

## **Concern Over Completion Rates**

This case study was originally developed by:

Erika Martens, Academic Development Unit, LaTrobe University

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### **Author's comments on use of this case study material**

The two sets of comments come from different discipline areas. They reveal that some issues are generic - for instance, difficulties with inaccessible or uninterested supervisors. Other issues are discipline-related – for instance, difficulties in trying to create a research tradition in a field that has not traditionally had one.

Workshops offered to a whole institution may attract an unpredictable range and number of participants. It is good to have discipline-specific material ready and to split groups up according to discipline. The small groups engage with familiar and relevant issues, and then when there is plenary discussion, they discover the range of responses and issues in other fields. If possible, a session facilitator might canvas what participants' experience and specific issues are before the workshop and prepare what is required.

School-specific workshops can afford a more focused approach. In those a facilitator could work with the postgraduate coordinator and/or head of school on discipline specific materials and issues.

This case study takes about 45 minutes in a longer workshop that may take 3 to 5 hours. I usually begin by discussing what completion rates are, how they are measured and how a single supervisor could measure his/hers, how they could access institutional data to find out the rates for schools etc. We discuss the significance of these numbers in relation to recent changes in funding, scholarship cuts, staffing profiles, etc. I also set aside some time to establish a concept of good supervision and some steps towards a clarification of the role, rights and responsibilities of a supervisor before I do the case studies as a way of pulling some of the concepts together. In a discipline specific group, the less experienced participants can then pick up a lot from their more experienced colleagues.

I usually use small groups plus plenary to report their findings. I once used a more elaborate set-up where I assigned specific roles i.e. student, supervisor head of

school/postgraduate coordinator, but this took too long, staff members were somewhat shy and for what they got out of it, it was a huge effort for them and me.

An amazing range of attitudes towards the candidates is voiced which is interesting for the staff. Many very useful strategies are described. The disciplinary and other contextual variation is quite obvious. Many retell their own horror stories and this has to be watched as it can take over.

The most common issue raised is that of lack of support for the supervisors in the face of increasing pressure to supervise, to be successful in doing so and in coping with ever more diverse and assertive students. The role of the p/g-coordinator is often described as lacking in proper 'power' to enlist support for supervisors from the head of school in terms of work-load reduction, help with difficult situations, general induction into this type of teaching etc.

When we get to suggestions for solutions to problems, participants usually ask for

- more support from the institution,
- more funding to assist their candidates,
- more training in specific areas such as writing, statistics.
- clear setting out of roles and responsibilities for both candidates and supervisors right at the beginning of the candidature,
- school-based milestones for all candidates,
- two supervisors for each project,
- regular writing tasks set for the candidate,
- detailed notes after each supervisory session,
- formal supervisor training,
- regular evaluation of the process,
- close matching of project with supervisor's research area,
- better selection of candidates, especially international students,
- preliminary enrolment,
- clearer grievance procedures.

It surprises me in that supervisors having problems don't seek much information or help on their own bat. Feeling quite alone in this process, most have not tried to get support from more experienced colleagues or from the chair of their faculty's higher degree committee.