2013

'The books don't talk to me!': Postgraduate student groups and research student identity formation

Felicity Bell
University of Wollongong, fbell@uow.edu.au

Rita Shackel
University of Sydney

Linda Roslyn Steele
University of Wollongong, lsteele@uow.edu.au

Publication Details
F. Bell, R. Shackel & L. Steele, "The books don't talk to me!: Postgraduate student groups and research student identity formation' (Paper presented at the 36th HERDSA Annual International Conference, Auckland, New Zealand, 1-4 Jul 2013).
'The books don't talk to me!': Postgraduate student groups and research student identity formation

Abstract
This paper explores alternative spaces for learning amongst postgraduate research (PGR) students in the form of research-related groups such as reading and discussion groups, writing groups, seminar series or social groups. Our research with PGR students and academics explores the pedagogy and role of such groups in student learning and identity formation. In this paper, we discuss our findings related to PGR student needs and the factors prompting the formation of research-related groups. A survey of 36 PGR students revealed that students were reasonably satisfied with the formal components of their research degrees such as supervision and mandatory units of study. Yet general dissatisfaction with other opportunities for intellectual engagement, and feelings of isolation, were also prevalent. We hypothesise that though a majority of students might feel supported to complete their higher research degree, they are not necessarily feeling supported in the transition to becoming scholars or in developing broader scholarly interests and networks. As other academic literature has opined, research-related student groups can fulfil a dual function, assisting students towards completion of their research degree but also socialising students into academia. This paper discusses the role that higher education institutions and faculties might play in supporting research-related groups. In particular, there is a balance to be achieved between facilitating groups and enabling sustainability while ensuring that PGR students maintain autonomy and a reciprocal degree of responsibility in governance of such groups, which are key to developing an academic identity.

Keywords
student, groups, research, identity, me, formation, postgraduate, talk, t, don, books

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details
F. Bell, R. Shackel & L. Steele, "'The books don't talk to me!': Postgraduate student groups and research student identity formation" (Paper presented at the 36th HERDSA Annual International Conference, Auckland, New Zealand, 1-4 Jul 2013).

This conference paper is available at Research Online: http://ro.uow.edu.au/lhpapers/1114
This paper explores alternative spaces for learning amongst postgraduate research (PGR) students in the form of research-related groups such as reading and discussion groups, writing groups, seminar series or social groups. Our research with PGR students and academics explores the pedagogy and role of such groups in student learning and identity formation. In this paper, we discuss our findings related to PGR student needs and the factors prompting the formation of research-related groups. A survey of 36 PGR students revealed that students were reasonably satisfied with the formal components of their research degrees such as supervision and mandatory units of study. Yet general dissatisfaction with other opportunities for intellectual engagement, and feelings of isolation, were also prevalent. We hypothesise that though a majority of students might feel supported to complete their higher research degree, they are not necessarily feeling supported in the transition to becoming scholars or in developing broader scholarly interests and networks. As other academic literature has opined, research-related student groups can fulfil a dual function, assisting students towards completion of their research degree but also socialising students into academia. This paper discusses the role that higher education institutions and faculties might play in supporting research-related groups. In particular, there is a balance to be achieved between facilitating groups and enabling sustainability while ensuring that PGR students maintain autonomy and a reciprocal degree of responsibility in governance of such groups, which are key to developing an academic identity.

**Keywords:** postgraduate research students, student discussion groups, postgraduate research pedagogy

**Background: The Crim* Network Project**

This paper reports on a research project directed at informing the development of a postgraduate research (PGR) student network (‘the Network’) based at the Sydney Law School. We are academics and PGR students who have an interest in PGR research groups and have variously been involved in supporting, organising and participating in such groups and the PGR experience more generally, including an informal student led group on criminal law and criminology (Steele, Shackel & Bell, 2012).
The project seeks to develop a pedagogically and empirically informed Network (Steele, Shackel & Bell, 2012) which is interdisciplinary and inter-faculty in structure and has a focus on criminology, criminal law and criminal justice in a broad sense. The breadth envisaged for the Network was prompted by the importance of opportunities for interdisciplinary exchange and cooperation afforded by criminology and related fields and was encompassed by referring to “crim*” disciplines. Moreover, in light of our location in the legal discipline, we saw interdisciplinarity being particularly valuable to address the problems of disciplinary authority and isolation that might confront legal PGR students. This broad focus of the group and open-ended approach to membership was seen as permitting for self-identification into the group, which we rationalised would strengthen the group’s coherence (Steele, Shackel & Bell, 2012).

