“Raising the level of debate”

A Case Study of Skills Development for Higher Degree Candidates

Prepared as part of the
Research Graduate Skills: Questions of Curriculum and Pedagogy Project

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Abstract

This case study is part of a national project on research graduate skills development, funded under the auspices of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council. The larger scoping project, in which this study is embedded, aims to identify and classify the range of current training and development initiatives used to enhance higher degree candidate skills. The desired outcome of this study is to provide a foundation for further research and development that will benefit not only candidates and staff, but also communities and society in the longer term.

The intention of this case study has been to present a detailed picture of the operational procedures in place at one Australian university. It has done so by moving beyond the conventional ‘report’ and towards a more comprehensive document inclusive of case records, conceptual models and tables. The main source of data for the study is a series of interviews taken with senior staff, responsible for developing skills of higher degree candidates. The goal was to represent the perspectives and insights of this group of internal ‘leaders’ with a view not only to deepening our understanding of skills development, but also to increasing individual and collective capacity to be more effective in the years ahead.

The argument advanced, is that simple and relatively unsophisticated concepts of postgraduate skills are of limited value and that the level of debate needs to be raised significantly, possibly by shifting the focus to more complex questions of curriculum and pedagogy. A plethora of definitions, lists and descriptions of research skills and generic attributes have been produced in Australia and elsewhere during the past decade or more. It is time to move on. To that end, the concept of research graduate capability has been offered as one possibility for promoting informed discourse and collective action.