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## First Course: Formal Coursework and the New Australian PhD—An interview with Margaret Kiley

Lucy K. Van

**Graduate Student Advocate Dr Lucy Van speaks with Higher Education Policy Researcher Dr Margaret Kiley about the recent introduction of coursework in Australian doctoral education.**

The provision of a coursework component in PhD programs is customary in the United States, Canada and Europe. Graduate students in Australia will have noticed that over the past eighteen months more universities are introducing formal coursework into the Australian PhD; until recently there has traditionally been little, if any coursework in the doctoral experience. Dr Margaret Kiley, Higher Education policy researcher at the Australian National University, leads a project investigating what's happening with coursework in Australian PhDs. Working in conjunction with the Australian Deans and Directors of Graduate Research (DDOGS), the project examines the factors that are leading to the implementation of formal coursework in the Australian PhD, and addresses some of the support and structural issues surrounding these developments. The project also aims to provide principles for doctoral programs for the consideration of Australian Deans developing coursework in the PhD.

Lucy Van (LV): *Your project responds to the recent introduction of coursework in Australian PhDs. As you're dealing with a relatively new phenomenon, it must have been challenging to define the parameters of the research—as far as I have seen your project is the first to be looking at this issue. Is there any consensus on what 'coursework' actually is?*

Margaret Kiley (MK): The project looks at the universities and faculties that for various reasons were suddenly trying to introduce coursework into the PhD. But when you actually spoke to those involved with the introduction of coursework and asked what that was, there was an amazing variety of understandings of what 'coursework' might be. For example, you've got people who think coursework is about research methods, those who would call coursework 'research processes'—all the things to do with how to do research. For others coursework is actually disciplinary knowledge: advanced disciplinary knowledge. And those two of course are quite different. But they have the same term, 'coursework.' And then you have some really interesting interpretations even of the word 'coursework,' where staff at a university might say, 'well we don't want that. We don't want our students having to go to a weekly lecture and have to sit an exam.' So there's one concept of coursework as weekly lectures and exams. Now we have this very interesting discussion about what actually does this word even include or relate to. Everyone has this view of it and don't really realise that there are three or four other views of the same word.

(LV): *Some new PhD students might have come across differing hurdle requirements, where in some cases they might need 50% to pass, and in other cases they might need 75%. Those different hurdles seem to signify different attitudes to what the purpose of that coursework is—is it meant to be something to bridge a gap or actually something that enhances or adds value to the degree?*

(MK): On the one side of the continuum you've got this notion—you've used the word bridging, I use the word 'foundation' or 'compensatory.' 'You're taking students who

for various reasons don't have a really strong background in something, either in the discipline or in the research processes so all that you want is for everyone to have a really solid base to start with and you want to make sure that everyone's at the same starting point, so you do something in the first semester', something along those lines. That's certainly one way and there are interesting examples around of universities doing that. Then a second way is to think, 'well look, we want to value add, and offer third year entrepreneurship, or leadership, or those kinds of things.'

I don't think one is better than the other or more correct or anything—there are just different perceptions and different reasons. So I've been thinking about this with basically what I call a straight out curriculum model—which says you normally start with your learning outcomes—what is it that you actually want from doctoral candidates maybe after they graduate? What content is it that facilitates these processes? Or do we want to think about employability skills, or ethics, or preparing future academics? And of course for different students it's different things. I think if you're a young physicist you probably want different things from if you're a forty-five year old person in the School of Education who's already worked twenty-five years! So it starts to raise all those issues about individual students and needs.

We could actually have any number of models. We could have a model that says in the first twelve months we want every candidate to enrol in and undertake research processes work, which would be about how to do the literature review, research methods, how to write, how to present, and that in fact the successful completion of all of that would be embodied in doing the confirmation seminar, for example.

Another example might be where you have one or two university courses or at least faculty courses, and a number of individual courses—so people can gain knowledge in an area they lack expertise, even if it is not directly related to their specific research topic. There might be someone that comes into a PhD program with a really strong background in communication because they've worked for twenty years as a teacher—they might not need to do a communications course but they might need to do something different, which they could elect to do. That's a different model.

