

**SUPERVISORS SAID:**

“It was more than just peer support; it helped develop the research culture across the School, and was particularly useful in encouraging graduate students, who work in disparate areas, to talk to each other.”

“I strongly encourage peer support; it can draw out capabilities in students and allows supervisors to target their energies most effectively.”

“For students by students ... the research demonstrates this is effective learning support.”



This brochure comprises a summary of in-depth interviews with postgraduate leaders involved in the Otago University Research Communities pilot study, conducted throughout 2009. The research was funded by a University of Otago Improvement Grant, was conducted by Simon Hart (Library), Jacques van der Meer (Student Learning Centre) and Nell Smith (Student Learning Centre), and supported by Dr Charles Tustin (Graduate Research Services).

**POSTGRADUATE STUDIES**



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# POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH

## PEER SUPPORT

### FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO SUCCESSFUL RESEARCH COMMUNITIES AND PEER GROUPS



The postgraduate research journey can be an individual and isolating one. Recent international research demonstrates the benefits of peer support for postgraduates.

This brochure reports on the Otago University Research Communities study, and contains ideas that could assist in establishing and maintaining successful postgraduate peer support groups.

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## THE **10** MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO SUCCESSFUL RESEARCH COMMUNITIES AND PEER GROUPS\*

### 1 CONNECTIONS

Successful communities and groups created connections. A positive research community or peer support group helped to connect students to each other, to staff, to their department, and to the University as a whole. Students felt there were “other people out there” and feelings of isolation lessened. For many students who primarily liked to work independently, knowing that there was a peer group meeting to look forward to on a regular basis gave them some structure and something to feel excited about. Students who felt connected by meeting with their peers felt invigorated and enjoyed receiving and giving advice, support, inspiration, and fresh perspectives.

*“It is the collegiality. It’s that coming together...it is feeling like there are other people out there who are on the same journey – who you wouldn’t meet otherwise.”*

### 2 FOCUS

Successful communities and groups had a clear idea of what they wanted. One of the major differences between our successful postgraduate research communities, especially peer support groups, was their focus. For example, some focused on academic matters (e.g. how to cope with all those references), some on social aspects (sometimes actively discouraging talk of “work”), or some on a mixture of the two.

*“You’re spending a lot of time alone – you have questions or even things you don’t know about and if you just meet up with people who are in the same process – there are synergies in that – you can get so much that is positive about it, and sharing your misery – it is just healthier and a very valuable element of the research journey.”*

### 3 LEADERSHIP

Successful communities and groups demonstrated strong leadership. While the sort of skills a peer leader might need depends on the type of group they lead, our fantastic leaders shared some characteristics – open mindedness; the ability to draw on their own strengths and on the skills of others; friendliness; patience; good organisation; and the ability to talk to staff members and to ask for help when necessary. The opportunity for group leaders to meet with each other was considered to be extremely valuable.

### 4 STRUCTURE

Successful communities and groups were open to different structures. There is no one “right” formula for establishing a successful postgraduate research community or peer support group. Many leaders found it helpful to survey their peers, formally or informally, to help them discover the particular needs of their group. To establish a successful postgraduate research community regular “peer support” meetings were not always necessary.

*“For me it was about trying to reach out to everyone and get a community to start with ... I’ve definitely heard that the vibe around the place has changed – staff members have commented on it – they’ve been inspired to get along.”*

### 5 OPEN MEMBERSHIP

Successful communities and groups were open to a varied membership. Groups were formed along different lines. For example some were formed on the basis of shared methodologies, others across broad subject areas (e.g., health). Some groups were departmental-wide while others were within a specific course. There were also examples of successful peer support groups with a membership that went outside of their immediate subject area or department. Student leaders reported that most students felt connected with others who were also on a “research journey” and were open to their group having quite broad joining criteria.

