

<b>Debate Proposition</b>	:	<b>Coursework is an essential ingredient of any strong PhD Program</b>
<b>Date</b>	:	10 June 2010
<b>Time</b>	:	10:50am – 12:00 pm
<b>Place</b>	:	E6A 102
<b>Chair Person</b>	:	Mark Dras
<b>For the Proposition</b>	:	<b>External:</b> <u>Murali Agastya</u> (Economics, University of Sydney) <u>Aleksandar Ignjatovic</u> (School of CSE, UNSW) <b>Internal:</b> <u>Md. Hague</u> (PhD student, Computing, Macquarie University)
<b>Against the Proposition</b>	:	<b>Internal:</b> <u>Michael Johnson</u> (Computing, Macquarie University) <u>Phil Taylor</u> (Behavioural Biology Research Group, Macquarie University) <u>Hadi Mashinchi</u> (PhD student, Computing, Macquarie University)
<b>Minutes Submitted On</b>	:	<b>15/06/2010</b>

#	Summary
1.	Debating Performance: Majority of votes goes to the team arguing against the proposition.
2.	Debating Outcome: Equal votes are received for both team.
3.	Student representatives present gifts to both teams and chair on behalf of the department.

**Chair - Mark:**

- ❖ Welcome all for attendance.
- ❖ Brief introduction of both debating teams.
- ❖ Format of the debate: Each speaker is allocated seven minutes. The chair will remind the speaker of time after six minutes.

**For the Proposition - Aleksandar:**

- ❖ Every subject should have some framework or structure that is not to be re-invented, which can be introduced in coursework study in a PhD program. The coursework study ensures that PhD students have intellectual maturity and reasonable skills to achieve their academic goals with their research project;
- ❖ Personal experience: I undertook my undergraduate study in Yugoslavia and then studied for Master in Philosophy. I then went to UC Berkley to study for my PhD degree and found the requirement to study logic by coursework in my PhD program a bit offensive. However taking part in the study, I realized that I had some misunderstanding regarding how my research project should be carried out, and the coursework study was very essential during my learning process for the PhD program.

- ❖ Therefore I believe that coursework study is an essential ingredient of any strong PhD Program.

**Against the Proposition - Michael:**

- ❖ First I would like to thank you Abhaya for offering me this opportunity to be part of the opposing team to the above proposition. I have been working on the HDR board for some years and would probably have a better understanding of the subject matter.
- ❖ I believe debates usually focus on the meaning of the words of the proposition. In this case, the word "any" means that if any instance or example can be provided against the proposition, it would not be a valid subject.
- ❖ Learning is important and is vital to a PhD program. One way of learning is by coursework; however is this essential to any PhD/Research program? Research means discovery. I do not believe that coursework study has the learning element required in research programs.
- ❖ To me, coursework is about the formal and structured studying in a classroom. This however differs from the concept of the coursework element required by Macquarie University. And we are actually arguing against the type of coursework required by the university.
- ❖ Ultimately, PhD program is about research projects. The university and supervisors need to target on what is needed for students in their projects, and need to provide mentorship and professional assistance to students to achieve their goals.
- ❖ Undergraduate units are excellent coursework program, but with PhD projects, what are to be put in for students with different research interests? Generally, coursework for PhD programs include general subjects, which are good to be available, but may not be necessary for some students or majors.
- ❖ With a PhD program, individuals will be examined based on their thesis, which are expected to distribute to knowledge. I previously had two students, who were distinguished people who participated in vast research projects and the coursework component was definitely not appropriate for them. This example confirms my opinion that the coursework element is not essential to "any" strong PhD program.
- ❖ PhD refers to Doctor of Philosophy, which is the highest award offered by the university. This program is about thinking. Students are expected to become qualified thinkers who can make their own plans for lifelong learning regarding what is to be achieved through their PhD practice.

**For the Proposition - Murali:**

- ❖ I suggest we all take a close look at the proposition subject - "strong PhD Program". Studying in PhD programs, students are expected to achieve research outcomes.
- ❖ Research means "search closely". In 1600, research was regarded as scientific inquiry based on generations of hypothesis on the shoulders of giants that are not to be re-invented.
- ❖ Coursework study can brief students to ensure that they are all put into study together. Doing this is cost-effective and necessary to enable students to communicate on the same level.
- ❖ We all understand that not everyone in coursework study will research under different projects. Looking back twenty years, the biggest achievements are completed in disciplines such as Mathematics, and medicine. Coursework study allows many to interact in classroom environment and they can

stimulate each other's thoughts for new hypothesis. These people specializing in their own work can acquire knowledge from other people which may contribute to their research.

- ❖ Finally, the nature of undergraduate study and master degree study has changed nowadays. The quantity of students have increased, which created larger classes for coursework study, however these may not prepare students for starting on a good project unless some further coursework study is dedicated in their PhD program.

