THE IMPORTANCE OF THE LOCAL IN A GLOBAL AGE: ANALYSIS OF NETWORKING STRATEGIES IN POSTGRADUATE LAW RESEARCH LEARNING

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Abstract

Research indicates that postgraduate research students, and particularly those researching in law, feel isolated socially and academically from one another, and from scholarly life. Postgraduate research students are now more globally connected because of technology. Yet opportunities to connect with colleagues locally, to share and reflect on research findings, methods and experiences are insufficient. This paper reports on the preliminary stages of a project led by legal and criminological scholars to establish a postgraduate student network that is interdisciplinary, interfaculty and cross institutional in structure with a specific focus on 'crim*' related studies including criminology, criminal law and criminal justice. The primary objective of the Network is to enhance student engagement with research cultures within and beyond their own faculties. The paper begins by considering the pedagogical issues around developing such a Network. An absence of research on postgraduate research pedagogy is noted, particularly research on group-based learning strategies. Drawing on existing educational literature, the authors identify six pedagogical grounds that may inform development of the Network: (i) skills acquisition, (ii) perseverance to completion, (iii) as adjunct to supervision, (iv) an additional site for learning, (v) socialisation and identity formation, and (vi) countering the disciplinary isolation and methodological limitations of the law. The second half of the paper reaches beyond the pedagogical literature and presents a survey of existing postgraduate research group strategies locally and internationally, particularly those directed at the learning needs of crim* students more specifically. The authors conclude that developing a crim* group that is pedagogically sound requires a reconceptualization of the broader pedagogical and institutional framing of postgraduate research education (particularly in law).

I. Introduction

Educational research indicates that the pedagogy of postgraduate research (PGR) education has traditionally been under-theorised, having been largely conceived of as a horizontal, insular and binary process, grounded in a master-apprentice model shaped by the supervisor-candidate relationship. Ultimately, PGR education has tended to emphasise learning through an independent research process culminating in production of 'the' dissertation.[1] Recent policy shifts in higher education, seemingly, have not disrupted this dominant model of PGR education, but instead have arguably intensified demands on productivity, transparency and accountability, which further reify this narrow conception.[2] This traditional and narrow approach to PGR education problematises the pedagogy of PGR learning and suggests a need to invigorate PGR

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1 S Powell and H Green, 'Conclusions' in S Powell & H Green (eds), *The Doctorate Worldwide* (Open University Press, 2007) 231; Terry Carney, 'Graduate Research Seminars: Theory or Praxis?' (1993) 4 *Legal Education Review* 165.

2 For a discussion of the PhD in the context of these recent policy shifts, see for example Ruth Neumann, 'Policy Driving Change in Doctoral Education' in David Boud & Alison Lee (eds) *Changing Practices of Doctoral Education* (Routledge, 2009) 210-224.

learning in a way that continues to encourage autonomous learning but which concurrently creates alternative learning spaces to account for different spatial and relational contexts for learning, especially through collaborative and peer-based learning opportunities.

This paper argues that a PGR student group or network offers an important pedagogical pathway for enhancing PGR learning, one that we suggest can be informed and shaped by six key pedagogical considerations. The first three fit within the traditionally narrow conceptualisation of PGR education, satisfying the goals of: (i) skills development; (ii) perseverance to completion of the dissertation; and (iii) supporting the supervisor relationship. The latter three reflect a broadened pedagogical framework for PGR education directed at: (iv) creating rich opportunities for peer learning; (v) creating an alternative space and relationships for learning, socialisation and identity formation; and (vi) countering the professionalism, authority and isolation of the legal discipline.

II. Goals and Pedagogy of Postgraduate Research Education

Clearly, the pedagogy of PGR training must reflect and promote the aims and objectives of such education. In Australia, recent policy statements have emphasised that PGR learning should be directed towards the dual objectives of knowledge acquisition and skill development.[3] The dissertation is viewed as the final 'tangible' product of PGR training, but the actual process of completion and the skills that must necessarily be developed in such a process are also core outcomes of PGR education. Undoubtedly PGR requires critical engagement with a complex field of learning and development of research skills 'for the advancement of learning and/or for professional practice.'[4] However, best practice suggests that PGR training should also be directed towards development of generic skills that aim to 'extend the capabilities'[5] of a PGR graduate 'as a person who is employable, can work well with others and can contribute beyond the area of their immediate research training.'[6] Generic skills should provide graduates with the tools 'required to [not only] achieve the timely completion of the degree' but also the skills required for 'employment in knowledge industries and further career development.'[7] In other words, PGR pedagogy should at least be directed towards: (i) attainment of complex understandings of a specialised field of knowledge; (ii) development of research-based skills including strong analytical skills; and (iii) readiness for employability. These three objectives inevitably overlap and interact to shape one another.

