Evaluation Criteria and Evidence for a Self Review of Higher Degree Research

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Abstract

In preparation for the Cycle 2 AUQA audit, higher degree research (HDR) at the University of Tasmania (UTAS) was identified as an area for self review to ascertain areas of strength and areas for improvement. The self review process included the development of evaluation criteria to provide a foundation for the development of standards for higher degree research at UTAS. These criteria were developed from a scoping exercise of Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 AUQA audit reports and the AUQA academic standards framework and were contextualised for HDR at UTAS. Evidence was collected against these criteria to demonstrate quality and standards in HDR. The self-review provided a number of recommendations that mirrored the (largely) north American Council of Graduate Schools principles for assessing the quality of HDR training; mainly, improving completion rates, clarifying career pathways for HDR candidates, preparing future faculty and preparing future professionals. The self review process at UTAS proved to be an invaluable tool to inform improvements in the quality of HDR training at the university and for informing strategic planning. This paper examines the evaluation criteria and identifies the evidence relied upon by audit panels when assessing quality in HDR training.

Keywords: self review, evaluation criteria, higher degree research, benchmark

Introduction

The recent emergence of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), to replace Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), has driven a focus on standards through the introduction of the Higher Education Standards Framework. An essential feature of this framework is the inclusion of ‘Qualification Standards’ based on the Australian Qualification Framework (AQF). These standards are to ensure universities demonstrate quality in HDR. A number of universities in their Cycle 2 AUQA audits undertook major self reviews in Research/Research Training (Bond, Charles Darwin, La Trobe, Macquarie, Melbourne, New South Wales and Newcastle) which led these institutions to build staff capabilities and capacity for improving and enhancing standards in HDR.

At the same time, universities are increasing opportunities for HDR training as a result of Government policy initiative which establish a target of 40 per cent of Australian 25 to 34-year-olds to possess a bachelor qualification or higher by 2025. Recent policy initiatives such as the Excellence in Research in
Australia (ERA), the Super Science Initiative and Postgraduate Research Student Support have resulted in a focus on measuring and improving research quality. Edwards (2010) argues that there will be substantial growth in domestic training capabilities as a result of the demand for PhDs based on the recent changes to Government policy. Universities are therefore interested in enhancing and expanding their research profile through the continued development of their HDR programs.

Universities, both nationally and internationally, are currently identifying challenges in HDR programs. A major US report identified the challenges in graduate school education - demographic shifts in population, international migration, increasing number of ‘non-traditional’ candidates and increasing numbers of individuals returning to graduate school after having spent time in the workforce (Wendler et al., 2010). These challenges are impacting on the quality assurance processes in HDR training. The UK, through their Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), has HDR programs as one of their key reference points for assuring quality in universities. In Australia, a recent Global Leaders Summit, jointly sponsored by the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) and the Go8, addressed the topic of measuring and assessing quality in HDR programs. The Summit recognised ten principles for best practice for HDR training. The first principle is about ensuring and improving the quality of HDR training, candidate student learning and professional development, and includes the following evaluation criteria:

- Admission criteria and recruitment
- Student learning outcomes, including transferable skills
- Mentoring and supervising structures
- Infrastructure for HDR training
- Quality of student experiences
- Measures of completion and attrition
- Career placement both inside and outside academe (Council of Graduate Schools, 2010)

Methodology

In preparation for a Cycle 2 AUQA audit at the University of Tasmania (UTAS), a self review of HDR was undertaken (September-October, 2010). The evaluation criteria for the self review of HDR were developed from a desk-review of AUQA audit reports (37 universities and both Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 reports were reviewed) and reference to the AUQA Framework for Standards, Evidence and Outcomes (AUQA, 2010) and are as follows:

1. Planning, governance and policy arrangements
   a. Strategic and operational planning
   b. Organisational structures and corporate governance
   c. Academic governance
2. Financial management processes
3. Supervision
4. Candidate progression and retention
5. Articulation pathways
6. Feedback from stakeholders and candidates
7. International candidates
8. Indigenous candidates
9. International research agreements and research training partnerships
10. Candidate Support
    a. Administrative
    b. Financial
    c. Academic
11. Benchmarking
The question- ‘How do you know?’ (Carmichael, 2010) framed the self review process and shaped the inquiry designed for the collection of evidence to demonstrate quality and standards in HDR measured against each criterion. The review process was designed to measure what were our achievements against a criterion, what evidence do we have, what processes and outcomes relate to the criterion and how well are we performing (Adams et al 2008, p.17). These findings were used to assist in the development of recommendations for improving the quality of HDR in all the above criteria.