**Against the Proposition - Phil:**

- ❖ The word "essential" in the proposition means that without coursework component, it is impossible for anyone to complete a strong PhD program. In this case, I am afraid that many of us "don't" have a strong PhD Program. I certainly did not have coursework component in my PhD program. Does that mean I don't have a strong research program? How is this possible?
- ❖ Or does this imply that the proposition for today's debate is wrong?
- ❖ It is understood that coursework element is important to learning, but is it essential to any PhD program? Shouldn't this have been carried out during students' study for their master degree or honor's degree before they take part in the PhD study?
- ❖ What is PhD anyway? PhD means research. People who enter this level of program should have been selected based on the criteria that they are well suited already. There should be no need to introduce coursework element to bring students up to speed.
- ❖ PhD programs involve particular things that reflect personal interests. How could coursework element provide service which can bring support to all different kinds of needs or interests?
- ❖ The worst impediment on coursework element in PhD program is time. At Macquarie University, PhD students generally have three to five years to complete their program. So how could they handle the coursework component? They may spend half a year attending coursework study, and meet requirements for this, another half attending conferences and publish papers. The remaining bit of their program may not be enough for them to carry out their research subject properly. Having to attend coursework study, PhD students have to distribute their time and energy, which should have been centralized to research only. Let alone the extra stress and distraction they need to deal with.

**For the Proposition - MD:**

- ❖ I am arguing in favor of the proposition. This is not only because I have been put into this team, but I do support this proposition strongly from my point of view.
- ❖ The word "strong" has caused my interest. Is there any "weak" PhD program? Certainly there is PhD by research, and PhD by coursework, but the proposition today should be referring to PhD by research. The Doctor's Degree of Philosophy give freedom to students, however sometimes this may not lead to a good research outcome.
- ❖ Time is now changing and we are not only expecting research outcome in PhD programs, but students also expect to receive support from their supervisors, lecturers and other professionals.
- ❖ Researchers are lonely, generally speaking. Coursework study provides them with guidelines and support. Without these, people during their study may change their mind about research subject and then their research may lead to

- nothing of value. In some areas, the completion rate for various majors of PhD programs is only 30% after the three to five years of work.
- ❖ Coursework element in PhD programs provides structure instead of allowing too much freedom, which may lead to a better completion rate in the end.
  - ❖ Without good guidelines or sufficient supervision, PhD students may not acquire the necessary skills such as communication skills, team work skills and they would not become good employees when they join the workforce.
  - ❖ PhD students have different academic background. They could be out of school graduates, or company managers. Coursework study can fill the gaps and bring people to the same level. Supervisors during coursework study can also pass on learning skills to students.

**Against the Proposition - Hadi:**

- ❖ PhD program are supposed to be carried out by independent thinker, or researchers. They should not have to be spoon-fed about structure of their study/ research.
- ❖ PhD students are not expected to know all, but to be specializing in their own subject field. There is no need to know all the rules or structures, which are to be learnt in their previous study before commencement of their PhD study.
- ❖ No one wants to stay in a university for their PhD program if they need to spend two years on coursework element, and the third year becomes very stressful in order to complete the research project. Students may need to extend their study under such stress and time allocation.
- ❖ The whole idea of participating in PhD program is to allow people to become good learner, which is the main purpose. I don't see coursework study as way of learning for this particular purpose.
- ❖ In summary, coursework element is not necessary for PhD programs.

**Chair - Mark:**

- ❖ Summary of the debate.
- ❖ Checking audience votes regarding debate performance.
- ❖ Suggest for further discussion among debate teams and audience.

**General discussion:**

- ❖ **Audience:** For those students who moved from Honor students into PhD study, if they only focus on research, how will these students be adequately prepared to become teaching staff?

**Opposing team:** Firstly universities do not provide teaching skills component in PhD programs; Also the Honor pathway is slowly moving away from the education system. In the future, we can expect more people to follow the pathway of Bachelor (by coursework), Master (by coursework/research) then PhD (by research). Some essential coursework element is still useful in students' learning process. Another important point is that learning teaching skills in PhD program is secondary. We have observed some interesting differences in the competency level of master students and honor students.

**Audience:** I personally do not think there is much of a gap in master and honor students and being a honor student turning PhD student, I don't think anything will disadvantage my learning.

**Audience:** I do believe coursework component in the three to five year PhD program is required. Students coming from different background do need support and training in order to carry out research.

**Opposing team:** University should select students with sufficient qualifications and skills, but also need take into considerations of those who have potentials, and may need further guidance/ support in coursework element. Generally speaking, most students should still prepare themselves before starting their PhD program.

**Audience:** Coursework element is indeed important and essential. Without this element, students could have completed their thesis incorrectly, such as in Aleksandar's case, where he only found out that he had misunderstanding of his research ideas when he was a PhD students at UC Berkley. Coursework study can prepare students to meet research standards.

**Supporting team:** Nowadays many things have changed. The quality of students has not been all that satisfactory. Students increase in number and university become a centre for professional training. Now the university is under the pressure to fill gaps when people move onto their PhD. It is also not realistic for students to do the research on their own. Coursework exercise can force students to follow structures, which is crucially important. Structure can provide guidance, and is not to limit people's thoughts.

**Audience:** I believe the proposition of this debate should be clarified further, otherwise sometimes the two teams are arguing on difference concepts. I also found some weak points in both teams' debates. For the supporting team, they claim that the increase in student number is the cause for a need to provide coursework in PhD program, so gaps can be filled. I don't think this is a strong point. For the opposing team, they claim that students could spend too much time on coursework or attending conference, and have not much time for their research. I think you are under-estimating the PhD students' time management skills.

**Audience:** To be fair, coursework element is important for some major, but not for some others. For mathematics for example, coursework is essential.

**Chair:**

- We may be looking at a possible model for universities to assign some coursework element for PhD students, but they get to choose which courses to take, and in this way students can receive support that is more specific to their needs.
- Summary of debating outcome.