

Proposal and Briefing Paper for the Faculty of Arts Research Committee

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Purpose

This paper seeks to outline an opportunity identified by postgraduates across the Faculty of Arts to improve the research training offered within Higher Degree by Research courses and the collegial environment fostered for postgraduates within the Faculty. It proposes a pilot program to be run in Anthropology and Sociology in early 2013 and requests a casual staff appointment and further structural support for this program.

Outline of current situation

- Transition between undergraduate and postgraduate studies is difficult—core skills need further development.
- Transition/orientation program has gaps—lack of community and networks leads to isolation, which prevents the collaborative learning that has been shown to improve postgraduates' research quality.
- The status quo cannot be maintained by postgraduates alone—postgraduates are under immense pressure to complete their theses prior to finalising their scholarships and as a result have only limited time to dedicate to such initiatives. A need exists for casual administrative staff and academic staff to run them.
- There is a willingness to support postgraduates amongst academic staff—but requires formal incentivisation due to heavy workloads.

Postgraduate study requires a significant change for students, whether they come from undergraduate courses or the workforce. In order to make the professional transition from student to academic, postgraduates must become more independent; yet this transition is not easy to make. The initial period of postgraduate candidature is often one in which students feel isolated, lost and ill-equipped. Due to rolling admissions, no formalised structure exists for introducing postgraduate students in the Faculty of Arts to fellow candidates or for integrating them into their disciplines. This lack of structural support for discipline-specific orientation results in most students having limited networking opportunities with fellow postgraduates. Such isolation from colleagues hinders the research quality and output of postgraduates, by preventing collaborations between students on journal articles and conference papers.

Postgraduate students in the Discipline of Anthropology and Sociology often feel that they are greatly under-prepared—in terms of research skills and theoretical knowledge—to produce high quality, original research. Prior to postgraduate study, most have not yet had the opportunity due to the time commitments required to conduct in-depth, qualitative research, and have little knowledge of: interview techniques, the preparation of fieldnotes, conducting participant observation, forming

researcher/informant relationships, utilising new technology and other techniques which are essential to effective and original ethnographic research.

In the Discipline of Anthropology and Sociology, we have attempted to address these difficulties through two complementary programmes: a peer mentoring scheme and postgraduate-organised 'workshops'. These initiatives have historical antecedents but have been held inconsistently in recent years; due to the time pressures on disciplinary staff and the removal of the designated and paid position of discipline Postgraduate Coordinator in early 2007 (after Cheryl Lange left). This year these programmes have, so far, been organised and run by postgraduate volunteers, placing considerable strain on students with already full workloads. The limited time and expertise of students has restricted the effectiveness of these programmes.

Proposed Pilot Program

The proposed program consists of two separate but complementary initiatives.

Advanced Tutorials

Postgraduate student representatives in Anthropology and Sociology seek to hold advanced tutorials which focus on theoretical, conceptual and methodological issues, in order to build on their undergraduate training in discipline-specific research. These tutorials fit well with the spirit of The University Policy on Graduate Research Training, especially Section 8 on the Graduate Research Community and Section 7.4.5, which states that, "all supervisors must... foster an environment in which research is seen as a creative and exciting activity."

Currently, postgraduate-run, discipline-specific workshops include scholarly discussion groups, writing groups and technical and professional development workshops. Without academic staff present to guide our discussions, this programme of workshops has had limited success, as we do not have adequate expertise to plan appropriately rigorous discussions on these complex topics. Discipline staff have expressed an interest in helping to moderate these sessions, however, they are unable to commit the time required to organise, and in some cases, to run them. The availability of an experienced staff member with anthropological training—to select topics and to lead discussions—would result in the strengthening of postgraduates' academic engagement.

We wish to conduct a more formal programme of advanced tutorials, which would commence in early March 2013 and run to late August 2013, with ten tutorials provided in total. These tutorials would not focus on generic skills but on developing the fundamental and core skills specific to the disciplines of anthropology and sociology. The teaching responsibilities for these tutorials would be shared equitably between the permanent academic staff who wish to take part. This division of labour would be possible as the heavy administrative burden would fall to the proposed casual staff appointed.

