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A Plethora of Policies: Examining Creative Research Higher Degrees in Australia

Abstract:

Our recent research project investigated a range of policies on creative theses and examination guidelines for creative research higher degrees from Australia. Data was collected from twenty-eight Australian universities identified as offering these degrees. Although some institutions continue to subsume creative arts theses under generic criteria, the majority have distinct requirements for the creative and scholarly components and, in some cases, specific examination guidelines. However, the policies and guidelines across the surveyed universities are far from uniform. Significant differences were found in terms of what constitutes a 'contribution to knowledge', the description and composition of the exegesis, its relationship to the creative work, and the stated role of the research question in the research degree. Given the variability in policies and guidelines; the continuing lack of certainty in the field regarding the exegesis's role, function and form; and inconsistency about the meaning and relative importance of key terms such as 'creative', 'original knowledge' and 'research', what frameworks and other information are available to support examiners in their attempt to apply consistent standards? This paper addresses this fundamental epistemological problem with particular reference to the theses in writing, considering if it is possible or preferable to find a standard for a form that is both bifurcated and depends so heavily on practice? We will suggest that there are ways to work towards certainty, equity and professionalism in thesis examination.

Biographical notes:

Janene Carey is a PhD candidate, researching and writing biographical creative non-fiction stories about caring for people who are dying at home. She has recently published a journal article on the ethics on life writing in *TEXT* (October 2008) and a short memoir in *Re-Placement: a national anthology of creative writing from universities across Australia*. She has been employed as a research assistant on a Carrick-funded project investigating creative research higher degrees.

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Introduction

Higher degrees by research (HDR) are where the seeds planted in undergraduate and graduate years sprout, bloom and (hopefully) bear fruit. They are of signal importance to universities, contributing intellectual and economic resources, and training knowledge workers who will become the future of the academy (Jackson 2003) and the industries that employ them. Yet, as Powell and Green write in a special issue of *Quality Assurance in Education*, ‘unlike the examining of undergraduate and postgraduate taught course work, the research degree examining process has moved on little during the past 30 years at least’ (2003: 55) and there is surprisingly little published on the assessment of these important degrees. Scrutiny of research theses assessment did not, indeed, begin in earnest until the 1990s, triggered by the massification of higher education and increased demands for quality assurance, best practice and benchmarking.

A sector-wide study of examination procedures for Higher Degree Theses (conducted by John Mullarvey for the AVCC in 2003) reveals this drive towards accountability, as well as a range of issues relevant to HDR examination in the creative arts. This study found some (although not total) consistency in procedural areas: two or three examiners used, predominantly (but not always) external to the university, some of whom may be international (though this is rarely obligatory). Examiners are issued with guidelines distinguishing between doctoral and masters level requirements (although specific examination criteria varied between universities), asked to provide a detailed and independent report and a summary recommendation drawn from a range of options relating to the extent to which the candidate has fulfilled the degree requirements, and generally allocated six to eight weeks for the task. Although all universities relied on the examiners’ written assessments, a number offer candidates the option of an oral examination, but only in situations such as examiners’ disagreement. Examiners’ reports were generally provided to supervisors and candidates; examiners’ identity may or may not remain confidential. Therefore, while Australian HDR examiners are sequestered off from each other (compared to levels of public, shared examination in the USA and UK), almost all Australian universities believe examiners need clear direction and hence provide a report form and guidelines (Mullarvey 2003).

Half a decade on from this report, and despite a large database of information about other aspects of postgraduate degrees and study, there is still very limited knowledge about what the higher degree examiners concentrate on in their evaluations. Though researchers are mining data about this issue, based on analyses of examiners’ reports, interviews with examiners and personal reflections, examination remains an area of higher education that appears to be taken for granted. Investigation into examination in the newer, non-traditional forms of research degrees has been principally reported by researchers from the visual arts, who have focused on how ‘theory and practice are being interpreted, conducted and judged’ (Dally, Holbrook, Graham, Lawry, & Bourke, 2003) during examination. In contrast, publications from the discipline of writing, as reflected in the general and special issues of *TEXT: journal of writing and writing programs*, seem preoccupied with elucidating the sheer difficulty of the task, views on what the exegesis *should* be like, and significant issues with, or speculations

about, how to move toward a more consistent set of examination standards. Given the dearth of empirical investigation into what is involved in the examination of a research degree in writing, one wonders how examiners go about matching their own examination practice and standards to the policies of the various universities.

