"Communicating 'success' with research students: Institutional responsibilities in encouraging a culture of research higher degree completions"

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Abstract

The modern university landscape is driven by an outcomes-based approach that stresses quality, impact and efficiency amongst its researchers. For newcomers still adapting to the alien lifestyle and rigorous demands of academia, such as Research Higher Degree (RHD) students, it is important that institutions are able to adequately guide them through the research journey and communicate not only what 'research success' looks like, but how to achieve it through information, partnerships, and shared experiences. This chapter seeks to explore the important role of 'communication as empowerment' in encouraging positive outcomes by enabling research students to complete their degrees with minimal problems and maximum satisfaction.

Introduction

Despite being regarded as the pinnacle of academic achievement, successfully attaining a research higher degree (RHD) does not firmly rely on a candidate's intelligence, nor previous level of high academic merit. Those working in higher education can attest to the fact that it is not always the brightest students that reach the end goal, nor is it unlikely for candidates with less impressive backgrounds to do very well in their chosen field. Rather, the successful completion of a doctoral or research master degree involves the complex interplay of various factors – insightful project design, robust organisational skills, positive supervisory relationships, competent university support structures and, for the most part, sheer determination. But the one element that links all these factors together is the ability for the university to impart vital knowledge of the research degree as a process and, through access to relevant information, enable informed and competent students to effectively traverse the various obstacles that can de-rail an otherwise promising early career academic.

In this chapter, I take the perspective of a research administrator to argue that to lift completion rates and encourage a culture of research success, universities must reassess how relevant knowledge is communicated to students and supervisors throughout the entire research degree process. The chapter begins with a discussion of the problems facing research student success in the modern university environment. It then notes how some issues, such as crises in competence and imposter syndrome, can be combated by improved institutional communication, which is viewed as a unifying and empowering force (Slack, 2006, pp. 223-231) if implemented correctly. The important relationship between institutional communication and the growth of successful cultures of research collaboration is also noted, before the chapter ends with a discussion of the benefits of preparing and empowering graduates for life after the dissertation.

Ultimately, the chapter argues that institutional responsibilities in developing open lines of communication and training between all stakeholders via various platforms are key in encouraging 'success', reducing attrition rates and ensuring that institutions maximise research outputs for the time, energy and monetary funds invested. In a world of commercialised research outputs, it is the *empowering and unifying elements of communication as a practice* rather than regulatory reporting that will ensure a sustainable research culture while driving successful graduates into the 21st century.

Commercialisation, attrition and the obstacles to research student success

According to Taylor (2012, p. 120), "over the last two decades the number of people registering for doctoral programmes in most countries has grown rapidly" as the research sector at universities in influenced by processes of massification, internationalisation, and diversification. But it has also been heavily influenced by the processes of commercialisation, where strict provider-consumer frameworks have come to dominate a research culture once built upon traditional closed-doors and 'secretive' master-apprentice style supervisory relationships. With the "McDonaldisation" of research degrees in recent decades, public research sponsors across much of the globe have baulked at the traditional *laissez-faire* attitude to PhD completions and instead sought to improve completion times through a conveyor-belt system of outcomes-based regulation, progress reporting and the enforcement of time and funding limits (Taylor, 2012, p. 122).

This increasing commodification and regulation of the research degree journey comes as no surprise, especially in countries where public and reportable funding is used to support many students regardless of their eventual completion or attrition. In Australia, the Research Training Scheme (RTS), designed to support Higher Education Providers in meeting the costs of research training for domestic RHD students, contributed approximately $620 million to the total $1.51 billion of government funds dedicated to research and research training in 2011 (Deloitte, 2011, p. 3). In the United Kingdom, where the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) uses a block grant approach based on research student load to partly fund research training, some £1,558 million was spent on research funding in 2015-2016 (HEFCE, 2015, p. 4). Other western countries, such as Canada, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, France, Germany, and the Netherlands also have varieties of public funding for research degrees and are therefore heavily interested in maximising completions and outcomes for the funds spent (Deloitte, 2011, pp. 43-45). While countries such as the United States of America limit research funding to federal scholarships and research grants, relying on many students to pay tuition fees for their period of candidature or receive fee relief directly from institutions (Deloitte, 2011, pp. 7-8), the "attrition of doctoral students is [still deemed] costly to society" (Smith, Maroney, Nelson, Abel & Abel, 2006, p. 17).

