive information on deadlines until later in the course, but were not necessarily expecting to receive it earlier than they did.

Comments below from students in each of the Faculties provide anecdotal evidence to help to explain some of the quantitative results:

**Comments: HUM**

*"I heard about my dissertation proposal through word of mouth. When I asked the department for further information no one knew anything about it." (LDC student)*

*"As I am a part time student the timing wasn't so crucial as I knew about the deadline from the full time students who submitted the year before me." (LDC student)*

*"I did not have a clue when I was supposed to submit a proposal - I had to more or less work it out myself - perhaps I missed a lecture or something." (PPL student)*

*"The email on dissertation proposals went round via email at around March. We told all the information, including deadlines, were on the module outline, except, there wasn't a module outline on Evision/u-learn!" (PPL student)*

*"We were made aware of the dissertation proposal in March, one month before the deadline for it. At the same time we were told about the final deadline for the completed dissertation." (AMA student)*

*"We didn't find out about the 'proposal' until around March, and that it would be due in May. We also had no actual courses on what our dissertation was meant to look like, the process of writing it, how to get supervisors, etc. As someone who has written papers, but never one so long as a dissertation I think it is an unfair advantage for those who have already written them." (AMA student)*

*"We didn't receive a single piece of information regarding our dissertations until about March. Students asked the course director for an outline, but were rebuffed and told that 'they didn't need to be thinking about their dissertations yet'. If you want high quality dissertation research you should provide students with the maximum amount of time to reflect throughout the year, not have academics who actively discourage them from doing so." (AMA student)*

These comments indicate a noticeable theme of students across a variety of HUM schools having to try to find out information for themselves. It seems that there is a level of complacency from staff, particularly in AMA, regarding dissertations with students being told that they should not worry about them too early on. Although this may be to try to be reassuring and not induce panic, comments indicate that not being told information encouraged more concern among students.

## Comments: FMH

*“Deadlines were moved and different dates were given on blackboard, module handbook and email...it was very confusing” (MED student)*

*“There was no proper announcement as to when proposal was suppose to be submitted - in fact, it took them more than 6 months to reply w/r to the outcome of the proposal” (HSC student)*

Only 2 comments from FMH students were left, which indicates perhaps more individual problems rather than a general trend. Graph 6 indicates that information on final submission deadlines is better than information on proposal deadlines in FMH, with a difference of nearly 10% between both.

## Comments: SCI

*“Dissertation deadline was discussed in an early research skills lecture but only vaguely and date mentioned turned out not to be the deadline in the end.” (ENV student)*

*“I don't think we were told about the exact date of the dissertation deadline until the middle of the second semester although I knew it would be towards the end of August.” (CMP student)*

*“Our dissertation was designed to encompass 12 weeks from june-september and be with a company. I remember deadlines first being explained just before the Christmas holiday!” (MTH student)*

Comments from SCI come from a variety of schools, indicating that there are issues among the whole Faculty with information on deadlines being explained at different times of the year in different contexts. Graph 6 indicates that a higher proportion of SCI students found out about their final submission deadline later than their proposal deadline.

## Comments: SSF

*“Not sure All I remember is that we did not have much time to choose a theme and didn't know that we had to choose in March.” (DEV student)*

*“It wasn't very clear when a dissertation idea was expected to be formed until after the Christmas break - around February. Also, we had to hand in a dissertation approval form, but this wasn't a proposal as such and didn't go into detail. I felt I would've greatly benefitted at later stages if I'd had to hand in a better thought-out proposal earlier on.” (DEV student)*

*“The law school only held dissertation information sessions and began sharing information on them in the spring term.” (LAW student)*

*“Dissertation supervisor told me of the deadline of the completed first draft about a month ago. I was assured by the internship coordinator that I would have an extension due to doing an internship organised through DEV, however the hub took a long time to actually confirm this extension which was quite stressful as I had only taken the internship on the assumption that I would have an extension but it was finally confirmed last week (mid July) after applying several months ago.” (DEV student. NB: this comment was left on 24.7.2017).*

As can be seen, most of the comments left by SSF students are from the school of DEV, which indicates there may be a more obvious trend in this school. Comments from DEV students indicate a lack of clarity around dates too with confusion about deadlines.

As part of the research we received several comments from students progressing from UG to PGT programmes surrounding the “cut off” of email accounts. Whilst not directly linked to the Dissertation experience, there is a clear disconnect between the “Stay right where you are” messaging in recruitment and the realities of being cut off from the University over the intervening summer. This should be fixed.

