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Creative synergies: exploring the process of supervising and examining the creative writing doctoral thesis

Abstract:

This paper explores the synergies between the process of supervising and examining a creative writing doctoral thesis. The hybrid nature of the Creative Writing doctorate, in particular, means that the student-supervisor dyad takes on increasing significance, since it affects the likelihood of a successful examination and productive future for postgraduates. This dyad, formed at the beginning of the doctoral journey, necessarily becomes a triad, with examiners as fellow travellers whose feedback affects the shape and perhaps eventual public reception of the thesis and/or creative artifact. The synergies between their roles produce outcomes that can benefit all three, enriching subject and pedagogical knowledge bases, fostering new research directions, enhancing artistic and intellectual careers and improving program design and assessment practices in the discipline. Supervisors and examiners participate in a number of communities of practice, but also join a unique micro community established when each new postgraduate enrolls. This community facilitates the dissemination of new knowledge which defines the Creative Writing doctorate.

Biographical note:

Professor Jeri Kroll is Dean of Graduate Research at Flinders University where she established the creative writing program. She has published over 20 books for adults and young people. *Swamp soup* (2012, for children) and *Workshopping the heart: new and selected poems* (2013) are recent books. *Research methods in creative writing* (Palgrave Macmillan 2013) and 'Creative writing and education' in the Wiley-Blackwell *Companion to creative writing* are recent scholarly works. A staged reading of her verse novel, *Vanishing point*, took place at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts 'Page to Stage' festival (2011). Puncher and Wattman will publish the book in 2014.

Keywords:

Creative writing doctoral degrees – Postgraduate supervision – Creative writing doctoral examination – Student-supervisor dyad

Introduction: national and international contexts

This paper explores the synergies between the process of supervising and examining a creative writing doctoral thesis. Given this focus, it asks key questions about how stakeholders define that species of doctorate and how they understand the tasks of supervisor and examiner. The first question reflects upon the shape and style of the thesis and the second upon the guidance and feedback candidates receive. Supervisors and students must negotiate between their conceptions of a creative writing doctorate and with the institution's guidelines, just as examiners must balance their previous experiences as students, supervisors and examiners with the instructions given to them for assessment. This knowledge allows each to perform their jobs competently. Effective performance, which is grounded in the interactions between the student, supervisor¹ and examiners, can produce complex outcomes that take myriad forms, and which can influence the postgraduate's future. The student-supervisor dyad established throughout the doctoral journey, including the examination and subsequent revision process, necessarily becomes a triad, with examiners as shadows or fellow travellers whose input conditions the shape and quality of the final product. This paper will also consider possible benefits that accrue to all parties during and after graduation.

A decade ago, I began to unpack the multiple identities of examiners (Kroll 2004), who ideally functioned as scholars, reviewers, critics, judges and mentors. Since that time, the national and international climate for postgraduate study has faced significant challenges, grounded in refreshed conceptions of what the doctorate in general should be, affected by the “massification” of doctoral degrees and the growing need for cross-disciplinary work’ (Holbrook et al. 2008: 37), increased governmental oversight of higher education providers in the Anglophone countries and a diverse student body whose needs require new solutions (Schofield 2013, Walker et al. 2008, Group of 8 2013). As Aitchison, Kamler and Lee point out:

In Europe, we have seen the third cycle of the Bologna Process and the establishment of the Council for Doctoral Education (see www.eua.be); in the UK, the *Report on the Review of Research Degree Programmes: England and Northern Ireland* (QAA 2007); in the USA, the Woodrow Wilson Foundation *Responsive PhD Project* (2000) and the *Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate* (Carnegie Foundation 2002); and in Australia most recently, an *Inquiry into Research Training and Research Workforce Issues in Australian Universities* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2008) (2010: 1).

In the past five years there have been more conferences², symposia and training workshops hosted by the UK Council for Graduate Education, the American Council of Graduate Schools, the Australian Council of Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies (DDoGS, which includes New Zealand deans) and similar organisations, in addition to government reports and guidelines, in particular those published by the Australian Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) and the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), affecting how universities structure research higher degrees and supervise doctoral students. In Australia, research training strategies need

to be embedded in Higher Education Provider compacts with the Commonwealth (Schofield 2013).

The United Kingdom has been proactive ‘since the late 1980s’ (Morley, Leonard & David 2002: 264) by setting national standards with the intention of professionalising supervision and all aspects of research training (Morley, Leonard & David 2002: 264). An overview of that sector in the past fifteen years reveals the increased emphasis on helping postgraduates and postdoctoral fellows not only to acquire appropriate discipline knowledge, but also generic and transferrable skills that allow multiple career outcomes. The growth of UK Doctoral Training Centres (21 to date),³ which integrate coursework into the PhD, has been one strategy to facilitate these. A cornerstone document that distils this mission to enrich student experience, *The Concordat: to support the career development of researchers*, is described as ‘an Agreement between the Funders and Employers of Researchers in the UK’ (The Concordat 2013). The latter group includes Higher Education Providers – all UK universities are signatories as well as research councils and related funding bodies (5).

