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When two universities meet: Fostering research capacity among Early Career Researchers

Abstract

Between one-third and one-half of all presently employed academics will reach retirement age in the next decade. A challenge facing universities in this current environment is to continue to sustain their research capacities. Policy-makers and universities have developed various strategies to support ongoing development of different cohorts within the broader research community. One strategic approach has been to foster the research capabilities of Early Career Researchers (ECRs). This paper describes and analyses the features of one promising program collaboratively developed to support ECRs from Australian education faculties within the University of Canberra and Charles Sturt University.

The program was initiated by senior researchers from both universities who identified a large number of ECRs on their respective staffs who worked in isolation and who would benefit from an expansion of their research and professional dimensions. While the program began as a 'top down' initiative, sufficient autonomy was allowed for the ECRs to identify their own professional requirements and to develop an ongoing program.

ECRs have met regularly over the past two years to identify shared issues; organise and attend joint professional development activities (such as visiting scholars and mentoring with senior researchers); and work on collaborative research projects and publications. Funding, ongoing senior management support, a variety of both senior and junior role models as well as working on common initiatives has provided momentum for the program.

The overarching aim of the program is to build a research community amongst the ECRs of both universities. An example of this collaboration has been a major writing project involving the production of a suite of articles by the ECRs concerning common ECR issues and support strategies. Outcomes also have included professional development and fostering cross university networks.

The characteristics underpinning the program are highlighted in this paper, with links made between theory and practice, resulting in valuable outcomes for the participants concerned. It foreshadows emerging changes to the culture of the two education faculties as a result of explicitly addressing ECR research issues. Suggestions for developing sustainable programs to support ongoing research capacity-building of ECRs in Australian universities conclude this paper.

Introduction

Between one-third and one-half of all presently employed academics will reach retirement age in the next decade (Nile, 2006). Along with such changes in demographics, is the newly conceived Research Quality Framework (RQF) that has intensified research efforts across Australian universities. Subsequently, there is an urgent requirement to support a culture that encourages and supports research amongst Early Career Researchers (ECRs) for future development and sustainability within the university sector. The importance of developing a strong research culture has been identified by successive commonwealth governments as crucial for Australia's long-term growth and economic prosperity, particularly as it attempts to position itself as a post-Fordist knowledge economy in an increasingly competitive, globalising world (Marginson & Considine, 2000). In such a context however, research becomes the pre-eminent 'numbers game' in enterprise universities (Marginson & Considine 2000, p.133), particularly within the context of the RQF.

Policy-makers and universities have developed various strategies to support ongoing development of different cohorts within the broader research community (see for example, Debowski, 2006). One strategic approach has been to specifically target the research capabilities of ECRs. In this paper, we include the Australian Research Council (ARC) definition of an ECR, as "a researcher who has a PhD awarded on or after 1 March 2002" (ARC, 2007, section 5.2.2), but broaden this classification to also include staff who are new to academic roles; those who are seconded from teaching positions into university placements; and/or those in the process of finishing a higher degree (including honours, masters and PhD) who consider themselves part of the research community. This broadening of the ECR definition is warranted on the basis that the ARC definition draws upon a more traditional definition of the academic as researcher based upon a scientific model of pure research. The 'ARC approach' though, tends to marginalise those disciplines where work is largely in the area of applied research via the investigation through the professions. One such discipline is Education, where academic staff are often seconded on the basis of their professional expertise and practice, and thus may not have the traditional research trajectory. The challenge of meeting the needs of such a professionally orientated discipline has been one of the reasons for the development of a cross-institutional support program for ECRs across two Schools of Education.

This paper focuses on a promising program designed to support and develop self-identified ECRs in the discipline of Education. It describes and analyses the processes undertaken to develop the program, between two Australian Universities: the University of Canberra and Charles Sturt University. It is co-authored by five of the ECRs who were a part of the first gathering for this program in 2006 and who have continued to work together on a number of collaborative projects. This conference paper is therefore a direct product of this ECR program and serves to demonstrate the promise inherent within it.

History and development of the program

The program was initiated by senior academics in education from the University of Canberra and Charles Sturt University in late 2005. Associate Professor Erica Smith, from the School of Education at Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, and

Professor Noel Gough, (then) from the School of Education and Community Studies at the University of Canberra, identified a large number of ECRs at their respective universities who would benefit from being involved in a cross-institutional network of educational researchers. Both Associate Professor Smith and Professor Gough identified ECRs who, for the majority of their time, worked with colleagues solely from their respective universities. They believed that these ECRs would benefit from interactions with staff from other universities to further their professional outlook and research agendas.

