REPORT ON RESEARCH HIGHER DEGREE SUPERVISION DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

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CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The Research Higher Degree Supervision Development Program underwent a major revision in 2006 to take account of the changed policy context and the University's requirements for supervisor registration.
2. Since the establishment of the Academic Board's Policy on RHD Training Supervision, a large number of supervisors have engaged with the Program and these numbers increase on a weekly basis.
3. The number of modules studied in a faculty is statistically related to improvements in students' satisfaction with supervision as measured on the SREQ.
4. There has been a substantial increase in completions and a decrease in the time taken to complete the Program since the introduction of the Academic Board's Policy on RHD Training Supervision.
5. Participants who complete the Program report higher levels of satisfaction than those who do not.
6. Completing supervisors tend to find the workload appropriate, indicate that they achieve the outcomes of the modules and generally find the feedback helpful.
7. Optional workshops are generally considered helpful.
8. There is evidence that supervisors develop skills, competencies and confidence in supervision by studying the modules. If they complete the Program, they also demonstrate they have achieved the University's criteria for good practice in supervision.
9. Training for students in good practice in supervision is desirable. This is in line with other Universities and is a way of addressing poor practice by senior established supervisors.

Faculty issues
10. There is wide variability in numbers of enrolments, modules completed and attitudes towards the Program and its workload in different faculties.
11. Misperceptions about the source of the information in the Program and the scholarly basis on which feedback is provided exist in some faculties.
12. The Program is designed to be supported/supplemented by local initiatives. It appears that this does not happen in some faculties.

Policy issues
13. There is faculty variability in the extent to which Academic Board Policy on RHD Training Supervision is adhered to. In some faculties there is a well established register of supervisors with a well known process for admission to the register. In other faculties there is no register.
14. Misperceptions still exist in some faculties about who owns the Program, the nature and source of the Policy and the location of supervisor registers.
15. Some areas where University policy requires clarification have been identified.

BACKGROUND

The University of Sydney Research Higher Degree Supervision Development Program was first developed in the Centre for Teaching and Learning in 1997 in collaboration with the University's Graduate Studies Committee, senior supervisors, academic managers and SUPRA. For the three years 2000-2002, the Program was nominated by the University of Sydney for an Australian Award for University Teaching in the category "Innovative and practical approach to the enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning in the applicant's institution." The Program was revised in 2001 and a process for supervisors to demonstrate their learning on the Program was added. In 2003, Academic Board, on the advice of Graduate Studies Committee, made completion of the Program mandatory for new supervisors (See Appendix I for extract from University Policy). In 2005-6 the Program was again completely revised and updated to take account of the changed policy context, the requirements for supervision registration, new research and scholarship on supervision and new resources that had become available. The revision included improved website navigation, direct links to library resources, an improved discussion forum, and improvements to the administrative section of the site (See Appendix II).

This report provides an overview of Program enrolments and completions, evidence of levels of satisfaction with the Program and evidence of what supervisors have learnt. It provides details of the extent to which the Program has contributed to improvements in students' experiences of supervision and raises issues for consideration by the University's Research and Research Training Committee and ultimately Academic Board.

The Program
The aim in establishing the Program was to provide training to meet the diverse development needs of University of Sydney research higher degree supervisors at all levels of experience wherever they were located. The solution was to provide flexible training so that supervisors could study when and where they wished and choose activities, learning goals and a level of involvement to suit their particular needs and interests.

The Program offers a set of resources to support academics' work as supervisors. It makes supervision resources available in two ways: first, as a set of discrete or stand-alone resources able to be downloaded as the need arises and second, as a systematic Program of independent study supported by optional workshops. The Independent Study Program (ISP) comprises seven online study modules, in which the first six are focused on the typical stages of a research student's candidature. Each module includes links to university policies, reflective triggers, practical activities and opportunities to relate ideas to the supervisor's own faculty context, a discussion forum, background scholarly literature, an opportunity for self-assessment and a mechanism for the provision of feedback (see Figure 1).
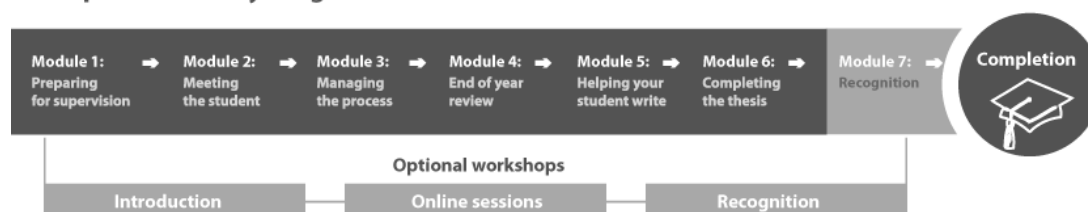

Figure 1. Structure of the Independent Study Program

The final module differs in structure and in function and is intended to help supervisors bring together their learning about supervision and consider their own specific challenges in supervision practice and how they might address them. Called the Recognition Module, supervisors are invited to write a case account of their supervision learning bearing in mind the university's criteria for good supervision practice (see Appendix III). Supervisors are free to choose the topic of their case study, and at specific points along the way, extensive feedback on supervisor's writing and thinking is provided. Nineteen of the assessed case studies are now available as a resource for other supervisors on the Program website. These reflect a range of supervisor experience from neophyte to well-experienced across various faculties, reflecting on such themes as setting up the first meeting with the student, aligning student-supervisor expectations, developing a research community and overall management of the process.

Supervisors who complete the Program (which takes about 28 hours of study time i.e. equivalent to one postgraduate unit of study), receive a certificate. In 2006 it became possible for supervisors to gain academic credit for completing the Program as a unit of study (EDPR6001: Research Higher Degree Supervision) through the Faculty of Education and Social Work.

SUPERVISION PROGRAM ENROLMENTS & COMPLETIONS

Overall, a total of 644 supervisors have enrolled in the Program since its introduction in 1997. Of these, 288 have enrolled in the new Program, i.e. since March 2006. Fifty-six supervisors have enrolled on both the old and the new Program making the total of enrolments 700. It is not known how many supervisors there are in the University but this number is estimated to be approximately 800.

