

## Examining the Creative Arts Doctorate in Australia: Implications for supervisors

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### ABSTRACT

One of the significant roles performed by the higher degree research (HDR) supervisor is to assist students to prepare their dissertations for examination. At a time when there is increasing interest in how the academy manages the transition of creative arts HDR candidates from apprentice to peer, there is also concern about the processes, practices, and policies associated with this largely under-researched area of research training. In a recent national Office of Learning and Teaching funded project, we investigated the policy expectations, expert and peer beliefs and expectations, and examiners' practice around HDR examination, and canvassed the creative arts academic community for their recommendations on best practice in the examination of creative arts doctorates. An unexpected finding was the role of the HDR supervisor in relation to these key areas, and the impact of supervisors upon the examination of students' theses. This article presents our findings with special reference to the role, understandings, and aspirations of HDR supervisors in the context, and process, of preparing their students for creative arts HDR examination.

### KEYWORDS

creative arts, doctoral examination, doctoral supervision

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### Introduction

A group of creative arts academics who have been very involved in the development of higher degrees in this field have recently completed a project that investigated the processes, practices, and standards associated with the examination of doctoral theses in the creative arts. This undertaking, funded by the Australian government, acknowledged the importance of a rapidly growing area for higher degree (HDR) research programs: the creative arts. In the early 1990s, there were very few enrolments or completions in a creative arts doctorate in Australia; by 2003—in a situation when 20 of the 39 universities in the country offered creative arts doctorates—there had been well over 400 such doctorates examined and completed nationally (CAUL, 2011). With this rapid growth came the need to interrogate how effectively Australian universities manage research training for creative arts practitioners (Holbrook, Bourke, Lovat, & Fairbairn, 2008; Marsh, Smith, King, & Evans, 2012). This concern is not confined to the Australian academy: in the UK, in Europe under the Bologna Process, and increasingly in the USA and Canada, there are rapidly expanding enrolments in, and models for, research degrees, and a concomitant concern about best practice (Barber, Donnelly, & Rizvi, 2013; Bourner, Bowden, & Laing, 2010).

This project was conceived in response to this context, and it is one of several OLT-funded projects investigating higher degrees in creative arts disciplines. Our previous project researched

supervision of creative writing research students (Webb & Brien, 2008); Baker and Buckley (2009) researched the issue of quality in visual arts higher degrees; and Phillips, Stock, and Vincs (2009) reported on assessment in higher degree training in dance. We drew also on our own experience in the sector as supervisors and examiners. Over the past decade, we have between us supervised some 60 doctoral candidates, examined some 80 doctoral theses, and completed previous research projects on HDR (see Webb & Brien, 2008). This experience has provided empirical data and anecdotal evidence that point to anxieties and uncertainties held by many doctoral supervisors, candidates and examiners about the examination process in general, and more particularly about the implications of presenting creative outputs as part of a research degree (Carey, Webb, & Brien, 2008). The creative arts are not alone in this unease: existing research exposes similar uncertainties about the process and outcomes, and the absence of established standards, for thesis examination in other disciplines (see, for instance, Bourke, Hattie, & Anderson, 2004; Denicolo, 2003).

In designing a project to address this uncertainty, we were keen to be as inclusive as possible, both in order to build knowledge about how the community of practice generally addresses the topic, and to strengthen connections between members of that community. We therefore sought the involvement of participants from a wide range of roles—supervisors, examiners, HDR administrators, and recent graduates—from the scholarly creative arts peak bodies,<sup>1</sup> and from every Australian university which, at that time, had a creative arts doctoral program. This involved us hosting research conversations in regional towns as well as capital cities. There were several levels of project involvement from the creative arts HDR community: membership of the project's reference group, participation in a roundtable or focus group, or completion of an online survey. These project respondents included 24 participants in 3 day long roundtables in 2011, 42 respondents in focus groups which we held in 4 states and territories during 2012, and 68 examiners and recent graduates<sup>2</sup> who completed the surveys.

