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The Higher Degree Research Journey as a Three-legged Race

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the relationship between Higher Degree Research candidates and their supervisors within the Creative Writing discipline (note 1). The paper was prompted, in part, by discussions between the two authors during 2003 regarding the evaluation and selection of Creative Writing Higher Degree Research candidates at our own institution in preparation for the following academic year. One author is a Professor with more than twenty years experience in supervision, the other is a young academic with several years experience as an Associate Supervisor, more than half-way through her own doctoral degree in Creative Writing, and about to embark on the Principal Supervisor journey for the first time.

The question of what makes an ideal Creative Writing Higher Degree Research student arose early in our discussion with glib reference to Goethe's ideal, if apocryphal, dog: it didn't bark, didn't bite, ate ground glass and shat diamonds. And indeed, perusing forthcoming Higher Degree Research candidates, we have dreamt at times hopefully and cynically of compliant, low-maintenance, older students who churned out Miles Franklin award-winners unbidden and younger ones who evacuated *Australian/Vogel* Award-worthy manuscripts on command. Meanwhile yet another Australian Federal Minister for Education is focussing on the end product as if he too has Goethe's dog in mind. However, our own knowledge of educational theory and our involvement in Higher Degree Research programs as supervisors and as students leads us to focus instead on the quality of the process of choosing the student, devising appropriate courses, and then integrating the student/supervisor and the research project.

Our initial question of what makes an ideal Creative Writing candidate for Higher Degree Research quickly expanded, then, to become a broader question about the nature of what we do as Creative Writing academics, why and how we supervise, as well as what role the Creative Writing Higher Degree Research plays in the career trajectories of our doctoral students. The more we discussed these issues, the more we found it impossible to separate any one part of the Higher Degree Research process without some reference to and acknowledgement of another part of that same process. Our premise, therefore, is that the Higher Degree Research process is a whole where the parts depend upon one another for their function and meaning: each determines and is determined by the others and their relationships. Our attempt to illustrate this is indicated in the following (Figure 1):

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE CREATIVE WRITING HIGHER DEGREE RESEARCH PROCESS

Dibble and van Loon 2003

Learning is a journey, and it is our belief that each Higher Degree Research journey implies a different relationship between and among the Higher Degree Research student, the supervisor, the research project (which consists of a book *and* its exegesis) and the culture that embraces them all. In this paper we would particularly like to discuss context, motivation and focus, and the relationship between supervisor and student, acknowledging that these are just some of the factors that influence the Higher Degree Research process. In and through this discussion, as our title suggests, we propose the image of the three-legged race as a paradigm for the student-supervisor relationship. Anyone who has run such a race realises the unique coordination needed - and knows that it is usually developed 'on-the-run', after the legs are tied together, amidst laughter/anger and frustration and sometimes falling down. Crossing the finishing line together is an achievement, but it is the process of learning how to move forward along the allotted track that produces the rapport and understanding in the players.

At the time of writing this paper, a significant report titled 'The Doctoral Education Experience: Diversity and Complexity' had just been released by the Department of Education, Science and Training (November 2003) (Neumann 2003) and so a supplementary aim of this paper is to review some of the key findings in this report, particularly in terms of their relevance to the Creative Writing discipline. Ruth Neumann, the author of 'The Doctoral Education Experience,' reports on the results of 130 interviews, two-thirds with doctoral students and the remainder with experienced supervisors. The interviewees were selected from four different disciplines and from six different Australian universities, and included candidates in professional doctorates such as the Doctor of Creative Arts. The intention was 'to give doctoral students "a voice" and to

enhance the understanding of the complexity and diversity of their educational experiences' (xiii). On an optimistic note, the report suggests that most doctoral students are positive about their doctoral programs, but there are also a number of considerations arising out of the report that will be of interest to Creative Writing academics involved in Higher Degree Research.