Survey aims and methods

To begin the process of addressing this gap, we undertook a survey of creative HDR in Australia, following Krauth's pioneering study in 2000, which found only eight Australian universities offering creative writing doctorates (Krauth, 2001). The aim of our data survey was to compile information about issues that frame thesis examination practice in the current academic environment, including: What counts as a creative thesis?; What elements are involved?; How are they defined; and, What is the size and proportion of each element? If there are insufficiently clear and shared answers to these relatively simple questions, then obviously the work of the individual examiner will be much more difficult, and the likelihood of a set of national standards will be slight.

A range of data was collected during February/March 2008 from the universities listed on the Australian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) writing courses database as offering creative arts HDR.¹ By definition, HDR have a research component of at least two thirds. This meant that coursework postgraduate degrees were excluded; PhDs, Doctorates in Creative Arts, Masters by research and some Professional Masters and Doctorates were included. Information was retrieved by checking appropriate university, faculty and school web pages, and searching using terms such as "exegesis", "creative arts theses", "creative writing" and "examination guidelines". In cases where there was limited, or no, detailed web-based information, a request for further documentation was emailed to the contact person identified on the AAWP list or those otherwise identifiable through the university website: for example, the relevant postgraduate or HDR coordinator. Ten such requests were emailed and six responses received. Of these six, three sent further information; two promised to send information but did not, and one replied that the university's policies were under review.

Several limitations of the data-gathering methods must be acknowledged, in addition to the caveat that the information was collected early in 2008. These are that the details in the AAWP database may have been incomplete or inaccurate; that universities may not have put all the information we were seeking on their websites or our searches may have failed to find it; and that policies or guidelines located may have been out-of-date or superseded. Even so, the fact that 80 per cent of the surveyed universities provided online information about their creative research higher degrees means that this data-gathering proved to be an efficient way of accessing information, and one that others in the public sphere – such as potential students, academics across the sector and examiners – could utilise.

Only eight years after Krauth's survey, we found the number of Australian universities offering creative writing doctorates had grown from 8 to 28. Also, in contrast to 'the difficulty a prospective student will find in locating information about

the current small crop of creative writing doctorates in both web-based and print materials' that Krauth reported, we found 23 of our 28 universities provided information about their creative arts theses that could be accessed via the internet. The remaining five universities mentioned the existence of creative research HDR without describing distinctive policies or guidelines, and we presumed their generic PhD criteria apply in these cases. Also noted by Krauth (2001) was that only one of his eight universities had publicly available examiners' guidelines for creative theses, and these were solely available in print form. In contrast, we were able to find examination guidelines online for 10 of our 28 universities, or more than one third. In summary, five of the 28 universities surveyed had minimal web-based information about creative arts theses policies and examination and presumably generic criteria apply;² while 23 listed specific requirements for creative work and exegesis.³ Of this latter group, 10 had examination guidelines for creative arts theses available on their websites.⁴ Clearly, the creative HDR has been thoroughly institutionalised and universities have made the relevant information public – a significant step in a comparatively short period of time.

What is a creative thesis?

Broadly speaking, the creative HDR falls into two camps: the conventional PhD, MPhil and MA awards, which have expanded to include a non-traditional component; and a set of newer, more practitioner-oriented awards with discipline-specific titles such as Doctor of Creative Arts, Doctor of Communication and Master of Visual Arts. Differences between these two broad types are discussed below; what they share is a bifurcated structure where the thesis comprises both creative and scholarly work, typically envisaged as two related components. The following kinds of phrases occurred frequently: “they must be clearly related”, “in a symbiotic relationship”, “mutually reinforcing parts of a single project” and “coherent and integrated”. For a master's thesis, the creative work is usually the equivalent of 20,000 to 30,000 words, and the scholarly component can range from 10,000 to 20,000 words. At doctoral level, the creative component is usually described as being equivalent to a novel of 60,000 to 70,000 words and the scholarly piece is usually of 20,000 to 30,000 words in length, although there is variation in all these word lengths across surveyed universities.

