Learning Advisors and doctoral border-crossing: Negotiating those frontiers

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Abstract

Although less well-recognised, Learning Advisors often play an equally important role in supporting doctoral students as discipline specific supervisors, particularly in terms of "generic" research skills development. Supported by an international array of contributors to our co-edited book, Developing Generic Support for Doctoral Students: Practice and Pedagogy (Carter & Laurs, 2014), we consider the development, pedagogy and practice of generic doctoral support, highlighting issues that both underpin and threaten our roles within an ever-changing environment.

Unknown territories

"*Go West, young man . . .*": this apocryphal nineteenth century advice to seek adventure and fortune in new domains remains equally valid for twenty-first century doctoral students, both male and female. Postgraduate studies are nothing if not a journey into the unknown. And, as any adventurer knows, the success of the journey depends not only upon the calibre of one's preparedness and perseverance, but the resources that help along the way. Supervisors and Learning Advisors are providers of survival support along the way.

Doctoral education — sending ever-increasing numbers of young scholars into uncharted territories—is a growing business, a boom like the drive west. (One reviewer of this article pointed out that the word 'west' is pertinent, since international students find institutions in the west, based on western values, to be alluring; this can be a source of cultural discomfort for these fledgling researchers as they realise how alien their surroundings are).

There's the same kind of fiscal-ambition motive: in 2007, Education was one of New Zealand's largest export activities, generating more revenue than either the fishing or wine industries (McCutcheon, 2007). The government, aware that education remains a foreign exchange earner, has set international doctoral fees at the same rate as

local ones: it wants to tap into new research potential. One level down, New Zealand tertiary institutions, driven by PBRF funding, are keen to increase their numbers of research students (in 2013, for example, 49% of the new doctoral enrolments at the University of Auckland and 50% at Victoria, University of Wellington were international students). The result of these ambitions is a growing diversity in terms of ethnicities, cultures, languages and educational backgrounds—something exciting in terms of New Zealand coming of age on the world stage, but also challenging in terms of our responsibilities to support these doctoral candidates. At the same time, funding pressures are calling for more timely completions, a tall order, as shown by the latest Ministry of Education figures on those who took eight years to complete what is expected to be done in half that time (New Zealand is not alone; our average accords with international trends) [see Table 1]:

Table 1

Eight-year Qualification Completion Rates of Domestic
New Zealand Doctoral Students

Starting years:	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
All doctoral students	49%	48%	54%	57%	60%	61%
Females	50%	46%	51%	57%	60%	60%
Males	49%	50%	57%	58%	61%	61%
Europeans	49%	50%	56%	60%	60%	63%
Māori		50%	41%	45%	53%	42%
Asians	53%	47%	54%	64%	70%	57%
Other ethnic group	56%	39%	61%	46%	58%	60%
Year of completion	**2005**	**2006**	**2007**	**2008**	**2009**	**2010**

Note. The figures reveal that only 49% of doctoral students who enrolled in 1997 had completed their degree in 2005, and so on. Adapted from *Achievement in Formal Tertiary Education*, by M. Wensvoort, 2011, p. 24.

Successful completion, as acknowledged by the Australian Graduate Research Skills project (Cumming et al., 2009, p. 9), see Figure 1 below, requires mastery of a complex array of 'graduate capabilities', many of which—as with any trailblazing skills—can only be acquired through experience along the way:

Conducting research . . .

. . . **Becoming a researcher**

thinking	Interacting	inquiring	analysing	producing	communicating	teaching	managing
asking	"working alongside"	reading	sourcing	developing	articulating	facilitating	planning
reflecting	"acting ethically"	exploring	handling	contributing	debating	demonstrating	organising
understanding	"gaining trust"	testing	conceptual-ising	(re)writing	speaking	mentoring	executing
identifying	Belonging	examining	integrating	publishing	arguing	coaching	performing
building	Becoming	focusing	quantifying	creating	presenting	enabling	conducting
challenging	Contributing	questioning	synthesising	predicting	defending	supervising	commercialising
rejecting	participating	collecting	clarifying	generating	justifying		
			solving		arguing		

Section labels: learning · cooperating · Evaluating · working · sharing · engaging · assessing · resolving

Figure 1. Research graduate capability. Note the circular design of Cumming et al.'s original graphic highlighted the mutual reciprocity and lack of hierarchy between elements. Adapted from *Research Graduate Skills Project*, by Cumming et al., 2009, p. 9.

