A Comparative Institutional Analysis of Learning Communities for Postgraduate Students: Region-Wide And Intra-University Group Comparisons

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Abstract

The recognition of the importance of learning communities for postgraduate students has been on the rise in recent times. As a result, many postgraduate students may wish to establish a learning community (LC) with peers and/or faculty members as a way of benefiting from the support LCS offer. This study undertakes a conceptual analysis of some key features required for organising and sustaining LCS and utilises the comparative institutional analysis (CIA) approach in order to model a variety of coordination types that can exist between faculty members and masters’ course students or doctoral students undertaking LC activities. This paper endeavours to conceptually depict the typologies of two LCS with respect to CIA principles, and to
draw conclusions about their respective cost-efficiency and sustainability, as well as outline implications for further research.

Keywords

learning communities – master’s course students – doctoral students – publication rates – comparative institutional analysis – knowledge transfer

Introduction

Supporting postgraduate students has become a strategic concern for universities in developed countries. In this context, the research development of doctoral students (DSS) has frequently been discussed. However, the research development of master’s course students (MCSs) has not been explored in similar detail. This is partly due to doctoral students being considered akin to early career researchers (ECRs) whereby their research development is essential to their degree, in many ways, whereas MCSs may not aspire to further research. One form of development offered to postgraduate students is evident in the efforts made to support them to produce academic publications, either through official course units (Copenheaver et al., 2016; Falk & Muller, 2019; Romesburg, 2013) or more informal approaches (Cuthbert & Spark, 2008). Furthermore, there is now growing pressure on international MCSs to be awarded scholarships towards their doctoral studies (Gopaul, 2019), the success of which may not only help students obtain future employment (Mantai, 2017; O’Keeffe, 2019) but can also be considered as an institutional achievement (Hakkarainen et al., 2014; Mantai, 2017; O’Keeffe, 2019). Furthermore, such publications can foster constructive relationships between students and their supervisors (Karpouza & Emvalotis, 2018; Pardun et al., 2015).

As LCS have become more commonplace, a trend has emerged where postgraduate students, particularly DSS, spontaneously form learning communities (LC) to support each other. As such, collaboration is an essential element in a successful LC, along with other key ingredients such as both knowledge transfer (KT) and knowledge building, which in a LC context involves creating knowledge as a social product (Kwok, 2009; Jiang et al., 2022; Nonaka & Toyama, 2003) or conceptual artefact (Saito, 2022; Bereiter, 2002). Graduate student LCS have also been found to involve: professional knowledge sharing (Baanqud et al., 2020; Drane et al., 2019; Stanca et al., 2021); joint writing groups (Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Lam et al., 2018); research skill development (Guerin et al., 2019; Lock et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2018); faculty
member led groups that facilitate student learning in particular units (Fan et al., 2020); and, organisational cultural change groups (Deng et al., 2021; Drane et al., 2019). However, with such diversity, there is a dearth of investigations that look to conceptually map out different types of postgraduate student LCS and the coordination arrangements they require.

Aim of this Study
This study aims to employ CIA to compare two different styles of postgraduate student LCS organised by Authors1 and 2. Author1’s LC has run since 2018, despite a smaller number of participants within his university, while Author2’s LC was only launched in 2022 with a larger number of participants and well-defined programmatic components in inter-regional, inter-cultural, and inter-university domains. Author3 contributes to this paper as a critical friend and LC researcher in commenting and critiquing the drafts and conceptualisation of the models of LCS as presented in the paper. These two LCS represent contrasting types of LCS with different socio-cognitive and socio-cultural characteristics, and their analysis in this paper is divided as follows. After the introduction, the analytical CIA framework is elucidated. Then, in the third section the analysis of to the two types of LCS by Authors1 and 2 is undertaken. The paper ends with conclusions about the cost-efficiency and sustainability issues of the two LCS and recommendations for further research.