Participation numbers have increased considerably since the introduction of the University policy on Training Supervision in 2004. This suggests that faculties are taking seriously the changed policy context (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Program enrolment numbers 1997-2007
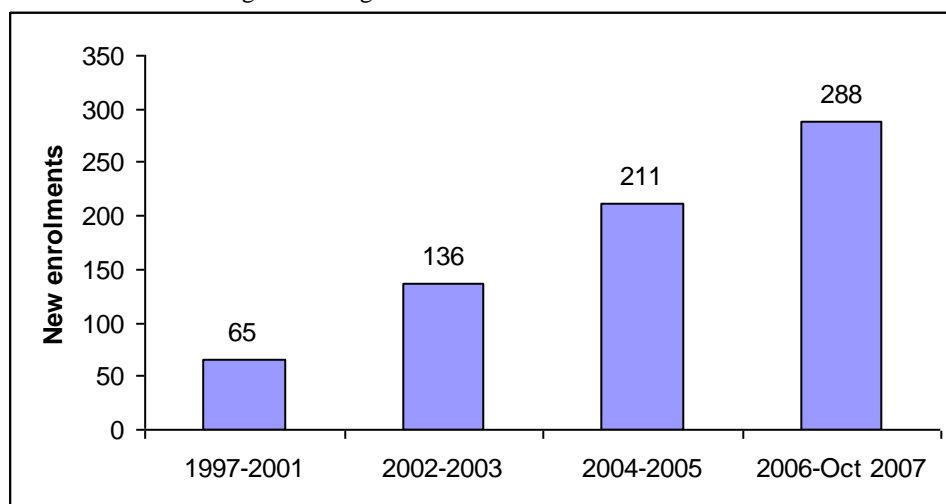
Since 2002 (when the Recognition module was introduced), 87 supervisors have completed the Program and a further 42 supervisors have completed the first part of the Recognition Module and received feedback. As is to be expected given the establishment of the University policy concerning Supervisor registration, there has been a significant increase in the numbers of supervisors who have completed the Recognition Module in which they complete their learning in the Program. Figure 2 demonstrates the growth in Program completions.

Figure 2. RHD Supervision Program Completions
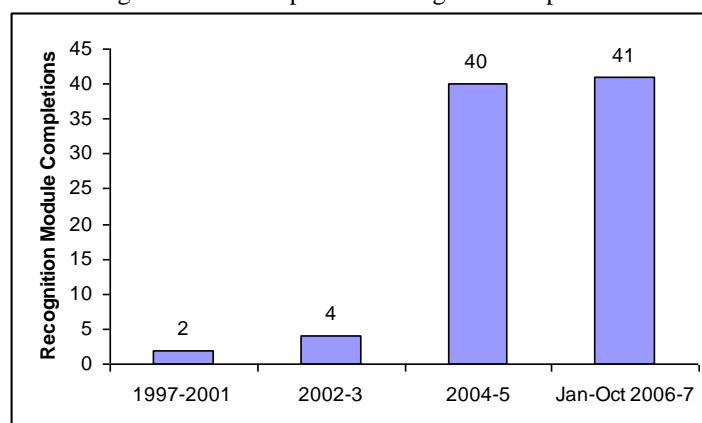
Our data also show that the length of time supervisors take to complete the Program has decreased. 50% of the supervisors who completed the Program in 2006-7 took less than six months to complete the Program. This contrasts with 2004-5 when only 27% of Program graduates took 6 months or less.

Faculty enrolments and completions
There is considerable variability in the numbers of supervisors enrolled and the number of modules overall completed in each faculty (see Figure 3). The administration area of the website records when a supervisor has completed a module. In calculating the overall number of modules completed, the two stages of the Recognition Module are counted separately. Thus the possible total number of modules studied by any one supervisor is eight.

An indication of the extent to which conformity to the policy on supervision registration is adhered to is shown by examining the variability in the proportion of full time equivalent staff (FTE) enrolled on the Program from the different faculties (Figure 4).

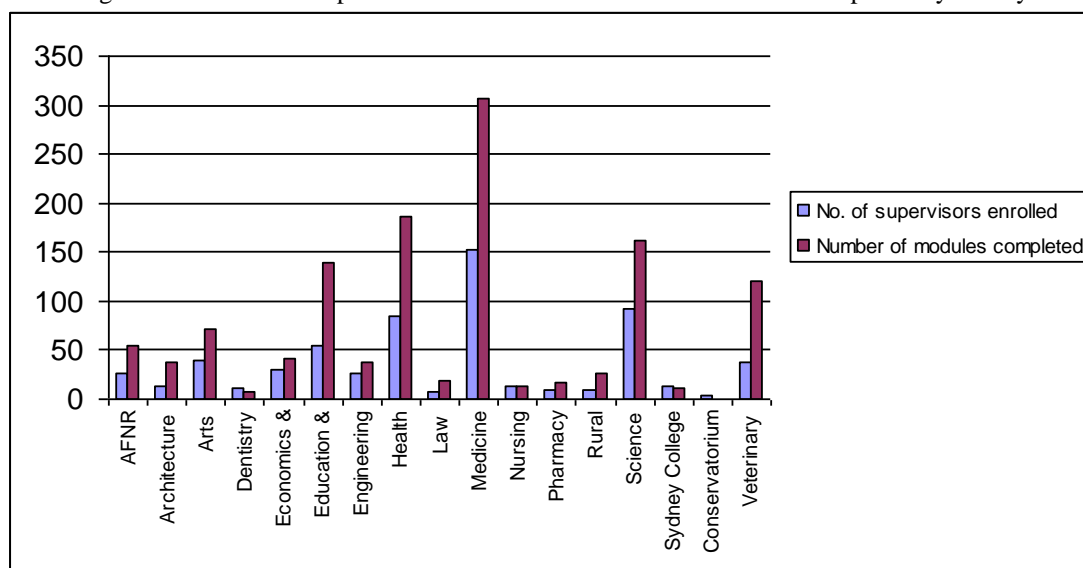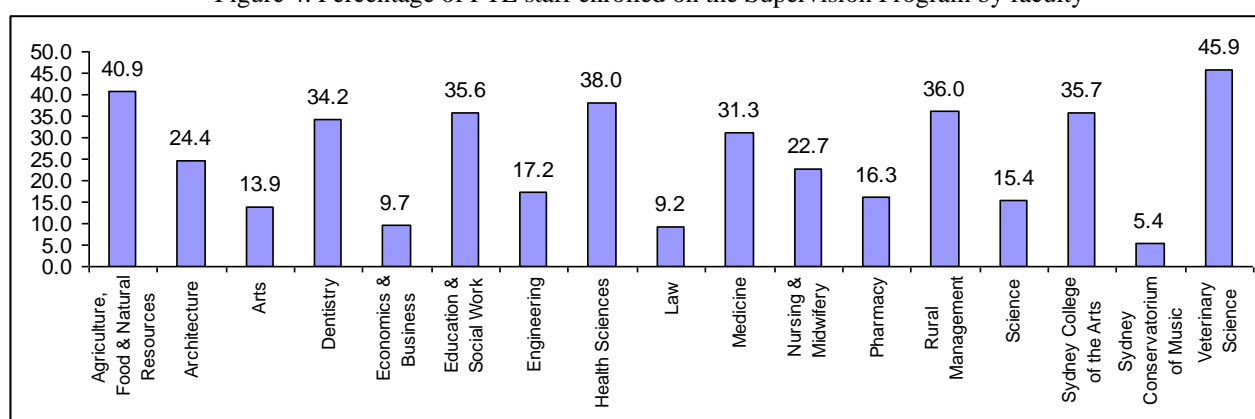Figure 3. Numbers of supervisors enrolled and numbers of modules completed by faculty