Seven key principles outline expectations and responsibilities for stakeholders on both sides. In particular, Principle 3 relates to the revitalised role that universities and employers should be required to adopt in order to service their clientele: ‘Researchers are equipped and supported to be adaptable and flexible in an increasingly diverse, mobile, global research environment’ (10). The fact that the ‘Outstanding Support for Early Career Researchers’ Award targets higher education institutions demonstrates the significance that the Concordat places on this aspect of research development (Concordat: 11). At the same time as the refreshed version of the Concordat was adopted in 2008, ‘Vitae (previously the UK GRAD Program) was launched’ (Background 2013). Managed by the Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC), Vitae’s brief is to ‘champion the professional and career development of postgraduate researchers and research staff in higher education institutions and research institutes’ (About Vitae 2013). As an online resource with its administration in Cambridge and hubs in eight regions of the United Kingdom (with some international members),⁴ it promotes individual responsibility in career development, supported by local institutional resources. It allows postgraduates, postdoctoral fellows, early career researchers and, in fact, any staff member and their supervisors to monitor progress and at the institutional level it encourages administrators to evaluate what programs it offers and to develop strategies to fill gaps. The latter benefit speaks to Vitae’s aim to ‘build human capital by influencing the development and implementation of effective policy relating to researcher development’ (Vitae 2013). A lynchpin is the online Researcher Development Framework (RDF Planner), ‘a tool for the planning, promoting and supporting the personal, professional and career development of researchers. It articulates the knowledge, behaviours and attitudes of researchers and encourages them to aspire to excellence’ (Vitae 2013).⁵ Doctoral supervision is one critical component, falling under the ‘Working with Others’ Dimension, which also includes, among other descriptors, ‘Collegiality, Team Working, Collaboration and Mentoring’ (RDF Planner).

The student-supervisor nexus

In this quality assurance environment, what stands out is the primacy of a productive student-supervisor relationship. Supervisors should help to identify what knowledge and skills are needed as well as to secure appropriate resources to maximise academic and career opportunities. Lisa Schofield of the Commonwealth Department of Industry, Innovation, Climate Change, Science, Research and Tertiary Education (DIICSRTE), noted that among the critical factors in student development were ‘strengthen[ing] ‘supervision support’ and establishing and refining mentorship programs’ (2013), leading to raised RHD completion rates. Institutions, therefore, must create appropriate research climates and set standards for effective supervision (especially in new disciplines). Among other qualities, supervisors should have a maximum number of students as well as be trained, research active and experienced, as noted in the European *Accountable Research Environments for Doctoral Education* Project, Australian TEQSA guidelines and the DDoGS’ ‘Good practice framework for research training’ (2013). This comprehensive framework, the product of a Commonwealth Office of Teaching and Learning Grant (2011), led by Professor Joe Luca of Edith Cowan University (<http://www.ecu.edu.au/centres/graduate-research-school/good-practice-framework>) in collaboration with DDoGS, presents a best-practice structure for the admission, supervision, management and examination of research higher degrees. There are a range of criteria for supervisor eligibility, founded on the principle that supervision is a method of teaching and, therefore, has a distinct pedagogy. This principle is embedded in TEQSA’s threshold standards under ‘Teaching and learning are of high quality’ (Section 4, 16, 2012), stipulating that those responsible for students (among them, postgraduates) possess a range of attributes. For example, academics need to

[be] appropriately qualified in the relevant discipline for their level of teaching (qualified to at least one Qualification Standards level higher than the course of study being taught or with equivalent professional experience);

have a sound understanding of current scholarship and/or professional practice in the discipline that they teach;

have an understanding of pedagogical and/or adult learning principles relevant to the student cohort being taught (2012).

These standards encompass the requisite degree (and, since the PhD is the highest qualification possible, arguably experience in completing doctoral students) as well as pedagogical skills in supervision and discipline knowledge. They also speak to the necessity of monitoring ‘the supervisor’s level of research activity’ (GPF 4.2, 10, also see Commonwealth of Australia’s Higher Education Standards Panel *Draft Standards* 2013).⁶

Complementing these standards or offering another method of achieving them, I would argue, is being an informed examiner, which aside from overseeing a research higher degree completion can demonstrate ‘equivalent professional experience.’ Research-active faculty members will be sought out as examiners because they have a publication track record, testifying to an international profile.⁷ In turn sourcing such experienced colleagues as assessors confirms the rigour of institutions’ examination

processes and speaks to the quality of their degrees. In a competitive international climate, this is another way in which universities can maintain global reputations (Go8 *Discussion Paper* 2012: 48).