The benefits generally of PGR students participating in research-related groups are well-accepted, whether these be reading and discussion groups, writing groups, seminar series or social groups (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2009; Leonard & Becker, 2009; Ward & West, 2008). Benefits are most easily demonstrated by groups that aim to produce specific outputs, such as thesis writing circles, because these outputs can then be clearly measured. However, despite persistent pressure to achieve tangible outputs and results, PGR groups can also fulfil other less readily quantifiable needs, such as providing support and including students in the life of the faculty.

A previous phase of our research project identified six possible pedagogical bases for PGR student groups, with a specific focus on the legal discipline (Steele, Shackel & Bell, 2012). Three fit within a traditional ‘narrow’ conceptualisation of postgraduate research education: skills development; supporting completion of the thesis; and supporting the supervisor relationship. Three further reasons extend beyond this narrow conceptualisation to a more complex, broadened understanding: creating opportunities for peer learning and alternative spaces for learning; socialisation and identity formation; and countering the authority and isolation of the legal discipline (Steele, Shackel & Bell, 2012, 28). Our earlier research sought to test and explore these bases empirically by conducting an online survey of PGR groups with a focus on categorising their main purposes and relating this to pedagogical considerations (Steele, Shackel & Bell, 2012, 30-31).

This paper follows on from our earlier analysis, which raised a series of questions for further research and consideration relating to the definition of the Network, its activities and the skills to be developed, its target group, scope, and the role that the Law School and academics should play in the Network. We wanted to discover more about how existing groups came to be: the impetus for their formation, their organisation and importantly, how they were sustained. In particular, in light of the transient nature of PGR student populations and the time constraints of PGR students, we were interested in the factors determining whether groups would die a natural death, having seemingly exhausted their own possibilities, or whether they would develop a life of their own and continue, irrespective of the individuals involved.

We were aware both from our own experiences and anecdotally that PGR students at the Law School were feeling isolated both socially and academically. A goal of the Network was therefore to foster and enhance faculty, and ultimately inter-university engagement. The proposed interdisciplinary and inter-university structure of the group was seen as essential given the interconnectedness of research communities in practice. Feelings of isolation amongst students are well-documented in studies of PGR around the world and across
disciplines (Deem & Brehony, 2000; McAlpine et al., 2012, 511-23; Delamont, Atkinson & Parry, 2004, 97). The traditional model of PGR education is often viewed as an inherently lonely and isolated path (Shacham & Od-Cohen, 2009, 287). Typically in higher research degrees within the humanities one key relationship – that between candidate and supervisor – is elevated as the keystone to successful completion of the research degree (see for example Parker, 2009, 43). This is reflected in the Council of Australian Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies Best Practice Guidelines: Research Doctorates, which arguably shapes the doctoral experience around the candidate-supervisor relationship and charges the principal supervisor with ‘primary responsibility for the provision and coordination of support and advice for the candidature’ (2010, 6).

Undertaking a doctoral or other PGR degree can be challenging, replete with lack of clarity and direction. This may stem from ‘a lack of clarity about doctoral expectations, incomplete understandings of academic life, and uncertainty as to whether… values can be aligned with those of the academy.’ (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2009, 109). Academic commentators have noted that the highly individualised model of PGR in the humanities (Boud & Lee, 2005; Pearson, 1999), focused on formal, institutional models of learning, may fail to acknowledge ‘informal routes to learning.’ (Hasrati, 2005, 567). The creation of groups or networks of postgraduate students has been put forward as a means of countering this isolation (Shacham & Od-Cohen, 2009). Moreover, there is a strong emphasis in the literature on networking and collaboration as helping to form an individual’s identity as a researcher as well as facilitating socialisation into academia (Baker & Pifer, 2011; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2009).