And the other idea that's getting quite a bit of traction is a learning plan. So it's not so much formal coursework and courses, but more that you formalise or structure the learning of each student throughout candidature so you would start on that obviously from day one. There is one example here at the ANU that's been implemented, and we're looking at another example at one of the Perth universities.

Generally, the model of the learning plan goes like this. In the first month someone would sit down with the candidate, either the supervisor, or someone from the graduate school, and get the candidate to think back to their learning background, where are their strengths, where are their weaknesses? The candidate would be informed about the doctoral qualities that the University think are really important, that you have to have some understanding of communication, ethics and so on.

*(LV): Are these the kinds of outcomes that these particular universities have felt that the traditional supervisor-candidate model wasn't able to achieve?*

*(MK): I had a number of recent graduates say words along the lines of, 'I wish someone had made me...I wish my supervisor had made me do so and so.' Well, you know, if your supervisor had gone to make you, you probably would have refused anyway. Or you would have been really grumpy about it. Like, 'what a waste of time.' So you've got this interesting situation where you've got doctoral students who wish they'd been made to do something. There are probably some things that really are good for candidates to experience—and so that's just one consideration. But the other consideration is—I*

think sometimes supervisors and candidates don't know the range of opportunities available for students. You get so caught up in your day to day life both as a candidate and as a supervisor—so sometimes it's hard to go back and go to the big picture—you're always thinking of timelines and finishing. So it wasn't so much as deficit but a way of perhaps opening up a broader set of horizons and saying that there's more to a PhD than just getting that thesis on a bookshelf. It's about this other knowledge and skills. Planning out the sorts of experiences that would be really useful for the candidate—for those who want to go into an academic career, maybe it's teaching. And so the plan would give you an opportunity to look at the individual trajectory of candidates and to design something accordingly.

(LV): *What about the design of the project itself? How does having these competing notions of coursework affect your research?*

(MK): I thought it would be really easy to do when I was setting this up, that everyone would be having four courses, and this and that—and it's just not showing up. So there are six universities involved in the project, in conjunction with the Council of Deans and Directors of Graduate Research. We've just started a student survey, in a couple of those universities, to see how those students go, what experiences they had, what they've learned, what they wish they had learned. These are current students. We would love to do it with exiting students, although it's quite early at this stage. I'm working with people who are really keen to do this. Some of them are doing extra things outside the project, so we'll garner all sorts of information.

(LV): *When you say you're working with people that are 'really keen' do you mean that these particular institutions are very 'pro' coursework?*

(MK): Not necessarily, no. We chose a range of perspectives. The project deliberately includes different kinds of universities—so larger GO8s and then smaller regionals. And then look at universities that have a very different approach to this. Across the sector there are all sorts of models. There are a couple of institutions now that have what they call four year PhDs. And when you enrol you are told it's a four year PhD, and the first year is coursework, and it includes both research processes and disciplinary knowledge. Then you do your three year research project. So that's one model. Then you've got the Macquarie Model, where they have their M-Res and then their three year PhD, a really interesting model. So it's fascinating to see how different universities are positioning themselves, partly because of their student cohort. So the sort of students that the University of Melbourne gets and the way that the University of Melbourne runs would be quite different from the way, for example, the University of Ballarat does. And not for any reason that one's better or one's worse, just different. And so even in the Melbourne area if you think of the University of Melbourne, RMIT and Victoria University, all within a square mile of one another, all have very different cultures. There's a great deal of interest—there's some fantastic stuff happening in Australian universities at the moment. And what's so interesting about it, I think, is its variation. I'm not finding 'one model'—I'm finding lots of different models.