Against this institutional view of what PGR training should achieve, two key questions then arise in making decisions around how the PGR experience should be shaped to achieve such outcomes. The first is what specific skills should PGR students attain in their degree; and the second is how should the PGR process be shaped to permit the requisite knowledge and skills acquisition? This second question requires us to think about what learning spaces might complement the traditional supervisor-candidate relationship to better achieve the goals and outcomes expected of PGR training.

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3   See for example Council of Australian Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies, *Framework for Best Practice in Doctoral Research Education in Australia* (October 2007, updated July 2008) <www.daad.de/id-e_berlin/media/pdf/australia_best_practice.pdf>; Australian Qualifications Framework, *Specification for the Doctoral Degree* (July 2011) <http://www.aqf.edu.au/AbouttheAQF/TheAQF/tabid/108/Default.aspx>. Institutional statements are also increasingly reflecting these dual objectives of PGR training: see for example The University of Sydney, *Research Degrees* (11 July 2012) <http://sydney.edu.au/research/involved/degrees.shtml>.

4   Australian Qualifications Framework, above n 3 at 18.

5   Council of Australian Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies, above n 3 at 4.

6   Ibid.

7   Ibid.

A. *Skills Acquisition*

The Australian Qualifications Framework identifies a suite of skills to be developed in the PGR student.[8] This includes cognitive skills that demonstrate the student's ability to both acquire an expert understanding of theoretical knowledge and critically evaluate such knowledge and practice through systematic investigation, and which ultimately enables the student to generate original knowledge. The PGR student should also develop 'expert technical and creative skills applicable to the field of work or learning'[9] which permit the candidate to 'design, implement, analyse, theorise and communicate research that makes a significant and original contribution to knowledge and/or professional practice.'[10] Moreover, the development of communication skills are also viewed as important 'to explain and critique theoretical propositions, methodologies and conclusions'[11] and to cogently present original research and its findings to peers and the community at an internationally recognised standard. Development of these skills is not only essential to enable the candidate to undertake discipline-specific research activity but 'are [also] key capacities when it comes to gaining and keeping employment.'[12]

B. *The Process*

As indicated, key to pedagogical decisions in shaping PGR training is a consideration of how the candidate-supervisor relationship can be complemented by other effective learning spaces. This question gives rise to two further considerations; first, what role should formal programs such as coursework play in PGR education? Secondly, what role might there be for less formal learning spaces within the PGR process?

In so far as coursework is concerned, the Council of Australian Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies in its *Framework for Best Practice in Doctoral Research Education in Australia* (DDOCGS *Framework*) states that 'within a doctorate [coursework] should be for the purpose of research education whether this be for making a significant contribution to knowledge for the discipline or a profession/professional practice.'[13]

The importance and potential role of coursework in PGR education has been recognised by scholars and educators.[14] Numerous considerations arise in relationship to coursework offerings including, for example, questions of content, timing of offerings and the purpose of the program. It is beyond the scope of the current discussion to answer these questions however, the need to consider how formal coursework and other programs might interact with informal learning spaces, must be noted. The DDOGS *Framework* in describing the 'research environment' of a best practice program states that 'candidates should have an open, collegial and productive learning environment including a coordinated program of activity to integrate them into their university and faculty, school and/or department.'[15] Moreover, the framework highlights that 'cohort or research group activities are particularly appropriate for integrating candidates into the research environment of their university and faculty, school and/or department.'[16] It is noted that such group activities 'can be offered across discipline groups' providing 'research students

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8   Australian Qualifications Framework, above n 3.

9   Ibid at 62.

10 Ibid at 62.

11 Ibid.

12 Council of Australian Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies, *Framework and Context Statement for Best Practice in Generic Capabilities for Research Students in Australian Universities* (November 2005) 2, <http://www.ddogs.edu.au/files?folder_id=2123770849>.

13 Council of Australian Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies, above n 3 at 2.

14 See for example B Evans, 'Doctoral Education in Australia' in S Powell and H Green (eds), *The Doctorate Worldwide* (Open University Press, 2007) 105; Neumann, above n 2 at 210.

15 Council of Australian Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies, above n 3 at 4.

16 Ibid.

[with] the opportunity for effective networking opportunities with an expanded group of peers and more "senior" students.'[17]

Accordingly, less formal learning spaces can be utilised to create such networking opportunities and facilitate socialisation of the PGR student to the research environment. Nettles and Millet (2006) argue that socialisation is a core aspect of doctoral education for students and institutions:

> [b]ecause student socialization contributes to students' performance, satisfaction, and success in doctoral programs. Socialization is also important because the movement to faculty renewal and replacement over the next decade will most likely bring a new focus on issues of faculty recruitment, retention, productivity, and satisfaction. These are all outcomes subsumed in the broad concept of doctoral student socialization - generally, the process by which students acquire the attitudes, beliefs, values, and skills needed to participate effectively in the organized activities of their profession.[18]

Accordingly, a carefully constructed postgraduate student group can complement the supervisor-student relationship to assist in knowledge and acquisition of critical research skills but importantly may also serve as a platform to equip the PGR student with the skills necessary to function as a productive member of their profession and compete successfully within the employment market place. In order to ensure the group successfully creates *pedagogically-informed* learning spaces and relations that are at the same time specifically responsive to the aims and objectives of PGR education, a nuanced consideration should specifically be given at the outset to the dynamics between students, the hosting institution/s and the broader academic terrain in developing the group's organisational structure, governance and activities.