Endorsing the complexity of the task which must now be done in a firmly limited time frame by students who are often away from home and writing in English when it is not their first language, the UK's Careers Research and Advisory Centre website, Vitae, presents a comparable (but entirely different) raft of competencies:

Figure 2. The researcher development project (Vitae, 2010, p. 2)

Despite these useful rubrics found in educational discourse, it is often Learning Advisors rather than supervisors who point them out to doctoral students. Although holding key responsibilities for doctoral students' success, supervisors are often more attuned to issues relating to the research topic itself, keen to focus on the methods of research and content of the thesis rather than on the pragmatics of how to acquire such skills as reading critically, developing an argument, or writing persuasively. Similar to a seasoned traveller's advice to "just pitch your tent somewhere sheltered" or "ford rivers using whatever material is on hand," supervisory directions to "review the literature" or "outline your methodology" presume competencies students may not

yet possess. Equally, feedback on a thesis draft along the lines of "meaning unclear" is as meaningless to the students as their writing is to the supervisor if they are unable to recognise what is wrong or how to remedy the situation. Often, even careful supervisors are unable to give feedback that allows students to respond to critical advice on their writing when it is given (Paré, 2011). Moreover, operating within the "master-apprentice" culture that permeates the academy, students often do not feel sufficiently confident to admit lack of understanding to their supervisors. Fear of failure, the "imposter syndrome" (Brems, Baldwin, Davis, & Namyniuk, 1994) or, indeed, simply not knowing it is what one does not know, leave the acquisition of doctoral skills open to trial and error. To return to our wild west adventure metaphor, this can be dangerous when completion deadlines govern success, and, indeed, survival.

Alongside this need to (somehow) acquire generic research skills, a wide array of other factors impact on successful completion: the student's personal circumstances, relationships with others (family, friends, fellow students, supervisors—*and* supervisors' relationships with each other), financial resources, university facilities, academic and linguistic abilities, previous research experience and career aspirations (Bromley, as cited in Carter & Laurs, 2014). These diverse, and always different, factors impinge not only upon the research project but also on its presentation in written form, the realisation of voice and sense of "performing" as a researcher (Tonso, 2006, p. 273) that are crucial.

Learning Advisors, like supervisors, are aware of the reality on the ground that results from the issues above, from the intensity of national and institutional drivers, increasing diversity, and tighter time frames. Working with doctoral students, we want to ensure students are well equipped throughout the journey. Individual supervisors should not be expected to do it all alone.

Just as early pioneers looked to those with experience and maps of the region to help guide them on their way, it makes sense for students and supervisors to draw upon the expertise in academic skills development available from generic Learning Advisors such as ourselves. We are increasingly certain that generic support for doctoral students plays a valuable role in complementing supervision to ensure safe travelling.

The words "generic" and "genre" both derive from the Latin *genus* meaning a type or class (Lewis, 1995), although each word has developed distinct connotations over time. Generic can mean general, non-specific, often used in relation to low-cost versions of more expensive products (that is not where we wish to locate ourselves). It can also, however, mean "specific to a particular form or genre," in this instance, we point out, the quite prescribed transition through the doctorate (as illustrated by the guidelines given to all examiners irrespective of discipline), and the genre of the doctoral thesis. Learning Advisors have expertise in overtly explaining the skills common to all research students *and* to thesis-writing (process and product). For this reason, we advocate a combined approach, allowing Learning Advisors'

expertise to augment that of discipline-specific supervisors, in order to ensure safe passage through the unknown realms of doctoral study (see too Strauss, 2013). It is better for supervisors and students, and better value for money, than putting all the responsibility on every supervisor to explain both the generic and the content specific.