(LV): *What about inside an institution? In addition to what you're saying about this variation between institutions, within an institution you can see faculties doing very different things from other faculties—have you looked at that?*

(MK): That is an interesting one. I've done some work with a couple of universities on that and it is—that's absolutely true. It's a really interesting issue. Margot Pearson, back in the 90s, did a great report on the diversity of higher degree by research students in Australia and back then she was talking about the percentage of part-timers on campus, the older students and so on. And this is becoming more obvious, you know. We have 40% of our students in Australia part time. We have, over in Education, the average age at forty-five for a student starting a PhD in Education. And so you've got these different disciplines picking up on that and saying 'our students don't need this, that and the other, they don't need career workshops because they've already got a career—what they need is 'a, b and c' not 'x, y and z.' And then others from some discipline areas are taking candidates who don't necessarily have that discipline background. An area like Environment's a really good example of this. You can do Environmental Studies and you can have a background in Science, or in Social Science, in many things. And so, often those people, they do need something quite different—in terms of discipline based coursework—from someone who's come through a straight Chemistry PhD or a straight History PhD. So that's an example of where the discipline differences are really showing up.

(LV): *At a governance level, are these differences something that concerns universities? Would universities not want to standardise an overall doctoral student experience?*

(MK): I think it really is tricky. The larger the university—so I'm thinking of the University of Melbourne and ANU and the University of Sydney and places like that, where there is so much variation and probably enough numbers, there's strength in an area to do their own thing. In a smaller university where there are disciplines with only 15 or 20 PhD students and seven or eight supervisors, it'd be very hard for to go it alone. Whereas if you've got, you know, 370 supervisors, or something, then you can probably set up a program that's self-sustaining. So I think size has something to do with it. I haven't got any data on that—that's just me thinking that. But it makes sense doesn't it? I mean, there'd be parts of Melbourne University, some faculties there that would be larger than some smaller universities. And you must have somewhere in the order of three to four thousand PhDs at the University of Melbourne. You're going to have pockets of strengths that perhaps don't exist in some of the smaller universities. So one of the attractions of having something somewhat more university or centrally-based is that you can work with greater numbers. At the ANU we have seven colleges, and they're quite independent of one another really, because we don't have a graduate school, so each college is doing its own thing with regards to coursework. And the college that I'm in is one example where we actually did introduce four formal award coursework courses, where the courses have numbers, and you enrol, and you get a result and all that sort of thing. And they are related to research processes. But that's just one college. And at the moment most of that structure is relying on individual staff to do that teaching, without any additional workload or whatever. It's just, you know, people do it. But if you're a much tinier university you wouldn't have that workload capacity. So workload's an issue too.

(LV): *I wonder if, relatedly, both university staff and candidates are concerned about timely completions.*

(MK): Yes, the other issue which comes up all the time in discussion is, 'will this either add to the time of candidature or, if we're going to do this, we have to shorten the actual thesis?' So perhaps people are thinking about a dissertation of less breadth and with less actual numbers of words. I think what we're finding is that if the coursework is

research processes work, then it probably would even help shorten the time to completion. Whereas if you're going to do disciplinary knowledge, there can be a feeling that it adds to candidature. However there are some places like the University of Melbourne, ANU and the University of Sydney where the graduates in some areas are going to be competing on an international stage with big companies—say with Economics, KPMG, and so on. These graduates need that broad knowledge to be competitive on an international stage, the argument is 'you need to be able to talk the talk.' You can't just go out and say, 'I'm an expert in one tiny area' and so they're saying because of the way our graduates go out and get jobs they need broad background. Even when it's discipline specific there's still the big picture there.

*(LV): Is there a sense then that this wasn't taking place in the traditional model, on an informal level? Is this kind of coursework filling a gap for something that wasn't there or is it formalising something that's always been there?*

*(MK): Well, in some areas like Economics it's been there for twenty or more years, it's nothing new. So others have perhaps started to think, wow—it probably is the way the world is going, that more and more of our students will be getting those sorts of jobs. Perhaps 15-20 years ago it wasn't quite the case, you might be more likely to stay in Australia unless you were really, really outstanding, so...*

*(LV): I was just thinking about the function of informal reading groups, discussions at the university bar, those kinds of collegial things. Are certain forms of coursework seeking to formalise what people were doing anyway by their own motivation? Is this about recognising the value of these activities and making sure that everyone is offered that opportunity?*

