Workshop/focus group findings

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Background

Over a six-month period in 2012-13 seven workshops/focus groups were held with candidates, post doctoral fellows/early career researchers (ECRs) and academic staff in two universities. These two universities were chosen as they represented different types of universities. University A is a new generation university which has grown and developed strength in doctoral education over the past ten years. Supervisors and candidates across a range of Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS) and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines were involved in the research. In comparison, University B is a research-intensive university belonging to the Group of Eight universities. In University B only the Science supervisors and candidates were involved as the Social Sciences at that university had already introduced coursework and the study was aimed at working with those universities introducing or planning to introduce coursework in both universities. The workshops and focus groups were noted and reported back to participants for clarification.

The aim of the workshops and focus groups was to facilitate participants in their discussions of the various issues related to why they might want to introduce coursework, how they might do that and what the content might address. As Table C1 outlines overall, 70 participants took part in the workshops/focus groups (31 at University A and 39 at University B).

Table C1: Candidate/Early Career Researchers and Staff by institution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Candidates and ECRs</th>
<th>Staff</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University A</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University B</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Methods and findings

To commence the sessions the questions posed by the Carnegie Foundation (Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, & Hutchings, 2008) were presented and in groups participants were invited to come up with their thoughts. The questions included:

- On graduation, what skills will candidates have developed?
- What content knowledge should they have when they leave the program?
- What will they have experienced?
- What habits of mind will they have developed, especially regarding being lifelong learners?
Learning outcomes
Responses to the first question: On graduation, what skills will candidates have developed? have been clustered into four main categories: research skills, employment skills, generic/transferrable skills and personal skills.

Research Skills
• Write in scholarly manner and ability to publish acceptable scholarly papers
• Present a coherent argument and think logically and in a scholarly and educational way
• Undertake independent enquiry and solve problems
• Present work – including to a general audience
• Translate research into commercial research bids and/or policy development
• Summarise the state of knowledge in the discipline and write a literature review
• Pose a testable hypothesis and/or frame good research questions and projects
• Critically analyse and then be able to ‘sell the analysis’
• Understand the role of different perspectives in research—particularly in qualitative research
• Able to do effective social science research including qualitative research

Employment skills
• Be able to teach
• Be a team player and also able to work individually
• Contribute to global and national economy
• Be able to supervise
• Plan a career
• Effectively manage time and work
• Network and become part of an educated population
• Sensible budgeting of money and resources
• Apply for grants

Generic/transferrable skills
• Transfer the skills developed to other situations
• Teach oneself new things
• Put into practice some of the things that have been learnt; and
• Have improved English.

Personal skills
• Curiosity
• Being ethical, and
• Doing something useful to pay back for all the help and support received during candidature.

Content knowledge
• Be recognised as the world leader/ specialist in that area of knowledge; and
• Have discipline-specific knowledge as well as knowledge of the broader context.
Experiences
• Self change
• That change is incremental; and
• Having experienced what it takes to do research.

Habits of mind
• Raised awareness of self as a learner and so influence others
• Habits of self discipline
• Develop the habit of academic scholarly thinking
• Persistence and resilience – ability to deal with setbacks and failure
• Awareness of acquired skills.

Following discussion related to the specific Carnegie questions participants were invited to suggest how they might ensure that candidates actually developed the above knowledge, skills and habits of mind. Responses have been categorised under: developing a framework; individuality and learning plans; timing; provision of learning opportunities; assessment; and the role of supervisors.

However, it should be noted that with each focus/discussion group with staff, (and to a very minor extent with candidates) the most common responses very early in discussion in a workshop related to the possible introduction of coursework into the PhD, were negative, for example:

• If students were ‘off doing coursework’ that would take time away from their ‘research’ requiring additional candidature time but there was no additional funding for this
• Coursework implied a lack of individual learning and development opportunities if candidates were all required to undertake the same coursework
• When should coursework be offered, should it be at the beginning, at the end or throughout candidature?
• How could the disciplinary nature of research degrees be addressed if there was some form of faculty of university-required coursework?
• Who would teach these courses when staff already had full teaching loads and would they have the expertise and who would handle the additional administrative loads?

Once these issues had been aired, participants began to actively suggesting a range of ideas and strategies for a more structured curriculum approach in the PhD.