III. EXISTING PGR GROUPS – LESSONS LEARNT

Educational literature and the policy framework that shapes PGR training in Australia point to the role that PGR groups might play in higher research education and the considerations that should shape their development. Additionally we argue that pedagogical decisions that shape this learning pathway should be informed by and draw on the lessons learnt from existing models of such groups. Accordingly, we identified and surveyed existing PGR groups operating within Australia and overseas. Given that our goal is to develop a specific space for exchange on 'crim*' related studies including criminology, criminal law and criminal justice we focused in particular on established groups directed at the learning needs of crim* students. Our survey of these groups examined the extent to which and manner in which their structure, governance and activities were influenced by pedagogical considerations.

A. *The Methodology*

We took a two-pronged approach in researching existing PGR groups. First, we examined the literature for discussion of pedagogical issues in development and use of PGR groups. This method revealed only four PGR groups[19] each with a clear institutional and pedagogical

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17 Council of Australian Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies, *Guidelines to Support the Framework for Best Practice in Generic Capabilities for Research Students in Australian Universities* (25 November 2005) 6, <http://www.ddogs.edu.au/files?folder_id=2123770849>.

18 M T Nettles and C M Millet, *Three Magic Letters: Getting to PhD* (John Hopkins University Press, 2006) 89.

19 Australian Law Postgraduate Network (Australia-wide) ('ALPN'), The Australian Postgraduate Writing Network (Australia-wide) ('APWN'), Graduate Researchers in Print (Monash University, Faculty of Arts) ('GRiP'), Thesis Writing Circle (La Trobe University, Humanities and Social Sciences)

framework,[20] but it did not capture student-led groups or groups of a more organic nature. This methodology also did not necessarily indicate whether groups were currently active. Accordingly, the second approach we took was to engage in web-based searching to locate the webpages of PGR groups.[21] We found an additional 17 groups[22] in this way. This second approach identified groups which were more likely to be student-led, informal, and with no explicit pedagogical framework.

Our research confirmed that consistent with an absence of scholarship on PGR pedagogy, there is also an absence of readily-available data on and analysis of the use of existing PGR groups. Clearly, more research and scholarship is needed around the use and value of PGR groups, including relevant empirical research that can inform and help shape the development of such learning pathways.[23]

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20 See Stephen Colbran and Belinda Tynan, 'Australian Law Postgraduate Network' (2006) 16(1&2) *Legal Education Review* 35; Denise Cuthbert, Ceridwen Spark and Eliza Burke, 'Disciplining Writing: The Case for Multi-Disciplinary Writing Groups to Support Writing for Publication by Higher Degree by Research Candidates in the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences' (2009) 28(2) *Higher Education Research & Development* 137; Wendy Larcombe, Anthony McCosker and Kieran O'Loughlin, 'Supporting Education PhD and DEd Students to Become Confident Academic Writers: An Evaluation of Thesis Writers' Circles' (2007) 4(1) *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice* 54; Jen Webb et al, *Australian Writing Programs Network: Final Report Prepared for the Australian Learning and Teaching Council* (University of Canberra, 2008).

21 We limited the PGR groups we searched for in three ways; first, to groups consisting exclusively or primarily of postgraduate research students, thereby excluding a number of reading groups and colloquiums/forums (notably in the United States, such as the Harvard Legal Theory Forum and the Washington State University Criminology Reading Group) that specifically include staff and students in their membership. Secondly, we focused on groups that were 'extracurricular' in the sense that they did not form part of an assessable unit of study (for a discussion of one such course see Carney, above n 1). Thirdly, we limited our search to those groups which were ongoing and extended beyond a one-off event.

22 Birkbeck Reading Groups (University of London, School of Law, Birkbeck), CompleMED (University of Western Sydney, Centre for Complementary Medicine Research), CRG Postgraduate Research Group (Curtin University, Creativity Research Group), Criminology and Criminal Justice Postgraduate Research Group (University of Edinburgh, School of Law), The Criminology Research Students' Discussion and Reading Group (University of Oxford, School of Law), Critical Studies Research Group (University of Brighton, Faculty of Arts, School of Humanities), Europa Postgrad Reading Group (Europa Institute, University of Edinburgh), Higher Degree Research Law Commons Initiative (Australian National University, College of Law), Humanities Postgraduate Connections Student Group (University of Southampton, School of Humanities), Sydney Law School Postgraduate Students Committee (University of Sydney, Sydney Law School), Graduate Research Reading and Discussion Groups (University of Melbourne, School of Historical and Philosophical Studies), PGR Crim* Discussion Group (University of Sydney, Sydney Law School), Postgraduate Research Group (University of Warwick, Film and Television Studies), SCCSSR Postgraduate Network (University of Glasgow, Scottish Center for Chinese Social Science Research), Sydney Health Policy Network - Postgraduate Special Interest Group (Menzies Centre for Health Policy), UC Irvine Center in Law, Society and Culture Student Group **(**University of California, Irvine, Center in Law, Society and Culture**),** University of Southampton School of Humanities Reading Groups (University of Southampton, School of Humanities).

