Quality in Postgraduate Education

EDITED BY
ORTRUN ZUBER-SKERRITT
AND YONI RYAN

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As postgraduate numbers increase, government funding for higher education is increasingly tied to the independent assessment of the quality of an institution's teaching, learning and research. Postgraduate education is central to a university's quest for quality because it combines these three elements.

Drawing on the best practice of a wide range of internationally known experts, this book sets out to establish a framework for setting the benchmarks of excellence. Part One deals with the most pertinent issues confronting universities at a systems level, Part Two the specific processes the contributors have tested and found useful in post-graduate education. Topics dealt with in detail include:

- planning for quality in graduate studies
- learning for research culture
- a model for the management of research-degree supervision
- residential staff-development programmes
- avoiding communication breakdown
- contracts and checklists for postgraduate supervision.

This timely and authoritative collection will have achieved its purpose if it becomes a reference point for administrators, academics and students endeavouring to ensure and sustain high-quality research outcomes for themselves and their institutions.

Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt is Associate Professor in Higher Education and Management at Griffith University, and a leading figure in the fields of postgraduate research, training and supervision, action learning and action research.
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List of Acronyms

AGPS	Australian Government Publishing Service
AIDAB	Australian International Development Assistance Bureau
AVCC	Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (Australia)
CAE	College of Advanced Education (Australia)
CEDAM	Centre for Educational Development and Academic Methods (Australia)
CSHE	Centre for the Study of Higher Education (Australia)
CVCP	Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (Britain)
DEET	Department of Employment, Education and Training
DORCISS	Association of Directors of Research Centres in the Social Sciences (Britain)
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council (Britain)
HEC	Higher Education Council (Australia)
HERDSA	Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australia
HERO	Higher Education Research Office (New Zealand)
NBEET	National Board of Employment, Education and Training (Australia)
NFER	National Foundation for Educational Research (Britain)
SERC	Science and Engineering Council (Britain)
SRHE	Society for Research into Higher Education (Britain)
SSRC	Social Science Research Council (Britain)
USDU	Universities' Staff Development Unit (Britain)

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Foreword

Roger Holmes

Higher education institutions around the world have become aware of the importance of quality assurance in the operation and delivery of their academic programmes. This applies especially to those universities in countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia, for which the distribution of substantial government support funding is directly linked to an independent assessment of the quality of teaching and learning, and of research and community service activities. This linkage of quality assurance outcomes with substantial differential funding provision has been catalytic in moving quality assurance into the mainstream of university work for academic staff and many general staff.

The major beneficiaries of a well-run quality assurance system in higher education are the students and graduates, who will have experienced many opportunities to provide comment and feedback on their experiences. Employers and other stakeholders will also have been consulted and included in this process. Academic staff should have gained adequate feedback to positively influence their teaching and learning activities and supervisory skills, as well as the course structure and content of academic programmes. Overall, the quality and performance of the university will have been improved by these quality assurance measures.

Research postgraduate training is unique among academic responsibilities in providing a direct linkage between teaching and learning activities and research. Typically, quality assurance programmes separate these functions and concentrate on teaching and learning in association with undergraduate or postgraduate courses, or on research issues, focusing on input and output measures of research performance and productivity.

Research postgraduate training, however, provides for an integration of these separate roles of higher education institutions, and can be legitimately dealt with under both headings.

This publication is therefore very timely and appropriate, in the light of increased awareness and implementation of quality assurance principles and practices, and the central position of research postgraduate training programmes within universities. The book will assist universities, faculties, departments and schools, as well as individual supervisors, in improving the quality and effectiveness of research postgraduate training and supervision responsibilities. It draws on the experiences of a wide range of experts within the university system and establishes a framework for setting benchmarks of quality performance and excellent outcomes.

The editors, Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt and Yoni Ryan, have arranged an excellent series of papers, selected to cover relevant areas and the skills required to support a quality research postgraduate programme. These range from strategic planning

issues, through to thesis writing, staff development — particularly in enhancing supervisory skills, effective supervision of overseas students, maintaining good communication and supervising literature reviews.

The publication is suitable for new and experienced researchers in the design, implementation and evaluation of the programmes of academic organizational units for research postgraduate students and/or supervisors. The book will also assist in designing staff development programmes for new supervisors of research postgraduate students, and in the identification of areas relevant to quality assurance in research postgraduate training.

May I warmly commend the authors on the wide and comprehensive coverage of issues related to quality assurance and the research postgraduate training programmes of higher education institutions.

