Developing Research Graduate Skills
An initial mapping of contemporary training and development initiatives

Report of Stage 1 of the
Research Graduate Skills: Questions of Curriculum and Pedagogy Project

Funded under the auspices of the
Discipline-Based Initiatives Scheme
The Australian Learning and Teaching Council

Jim Cumming
Centre for Educational Development and Academic Methods
The Australian National University

jim.cumming@anu.edu.au

June 2008
Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to report on the outcomes of a mapping exercise, designed to inform the development of a new project on skills development for Higher Degree by Research (HDR) candidates. Funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC), the aim of the project is “to scope, within a range of universities, the way in which the ‘curriculum’ of the HDR experience prepares students for academic and non-academic careers”.

Demand for action on skills development has been emanating from a diverse range of groups for well over a decade. Employers and governments, as well as sections of academia have contributed to the creation of a ‘skills agenda’ that has been gaining momentum in a number of countries. A significant feature of development is that variation has emerged around three factors: language - the way in which skills are defined; purpose - the use to which skills might be put; and approach - the means by which skills might be developed. The objective of this paper, therefore, is to investigate the nature and extent of this variation with a view to establishing a solid foundation upon which fresh research might be conducted.

The argument advanced is that discussions about the characteristics and categorisation of skills in the higher education sector have outlived their usefulness. In addition, much of this discourse at the HDR level is relatively under-theorised. It is proposed, therefore, that this research focuses on the curricular and pedagogical dimensions of initiatives that are designed specifically to enhance the skills and capability of research graduates. It is anticipated that three main outcomes will be generated as a result of the project. First, a detailed and comprehensive register of HDR skills training and development initiatives. Second, a set of cases comprising an analysis of provider perspectives on current and emerging issues together with the implications for key stakeholders. Third, a theoretical model or related conceptual device that will deepen current understanding of the key factors associated with the development of skills and capability at the HDR level.