Yet as a growing number of international critics testify, there is a research deficit when it comes to assessment or examination of doctorates in general (Holbrook, Bourke, Lovat & Fairbairn 2008, Kroll & Webb 2012, Morley, Leonard & David 2002, Mullins & Kiley 2002, Webb & Brien 2010, Webb, Brien & Burr 2012). It is vital that in this phase students be 'treated both fairly and with appropriate rigour' (Burr, Webb & Brien, 2011: 3). Many universities have succumbed, however, to 'a head in the sand ostrich syndrome'. They have taken the money from RHD completions (especially from popular new disciplines) and run, relying on the way in which academics have functioned as examiners in all fields. Reflective practice that has characterised debate about good supervision and research training has not extended to examination, which still revolves around generic institutional instructions to assessors to judge for originality and contributions to knowledge and to unwritten or unspoken discipline conventions.

In particular, Morley, Leonard & David, discussing the viva as the final assessment process, assert that 'the examination of doctoral degrees in Britain is left to informal networks and a belief in the notion of collegiality' (2002: 270). Tinkler and Jackson (2002) support this impression of secrecy and indeterminacy. As in Australia, the more recently founded universities and the newest degrees seem to have the most 'explicit guidelines' (Morley, Leonard & David 2002: 267), as emerging disciplines need to establish the credentials of their degrees, staff members and graduates as well as to argue for the validity of their research methodologies. Nevertheless, the confidentiality of examiners' reports combined with a laissez-faire culture with regard to assessment have implications for supervisor responsibility. If national and international benchmarking is just beginning, based on teaching and learning grants and pilot research projects, then there will necessarily be intense pressure on supervisors to negotiate the examination phase with postgraduates capably.

In sum, if we conceive of the services and resources surrounding a RHD candidature as a wheel, students exist at the heart. All else needs to revolve around them, because the goal is a successful completion. Principal supervisors are closest to them; ideally they can advise what needs to be accessed when and so help the wheel to turn smoothly. It cannot stick at the examination phase. This paper finally considers, therefore, the critical synergies between supervisor and examiner at that final juncture. The term 'synergies' in the title is apt because it points to the manner by which it encourages certain types of behaviour. The supervisor-student-examiner triad engages in a 'cooperative interaction' (see, *American Heritage Dictionary* and *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* 2013), whether consciously or unconsciously, to ensure that 'the interaction' produces a 'combined effect ... greater than the sum of their individual' contributions. Furthermore, working together in their respective roles proves a 'mutually advantageous conjunction' (*American Heritage*) with the possibility of a range of outcomes. The doctoral candidature includes examination as a critical element because it is impossible to grasp how successful a supervisory relationship has been without considering not only the outcome of the examination but also the

aftermath – revision and confirmation leading to award of the degree. When candidates step onto the stage at graduation and stand while the citation is read to the audience, and supervisors watch on (hopefully satisfied), they have closed the loop on one aspect of those interactions, although others might continue throughout their careers.

What is a doctorate in creative writing?

In the last decade of the twentieth century, there was a major expansion of doctoral studies, and a widening of the types of doctorate that may be undertaken in both the UK and in other countries (Morley, Leonard & David 2002: 264).

This statement points to the development of professional and practice-led doctorates, creative arts PhDs among them. Recent studies (Boyd 2009, Brien & Williamson 2009, Krauth 2000, Webb, Brien & Burr 2012) confirm the popularity of creative writing higher degree study, especially in Australia and the UK, and yet research into structure and supervision, let alone examination practices, is still in its early stages: ‘Diversity, indeed, is more prevalent than uniformity’ (Carey, Webb & Brien 2008: 10). Yet in the twenty-first century, re-evaluating the purposes of the conventional PhD, studying the best methods of achieving them and benchmarking to confirm international consistency and quality has only been undertaken over the past fifteen years or so (Aitchison, Kamler & Lee 2010: 1), as I have noted. The latest focus has been assessment in doctorates, hampered by confidentiality issues and also reluctance of universities and academics to make explicit the way in which they have undertaken it for decades. Research suggests that confusion exists about the purpose of examination itself. Should it be formative (to aid student learning with relevant feedback), summative (to evaluate outcomes), or both (see Morley et al., Webb, Brien & Burr 2012)? Do students and supervisors understand which approach examiners will take and have the latter been properly briefed? Academics can find generic or institution-specific policy about such things as nomination of examiners, conflict of interest and divergent reports, but again, these do not let supervisors or students into the room (metaphorical or literal) where the hard-work of decision-making takes place.