Analytical Framework

Comparative Institutional Analysis (CIA)
CIA is predicated on the idea that in any organisation, members create and follow their own rules, which may be written or remain unwritten, depending on their contexts and fitness for achieving the members’ objectives. CIA provides a perspective which unpacks how actors generate these rules, and what societal or organisational conditions underpin them. Once these rules are socially or organisationally supported (and followed) by members, and there is no incentive to reform them at a given time, then this is called an institution (Aoki, 2010; Greif & Laitin, 2004; Hall & Taylor, 1996; Morgan et al., 2010). How members align with each other in a given situation is reflective of the institution or organisation and society. Once established, the institution frames actors’ actions in a stable way because of inherent incentives and sanctions, resulting in a state of equilibrium (Aoki, 2010).

At the same time, if there is any significant change or shock inside or outside the institution, actors may adjust the rules, which produces shifts in the equilibria (Aoki, 2010). The reasons for this vary, depending on the case
and context. In addition, CIA aims to analyse such a *shift in equilibrium* and to theorise dynamic institutional changes by applying both game theory and historical analysis. For the purposes of this study, however, we aim only to provide a conceptual discussion utilising the CIA framework, rather than engaging in the rigorous mathematical discussions required for a full game theoretic analysis (Saito, Kwok, & O'Donovan, 2023). The interactions between actors will be discussed qualitatively, with reference to the literature and documents (Saito & Pham, 2019, 2021; Saito et al., 2020). Then, for historical analysis, the actors will be treated as taking actions to strategically achieve their goals, including coordinating with others or responding to the actions of other actors.

CIA has been applied in various fields across the social sciences because of its strength in mapping typologies and critical conditions. These have included policy and governance (Brady, 2023; Chevalier, 2017; Escher, 2020; Hee Park, 2008); natural resource management (Kamran & Shivakoti, 2013; Li et al., 2021; Ogbaharya & Tecle, 2010); and, labour issues (Becker-Ritterspach et al., 2017; Robinson et al., 2022). CIA makes it possible to conceptualise various practices which might differ from, or conflict with, each other as the cumulative choices of rational actors under given conditions. Despite this flexibility, it has only been applied in a few instances within educational contexts. In higher education, it has been utilised to analyse graduate strategies in the labour markets (Saito & Pham, 2019), university programmes to prepare their graduates for employment (Saito & Pham, 2021), an evolving history of a pre-service teacher education in Okinawa (Kakazu & Saito, 2021), acceptance of students with disabilities (Järkestig Berggren et al., 2016), and typologies of formation of learning communities for MCSs (Saito, Kwok, & O'Donovan, 2023). CIA is well suited to further investigations of the typologies of LCSs for postgraduate students in general, inclusive of both master's and doctoral course students.

**Framework of Analysis**

For this analysis of LCSs, three key concepts will be utilised, namely, settings, activities, and goals. First, the setting refers to where LCSs are organised. In establishing LC, an organising faculty member (FM) would decide whether to run it with people outside their university or keep it entirely within their institution. Second, activities can consist of tasks such as reading books and articles, hands-on writing sessions, lectures, and so forth – which would constitute the main routine activities LC members would engage in. The third element, goal orientation, captures the purpose of the LC in terms of delivering student inputs (e.g., KT aimed at increasing their research skills...
and knowledge), or on producing specific outputs (e.g., in the form of student authored or co-authored research articles).

Analysis

Author1’s LC

Contexts

Author1 has worked successively in a Singaporean university and then an Australian one. As a Japanese FM he considered whether it would be possible to run a ‘research seminar’ as is practised in many Japanese universities, which takes the form of a group advisory session between a few students and a FM (Rakhshandehroo & Ivanova, 2019). In this activity, unlike a lecture containing some dozens, or even hundreds, of students in a large hall, a smaller group of students and the FM interact with each other discussing their own research interests (Rakhshandehroo & Ivanova, 2019) and datasets (Takata et al., 2013). These ‘seminars’ continue for over a year, even over multiple years, on a regular basis. In this way the students and FM deepen their ties through joint academic inquiries. Neither one of the universities where Author1 served by that time had such arrangements in place, so he implemented an informal approach from April 2018 to compliment the formal one-on-one doctoral or master’s thesis supervision, so as to access the many benefits he was aware of that derive from students having such ongoing interactions with peers.