2. Context

A number of 'big picture' factors affecting Creative Writing programs in Australia are worth considering when we discuss choosing and supervising individual postgraduate research students. According to the DEST report mentioned above, the Higher Education sector's response to the Government's 1999 White Paper *Knowledge and Innovation* (Kemp 1999) is changing both the kinds of students and the kinds of research topics selected for Higher Degree Research programs in Australia. The push for so-called timely completions has resulted in a trend toward more selective recruitment that 'clearly restricts diversity in the student population' (Neumann 135) and has resulted, in some disciplines, in 'a trend toward 'safe' research' (136). In science and engineering 'safe' research leads to smaller projects that can be completed more quickly, meaning that the higher-degree students involved will not acquire as many research skills as otherwise and/or that research outcomes will be more modest.

What might safe betting mean in the context of Creative Writing Higher Degree Research Programs? We cannot do what our colleagues in science and engineering do, for 'The Minute Waltz' cannot be played in less than sixty seconds, as it were: there is a limit to how short (say) novels can be made and certainly on how much simpler their plots can be if they are to remain marketable to publishers. Thus safe betting might involve recruiting people more advanced with respect to outcomes, at least with respect to the creative part of the outcome - candidates represented by agents, with a few books on their résumés and proposals already accepted by publishers. The main, ostensibly positive, outcome presumably would be a timely completion because the student would be primarily focussed on the exegesis, and a related one would be that half of the teacher's job would be lightened. Another might not be regarded as positive, namely that the already-published student might not learn a great deal about creative writing as a result of the process, instead recycling themes and techniques from earlier work. And a third result might be construed as clearly negative: younger/newer/less-advanced writers would be denied the opportunity to learn the craft and enter the profession.

Related to this issue is the relationship between Creative Writing in Higher Education and the publishing industry. If, as Hilary McPhee proposes (McPhee 2001), in-house editors are disappearing and the money available for sub-contract freelance editors to advise on correction and revision is being subsumed by an ever-expanding marketing budget, has the role of the Higher Degree Research supervisor become a de facto editor for publishers, a hidden government subsidy for an ever-struggling industry? If so, is this a good thing? Is it how we would want to define our role? Philip Edmonds, writing in a recent edition of *TEXT*, clearly laments such an idea, pointing out that such a fate would turn university writing programs into 'quaint cottage industries' that simply reinforce existing industry structures (Edmonds 2004).

On a more positive level, the third factor to note is the growth of Creative Writing Higher Degree Research programs in Australian universities. This growth has been both recent and rapid. When Nigel Krauth published the first nationally-collected statistics on such programs offered in Creative Writing in Australia in 2000, there were nine Higher Degree Research programs at doctoral level for potential candidates to choose from (Krauth 2000). A more recent count of offerings in the AAWP Guide (undertaken in May 2004) indicates that 23 institutions are offering Higher Degree Research in Creative Writing, including 25 Research Masters programs and 20 doctoral-level programs.

At Curtin University of Technology, during 2003 alone, we have had a widely diverse range of applicants for Creative Writing Higher Degree Research programs. These have ranged from award-winning authors, to MFA graduates from the United States, from our own Honours graduates, to doctors of physics and dentistry who have a remarkable interest in writing a novel. The greater the interest in Creative Writing research degrees nationally and the greater the diversity of applicants, the more urgent the imperative to decide whether certain degree programs should be more responsive to the students in a certain spectrum of the applicants or to certain post-graduation practices like full-time writing, or teaching writing, or working in an allied area like art therapy. Indeed, this matter, taken in tandem with the recent pressures to recruit students that are safe bets for timely completion (as indicated in Neumann's DEST report) may shortly see particular Creative Writing programs and/or particular supervisors in Australia working more exclusively with particular genres, markets or professional outcomes in mind. Such a trend would also be in line with the Federal Government's *Knowledge and Innovation* White Paper, which encourages universities to prioritise places based on an institution's fields of research excellence and concentrations.

