Coursework in the PhD: Why, How, What and When?

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Eight-step curriculum approach

- Learning outcomes
- Content
- Timing
- Structure
- ‘Delivery’ methods
- Resources
- Assessment
- Evaluation
Why might we want ‘additional learning’?

Presumably the most obvious answer is:

To provide opportunities for candidates to develop desirable doctoral level learning outcomes (including the completion of the thesis)
What might these outcomes be? (AQF Level 10)

• Knowledge
  – A substantial body of knowledge at the frontier of a field of work or learning, including knowledge that constitutes an original contribution
  – Substantial knowledge of research principles and methods applicable to the field of work or learning
AQF Skills

• Skills
  – Cognitive skills to demonstrate expert understanding of theoretical knowledge and to reflect critically on that theory and practice
  – Cognitive skills and use of intellectual independence to think critically, evaluate existing knowledge and ideas, undertake systematic investigation and reflect on theory and practice to generate original knowledge
  – Expert technical and creative skills applicable to the field of work or learning
AQF Skills (cont)

– Communication skills to explain and critique theoretical propositions, methodologies and conclusions
– Communication skills to present cogently a complex investigation of originality or original research for external examination against international standards and to communicate results to peers and the community
– Expert skills to design, implement, analyse, theorise and communicate research that makes a significant and original contribution to knowledge and/or professional practice
AQF Apply knowledge and skills

– With intellectual independence
– With initiative and creativity in new situations and/or for further learning
– With full responsibility and accountability for personal outputs
– To plan and execute original research
– With the ongoing capacity to generate new knowledge, including in the context of professional practice
UK Framework

• More comprehensive, so maybe worth thinking about! (See handouts)

Handouts:
Pages 61 & 62 at

http://www.vitae.ac.uk/rdf
With those learning outcomes what content is needed…

- Research processes?
- Employability skills?
- Communication skills?
- Developing ethical researchers?
- Preparing future academics?
- Advanced disciplinary knowledge?

• Are there some learning experiences that we want all candidates to experience? Why? What are they?
What's the ideal *timing* for these experiences?

- What learning needs to be structured prior to enrolment e.g. Honours? MRes? Professional experience?
- What learning best occurs within the first 6-12 months e.g. introductory research methods and ethics?
- What learning is appropriate for mid term and then again in the last 6-12 months?
What might be the best *structure*?

- Formal coursework?
- Specialised courses?
- Individual learning activities?
- A combination?
- Programs that articulate closely with prior learning experiences?
- A structure that provides supportable exit points?
How might we think about ‘provision’?

• Online?
• Lectures?
• Seminar series?
• Working with the supervisor?
• Within Schools/Faculties, across universities, or in collaboration with other universities?
• Intensives? Retreats? Summer Schools?
Resource implications?

- Would staff volunteer or have additional work built into their workload to offer lectures/courses?
- What’s the role of staff in units such as Learning Centres and Graduate Research Services?
- Consultants? Supervisors? Students’ Associations? Or?
- Are these learning experiences likely to extend Scholarship times and RTS?
- Will there be financial implications re space, materials, and additional staff?
How will we assess learning?

• Through comments in examiners’ reports?
• Achievement of formal milestones?
• Publication of journal papers and conference presentations?
• Supervisor comments in annual reviews etc?
• Observations?
• Candidate self-assessment?
• Or?
How will we know if we’ve got it right i.e. *evaluation*?

- Improved completion times and rates?
- Comments from thesis examiners?
- Improved ratings in PREQ/internal surveys?
- Fewer grievances?
- Improved graduate employment outcomes?
- Increases in publications during and immediately following candidature?
- Or?
Disclaimer

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