

Griffith University

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The Creative Writing Doctorate in Australia: An Initial Survey

Introduction

Currently creative writing doctorates are hard to get anywhere in the world. In the northern hemisphere, the Master of Fine Arts is the generally-accepted terminal degree in the discipline. But in Australia, creative writing programs view the doctorate as the ultimate academic writing award.

In the Australian context, the creative writing PhD is subject to ongoing political debate about research worth and cultural values for creative practice. National notions of research equivalence (the debate here often led by the sciences) intertwine with internal university problems in valuing creative projects as valid academic pursuit.

The small number of creative writing doctoral programs available in Australia are subject to a variety of submission and assessment requirements. The potentially 100%-creative-work model sits alongside the exegesis-linked-to-a-creative-product model. And between them one may posit a fictocritical 'integrated' model. Examination criteria for this broad array are 'still evolving'.

Australian university writing programs are international pioneers in developing the creative writing doctorate, but there is not yet a nationally-identifiable unitary practice in the endeavour.

Nature of the Survey

This paper is based on a survey undertaken in the three months prior to the AAWP Writing 2000 Conference in June 2000. It established that the creative writing doctorate, as known in Australia, was defined by degree programs in a small number of universities - just 8 of them. This compared with 37 Australian universities where creative writing studies could be undertaken at levels below the doctorate. In these 8 universities (in April 2001 the number has risen to 11) a student can enrol in a doctoral research program where the final submission may include for assessment an original text in the form of a creative writing product. (See Appendix)

The survey gathered information about requirements a) in terms of admission criteria and procedures, and b) in terms of assessment guidelines given to students and examination criteria provided to examiners. For a) I asked a research assistant (the prospective 'student') to go through the early steps in applying for a creative writing doctorate at the 9 universities publicised by the AAWP as offering such a degree. The 'student' used initial email approaches with telephone follow-ups. For b) I contacted by telephone the Office of Research in six of the universities concerned and asked them to provide me with the Guidelines for Examiners in the case of a doctoral submission involving a creative writing product. In this part of the survey I made enquiries as a prospective 'examiner'. Both the 'student' and the 'examiner' revealed to the universities that they were involved in a survey, but indicated they wanted 'normal' treatment.

The survey accumulated documents provided by the universities on request or were taken from the web. It also recorded the experiences of the two researchers.

Clearly the aim of this initial survey was not to find out what academics or students within each of the universities concerned have to say about the situation of their respective doctorate courses. That discourse has begun elsewhere. Internal matters such as the types of projects accepted, the problems of supervision, the kinds of teaching or mentoring, the nature of the exegesis, the relative weighting of exegetical and creative material, the role of external editors, etc are not considered here. This survey focused on promotion and administration of the early and late phases of the degrees from two perspectives external to each university - the inquiring student and the potential external examiner.

It seemed to me that the likelihood for success of this new and developing kind of program, and its viability in the current political situation, would be dependent on the ways in which universities promoted, administered and examined the degree. And from that, how purposefully they stood behind its existence amongst the array of doctorates available and in the changing political context.

The Creative Doctorate's Status

There are various contexts for the creative writing doctorate that will affect its status: how it stands in relation to similar postgraduate studies internationally; how it stands in relation to doctorates in other disciplines in Australia; how our small number of programs stand in relation to each other; and how the current state of flux in research training in this country - a highly politicised matter - might impinge on its current and further development.

In his seminal paper, 'The Ghost and the Machine: Creative Writing and the Academic System', Andrew Taylor states:

it is important that higher degrees in Creative Writing be *recognised* [my italics] as research degrees, otherwise universities will marginalise them...

This concept of being '*recognised* as research' is both an internal and external matter for universities. Taylor goes on to suggest that the battle for recognition has to be taken up initially at an internal level - that academics teaching and supervising creative writing projects will first have to skirmish with their local administrations, and that skirmish having been won, the individual university will have to impress its recognition on other universities, and then, that the collective of universities that recognise creative writing as research will have to commit to a campaign to overthrow federal government negative thinking.

