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## Fostering Honours and Postgraduate Participation in University Research Communities

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### Abstract

This paper addresses a problem Kiley (2005) and others have noted is endemic to Australian universities. In 2007, we took the first small practical steps to address the difficult task of drawing honours and postgraduate students of literature into the research culture of their discipline. Our focus was a conference we organised and that took place in July 2007. We chose keynotes who are not only internationally pre-eminent in their fields of literary theory and criticism, but have also participated in the recent wars that have surrounded the teaching of literature in the universities. We wanted to offer our students the opportunity to be more than awestruck listeners at the feet of Great Men; we wanted them to be conference-ready so they would engage directly with the new research that would be presented; we wanted them to experience a level of intellectual excitement that might feed into their own work. To that end, we set up a number of formal and informal enabling structures that brought groups of students and staff together in ways that included an informal reading group, a formal honours course based on the keynotes' work, and how-to-write-and-present-a-paper workshops for postgraduates. All were geared to the conference and fed into it as they fostered students' awareness that they belong to, indeed are essential to, an ongoing vital research community. Our next step is to encourage and facilitate others who might wish to adopt and adapt these strategies.

### Introduction

A little over a year ago, in February 2007, Megan Hoffmann, Dr Tony Thwaites and I took the first practical steps to address a problem endemic in the arts and humanities in Australian universities. What, we asked ourselves, could we do to lessen the separation of research higher degree and honours students from the broader research cultures of our institution. In response, we began to develop a multi-layered, straightforward, easy-to-implement program that would

First draw these students into our research community, the multi-disciplinary School of English, Media Studies, and Art History (EMSAH) at the University of Queensland, and

Second not add too greatly to our already challenging workloads.

We began to map a program that would work vertically, between staff, rhd and honours students, and horizontally between student peers, in the hope that eventually it will become self-sustaining as students see working with others to be normal rather than aberrant.

By encouraging students to work with each other, and with staff members beyond the necessarily narrow circle of their advisory teams, by inviting them to "come into our (research) parlour," we hoped to mitigate the debilitating sense of estrangement reported by many student researchers, and which the research shows works against completions. If our students enjoyed the research experience, the research might go better.

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And of course we envisaged benefits for us as advisors and teachers, and for the School. We wanted to tap into all that new energy; to take advantage of what King (2007) in an impassioned argument for the importance of postgraduate research to Australasia's socio-economic future, has termed the "fresh pair of eyes" a new researcher brings. We knew from experience that as we nourished our students they would in turn nourish us.

The papers my colleague Megan Hoffmann and I presented at the QPR Conference in 2008 and that are gathered in these proceedings are interlinked. I began by introducing the overall scheme; Megan and I then each focused on specific elements that meshed to make up the foundations of the program we will develop and disseminate, with our colleagues, in the months and years to come. My focus will be the postgraduate experience, and Megan, who is a enrolled in an MPhil in performance studies with EMSAH, will focus on the experience of honours students, who occupy a liminal position between our undergraduate and postgraduate programs. To distinguish between the two groups we've been working with, I will from here on refer to honours students and rhd students.

In terms of evidence, it's very early days, though we do have some qualifiable and quantifiable data. Our papers are largely descriptive—they are not the result of the kind of intensive research others have done and are doing; rather they record our on-the-ground experiences and our plans for the work we have begun. In connection with this, I'd signal here that while we recognise the problem we address is an arts and humanities one, we believe aspects of our plan might benefit other research areas.

Our literature search showed, unsurprisingly, that there is strong evidence that researchers operating in "networked environments" (Fox and Milbourne qtd in Kiley (2005) are more productive than those who work alone. Such evidence, together with the quantitative data provided by the Graduate Careers Council of Australia's (GCCA) Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ) and our own more nuanced if less quantifiable experiences, supported anecdotally by staff and student colleagues, suggested to us that for rhd students in the arts and humanities, research resembles more closely the solitary vice than an interactive productive sociable activity. All this persuaded us of the pressing need for a program that would welcome and integrate rhd and honours students into EMSAH as researchers. We felt we could model a mutually enriching process of reciprocity as we made clear our appreciation of their commitment to our program. While most EMSAH advisors may, with King (2007), recognise the benefits that accrue to us personally from the intellectual stimulation and emotional satisfaction of working closely with research students, we are aware that too often we fail adequately to impart that recognition. In planning this program, we wanted students to know that their contribution to our community is important and it is valued. We hoped that in return would come a recognition of the responsibilities inherent in the role of student researcher: the kind of environment we wanted to foster would only take root and grow if our students were as committed to its success, to their community in other words, as we were. There are encouraging signs that this is happening.