23 This is particularly so as neither literature review nor web searching will capture groups that are extremely informal and organic in their nature (for example a group of PGR colleagues who start up a writing group or a reading group through 'word of mouth'). Moreover, neither of these methods will necessarily indicate the current usage of the group by PGR students. As well as the inclusion of this empirical data in pedagogical scholarship, there is also a need for documentation and sharing both within and across institutions, of the knowledge possessed by students operating or involved with PGR groups. PGR students are a relatively transient student population so there is a risk not only of PGR groups coming and going but also of losing valuable knowledge and experiences about the operation of PGR groups, which could benefit other PGR students.

B. *Our Analysis*

We engaged in a qualitative thematic analysis of the information we located relating to 21 existing PGR groups. The themes included in our analysis were those that emerged from our literature review on PGR pedagogy. Accordingly, we first examined how the structure of the groups can shape pedagogical outcomes by examining the groups' disciplinary focus, geographical scope, types of activities, online interaction, and membership/target group. We discuss these findings in Part C below. Secondly we analysed the groups by reference to the six pedagogical bases we identified above as being relevant to shaping such a learning strategy, namely skills development, perseverance to completion, adjunct to supervision, the creation of new learning spaces, socialisation and identity formation, and countering the professionalism, authority and isolation of the legal discipline. We discuss this facet of our analysis in Part IV.

C. *The Structures of Existing PGR Groups*

The pedagogical literature suggests the following structural features may impact on learning outcomes.

1. *Discipline*

We located only one PGR crim* group in Australia: the PGR Crim* Discussion Group which operates out of the University of Sydney and is open to all University of Sydney PG students. We found two PGR criminology groups in the UK operating out of two different law schools: the Criminology and Criminal Justice Postgraduate Research Group (University of Edinburgh, School of Law) and the Criminology Research Students' Discussion and Reading Group (University of Oxford, School of Law). Aside from these three crim* specific groups, eleven groups were located within the humanities disciplines[24] and five were located in the discipline of law.[25]

The relatively low number of PGR groups confirms our earlier observation that institutionally, PGR programs remain centred on the supervisor and student relationship. The even smaller number of law PGR groups compared to those in the humanities might reflect the particular idiosyncrasies of legal research (particularly doctrinal research).[26]

2. *Geographical Scope*

The majority of the groups were university specific and operated out of, and for, students in a single institution. The exceptions were two nation-wide groups, which emerged from grants funded by the Australian Teaching and Learning Council.[27] All of the student-led groups were

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24 APWN, CRG Postgraduate Research Group (Curtin University), GRiP, Critical Studies Research Group (University of Brighton, Faculty of Arts, School of Humanities), Europa Postgrad Reading Group (Europa Institute, University of Edinburgh), Humanities Postgraduate Connections Student Group (University of Southampton, School of Humanities), Graduate Research Reading and Discussion Groups (University of Melbourne, School of Historical and Philosophical Studies), Postgraduate Research Group (University of Warwick, Film and Television Studies), SCCSSR Postgraduate Network (University of Glasgow, Scottish Center for Chinese Social Science Research), Thesis Writing Circle, University of Southampton School of Humanities Reading Groups (University of Southampton, School of Humanities).

25 APLN, Birkbeck Reading Groups (University of London, School of Law, Birkbeck), Higher Degree Research Law Commons Initiative (Australian National University, College of Law), Sydney Law School Postgraduate Students Committee (University of Sydney, Sydney Law School), UC Irvine Center in Law, Society and Culture Student Group (University of California, Irvine, Center in Law, Society and Culture**).**

26 For a discussion of these idiosyncrasies and a critique of how these might impact on the PGR experience, see Desmond Manderson, 'Law: The Search for Community' (2002) 26(74) *Journal of Australian Studies* 147.

27 The Australian Law Postgraduate Network and the Australian Postgraduate Writers Network.

confined to one specific university faculty. This raises questions about the absence of inter-university groups, particularly in a purportedly 'global' and 'connected' era and a university climate that encourages academics to develop funded research projects that include members from a variety of institutions. One possible reason might be that to the extent PGR groups serve to address social isolation, students have a preference for face-to-face contact at a local level so they can interact with those students with whom they usually work side-by-side. Yet, our personal experience as participants and organisers of postgraduate research student conferences suggests that PGR students actually value opportunities to engage with students from other institutions. The success of a PGR group with a broader geographical basis than those currently operating might hinge on factors such as: institutional support across universities, financial support to encourage students from other institutions to participate, shifting the location of meetings to give a sense of shared ownership of the group, and governance structures that enable democratic participation across institutions. Success might also hinge on the online content and online opportunities for engagement, as discussed further below.