Although the need to impart generic research skills seems obvious to ATLAANZ members, it has only recently gained much recognition in education literature. Hence our borderlands metaphor; we think that Learning Advisors inhabit such a zone as they work across disciplines with generic support. The call for research training rose to prominence with the UK's Roberts' Report (2002), which highlighted the need for research graduates to also demonstrate employability skills. The Australia National University Research Graduate Skills Project, also in response to government and employment sectors, identified skills and mapped existing resources down in this end of the world (Cumming et al., 2009). In New Zealand, Marcia Johnson and Bronwyn Cowie from Waikato's newly-established Doctoral Research and Writing Unit are spearheading research into the area. However, with the exception of the United Kingdom, where Roberts' money (£120 million annually 2003-2011) funds nationwide workshops (Vitae, 2010), any training in generic skills remains at the discretion of individual institutions. This tends to leave Learning Advisors engaged in this significant work at the mercy of senior management bent on being seen as change managers.

The value of generic support, irrespective of its form, has been similarly slow to gain recognition, with commentators such as Barrie (2006) focusing on tangible skills such as computing, information literacy and time management, and Rowland (2006) arguing for embedded delivery within the disciplines. Until recently, the only real overview was Hinchcliffe, Bromley and Hutchinson's (2007) *Skills Training in Research Degree Programmes: Politics and Practice*, which looks at the UK context. Having now put together a significant book on generic doctoral support, we are keener than ever to pull this topic into the conversation, partly because debate always assists with better practice, and partly to stake out the value of the work we do in the hopes that those holding the tools for change refrain from devaluing our work.

In 2013, we co-edited a complementary work, entitled *Generic Doctoral Support, Practice and Pedagogy* (Carter & Laurs, 2014), weaving together vignettes from more than 30 practitioners in Australia, New Zealand, United Kingdom, United States and elsewhere. These include ATLAANZ members, Karen Commons and Xiaodan Gao (Victoria, University of Wellington) and Cath Fraser (Bay of Plenty Polytechnic), among others:

- Tony Bromley (University of Leeds): co-author of *Skills Training in Research Degree Programmes* (Hinchcliffe, Bromley, & Hutchinson, 2007);
- Claire Aitchison (University of Western Sydney), Susan Carter (University of Auckland) and Cally Guerin (University of Adelaide): the Doctoral Writing

SIG (http://doctoralwriting.wordpress.com/) bloggers with a wide international following across 140 countries;

- Shosh Leshem (University of Haifa) and Vernon Trafford (Anglia Ruskin University): co-authors of *Stepping Stones to Achieving your Doctorate* (2009);

- Inger Mewburn (Australian National University): the "Thesis Whisperer" (http://thesiswhisperer.com/) with huge uptake internationally;

- Terry Evans (Deakin University): co-author of the "Doctorates Downunder" series of books;

- Brian Paltridge (University of Sydney) and Sue Starfield (University of New South Wales): co-authors of *Thesis and Dissertation Writing in a Second Language* (2007); and

- Gina Wisker (University of Brighton): author of *The Postgraduate Research Handbook* (2008) and *The Good Supervisor* (2010).

Our book explores generic support through a temporal framework; we look at generic doctoral support's inception, its development into its wide potential, and its future sustainability. Beginning with the drivers calling for acquisition of measurable skills within the academy, the book explores the history of generic support provision: from individual workshops initiated by individual staff, on to customised programmes for specific cohorts, university-wide doctoral skills programmes (with input from academic developers, library, IT and Learning Advisors), nation-wide fora, and formal qualifications in "postgraduate research skills".

The book then explores generic support's capacity to bring together students from across campus, helping develop their critical thinking, intercultural and thesis-writing competencies by stepping outside discipline-specific boundaries. Whereas Learning Advisors once suspected they were seen as remedial (Crozier, 2007), as "the writing ladies", on a par with tea ladies (Alexander, 2005), this section demonstrates the academic acumen behind sessions showing how to evaluate literature, write with conceptual clarity, and recognise cultural conditioning that hampers critical thinking.

In this section, we are especially interested in the transition of identity that doctoral students make as they step into becoming expert independent researchers, and as they develop a voice and presence in their research writing—as Park (2007) notes, the product of the doctorate is the researcher as well as the original contribution and the thesis. Sometimes the task of building that competent researcher is not so easy. We consider the social negotiations, transitions, and identity development of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender), indigenous / Māori, and women, groups for whom academia may still exhibit a western, male-dominated and heteronormative culture that feels hostile and exclusive. We devote a chapter to the support of students whose first language is not English, a growing group with social pressures and responsibilities, who are also fighting the sense of being outside the institutional culture where they work. The book also covers generic support for part-time doctoral

students, who often have full time jobs and family responsibilities and who often feel excluded from the collegial support that full-time doctoral students enjoy.