Settings

Author1 chose to restrict the LC to an internal student setting within the Australian university drawing on a cohort of Master’s and PhD students whom he co-supervised. He invited his supervisees to an initial biweekly meeting which took the form of reading seminal social scientific works in sociology and philosophy in order to expand the students’ background knowledge. In August 2019 he changed the nature of these meetings. The target group were still his PhD students and involved discussing their progress and providing mutual support. As the number of participants increased, so too did complications with meeting regularly due to issues arising from juggling part-time work, study, and life pressures, which reduced participants’ ability to prioritise the meetings. Additionally, as Master’s course students started to attend the meetings, some PhD students did not see the relevance of interacting with them, and eventually the majority of participants were MCSS, particularly those interested in publishing their work and continuing on to a
PhD degree. Interestingly, a tacit agreement evolved where participants would leave the meeting once they were admitted to a PhD course.

At the end of 2022, however, another trend emerged wherein one participant who enrolled in a PhD course continued attending the meetings. Meanwhile, the number of mcs decreased due to a combination of graduations and a drop off in new members joining, and then some new PhD students joined. Even a participant at the Bachelor’s level joined whilst at an exceptionally early stage of awareness of research and publication.

Thus, the setting was entirely internal, with some occasional visitors (like former graduates or others) in attendance at times. However, the vast majority of participants were students of the university, virtually all of whom were international students speaking English as their foreign language.

Activities
As outlined briefly above, after the first year, the mode of participation in this LC consistently took the form of a small seminar. That is, participants were encouraged to share their ideas, understanding, experiences, tensions, and struggles with other students, rather than looking to explicitly master a particular set of knowledge. By exchanging views, opinions, comments and questions with each other, the students were able to deepen their learning in each session. Even in the initial reading sessions from April 2018 to August 2019, more emphasis was given to what students’ thought of the process of reading the texts, in addition to discussing their meaning.

Once or twice, after August 2019, Author1 gave a speech or lecture about a topic based on participants’ requests. However, these would only take half or less of the 90–120 minutes session. Author1 would also report on the content of his own research just as other participants did. Over time the emphasis on different activities changed. From August 2019 to December 2022, while students shared their progress and issues with their own research, some mcs actively published journal articles or book chapters and became confident working on publications in a very self-directed way, despite the challenges they faced writing as a non-native speaker of English. As a result, the seminars transitioned towards an emphasis on actual writing. Since January 2023, Author1 decided to incorporate silent writing time into each session – usually around 55 minutes from the start, with another 30 to 40 minutes to share and reflect afterwards. This was in response to students frequently reporting a sense of stagnation in their progress or writing blocks (Aydin et al., 2023; Ho, 2016). Author1 also informally supports other Japanese PhD students with their dissertations, and has found those students – many of whom are working professionals – have similar difficulty with overcoming
such writing blocks. One of the effective ways to address this issue is to let the students directly work on their writings as part of a writing group (Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Lam et al., 2018; Quynn & Stewart, 2021). Thus, he decided to introduce this element into the LC sessions. This is not an original idea but is adapted from other FMs who spend time with students and/or each other concentrating on writing.

Goals
This LC demonstrated a transition in goals from a knowledge transfer orientation to a publication orientation. In terms of orientation, the first phase from April 2018 to August 2019 was essentially a reading/discussion group (Ey et al., 2020; Schenk & Steppan, 2014). The participants, both students and FM, read the books together section by section. The aim was to strengthen background knowledge of social sciences, regardless of whether these texts would feature in their dissertations or not. This way of organising the meetings was often observed in ‘zemi’ or ‘research seminars’ (Rakhshandehroo & Ivanova, 2019) in the Japanese universities. However, the students became interested in analysing their own data, so eventually Author1 thought that discussing progress and challenges would benefit them all and be more meaningful.

