

Flying Start: Partnering with students and other stakeholders to support the transition into doctoral study

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This paper reports on an extended orientation program for PhD students, ‘Flying Start’, offered to all early PhD students, both domestic and international, across all disciplines and schools at an Australian University. The aims of the program are to provide additional assistance to candidates to meet the requirements for confirmation of candidature (CoC), as well as helping them to identify additional skills they may need as researchers and to understand some of the broader challenges of doctoral study as a complex ‘rite of passage’ (Kiley, 2009). The program is offered three times a year, each offering consisting of two sets of two-day modules, which students ideally take towards the beginning and towards the end of their first six months. Both modules contain workshop streams related to each of the program aims. ‘Flying Start’ takes a blended learning approach that combines intensive mode teaching (IMT) and the provision of online resources to provide guided introductory and concluding sessions, following which students are able to access resources designed to support independent study and development. A key feature of the program is collaboration between Academic Language and Learning (ALL) practitioners, library and counselling staff, and PhD students, to co-develop and present the workshops streams. The paper argues that by making use of the available resources and by collaborating with other stakeholders, including the students themselves, as well as drawing on their own expertise, ALL practitioners are able to make a significant contribution towards enhancing the transition experience of early PhD students.

Key Words: doctoral education, transition, partnerships.

1. Introduction

The transition from coursework to the independent research expected of PhD students can be challenging for international and domestic students alike. In the United States, PhD students typically undertake foundation coursework components, before commencing their dissertation. In Australia, there have traditionally been no coursework components; rather, PhD students undertake their theses directly, under the direction of their supervisors, following a confirmation of candidature (CoC) period. During this period, students must demonstrate the viability of their projects, and their own competence to carry this out, through the production of a research proposal and delivery of an oral presentation. Passing this milestone is often a significant leap from previous coursework completed. In fact, the confirmation of candidature period can be described as a complex ‘rite of passage’ (Kiley, 2009) that brings a range of academic, social and personal challenges.

Various programs have emerged to assist PhD students to cope with this challenging transition. For example, recognising the particular challenges faced by international PhD students, comprehensive transition programs have been provided for some time by some universities for this cohort, including the IBP-R program at the University of Adelaide (Cargill, 1996) and the SKIP program at James Cook University. More recently, a number of universities have begun to introduce coursework components for all doctoral students (Kiley, 2017). Such approaches can clearly provide comprehensive transitional experiences for beginning PhD students, although they also represent a substantial investment in time and resources.

This paper reports on another approach in the form of an extended orientation program, Flying Start, offered to all early PhD students both domestic and international, across all disciplines and schools. The aims of the program are to provide additional assistance to candidates to meet the requirements for CoC, in addition to that already provided by supervisors and School programs, as well as helping them to identify additional skills they may need as researchers and to understand some of the broader challenges of doctoral study.

Under the broad direction of the Graduate Research Office, Flying Start is coordinated and largely delivered by ALL practitioners, in the positions of Academic Coordinators of Learning Support at the Centre for University Teaching and Learning. Although the program was initially focused on providing candidates with additional assistance towards meeting the requirements for CoC by further developing their research proposals, literature reviews and oral thesis proposal presentations, it has evolved to provide a much broader transition experience. This evolution has been influenced by the experience of the ALL practitioners working with beginning PhD students to understand the challenges they face. It has also been influenced by their engagement with the literature on the doctoral experience, as well as guiding frameworks, such as the Vitae (2011) *Researcher Development Framework* and other available resources, such as the Thinkwell book series, including *The Seven Secrets of Highly Successful Research Students* (Kearns & Gardiner, 2008). In presenting Flying Start, this paper argues that by performing the roles of facilitators of partnerships and collaboration, as well as specialists in academic language and learning, ALL practitioners are able to make a significant contribution towards enhancing the transition experience of beginning PhD students. More specifically, by making use of the available resources and by collaborating with other stakeholders, including the students themselves, ALL practitioners are able to develop and lead the delivery of orientation programs that introduce students to the various dimensions of doctoral study.