The creative element

Although the scope of the creative work is often defined in terms of word-equivalence, it would be incorrect to assume that all are text-based, even for theses undertaken within the broad spectrum of 'writing'. Creative works take a wide variety of forms. For example, Newcastle University allows for 'an exhibition, a design project, a portfolio of literary or musical compositions, a sequence of recitals, recordings, audio visual, multimedia or other creative productions'.⁵ James Cook University lists the following possible range for doctoral and master's research: artists' books, composition, creative writing, graphic design, illustration, multimedia, music technology, musical composition, musical criticism and analysis, musical

performance, new media arts, painting and drawing, photography, film, video, television, playwriting, printmaking, sculpture, theatre directing and acting, visual communications.⁶ Even for those universities that list a more conventional and limited range of options, experience suggests many will accept a multimedia work, artist book or performance as the creative element of a writing HDR thesis.

Such openness regarding the shape of a creative HDR thesis places additional demands on examiners, who must be able to engage with work that might not precisely match their expectations of how a thesis should look, as well as requiring a range of assessment competencies. Rather than being asked to assess the quality of, say, a novel and essay, examiners may need to have skills in visual, tactile, sonic, non-English language or performance elements, and in the genealogy of disciplines that are outside the norm for writers and literary theorists; and this will have implications for the candidate and institution. How valuable, for example, is an examiner's report if that examiner is simply not literate with respect to important aspects of the thesis? While this should be resolved when an examiner is appointed, it is not always easy to secure a panel of examiners with the requisite range of knowledge, skills and experience. An answer is to build a panel with varying skills – a musicologist, poet and philosopher if necessary, for instance – and then persuade each that their critical judgment should bear primarily on those parts of the thesis that relate to their field of expertise. This requires that early on in the candidature, supervisors should be helping the candidate to: clarify the breadth of the project; consider which elements are committed to aesthetics, and which to the generation of knowledge; be clear about which parts need artistic review, and which require close attention to evidence, argument and conjecture. Examiners too must be willing to be explicit about the sorts of work they are eligible to assess, both when they are contracted, and in the writing of their report. And the personnel in charge of reading and assessing the examiners' reports – usually the heads of research – must have sufficient information about student intention and the examiners' various capabilities to weigh up the reports, and establish the overall result.

Several universities offer discipline-specific recommendations about the size of creative works. For example, the course requirements for the Doctor of Creative Arts at the University of Western Sydney contain the following specifications:

Communication A substantial portfolio of work in the communication discipline is required ... equivalent to a series of programs for television, radio or multimedia presentation, or one program of substantial length.

Dance High level choreography or leading role performance in publicly presented productions, including one of 90 minutes duration.

Electronic arts Three solo exhibitions in galleries and festivals, or presentations in performative modalities. ...

Music and sound arts Composition: a folio of compositions ... for example a full-length musical, opera or symphonic score, or 6-8 equivalent compositions for smaller resources or other media. Performance: three 60-90 minute recitals demonstrating high levels of artistry. For example, a full-length solo and chamber music performances, a concerto or its equivalent

Theatre High level direction or leading role performance in publicly presented productions, including one of 90 minutes duration.

Visual arts Three solo exhibitions in painting, in photo-media, in sculpture; or a 90-minute video or film; or video installation and exhibition.

Writing A folio of creative work such as a poetry collection (70-80 pages), a play script or film script (90 minutes production), or a novel (70,000 words).⁷

While unusual in its precise quantification of scale and in sequestering the various disciplines, this is by no means unique. A number of universities draw on the same operational logic: that is, that the work be equivalent in scale to similar work being presented publicly in the creative arts ‘market’.