A major impetus in forming the initial group was to build the social capital of ECRs in terms of forming professional networks both within and outside their respective universities (Smith, 2007). The advent of the RQF has made this a far more pressing issue with ECRs having to nominate research groupings when they often do not have the established track record of publications, nor the senior connections required to form such networks. Although there are large numbers of ECRs in the two institutions, the heavy teaching and administrative loads associated with being an ECR, along with a general intensification of academic workloads in the past decade, has meant that the time required to build research networks is lacking. Moreover, this isolation can be exacerbated by geographical distance from other professional and research networks. Charles Sturt University is multi-campus with its Schools of Education over one hundred kilometres apart and so the University of Canberra is geographically its closest partner. In addition, while Canberra is a capital city it is also regionally-located, and so culturally, the University of Canberra and Charles Sturt University were obvious partners in this collegial relationship.

Similarities between the Schools of Education within the two institutions encouraged respective senior Education research staff to collaborate on this program. The ability to create instant networking opportunities and enhance the research culture of both institutions were key reasons to initiate the University of Canberra and Charles Sturt University link. Obvious benefits of the collaboration would be access to each other's resources (eg libraries, guest speakers, visiting scholars), and the additional resources Canberra has to offer (eg commonwealth government agencies and major libraries). Experiencing two different university regulatory systems also allows ECRs to understand some of the internal operations of other institutions within the tertiary sector, alleviate naivety and provide useful corporate knowledge as they move forward in their academic careers. The shared view of the importance to enhance the capability and capacity of the ECRs from both institutions led to the first ECR workshop early in 2006, attended by approximately twenty ECRs.

Participant ownership of the ECR program was a key principle in the minds of its initiators, Smith and Gough. From the outset, the program was very much owned and developed by the ECRs themselves. The first workshop was organised and facilitated by two ECRs, one from each of the two institutions. The same two ECRs developed an ECR 'needs' and 'solutions' survey for dissemination and completion at the first gathering in February 2006. This survey focused on ECR 'needs' ('what are your needs as an ECR?') as well as 'solutions' ('what would help you as an ECR?'). The identified 'needs' were skills-focused (writing skills, knowing how to publish, how and where to apply for grants); pragmatic (having more time); and interpersonal (developing networks, mentoring needs, support).

The survey indicated that the ECRs believed from the outset that, with guidance and support from more experienced staff, they were capable of organising supports to meet these 'needs'. 'Solutions', or items that the ECRs identified as being helpful, were predominately focused on interpersonal relationships that included other ECRs, informal networks, supervisors, a supportive leader, and what one participant called 'corridor conversations'. These self-identified 'needs' and 'solutions' formed the framework of the subsequent program. Consequently, the two ECR groups positioned themselves using the emerging framework to lobby their Heads of School, Directors of Research and other committees. Various activities were then organised. These activities included opportunities to collaborate and share ideas, projects and activities; mentoring arrangements with experienced researchers; assistance with grant writing and other funding applications; and assistance with professional writing.

It should be noted that there have been many 'firsts' for the ECRs since the group's inception. For example, this paper itself has been the first collaboratively written piece for many of the authors. Although ECRs were drawn from two universities, they were able to access the mentoring and support of experienced scholars from both institutions and consequently further networks beyond.

Another key feature of this ECR program has been its informal structure. Whilst the risk is that such an approach might lack direction or momentum, it has instead allowed much freedom and ownership so that the program is self-supporting. It is expected that the skills the ECRs develop during this program will carry them through to being effective and productive future academic leaders.

Various activities have occurred throughout the two years of the program, including on site visits (full day and two day programs), teleconferences, and telephone and email contact for all ECRs across the Schools of Education of the two universities. Guest speakers have been invited that have focused on specific issues identified by the ECRs, including presentations on the following:

- RQF and the place of ECRs;
- Research careers – how senior researchers started, their careers to date, what helped, skills they focused on developing and why;
- Narrative theory as a research methodology;
- Strategies for research collaboration;
- Support mechanisms for ECRs, including mentoring and how to initiate mentoring relationships; and
- Issues and potential problems through the process of being mentored and the responsibility of the ECR within the mentoring process.

