

## New civics: Translating higher degree research education policy in Australia

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**Abstract:** *For several decades in higher education in Australia postgraduate research students have enjoyed a somewhat liberal educative experience, in part due to the hybrid nature of higher degree research education and in part due to a somewhat mysterious reverence for research. Increasingly, however, higher degree research students are the subject of academic scholarship and Commonwealth and institutional policy focusing generally on improvement, but specifically on the student – supervisor relationship, timely completions, and more recently, the acquisition of generic capabilities. It is now believed that it is in the better interest of tertiary institutions and government to strategically manage higher degree research education. An important question is how is the change from mysterious and laissez faire to transparent and managed translated to students? How do students come to know what is expected of them? How do they become good students? In this paper I employ a metaphor of national civics pedagogy in quantifying four levels of institutional policy as evidenced in a nationwide tertiary institution higher degree research policy survey. Moreover, as a critical and active participant in my own educative experience, as well as a student advocate, I highlight gaps in Commonwealth and institutional higher degree research pedagogy and suggest new ways to translate higher degree research policy to produce well informed ‘citizens’.*

**Keywords:** *postgraduate pedagogy, higher degree research policy*

### Introduction

The purpose of this paper is two fold. Firstly, I explore two sites of student experience; places, real or virtual, where higher degree research students act or are acted upon. Secondly, in considering two sites of student experience, the national and institutional, I then propose a refocusing of improvement efforts from supervisors to students, with a necessary shift of responsibility from supervisor to student.

When thinking about policy in higher degree research in Australia and national and institutional sites of student experience, I recall my American civics class. Thirty years ago, in middle America, the only mandatory unit in the high school curriculum was civics and I recall it now because civics class taught us how to be good Americans. It imparted United States constitutional history, policies and laws of the country to the individual via a local institution (the high school). Ideally, it framed a citizen whose life can be bound by individual rights and responsibilities, institutional policies and procedures, and national policy or law. Civics is a national pedagogy which leads to an educated, active citizenry. In this paper, I employ civics pedagogy as a metaphor to reconceptualise the policy, practice and pedagogy for

research students in Australia and to show how all three can be intricately re-woven to produce a new breed of research students.

With a civics metaphor in mind, in the first section below, Constitution, I explain the data collection method of my web policy review. The findings of my search are collated and presented in the second section, entitled Congress, and in the final section, Citizen, I suggest new ways to translate higher degree research policy to students but to equally encourage students to assume more responsibility for and undertake scholarship about, their research education.

## **Constitution**

The United States Constitution was the core of my civics class. Similarly, the policies introduced periodically by the Department of Education, Science and Training are integral to the operation of higher degree research education in Australia. To answer questions about how institutions practice higher degree research policy education, I began with the assumption that most, if not all, important university policies, guidelines and practices (including workshops) are readily accessible at Australian university websites. This proved generally true, as most institutions have realised the importance of easily updatable, centrally available information for all staff and students. In doing web research such as this, it is crucial that one must have an intuition as to where data of this nature is stored. Equally, as the web has surprisingly distracting qualities due to the nature and ease of hyperlinking, it is important to approach web research with a structured set of questions one hopes to answer. By necessity, I initially focused upon a single institutional site of experience; information dissemination by education programs. What is offered by way of supervisor education? Next, what was offered to students? What institutions offered workshops bringing supervisors and students together? Further, I noted and collected codes of conduct and supervisor policies and guidelines. I continually sought details of nature, frequency and focus of higher degree research programs offered at individual institutions. What I found, frequently by roundabout means, were supervisor training programs handled by central facilities such as staff development or learning/certificate programs offered by separate units in the university structure. Higher degree research student programs were scarce, and rarer still were workshops which brought the student and supervisor together. For each university I created a paper, and where applicable, an electronic, file containing policies and practices and a summary profile. Each summary was then entered on a data collation sheet. The findings are summarised in a novel matrix in the following section, Congress.

## **Congress**

The United States congress serves two important purposes. It represents constituent groups to the government, but also translates initiatives into legislation. In a collective sense, tertiary institutions, and more specifically Deans and Directors of Graduate Study, serve a similar function. The Deans represent institutions, but also implement change by writing and implementing policy—the legislation of tertiary institutions. Like legislation, policy is written as much as to respond to local needs as it is to comply with national directives, all with a view to improvement. In considering the institutional site of experience and available education programs, I noted that twenty-five of the thirty-nine have centrally organised workshops for higher degree research student supervisors. However, only thirteen of the thirty nine institutions have centrally organised student programs beyond an induction session or basic skills (ie Endnote<sup>®</sup>). These institutions are: Bond University, University of New South Wales, University of Technology Sydney, The Australian National University, University of Wollongong, Monash, RMIT University, University of Ballarat, Victoria University, Flinders University, the University of South Australia, Charles Darwin University and the University of Western Australia. Three institutions; Curtin University of Technology, University of South Australia and Charles Darwin facilitate the student supervisor relationship negotiation with a written agreement or checklist designed for face to face

meetings. The outcome of my review verifies an improvement imperative as noted by Williams & Lee (1999). But more importantly, four separate functional typologies emerge from the data about Australian university codification of policies, procedures guidelines and training relating to higher degree research students and supervision. The four functions, Level I, Regulate, level II, Interpret/Facilitate, level III-Endorse, level IV-Mediate are shown in Table 1 where each level/function and its' foci (supervisor or student) are explained fully below.

