

SURVIVING and
THRIVING
in **ACADEMIA**

BUILDING COMMUNITIES IN ACADEMIA



EDITED BY
MELINA AARNIKOIVU • AI TAM LE

BUILDING COMMUNITIES IN ACADEMIA

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BUILDING COMMUNITIES IN ACADEMIA

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

We would like to dedicate this book to everyone who is building communities wherever they go, often behind the scenes, motivated by sheer care, and without any extra incentives or rewards. Your work is invaluable, and it matters.

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INTRODUCTION

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The two of us were brought together by a community. In 2019, we met for the first time in Kassel, Germany, where the network for early career higher education researchers (ECHER) was organising an Academic Writing Clinic for its members. One of us (Melina) was an organiser, and the other (Ai Tam) was a participant. This conference remains the only occasion where we have met in person. As one of us lives in the Netherlands and the other in Australia, it is not exactly easy to meet up for a coffee to discuss research (or anything else). Yet, because of ECHER, we have stayed in touch, exchanged emails and now, most recently, decided to co-edit a book on a topic of great importance to us: building communities in academia.

Academic communities exist everywhere. They are important not only for academic socialisation and generating intellectual capital but also for fostering academic well-being (Elliot et al., 2023). The importance of communities has been shown especially in the context of doctoral education (see e.g. Cai et al., 2019). While doing research might once have been a

highly solitary endeavour, it could not be further away from the reality today. No one can make it alone, without help from others. In this book, we want to highlight the importance of all academic communities, despite one's career stage. No matter if one has only started doing research or been involved in it for decades, we need colleagues with whom we exchange ideas, discuss our or other people's work, with whom we brainstorm, generate data, write or who provide us with valuable feedback on our not-yet-so-great paper drafts. And, sometimes, colleagues form communities that provide the social support to buffer against the 'hidden injuries of the neoliberal university' (Gill, 2009, p. 39) that many of us are experiencing.

As one of the few upsides of the COVID-19 pandemic, communities are no longer something bound to a specific physical space. Instead, a community might connect people residing in various parts of the world. But how do communities come to be, and how do we develop and maintain them? What kinds of challenges are involved when bringing people together on a regular basis? Whose responsibility is community building in academia to begin with?

To explore the practical side of community building in academia, this book brings together examples of successful community-building efforts by academics from different career stages, disciplinary backgrounds and country contexts. Together with us, these community builders seek to find answers to three wider questions:

1. What types of communities are important in academia?
2. How do we develop and maintain them?
3. What are the challenges of creating sustainable academic communities?

While the chapters will primarily demonstrate success stories in academic community building, we also want to discuss the more critical side of community building: its costs for individual academics. Because, despite the various benefits of communities, there is a darker side to them. Community building takes a great deal of time and (often voluntary) effort (Brankovic & Aarnikoivu, 2021) and is rarely officially rewarded. Additionally, not everyone might be able to find a suitable community, even though they might want to. Therefore, we hope to address community building through a practical yet critical lens.

To begin exploring community building in academia, we want to define the key concepts that we use throughout the book. First, what do we mean by a *community*? When inviting authors to contribute to this book, we decided not to offer them any strict, pre-given definition. After all, we, the editors, had already made some preselection based on who to choose. Indeed, there was a reason why we reached out to these particular authors. We chose to invite them because we felt they had built or were involved actively in a *Community of Practice* (CoP). Others experienced the lack of such a community and, thus, could tell us why they matter. According to Wenger and Snyder (2000), CoPs are ‘groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise’ (p. 139). While some of the communities explored in this book also have some kind of formal role (e.g. funding to enable its existence), it is the ‘shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise’ that becomes crucial for understanding what this book is about because, as Wenger and Snyder (2000) also explain, we can find many groups in academia that simply come together to share knowledge or accomplish a specific task. CoPs, however, are something more. They are meant for members to *learn* and *develop* their skills, as Wenger and Snyder

emphasise. In other words, to qualify as a CoP in academia, the members of the group need to care about other members and their development as researchers (or teachers), or simply as people. Additionally, we also argue that a community, ideally, functions as a *reflexive space of appearance* (Cotter, 2014), a space of ‘honesty, critique and new beginnings’ (p. 459) for its members. For this reason, we do not consider typical research groups or associations that only come together to discuss a specific research topic as *communities*.

In addition to communities, this book is about *people* within communities. Since the authors come from different higher education systems, we have decided to allow flexibility in terms of career-stage terminology. Therefore, a person doing doctoral studies might be referred to as a *graduate researcher*, a *PhD candidate*, or a *doctoral researcher*, for example. The book also includes reflections by (former) master’s students, postdoctoral fellows and some established scholars. Some authors are currently doing research, some are teaching and others are working in other roles. However, what is shared by all of them is that they *care* about building spaces where people can learn, grow and flourish together.

