Chapter 1

Reconceptualizing Postgraduate Research: An Online Blended Learning Approach

Maggie Hartnett
Massey University, New Zealand

Peter Rawlins
Massey University, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

The professional inquiry (a researcher training and development course) was introduced into the Master of Education program at Massey University, New Zealand in 2014 as a practitioner-based alternative to the research thesis pathway. In contrast with traditional, independent, time intensive models of postgraduate research supervision, the authors developed and implemented an innovative blended learning model of postgraduate research training and development to ensure the growing demand of future, predominantly distance, students would be met. The online, blended model developed and discussed here within the discipline of Education has the potential to be utilized across different disciplines and postgraduate programs including those at doctoral level. In its fifth year of delivery, the online community has grown from nine students and seven specialist academic advisors in the first cohort to 45 students and 27 academics in the current offering, ensuring an accessible and equitable research learning experience for all students.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes an innovative blended learning model of postgraduate research training and development. The Professional Inquiry (a researcher training and development course) was introduced into the Master of Education programme at Massey University, New Zealand, in 2014 as a practitioner-based alternative to the traditional research thesis pathway. Information available at the time suggested that approximately 60% of all Master of Education students would opt for the professional inquiry, highlighting an increasing demand for postgraduate research supervision. However, limited availability of academic staff to supervise postgraduate research via time-intensive, traditional mechanisms necessitated a new and innovative approach to research training and development to meet the growing demand of future, predominantly distance, students. In response to this challenge, an innovative team-based, blended model of digitally-facilitated postgraduate research training was developed. The chapter begins with a brief discussion of the wider societal and educational context in which the development of the professional inquiry is situated. This is followed by a discussion of the small but growing body of online/distance postgraduate research literature that helped to inform the development of the course. Next, the general nature of blended learning is discussed and is contrasted with the innovative blended learning model of postgraduate research training and development created for this course. A detailed description of various aspects of the course follows, along with how the characteristics of the design align with strategies known to support online research supervision and postgraduate student satisfaction. The chapter concludes with challenges that arose from course implementation, solutions to identified issues and suggested areas for future research.

BACKGROUND

The use of digital technologies has become ubiquitous in today’s world. Few areas of everyday life are unaffected by the introduction of technology, including education. Within the Higher Education (HE) sector, the availability and uptake of distance and online courses has been steadily growing. The latest report from the US (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018) shows that in 2016 almost one in three (31.6%) higher education enrolments were for distance education courses. This is up from one in four (25.9%) in 2012 and has occurred at a time when overall enrolments in US higher education declined by 3.8%. The tertiary education sector within New Zealand has also seen the proportion of equivalent full time students (EFTS) in courses delivered using technology (that includes web-supported, web-enhanced, and web-based) gradually increase from the 2005-2009 period to the 2010-2014
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