Despite such growing regulation concerning research students and the push for accountable degree completions in many countries, stress and attrition levels in the RHD sector remain high around the world (Sakurai, Pyhältö & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2012, p. 99). In North America, for example, doctoral attrition rates are estimated to sit at somewhere between 40% and 50% (Litalien & Guay, 2015, p. 218). While it is difficult to ascertain the exact attrition rates in

countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom due to the varieties of enrolment patterns, study breaks and research setbacks that extend degrees for much longer than their 'standard' time frames, the rift between the numbers of enrolments and those eventual completions can be generalised as considerable. Anxiety regarding postgraduate non-completion rates has remained an issue for government funding bodies for several decades, with "attrition and time taken to complete as long-standing causes for concern in Britain, Canada, the USA and Australia" (Wright & Cochrane, 2010, p. 183). Furthermore, research degree attrition is seen as a significant problem for not only funding bodies worried about efficiency dividends, but also the universities themselves, as it "reduces resources and at the same time incurs costs for faculty members who have invested considerable time in research projects that will never be completed" (Litalien & Guay 2015, p. 218).

With this problem in mind, the question of why research students withdraw from tertiary study should first be addressed, to acknowledge where institutions can focus their attention in improving completion rates through enhanced institutional communication practices. According to Cook (2009, p. 2.), the roots of attrition in higher education stem from a variety of causes, including a lack of preparedness for higher education, uncertainties in their long-term goals, social isolation, or financial problems. Many of the factors associated with student withdrawal are not solely attributable to the student" (Cook, 2009, p. 3), as often students misunderstand institutional expectations, or are insufficiently supported during their university experience. Smith et al. (2006, p. 18) highlight several important organisational factors that also affect research degree attrition, namely the student selection process, program structure or lack thereof, ineffective or non-caring advisors, lack of program flexibility, and a lack of community within the program itself.

These organisational factors all contribute to the major reason for research degree attrition: self-doubt. According to Litalien and Guay (2015, p. 229), 'perceived competence appears to be the cornerstone of doctoral studies persistence". Crises in competence – or at least the belief of research incompetence and 'imposter syndrome' – are more pronounced in research degree programs due in part to their nature as autonomous, lengthy and with less structured indicators of competent progression. Litalien and Guay also note the importance of a quality student-adviser relationship, as well as the interactions with other faculty members as sources of encouragement (2015, p. 229). As will be discussed in the next section, this is where effective communication strategies and support networks – designed around the notion of communication as a practice designed to empower and unite students – must be implemented to ensure students are well-informed of the trials that they will face, are able to self-assess their progress in a positive light, and push on towards completion without walking away. Without revisiting how universities actually impart practical knowledge to higher degree research students, they are, in fact, simply setting many promising students up to fail.

Communication and completions: Institutions empowering students and supervisors through quality information, inductions and research training programs

For many students undertaking a research higher degree, self-doubt and attrition is largely due to a breakdown in expectations, processes, and the perception of progress towards an end goal that may not necessarily be completion, but an individual's idea of what constitutes their own success. As Semenza insightfully tells willing postgraduate readers in the United States:

> Throughout your graduate career, you will be bombarded by devastating statistics about the job market, many of which will seem custom-made to deepen your own personal anxieties. And despite all of these reminders about *what* you need to do to succeed, only rarely will someone actually stop to explain to you *how* you might do it.
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> (Semenza, 2010, pp. 1-2)