**Methodology**

In this article we explore the empirical context for the development of the Network through data collected from PGR students and academics on their experiences and involvement in PGR student groups. Our research design consisted of three stages.

First, we surveyed PGR students about their satisfaction with their postgraduate studies and their interest in participation in research-related groups. The survey included closed ended questions utilising rating scales and open-ended comments boxes.

Drawing on themes from the available literature, the survey asked students about their satisfaction with the opportunities for intellectual engagement within their institution, relationships with supervisors and any mandatory units of study. The survey then asked students about their current or past participation in any research-related groups, the focus and operation of those groups and positive and negative aspects. Finally, the survey asked students about their interest in participating in a PGR student group and importantly, their preferred format for such a group.

The survey was administered in two ways. A hard-copy version was distributed amongst students attending the Sydney Law School Postgraduate Conference in 2012. The theme of the conference was ‘Crossing Boundaries’ and the call for papers emphasised the interdisciplinary focus of this theme. The conference was attended by approximately 60 students from both the University of Sydney and other universities around Australia. Twenty-one copies of the survey were returned following its distribution at the conference.

Secondly, an online version of the survey was created using SurveyMonkey. As this was done subsequent to receipt of the hard copy surveys, some minor changes were made using feedback from the hard copy surveys. The link to the online survey was then sent to
administrators at university law schools in New South Wales with a request that the invitation to participate be distributed amongst PGR students. Confirmation that distribution occurred was received only from Sydney University, Macquarie University and University of Technology Sydney. Given this sampling method the exact number of students invited to participate is unknown. Fifteen completed surveys were received. In total then, 36 responses were received to the surveys. As the survey was administered anonymously it is not possible to identify the universities participants attended. Survey comments were analysed using a general inductive method to identify emergent themes (Thomas, 2006). This was seen to be important in gaining a deeper understanding of the reasons for the attitudes expressed.

Thirdly, following this thematic analysis of the survey responses, we undertook targeted discussions with academics who reportedly were, or had previously been engaged in running a research-related group with at least some student members. Eight academics based within law or humanities departments were contacted with an invitation to participate in an informal discussion with a researcher about their experiences. At the time of writing, four in-depth interviews had been conducted, though none with academics from law faculties. Two academics were involved in running structured interdisciplinary writing groups for PGR students in the humanities, one academic was involved with an online discussion group for PGR students of creative writing, and another academic ran an informal discussion group straddling philosophy and linguistics, with both PGR students and academic members. The discussions with the four academics were loosely structured and focused on the genesis, purpose and perceived sustainability of groups, as well as the academic’s particular involvement and the institutional setting of the group. This approach was intended to capture some of the complexity and particularity of the activity of running research-related groups (Stake, 1995).

Results and discussion

Identity and expectations of PGR life
A key aim of the research project was to identify the extent to which there was a need or desire amongst PGR students for a postgraduate group such as the Network envisaged. This involved ascertaining not just whether students answered ‘yes’ when asked if they would participate in such a group, but whether students felt dissatisfaction with aspects of their postgraduate study experience which might be addressed through involvement in a group.

The majority (72%) of survey respondents expressed that they were satisfied with existing opportunities for intellectual and social exchange. However, from the comments made, it was apparent that some students (almost 20%) were either satisfied with having little contact with others, or blamed themselves for not making more time to engage:

I do not have much interest in intensive interaction with other students. The nature of my candidature and full-time work commitment, as well as family commitments, means that the occasional interaction through the Legal Research subjects and postgraduate conferences are sufficient for me (#4).

While I haven’t taken advantage of the opportunities that have been offered, this is through no fault of the Faculty or the post-grad committee, but through my own failure to take advantage of them (#21).

These comments suggest that some students had internalised popular expectations about the ‘loneliness’ of completing a postgraduate research degree and did not harbour expectations of
other collective or informal learning opportunities. They also reflect the findings of others such as Aitchison, who observes that despite the apparent effectiveness and positive impact for students who were part of thesis writing groups, attendance remained low (2009a, 2009b).

Other students, however, indicated dissatisfaction:

My doctoral experience has been very solitary, with little sense of cohesion among graduate students or activity on the part of faculty to engage and collaborate with us (#22).

