SYMPOSIUM SESSION: THE IMPLEMENTATION OF RESEARCH DEGREE GRADUATE QUALITIES: A UNIVERISTY-WIDE APPROACH

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In recent times, research education has proved to be a minefield for universities. From small beginnings (remembering that Australia's first PhD dates back only to 1946) there has been, since the 1980s, a steady movement towards mass research degree enrolments.

While laudable, this development has brought with it inevitable pressures – the nagging need for timely completions, refinements in the role of supervisor, increasing debate over the measurement of research candidate satisfaction, differing opinions on the requirement for publication during enrolment and, for the increasing output of thesis-writers, anxiety over employment potential after the thesis (Gallagher, 2000).

The Australian Government's national policy on research education requires the development of research candidates' generic graduate attributes (Borthwick and Wissler, 2003). This policy position raises the question of what particular qualities distinguish the holder of a PhD by research from other degree holders?

The question is not new; it has been asked in international research, particularly because of the pressures being placed on universities to justify research degrees as a preparation for the workforce, not only in the academic area but also in government, the professions and industry (Cryer, 1998).

In 2003 the University of South Australia charted a path through this minefield, by constructing a set of Research Degree Graduate Qualities together with related processes that plan for the development and achievement of such qualities. The set of Qualities was intended to distinguish research degree candidates from first degree graduates and coursework postgraduates.

This was not a scholarly foray into theoretical abstraction. The practical intention was to define more precisely what the research degree candidate achieves in writing a thesis. What qualities are called into play in the actual research environment? What competencies are required to achieve the result of a finely honed thesis that extends the boundaries of knowledge even incrementally?

Like any other university, the University of South Australia has a wide range of research degree candidates involved in writing theses that are sustained by a burgeoning number of quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. Any list of Research Degree Graduate Qualities would have to be elaborated so as to take into account the specific discipline, the professional area and the actual type of research that was being undertaken. The profile of qualities achieved in any particular candidature would be unique and academic areas within the University might want to define their own interpretation of the generic qualities, but there would be commonalities.

The identification of Research Degree Graduate Qualities was achieved after a first phase, consultation of work undertaken internationally to identify the main characteristics of research degrees (for example, Osborn, 1977: 188-189). This international work was linked to the more general agenda of identifying and assuring quality in universities in terms of learning outcomes.

Subsequently, the University undertook a conceptualisation of research degree education identifying the research degree candidate as one who is caught up in 'pedagogic continuity' (Delamont et al.,, 1997:324-5), a process of socialisation in which the candidate learns the parameters of a problematised field of research and is socialised into the practice of relevant research skills. To this pedagogic continuity there are a number of contributors within a research degree environment, including supervisors, established researchers and peers. Within this pedagogic continuity, the candidate is enabled to perform cutting edge research on a specific body of knowledge in two modes – autonomous and collaborative – in an exercise that necessarily interfaces with society and which establishes the candidate in a pattern of lifelong research.

Accordingly, four general quality areas were identified: a Body of Knowledge quality, an Autonomous quality, a Collaborative quality and a Societal-interactive quality. These broad categories have been further analysed into seven more specific qualities or competencies:

A Postgraduate research degree graduate of the University of South Australia:

1. has an understanding of current research-based knowledge in the field, its methodologies for creating new knowledge, and can create, critique, and appraise new and significant knowledge
2. is prepared for lifelong learning in pursuit of ongoing personal development and excellence in research within and beyond a discipline or professional area
3. is an effective problem solver, capable of applying logical, critical and creative thinking to a range of research problems
4. can work both autonomously and collaboratively as a researcher within a particular discipline or professional area and within wider but related areas
5. is committed to ethical action and social responsibility as a researcher in a discipline or professional area and as a leading citizen
6. communicates effectively as a researcher in a discipline or professional area and as a leading member of the community
7. demonstrates international perspectives in research in a discipline or professional area and as a leading citizen.

In defining these Research Degree Graduate Qualities and committing itself to their implementation within the research degree environment, the University of South Australia affirms to the academic and professional sectors that its research degree postgraduates have already engaged in original research in order to solve significant problems, that in doing so they have learned how to work autonomously and collaboratively, that they have set up lifelong learning patterns and networks, that they have been effectively able to communicate their research findings, that they have performed research in an ethical manner, and that they have introduced international perspectives into their research.

Further, the University has established appropriate scaffolding and can point to a nesting of checks and balances, from an initial Statement of Agreement between supervisors and candidates, to successive Reviews of Progress and to a Final Review of Progress, all involved in a process of quality control to ensure that this process of interaction between the research degree candidate and the generic Qualities is actually happening.

The Statement of Agreement not only regulates a healthy and mutually acceptable candidate/supervisor relationship but also formulates a customised Research Degree Program for the individual research candidate. The basis for this Program is the generic Research Degree Graduate Qualities which are elaborated, within the Statement of Agreement, in terms of the particular needs of the candidate.

The Statement of Agreement is aligned closely with the candidate's formal Research Proposal, the blueprint for the eventual thesis. The planning phase of the Statement of Agreement is appraised together with the Research Proposal. The Statement of Agreement also feeds into the first Review of Progress, becoming its defining element. The Review of Progress, in turn, contains a planning phase which is taken up in the next Review and so on.

After they have submitted a thesis, a Final Review of Progress gives research degree postgraduates the opportunity to reflect on what has been achieved. Each postgraduate is enabled to provide a summary of achievements in each Quality, a summary that arises from and is interpreted by their particular and unique research degree experience. Together, the research thesis and this Final Review of Progress provide better information about the totality of individual achievement. For self-knowledge, for the information of potential employers, and for the university's custody of quality measures this sequencing is of prime importance.

In this way, the University provides for supervisors and research degree candidates an agreed structure within which to work, and a means for defining and maintaining quality in an area where quality is being demanded as never before. From the point of view of the research degree candidates, the principal requirement, as previously, is to write a competent research thesis. The other requirements are geared towards doing this more transparently, efficiently, and effectively.

The research degree candidates are being asked to be more explicitly aware of the transferable competencies they are acquiring by the very process in which they are involved: learning to undertake prolonged and complex research, in both autonomous and collaborative modes, using lateral and creative thought to solve problems by sifting through large-scale information resources and challenging established paradigms to propose novel solutions, thereby establishing lifelong possibilities of renewed research activity—the Association of Graduate Recruiters (1995:46) note that the highest stage of transferable skills is concerned with lifelong learning—while acting ethically within their broad discipline and professional field and achieving effective communication, and interacting with and within national and international academic networks.

In short, the Research Degree Graduate Qualities identified within The University of South Australia are intended to identify generic outcomes that result from the research education experience. They are not add-ons; they are derived from the existing experience, usually through cyclical processes not normally articulated. Of some importance for all stakeholders is the fact that they also identify competencies that are transferable to the workplace, either academic or professional.

References

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