One marker of a nascent willingness to maintain standards by comparison has been the expansion of examiners’ assessment obligations. Aside from preparing the formal report, they are asked by many institutions to comment on generic categories that break down thesis quality into its components. Among others, common areas on which comment is required (with a Yes, Marginal or No box to tick) are:

Evidence of an original investigation or testing of ideas;

Competence in independent research or experimentation;

Thorough understanding of the appropriate techniques in the field demonstrated both by their application and a thorough review of the literature; and

Appreciation of the relationship of the special theme to the wider field of knowledge (Sourced from a range of Australian HEP report forms).

Collating answers prepares universities to track the quality of doctoral work overall by analysing where additional training for both students and supervisors might be necessary. It also provides useful knowledge at a faculty or school level. Additional quality-control questions allow universities to gauge whether they are appointing experienced examiners whose judgments need to be heeded and also whether reports support their reputation for excellence in postgraduate education. For example, examiners might be asked: How many theses have you examined?; Would you consider this thesis to be in the top 5% (or 10%) of theses you have examined?; Would you recommend this thesis for High Commendation (award With Merit, Vice-Chancellor's Prize, et al.)?; and, Would you like to comment further on this thesis? Many university-wide instructions now emphasise that examiners need to clarify what revision needs to be done for award of the degree (the summative assessment) and what revision or future work might assist student learning and/or eventual publication (the formative assessment).

Newer disciplines, which have not established many firm conventions, might suffer more from lack of research on doctoral assessment; there is less unwritten discipline knowledge, a smaller critical mass of colleagues and little information against which to benchmark. Creative arts academics cannot compare what they do with procedures that have national or international credibility except on the most general level.⁸ Indeed, Kwiram (2006, as cited in Holbrook et al. 2008: 36) has described PhD candidature as an 'apprenticeship in the art of discovery', which emphasises its heuristic nature. On the positive side, creative writing supervisors have the chance to develop practices that answer the needs of this type of multiform doctorate and can respond to ongoing debates about what constitutes originality and new knowledge. This climate of self-reflexivity and accountability has encouraged them to critique the shape and rigour of higher degrees.

One of the prime areas for exploration, therefore, has been the form of the hybrid creative writing PhD and the challenge of assessing its contributions so it accords with the standard OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) definition, upon which UK and Australasian research assessment systems are based. Research is: Any creative systematic activity undertaken to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of humanity, culture and society, and the use of knowledge to devise new applications. (OECD *Glossary of Statistical Terms* from Research and Development – UNESCO <http://stats.oecd.org/glossary> [Accessed 1 June 2013] Also OECD *Glossary*. Experimental Development definition, also see OECD Frascati Manual, sixth edition, 2002 (30) for applied research.)

According to the Australian Qualifications Framework, research is, after all, 'the defining characteristic of the Doctoral Degree Qualification' (2013: 63). Although a review of the growing body of literature analysing possible models of creative doctorates and the exegesis, in particular, is outside the scope of this paper,⁹ some key points can be made that speak to the way in which supervisors and examiners must function in order to support postgraduates. It is worth highlighting here that the creative writing thesis, which relies on both process and product, grounded in an appropriate scholarly or critical context, must find a form that demonstrates its advancement of knowledge to society, culture or community. The majority of

university guidelines in Australia dictate that examiners need to consider the thesis as one entity, in order to achieve this contribution, whatever format it takes.¹⁰ Terms such as ‘complementary,’ ‘interface,’ ‘interrelation’ and ‘integration’ instruct supervisors and examiners that postgraduates must engage with how their work as a whole advances knowledge.

This focus on interface and unity challenges supervisors and students to keep the hybrid connected, rather than to let each part wander off on different paths. The creative arts thesis is a polyphonic discourse, addressed to multiple audiences (including peers, supervisors, examiners and readers [Kroll 2004]) where both parts must remember to speak or respond creatively to each other – if critical and creative parts are not intertwined to begin with. Allowing too much separation to occur in either conception or execution often leads to what I call ‘the exegesis as afterthought,’ with no strong integral relationship to the creative artifact. If supervising this type of thesis is a challenge, assessing it is more so, as examiners only come in at the end of the intellectual and aesthetic conversation. Given the mercurial identity of the creative thesis, therefore, supervisors need to ensure that their departments or schools have clear guidelines for commencing students about shape, word count (or generic equivalents), formatting options, hybrid constructions, etc. If this is not the case, then appropriate and detailed guidance at the beginning of candidature is even more imperative. Students must be aided in finding a workable model that accords with institutional RHD guidelines and national standards.¹¹ The same guidelines must be made available to examiners, along with generic university instructions, in order for them to prepare a fair and rigorous judgment.