Level/Function	Supervisor	Student
IV Mediate	Framework	
III Endorse	Grad Certification, Supervisor Register, formal programs	?
II Interpret Facilitate	Workshops	Workshops
	Seminars	Seminars
	Handbook	Handbook
	Guidelines	Guidelines
I Regulate	Forms	Forms
	Policies	Policies
	Codes	Codes

Table 1. Australian universities higher degree research policy matrix. Arrow indicates trend over time for increasing improvement. Grey area suggests little or no data exists for this category.

### Level I Regulate

The foundation of the matrix represents basic trends in Australia where forms, policy and codes are created for informational or regulatory purposes for both the supervisor and student. Most institutions in Australia currently demonstrate this primary level of governance. Some institutions have joint codes of practice and/or policies which contain details for both the supervisor and student.

### Level II Interpret/Facilitate

The next level of the matrix represents a secondary stage where the university evolves to provide guidelines, handbooks, induction events and seminars to interpret increasingly complex information. Workshops introduce complex codes and policies separately to both supervisors and students. However, traditionally, the supervisor has been seen as the storehouse of knowledge of relating institutional/governmental policy and practice. So, it is unsurprising at the secondary level the workshops and seminars are centralised and run annually for supervisors, whereas amongst postgraduate students, only one centralised induction session is common. Grey areas in the table indicate little data was available, and thus, perhaps this area requires further development.

### Level III Endorse

The third level, Endorse, represents institutional efforts to formalise workshops and seminars. Typically delivered in modules, the recipients, usually supervisors, receive a diploma, certification or accreditation. Upon formal endorsement or certification in this way, supervisor names are then entered into databases

or registers. Examples of supervisor registers can be noted at Curtin University of Technology, University of Western Sydney, RMIT University, University of Technology Sydney, University of Sydney, University of South Australia and Charles Sturt University. Alternatively, many universities offer Graduate Certification programs for staff. These are in place at Monash, Griffith University, University of Technology Sydney, University of Queensland, University of Canberra and the University of New South Wales. Endorsement is evidence of nearly two decades of planning, policy and scholarship in the area—notably advanced through the pioneering efforts of Prof Ingrid Moses (Moses, 1985, 1988, 1994) and Ortun Zuber-Skerritt (Ryan, Zuber-Skerritt, & Pinchen, 1998; Zuber-Skerritt, 1992; Zuber-Skerritt & Ryan, 1994). In marked contrast, I find little or no endorsement of students in a parallel way. Few Australian universities have co-ordinated and centralised efforts to provide higher degree research students with education programs parallel to those extant for supervisors.

#### Level IV Mediate

Level IV of the matrix, Mediate, bootstraps lower levels without necessarily progressing through each level as above. Some universities have frameworks which draw together all relevant policy, supervisor practice, and new initiatives with a view to not only shaping environments to facilitate efficient and effective research education but to further inform policy directed for growth and improvement in pre-determined areas. For a current example see: University of Technology Sydney (2004). The category spans both the student and supervisor because, unlike predecessor endeavours, the issues/outcomes are not handled separately, but integrated in one framework. However, the category is shaded in the above matrix because data regarding frameworks is relatively scarce. Equally, implementation and outcomes are not yet apparent.

#### Citizen

What I learnt in civics went beyond rote memorisation of Constitutional minutiae or the functions of Congress. I learnt that rights were conferred upon me *in exchange for* responsibilities I had, those things that made me a good citizen—not breaking laws and the importance of participation, for example. I enacted civics pedagogy by being informed but also responsible for and actively participating in, decisions about me.

