Problem definition and thesis writing
Workshops for the postgraduate student

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Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to present some innovative solutions to major problems experienced by coursework postgraduate students. The paper focusses on two key problem areas: the definition of the research problem, and the planning and writing of the first draft of the thesis. It is argued that one approach which can assist the student to overcome these problems is the workshop; research skills can be developed through the practical guidance, group-support, discussion and reflection which occur in the workshop context. The authors' experiences in conducting postgraduate workshops at Griffith University are discussed, and student evaluation of the workshops presented.

One of the major problems which Honours or Masters-by-Coursework students confront is the requirement that the research thesis (which may constitute 40-50% of total assessment) must be completed in a very restricted period of time, normally one academic year for the full-time student or two academic years for the part-time student. This problem is frequently compounded by the fact that the Honours or Masters student has had no informal experience of independent research or any formal tuition in techniques and methods of research. Educational research on postgraduate study has hitherto tended to concentrate on problems confronted by doctoral or Masters-by-Research students. Such problems are not, of course, different in kind to those faced by the Honours or Masters-by-Coursework student; they are however, accentuated for these latter students by the imposition of severe time limitations and their own inexperience. Both of these factors may contribute to the failure of such students to complete their course of study or to submit their theses by the prescribed date; at the very least, they may contribute to poorer academic performance. It therefore behoves those responsible for the supervision and tuition of these students to be aware of those phases of the research process most likely to impede progress and to be able to identify and employ procedures and techniques which can assist students through such obstacles.

In this paper we will argue that two phases of the research process are critical to the progress and performance of the beginning researcher: the first involves the definition, construction and articulation of the research problem itself; the second occurs at the point at which the student approaches the writing of the first draft of the thesis. We will then describe a procedure employed to overcome these problems faced by Honours and Masters-by-Coursework students
in the School of Modern Asian Studies (M.A.S.) at Griffith University; this procedure involved the use of workshops in which the students collectively confronted these impediments to research. Their design, implementation and evaluation will be described. We turn firstly, however, to a brief discussion of general problems of thesis writing identified by educational research and by postgraduate coursework students within M.A.S.

**Problems identified in postgraduate thesis writing**

One central problem of postgraduate research which has been identified is the failure to complete the thesis within the required time. Statistics gathered by several research bodies with interests in postgraduate research suggest that this is a problem which spans disciplinary boundaries and indeed is common to postgraduate research in both the social and natural sciences. The Science and Engineering Research Council of Great Britain (SERC, 1983) published the results of a survey which revealed that less than half of all full-time PhD candidates completed their theses within three years. Figures released for 1983 and 1984 indicate that this pattern has improved only marginally: overall four-year completion rates for over 2,000 SERC-supported PhD candidates only rose from 49.1 percent to 51 percent between 1983 and 1984 (Turney, 1985). Similarly, the findings of the Social Science Research Council of Great Britain paint an even gloomier picture: only about forty percent of PhD candidates on a Research Council award had submitted their theses within six years (SSRC, 1980: 28–29):

There are likely to be a number of reasons for this which might include students tackling over-ambitious topics; insufficient training in research methods and techniques and inadequate supervision. Some remedies under consideration include increasing the number of studentships allocated as linked awards (see SSRC Annual Report 1977/78); introduction of new forms of research training which include substantial taught components in the first year; closer monitoring of departments and students by SSRC.

The SERC (1983) suggests four main reasons why postgraduate students do not complete their theses in the allotted time:

1. Students make a slow start, particularly in the area of problem formulation and literature survey;
2. The perfectionism of students who are never satisfied with their work;
3. Distraction from the main focus of the research project; for example, by reading texts unrelated to the topic;