Integrating Coursework into Research Programs

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In 2013, Macquarie University will introduce a new standard pathway from Undergraduate Study to Higher Degree Research. From January 1, 2014, the Master of Research or equivalent will be required for admission to HDR programs at Macquarie. Because of the funding arrangements, the degree will be known as the Bachelor of Philosophy/Master of Research program for domestic students and the Master of Research for international students.

Background
The new program was initiated to respond to perceived problems in current pathways programs:

• Graduates from Australian research degrees do not have comparable levels of knowledge of disciplinary content as their counterparts overseas. This also effected candidates’ decisions about their research projects prior to and during HDR candidature.
• The first-year of HDR candidature tends to be unstructured and isolating, leaving candidates without a proper orientation in research;
• The current standard pathway to HDR has low and in many areas, declining enrolments;
• Students entering HDR do not feel they belong to a student cohort, with all the support and encouragement that can entail;
• Australian qualifications are not easily co-ordinated with international programs, making joint programs and degree portability difficult to arrange.

Options
The alternatives are to:

• Maintain the status quo, and improve publicity for HDR programs. This strategy has been tried for some time and has met with limited success. It also overlooks the academic limitations of current offerings.
• Add coursework in PhD: The risk here is that if students progress through Honours (where they regularly do a small research project) into the PhD and start with coursework, then there is a separation between their research training and their major research project. Adding coursework into the PhD would require careful planning in designing the balance and sequence between advanced disciplinary content and research training. It also risks blowing out PhD completion times;
• Developing a dedicated Masters research training program which combines advanced coursework and research training. Macquarie chose this option.

Structure
The new Macquarie program combines a year of advanced disciplinary content, incorporating research preparation and project work with a year focussed on research training and a significant research project. In the first year, students will complete 6 electives, receive training in research communications, report on the key research issues in their discipline and conduct a significant amount of individual research. There will be over
200 units available from which students will chose their electives. Students will be able to design individual and interdisciplinary programs related to their specific interests, subject to academic approval.

In the second year, they will conduct a full-length individual research project, while receiving training in research methodology, research planning, literature review and project management. For details of the degree content see: http://www.courses.mq.edu.au/postgraduate/research/bachelor-of-philosophy-master-of-research

The new program responds to each of the problems outlined above by: providing significantly more disciplinary content and research training than in Honours; offering a more attractive qualification (a Masters rather than undergraduate Honours degree; and providing a sense of a cohort by incorporating structured research training workshops and classes in the research training program.

Unlike programs combining a continuation of Honours with coursework in the PhD, the Macquarie program is clearly compatible with most international qualification regimes. It also provides neater entry and exit points and clearer milestones than an extended PhD program, and by providing students with a more solid grasp of disciplinary content and a deeper induction in research training, it also prepares them better for HDR, in order to reduce current completion rates.

**Schedule**
The first year of the program will be taught in 2013, and the second year will be taught for the first time in 2014.