### Recommendations: information and communication

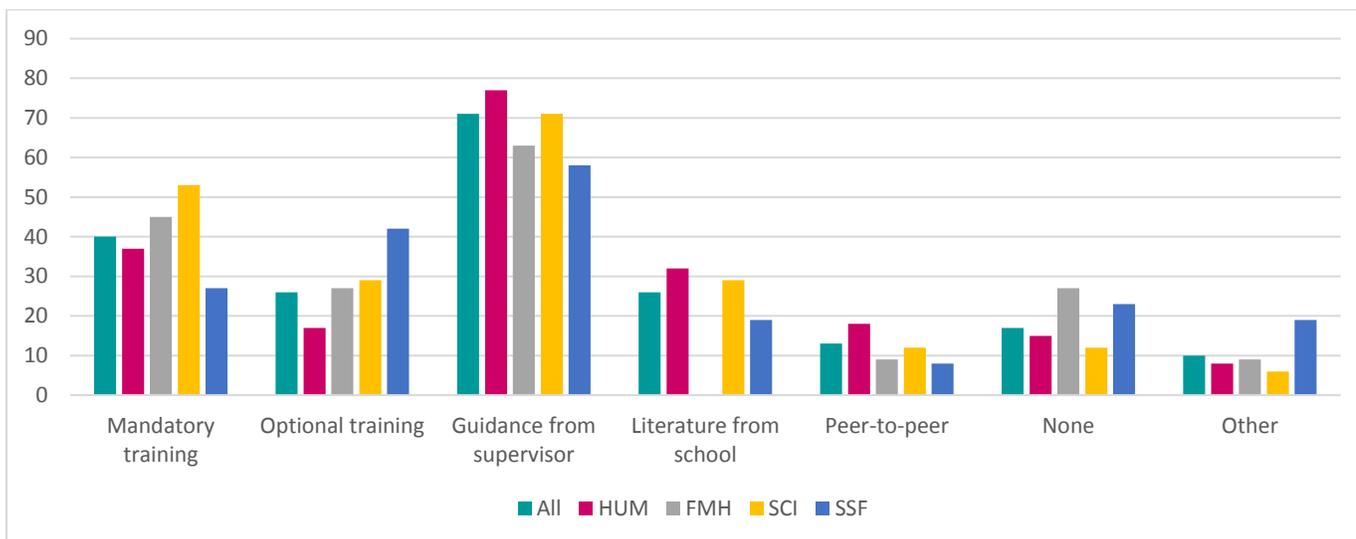
1. UEA should publish information on dissertation proposal and submission dates to be included in all course and module outlines so that students start the course with a clear idea of these major deadlines for the year.
2. Information on deadlines throughout the year should be included in inductions and on Blackboard as well as in course and module outlines.
3. UEA should ensure that all schools have consistent communication strategies with regards to the sharing of information regarding their PGT courses, particularly in terms of dates, deadlines and resources.
4. The Dissertation module (or element of module) should be clearly outlined in module descriptions/outlines. This should include assessment criteria.
5. A “fix” should be introduced that enables students continuing from UG to PGT to retain their email account, library access and related entitlements (ie SU membership).

## Chapter 3: training and preparation

One area we wanted to explore in more detail was students' preparedness for undertaking PGT -level dissertation research. We understand that the kind of research methods required for PGT dissertations can be very different to that of Undergraduate, and so wanted to gauge from this survey the extent to which UEA students felt they had been prepared and trained to undertake such research.

### 3.1 Type(s) of training received

We asked students what kind of research methods training had been offered to them. They could select as many options as were appropriate to them. As you can see from graph 8 below, the results were very varied:



**Graph 8: types of research training received by students**

The most common type of training offered across all Faculties was guidance from supervisor. Although this is positive to see, this could be quite a subjective form of training and support and also hard to monitor the exact information being relayed to students.

SCI had the largest proportion of mandatory training, however the fact that this was still just over 50% of students indicates that it is mandatory on a school-by-school (or even course-by-course) basis, rather than for all students of a particular Faculty. Comments from SCI students included:

*“Very little support offered re skills for the dissertation, and it was not very helpful re the variety of topics which may have been available either” (ENV student)*

*“Had to learn new software by myself, wasn't provided with any direction” (MTH student)*

*“We received a single document on “research methods” and that was all the guidance we were given. Whilst that might be enough for students who have written a dissertation before, our course had a majority of students who were new to academic writing/academic writing in the UK” (MTH)*

SSF had the lowest percentage of mandatory training and the second highest percentage of no training. This indicates that SSF students in particular may not feel as well prepared going into writing their dissertation. However, they also had the highest proportion of optional training; it may be worth considering reverting some optional training into mandatory training in order to provide students with more rounded preparation. Comments from SSF students on training included:

*“No department led sessions to help us with our work, some sessions during induction week not satisfactory” (DEV student)*

*“We had research methods module but we spent less time on applying these methods” (EDU student)*

*“Some brief work on research during my course meeting” (DEV student)*

Question 10 of the survey was “If you have received any form of research training, please give a little more detail on aspects such as content, regularity of sessions (eg. one-off or a series of sessions) and usefulness/relevance of content”. The themes emerging from these comments were as follows:

**i. Sessions too brief or not regular enough**

- 20 responses (43%) said that sessions were either too brief or not held regularly enough
- 13 (28%) students stated that they received only one-off sessions
- Others complained that they felt the sessions were rushed and tried to cover too much in the time period, meaning the information they received was not adequate – one student described them as ‘helpful but unstructured’