Presentations were organised and planned by ECRs as a group, through the lead organisers identified at University of Canberra and Charles Sturt University. From the beginning ECRs identified their own, ever-evolving learning requirements and worked at addressing them. They also acknowledged the importance of interpersonal relationships and working together as a group, both as a way of organising their own professional development but also as a way of networking and working on their own research projects.

One example of this joint collaboration and networking, has been the establishment of a subgroup of seven members who have worked together on a specific writing project, shaped around the experiences of ECRs. Although the final presentation of the project is not clear (it may be a book or a suite of journal articles), the group knew that they wanted to work as a group of ECRs, focusing on issues relevant to ECRs. A working title for the ensemble for this project to date is 'About ECRs, by ECRs'.

Within this concept of working together on issues related to being ECRs, the subgroup had various foci, including:

- Why do research? An ECR perspective;
- Defining an early career research and the contestations around this definition;
- Researching as an ECR in rural and isolated settings;
- Seconded teachers;
- Developing an academic identity;
- What it means to be an academic leader in the 21st century; and
- Documenting the process and outcomes of a mentoring program for the research projects of ECRs.

While this small working group has met regularly and worked on these broad foci, the larger group of ECRs, in the two universities has also continued to meet. A morning tea for ECRs was held early 2007 to develop a new program for the calendar year. Such occasions have enhanced the professional and social development of ECRs in the two universities and has aided in the establishment of a safe collegial atmosphere. With the changing requirements and availability of the participants over the two years since its inception, the membership of the ECR group has been informal, with people coming and going, depending on what the program offered, and their interest and time. Many in the group have had to juggle their new positions as lecturers as well as incorporating research. Some in the original group have also been undertaking part-time study and completing their own PhDs. Importantly however, the ECRs have been a self-identified group, and so have chosen to attend or not, depending on their own research and networking requirements. The program has evolved over the two years, and it is expected that it will continue to do so, as members flow in and out, with their differing agendas, and with the different organisational expectations of the two universities.

Key features

Funding

Funding of just over \$2000 was provided by the School of Education, Charles Sturt University, on the basis that the ECR forum would develop networks for collaborative writing and assist in developing research potential through ongoing professional development opportunities across the two campuses. Schools of Education from both universities provided funding for the ECRs to attend both formal and informal workshops and seminars. This has been an invaluable support for the ECRs as well as demonstrating the value placed on them as resources by their respective Heads of School and Directors of Research within their Schools.

Support from Senior Personnel

A key feature of the success of the program thus far has been the visible support and encouragement from senior leaders within the respective education faculties. This has

been evident both in terms of their initiation of the program and the funding to cover costs such as travel, accommodation and meals (given that the universities are approximately 280 kilometres apart). Indeed, support from senior leaders and managers are important characteristics of any change program's success (Sinclair, 1994). The particular support that the ECRs received from the respective schools sent a clear signal to all stakeholders that this was an important and valued initiative.

The program has not only been important to the ECRs involved however, but has also been recognised as being important by the senior academic staff supporting the program. One of the initiators of the program, Associate Professor Erica Smith (2007) has noted the importance of senior researchers putting themselves into the shoes of ERCs, and remembering the possible hesitation, confusion and lack of confidence that they might feel. She acknowledges that this may not be the case for everyone, but nonetheless she sees it is important to empathise with what ECRs might be facing when approaching research. Similarly, she has indicated that it is important for senior leaders and managers to understand the two very different pathways for education academics: that is, either coming into academia after having a profession, or always being an academic. Both groups have different demands and experiences, and both require support. The type of feedback provided by this coalition of ECRs has thus been useful for senior managers across the two universities.

Momentum

While the program was formally initiated by senior staff members, it has continued to be embraced, further developed and maintained by the ECRs themselves. Adopting this self-supporting approach was always an intention of the program with the involvement of senior leaders and managers to provide the initial directions and to arrange financial support. The ECR group has remained an informal, self-directed and self-motivated group with fluctuating numbers depending on the specific project/s being undertaken. Shared workshops, seminars, and special writing projects, have been combined with social events over the past two years. These events have served to enhance the research output of participating ECRs as well as the level and quality of networking and collaboration.

The peer-mentoring within the ECR group by other group members has also been an important feature for maintaining momentum. Group members ranged from recently seconded or contracted novice academics, new PhDs, those both enrolled in a PhD whilst lecturing in substantive positions, and those who had received their PhD four-five years earlier. This mixture of ECRs has enabled the informal mentoring of more experienced ECRs of those lesser experienced.

