

# One size does not fit all – how do we cater for all research students?

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**Dr Laura Dickinson, Dr Terrie Fraser,  
Dr Steven Grivas, Dr Vittoria Grossi**



**DEAKIN**  
UNIVERSITY

# What are the aims of the HDR team?

- Support all students at their level and candidature
- We want to address individual needs but foster and promote peer writing groups
- Increase engagement and retention to our programs

# Study Support for HDR students

- Orientation sessions to all new HDR students (face to face and online)
- 1-1
- W/shops – generic and faculty specific (on demand, negotiated)
- Cloud site *Writing for research* (self-access resources – **redesign in progress**)
- Thesis Study Groups (campus and cloud)
- For supervisors - modest attempt on giving effective feedback.

# Our challenges and dilemmas

- How do we cater for different sizes? (diverse cohorts, different research background, stages, varying disciplines)
- How do we cater for different approaches and perceptions and ways of learning (strategies)
- How do we foster a community, build trust and collaboration with all stakeholders?
- What is our role: educators, facilitators, bridging?
- Do our stakeholders understand our work? How are we seen by supervisors?
- Where are we positioned in the institution?

# Data and approach to analysis

- Critical self-reflections shared with colleagues aimed to articulate what we were each observing.

‘Critical reflection requires us to ponder our practices, processes, and identities. It also requires us to look beyond our own circumstances to the external factors, policies, and people that might influence the choices we make and the actions we take’ (Sutherland 2013, p. 111).



# The School of Architecture

- supervisor and student feedback
- observations in our 1-1 (includes ALL students)
- a collaborative process

We will outline 2 versions of work in this School over 2 trimesters.

We are still trying to get this size right!

# Workshop development

Thematic workshop **Series 1** was designed according to topics suggested by:

- Language Advisers based on previous workshops
- School of Architecture HDR coordinator
- HDR architecture students

Thematic workshop **Series 2** was re-designed according to feedback from:

- HDR coordinator and supervisors
- HDR students



# Workshop topics

- 1. Understanding your thesis structure**
- 2. Formulating a research question**
- 3. Writing a literature review**
- 4. Descriptive, critical and reflective writing**
- 5. Integrating sources – textual and non-textual**
- 6. Academic writing – constructing your argument**
- 7. Academic writing – paragraph and sentence structure**
- 8. Academic writing – editing and proof reading**





# Reflections

*'The **first** iteration of the architecture writing workshop was **more structured and prescribed**. Whist there was some uptake by students, **there was minimal participation** in the workshops.'* (Laura)

*'For the **second** iteration, the supervisor asked if we could make them **more based around students' writing**. Initial numbers were quite good, however, students would turn up and **not all would have a draft of their writing**. Therefore, workshops were still **individualised** and **students could not share** their writing and offer feedback. I emphasised the **positive collaboration between students** in the sharing of their writing to encourage the students to bring their writing so we could develop a sense of **'peer learning'** allowing students to **'participate in a community of research practice'** (Boud & Lee 2005, p. 504).'* (Laura)

# Reflections

*'By the fourth workshop, I was **happy when all students had brought some of their writing to share to give specific feedback.** We worked through the ppt, looking at specific writing features. At the end of the session, I asked them if they found it **helpful** and they said they were **happy with the structure of the workshop** . . . . At last I felt like I had found the right combination, **the correct pattern**, for how the workshops could progress. **A mix of materials**, some **explicit teaching** and examples, and some **peer learning** through sharing writing and giving and receiving feedback.'* (Laura)

# Theme 1 - Writing is key and support is diverse - who does what?

There are numerous support services available:

- Epigeum
- Faculty based optional/compulsory
- Study skills/grammar based
- Supervisors
- Informal peer support groups
- PhD Xtra
- Fortnightly Thesis Study Groups : both online and on campus

Students must navigate these different models and this can be a challenge.



# Theme 2 - How to address writing support

Research shows that doctoral students undergo a great change in their scholarly identity (Cotterall 2013) and writing is central to the PhD journey but it is not always taught explicitly, and often assumed that students know how to write or will pick it up. However, many students need assistance (Cotterall 2011).

