Good Practice Guide: Developing Research Capacity

What is this guide?
This guide to good practice in the development of research capacity is a series of statements about effective ways of creating conducive institutional settings for research. The statements are expressed as actions that can be taken by executive leaders of research development, such as deputy and pro vice-chancellors, and other senior staff with whom they work to develop research. These include deans, associate deans, heads of school, research group directors and the like. The guide is intended to be a useful resource that informs strategies aimed at enhancing the institutional structures and processes that support research.

Who developed this guide?
This guide was developed and published by the Centre for Leadership in Research Development (CLRD) at the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC). The guide is one of the outcomes of a national workshop conducted by the CLRD at Queensland University of Technology in November 2012.

The CLRD is a USC centre funded by the Commonwealth for three years under the Collaborative Research Networks (CRN) program. Its purpose is to develop and provide resources to support research development in universities striving to increase their research intensity. Its main activities are a series of national workshops and production of related good practice guides; development of a handbook for executive leadership of research development; and making contributions to the research development literature with a view to influencing both argument and practice in the field.

This workshop on development of research capacity was a gathering of approximately 30 participants comprising deputy and pro vice-chancellors, directors of research, managers of research offices, CRN coordinators and other senior research leaders and managers from most universities that received CRN funding. The names of all participants are listed in the acknowledgements section of this guide.

Why has this guide been produced?
This guide has been produced to help universities striving to increase their research intensity, which is a choice a range of institutions are making in response to changes in the Australian and international research environment. The decision to produce the guide is based on three premises. First, that while research development is a ubiquitous challenge, as a practice it needs more attention, including more investigation and engagement with the literature.

Second, that there are two broad categories of action in research development and each of these needs specific consideration. These are development of research capability and research capacity, with capability relating to skills, and capacity relating to institutional settings, such as strategy, policy and systems. Hence the focus of the CLRD’s second national workshop from which this guide is derived.

Finally, that ideas about research development are difficult to put into practice, especially in a coherent and coordinated way across whole institutions. Therefore, well-honed statements of good practice informed by practitioner knowledge and experience, and the body of knowledge in the field, can be a useful resource, especially when intelligently adapted for different environments and stages of institutional development. This is why the third CLRD national workshop was on senior research leadership.

This good practice guide should be read in conjunction with the guide on developing research capability and the Handbook for Executive Leadership of Research Development, also produced by the CLRD. The good practice guides are comprehensive in scope, but are presented with minimal explanation. The intention is to provide a snapshot of headline approaches that outline the territory and key markers of successful research development. The guides are designed to be accessible ready reckoners that can be pinned to notice boards and used to keep the big picture in focus. They are also likely to be a useful resource for professional development activities.

The handbook is also intended to be accessible and easy to use, but provides a more discursive, evidence-based analysis of the challenges and successful strategies of research development. It is constructed around a set of principles, each of which is amplified by discussion of key elements that explain and justify recommended actions. The handbook also includes vignettes from case studies that provide an insight into the experience of leaders who have succeeded in catalysing significant improvement in their institutions’ research performance. The principles and case studies are linked to a “background briefing” about the findings of international studies concerned with the conditions that enable sustained increases in research performance.

The good practice guides and the handbook are complementary and consistent, and together provide a set of resources that should help senior research leaders to fulfil their roles and build institutional support for their work.
The university’s explicit commitment to research is reflected in its highest level planning and budget documents, and the expectations of all senior staff. Building a serious research profile does not happen without the deliberate action of executive leaders. If it is not prominent in the strategic plan, other high-level plans, and mainstream budgets, it is unlikely to be achieved. Similarly, it is essential that all executive and senior staff activity support research development. While it needs to be led by member of the executive, the whole task cannot be left to one person.

The university focuses the development of its research profile in selected areas. The ultimate aim of being more research intensive is to have breadth and depth of research excellence. But this journey can only commence with deliberate action of university leaders. If it is not prominent in the strategic plan, other high-level plans, and mainstream budgets, it needs to be led by a member of the executive, the whole task cannot be left to one person.

The university takes into account its mission; location; competitive advantages; existing research performance; and the breadth and depth of research excellence. The research plan is developed, not by a committee, but by an executive board. The central assumption is that excellence is deeply rooted in our history. A focus on art will enable us to become known as leaders in their fields, researchers in less research intense universities are likely to be more successful if they collaborate with the existing leaders in their fields.