Synergies between supervision and examination

Answering the question, ‘What do the roles of supervisor and examiner have in common?’, is one method of grasping the synergies between the activities of supervision and examination. All Australian universities embed supervisor responsibilities in research higher degree policy; an expanded understanding of responsibilities appear in the DDoGS ‘Good Practice Framework.’ They include such things as helping to identify a project and appropriate methodology; monitoring progress; offering timely and constructive feedback; keeping in contact with associates or externals on the supervisory panel; arranging resources (physical and financial); nominating knowledgeable and sympathetic examiners; and overseeing whatever revisions are necessary for award of the degree. The less tangible aspects of supervision spill over into the concept of mentorship (Kroll & Finlayson 2012, Walker et al. 2008), but the responsibility to induct students into a discipline ethos as well as to provide professional and career development has been highlighted in the past decade (Kalin, Barney & Irwin 2009).

This expansion of the supervisory role, or at least the push to make this professional development aspect of it more explicit, has occurred because of the re-evaluation of the conventional doctorate. The United Kingdom Council for Graduate Education, the UK Concordat, the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate, the Australian government’s *Inquiry into Research Training and Research Workforce Issues in Australian*

Universities (and subsequent consultation papers), guidelines in TEQSA and the AQF have all in various ways acknowledged that universities have responsibilities to prepare their postgraduates for life after degrees. In other words, they cannot continue to take students in for their own benefit and neglect to offer generic and transferrable skills training so that they have diverse career options upon graduation. Best Practice Research suggests that supervisors provide students at enrolment (or even before) with a statement about their practice and expectations (see Kiley's 'Expectations of Research Supervision' as an example), what some call a 'learning agreement' (Humphrey, Marshall & Leonardo 2012: 52), a kind of contract to which both consent in order to make explicit the student-supervisor relationship and candidature mode of operation. This can include tangible items such as frequency of meetings, volume and turnaround time for work as well as more generic milestones, such as conference attendance and publication, but it can also include intangibles that speak more to the mentoring and professional development aspect of supervision.

Creative writing (and creative arts) doctoral programs, because of their dual focus on practice and scholarship (process, craft and knowledge generation), are well positioned to provide this more comprehensive service. Principal supervisors must advise throughout on ways to achieve the creative PhD's goals. As practitioners, they can pass on skill gained from evaluating both their own and student work and, in addition, professional expertise acquired through dealing with editors, theatre or gallery managers, arts administrators, et al. – in other words, the cultural and commercial milieu in some form (Hecq et al. 2012). They have insight, thus, into the relevant community of practitioners from a participatory point of view. As academics, they have knowledge of cultural and critical context. In sum, they help to balance the competing demands of craft and scholarship.

One other task worth foregrounding is the generic responsibility to maintain contact with other supervisors. Whether deep discipline and craft expertise is split between Principal and Associate(s), the Principal must maintain the unified perspective. If a bipartite structure is employed, they must read both components, otherwise they will not be able to gauge how successfully the thesis performs 'as a whole.' After all, this whole is what examiners will judge. Supervisors will be cognisant of the intellectual and aesthetic journey the student has undertaken, since their relationship has developed over time, but examiners will not, as their relationship is restricted to the task in hand, focused on the submitted product. Understanding how to 'brief' examiners within a preface and/or introduction will help students to clarify the nature of their contribution and the logic of thesis structure. Finally, whether supervisors have completed a creative writing or conventional doctorate, they will have developed personal knowledge of the doctoral journey that will assist them in performing their role (Hall & Burns 2009: 49).

In Australia, which has no viva generally, examiners must perform multiple roles, but aside from often inadequate or confusing guidelines, they are restricted to impersonal interactions with candidates, which are compressed into a short time frame. In creative writing and the performing arts, this challenge is exacerbated. Examiners and supervisors must understand what they consider originality and feel confident about forms of knowledge and appropriate modes of dissemination. Phillips, Stock and

Vincs (2008-9) note that, in dance, stakeholders were faced with ‘incongruous protocols and the often inadequate criteria distributed for candidates and examiners (6). Their ALTC project grappled with ‘the UK Council for Graduate Education’s study on practice-based doctorates’ (8), considering how their formulation of “the experience of ‘doctorateness’” (8) might translate to the performing arts. The key terms here are not only ‘experience,’ but ‘essence,’ ‘breadth’ and ‘depth’ (http://www.ukcge.ac.uk/report_downloads.html). In the majority of cases in creative writing, university generic guidelines do not necessarily cover all of these criteria for ‘doctorateness’, leaving decoding to supervisors and examiners.

Holbrook et al. (2008) and Mullins & Kiley’s (2002) research (still at an early stage) note that there is a reluctance to fail research higher degree students yet consistency among examiners about what constitutes a PhD; that consistency, however, tends to be expressed in imprecise or metaphorical language. The nature of creative practice might entail a degree of experimentation that does not have an equivalent in other disciplines, in particular in the hard sciences. An astute supervisor might notice early in the candidature that experiments were not producing useful data; this problem could be noted on Annual Review of Progress forms and new experiments designed. In fact, some science departments prefer students to structure their PhDs as three or four papers, often published in refereed journals before submission. A peer-review feedback mechanism, therefore, is inbuilt in this process. With an extended project in creative writing such as a novel, a film or a play, it might be hard to gauge whether it will ‘lift’ and succeed before the student has finished revising it¹². As Hecq suggests, ‘good art-making is based on a degree of experimentation and failure’ (2012: 30) and, hence, the creative artifact of a thesis might not find a public or commercial outlet.