2. Different dimensions of transition into doctoral study

The initial impetus for the Flying Start program was an institutional change towards a more formal and tightly monitored CoC process, with explicitly stated milestones for this first six months uniformly embedded across the university into all disciplines. Therefore, the initial focus of the program was on assisting participants to review and further develop their research proposals, literature reviews and oral presentations. Assisting students to meet these requirements remains an essential aspect of the program; however, the literature suggests that this is just one aspect of the transition experience of PhD students in their first year of study.

Transition pedagogies, while usually designed for first-year experience (FYE), can also be ‘extrapolated to support postgraduate students encountering new contexts and modes of study’ (Hamilton, Thomas, Carson, & Ellison, 2014, p.10). A useful typology of transition experiences, based on three broad conceptions of transition as ‘induction’, as ‘development’, and as ‘becoming’, is provided by Gale and Parker (2014). The conception of transition as ‘induction’ conceives of ‘a linear progression through a number of “phases”’ (Gale & Parker, 2014, p. 739), which is typically supported by whole-of-institution approaches to the transition experience. In doctoral education, this view of transition corresponds to the practice of monitoring PhD milestones, including confirmation of candidature (CoC), and is particularly salient to stakeholders such as graduate

research offices and supervisors. The conception of transition as ‘development’ focuses on stages of individual development or transformation, rather than institutional milestones. In doctoral education, this corresponds to the identification of particular skills that candidates need to develop through stages of increasing competence, exemplified by constructs such as the Vitae (2011) *Researcher Development Framework* (see Section 3 for details). This view of transition typically concerns stakeholders such as library staff, who may contribute to the development of these skills. Finally, the notion of transition as ‘becoming’ conceives of transition much more broadly and personally in terms of ‘the complexities of life and the interdependence of “public issues” and “private troubles”’ (Gale & Parker, 2014, p.744), which in the case of doctoral education encompasses the whole journey as a fluid process of doctoral becoming. As Barnett (2004) points out, such becoming goes beyond skills acquisition to embrace a wider range of dispositions, behaviours and attitudes necessary to respond to uncertainty in learning. While Gale and Parker (2014) suggest a preference for this more sophisticated view of ‘transition as becoming’ in higher education, as ALL practitioners working in doctoral education, we arguably need to take a more pragmatic stance and support each of these aspects of transition.

The growing body of literature on the complex challenges of doctoral journeys complement these insights into the transition experience. A major theme in this literature is the idea of doctoral research as a series of ‘rites of passage’ (Kiley, 2009; Wisker et al., 2010; Wisker, 2016). Drawing on the work of Turner (1979), Kiley (2009, p. 295) explains the doctoral journey as a rite of passage in which candidates separate ‘from their stable, known state and [enter] into an ambiguous, liminal state, a state which can last for several years, culminating in the ritual consummation of examination and graduation’. Within this journey, confirmation of candidature (CoC) is a ‘mini rite of passage’ (Kiley 2009, p. 295) that students must pass through over a shorter period of time. A key characteristic of the liminal states that students enter is getting stuck in various ways, be they cognitive, social, or emotional (Ahearn & Manathunga, 2004). Therefore, in order to develop, doctoral students need ‘a balanced amount of challenge and support to facilitate their growth and change in relation to psychosocial, social identity, and cognitive development.’ (Gardner, 2009, p. 214). Although the focus of many training programs for PhD students may be academic and research skills, the personal and social aspects of the doctoral journey may be equally challenging.

Another related theme is the need for students to cross particular thresholds, or understand ‘threshold concepts’ (Meyer & Land, 2003) in order to proceed. Just as students can get stuck in different dimensions of the journey, they may also need to develop an understanding of various threshold concepts. Kiley and Wisker (2009) identify a series of academic concepts in doctoral education, including ‘argument’, ‘theorising’, ‘framework’, ‘knowledge creation’, ‘analysis and interpretation’ and ‘research paradigm’, which are very likely to surface during the production of CoC requirements such as research proposals and literature reviews. However, much broader concepts have also been identified, including ‘doctorateness’ (Trafford & Leshem, 2009) and the writing process (Wisker & Savin-Baden, 2009).

The challenges and thresholds faced by early researchers are equally varied and complex. In their research on emotions in early doctoral research, Morrison-Saunders et al. identify a range of common anxieties, including:

deciding where to start, especially in tackling the body of literature that needed to be understood and reflected upon; focusing on a research area that would be manageable; focusing on a project that would make a valuable contribution to the field; ensuring that the research will be sufficiently original to fulfil the requirements of a doctorate; and determining an approach for the project (2010, p.210).