Taylor said of the situation in early 1999:

...because [these programs] contribute nothing to [a university's] pursuit of Research Quantum...[t]his is something that each university has to pursue for itself, and it has significance for the nature and formal requirements of Masters and Doctorates in Creative Writing or the Creative Arts.

Since Taylor made these statements, and in the context of the spill of ideas generated by the Government's Research White Paper in late December 1999, a window of opportunity opened. (See also Taylor, October 2000.) Universities were asked to respond to Minister Kemp's new governance of research training by indicating their definition of 'research activity' amongst academic staff. That window allowed universities that already involved themselves in supervision of creative doctorates to take the running in impressing the Minister, and the research community in general, of the significance and substantiality of the creative writing doctorates they offered.

I will come back to the doctorate's status and its contexts later in this paper. At the time the survey was conducted some of these matters were considerably less clear than they are now. The survey coincided with a period when the representatives of creative industries training in Australian universities had come to a full realisation of the seriousness of the academic research situation with regards to the future and mobilised themselves accordingly. The survey provides a snapshot, however, of the somewhat ragged state of the creative writing doctorate just after the White Paper's publication.

Results of the Survey - Entry

The survey showed up, rather alarmingly, the difficulty a prospective student will find in locating information about the current small crop of creative writing doctorates in both web-based and print materials disseminated by the 8 universities involved. When the 'student' went through the process leading towards formal application for a creative writing doctorate at the 9 universities publicised by the AAWP, she came up with the following result:

one of them didn't offer a creative writing doctorate at all (a mistake on the AAWP's part);

five of them passed her on to an individual academic staff member who, it was said, had information not yet or not normally publicised;

two of them clearly stated in website and printed form that such a program was available and described it confidently and comprehensively;

and the last did not respond.

Regarding the five who passed the 'student' on to an individual staff member, the response was interestingly similar in each case. The university did not *clearly* publicise the fact that a doctorate with a creative writing component was available, but enrolment, as if by subterfuge, could be arranged. When pressed, in each of these cases, the academic staff member admitted that the formal requirements for such a degree were 'in process of being developed'. In other words, the internal skirmish was probably in full swing. A candidate can enroll, but the criteria for the ultimate submission are somewhat clouded and certainly not developed to a point of confident publication.

These five universities enroll the student into a generic PhD program. The student can propose, be accepted into and supervised in, and submit for examination a creative writing work as the major part of this degree, but the business lacks full documentation as yet. It is my opinion that these universities have, over the last several years, allowed students to enroll in creative writing doctorates in order 'to see what happens'. In some cases it seems these enrolments were illegal, in the sense that the university did not have the ability to award the degree at the time of taking the students in. There is one well-known history of a student's final submission sitting on an Office of Research desk while the university took six months to decide on the criteria by which it would be examined. These insecure arrangements, and the state of unease they engender later on for the enrolled student, do not apparently prevent prospective students from wishing to continue with enrolment into these degrees.

While the parlous state of official requirements is a worry to both administrations and students, and an area of possible legal contest, it has its positive side. The 'see what happens' approach has been useful. It has allowed the creative PhD into these universities via the back door, so to speak. These universities have waived strict rules and shown foresight and academic generosity. Almost unheard of elsewhere in the world, you can indeed get a creative writing PhD in Australia. This kind of administrative initiative (or was it just administrators caught napping while academics undermined the system?) while dangerous, has been effective.

Regarding the 'I'll pass you on to an individual academic staff member' tag, further enquiry revealed this to be the *normal* way into a PhD program in any discipline in these universities. Via this process a quick and responsive assessment of the applicant's qualifications, his proposed project and the availability of supervisory expertise is promised. The prospective creative writing enrollee, while possibly concerned that formal requirements are 'still evolving', at least gets the usual *personal* treatment. This becomes a problem (not only in the unclear creative writing area, but in better established areas as well) when academics give misleading information. Academics are more likely to give misleading information when the administrative situation remains unresolved. In the survey, the 'student' was referred to *senior* staff members, usually program heads - 'someone who knows about the area' (both academically and administratively) - in these five universities. The universities clearly rely on their senior staff not to mislead or make false promises in the current creative PhD quagmire. This is part of the normal stress of senior academic life, but it also means that the information given to students can be guarded and hedging, and not conducive to their comfortable entry into a program of intense study.