Although there were limits to our capacity to be truly inclusive with regard to the fieldwork—mainly because of the difficulty of establishing times when local artist- academics could attend these events—people based across the country (except Tasmania and Northern Territory)<sup>3</sup> participated in the roundtables or focus groups, from across the spectrum of universities, and from many representative art forms, with participants from creative writing, performing arts, visual arts, media arts, music, and design. The participants in the roundtables were senior academics, heads of graduate studies programs, and other academics with significant experience in research and research training. The focus groups included senior academics, but also drew early career academics and recent graduates. Participants in this group generally had little experience in examining creative arts doctorates, although almost all were supervising higher degree candidates in a creative arts discipline. So, although the numbers of participants mean our findings should be considered indicative of views in the disciplines rather than generalizable to the population of creative arts academics, they do reflect a broad cross section of creative arts academics in Australia, and some of the questions they raise about research training in creative arts disciplines.

## **Defining the Doctorate**

Most examiners, of course, are also supervisors; and all supervisors need to understand the particularities of examination in their discipline area. Consequently, during the research for our project on examination, we found ourselves being brought back, again and again, to the role of the supervisor, and to the implications of our findings for supervision in the creative arts. Participants in the project raised a number of compelling questions about aspects of doctoral supervision in the creative arts, and discussed them extensively: and the first question raised was what the community of creative arts academics understand by the term 'doctorate'. After all, if we are to supervise a doctorate, we need to appreciate both what a doctorate is, and the nature of its overarching aims and goals. Almost as frequently raised was the point that supervisors need a shared understanding of the nature and role of examination in order to help a candidate prepare for this. There was,

however, debate about what examination actually means: is it engaged interaction, or a final judgment?

The first question, the nature and purpose of a doctorate, raised a number of sub-issues of relevance for all supervisors involved in creative arts higher degrees, and particularly with how to articulate the academic standards of doctoral degrees. Issues included:

1. The quality of research in these degrees;
2. The breadth of understanding of the field shown by a candidate;
3. Candidates' ability to use academic language;
4. The capacity of the outputs from doctoral degrees to satisfy professional/ academic as well as personal/artistic outcomes;
5. The relationship of the two elements of a creative doctorate;
6. The difference between a doctoral submission and 'just a good piece of art';
7. How an examiner can evaluate the quality of the creative/practical work and the written component; and
8. How these components should be weighted in their final assessment.

Although these questions were raised in a number of roundtables and focus groups, they were not easily answered except for the first, overarching one: *What is a doctor-ate?* Throughout the project, respondents came up with variants of the same definition of a doctorate—a definition that can be found in similar terms in the majority of university HDR policies. That is, the defining features of a doctorate are that it makes a contribution to knowledge, and that the candidate who presents it for examination demonstrates the skills and capacity needed to undertake sole research.

As many participants in the project acknowledged, however, there are so many different types of creative doctorates that it can be difficult to determine what should be the main focus of the student's, and therefore the supervisors', attention and energy. Doctoral degrees exist on a continuum that ranges from one extreme, a PhD that takes a conventional form, but focuses on a creative field, to the other extreme, where the majority of the work submitted for examination is the creative artifact. This is effectively a professional doctorate, and is typically named Doctor of Creative Arts, Doctor of Visual Arts or Doctor of Music. In between can be found what are the most frequently offered and undertaken types of HDR, the so-called 'creative PhDs', which constitute a major creative artifact and a significant piece of critical writing.<sup>4</sup> But there is substantial variation here too: the critical work can range from 10,000 words to 50,000 words, and the expectations of the creative artifact vary considerably across art forms and universities (Webb, Brien, & Burr, 2013).

### **Art Practice vs. Research Practice**

While these two issues were consistent features of our research conversations, participants also consistently argued that creative practice lies at the heart of the doctoral project, and that this should therefore be a central concern of supervision in the field. As one of the respondents said about the doctoral degree in creative arts: 'It's got to develop the candidate's practice' (focus group; examiner). Others observed that undertaking a creative doctorate can result in candidates revisiting their practice, finding points of refreshment, and/or changing the direction of their artwork. But there is a tension in this, because the respondents, with equal consistency, argued that the point of undertaking a doctorate is precisely not the creative practice, but the research practice. As an examiner participating in one of the focus groups said: 'the doctorate is not making an artwork; it's writing a thesis'.

