Coursework in Australian PhD programs:
What’s happening, why, and future directions?

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Early in 2012 the Office of Learning and Teaching funded a project titled Coursework in Australian PhD programs: What’s happening, why, and future directions? The project was considered to be timely not only because of the movement in the sector toward coursework in the PhD but also because of the implementation of the new Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) and the introduction of TEQSA.

When addressing matters of curriculum there are a number of issues that need to be addressed, as outlined below.

An initial curriculum issue is: what are the intended learning outcomes? Whether we agree or not, the new AQF Framework for the Doctorate (Level 10) has done this for us. However, does the AQF statement capture everything?

Secondly, what content might we be considering? For example:

- Research processes?
- Employability skills?
- Communication skills?
- Developing ethical researchers?
- Preparing future academics?
- Are there some learning experiences that we want all candidates to experience? Why? What are they?
- Or?

A third curriculum issue to consider relates to timing. When is the most appropriate timing for various learning experiences? How can this be determined? Should we be putting our efforts into improving the entry courses for students e.g. the MRes, Honours and Graduate Diplomas in Research Methods and at the same time tightening entry policies? And/or, are we considering learning experiences that need particular emphasis during candidature e.g. preparing for confirmation early in candidature and then preparing for post-graduation towards the end? So, some of the questions here are:

- What learning needs to be structured prior to enrolment e.g. Honours, MRes?
- What learning best occurs within the first 6-12 months e.g. introductory research methods and ethics?
- What learning is appropriate for mid term and then again in the last 6-12 months?

Fourthly, when developing curriculum and related to timing we need to consider structure. In this case are we thinking of:

- Formal coursework?
- Specialized courses?
- Individual learning activities?
- A combination?
- Programs that articulate closely with prior learning experiences?
- A structure that provides supportable exit points to gain some sort of qualification for candidates who choose to withdraw from candidature.
A fifth issue concerns the **delivery methods** that might best suit the learning experiences:

- Online?
- Lectures?
- Seminar series?
- Working with the supervisor?
- Within Schools/Faculties, across universities, or in collaboration with other universities?
- Intensives? Retreats? Summer Schools e.g. ACSPRI?

**Sixthly**, and linked with delivery methods is the matter of **resources**, both human and material. Who might be expected to provide these courses?

- Academic staff who volunteer to offer lectures/courses?
- Staff who have additional work built into their workload?
- Staff in units such as Learning Centres and Graduate Research Services?
- Consultants?
- Supervisors?
- Students’ Associations? Or?

And what are the material resource implications:

- Are these learning experiences likely to extend Scholarship times and RTS?
- Will there be financial implications re space, materials, and additional staff? Or?

A seventh critical factor in curriculum design is **assessment**. With regard to setting up learning opportunities for doctoral candidates, how might we assess that the desired learning has occurred. Will it be:

- Through comments in examiners’ reports?
- Achievement of formal milestones e.g. confirmation seminar?
- Publication of journal papers and conference presentations?
- Supervisor comments in annual reviews etc?
- Observations?
- Candidate self-assessment? Or?

**Finally**, a curriculum approach would indicate that **evaluation** was an important consideration. How might we evaluate the impact of new programs for candidates through:

- Improvements in completion times and rates?
- Comments from thesis examiners?
- Improved ratings in PREQ, in particular the skills scale and overall satisfaction along with internal quality assurance surveys?
- Fewer grievances?
- Improved graduate employment outcomes?
- Increases in publications during and immediately following candidature?

All issues to be discussed.