3. Motivation and Focus

Directly related to the question of orientating whole degree programs in particular directions is the issue of student motivation. Why does a candidate choose to do a Higher Degree Research in Creative Writing? In considering both the selection of candidates and the likely relationships those candidates will develop during their Higher Degree Research journey, issues to do with how pro-active the student is inclined to be and how much s/he 'owns' the project need to be taken into account. Some students need little or no encouragement to work, whereas some others can be virtually recalcitrant, resisting getting started and then, once started, expecting to be told what to do every step of the way. In a broad sense, Neumann's DEST report found that candidates who take responsibility for managing their Higher Degree Research commitments and have a consuming interest in their research are far more likely to have a good relationship with their supervisors and to complete on time.

In the Creative Writing discipline, possibly the best indicator of potential motivation is a healthy publication record. But an interview can also be a good guide, and it has the added value of letting the student and the supervisor discover the extent of the rapport between them. We also believe that an important indicator of motivation is how well focussed the prospective student is.

By focus we mean how clearly s/he has defined the Higher Degree Research project, that is, its product and the research requisite to it - for

example, whether or not the student has settled on a traditional genre or some mixed or new one. If a relative beginner has chosen a genre, then the resultant book (say) will be his/her first one. If it is an already-published writer, then the question is whether s/he more wants to learn to write a sequel, or if s/he wants to acquire a sufficient overview to be able to write any number of different pieces in that genre. The same questions apply to someone who wants to switch from one career and/or genre to another, as in the case of a journalist who wants to change to fiction: is it the short story, novella or novel; the first one, or the second, or the series, for example? In addition to these questions, there is the question relevant to all Higher Degree Research applicants as to how and to what extent the project constitutes a new contribution to knowledge.

In this connection we are also interested in what awarenesses and knowledges would-be-students bring to their projects. Introspection is important but it can lead to two different unproductive manifestations. In one of them the student is so self-absorbed that, like Narcissus, s/he cannot even start to write for that reason. In the other, students can find the writing process to be so cathartic that they are blinded to the fact that their self-analyses and self-revelations are utterly fascinating to no one but themselves. These tendencies are more to be addressed and guided than resisted or dismissed, if only for the fact that they are closely implicated with different kinds of writing, most obviously autobiography.

In the same connection it is important also to address the extreme at the opposite end of the spectrum, namely the kind of other-orientedness that blinds you to yourself and might even be a strategy against self-awareness and self-knowledge. It can make for a helpful student in workshop sessions, one who empathises with other writers and praises their work. But it can also make for a student whose intolerance for separation renders him or her incapable of measured judgements, an incapacity that would be disabling when writing biography, for example, and/or other creative non-fiction genres.

As for different knowledges, we are concerned to decline the gambit offered when terms like 'academic' and 'intellectual' are opposed to terms like 'creative' and 'imaginative', oppositions we too often accept from others or even use ourselves. For one thing, they have us holding the weak hand, leaving us to pit irrationality and illogicality against reason and logic when the rest of the synonyms are dealt out. For another, they are false dichotomies, in that they force us to affirm only one of two things of value to us: we want our students to be intellectual *and* imaginative, academic *and* creative.

To that end, we propose 'academic literacy' and 'creative literacy' as useful terms; in this context 'literacy' denoting two related skills, namely skill in intelligent and imaginative reading (critique) and skill in imaginative and intelligent writing (technique). By being complementary, the terms acknowledge the facts that we value both skills equally and, moreover, believe that better readers make better writers and better writers makes better readers. Practically speaking, various institutions will put different emphases on the academic or the creative, but we assume none will seek out students who are unintelligent and unimaginative.

In many cases, the knowledges students bring to their Higher Degree Research programs are the direct result of the knowledges encouraged and developed in those students via an institution's undergraduate and honours programs. Indeed, 'The Doctoral Educational Experience' report indicates

that by far the most common matching of student and supervisor occurs where the two already know each other:

This was the case for half of the students interviewed in this study. In these cases the student is familiar with the supervisor's research area through previous undergraduate study, usually through honours, and not uncommonly, after a break from study. Through undergraduate study students have often undertaken honours research and it is common for those students to return to their honours supervisor to work on an extension of their honours topic or a related area. (Neumann 32)