**ii. Research training not relevant or useful**

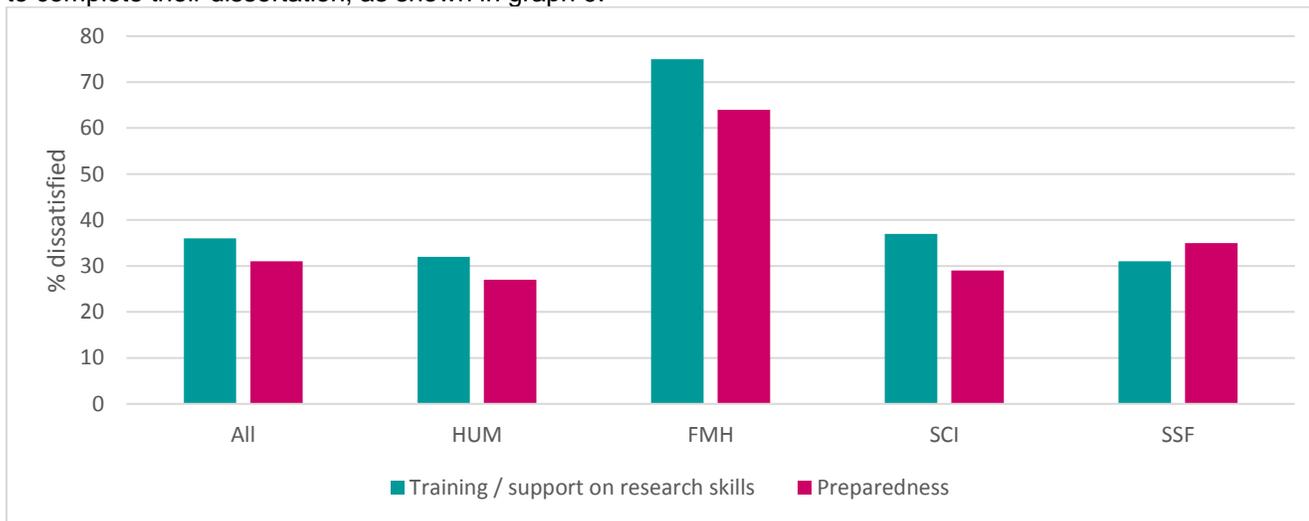
- 15 answers (32%) found that the research training sessions were not useful or relevant
- Students complained that sessions were poorly run and not very engaging
- In addition to this there were complaints that the content was not specific enough to the course

**iii. Research training expected too much**

- 8 students (17%) felt that the sessions were either too demanding or assumed students had a higher level of knowledge than they actually possessed
- One student complained that they had to a statistics module despite being on a media course

**3.2 Satisfaction with training received**

Alongside these results, students were also asked how satisfied they were with training offered and how prepared they felt to complete their dissertation, as shown in graph 9.



**Graph 9: dissatisfaction with training and support and general preparedness for undertaking a PGT course**

As can be seen, FMH’s dissatisfaction is far higher than the other Faculties. It is worth noting that FMH had fewest respondents, so this may affect the weighting of the results; however there is still significant difference between them and any other Faculty.

Generally, dissatisfaction with training and support is higher than on preparedness, but it is arguable that the two are closely linked and could therefore offset each other.

We also asked students whether there is there any information and training that they would have liked to have received prior to starting their dissertation that they did not receive. The emergent themes from this question were:

**i. How to write/structure a dissertation at PGT level**

- 28 responses (39%) wanted more information regarding how to write and structure a dissertation
- Students requested more sessions on how to construct a 15000 word piece of writing and would have appreciated more support with writing specific sections (e.g. abstract, lit review, methodology)
- Many also requested dissertation writing guides and sample dissertations to be put on Blackboard

**ii. More information about research skills**

- 17 people (26%) said they would have liked more teaching about research skills and methods

- Some students felt that they did not receive enough to teaching about this aspect to justify the tuition fees

**iii. More access to dissertation supervisors**

- 9 responses (14%) wanted more help from or communication with their supervisors
- Particular complaints were made about the lack of help in contacting an advisor despite not knowing anyone in the department
- There were also concerns about how difficult advisors could be to contact for meetings

**iv. Training for required software**

- 4 people (6%) said that they did not receive the necessary software training which would have helped with their dissertation

**Recommendations: training and preparation**

1. All PGT courses should offer mandatory training and information on the dissertation-writing process.
2. All students should be required to complete self analysis around their research skills relevant to their discipline and be required to submit a personal development plan that closes any skills gaps.
3. Personal development resulting from the analysis should include a range of discipline-relevant training opportunities.
4. Schools conduct cohort-level analysis on PDPs and dissertation results/feedback to establish ongoing need.

## Chapter 4: supervision

Anecdotal feedback from PGT students prior to the release of the survey indicated that there was inconsistencies between and within schools and Faculties in regards to quality and regularity of supervision.

### 4.1 UEA guidelines on supervision

Official UEA guidance on supervision of PGT students is very difficult to find. There is a central UEA University Student Handbook<sup>7</sup>, a document for UG and PGT students, which makes clear the distinction between an academic advisor and a dissertation supervisor with the quote:

*“If you are a postgraduate taught student and are required to complete a dissertation as part of your programme then you will also be assigned a Supervisor as your academic mentor for this piece of work.” (p. 6)*

However, the document mentions the word ‘adviser’ 52 times, yet only mentions ‘supervisor’ three times, once being the above. Given the fact that the roles of advisers and supervisors for PGT students are very different, this illustrates how the document does not sufficiently provide guidance for PGT students.

