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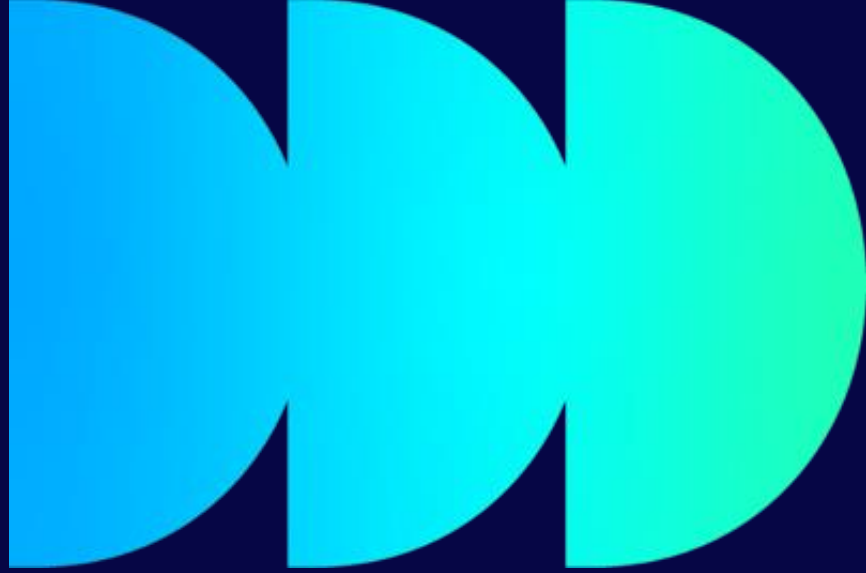
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CAKE AND SCHOLARSHIP
ANNUAL REPORT
2023–2024

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January 2025

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
1. The Beginning	3
2. The Rationale	5
3. The How: Peer Support for Scholarship	6-7
4. The Impact	8
5. Outputs	9-12
6. Wider Impact	13-14
7. Going Forward	15-16
8. References	17

1. The Beginning: 'we own our scholarship'

Early in 2023 the Cake and Scholarship group (C&S), was co-founded by Bryony Gilbert and Wannette Van Eg Dom–Tuinstra, as a peer support group for Student Experience Managers (SEMs) to help each other develop research and scholarship ambitions.

Dedicated time was set aside on Fridays from 10-11am to provide peer-supported learning on research and scholarship.

This hour of peer support is a time to brainstorm, to focus ideas for scholarship topics and research tactics and receive constructive feedback on initial ideas, as well as support for practicalities such as obtaining study leave and submitting funding applications. This is effective and attendees explain that the group meeting is *"a good place to bring ideas, and have research plans discussed with constructive criticism"* and *"has provided a space for support and ideas"*. It also acts as a:

"safe space to 'shoot the breeze' with like-minded people. It affords the opportunity to discuss one's own scholarship and others' scholarship, so that we can all learn from and offer advice to each other."

2.The Rationale

Scholarship is a key responsibility and entitlement of the SEM role, and it is positively and actively encouraged by line managers. It is also essential for promotion and progression. Indeed, the SEM role provides fertile ground for inspiration to conduct meaningful research in practice. Engaging in scholarship makes everyday tasks meaningful and something to be explored. It helps SEMs to think 'big picture' and motivates us to innovate and improve the student experience.

While working in a distance-learning context, scholarship activities provide important opportunities for networking and connection that overcome isolation and 'siloing'. This has important implications for SEM well-being as well as our role as 'pracademics'.

However, the SEM role itself is extremely busy with many competing urgent tasks that often need to be prioritised ahead of scholarship. As an obstacle to scholarship, this is an enormous source of frustration for SEMs, as expressed by one attendee:

"I was fully aware that 22 days scholarship leave is available to me in my role as SEM, but what I was not aware of when I joined is that 22 days is very notional. You are not assigned any less work because of being awarded 22 days of scholarship leave. As such, scholarship has to be fitted in around what it termed the 'core role'. When this is the case, it tends to get put on the back burner for many."

Other barriers to SEM scholarship range from organisational culture factors to SEM knowledge and skills. Rob Tumilty made an initial exploration of this in his MBA research project (Tumilty 2023) which inspired early conversations that would lead to the formation of the group.