This raises another frequently-cited requirement for the creative work: that its quality should be commensurate with public presentation. For creative writing, being ‘of publishable standard’ is the usual criterion; however, Flinders University directs that the creative work should ‘meet current artform industry standards’ and be able to ‘sustain critical examination in the same way that exemplary texts can’.⁸ In the areas of theatre, dance and visual arts, public performances and exhibitions – which examiners attend – are typical. As with issues of form and content discussed above, this raises the matter of examination specifications: not all universities are clear in their notes to examiners about whether the principal issue at stake is the original contribution to knowledge, publication standard, quality of experiment (innovation) or another imperative. Unless examiners are offered very precise information, it is possible that candidates are not tested sufficiently on what, throughout their candidature, may have been an important element; or that they are critically judged over an aspect that, in fact, is not particularly important for their university. It is unreasonable, for instance, to give a negative report on publishability if the student was in fact aiming to explore a new form of writing or paradigm of thought.

The majority of the institutions surveyed do not go beyond the kinds of examples already presented in specifying the various forms the creative work can take and the size and quality required. Exceptions are RMIT, Melbourne and Newcastle University, each of which provides an extensive set of recommendations and guidelines about the attributes of the creative component. RMIT informs students that:

The candidate for both M.A. and PhD degrees must present their work as an appropriate contribution to the field in that it may be presented, screened, installed, exhibited, programmed or published in an appropriate venue, publication or accredited outlet. As a starting point, the candidate may consider the needs of a likely audience and/or producer for their work.

The candidate may also ensure that the project addresses the key research questions that are identified in the exegesis component of the research. The project may therefore be seen as the result of a rich and well-organised research and development process.

The candidate is encouraged to develop the work according to a specific premise or viewpoint that may be explored in the exegesis. The exploration of this premise helps the candidate to focus their intention and to articulate their aims in creating the work.

Whether working on a work or a project, the candidate must demonstrate reasons why their work may be presented to a public audience.

While the candidate needs to consider their work as original, they must adhere to technical criteria that are appropriate to the genre and to the discipline area. This means the project must be produced within a recognizable and logical artistic and/or industry context, according to standards, techniques and methods that are recognized within the particular discipline field.

The candidate's project may exhibit a high level of technical attainment by observing and acknowledging the conventions of their specific genre. An understanding of genre may provide the candidate with a liberating set of constraints that may help them find an audience for the work. A healthy respect for genre may help produce commercial work just as it may produce radical departures from convention. In any case, the school's concern is with projects that deliver quality and imagination.⁹

We quote this at length as it offers a rare, and helpful, comprehensive articulation of expectations, needs and logics in the practice research paradigm for examiners as well as candidates.

The critical element

Although requirements for the creative work thus seem to be relatively free of contention, with all universities surveyed having similar expectations as to scale and quality, the same cannot be said for the second major component of the creative thesis: the critical element. Even the question of what to call this remains unsettled. Although 'exegesis' is by far the most common appellation (used by 15 out of the 24 universities with such details available), the following terms were also found: "dissertation" (UTS, Wollongong, Melbourne); "critical essay" (UQ, UWA); "critical/theoretical component" (Macquarie, UNSW); and "thesis" (JCU, La Trobe). While most of those deploying the tag "exegesis" do so without definition, the list of functions it is clearly expected to perform usually goes well beyond the dictionary meaning of 'explanation or critical interpretation of a text' (Collins Australian Dictionary, 2007), and often moves into traditional research report territory. Interestingly, Murdoch University's draft guidelines for creative theses not only distinguish between these, but also allow for both in the creative thesis:

The written component of the thesis that accompanies/complements the creative work may take the form of either a dissertation or an exegesis. A dissertation is a substantial written text, which addresses the research questions and advances the argument of the thesis. An exegesis is a formal written exposition or explanatory essay in which a student critically examines their creative product in the light of contemporary theory and practice.¹⁰

In their analysis of completed exegesises from the University of Queensland and Griffith University, Bourke and Nielson (2004) note a preponderance of content based on literary/cultural studies theory. It is therefore noteworthy that a number of institutions, particularly those which encourage research processes reporting, actively dissuade candidates from approaching the exegesis in this manner. Both Deakin and

