

Building local leadership in research education

Case Study 4 – Implementing change but struggling with the transition of the HDR role

This case study is a personal reflection on the implementation of institutional research and Higher Degree Research (HDR) initiatives within a department. The case study also examines the issues around continuity of structures and processes when the Departmental Director role relinquishes the role after several years and it is taken up by someone else.

Background

Taking on the role of Departmental Director of HDR was my first large-scale ‘administrative’ responsibility, and one that dovetailed quite nicely with my perception of myself as more of a researcher than a teacher. Since I had just been promoted to senior lecturer, it was an opportune time to take on the role, with my mentor reminding me that I needed to start preparing for my next promotion. Those words shaped how I approached the role, thinking I’d better take a bit of initiative.

I was also helped because the university was in a transition phase and a more formal structure for HDR across the university, including a Dean HDR and Associate Deans in the Faculties, had been established. It was recognised that HDR was becoming really important to the university’s research effort. More scholarships were made available and the university decided it was going to ‘up’ its research output through research training. There was also much more of a sense of what really mattered was completions and timely completions. That became my challenge in the role: to shift candidates’ and supervisors’ perspective on the time frame and scope of a PhD.

Working with Candidates: Structures to Enable Moving Towards Completion

Creating a more structured and accountable PhD experience was the first thing I set about doing.

There was no formal coursework requirement for new PhD candidates, nor was there a formal presentation of proposal. I developed a set of departmental milestones for the first six months of candidature. These included two masters level courses on methods and theory, which new candidates had to ‘audit’. Not all candidates and supervisors were happy with this. If they had just done honours they would say ‘*oh we’ve done this*’, so it was about ‘*yeah but you do it in a different way*’ so most of the time the job was to explain it to them. It was about helping them to realise that they have different goals through the PhD. That was always going to be an issue and you just have to trust the supervisors a bit more in those cases if it’s not a conventional PhD. And then finally, these courses culminated in a formal proposal presentation to the entire department.

The university had an annual review process, but it hadn’t been taken very seriously by other candidates or supervisors in the department; for instance, there wasn’t consistent follow through. So I focused on sorting out these issues in the early stages of my HDR role. Other departments in the faculty had scaffolded departmental processes through the annual review, so I followed their example. There was an annual interview in conjunction with the university report, as well as an additional departmental form for budgeting and timelines. And I involved other supervisors in the interviews, creating an opportunity for a sharing of PhD experiences. We always had HDR matters on our department meeting agendas which they’d never had before. We used to have retreats, we used to have

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workshops, we had two day workshops that we actually did with colleagues at Newcastle so every year we did a two day workshop for our post-grads. Sometimes the retreats would be around writing, or we would bring someone in to talk for a day. These involved both supervisors and candidates.

Working with supervisors

There's only so much you can do with candidates. If we were to raise our completion rates we also had to change supervisors' approach to the PhD to being much more focused on getting students out rather than letting them drift and doing their own thing. We had twelve academic staff in the department at that stage. we were spread across two age groups: we had a group of young people and a group of old people who subsequently left. So what we did was try to create a positive culture about supervision being important and that good quality supervision was in everyone's best interest for our students to complete. I worked more informally with supervisors, talking about the 'new' PhD, bringing them along often by example or with the newer staff. There was a level of resistance amongst staff but generally because we were such a relatively tight group it worked out, and a gradual generational change in the staff profile also helped.

In retrospect two activities stand out as being particularly useful in shifting the culture of supervision. The first was the prevalence of co-supervision across the department. Because every student needs two supervisors we would sometimes use this in an explicitly mentoring way, such as bringing together more junior and senior people who would work together harmoniously and not disadvantage the candidate, but also had different supervisory expectations. In my experience I think you learn a lot in co-supervisory relationships, especially when you sit in meetings together, because you learn how people respond and give feedback. The second helpful activity was the annual review interview. In the annual interviews the supervisor would leave the room and then the candidate would be asked to make some comments and you would find out things. If there were problems with supervision it was my role to subtly raise them, or sometimes confront them. It was important to allow both the student and the supervisor the space to talk about the issue, and in some cases to suggest alternative options. This seemed to work, but it was not something I had originally thought I would be doing!

