



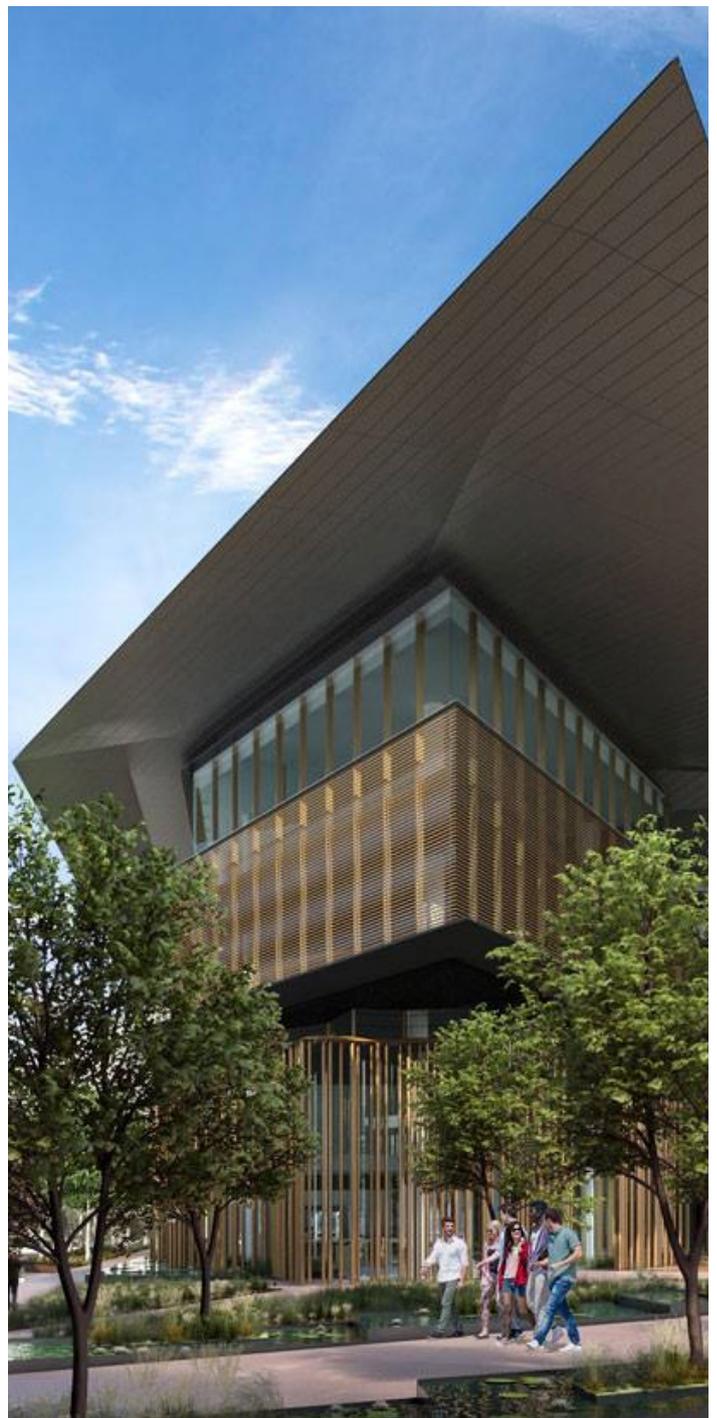
# CASE STUDY

## Implementing *Supervising Doctoral Studies* as part of a mandatory development programme at James Cook University

### Background

James Cook University joined the Development Group for *Supervising Doctoral Studies 2.0* in 2019. As a relatively young university (founded in 1961), they have a smaller Postgraduate cohort, with around 700-800 students taking part in either a Masters or PhD programme. As a result, Susan Gasson, Coordinator HDR Advisor at the university, found it thrilling to be able to listen to the students discuss their research projects first-hand, which wouldn't be possible in a larger university with thousands of students.

As a newer institution, Susan recognised that there was a value in the opportunity to work with others and learn their practises. As a result, they have taken an active role in the development of the programme, 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'. This is intended to manage the power differential between students and teachers, allowing their students to feel their growing capacity as an individual researcher.



## 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, after gaining more experience they become 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 university's specific advisory structure. This ensures that the advisor can utilise their previous training and apply it to their current position at James Cook University.

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 University 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 complete 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.

## Benefits

Susan found that this online course was particularly helpful through the transition into remote learning following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the course is carried out through an online, secure software, it was still easily accessible for advisors working from home. This ensure that the university did not abandon their duty of care to their researchers and were still able to provide effective and encouraging support, which enabled their PhD students to be minimally impacted by the pandemic.

It was also found that introducing this training at the very beginning of an advisor's experience was beneficial. It meant that they were aware of the resource which they had readily available to them and were constantly able to refer to it to ensure they were providing the best support possible to 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.

Find out more about *Supervising Doctoral Studies 2.0* and how it can support both new and more experienced supervisors at your institution.

Find out more: [www.epigeum.com](http://www.epigeum.com)

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