

## Building local leadership in research education

### Case Study 1 - Creating a culture for research students

*Building research education within a faculty is a long process. It involves cycles of change, innovation, reflection and collaboration. Implementing change requires not just top-level leadership but leadership across various roles within a faculty. The following case study documents how one faculty introduced a range of strategic initiatives designed to build a stronger research education environment. The initiatives were led by multiple people to create a strong research culture, particularly for research students. This case study is also a story about opportunistic links with other initiatives, both institutional and national.*

*It starts by setting the context of change and the challenges facing the development of a research education culture within this specific faculty. It takes up a number of initiatives designed to incorporate particular kinds of activity to broaden the research student experience and provide for better integration of students and research cultures. It discusses how these events were built into a doctoral student plan and concludes with some reflections of those involved on the overall development.*

#### Context

In the early 1990s, the Faculty of Education made a decision to foster research and research students, and as part of that direction appointed a new Professor and Head of School with the explicit goal to build a stronger research base within the Faculty. At that time, research students were primarily part-time and mature age, and most came with minimal research experience but with the intention to research a specific topic of their own. This meant that few of them were able to join in a research group or join an existing project. The longer-term intention was to create a context in which these research students would be able to engage in a strong research community as part of their research experience. Developments over the following 20 years were initiated and implemented by a range of local academic leaders.

#### Move from traditional coursework to an integrated program of activities for all doctoral students

The new appointment coincided with the start of an expansion of research student places. However, there was a sense of uncertainty in how to deal with the increase in students and supervisors. Many were encouraged to do a professional doctorate (EdD) rather than a PhD, which was an attractive alternative for many students, and numbers

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increased. In the early stages, the first year of the EdD was coursework, with fairly traditional research-oriented coursework units. The problem was that while most students completed the coursework stage successfully, they then had difficulty making the transition into doing their own projects. Staff tried all sorts of different ways of dealing with this; trying to do things that carried into the second year, adding activities, building the cohort so they could support each other more, and having meetings. For many years aspects of the EdD were tinkered with, in an effort to get it to work and to stop the large drop-out rate in the second or third year. There was concern about completion rates, which were not satisfactory and not as good as the PhD.

As part of the reforms in the faculty, another academic leader was influential in identifying the kinds of things that should be included in the coursework. She suggested a move away from traditional masters subjects to block activities around the different elements of what you need to do for a thesis; for example, early discussions about 'what's the difference between a PhD and an EdD', and including blocks on the 'literature review', 'ethics', 'planning a study', 'methodology' and so on. Rather than organising the program around different course units, it was an integrated program with continuity and oversight from a single coordinator. These changes were instituted for the EdD and although it was generally regarded as a better program, there were still problems with drop-out rates after the end of the first year.

Parallel to the EdD developments, there was an increase in PhD enrolments. There was considerable overlap in the EdD and PhD cohorts in terms of demographics and types of study, although some PhD students are younger, more likely to be full-time and more likely to be attached to externally-funded research projects. PhD students showed interest in the EdD block programs and requested to be included. Over time the new model became accepted as the introductory program for all doctoral students in the Faculty. Students don't have much sense of being enrolled in coursework in the traditional sense because every first year assignment is a part of what they would be doing anyway for their research activity.

### Particular initiatives

#### *Community of scholars meetings*

Concurrently with these changes there were PhD students saying '*well we don't*

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*actually get together much, we don't know who these other people are, we don't have much contact with the Faculty'. The faculty had always had research seminars but that wasn't regarded as enough because seminars are always topic or visitor driven and that meant there wasn't much opportunity for students to talk about research more generally. In particular, there was very little opportunity for students to talk about research with staff other than their supervisor, and even then supervisors tended to talk about research only in direct relation to the student's project. In many cases, students often did not know what research their supervisor was working on unless they just happened to have presented a seminar about it. Therefore the senior staff in the faculty identified a gap: there wasn't a community of research that included research students. Although certain research groupings were very active, there wasn't a strong community beyond the immediate players and certainly not with students who were working on topics that did not directly connect with staff projects. What was identified was a gap between the student program and what researchers did.*

Various possibilities were explored and one of the strategies adopted was what was termed 'a community of scholars meeting'. The community of scholars started with a monthly meeting in late afternoon or evening so that the part-timers who were at work could get to it. The idea was that it was a place where researchers could talk about doing research. At these meetings, staff and students were able to present their research and raise issues to a supportive group of insiders as distinct from the public and often final version given in a seminar. There were also opportunities for students to plan the sessions themselves. A staff member was available to support the students and the students' steering group, but the aim was for it to be student managed. Involvement was voluntary and no records were kept of who attended.

Sometimes staff attended, particularly when they were specifically invited to do something, however staff involvement was a continuing problem. On occasions more than one member of staff would be invited and there would be a discussion about an open topic, such as '*How do you find a question to research*'. Different people would tell stories about how they grappled with this question for one of their projects. So the focus was on demystifying research, and being able to discuss the things students wanted to know about research but didn't get told in a research course.

#### ***Student Research Conferences***

Another initiative in building a strong research culture and engaging research students was the Student Research Conference. Students are encouraged to present a

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paper even in their first year of enrolment, and specific staff are also invited to present. A wider group of staff are encouraged to come along not just to hear the students but to contribute to the sessions by discussing the research process, acting as keynote speakers, or being discussants on panels. Participation was not mandatory for students as the intention was to make it like any conference. The approach was always that *'if it wasn't interesting enough for students to come along anyway then it probably wasn't worth doing and just getting students to come along for the sake of coming along is not sufficient reason'* The annual student conference is organised by students. A staff member was available to help with but students, particularly the full-time ones, were encouraged to do most of the organising e.g. calling for abstracts, vetting contributions, arranging rooms. This initiative has continued for over ten years and it has been adopted by the subsequent mega-Faculty, following a restructure.