*(MK): I think that's a really good point that you've made there, I think that it's about recognising the value and it's also recognising that not all candidates necessarily see these things as important. For example, I might see it as important that candidates meet informally to chat over their experiences, but I can understand why some candidates might feel this is wasting time as it is not directly related to their research project. And, if you're a part-time student, how do you build in those collegial chit chats over coffee and a drink if you work full time and you fly in for an hour after work to talk to your supervisor and then by seven o'clock you have to go home and cook dinner? I agree, I think a lot of students, a lot of capable students have done this anyway. But this is recognising the importance of those things. You know, you can't force a student to have coffee, but you could have something like a writing retreat, where a School might say well, there's this writing retreat where we'll go away for a week, and if you've got kids and so on, we're going to have to find a way of someone looking after the kids for a week because that's part of our requirement here, that everyone goes on a writing retreat. It may be that Schools are able to help candidates with some funding for child care or some internal arrangements. And it's not about writing—well, it is—but it's also about getting to know your colleagues and your discipline and other important skills in other ways. My guess is that by the time the project's ended—which will be next year—there's going to be a phrase that I'll have, which I think will be something like 'a structured approach to doctoral education.' This will say that in some cases it's a really good idea to have formal coursework that's research methods, and in some disciplines it's important to have coursework that's on disciplinary knowledge, because of the discipline that it is. And for others it'll be important that they have these sorts of learning plans. And perhaps, I would like to think, everyone would have a learning plan, and the learning plan would include formal coursework and then informal, or less*

formal things. And the one thing we think about is—not just in the first year of our candidature—I'm very keen, for us to keep thinking about what happens in the middle of candidature, which is usually a time when students really feel miserable. I mean the first year everyone's usually pretty good, pretty high, fairly enthusiastic. The second year is, 'I hate this, it's stupid, boring, I want to pull out.' We know that. So to me it would be a good time to have some other structured coursework. I know that sounds really awful, 'forcing' students to have to do it—but again, you know if candidates are going to be miserable and flat, and rather than letting them get like that, you might intervene with some courses and support. And then towards the end, maybe preparing them for futures, whether it is how to write research grants, how to apply for jobs—all of this could be incorporated into coursework.

(LV): *Is there anywhere in your study where you address any concerns about the introduction of coursework, some concerns members of staff or students might have expressed—are there any trends in that area, where there's a sense of resistance?*

(MK): No, the negative trends are about as varied as the positive trends. There is concern about the time an overall feeling that 'we don't have enough time.' But then, some said, we don't mind adding time because it's really important for our students to have these experiences. So it varies. For example for the discipline specific information respondents say students really, really need this in order to be competitive in the workplace is valued, so there's a call that that's the way it's got to be. For example, where departments talk about the disciplinary knowledge as part of the PhD they really value it as they believe it helps candidate to be more competitive in the workplace, whereas, in other disciplines they value other experiences, maybe something like teaching. When we get the survey data back from the candidates that's when we'll know about their concerns. We have done some focus group work with candidates and recent post-docs, and I think their main concern was—they were keen to make sure that early on they had a really clear idea of all the possibilities. They felt that there were things that sounded terrific that they'd never known about. That was the really interesting idea. And I guess what happens is that at induction you tell students everything and they kind of forget about it in the whirl of their day to day life. And then six months later you have someone ask 'haven't you done such and such?'—and they think 'oh gosh, I forgot, did you tell me about that?' The other concern is certainly workload for staff. That if we suddenly introduce coursework—who's going to teach it? Who is qualified to teach it?

And then there's the other side of the coin. If the students have this really sound basis of research design then that actually could make your life even easier as a supervisor. So there often seems to be a trade-off, depending on how you view the world. And which discipline you come from. So where supervisors have been very used to having their own students and doing their own thing one-on-one, the more humanities-based model, I think for some of them—some—the idea of having courses and so on really is very attractive, because it lessens the load for them. Others feel that it's taking away from their one-on-one students. So there are no trends, there are differences. I couldn't say the major concern is this or that. Whereas years and years ago we introduced something at the University of Adelaide in the first semester. And everyone kept saying, 'oh this will add so much time' and it didn't, it literally sped it up. Because they had all this good stuff at the beginning.

