RMIT PhD Research curriculum framework  
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RMIT is currently conducting a wholesale review of the research curriculum as part of the larger ‘RMIT PhD project’ which consolidate all PhD programs into a single program code and create a whole of university approach to research training.

Frequent student complaints about research methods prompted a content analysis of research methods course outlines. This investigation revealed that many courses were suffering from ‘bloat’. Well-meaning research methods teachers, knowing that they had all research students in the room for possibly the only time in their studies, were trying to deliver a broad range of communication skills and administrative information in addition to research methods. This resulted in actual methods training being squeezed out, particularly with respect to practical skills, such as analysis techniques.

To complicate matters, research methods was front loaded in the student experience; the assumption being that this course would somehow ‘immunise’ candidates with knowledge that would last their whole candidature. Many claimed they had forgotten much of what was taught in methods courses by time they came to apply it. The challenge was to design a curriculum framework which would accommodate the diversity of disciplines in our cohort, while providing appropriate coursework at time of need. At front of mind in this process was the need to demonstrate AQF and HESF compliance and allow opportunities for remote students to participate in an authentic and valuable way.

Our approach was forensic. First we removed the parts of the ‘bloat’ which would be common to all candidates—ethics, OHS, copyright, plagiarism, data management and so on—and designed a compulsory, centrally managed, set of online modules. This enables us to deliver essential information for any researcher operating in the contemporary university and directly guides students through administrative processes, like ethics applications. The rest of the research methods content was split into two parts: foundations (epistemology) & design and techniques. We added a fourth category of ‘academic practice’ to cover writing, communication and teaching skills, which many candidates want to acquire, or polish, during their candidature.

We encouraged schools to revisit research foundations and design in the form of a 12 week course. We proposed using a draft literature review and the project plan as assessable components. This would be potentially the only compulsory course in the program and explicitly prepares candidates for their first milestone presentation: confirmation.

Research techniques like interviewing, survey design, lab measurement techniques, statistics are offered as separate ‘mix and match’ courses which candidates can pick up at will or be directed to by their supervisor. We are exploring how ‘academic practices’ such as writing, presenting and teaching could be treated as separate courses taken at time of need.

This model enables candidates to take courses in a flexible way throughout their candidature and recognises that projects and candidate’s goals evolve over time. We did ‘scenario modelling’ to test how the curriculum might look for different members of our cohort. Here is a possible design student trajectory:
Bracketing all the proposed coursework is the existing research culture opportunities, such as school workshops and seminars. We hope that this refashioning of the research curriculum will reduce the need for these workshops to backfill basic skills and enable more time for the disciplinary, and inter-disciplinary, conversations, so essential to a vital and active research culture.