3. *Activities*

The majority of the groups were structured around general meetings, for example, discussion groups or reading groups with no specific skills-based component. The groups that did have a skills-based component[28] were focused predominantly on writing or presenting. The groups with a writing skills component seemed generally to have a strong institutional framework and were led or supported by academics, suggesting that the nature of the activities engaged in by such groups coincides with the level of institutional involvement. This in turn raises questions about whether the lack of writing skills-based activities in the student-led groups is a reflection of a lack of student need, or rather whether it indicates what PGR students have the time, knowledge and resources to organise. A further question that arises is: if structured skills-based activities necessarily coincide with greater academic involvement, how then does this impact on the relational dynamics underpinning various pedagogical aims?

4. *Online Dimension*

For an overwhelming majority of the PGR groups identified, the online content was limited to information related to upcoming face-to-face events and did not extend to opportunities for online interaction such as blogs or Skype meetings.[29] This was an interesting finding given the growth in eLearning generally in coursework and the growing use of social media in society more generally. Students may prefer face-to-face contact because their very isolation is derived from independent computer-based research, or it might be that face-to-face verbal contact might not be as burdensome as textual engagement given the time already spent writing the dissertation. It might also be that because the majority of groups are within the one faculty or institution, remote, online contact might not be as necessary were groups inter-university in character. Yet on the other hand, online content might still benefit those PGR students who are not situated on campus (for example, due to part-time status, caring responsibilities or geographical distance).

The transience of PGR student populations and the time demands required to update and maintain a website might be disincentives to developing an interactive online component. There

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28 Four skills-based components were identified: writing (APWN; GriP; Thesis Writing Circle); presenting (CompleMED Postgraduate Forums; Criminology and Criminal Justice Postgraduate Research Group, Edinburgh University; Critical Studies Research Group; Europa Postgrad Reading Group; PGR Crim* Discussion Group; Postgraduate Research Group); conference organising (Humanities Postgraduate Connections Student Group, The Criminology Research Students' Discussion and Reading Group; Sydney Law School Postgraduate Research Students Committee); and grant applications (UC Irvine Center in Law, Society and Culture Student Group). Some groups involved multiple skill-based components.

29 The only two groups that did have rather detailed online dimensions were the ALPN and the APWN. The ALPN's content was non-interactive and outdated; the APWN has some more recent blog posts.

is the risk that an out-dated or unused website could deter new PGR students from participating in the group by suggesting the stagnancy of the group and betraying an active and vibrant community.[30] Many of the sites we found that did contain some form of updated content, including informational content on events, were out of date, with the most recent posts being up to three years old.

5. *Membership*

The groups were split in relation to membership – some exclusively involved PGR students whereas others involved PGR and postgraduate coursework students (PGC students). This raises questions around the difference in experiences, needs and research interests between these two groups of students. Our own experience suggests that PGR students, by very dint of the depth, intensity and duration of their research tend to have more of an interest in reflecting on research methods, use of theory and research experiences and processes compared to PGC students.

Other issues raised by the data relate to how membership can impact on the operation and sustainability of a group. As mentioned earlier, PGR students are a relatively transient group whose spare time might fluctuate depending on their stage of candidature and other academic work and activities they are engaged in. Some groups require a commitment from participants, whereas others acknowledge the shifting levels of commitment by students.[31] Consideration should also be given to how membership can be established and maintained in a group that is as diverse as the PGR student body.[32] This consideration might impact choices in the group's organisational structure, activities and meeting places; some of which may have to evolve as the needs of its members change. In order to ensure the needs of members are being met, ongoing consultation with the PGR student body would ideally occur periodically.

IV. The Pedagogical Basis of PGR Groups

Deciding where a PGR student group fits in the pedagogical terrain is important not only because of the potential of the group to be a catalyst for a rethinking of PGR education, but also because the group's ultimate success will depend in part on institutional support and hence requires recognition at the institutional level. Where the institution remains fixed on a narrow

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30 For example, Brien and Webb flag the risk of online content becoming a grave to a failed community: Donna Lee Brien and Jen Webb, 'The Australian Postgraduate Writing Network: Developing a Collaborative Learning Environment for Higher Degree Students and Their Supervisors' in D Orr et al (eds), *Lifelong learning: Reflecting on Successes and Framing Futures: Keynote and Refereed Papers from the 5th International Lifelong Learning Conference, Yeppoon, Central Queensland, Australia, 16-19 June 2008* (Central Queensland University Press, 2008) 79, 82-83.