This raises other issues for candidates and supervisors. Obviously the artwork must be at the heart of the project: otherwise why not simply undertake a traditional doctorate? But the artwork cannot be the main focus; otherwise it will not be a research degree. Although improved artistic capacity is almost always a pleasing byproduct of a doctorate, the point of these degrees is not to train artists better, but to develop better research professionals. With this in mind, participants in the project discussed the role that art plays in the candidature, and how a supervisor might help a candidate to tease out the distinctions between creative and research practice; between art products and knowledge products. One response offered was that supervisors need to help candidates find a research question that is capable of being answered, and that is also a question for which a creative arts approach can offer insights. The question needs to be both responsive and relevant to art practice; and the art practice should be conceptualized as a way of thinking, and used as a research method, rather than being seen as the point of the research degree.

One implication of this is that a research degree is not the place to learn, or even necessarily to hone, the skills and techniques required of the candidate's art form; candidates should already be skilled in their practice before commencing a doctorate, because a considerable portion of their energy and creative-intellectual work needs to be committed to building research skills, knowledge and capacity. If they already possess the relevant skills to practice art, they will be in a good position to produce art that is of quality (within the constraints of time and budget that are part of the candidature experience); if they have insufficient technical skills, they are likely to fail on both the artifact and the knowledge outputs.

Perhaps the key point that came out of these discussions is the importance of reflective practice. The respondents insisted that candidates must, as one respondent explained, 'reflect critically on their own practice to extend knowledge for other people' (focus group; examiner). This obviously has ramifications for higher degree supervisory practices in the creative arts, as it raises a series of fundamental questions about what supervisors encourage students to do and to achieve, and how they advise them to manage their time and to report on progress during the course of the candidature. In particular, most candidates will need careful support in working out how they will address the problem of the relationship between the creative and critical work.

## Policy Matters

Another key issue raised by supervisors revolved around preparing candidates for examination. During their candidature, students are often focused on conceptualizing and completing both the creative and the critical work, and thinking about their future career paths. But supervisors need to focus on the endpoint of the candidature—the examinable dissertation. This includes working with the candidate from the point of entry right through to completion, to ensure that learning has been achieved, capacity built, and knowledge generated, and reported on, in the course of those three to eight years. It also involves the supervisor in helping the candidate to ensure that the final thesis meets what is required by HDR policy and practice in their particular art form, and at their particular institution. This will be in terms of such matters as the scale of the object, the mode of presentation and the timing of the submission, as well as research rigor and integrity.

A number of our project's participants were very positive about policy frameworks for HDR. Comments include: 'Policies give some consistency across the board; that means everybody is treated in the same or similar ways' (AD-R); 'Policy helps to guide correct procedure ... my sense is that policy is really important to ensure transparency and correct protocol' (HDR supervisor). Another participant, a research director, observed that university's policies are particularly useful for (the many) staff who do not yet have extensive experience in supervising candidates to completion. In such cases, these policies often function as a form of *de facto* training because they alert supervisors to what is expected in terms of both the overarching requirements and the finer details that may be relevant to an individual candidate. These policies apply across the candidature: from

the initial selection of potential student who possesses the right skills and an appropriate project; through matching the student with the appropriate supervisory panel, and then ensuring that supervisors and students are aware of (and comply with) the various milestones designed to keep the project on track; to the examination process and completion.

Doctoral policies and university processes were, however, also seen as a potential problem. One HDR supervisor considered that the extension of bureaucracy into research supervisions can create practical problems, including the problem of version control (because they are often being revised), and interpretation (because often policies are 'dense'). They create problems also for candidates, as another participant, a research leader, explains:

Over the past five years I've examined doctorates that were extremely problematic, and I hesitated about failing them. But in the end I thought that the problem was not the student's, but actually in the way the structures of the degree were set out by the institution. (roundtable; head of research)

Across Australia, research managers and administrators have been benchmarking and improving HDR policies, which should lead to improvement in both the candidates' experience and the quality of supervision. In a number of universities, attention is also being paid to the provision of a more comprehensive training for supervisors to ensure that they are more cognizant of their institution's policies, and more familiar with contemporary best practice in supervision. However, most of the participants in this project felt there is too much disparity in HDR policies, and insufficient training for supervisors and examiners, across Australian universities. This disparity means that there are inconsistencies in approach to supervision and examination, both between and across art forms. This creates a problem for supervisors because, while they generally attempt to comply with a set of standards that are broadly shared nationally (and internationally), these standards are rarely articulated in policy.