…there is no exchange (the books don’t talk to me!) (#25).

Approximately half the survey respondents reported feeling isolated from other students or from the academic community. Five students made comments indicating that this was linked to the fact that they rarely attended campus, either preferring to work from home or being distance students:

I do quite a bit of work at home and sometimes I’m not even in the same city as the university. Some days I barely speak with anyone! (#28).

The varying desire among PGR students for greater intellectual and social exchange with others is referable at least in part to differences in expectations and goals. It is well-recognised that many PGR students will not inevitably move into academic careers. By the mid-1990s, ‘only 44% of research graduates seeking employment were employed as either an academic or a full-time researcher’ (Pearson, 1999, 273). Unsurprisingly, this can lead students to ‘struggle with an unclear conception of who they can and want to become as a result of their doctoral studies’ (Räsänen & Korpiaho, 2011, 19).

Ambiguity towards, or rejection of, an academic career was apparent from some of the survey responses (given in relation to a question regarding satisfaction with supervisors):

I have no ambition to become a career academic… (#13).

Both my supervisors are generally available to discuss issues/difficulties/anxieties I have. I believe they would be supportive if I was more ambitious about being professionally strategic but I’m not. (#15).

These comments draw attention to the fact that, for those PGR students who are not intending to pursue an academic career, the benefits offered by the Network for socialisation into academia might not be a relevant incentive to participate in the group or a relevant benefit from participation. Importantly, then, while many academic commentators have emphasised the importance of networking and collaboration during a PGR degree for socialisation into academia, this will not be relevant for all – at least to the extent that those not entering academia are doing so out of choice. This does not necessarily mean that the Network is redundant for these individuals. Rather, there might be other benefits to participation such as developing more generic skills in communication and teamwork. There might also be benefits related to present PGR circumstances such as supporting completion and supplementing the supervisor relationship. Moreover, for these students socialisation into the role of PGR student might also be important, particularly if these individuals are working full time in professional environments and do not see their primary identity as ‘student’. On the other hand, to the extent that students are not entering academia for other reasons (such as
limited secure employment opportunities, lack of social capital or lack of knowledge about opportunities) then the benefits of academic socialisation derived from the Network are likely to have more significance.

Notably, PGR students will already have different levels of identity formation and socialisation upon entry into their research program, and in the course of progression through the degree. Those students employed on teaching staff will likely already have a sense of academic identity and be socialised into the academic community (Räsänen & Korpiaho, 2011, 21). Two survey respondents commented that they were in fact already working full time as academics whilst completing their PGR degree and hence did not feel isolated from the academic community, which provided more opportunities for interaction. Already working in academia, and being considered inter alia ‘an academic’ may thus import a different set of concerns. These candidates might, for example, still feel isolated from their cohort of PGR students, despite being more inculcated into the academic environment, or they might struggle with assuming the identity of ‘student’.

The busy lives of PGR students and the multiple competing demands on their time meant that for many, achieving completion of their thesis was the primary aim. Though students might ideally like to participate to a greater extent in academic life, and experienced feelings of isolation, they perceived this to be an inevitable sacrifice for completion or the trade-off for engaging in many other activities.

**Group formation and PGR student needs**

There is an inherent tension between the focus on the product of the PGR degree – the thesis – and its completion, and the need to develop skills beyond production of the dissertation. Academic analysis of postgraduate study groups has tended to emphasise their role in developing such skills as writing, critical thinking, collaboration and knowledge development (Cuthbert, Spark & Burke, 2009; Brien & Webb, 2008; Lewis & Habeshaw, 1997; Maher et al, 2008). At the same time, the emphasis on completion of the dissertation, such as that identified by Colbran and Tynan (2006) amongst supervisors of PGR students in law, may lead to a narrowing of focus. Indeed, a group which does not appear to be moving students directly toward completion might be seen as at best a distraction and at worst, obstructionist (Devenish et al, 2009). Emphasising completion of the doctorate or dissertation may be antithetical to the broader intellectual exploration espoused by a particular group. This is particularly likely to be so if students do not necessarily consider themselves on a pathway to an academic career.