**Evaluation Criteria for Self Review of HDR**

**Criterion 1: Planning, Governance and Policy Arrangements**

a) *Strategic and Operational Planning:* Universities must demonstrate an alignment of their strategic planning with operational planning, resources and staffing requirements. The strategic goals in Research need to be aligned to the planning and resourcing in Research Training. Examples of evidence: University Strategic Plans, Research and Research Training Plans.

b) *Organisational Structures and Corporate Governance:* Nationally, HDR has seen a restructure in organisational structures to meet the increasing growth in training. There has been a shift away from Graduate Administrative Services/Offices/Units towards the development of Graduate Schools (positioned either centrally or in faculties). A number of Australian universities position HDR within their Research Divisional structure, not unlike ‘super faculties’ and those with a strong research culture reflect this change by referring to them as the Faculty of Graduate Research/Studies. Universities in their establishment phase or with less emphasis on research, structure HDR within ‘Research Offices’, placing a stronger focus on administrative rather than academic support for candidates.

Some universities in response to Federal Government initiatives are positioning research training as a priority and have invested in leadership positions in HDR to build their research profile. Audit panels examine how a university’s corporate governance impacts on such areas as HDR. A lack of clarity in governance and management structures can contribute to governance problems and have an influence on the lines of reporting and communication (Shattock, 2006). Examples of evidence: University governance structures and reporting lines.

c) *Academic Governance:* Academic governance relates to the structures, policies and processes which ensure quality outcomes (AUQA, 2010, p.2). Audit panels examine the role of research committees (or equivalent) to determine if there are defined terms of reference and agreed delegations of authority (Shattock, 2006). Policy arrangements in HDR focus on the development and oversight of policies in supervision, assessment of coursework programs, ethics/plagiarism, minimum resources for candidates, minimum standards for candidates, assessment, admission, curriculum, learning support, candidate grievances and appeals, candidate enrolment status and research programs.

**Criterion 2: Financial Management Processes**

In universities with a research focus the budget management in HDR is the responsibility of the Dean of Graduate Research/Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Graduate Research) who in turn reports to the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research)/Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research). Business management practices relate to the internal processes for managing the budget for the allocated research centre/school/unit. Financial allocations in HDR relate specifically to improving the HDR candidate experience through the number of scholarships provided, improving resources and supporting candidates with adequate research training. Audit panels are interested in how the monetary investments of the institution improve candidate experience and retention.
Criterion 3: Supervision

Audit panels recommend that universities address the following key themes for the supervision of candidates: guidelines and registration; quality assurance processes and professional development for supervisors.

a) Guidelines and Registration: Audit panels recommend that guidelines for supervisors are developed so as to ensure consistency in the standards of supervision across the institution. Some panels recommend that registration for supervisors is mandatory, particularly in universities building their research culture and capacity. Examples of evidence: supervisor register, guidelines and policies.

b) Quality Assurance Processes and Frameworks: Audit panels are interested in the development of University-wide quality assurance processes in respect to research supervision and candidate feedback. Examples of evidence include the collection of feedback on supervisors from candidates in their annual review process; the development of a process to measure the quality of research supervision through the supervisor register and the development of an overall quality assurance framework for HDR.

c) Professional Development for Supervisors: The professional development and training of graduate research supervisors is an area for improvement for many universities. Audit panels commend universities that demonstrate supervisor training accreditation programs, the use of supervisory panels instead of sole supervisors and give examples of good practice in offshore teaching of research higher degree candidates. An issue related to supervisory panels or groupings is a greater emphasis on monitoring the quality of research supervision if it involves various researchers from other institutions. Also, an ongoing issue is developing mechanisms in performance management which address poor quality supervisory practices, as well as promoting good practice. Examples of evidence: training modules and workshops for supervisors.

Criterion 4: Candidate Progression and Retention

Candidate progression and retention are significant indicators in understanding the support that is given to candidates. Audit panels review completion and satisfaction rates and the processes universities have in place to monitor and review candidate progression and retention. Examples of evidence: candidate management practices, research learning plans; milestone checks, annual reviews of progress; analysis of candidate surveys and keeping an ‘at risk register.’