Further research using UEA’s website indicated that there may also be Faculty-level guidance documents as one for FMH<sup>8</sup> was found. Although this is positive to see, UEA should be more consistent in its messages and guidance for those undertaking a PGT and should ensure that *all* Faculties have their own guidance too. FMH’s document also contradicts the central document around supervision. As can be seen from the quote above, the central document states that students “will be assigned” a supervisor. FMH’s document does not explicitly state how the supervisor will be allocated, but instead uses the more passive phrasing “once the chosen supervisor has agreed to take on the role” (p. 3). This implies that it could be either the student or staff choosing the supervisory pairings. Our survey into PGT students dissertation experience uncovered further information about allocation of supervisors:

### 4.2 Allocation of supervisors and initial contact

Results from the survey indicate that there is huge variation in practice as to supervisor allocation within and between Faculties. Graph 10 below shows the method for supervisor allocation split between the different Faculties:



**Graph 10: how supervisors were allocated (% of respondents) between each Faculty**

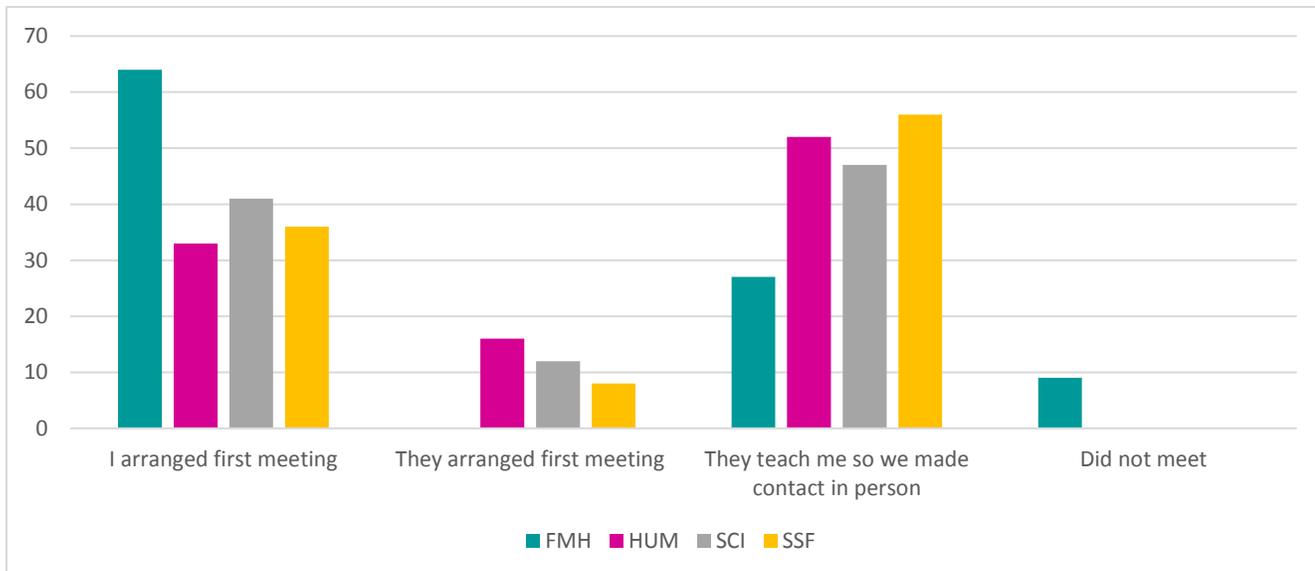
As can be seen, the most common form of allocation is through students asking for specific staff, followed by supervisors being allocated based on their knowledge of the research area. Whilst it is positive that some students from across all Faculties have been able to have input into who their supervisor is, the spread of varieties of allocation across and within Faculties indicates that students are not having a consistent experience.

It is also concerning that nearly 20% of HUM students stated that their supervisor was allocated randomly. Whilst random allocation has its merits, it is not fair for some members of the Faculty to have structured allocation whilst others’ allocation is random.

<sup>7</sup> Available at <https://portal.uea.ac.uk/documents/6207125/8540534/University+Student+Handbook+for+Taught+Programmes/bbd468b8-e895-4cd2-b496-6dcc0ac1f08c>

<sup>8</sup> Available at <https://portal.uea.ac.uk/documents/6207125/13474379/Research+Dissertation+Guidelines+for+Students+2017-18.pdf/1ddd0429-0408-4e31-b7a7-64493f23376d>

We also asked students about their initial communication with their supervisor, given that the central UEA guideline document, cited previously, does not specify how initial contact should be made and by whom.



