

# Inquiry-Based Learning in Public Law: Adelaide's Small Group Discovery Experience

Cornelia Koch (Senior Lecturer) and Dr Matthew Stubbs (Associate Professor)  
Adelaide Law School, University of Adelaide

## The SGDE Embedded in the Principles of Public Law Course

*Principles of Public Law* (PPL) is a large, compulsory, first-year course.

### Course Schedule

- Weeks 1-8: the substantive law
- Final Exam (mid-semester break)
- **Weeks 9-12: the SGDE Research Project**

### SGDE Research Project Progression

- **SGDE week 1**
  - Finalise groups
  - Choose topics
  - Start research
- **SGDE week 2**
  - Bring essay plan
  - Redirection of topic, limitation of scope of essays
- **SGDE week 3**
  - Final opportunity for questions
  - Feedback on draft introductions and/or conclusions
- **SGDE week 4**
  - Essay finalisation and submission

### SGDE Delivered in the Law Library Computer Suite

– ‘allowed us as students to be **independent in our research whilst being assisted with where to find resources**’.

## Developing Students' Research and Writing Skills

Students reflecting on the SGDE one year after completing PPL:

*‘The **research skills that we learnt ... were invaluable**. ... I have **literally used these researching skills on every single assignment since completing the SGDE**.’*

*‘It was **good to learn more about the research process** and I found it has really helped me this year for finding cases and with assignments **reflecting back – lasting benefit!!!**.’*

*‘Currently I am working part time at a Barristers Chambers, and recently have started to do legal research for some of the barristers here. I just wanted to email you and say that what you taught last year was **really worthwhile and has helped me a lot**’.*

## Inquiry Learning in a Large First-Year Compulsory Law Course

### SGDE = Small Group Discovery Experience

- a **signature pedagogy** at the University of Adelaide
- ‘a small group of students, meeting to work at the discovery of new knowledge under expert guidance.’

Our SGDE (run each year since 2014) provides an **engaging, authentic, research-based discovery experience** under **expert supervision** for first-year law students (around 400 each year). Students work in groups of 3-4, researching key contemporary public law issues. They produce a 2000-word research essay.

After eight weeks of studying substantive legal principles, the SGDE offers students the opportunity to **engage more deeply** with one area of public law, while also building **essential professional skills in research and teamwork**, and forging **connections with peers and our teaching team**.

Academic mentors for the SGDE are all senior research staff, **so all students have the opportunity to have expert supervision and engage with key staff**, no matter who their seminar teacher is.

Students explore public law questions going to the heart of **contemporary debates**, including:

- whether there should be a plebiscite on same-sex marriage
- whether the *Australian Constitution* should contain a guarantee of non-discrimination against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- whether new parliamentary processes adequately protect human rights in Australia, or a bill of rights is needed.



## Enlivening a Spirit of Discovery Beyond the Classroom

In both 2015 and 2016, teams of PPL students have **presented their SGDE research at the University of Adelaide's Beacon Conference of Undergraduate Research (BeaCUR)**. In both years, PPL teams have **won the prize for Best Group Presentation** from the Faculty of the Professions, and in 2016 a PPL group won the prize for Best Presentation (Level 1). The Best Group Presentation winners at BeaCUR in both 2015 and 2016 have been supported to **attend and present their PPL SGDE research at the Australian Conference of Undergraduate Research (ACUR)**.



A group presenting their 2014 PPL SGDE project at BeaCUR 2015 (pictured with Matthew)

## Building a Sense of Community

The connections built to both peers and academic mentors in our SGDE foster **a sense of inclusion** from the first year of law school.

*‘**something I will never forget ... will influence my self in a positive way when working with other people**. Thank you!!’*

*‘The ability ... **to personally engage with the academic staff was invaluable**. The increased correspondence with academic staff in comparison to other courses made **an immensely positive impact in terms of learning and knowledge retention**.’*

*‘**hugely beneficial**. It allows you to **make connections with other students** and working with other people helps you to **consolidate your understanding by seeing it from another perspective**. This is something I've found the most difficult in my experience at law school. As a student in such large numbers you can often feel extremely distant from the help you need.’*