The first question Tony and I asked was why our student researchers did not take advantage of the opportunities for mutual cooperation and intellectual exchange already available. Why, for example, did so few come to School seminars, join reading groups? Why had the once- strong student society collapsed? Anecdotal and other evidence with which you will be all too familiar suggests that for a range of reasons, including the need to complete the thesis before the scholarship runs out, pressures of paid work and duties to family, rhd students are wary of venturing beyond the confines of their own research. The

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prospect of a commitment to a broader community is perceived to be a threat rather than a boon. Rather than an enriching relationship of give-and-take likely to result in an enhanced research experience, a more sophisticated thesis, and a speedier outcome, communal engagement is feared as a divagation, even a snare, likely to jeopardise timely completion.

However, there is another perspective on the problem: that of the students. As researchers including Conrad (2007) and Kiley (2005) have noted, the Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire, which is sent to all students graduating with a research higher degree, reveals that a significant number believe arts faculties don't do enough to invite students' intellectual engagement in research communities. While the arts score well overall in terms of postgraduate satisfaction, when it comes to the five questions that are geared to "research culture"—what the GCCA terms "intellectual climate"—they score considerably less well.<sup>4</sup>

We addressed the problem from two angles. I will now, very briefly, touch on the honours angle, before Meg discusses it in detail in the second paper.

We were in a particularly good position to respond to the sense of isolation experience by honours students: I am Director of Honours, and Meg "survived" my program in 2006. Together, we set up a multi-layered system of buddying and mentoring designed to entice these, the newest of our research students, into our research community and in so doing to facilitate the border crossing from undergraduate study to independent research. This part of the program will continue to require careful nurture, but if we can tread a delicate path between institutionalising the program and allowing it to develop organically, we believe its effects will flow on to our postgraduate program in years to come as honours students make the transition to research higher degrees.

Our welcoming of rhd students into the research culture of their discipline had as its focus an international conference Tony Thwaites and I organised for the second semester of the program's first year. We wanted students to have the opportunity to be more than awestruck listeners at the feet of Great Men and so we chose keynotes we knew would extend our students intellectually at the same time as they modelled best practice in terms of presenting their research and responding to that of others, including, of course, the postgraduates themselves. The keynotes we chose are internationally pre-eminent in their fields of literary theory and criticism, but they have also participated in the recent wars around the teaching of literature—they have a theoretical and pragmatic interest in the welfare of students and the discipline.

Our conference preparation and the conference itself were to operate as a discreet research community but one that opened out into the broader one of the international conference. We wanted our students to be ready. For this to happen they needed to be familiar with the work of the keynotes and so we set up a range of formal and informal parallel enabling structures that brought together students and staff in the lead up to the conference.

There were two formal elements that could be folded into our School-assessed teaching workload:

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<sup>4</sup> The five points the GCCA uses to measure "intellectual climate" are: the department provided opportunities for social contact with other postgraduate students; I was integrated into the department's community; a good seminar program for postgraduate students was provided; the department provided opportunities for me to become involved in the broader research culture; and the research ambience in the department or faculty stimulated my work (Qtd in Kiley 1).

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First, Tony Thwaites and I taught, with five guest-lecturer colleagues, a one-semester honours literature seminar for 12 students in which we read canonical primary texts, including *Heart of Darkness*, *Mrs Dalloway*, and Wallace Stevens's poetry. Each text was coupled with an exemplary critical essay by one or other of the keynotes. The essays were the focus: we read them for content, and as models for argument, analysis, rhetorical strategies.

Second, because we are aware that few rhd students receive training in presenting at conferences, Tony and I, together with visiting academic Dr Felicity Plunkett planned and taught a one-semester pass/fail course to teach the process of writing and presenting papers. We enrolled ten students whose disciplines ranged across creative writing, cultural studies, film and television, and literature. They were encouraged to re-vision an aspect of their thesis from a perspective that would intersect with the conference theme. (In this we were mindful of two things: student fears of moving too far away from the thesis topic, and the opportunity to receive useful feedback for the thesis from a wider research community).

