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**Facing the final hurdle: creative arts PhD programs and examination standards**

Abstract:

The creative arts are firmly established within the Australian academy, as is evidenced by the increasing enrolments at research masters and PhD levels, and by the fact that these disciplines – creative writing, visual and performing arts, design – are sufficiently established for their practices and standards to be scrutinised and reviewed. Recent ALTC projects on this topic include: Webb and Brien 2008 (writing); Phillips, Stock & Vincs 2009 (dance); and Baker 2009 (visual art). The number of significantly funded research projects into this issue indicates that how the academy manages the transition of creative arts HDR candidates from apprentice to peer is (perceived to be) less transparent, and less consistent, than it might be.

This paper draws on findings to date from our current OLT-funded project *Examination of doctoral degrees in the creative arts* (2010) and, in particular, the ways in which creative-arts academics have responded to the diversity of HDR policies and practices in Australian universities. The most frequent response has been the expression of a desire for better and more consistent policies and agreed standards to ensure rigour in creative-arts examination. Simultaneously, however, creative-arts academics want to preserve each discipline's particularity and their individual institution's practices. With a focus on the discipline of writing, this paper raises questions about whether it is possible, or even desirable, to produce a framework to guide creative-arts examination in the Australian academy. We suggest that such anxieties can be addressed and, indeed, overcome in ways that will enhance the quality and standing of postgraduate creative arts HDR in Australia.

Biographical notes:

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It's quite astounding how little information there is out there and how little research there is into examination. I suppose it doesn't look very interesting until you start looking at it; also it's a slightly priestly sort of mystery, and we don't like to open the mysteries up too much. (Respondent at a project Roundtable, 2011)

## **Introduction**

As the creative arts move from an emerging to an established discipline cluster in the Australian academy, both the number of higher degree by research (HDR) students and the work they undertake in their degrees has come under growing scrutiny. That the creative arts are firmly embedded within the Australian academy is evidenced by the increasing enrolments at research masters and PhD levels, and by the fact that these disciplines – creative writing, visual and performing arts, and design – are now sufficiently established for their practices and standards to be critiqued and reviewed. Recent major national ALTC projects on this topic include: Webb and Brien 2008 (writing); Phillips, Stock & Vincs 2009 (dance); and Baker 2009 (visual art). The number of significantly funded research projects into creative-arts research degrees also indicates that the way that the academy manages the transition of creative-arts HDR candidates from apprentice to peer is at least perceived to be less transparent, and less consistent, than it might be.

The need to build knowledge about the process of examination, the policies that frame examination, and the aims and possible outcomes of creative-arts doctorates is based on three significant factors. One is the rapid growth in the numbers of doctoral candidates working in a creative-art discipline. Nicola Boyd's census of creative writing doctorates from 1993 to 2008, for instance, identified 199 completions across Australia and New Zealand (Boyd 2009), while a search of TROVE suggests that completions are now close to 400. The second factor is that despite the significant numbers of doctoral candidates being supervised and examined, there is little research into the practice or process of examination in the creative arts (see Burr, Webb & Brien 2011): or indeed in examination more generally. Holbrook et al. (2008) have demonstrated that there is little in the way of research studies into doctoral examination, and considerable diversity in all aspect of the HDR process. Finally, there are significant differences between university policies on all elements of the HDR from entry to examination (Carey, Webb & Brien 2007). Our current OLT-funded project, *Examination of doctoral degrees in the creative arts* (Webb and Brien 2010), aims to contribute knowledge about this area.

This paper reports on findings from our research and, in particular, the ways in which creative-arts academics have responded to the diversity of HDR policies and practices in Australian universities relating to the examination of candidates. Discussions with creative-arts academics from across the art forms have revealed a widely held desire for better and more consistent policies, and for a shared understanding of standards, to ensure rigour in creative-arts examination. This paper raises questions about whether it is possible, or even desirable, to produce a framework to guide creative-arts examination in the Australian academy. Our findings indicate that the anxieties examiners have about processes and standards can be addressed and, indeed,

overcome in ways that will enhance the quality and standing of postgraduate creative arts in Australia.