**Graph 11: how initial contact was made between students and supervisors**

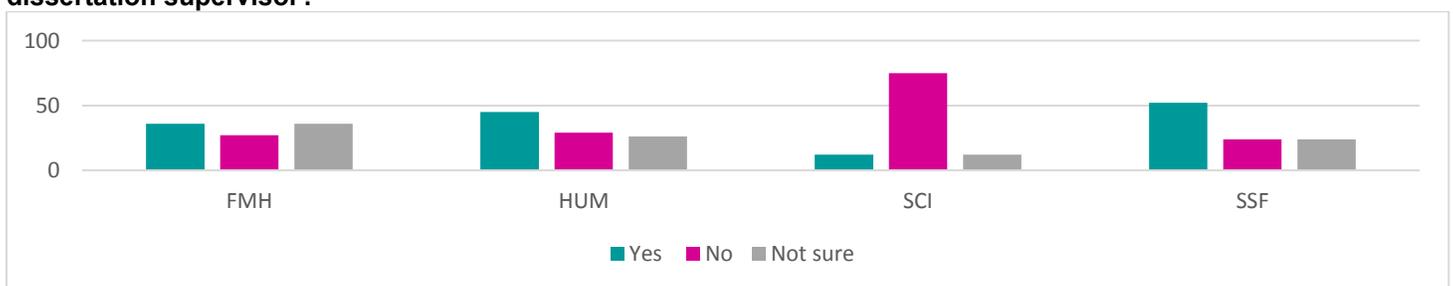
The results are hugely varied across the Faculties. The majority of FMH students arranged the first meeting themselves, which sits in line with the guidance given in FMH’s Research Dissertation guidelines document: “it is your responsibility to arrange meetings with your supervisor”<sup>9</sup>.

The majority of HUM, SCI and SSF students stated that contact was made because of students being taught by their supervisor, however over a third of students from all of these three Faculties stated that they arranged the first meeting. This graph indicates that the onus is very much on the student to establish contact with the supervisor. Whilst there is no issue with this, detailed and consistent guidelines and support should be in place for PGT students to allow them to make the most of their supervisor in as fair a way as possible.

### 4.3 Support from supervisor

We also asked students about the amount and quality of support from their supervisors, starting with whether there is a limit on the amount of meetings that students can have. We asked this because we are aware that some schools have policy on a maximum number of hours allowed for students to meet with their supervisors. Graph 12 illustrates the results:

**Graph 12: Responses (%) to the question “is there a limit on the amount of time you can spend with your dissertation supervisor?”**



It seems that Science generally does not put a cap on hours available, but that in SSF and HUM it is far more common. FMH has a very broad range of responses, with the same number of students answering ‘yes’ as ‘not sure’. There is certainly no consistency across UEA generally and some clear inconsistencies within Faculties.

Comments from students from each Faculty illustrate further reasons:

<sup>9</sup> Page 4. Available at <https://portal.uea.ac.uk/documents/6207125/13474379/Research+Dissertation+Guidelines+for+Students+2017-18.pdf/1ddd0429-0408-4e31-b7a7-64493f23376d>

### **i. FMH**

There were only a few comments from FMH students for this question, however the three that were left illustrate a variety of practice.

*"10 hours per year" (HSC)*

*"One day a week was allocated for project work (Friday). Not very helpful if the external supervisor works only Mondays and Wednesdays." (MED)*

*"My supervisor never had time" (HSC)*

### **ii. HUM**

Lots of HUM students mentioned supervisors being on holiday or away from campus limiting contact time. Comments from LCD that this schools' students are told to expect 4 lots of one-hour meetings:

*"4 sessions of 30-45 minutes." (LDC)*

*"four one hour meetings in June" (LDC)*

*"We were told not to expect more than four meetings, and were told that we should not expect tuition through August. Though **my supervisor was happy to meet more frequently** and throughout August, I know that some other students weren't." (LDC)*

The comment above is particularly pertinent because of the wording in bold: this particular student was able to meet with their supervisor more often, thus putting them at an advantage compared to their peers despite the schools' policy.

AMA students speak more about there being a very distinct time limit to when supervision must end:

*"We are not allowed to contact them after August basically, which is ridiculous when we've barely had time to formulate a topic and conduct research." (AMA)*

*"There was a cut off six weeks before the deadline which was apparently for staff holidays, but some students still saw their supervisor after this cut off which doesn't seem fair" (AMA)*

*"I was told at the end of June of the 'policy' not to expect supervision beyond 21 July. So I had a possible 3 months of supervision time. Within this time there was no limit." (AMA)*

*"My supervisor was lovely and never capped the number of meetings. However, there was allegedly a school policy that meant we would not receive 'official' supervision after July 21st. This was never communicated in writing, and resulted in some students only finding out on the 11th July that after 10 days they would not be able to see their supervisor anymore. How can people make sure they see their supervisor before such a crude deadline if they are not even informed of this policy? Why does the university advertise their masters courses as 12 months, when they don't provide supervision over the summer period? Why does the university not provide secondary supervisors and have contingency plans when academics are on research leave?" (AMA)*

The comment above, similarly to the LCD student previously, indicates that some students may be getting more regular contact with their supervisor if the supervisor allows it. Whilst we would discourage there being a cap on hours or a cut-off point, inconsistency between supervisors is also bad practice

### **iii. SSF**

SSF's students had very varied responses,

*"Would have been nice to clarify what to expect, and some FAQ's as a lot of people were unsure of things to do with the dissertation." (DEV)*

*"Once before starting the dissertation, and once when the draft was 80% completed" (DEV)*

*"it didn't come up. I kept meetings to 30 mins. I read initial guidance saying to aim for 6 meetings including initial idea development, so I kept to those limits and didn't push for more. it was perfectly reasonable and fit the task, afterall the aim was to produce an independent piece of research" (DEV)*

Comments from DEV students indicated a trend of not being aware of whether there was a cap, due to a lack of information and clarity from the school. The second comment above, however, does indicate a limit of times of only 2 meetings over the course of the year.

