

Building local leadership in research education

Case Study 2: Engaging students and staff in sustainable research

This case study records the efforts to build a research community in a small research institute. The transdisciplinary nature of the research, and the commitment of the researchers within the institute to draw on approaches adopted by key leaders in their field, has resulted in a strong community based model of research education and leadership.

This case study was provided by the Director of the Postgraduate Portfolio, Institute for Sustainable Futures. The Director reflects on the achievements so far, areas for future improvement and issues of transition for the role of Director.

Context

The Institute for Sustainable Futures is a research centre. The research work is multi-disciplinary. The research program is quite small; we have about twenty-five students. They work on very diverse projects partly because of the diversity of the interests of the staff. Of the twenty-five students, probably three quarters are full-time, although they move between full-time and part-time to manage their candidatures. The initiatives have developed over the last 10 years.

Senior role

I have a position as a Professor in the Institute, and I've always been part of the senior management group because in the early days there was only three of us. We have created a model based around portfolios reporting to the Institute Steering Group. There are five portfolios and one of those is the Director of the Postgraduate portfolio. There has always been someone in the administration team who has had a postgraduate assistant function, but as always with individuals the calibre of that assistance depends a bit on the individual and their level of interest in it.

Building a research community

The first need of the program was to develop a community. Because the students didn't have a space, they felt very isolated; they saw only their own projects, and they were topic focused so they couldn't see any similarity across any of the other students at the Institute. Creating a community meant that we needed to find something that was shared amongst them; the thing that was shared was '*what are your cross disciplines?*' This meant bringing more than one perspective into the space that they were working on. We needed to find a language to talk about that so we started to explore these concepts of multi disciplinary research and decided that mostly what we're doing is transdisciplinary. Because of the nature of our students and because of the nature of the Institute, there are some important distinctions between those different ways of working across disciplines. Also the mission of the Institute is to create sustainable futures, and we take that seriously, so when we're working on projects we actually do

Further resources available from www.first.edu.au

Support for this resource has been provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The views expressed in this resource do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.

Building local leadership in research education

want to make a difference. Therefore the goal is that we shouldn't be doing repeat work, but we should be helping people in the best possible way with how they do their projects. So our students either pick that up because of the kind of space that they're surrounded by or they come with that intent because they're mature age students and there's something that's annoying them or some issue that they see in their space and they're really motivated to create some change in that place,

Support groups

There's lots of different ways of support that are really important. Feeling like you're not alone is even more important in this kind of space I think, because the PhD process is as much a personal journey as it is an intellectual gain. It's a highly challenging personal journey, because these students don't necessarily have a topic. This is in contrast to other places where I've worked where there's a lab group or there's some topic community but in the early days here at least there was not much of a topic community.

We have support groups, called GAS, which stands for 'group accountability and support'. Another staff member actually set up the accountability and support group because she felt she missed out on support as a research student. We have reviews of the GAS groups in a community kind of way, like a shared group meeting. There'll always be a couple of the students that have been around a bit longer who say something like '*Yeah ...I thought the GAS Groups were going to be a waste of time but actually it's been fantastic*'.

Each year we re-establish the accountability and support groups which is a tough decision because it means we're breaking some relationships. What we try to do is to make sure that the new people coming in get a chance to connect with the people who have been around a bit longer and are a bit further along in their PhD so that we ensure those relationships are there to provide different kinds of support.

Working with supervisors

It is harder to get engagement from all the supervisors. In the early days there were only three supervisors. Since then we've grown the number of staff with PhDs. Some of our students have graduated and they've stayed and we've also bought in more people, so we now have about twelve potential supervisors. They've come in at different times so it has been important to help them understand what the postgraduate program and how it's different from other places, which is an ongoing challenge. We need to introduce them to the processes properly, as well as encourage them to be active contributors to the intellectual development of the program. Some of them get that, but others think it is not important. Most supervisors come out of single discipline concept backgrounds so they haven't experienced what the students have here. The few who've come through the program are the ones who get it a bit more.

Further resources available from www.first.edu.au

Support for this resource has been provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The views expressed in this resource do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.