It would be interesting to conduct research specifically in the Creative Writing discipline in Australia to discover whether or not this broad practice is statistically comparable for our area. Anecdotal evidence would suggest it is so to some extent, but the second most common route for candidates to particular supervisors is, according to DEST, through the identification of particular individuals by prospective students on a national or international basis. This scenario involves what Nigel Krauth and Inez Baranay call 'the acclaimed supervisor factor' (Krauth & Baranay 2002). They list writers such as Glenda Adams, Elizabeth Jolley, Amanda Lohrey and Kevin Brophy, on the Australian scene, as acclaimed writers who are well known as writing teachers and writing supervisors. 'What students are looking for here,' say Krauth and Baranay, 'is very much a sense of "mentorship" and its focussed experience.'

4. Relationships

The relationship that exists between Higher Degree Research students and supervisors does not fit easily into available models, especially in the Creative Writing area. That is, the provider-client metaphor adopted by most universities since the 1990's does not apply because the supervisor is not a salesperson whose job or level of income is directly affected by his/her success with individual students. Medico-legal and pastoral metaphors do not apply either, for privileging the confidentiality of the information exchanged in the relationship is not the central issue.

A browse through recent Higher Education pedagogy papers on student/supervisor relationships uncovers a number of other classifications. Tricia Vilkinas, writing in *Education and Training*, describes the supervisor as a kind of manager and refers to management literature accordingly (Vilkinas 2002). M.T.B. Drysdale, writing about the student/supervisor relationship in a graduate education context, coins the term 'dyad interdependence' - one that quite suits our image of three-legged racers (Drysdale 2003). By far the most commonly cited term for the relationship in the Higher Education literature, however, is that of mentorship. This concept invokes a filial metaphor, such as the one underpinning the relationship between Mentor and his nephew Telemachus while Odysseus was away at Troy (note 2). It is also, as Krauth and Baranay have documented in an earlier edition of *TEXT*, the most commonly used term and practice for formal relationships between established and emerging writers funded by writers' centres and the like outside of the academy in Australia.

Mentoring occurs when a person - with knowledge not readily available elsewhere, even knowledge unique to the mentor - is willing and able to

establish a special bond with a student intent upon acquiring that knowledge. Mentoring in the Creative Writing area is unique for two things. One is the fact that the medium is the matter - English is both the language of the instruction *and* the subject matter (as in poetry or prose). The other is the extent to which the *student* is also the subject matter, something we are most acutely aware of when working with students writing confessional poetry, for example.

Theoretically, the fact that it is a mentoring relationship does not matter in some respects. That is, assuming the student is clear about his/her needs and interests, then it makes no difference if s/he wants to attempt parthenogenesis or learn how to write fiction with a second-person narrator. But in practical terms it can make a great deal of difference. For one thing, some students either don't know what they want or change their minds along the way. For another, it sometimes becomes clear that a student who thought s/he was a poet is much better at (say) drama. Particularly where the numbers of staff and students are relatively small, it is not always easy to find a different mentor for a student.

This situation moots issues beyond problems merely involving such things as genres. That is, the original Mentor was able to give counsel and advice because of the special relationship that existed, with his care matched by Telemachus' trust, and as teachers we try to maintain a nurturing environment in class. And yet, with ten, twenty or even thirty undergraduate students in the room the results will inevitably be somewhat mixed; but that is known by staff and students in advance, and there are compensatory mechanisms like the support that students give each other. The situation is much different in the one-on-one Higher Degree Research relationship in the Creative Writing discipline: if recruitment and/or enrolments are not conducted with regard for much more than a person's reputation or demeanour on the day, then our hopes for the relationships formed are not much more than for a three-legged racing pair ludicrously ill-matched for comparative stride.

The supervisor and the student alike must be prepared for an unusual amount of give and take that involves trust (and even risk) perhaps unique to education in the arts. Where the relationship is much at risk is when it becomes clear - as is inevitable given a research project's new contribution to knowledge - that the student knows more than the supervisor or needs to take the project into territory new to the supervisor or to both of them. Where it is most exhilarating is when they become equal partners with different learning and production goals, something that can require the supervisor to subordinate his/her ego and interests to the student's. With these aspects in mind, we wonder if there is a point at which the term mentorship becomes inappropriate for the student/supervisor relationship. For surely there was a point, perhaps several points, at which Mentor learnt something from Telemachus.

