Focus

Enhancing the research learning climate for higher degree research students.

- Learn about the University’s new initiatives to enrich the learning climate for research students
- Find out about some innovative practices and investigations that are taking place in faculties
- Exchange ideas about enhancing the research learning climate in your part of the University

Program

I. WHY THIS FOCUS
Professor Marie Carroll introduced the issue of climate and showed data on how the PREQ and SREQ data for the last 5 years has ratings on the climate scale consistently around the 60% mark, the lowest rating of any of the 5 scales.

II. WHAT INDIVIDUALS ARE DOING IN FACULTIES

- Professor Anita Bundy (Health Sciences) and two research student, Nicola Hancock and Justin Scanlan, spoke on initiatives to support research students’ learning. PIEL (Participation in Everyday Life) is a program for PhD students to meet and talk about the obstacles to doing research. Students brainstorm and provide numbers of solutions for a huge variety of obstacles, from getting published, to getting enough participants, to sharing information about the best thesis colours and binding. It is held for 2 hours every week. The students spoke enthusiastically about the value of this solution focused meeting, which has the aim of dealing with unfinished problems. The meetings are always relevant to the students, and increase the sense of being part of a research community.

- Dr Bronwen Dyson (Arts and Social Sciences), who is the faculty’s Postgraduate Academic Writing Adviser, spoke about a course she is piloting on writing in Arts & SS. Its aim is to counter isolation and create a community of practice among PG research students – particularly for international students, those for whom English is an Additional Language, and those in their first years of candidature. The course seeks to foster a better understanding of thesis and dissertation writing requirements, and to strengthen the links between writing support and supervision. It is a semester length course with Pass/Fail criteria, to mimic the thesis examination process, but it is not for credit.

- Dr Arlie Loughnan (Associate Dean Postgraduate Coursework, Law) explained that the Law Faculty requires postgraduate research students to complete Legal Research 1, 2 and 3 over the course of their degree. Students undertake ‘LR3’ as close as possible to the completion of the thesis. Its aim is to give students a final boost prior to completion of the
thesis by providing support from academics other than a student’s supervisor and associate supervisor, as well as support from peers, all of whom are in a similar position (ie aiming for completion) during the 3 to 6 months leading up to thesis submission. In LR3, the students meet for a 3-hour session before the start of semester in order to share their plans for the semester, and they meet again for a 2-day session towards the end of semester in order to present their theses, pitched to a generalist audience. Between these two sessions, the students are required to pair up and to swap a chapter/part of the thesis with a colleague for feedback/comments from a generalist rather than a specialist.

- **Zoe Alderton** and **Johanna Petsche**, research students in Arts and Social Sciences, talked about how a small group of research students supported each other with writing, editing and publishing their work and through this process building a research community. Their small group, known as ‘The Experiment in Awesomeness’, was started in 2008 by Dr Alex Norman, then a PhD student in Religion, and met throughout 2009 as a forum for formative peer feedback on chapter drafts, conference papers and so on. The presenters spoke about the value of receiving referee feedback and braving the publication process while in the first year of PhD candidature, and then in 2011 serving as guest editors of a Special Issue of *The Journal of the Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics*. This involved liaising with postgraduate (and academic staff) authors and with referees, communicating referee requirements to authors, and making editorial and stylistic changes.

### III. WHAT COLLOQUIUM PARTICIPANTS ARE DOING TO CREATE COMMUNITIES:

#### Group 1
**Creating a research community that is the right size**
Discussion facilitated by **Dr Ruth Phillips**, Education and Social Work

Suggestions for building a research community included academic networks, faculty/interfaculty research networks such as Social Policy Network, SYRENS Sydney Social Justice Network, academic staff research seminars and colloquia, research student seminars, research student for a journal located within a faculty/program/department/school, local/national/international networks through conferences and associations, and external collaborations. The key ingredients for a strong research community were identified as seniority, who you know, workloads, and connections between research students and the wider faculty. As the earlier presenters made clear, the right size is a particular challenge at a large university like Sydney, and communities are best formed locally. The suggestion was that groups should be about 15 – not too big and disparate.

#### Group 2
**Creating a research community across physical distance**
Discussion facilitated by **Dr Damien Field**, Agriculture and Environment

In a multi campus institution like Sydney, it is a challenge to build a community for students who never come to Camperdown. What is needed is a strong commitment by senior research staff and supervisors to go to where the students may be located, for example in small towns in NSW where they may be doing field research. There is also a view that lunchtime research seminars do not work for certain professional groups who are working (e.g. medical or nursing students). Instead, students must be told when they enrol that they will be expected to attend a research
week (as Sydney Nursing School does) during each year of their candidature, the date for which is advertised far in advance for people to plan leave around. The Nursing research week builds a strong sense of community through student presentations, discussion groups, and guest speakers.

IV. WHAT THE UNIVERSITY IS DOING AT A CENTRAL LEVEL

Professor Marie Carroll (Graduate Studies Office) spoke about the PhD renewal and Training Needs Analysis projects, suggesting that these initiatives will bring students together in new ways. With everyone having to undertake some knowledge and skills development, there will be unprecedented opportunities for students from all disciplines to come together and share their views.

Associate Professor Simon Barrie (Director of Teaching and Learning) spoke about the ITL’s contributions to research community building for research students via work this year with faculties (Sydney College of the Arts, Education and Social Work/Law/Arts and Social Sciences) through the development initiative for experienced supervisors, which seeks to build leadership and peer exchange (not ‘required training’) – as well as ITL’s contributions to working parties on Supervision and on the Annual Progress Review.

To discuss ways of improving the research climate for students in your part of the University, please contact Dr Cynthia Nelson (cynthia.nelson@sydney.edu.au), who co-planned this Colloquium session with Professor Marie Carroll.