

## Department of Geography, University of Otago Postgraduate Research Culture



Our Department has a wide range of postgraduate programmes (18 in all) in Human and Physical Geography, Environmental Management and Planning, with options and pathways to suit most needs. Students are supported and supervised by staff who are international experts in their field. Their breadth and depth of knowledge, as well as strong external professional connections, means they are well placed to help students plan their future careers and offer advice based on genuine experience.

We have a large, vibrant and friendly postgraduate community housed in modern facilities with dedicated computer access. We provide an environment where students receive one-on-one and group support, attention and training through directed reading, mentorship, coursework and seminars that foster creative, intellectual and personal development, according to their changing needs. There is a strong emphasis on experienced students sharing understandings with newer students. Our Departmental culture emphasises the accessibility of academic and general staff to postgraduate students, encouraging them to view themselves as peers in the research community.

Taken together the people, facilities, events and atmosphere within the Department create an atmosphere that prioritises and enhances a postgraduate research culture that is stimulating, challenging and most importantly enjoyable.

## 1. Pre-arrival and Orientation practices

The Department of Geography has an array of established and effective pre-arrival and orientation practices. These include:

- **A comprehensive Postgraduate Information Session.** This event is held shortly after the University Postgraduate Expo. An outline is provided of the different postgraduate degrees and pathways available within the Department. Informal talks are then held between senior undergraduates and staff advisors for each sub-discipline within the Department. Senior postgraduate students also share their experience and advice on the postgraduate experience and the different postgraduate degree options.
- **Postgraduate course advising sessions at the end of Semester 2.** Advisors for each sub-discipline within the Department are available for postgraduate course advising appointments in the final week of Semester 2 to provide another formal opportunity to explain the nature of postgraduate study within the Department and advise students on the implications of their postgraduate study choices.
- **A Graduate Orientation Day.** This takes place in Orientation Week at the start of every year. All academic and general staff, new and returning postgraduate students attend. This day introduces students to the range of services available in the Department, ensures that they understand the resources and facilities available to them, and facilitates the growth of an open and welcoming atmosphere within the Department. The day comprises a series of activities – from ‘icebreakers’ to a sit-down meal, outlines of key aspects of the research process and practices within the Department, to small-group break-out sessions covering key study skills, managing the transition to postgraduate study and research, and career development. The break-out sessions are led both by staff and returning/senior postgraduates, which helps to foster a strong sense of shared identity and community amongst the incoming cohorts.
- **A Graduate Orientation booklet.** This provides a key source of reference information for all aspects of postgraduate life within the Department. All postgraduate students are provided with this booklet that is designed to give students information specific to the Department of Geography on the requirements, facilities and activities for postgraduates, detailing how supervision works, how the postgraduate committee functions, postgraduate student representative’s roles, postgraduate academic development seminars, channels of communication, academic and professional interest groups, sources of funding within and beyond the Department, Department study spaces, Department academic collections and resources, health and safety, laboratory and field activities, vehicle use, specialist software and cartography, etc. It is meant to be a Geography specific companion to the University-produced handbooks for Masters and PhD students.
- **Arranging a research supervisor.** The departmental Postgraduate Committee takes a proactive role in ensuring that all new students have an appropriate supervisor for the research component of their degree. Students typically approach potential supervisors before the end of their undergraduate degree, with the Postgraduate Committee having an oversight role to ensure everyone is well looked after and supervisor workloads are fitting to ensure adequate time is available for a positive supervision experience.



Graduate Orientation Day 2017

## **2. Supervision and research support practices**

Supervision and research support for all postgraduate students in the Department of Geography begins with the aforementioned Graduate Orientation Day – with a series of talks and breakout groups led by staff and senior postgraduate students providing instruction, advice and support on expectations and the transition to postgraduate study.

The nature of the supervisory relationship, and opportunities for support are set out early on following the start of the academic year, with the completion of a compulsory supervision agreement (which was an established practice in the Department some years before being adopted by the wider University). The supervisory agreement outlines the expectations both the supervisor and student have of each other, ensures the student has adequate resources for their forthcoming study, and provides an initial opportunity for developing a timeline for their research. As the name suggests, this process is a two-way discussion and agreement, rather than a series of instructions from the supervisor.

All postgraduate students are provided with desk-space within a shared office with dedicated IT facilities, together with a common room area that has kitchen facilities. Having the students work and congregate within the Department is another very important mechanism to foster a strong sense of shared identity and community, both between students in different postgraduate programmes, and between students and staff.

Key matters associated with postgraduate studies in Geography are administered by the Postgraduate Committee. The Committee is responsible for ensuring that application for admissions are processed, that students have appropriate supervision and that student's progress efficiently through their studies/research. The Committee plays an active role in facilitating an energetic and supportive postgraduate environment and is open to new ideas and initiatives. Student participation in the formal Committee occurs through four student representatives (PhD, Masters, MPlan and CSAFE PhD students). The Committee will address suggestions and issues raised by the postgraduate students in general (conveyed via the student representatives). The Committee organises the Department's participation in the University Postgraduate Information day and hosts an internal Postgraduate Information day in the Department for prospective students. Postgraduate students are also members of the Department's other committees and take part in the monthly staff meetings.