Collective voice and ECRs

Professional isolation can be a major feature of the ECR profile and can inhibit his or her development. This feature was acknowledged by the developers of the program and a heightened public profile of ECRs was one of the anticipated outcomes of this initiative, as was the improvement of performance management and RQF goals for ECRs. An overall lifting of research capability and productivity was another key objective of the ECR group.

The Schools of Education are major disciplines within both Charles Sturt University and University of Canberra. As a group in 2006, ECRs constituted more than 50 per cent of the staff profile at Charles Sturt University's School of Education, and a similar percentage characterised the School of Education staff profile at the University of Canberra. In terms of sheer numbers, the enhancement of their collective power and influence via this initiative has been a key feature of the program. For example, a new professional development program for ECRs from all disciplines across Charles Sturt University has been initiated in 2007 by senior staff revealing that being an ECR is now firmly on the agenda of the that university. In a similar vein, the University of Canberra provides three release time scholarships, available on a competitive basis to ECRs across the University. Although we would not claim that there is a direct cause and effect relation between these respective University-wide programs and this ECR initiative, the enhanced visibility of the education ECRs as a group may have contributed to an increased awareness amongst senior staff of the importance of cultivating the skills of this group.

An important feature of this ECR program has been the inclusion of teachers seconded to the universities and casual or short-term contracted academics, as their involvement has contributed to the quality of the collective voice of the ECRs. Broadening of the scope of the ARC definition of an ECR for the purposes of this program, has meant that the program actively includes, rather than excludes, seconded teachers and the like, in the research process. Involvement of contract academics and teachers seconded to teach, however, has been a contentious issue. Nonetheless, it is the view of Associate Professor Smith at Charles Sturt University that they ought to be encouraged but not overwhelmed by research. While Smith acknowledges that some academics believe they should be afforded 'protection' from research, it was the belief of the initiators of this program, that the research process should be an activity in which all ECRs, including seconded teachers, could be involved. Furthermore, it is the view of the respective universities that the research process should be positive, worthwhile and supportive for all those undertaking it. To this end, the group has been established to be a self-selected, self-supporting, inclusive and collective.

Development of networks across universities – leaders of the future?

Another common feature of ECRs workloads is the necessary balancing and prioritisation of research activities, with their teaching and often administrative-intensive workloads that come with teaching large first year, under-graduate classes. This feature is particularly the case in newer universities such as Charles Sturt University and University of Canberra, which do not have the same cultural and economic capital of the 'sandstone universities' and hence, rely heavily on government grants and student fees for their income. The lack of a tradition of a strong research culture also means that newer staff and ECRs do not have the same degree of access to research networks and mentoring to those ECRs in the larger, research-intensive universities. For these reasons, it can be a challenge for ECRs to prioritise their research, particularly when they are simultaneously attempting, as newer academics, to come to terms with new teaching materials, subjects and administrative systems. Hence, this ECR program has sent a strong signal not just to the individuals themselves but to their Schools, that the fostering of their research activities and networks is a key human resource development priority at the broader organisational level. Moreover, in an era in which the academic profile is increasingly

ageing, the cultivation of ECRs in terms of succession planning and shaping leaders of the future, is being seen an important strategy.

Within the current political climate the nature of research is changing and as a consequence, these research demands are requiring new sets of skills. These skills not only include the traditional research skills required for any research project, but given the increasing trends within education research to gain funding from government agencies, the new skills required are broader. These additional skills include the ability to write grant proposals; construct robust research within short timeframes; manage time and budgets; work collaboratively and demonstrate media skills. In many ways, the ECR project described here has encouraged the ECRs involved to develop and practise these very skills.

Referring to research within the field of Vocational and Education Training (VET), Smith (2004) has observed that

... research work is becoming more collaborative and team-based and this gives rise to an increasing demand for effective project management.... (Researchers) are increasingly called upon to be able to use a variety of research methods, crossing the quantitative/qualitative divide. They work much more closely with funding bodies and other clients. They communicate with a wider variety of audiences than hitherto (p.212).

He continues his observations arguing that new (VET) researchers need to be able to practise broad communication skills rather than merely academic writing skills; they need to be able to work with and manage others rather than focusing on self management; and that they need to become interdisciplinary rather than being discipline-based (Smith 2004). The sheer process of working together, organising the various forums, projects and sessions has meant that we, as ECRs, are practising these very skills of the new researcher, and this has been a particularly valuable component of the program.

