Ancora Imparo - towards the Monash PhD
(Ancora imparo is the University motto - "I am still learning")
Professor Rod Devenish, Academic Director, Monash University
Institute of Graduate Research

In 2009, the Senior Management Team approved the establishment of a project to investigate good practice in research training and to propose how such practice could be implemented at Monash. From this project a paper and a set of accompanying recommendations were published for stakeholder consultation in June 2010. A three week consultation period followed where staff and HDR students were invited to complete an online poll and respond to the discussion paper and project recommendations. Engagement in the project was high with 1060 unique views of the consultation pages on the website, more than 150 votes registered in the online poll and 42 submissions received. A white paper was subsequently written and endorsed by the Senior Management Team and Academic Board, with resulting commitment to the following principles:

• The PhD program will be made up of two elements, namely a thesis component and a training component
• A course structure will be developed for each PhD program, designed to give students both knowledge specific to their field and research training that builds a range of transferable skills that are desired by employers, in industry, academia, government or community
• The training component will include training skills development opportunities and/or a mandatory coursework component
• All students will be required to undertake (or gain exemption from) a selection of these elements which combine to 192 hours (the equivalent of 24 credit points or three months) to be taken at appropriate stages during candidature
• A suite of relevant training skills development opportunities will be identified for each PhD program
• All students in a discipline will have the same program requirement, no matter what campus they are on
• Skills training opportunities would be presented in various forms including short courses (offered locally or centrally), project or collaborative work, (international) conference or fieldwork experiences, mentoring and shadowing
• The aim of the program is to provide a breadth of experiences within an academically sound model with the social support of a cohort, maintaining a reasonable flexibility within the model to recognise discipline differences

Faculties have the flexibility to develop programs that provide discipline specific training and coursework, along with the development of a range of skills that will allow candidates to become more efficient researchers, ultimately improving the quality of the research. The inclusion of skills training acknowledges the growing recognition of the value employers (both within and external to academia) place on generic/transferable skills in prospective employees. The following programs are indicative of the generic training that will be offered to HDR candidates:
• Leadership
• Project management
• Presentation skills
• Effective writing
• Grant writing
• IT skills

An on-line module in Research Integrity has been developed, which will be compulsory for all candidates and will provide training in research skills and techniques, managing research data and materials, publishing and disseminating research findings, the proper attribution of authorship, how to conduct effective peer review and how to manage conflicts of interest.

In addition to skills training, faculties will have the option of introducing a coursework component to the PhD. Coursework units include: Contemporary Research in Philosophy, Advanced Research Methods in the Social and Political Sciences, Advanced Quantitative Research Methods and Advanced Qualitative Research Methods

The introduction of coursework and training with the PhD has led to a number of significant changes to the way the PhD is currently administered, necessitating the development and modification of a range of policies, processes and procedures, to ensure the smooth passage of the Monash PhD beginning in 2013.

Some of the elements that have required changes to administration process and policy modifications include:

• The equation of skills training hours to credit points
• Recording of coursework and skills training
• Grading of skills training
• Approval mechanisms for faculty proposals for coursework and/or training
• Publishing of information in the University Handbook
• Administration of coursework units
• Implementation of systems to record skills training
• Procedures to track attendance at training
• The development of enrolment principles for coursework and training units
• Admissions procedures
• Transcript policy

Communication has been a critical success factor in the establishment of the Monash PhD, with engagement necessary across the university to implement system, administration, and policy changes. Communication plans with a variety of methods to engage with the numerous stakeholders impacted by the changes, that maximise opportunities to inform at multiple touch points have been developed. A number of working parties were established with key stakeholders from throughout the university to facilitate the development of coursework unit management, systems for tracking training, enrolment principles and admissions processes.