All postgraduates are able to access funding from the Department in order to carry out research, with the amount varying depending on the research weighting in the different postgraduate degrees. In addition to a standard financial allowance, the Department has two internally funded research grants available to postgraduate students: the Ron Lister travel grant for research in Asia, and the Hugh Kidd grant for students undertaking research in New Zealand and two Departmental Master's scholarships. Postgraduate students are also often further supported in via research-related Summer Scholarship programmes (11 awarded in 2014; 12 in 2015; and eight in 2016). Our students have also been very successful in gaining field research grants from a series of external organisations.

Ongoing academic support is provided through the year via a series of specially devised postgraduate workshops. These cover different aspects of the research process as well as workshops on publishing, career guidance and external engagement, and typically run once or twice a month (see in Appendices). The workshops are open to all postgraduate students at all levels. Again, senior postgraduate are encouraged to take an active role in facilitating these workshops, helping to keep the workshops student-focused and further building a sense of community. The Master of Planning programme has its own set of postgraduate seminars (see in Appendices), which supplements and extends some of the aspects covered in the general postgraduate workshops. Every year the Department hosts a series of international visitors, including the Ron Lister Visiting Fellow. These visitors frequently run 'Masterclasses' which assist students in acquiring in-depth understanding of specific topics (see in Appendices).

Finally, student-organised peer-support groups are also encouraged. In its most recent incarnation this is called the 'Eureka' group and has included reflection sessions linked to previous postgraduate workshops, 'shut up and write' sessions, together with other topics of interest.

### 3. Student participation in research activities

Student participation in research activities is a notable feature of our Department students, and takes a number of forms:

- **Contributions to the Departmental seminar series.**  
These provide a valuable opportunity to deliver a relatively long (c.50 minute) exposition of their research, and as such encouragement and feedback from academic staff and from other postgraduate students. Often these are done towards the end of candidature or when students are practising their presentations before embarking upon their first major international conference (see Appendices).
- **Departmental Postgraduate Research Symposium.**  
Each year the Department has a full-day postgraduate research symposium which is run along the model of an academic conference. All students contribute either a 15 minute oral presentation or a poster, depending on their degree. This is invaluable opportunity for new students to have a 'first-go' at showcasing their ideas, and for more senior students to update staff and their peers on progress. The universal involvement of all staff and postgraduates of the Department is another key mechanism for community-building in the department. Prizes are awarded for best posters and best presentations in the different degree programme categories.
- **Postgraduate Academic Development Workshops.**  
Academics and postgraduate students jointly run regular workshops on Friday afternoons on a very wide range of topics relating to the full time-line of experiences students encounter in their postgraduate progression, from how to manage the supervision situation, to field work in complicated situations, to regulatory compliance, to writing, and success in job applications (see Appendices).
- **Peer reviewed publications.**  
The nurturing and productive research culture is clearly evident in the large number of co-authored publications by postgraduate students and academic staff members – approximately 87 journal articles from 2014 to the present day (and many more conference proceedings and posters). Almost all of those who have recently submitted their PhD take advantage of the publishing bursary that the University provides, where academic staff assist students in readying the results of their research for academic publication.
- **Conference attendance.**  
All PhD students are able to access some Department funding for presenting papers at international conferences at least once during their candidature; we also assist Master's students who are presenting papers or posters at conferences. In 2017 we have given a grant in aid to 21 students to attend conferences, 9 students in 2016, and 17 students in 2015. Examples of some of the conferences attended with the financial support of the Department in 2017 include the Royal Geographical Society (UK), Regional Studies Association (Ireland), Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (USA), NZ Planning Institute, NZ Hydrological Society, NZ Association of Impact Assessment, etc.

#### 4. Social activities for students

The Department recognises the importance of building a convivial atmosphere and community within the student cohort, and between students and staff. To this end we organise and facilitate a number of social activities through the year.

There are four principal events across the year – closing receptions at the Orientation Day (start of the year), the Postgraduate Symposium (mid-year), the PhD end of year lunch, and finally an end-of-year celebratory barbeque. The barbeque is also open to final year undergraduate students, and serves as another important community-building exercise for those undergraduates contemplating postgraduate study.

In addition to these more formal/institutional social occasions, the Department liaises with and supports social events organised by the local branch of the NZ Geographical Society – in particular the twice-annual quiz event and the Geography’s Got Talent event.