## **Our findings**

We need to begin by qualifying the scope of our project. We have attempted to cast a very wide net, and have been able to gain input from all the university-aligned creative-arts peak bodies. We attempted to draw in participants from all universities with a creative-arts doctoral program, and hosted focus groups in a several regional towns as well as capital cities. There were limits on our capacity to be truly inclusive – mainly due to the unavailability of artist-academics and, in one or two cases, resistance to the project from universities we approached. However, there has been input from people based across the country (except Tasmania and Northern Territory), from across the spectrum of universities, and from across the art forms (creative writing, performing arts, visual arts, media arts, design).<sup>1</sup> Though the relatively small numbers mean our findings should be considered indicative of views in the disciplines rather than generalisable to the population of creative-arts academics, they still reflect a broad cross-section of creative-arts academics in Australia.

Our research respondents included 24 participants in three day-long roundtables in 2011, 42 in the focus groups held in four states and territories during 2012, and 68 examiners and recent graduates who completed the surveys.<sup>2</sup> Generally speaking, the participants in the roundtables were senior academics and heads of graduate studies programs: those who are highly experienced in research and research training. Focus groups included senior academics, but also drew in recent graduates, early-career academics and those who have little experience in examining creative-arts doctorates. We discuss their opinions and ideas separately, in order to account for the different nature of these categories of respondent. Interestingly, however, the positions, concerns and interests of people in each group were not radically dissimilar, despite the differences in their actual knowledge and experience, which may attest to the small population of creative-arts academics and perhaps a degree of coherence within the field.

## **Roundtables**

Roundtable respondents identified the following main issues in examination:

- In order to assess a doctorate, we have to understand and share a common idea of what a doctorate actually is.
- In order to assess a doctorate, we have to understand and have a common idea of what examination is: whether it is, for instance, engaged interaction or judgment.
- In order to be equitable, we need to develop national parameters for such thesis elements as length, structure and content.
- At least some examiners will bring their own gatekeeping rules into the process and ignore what the student and/or examination guidelines provided to them expressly stated.

A number of questions were raised concerning the academic standards of doctoral degrees. These included queries about the quality of research in these degrees, the breadth of understanding of the field they displayed, candidates' ability to use academic language, and the capacity of the outputs from doctoral degrees to satisfy professional as well as personal outcomes.

The relationship of the two elements of a creative doctorate was also a significant concern. Respondents discussed the need to distinguish a PhD from 'just a good piece of art'; how to differentiate between the quality of the creative/practical work and the written component, and how these components should be weighted evenly. The roundtables and focus groups, and our analysis of over 70 examination reports, indicate that it is rare for examiners to request major revisions of the creative product. Examiners ask for anything from minor to extensive revisions of the exegesis, but the creative work tends to be allowed to stand, even when it is judged as barely adequate.

Universities' examination policies were also considered, in some depth. Doctoral policies were identified as functioning as a form of de facto training for candidates, supervisors, administration staff and examiners. For staff without extensive experience, these policies were considered 'one way of alerting them to what's expected'. A postgraduate coordinator stated that policies were central and helpful in her work:

I actually feel somewhat supported by the policies in situations where there is conflict; or, for instance, a supervisor wants to take in an inappropriate student, and my only defence is to say, *but look, it says here in the policies they must show that their research is pertinent to the field.*

However, doctoral policies and university processes were also seen as a potential problem for candidates:

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, or just because the student had received very poor supervision.

The issue of failure engaged the Roundtable respondents, whether this was in terms of the work produced in a doctorate – 'I want to raise the issue about the need to fail; anyone involved in creative work knows that failing produces outcomes' – or more generally in terms of the way candidates are assessed:

Students tend to see the whole assessment and examination process as a summative assessment, as though they're being judged on a pass/fail basis; but examiners see their feedback essentially as formative.

Throughout these Roundtable discussions, examiner investment in the process was very apparent. This was manifest in examiners feeling their examination played a significant role in discipline standards, as in, 'I'm conscious that the examiner has a very big responsibility in forcing the field to improve its standards. So examination is actually a powerful tool'. Another examiner reported explicitly that the role is one of 'gatekeepers to our disciplines' but that they also function 'as critics of our junior peers' writing', and as 'judge, analyst, mentor'. For others the task revolved around

providing formative feedback: 'it's about helping to make the thesis shine more brightly'.

### ***Focus-group findings***

The focus groups similarly contributed a great deal of pertinent information. One of the issues frequently raised was what a doctorate should deliver. A common response is exemplified in this statement by a focus group member: 'The fundamental thing is a contribution to knowledge, and demonstrated skills and capacity to undertake sole research'. While creative practice was seen as central to the doctoral endeavour – 'It's got to develop the candidate's practice' – the focus group members generally distinguished artwork per se from a creative doctorate: 'It's not writing a book or making an artwork; it's writing a thesis'. While they are committed to the notion that a creative doctorate must result in 'an interesting original work', they also insist that candidates must 'reflect critically on their own practice to extend knowledge for other people'.

