Inquiry-Based Learning in Public Law: Adelaide’s Small Group Discovery Experience
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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".

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.

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."

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).