Finally, from the beginning, we must recognise the fact that, for reasons no more culpable than 'personality conflicts,' a supervisor and a student might not get along. One may find the other a poor listener, for example, or one may feel the other is too brash. A different problem with the same effect can result when a student decides that the work has reached a point where he or she would be more comfortable with a supervisor of a different gender. In addition, staff should make clear to students that it is possible or even likely the supervisor will be away on leave for substantial periods during the program or might even leave the university for other employment or for retirement. This can affect different students in

different ways: a supervisor could be away for two semesters during a full-time Masters student's year or two of work; and part-time doctoral students constitute a trickier problem, for they can be with us for six years (or even more with leaves of absence). If the possible need for alternative supervisory arrangements are not at least acknowledged at the beginning, if not tentatively put in place, it is arguable that an unhappy student would have a legitimate complaint against the university.

It seems obvious when reports like 'The Doctoral Education Experience' posit that relationships between supervisor and student work best when 'both students and supervisors are careful in their mutual selection,...the inherent power differentials in the relationship are clearly recognised and there is open and frequent communication between student and supervisor' (Neumann 139). But in three-legged races, there are always those who spend more time falling over than moving forward. This can be fun, or it can become rather torturous: a kind of comedy of errors. Consider, for example, the following two rather comic but tragic scenarios.

5. Two scenarios

Scenario 1

The candidate is a beginning writer applying for a doctoral Creative Writing program at the same university where she completed a BA(Hons) in the area. She is more interested in self-discovery than in publication, and her writing is based on personal experience in the sex industry. The exegesis explores the genre of women's erotica and is well grounded in contemporary critical theory.

The supervisor is a young staff member, already known to the candidate, and they form a close and promising relationship, meeting once a fortnight. However, twelve months into the doctorate, the staff member, who is herself regarded as 'promising', scores a job at a prestigious Hong Kong university and leaves the country. The candidate is passed on to a more mature male supervisor whose specialisation is not in the Creative Writing area, but who has done some critical work on sexuality and gender.

The relationship is an uncomfortable one, and meetings drop back to once every three months. The new supervisor finds the candidate difficult to hold a conversation with - she gives monotone single-syllable answers to his questions. At the end of the second year, the candidate reveals that she is being treated for a psychological disorder, and that her medication sometimes makes her moody. One could speculate that discomfort in the relationship is raising the student's anxiety and thereby increasing the need for medication, which in turn makes the relationship more difficult and less productive. Progress on the project slows.

At the end of three and a half years, both novel and exegesis are ready for examination, largely due to help from the initial supervisor who has been sending feedback via email from overseas. The ex-supervisor encourages the department to 'show off' the work to high-profile examiners: it is a sure thing. The thesis is submitted mid-year, and the novel is simultaneously entered for a national first-novel award. Just before the announcement that the book has been shortlisted for the award, one of the examiners submits a glowing report to say 'do not change a thing', suggesting the student's name be added to the Vice-Chancellor's List. The other examiner - from a

local university - takes a longer time to return a verdict and then, the day before the book is announced as winner of the major national award, submits a lengthy report saying that the work needs a complete rewrite. He is concerned that the text is more unacknowledged fact than original fiction, and that it is moreover highly defamatory. In addition, he has listed extensive notes where he proposes that substantial sections of the novel are plagiarised from a thesis submitted at his own university three years earlier. This claim is later proven.

Scenario 2

The candidate is an established writer, has published three novels, two of them to critical acclaim - the most recent won a Premier's Award. He wants to write full-time, but has school-aged children and a mortgage and needs a steady income. He hears about the doctoral scholarship program and thinks he might be able to use it as a de facto arts grant, enabling him to work full-time on the next novel (which is already substantially underway) for three or four years. He has a first degree in geography (with no honours year) and is not overly enthused about the prospect of theorising the writing process in the exegetical component. He is phobic about literary isms.