Wisker et al. (2010, p. 19) write that students may struggle to ‘find a language in which to discuss their work, both in terms of grasping or being comfortable with academic language and articulating their learning’. Chatterjee-Padmanabhan and Nielsen (2016) suggest that the research proposal itself is a troublesome threshold, particularly for international students faced with the challenges of critically appraising literature, and developing theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches.

What the literature makes clear is that alongside the overt, skills-based process of doctoral study, there is covert process that involves the development of less tangible skills, dispositions and attributes. We have mapped this (see Figure 1) and suggest that these two processes may tend to synchronise at identifiable points and often develop in parallel. In addition to developing technical skills for achieving PhD milestones, students need to develop awareness of and dispositions, behaviours and attitudes related to the process of doctoral study and those related to self-development or becoming. Furthermore, evidence suggests that the competencies required ‘behind the scenes’ are as critical to successful PhD completion as academic and procedural skills (Cantwell, Bourke, Scevak, Holbrook, & Budd, 2017; O’Meara, Knudsen, & Jones, 2013). Student attrition is frequently linked to inadequate development of these comparatively abstract competencies, including resilience to setbacks (Castro, Garcia, Cavazos Jr, & Castro, 2011), dealing with uncertainty (Cantwell et al., 2017; Gardner, 2007), developing self-direction as an independent researcher (Gardner, 2010), combating perfectionism, procrastination and low self-esteem (Ahern & Manathunga, 2004; Grover, 2007; Kearns & Gardiner, 2008), and maintaining a work-life balance (Gardner, 2007; Gardner, 2009; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012).

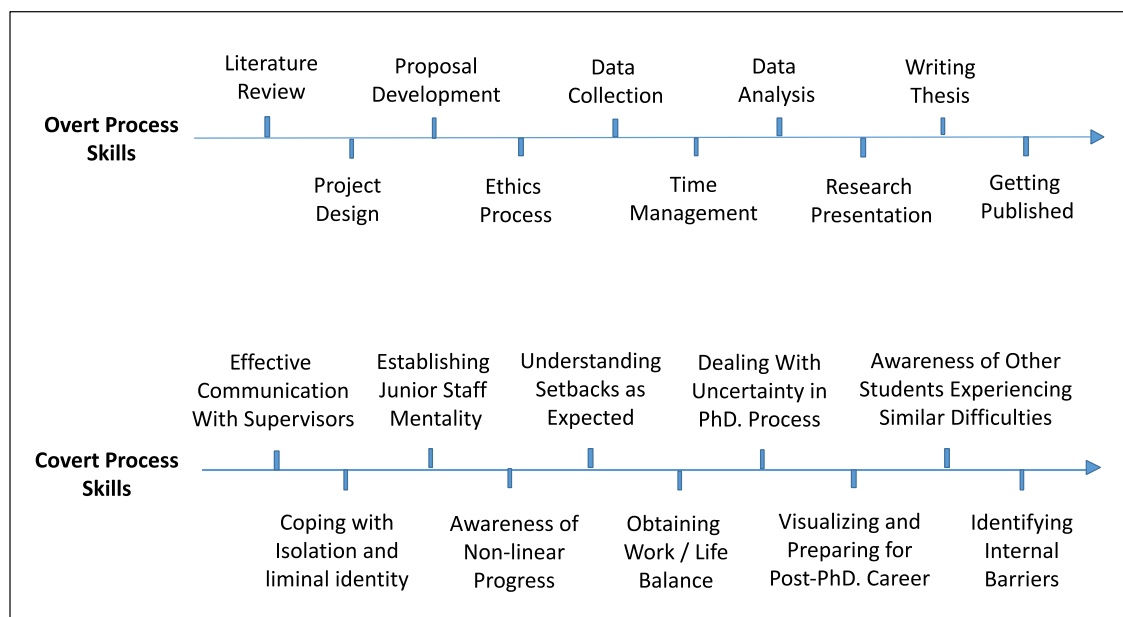


Figure 1. The parallel processes of PhD study.