3. The How: Peer Support for Scholarship

SEMs come to the role with a range of research and scholarship skills and experience, which underpins the decision to support through a peer support practice. The peer support method of teaching and learning is an integrated and intentional collaborative method that addresses practical, technical and emotional aspects. (Barkley and Cross 2014).

For example, some SEMs have a strong background in academic research and provide invaluable technical expertise to those who do not. The positive impact of this is best expressed by this feedback:

"I had very little knowledge of how scholarship worked at the OU and felt very lost. Since it (the group) began I have been able to find information about policies, processes, funding, managing these projects etc., through speaking with colleagues during our weekly meet up."

Practical support and advice identified by attendees includes: 'how to submit a funding application, and when I might need to seek ethical permissions.' In particular, the support for authorisation has been highly valued and effective as evidenced by this quote:

"prior to this time I was totally unaware of the ethical considerations that the OU require are incorporated into a piece of Scholarship. This takes on added significance as a colleague and myself are utilising research methodologies which fall under the requirements, and but for information gleaned solely from this forum, we would have gone ahead and been in breach, thus rendering our research flawed, potentially void!"

As the group has grown and matured, attendees have gained experience in all aspects of scholarship, from seeking funding and navigating ethics, to identifying outputs for dissemination. This collective experience is an invaluable practical resource and source of motivation.

Cake and Scholarship fulfils a vital emotional support role in building SEM confidence in scholarship:

"I cannot say how supportive it has been, for somebody without a background in scholarship. It was good to know I was not the only one unsure what or how to do this, and as a group, have felt able to throw myself into scholarship, resulting in now applying for funding. Without this group, I believe I would not have undertaken any, which I am aware some SEMs who have been here a few years, are in this position."

The TEAMS site is effective for this collaboration and resource sharing, to support and train first time researchers in practice. Many of these resources came from previous experience in teaching research methods, supervising dissertations and developing curricula in research methods.

Additional support and training included: publicising Share First Friday events; Research training events from (the FBL Research Support, OU Library, Research Career Development website, Research Ethics committee (HREC and SRPP), and The Researcher's Journey Landing Page); sharing conference information and publication details, including a presentation from Ben Turner, editor of The Law Teacher, who explained the range of types of outputs that could be published; a presentation from SCILab.

As our collective scholarship endeavours have matured, Cake and Scholarship has become a vital resource for peer review of funding applications, publications and presentations.

4. The Impact

A somewhat unexpected outcome was the impact on wellbeing that is provided by the 'convivial' atmosphere, and the opportunity to *"contribute to the work of others while picking up useful guidance which will benefit all active research."* Others noted the group has, *"enhanced collegiality amongst the newer SEMs"* and provided a *'work balance'*.

Peer support also took the form of practically supporting scholarship such as publicising surveys and focus groups for projects.

The effectiveness of this peer support is best evidenced by the fact that very soon all the attendees progressed their scholarship ideas into fully-fledged and focused projects, many of which were funded. The peer support grew into a community of practice, as we gained competence through the knowledge and skill transfer of others sharing learning on everything from how to navigate the ethics process, to keeping project momentum even during peak SEM periods, such as module start. As expressed by one attendee;

"It also provides a gentle measure of accountability: it is good to have to come along and explain where my scholarship plans have reached and what we might need to do to make progress."

5. **OUTPUTS:**

SCILAB funded projects

1. **An exploration of the barriers to Regional Academic participation in Scholarship (SoTL) and development of appropriate supports and tools to overcome those barriers and encourage participation.**

This project explores the democratisation of research through primary data collection on the barriers and enablers of SEMs in research and scholarship. Phase 1 initial findings confirm that scholarship by SEMs will not just organically happen without structured support and skills development.

https://www.scholarship-exchange.open.ac.uk/projects/An_exploration_of_the_barriers_to_Regional_Academic_participation_in_Scholarship_SoTL_and_development_of_appropriate_supports_and_tools_to_overcome_those_barriers_and_encourage_participation_/218344

Project lead(s): Claire Armstrong

Team members: Rob Tumilty; Emma Bassett; Suz Corcoran; Carol Sherriff; Hayley Glover; Wannette Van Eg Dom Tuinstra; Nicola McDowell

2) Unpicking the experiences of BA Criminology and Law (Q92) students studying law modules: understanding the awarding and retention gaps