The research on doctoral pedagogy informs our work:

- **‘writing as a social practice’** and **‘writing cultures’** – spaces to talk about writing, play with writing and to perform writing (Kamler & Thomson 2006, pp. 20–21, 144). *Emphasis added*
- **‘peer learning’** as pedagogic discourse and construed as a **‘two-way reciprocal learning activity’** (Boud & Lee 2005, p. 503). *Emphasis added*
- **Giving and receiving feedback** as a valuable part of the writing process (**‘the gift’** by Guerin 2014). *Emphasis added*

# Theme 2 - How to address writing support

## However, we observed:

- Students requested structured w/shops, followed up by 1-1 support, resisting the peer-learning model, unaware of the value of **'the gift'**.

*'When I offered a student feedback on their writing, the other student who was also participating decided to leave as they had no feedback to offer their peer. It seemed that they **missed the point of the 'gift exchange'** (Guerin) whereby a **'necessary feature of peer learning is that it is reciprocal'** (Boud & Lee, 2005, p. 511). The student who shared his writing did not attend another workshop after this.'* (Laura)

- Support for writing continues to be viewed as a **'stage'** rather than a **'process'** – it is difficult to change this mindset.
- For example, some **supervisors refer students** at final stages in order to have the thesis proofread.

*'Are supervisors basing their expectations on witnessing a need for the development of student writing and wanting us to **fix the problem?**'* (Laura)

# Theme 3 - the nature of supervision

- Supervision has changed in recent times with multiple expectations: ‘Changing roles illustrate how supervision is situated in a context where wider faculty issues influence the quality of the process’ (McCallin & Nayar 2012, p. 65).
- Different models of supervision are needed (McCallin et al. 2012, p. 67).

*‘Some supervisors neglect to understand the value of thesis study writing groups which could be strategically delivered to their HDR cohorts at particular milestones. Instead, they **refer students one at a time**, so that 1-1 work is intense for the purposes of **editing or proofreading**. This is unfortunate, as the development of **“identity work”** (Kamler & Thompson 2014, p. 118) - so vital to the development of the candidate and the writing itself - could be enhanced with endorsement of peer sharing writing groups.’ (Terrie)*



# Theme 3 - the nature of supervision

- The HDR student journey continues to be a negotiation with power imbalance and different approaches and styles when giving feedback to writing.
- This has implications for our work due to boundaries and roles.

*'In discussing work with students, we make clear that it is supervisors who have the final say in the structure and content of the thesis. **We need to be careful about crossing into content.** We therefore encourage students to seek agreement and feedback from their supervisors. We observe that this is not always easy due to personal, cultural and hierarchical discourses.'* (Vittoria)



# Theme 4 - intercultural perspectives

At times the journey can seem **more complex for international students** due to perceptions of cultural differences and language proficiency.

- International students have disparate experiences: if 'universities are to genuinely welcome the international candidates they recruit so enthusiastically, they need to be equally attentive to supporting and encouraging all doctoral researchers in their journey towards scholarly identity' (Cotterall 2013, p. 9).
- Pratt's notion of contact zone can apply to intercultural supervision where 'asymmetrical power dynamics between supervisor and student are overlaid by **different cultural assumptions about pedagogy**. For example, culturally diverse students may feel they have very little power in the supervision relationship not only because the supervisor has greater authority as the teacher, but also because the supervisor and student may have very different cultural expectations about how supervision should work'

(Manathunga 2013 p. 97). Emphasis added





# Theme 4 - intercultural perspectives

*'We find that **EAL students** do have, or perceive to have, **greater difficulties with writing a PhD in English**. We found it difficult to determine whether the session was being well received when EAL participants were not actively interacting. So, **we assumed they were not engaging**. We have to remember that these **students may need more time** before they feel they can actively participate and contribute in a way we expect.'* (Vittoria)

*'For the first online workshop, only one student attended and **did not make a comment** throughout the session. I did wonder if they had left the room and did not log out and I was sitting there talking to myself. However, later he **emailed to say how helpful the session was**. It was surprising feedback. He subsequently attended a further workshop and he did contribute a draft for comment.'* (Laura)



# What next?

- **Keep what worked** – some workshops are welcomed and needed.
- **Collaboration** is everything and provides a good working model we plan to explore further in the future.
- **Promote** understanding of writing groups as informal places where talking and discussing research will assist writing development to students and supervisors including English language development.
- **Feedback** to Schools about issues we see in 1-1 practice.
- **Consolidate** our work in new cloud site – more visible for staff and students.
- **Articulate** a strategic approach with our stakeholders.



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