

# Growing a collaborative research training partnership with Bhutan

Rod Wissler, Jill Borthwick and Lynda Torrie report on an international capacity building programme.

Senior academics from the Royal University of Bhutan (RUB) and Bhutanese government departments took part in an intensive three-week research management programme that was held at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Australia, in April-May of this year.

The programme's initial purpose was to build supervision and research leadership capacity to support the organisational advancement of RUB and its central role in Bhutan's national development.

The programme was funded by the Royal Civil Service Commission (RCSC) of Bhutan, and delivered by expert staff associated with the Australian Technology Network's e-Grad School (eGSA), through the QUT Research Students Centre.

## Research training and development: RUB and eGSA

RUB is Bhutan's sole university and operates on a distributed model, with its courses dispersed across ten member colleges located in different regions of the country. The model 'allows for shared planning arrangements, shared staff development, joint curriculum developments, shared costs and efficiencies'.<sup>1</sup>

RUB's university charter cites research as one of its dual university objectives, alongside that associated with teaching and learning. The university's intention is to introduce postgraduate research studies in 2012. Accordingly, it is active in addressing the need to grow the staff required to meet this objective.

The eGSA/QUT-based programme met this need for supervisor development and research leadership skills, offering selected Bhutanese staff the opportunity to acquire capabilities to

commence supervision in the lead-up to 2012, and laying a foundation for ongoing, internet-based professional development. In the follow-up to the programme, a number of Bhutanese PhD students will enrol at Australian universities. 20-30 Bhutanese PhD students will enrol at QUT as part of this programme, and they will be jointly supervised by QUT supervisors and their Bhutanese counterparts.<sup>2</sup>

The rationale for the RCSC's choice of the e-Grad School programme can be found in some noteworthy correspondences between eGSA's drivers and the RUB model with its emphasis on finding ways to deliver resources across a large numbers of sites. In eGSA's case, its origins go back to the five universities in the Australian Technology Network (ATN) agreeing to provide innovative resources to their postgraduate research students, and recognising that the only way to achieve the level of quality to which they aspired was through pooling their expertise. With each of the five universities (Curtin University of Technology, University of South Australia, RMIT University, University of Technology, Sydney, and Queensland University of Technology) located in a different state, factors of distance and time zones had to be resolved in the delivery of resources. The ATN collaboration has led to shared planning, academic governance, curriculum development, and teaching and quality assurance. For the ATN and eGSA, online technology and e-learning have been central to each of these processes. As eGSA has grown – and its user group expanded vastly – the required technology to support it has necessarily increased in sophistication and outreach. This was seen as a powerful model for the future development of RUB.

The eGSA resources are offered in flexible

but mainly online mode; all are designed to promote interactivity between participants, who report that networking with distant peers has been a major bonus for them. In the Bhutan training programme, many participants experienced their first intensive use of online learning resources – a powerful tool for their future work as research supervisors and managers. eGSA's clientele now includes postdoctoral fellows, research administrators and research managers, and the user group has expanded to encompass many other universities, institutions and groups, such as the national Cooperative Research Centres, government and industry.

eGSA provides the framework for students gaining two fully online award-level qualifications. The Graduate Certificate in Research Commercialisation commenced in 2007, and has graduated 58 students to date. The follow-up Master of R&D Management was launched at the beginning of 2009 and already has international as well as Australian enrolments.

## Supervisor development and today's research students

The traditional concept of supervision involves an experienced academic helping the research student to complete a high-quality research project, culminating in the award of a PhD. However, in today's employment-conscious global and electronic environment, increasing responsibilities are being assigned to supervisors and administrators working with research students. The ability to innovate, work in research teams and lead them, and be an entrepreneur are just some of the abilities typically expected of today's PhD graduates by governments and employers.

Consequently, the programme tailored for the Bhutanese contingent drew on eGSA resources that inform the cluster of responsibilities that go with the supervisor role, as described in the next section.

## The Bhutanese contingent and the programme

The contingent consisted of highly-qualified professionals occupying senior roles in RUB, the Bhutanese RCSC and its ministries. Of the 12, ten held doctoral qualifications from major universities in Europe, the US, Australia, Asia and the UK. Two are in the final stages of completing PhDs in Australia. Their discipline areas were diverse, including the natural sciences, the environment, business and teacher education. The positions they held spread across the states and provinces of Bhutan, where they were variously deans, chiefs, and directors in their different workplaces. The one woman in the group held a PhD in Botany and was Dean of Academic Affairs at her RUB college. Their ages ranged from the late 30s to 55.

The three-week programme was led by Professor Rod Wissler, Dean of Research and Research Training at QUT, who is also the Chair of the eGSA Board. In line with the programme's aim of developing supervision and research leadership capacity at the RUB in preparation for their offering of postgraduate research degrees, sessions were designed to incorporate both aspects: supervision and research leadership. This was achieved through framing issues associated with supervision to take in the research leadership development aspect.

Daily sessions included face-to-face contact with presenters working in the eGSA areas with particular relevance to supervisor development and research leadership. Participants also engaged in scheduled sessions in a ded-

icated computer laboratory, working online with eGSA resources.

The structure of the online and interactive Supervisor Solutions programme ([www.egradschool.edu.au/whategsoffe/supportforsu.jsp](http://www.egradschool.edu.au/whategsoffe/supportforsu.jsp)) served as the spine over the three weeks, with the lecturer who coordinates and moderates Supervisor Solutions providing input on a number of occasions. Further face-to-face input came from ATN staff who work as lecturers, facilitators and online moderators around Australia on eGSA modules and on its two award courses. The presenters found the interaction with the highly motivated and experienced participants to be both rewarding and stimulating. Presenters' reports on their sessions all celebrated the opportunity to work with such a group. A comment from one (Gillian White, University of Technology, Sydney, who presented on research project management) summed it up: 'the engaged group was not afraid to learn or push me to provide more'.

The list of topics demonstrates the broad terrain of the programme:

- Support for supervisors
- Maximising research careers
- Leadership skills and workplace communication
- Research project management and R&D management
- Knowledge transfer
- Entrepreneurship

This wide range of topics gives some flavour of the expectations placed on supervisors in today's universities – and of their students

on graduation. The resources are multi-purpose: they lend themselves to being useful to the research student and to the supervisor for research supervision purposes. They also carry the means for acquisition of further gains in professional and personal skills for the supervisors and research leaders themselves.

## Conclusion

The programme was evaluated throughout, using formal and informal methods to establish participants' levels of satisfaction and whether their expectations were being met. The final evaluation was formal in nature, with the feedback received consistent with the high level of satisfaction with all aspects of the programme that had been expressed over the three weeks.

Participants highlighted the substantial skills they had acquired, all in a friendly and well-organised environment. They were also pleased that presenters demonstrated knowledge of Bhutan and built this into resources and activities. Gratitude at being able to participate in a programme of such dimensions was commonly expressed and the Bhutanese and Australian sponsors thanked. The endnote from one participant was 'The course was very enriching and practical not only for PhD student supervision but also for carrying out regular research and teaching activities'.

Those associated with the planning and presentation of the programme here in Australia echo that sentiment, and look back with pleasure on their experiences in working together with Bhutanese colleagues. Currently, the QUT/ATN group is planning similar programmes with research groups from South Africa and the Philippines. RG



The Bhutanese Royal Civil Service Commission at a supervisors' training workshop at the Queensland University of Technology, Australia

1 *Reaching New Heights*, Royal University of Bhutan prospectus 2008-2009, p.11

2 The Australia Bhutan Friendship Association reports that 71 students from Bhutan are currently doing postgraduate work in Australia on research Masters' and PhDs.

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