The postgraduates are also encouraged to form their own social ‘committee’, with financial support provided by the Department as needed. The social committee is typically initiated at the Orientation Day at the start of the year, and involves both returning and new postgraduate students. Events range from causal morning teas and after work drinks, to baking competitions, academic ‘speed-dating’ events. This year the social committee has expanded to cover academic peer-support as well: the aforementioned Eureka group (with the group name indicating the preferred meeting place for the social side...)

We receive a lot of positive feedback about the social elements of our postgraduate life in the Department and the sense of collegiality between students and staff that fosters belonging. Some examples of feedback received from postgraduates this year includes:

- *“The Geography Department is incredibly supportive of its postgrad students. It is a sociable community, but one that provides lots of opportunities to teach and share knowledge. I feel like the staff here really care.”*
- *“It’s a good community to be a part of because of the nature of the department and the different events. It has friendly staff who are approachable.”*
- *“Staff are lovely and you feel supported.”*
- *“I really like that we have our own area to carry out work and common room facilities to have coffee/make lunch.”*
- *“There is a laid back community vibe. Lots of support if needed; approachable staff; free tea and coffee.”*
- *“All the activities put on in the department are one of the best aspects of postgrad life here. And staff are there to help.”*



Postgrad Bake-Off

## 5. Evaluative data for the postgraduate experience

As the feedback below demonstrates, graduates undertaking degrees within our Department are largely extremely satisfied with the quality of supervision and research support that they receive.

- **Student awards.**

In addition to extensive publications, the quality and effectiveness of our postgraduate research culture is also evident by the recognition our graduates receive in invitations to external events and awards.

- Students from the Department won the best Master's thesis prize from the New Zealand Geographical Society each year from 2013-2015 and best PhD thesis in 2016 and 2017.
- Four 'best student presentation' awards have been made at external conferences since 2014
- A student received an International summer scholarship award from the NZ Hydrological Society
- Eight MPlan students have received awards on the basis of their work in this period from organisations such as the New Zealand Planning Institute and Resource Management Law Association, amongst others.

- **Supervision awards.**

Academics in the Department have won the NZ Geographical Society Supervision Award in 2015 and two in 2016. Academics have also won the OUSA Humanities Supervisor of the Year in 2016 and "Top 12 in the University" Supervisor Award in 2014.

- **Student testimonials.**

A series of postgraduates have indicated high levels of satisfaction with their postgraduate experience in the Department. A small number of recent examples include:

- *"My supervisory relationship with xxx is one for the books. Always supportive, xxx has encouraged optimism / hard work from the beginning and through all research stages... challenged pre-existing assumptions, pushing me to critically re-evaluate the practices of my past that I was now researching. Conversations were always constructive and honest. xxx cautioned of unrealistic goals without stifling ambition."*
- *"xxx is an awesome supervisor. Very open and accommodating to new ideas for the course of research that xxx supervises. Xxx's role as a supervisor surpasses the 9-5 working day available for advice and help 24/7 (give or take an hour or so). The most supportive supervisor."*
- *"xxx was a key influencing factor for why I chose to enrol in the MPlan Programme. xxx brought a sense of ease and cultural security within what could quite easily be a cold environment void of anything related to kaupapa Māori."*

- **Graduate Opinion Survey.**

Our Department results in the Graduate Opinion Survey score consistently highly in the quantitative metrics and we have been praised highly by the DVC Academic for our results. Some examples of experiences reported in this survey include:

- *"I was privileged to work with xxx who not only guided me through my research Journey, but treated me like a 'colleague in training', and in part because of this I now have a permanent position in a geography department back home"*
- *"I was very happy in the department and very much enjoyed the departmental culture and activities."*

The success of our research culture is evident in our excellent completion rates, continuing success in co-publishing with students, and external recognition of our students by national and international scholarly and professional bodies.

## 6. Other evidence

We also assist our postgraduate students in their wider development through involving them in outreach activities and staff activities, including high school visits; Hands on at Otago; Research Assistance work and related field and lab-based activities, and Demonstrator/Tutor/Lecturing opportunities. For example,

<b>Employment</b>	2015	2016	2017
Tutor/Demo	44	43	42
RA	22	26	19

### **Annual Marae Visit**

The Planning programme organises an annual visit to a local marae, in which other Geography staff and postgraduate students are encouraged to participate. In preparation for the marae visit, staff and students are required to attend marae protocol and cultural preparation sessions and a short lecture series run by planning staff.

### **Celebrations**

We have a range of celebrations throughout the year, these include noting and applauding all research completions and all student publications with photographs and posts on our Department Facebook and Twitter feeds; we have in-house morning teas to mark postgraduate submissions and departures; we offer MPlan awards for academic excellence and for contribution to the programme, sponsored by Dunedin City Council; we give out Symposium Awards for posters and presentations delivered by students across our programmes. The collegial bond amongst staff and postgraduates is greatly facilitated by our spatial co-location, which enables ease and frequency of interaction, diminishes barriers, and assists in the development of identity and community in an academic and social sense.



Geography Postgraduate Students on a Field Trip to Nuie, 2016