Thus, from August 2019, the goal orientation of the meeting became more slanted towards individual’s research and writing outputs. This became especially the case once MCSSs became the majority of participants, and it became clear they desired to focus on publications and their own research. Indeed, a number of collaborative works were published by members of the LC in that time (Fatemi & Saito, 2020; Huang & Saito, 2022; Lin & Chan, 2020; Xu & Saito, 2023). Adding silent writing time further emphasised the focus on publishing, hence the LC fully morphed into a writing/discussion group from January 2023, where actual writing (Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Lam et al., 2018), not just discussing writing, takes place.

Author2’s LC
Contexts
Since 2000, Author2 has experience establishing online inter-regional, inter-school, and inter-disciplinary collaborative LCS in Australia, China, and Singapore. He realises there is a great potential for students and teachers to make educational breakthroughs by participating in project-based learning activities (Tan & Kwok, 2005). He recently attempted to implement such LCS in a postgraduate environment.

Academic supervision in higher education is often confined to an apprenticeship model with a sole supervisor-student relationship. However,
the success of this model largely depends on how closely the supervisors work with the students (Austin, 2002; Sarnecka et al., 2022), and there is no guarantee that DSSs, let alone MCSs, will actively produce either solo or co-authored research works during their candidature. Over the decades, many universities have introduced generic courses and workshops on research methods and methodology in order to increase publication rates. However, students still have difficulty applying generic research knowledge to their specific research context based on their limited research experiences (Ayden et al., 2023; Ho, 2016).

Settings
Author recently sought to supplement the traditional apprenticeship model of academic supervision in Hong Kong (China) by introducing an externally networked LC involving collaboration with key FMs at universities in Australia, Bangladesh, Beijing (China), and Japan to launch an online inter-regional, inter-cultural, and inter-university collaborative LC among research students (including DSSs and MCSs). This LC endeavours to solve three problems. First, it consolidates all the LC resources in one unified e-learning platform at inter-regional/inter-university levels, funded by one university in one region. This has the benefit of efficiently pooling financial resources in the face of national and regional reductions in public funding of higher education and academic research. Second, it looks to promote high-quality KT between postgraduate students and help attract new students into higher-degree programs. This helps to satisfy the growing need to (re)connect intellectual resources and expertise to better tackle global issues in an increasingly interdependent world. Third, it encourages and supports collaboration amongst its FMs and student members in inter-regional, -cultural and -university domains and promotes publication of joint impactful research into relevant topics of shared interest. So this LC setting is very much an external one that seeks to provide an inter-institutional forum for its members.

Activities
The primary activities involve a series of formal online lectures delivered by FMs from the member universities discussing research methods and their experiences in publishing their research. Then breakout room activities provide opportunities for students from different universities, cultures, and regions to interact and share their ideas in smaller groups after the formal guest talks. Such follow-up discussions are prompted by a set of guiding questions relating to the lecture contents.
From a socio-cultural perspective, participant students have the opportunity to internalise the ideas of guest speakers, combine their relevant research contexts/methods with those of the guest speakers, and then socialise with international peers in order to deepen their learning and reflect on how the research methods and publication experiences might apply to their own research endeavours. There is also an opportunity for some student group leaders to combine what their peers have shared and externalise their learning by questioning and/or challenging the guest speakers’ webinar content. Such KT in the second LC is more dynamic and multi-dimensional than the traditional academic apprenticeship model, which tends to focus on the supervisors’ research knowledge bases. KT in this LC differs conceptually from just knowledge sharing or knowledge dissemination from sources to recipients, rather such KT takes on a role commonly found in the information sciences and software engineering in that it becomes a type of knowledge reuse (Markus, 2001), while extending beyond an individual’s absorptive capacity to identify, assimilate and exploit knowledge (Alavi & Leidner, 2001). Here, students’ social cognition, aided by mentors’ scaffolding of participating students’ thinking, transcends the static socialisation-externalisation-combination-internalisation (S-E-C-I) interactions in the traditional models of knowledge management (Nonaka, 2008) in postgraduate education.

Interview and participating observational data reveal clear evidence of KT within some guest speakers’ and participating postgraduate students’ deeper reflections and the re-contextualizing of research methods/methodology into their own areas of research. Another form of KT was evident in guest speakers’, discussion mentors’, and participating students’ co-construction of new understandings of research methods and research publication processes well beyond the closed-boundary knowledge found in knowledge management models (e.g. SEC1). So, the participation in this LC is very much a combination of lecture and seminar settings where large scale communications are ameliorated by, and digested within, smaller reflective virtual spaces.