Regarding the specific qualification requirements for undertaking a doctorate with creative content, the survey indicated that entry demands do not differ greatly across the board. All give value to previous academic record, to industry and/or research experience, to publication achievement, and to submitted portfolios. These types and levels of recognised qualification are similar to entry requirements in other disciplines, e.g. Education.

The two universities that clearly advertise and describe comprehensively the details concerning their creative writing doctorates are the University of Wollongong and the University of Technology, Sydney. In both cases, the doctorates on offer are DCAs - Doctorates in Creative Arts - not PhDs. Having availability of DCAs seems to produce a greater willingness, on the part of the universities concerned, to publicise and commit to the significance of this level of study. In the published documentation it is emphasised that the DCAs are equivalent to PhDs in these universities. Both universities publish side by side the different requirements for a creative doctorate and those for the generic doctorate.

There's a caution to be expressed here. University administrations have been willing to support and promulgate the notion of doctoral studies labeled 'Doctorates in Creative Arts' where creative products are concerned, while they were more reticent about publicly standing by the notion of the generic PhD with a creative component. The possibility that all creative doctorates might be DCAs - that no PhD should be 'creative' - has been underlying the 'see what happens' approach. The DCA in creative writing would be the easy way out for universities who don't think creative writing is a 'proper research' endeavour.

This, of course, raises the question of whether DCAs in Australia are really considered as equivalent to PhDs. And further, whether the DCA might not ultimately be seen to be equivalent to the MFA (the Master of Fine Arts) in the United States. I will come back to this point later.

Results of the Survey - Examination

While the survey observed that entry into the available degrees was an uncomfortable process, but comparatively unproblematic once information was found and local campus circumstances were overcome, graduation out of these degrees was considerably more fraught. Examination and conferral of a doctorate in creative writing is currently subject to several highly-politicised scenarios. The main point here is that the majority of universities offering creative writing doctorates have not yet fully published their examination criteria.

In approaching the Office of Research in six of the universities concerned in the survey, I had already acted as examiner for two of them in creative writing PhD submissions. So, in some cases, I had personal experience of the full processes involved.

Regarding the survey, in only one case was the information given to me already publicly available (in print form). This university - the University of Technology, Sydney - tells creative doctoral students, even before they enroll, about the criteria under which their examiners will operate. Thus doctoral student and examiner are together working from an expressed set of guidelines.

The other universities provide their doctoral examining criteria in the form of a proforma for examiners' eyes only. They have generic doctoral assessment criteria available to the student upon request, but don't necessarily publicise them. In one university, the particular concerns for assessment in the 'aberrant' case of a creative writing PhD are included only in a covering Office of Research letter to examiners regarding the particular requirements of the school involved - an add-on factor delimiting the generic requirements. This university will continue with this method until the debate over its creative PhD assessment criteria is resolved. Interestingly, this debate is not mainly between the creative arts and other disciplines in the university; it is a debate amongst the creative arts themselves.

My personal experience of the processes of examining for other universities is that on a couple of occasions I have been unhappy about a PhD submission sent to me for assessment because the criteria applied in my own school (but certainly not yet publicised by my University) differ from the practice and requirements, or the standards, seemingly applied in the manuscripts that arrive. At the doctorate level, where assessment is always an across-university affair - and is both fine-grained and large-scale, and high-pressured to boot - small problems and differences can quickly blow up into major difficulties. It seems in theory that some sort of standardisation of examination criteria is called for, but this will never happen. The contradiction at the heart of the PhD system - where each university has its own requirements, but also demands external examination - is entrenched. It would be pointless for creative writing to draw attention to itself by attempting to change this. But it would not be pointless for academics and administrators in individual universities to hurry up the process of settling on and publicising their separate examination criteria for creative PhDs.

