

Building local leadership in research education

Scenario 4: Engaging supervisors in improving and broadening the doctoral student experience

Your Faculty has been successful in introducing a form of coursework, research seminars and other research activities. Research students are enthusiastic about these developments, but very few supervisors have engaged with these activities and only some have actively encouraged their students to be involved.

Most supervisors perceive that they do a good job supervising their students but the students believe that they could learn more if they were exposed to researchers other than their supervisor. The students want opportunities to hear about other research being undertaken in the faculty, to hear about different research approaches and to discuss issues around good quality research.

You sense that there is tension because some of the successful supervisors don't think it's necessary for their students to experience a range of views. You think that people would want to show off their students and that candidates need to have the opportunity to shop around but you have come to realise that there's a group of supervisors who strongly believe that it is in the best interests of students to present to their own research group. They don't want their students to be influenced by other supervisors and so they stop them from attending anything else that the department/faculty puts on. These supervisors are protecting territory and are successful and represent a powerful faction in the department. On the other hand you know of one supervisor who only read one draft of a thesis and he's one of the best supervisors. He had coffee with students a lot of the time. If there's something working why would you want to change it? Also you are aware that it's difficult to get the poor supervisors to attend anything as well.

You want to develop a proposal for a range of activities to help build a sense of a research community and broaden the research experience for HDR students.

1. Questions for consideration
 1. What kinds of activities do you think would help build a research community?
 2. How do you initiate engagement? Do you need to issue personal invitations? How do you traverse different territories in the faculty?
 3. Whose support do you need? Do you need the backing of somebody with authority, eg Dean/ Head of department, or do you need the most active researchers to support this initiative?

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4. What will motivate supervisors to participate? How do you create value for supervisors?

Additional information

Below are a number of issues that might be raised in discussion, or, as a facilitator you might like to pursue with a group. Following each issue there are a number of suggestions for consideration.

Issue 1

Are you able to build a community among your students and academics? Sometimes this occurs at a disciplinary level, or around a particular program of research. It's important that neither students nor supervisors should feel isolated. Every supervisor and every student should feel part of, and gain support from a group. What can you do to build a sense of belonging to a community of scholars?

Suggestions

1. First of all it's a good idea to examine university policies and ensure you are familiar with the university's supervision, HDR and research policies and use these in arguing your case. You may well find that in the policies there is an expectation that supervision is a collective enterprise, rather than the preserve of single supervisors. In many universities there is an expectation that each student should have at least two supervisors.
2. Encourage supervisors in cognate areas to join together to engage in group supervision. This brings the students together and can result in lively exchanges and a sense of belonging to a group.
3. Hold a postgraduate conference. This helps to build a community of scholars. The students and supervisors are there together listening to research. Members of the faculty who are not supervisors can also give feedback and may be encouraged to take on students. The feedback students can get from an interdisciplinary audience is very valuable. Also the networks they set up during such a conference are invaluable.
4. Be aware of tensions between research centres and research strengths. Directors of centres may think the students belong to them but research strengths may also think the student belongs to them. Where the money flows also creates tensions. These structural issues affect students' identity. It's a good idea to think about how to overcome this.

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5. Hold an all staff research day. When this was tried in UTS people who have good ideas were targeted to speak. The Dean made the event compulsory. It was effective and people enjoyed it. This established a culture which said that if you didn't come you are not involved in the research in this faculty. Everybody is on the spot. HDR students all want to say they are a special case so they all have to come too.
6. Hold weekend events twice a year where students' mandatory 'work in progress' reports are interspersed with workshops some of which could be on supervision. Weekend workshops may get a lot of flack initially but they will develop a community over time. At the ACU, the weekend workshops sessions relate to the stage that students are at. And it's a formal process so supervisors are required to attend. The Sunday can be for prospective students so staff might come if they want HRD students in the future.
7. It's a good idea to develop everyone's understanding of how you learn in research. One way of doing this is to strengthen the research seminar or to hold a series of workshops with supervisors available to present as well as supervisors doing keynotes on broad brush reviews of the disciplinary area. This is likely to result in some students seeing things broadly.
8. Be creative about the kind of meetings you arrange either just for supervisors or to bring supervisors and students together. Debates, works in progress sessions, speed-dating for supervisors and students, seminars on topics of common interest, e.g. open access publishing, are some ideas to think about. Ensure that whatever events you organise, they need to be meaningful and significant.
9. Be aware that having a research week may result in students not engaging with it unless it includes compulsory sessions.
10. Incorporate students and supervisors explicitly in visiting scholar activities e.g. boozy lunches, works in progress, seminars etc.
11. Encourage and provide support for virtual networking and/or online forums, webinars, etc. Establish an online support chat room for students and/or supervisors to talk to each other.
12. Treat students as staff who therefore have infrastructure and committee representation. Recognise that many students have come from the workforce and they need to be treated as colleagues rather than students.