Much scholarship, and indeed institutional policy, code, programming and funding pertaining to higher degree research pedagogy in Australia focuses on what constitutes a good supervisor. While this is not surprising, perhaps, because supervisors are generally employees of an institution and students are not, this has perpetuated myths and metaphors which consistently focus on aspects of supervising, rather than being a student. As I conducted my web research of the thirty-nine Australian institutions I sought evidence of a pedagogy which facilitated higher degree research students learning how to be ‘good students’. While many universities offer postgraduate induction sessions and some opportunity to gain skills (Library, Endnote®), I find little documentation that suggests good student programs exist. Recent scholarship envisions programs which are student focused (Singh & Knight, 2002) and driven by generic capabilities (Borthwick & Wissler, 2003) and learning outcomes (Shaw & Green, 2002). However, Pam Green (2003) in her recent chapter Diminished spaces for learning, rightly comments on the irony of push for timely completions in parallel to demands for graduate capabilities. Sadly, she returns to a default position of placing the onus of this squarely upon the broad shoulders of the supervisor:

The imperative is for us to further theorise the pedagogy of supervision... Now that performativity guides what counts, we must face the challenge and the need to complicate, rather than simplify how we view and make space for research supervision. (Green, 2003, p. 170)

In other words, scattering the countryside with generic skills windmills for hapless student to joust will effect little outcome. To make good postgraduate students we must face the challenge to complicate, rather than simply how we make space for them. Australia must; a) create a national framework that articulates the role the higher degree research student plays in national innovation systems, but also recommends policies which are directly linked to improvement programs for higher degree research students. b) create a space for higher degree research students to explore and theorise and their own pedagogy, to have a 'voice', but equally students must claim a stake, a responsibility to the Commonwealth for the investment in them, and c) enact policies which allow time in research candidature to accomplish this! I therefore make the following recommendations.

## Recommendations

### 1. A parallel pedagogy of studentship

The literature from which so many supervisor development programs have evolved provides analogues which may prove useful when considering a parallel pedagogy of studentship. Take for example Lesley Willcoxson's (1994) Staff development needs and workshops for postgraduate supervisors (Appendix) which lists numerous staff development needs, suggests modules and topics and proposes workshops and seminars. With a dual view of empowering students to claim some of the authority and power in the supervisory relationship and create an higher degree research pedagogy, the table can be viewed with a student, rather than supervisor focus. For example, let the words relating to the supervisor = student related words, so where the table lists 'Identified staff development needs', read instead, 'Identified student development needs' or 'Patterns/models of supervision', read instead 'Patterns/models of studentship' or 'The characteristics of a good supervisor & good supervision' read instead 'The characteristics of good students and studentship'. Reading this table with a view to centrally organising and delivering higher degree research student education programs would function at numerous levels; a) provide a counter-balance to a one-sided and one directional approach, b) empower students to share both the power and the responsibility of being a student, c) ensure graduate 'capabilities/outcomes/attributes' are addressed via appropriate programs, and d) rightly apportion certain administrative responsibilities to students. Indeed, when I read this table as though it is a program for students, I begin to wonder why, for so many years, have supervisors have been overly responsible for what should have long been the domain and control of the student.

Implementing a student-centred development program might not be as labour and cost prohibitive as research managers might think. At many institutions it may cost as little as the time of a co-ordinator to take stock of what is currently being done and put together a program which centrally unites disparate university efforts (framework-style!). In some universities it may mean the creation of web sites or the devotion of staff development resources to the new area of 'higher degree research student pedagogy'. The following suggest just a few module based workshops/programs:

- A view from DEST: Workshop formally acknowledges what higher degree research students bring to Australia's research efforts, how they form a building block for future knowledge and in smaller spheres, acknowledgment of direct contributions to research projects, particularly commissioned research by and for the Australian government, industry, etc. It further details DEST policies and practices which directly or indirectly effect students.
- Expectation negotiation: Workshop facilitates direct communication (ie both the student and supervisor attend) in an effort to align expectations of both. Currently UTS, RMIT, Ballarat, UWA and Charles Darwin run similar programs.
- Bi-directional feedback: Workshop assists students with strategies to provide constructive feedback to supervisors particularly relating to the sort of feedback they hope to get from their supervisors.

- Information literacy: Workshop organises information relating to and highlights existing opportunities for advanced database searching, wordprocessing, SPSS®, EndNote®, NVivo®, etc
- Writing: Discipline based candidacy and thesis writing
- Methods: Discipline based methods and methodologies
- Case study: Discipline based case study (McCormack, 2004)
- Short courses: Teaching, intellectual property, languages, team work, project management, technology transfer, media relations, business methods, professional development (adapted from (Gilbert, Balatti, Turner, & Whitehouse, 2004)

As a PhD student, a student representative and researcher of PhD students, I believe there is support in student groups in Australia for generic, alternative and relevant skill development. Recent work by Gilbert et al (2004) supports this claim. However, there remains an important and potentially conflicting Commonwealth policy which rewards institutions for 'timely completions'. The conflict will arise because new programs, new pedagogies require a time commitment of the student, time that higher degree research students do not possess presently. But we have learned in civics that vexing, deleterious laws, such as prohibition, can be repealed. In line with recent Council of Australia Postgraduate Associations recommendations (2004), I must plea for an extension of candidature (time to complete) to 4 years for a full-time PhD student.