*"Dissertation module organiser said that we should see our supervisor only for 6 times. I have not counted our meetings." (EDU)*

*"Maximum 2 supervision meetings" (LAW)*

Responses from other schools in SSF indicate further inconsistencies between schools which supports the results shown in graph 12.

We also asked students how supported they felt by their supervisor whilst completing their dissertation, the results of which are in graph 13 below:

**Graph 13: how supported by their supervisor do students feel?**



Generally, students' responses indicate that they feel supported by their supervisors, however there are fluctuations between each Faculty. A large proportion (20%) of SSF students say that they felt 'mostly unsupported', whilst SCI had no students saying they were either mostly or totally unsupported. HUM and FMH have the widest spread of responses, with students' opinions stretching from 'totally unsupported' to 'totally supported'. Although we recognise that support can be subjective and different supervisors will support in different ways, we would like to see all students feeling 'mostly' or 'totally' supported by their supervisors in order to try to ensure as consistent an experience as possible.

#### 4.4 Supervisor knowledge of subject area

Students were asked how much knowledge their supervisor had in their area of research. Only 4% answered 'no knowledge', 35% answered 'some knowledge' and 60% answered 'specialist knowledge'. This is positive to see, especially given that nearly 90% of respondents think it should be compulsory for all supervisors to have knowledge of their supervisees' areas of research.

Some comments left by students on this indicated that it may not be enough or as simple as the supervisor having specialist knowledge:

*"Tricky question to answer: my supervisor certainly had invaluable knowledge of writing screenplays, but very little knowledge of the 'researched' content in said screenplay." (LDC)*

*"There'd be problems with both, it seems. If a supervisor has specialised knowledge, there could be a possibility of he/she countenancing certain positions and being resistant to other views; if the supervisor has little or no experience/knowledge in a particular field, they may not be able to advise adequately. So knowledge, yes; specialised knowledge, not necessarily." (PPL)*

*"In some departments, there is very limited range of specialisms. This would limit the choice of subject areas available to students. On the assumption that many departments probably aren't intending to 'diversify' (being a world-leading expert on a single philosopher is very much their 'thing') a better solution would be that supervisors have to have a working knowledge of the broader themes, and to set time to read/gather knowledge on the specific areas." (PPL)*

Some comments indicated that students may prioritise a supportive supervisor who can successfully guide them through the dissertation-writing process over one with expert knowledge:

*"There needs to be an option to have a supervisor that can guide the fundamentals of a dissertation if the student feels their knowledge on the subject to be exceptional" (AMA)*

*"I mean they don't necessarily have to have expertise knowledge, but their knowledge should be above average to be able to help students get through and provide guidance" (ECO)*

*"Sometimes work ethic and level of support are just as important, but it can also help to have someone with a lot of knowledge in your area of study" (PPL)*

*There's a lot more to supervision than specialist knowledge. I requested to be put with my supervisor because they really compliment the way I work, and I'm comfortable working with them. Though they don't necessarily have specialist knowledge in my particular field, they are really good at the things I am really bad at; where I struggle with structure and literary theory, they are really good. (LDC)*

These comments combined with the quantitative results indicate that most students feel that supervisors should have a broad knowledge of their supervisees subject area, but that also general support is incredibly important and should not be overlooked.