*“I belong to a trans-disciplinary group and to begin with I thought... oh, we really aren’t going to have anything in common...but I have to say that the diversity has been – I’ve just loved it – I love that part of the group.”*

### 6 DEPARTMENTAL SUPPORT

Successful communities and groups experienced some support from their department. While some groups existed in difficult departmental situations with little or no encouragement, our most successful groups did have some form of support from their department. Some peer leaders were empowered simply by the knowledge that the staff had “faith” in them, and others were encouraged by words of support from their supervisors and administrative staff. The provision of some financial support (such as a coffee card) was greatly appreciated by the leaders who enjoyed being able to offer something in their “come along to a meeting” emails. Other leaders reported that some students felt more comfortable attending a group that was, at least on some level, an official and “supported” activity. This support could be as simple as a recommendation from a supervisor.

### 7 SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Successful communities and groups created a safe and comfortable environment for everybody. It was important for successful postgraduate communities or peer support groups to appear to provide a safe and comfortable environment that was welcoming to all students. Meeting in an alcohol-free, day-time situation proved to be the most popular setting.

*“We talk about anxieties and difficulties that relate to work and they get a sense that they are not alone. I think what sort of connected people was the research journey, that you’re somewhere ... figuring things out [on the road to] submitting.”*

### 8 FACE-TO-FACE INTERACTION

Successful communities and groups created opportunities for face-to-face interaction. Student leaders reported the benefits of the groups meeting in a face-to-face situation. While some groups used a social networking site to organise their meetings there was no support amongst our leaders for any form of online support. Often “to get out of the office” or even “out of the building” was a highlight of being a group member. Many groups chose to meet in a neutral central location such as the University Staff Club (Dunedin Campus).

*“We were reasonably tired near the end [of their PhD] and I think it has got a few of us through the process – it is really nice to look forward to the meetings, get out of your office, vent about whatever is going on in your life. You can get through it, and rely on the support of others and also give support to – and it is a lot better.”*

### 9 OPTIMAL NUMBER

Successful communities and groups had an optimal number. Leaders reported needing a “critical mass” of at least six to eight students to enable them to enjoy good discussion and vitality. Having quite relaxed entry criteria enabled groups to easily replace departing students with new ones. This often happened through word-of-mouth connections with existing members.

### 10 MILESTONES

Successful communities and groups celebrated milestones. Many successful groups enjoyed celebrating the academic and social milestones of their members. Over the long course of postgraduate study it was very beneficial for students to have a place they could share and celebrate their milestones – however, big or small! – finishing a chapter; completing data collection; writing a paper; handing in a draft; getting a good mark. The size of the celebration did not seem to be of much importance – most students were happy with a chance to talk, to be given a “well done” and, perhaps, a chocolate fish!

#### ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL...

It was clear from the interviews with peer leaders that many different types of groups could lead to successful outcomes. Whereas some groups had a greater focus on peer support (within the context of research communities), others had a greater focus on the development of a research culture (with a commitment to peer support).

Some groups had a social function and promoted this as a point of difference, whereas others had a more academic function and ran sessions based on academic topics. Some functioned as a mixture of both academic and social.

*“We had an induction at the beginning [of my studies] and then basically everyone closed their doors...I felt really isolated and one positive aspect of having this networking community was to provide opportunities where students feel really welcome and comfortable to engage with others.”*



## THE **10** TIPS FOR SUPPORTING RESEARCH STUDENTS IN A DEPARTMENT

– as recommended by our leaders in the interviews

- ✓ encourage the establishment of peer support networks
- ✓ provide a financial contribution to recognise their value, e.g., coffee cards, biscuits, sports team t-shirts
- ✓ recognise that peer support may focus on both or either academic or social needs
- ✓ be aware that this is one option for students to support each other
- ✓ provide a welcome package for new students
- ✓ encourage students to attend morning or afternoon tea in the department
- ✓ encourage students to attend departmental academic activities
- ✓ support sharing of ideas, such as organising a student symposium or social occasion
- ✓ help to celebrate and communicate the milestones of postgraduate students
- ✓ embed the concept of peer support in the overall support structure for research students

\* These factors were established through analysis of interview data. All peer leaders were interviewed at the conclusion of the pilot project at the end of 2009. The included quotes are extracted from these interviews.