A project that explores the challenges experienced by BA Criminology and Law students studying law modules to understand the awarding and retention gap. W250 (Evidence Law) will be used as a vehicle to explore these issues. The project identifies potential teaching and learning interventions which may improve the experience of BA Criminology and Law students and their progression and achievement on law modules.

https://www.scholarship-exchange.open.ac.uk/projects/Unpicking_the_experiences_of_BA_Criminology_and_Law_Q92_students_studying_law_modules_understanding_the_awarding_and_retention_gaps/219058

Project lead(s): Katie King

Team members: Mischa Allen, Martin Jones

3) How can all of our students meet the Legal Research Learning Outcomes for level 2 and 3 Law modules

A project that seeks to understand how students view and approach developing their online legal research skills. Project findings will be used to propose recommendations, to help all of our students meet the Legal Research Learning Outcomes in their law assessments or modules.

https://www.scholarship-exchange.open.ac.uk/projects/How_can_all_of_our_students_meet_the_Legal_Research_Learning_Outcomes_for_level_2_and_3_Law_modules/219097

Project lead(s): Mel Holmes and Sophie Doherty

Team members: Hossam Kassem

4) Exploring staff-student partnerships: co-designing and assessing module materials from production to presentation

This scholarship project's objective is to understand how Students as Partners (SaP) can further support module production. Students as Partners (SaP) is a pedagogical approach increasingly used in higher education (Bryson 2014), and the focus will be on the process of co-production with students.

Project Leads – Mel Holmes and Sophie Doherty

5) Improving assessments for neurodivergent students

Neurodiverse is a blanket term used when someone's brain processes, learning methods and behaviour is different from what is considered the norm (The Brain Charity). Like most institutions, the OU provides a wealth of support for such students, but within the Law School, most assessments are presented and completed via a written format which may not provide neurodiverse students with the best opportunity to achieve their potential.

The project intends to look at the current assessments on the LLB from a neurodiverse viewpoint.

Project Leads – Carol Edwards and Mel Holmes

Blogs:

- **'Reflections on Working with Student Undergraduate Researchers'**
<https://law-school.open.ac.uk/blog/reflections-working-undergraduate-student-researchers?nocache=678f83aa1fc6e> Mel Holmes, Abi Light, Natalie Jeffries.
- **'The court and the classroom are not that different'** <https://law-school.open.ac.uk/blog/court-room-and-classroom-are-not-different> by Mel Holmes
- **'Emboldening the student as advocate; being emboldened educators'**
<https://law-school.open.ac.uk/blog/emboldening-student-advocate-being-emboldened-educators?nocache=669545569fd44> By Corey Flynn, Bryony Gilbert and Wannette Van Eg Dom – Tuinstra
- **'TMA Extensions and Myth-Busting; Triage and Effective Use of the EAID at TMA01'**
<https://law-school.open.ac.uk/blog/tma-extensions-myth-busting-triage-and-effective-use-eaid-tma01>
By Bryony Gilbert and Wannette Van Eg Dom – Tuinstra
- **'The North Ignites a New Community of Learning and Social Justice'**
<https://law-school.open.ac.uk/blog/north-ignites-new-community-learning-and-social-justice>
By Ash Odedra, Bryony Gilbert, Jen Harper and Wannette Van Eg Dom – Tuinstra
- **'The Carousel of Scholarship: How to Ride Its Ups and Downs'**
<https://www5.open.ac.uk/scholarship-and-innovation/scilab/blog/carousel-scholarship-ride-its-ups-and-downs>
By Nicola McDowell, Wannette Van-Eg-Dom-Tuinstra, Claire Armstrong, Rob Tumilty, Emma Bassett and Suzanne Corcoran.