More than half of the students surveyed (53%) indicated that they had been, or were currently, involved in a research-related student group while a quarter of these students reported involvement in academic-led groups. The nature of the survey questions and the data collected did not disclose the specific reasons why respondents had ceased involvement in particular groups, though we discuss below some of the respondents’ comments on the negative aspects of groups, which might perhaps have informed decisions to cease involvement. Students generally had positive comments about the groups in which they had been involved which included social groups, informal discussion groups, online discussion forums and seminars. Negative comments related more to procedural or administrative aspects of groups, such as low numbers or being unable to find convenient times to meet. The major problem for students participating in groups was simply finding the time, amongst other responsibilities, to attend meetings:
The student group was set up online. The group involved students and academics interested in drug-related research. It was an informal structure. …One positive aspect was the ability to discuss issues related to my thesis with like-minded people. The group members were interested in similar areas of research and we were able to discuss many issues at length. One negative aspect was that meeting numbers declined rapidly (#12).

There are no groups currently running in my area of research. I have attempted to start one but it was unsuccessful due to conflicting schedules - most people work full time and/or have family responsibilities, so we could not settle on a suitable time… I have [also] been involved in a ‘research in progress’ group. The group was very positive, it offered a non-threatening forum to discuss and develop ideas. The only negative is that the group disbanded, again due to scheduling difficulties (#9).

When asked about their ‘ideal’ group, one aspect of the survey in which students were relatively well united was in relation to beliefs about academic involvement, with almost two-thirds of students answering that they believed academic involvement would be necessary for any group to function successfully. The desire to overcome problems of low attendance and lack of organisation were perhaps part of this belief. Even the four students who thought that a group would not need academic involvement to function successfully indicated in their comments that academic involvement would nevertheless be desirable.

Generally, responses indicated that some students preferred academics to facilitate or organise the group and essentially provide students with feedback. In a representative comment, one student stated:

Students on their own often lack the resources and motivation to maintain a group on an ongoing basis. On the other hand informal groups require no academic involvement (#23).

The importance placed on academic involvement in the group may be understood, as the comment above suggests, as part of a desire for structure and consistency, and also some degree of embeddedness or acceptance within the faculty. Possibly students were aware, from their previous involvement in research-related groups, of the tendency for less formal groups to flounder and eventually disband. Academics are in more stable positions to ensure long-term continuity of groups.

The emphasis on academic involvement also illustrates the tension between identity formation and socialisation into PGR education and academia. As Boud and Lee (2005) point out, socialisation into PGR education involves assuming the identity of student and the related ‘horizontal’ power differences that come from this subject position. In comparison, assuming the identity of academic and being socialised into academia involves more ‘vertical’ relationships with academic colleagues. The surveyed students seemed to envisage a continuation of the master-apprentice supervisor type relationship in the groups, rather than a situation in which academics and PGR students participated in an explicitly non-hierarchical manner such as that described by Dahlgren and Bjuremark (2012) in relation to seminars. At the same time, there appeared to be an expectation that academic-led groups would still be a ‘safe place’ for students to share their work (Devenish et al, 2009, 62; Cuthbert & Spark, 2008, 85-87).
This reflects the primary focus on ‘narrow’ pedagogical considerations linked to the end product of the thesis as opposed to achieving broader pedagogical outcomes such as the kind of self-sufficiency and autonomy which can be part of creating an identity as a researcher or academic (Green & Lee, 1995). It might be that one reason underlying PGR students’ desire for institutional involvement in groups relates to these less tangible outcomes of groups being overlooked or undervalued by PGR students and by the institutions they belong to because of neoliberal expectations of productivity, efficiency and output. Yet, our earlier research suggests that these less tangible, more emotional and human, aspects are a strength of groups and might also be essential to meeting the more concrete and output-driven aspects of PGR experience (Steele, Shackel & Bell, 2012).

**Autonomy and institutional support**

The data from our student surveys shows a clear preference for academic involvement in PGR research groups. Existing pedagogical literature and the data from our interviews with academics, however, suggest that there is a necessary balance to be achieved between the role of academics in facilitating groups yet still ensuring that PGR students maintain autonomy and have a reciprocal degree of responsibility in governance of such groups. Autonomy is an important aspect of the academic socialisation process (though one possibly unrecognised by PGR students) because it contributes to such factors as building confidence, as well as developing skills in independent work, communicating research with colleagues and organising events, all of which are important in academic roles and indeed in the wider workforce.