31 The Graduate Researchers in Print group requires students to commit writing a complete draft of a journal article. In comparison, the website for the Graduate Reading and Research Discussion Groups states that: 'Some groups persist for decades; others wax and wane with shifting student interests': School of Historical and Philosophical Studies, *Graduate Reading and Research Discussion Groups* (21 June 2012) University of Melbourne <http://history.unimelb.edu.au/students/postgraduate/reading-discussion-groups.html>

32 For a specific flagging of these concerns in the international student context, see Sara Cotterall, 'Doctoral Pedagogy: What Do International PhD Students in Australia Think About It?' (2011) 19(2) *Pertanika Journal of Social Science and Humanities* 521, 528-529. For a more general discussion of some of the issues facing first-generation PhD students, who might also be from racially disadvantaged or non-upper/middle class backgrounds, see Susan K Gardner and Karri A Holley '"Those Invisible Barriers Are Real": The Progression of First-Generation Students Through Doctoral Education' (2011) 44(1) *Equity & Excellence in Education* 77.

conception of PGR education, a group might ultimately never achieve its maximum potential because it remains incomprehensible or marginalised on a formal, institutional level.[33]

The PGR student groups we identified above were examined to see how the aims and operation of the groups might be linked to the pedagogy of PGR more generally. As noted earlier, the groups' aims and methods of operation (as self-described on their websites) were analysed by reference to six pedagogical goals.

A. *Critical Skills Development*

Nearly three-quarters of the groups expressed themselves as being directed towards encouraging and facilitating critical response and/or discussion.[34] Unsurprisingly, in several groups this was linked to student presentation of work or ideas – for example, it was common for the group to be structured around a student presentation followed by critical discussion of the presentation, or simply a discussion about a text or piece of research. Groups typically stated their purpose was, for example, to 'provide postgraduates with an excellent opportunity to share and discuss their research and ideas.'[35] Despite a prominent focus in the academic literature on the role of PGR groups in developing the writing ability of students,[36] only four groups explicitly proclaimed themselves as aimed at developing writing skills.[37] As noted above, two of these groups appeared to be led by individual academics with a particular interest in this area.[38] Only one group, the Australian Law Postgraduate Network (ALPN), appeared *not* to be focused on critical skills development. While this group had a comprehensive online presence, it offered no opportunity for face-to-face interaction.

B. *Support to Completion and Supplementing Supervision*

It is widely recognised that a major factor hindering completion of a postgraduate dissertation is social isolation,[39] and this is particularly the case for researchers in the humanities.[40] All the groups self-described as having the goal of provision of social and peer support for PGR students. This seems to bear out the fact that PGR groups are predominantly discussed in the academic literature (aside from skills-specific groups) for their role in combatting social isolation or offering peer support.[41] For example, the Centre for Complementary Medicine Research at the University of Western Sydney describes its postgraduate forums as being 'great for networking, providing support for peers and receiving constructive feedback.'[42]

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33 For example, Devenish et al note in relation to a postgraduate research students' group the imbalance between behaviours as postgraduate research students and those that were identified as relevant within the students' institutional context: R Devenish et al, 'Peer to Peer Support : The Disappearing Work in the Doctoral Student Experience' (2009) 28(1) *Higher Education Research & Development* 59, 60-61.

34 Fifteen out of 21 groups.

35 Humanities: Research & Graduate Studies *Creativity Research Group Postgraduate Research Group* (2012) Curtin University <http://research.humanities.curtin.edu.au/clusters/crg/grad_research.cfm>.

36 Cuthbert, Spark and Burke, above n 19; Brien and Webb, above n 30; D Maher et al, '"Becoming and Being Writers": The Experiences of Doctoral Students in Writing Groups' (2008) 30(3) *Studies in Continuing Education* 263.

37 APWN; GRiP; ANU Higher Degree Research Commons Initiative; Thesis Writing Circle.

38 GRiP; Thesis Writing Circle.

39 Colbran and Tynan, above n 20.

40 Sara Delamont et al, *Supervising the Doctorate: A Guide to Success* (Open University Press, 2004) 97.

41 Devenish et al, above n 33.

42 Centre for Complementary Medicine Research, *Postgraduate Research* (25 August 2010) University of Western Sydney, <http://www.uws.edu.au/complemed/complementary_medicine/postgraduate_research_training>.

Although providing peer support was clearly intended as a goal of all groups, the other facet in supporting a student to completion – aiding with production of work – was referred to by only four groups, three of which were specific 'writing groups'.[43] Moreover, only three groups explicitly identified their role as a support for the student-supervisor relationship.[44] The website of the Thesis Writing Circle at La Trobe University states:

> Here is a safe and sociable opportunity to gather responses to your work from more and different readers than your supervisor alone; and perhaps to focus on different aspects of the writing, in closer focus, than supervisory meetings can accommodate.[45]

The limits of the student-supervisor relationship - bounded by time constraints and subject matter - are clearly identified. In contrast, the Australian Postgraduate Writers Network (APWN) lists as one of its goals to improve the quality of supervision, stating its aim is to: '**Promote collaborations** between supervisors and candidates to reduce higher degree research student isolation and attrition and to improve supervision quality'.[46] However, the majority of groups did not make any comment on the supervisor-student relationship in reference to their activities.