Goals
As outlined above, the primary orientation of this LC is toward dynamic KT which derives from students’ and FMS’ online transfer of research knowledge in inter-regional, inter-cultural and inter-university domains in the Asia-Pacific rim. Topics about methodology and publishing are scheduled and available online, with additional extensibility for such KT achieved using Zoom-style webinars and breakout rooms which are readily accessible to students and FMS through mobiles, PCs or other handheld devices.
Discussion topics range across both methodological aspects of participant’s research and publishable aspects of their potential research. The follow-up group discussions break down the webinar themes into readily understandable topics through mentor facilitation. Pertinent methodological themes and topics are covered across a wide range of research methods and methodology in qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research paradigms. Hence the goal orientation of this LC is very much focussed on KT and developing a strong knowledge base for participating graduate students in order to support their future research writings.

Conclusion

This study aimed to compare two LC approaches for postgraduate students organised by Authors1 and 2 drawing on a CIA analysis of LC conceptual typologies with shedding new directions in professional and research development of postgraduate education. Both LCs aim to increase the research publication rates of participating postgraduate students and FMs. Author1’s LC is on a much smaller scale compared to Author2’s LC, with a strong emphasis on students within his university. The activities would be more hands-on, focussing on their own activities, and transitioned from a reading/discussion model (Ey et al., 2020; Schenk & Steppan, 2014) to more of a writing/discussion group (Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Lam et al., 2018), with practical activities targeting completion of research and publications. This LC would be named as Intra-university Hands-On (IH) mode from the nature of LC.

By contrast, Author2’s LC represents an expanded version of Author1’s original LC setting in that it has undertaken extensive community development and developed a large external network beyond a single university. While it preserves much of the reading/discussion elements and some participating students and FMs have started undertaking co-authored research across the inter-regional, inter-cultural and inter-university domains (Saito, Kwok, & O’Donovan, 2023), more formal activities like lecturing play a larger role and dominate the time spent in LC activities. As a result, in the case of Author2’s LC, KT regarding research methodologies is the central goal of the LC, and it can be labelled as Extra-university Knowledge Transfer (EK) mode. The two LC modes are shown in Table 1.

The two LC cases here represent extreme modes, but more inter-mediate LCS that lay somewhere between these two modes are possible, and further investigation of the hybridised forms of LC typologies is warranted.

Critical to the success of any LC is efficiency – minimising costs, not just financial but including such things as time costs (Rieskamp & Hoffrage, 2008;
Rose, 2020), and maximising the benefits for postgraduate students and FMSs. One cost reduction is to incorporate students’ and FMSs’ actual writings as part of the LC activities, eliminating any requirements for sourcing extra materials. And of course, the subsequent discussions about their own writings will be of more practical use and stay both fresh and real. This also help to sustain a steady flow of relevant activities and creates opportunities for further interactions either within or outside their own universities.

Such sessions, however, are necessarily kept to a small scale, so that the participants may develop strong ties with deeper understanding of each other’s work. They may catch up with each other more often, and the sessions would, and could, be a place that fosters mutual caring (Noddings, 2013) – particularly if they struggle with writing blocks, and are able to share ways of overcoming them with each other, thereby increasing confidence and trust amongst all members.

However, this approach offers limited opportunities to develop broader networks with postgraduate students beyond their own university, or even other LCSs within the same university. As a result, there is a risk of insularity which can both discourage new members from joining and reduces exposure to others beyond the LC. This is where Author2’s LC has excelled and is a good example of extended webinars beyond geographical boundaries. This LC extends across several universities, with coordination by key FMSs at each institution under the leadership of Author2 and mentorship of Author1.