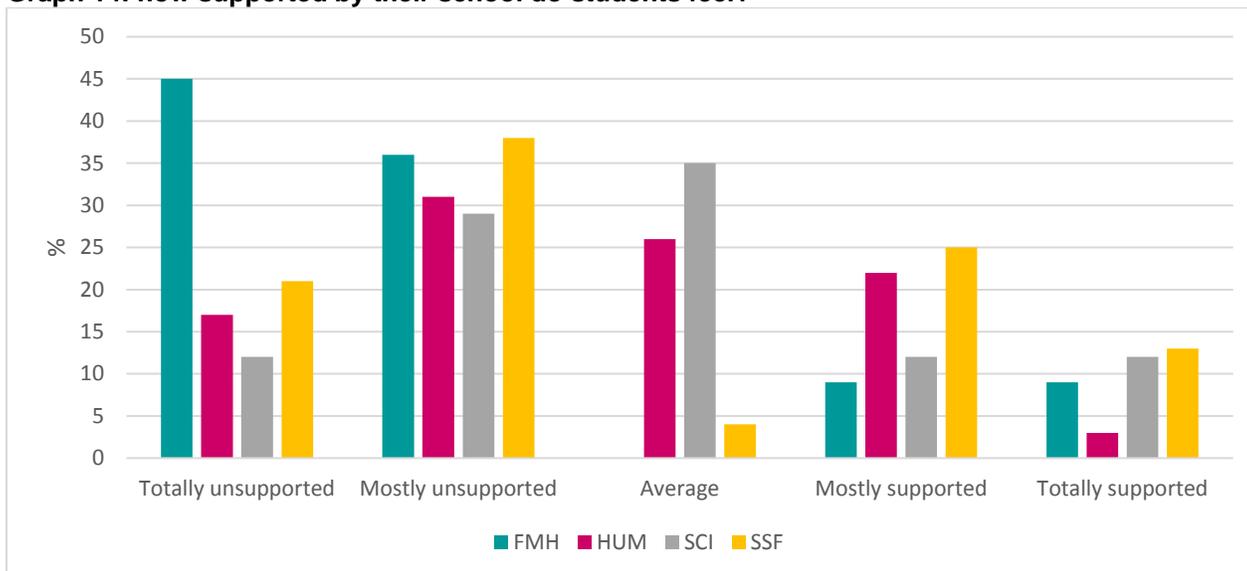
### **Recommendations: supervision**

1. All Faculties, but HUM in particular, should review their policies to ensure that there are no cut-off dates for supervision.
2. UEA should ensure that all PGT courses are providing secondary supervisors for all students.
3. UEA should ensure that students have clear and consistent information about standards of supervision at UEA and what to expect from their supervisor.
4. Basic expectations around time allowed with supervisor should be established and communicated.
5. A clear process for the selection of supervisors should be developed and published.
6. UEA should develop a transparent system for dealing with student complaints or issues with their allocated supervisor.
7. Items 3 to 6 should form the basis for a PGT supervision policy agreed at Senate.

## Chapter 5: General support and feedback

The final three questions of the survey asked for general satisfaction with support from their school, and allowed students to leave any general feedback they may have. Graph 14 below indicates satisfaction with school support:

**Graph 14: how supported by their school do students feel?**



Generally, students' feedback is weighted more towards feeling unsupported by their school, particularly in FMH. Combinations of 'mostly' and 'totally' supported is highest in SSF, although they also have the highest percentage of students feeling 'mostly unsupported', which indicates fluctuations within Faculties and between schools.

We also asked students what one thing the University could do to improve their Masters dissertation experience. We have themed the results to indicate the top five responses:

### i. Better course structure

- 53 responses (45%) said they believed the course could have been structured in a more organised way
- The major issues were that courses felt rushed and the dissertation deadline should have been extended in order to let people complete the dissertation without feeling so stressed

*"The submission date is 18/10/17 and final placement starts on 23/10/17. There is not sufficient time to produce EBL presentation, prepare for final placement and complete dissertation. The whole experience is very stressful and there are many sleepless nights involved" (HSC)*

*"better time management. having to find a place to live plus having only three months for an intense piece of work was beyond exhausting and luckily i had a mentor but others had to go into counselling" (PPL)*

*"It all felt far too rushed and far too late, with supervisors already focussing on summer holidays and their own research. I would move the start of the research supervisions forward to immediately after Easter and have some preparation/discussion of proposals several months before this." (LDC)*

### ii. Increase teaching about research methods

- 21 (18%) students felt that they did not receive as much training about research methods as they needed
- Some students complained that they were left in the dark and had to buy their own books to make sure they employed the correct research methods

*"Starting earlier on in the year, focusing on developing a research proposal as mandatory towards the dissertation months prior to the actual research period." (DEV)*

*"Improve research training other than modules such as research method clinic, research software clinic, and practical workshops." (DEV)*

### iii. More social opportunities/pastoral care for masters students

- 19 (16%) responses said they felt that they should have received either more emotional support or the opportunity to have social engagements with other masters students
- A common problem highlighted was that doing the dissertation can be a lonely experience

*“Much much more support. From the university level and the school level. Groups where people can meet on their dissertations together (as in working separately but in the same room quietly and individually to fight the feelings of isolation that can overwhelm while doing dissertation) I think exist but if they do are really not well advertised. Perhaps coffee meeting where students can meet up, especially for those of us who are still working when the uni starts to empty for the summer.” (ENV)*

*“Some sort of celebration for Masters students finishing in September would have been good. I feel like when I hand it in it will be an anticlimax as I can’t graduate until next July.” (EDU)*

#### vi. More support from supervisors

- 18 students (15%) said that they wished their supervisors had been more supportive or accessible:
- Many responses felt supervisors were too busy with their own teaching and research to have time to adequately support them

*“It would be better if supervisor could thoroughly check, review and give feedback on student’s dissertation draft in detail before its final submission.” (NBS)*

*“Make it clear to supervisors that they should support and advice students because the others on this masters were pretty much left to guess and work things out alone” (BIO)*

#### v. Improve support over the summer

- 13 people (11%) said their experience would have been improved if they had received more support over the summer:
- A common complaint was that dissertation supervisors became very hard to access over the Summer, making the dissertation writing process a stressful and isolating experience

*“Supervision sessions should be spread out across the summer, rather than all squeezed in within the first few weeks.” (LDC)*

*“Ensure supervisors are available during later stages of dissertation. And it is compulsory for them to look at first drafts if that is stated as part of the course.” (BIO)*