But simply recasting policy so that all universities have the same focus is not the answer. Although our project found that supervisors hold similar ideas and values about the purpose of a creative arts doctorate and the role of the supervisor, there was a vivid disconnect between an appeal for more consistent policies and standards to guide candidates, supervisors and examiners, and the desire to preserve individual discipline particularities and individual institutional practices. Some respondents considered that the lack of consistency across programs and expectations was not a problem for examination because 'Examiners are more experienced [than general creative arts academics]; they might have differences of opinion but they're much closer to a standard' (focus group; ECR), but this was not the general opinion. Many more respondents identified a need for a systematic and standardized approach; as for instance in the following responses: 'Examiners really need some guidance on how to make their judgments' (focus group; experienced examiner) and 'We do need a set of consistent frameworks about the range of possible methodologies' (focus group; Associate Dean, Research). Such frameworks would obviously guide supervision across the sector in a much more consistent and equitable way than is currently the case.

An ongoing issue for both supervisors and candidates, and one that is not consistently addressed by university policies, revolves around the nature, scope, and function of the critical work that accompanies the creative artifact. Evidence from numerous conference presentations and recent publications in the creative arts disciplines is that, despite a decade of fairly extensive examination, there remains considerable uncertainty regarding what is widely known as the 'exegesis' and this causes anxiety for many candidates and supervisors (see, for instance, Dally, Holbrook, Graham, Lawry, & Bourke, 2003; Carey et al., 2008). A number of university policies in this area remain imprecise or limited. It is, for instance, not uncommon for policy documents to offer little more direction than the expected word count of the critical work, or the relative weightings of the creative and critical components. This leaves the definition of the critical work up to practitioners, which means there are sometimes radically variable approaches to the production and assessment of this writing. For example, although most examiners agree that the point of critical

writing is *not* for students to evaluate or provide a commentary on or interpretation of their own creative product, our experience is that some supervisors both expect and request students to produce such commentaries, and that some students consider it to be an appropriate approach. This lack of clarity about the purpose and role of a critical essay can result in a negative outcome for the student, because the absence of a policy direction in this respect means there is little consistency in how examiners respond to the critical writing.

Policy frameworks also direct the supervisor in the final stages of candidature, when the candidate is ready to submit his or her work for examination. In most Australian universities, it is the task of the supervisor to identify and then contract appropriate examiners. This involves consideration of policy requirements. Some universities insist that at least one examiner must be based outside Australia; others forbid the use of an examiner who is not currently employed as an academic; some require two, and some three examiners; and all have conflict of interest rules of varying degrees of rigor. But even supervisors who are thoroughly versed in, and committed to, the policy imperatives are likely to struggle to meet each requirement because of a more practical difficulty: the supply of sufficient examiners of appropriate capability for the task. The nature of a creative arts dissertation, which combines an art form with an epistemological, methodological or theoretical framework, means that examiners are often called on to evaluate work that is, in some parts, beyond their real expertise. An expert on, say, sculpture, might know little or nothing of Merleau-Ponty's thesis, or vice versa. It can be very difficult to align examiners' capacities with the work's demands in a discipline area that is so marked by individuality. As a supervisor told us, 'The forms of the thesis and the nature of the work are so diverse and each project is really its own project'. And even once the supervisor has identified and contacted potential examiners who are both qualified and capable, and who are approved by policy, they may find one or more of them unwilling or unable to take on that particular thesis at that particular time. This is not surprising, given that examiners are, for the most part, members of the chronically 'time-poor' academy, but it adds a considerable difficulty to the supervisor's role: a difficulty that cannot be fully addressed by policy, because it is predicated on the multiple types of, and approaches to, the creative arts doctoral degree.

## Standards?

We began planning this project at a point when the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) was funding discipline scholars to develop academic standards relevant to particular disciplines (Office for Learning & Teaching, 2009). Professor Jonathan Holmes, the ALTC Discipline Scholar for the Creative and Performing Arts, consulted Australia-wide on standards and graduate learning outcomes for students undertaking bachelor or coursework masters degrees in the creative arts disciplines. While Professor Holmes was able to consult widely with the discipline and develop a generally agreed set of threshold outcomes that apply regardless of the art form, what constitutes standards above this threshold remains undefined. Further, the scale of the project did not provide sufficient time to address standards or outcomes relevant to research degrees, though the report observes that this is needed because it 'remains the case that there are substantial variations in the ways in which higher degrees in the creative and performing arts are offered in Australia' (ALTC, 2010, p. 13).