The university establishes research collaborations with relevant, well-resourced industry, business and community organisations. Research is expensive and is usually undertaken at a net financial cost, especially in less research intensive universities. Money to fund research is scarce. There is little point partnering with organisations that cannot either fund, or help leverage funds for research. Collaborating with practitioners in the field enables research to have an impact on both the literature and the community.

The university establishes research collaborations with relevant, high performing complementary research groups at research intensive universities. In a competitive environment increasingly driven by research quality and impact, success follows activity undertaken by groups that include known leaders in their fields. While working to become known as leaders in their fields, researchers in less research intensive universities are likely to be much more successful if they collaborate with the existing leaders in their fields.

The university establishes strategic longer-term partnerships with relevant, well-resourced and/or influential organisations. These are organisations such as research institutes, government agencies, philanthropic organisations and overseas universities. In developing the university’s research profile, performance and culture, it is very useful to establish partnerships with organisations that have a research interest and a research budget, and that can open doors in Australia and overseas.

The university establishes strategic longer-term partnerships with governments, state and local governments and their departments. Very few universities in Australia have been able to become research intensive within the early stages having a strong working connection with key government departments. This is because they have significant research budgets and responsibilities. They need university partners to gain access to expertise and granting schemes. Research undertaken with these partners is by its nature, aligned with government research priorities.

The university collaborates with research partners to gain access to, and develop, strategic research infrastructure. Both hard and soft research infrastructure is available to universities that make the right strategic connections. Existing infrastructure is often underused due to shortages of research project and program funds. This can be supplied by a university partner who can offer the right expertise and access to funding schemes. Joint appointments with relevant organisations can create access to research infrastructure. Similarly, co-location and co-location of resources can form the basis of mutually beneficial partnerships. In addition, well-established organisations often have expertise in matters such as intellectual property that can be lacking in less research intensive universities.

Implementation of Good Practice

It is acknowledged that what is perceived to be good practice is not always easy to implement and that there are many environmental factors that impose constraints. It is also acknowledged that as an area of practice research development is a contested field. As in most challenging enterprises, judgement has to be exercised. The following are a distillation of good practice in the development of research capacity as produced through the processes of the national workshop conducted by the CLRD in November 2012. They are presented in three sections representing key aspects of institutional development for excellent research performance.

**What is good practice in the development of research capacity?**

The following statements are a distillation of good practice in the development of research capacity as produced through the processes of the national workshop conducted by the CLRD in November 2012. They are presented in three sections representing key aspects of institutional development for excellent research performance.
Positive Research Culture

Adjacent is a selection from the research development literature, much of which is based on empirical studies. A key theme in this literature is that strategic action, such as that recommended by this guide, is much more effective in the context of a positive research culture.

But what is research culture and what makes it positive? In the research development literature, a positive research culture generally refers to the practices, modes of organisation and discourses that constitute the normal everyday worlds of researchers. Creating the conditions under which these can be positively charged and have the power to keep lifting research performance seems to be an essential ingredient of sustained research development.

A positive research culture, according to much of the research development literature, is exemplified by:

- common understandings of the values, norms, motivations, work habits, expectations and sanctions of life as a university researcher;
- positive engagement with a discipline/field/profession; its connections with other disciplines; its theories, methodologies, methods and techniques; its national and international leaders; its key outlets and sources of funding; and its end users;
- positive engagement with the institutional systems and processes that support and enable research;
- academic organisational units that have clear directions; are highly interactive and cooperative; have devolved leadership and management responsibilities; have relatively stable memberships; routinely discuss their agreements and disagreements; have a strong work ethic and value effective time management; are open to new ideas and actions; are committed to teaching and service as well as research; and invest in coaching and mentoring.

These practices, modes of organisation and discourses tend to be more prevalent (but by no means universal) in research intensive universities. Less research intensive universities (and probably less research intensive areas of research intensive universities) seem to need to take deliberate steps to develop them. Thus, while the long term success of strategic development of greater research intensity hinges on effective research management processes, such as development of research capacity, it also relies on the strengthening of academic cultures.

Key References


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