Curriculum Design in the Humanities and Social Sciences at Macquarie University

Nick Mansfield
Dean, Higher Degree Research
Macquarie University

Background

Macquarie University is a comprehensive university of about 40,000 students in the inner north-western suburbs of Sydney. Macquarie has about 2,000 Higher Degree Research (HDR) students, 97% of whom are doing the PhD. Traditionally, in Australia, the PhD is by thesis alone, without coursework, or if there is coursework, it's a short non-graded course on research methods. The pathway to HDR at Macquarie, as at all other Australian institutions, has been by way of the one-year add-on Honours program, a fourth undergraduate year for elite students.

There are problems with the add-on Honours year. It is declining in appeal to completing undergraduate students; it is not internationally portable; and it does not provide adequate research training or disciplinary content for students progressing to HDR. Many Australian universities are considering moving away from the Honours pathway to a more internationally standard master's program as the core preparation for HDR study. In 2013, Macquarie started teaching its two-year Master of Research as the standard pathway to PhD admission. This degree comprises one year of advanced coursework with a one-year structured individual research project. Key aims of the program are to

- develop an internationally recognised and transferable HDR pathway program;
- provide students with a deeper advanced knowledge of the discipline in which they intend to become researchers;
- provide students with a structured introduction to research methodology, project management and research planning strategies; and
- establish a clear supportive cohort of students as they progress from undergraduate into HDR.

Online Teaching

Departments developing their programs for the Master of Research were given the option to run their units online. The uptake for this option was greatest in the primarily text-based programs in the humanities and social sciences. These have a strong tradition of online offerings at the undergraduate and postgraduate coursework level. Uptake has not been significant in the sciences. Online teaching is especially attractive for some of our social science disciplines because they have traditionally taught a large number of PhD candidates living overseas, some of whom never set foot on campus.

However, the decision was made not to offer the master's program wholly online at this stage. This was for a number of management reasons and also because it was considered impractical to offer the compulsory and centrally-taught Research Communications unit online because this unit required face-to-face engagement.

As the academic responsible for implementing this program, I also have a number of other issues/problems with full online delivery that I would like to raise and receive feedback and advice about:

1. <u>Development of a cohort</u>: One of the key aims of the master's program was to develop a strong sense of a cohort for students. This has traditionally been a problem for Australian HDR programs. Honours classes are small, and with no coursework program in the PhD, students do not develop a strong sense of belonging to a group. Australia is a country of a small number of large cities where the bulk of the universities are situated. Sydney and Melbourne each have a population of about five million in a national population of 22 million. Students commonly grow up, receive their education, and work in the same city. They do not travel to be educated and do not live on campus. In short, there is a lot militating against the development of strong campus life, and a strong HDR cohort.

   <u>Issue 1:</u> Is it possible to develop a real sense of a student cohort with online teaching?

2. <u>Pastoral care</u>: One of my responsibilities as Dean of HDR is the pastoral care of HDR students and supporting/negotiating the relationship between supervisors and candidates when they run into difficulties. In my experience, it is easy for the relationship between supervisory panels and distance research students to enter into difficulties and miscommunication, even though we require the appointment of a local adjunct supervisor. Not only is it easy for relationships to become tricky at a distance, it is also very difficult to mend them. Often, it takes a long time for problems to be recognized and also it is very difficult to negotiate at a distance. This problem could be magnified in coursework programs that are striving to introduce students to research because students have not developed resources of self-reliance and do not have well-developed research strategies.

   <u>Issue 2:</u> How do you develop proper systems of pastoral care for distance research coursework students?