We work in a discipline field that abhors conformity - and this fact relates to the continuing powerful significance of creative writing in the culture. Good creative writing continues to get noticed and have central cultural influence precisely because it doesn't give in to anything politically, socially, or theoretically institutionalised. Exciting and valuable creative writing tends to map out the unexamined, the undetermined, and the unfavoured in the culture. The process of shoe-horning creative endeavour into the academic research context is difficult enough without worrying about standardisation of assessment. I have been running a postgraduate writing program where I tell students to break literary and cultural rules and progress thereby, but then I need to get each student aside to explain that the PhD requires adherence to a swagload of academic conformities. I also have to impress upon my students that there are examiners out there who are unpredictable. 'They're worse than critics,' I say. 'They're worse than national literary award judges.'

Faced with this kind of dilemma, the Creative Arts Faculty at the University of Wollongong has produced a delicately balanced Examiner's Report proforma for their Doctor of Creative Arts. It asks the examiner to have an opinion about and report on whether:

- 1) the submission (the creative work together with the accompanying documentation) provides evidence that the candidate produced original creative work;
- 2) the submission demonstrates that the candidate has made a significant contribution to the creative discipline(s) concerned and/or the areas of inquiry;
- 3) the submission reveals that the candidate has a broad understanding of the creative discipline(s) concerned and/or the area(s) of inquiry;

4) the submission contains material suitable for publication (in written form or exhibition or performance);

and 5) the candidate has presented the submission in a manner and at a level appropriate to the creative discipline within which the work was conducted, and the literary, technical and artistic standard of the documentation is adequate.

The proforma also includes an information page that describes how there should be 'an integral relationship between the creative work and the documentation' and how a 'creative work may span more than one creative discipline, or be interdisciplinary in relation to creative disciplines, or explore new artforms for which there is no established disciplinary location.'

This well-wrought set of guidelines clearly derives out of Wollongong Creative Arts' long offering of their DCA. They have operated it for more than fifteen years and consider it a flagship program. Their examination criteria are notably flexible and broadly encompassing; they give the examiner plenty of room to move in. But they also give the student, and the degree itself, space for experimentation and innovation. The fact that the degree deals with submissions across the board in the creative arts - from pottery to poetry - is precisely why it is useful to consider for creative writing alone. Creative writing's broad field and its potential new directions require this elasticity.

I suggest that there is a benefit for creative writing schools around Australia to *settle* on and publicise a broadly similar set of flexible doctoral assessment guidelines - not to promote conformity per se, but to allow confident and amicable examining interactions to take place. I would see this idea of 'settling' on criteria to be something constantly debatable and always in flux. As creative writing moves in relation to cultural demands, so should the academic criteria for assessing its worth. The only way to keep sets of criteria responsive and vital is through information and communication. Staff in universities that offer creative writing doctorates should let each other know what's going on and keep in touch in order to monitor nuances and influences from political, cultural and academic spheres. If the creative writing doctorate is to establish its status, and survive, in the highly-politicised current research context, as a first requirement it needs nationally networked support.

Overseas and Local Comparisons

In the United States, the MFA is the terminal degree for creative writing (and other creative arts) academic study. The MFA will secure a job teaching creative writing in an American university (along with appropriate publications). In the past it was the adequate qualification for a long and successful career, with promotion, in a creative department. Susan Hayes, in her useful article published in *TEXT* and titled 'A Better Class of Writing? Some Reflections on the MFA Program in North America' indicates how in the States a bifurcation has been institutionalised. While the top academic qualification in other academic disciplines is the PhD, in the creative arts it is the MFA. This seems to say something about the value of the creative arts.

From speaking with American colleagues, I have the opinion that there has been a 'put-down' institutionalised into the North American process. In creative research there, one has normally aspired only to a Masters level. But the situation is changing. I currently have two PhD supervisions, domiciled in North America, who have come to me wanting an Australian PhD in creative writing because the status of the doctorate is something other than that of the MFA. The American creative academic context has begun to move towards recognition of the fact that the doctorate is the key degree.