Figure 4. Percentage of FTE staff enrolled on the Supervision Program by faculty

SATISFACTION WITH THE PROGRAM

As shown in the above figures, Program participants come from a wide range of disciplines. They exhibit a broad range of views of supervision. Some are experienced supervisors and some are new to supervision. Some study the Program voluntarily and others do it because it is a requirement for their registration. Through its emphasis on starting from supervisors' own experiences, the Program has been able to accommodate a variety of responses and to move supervisors along the path of critical reflection. However, it is pertinent to consider the extent to which supervisors are satisfied with the Program overall. Evidence for this comes from five sources:

1. online survey in supervisors registered on the Program (2006)
2. feedback provided at the ends of each module on the extent to which the module has met its defined learning outcomes for the supervisor (2006-7);
3. unsolicited feedback provided to the course coordinators following receipt of feedback on the Recognition Module Case Study;
4. feedback on workshops (2007);
5. Institute for Teaching and Learning review of academic development Programs (2007).

Online survey of supervisors
In April 2006 an online voluntary survey of all registrants was carried out through the ITL survey system. The survey was designed to provide data prior to the introduction of the new version of the Program. It included a question about

what the main reasons for studying the Program were. 41 (i.e. 63%) of respondents indicated that a main reason was because they were interested in improving their supervision practice while 23 (35%) were studying the Program because it was a requirement for supervisor registration and 22 (34%) indicated that their main reason was to understand university policy and procedures. 17 (26%) were about to supervise a new student, 14 (22%) were studying the Program because they had no prior experience of supervision and 16 (25%) were studying it because they wanted to better understand the Australian context for research higher degree education.

Table 3 provides a summary of the 64 responses received on seven USE-type questions. It shows that supervisors who had completed the Program were more satisfied with it than those who had not completed it.

	Completed		Not completed		Overall	
	Mean	% agree	Mean	% agree	Mean	% agree
The learning outcomes and standards of the Program were clear to me	4.4	100%	3.8	80%	3.9	85%
The flexible learning mode (web-based) supported my learning about research higher degree supervision	4.4	86%	3.9	82%	4.0	83%
I felt the workload in the Program was too high	2.8	28%	2.8	22%	2.8	24%
The Program helped me to better understand my institutional roles and responsibilities as a supervisor	4.1	79%	3.8	76%	3.9	77%
Interaction with other Program participants helped to develop my supervision practice	3.6	71%	3.2	42%	3.3	51%
The Program addressed the issues about research higher degree supervision that I was personally interested in	3.9	71%	3.5	56%	3.6	60%
Overall I was satisfied with the quality of the Program	4.3	86%	3.7	70%	3.8	74%

Table 3. Online survey responses general questions (% agree is the proportion of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement)

Supervisors were asked to explain reasons for their ratings. Typically, there were 4 times more positive open- ended responses on these questions than negative ones. The proportion of positive to negative comments has been retained in reporting on this data.

The learning outcomes and standards of the Program were clear to me (20 open-ended comments)
- The website explained expectations well
- I thought the modules were very good
- The Program was structured well and easy to follow. Gradual step by step process made it easier and the fact that it was divided into sections helped as you could do them in your own time
- Learning objectives were clearly stated and enabled me to objectively compare what I had learned with what was expected
- My personal learning goals did not exactly match the outcomes of the Program
- Made clear in the course – not very clear on the website

The flexible learning mode (web-based) supported my learning about research higher degree supervision (22 open-ended comments)
- I found this informative, reflective and enjoyable
- I was able to complete the modules at my own pace and when I had a spare moment
- I could do the modules at my own pace and as my other work commitments permitted
- Web-based is good as I am off-campus
- It was flexible which was great but as a result I tended to put a lower priority to completing in a timely manner, which is not good
- I thought the Program was soundly thought out and involved solid principles. However it was a frustrating experience also. I think the technology to deliver the Programme is now dated and would benefit from a serious overhaul [Note: this has been done with the 2006 Program revision]

I felt the workload in the Program was too high (21 open-ended comments)
Modules 1-6 are designed to take approximately 1.5 hours of study time. Supervisors were asked about the length of time they had spent on each of the modules. 60% of the respondents indicated they had spent around one and a half hours while 23% of respondents indicated that they spent less time. It will be noted in Table 3 that supervisors did not

generally consider the workload to be too high. This finding needs to be seen alongside the main reason given for not completing the modules. Not having the time was mentioned by 13 supervisors as a reason for not continuing with the modules. Other comments were:

- At times it could conflict with my teaching and research duties but I felt it was an appropriate amount of work and kept my interest in wanting to finish it
- There is plenty of work but this is necessary to achieve [a] high standard
- The flexible delivery gave me the chance to work at my own rate – I just had to make the time but it was not onerous once I got organised
- I easily completed the modules in less than the expected time
- It seems to be I could do each module in great depth if I followed up on all the additional readings, but reading over the basic module notes was not too demanding
- Too many other claims on my time in addition to a resentment at having to enrol in the Program in order to be recognised as a supervisor
- When you first arrive at an institution there are a lot of things to do – new lectures to be written, grant proposals to write; students to supervise etc. I am struggling to find the time to finish off this Programme – there is always something more urgent that needs my attention. In addition, most Heads of department/School do not understand the work involved in completing this Program and so make no allowance for it in assigning other duties

The Program helped me to better understand my institutional roles and responsibilities as a supervisor (17 open-ended comments)
- It was thorough and provided a systematic way for me to enhance my knowledge of my roles and responsibilities as a supervisor
- The Program clearly outlined the role of a supervisor and I was able to adapt this to my own situation
- I think the Program contains a wealth of information that helps and identifies contact points
- Good information on University policy and processes was provided
- This did help as I hadn't previously supervised anyone before and coming into a new university, it was good to learn about my role here.
- Having completed a similar Program at another institution I already had a good feel for this

Interaction with other Program participants helped to develop my supervision practice (26 open-ended comments)
- Hearing about others' personal experience, highlights and lowlights really helped. So many different experiences showed there is no one way to supervise
- The little interaction with other participants that I have had to date has been helpful
- It has helped me to understand the environment here at Sydney
- Reading the discussions did help to stimulate my thinking on research supervision practices
- I was not able to interact with others as much as I would have liked (mainly because I found myself doing the modules late in the day or when others were on holidays) but when I did it was really enlightening and interesting
- Have not yet interacted with other Program participants
- My interaction with others was minimal
- A lot of the participants had similar experience to me so not sure if it was all that helpful

The Program addressed the issues about research higher degree supervision that I was personally interested in (18 open-ended comments of which 3 indicated they could not comment because they were 'at a preliminary stage of the course').
- I actually became aware of the issues I am now passionately interested in, but it is not the case that I had a set of issues, and found answers. The strength of the Program is that it makes you think
- I found the readings and information provided about quality research higher degree supervision very helpful
- I gained valuable insight into research supervision
- I found an opportunity to examine a wide range of issues
- Would have liked more insight into cross disciplinary and part time supervisory practice
- I was looking to find out more of the policies and requirements of a supervisor and postgraduate work

Overall I was satisfied with the quality of the Program (22 open-ended comments)
- I thought the Program was very appropriate and well designed. Good work ITL!
- It was definitely worthwhile doing

- I have been very happy with this Program so far
- It is a very professional, credible product that provides practical and useful advice across all the major areas that challenge supervisors. Keep up the good work.
- I really like the Programme and have appreciated what I've been able to learn and have put it into practice with three new honours students this year. The only big limitation for me is time. I'd love to have time to follow up on the additional materials, but it's very hard to find the time to do so.
- I resent having to complete the Program as I have been a clinician and researcher for so long. There are too many requirements on my time and I have not yet been convinced of the relevance or importance of this Program.
- My main suggestion is to develop a new version.[Note: this has been done]

Recognition Module

Supervisors who had completed the Recognition Module in the new Program web site were also asked questions about their learning on this Module (see Table 4).

	Mean	% agree
Q1.I found the case process useful in identifying the aspects of supervision I wanted to further develop.	4.3	86%
Q2. The writing at each stage of the Recognition module (descriptive, reflective, case study) helped to progress my ideas about supervision	4.2	86%
Q3. Feedback from the ITL identified areas of improvement that I will not be able to act on.	3.8	65%
Q4. Reading the research literature about supervision has helped me to develop a coherent and scholarly account of my practice	4.3	93%
Q5. Through completing the Program I have extended the range of strategies I can employ to help improve the learning experience of my students	4.2	86%
Q6. My supervision has improved as a result of completing the Program.	4.0	79%

Table 4. Online survey responses on Recognition Module

The following are some typical open-ended comments about the Recognition Module made by supervisors in this survey. Note that in this survey almost all comments on the Recognition Module were positive.
- The Case Study made me look very critically at the supervision practice in my own clinical school
- The case study process was well structured and well paced. Very descriptive and clear in its goal setting. It helped me clearly identify areas of need and to structure a plan for improvement
- The feedback given was excellent and very valuable
- The feedback was very good (2 responses)
- The feedback is one of the course's strengths
- The feedback I received was always constructive and although hard for me to act on, the suggestions are not impossible and worth pursuing
- The research articles were reassuring - other people were experiencing the same difficulties but I could see they had implemented strategies to effectively deal with problems
- I have introduced a written supervision agreement with my students
- The focused reflection has been the most helpful part
- I find I am much more confident of my approach to supervision, and better able to articulate and theorise it.
- The readings were very useful as they articulated and therefore clarified many issues for me. I thought the whole Program was put together very well. It was easy to follow and will provide a basis for my future supervision. I liked the supervision portfolio and will also follow this up
- Now I understand that it is crucial to urge the student to start writing at the early stages of his PhD, but more importantly to provide useful feedback on a frequent basis at these stages.
- The student-focused aspect vs teacher-focused. My approach in the past has been teacher-focused which was not very helpful as I realise. 2. My approach to supervision is now better understood based on pedagogical theory and practices as contained in literature. 3. Critical reflection of my approach to supervision has been enhanced by articulating my case study.

Feedback on modules

The 2006 revision of the Program included, at the end of each of the online modules, an opportunity for supervisors to provide feedback about the extent to which that module had achieved its objectives. Table 5 provides a summary of this data. Appendix IV provides detail of responses on individual items. Percentage response rates in brackets are based on the number of supervisors completing each module on the new Program.

	Percentage agreement
Module 1: Preparing for supervision (n=47, 43%)	97%
Module 2: Meeting your student (n=19, 22%)	99%
Module 3: Managing the process (n=30, 49%)	92%
Module 4: End of year review (n=17, 27%)	88%
Module 5: Helping your student to write (n=19, 32%)	96%
Module 6: Completing the thesis (n=22, 37%)	92%
Module 7: Recognition (n=5, 19%)	89%

Table 5. Research Higher Degree Supervision Development Program:
Feedback on individual responses in the new Program.