Meyrick’s contextualisation of art-making within contemporary culture problematises the term ‘good’, pointing to the dimensions of the challenge to define quality:

A practitioner’s idea of ‘good’ art is different in experiential vista from that of a policy-maker’s, not just because they are different people but because the position of the descriptor stands in different relation to its empirical referent. For artists, ‘good’ is an inductive conclusion or empirical generalisation, a result of looking at examples of art and drawing out relevant features. For arts bureaucrats it is a nomothetic category, a value anterior to the practices of the field, which it must inform and shape (Meyrick 2013: 4).

Postgraduates (and by extension, supervisors) are immersed in the process of ‘looking [including the practice of reading] at examples of art’ in order to compare, evaluate, and plan new work that responds to or develops the field. The process of making and ‘looking’ is integrated, not separated. This instability and uncertainty ‘is difficult’ for policy-makers and ‘for public investors to understand’ (30) and, thus, requires a persuasive argument; it cannot be made too difficult for the academy’s gatekeepers whose assessment of the doctorate will determine whether the student becomes their peer.¹³ Examiners must assess the whole by attempting to understand the research contribution of the process and the product. It is heartening that, at least in the creative arts, those charged with evaluation ‘hold and display deep feelings of responsibility

towards maintaining standards at individual, discipline, institutional and industry level' (Burr, Webb & Brien 2011: 8).

Stakeholders hope, therefore, that experienced examiners can 'recognise the genus first and then try to identify the characteristics that individual examples of the new creative arts species have in common, which confirms their membership in the group' (Kroll 2004: 2). With the growth of institutions granting degrees alongside flourishing new media platforms and increased numbers of creative arts interdisciplinary projects, this need to recognise 'doctorateness' and to compare species has intensified. In the twenty-first century, if it is impossible for supervisors to be experts in all genres and the plethora of theoretical models available to postgraduates (who have the time to immerse themselves in a web-rich research culture), then they must find strategies of negotiating between their weaknesses and strengths so students receive the attention they need. The same is true of examiners.

The solutions to the difficulties enumerated above, therefore, must involve stipulating that at least one, if not both, examiners¹⁴ have the same broad experience as supervisors. They should understand something of the pedagogy of RHD supervision as well as be skilled in a craft; they should be familiar, if not knowledgeable, in a variety of research methodologies and subject areas. In other words, examiners should possess similar qualifications and experiences as supervisors (who ideally possess the multiple identities of practitioner, scholar and teacher). These accepted principles have been common in university policy but have recently been expanded by TEQSA and the DDoGS Good Practice Framework. The necessity for integrity and rigour in the examination process implies that assessors are competent to judge. In fact, the *Australian Qualifications Framework* embeds this principle in its 'Specification for the Doctoral Degree' by including, at the end of the degree's definition, this proviso about examiners:

The Doctoral Degree (Research) qualification (leading to the award of a Doctor of Philosophy) is designed so that graduates will have undertaken a program of independent supervised study that produces significant and original research outcomes culminating in a thesis, dissertation, exegesis or equivalent for independent examination by at least two external expert examiners of international standing (2013: 65).

In creative writing as in all doctorates this should require Examiners, just as Principal Supervisors, to hold at least the degree examined if not one level higher (see TEQSA threshold standard) and, aside from being research active, to have professional experience. One interpretation of 'professional experience' is that supervisors have seen an RHD student through to completion. Understanding the complex doctoral journey, especially of a creative writing thesis, and the dynamics of the practice-led research loop, will allow an informed reading.

To summarise, for both examiners and supervisors, assessing theses, researching in the field, conferencing, designing projects that have both traditional and non-traditional outputs and reading widely to update theoretical knowledge prepares them to fulfil complex roles. Even if supervisors and examiners have not completed a creative writing doctorate themselves, but a conventional one, they might have designed a program, immersed themselves in the discipline and gathered further experiences by

supervising a diversity of models. In fact, examining is a highly productive (if time-intensive) method for learning what works – a kind of intellectual and aesthetic sticky-beaking that sharpens perceptions, allowing supervisors and examiners to see what's going on nationally and internationally. In addition, it allows benchmarking at least on an individual level. Academics are forced to be self-aware, forced to reflect, forced to ask: How does my students' work compare with the thesis I am now assessing?