C. *Creating New Learning Spaces, Identity Formation and Socialisation*

In light of our earlier discussion, in addition to extending the pedagogy of PGR education, there is also a need to create and support additional and distinct spaces and relations for learning. On this basis, a PGR student group can provide an alternative space for learning, which is structured around peer relations.[47] In examining whether PGR groups aimed to create new and different spaces for learning we looked at academic involvement and the extent to which groups were student-led. We were also interested in the extent to which groups identified as creating a community of practice.

Communities of practice are defined as 'a system of relationships between people, activities and the world; developing over time, and in relation to other tangential and overlapping communities of practice'.[48] Shacham and Od-Cohen (2009) identify different themes around communities of practice for PGR students, including the sharing of ideas and experiences, and the diffusion of ideas, amongst others.[49] They considered the diffusion of ideas to be 'especially significant in light of the fact that the cohort members come from different disciplines... and hence they relate to colleagues representing diverse issues, opinions, and views.'[50] The involvement of participants with different levels of experience and histories of membership, within the groups, is also important to facilitate socialisation and identity formation, as well as renewal.

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43 Thesis Writing Circle; GriP; ANU Higher Degree Research Commons Initiative. The fourth group was the Humanities Postgraduate Connections Student Group, University of Southampton.

44 APWN; APLN; Thesis Writing Circle.

45 Humanities and Social Sciences Students, *Thesis Writing Circle* (2012), La Trobe University <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/students/humanities/your-studies/academic-language-and-learning-unit/thesis-writing-circle>

46 Australian Postgraduate Writers Network, *About Us* (2012) <http://www.writingnetwork.edu.au/content/about-us>

47 See Manderson, above n 26 at 158.

48 Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge University Press, 1991) 98. See also David Boud and Alison Lee, '"Peer Learning" as Pedagogic Discourse for Research Education' (2005) 30(5) *Studies in Higher Education* 501, 502-03.

49 Other themes that emerged were the raising of the level of thinking in these communities of practice; namely more openness to critique and more crystallisation of concepts and ideas, empowerment and emotional support: Miri Shacham and Yehudit Od-Cohen, 'Rethinking PhD Learning Incorporating Communities of Practice' (2009) 46(3) *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 279, 285-286.

50 Ibid, 285.

Only two groups, the ALPN and the APWN, explicitly made reference to encouraging or creating communities of practice. This is not to say, however, that other groups were not in fact engaging in this as well despite there being no explicit statement to this effect. The creators of the ALPN describe their intentions for the network as being able to 'facilitate intellectual collaboration and the foundation of future research networks, thus creating a solid community of practice' in addition to providing opportunities for collaboration.[51]

Questions might arise around the sustainability of such communities of practice. As noted above, in some instances online content appears not to have been updated for several years. It may be that the lack of face-to-face contact and the scope of the network – across many institutions, geographically distant – render it unsustainable. It may also be that in some instances the actual articulated purposes of the group are driven by funding or grants objectives, but the practical reality is different.[52]

The apparent "top-down" approach of the ALPN can be contrasted with the PGR groups in the sample which were student-led – this made up approximately half of the groups, although the information provided for some groups rendered it unclear as to whether or how academics were involved.[53] The extent to which academic involvement in PGR groups is necessary and/or desirable has attracted some discussion in the literature on postgraduate pedagogy. Green and Lee (1995) have argued that postgraduate research is a process of 'becoming and being a certain authorised form of research(er) identity'.[54] PGR groups can allow for interactions amongst students giving opportunities to understand their own disciplinary theoretical, methodological, political and ethical perspectives on research and in turn better understand where they fit into academia and what 'kind' of academic they are. However the literature draws attention to the dual nature of socialisations for doctoral students – as student and as academic – identities, which are apparently discrete.[55] This might itself be problematic insofar as for example, a student-operated PGR group might achieve doctoral student socialisation, but not academic socialisation. If a PGR group is not appropriately recognised by the faculty and integrated into the academic community, it may not achieve one of its ends.[56] The involvement of the institution and individual academics in the governance and the activities of the PGR group might thus be considered in relation to ways that these two forms of socialisation can be addressed and possibly even brought together.[57]

D. *Countering Disciplinary Isolation and Methodological Limitations*

As noted above at Part II, nearly all the groups were confined to a single institution and indeed, to a single faculty within an institution. The lack of interdisciplinarity is particularly significant for PGR students within the legal discipline, for several inter-connected reasons. One reason is the professionalism of law. This is reflected in undergraduate legal studies which are taught in the framework of 'professional' degrees, the focus being on training for professional practice

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51 Colbran and Tynan, above n 20 at 40.

52 Both groups were funded by Australian Learning and Teaching Council grants.

53 For example, the CompleMED Postgraduate Forums, CRG Postgraduate Research Group and the ANU Higher Degree Research Commons Initiative.