The data indicate that when supervisors complete the feedback forms, they record high levels of satisfaction with the modules overall. One issue that is consistently lower in ratings is the issue of strategies for evaluating supervision. This issue is now routinely addressed in the feedback to supervisors on the first part of the Recognition Module.

Unsolicited feedback
Supervisors frequently write to express appreciation of the feedback provided in the Recognition Module. The following are some typical comments:

"I very much appreciate your feedback. Indeed your feedback on many occasions, not only through this Development Program, has elicit many challenges to me (and perhaps others as well), which had led to my critically reviewing and reflecting my thoughts about many pedagogical issues. I have learnt a lot from this Program- and I hope this will rub off on my current and future students. I hope to be in touch in the near future when opportunity arises to conduct a scholarly enquiry on some of the issues I raised (of which you suggested the way forward in your feedback) in my reflective account. Accept my kudos to you and Angela for developing such a challenging but enriching Program." (Supervisor FAFNR 2006)

"Thank you both for the time and effort you have put into creating and maintaining this self directed course. I have learnt so many valuable lessons from completing the assignments. It is an invaluable resource.(Supervisor Faculty of Medicine, 2006)

"Many thanks for all your hard work on this and so many other ITL things. Thank you for such positive and useful feedback: I can confirm that the course has given me lots of insights and lots of directions to pursue in terms of equipping myself for supervising." (Supervisor, Faculty of Arts, 2006)

Thank you so much for your feedback, it is great to get such a comprehensive comment. I have had one read through now and will read again thoroughly later this week. I am looking forward to completing these final stages of the module. As such I have a meeting planned next week with a PhD student I will be primary supervisor for this year. We have been discussing and having a little fun with the tools within the modules thus far and am looking to go through them together next week in preparation for my final case study." (Supervisor, Faculty of Health Sciences, 2007)

Feedback on workshops
At the end of each workshop, participants are asked to rate and comment on four questions. Collated feedback for all workshops in 2006-7 demonstrates a high level of satisfaction with workshops with all but a very few supervisors not agreeing that what they had learnt in the workshop would be useful to them, that the facilitators supported their learning effectively, that the Program met their needs and in overall satisfaction with the workshop (See Table 6).

	Semester 1 (n= 36)		Semester 2 (n=43)	
	agree/ strongly agree	% agreement	agree/ strongly agree	% agreement
What I have learnt in this Program will be useful to me in my work	34	94%	38	88%
The facilitators of this Program effectively supported my learning	33	92%	39	91%
This Program has met my needs in relation to this topic	32	89%	33	76%

Overall I am satisfied with the quality of this Program	33	92%	37	86%

Table 6. RHDSDP summary of workshop responses (2007)

Typical comments include the following:

- I learned so many things about University policies and postgraduate supervisors I had never heard of before.
- The workshop has helped my understanding of the supervisory course and improved my understanding of the supervisory role.
- Thanks very much for all the thought you have put into this. I also appreciated hearing about the many ways in which the HDR Development Program for supervisors has been evaluated, researched and validated. Congratulations on an excellent Program!
- I gained a good picture of what is required, not only for the final modules but for the whole course. I know what I need to do and now I will be able to use what I learnt through doing this course/my supervision practice.
- I was already aware that being trained to do research did not mean I was trained to supervise students in research. Today I was given a lot of insight into ways to think about supervision and how to do it effectively. I look forward to this learning process.
- Provide more workshops during the year, ie. more opportunities to do these workshops in a year.
- It's all good – it is making the time that is a bit hard. I wonder if the course could be made as one you can enrol and do a module a half day (not just book computers but as a led module) than people might be more inclined to do it, or find it easier.

Comments made in the ITL Review of Academic Programs
In 2007 a review of ITL academic Programs was carried out and all registrants on the Program were asked to comment. 19 entries were made on the Supervision development Program. 11 of these were wholly negative, 6 were positive and 2 included both positive and negative comments. Several suggestions were made for how to develop the Program.

The negative aspects commented on were the time taken to receive feedback on the recognition module, "this strikes me as a good Program but the length of delay is a problem", dislike of the feedback, the view that the Program was "too time consuming" or not a good use of time, the fact that the Program appeared to be for novices and the supervisor had a good deal of experience or the fact that they couldn't supervise before doing the course, the style of writing (e.g. "patronizing", "uninformative", "uninteresting", "not very stimulating"), the extent to which the supervisor's own ideas were able to be expressed, and not memorising, "what ITL want to use as a standardised version of supervision", "The cynic in me wonders whether it was developed to make the ITL seem more important."

On the other hand, positive comments included: "A very good Program with excellent advice and suggestions. Well done," "This was an excellent Program and well worth the time involved in completing the various components of the Program," "I found the information helpful", "I found this Programme very useful and really cannot make any suggestions for improvement." " [Name] has done an excellent job with this Program. Any improvements would only involve tinkering around the edges. No major changes needed".

As part of the ITL review, an ITL staff member not associated with the Program interviewed 14 Associate Deans (Teaching and Learning) concerning the Program. 5 of them had very little awareness of the Program and some comments suggested that others were unaware of aspects of the Program, e.g. suggestion for increased input to Program from other areas apart from ITL, comment that the Program was "far to ITL-centric" (in fact, well over 400 staff of the university have contributed to the development of the Program), "a modular version would help", "it would be better engaged with if it were flexible, modular" (in fact, the Program is a very flexible Program and is constituted of a series of modules).

It should also be noted that there were some positive comments amongst Associate Deans: "[the Program is] generally well received – people accept they have to do it – seen as useful and there have been improvements on the faculty PREQ".

A number of suggestions were made by Associate Deans for initiatives to develop supervision at the faculty level: mentoring, faculty follow-up support, integrating supervision development into the PhD experience more, some local sessions. Other suggestions made for improvement in the web-based comments were: make [it] more faculty specific/more meaningful for clinicians, include learning circles, make [it] available as part of the graduate certificate, link more tightly to induction procedures for new staff, offer an alternative. Suggestions for the Program included "initial induction and then some follow up support and then after you had done some supervision there could be the longer term

reflection aspect of the current Program". One Associate Dean commented "the underlying register is seen to be a problem – who is managing it? Why isn't it public?"