Victoria universities, for instance, state that the exegesis for a creative thesis is not ‘a separate exercise in art theoretical discourse, which would be undertaken only in the case of a theoretical thesis.’^{11,12} The University of Queensland currently advises students that a wide variety of approaches is encouraged, and while their critical essay may engage with issues of literary theory and criticism, ‘it need not primarily function as an exegesis on contemporary theory’.¹³ Edith Cowan University is distinctive in that it explicitly allows the possibility that the exegesis be constructed as ‘an essay or set of essays’, rather than a monolithic entity. It also offers a smorgasbord of content options, stating that the essay(s):

may involve one or more of the following in relation to the writing project: relevant theoretical issues; its conceptual and/or cultural context; its aims and methods; its relation to other writers or writing within the genre; any other matter agreed upon with the candidate’s supervisor and appropriately approved.¹⁴

The three models for the exegesis suggested by Milech and Schilo (2004) – ‘context’, ‘commentary’ and ‘research question’ – are a useful way to classify our survey data and ascertain current practice. Under the context model, the exegesis takes the form of a scholarly supplement to the creative work, elucidating its historical, social, disciplinary and theoretical background. For example, the University of Canberra states that the exegesis should ‘provide a theoretical foundation which complements and grounds the creative work; and analyse, critically annotate and/or reflect on the creative component.’¹⁵ The University of Queensland’s ‘critical essay’ also fits the context model:

The critical essay may respond to, or situate, the creative project in an insightful way, or reflect upon an issue germane to creative writing practice such as the processes or techniques of creative writing in the appropriate genre or in the creative project at hand. Alternatively, the critical essay may examine the contexts and conditions of the candidate’s creative writing; the critical, industrial or historical issues relevant to the candidate’s creative project; or explore a scholarly issue of, for example, genre, theory, or thematics in other creative work of demonstrated relevance to the candidate’s creative project.¹³

Our survey, however, revealed a change since 2004, when the context-focussed exegesis was ‘the dominant model across Australian universities’ (Milech & Schilo, 2004). Now, of the 20 universities for which we found sufficient information to attempt a categorisation, six (less than one third) describe their exegetical requirements in context-model terms.¹⁶ With the exception of Curtin University, the remaining two thirds require an exegesis along the lines of what Milech and Schilo define as ‘the strong version’ of the commentary model: an exegesis which includes an account of the research process that shaped the creative work. For example, Deakin University’s guidelines for the examination of visual and performing arts degrees read:

the thesis should convey clearly the description of the project, how it relates to the field as a whole, how the project was pursued, what techniques were used and how successful they were, and the outcomes of the research.¹¹

In conducting the categorisation process, we looked for the most dominant type of requirement. Some that we categorised as ‘commentary’ do also incorporate aspects of the ‘context’ or the ‘research question’ models. Curtin alone was placed under the research question model because of the prominence they assign to a question-driven process in their guidelines: the creative and exegetical components ‘form two complementary outcomes of a singular research program’, addressing ‘the same central research question’ with the common goal of ‘articulating, in differing modes or languages, ideas or meanings which “answer” that question.’¹⁷ Although Scrivener (2000) notes the difficulty of trying to shoehorn all creative theses into a problem-solving framework, our extensive experience as examiners (Webb, Brien) has shown that research questions, either up-front or emergent, can be usefully deployed under any exegetical model.

Other Elements

A small number of the universities surveyed incorporate elements beyond the creative and scholarly components discussed above within their creative research higher degrees. The Doctor of Creative Arts program at Curtin University, for instance, includes compulsory coursework in research methodology, designed to assist candidates in refining their research question by providing ‘study in relevant history, methodology, theory and criticism’, and comprising 25 per cent of the program of study.¹⁸ At the University of NSW, MA by Research in Creative Writing candidates undertake a supervised reading program and complete two creative writing coursework units.¹⁹ MPhil and PhD candidates in creative writing at the University of Queensland attend compulsory seminars in advanced research methods and creative writing.²⁰ Deakin University allows HDR candidates in the visual and performing arts to submit optional ‘supporting material’ with their exhibition/performance work and exegesis¹¹, while candidates for the Doctor of Philosophy award in the Faculty of Art and Design at Monash University are required to submit a photographic record of their visual or creative work, in addition to an exhibition and exegesis. Candidates also complete coursework units in research methods, theory workshop and documentation studies as 15 per cent of their program.²¹