Finally, the literature also suggests that raising awareness of these various challenges and helping students to begin to understand that thresholds exist early in their candidature is likely to be beneficial. Individuals navigating uncertain territory who prepare themselves with informational resources and social supports are better situated to cope with challenges that arise (Davis & Asliturk, 2011). Given that uncertainty and ambiguity are commonly reported experiences during doctoral study (Gardner, 2010; McAlpine, 2012), explicitly introducing these challenges may alleviate concerns, as well as assisting students to develop realistic expectations. Developing such understandings may better prepare them to deal with challenges beyond the anticipated academic hurdles (Cantwell et al., 2017), and to identify potential sticking points, reframe them as normal experiences, and explore counteractive strategies and avoid self-defeating patterns of behaviour

that can interfere with progress. Finally, developing such understandings in a group context can also help students to cope with isolation and liminal identity.

3. The design and delivery of Flying Start

The Flying Start program aims to help students understand these different aspects of transition into doctoral study. Whilst Flying Start was initially designed around the explicit milestones of writing the research proposal and literature review, it has evolved to address many of the other challenges mentioned above. The program is offered three times a year, each offering consisting of two sets of two-day modules, which students ideally take towards the beginning and towards the end of their first six months. This top-and-tail approach allows for guided introductory and concluding sessions within the program and supported independent study and development between modules. The program also takes a blended learning approach that combines intensive mode teaching (IMT) (Male et al., 2016) with provision of online resources through the University's learning management system. For four days (2x2), Flying Start brings up to 40 research students across all university disciplines into a single room and takes them through a series of activities designed to help them to make the transition into doctoral study. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, each module consists of a series of face-to-face seminars (or workshops) delivered by ALL practitioners, professional staff, and senior PhD students.

An intensive mode teaching approach, rather than stand-alone workshops over a longer period, has been adopted for several reasons. Firstly, IMT fits in with the varying demands that commencing research students are juggling, requiring attendance over shorter periods. It also allows for an intense learning engagement and focused immersion in the tasks of confirmation of candidature, which again meets the needs of this particular cohort. Students' actively learning from each other is one of the reported positive outcomes of IMT (Male et al., 2016) and this was certainly a key reason for using this mode.

In order to ensure that the face-to-face component is as effective as possible, recommendations for best practice in intensive mode teaching (Male et al., 2016) have also been followed. Firstly, delivery of the program values and supports the diversity of students' backgrounds in all possible ways: culturally and disciplinary. The program is always delivered by mixing participants into small groups with authentic tasks set and the pedagogical reasoning for both tasks and grouping being made explicit. A certain level of physical comfort and support is also needed when asking large groups (up to 50) participants to stay in the same room for 5-6 hours. Therefore, efforts are made to secure physical teaching spaces that are both comfortably large, well ventilated and lit by natural light, with movable furniture and good IT support.

A key feature of all Flying Start sessions has been promoting a partnership between ALL practitioners and PhD student participants. Rather than following a traditional lecture style delivery, the format of the workshops is deliberately integrative, encouraging frequent student groupthink sessions and class-wide feedback of issues and strategies. Research by Tinto (1997) indicates that this collaborative, active learning approach fosters student empowerment and persistence in learning. Tinto further suggests that the outcome of having multiple perspectives offered by the group is superior to learning activities led solely by faculty: "... the use of a collaborative pedagogy that brought students and faculty together to teach added an intellectual richness to student experience that the traditional pedagogy did not." (Tinto, 1997, p. 613). Importantly too, student-led discussions may encourage conceptualization and practice of a junior researcher as opposed to operating from a passive student mindset.

Secondly, the online component enables student access to course seminar materials both before, during and after the IMT. This is an important aspect of IMT, since it means that the focus of class time can be on unpacking and working with difficult concepts or skills. Since students have already begun their candidature, they have also already encountered the troublesome features of thresholds such as writing research proposals and literature reviews, before entering the IMT of

Flying Start. They are therefore ready to focus and work with the carefully designed activities in class and use the LMS site to follow up resources and materials after class.

Finally, the content of the program is largely aimed at helping students to understand threshold concepts related to each of the different aspects of transition introduced above. As well as being pertinent to the doctoral experience, Male et al. (2016) stress that a focus on threshold concepts is also essential to IMT since shorter teaching periods necessitate a focus on the troublesome, difficult thresholds that students need to navigate.