The academics involved in a group can nevertheless play an active role in instigating and supporting student autonomy. For example, this came through in our interview with Professor #A, an academic responsible for facilitating a student writing group. She explained that she had travelled overseas and had to miss several weeks of the fortnightly sessions. While Professor #A was away, however, she saw an email in which a student commented on the fact that in her absence, the student participants had more time to talk. On her return, Professor #A decided to begin providing her feedback by email, so as to free more time for discussion in the group. The group in that case had reached a level of functionality where its members could carry on without their facilitator, and indeed, may sometimes have preferred to do so.

A similar comment was made by Professor Jen Webb, in describing the Australian Postgraduate Writers Network (APWN) (Webb et al, 2008; Brien & Webb, 2008), an online forum for PGR students of creative writing. She explained that while originally the site was intended for both students and supervisors, the involvement of supervisors ‘had a muting effect’, and it was determined they should not attempt to participate in the forum. Instead, the website became very much the province of students alone, though it retained close ties to its ‘peak body’, the Australian Association of Writing Programs. Professor Webb explained that, now in its fifth year, the website went through ‘dull periods’, but the inclusion of news items from the peak body such as job opportunities or conferences drew participants back to the site. This confers legitimacy as well as sustaining the APWN.

Our student surveys indicated that a majority of students (72%) were interested in a group with online aspects. Comments suggested that the primary reason for this was the ‘convenience’ of online communication, for example:
An online group would provide a significant level of flexibility in terms of time commitment and availability (#17).

Of the groups run by academics who participated in our research, only the APWN, being an online forum, had an ongoing, interactive web presence. Although the writing groups had websites, these were informational only, and all communications outside of face-to-face meetings occurred by email. All the groups relied upon new PGR students being advised of the groups’ existence and encouraged to attend by supervisors or peers.

**Conclusion**

This study sought to examine PGR student satisfaction with the social and intellectual aspects of their research experiences and their related needs for PGR student groups, as well as how existing PGR groups were formed, organised and sustained over time, by conducting a small survey of PGR students and in-depth discussions with academic facilitators of groups. Respondents reported being largely satisfied with the opportunities they had for intellectual and social exchange within their degrees. Despite dissatisfaction amongst some, particularly in regards to isolation, a minority of students appeared to accept this as an unavoidable aspect of PGR. While ideally students might like a different experience of PGR in which they were more engaged with the research cultures of the faculty, in reality they tended to de-prioritise activities not directly related to completion of their theses, reflecting a narrow pedagogical conceptualisation.

PGR students who did desire greater levels of involvement in research-related groups were frustrated by the difficulties of organisation and attracting a sustainable quorum of participants. It may be that the difficulties in self-organisation lead to a high proportion of students feeling that academic involvement was necessary for the successful functioning of a group. Indeed, as indicated by our interviews, academic support could be key in structuring groups and engendering participation. At the same time, if groups are to play a role in socialising students into academia, it will be important that students have scope for participating in governance and directing the group. With appropriate institutional support, student groups might be able to achieve a self-sustaining, autonomous life of their own which can not only facilitate socialisation but also accommodate students’ movements between identities at different times during their candidature.

The challenge in moving the Network forward will be in balancing the pedagogical goals of autonomy with student perceptions of need as ascertained from the data, namely the desire for academic involvement and formal institutional support. It is a question for further research whether the Network is able to successfully serve the diverse needs of PGR students with differing interests, goals and imagined futures.

**Acknowledgements**

The authors wish to thank all those students and academics who participated in surveys and interviews. Funding for this project was provided by a Strategic Teaching Enhancement Project grant from the University of Sydney.

**References**


instruction provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The authors also grant a non-exclusive license to HERDSA to publish this document in full on the World Wide Web (prime site and mirrors) and within the portable electronic format HERDSA 2013 conference proceedings. Any other usage is prohibited without the express permission of the authors.