The would-be supervisor has no real desire to work with this particular person, who has been known to behave badly at literary festivals, and who once said publicly that he didn't believe that Creative Writing could be taught. Nevertheless, the supervisor feels the reputation of the university's postgraduate Creative Writing program could benefit from an association with this critically acclaimed novelist - having this candidate complete might attract positive attention to the degree.

The candidate secures a scholarship and the would-be supervisor becomes the actual supervisor. The candidate takes eighteen months to complete a publisher-ready draft of the novel, taking on board none of the supervisor's comments (except for some minor proofreading corrections) and he makes no progress at all on the exegesis. Twelve months pass, and during this time the candidate, who is supposed to be working on the exegesis, sees the supervisor twice - once to fill her in on the youngest child's latest illness, and once to tell the supervisor he is dropping out of the research methods unit (the only required coursework) because the lecturer who is taking that course is a knob-end who doesn't know the first thing about writing novels.

Three years in, the candidate's novel comes out with Peckerwood Press and is shortlisted for the next Premier's Award. The supervisor begins to feel completely ineffectual and, having never published a novel herself, slightly intimidated. The candidate accepts an advance on novel number five. The supervisor goes on combined long service and study leave. The scholarship runs out. The candidate has still made no progress on the exegesis. Had he received an arts grant, the result most likely would have been the same.

6. Analysing the Two Scenarios

Of course these are fictional scenarios, and in either case, the number of things that have gone wrong you would not wish upon anyone in real life. But there remain embedded in these scenarios a long list of possible things

that can (and sometimes do) go wrong along the Creative Writing Higher Degree Research journey in real life.

In the first scenario, there are a number of elements that may ordinarily occur over the course of a single candidate's Higher Degree Research in any discipline: one supervisor leaves the country, another goes on extended leave, the candidate suffers a long-term illness. In addition, it would not be unusual for the writer of a first novel to base a significant amount of the fiction on things that have occurred in real life. But there are also a group of extraordinary occurrences in this first scenario, things far less predictable, that to make things worse, were poorly handled. Consider that the candidate has come through the faculty or department's honours program, she and the supervisor have an existing relationship, and that the project seems like a significant new contribution to knowledge, as well as being well-grounded in critical theory.

We can only speculate, of course, as to how the numerous things that went badly wrong might have been prevented. Perhaps the candidate was too dependent on the first supervisor. Perhaps the first supervisor, in her naiveté, encouraged this. It's also possible that the candidate should not have been awarded a replacement principal supervisor from outside of the Creative Writing discipline. But then again, maybe it wasn't the discipline area that was the problem in that second relationship, maybe both the supervisor and the student failed to be selective enough of each other. How are decisions made in this department or faculty regarding who supervises whom? Was there an opportunity for these two to meet each other at length first, or was the choice made in a hurry, on-the-run? And then there are the plagiarism and legal issues. Could these have been foreseen? To what extent is it the supervisor's role to pick these things up? And to what extent is it the candidate's responsibility to behave ethically in the first place? Should a candidate be permitted to submit a manuscript for a high-profile literary award prior to submitting a thesis to examiners - or would that tie the supervisor's hands and make examination not wholly an objective process? Finally, what role did the postgraduate coordinator play in all this? Was s/he completely ineffectual? Indeed, in both scenarios, why weren't the problems picked up in annual progress reports, *before* things got out of hand?

Significantly, and it would come as no surprise to most Higher Degree Research candidates, nor to their supervisors, Neumann's DEST report identifies 'a very strong recognition of difficulties with the annual progress reporting format', one that warrants investigation (Neumann 137). According to Neumann, postgraduate students favour a panel review without the supervisor present - not the standard practice at most institutions. Additionally, the report found that although most institutions have taken into account pastoral care and ombudsmen roles to some extent, the reality was more often that such people 'carry a heavy responsibility with little authority' (137).

