

## **HASS PhD completions rates: beyond the doom and gloom**

### **Denise Cuthbert**

In late 2007, the Council for Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (CHASS) convened a teleconference involving leading players in doctoral education in the humanities, arts and social sciences (HASS) to discuss the co-ordination of sectoral-wide initiatives on the HASS PhD. The first initiative to flow from this historically significant conversation is the national workshop on the Future of the HASS PhD, to be held at UNSW on 7 March 2008.

During this discussion, Professor Faith Trent, President of the Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences & Humanities (DASSH) advised that informal reports from HASS Deans indicate doctoral completion rates had improved markedly over the figures published during discussions over the introduction of the Research Training Scheme (RTS) in 2000.

She suggested that the sector would do well to disregard old data and update research on completions rates to dispel the too familiar 'doom and gloom' stories which circulate around the HASS PhD experience and completions rates in particular. The features of this 'doom and gloom' view of HASS PhD are, indeed, too familiar: inadequate, even parlous, supervision, student isolation, high attrition rates, and theses, when completed at all, taking up to 6-7 years.

Professor Trent is correct. Developments in HASS doctoral education since 2000 and their positive impact on the PhD student experience now demand a dramatically different account of the PhD in these disciplines.

While we wait for comprehensive, up-to-date data, it is possible to begin the process of dispelling the 'doom and gloom' by documenting and sharing initiatives in HASS PhD education and outcomes at the level of individual institutions.

The Faculty of Arts at Monash is one example. In 1999-2000, the faculty was not in good shape to weather the impact of the RTS funding model. Only 37% of the combined 1994-96 PhD cohorts had completed their degrees within the then funded period of 5 years. Attrition was high – up to 60% in some disciplines. Student satisfaction was low. Predictably, matters involving Arts PhD candidates constituted an unhealthy proportion of grievances taken up by the Monash Postgraduate Association (MPA), the student representative body.

In this context, the RTS imperative of doctoral completion in the reduced period of 4 years seemed like a pipe dream. Only 14% of the combined 1994-96 cohorts had managed degree completion within 4 years.

Eight years on, the situation is significantly different. The faculty now presides over a PhD program where several disciplines now routinely achieve timely completion rates of over 70%. At the same time, there have been significant reductions in rates of attrition across the faculty and in candidature length.

Other indicators of improvements in the quality of graduate research education are also on the rise. For example, the rate at which candidates publish their research in refereed journals has risen from a faculty average of just 7% in 2003-4 to rates approaching 20% in some disciplines. Nearly all disciplines reported increases in this area of activity in 2006-07.

A higher proportion of research students in the faculty is completing, within shorter candidature times than ever before. More of them are securing valuable publications along the way. Grievance rates in Arts students are dropping, according to the Monash Postgraduate Association. And students are happier.

How has this turnaround been achieved? The improvements flow from a comprehensive and systematic approach to the management of graduate research education at all levels in the faculty and in each school. Something of the significance of registers when we consider how relatively recent the idea of 'doctoral education' as a coherent area of activity is in many HASS disciplines, as distinct from the old scenario of handfuls of research students working away on their theses, with differing success, in relative isolation.

The turnaround in Arts at Monash has been achieved through a suite of programs and initiatives all conceived to bring greater openness and accountability to the once 'closed' area of research education, especially supervision.

Concerns about the skills-bases of commencing research students have been addressed through a formal research training seminar program which runs fortnightly throughout the academic year. Attendance is compulsory for all probationary candidates.

Progress is monitored closely and impediments to progress are reported – and acted on. Schools have put resources into programs of events geared to the needs of research candidates. Regular day-long research retreats, mini-conferences and work-in-progress reporting days are now important events in the academic year in most schools.

While preserving valuable features of the HASS PhD process, academics in Arts have also been prepared to learn from practices in other fields. We have emulated, for instance, the practice in science-technology-engineering-medicine (STEM) of enhancing the graduate research experience by actively inducting candidates into research communities.

Finally, the faculty made it clear that graduate research education is core business, not something that happens in between teaching and research. Criteria for 'research active' status were revised to include both HDR load and completions. Performance as a supervisor is scrutinised along with publications, grant activity and teaching for the purposes of promotion and eligibility for OSP. Getting research students through their research degrees now impacts on academic career trajectories.

Monash Arts is only one instance of the turnaround in HASS PhD completion times to which Faith Trent alluded. The Monash experience confirms the view that we in HASS need to dispel some of the old myths.

Denise Cuthbert is a member of the School of Political and Social Inquiry and was Associate Dean (Graduate Research) in 2000-06 in the Faculty of Arts at Monash. In 2007 she was awarded a Carrick citation for her contribution to HASS doctoral education.

Registrations for the CHASS workshop on March 7 are closed, but further information is available at: [www.chass.org.au](http://www.chass.org.au)