We have organised the chapters of this book by career stage, starting from master’s students and doctoral researchers towards communities that can benefit any academic. In the first content chapter, Chapter 2, Amoni Kitooke, Sally Windsor, Martina Lazarevska, Oscar Funeskog and Samuel Holt discuss how community building can take place at a very early stage of research, namely a master’s programme. As they characterise, master’s students engaging in research are ‘not quite yet inside and at the same time not wholly outside of academia’ (Kitooke et al., this volume, p. 11), making them feel *liminal* belonging. With autoethnographic vignettes, the authors reflect how they established a CoP during their master’s studies, and how they keep maintaining it even after

graduation. The vignettes not only demonstrate the various sides of liminal communities for emerging researchers but also challenge the normative ideas of novice researchers being at the periphery and more experienced researchers being at the core.

Chapter 3 turns our gaze towards graduate researcher-led communities. Yuqi Lin and Ai Tam Le reflect on their experiences as graduate researchers in Australia and describe how they designed, developed and delivered professional development projects for their peers. This chapter illustrates the potential of graduate researchers as active contributors in co-creating a vibrant intellectual community in one's institution. Simultaneously, it offers useful practical guidance for other graduate researchers who wish to embark on similar community-building projects.

In Chapter 4, Juuso Henrik Nieminen and Robyn Ruttenberg-Rozen delve into a topic which has not received much attention in scholarly literature – searching for a community and sense of belonging as a postdoctoral fellow. As they emphasise, this career stage is highly individualistic: The researcher is aiming at advancing their own career while simultaneously experiencing a great deal of loneliness and uncertainty about their future. With their powerful personal narratives, Nieminen and Ruttenberg-Rozen share their experiences as a research fellow and supervisor, respectively, highlighting how (non-)belonging can manifest in the 'lonely' structures of postdoctoral fellowships. Their chapter is a timely reminder of how academia can be reimagined to support postdoctoral researchers who can easily fall through the academic cracks.

Chapter 5 introduces an international online community of women researchers, the Early and Mid-Career Researchers' (EMCR) 'Incubation Hub', which was originally formed to discuss different taboos or otherwise difficult or delicate topics

of higher education. Gaoming Zheng, Mee Joo Kim, Jing Qi, Melina Aarnikoivu, Saule Bekova, Charity Meki-Kombe, Baktygul Shabdan and Lifutso Tsephe share the story of how they established the community, what it has given to its members during its existence and what kinds of challenges the members and the community as a whole is facing due to its unique characteristics. Their chapter demonstrates how an academic community built on ‘sisterhood’ can offer a supportive space against personal and professional setbacks.

Next, in Chapter 6, Vesna Holubek and Henna Juusola explore the personal and professional benefits of informal communities. In their example, based in the Finnish context, they offer reflections on how the role of an early-career researchers network (ECRN) can support not only its members’ professional growth but also well-being. This chapter adopts the form of an imagined online coffee meeting, which functions as a narrative vignette. As the authors illustrate, such informal meetings prove effective in providing scholarly peer support and fostering information sharing not only on one’s specific field but across academic work in general.

In Chapter 7, Mayya Sundukova and Olga (Olya) Vvendeskaya take perhaps the most practical approach to academic community building in this volume. From the viewpoint of mental health and well-being, they offer the readers a workbook that can be used to create a community from scratch. As they point out, there are several steps in creating a viable, valuable community, such as specifying what the community is for and how it should be structured, finding members, how to communicate, how to find allies and how to consider budget-related questions. While their chapter discusses mental health-focused communities, the workbook can also be used for other types of communities within any professional organisation.

Chapter 8 offers us the story of *Research Whisperer*, a community which started as a blog but has evolved ever since to include a variety of activities aimed at supporting researchers. Tseen Khoo and Jonathan O'Donnell share the background and developmental challenges of their journey of over a decade, which still continues to this day. Like many other authors in this book, they were also driven by an ambition to change academia for the better by 'levelling the playing field' through knowledge sharing – an act of 'aspirational activism'. What is especially highlighted in this chapter is that community building does not have to be a solemn endeavour; instead, it can be infused with humour, leading to not just supportive professional environments but also to lasting friendships.

In Chapter 9, Sinéad Murphy puts the idea of rewarding individual outputs and sole authorships under the microscope by examining how collaborative and individual research can benefit each other. By using *Beyond Gender*, an unaffiliated research collective as an example, Murphy analyses how the development of collaborative practices can be done productively outside of traditional institutional settings. She also shows how being part of such a collective can generate research activity in a wider context, while also discussing the importance of mattering and belonging.

Finally, in Chapter 10, Andrew G. Gibson and Taina Saarinen ask what, in a way, all chapters and this book, as a whole, ask: *What if academia was not a gladiator fight?* To critically reflect on this question, Gibson and Saarinen offer an illuminating case of building a research group focused on internationalisation of higher education, *Alternative Internationalisms*, which has brought together researchers around the world. The chapter explores how developing this community as a safe space allowed the authors to consider what it means to 'be together', and what 'togetherness' means in relation to

those hierarchies that there are in academia but also elsewhere. In emphasising the ‘alternative’, the authors attempt to create a safe, supportive community in which academics from different career stages come to learn together.

Academic work and the future of universities might sometimes seem hopeless (Hall, 2020) amid all the precarity and competition. However, reading, editing and publishing these chapters has made us hopeful, hopeful that there are those who keep striving to create and maintain supportive, inclusive spaces where academics can come together, learn from and support each other and, in that way, create more sustainable and caring universities (Corbera et al., 2020). We hope the readers of this book become hopeful as well.

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