**CHANGES IN SUPERVISORS' UNDERSTANDING OF SUPERVISION**

It has been consistently noted, that when supervisors write their descriptive account (i.e. the first part of the Recognition Module), they demonstrate that while they have learnt a number of strategies for managing the process, have greater awareness of University policies and the importance of timely completions, their basic orientation to supervision remains unchanged. Typically, supervisors demonstrate teacher-focused ways of thinking about supervision as 'telling', exhibit a 'one size fits all' view of supervision rather than taking account of the needs of diverse students, and view supervision as an individual matter rather than related to the departmental context. The ways in which understanding of supervision changes through the process of engaging with the feedback in the Recognition Module has been monitored and reported (see Brew & Peseta 2004). Typical of the changes that supervisors make are:

- a movement towards a more student-centred view of supervision;
- less of an ad hoc, reactive approach to supervision and more emphasis on a professional, planned and pro-active approach to anticipate and meet students' needs;
- move away from a 'one size fits all' model of supervision towards a recognition of the need to develop a repertoire of approaches to meet the needs of diverse students;
- a re-evaluation of earlier thinking and ideas about supervision (often those derived from the supervisor's own experience of being supervised);
- a more sophisticated view of supervision based on a knowledge of some, or the existence of, the literature on supervision;
- qualitative shifts in thinking about supervision for example, away from the supervisor establishing goals and expectations and towards recognizing the importance of taking account of the student's perceptions of the process;
- development of ability to articulate a rationale for their supervision or a theoretical framework to guide future decision-making;
- greater recognition of the importance of developing the community of scholars which provides a context for candidature;
- the ability to situate their supervision practice within an informed view of the institutional context

IMPROVEMENTS IN STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF SUPERVISION

An analysis of data from the Student Research Experience Questionnaire (SREQ) prepared by the Dean of Graduate studies in 2006 demonstrates consistent improvement in students' experiences of supervision across the University from 2002 to 2005. Figure 5 shows the percentage improvements in students' experiences of supervision as measured on the student research experience questionnaire (SREQ). The question that needs to be asked in relation to the Research Higher Degree Supervision Development Program is whether there is a relationship between improvements in supervision and the extent to which faculties have studied the Program.

Figure 5. SREQ Trends 2002-5005 (Source: Behnia, M. (2006). Analysis of student research experience questionnaire (SREQ) - areas of best practice and suggested improvements. University of Sydney, Office of Dean of Graduate Studies)
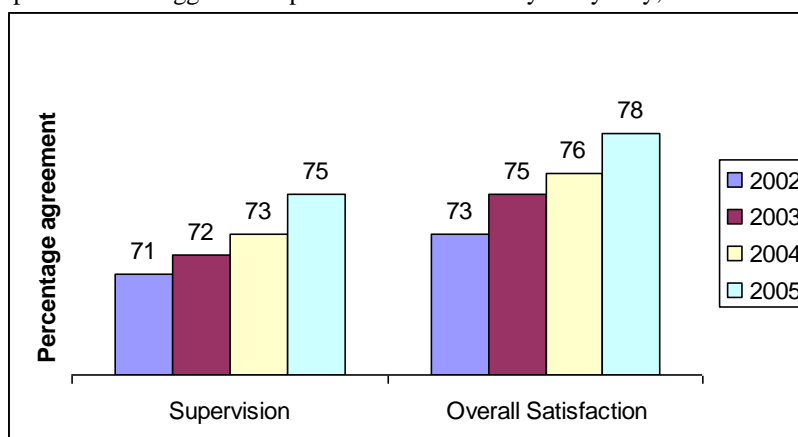
The statistical relationship between faculty-level degree of completion of modules 1 to 8 of the Supervision Programme, and changes between 2002 and 2006 in RHD student experience as measured by scales of the Student Research Experience Questionnaire (SREQ) was analysed. At the faculty level, the degree of staff participation (as measured by the percentage of modules 1 to 8 completed) was correlated with improvements in student experience of Supervision, $r = .56$, $p = .023$; with improvements in Intellectual and Social Climate, $r = .52$, $p = .040$; and with overall satisfaction with the research higher degree experience, $r = .49$, $p = .028$ (one-tailed). (A one-tailed test is justified on the grounds that a positive relationship was hypothesised). (See Appendix V for statistical data.)

We can therefore report that there is statistically significant evidence of a link between the number of modules studied per full time equivalent member of staff in a faculty and improvements in supervision as measured on the University's Student Research Experience Questionnaire (SREQ). Given this, it is reasonable to deduce that the Program has made a significant contribution to the improvement of supervision across the University. In fact, in the Faculty of Medicine which has a large number of enrolments on the Program and a formal procedure for supervisor registration in line with Academic Board policy, student ratings of supervision went up by 4 percentage points from 2004 to 2005. (The average increase is 1%.) Veterinary Science which has a large and growing proportion of enrolments on the Program also made substantial improvements in students' perceptions of supervision in that period.

We note that improvements in research climate also correlate significantly with engagement with the Program. This indicates that we must exercise caution in interpreting the results. Faculties may have taken a number of steps to improve students' research higher degree experiences including encouraging or requiring supervisors to undertake the Program. Nevertheless, studying the modules is associated with improved supervision as experienced by students and is clearly an important part of overall faculty strategies resulting in improved RHD experiences.

DISCUSSION

Given the size and complexity of the Supervision Development Program and the fact that many supervisors study it because they are required to do so, it is encouraging to see that it is generally appreciated, particularly by junior staff. There is clear, statistically significant evidence of a positive relationship between the numbers of modules studied in a faculty and improvements in faculty performance on the Supervision Scale of the SREQ. Evidence from leading academics responsible for supervision development in Australia, Canada, the UK and Malaysia suggests that the pioneering Recognition Module is the only known example of the assessment of supervisors' training in the world. There are, however, a number of issues that have arisen and these require discussion and resolution.

The Program appears to work best when it is studied by junior staff within the context of a well formulated response to the University's Policy on research and research training. Supervisors in such contexts encounter a range of strategies for structuring the supervision process, develop more confidence in supervision, and change their conceptions of supervision practice through studying on the Program. For those supervisors who complete it, the Program is generally viewed as flexible, the workload is viewed as manageable and the feedback they receive is generally appreciated. When they attend them, supervisors consider that the optional workshops meet their needs.