There was agreement that the quality of thesis examination itself is variable. The reasons they gave for this ranged from the lack of 'a systematic set of axioms that defines what's valid, only a set of broadly defined agreed definitions about its contribution', to the lack of 'a more systematic understanding of the range of possible configurations' in creative theses, given the number of art forms, creative disciplines and possible projects that characterise the field. Another difficulty is how examiners interpret the language used in examination guidelines. For instance, 'It's difficult if the university criteria include "professional standard": students don't have the budget and we're examining research, not professional practice'. A number of commentators saw examiners as central to the issue of examination standards, as it is examiners who are creating 'what the standards are and how they relate to the university's stated standards' in how they interpret the guidelines and in how they understand standards in their own discipline.

The question of standards received considerable attention. There was a vivid disconnect between the desire for more consistent policies and standards to guide examiners, and the desire to preserve individual discipline particularities and individual institutional practices. Some respondents considered that it is not a problem because: 'Examiners are more experienced [than general creative-arts academics]; they might have differences of opinion but they're much closer to a standard', but this was not the general opinion. More respondents identified a need for a systematic process: for instance, 'Examiners really need some guidance on how to make their judgments'; and 'we do need a set of consistent frameworks about the range of possible methodologies'.

The problem identified was not only examiners' capability, but the fact that 'The forms of the thesis and the nature of the work are so diverse and each project is really its own project'. Related to this, there was resistance to any bureaucratic mode of setting and assessing standard. 'We don't need a set of rigid rules', said several focus-group members, and 'We're interested in standards but not standardisation'. Some in fact felt there were already high standards, and that the necessary mechanisms are

already in place. The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), for instance, was referred to several times as a marker of national standards, despite the fact it did not take on regulatory responsibility until 1 July 2012.

This was not a consistently held position across the groups, though, with many respondents maintaining that there is such diversity in the disciplines that national standards would be unachievable. One respondent said, 'A unified universal Australian standard for examining? I think it would be very difficult because we have disagreements'; and another pointed out, 'There are no standards and you can't assume what happens in your institution happens in another because they're often quite different'. Yet another considered that a focus on standards could have negative implications, saying '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'.

### ***Examining doctoral degrees***

Despite the concerns expressed, examiners in the Roundtable discussions were universally positive both about the examination experience and the positive qualities they believed that examiners bring to the task. Good examiners, they stated, are generous, 'sane and decent human beings', with significant knowledge and insight, and with a clear understanding both of what 'academic rigour' means and of whether students met professional as well as academic standards. An examiner, it was generally felt, is a 'friendly reader' who approaches the dissertation 'with an open mind' and plays the role of 'constructive critic', providing formative feedback to candidates, and intending this feedback to be used to improve their work. Examiners are not only professional in terms of reading the work, following guidelines, examining within the required timeframe and engaging with the university over any concerns, they noted, but also 'ready to be astonished' by the thesis.

Focus-group participants paid less attention to the examiner and more to the processes and policies associated with examination. The various groups in this category made a series of recommendations concerning doctoral processes and policies. The first of these reflects a sustained and repeated concern about the nomenclature used to describe doctoral degrees, and especially the question of whether a PhD is 'the same' as a doctorate, and whether a creative doctorate is equivalent to a conventional PhD. The term 'rigour' cropped up repeatedly in these discussions of equivalence, as did concern about the perceived value of a creative doctorate, and whether these degrees advance knowledge and/or practice. Most respondents insisted that the creative doctorate must include evidence of high technical ability in the art form, while the doctorate 'evaluates the capacity of that person to conduct independent research and deliver new knowledge', rather than evaluating their 'artistic ability'. Recent graduates in these groups were especially definite that the doctoral degree is about generating knowledge, and that the creative artefact is, in the words of one respondent, 'a byproduct' of this process.

When asked their opinions on how the standard of examination could be improved, participants in both categories felt that examiners should only examine doctoral topics

close to their own area of creative research. They acknowledged that a lack of examiners often makes this difficult, and that there is only what one respondent called 'a limited pool' of examiners. Apart from members of ASPERA, who told us that their organisation has a well-populated Register of Examiners, their experience of any attempt to form such a register has been disappointing at best.