Table 1. Indicative schedule for Module A.

Day 1 Activities	Learning Outcomes
Introductions and thinking about your first 90 days	Get to know each other and understand the process for the program
Behaviors and attitudes of successful PhD students	Gain awareness of key aspects of doctoral study
Structuring and writing research proposals	Build awareness of the critical features and threshold concepts involved in writing research proposals
Working with Supervisors	Understand the supervisor role in their research and how to manage the relationship
Planning your PhD	Develop an individual plan for the next 90 days
Day 2 Activities	Learning Outcomes
Structuring and writing literature reviews	Build awareness of the critical features and thresholds concepts involved in writing literature reviews
Discussing beginning research skills and priorities	Build awareness of a development framework to identify current skills and areas for development/Identify practical resources to help you complete your doctorate
Library resources & services to support researchers	Identify library resources & services to help you complete your doctorate
Time Management and balancing life and research	Understand your preferences for time management to inform self-directed management/Identify and apply practical tools and techniques for time management
The PhD Experience: Panel of students from the 2016 cohort	Understand some of the common experiences facing PhD students

Table 2. Indicative schedule for Module B.

Day 1 Activities	Learning Outcomes
Checking your progress	Assess progress on confirmation of candidature targets
Reviewing and revising your research proposal	Evaluate and develop a strategy to finish or improve research proposal by CoC date
Reviewing and revising your literature review	Evaluate and develop a strategy to finish or improve your literature review by CoC date
Preparing for the oral thesis proposal presentation	Develop strategies for effective presenting
Day 2 Activities	Learning Outcomes
Preparing for the oral thesis proposal presentation	Practice presenting part or all of oral thesis proposal presentation

Within this intensive mode approach, the program addresses each of the different aspects of transition into doctoral study introduced above through particular streams of workshops. The first stream aims to provide additional assistance to candidates to develop the overt skills needed to meet the requirements for CoC by producing their research proposals and literature reviews, and preparing for their oral thesis proposal presentations. In delivering this original stream of the program, the ALL practitioners have drawn on their practical experience in working with doctoral students, as well as making use of available resources and insights from the literature. General guides and real examples are used to deliver content about typical elements of research proposals and rhetorical patterns. For example, students are prompted to discuss how well they have stated the gap in knowledge and the scholarly significance of their research through presentation of the create-a-research-space (CARS) Model (Swales & Feak, 2004) and its rhetorical moves - establishing a research territory, establishing a niche and occupying the niche - as well as presentation of language that can be used in each of these moves from Academic Phrasebank (Morley, 2014). Students are also introduced to relevant threshold concepts, or aspects of research proposals that students typically find problematic, such as the notion of a thesis as a 'claim or defense' of an argument, rather than just 'a collection of work' and the notion of 'articulating a position on "the literature"' and locating the work within this' (Mewburn, 2011). Finally, students are prompted to discuss how well they have developed and presented a clear argument for the proposed project through presentation of a range of techniques for developing argument, including mind mapping and argument mapping, using the table of contents to generate statements and reverse outlining. However, these short presentations are designed to lead into a series of discussions in discipline groups, in which students discuss what research proposals look like in their research areas, what challenges are involved, and what advice they can give to their peers (Boud & Lee, 2005). Accordingly, the role of the ALL practitioners as content providers gives way to a facilitatory role that encourages the developing expertise of the students themselves as writers in their disciplines.

The design of the literature review sessions are structured in a similar way, with presentation of selecting and organizing information in literature reviews (such as chronological, classic studies, thematic and inverted pyramid patterns) and ways of working with the literature and finding patterns (such as the use of reference lists as 'big picture' tools for getting an overview of arguments and the use of matrices to interrogate annotated bibliographies and identify implicit themes) leading to discussion of disciplinary and individual challenges. Finally, sessions designed to help students prepare for their oral thesis proposal presentations combine presentation of approaches such as the 3-minute thesis with peer feedback on mock presentations.