There is a chapter on how generic support can assist doctoral students to prepare for future careers while they progress through the doctoral process. Two chapters are given over to writing support, since this is often core business for Learning Advisors. The first puts writing in the context of the overall doctoral process; the second more closely investigates the sort of support available with specific examples. Writing is generally regarded as closely tied to one's academic identity, and highly personal, which means that "rigorous feedback" without sufficient talk about the creation of both individual voice and the audience's need for clarity is often painful: doctoral writing is an area where support from alongside is especially welcome.

Through the book run threads showing how generic support allows the sharing of the commonalities of the research journey to foster community and break down the insider/outsider notions (Walker & Thomson, 2010) and make explicit the unwritten rules that may threaten successful completion. We show how talking with peers from across campus can normalise the emotions involved, making the challenges more endurable. The book steadily demonstrates the ways that generic support is the place where doctoral students are most likely to acquire those graduate attributes our institutions say they will have, including the ability to contextualise one's own research within the wider framework, something that talk across disciplines enables you to do.

Quo vadis?

Despite sound evidence of the scope of generic programmes, these remain uncertain times, with Learning Centres at the mercy of institutional change managers who sometimes seem to want change with its own sake. The fact that Learning Advisors work on the side of an active volcano is a darker theme running through the book: during its construction, several of its internationally recognised contributors underwent restructuring that felt destabilising and demoralising. A final chapter suggests ways in which generic support providers such as Learning Advisors can show their own worth, in order to satisfy those in senior management who may be tempted to see our work as expendable in tighter times, seeking to restructure our working environment far too recurrently to enable us to work to maximum capacity. For this reason, the book confronts the on-going need to justify our position within the academy, given that we are variously categorised as academic, professional, general or service staff, funded centrally or from student levies, operating as autonomous units or, increasingly, subsumed within other settings such as libraries or faculties.

For the dual purposes of bringing best generic practice into discussion, and sharing ways to document Learning Advisors' value in order to protect ourselves, the final chapters considers future sustainability, by outlining evaluative models currently in place in the UK, together with a series of criteria that practitioners might find useful

in order to assess the impact of their programmes. To this end, after canvassing opinions from contributors to the book —an exercise in which we also invite ATLAANZ members to share— we propose that the best generic support for doctoral students should:

- merit positive student evaluation from regular periodic surveys of PhD students ("word-of-mouth" our strongest promotional tool)
- exemplify strong teaching practice (countering "no-frills" assumptions about generic support with evidence of our specialised expertise)
- use its clear overview of doctorate (generic in the best sense, complementing discipline-specific approaches)
- have benefit for the students' future (precisely because our focus is on skills rather than content, our purview equips students for life beyond the academy)
- provide community of practice collegiality (bringing students from across-campus together enabling peer-support and sharing of commonalities)
- aid students' identity transformation (acting as intelligent listeners, unfamiliar with the topic, gives students freedom to find their own voices)
- foster academic citizenship (modelling humanistic values, providing holistic and inclusive support in accordance with institutional missions).

Gathering substantive evidence of good practice (student evaluations, peer-observations, practitioner portfolios, self-reflections, awards, etc.), as well as the more usual quantitative attendance and demographic data, is crucial if we are to assess our contribution and demonstrate it persuasively.

Our final suggestion is that perhaps we need to attract funding that would enable us to catalogue and share our resources. Individual Learning Centres in New Zealand have stood alone for too long; it is time we looked seriously at pooling our wealth of expertise by creating a national database from which to demonstrate our collective might in helping students safely traverse the Badlands of the doctoral research landscape.

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Appendix

Statistics relating to the refereed proceedings

A total of 30 presentations were included in the 2013 ATLAANZ conference programme. Subsequently, a total of 10 papers were submitted to be considered for the refereed proceedings of the conference. Table 1 shows the distribution of referees' recommendations across the categories available.

Table 1

Distribution of Referees' Recommendations by Category

Category	Number of recommendations
Accept for refereed publication as presented	0
Accept with minor revision	10
Accept with major revision	4
Reject	0
Total	**14**

Of the 14 papers submitted for review, three were withdrawn for refereed publication by the authors. The rest were accepted for publication once revision had been completed.