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**Building an online learning community for doctoral research students (0181)**

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**Research Domain: Learning and Teaching**

The knowledge gained during the PhD journey is often disseminated across a narrow subject field and much of the 'messiness' involved in the research process is lost as it is written up. Individual PhD students may work in isolation and miss out on wider learning opportunities and networks. This study focuses on a project designed to enable knowledge exchange and support the development of employability skills through an online community seeded using multi-media resources contributed by current and former PhD students and academic staff and focusing on their experiences. This paper presents an evaluation of the project and explores issues such as: engaging research students; developing an online community; developing content involving PhD students; providing individual and generic learning pathways or trails; working within and across disciplines; working across traditional boundaries e.g. faculties and departments, graduate school, academic services; and researchers' perspectives on employability issues.

**Paper proposal for Society for Research into Higher Education Annual Conference 2009**

**Title:**

**Building an online learning community for doctoral research students**

**Research domain:**

Learning and Teaching

**Outline** (1000 words max – excl. references – 1000 words actual):

*The problem*

The knowledge gained during the PhD journey is often disseminated across a narrow subject field and much of the 'messiness' involved in the research process is lost as it is written up. Individual PhD students may work in isolation and miss out on wider learning opportunities and networks. This study focuses on a project designed to enable knowledge exchange and support the development of employability skills through an online community seeded using multi-media resources contributed by PhD students and academic staff focusing on their experiences. This paper presents an evaluation of the project and explores issues including: engaging research students; developing content involving PhD students; developing an online community; providing individual and generic learning pathways or trails; working within and across disciplines; and working across traditional boundaries e.g. faculties and departments, graduate school and academic services.

The experience of doctoral students is extremely varied and dependent on factors such as their discipline, departmental and faculty research cultures, mode of study, and supervisor. For example, Chiang (2003) found distinct differences in perspectives between chemistry and education research students regarding their role, networks (who they work with) and the value they placed on research skills training. The issue of isolation is a recurring theme, e.g. Deem and Brehony (2000) found that

international and part-time students experienced more difficulties in joining peer and academic cultures than home and full time students. Thus the origin of students also influences their doctoral experiences.

Chiang (2003) identified that the learning needs of doctoral research students have undergone rapid change and development. He observed that doctoral education has shifted its focus from an experience that enabled entry into an academic community and career, to a qualification for entry into the wider labour market. This puts emphasis on doctoral students gaining a wider set of employability skills and reflects the need for transferable skills expressed in the Roberts Report (Roberts 2002).

Therefore to be successful, an approach to enhance research students' experiences needs to target the diverse range of students including:

1. Students who are embedded in their own research networks and cultures.
2. Students who are working within a narrow research culture.
3. Students who have little opportunity of observing expert researchers.
4. Students who are working on- or off-campus, as well as those engaged with fieldwork.
5. Students who need to develop their employability skills.

#### *Previous approach*

Given the individual nature of doctoral research and the research journey, these students are likely to want access to flexible resources with the option of working through them via a personalised route. Birbili (2002) identified that web based systems can enable this by giving the learner control of the sequencing and progression of learning, the ability to revisit material, and an environment that is conducive to asking questions and sharing uncertainties as well as their achievements.

Unsurprisingly, this route has recently been explored. Joyes and Banks (2008) describe an online pedagogy that revolves around video research narratives and Espinoza-Ramos and Hammond (2008) present a case study. In both cases, the goal was to promote the formation of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) through collaboration to reach shared understandings (Ong & Hawryszkiewicz, 2003). However whilst the resources were well received, particularly when the situations seemed closest to their own, no communities of practice developed. To be successful the participants must be willing participate and contribute to the community, and doctoral students with individual goals have little or no motivation in this regard. Furthermore Joyes and Banks found that for a student to join multiple communities they face multiple complexities, and Espinoza-Ramos and Hammond suggested an active 'graduate association' afforded ample social contact limiting the online collaboration. Participation in such communities requires that the participants are local and share the same experience (Wenger, 1998), which is hard to achieve over a university, with its distinct range of research cultures and sub-cultures, as there is a need to identify and engage suitable collaborators. These studies show that interaction needs to be encouraged or seeded, possibly through physical as well as online teaching and collaboration (Espinoza-Ramos and Hammond, 2008).

#### *Our solution*

This analysis informed the development and provision of a graduate virtual learning environment which provides an opportunity for different research students from across the university to share their experiences and learn from each other, and at the same time to become part of a wider research and

professional network. We identified that the community needed to emerge before it organically grows and that if there was no initial stimulation material then it was unlikely that research students would engage with the site. Therefore, we seeded resources and the community by working directly with a small group of staff and students to capture their research experiences and learning journeys.

An earlier project, the Virtual Graduate School (VGS), established the feasibility and value of this approach. This was succeeded by the Graduate Virtual Research Environment (GVRE) which enabled us to create generic learning pathways that linked the multimedia resources according to the skills training statement for researchers (UK Research Councils 2001) and provided the mechanism for students to be able to identify and contact both the providers of the videos and those who watched them. It also enabled students to create individual learning tracks which captured their personal learning journeys. Students were willing to explore different research approaches and evaluate them and thus form links between different networks. The initial evaluation of the GVRE involved a survey and a number of focus groups, and that enabled us to explore the impact of the GVRE on the research students' learning experiences and research journeys.

This paper presents an evaluation of the initial VGS and its successor the GVRE including the findings from the survey and focus groups. It also explores issues identified in the development process such as: engaging research students; developing an online community; developing content involving PhD students; providing individual and generic learning pathways or trails; working within and across disciplines; working across traditional boundaries; and researchers' perspectives on employability issues.

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