It comes as no surprise that there is a large market for PhD 'self-help' books, written by academics to help research students 'crack the code' by researching 'how to do research'. Most RHD resources taking up space in the libraries of institutions, such as *Doctorates Downunder* (Denholm and Evans, 2010) or *Doing Postgraduate Research in Australia* (Stevens and Asmanr, 1999) are very helpful for the interested PhD student in advising what they need to do, how they can break up the process into manageable sections and avoid common problems. While such resources are a lifeline for the astute research student, many others may not realise this until it is too late, instead relying on the institution to provide sufficient information to traverse the research experience and complete successfully. The fact that so many books exist on how to avoid the pitfalls of research indicates the opposite - that many students are often left in the dark on what they need to do by institutions themselves, and that much of the knowledge of 'how to' succeed in the research environment is left to external parties. Instead, this section argues that rather than outsourcing the idea of success to such manuals and self-help gurus, institutions themselves need to take a greater responsibility for imparting quality information to students at all milestones in the HDR student journey. In this way, can attrition be lessened and research success be cultivated.

As the above examples indicate, 'success' in research seems intrinsically linked to how students can locate and interpret the messages being sent their way via a range of pathways, voices, and media, and then act accordingly – how they communicate with the world around them. In this sense, this chapter sees 'communication' from a broad definition where many competing meanings regarding relationships and shared knowledge coalesce; "Communication,' Slack writes, "*is* the process of transmitting messages from sender to receiver, it *is* the process of encoding and decoding, it *is* the effect of a message on a receiver, it is the negotiation of shared meaning, it *is* community, it *is* ritual… [yet] communication is not in essence any of these, and it is not any of these exclusively" (Slack, 2006, p.223). The defining characteristic of the type of desired institutional communication discussed in this chapter, however, is its role to *empower* and forge strong relationships between sender and receiver. Slack is insistent on treating communication as 'articulation', whereby all interactions

can be seen through a "contingent joining of parts to make a unity or identity that constitutes a context, and the empowerment and disempowerment of certain ways of imagining and acting within that context" (Slack, 2006, p. 225). Depending on what information, experiences, ideologies and material is presented and 'articulated' with or joined to other values, structures, and organisations, can messages be understood with varying outcomes. But communication can also be viewed as a practice, "a coherent set of activities that are commonly engaged in, and meaningful in particular ways, among people familiar with a certain culture" (Craig, 2006, p. 38). In this respect, communication is an important relational tool and one that can be done well, poorly, or not at all (Craig, 2006, p. 40). It is therefore imperative that the correct messages are sent and received in a positive and constructive light. For the purpose of this chapter, 'communicating success' can be described as having an emphasis on how correctly coded messages, information and programs can be used as 'articulated practices' to create unity and empower those who interpret them and make use of such knowledge to negotiate the world in which they live. For research students, communication is therefore a significant part in ensuring that they have the capacity to avoid problems through capturing and interpreting the positive and constructive messages that are transmitted to them. If they do not, 'success' may be fleeting indeed, or completely out of reach.

Laske and Zuber-Skerrit note that "Communication plays a crucial role in postgraduate education. Sharing ideas and constantly negotiating meaning reduces the 'lonely researcher' syndrome" as well as being a vital component in imparting one's research to the wider community (1996, p. 11). But successful communication between institutions, students and supervisors is important very early, even prior to commencement; from the very first moment a student considers undertaking a research degree. As Eley and Murray (2009, pp. 27-28) write, the last few decades have seen increasing demands on postgraduate research students, and "an awareness of all matters related to admissions are fundamental to their progress in the early stages of their research program and beyond". It is important that an institution advises potential applicants of what a PhD or research masters actually is, and what they will be doing if they choose to commence. Smith et al. (2006, p. 19) argue that the selection of research students should be much more than simply a focus on academic merit or official entry requirements, but the process should also act to impart further knowledge to applicants so that they adequately "know the rigorous course of study they are selecting before the application process" concludes. Supervisors, who will be committing to a relationship with the applicant for at least three years, should also be especially keen to 'scout' their new wards and inform them of how they operate, their expectations and responsibilities if they do commence, and thoroughly understand the motivations of each applicant. Through such discussions the supervisor can tailor the applicant's desired research journey accordingly while 'positively discouraging' those who have not thought it through via the formal quality recruitment information such as university websites and publications. Advice on the intensity of the research lifestyle prior to commencement can sometimes ready applicants to abolish romanticised views of the HDR journey and instead the hard work that will culminate in completion and success – working long hours in isolation (Semenza 2010, p. 37). Furthermore, in incorporating an interview as part of the application process, institutions can assess eligibility based on a prospective research student's personal needs, counter any unfounded

expectations of the research journey while greatly assisting their preparation for the trials ahead (Smith et al., 2006, p. 19).