Developing a framework
Based on the knowledge, skills and attitudes above, groups were invited to consider organising them into some form of framework, taking into account an institutional set of desirable outcomes for doctoral candidates. The recently revised Australian Qualifications Framework (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013) and the UK Vitae Framework (Vitae, 2011) were provided as examples, as well as the framework from Michigan State University (2009). Participants then drew up matrices of types of knowledge and skills ranging from early in candidature through until the later stages of candidature. Participants suggested that within this matrix, schools, faculties and the university could indicate programs e.g. courses,
coursework, seminars, professional activities that already exist, and identify gaps for development by them and the institution.

**Individuality and learning needs analysis and plans**

Given the diversity of candidates it is not surprising that an issue that arose strongly in any workshops with research supervisors and candidates was the passion with which those involved addressed the importance of recognising and accommodating the individual needs of candidates. Furthermore these variations had to take into account the school and disciplinary idiosyncrasies which shape the candidate’s experience.

However, one suggestion that was strongly supported as a way of ensuring candidates had access to the learning they needed, while at the same time maintaining individuality was the introduction of a learning needs analysis and the development of a learning plan, sometimes known as personal development profiles (Gough & Denicolo, 2007). It was argued that the keys to the learning plans was the negotiation between candidate and supervisor/s and regular review, and that candidates needed to be encouraged to be more proactive in terms of determining their own learning needs and required training and development.

**Timing**

Views here ranged from: Progressive development throughout candidature with courses/programs/workshops integrated into the candidate’s research program; through to provision of foundation courses to get candidates off to a good start with their research e; and the integration of research education from Bachelor-Masters-PhD. However, one view that was generally supported was the need to provide support for candidates throughout candidature.

**Provision of learning opportunities**

Participants suggested a range of learning opportunities from university-wide seminars and coursework to assist in understanding a broader context, through to the faculties developing their own particular way of ‘packaging’ the candidate experience in line with the overall principles of the university and taking into account the specific needs of their cohort.

It was argued that one of the benefits of institution—or faculty-wide programs was the provision of opportunities for candidates to develop strong peer networks and to learn about other approaches to research e.g. different methodological approaches, ways of viewing knowledge and conceptions of research.

There was agreement that the universities should build on the successful programs already in place in their schools/faculties and determine ways in which they could be shared while being aware of disciplinary and interdisciplinary practices. Other participants suggested the alternative, that is, existing institutional provisions that are of a more general nature be modified to suit the needs of disciplines. Part of this development would involve determining any learning experiences considered to be required/mandated and those that were individualised.

Additionally, there was general agreement that there are many ways in which candidates can learn and develop e.g. through structured, semi-structured and

unstructured activities (Cumming & Kiley, 2009). See Appendix H for diagram of approaches.

Another way of thinking about the provision of different types of coursework was discussed and included enabling, enriching and articulating courses.

Enabling courses have two aims, depending on the candidate’s needs. For example, enabling courses can assist candidates in ‘getting off to a good start’ and/or they can accommodate candidates who are underprepared in research. These courses might have a focus on research processes or advanced level disciplinary knowledge which are front-ended into the first six to nine months of candidature.

Enriching or value-adding courses provide specific experiences for candidates that are beyond the standard ‘completion of a PhD’. These experiences might relate to the nature of the university, for example the values of social justice or ensuring that one’s research contributes to the region. Or, they might be designed to enable candidates to gain experiences by studying in another country or institution for part of their candidature.

Articulating courses are generally made available later in candidature or on completion of the degree and might include experiences such as teaching, project and financial management or six-months in an industrial/commercial setting that provides assessable skill development in an authentic setting beyond the university.

**Assessment**

Participants suggested that existing milestones might provide suitable assessment points e.g. successful completion of the Confirmation Seminar. There was also a suggestion that introducing an oral exam would provide opportunities for assessing some of the identified skills.

**The Role of Supervisors**

Participants were very clear in their views that for anything to work effectively it was critical that supervisors were involved at all stages of program development. Additionally, it was suggested that supervisors be actively involved in skills assessment/entry pathway of candidates and it was suggested that a program of supervisor support and discussion be developed in conjunction with the new programs for candidates.

**Summary**

Based on responses from participants it became clear that the term ‘coursework’ was inappropriate and a more appropriate term is a ‘structured program’ or ‘structuring the PhD curriculum’. Critical aspects of this structure include: a clear set of learning outcomes; an overall framework within which candidates and supervisors can identify and develop their own, individualised program; and the importance of supervisor involvement.

**Acknowledgement**

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**References**


Vitae. (2011). Researcher Development Framework. [www.vitae.ac.uk](http://www.vitae.ac.uk)