The second stream of workshops aims to help students to identify additional skills they may need as beginning researchers and the various behaviours and attitudes they will need during CoC and throughout their project. To comprehensively address this dimension of transition, the program uses the Vitae (2011) *Researcher Development Framework*, which outlines the skills that researchers need to develop, as well as online resources from the Vitae website related to each of these skills. Partnerships have also been developed with the library and counselling service to provide expert advice on particular skills sets, as well as linking students to on-campus services. These include subject librarian sessions on information literacy, complemented by the Vitae (2012) *The Informed Researcher* booklet; and counselling sessions on time management, incorporating discussion of related issues such as procrastination and perfectionism, complemented by the Vitae (2008) *The Balanced Researcher* booklet.

The final stream of workshops aims to help students to understand some of the broader challenges of doctoral study and to gain insights into the 'secrets of success' (Kearns & Gardiner, 2008). This aspect of the program relates to the conception of 'transition as becoming' (Gale & Parker, 2014) and addresses the parallel process described in Figure 1 and the need for early doctoral students to develop the dispositions to cope with all of the personal, social and academic aspects of life as an early career researcher. Former participants, now more senior research students, are invited to share their PhD experiences through a panel discussion, scaffolded by themes from

‘The PhD Experience; what they didn’t tell you at induction’ (Kearns, Gardiner, & Marshall, 2008).

Taking this further, Flying Start has recently introduced the use of a current, mid-program PhD candidate to assist in delivery of workshop components. This role has included fielding student enquiries throughout the program, providing specific strategies toward attaining CoC, offering feedback on early presentations, and hosting a panel session of senior PhD students. The partnership between ALL staff facilitating the workshop and the PhD student co-presenter has provided a unique and deeper understanding of the issues most relevant to current, early stage students.

4. Evaluation of the program

Evaluation of Flying Start carried out so far suggests that the program has been successful in its aims and has made a contribution to longer term outcomes for PhD students and the university. A useful framework for evaluating the impact of training programs for research students is the Impact Framework (Bromley & Metcalfe, 2012) provided by Vitae. In particular, the framework identifies levels of impact or outcomes in terms of basic output, participant reactions, learning, behaviours and final outcomes, as well as indicating the types of evidence that can be used to demonstrate these outcomes. In terms of basic output, 300 PhD students have participated in the program since it began in 2014, across all schools at the university. Participant reactions of the program have been consistently positive. These have been gauged through regular anonymous student evaluations in which 90% of respondents over the period 2014 to 2017 have indicated they would recommend the program to other students. Student evaluations also provide evidence of learning that has occurred on the program in relation to the three aims mentioned above, with students giving a broad range of responses to the question *Which part of the program was most useful and why?* While some students reported that the program had helped them to develop their research proposals and literature reviews, others reported that it had helped them to identify essential skills, such as time management, and to understand the challenges of the doctoral journey. A pre- and post-course survey is now planned for 2018 to gather more evidence of the learning and behaviour change that might occur during the program. Given the many potential influences on final outcomes such as completion times and quality of student work, including individual PhD student circumstances, supervision, school-based support and examiners (Carter & Laurs, 2014, p. 153), it is unlikely that the impact of Flying Start alone on these outcomes can be established. However, the combination of evidence that has, and will be collected, may reasonably suggest that the program has contributed to these outcomes (Bromley & Metcalfe, 2012, p. 6).

5. Conclusion

The early stages of doctoral research are significant because they form a ‘rite of passage’ into a new identity. Confirmation of Candidature is a threshold experience for early researchers, a threshold that involves spending extended time in liminal space. This is a complex transition involving the development of content knowledge, professional and disciplinary skills and the development of a sense of belonging to a new community. Much of this transition work is also occurring within a pressured time frame and within institutional frameworks that render invisible the work needed at the personal and emotional level. Alongside the supervisor-student relationship and school-based support, Flying Start is designed to help students to navigate this troublesome space of ‘becoming’ an independent researcher. While Flying Start is limited in terms of addressing specific disciplinary challenges, and cannot provide the kind of in-depth learning that a bridging or coursework program can provide, it does offer an extended orientation to these different dimensions of becoming a doctoral student. It also demonstrates the ways in which ALL practitioners can lead such programs by combining the roles of specialists in academic language and learning and content deliverers with the roles of facilitators of partnerships and collaboration.

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