

# Action Research PhD Cohorts - Factors for Success

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## Overview

- Introduction
- Research Methods
- Case Studies
- The Five Factors
- Implications

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## Introduction

PhD Research 'Developing Sustainable Cohort based Action Research PhD Programs'

- Motivation for the research
- Research questions

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## Research Approach

- Appreciative Inquiry
- (Appreciative) Learning Histories
- Case Studies:
  - Business Action Research Cohort (BARC) – Monash University
  - Postgraduate Program in Action Research at the Centre for Action Research and Professional Practice (CARPP), University of Bath

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## BARC – Monash

- 1999 – Cohort formed:
  - 6 PhD Students and one supervisor
  - Common background in the Master of Management (Organisational Systems) (MOS)
  - Met each month for 2-3 hours
- 2005:
  - 2 graduations
  - three new cohorts formed – mixed membership
  - no longer a common background
  - my research started

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## BARC – Monash, cont.

- 2006:
  - Returned to a single cohort
  - Mixed membership
  - Dual focus
- 2009:
  - 2 more graduations
  - student cohort formed in addition to the main cohort
  - loss of founder

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### CARPP – Bath

- Established in 1993 along with the cohort based Postgraduate Programme in Action Research (PPAR)
- Three phase program:
  - Diploma
  - MPhil
  - PhD
- Met every 2-3 months for 2-3 days
- Diploma phase – 15 months - workshops, writing and small group supervision

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### CARPP – Bath, cont.

- Masters phase – research, writing and small group supervision, continue
- PhD phase – more independent writing

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### The Five Factors

- Process
- Relationships
- Intellectual Stimulation
- Philosophy/Research Methods
- Outcomes

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**Process**

- Creation of 'space' for learning
- Learning about the theory and practice of action research
- Focus on the individual
- Shared Supervision (the sixth factor?)

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**Process**

*The learning set has enabled me to discuss ideas in a safe, yet intellectually critical and stimulating environment. Our discussions have opened up areas of research that I had not previously thought of, or found in my individual research.*

*The cohort allowed me to develop in the positive critical sense with an enquiring mind-set that feels comfortable with ignorance - it's OK not to know.*

Monash cohort members

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**Process**

*I think we do three things simultaneously...we stimulate them with ideas: we make sure that they start some reading and we give them an opportunity to talk about that...Then ...we really try and encourage people to actually do something. ...the third thing is that we provide non-judgmental settings to reflect together about what's happening.*

CARPP Teaching Staff

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**Relationships**

- Emotional and intellectual support
- Friendship/Community
- Mutual obligation
- Interdependence
- Collaboration

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**Relationships**

- *I value the relationships and complementary skill bases. 'My critical friends' appreciated moving from always being supportive friends to more 'critical friends' where they challenged the views and ideas.*
- *In the difficult times, it was reassuring to find that others were going through similar problems and we were able to seek solutions together and provide each other with encouragement.*

Monash cohort members

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**Relationships**

- *I think we learn from each other through the groups and spending time with each other in different groups. Then we get to know each other and we develop a trusting sort of relationship, and learn some more from each other.*
- *Just having mates that you can ring up or talk to, who know what you're talking about, because sometimes you just think 'God, I'm in this world by myself'. Just having that community, really, of people you can check things out with.*

CARPP cohort members

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**Intellectual Stimulation**

- Exploring ideas using discussion and debate
- Sharing learning with others
- Developing insights
- Working together to create new knowledge

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**Intellectual Stimulation**

- *We all have a long term commitment to our quest for knowledge. If that wasn't happening people would withdraw. It's not just sharing research, but what's behind that - the learning.*
- *Tim Haslett & John Barton have a wide knowledge, which made our discussions more intellectually stimulating. We've now taken on a lot of that knowledge. We're now a self-reinforcing system.*

Monash cohort members

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**Intellectual Stimulation**

- *Especially in the early days at Bath I would leave on the Friday buzzing. A lot of the high points were intellectual ones but you would almost embody them, so you'd be quite shaken. They were quite intense exchanges about somebody else's work or you'd have an intense exchange about your own work.*
- *The group tutorial experiences were stimulating in terms of how intriguing they were, the differences, the tensions - it was interesting.*

CARPP cohort members

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**Philosophy/Research Methods**

- **Shared** body of theories and approaches that are in use by the group:
  - Action Research
  - Systems Thinking
  - Sustainability (CARPP)
  - FMA (Monash)
- Developed through:
  - The MOS & early PhD for Monash students
  - The PPAR Diploma for CARPP students

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**Philosophy/Research Methods**

- *We have a shared philosophy of systems thinking and systems theory. People developed deep knowledge about specific areas...And everyone recognises [other] people's expertise.*
- *...over time action research has become a way of operating in the world for all members of the cohort. As this ...has evolved, it has shaped our personal identity and how we define ourselves and what we do.*

Monash cohort members

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**Philosophy/Research Methods**

- *First-person research, in our tradition, is the foundation of anything else you do. So we do emphasise reflective practice and what this means to the individual.*
- *...action research the way it's taught in CARPP is really as a way of life.*
- *...one of the things I notice is we use the word inquiry much, much more than we use the word research. The language has shifted...from research into inquiry.*

CARPP cohort members

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### Outcomes/Results

Monash cohort	CARPP cohorts
Creation of new knowledge	Making a difference and changing the world
Publication of journal articles that document the new knowledge	CARPP's contribution to AR
The reputation of the group	CARPP's web of influence
PhD completions	Moving from Diploma to MPhil to PhD PhD completions

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### Outcomes/Results

- *We all contribute to a body of work. There are positive rewards for being involved.*
- *The Monash cohort was well known at conferences and for its papers.*
- *John Stevens' work with viable systems in dope testing greyhounds resulted in being able to convict people - that had never been done before. It's turning high level theory into grass roots business.*

Monash cohort members

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### Outcomes/Results

- *CARPP started in 1994 and by 2005 it had graduated 25 PhDs, 4 MPhils and 17 Diplomas.*
- *As a community we're doing stuff out in the world. We're taking on research contracts and consultancy contracts, as well as the teaching. We are actively engaged.*
- *I think what we've done here lives on in people's lives, and that's why the first-person inquiry is so fundamental. That's what it's about: it's people living their lives differently and taking inquiry into their lives.*

CARPP cohort members

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### Implications

- Cohorts are an effective way of working through PhD study
- The right 'process' can lead to the existence of the other factors
- Shared philosophy/method is important and can be developed over time
- Action Research is an ideal methodology for cohort based PhDs

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### The Final Word

*The thematic nature of a CARPP PhD and the cohort character of it, together with the close personal relationships people build, not just with their supervisor but with their peer group, all seem to support people more strongly in part-time study than the normal PhD part-time student would experience. Because of that the success rate is good.*

Academic Staff at CARPP

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