University of Canberra, Central Queensland University and University of Canberra

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Introduction: Examination of doctoral degrees in creative arts: process, practice and standards

The creative arts disciplines constitute an important growth area for research higher degrees (HDR) and, in recent decades, they have built a body of knowledge and a set of practices associated with research and research training. However, there is very limited work in the creative arts disciplines that investigates how and why HDR examiners arrive at the commentary presented in their reports. This sets up a quandary for HDR both supervisors and their candidates: how should they best position a thesis for examination? What do examiners want, and how do university policy frameworks facilitate successful candidature and informed examination?

The creative arts disciplines are not alone in this quandary. It was not until the 1990s that researchers began to examine research thesis assessment in any sustained way. This means that examiners, supervisors and candidates alike have experienced a degree of uncertainty about the process of examination, and about what constitutes the standards to be applied to doctoral theses. However, the creative arts face challenges that are not necessarily an issue for the longer-established research disciplines. This is in part because it is not a single discipline, but a group of disciplines whose only real point of connection is a commitment to the making of creative works. Each art form, and each university program, takes its own position on what constitutes the substantial body of work that makes up a doctoral thesis, and the outcomes that should emerge from the period of candidature; which means that the discipline, considered as a field of practice, is highly idiosyncratic. This puts in place, for candidates, supervisors and examiners, a number of challenges including:

- given the often-substantial differences in policy frameworks, procedures and institutional expectations, how can we establish what constitutes the standards of quality on a national basis;
- how do examiners match their own examination practice and standards to university policies;
- how do we find sufficient examiners with the right range of competencies to examine a particular thesis, given the relatively small pool available internationally in the creative arts and the complexity of elements involved in a single thesis;
- given the wide range of degree options at doctoral levels, and of art forms in

which research can be conducted and presented, how can we define and describe expectations of work in this discipline area; and so, finally,

- how can we state with confidence that examination results in a defensible, rigorous and formative assessment of a candidate's work?

This Special Issue of *TEXT* responds to the challenges faced by HDR supervisors, examiners and candidates in the creative arts, by publishing a group of research papers that specifically engage with doctoral examination. We invited contributions from scholars from across the creative arts disciplines. The possible topics included: what constitutes a doctorate in the creative arts; the relationship that exists between supervision and examination; the process and practice of examination in the creative arts, with particular reference to their efficacy; problems and possible solutions in HDR examination; the relation between examination policy and practice, and the contribution to quality that is added by policies and institutional guidelines for examination; discussions that explore the expertise and range of skills and knowledge required by examiners in these disciplines; how intellectual rigour is evaluated in a creative practice thesis; and the thorny question of when and why to fail a research higher degree thesis.

Our contributors responded from Australia and the UK, and we have included 11 contributions in this Special Issue, most of them written in response to our call for papers. We are, however, delighted to include two previously published studies, reproduced here with the kind permission of the authors and the original publishers. Margaret Kiley's paper looks at the Australian approach to doctoral curriculum design and examination practices in the light of international practices, and suggests the need for better alignment of the examination process with the doctoral learning program's imperatives. Louise Morley, Miriam David and the late Diana Leonard focus on the British context, and explore how policy changes have affected examination processes. What these two papers together provide is an excellent contextual and, to some extent, historical framework for examination processes, within the logic of policy, curriculum design and practice-oriented outcomes for candidates and their institutions.

Three papers review current practices in creative art PhD examination in Australia. Taking the Doctor of Creative Industries at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) as her example, Cheryl Stock presents an overview of emerging doctoral practices in the creative industries examining theoretical principles, emerging methodological approaches, blended learning delivery modes and flexible doctoral outputs which she contends are shaping creative arts doctorates towards greater research-based industry outputs. Jeri Kroll draws on the Creative Writing doctorate to discuss the wide-ranging, mutually beneficial interplay of examiners, supervisors and candidates in shaping doctoral outcomes including the dissemination of new knowledge that is acquired through a combination of practice and research. Our paper (by Donna Lee Brien, Jen Webb and Sandra Burr) outlines the rhetoric associated with the concepts of success and failure, and observes how these terms and the values associated with them are applied in the process of examination.

The next set of papers considers three particular contexts in higher degrees by research examination – music, the *viva voce* and the PhD by Publication - each with

their own individual problems and practices. Scott Harrison suggests that time-based work such as music, presents particular challenges for the assessment of doctoral work with the ephemeral nature of music, the balance of process and product and the subjectivities of the examiners all playing a role in outcomes. He uses case studies in music involving live and web-based submissions to demonstrate examination practices in this field and notes the fundamental entwinement of assessment and pedagogy in examination outcomes. Andrew Melrose argues the merits of the *viva voce* and addresses its procedures and practices in Creative Writing PhD examination. Melrose posits that the *viva voce* may be the one and only chance a new writer/researcher has to meet their first critic, a process which he contends is central to the dissemination of knowledge. Maggie Butt's paper tackles the increasingly popular PhD by Publication and the examination issues raised including a lack of consistency in the criteria, particularly in terms of the previously published works, the purpose of the exegesis, and questions about equity and rigour. She warns that because of the volume of work produced, the PhD by Publication is not an easy option for candidates or the examiners.

Finally we have two interviews with HDR administrators, one at the University of Canberra and the other at QUT, discussing their perspectives of the process of examining creative arts PhDs. As well as explaining the 'fit' between creative and conventional theses, Cath Raby from the University of Canberra, speculates on the value of creative arts doctorates to candidates and the institution. Her revelation that she sees her role as making sure that the process is streamlined and working for everybody is perhaps typical of the positive and enabling attitude of almost everyone that we came across during our project, including examiners, supervisors, and administrators. Susan Carson from QUT remarks on the process from the point of the creative industries disciplines. Her experience of examiners and the examination process is also positive, although she also provides some food for thought in terms of examiners who do not follow the examiner guidelines and the problems arise when there is a mismatch between the examiner's experience and the project aims.

We are extremely grateful for the generosity shown by our contributors in writing these papers. The very fact that notoriously time-poor academics so willingly embraced this opportunity to discuss creative arts higher degree examination, suggests that it continues to be a topic of interest and concern in the academy. We believe that this Special Issue, whether sharing ideas, perspectives and experiences, or critically engaging with new modes of examination, makes a significant contribution to the discourse.

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members of the international Reference Group, members of the roundtables and focus groups, those who responded to the survey, and others who supported the project as research assistants, facilitators and administrators. The full project report is available on the AAWP website, at http://aawp.org.au/files/PP10-1801_UC.Webb_Final%20Report.pdf. It can also be found online on the OLT website, at <http://www.olt.gov.au/project-examination-doctoral-degrees-creative-arts-process-practice-and-standards-2010>.

The editors of this Special issue have a history of collaboration on projects related to postgraduate research higher degrees in the creative arts.

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