In the second scenario, which is less dramatic than the first, the end-point is far more predictable. This candidate was not a suitable candidate for a Creative Writing Higher Degree Research program. This is not to suggest that published novelists who have been away from higher education for an extended period do not make good Higher Degree Research candidates. But this student's lack of awareness of the Higher Degree Research context and requirements, coupled with the supervisor's willingness to overlook that lack for the sake of public profile and an assumed timely completion lead both the university and the candidate down a difficult path.

In fact, we would argue that in both scenarios, the problems that arose during the journey could largely have been prevented if the candidates were more carefully screened for their suitability to both the Higher Degree Research program and to the supervisor. Similarly, some responsibility lies with the candidates themselves, in their need to be more clear about their motivation and focus.

7. Conclusion

Philosophers like Gary Larson have demonstrated that domestic animals do not have masters but harmless humans with whom they share life for a time: so too with Higher Degree Research students and so-called supervisors. We have raised a number of issues in this paper that are likely to arise for students/supervisors during their respective journeys through the Creative Writing Higher Degree Research program. Some of these issues are particular to the Creative Writing discipline and some are not. Some are within the control of the individual student and or supervisor and some are not. We would like to conclude our paper with some suggestions for dealing with those issues that we believe are in within reach of the individual players, or rather, within reach of the duo running together, for a time, in the three-legged race.

Considerations for the student:

How is your project a research project and why is it suited to the academy? A helpful diagnostic device is to ask whether or not you would be interested and able to research/write the exegesis only, instead of the exegesis and the related creative work.

Make a checklist of what you want in your supervisor: professional reputation and/or experience with the genre/technique, theory, etc.; and/or personal rapport.

Sound out potential supervisors prior to putting in an application, and find out what other postgraduate research students in Creative Writing have to say about particular supervisors before you commit.

Be responsible for your research and take ownership of the process.

For the supervisor:

If choosing students who you believe can complete in a timely fashion, consider and affirm the effects of that choice on the diversity of the student population, the quality of the journey you take with the student/s, and the quality of the product.

In consultation with the student, clarify expectations and responsibilities with respect to the Creative Writing program, the exegesis and the creative work, and your respective roles prior to embarking on the journey.

Explain the purpose of the annual progress report and explore the appropriateness of agreeing to more frequent milestones at which progress will be monitored.

Ask yourself how many three-legged races you can run simultaneously and in how many directions. Or, to put it differently, how many and how diverse can your Higher Degree Research students/projects be without compromising the quality of your supervision?

Considerations for the already leg-strapped duo:

Adjust, adjust! DEST research indicates that the most successful supervisory relationships are those in which power differentials are acknowledged, and communication is open and frequent.

Adjust, adjust! Perspectives change according to the stage of the enrolment. It is worthwhile recalling Figure 1 and discussing openly the myriad different factors influencing the journey at any one time.

However odd the three-legged supervisor/student duo might look to us, the better their fit from the beginning, the better they will get along, whatever the reason for starting the race and whatever its goal might be (note 3).

Notes

1) We use the term Higher Degree Research (often abbreviated as HDR) throughout this paper in the sense used by the Australian Government's Department of Education, Sciences and Training (DEST). It is a term that is used by DEST to refer to all postgraduate degrees that are predominantly research-based. At the authors' institution, Curtin University of Technology, the programs offered in the Creative Writing area are professional ones, that is, the Master of Creative Arts and the Doctor of Creative Arts. We have chosen to use the HDR term in order to encompass other models of postgraduate research programs in creative writing in Australia (for example, the University of Queensland's programs in Creative Writing that use the more traditional Master of Philosophy and Doctor of Philosophy titles but follow much the same guidelines as our own professional creative writing masters and doctoral programs). Return to article

2) Dibble has written about mentoring in 'An Idiot of the Present or a Genius of the Future?: Some Problems, Some Promise' in *TEXT*, 6.2 (October 2002). Return to article

3) Note that an earlier version of this paper was presented as 'Goethe's Dog: Choosing, Feeding and Caring for the Postgraduate Creative Writing Student' at the Eighth Annual Conference of the Australian Association of Writing Programs, UNSW/Sydney, 27-30 November 2003. Return to article

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