## 2. Responsibility

Today we see the refutation of the typical student—fresh faced from an honours degree, predominantly male, full-time, and 'unfettered' by family commitments. Salmon and others (see McCormack, 2004, p. 320) tell us that in fact no student actually matches this stereotype. It is suggested that as many as half higher degree research students are enrolled part-time or are older students returning to education after a period away from university. Many, therefore, are external or at the very least, have part-time jobs and commitment to spouses or family. What this suggests is that, for the main, we are now dealing with mature individuals—at the very least social, productive and responsible adults. How then, does the literature still focus on what can be done by the supervisor? Hasn't it come time that postgraduate students, in parallel, must learn to accept the full responsibility of what it means to be a student, just as they are full members of other social groups to which they already belong? This is not to say that students come to research equally conversant. What new parent can say that literature, stories, or advice ever prepared them for the countless sleepless nights and days of utter exhaustion? So it is with being a student. Doing a PhD is normally a matter of choice, and once chosen, like a good citizen, the student must take responsibility for it. It is time for a new civics—a new vision of what it means to be an higher degree research student in Australia.

Identified Staff Development Needs	Proposed Modules and Topics	Proposed, Workshops and Seminars	Actual Workshops and Seminars
University/AVCC guidelines (incl. grievance)	1. <i>Contextual issues</i>		
Ethics committee	University guidelines for postgraduate study	University procedures/dealing with grievances	University procedures: administrativ, grievance and examination
Supervisor/student responsibilities	Ethics & the Ethics Committee	The University's code of practice: rights & responsibilities in postgraduate supervision	Intellectual property and Ethics Committee guidelines
Facilities & resources available	Rights & responsibilities of main participants	Intellectual property/ Ethics Committee guidelines	Services, resources and funding available for postgraduates
Intellectual property	Facilities and resources (including funding)		
Funding models	Intellectual property guidelines		
Minimal necessary resources	Grievance procedures		
Sources of assistance for supervisors			
Assistance for off- campus supervisors			
Assessing potential students			
Assessing suitability: overseas applicants			
	2. <i>Interpersonal Issues</i>		
Reasonable expectations	Reasonable expectations of main participants	The characteristics of a good supervisor & good supervision	Good supervision and the University's code of practice
The role of a supervisor	Resolving conflicts	Preventing and resolving problems in the supervisory relationship	Preventing and resolving problems in the supervisory relationship
Conflict resolution	Roles of associate & co-supervisors	Co-supervision & interdisciplinary supervision	Co-supervision, associate and interdisciplinary supervision
Establishing an appropriate relationship	Life of the postgraduate student in the Department	Working with International and NESB students	Supervising International and NESB postgraduate research students
Handling difficult or unsatisfactory students	Peer support networks		
Communication skills	Non-traditional postgraduate students (e.g. NESB. International, mature age)		
General issues in supervision			
Workshop by experienced Supervisors			
Patterns/models of supervision			
Conducting supervision meets			
Supervising multi-disciplinary Projects	3. <i>Research</i>		
Working with co-supervisors	<i>Management Skills</i>	Time management/ stages of a project	Time management for the supervisor of postgraduate research students
The role of postgraduates in a Department	Information retrieval & management skills	Selecting & clarifying a topic/defining research aims and objectives	Postgraduate research: giving feedback and assessing progress
Encouraging peer support	Research & technological skills (e.g. statistics, labs)	Feedback, assessment & progress reports	
Supervising overseas or NESB students	Time management skills		
	Clarifying different research types & methods		
Research management	Selecting & clarifying a research topic		
Teaching responsibility & self-sufficiency	Defining research aims & objectives		
The process of learning	Feedback, assessment & progress reports		
Teaching working skills to postgraduates			
Stages of supervision	4. <i>Communication skills</i>		
Project timing	Making explicit discipline	Writing thesis and literature reviews	Publication and the postgraduate research student: the supervisor's role
How to formulate topic and conduct research	Discourse conventions	Discipline-specific conventions/writing the thesis	
Aims of postgraduate work	Writing thesis proposals	Writing for publication	
Assessing reasonable progress	Writing literature reviews	Identifying literacy & oracy problems, appropriate W interventions & support	
Methods of assessing research work	Writing the thesis		
	Writing the publication		
	Making oral presentations		
	Role of feedback in written & oral skill development		
Writing courses for students	Setting writing tasks to segment the research project		
Grammar courses for students	Needs of specific student groups (e.g. NESB)		
Thesis writing formulae	Identifying literacy & oracy problems		
Supervising writing	Identifying appropriate interventions & support		
Developing writing and Presentation skills	Editing, proofreading and other finishing touches		

Appendix. Staff development needs and workshops for postgraduate supervisors ( Willcoxon, 1994, p. 160)

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