Scenario 5: Creating efficient systems and practices (Managing busy work)

There are two cases to consider in this scenario.

Case 1: You have just taken over the coordination role and are starting to regret taking it on. There is just so much work to do. Every day there are emails from students, prospective students, supervisors, and then the Faculty wants immediate responses to their requests for information. Sometimes you don't even know the answers to the questions, so you have to spend time asking others before you can respond. You can't imagine what it will be like during scholarship ranking and application time, or when you have to coordinate reviews and presentations of the candidates at the end of the year. You've had enough, and since you can't quit the role, have decided to take a more methodical approach.

Questions for consideration

- How might some of the REC processes (e.g. applications, enquiries) be streamlined?
- Are there technologies to support you?
- What types of relationships might you develop to help you?
- How might you best use administration staff to help?
- What time management techniques (of your own time) might you use to help?
- What would you have most wanted to have been briefed on when you started?

Case 2: You are about to finish your term as a coordinator. When you began three years ago, the previous coordinator gave you a pile of papers and left the university. You don't want the incoming coordinator to face the same old challenges as there are new issues they will need to tackle. You have been thinking about planning a transition.

Questions for consideration

- What would you have most wanted to have been briefed on when you started?
- What would a realistic transition process look like?
- If you were to prepare a handover document, what would be in it?
- What tips would you provide on working effectively with colleagues?

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Additional information

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

Issue: Managing the busy work associated with the REC position can be burdensome and take up so much time there is no opportunity left to initiate strategic activities to improve the research education experience.

Are there ways to streamline the work processes?

Suggestions:

- Reduce the number of signatures required on low status documents, such as parking permits
- Do a top-down review of all internal processes to streamline layers of approval for all documents
- Create online sign-off processes to speed up the flow of documents
- Setup and use alert systems to remind HDR candidates about progress reports and other key events
- Make good use of time management strategies, e.g. let HDR students and supervisors know that you will only answer emails at dedicated times, such as afternoons.
- Clarify expectations about availability
- Develop some ‘standard’ response emails
- Triage emails to see what needs to be done straight away
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Issue: Both RECs and HDR administration staff and managers have a range of responsibilities managing and reporting on HDR candidature progress.

What strategies can be employed to ensure that relationships between RECs and admin staff work well and that efficient processes are in place to manage the workload? What technologies might be useful in streamlining processes?

Suggestions:

- Clarify the roles and responsibilities between the REC and admin support
- Set up regular meetings between REC and admin support
- Use a flowchart to identify different processes and responsibilities eg admissions and examinations

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- Have a network of HDR administrators across the university, that meets for particular events but also meets a couple of times a year to discuss issues, share information and provide peer support
- Use technologies to streamline administration processes, such as online student filing systems
- Use the Learning Management System (LMS) to disseminate information to HDR candidates

Issue: When staff filling REC positions move on and take on new positions, it is often difficult for the new REC to quickly ascertain what are the key activities and responsibilities in the new position. Many RECs have suggested that a ‘handover’ process would have helped facilitate their work.

What things might be useful for a ‘handover’?

Suggestions:

- Alert staff to key policy documents
- Admissions process information including policies, forms and processes – perhaps an admissions flowchart
- Provide a list of key people
- Provide a work plan that outlines reporting lines, key processes and parameters for the role
- Provide a glossary of terms used in research education
- Provide a timeline for key activities across the calendar year
- Provide a clear outline of how student files are organized, including training and access to data
- Leave a supervisor database, including experience, interests (through key words) and qualifications
- One of the challenges is how do you pass on ‘unwritten knowledge’ about problem supervisors and students? Should this be left for the new coordinator to find out for himself/herself?

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