Criterion 5: Articulation Pathways

The postgraduate curriculum has been under debate nationally and internationally for a number of years now, following Bologna and the introduction of the Melbourne Model. The present issues in HDR are articulation pathways (Honours) into postgraduate research, Masters Coursework (credential creep) and the alignment to the AQF. The developing trend in HDR is towards the introduction of postgraduate qualifications which tie more closely with industry and offer a more practical focus. Audit panels look for evidence of adherence to the AQF and individual statements of graduate abilities.

Criterion 6: Feedback from Stakeholders and Candidates

Audit panels are interested in how universities improve learning and teaching through the effective use of feedback from stakeholders and candidates. Examples of evidence include tracking the career destinations of PhD candidates; providing timely feedback as a result of the annual surveys and details of any subsequent improvements in place; and the development of annual improvement priorities which arise from data from candidate surveys.

Criterion 7: International Candidates

With the increasing international presence in Australian universities, internationalisation has become a category of major importance to universities. Audit panels examine how universities are able to provide support and a sense of intellectual community for international higher degree candidates. Examples of
evidence include feedback from international candidates regarding not only courses and teaching but also to services and opportunities provided to them with the intention of improving candidate experience of campus life. Audit panels also pay attention to entrance credentials and language requirements.

**Criterion 8: Indigenous Candidates**

Universities are developing mechanisms to support their indigenous HDR candidates. Many universities have strong mentoring programs for their indigenous candidates in undergraduate degrees and it is an area for improvement in higher degree research.

**Criterion 9: International Research Agreements and Research Training Partnerships**

According to audit panels international research agreements and research training partnerships is an area for improvement for many universities. There needs to be more work in monitoring partnership agreements/contracts and responsibilities. A memorandum of understanding (MOU) may include expectations of candidate support and facilities that a partner will provide but audit panels recommend that documented processes for ensuring these expectations are met are in place. Evidence: cotutelle arrangements backed by MOUs and/or candidate agreements that articulate the requirements concerning ownership, resourcing, responsibilities and academic requirements.

**Criterion 10: Candidate Support**

Candidate support includes administrative, financial and academic support. Administrative support relates to the enrolment and administrative arrangements in assisting candidates through their degree. Financial support relates to access to space, computers, assistance with conference funding, scholarships and other funding related to candidature study. Academic support is about how universities set up a research training program which supports candidates and early career researchers with the necessary skills to assist them in their degree/career. It also is about providing time allocation to support study arrangements and having the assistance of university teaching and learning staff through professional development programs. Candidate career development and closer collaboration with employers is an area for improvement in HDR programs.

**Criterion 11: Benchmarking**

Audit panels recommend that universities need to improve the ways in which they undertake benchmarking initiatives. Areas for consideration are candidate assessment/grading, benchmarking processes for input from candidates, employers and other external stakeholders, benchmarking provision of resources and peer review activities assessing and evaluating against international as well as domestic benchmarks.

**Discussion**

The self review of HDR was a helpful tool to inform improvements in the quality of HDR training at the university and for informing strategic planning. With regards to quality assurance processes, the self review highlighted some key lessons learnt:

- develop transparent and rigorous processes for maintaining and assuring the quality of HDR training and management on a regular basis;
- initiate a Graduate Research Coordinators network to ensure consistency and develop and share good practices in HDR;
- develop a process for monitoring the quality of theses based on HDR candidate completion rates rather than completion times. The completion data in the self review identified a clear need for improvement;
- determine how data will be analysed, such as a faculty or discipline focus;
- develop infrastructure for validating the development of new units in HDR training programs;
- use survey data to candidates and supervisors to formatively improve the quality of supervision and communicate improvements based on feedback to candidates and supervisors; and
• analyse feedback data at various stages of candidature to maximise quality outcomes and for early intervention to identify and assist ‘candidates at risk’.

Conclusion

The self review of HDR at UTAS produced 25 recommendations which were endorsed by an international consultant during a subsequent peer review. The recommendations mirror both the CGS principles for assessing the quality of HDR education and the US findings for HDR training (Wendler et al., 2010, pp.42-43) which were about improving completion rates, clarifying career pathways for HDR candidates, preparing future faculty and preparing future professionals. The self review process at UTAS proved to be an invaluable tool to inform improvements in the quality of HDR training at the university and for informing strategic planning in this area. The UTAS self-review will be used to inform a future benchmarking project on HDR training with Deakin University and the University of Wollongong.

References