This LC gives participants access to a large academic network of students and scholars that transcends the regional, cultural and university boundaries through its online mode. Such a network could eventually lead to future

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**Table 1** Comparison between IHO-mode and EKT-mode LCSs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Settings</th>
<th>Author1’s LC: IHO-mode</th>
<th>Author2’s LC: EKT-mode</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Running in one university with smaller numbers of students</td>
<td>Connecting externally with other universities (Author2’s case: inter-regional) catering for a large number of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>Hands-on oriented about the students’ projects</td>
<td>Formal webinars by FMSs (with elements of scaffolded group student interactions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>Students’ publication of their own works through joint or solo authorship</td>
<td>KT of research methodologies and written publications</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
joint inter-regional, inter-cultural and inter-university research partnerships. The network would expose students, as well as FMs, to habits of practices in other universities that can help contextualise those at their own university. It also pools a wide array of expertise and gives the LC members access to the combined authoritative knowledge of scholars beyond any individual university the participant students belong to. In this way they may learn, re-learn, and re-conceptualise the various topics across different research contexts. If the coordinators of this type of LCS have wider networks with representative scholars who can support the activities, the probability of such learning opportunities would increase dramatically.

The costs of this LC in terms of time (Rieskamp & Hoffrage, 2008; Rose, 2020) and finance (Schwartz, 2012) are shared in a complex manner. The coordinating FMs need to have a shared understanding of the aims, contents, and methods of the programmes, prior to commencement. All such preparatory work requires extensive communication and meetings, bringing with it a heavy time cost. If the external scholars are to give lectures, they may have to be paid, and software platforms need to be identified, procured, set up and supported. Given the extensive nature of the programme such costs can grow substantially. Such cost issues naturally raise questions about sustainability – and in order to sustain the activities, there would need to be executive and administrative support by funding agencies in at least one of the participating universities.

Last, there has been an uneven distribution of KT among communal student membership in the second LC, due to regional differences in the research cultures of individual universities and their FM members. Postgraduate students’ universities/regions seemed to dominate the past LC events, whilst students in other regions had much lower participation rates. Like all LCS, these two LCS will face scalability and sustainability problems (Kwok, 2009), including dealing with unpredictable turnover in FM membership and sudden changes in student membership after annual graduations. Further empirical research agendas could focus on articulating the logistics, procedures, and knowledge-building agency principles for that can re-balance such KT, as well as investing in longitudinal studies to explore how such LCS impact participating students’ ultimate understanding of research methods/methodology and strengthen their power to increase their publication rates in academic publications.

It would also be valuable to undertake more qualitative case studies of such LCS in greater depth. For example, the meaning participating students derive from their experiences of the joining each LC type would be valuable information to collect. Particularly in the case of Author’s LC, how the students and Author or other FM members would interact with each
other, as well as other entities – manuscripts and journals can be further investigated. In the case of LC run by Author2, the student opinions would be captured through surveys and interviews, focusing on KT issues. Moreover, the conditions of sustainability for each LC needs to be studied further. In addition to LCS run by Authors, cases of other LCS for postgraduate students can be also examined about how the organisers attempt to sustain their activities in online or blended modes (Matthews et al., 2017) and how those attempts would work effectively.

**Reflections and Recommendation**

Various kinds of LCs can be formed to meet the common needs of postgraduate students in either the same region or across various regions. Inter-regional LCS, however, require that coordinating FMs and students need to be aware of various costs and commitments involved. Setting up LCS, especially externally networked LCS, requires substantial time, labour and even finances. There also needs to be good coordination amongst the relevant FMs who share clear goals in order to produce high-quality content.

If FMs or students are interested more within their own institutions, a smaller scale LC similar to that of Author1 can be more easily and flexibly organised. These types of activities can be run quite easily with the limited number of participants, but it too will have time costs. In this case, the focus also needs to be clearly set – an orientation toward knowledge building/transfer or written outputs, like publications or research. In such an LC, FMs need to be aware of the explicit and implicit needs of the participants and be sensitive to their issues and problems. Also, while such an LC can run for a longer time with lower costs, these costs are mostly borne by the FM who needs a determination of to keep running. It is important to accept that there will always be some moments of dullness or slumps, but the FM needs to keep running activities – sitting in the same place at the fixed time – if the LC is to survive.

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