

PhD Research opportunities in the Sociology of Safety

School of Sociology

Australian National University

ANU Sociology has an active program of research focused on industrial risk and safety via our participation in the Energy Pipelines Co-operative Research Centre (see www.epcrc.com.au). We are seeking PhD students to join our research group in this area.

The Issue

Society relies on technologies such as oil and gas exploration and production, aviation and nuclear power generation. Despite decades of effort to eliminate accidents we see that disasters continue to occur in these complex, socio-technical systems. Events such as the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and the Fukushima meltdown following the Japanese tsunami cause individual suffering and also immense social disruption. Investigations into these events rarely reveal new technical knowledge, but show that knowledge we have is not being applied. Further, the reasons for this lack of application are almost always social. For this reason, organisations responsible for designing, building, operating and regulating these industries are increasingly turning to social science for answers.

Through our partnership with the Energy Pipelines CRC, ANU Sociology has an active research program in the general area of industrial accident causation and prevention, with a particular focus on high pressure natural gas transmission pipelines. Current projects include:

- Incentive schemes for senior managers that encourage a focus on system safety
- Organisational design and the influence of safety specialists
- Social processes related to safety in design.
- Professional learning and replication of safety culture across generations.
- Organisational causes of the San Bruno fire.
- Public risk perception of carbon dioxide pipelines.

We are seeking PhD students to join this program. One student will investigate the social circumstances surrounding external interference in pipelines. Gas pipelines are buried under our streets, suburbs and paddocks. A common cause of pipeline damage (and in the extreme, rupture and explosion) is work by earth moving and drilling machinery operators. Whilst they are working near pipelines, these people are often not related to the gas industry. Preliminary research suggests that people are often aware of the presence of the pipeline and yet damage still occurs despite the risk to personal safety. This PhD research will investigate why these events continue to happen and the relationships between and within regulators, local councils, landowners, gas companies and contractors that contribute to this problem.

Other PhD projects will be initiated depending on candidates' interests and the need of our industry partners.

The Research Team

The team is mentored by Emeritus Professor Andrew Hopkins. Professor Hopkins' work on the causes of accidents such as the Longford Gas Plant Explosion the Gretley mine collapse, the BP Texas City Refinery fire and others is well know.

Dr Jan Hayes is the program leader. She has nearly 30 years' experience in the resources sector covering areas as diverse as plant operations, engineering design, quantitative risk assessment and sociology research. She joined ANU to lead this project in 2010.

The team currently includes three other full time researchers (including one PhD student). The work is also supported by Professor Stewart Lockie (Head of School) through his research interests in environmental sociology.

Current team members have a range of disciplinary backgrounds but our current activities are all sociologically based.

The Scholarships

The Australian National University (ANU) is offering a total of four full time scholarships for PhD students. The value of the stipend is negotiable above the standard APA rate.

Scholarships are available for high quality candidates from Australia or overseas. Applicants should hold a first class or upper second class honours degree or equivalent prior studies (such as a Graduate Diploma or a Masters degree) that include some research work. We welcome applications from candidates with a sociology background or from other disciplines. Candidates with background working in energy companies are also encouraged to consider applying.

To Apply

We are seeking at least one candidate to commence nominally 1 September 2012, but funds are available for commencement in coming years. Candidates interested in a 2013 start date are encouraged to contact us now. If you are interested, please contact: jan.hayes@anu.edu.au including a CV and short statement of research interests.

Research students can commence at any time of the year but preference will be given to applicants who are able to study on a full time basis. Students are permitted to undertake some paid work in addition to full time study in accordance with University rules (currently six hours or up to 20 hours with approval).