MCD University of Divinity offers 4 higher degrees by research: a Master of Arts (MA), which will be replaced in 2013 with a Master of Philosophy (MPhil), and a Master of Theology (MTheol); and a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) and Doctor of Theology (DTheol). The MA/MPhil/PhD stream was introduced in the late 1990s to enable candidates without an in-depth theological background nonetheless to progress to doctoral research in cognate areas such as history, philosophy, ethics, etc... The MTheol/DTheol stream has, since 1956, catered specifically for those students whose prior studies, at either undergraduate or graduate level, have been in theology or divinity.

Since their inception, each of the research masters programs has been offered with both major thesis and minor thesis options. In the former, the candidate satisfies the course requirements by writing a thesis of 40,000 words. In the minor thesis option, however, the candidate supplements a 25,000 word thesis with two postgraduate-level coursework subjects, each of which is intended to provide additional discipline-relevant training.

There has not historically been any coursework in either of the doctoral programs, although from 1996 until 2010, MCD did also offer a professional doctorate (the Doctor of Ministry Studies [DMinStuds]) which incorporated coursework and practicum subjects alongside a shorter 50,000 word thesis.

There have been two major drawbacks to the coursework electives within the masters by minor thesis programs.

1. The subjects for minor thesis candidates are intended to supplement the main areas of thesis research, but are invariably run in alternate years, and even occasionally on a 3-year cycle. This has naturally meant that students have not always been able to access subjects which are particularly appropriate to their research. On occasion, students have opted to go part-time in order simply to enrol in a suitable subject. More usually, the subjects in which the candidates do enrol are of only tangential relevance to their theses.

2. The coursework subjects themselves are discipline-specific, and have not provided any significant level of research training skills.

To address these concerns, as well as to try to provide some generic skilling for all our research students, the Academic Board of MCD agreed last year that, as of 1 January 2012, all commencing HDR students – irrespective of degree type – must undertake in their first
year of candidature a semester-length Research Methodologies subject. This subject has been embedded into the course requirements, as established by the relevant regulations, for each of the research masters programs and the two doctorates.

The subject is being run centrally by the Research Office and coordinated (and in part taught) by the Director of Research. The decision to offer the subject in this way is designed to signal to the students and the university as a whole that this is an institution-wide initiative that is supported and resourced by the Vice Chancellor.

We have almost finished teaching this subject for the first time, with the first batch of assignments having already been marked, and the second assignment due in a matter of days. The result has been a class size of approximately 30, half of whom are commencing masters and doctoral students, the other half of whom are Honours, coursework masters or graduate diploma students, who are taking it to 'test the waters' of research and who will therefore have already met that particular course requirement if they choose to apply for admission to a research program.

The subject has covered both generic research methods (e.g. how and why to do literature reviews, ethics compliance, and the use of various software programs such as EndNote and Nvivo). It has also addressed particular research methodologies appropriate to MCD's educational scope, e.g. the different types of methodologies used by those who work in systematic theology, compared to those in biblical and language studies, or pastoral and practical theology. It has been taught face-to-face, but with a Moodle subject page on which weekly readings and assignments have been posted and a social forum set up, so that the students can interact with each other between classes and so that distance students can still have access to class materials.

The hope: that MCD research students will, by the end of their first year of candidature at the latest, be familiar with a range of theologically-relevant methodologies, and skilled in the particular research methods they will need to demonstrate in their theses and to their examiners.

The results so far: this is the first year it has been offered. However, feedback from the first cohort has been excellent. The students have engaged enthusiastically with the readings, the guest lecturers, and with each other both in class and via the Moodle social forum page. There has been a recent request by some in the class for a second-level subject which would build upon these foundations.

The problems still to overcome: frequency of subject offering. At present, the subject is resourced only to the point that it can be offered once per year (in 2012, during 2nd semester). MCD needs to find a way in which the subject can be run in both semesters every year, and therefore offered to each candidate in their first semester of study and not just in their first year. Related to this issue is the hope that we will be able to offer the subject online, or at least have it also taught at MCD's interstate colleges (in Adelaide and Sydney).

---

1 This requirement is waived if the student can show that they have taken an equivalent subject at an appropriate standard, in previous studies. That subject is then credited to their enrolment.