Providing suitable information for both students and supervisors in the early stages of commencement is possibly the most important aspect in communicating an institutions' expectations, support structures, and limitations. As Laske and Zuber-Skerrit argue, postgraduate researchers must be supported by departmental and institutional practices that assist the effective communication of postgraduate rights, rules, regulations and guidelines in a way that is designed to meet the faculty and students' expectations and standards; "to "be clearly formulated and distributed, but also discussed within the department, school or faculty" (Laske & Zuber-Skerrit, 1996, p. 13). The ways in which universities impart this information to research students is also an important consideration, and must consider the changing face of postgraduate study to an increasingly online environment. Online supportive research networks have become more necessary in recent decades, with the increasing number of students completing research degrees by distance. How institutions communicate to those who have little face-to-face or on-campus contact with supervisors, faculty, or research administrators is now vital for support strategies to keep up with social and technological changes. Albion and Erwee (2011, pp. 121-128) have noted that distance doctoral attrition rates can be 10-20 per cent above on-campus levels. Students by distance, removed from the centre of the research culture and isolated from support networks, face greater challenges to ignorance of university processes, policies and opportunities, and are often unable to as easily solve problems affecting their studies as those on-campus.

As a result of such a shift, internet resources, in particular institutional home pages and sections devoted to research, must be informative, accurate, yet realistic. They must also be easy to navigate, and relevant information must have a logical layout to ensure the pages are seen by students as a valuable way to access important information. The formal writing style of many official university websites, which must project outwards to the community as well as inwards to its students, often inhibits universities' ability to connect to its current student population in any real depth, so other avenues of electronic communication may be beneficial to complement the official internet information. Emails can easily be missed, deleted or ignored – especially if an institution fills a student's email inbox with irrelevant or unnecessary items – but most universities now have student portals and secure online sites which can be treated somewhat like closed-group undergraduate study pages and forums. The author's home university has enjoyed much success in creating a research student Moodle site, which contains relevant information about the research student journey, forms, contacts within faculty, discussion forums, and important dates, written in a relaxed style and easier to navigate than official pages designed for a much wider audience. Treated like a normal undergraduate subject study page, this 'Research Higher Degree Moodle site' can extend the amount of information and community focus to isolated research students. In a world where many students will rarely visit their institutions nor have face-to-face communication with even their supervisors, it is important that the interface between student and support networks is clear, accessible, and most of all, seen to be a resource worth using to clear up possible issues before they reach critical mass or affect chances of completion.

Based around a strong online portal, universities can begin to ensure that institutional policies are adequately communicated to interested parties and are consequently used to ensure quality, standardised procedures, as well as transparency and equity amongst students. This communication of policies, procedures and useful information is best carried out though inductions and introductory courses based on university legislation. However, depending on their length and content, many students can still remain unaware of a majority of their rights and responsibilities afterwards, let alone how to carry out effective research. Wiley and Mort (2005, p. 766) argue that in a modern research environment where students demand a "fuller experience together with assistance and advice on development of skills to effectively manage their research", long-term inductions or research development programs over the course of the degree are vital in developing such a research culture through active communication and encouragement on the part of the institution. Aimed to foster a learning environment based on multidisciplinary teamwork and reflective practice, institutional induction programs must ensure that all aspects of the RHD journey are covered in depth, to not only introduce students to the postgraduate research environment but also "clarify and align the expectations of the faculty, schools, and supervisors for the students; inform students of faculty requirements, policies, and procedures; encourage development of skills essential to research… reduce student isolation… [and] create a multidisciplinary collegial environment for future networking" (2005, p. 768). Effective communication also extends to enabling quality ongoing training for supervisors in areas such as professional relationship building, empowering others, student mentoring, research collaboration, writing for publications and grants, and helping students gain professional positions after graduation (Smith et al. 2006, p. 21). In building up the knowledge base of both the supervisor and student, institutions can help empower that very important relationship between the two.