The Program works less well where there is no faculty support for it and where the University's policy is not being adhered to, i.e. where there is no supervision register. In a few cases, senior staff may be antagonistic and some staff are resentful of the University's requirement. In such contexts, the Program is viewed as inflexible, the workload is viewed as too high and the feedback unhelpful. Fortunately, taking account of all the sources of data presented in this report, it can be seen that such cases are comparatively few.

As this report has demonstrated, supervisors who complete the Program generally find the workload manageable, but until staff engage with the Program they often perceive the workload as excessive. In some faculties, new staff are required to complete the supervision Program as well as the Graduate Certificate run by the ITL. Faculties need to provide time for supervisors to complete the Program, particularly those just embarking on an academic career.

Local initiatives

Initially designed as a central Program for supervisors who chose to study it, the Supervision Development Program was intended to be supported by local faculty or school-based initiatives to deal with discipline-specific issues. From the data we have, however, it is clear that a number of schools and departments do not have additional support Programs. This is regrettable. While there are numerous opportunities for supervisors to apply their learning on the Supervision Program to their own contexts, more local support is needed to supplement it.

One possible way to achieve this is to spread the provision of feedback on the Recognition Module to more staff, perhaps on a faculty basis. The current system of feedback is managed by the two ITL staff coordinators of the Program. In spite

of the dramatic increase in numbers of completions from 2003 to 2007, with the introduction of the University requirement that new supervisors should complete the Program, no additional resources have been provided to support this process. Consequently, the staff responsible have had to manage the provision of feedback on top of their heavy workloads with the result that at busy times of the year (i.e. before the beginnings of each semester), feedback times have lagged. In order to cut down on the amount of time spent on providing feedback, in 2007, a new system for providing feedback is being piloted. This system reduces the time spent (typically 2 hours per completion) by about 50%. It remains to be seen ho effective the new system is.

The feedback provided is grounded in the literature on good practice in supervision. It is not simply the views of ITL staff. Nevertheless, there is, in some areas of the University, a view that the feedback proselytizes ITL agendas. There is thus a need for faculties to take ownership of the feedback. There are now many supervisor graduates of the Program who would be well able to provide feedback to their peers. It may be that the new ITL Cluster Coordinators would be able to organise this.

The Policy
We have demonstrated that there is a variable response to the policy 'Postgraduate Research Higher Degree Training Supervision' across the University. It is now appropriate that the Research and Research Training Committee review this policy in the light of the data presented in this report. One important question is how to migrate good practice in implementing the policy to other faculties. Also, it would be helpful to reiterate to faculties that the policy was not made by the ITL.

The Program Coordinators are often asked to explain or clarify the University's policies. In responding to such requests, it has become evident that clarification of the University's policy on the numbers of candidates able to be supervised by any one academic is required. It is unclear for example, whether a maximum of five PhD students applies to research-only staff as well as academics with teaching and research roles. Clarification on how many Masters students can be supervised in addition to, or instead of, five PhD students is also needed.

An issue that arises time and again as a result of developing Programs for supervision training and development is the coordination of a corresponding set of Programs for research students. The nature of doctoral education provision is emerging as an interest world-wide and universities are inevitably looking towards a number of new initiatives that respond to the changing nature of the doctorate. It should be noted in this context that central provision for students as well as supervisors is becoming the norm in Australian Universities and Academic Board may wish to consider strengthening provision in this respect.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The online Research Higher Degree Supervision Development Program is an internationally recognised Program of supervision development that engages research higher degree supervisors in critically reflecting on their practice. This report has demonstrated that the Program has support from academics in many faculties and has contributed to improving students' experiences of supervision across the University. Another large research-intensive university in Australia is now running a generic version of this Program under commercial licence and we are in discussions with staff responsible for supervision development in other universities overseas and in Australia.

Finally, therefore, it is recommended that Research and Research Training Committee:

1. reaffirm its commitment to the Research Higher Degree Supervision Development Program.
2. find ways to spread good practice in adherence to the policy on Supervision Training to faculties who do not have strategies for its implementation.
3. commend to Academic Board and the University community the provision of supplementary supervision development to meet diverse disciplinary needs at school or faculty level.
4. consider whether the ITL continues to be the most appropriate body to implement supervision development
5. commend to faculties collaboration in the provision of Recognition Module feedback to their staff.
6. seek to find ways to provide or strengthen parallel training for research higher degree students centrally and at faculty level.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

APPENDIX I

EXTRACT FROM ACADEMIC BOARD POLICY

Postgraduate Research Higher Degree Training Supervision at the University of Sydney

Approved by: Academic Board
Date of approval: 12 November 2003
Date of effect: 1 January 2004
Amended: 15 November 2006

Supervisor
(a) General requirements
To be eligible to be appointed as a supervisor, a person must:
  (i) be a member of the academic staff of the University at Level B or above; or
  (ii) be considered appropriate by the Dean of the Faculty on a case by case basis;
and
  (iii) hold a qualification at a level above that for which the candidate seeks to be supervised, or
  (iv) hold a qualification at the same level as that for which the candidate seeks to be supervised and demonstrate a record of scholarly achievement; or
  (v) demonstrate current and active involvement in research appropriate to the field of study and a record of scholarly achievement to the satisfaction of the Dean of the Faculty on a case by case basis;
and
  (vi) participate in activities for postgraduate research training supervision as the Dean of the Faculty may deem appropriate; and
  (vii) meet such other conditions as the Dean of the Faculty may deem appropriate.

(b) Specific requirements
To be eligible to be appointed as a supervisor, in addition to the general requirements above, a person must:
  (i) have acted as an associate supervisor for the successful completion of at least two candidatures at a recognised tertiary institution; or
  (ii) have acted as a supervisor or an associate supervisor for at least 12 months duration at a recognised tertiary institution, **and have completed the Institute for Teaching and Learning Postgraduate Supervision Development Program**, or equivalent[1]; or

  (iii) have acted as a supervisor for the successful completion of at least one candidature at a recognised tertiary institution.

[1] The Postgraduate Research Training Sub-Committee of the Graduate Studies Committee shall determine which courses are equivalent to the Institute for Teaching and Learning Postgraduate Supervision Development Program.

