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# Modelling good practice in research training for design postgraduate students.

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## ABSTRACT

The experience of postgraduate research students has been evaluated and analysed in numerous surveys by the Australian government and by universities over the last eight years. This is spearheaded by the government's expectation of the university sector's responsibility in matching competitive federal funding of postgraduate fees with appropriate training to meet employer/industry needs. The exercise requires universities to address pertinent issues regarding the postgraduate research experience, in particular, research resources, supervision quality, 'research culture' and research training.

This paper is a longitudinal study of a continuing scheme which addresses key aspects contributing to research training and a 'research culture' for the burgeoning Masters by research and PhD programmes in the School of Design Studies during 2002-2006. Responses from a university-wide exit survey of postgraduate research students in 2002 identified supervision, research skills and research culture as important factors contributing to positive experience. The survey results are significant for design studies where postgraduate research and experience in supervision are relatively new compared to engineering, science and social sciences. The scheme focuses on a series of seminars and workshops to address research training and research culture for a group of postgraduate students with diverse backgrounds and experience including Honours graduates and professionals who graduated from the university more than five years ago; practice-led and/or thesis-based research; local/international students; and fulltime/part-time modes.

Results from student evaluations of the scheme demonstrate that responses to postgraduate research experiences have been satisfactory even though participation in the programme is optional. However, the scheme has resulted in an increasing level of student successes in grant applications for conference travel, acceptances of conference abstracts and papers, and confidence in thesis writing. The paper concludes by suggesting research training as one of the key contributors to a positive postgraduate experience and 'research culture' complemented by appropriate supervision.

## INTRODUCTION

Australian postgraduate research degree programmes in art and design were offered during the late 1980s / early 1990s after a period of higher education reform which precipitated the amalgamation of colleges of advanced education with the university sector. For Sydney design (and

art) education in its broad context included graphic and communication design, jewellery/object/wearable design, environment/spatial design, ceramics, fashion/textiles and new media. Prior to the amalgamation most Australian art and design courses and programmes were offered as undergraduate degree, diploma and/or vocational courses with limited articulation to postgraduate coursework and/or research programmes.

Within this period of a cautious but inevitable move towards the introduction of postgraduate research programmes including Masters by research and eventually Doctor of Philosophy, the challenge for the higher education sector in art and design was manifold (Evans 2000). Firstly, it was necessary to define the context and design of postgraduate research in art and design. Secondly, the location of methodologies in design research. Thirdly, the identification of training and 'generic skills' for postgraduate research students. Fourthly, the training of academic staff as supervisor in the research process. This paper focuses on strategies for the development of generic skills within a cohort of postgraduate research students in the School of Design Studies during 2002-2006 in response to the federal government's Research Training Scheme (RTS) which addresses the postgraduate research experience, in particular, research resources, supervision quality, 'research culture' and research training.

## POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

During the second semester of 2004 the Office of Research Training at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) conducted a series of focus group discussions to gauge the experience and satisfaction of postgraduate research students from a cross section of faculties and disciplines. Two postgraduate research students and the postgraduate research coordinator from the School participated in the exercise. The informal discussions provided information from current students and graduates on a range of issues which contributed to postgraduate research experience and satisfaction at UNSW including career planning, conference attendances and presentations, ethics and research, generic skills, grant applications, intellectual property, isolation as a postgraduate research student, management of the research process, networking, publishing, research skills specific to the discipline, research culture and community, resources and workplace conditions, supervisor-student relationship, teaching/tutoring opportunities, and thesis writing skills (UNSW Office of Research Training 2004). Some faculties collected data from exit surveys of

postgraduate research students but the process was erratic and the results varied widely because of the different focus of each faculty.

Although the Masters by research programme in the School attracted a small but growing cohort of candidates during the mid-1990s, it was an opportunity for the School to participate in the focus group discussions and develop strategies for the burgeoning higher degree programmes and improve postgraduate research experience. The School offers postgraduate research programmes in design studies including ceramics, design management, design history, environment and spatial design, graphic design, object and jewellery design, and textiles. The outcome of the research programme can take the form of a thesis or a combined thesis and studio component. The diversity in research undertaken by staff and students represents an inclusive approach to the range of methodologies – qualitative, quantitative and practice-based – and research skills employed in design research (Webb and Sillitoe 1998).

