A Cross-University Model for Coursework in the Initial Year of the PhD

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Context
VU commenced consultations in 2009 through its Postgraduate Research Committee led by the Office of Postgraduate Research to consider the feasibility and value of introducing a coursework component into the University’s PhD programs. The consultations and discussions were motivated by a number of concerns:

• Increasing diversity of the PhD cohort in terms of their pathways into the PhD
• Most pathways were not considered to be adequately equipping new doctoral candidates to work at the sophisticated conceptual levels expected and this was impacting on the quality and timeliness of candidature proposals, and ultimately timeliness of submissions.
• Decline in the proportion of ‘high quality’ PhD theses (based on a three tiered system of examiner thesis quality rating)
• Continuing student dissatisfaction with intellectual climate and the level of peer to peer and peer to academic engagement

Consultations led to the development of a detailed paper on the introduction of coursework into the PhD, including underpinning principles and a model for coursework for the initial year of the PhD program. In 2011, the initiative received support from all three Higher Education Faculties leading to initial implementation in 2012. Guiding principles for the design of the coursework component were developed and supported within the University community and support the ongoing development and implementation of coursework:

• The value of a structured learning component in the first-year of the PhD for all/most research students
• Maximised flexibility in delivery options, including an on-line mode
• Twin emphasis on individual research project needs and priorities, and understandings of the wider disciplinary and interdisciplinary context of research and the contemporary research environment
• Close synchronisation with candidature processes
• Self-reflective and independent learning expected and valued
• Opportunity for some interdisciplinary interaction
• Content and approaches consistent with AQF level 10
• Close involvement of OPR and Higher Education Faculties to ensure complementarity of coursework with Faculty candidature requirements and with other VU PG training workshops and learning support provision
• Efficient use of resources, including maximising opportunities for cross-Faculty and cross-University collaboration

Structure
The coursework component within VU’s PhD is designed to equate to a maximum of 48 credit points (0.5 EFTSL) in total, normally in the format of a maximum of 4 x 12 point
units, to be completed within the first year of doctoral study, with, at minimum, the 2 core units being required to be completed prior to presentation for candidature.

Each 12 credit point unit’s learning and assessment time commitment is approximately 100 hours, with a maximum of 20-22 hours per unit being in the format of face to face learning, at this early stage offered in weekly and burst modes only.

The overarching aim of the coursework is to **strengthen and systematize the conceptual, methodological and ethical base from which research students can build and develop throughout their candidature.**

**Overall Concept for the Structure of Coursework**
Core Units (2) – 24 credit points  (Required component for all PhD students)

- **Conceptualising and Contextualising Research** (a cross-disciplinary unit, structured around Kamler and Thompson’s concept of ‘fields of knowledge production’ and promoting strong critical disciplinary literacy)
- **Research Integrity and Ethics** (draws on resources in the Global Research Ethics and Integrity online modules licensed from University of Melbourne/U21, but customised to VU’s context and emerging integrity and ethical dimensions of research practice) Plus
- **Electives** - up to 24 credit points (normally 2x12 points) (Requirements to be determined by each discipline)

**Implementation**
A staged approach to the introduction of the coursework has been planned with the focus for 2011-13 being on the two core units, and detailed scoping and introduction of the elective component, 2013-14, following the University’s current restructure into 7 colleges.

**Distinctive Features of the VU Model Core Component**
The core units are:

- Cross-University with students working in cross-disciplinary groups of maximum of 20 students. to balance disciplinary immersion with ’interdisciplinary research literacy’.
- Extensive cross-university supervisor input to support the development and refinement of the unit curriculum through the formation of cross-Faculty curriculum design teams.
- A team teaching model provides opportunities for supervisor/academic participation in the teaching delivery working with a small core of academics from the central postgraduate research academic team.
- Out of class tasks and assessment are closely tied to preparation for candidature and ethics/integrity requirements with expectations of a level of regular supervisor engagement in each candidate's disciplinary application of the content.
- Culmination of each semester’s delivery (July and December each year) is a mini-conference with strong involvement of students and supervisors. Students contribute not only by presenting their work in the form of oral presentations and posters, but also in chairing sessions, and assessing and commenting on fellow students’ work.
Evaluation
A work in progress! Generally extremely positive appraisals by both supervisors and students themselves across the disciplines in Semester 1, and virtually unanimous agreement that the level had been pitched appropriately. It has taken peer to peer engagement to a new level, with indirect benefits for supervisor development and engagement as well. However, a massive amount of work, and still much scope for enhancement and further development, especially to maximise relevance across the disciplines.