Another factor considered important in improving the standard is the provision of examination guidelines by universities. They are, respondents consider, a useful resource that should continue to be routinely provided to examiners; guidelines detail important aspects of the examiner's task such as the relationship between the creative work, the exegesis and the dissertation as a whole, the strength of the argument(s) and the quality of the work. There was a perceived need for both the generic/general university rules and discipline-specific guidelines, and respondents suggested that the creative-arts disciplines could develop and implement the latter. In developing such guidelines, they recommended, benchmarking across universities would be an important tool, and they also recommended that Australian universities and researchers begin to forge relationships with European universities and research training programs.

Many Australian universities are beginning to institute compulsory research training for HDR candidates, but there remains concern about the lack of training for examiners of creative-arts doctorates. Roundtable participants recommended that there should be regular and open discussion about policies, practices and reports via an annual conference or symposium, and that perhaps a website could be established to allow sharing and viewing of best practice. Examiners' reports were seen as an important resource in improving the standard of examination. These reports are highly confidential documents, only seen by a small group that includes postgraduate or research-office managers and administrators, supervisors and candidates, so the recommendation that these be made available for training purposes is a fraught issue. We asked universities across the country to make creative-arts doctoral reports available to us for analysis, but experienced considerable resistance. This is despite the fact that the project Reference Group represents a considerable number of universities, we provided details of our comprehensive ethics approval, and we clearly stated that we would de-identify these reports and preserve both privacy and anonymity. While the development of a database of examiners' reports seems a very sensible recommendation, it is unlikely that it will be achievable in the near future.

A further concern is the nebulous status of examination in universities. It is something that is almost totally disregarded in any estimation of an academic's capacity or service. Some responded suggesting that individual examiners need a position description, or other statement of an examiner's role, required expertise and values. There also needs to be work at policy level to improve the standing of examination work, so that it can be used as evidence of engagement with the scholarly community and peer research esteem, in situations where an academic's work and standing is being evaluated.

It was generally agreed that examining higher degrees is an altruistic component of the academic gift economy (with much in common with providing peer review for

journals), although some felt that the payment examiners received should be increased to reflect, more accurately, the work involved. More pressing, however, was the need to have examiners' efforts recognised as an important component of an academic's work.

### **Concluding remarks**

Our research on this issue has revealed both agreement and contradiction. Nobody, it seems, wants a restrictive code to guide doctoral examination in the creative arts. Almost everyone, however, who interacted with our project considers there should be clearer guidelines to assist 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. While training and mentoring were seen as important, developing a means of sharing information, resources and best-practice developments and knowledge in this area was seen as seminal to the examination process. The scholarship of examination was felt to be central and an aspect of the HDR process that could be promoted and disseminated through discipline-related publication and conference papers. The question of the status of academic examination was another important thread, and raising this was seen as a way of increasing the pool of available examiners. While there was little interest in legislated guidelines, it was felt that the lack of coherent guidelines threatened the integrity and content of each discipline's programs and so institutions should view and interrogate the policies of other universities, and test their own against these.

This leaves us, as is very common in research projects, with not only a better understanding of our problem but also an awareness that our project has only scratched the surface of the topic. As numbers of creative-writing doctoral candidates increase, it will become increasingly important to ensure that candidates, supervisors and examiners have shared understandings of what constitutes a doctorate in writing, of the relationship between knowledge generation and technical advances, and of how to evaluate quality, rigour and innovation in this strange object that is the creative-writing doctorate.

### **Endnotes**

1. Project participants came from Queensland (CQU, Griffith, JCU, QCM, QUT and USQ); Victoria (Ballarat, Deakin, La Trobe, Melbourne, Monash, RMIT, VCA and VU); NSW (Newcastle, SCA, SCU, Sydney, UNSW, UTS, UWS and Wollongong); South Australia (Flinders and UniSA); Western Australia (ECU); and the ACT (ANU and UC). Despite efforts, we were unable to generate interest or involvement from the Northern Territory or Tasmania, or from universities in Western Australian other than ECU.

2. Project Roundtables and Focus Groups were held on the following dates at these locations:  
Roundtables – 5 July 2011, Sydney; 2 August 2011, Melbourne; and 20 October 2011, Brisbane;  
Focus Groups – 11 November 2011, Sydney; 17 November 2011, Sydney; 8 December 2011, Canberra; 15 November 2011, Canberra; 23 November 2011, Newcastle; 28 November 2011, Newcastle; 29 November 2011, Newcastle; 21 November 2011, Melbourne; 23 November 2011, Melbourne; 28 November 2011, Melbourne; 17 May 2012, Brisbane; and 29 November 2011, Brisbane.

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