## GENERIC SKILLS

Numerous research and reports over the last ten years have focused on the role and significance of ‘generic skills’ for postgraduate research students (Ballantyne 2004; Borthwick and Wissler 2003; Gilbert et al 2004; Pearson and Brew 2002). The term ‘generic skills’ - also known as generic capabilities, transferable skills and graduate attributes – refers to ‘skills and attributes which have a direct link to postgraduate research students’ employability, whatever their research topic and/or discipline base’ (Borthwick and Wissler 2003:1). This paper focuses on generic skills programmes which are made available to all postgraduate research students as distinct from programmes which provide the development of specific research skills for the completion of the students’ research projects. The University already provides workshops on developing thesis writing skills and literature review through The Learning Centre, a unit which supports postgraduate research students and staff. The University Library and College of Fine Arts Library conduct regular sessions for postgraduate research students on information literacy skills, information retrieval and management, and specific software training.

In 2002 the postgraduate research coordinator in the School of Design Studies identified the need to organize research training for a growing and diverse group of postgraduate research students. There was a justifiable argument to centralize research training to address different disciplinary cultures, experiences and approaches in response to some of the practical needs of the students (Newbury 2000). The cohort of postgraduate research students included design practitioners/professionals with an undergraduate degree obtained within the last eight years, Honours graduates, and academics who enrolled in postgraduate research programs for career and/or professional development reasons. For the postgraduate research student the level of research training varied according to each individual’s background and experience, and the mode of fulltime or part-time enrolment. The reliance on the academic as supervisor to impart *all* aspects of research education and training was impractical since there were not many

academics in design education with postgraduate research degree qualifications, in particular a PhD (Macauley 2000; Smith 2002; Vilkinas 1998).

The outcome was the introduction of generic skills training in a design seminar course for all postgraduate research students in the School. All new postgraduate research students were encouraged to attend the optional programme, and the records indicate a healthy number of attendances by new students at the beginning of the research period. The attendance figures for students entering their final year of research decreased since these candidates had benefited from the programme and were inclined to focus on the submission of thesis and/or the examination of the studio work. One special outcome from this programme is the mentoring of new postgraduate research students by senior and experienced candidates who had benefited from developing the generic skills. The postgraduate research coordinator was strategic in the inclusion of specific generic skills in the design seminar – fortnightly two-hour programme within the 13-week semester – although special sessions were arranged on other occasions for research training which required extra time.

## MODELLING RESEARCH TRAINING

The career plans of postgraduate research students in the School include teaching at secondary or tertiary institutions, practice as artist/designer, and teaching positions at tertiary institutions. The range of generic skills taught in the design seminar reflects the career needs of postgraduate research students and includes abstract writing, conference paper writing and presentation, and grant application.

### Abstract writing

The inclusion of skills in abstract and conference paper writing and grant application is strategic. It complements the availability of competitive Faculty funds to finance postgraduate research student attendance and participation at a conference or exhibition. Students respond very positively to attending and participating in conferences and/or exhibitions as it provides opportunities for networking and disseminating their research. The skills gained from the experience of writing an abstract and conference paper can also contribute to the student’s confidence and progress in thesis writing. The School views this training as essential and complementary to the development of skills in scholarly writing which is new to postgraduate research students with backgrounds in art and design practice. The development of skills in writing conference abstracts and papers parallels skills learned from the thesis writing workshop conducted by The Learning Centre each semester to assist art and design research postgraduates to prepare dissertations and theses specific to the disciplines.

### Conference attendance

The organization of research training also includes the monitoring of announcements of conferences and exhibitions which are suitable for new and/or mid-term candidates in the Masters and PhD programmes. The dissemination of information regarding the conferences and exhibitions is dispatched by email on a regular basis, and individual

students are encouraged to consider particular conferences and /or exhibitions by the supervisor or postgraduate research coordinator. The students are also reminded of the deadlines of Faculty student conference travel grants to plan ahead for submission of conference abstract followed by grant application should the abstract be accepted. The competitive nature of the student conference travel grant requires the acceptance of the conference abstract as one of the conditions for the award of the grant. Feedback from postgraduate research students who returned from their first conference demonstrates confidence and invaluable experience in the public presentation of the research, and the positive response from conference delegates. Often the experience will encourage the individual to continue the submission of abstract and paper for other conferences during the period of candidacy. It is a strategic way to train postgraduates to identify key conferences as specific platforms to disseminate research via conference proceedings and network with researchers in the field. Another flow on effect from this strategy includes the encouragement of experienced postgraduate research students to submit papers for refereeing in appropriate journals.