APPENDIX III

CRITERIA THAT SUPERVISORS WHO HAVE COMPLETED THE SUPERVISION PROGRAM HAVE DEMONSTRATED

CRITERIA FOR GOOD PRACTICE IN SUPERVISION (Source: http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/supervision/modules/criteria.cfm)

1. Interest in, and enthusiasm for, the supervision of postgraduate research students.
2. Appreciation of a range of good practice approaches to supervision and an understanding of what constitutes a productive research learning environment.
3. Establishment, for and with students, of clear goals and expectations in the light of up to date knowledge of the University's requirements.
4. Productive and regular meetings held with students which provide them with sympathetic, responsive and effective academic, professional and personal support and guidance.
5. Careful management of the supervisory process to achieve timely and successful completion of the thesis.
6. Development of a partnership with students which takes account of the need to assist them to develop a range of generic attributes and to introduce them to the research community.
7. Open communication established with students with timely feedback, which is both supportive and challenging, given on progress.
8. Utilisation of a repertoire of supervisory strategies to take account of the differing and diverse needs of individual students including assisting students from equity groups and those off campus to achieve success in their study.
9. Evidence of systematic evaluation of competency in supervisory skills and of critical reflection and engagement with salient and emergent issues in their own field of research, to improve supervisory practice.
10. Use, by the supervisor, of the literature on the scholarship of supervision pedagogy, and of relevant policy issues in research education to enhance the postgraduate research experience of their students.

FEEDBACK ON THE OBJECTIVES OF INDIVIDUAL MODULES IN THE NEW PROGRAM.

(Percentage response rates are based on the number of supervisors completing each module on the new Program)	Percentage agreement
Module 1: Preparing for supervision (n=47, 43%)	
I have begun to clarify my role as a supervisor	100%
I am beginning to develop an educational rationale for my supervision	91%
I can articulate the key aspects of my supervisory responsibilities	100%
I have reflected on what I consider effective supervision to be	100%
I can identify the appropriate institutional policies which govern research higher degree supervision and learning	94%
Module 2: Meeting your student (n=19, 22%)	
I understand the need to clarify my own expectations of the thesis process with students	100%
I would consider inviting my students to communicate their expectations of working with me	100%
I have begun to think about the importance of negotiating ground rules for supervision with my student(s)	95%
I understand the need for developing a repertoire of supervision strategies to suit the learning needs of individual students	100%
I have developed new ideas for thinking about the importance of the first meeting	100%
Module 3: Managing the process (n=30, 49%)	
I am aware of the importance of timely completion	100%
I understand and can articulate the distinct stages of supervision	87%
I understand the importance of inviting students to share their strategies for successful supervision	100%
I am beginning to understand that the way I view teaching and research will impact on what I think good supervision is	93%
I can see that students will have a view on appropriate supervision and can account for that in my practice	90%
I have developed a set of strategies that will help me decide on the effectiveness of supervision meetings	80%
Module 4: End of year review (n=17, 27%)	
I have learned a number of strategies which will address challenges in students' progress	100%
I feel confident that I know how to obtain feedback on my supervision practice	76%
I understand what is involved in the annual review process in my unit/department/faculty	88%
I feel confident that I will be able to prepare my students for the annual review process	82%
I understand the implications of different views of research for my supervision practice	94%
Module 5: Helping your student to write (n=19, 32%)	
I appreciate the importance of ensuring that students begin writing early in their candidature	95%
I feel capable of devising a set of writing tasks early in the candidature	95%
My understanding about how to support student thesis writing has improved	100%
I feel confident in my ability to provide effective feedback to students on their writing	94%
I know how to diagnose and respond to common thesis writing problems	94%
Module 6: Completing the thesis (n=22, 37%)	
I understand the final steps in preparing a thesis for submission	95%
I am now familiar with university policy regarding thesis examination	96%
I have developed a set of criteria to help determine appropriate thesis examiners	91%
I know how to help students prepare for their theses for examination	100%
I am confident that I can help students engage and respond to their examiner's reports appropriately	91%
I have developed a set of strategies that will help to evaluate my learning as a supervisor	76%
Module 7: Recognition (n=5, 19%)	
I can identify the legacy of my own research student experience on my approach to supervision	100%
I understand the difference between a student-focused and teacher-focused approach to supervision	100%
I am beginning to develop strategies that are consistent with a student-focused approach to supervision	100%
I see the value in incorporating a community/collegial model of supervision to supplement my individual practice	80%
I feel confident that I can evaluate my supervision	80%
I have found the scholarly literature on supervision useful in growing my ideas about supervision	80%
Writing a case study of an aspect of my supervision practice has been useful for my learning	80%
I can articulate a coherent and theorised educational rationale for my approach to supervision	80%
This module has developed my skills and abilities to critically reflect on why I supervise the way I do	100%

APPENDIX V

RELATION OF PARTICIPATION IN SUPERVISION PROGRAMME AND RHD STUDENT EXPERIENCE (CORRELATIONS)

		% of total maximum modules completed	supervision	infrastructure	climate	generic_skills	OSI
% of total maximum modules completed	Pearson Correlation	1	.564(*)	-.018	.517(*)	.170	.486
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.023	.948	.040	.528	.056
	N	16	16	16	16	16	16
supervision	Pearson Correlation	.564(*)	1	.510(*)	.710(**)	.393	.863(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.023		.043	.002	.133	.000
	N	16	16	16	16	16	16
infrastructure	Pearson Correlation	-.018	.510(*)	1	.667(**)	.648(**)	.667(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.948	.043		.005	.007	.005
	N	16	16	16	16	16	16
climate	Pearson Correlation	.517(*)	.710(**)	.667(**)	1	.577(*)	.657(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.040	.002	.005		.019	.006
	N	16	16	16	16	16	16
generic_skills	Pearson Correlation	.170	.393	.648(**)	.577(*)	1	.538(*)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.528	.133	.007	.019		.031
	N	16	16	16	16	16	16
OSI	Pearson Correlation	.486	.863(**)	.667(**)	.657(**)	.538(*)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.056	.000	.005	.006	.031	
	N	16	16	16	16	16	16

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

REFERENCE

Brew, A., & Peseta, T. (2004a). Changing supervision practice: a Program to encourage learning through feedback and reflection. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International, 41*(1), 5-22.