Peer Mentoring

In conjunction with the advanced tutorials, a peer mentoring network between commencing Higher Degree by Research students and established candidates has been developed. Section 8 of the Policy on Graduate Research Training refers frequently to the need for postgraduate students to participate fully in the intellectual environment of the School. Mentoring linkups would be formed between students who have completed at least one year of candidature and commencing students, who share similar research interests. Peer support would be provided for the first six to twelve months of the latter's candidature, a time commitment to be voluntarily agreed on by students. Being a peer mentor would enable experienced postgraduates to develop their supervisory skills, thereby preparing for their post-degree careers.

Initiated in 2012, the pairing of new candidates with peer mentors has been organised exclusively by Vanessa Caparas. She has spent time crafting targeted communications with postgraduates explaining the benefits of mentoring peers, writing guidelines for peer mentoring and regularly asking mentees for feedback on the mentoring they have received. Complete reliance on unpaid student labour to run the peer mentoring scheme will inevitably lead to its decline when the postgraduates administering this initiative begin their fieldwork, complete their theses or commence a career after graduation. Formal and consistent administration is required, in order to ensure that new students are not overlooked when they enrol and to keep track of students who are leaving for or returning from fieldwork.

Advantages and outcomes of the proposed trial

The ten tutorials and peer mentoring would provide students with the skills, resources and confidence to work more efficiently on their PhDs and academic papers.

Advanced Tutorials:

- The advanced tutorials fill a gap in the teaching and learning of discipline-specific competencies in ethnographic research, technical knowledge and anthropological and sociological discussion, which are not currently provided by the workshops on generic skills run by the GRS or Student Services.
- The tutorials would improve students' abilities to analyse their research findings and to critically understand key academic papers and theoretical debates in anthropology and sociology.
- The tutorials foster academic networks between postgraduates and staff, a professional necessity in the current global academic climate.

Peer Mentoring:

- Peer mentors assist new research students' integration into postgraduate study and the discipline-specific environment—as opposed to the formal orientation provided by UWA.
- Peer mentoring builds a dynamic research community in which postgraduates collaborate on producing publishable research—fulfilling UWA Policy on Graduate Research Training.
- Peer mentors provide guidance that supervisors are unable to give—due to time constraints and social barriers.

Collaborative Learning:

- Collaborative learning, such as that provided by the above programmes, has been shown to increase the likelihood of thesis completion as well as minimising delays to completion.¹ Other demonstrable beneficial outcomes include high quality research and the development of professional contacts and support systems.²

Requests

We make the following requests of the Faculty of Arts Research Committee:

1. That the Arts Research Committee source funding to pay for a casual staff appointment of one day (7.5hrs) per week, to provide administrative support for the pilot program in Anthropology and Sociology from March to August 2013, inclusive. This appointment would ideally be someone who has completed, or is nearing submission of a PhD, preferably in UWA's Discipline of Anthropology and Sociology—such a person would have relevant discipline-specific knowledge.
2. That the Arts Research Committee make a recommendation to the Dean of the Faculty (or other appropriate authority) for a scheme to provide appropriate recognition in workload points of the work done by teaching staff for these tutorials.
3. That the Arts Research Committee conduct a review of this program at its earliest convenience from late August 2013, to investigate continuing support and the expansion of the program into other discipline groups.

¹ L. Conrad & E.M. Phillips, 'From Isolation to Collaboration: A Positive Change for Postgraduate Women?', *Higher Education*, vol. 30, no. 3, 1995, pp.313-322; E.L. Kennedy, 'In Pursuit of Connection: Reflections on Collaborative Work', *American Anthropologist*, vol. 97, no. 1, 1995, pp.26-33; Y.M. Martin, M. Maclachlan & T. Karmel, *Postgraduate Completion Rates*, Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Canberra, 2001.

² For studies on research quality see P. Christensen, J. Hockey & A. James, 'Depending on the Field...?: The Natural History of a Research Project', *Anthropology Today*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1997, pp.3-7; D.F. Lancy, A. Rhees & J. Kinkad, 'A Sense of Community: Collaboration in a Large Anthropology Class', *College Teaching*, vol. 42, no. 3, 1992, pp.102-106. For studies on professional contacts and support systems see S.K. Gardner, "'What's Too Much and What's Too Little?': The Process of Becoming an Independent Researcher in Doctoral Education', *The Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 79, no. 3, 2008, p.326-350; S.K. Gardner & B.J. Benita, 'Graduate Student Involvement: Socialization for the Professional Role', *Journal of College Student Development*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2007, pp.369-387; B.E. Lovitts, *Leaving the Ivory Tower: The Causes and Consequences of Departure From Doctoral Study*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, 2001.