Doctoral curriculum for candidates at Edith Cowan University
A case study

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Background
Edith Cowan University identified improvement opportunities within the areas of candidate skill development, completion rates, and time to completion. A working party was established in February 2012 to investigate whether structured learning opportunities that complement the traditional model of supervision would address these opportunities for improvement, and if so, how they may be implemented. The initial ECU project is now part of a wider OLTC grant “Coursework in Australian PhD Programs: What’s happening, why and future directions?”

Aim
The purpose of this semester-length activity with staff and students at ECU to address the following issues:

1. For your discipline, when a doctoral candidate graduates:
   • What do you want them to be able to do?
   • What will they have experienced?
   • What habits of mind will they have developed?
   • What skills will they have developed?
   • What content knowledge should they have when they leave the program?
   • Do the new AQF requirements for Level 10 cover these outcomes or do you need to add some others?
2. Given these answers, then what doctoral curriculum do you need to develop to enable these outcomes to occur?

Proposed structure
Two different meetings of staff and one with a group of candidates and early career academics have been held to date. Fourteen academics from four faculties representing a cross section of disciplines and roles (including Associate Deans Research, Postgraduate course coordinators, and experienced supervisors) and four representatives of the Graduate Research School collaborated on possible models.

The matter of desirable outcomes was achieved fairly quickly with general agreement with the AQF outcomes, although participants suggested there needed to be more emphasis on ethical qualities.

Having discussed the outcomes much of the first session was spent identifying possible learning activities that might support these learning outcomes (see the attached matrix of activities under six headings). There was agreement that there was a need to build on successful, existing programs, to ensure supervisors are adequately trained to support candidates in their learning and development needs and to ensure that there is depth and
breadth of training to support candidates in mid to late candidature, not only ‘up front’ in early candidature.

It is important to note that experience has shown that in the early stages, avoiding terms such as coursework was important. Coursework, rightly or wrongly, conjures up thoughts of a US PhD model or of weekly lectures with exams. Therefore, much to the amusement of many of the participants, the term ‘learning activities’ was used to generically include courses, seminars, coursework, lectures, online sessions, workshops etc.

Armed with the learning outcomes and the matrix of learning activities participants were then asked to return to their Faculty and for the following month to consult with colleagues (staff and/or students) and to gain ideas and gauge levels of support for the work to date.

**Future development and evaluation**

At the next meeting of the groups the following will occur:

- Complete the matrix of key areas of candidate learning and development
- Bring details of programs already available in Schools / College and the University that could be plotted against the matrix
- Revise an outline of a learning plan that could be trialled over the next few months. The learning plan outline will need to be detailed enough to assist all supervisors and candidates to complete it with relative ease and yet be flexible enough to meet the specific needs of candidates and their supervisors.
- Develop the details of the suggested courses that would be available for Masters and PhD candidates (but not confined to) learning outcomes, content, assessment and the staffing requirements.

The next meetings of the groups will be in November.

**References**