Other key features

Other key features of the program have included the prioritising of research both for those involved as well as for their respective Schools. The opportunity to collaborate with interstate colleagues has opened up a range of new research possibilities such as investigating methodological issues in educational research. It is anticipated that these opportunities will lead to a general rise in the confidence and skills of ECRs as academics and future leaders within their respective universities, within the university sector and in their research areas more broadly. Thus, support for the ECRs in the early stages of their careers has been a strategic move at both the individual and the collective level.

Issues for the future

The shift from a 'teaching only' to a 'teaching and research culture' can present some difficulties to the novice researcher (Hsieh, Acee, Chung, Hsieh, Kim, Thomas, You, Levin & Robinson, 2005). Although the experience of completing a PhD provides some skill development, builds confidence, and provides the basis for early publications, there are many lecturers who do not remain active researchers (Bazeley,

2003). Grbich (1998) has argued that increasing the number of active post-PhD researchers could be achieved by providing a motivating environment within which individuals are encouraged to acquire the skills to continue as successful researchers. In our case, the development of a joint research paper, has given impetus for further extension of this research group. We are pursuing the possibility of a special issue of a journal with articles on an ECR theme, which is further building and extending our research capital. A possible future extension would be to focus on the writing of a book to help ECRs develop the necessary skills to succeed as researchers. A collaborative book concept could include some experienced researchers with guest contributions to attract potential readers and to add prestige to the publication. To further enhance the overall skills of the members of the group, workshops should continue to be organised with guest contributors invited to run sessions on how to succeed in the present education research environment.

The loss of promising beginning and early career researchers through the overall reduction in access to external grants has been identified as a major issue in research productivity (Bazeley, 2006). For ECRs, willingness and resourcefulness in seeking alternative sources of funding, and developing connectedness to research communities is important. Many ECRs succeed in obtaining research grants by piggybacking onto a successful professor or research team (Bazeley, 2003). Future research activity by the ECRs from the Education Faculties of the University of Canberra and Charles Sturt University then could focus on more collaborative research-based projects.

Experience and evidence suggests that online collaborative networks do not start spontaneously and that ongoing thoughtful approaches are required to sustain them (Bull, Bell, Thompson, Schrum, Sprague, Maddux, Dawson & Knezk, 2006). Mindful of this advice, the members of this group are focusing on capitalising on the development and expansion of the research network and the development of leadership skills using both electronic and face-to-face meetings to advance our interests. Scholarly organisations across all disciplines struggle to avoid appearing to be too closely knit. It is also acknowledged that to keep the ECR network alive and active there has to be a continuing effort to recruit new individuals to join the group. To further expand to scope of the group, some members taking up positions at other universities may provide opportunities for a wider collaborative network with access to a broader field of more experienced researchers.

The casualisation of the university workplace is an increasing issue for the tertiary sector. This is particularly evident within Schools of Education in Australian Universities, where seconded teachers, contracted academics, casual tutors and lecturers constitute an increasing proportion of the academic staff. This trend puts pressure on the remaining permanent staff (both aging and dwindling in numbers) to work in increasingly smaller academic circles. The role of support mechanisms for this group of ECRs including contact with senior academics at conferences such as this, is important for the overall sustainability of the research active academic in education. The inclusion of our paper in this conference has therefore been an important feature of this ECR program.

Conclusion

ECRs are important to the continuing development and sustainability of the research culture with Schools of Education in Australia. The reason for senior researchers from the University of Canberra and Charles Sturt University initiating the program outlined in this paper was so that the ECRs from the respective institutions would benefit from an expansion of their research and professional opportunities. The sustainability of this ECR program has been enabled through the financial and academic support of senior academics at both universities and through the motivation of the ECRs involved.

Key features and strengths of this program to date have been to:

- provide leadership opportunities for the participating ECRs;
- enable peer-to-peer mentoring opportunities to grow among the members of the group;
- broaden the horizons of the individual ECRs through the group's cross-institutional nature;
- use the development of joint research publications as a mechanism for maintaining momentum among members of the group; and
- enable members of the group to see the links between research and practice.

It is acknowledged that the current group of ECRs will move on to other universities and to other positions within our own universities. These potential changes are being viewed by the group as opportunities for broadening the networks among the group and to the creation of a new generation of education researchers. We see these changes as important for the longer-term health of the field of education research in Australia.

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