Succession

So after 7 relatively fun years I was promoted to Associate Professor, with my HDR role a central tenet of my claim. But to be honest I'd grown a bit tired of the role and had taken on another larger administrative role in the meantime. It was time to hand over the role. And of course it became my job to start the process of finding someone. I identified a person that I thought would be good because I reflected on my previous role as an active researcher and the need to do some admin role and I thought the HDR role would be a good one for this person to do.

For this, we planned a six month handover period where I was helping him out. But it didn't work out. One of the reasons was person-related - this person was just not as hands-on as me. I'd thought about the role as a win/win, it's a win for the department and candidates because hopefully there are more completions and the candidates have a better experience. But is also a win for the research education community and it is good in a career sense too. Ticking the boxes is not going to get you promoted but doing something good, or doing something different will enhance your career. Unfortunately I

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assumed people would approach this thing the way that I do. But that was not the case. So some of the activities like research workshops and follow ups began to fall off the agenda.

Another reason was I'd actually put, probably to my detriment, things under the radar rather than a formal requirement on the books because that was just the easiest way to do it, eg. the coursework requirements were expectations rather than mandated. So unless you were keen on following them up, there was no mechanism for them. And subsequently the department was restructured and became much larger. So another person took over the role but again an active researcher who just wanted to do things to minimise work. So the things they saw as more 'bells and whistles' got lost, including all the mentoring, the retreats, all the focus stuff to build a cohort and to build a cohort of supervisors. It disappeared and became much more of a perfunctory '*yeah fill in the forms, do this, allocate resources, deal with space, deal with problems*'.

To be fair the institutional expectations of the role did change over time and it now has more of a managerial one, with more of a focus on a reporting line process. But I still regret not managing the handover better. Perhaps it was just part of the transition process from a small department to a larger one. When I'd taken the job on we were a smaller place and I was asked by the department to take on this role. I think that if there had been something like a position description they'd have said 'this is what we want you to do'. A position description would encompass those broader things and not just include the operational processes, eg. '*do the annual reviews*', '*do the budget*', '*do all those managerial things around managing progress*' but also '*how are you looking after that person/that issue?*' and '*what is the research environment now?*'.

I probably could have documented what I did much better and the process and why I did it so that I could communicate that better to the person taking over because in retrospect the first person came from an active research environment but not the university sector and really struggled with university because we're very bureaucratic. So it's more about having a sense, a clearer definition of the non-managerial aspects of the role and its opportunities, and its potentials. I wouldn't call it 'nurturing': if you started talking about nurturing to people in the Science Faculty they're just like 'what's she on about'. It's about making sure people see the link between happier researchers and more fulfilled researchers, and achieving a better research output.

On reflection, I would say that it's partly around identifying the person but providing them with the imagination of the position rather than the confines of the position but also having institutional structures from the department up to institutional level. I also think it's the institutional structures and institutional workload; you have to have a sense of what is the workload. In the Faculty of Science 50% teacher reduction is in fact three hundred hours a year - that's eight weeks work, which is not bad.

The timing of my departure coincided with departmental changes as well; three departments were merged into one. I'm not sure if anything would have survived that transition but I also think it would have been easier if there had been particular structures in place. One of the issues is this work is labelled as admin in universities, and my colleagues are always reluctant to take it on. By calling it 'admin' they forget that a lot of it is actually curriculum development work and should be categorised under 'teaching'.

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Commentary

This case study plots the development of a range of strategies to build a research community and improve the quality of the research experience for both students and staff. The Director of HDR understands the potential in positions such as these to enhance career trajectory but she also engages substantially with the work including taking on the 'messy' parts of the job such as following up with supervisors who don't complete the paperwork.

This case study looks back at how the transition process could be improved to ensure that positive initiatives are maintained as part of the role. The time spent on developing and improving initiatives, based on good practice, is an investment by the university, but one which can so easily be lost during changeovers. She poses the question about whether it is choosing the right person for the job, or is it about making sure the initiatives are actually documented and established as processes, or is it about the need for stronger institutional structures so that processes don't collapse?

Perhaps it is also about better position descriptions for the role. The labelling of the role in this university as 'administration' sets the tone for a managerial role rather than a mix of 'administration' and 'teaching', to accommodate the curriculum development work that goes into building an effective HDR education program.

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