Conclusion: the chain of minds

This paper argues that supervisors and examiners of creative writing doctorates should ideally possess similar degree qualifications as well as practitioner, critical and pedagogical experience in order to perform to international standards. This parallel professional profile allows productive synergies to emerge at the critical examination phase when all three interact. The creative writing doctoral experience, involving student, supervisor and examiner, is not restricted, however, to completing the degree itself and producing creative and/or critical work to a certain standard. Since this triad comprises those who are practitioners and scholars (whether emergent or established), the synergies between supervisor and examiner roles allow a myriad of outcomes that begin with determining the shape of the thesis. That outcome is final only in the sense of being fixed for award of the degree. It is important to remind postgraduates that revisions to a thesis are not irrevocable. They own their intellectual property (IP) and can rewrite and expand once they leap the final academic hurdle. The text that remains in a library or database will find one audience, but the student's work will likely find others outside that context, readers who will encounter all or part of the thesis in a variety of forms.

Examiners' expert input frequently provides feedback that differentiates between revisions for completion (summative) and suggestions that point the way to future publication or other public dissemination (formative). Like the supervisor, they function as another species of editor, thus, one who has a temporary 'final' say. Follow-on effects also mirror what supervisors might provide. They include use (with permission) of appreciative comments from examination reports on the dust jacket of a published version of the creative artifact or in an exhibition catalogue, for instance. Praise can also lead to examiners being approached to write job or grant references. Their imprimatur (just as a supervisor's) reflects, therefore, on the work's status and can open pathways to postgraduate career possibilities. In many UK universities one of the reasons behind appointing at least three experienced examiners is to secure the stamp of quality for the work and increase professional networks (see Morley, Leonard & David 2002). Benefits can flow in all directions, however, founded on relationships established during doctoral candidature.

On a micro level, the postgraduate-supervisor-examiner triad forms a kind of community of practice brought together for one purpose – to train the student to become a peer. They form a team, according to Katzenbach and Smith's definition, a team being 'people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable' (1994: 45). Accountability applies to all members, specified in university

policy and in best practice guidelines for each role. The benefits mentioned above also are available to them, based on the premise that their contributions produce a ‘combined effect greater than the sum of their individual’ parts (definition of synergy: *American Heritage*). The team experiences a ‘mutually advantageous conjunction’ (*American Heritage*). On a personal level, positives might include new research directions, collaborative projects, co-authorship and refined knowledge about supervision that enhances existing practice and pedagogical understanding for the ECR. All of those affect promotion opportunities in academia. On an institutional level (applying to both supervisor and examiner), the positives might include improved supervisory training and updated postgraduate programs and assessment processes to ensure rigour in doctoral degrees. On a national disciplinary level the positives might include new modes of disseminating creative writing research, clarity about acceptable doctoral models and consistent examination standards.

In order to clarify these complex interactions it is worth revisiting the doctoral journey in toto. Postgraduates need to be drawn into the recursive process of candidature, at first developing personally and professionally in conventional ways (and achieving specified milestones), but eventually moving beyond what they perceived as their desired goals. This heuristic understanding of the supervisory relationship suggests another way of conceptualising the benefits of the practice-led research loop, where each stage might curl back on itself, but eventually pushes the project (and individual) forward. In addition, this allows an alternative way, specific to the creative arts, of conceptualising the conventional wisdom that by the end of candidature the student knows more than the supervisor and, at least in terms of subject knowledge, is now the expert. Examiners come in near the conclusion to verify that this is so and, perhaps, to gain new knowledge themselves. But the loop is not quite closed.

Are postgraduates aware of the synergies between supervisor and examiner? In fact, during the last six months of candidature, I tell my postgraduates that I am reading as an examiner would. If examiners offer similar feedback (whether positive or negative) to a supervisor’s, it confirms the trust that students have in the supervisor’s judgment – and therefore in other advice they have given about careers, publication opportunities, etc. Does the practice-led research loop close after examination? Not yet, because Principal Supervisors still need to negotiate between examiners’ reports, arbitrating with students who must revisit the thesis, and interpreting for them the occasional conflicting advice by ‘channelling’ what they believe examiners mean. Does the practice-led research loop close at graduation? Do the synergies between supervisor and examiner cease to be valid? Does the team, which has shared this intimate meeting of minds, disband?

Here is an attempt at an answer by way of visualisation. Picture graduation. Students mount the stage. Behind them supervisors sit, noticing the similarity of caps and gowns, differentiated only by degree. Are there signs of individuality? Most visible are the shoes that students wear as they walk to the podium to receive their parchments: heels, trainers, thongs or conservative flats and brogues. Yet what is a Creative Writing doctorate but the embodiment of a personal artistic and intellectual vision? In most cases, the thesis has not yet found its final audience. It is a text in search of readers and critics who will hopefully appreciate it on another level from supervisors

and examiners, whose pleasure in reading is tempered by their identities as academic gatekeepers and, hence, their need for sympathetic objectivity.