### ***Doctoral Research Plans***

Part of the context of the new 'employability agenda' led by the federal government was that there were concerns about *'Do doctoral students actually get jobs'* and *'Are they equipped to get jobs'*. The question being asked of/in universities was *'So what are you doing in your programs to develop skills other than doing one project'*.

Whilst it was acknowledged that there were external pressure on universities to make research degree graduates more employable through diversifying their work to a broader range of activities than their thesis, internally, there was also concern in the faculty that the various activities that students undertook in conjunction with their studies were not recognised and recorded. Doctoral students often ended up with little to show other than their completed thesis.

The Faculty therefore introduced a Doctoral Research Plan, This plan was based on a structure for the three stages of a doctorate. The first stage was pre-confirmation, before the major doctoral assessment at the end of the first full-time year equivalent. The second was the post-confirmation period when the student was immersed in the agreed project, and then there was the later phase that led to completion. A range of things that students might do in these different stages was identified and listed as prompts for each stage. They included things like participating with the community of scholars or presenting papers at internal conferences but also it encompassed students doing other things like going on placement somewhere or presenting papers at conferences or writing a journal paper. The idea was that students

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would keep a record of what they did. The intention was not to generate a formal portfolio but to provide a kind of template, which had prompts of possibilities. Students populated it with the things that they did.

This process subsequently transmuted into the University's Doctoral Framework. The concept was taken up by the University Graduate School and was effectively trialled within one faculty. It is now included in the Doctoral Framework which has been progressively rolled out to all faculties.

The Doctoral Research Plan identifies needs, but it is not only what is needed for a particular doctoral project, but also what is required to meet the DDOGS framework for doctoral capabilities, and whatever else the student would want to incorporate into their studies. The idea of this plan was that it was negotiated with the student and the supervisor, with the oversight of the research degree co-ordinator, because some of the things went beyond what the supervisor could organise or do. Students have a different plan for each stage of their doctoral studies but it is a rolling plan which changes over time. For instance, students prepare and negotiate a plan and at the end of six months a review is undertaken. In those six months before the review the plan is updated and modified it. It then that gets handed in to the faculty and at the end of the year submitted to the University Graduate School.

This initiative was a combination of what people saw to be good practice, the willingness of a number of individuals to devote some energy to it and also the slowly changing regulatory framework that underpinned it. Now, supervisors are faced with the requirement to have a discussion with students about the plan within the overall doctoral framework. There continues to still be some corridor talk about how some students and their supervisors are trying to ignore it, but it is part of the change strategy that recognises that if you have a device that students own and that students drive, supervisors are brought along.

### Reflections on the process of implementing change

Many of the faculty initiatives have eventually become part of the infrastructure and the 'normal' way of doing things. Rather than waiting for changes to be required (either externally driven or internally driven), needs have been identified and initiatives started. Then when changes came along, we've been able to appropriate them and use the change to legitimise what we've been doing and to move it to the

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next step. These strategies have to be seen as long-term cultural changes and the processes are not meant to be stifling.

All the changes are hard won; none of them occur easily, none of them occur through just doing one thing, none of them occur through a policy, and none of them occur through setting up an activity. They've got to be continually reinforced. From the leadership perspective, whoever is in the position of authority can't do it all; no one person can do it all. The great success of the initiatives in Education has been the diversity of people that have been involved. Different people have done different things, so the weight of all the responsibility and change hasn't sat on one set of shoulders. Also by embedding the new practices in the 'normal' process, the advantage is that when people change or move on, or when they change role, there are other people in the system that understand what the issues are and what needs to be done so we're not continually reinventing the wheel.

The process of building a quality research education environment is like a collective renewal process where you have to keep on tackling it and working away at it in order to meet change. Sometimes these are driven by external performance, for example, issues like completions have been very influential. Bringing in new people and re-energising it is also important, for example, we have young post-docs with relevant skills running some short courses or workshops for students and contributing now to this overall doctoral framework. It's always going to be fragile, always going to be individually dependant, but if the overall climate in the faculty is supportive and appreciative of initiatives in this area, then worthwhile change is possible.

### **Commentary**

*The initiatives documented in this case study reflect a response to the changing nature of doctoral education since the 1990s; in particular the need to support a different and broader student cohort, meet agendas to increase student enrolments, ensure greater student engagement in research leading to better student experiences and better completion rates, and produce students with improved employability opportunities.*

*The recognition amongst academic staff that doctoral students needed a new pedagogical model in order to flourish was innovative. The activities and processes to build this new pedagogical model were not driven by a single ideology but were a considered reaction to student demand or identified need. Multiple initiatives were implemented to address different issues. Ideas were tried out, reviewed and adapted over time. Consideration was given to the contexts of students and environment. Most*

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*activities became formalised and embedded into normal practice.*

*The leadership to make these changes was spread across several layers within the faculty: at the Dean level, at the Research Degrees Coordinator level and at the doctoral program level. Rather than relying on a single point of leadership, the notion of distributed leadership, with multiple nodes of activity and multiple contributions from different people with different skills and levels of involvement, proved to be a particularly successful way of developing initiatives that were compatible with each other, contributed to enhancing the overall process and helped sustain the energy. The advantage of having a bigger entity to share responsibility is preferable because otherwise the success of initiatives becomes too dependent on one person. Embedding new activities and processes into a framework that has been ratified by the academic community also means that changes do not rely on individuals. Engaging new staff in the activities means that the processes evolve and adapt to new influences and environments.*

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