Roger S. Holmes
August, 1994

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Introduction

Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt and Yoni Ryan

Issues of quality, institutional research culture and processes which encourage, achieve, sustain and assure high quality teaching and research in our universities have been matters of intense debate in Britain and Australia in recent years.

Quality has a generally understood meaning, but it is very difficult to define. It is often used as a synonym for excellence, and its specific connotations are explored further in the context of postgraduate education in Peter Sheehan's chapter here. **Postgraduate** (or graduate) study in this book refers to higher degrees which have a substantial amount of research as a major component, by contrast with coursework Masters degrees, or even coursework doctoral programmes.

The book will be of interest to all higher education institutions, and to supervisors of postgraduate students, as well as to students themselves, because it canvasses not only systemic responses to the increase in postgraduate numbers but also particular matters of concern, such as research training, thesis writing and supervisory practices. Hence it is structured in two parts.

Part One (Chapters 1–6) discusses issues of quality and institutional research culture. This includes the importance of institutional and departmental infrastructure, criteria for evaluating theses and research applications, research in the new universities, women and overseas students. Part Two (Chapters 7-14) suggests educational processes and strategies by which high quality research and supervision may be achieved, including residential staff development programmes, managing the writing process, strategies for improved communication, supervising literature searches, and using contracts, checklists and guidelines.

Ingrid Moses' opening chapter sets the framework of the book by emphasising the importance of departmental and institutional infrastructure for the quality of postgraduate study. Yet she concludes that in the end the 'quality of staff and students is still the key variable'. Chapter 2 is a revised version of **Peter Sheehan**'s keynote address at the Residential Staff Development programme in 1993 described in Chapter 7. Sheehan argues that key factors affecting the quality of the thesis are similar to those affecting the quality of a research application to external grant agencies. **Lewis Elton** and Task Force Three in Britain report in Chapter 3 on their investigations of staff training needed to promote more efficacious teaching, examination of theses, and research in our universities. They provide detailed recommendations for institutional and departmental training programmes.

In Chapter 4, **Jan Whittle** describes the development of a policy framework in a 'new' university to establish university-wide procedures, such as an agreed Code of Good Practice for Research Degree Supervision, and a Register of Research Degree Supervisors. Drawing on universal social and institutional gender inequities, **Linda Conrad** identifies the particular contextual problems facing female students, and suggests a number of practical ways in which institutions can engender 'women-friendly' practices in Chapter 5. In the following chapter **Tania Aspland** and **Thomas**

O'Donoghue consider the influx of overseas students to Australian universities, and on the basis of a case study, explore the difficulties faced by students of differing cultural backgrounds, particularly in relation to attitudes to authority, and the amount of direction students expect.

Part Two turns to more specific processes which might be adopted by institutions and individual supervisors. In Chapter 7, **Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt** proposes residential staff development programmes which focus on the many issues involved in supervision, and which operate as a catalyst for further programmes at the institutional and departmental level — a train-the-trainers programme. The actual writing of the thesis is often the cause of greatest anxiety for students. In Chapter 8 **Robert Brown** argues that success can be assured through reconceiving writing as a marketing exercise, while **Nanette Gottlieb**, in Chapter 9, argues for the use of concept maps, processes of time management, and clarification of examiners' criteria.

Pam Denicolo and **Maureen Pope**, in Chapter 10, explore the use of personal construct psychology as a mode of clarifying the pressures on individual students through grid, 'snake' and narrative techniques and concept maps. Chapter 11, by **Estelle Phillips**, explores the nature of communication breakdowns by comparing student and supervisor narratives about their relationship during study.

In Chapter 12, **Christine Bruce** defines the nature, process and product of a literature review and considers the vital training necessary for advanced information retrieval skills. Arguing that the demographics of postgraduate students have changed from full-time young adults to part-time mature adults, **Yoni Ryan** suggests in Chapter 13 that contracts and checklists could prove effective measures to deal with the difficulties faced by institutions, staff and students as a result of these changes in the student population.

Finally, in Chapter 14, **Barbara Grant** and **Adele Graham** report on the guidelines for communication they have developed at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, and the variable success they have had in introducing use of such guidelines, despite student enthusiasm. John Jones adds an afterword setting the philosophical context of the project.

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The editors pay full tribute to the desk-top publishing skills of Erica Maddock, who reformatted or rekeyed and remained cheerful throughout 'the production process'.

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