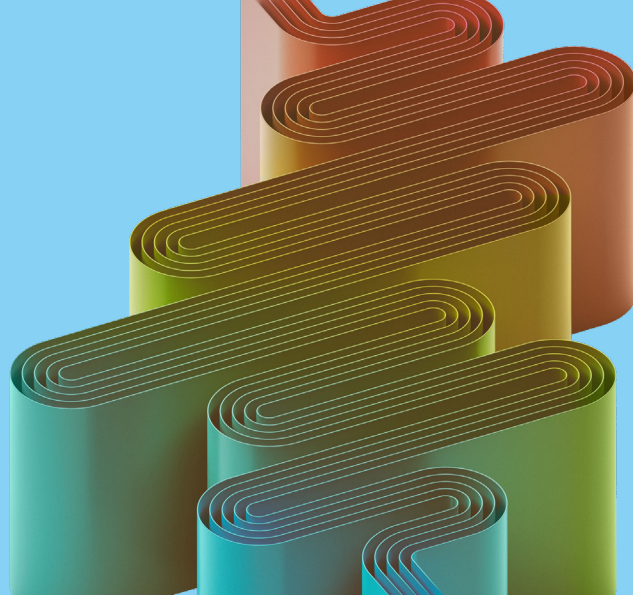


Transforming higher education training



Case Study – Supervising Doctoral Studies and James Cook University

James Cook University joined the Development Group for *Supervising Doctoral Studies 2.0* in 2019. As a relatively young university, they have a smaller Postgraduate cohort, with around 700–800 students. Susan recognised the value in working with others and learning their practices. They took an active role in the development of *Supervising Doctoral Studies*, with Susan's colleague, Liz Tynan, flying to London to take part in the Development Group workshop. Liz found this to be an “enriching experience”, as she thoroughly enjoyed sharing ideas about the approach which their university takes to supervising PhD students and listening to other universities detail their own initiatives. James Cook University takes a less hierarchical approach to supervising, choosing instead to have ‘advisors’ and ‘mentors’ to manage the power differential between students and teachers, allowing students to feel their growing capacity as an individual researcher.



Who did we speak to?

Susan Gasson, Coordinator HDR Advisor.



What kind of subscription do James Cook have?

Supervising Doctoral Studies accessed via ‘Blackboard’.



Highlights

Susan recognised that there was a value in the opportunity to work with others and learn their practices. Susan's Colleague, Liz Tynan, flew to London for the Development Group workshop and found this to be an “enriching experience”. She thoroughly enjoyed sharing ideas about their university's approach to supervising PhD students and listening to other universities detail their own initiatives.

Case study

Implementation

At James Cook University, *Supervising Doctoral Studies 2.0* has been implemented alongside other forms of mandatory training for advisors and mentors. The university has a three-tiered structure to their advisory team. New researchers become Secondary Advisors, then Primary Advisors, and once they have two completions of doctorate students, they can apply to become an Advisory Mentor.

To support this, the university have identified sections of the supervisor modules which speak to the specific requirements of each tier and encourage their advisors to complete the tasks relating to their specific role. To ensure that their staff remain up to date and engaged with the scholarship of supervision, the university requires that if a Primary Advisor has not elevated to another level, or if an advisory mentor has not attended a workshop after 4 years, then they must complete a quiz about their role.

Susan detailed that this quiz is related to many of the modules within the course. Since the course is always available to advisors, they can use the resource to refresh their knowledge on what is required of them to become an effective advisor to individual researchers.

Although the course is used as a mandatory form of training for newer advisors, there are some instances where they allow more seasoned scholars to undertake a more concise version of the training. This is done on a case-by-case basis, and if a scholar states that they have received training on supervising doctoral studies from a previous university, they are invited to meet with Susan for a discussion, in which she references the course modules and how their training fits within the universities specific advisory structure. This ensures that the advisor can utilise their previous training and apply it to their current position at James Cook University.

The programme is implemented through the Blackboard software system. They discovered that this was an effective way to ensure that all their staff were able to access the training easily. Susan found that the better way to implement the programme was to make as few changes as possible, choosing instead to tweak only the end point to fit with the functionality of the software.

The wider context

The university recognises that to undertake a PhD qualification is an extremely challenging and stressful commitment for its researchers. As a result, they take an approach based on 'project management' for the progress of their researchers, through implementing a Candidature Committee as a way of tracking this. Six weeks into their PhD, researchers take part in an expectation exercise wherein they outline details of their expectations from their advisors and progress they hope to make.

Susan explained that to guide researchers through this process, advisors are encouraged to utilise the modules provided in *Supervising Doctoral Studies 2.0* as a reference on where to start.

After six months, this is reviewed again, and they compete a confirmation of candidature. Throughout this process, PhD researchers are reviewed on what their project entails, whether they have researched it effectively, and if they have provided a suitable project proposal. If they have been able to provide sufficient evidence of their progress, the Chair of Panel reviews their work and confirms their place on the committee. If they have not progressed, then advisors provide extra support for their researchers and their progress is reviewed at a later date.

Susan explained that the advisors are encouraged to review the *Supervising Doctoral Studies 2.0* modules throughout the entirety of this process, as they are readily available, and provide ideas on the best methods and practises on how to provide extra support to their researchers.

Outlook

Susan estimated that James Cook University has roughly 600 advisors, with around 60 new advisors being accredited in 2021. This means that around 10% of the advisors at the university are required to use *Supervising Doctoral Studies 2.0*. Susan also stated that this number was not indicative of the true amount, since she knows of many advisors who constantly refer to the course, even after their initial training. Having this resource available to staff ensures that advisors are providing continued support to researchers, and the university will continue to encourage staff to take these modules to maintain this high standard of care.

Get in touch

To find out more about any of our programmes and what Epigeum can do for your institution, please get in touch.