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13. Always have a rationale for the events that you organise and make this clear in your publicity. Specify what the session is expected to achieve and why. Also make it clear who the session is specifically designed for, otherwise people are likely to make the assumption it's not for them.

Issue 2

However much you try to engage supervisors. Some may be reluctant to participate. You may find that it is the most successful supervisors in terms of completing good theses, and perhaps most senior who are the reluctant ones. You may also be faced with supervisors who do not wish their students to join with and hear what other supervisors and students have to say. So how do you initiate engagement? What will motivate supervisors to participate? How do you create value for supervisors?

Suggestions

1. There are different models of supervision and it is a good idea to be clear about what the models are and make them clear to candidates. One way to do this is to invite supervisors supervising in different ways to present their different models in a workshop or seminar so that both students and supervisors can see that there are different ways to supervise.
2. Experienced supervisors have accumulated wisdom. So invite them to come and talk to more junior supervisors. One suggestion is to invite them in threes and ask them to talk about their approaches. Use flattery if necessary to get them to come and share their ideas.
3. If experienced supervisors are reluctant to come and share their wisdom, you should work more with beginning academics.
4. Supervisor registration with compulsory workshop attendance is also important to encourage participation. Some form of recognition for participation, for example a certificate signed by the Dean, is also important.
5. Are dedicated supervisors attending? Remember that if their students are presenting then their supervisors are likely to attend events.

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6. Turning up to events is a problem for both candidates and supervisors. So take a roll of students and supervisors. Having important news, interesting issues, keynotes from respected individuals offered is important even if supervisors don't come. Students can be bribed with food! Don't underestimate the importance of catering even for senior supervisors. Match the catering to what you want to achieve. Would reluctant senior supervisors come to a wine tasting, for example?
7. Build on milestones. Advertise successful sessions after the event to ensure that those who didn't come feel they missed out.
8. You could turn sessions into fact-finding rather than information giving. For example you could invite reluctant supervisors to join a focus group designed to investigate good practice in supervision. Invite supervisors even if you don't think they are the good ones because they will then hear what others say they do. This can help poor supervisors to see that they have things to learn.
9. Continue polite invitations and carrying on enthusiastically in spite of rebuff and setbacks. Remember that this list has been created from discussions among other RECs who are experiencing the same issues!

Issue 3

Engaging supervisors is not necessarily something that, as a REC, you can do on your own. You may well need support in engaging professors and senior staff to share their ideas and to fully participate in a community, particularly if you are in a faculty where collaborative working is not the norm. Whose support do you need? Do you need the backing of somebody with authority, e.g. they Dean or Head of department, or do you need the most active researchers to support this initiative? How can you garner support for yourself?

Suggestions

1. Professors, Deans and Heads of Department need to exert leadership so gaining their support is critical. High level leadership is important. Leadership of the head of school is important and Deans have to be convinced to invest in it.

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2. Money has to be put into such initiatives. In one example, having a regular event and a dinner in a restaurant with supervisors and students over time led to an expansion in the HDR student numbers.
3. People have to rethink what their job is, e.g. a senior leadership role. The way to influence this is through the performance management process, so not just having completions and happy students, but the requirement to demonstrate leadership needs explicitly to be required in supervisors' performance management. So the support of senior managers is critical. How can you gain such support? How can you act to begin to change policy and practice in this regard?
4. Workload allocation needs to include time to attend training events. So the support of the head of school or faculty is important.
5. Provide reports on progress, and issues to be addressed to your Dean, head of school and other influential people. Remember that 'managing up' is an important aspect of leadership. We often make assumptions that our actions are seen by everyone, but it is important to recognise that unless we explicitly report, informally and formally to those above us, our actions will go unnoticed.

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