While the tone of the ALTC report is positive about the capacity of the creative arts disciplines to develop standards for taught courses, the participants in our project seemed less sanguine about the capacity to achieve this for research degrees. As one respondent stated, 'A unified universal Australian standard for examining? I think it would be very difficult because we have disagreements' (focus group; examiner); another pointed out that 'There are no standards and you can't assume what happens in your institution happens in another because they're often quite different' (roundtable; research professor). In this, they reflect a longheld perspective in art education, one that can be found as early as Donald Gordon's 1956 paper on the topic. Gordon wrote, 'standards in

art are relativistic. Standards do exist, but there are [*sic*] a plurality of standards. No single standard is appropriate for all times, cultures and mediums' (1956, p. 17). Echoing this view, most focus group members resisted the idea of a shared set of standards, on the grounds that the disciplines are too different, their traditions too variable, and each project too distinctive to permit a shared set of standards for the outcomes of research degrees.

In addition, a number of the project's respondents considered that the necessary mechanisms are already in place. The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), for instance, which was established by the enactment of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act (2011, Cth) was referred to several times as a marker of national standards, despite the fact TEQSA did not adopt regulatory responsibility until 1 July 2012 and thus had not had time to provide this sort of benchmarking role; and despite the fact that standards are defined not by TEQSA, but by the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF, 2011). Further, rather bleakly, some of the respondents thought that the drive for standards and external evaluation of practice was having a negative influence on quality. One senior respondent stated, 'I think the standard's more consistent of late but slightly more mediocre, as if the supervisors are stopping people aiming really high and are focusing more on achieving minimum standards' (roundtable; dean of school). Our project did not provide the scope to tease out this comment, but it is an indictment of supervisory practices in the creative arts disciplines—and perhaps of the structure of the degrees themselves. Are we, as supervisors, encouraging students to aim low? If so, what are the motivating factors, are they valid, and can they be changed? But these are questions for another project.

## Conclusion

It is clear from the above that our research into this issue revealed both agreements and contradictions. Nobody, it seems—whether supervisors, examiners, or recent graduates—wants a restrictive code to guide doctoral examination in the creative arts. Almost all the project participants, however, considered that there should be clearer guidelines to assist supervisors in preparing candidates for examination, and examiners in making their judgments and preparing their reports. There was also considerable interest in improving the standard of examination by providing professional development opportunities for examiners. Examiners, it was noted, are usually also supervisors, thus will be informed about the principles of HDR training and examination; but because they will be from a different university, they will not necessarily be *au fait* with the particularities of another university's policies and expectations. Better benchmarking, better training, better support, and more communication among supervisors and examiners would, it was felt, lead to more explicitly shared research values and research education knowledge, greater consistency in the process and, therefore, more equitable and more useful outcomes for students.

This project left us, as is very common in such research undertakings, not only with a better understanding of our problem but also with a clear awareness that our project has only scratched the surface of this topic. As the numbers of doctoral candidates in the creative arts continues to grow, it will become increasingly important to ensure that supervisors, their candidates and examiners share understandings of what constitutes a doctorate, of the relationship between knowledge generation and professional advances, and how to evaluate quality, rigor, and innovation in this still strange object that is the creative doctorate.

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## Notes

1. Australasian Association of Writing Programs; Australian Association for Theatre, Performance and Drama Studies; Australian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences & Humanities; Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools; Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association; and the National Council of Tertiary Music Schools, as well as the UK's National Association of Writers in Education.
2. For the purposes of this project, we defined 'recent' as those who had graduated within the past decade.
3. Individuals in Tasmania and Northern Territory were involved only via the online surveys and, later, the online workshops. During the fieldwork stages of the project, the limited number of people working as supervisors of creative arts doctoral candidates in those two regions made it difficult for us to recruit sufficient people for a meaningful roundtable or focus group.
4. While the term 'exegesis' is widely used in the university-based creative arts community, participants of the project almost universally rejected the term on the grounds that it is inappropriate—that the critical writing does not have an exegetical function. Many universities use 'exegesis' for the critical work, but in most cases only in association with one or more of a plethora of other terms, including 'analytical comment'; 'critical analysis'; 'critical commentary'; 'critical essay'; 'dissertation'; or 'scholarly essay'.

## Notes on contributors

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