In sum, supervisors, students and examiners in their generic identities participate in more than one academic and professional community of practice, each with its own 'modes and domains' (O'Rourke 2005: 58), which sometimes have competing and overlapping agendas. Negotiating between them is the challenge. Nevertheless, at each postgraduate enrolment a micro community forms centred around one student; associate and external supervisors are added to this community with various levels of involvement. The last to join are examiners. As a whole, this micro community of practice supports the individual in developing her artistic and intellectual vision and thereby facilitating dissemination of new knowledge acquired through practice and research, which defines the Creative Writing PhD.

For these professionals and early career researchers, therefore, creative research requires more than practice and scholarship, it requires sharing the knowledge discovered and thereby encouraging appreciation, reaction and debate. The most significant authors provide a vision of what every creative writer ideally desires – a kind of immortality based on life lived by their readers, as Sarah Bakewell explains when she describes Montaigne's effect on his public: Over the centuries, this interpretation and reinterpretation creates a long chain connecting a writer to all future readers – who frequently read each other as well as the original (Bakewell 2011: 315).

Each postgraduate, thus, becomes the first in a unique 'chain of minds' (317) established when they enter the academy. Supervisors and examiners are their first readers.

Endnotes

1. Supervisor here refers to Principal Supervisor, the person who bears the primary responsibility for candidature management.
2. For example, among more frequent meetings, the UK Council for Graduate Education holds a yearly conference. In 2013 its title was 'International conference on developments in doctoral education' (Edinburgh, April 2013).
3. Interview with Dr Tessa Parkes, Deputy Director, Scottish Graduate School of Social Sciences, 9 April 2013.
4. In 2013 a number of Australian universities are participating in a free RDF Planner Trial, Flinders University among them. This is the result of a presentation that Vitae Director, Janet Metcalfe, gave at the 2012 November DDoGS conference in Melbourne.
5. All UK institutions (this includes Scotland and Northern Ireland) have to use the Researcher Development Framework.
6. The July 2013 Higher Education Panel *Draft standards for research and research training* includes as Research 4.1: 'The concept of "research-active" staff is defined and complied with in the implementation of research policy and practices.' Research Training Number 4.2 (3) states: 'Each research student is supervised by a principal supervisor who is research active in the relevant field of research, there is at least one associate supervisor with relevant research expertise and continuity of relevant supervisory expertise is maintained throughout candidature.' See <http://www.HEstandards.gov.au> for all documents and Calls for comment.

7. TEQSA guidelines state in general that doctoral examiners should have international standing (it does not define how that is established). Some Australian universities stipulate (in appointment of examiners' policy) that at least one examiner should be based overseas. In the UK some universities stipulate, as Morley, et al. attest, that at least three on the panel must be experienced, demonstrated by having assessed at least three theses.
8. It is worth noting the differences between Australia, Europe, the UK and the US. The standard format in Australia is to appoint two or three external examiners. In the US the defence panel is the norm, comprising a number of internal examiners, often including the supervisor. The defence with a range of internal and external assessors (often held publicly with a Q & A at the conclusion) is common in Europe. In the UK the viva, or defence, although private, can determine whether a candidate passes or fails, regardless of the written reports by internal and external examiners. See Holbrook, Bourke, Lovat & Fairbairn and Morley, Leonard & David, among others.
9. See, for example, most issues of *TEXT: journal of writing and writing courses*, the *TEXT Special issue Illuminating the exegesis* (2004) and *New Writing: the international journal for the practice and theory of creative writing* as well as various symposia focused on innovation in creative arts degrees.
10. An online survey of universities with established doctoral programs demonstrates this.
11. That is, for doctorates, which are Level 10 degrees in the Australian Qualifications Framework: 62-66.
12. It is true that some universities allow creative work (such as novels) published before submission, to be sent to examiners as a finished commercial project. The ethics of this practice is under debate (see Webb & Kroll 2012). These theses would be in the minority at this point in time.
13. As other Australian universities, Flinders notes in its 'Examination of a thesis' policy that: 'If the degree is awarded, the candidate will become the peer of the examiners' (FU, 2010, at http://www.flinders.edu.au/currentstudents/rhd_students/examination-of-a-thesis).
14. It takes time to build up a body of experienced examiners, especially those with international credentials, in any relatively new degree program such as creative writing. The situation has improved due to the flourishing of key journals in the field, annual conferences hosted by the Australasian Association of Writing Programs, National Association of Writers in Education and Great Writing (greatwriting.org). In addition, an Examiners' Register located on the AAWP website (formerly on the Australian Postgraduate Writers' Network site, at www.writingnetwork.edu.au/examiners) has proved useful. How one 'mentors' or develops early career researchers as examiners is another area worthy of research.

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