### **Grant application**

Postgraduate research students consider grant application skills as desirable and essential in art and design practice since they will continue to apply for competitive government and private grants to support their continuing research/practice upon graduation. For postgraduate research students who consider a career in academe as teacher or researcher, experience and training in grant writing skills and a track record in grants and publications will contribute significantly to the employability and suitability of the individual.

The teaching of writing for grant applications and conference abstracts is based on a 'communities of practice' model introduced by Professor Neil Brown, former Associate Dean (Research) at the College of Fine Arts, for training academic staff. The model encourages the facilitation of all participants to act as peers in commenting, reviewing and sharing of each individual's application for a grant or conference abstract from an initial draft to the final document. In adopting this model of research training, the postgraduate research coordinator acts as the facilitator who announces and invites interested postgraduate research students to attend the first session of the series of workshops. The initial meeting with the postgraduate research students outlines the process for the sessions and expectations of the students' commitment. At this point the student will decide to continue with the workshop if there is a commitment to apply for a grant or to write a conference abstract or to learn the skills. It is essential that the group of students show commitment to the process since the outcome will depend on each individual's contribution and participation in the group. The duration of the workshop series will vary according to the focus, for example, weekly two-hour sessions over four weeks for a grant application, or three weeks for writing a conference abstract. Since the workshop concerns the generic skills in writing for grant applications and conference abstracts, the focus is on the clarity and structure of the writing in addressing the key components of the grant or abstract. The workshop series is structured to examine the

criteria and processes in the evaluation of grant applications and review of abstracts.

Student feedback on the training for writing grants and conference abstracts has been very positive, and the results are complemented by the growing rate of successful grant applications from postgraduate research students in design since 2002. Similarly the number of design students who have been successful in getting abstracts accepted for international conferences has increased although the lack of conference travel funding can hamper the intention to present at the conference. For the students who had the opportunity to attend and present at conferences, there are clear personal achievements include the development of confidence in the individual's research, verbal and visual presentation skills, confidence and improvement in writing, and networking skills (Zuber-Skerritt 1998).

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The generic skills for postgraduate research students in design are similar to those appropriate for students from other disciplines since these skills and attributes have a direct connection to the students' employability regardless of their research topic and/or discipline base. The School of Design Studies recognises the need to make available generic skills to all postgraduate research students from diverse backgrounds, experience and disciplinary cultures. This is particularly pertinent to postgraduate research students from a studio-based background who can benefit from developing skills in academic writing, writing conference abstracts and journal articles, presenting at conferences and exhibitions, and grant application. The provision of training in generic skills for postgraduate research students also identifies a challenge for academics who may not be in the position to supervise as well as teach all aspects of generic skills. This situation complements the immediate and long-term need to provide generic skills training for teaching staff as part of the university's professional development programme to prepare academics in art and design as researchers and supervisors.

Postgraduate research students in art and design are cognizant of the professional benefits and employability in gaining research training. The strategy of providing generic skills – including writing grant applications, and conference abstracts – for all postgraduate research students in the School has demonstrated positive postgraduate research experience and satisfaction during the period 2002-2006, resulting in increasing level of successes in student grant applications and acceptances of conference abstracts, and the mentoring of postgraduate research students by senior and experienced students. The School recognises the design seminar model and mentoring process as part of the development of a burgeoning research culture and 'community of practice' in the postgraduate research student cohort and staff. A former postgraduate research student from the School described generic skills as essential for research training and conventionally learned through mentoring by an experienced supervisor, but not something which one can glean from a textbook. Research training remains one of the key contributors to a positive postgraduate research experience and research culture complemented by appropriate supervision.

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