Coursework in the Australian PhD: Issues and Implications

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Overview

• Findings from the OLT project
• Short break
• Discussion of the implications regarding coursework in the PhD as they relate to your institution/discipline
To start…

• What do you immediately think of when I mention “coursework in the PhD”?
• Why might this be?
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)
AQF and TEQSA

• Skills, Knowledge, Application
• Are these enough? Which universities have more comprehensive outcomes for their research graduates?
• What do they entail?
• The Doctoral Degree (Research) qualification (leading to the award of a Doctor of Philosophy) is designed so that graduates will have undertaken a program of independent supervised study that produces significant and original research outcomes culminating in a thesis, dissertation, exegesis or equivalent for independent examination by a least two external expert examiners of international standing.
Research in the program of learning will be for at least two years and typically two-thirds or more of the qualification. The program of structured learning typically will include advanced coursework. The program of learning may also include advanced coursework to enhance the student’s capacity to make a significant contribution to knowledge in the discipline (or cross-disciplinary field)
and/or research-integrated practice developed in collaboration with a relevant professional, statutory or regulatory body. The advanced coursework may support but not replace the research outcomes. The advanced coursework and research-integrated practice will support the research outcomes.
Institution

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Candidate</td>
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OR???

Candidate

<table>
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<th>Discipline</th>
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<td>Institution</td>
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Project aims

• To provide an understanding of the issues related to the introduction of coursework within the Australian PhD, particularly:
  – Pedagogical,
  – Curriculum,
  – Organisational, and
  – Funding
What did we do?

- Involved six different types of Australian universities with
  - Interviews with Deans of Graduate Studies
  - Extensive workshops and focus groups in two
  - Survey of candidates in five institutions
  - Analysis of different approach (MRES) in one
What did we find?

• Approx. 75% of universities have/are discussing the introduction of coursework

• Different perceptions of coursework
  – Lectures and exams
  – All candidates treated the same
  – Content related to discipline, Employability
  – Research processes
  – In the first year or throughout candidature
Possible content?

• Generic research methods or topic specific research methods
• Disciplinary knowledge
• “Soft skills” e.g. team work
• Research related skills e.g. grant writing, publishing
What’s the ideal *timing* for these experiences? For example:

- What learning needs to be structured prior to enrolment e.g. Honours or 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 experience
- A structure that provides supportable exit points
Fig 2. Approaches to Research Graduate Capability Development

Formal / Structured
[training]
- programs (e.g. ‘induction’)
- certificate courses (e.g. ‘commercialisation’)
- customised activities (e.g. ‘scientific writing’)
- training exercises (e.g. ‘internal’)
- review (e.g. ‘monthly’)
- forum (e.g. ‘skills’)
- workshops (e.g. ‘residential’)
- conferences (e.g. ‘international’)

Informal / Semi-structured
[scaffolding]
- minor subjects (e.g. ‘language’)
- short courses (e.g. ‘NVivo’)
- ‘community of scholars’
- ‘community of research practice’
- forums
- ‘in the field’
- ‘around the coffee table’
- ‘journal clubs’
- seminar series
- ‘technical talks’
- discussion groups (e.g. online)
- e-portfolio
- programs (e.g. ‘transferable skills’)
- ‘peer learning’
- ‘mentoring’
- ‘coaching’
- ‘dialogue’
- ‘working alongside’
- ‘training’
- ‘preparation’
- ‘reviewing’
- ‘supervision’
- ‘demonstrating’
- ‘mastery, capacity, scholarship …’
- ‘actively participating’
- ‘creating new knowledge’
- ‘becoming independent’
- ‘professional practice’
- ‘research groups’
- ‘academic practice’

Emergent / Unstructured
[performance]
- ‘paid employment’
- ‘partnership projects’
- ‘cooperative research centre’
- external laboratory [e.g. ‘in America or Europe’]
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?

• Who will teach? Who has the qualifications

• What’s the role of:
  – staff in units such as Learning Centres/ Graduate Research
  – Consultants
  – Supervisors
  – National groupings Or?

• Impact on completion times

• Financial implications re space, materials, and additional staff
How will we assess learning? e.g.

- 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
- Employer feedback Or…?
How will we know if we’ve got it right i.e. *evaluation*?

- Improved completion times and rates
- Comments from thesis examiners
- ‘Happier’ supervisors and candidates 😊
- Improved ratings in PREQ/internal surveys
- Fewer grievances
- Improved graduate employment outcomes
- Increases in publications during and immediately following candidature
- Or…?
Stages of candidature

Discipline-specific

Academic

Generic

Employability

Teamwork skills

Working in a lab group

“Being” an Economist

Narrative Inquiry

Advanced

Economic theory

General research methods
Main outcome to date

• To support the individual nature of candidature develop:
  – A skills analysis strategy
  – Learning plan
Online survey to candidates

- Most respondents in PhD
- Female 63% Male 37%
- Domestic 65% International 35%
- Full-time 70% Part-time 30%
- Entry qualification
  - C/w masters 33%
  - Honours 32%
  - Research Masters 25%
Survey: Age

- 20-29 = 29%
- 30-39 = 25%
- 40-49 = 23%
- 50+ = 22%
Employment

• Prior to enrolment
  – 57% in fulltime employment
  – 52% of those in Education

• Employed during candidature
  – 34% not at all
  – 52% of those employed full/part-time in Education

• 62% anticipate working in Education after graduation
Coursework

- 44% had undertaken coursework as part of their doctoral program
- 58% of all respondents reported that coursework should be part of the doctorate with the majority suggesting it should be in the first year
Main benefits of coursework

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<tr>
<th>Benefit</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Helped with concepts and theory</td>
<td>77%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provided background knowledge for doctoral research</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help solve problems in field of study</td>
<td>74%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increased knowledge about discipline</td>
<td>67%</td>
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## Required for employment

<table>
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<th>Skills/knowledge</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<td>Relating doctoral research to employer requirements</td>
<td>42%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Information about the job market</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networking</td>
<td>37%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interview skills</td>
<td>24%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing to selection criteria</td>
<td>21%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Preparing a CV</td>
<td>20%</td>
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Specific additional experiences for anticipated job

- Publications 44%
- Networking 28%
- Teaching 27%
- Translating current skills into a new job 24%
- Presentation skills 21%
- English language 7%
Main findings from survey

• Education main employment pre, during and post candidature
• Coursework seen as desirable, especially in first year
Discussion

• What is your university doing re coursework in the PhD including needs analysis and learning plans?
• Do you have examples you can share:
  – With one another?
  – With the project?
Websites

• The Graduate Skills project http://www.gradskills.anu.edu.au
• Vitae for Researcher Development Framework http://www.vitae.ac.uk
• Honours project http://www.aushons.anu.edu.au/
• Coursework Masters project http://courseworkmasters.anu.edu.au/
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References


References (cont.)