Expanding induction programs and student/supervisor training to act as the beginnings of full research training programs that continue throughout the student's journey can also be of benefit. Ultimately, such university-led initiatives that extend outside traditional supervisor-student relationships can help foster an inclusive research culture in which "high-quality research, awards, publications and successful grant applications are facilitated, develop, and rewarded" (Laske & Zuber-Skerrit, 1996, p. 14). Programs that act to inform students of the steps to 'research success', create a portfolio of research skills and enable them to succeed not only at university but also after graduation, should be another prime focus of institutions. The creation of staff-led seminar series, built on the relaying of practical information to groups of postgraduate researchers such as job prospects, publishing, teaching and balancing commitments, can help fill the void left by a busy supervisor and encourage collegiality while enabling mentoring from wider afield than a student's small inner circle.

Communicating a culture of research completions through collaboration

As Thomson & Walker (2010, p.10) state, university-produced "manuals of procedures and lists of suggestions do not successfully address cultures of doctoral education and supervision because getting a PhD involves more than 'generating a product or perfecting a set of skills'". Instead, it is important that university initiatives such as inductions and student portals focus on the importance of collaboration, collegiality and networking to enable competent and

engaged researchers who believe in their abilities and can maintain successful relationships within the academic community. As such, combatting isolationism should be another major focus of universities in creating a successful research culture, which Holmes (1996, p. 40) identifies as being, at a broad level, the shared and substantial research values among members of an effective research group. This may include common characteristics such as consistency between the mission, goal and objectives of the university or research group, supportive research and research postgraduate training policies, effective staff development programs and reward mechanisms, effective research leadership and a willingness to collaborate, to name a few. At the heart of each of these characteristics is the effective communication of what is required to perform well and excel as part of a team.

Institutions have a responsibility to help students break away from isolated and solitary research practices through encouraging greater levels of empowered communication themselves. The creation of communities of practice and research groups is one such way of involving students in community-led collegial projects. Universities can also take the initiative in encouraging the bonds of research friendship though student societies and associations, meet-ups, and the role of formal postgraduate representatives. In joining such communal activities, research students can compare progress against others' and determine that their own issues with self-doubt are shared, or not nearly as drastic as to contemplate quitting. Holmes (1996, p. 45) especially notes the importance of promoting and supporting postgraduate students' associations as a way of helping students help themselves. Many student groups can easily fail due to lack of interest or time from students busy working on their own research, where some form of financial or communicative assistance from the universities can help such associations gain traction and become self-supporting. Once again, the author's home institution has also enjoyed great success collaboratively through the establishment of a centralised information system designed to inform and link researchers and keep the entire university up to date with research activities, seminars, projects, and publications, named ReDTrain (Researcher Development and Training). Frequent bulletins and the inclusion of all departments limits fragmentation and alienation of staff and students while promoting important researcher endeavours. In enabling a higher level of communication among students, institutions can forge mutual support networks, combatting isolation and negating competition between students who could be better served acting collegially (Conrad & Zuber-Skerritt, 1996, p. 101). Communities of practice, research groups, sponsored postgraduate associations and innovative projects such as ReDTrain act as institutional-led support frameworks where students can gain insight and ideas from others in the same situation, negate emotional stress and be encouraged, very early on, to form working partnerships and help complete publications through collaboration.