I think the idea is thinking, 'what is it we want from our PhD graduates?' Do we want them to have this sort of a broader knowledge, a broad set of skills, not just for their jobs but for their life? And therefore are there additional things that seem appropriate to learn and therefore be taught in a PhD? They don't have to be taught in

formal lectures—as I said, they could be writing retreats, all sorts of things. What is it we want our graduates to be able to do? George Walker who headed up the Carnegie Initiative on the doctorate in the USA, he posed the following questions: what do we want our graduates to know, what habits of mind do we want them to have—you know, will they be very ethical? Will they see that their work is about contributing to society? And what skills will they have? What you want from physicists is different from what you want from artists, or musicians.

(LV): *Your project talks about Australia, Australian institutions, and this relatively recent phenomenon of coursework, despite certain areas such as Economics having it for quite a while. So is Australia being forward thinking in a way in this introduction, even though it's a very varied introduction, or is it following an international trend?*

(MK): I think it's more following the trend. When I first started looking at this I had reactions saying, 'oh yeah, you want to introduce the US model.' In the US they've always had coursework but their coursework on the whole has been discipline knowledge. The US model is really different. We're not saying we're having the US model at all. Interestingly enough, when I talk to groups of staff that have done their PhD in the US—there are quite a few here at the ANU—they're thinking of that model, and we have to say, no, no, no, we're not saying this is a US model, we're talking about an Australian model. And I think I was very strong on that deliberately, not to imply we're taking someone else's model and imposing it but looking at what might work for Australia given our circumstances and our students, and our universities and so on. But there have been examples all around—probably many countries other than New Zealand, New Zealand's very similar to us—where there have been either formal coursework or formal courses that haven't existed in Australia up until now.

(LV): *Who are the stakeholders in this project? Is the purpose of the project to facilitate the implementation of formal courses? Or is it an objective enquiry?*

(MK): It's ended up being two things but it was designed originally to look at what was happening, using the six universities as a basis for more intensive work, with all the actual different things with graduate studies, and come up with various models, a series of questions on the ways that universities might structure them—not saying they have to follow them—but that these are the sorts of questions you need to address. For example, is it about the discipline, or is it about the research process? If so, why? Those kinds of questions. What has happened as a result—because of the other kind of work that I do in an advisory role—I'm actually doing some work with two groups about how they want to go about implementing some programmes. I'm doing some implementation training, working in a couple of places—linked with, but separate from the project. But it's a fantastic opportunity for me because I'm getting these really on the ground things with students and academic and admin staff, the three together, so we get to all work together and talk about what they want. And we've had post-docs involved too.

(LV): *So you've had four groups then—current students, academic staff, admin staff and post-docs*

(MK): Yes but all together—one place we've had the students separately for a focus group but in the other places we've had groups, let's just say, a group from one discipline—a couple of supervisors, maybe the convener, a couple of PhD students and one post-doc. And they all sit and talk about—what do they think about the outcomes,

what do they think would work best, so on and so forth. So it's very joint in that way. So students have been involved right from the beginning. And also I think as I said, post-docs are really important, especially recent post-docs, because they're the ones who can look back on what happened and say, 'ohh, yeah but I really wish I'd had that.' 'I wish they'd made me do it.' And so I've included some of them as well, and that's been terrific.

*Graduate students who would like to find out more about 'Coursework in Australian doctoral education: what's happening, why, and future direction?' can contact the project manager Karen Bell: [Karen.Bell@anu.edu.au](mailto:Karen.Bell@anu.edu.au)*

## **Biographical Statement**

*Lucy Van* works as an advocate at the Graduate Student Association at the University of Melbourne, where she undertakes individual casework and also conducts research into policy issues affecting graduate students. She is also an editor for *Mascara Literary Review* and is on the editorial board for *Peril: Asian Australian Arts and Culture Magazine*. She completed her PhD at the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne.

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