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RESEARCH WORKSHOP ABSTRACT

BY PROFESSOR LEE GODDEN (Melbourne Law School)

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Interdisciplinary research: A case study of 'water theme' research and the Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute

This seminar focuses on interdisciplinary research as one form of research methodology that might be adopted by legal academics. Increasingly, external funding bodies, such as the Australian Research Council, are supporting research that involves a team of researchers drawn from different disciplines and organizations. Similarly, within the University of Melbourne itself, there is an emerging research orientation toward Interdisciplinary Research Centres. The Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute is the first of the interdisciplinary research centres to be established. The aim of the centre is to act as a facilitator for research on environment and sustainability with a particular emphasis on socially-oriented research within the Australasian region. In addition, the MSSSI is to act as a coordination point for information about the university's research in this field for external organizations, particularly prospective funding bodies. The MSSSI is organized around four themes: risk and resilience; sustainable cities; food and water, although it is recognized that there are many interconnections between these themes.

In this seminar, I will explore the notion of interdisciplinary research and the potential role that law and lawyers might play in an interdisciplinary team. To this end, I have provided a reading by Marilyn Strathern, a leading international cultural anthropologist, exploring the notion of interdisciplinary research centres and the 'communities of practice' that can evolve.

Moreover, surprisingly perhaps, many areas that lawyers would regard as falling particularly within the disciplinary boundaries of law, such as institutional governance and social change, often are not considered by many disciplines as areas where law can make a significant contribution. As a theme co-leader for water, I am interested in facilitating greater involvement of lawyers in the many and varied projects relating to water that exist across the University – and in other MSSSI themes areas. In this regard, I will outline a series of case studies of water-related interdisciplinary research. These case studies comprise: an examination of the implementation of the Water Act 2007 (C'th) from the perspective of institutional complexity and social learning within statutory authorities; water governance as an adaptation to climate change in cities around the Pacific Rim; and water/energy/greenhouse gas emission considerations in distributed systems as a component of environmental impact assessment and planning laws. The focus for the case studies will be the development process for interdisciplinary research, rather than an exposition of research findings.