Building local leadership in research education

Retreat for postgrad program

We do an annual retreat for the postgraduate program. It's just two days and we take over a space. It's cheap and cheerful. The model is intentional and it's based on Schumacher College, which is in Devon in the UK.

In the sixties Schumacher was one of the lead people writing about environmental themes. Schumacher said that bigger is not necessarily better; there are many ways in which you can pick small as being actually better. There's a college that's been set up in his memory and it takes a very deliberate approach to the way it runs its courses and opportunities. One of the things that the program makes explicit is the need for maintenance and it also seeks to create community through that, so when you go and do a course at Schumacher you live in a little college room with a shared bathroom and shared meals. You are put on one of the three teams, so either you'll be cleaning the bathrooms or you'll be cleaning the big house or you'll be making a meal. The model for our retreat is a bit like that. We go somewhere where we prepare foods together and share the food that we prepare and we have to cook and clean for ourselves. The whole idea again is that we're creating opportunities for different kinds of conversations and different kinds of relationships to develop. At the same time we need to make space for these other parts of our lives because they're important.

The great thing about this model is that the Institute pays for the accommodation, people pay for their train fares up there and we share the cost of the food. The cost of the food is about the same as what it would cost you to eat anyway because we're just buying normal food.

This year at our annual retreat only four supervisors were there for both days and another four supervisors came up on Monday and four didn't come at all. We have quite collaborative processes for building engagement in what's happening in the retreat. The sessions are co-delivered by supervisors and students so that they all get opportunities to develop those skills as well and to have control over what's delivered and how it's delivered and how we engage. There is an expectation that the students will attend. Most of them came this year. This year we tried a new thing; we bought back a couple of our old students. Actually it was partly because I was overloaded but it forced a couple of really good outcomes. So two of my students were happy to come back to help at the retreat.

Candidature plan process.

I've been involved with the implementation of the candidature plan process since the start; it has been a big change that we're still working our way through. First there was a University working party maybe five years ago and then there was the pilot and then the drafting of the documentation and then the rolling it out. What that did was to give me a structure, a kind of an external structure to try and get people to engage in thinking about their own learning in a more formal way. So in the early stages of the retreat, because my background was in Engineering and teaching I used all sorts of

Further resources available from www.first.edu.au

Support for this resource has been provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The views expressed in this resource do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.

Building local leadership in research education

resources, around critical thinking, the whole idea of learning outcomes, and getting people to think about ‘how would you know?’ and ‘how do you find out what you don’t know?’. We’ve used these resources lots of times both in projects and with the students to give them a language to decide what it is that they’re seeking to do and to help them understand that you can learn at different levels. The PhD requires you to, at some point at least, think at the higher level of critical thinking and learning kind of skills. So I have introduced those at different points but what the candidature plan does is to institutionalise those more so.

Monthly meetings of supervisors and students

We have monthly meetings for all supervisors and students, but only some of the supervisors come. The meetings last for an hour followed by a shared lunch. One staff member helps set up the program and one of the students who is really interested in developing in supervision also helps. All students and supervisors are invited and it is about them making decisions about ‘*Is there anything specifically in it for me*’, ‘*probably not*’, ‘*would it be valuable for this meeting if I came*’.

The meetings take on different roles over the year, so in the early part of the year they’ll be about planning some kind of induction process or kind of kick off process. The last three have been about planning retreats and so that’s where we come together as a group and make a decision about what topics are going to be the focus of the retreats and who’s going to be involved in what. Then groups go away and at the next meeting discuss what each group will do at the retreat and ask for feedback. The next one will be about ‘*what are we going to do with progress reports this semester*’. We changed the progress reporting form after the first progress reports were due because there was a reflection on the structure of the progress reports and a discussion about what was good and what was bad.

Student roundtables

In discussing what else the students do, we’re trying desperately hard to get them to give a roundtable. We have a roundtable spot each week and we’ve structured it so that there’s two half sessions in an hour; one is the postgraduate spot and one is the staff spot. The roundtable student don’t have to bring a piece of their research; they can bring a paper they’ve been reading or other things. People here are ridiculously interested in a very wide range of things.