## Summary of recommendations

1. A review of all PGT programmes' advertised end dates and actual submission dates should take place, and any literature or information given to students should be reviewed to ensure transparency.
2. UEA should ensure that there is consistency in submission dates, enabling improvement in administrative capacity to support.
3. UEA accommodation should review provision available to PGT students to ensure that the contract end date is not significantly beyond the students' hand-in date.
4. UEA should publish information on dissertation proposal and submission dates to be included in all course and module outlines so that students start the course with a clear idea of these major deadlines for the year.
5. Information on deadlines throughout the year should be included in inductions and on Blackboard as well as in course and module outlines.
6. UEA should ensure that all schools have consistent communication strategies with regards to the sharing of information regarding their PGT courses, particularly in terms of dates, deadlines and resources.
7. The Dissertation module (or element of module) should be clearly outlined in module descriptions/outlines. This should include assessment criteria.
8. A "fix" should be introduced that enables students continuing from UG to PGT to retain their email account, library access and related entitlements (ie SU membership).
9. All PGT courses should offer mandatory training and information on the dissertation-writing process.
10. All students should be required to complete self analysis around their research skills relevant to their discipline and be required to submit a personal development plan that closes any skills gaps.
11. Personal development resulting from the analysis should include a range of discipline-relevant training opportunities.
12. Schools conduct cohort-level analysis on PDPs and dissertation results/feedback to establish ongoing need.
13. All Faculties, but HUM in particular, should review their policies to ensure that there are no cut-off dates for supervision.
14. UEA should ensure that all PGT courses are providing secondary supervisors for all students.
15. UEA should ensure that students have clear and consistent information about standards of supervision at UEA and what to expect from their supervisor.
16. Basic expectations around time allowed with supervisor should be established and communicated.
17. A clear process for the selection of supervisors should be developed and published.
18. UEA should develop a transparent system for dealing with student complaints or issues with their allocated supervisor.
19. Items 3 to 6 should form the basis for a PGT supervision policy agreed at Senate.

## Concluding thoughts

As can be seen from the research behind this report, the experience of PGT students at UEA is hugely varied, particularly in terms of support and communication. uea(su)'s desire is for all PGT students, regardless of course, school or Faculty, to have a fair and consistent experience and have access to reliable information and advice, principally in regards to completing their dissertation. There is inconsistencies both within and between schools meaning that some students are at a stark disadvantage in comparison to others, particularly in terms of supervisory access and support.

We, as a union, are keen to work with UEA further to bring forward the recommendations highlighted in this report and do what we can to bring them to fruition and would urge UEA to take heed of both our recommendations but, more importantly, the given feedback from students.

## Appendix A: PGT students dissertation experience survey questions

### \* 8. How would you rate your school on the following aspects of your Masters dissertation experience:

	Totally unsatisfactory	Mostly unsatisfactory	Average satisfaction	Mostly satisfactory	Totally satisfactory
Information and communication prior to starting the course	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Please explain your answer if you wish	<input type="text"/>				
Information and communication during the course	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Please explain your answer if you wish	<input type="text"/>				
Training / support on research skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Please explain your answer if you wish	<input type="text"/>				
Clarity and transparency on deadlines	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Please explain your answer if you wish	<input type="text"/>				
General support	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Please explain your answer if you wish	<input type="text"/>				

### \* 9. What research methods training has been offered to you? (please tick as many as appropriate)

- Mandatory training during my Masters
- Optional training during my Masters
- Guidance from my supervisor
- Literature provided by my school (eg. guidance leaflets)
- Peer-to-peer training and guidance
- No research training
- Other (please specify)

10. If you have received any form of research training, please give a little more detail on aspects such as content, regularity of sessions (eg. one-off or a series of sessions), and usefulness / relevance of content.

### \* 11. How prepared did you feel when starting your Masters dissertation?

Totally unprepared	Mostly unprepared	Averagely prepared	Mostly prepared	Totally prepared
<input type="radio"/>				

Please explain your answer if you wish

12. Is there any information and training that you would have liked to have received prior to starting your dissertation that you did not receive?

\* 13. How was your supervisor allocated?

\* 14. Please select the option which most accurately reflects your initial communication with your supervisor:

- I was told the name of my supervisor and I arranged a first meeting
- My supervisor got in touch with me and they arranged a first meeting
- My supervisor teaches on the course so we made initial contact in person
- I did not meet with my dissertation supervisor

Please explain your answer if you wish

\* 15. Was there a limit on the amount of time you could spend with your dissertation supervisor over the length of your course?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure
- If 'yes' please specify what the amount of time was

\* 16. How much knowledge of your area of research did your supervisor have?

No knowledge	Some knowledge	Specialist knowledge
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

\* 17. Do you think it should be compulsory for all supervisors to have knowledge of their supervisees' areas of research?

- Yes
- No

Please explain your answer if you wish, particularly if you chose 'no'

\* 18. How supported have you felt whilst completing your dissertation, by...

	Totally unsupported	Mostly unsupported	Averagely supported	Mostly supported	Totally supported
... your supervisor	<input type="radio"/>				
... other lecturers	<input type="radio"/>				
... the school in general	<input type="radio"/>				

**\* 17. Do you think it should be compulsory for all supervisors to have knowledge of their supervisees' areas of research?**

Yes

No

Please explain your answer if you wish, particularly if you chose 'no'

**\* 18. How supported have you felt whilst completing your dissertation, by...**

	Totally unsupported	Mostly unsupported	Averagely supported	Mostly supported	Totally supported
... your supervisor	<input type="radio"/>				
... other lecturers	<input type="radio"/>				
... the school in general	<input type="radio"/>				

**\* 19. If the University could do one thing to improve your Masters dissertation experience, what would it be?**

**20. If you have any further comments on your Masters dissertation experience please do leave it below:**