Most of the variety in the relative proportion of the creative and exegetical components of creative theses relates to whether the award is a general research degree (such as MA, MPhil or PhD) or a named degree in a specified discipline (such as MCA or DCA). Although, under both types of awards, the most common arrangement is for some 60 to 80 per cent of the word count to be assigned to the creative work, some institutions specify an even split for general research degrees with a creative component. Macquarie University’s Department of Media, for instance, stipulates that the theoretical component of a creative thesis should be at least 25,000 words for the MPhil and 50,000 words for the PhD, with the creative work constituting approximately 50 per cent of the thesis.²² At UTS, both PhD and DCA awards are offered in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences: the creative work for the DCA can be the equivalent of 50,000 to 70,000 words but within

the PhD ‘the non-traditional material is considered a minor component of the thesis and is equivalent to a maximum of 30,000 words’.²³ The University of Wollongong similarly offers MA/PhD awards with 50 per cent as creative work and MCA/DCA awards with 70-80 per cent as creative work.²⁴

For the most part, examiners of creative theses are advised that the thesis should be examined as a whole with no individual weighting of the components. RMIT, however, specifies that the “project” in their MA and PhD ‘has a dominant (50-75%) loading in consideration of the final result’ with the exegesis a ‘lesser or equal loading (25-50%)’ – a loading dependant ‘on the emphasis of the author and the requirements of the department’.²⁵

Continuing uncertainty

This data demonstrates that form, scale, objectives, relationship to the scholarly paradigm, and the ‘packaging’ of elements comprising the submitted work, all vary to some extent, depending on the university, degree, and art discipline involved. While there is a trend towards a ‘research report’ focus, there is still no general agreement on the point of such a document. Is it to explain the purpose and process of the creative work? Is it to address and explore an intellectual question or social problem? Is it to add discipline-specific, or other, knowledge to the pool? A significant step has been taken by Monash University where, as Nelson explains, the “original contribution to knowledge” has been abandoned in the creative arts as ‘misleading and perhaps even pretentious’ and the regulations amended to provide for a new objective: ‘a cultural contribution of substantial significance’ (2004). The Monash *Handbook for Doctoral and MPhil Degrees* makes it clear that this criterion is applied to the creative work alone:

The thesis (or work) will take the form of a piece of creative writing and accompanying exegesis. The former should make a substantial contribution to culture. The exegesis will involve researching the several aspects of the creative writing project, the characteristics of the genre and the contextual framework within which the writing falls.²⁶

This is in notable contrast to the more usual requirement that the creative and exegetical works, taken as a whole, should meet the doctoral-level hurdle of contribution to knowledge. It is, indeed, the converse of the position taken by the University of Canberra: ‘Staff and candidates should note that in a creative research project, the academic rigour of the exegesis is critical to determining whether the “thesis” meets the requirements of the research degree’.¹⁵

In the policies and guidelines we surveyed, the most common answer to the question – what substantiates the claim that a creative thesis is based on doctoral-level research? – would seem to be that either the process followed or the end-product serve to advance knowledge in the creative discipline concerned. Another widely accepted form of substantiation is that the candidate has elucidated, in a scholarly manner, issues relevant to their creative work. A third possibility, less commonly articulated in policy documents, but canvassed under the label ‘research-led practice’ in a

forthcoming book by Roger Dean and Hazel Smith, is the situation where primary research in another disciplinary area is used to provide content for the creative work. An example of this can be seen in the University of Wollongong's examination guidelines for Doctor of Creative Arts theses, which explicitly says that the original and significant contribution can be to the creative discipline and/or the area of inquiry within which the work is located:

Area of inquiry is used here to refer to the way in which the submission may constitute an investigation of an area of knowledge other than the creative discipline(s). Put simply, the creative work may be about something other than its own contribution to the creative discipline(s).²⁷