Lastly, maintaining open lines of communication between institutions, supervisors and students can enable more successful feedback mechanisms that seek to unravel isolated student concerns and address significant issues before they cause students to withdraw. Student forums, postgraduate societies and online student questionnaires are important avenues for feedback, and can be used to not only measure progress or supervisor-student relationships, but adequately address ways in which information can be better transmitted to them and improve

their level of satisfaction and confidence. It is also important for such feedback mechanisms to include other stakeholders, such as employers, sponsors, supervisors and recent graduates to further understand the institution's strengths and weaknesses in imparting knowledge and adapting to the needs of all involved (Ely and Murray (2009, p. 169). Such strategies are aimed at creating productive, competent researchers through effective imparting of knowledge of the 'journey' when they need it most.

Setting students up for success post-completion

While completion is often the regulatory requirement driving the idea of student 'success', it is still important to end this discussion with a focus on post-completion success and the benefits to students and institutions. Significantly, many of the communicative strategies involved in preparing students for successful completion through empowerment and reciprocity can be extended to supporting them after graduation. Throughout the research higher degree journey, students should be informed of the realities of modern research, how to go about publishing, realistic planning and timeframes for working constructively on future goals, while discouraging self-doubt in the hyper-competitive job market of modern academia. Eley and Murray (2009, p. 166) note that the purpose of many research degrees has changed over the last few decades, and now many more students qualify for a doctorate than there are for permanent academic positions in many countries and many academic disciplines. In order to assuage those dropping out after the realisation that many will not enter academia no matter how hard they struggle or publish, universities need to communicate how their programs are built around concepts of a formalised 'research training program' that enable students to acquire a portfolio of relevant lifelong skills, rather than simply produce a dissertation to gather dust on a library shelf.

Upon graduating and becoming early career researchers, many students will still be ill-equipped to deal with the raft of new challenges standing between them and successful continued research. Attrition does not simply happen during a degree, but afterwards, as research degree graduates struggle to stay in the field in those crucial years directly after completing. As Tynan and Garbett (2007, p. 411) state, "getting a foothold on the academic ladder can be a daunting prospect. For some early career researchers, achieving this goal seems almost impossible", being cut off from mentoring, encouragement and financial assistance while being required to take on heavy teaching workloads on short-term contracts while trying to publish work and develop a research profile. As competitive and individualistic tendencies take hold once more, it is up to institutions to continue to communicate support and encouragement to its graduates, providing opportunities for them to communicate with one another through alumni portals and form collaborative research structures, rather than cutting them loose post-completion.

To properly support research students still planning their futures, institutions need to focus on these aspects. Completion is not really the end goal here, despite the focus of funding bodies expectant on a reportable outcome, but a launch pad to a promising research career. It is an important milestone, one that needs to be passed rather than reached, and graduates must keep enough energy in the tank to keep going after completion. Universities should not wish to

produce exhausted and bewildered graduates who decide to leave the profession once they do submit, as that in itself is a waste of talent. As Stevens and Asmar (1999, p. 102) note, 'post-thesis burnout' affects over a third of graduates, greatly inhibiting them from any further research. Only by treating the entire process of a research higher degree completion as only one part of a greater journey that aims to create a competent, lifelong researcher – explaining the highs, the lows, the expectations and the realities of the experience through effective communication – can universities be conscious actors in encouraging this success.

The sink or swim mentality of traditional research training has never been viable, and is extremely inefficient for modern universities who are tasked with reportable and quality outcomes for all stakeholders. Without attaining a working knowledge of the research higher degree process, what is expected from them by their university and what to do when they encounter difficulties, students are liable to waste substantial amounts of time and effort, experience high levels of mental anguish, fall behind in their timelines, extend submission dates, and eventually withdraw from their studies. Minimising these negative experiences should be a university's priority. By focusing the attention of support structures to how information is relayed, a cohort of empowered students can be best situated to complete their research project as easily and effectively as possible. Research training programs and empowering communication strategies must be developed to ensure admitted students avoid crises of competency and have the tools at their disposal to traverse the pitfalls of the research higher degree journey. The role of institutions should not be about throwing students in the deep end and seeing who surfaces, but instead teaching them the ways to thrive in an encouraging and responsible research environment, led by strong institutional communication practices.

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