Trying to get people to give presentations is always a challenge, and we’re still working on ways to encourage the students to acknowledge the fantastic opportunity that they have whilst they are just working on one thing. Staff don’t get the opportunity to read in the same way that the students do so it’s a bit about trying to strengthen the links between the staff and the postgraduates and that’s one of the messages they’ve been given. Generally there’s always enough of a crowd and people in general do recognize that you pick up interesting ideas from a completely different process.

Further resources available from www.first.edu.au

Support for this resource has been provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The views expressed in this resource do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.

Building local leadership in research education

Modules

We have been keen to shift the program to the next level. This is driven by the University candidature plan, the DSP (Doctoral Study Plan), the whole doctoral framework, and the notion of study modules and modularity. We recognise that we've developed a really rich language over the history of the program but we haven't yet developed good ways of sharing that. We are developing modules which will be offered to staff as well as students and perhaps also more widely available. We will need to translate what we've developed into assessable modules for use for new students, for staff, for supervisors as well.

Leadership

In the role as Director of the program, I think I am in a leadership position; and whether you like it or not, when you're in a leadership position you are a role model for people. I am really conscious about that and so I try to make our processes consistent with what we say is important.

As the Director of the program I also have to manage the budget. As our research institute works on external billable projects, the postgraduates are actual listed on our 'billable hours' system, so I can check how supervisors are tracking their time with students and so on. We are testing it out as a model. Admin support has been variable. People who get allocated to do the admin support often have many other responsibilities and sometimes other things seem more important to them. It is mainly about the need for better record-keeping, for instance they come to the postgraduate meetings and take notes. I just need some time to focus on it and make that clear to the people that I need to get help from the admin team.

There is one thing that I don't think I've done so well; we've learned an enormous amount and we got through the changes but what I haven't done is to write about that. Our models have now been used in other projects but they're not in the space that is meaningful to others. That's one of the things I'm going to commit to in the first half of next year. I hope I will be able to hand over to someone else next year so I want to make sure that I've wrapped up all of the things that I've been part of to help with the handover. That's another element of leadership, which is that you need to prepare well for succession.

Future challenges

I have been doing this role now for 10 years and I would like to see someone else take on the role and bring their plan to it. Other staff members have worked with me in developing the program but it is difficult when their personal and study circumstances mean they can't contribute as much. This has meant I haven't had the same degree of intellectual support in kind of developing things and taking things forward that I would have liked to have had.

Further resources available from www.first.edu.au

Support for this resource has been provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The views expressed in this resource do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.

Building local leadership in research education

I think the continuing challenge is to make the community something that people see value in. We've had an ongoing conversation with people who are further on in their programs they're saying '*oh there's new ones coming in and they don't want to be part of things, they won't contribute*' and we've had that on and off for some time. I'm not sure whether it's just about the life that we live these days where everybody, even our students, feel more and more pressured and short of time. Over time most people come around to contributing and this may depend on whether they are more or less oriented to being part of a community.

The process model that we have here brings it's own sort of pressures. Everyone's under lots of pressure these days and so making time for additional postgraduate things beyond supervision, making time for any kind of additional things, is an issue for people.

Commentary

This case study details the strategies used over time to build a research culture in a small cross-disciplinary research centre. The initiatives aim to foster a sense of common interest across a diverse research area, and also align with the institute's philosophical views about sustainability. The activities such as the retreat and support groups work to bring HDR students and staff into a common space where research conversations become part of living together.

The role of the Director is critical in ensuring the activities are well-designed and effective in supporting students. Through her leadership she brings other people into the research space and they also contribute to the activities or support strategies.

The Director engages with institutional changes, such as the candidature plans, and leverages these activities and structures to create interest and debate about the role of supervisors, in particular the intellectual engagement they need to have with their research students. Ongoing and meaningful supervisor engagement with the collective activities remains an ongoing challenge.

Whilst acknowledging that many of her colleagues contribute to the success of the program within their own limitations, she is also aware that, after 10 years in the role, she needs to transition out and take on other responsibilities in the institute. She is reflective about the challenges of her role and missed opportunities to document the initiatives she has introduced. She hopes to work on this aspect in the near future.

Further resources available from www.first.edu.au

Support for this resource has been provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The views expressed in this resource do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.