

Australian Technology Network

FIVE UNIVERSITIES: ONE VISION



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Report from the 2004 ATN Symposium from the Research Education Working Group.

The Research Education group canvassed a range of issues of common to the ATN institutions before focusing on two key strategic areas and associated projects. The issues canvassed in the first instance included *completions*, *staff development* and *the distinctiveness of the ATN research education experience*.

Completions

In a general sense, all initiatives are intended to contribute to increasing completions across the five institutions. Future strategies would require the gathering of data on existing policies and strategies. This may include structured programs, the resources readily available to supervisors and the module workloads. While considering a 'selecting for success' ideal there would be need to need to address its feasibility in terms of quotas, load, RTS formula and the recruitment process as well as the ATN commitment to equity and developmental strategies for applicants.

Some members believed that over-enrolment was an appropriate strategy to increase completions whereas others believed this was not a wise strategy. It was agreed that in due course, after generating a clearer model of supervision capacity in each institution, there could be a case for mapping future potential demand and how it corresponds to supervision capacity across the ATN.

Staff Development

The group consider the further development, examination and implementation of shared resources around supervisors, additional to the existing web resources such as FIRST and Supervisor Solutions. Part of this will be subsumed under the two major initiatives proposed for the remainder of 2004 (below).

ATN distinctiveness

It was deemed important to specify the distinctive research education experience of ATN research students, emphasising ATN branding derived from a clearly articulated ATN vision and mission statement. .

This would point to the development of a distinctive set of characteristics that capture what a student from an ATN University will gain through studying at an affiliated ATN institution. It would also require data to validate our stated points of distinctiveness. As an

accompaniment to this we need to look at how this can be assessed and measured to determine if the characteristics are being achieved.

The distinctive nature of the experience would be related to the need to articulate more closely with industry, and would be promoted to industry so they know what characteristics (both personal and professional) they can implement in the industry environment. It might include development of an industry development collaboration tool kit with uniform presentations to staff and industry to build affiliations.

Finally it was suggested that the opportunity should be taken to develop/promote and position the ATN through the Bi-annual ATN Research Conference and the alternating Postgraduate Quality Research Seminar.

RESEARCH SKILLS WEB SITE AND ONLINE MODULES

The group resolved that an appropriate flagship project could be the development of an ATN research skills website. It was agreed that it was feasible and desirable to develop on-line models covering research skills and that this would contribute to an overall increase in ATN branding and positioning.

The Research Training Site would be kept separate but easily linked either from the ATN website or the ATN LEAP website. It was proposed that it would have its own URL site, such as www.ATNresearch.com. The front page would include a discussion forum, upcoming events, list of papers, publications and surveys. (See Figure 1).

The website could incorporate a link to the ATN LEAP modules, and related online courses, but with a development and extension of the ATN LEAP program to offer a 'research skills' strand of modules. Using the existing LEAP project processes with new, additional strands would add value, by utilising the existing ATN LEAP infrastructure and increasing the already high profile of that project.

Elizabeth Greener, ATN LEAP co-ordinator tabled a schematic outline of the proposed extension of ATN LEAP to include new modules (need to stress that the project is to develop 'Research Skills' not 'Research Methods'). Gaynor Austen (QUT) from the ATN Libraries Group discussed the potential for incorporating a *Repository of research skills learning objects* into the website and the research skills modules. She indicated that they had been working on a model incorporating a repository of learning objects. The learning objects will be small learning activities that each university could use at its own discretion.

Each LEAP Research Skills module can link to a number of learning objects, each containing one task and one outcome. Each module would specify context, structure, objectives and outcomes for students or staff accessing the resource. It was suggested that a next step would be to develop a template for each module.

Some ideas for the modules to be developed included interviewing, gathering data, grant writing and proposals, structure of funding in Australia and Overseas, conference writing, statistical techniques and information retrieval. These would contribute to making research students at ATN institutions 'Research Ready' and could be expected to improve completion rates and times. It would be the role of the supervisor to direct students to this website for the area of training. A supervisor development package entailing leadership and guidance could also be developed.

The ATN DDOGS will meet to discuss this further in April. LATN will also need to determine who is responsible for keeping the repository current and updated. LATN will be meeting late March to discuss this project further.

Each university is to contribute material and seek areas of expertise for at least one module each, chosen to cover specific areas of research skills. Yet to be determined are:

- financial commitment necessary to fund a project officer,
- accessibility,
- negotiating the intellectual property,
- working within a framework,
- how to use the repository effectively,
- what links should and need to be made,
- resource allocation and cost,
- maintenance and quality control,
- primary users whose needs must be met,
- evaluation process.

It was agreed by the group that this would take 6 months of a project officer's time. 2004 will be seen as the development period, with the aim of refining the model, to launch a site in 2005.

2. CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT FOR SUPERVISORS – PILOT

Workload and supervision

In light of debates about cross-subsidisation of funding for teaching and research education within each institution it was deemed appropriate to compare the supervision workload models and to benchmark across the ATN institutions. While the 'high and low cost' classification of disciplinary areas attempts to recognise the difference in resources necessary to supervise candidates in various areas, that dichotomy does not reflect the full range of variation in resources required, including supervision time. Previous attempts to develop models of supervision and workload within each institution have been hampered by wide variability in disciplinary procedures and resources.

The group considered a pilot benchmarking project that is discipline specific across the 5 institutions. It would involve choosing a number of similar disciplines across the ATN comparing workloads and how costs are calculated. In due course, if the pilot was successful, it could extend to supervisor/student ratios and the benchmarking of resource provision. It could also look at and aim to document 'best practice(s)'.

In order to be more than a reaction to the Nelson pressure to 'do more with less' it was proposed that this project should also aim to document innovative modes of supervision that might contribute to the case for a distinctive ATN research education experience. They could include panel supervision, cluster supervision (which some institutions already have in place) and a consideration of key performance indicators of supervisors. It was seen to be important that any such developments be seen as positive developments rather than cost-cutting exercises that compromise 'supervision quality'. There is a need to define quality in terms of the applied and industry-oriented research that are said to distinguish the ATN research education experience.

It was proposed that by April the ATN DDoGS would agree on the specific disciplines to be benchmarked and formulate a timeline and processes for implementation. This would

include a proposed strategy for generating the data from their respective Schools, Faculties and Divisions. DDoGS will need to make the case to their areas in their respective institutions being asked to provide the material.

Figure 1