Overall, the Australian approach contrasts markedly with the influential position taken by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Board (now the Arts and Humanities Research Council), that the claim for a creative work to be considered research rests solely on its contribution to 'the discipline or related disciplinary areas', and where research to provide content is specifically excluded (McArthur 2004). The example given is clear: 'the admissible research dimension of a play about the Suffragettes is that which relates to the discipline of drama rather than research into the Suffragettes' (2004: 76). While the UK research culture has changed in the intervening four years, this position on practice-led research has not. The 2008 funding guidelines again exclude research for content, and also exclude cultural contribution as a research contribution: 'Work that results purely from the creative or professional development of an artist, however distinguished, is unlikely to fulfil the requirements of research' (AHRC 2008: 27-28).

Concluding remarks

Despite the general availability of information about these creative research degrees, the examination guidelines and framing policies are far from uniform across Australia. Diversity, indeed, is more prevalent than uniformity. Significant differences are found in what is understood as constituting a "contribution to knowledge", the description and composition of the exegesis, its relationship to the creative work, and the role of the research question. Given this variability – as well as inconsistencies about the meaning and relative importance of key terms such as "creative", "original knowledge" and "research" – the concern arises of how to establish and guarantee certainty, equity and professionalism in thesis examination.

Administrative staff in higher degrees offices are generally meticulous about sharing information about policies and procedures with colleagues in other universities; we suggest research committees, supervisors and examiners need to follow their lead, and ensure that there are shared understandings – if not about the shape, scale or focus of the degrees and the resulting theses, then at least about how to read examination policies, and how to apply professional standards to the work of evaluating a research thesis. Clearly, there is also a need for ongoing discussion about the role and function of research degrees in the creative arts, and a sustained effort made towards benchmarking policies, expectations and standards. Of particular concern is whether these degrees should be required to make a contribution to knowledge or to culture, or

both. Until this is clarified and – to some extent – standardised, it is vital that universities provide very explicit information to examiners about what *their* candidate was expected to produce in the course of their candidature. Similarly, it is vital that examiners are very self-reflexive about what they are capable of examining; what they expect from the examination process; and how willing they are to suspend their own supervisory practices, judgment and expectations to meet the requirements of individual universities.

Despite the often articulated statement that the creative arts are ‘emergent’ or ‘young’ disciplines in the university context and, therefore, still developing, by 2003 more than 425 theses in and about the creative arts had been completed and examined in Australia (Evans et al 2003)²⁸, and in the decade since the Strand Report, creative arts disciplines have built a body of knowledge and set of practices. We also recognise that diversity, and intellectual and aesthetic freedom, are among the central values of most creative arts institutions and creative practitioners; and we do not advocate crushing these in the interests of apparent conformity to a rigid national standard. Rather, we advocate a close attentiveness to the myriad of differences revealed by our survey, and the necessity to continue to build the body of disciplinary knowledge about how best to serve the needs of both our disciplines and research students.

Endnotes

1. Universities involved in this data survey: Central Queensland University, Curtin University of Technology, Deakin University, Edith Cowan University, Flinders University, Griffith University, James Cook University, La Trobe University, Macquarie University, Monash University, Queensland University of Technology, RMIT University, Southern Cross University, Swinburne University of Technology, University of Adelaide, University of Canberra, University of New England, University of Melbourne, University of Newcastle, University of New South Wales, University of Queensland, University of South Australia, University of Sydney, University of Technology Sydney, Victoria University, University of Western Australia, University of Western Sydney, University of Wollongong.
2. Central Queensland University, James Cook University, La Trobe University, University of New England, Southern Cross University.
3. University of Adelaide, University of Canberra, Curtin University of Technology, Deakin University, Edith Cowan University, Flinders University, Griffith University, Macquarie University, University of Melbourne, Monash University, University of Newcastle, University of NSW, University of Queensland, Queensland University of Technology, RMIT University, University of South Australia, Swinburne University of Technology, University of Sydney, University of Technology Sydney, Victoria University, University of Western Australia, University of Western Sydney, University of Wollongong.
4. Curtin, Deakin, ECU, Flinders, Melbourne, Newcastle, RMIT, Swinburne, Victoria, Wollongong.
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