Within the larger student group, were nested three smaller ones, self-selected according to research area. The large group exchanged ideas and then drafts through an on-line discussion board and all thirteen of us were required to read all the latest drafts in preparation for each classroom meeting. In between those meetings, the small groups met online and face-to-face to offer intensive feedback. They gained transferable skills: working together, giving and receiving rigorous feedback, and the importance of encouragement.

Working with us and with each other, they began by

Developing the kind of abstract that sells an idea to a committee. (On enrolment in the course they accepted that there was no guarantee their papers would be accepted, though in the event they all were).

They then workshopped outlines and drafts, online and face-to-face, using the same process.

The course ended with a dress rehearsal at which students tried out presentation skills and they practised being an audience, learning the skills of offering useful generous feedback rather than taking the opportunity to reveal their own knowledge, and asking questions in an environment that would be more public than most of them had yet experienced. (Before the conference, students got together of their own volition for further practice runs, further feedback).

The results of this careful preparation were very professional presentations and, according to the students themselves, very little performance anxiety.

Now for two less formal elements of the project that cannot either be absorbed into an academic's normal teaching load or count for student credit:

First, an informal and shifting population of staff, RHD, and honours students met weekly and read examples of the work of each keynote that were particularly pertinent to the conference theme. We read together, word-by-word, line-by-line in a long-established EMSAH tradition that blessedly requires no pre-meeting preparation, pausing to discuss as often as seemed appropriate. Not only was this another step towards conference-readiness, it was another opportunity for students and staff to meet and to work through ideas together in an environment that broke down some of the inevitable hierarchies of the classroom.

Second, honours and rhd students from the two formal seminars were invited to help run the conference. This brought these two cohorts together in an environment far removed from that of the classroom to work towards a common goal.

As I've noted, this work is in its early stages, and it's too soon to speak of anything like results, but some things have already been seen to work well:

1. Postgraduate students have been able to receive the kind of support and training that enabled them to participate very successfully in an international conference.
2. When honours and rhd groups came together to work on the conference it became abundantly clear that the whole of the project was greater than its parts. The rhds reported they enjoyed the support and training they received in researching, writing and presenting as part of a group, and then working as a team with honours students to take on the responsibility of managing sections of the conference, and then networking with international scholars in that broader research community that blossomed around the conference itself. These are the kinds of research and transferable skill outcomes Mark Western and Alan Lawson have identified "as clear deficits" in Go8 PhD graduates' perception of their training. Evidence of the way such community and team-work might become embedded and thus self-sustaining may be seen in the fact that this year our much-mourned EMSAH postgraduate student society has been reborn and a group of students from this cohort are building on the knowledge they gained from last year's conference to plan and manage from the ground up this year's EMSAH honours/postgraduate Work-in-Progress Conference.
3. There is one quantifiable result linked to that training: five of the ten rhd course participants have found publishers for essays developed from their papers, and a sixth is reworking his at the request of a journal editor.
4. Tony and I were able to run two formal courses that were integral to the project as part of our normal teaching loads.
5. We often commented that after one of our classes, or after the reading group, we felt invigorated when experience might have suggested we'd be exhausted. Watching our students thrive together was perhaps a bit like runner's high.

### **Conclusion: now what?**

In line with Carrick's current concerns, Tony and I want to embed the work we've been doing, and we want to disseminate it by talking to other disciplines within the University of Queensland, and more broadly. Although we have discussed our work one-on-one with colleagues at UQ and at other universities, these papers are the first formal step we have taken to disseminate our research and to receive feedback. Halsea, Deane, Hobson and Jones (2007) note how few award-winning teachers actually publish their research. We feel our experiences will add usefully to a growing body of excellent published research in this area.

If our program is not institutionalised within our own School of English, Media Studies, and Art History, it risks being lost. On the other hand, we're aware that it has worked well because it's a program we devised to suit the way we work with students. Our sense is that it would be to say the least counterproductive if the School were to require the next director of honours and each and every organiser of a conference to reproduce what we have done as we have done it.

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Dissemination will need to allow for a great deal of flexibility. And if we are to persuade our colleagues, we will have to be as seductive in our approach to them as we have been in persuading students that working with others is beneficial and even fun.

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