54 Bill Green and Alison Lee, 'Theorising Postgraduate Pedagogy' (1995) 2 *Australian Universities' Review* 40, 41.

55 Ibid.

56 See for example the finding of McAlpine and Amundsen that a doctoral student committee set up to advocate in relation to problems encountered by the doctoral student community that the socialisation benefits of the committee were countered by the broader institutional failure to include the doctoral students within the academic community: L McAlpine and C Amundsen, 'Identity and Agency: Pleasures and Collegiality Among the Challenges of the Doctoral Journey' (2009) 31(2) *Studies in Continuing Education* 109, 115.

57 Devenish et al, above n 33 at 68; Susan K Gardner, '"I Heard it Through the Grapevine": Doctoral Student Socialization in Chemistry and History' (2007) 54 *Higher Education* 723, 738.

rather than the study of law itself as an area of social, philosophical, historical and critical inquiry. The second reason is that within the legal discipline, law is constructed as an isolated sphere of knowledge that can be known truthfully only through traditional legal method (i.e. doctrinal method or statutory interpretation). In this way, students of professional law degrees develop a particular faith in the truth of law and a devotional practice to particular legal methods.[58] Arguably, the very authority of law tends to marginalise and de-authorise alternative methodologies for knowing the law. Thirdly, this idea of the law only being capable of being known through doctrinal research also marginalises the interdisciplinary *study* of the law.

A PGR student group, particularly one that is interdisciplinary in nature, could provide an opportunity for students to reframe their learning and relocate their relationship to the law in terms of critique and challenge, and inquiry into the law itself. It could also encourage reflexivity insofar as discussion could take place on issues of method, practice and theory that would not necessarily be considered in the textual process of the dissertation itself. Reflexivity is particularly important in relation to legal research because of the disciplinary demands for a normative or reform dimension that pronounces what the law *should* be. Furthermore, an interdisciplinary group would also assist in breaking down the authority and privilege of legal scholarship and help law postgraduate research students to see and accept their location as one of a number of positions from which a scholar can engage with the law. This might be particularly relevant for a (sustainable) inter-disciplinary crim* group to address, as the authority of law may have a tendency to marginalise and de-authorise other perspectives on crim*, potentially alienating researchers in other disciplines.

Whilst law might be particularly uni-disciplinary, Miller and Brimicombe (2004), discussing a multidisciplinary postgraduate research course they developed, emphasise the importance of multidisciplinarity in PGR education generally.[59] This is on the basis that the PhD as an individual research project encourages disciplinary embedment.[60] Another advantage of multidisciplinary PGR students' groups (notably those focused on specific skills development) is that they can focus on the development of generic, professional, transferrable skills without becoming distracted or immersed in disciplinary-specific issues.[61]

V. Conclusion

This research seeks to explore how alternative learning spaces might facilitate the goals of training in postgraduate research, with a particular focus on the role of PGR discussion groups outside coursework or institutional requirements. Consistent with an absence of scholarship on PGR pedagogy, we found an absence of readily-available data on and analysis of the use of existing PGR groups. Seeking to develop an interdisciplinary, inter-university PGR group, with a specific crim* focus, our research lead us to analyse the structure, goals, governance and activities of PGR groups operating in Australia and overseas.

Although many groups self-described as undertaking similar activities and focusing on the development of similar skills, we found remarkably few groups which were inter-faculty, let alone inter-university. This was surprising in light of the apparently increasingly global and interconnected nature of academia and academic institutions. Moreover, although the groups found were located via web searching, few had a strong online presence or ongoing activity.

In addition to analysing the structure of PGR groups, we were particularly interested in discerning any pedagogical basis (whether explicit or implicit) for the operation of the PGR groups in our sample. We considered the groups in terms of six key pedagogical considerations. Virtually all the groups were intended to facilitate the development of critical skills, whether by

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58 See Manderson, above n 26 at 150, 155-56, 160.

59 Nod Miller and Allan Brimicombe, 'Mapping Research Journeys Across Complex Terrain with Heavy Backage' (2004) 26(3) *Studies in Continuing Education* 405.

60 Ibid.

61 Cuthbert, Spark and Burke, above n 19.

presenting, engaging in critical discussion, or writing, and all the groups expressed themselves as having a social function, giving implicit recognition to the importance of combating isolation. Interestingly, few groups (aside from some writing groups) were focused on the actual production of research output and very few made any reference to the student-supervisor relationship, despite its looming presence in postgraduate education. Furthermore, virtually no group was explicitly engaged in the creation of communities of practice or socialising students into academia. Finding a balance between institutional integration and student autonomy within groups is likely to be extremely important in terms of sustainability and in enhancing opportunities within PGR learning. Developing a PGR crim* specific group that is pedagogically sound will require a reconceptualization of the broader pedagogical and institutional framing of postgraduate research education (particularly in the legal discipline).