- **Force-feeding? What makes good written feedback and how much is too much?** <https://www5.open.ac.uk/scholarship-and-innovation/scilab/blog/force-feeding-what-makes-good-written-feedback>

By Daniel Russell (with support from Wannette Van-Eg-Dom-Tuinstra)

Conferences/ Presentations

- 'Large tutor Groups' by Mel Holmes Presented to SE colleagues meeting 7th January 2025; presenting to OU SEM/staff tutor colleagues Share First Friday on 7 February 2025
- Legal research scholarship by Mel Holmes– Presented to Teaching Director 15th January 2025
- Legal research scholarship by Mel Holmes at Share Lunch Programme Website: SHARE – Scholarship Help AREa | learn3, 10th June and eProgramme Meeting 19th March
- Law AL feedback on the use of large tutor groups by Mel Holmes and Ash Odedra, SE Team Meeting February 2025
- 'Five Things I Wish You Knew' Exploring Emotional Labour and Extensions from a tutor perspective.' by Bryony Gilbert and Wannette Van Eg Dom – Tuinstra EADTU Conference 2024, Cyprus
- 'Counter-Intuitive? Success with Combined Online Day Schools Tutorials on a Level 1 Law Module' by Dr Wannette Van Eg Dom-Tuinstra, Dr Glen Marshall, Ash Odedra, Katie Jukes, Bryony Gilbert Getting Them In Symposium, November 2024.
- Extensions: Effectiveness, Dissonance and Emotional Labour: A Mosaic of our Scholarship So Far' by Bryony Gilbert and Wannette Van Eg Dom – Tuinstra 'Let's Talk Retention Event 22 January 2024.
- *The Impact of Extensions on Student Retention and Progression'* Bryony Gilbert and Wannette Van Eg Dom – Tuinstra 'Let's Talk Retention' event May 2023

This year, 2025, sees a number of Cake and Scholarship attendees with acceptances at prestigious conferences including the SLSA Conference in Liverpool and the HEA conferences in Sheffield and Newcastle.

6. Wider Impact

An underlying aim of this group was to change the culture of SEM research and scholarship, and so influence at the macro-level. Discussions with colleagues revealed intense frustration at the obstacles to scholarship namely, lack of dedicated time, but also respect for the prioritisation of that time, and acknowledgement and recognition that SEMs, are academics too, on par with Central Academics. Indeed, it was because it was learned that for many Central Academics, Fridays are offline days, that through Cake and Scholarship, SEMs who are members of Cake and Scholarship try to dedicate Fridays for SEM scholarship. All other tasks can wait until Monday and the meeting of the group, as the first order of business on a Friday helpfully sets that tone and infuses our professional discourse.

The effectiveness of this approach is evidenced by attendee feedback, confirming:

“By having regular meetings we underline the importance of scholarship in our SEM role. It gives us permission to do our scholarship without feeling guilty that we are not doing all those other tasks that come with our job. It means that, once a week, scholarship takes priority.”

Another attendee has said that this group:

“has offered the most support for scholarship that I have had since joining the OU. I am now in a position where I have funding secured for the scholarship project and am making progress through the complex forms and procedures something I would not have been in a position to do without Cake and Scholarship.”

The support for scholarship in the faculty is developing. Scholarship will now be recorded on the AWM tool, reflecting the Faculty’s recognition of the importance of this in the SEMs’ workload planning. SCILaB has a new director with an exciting programme of events to support SEM scholarship.

Going forward

Having taken on board feedback from attendees, Cake and Scholarship will maintain its informal, 'drop-in' approach. It is recognised that this informality also provides the psychological safety and belonging that is necessary to test and develop ideas for scholarship, and identify and overcome barriers. *"I like knowing that it is there and a regular fixture, even though I don't go regularly. I know it is there when I need it!"*

In Autumn 2025 we expanded our field of influence to include Lunch and Scholarships on Tuesdays at midday for those colleagues whose work patterns do not include Fridays. These have been very well attended, and by a wider pool of our SEM colleagues.

Our new SEM colleagues appointed in January 2025 have also been specifically invited to join Cake and Scholarship and Lunch and Scholarship, providing a useful opportunity to interact with the wider SEM team and be introduced to scholarship.

Plans are underway for a SEM scholarship poster event at the next SEM development day.

Going forward

Principally through peer support and a community of practice, Cake and Scholarship, fuels the empowerment of SEMs to achieve teaching and learning excellence.

We are Cake and Scholarship (also Lunch and Scholarship!) and we are here to stay.

REFERENCES

Barkley, E. F., and Cross, K.P, (2014) *Cross Collaborative Learning Techniques : A Handbook for College Faculty*, John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated: ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/open/detail.action?docID=1745058> [Accessed 25 August 2024]

Tumilty, R. (2023) '*SEMs and Barriers to Scholarship* 'B875 dissertation. The Open University. Unpublished work.