It needs to be emphasised, however, that the end-product for submission in an MFA tends to be solely a creative work, e.g. a publishable novel, or a publishable collection of poems or

stories. An immediate difference in the Australian academic environment is that all current doctorates appear to demand a contextualising research study - a substantial critical/theoretical essay, or an exegesis of 20,000 to 30,000 words - that conforms to the overall demands of the generic PhD. Methodological and presentational requirements in this situation involve inclusion of, for example, a significant research bibliography. The 100%-creative-work model only operates, as far as I am aware, in a very few cases at the Masters level in our universities.

But the 100%-creative-work doctorate is talked about in Australia. In seeing our way forward, we are left here with the dilemma of proposing that the creative writing doctorate merge with the American MFA model (the all-creative project) or insisting that it retain elements equivalent to the requirements of the generic PhD (the 'research-equivalent' factor thus clearly demonstrated).

My own view is that Australian universities should press forward with the idea of the generic PhD gained through creative product plus contextualising academic study. I believe that it might be easier for us, in the immediate circumstance, to take the DCA route - to separate the creative doctorate off from the generic doctorate. But by that route we will set up a situation where the DCA, being different from the PhD, will be interpreted as being *different in research standard* from the PhD, and will be vulnerable to devaluation. The DCA will go the way of the MFA, and we will still want our PhD.

Specialist doctorates from named disciplines, e.g. a Doctor of Science, were once considered in the Australian academic context to be superior to the generic PhD. However, this use of terminology has been affected negatively by the rise of the 'Professional Doctorate' - a postgraduate award often involving the DETYA-authorised maximum permissible coursework component. The Doctor of Creative Arts has not achieved the status of the specialist doctorate, due to the precariousness of the creative arts in the research arena anyway. Also, in spite of not involving coursework, the current DCAs - as 'non-traditional doctoral submissions' - suffer from some of the fallout produced by the growing number of 'non-traditional' professional doctorates. Of course, the kind of full PhD we are talking about in creative writing involves a 'non-traditional doctoral submission' too, and there may with time develop a discriminatory segregation of PhDs - the 'traditionals' and the 'non-traditionals'.

The debate over the research value of creative writing continues, and I don't know why. It seems to me that creative arts practice is a major building block of culture, and the exegetical examination of it is the testing of the block's strength. As such, high-level creative activity and analysis are easily worthy of full PhD status. If an Engineering student can get a PhD for studying the ways in which a pre-stressed concrete girder cracks under pressure, why can't another student get an equally good PhD for studying the ways in which the entire culture cracks under the threat of an idea such as maternal infanticide? I know a PhD student who has a university-provided machine that breaks concrete girders. He watches as it happens and records it. He's writing up his findings in a slim dissertation. I know another PhD student - less well-funded - who is looking at how and why women kill their babies. She's recording cases in history and analysing attitudes among her peers. She's writing it up in the form of a novel with exegesis.

The Changing Australian Context

Any conclusions to be drawn from the survey need to be viewed in the light of changing political circumstances in the academic research domain. The survey was undertaken at a time when political momentum was developing around the issues of the creative PhD in Australia. The White Paper had opened up space for debate about these issues. The universities involved in creative industries training lobbied, it appears, quite successfully.

Government and the research community seem closer than ever before to a real recognition of creativity as research, evidenced by progress in discussions about:

- re-recognition of certain categories of creative product for Research Quantum;

- coordination of research grants between the Australian Research Council (the federal research funding body) and the Australia Council for the Arts (the federal arts funding body);

- inclusion of creative practice applications in ARC research funds rounds;

- and continued funding for creative PhDs under the new rules (which include, however, fewer funded places).

In the current climate it has been left to the universities themselves to decide individually what constitutes research for a PhD. The government appears concerned to step in only where professional doctorates contain too much coursework.

With reduced government funding for PhDs there may be greater pressures on students to complete within the set time. For creative writing students this is equivalent to the professional situation where a publisher's deadline must be met.

In those universities that responded to the survey, it was clear to the researchers that 'things were happening'. The bulk of these universities appeared to be 'in a muddle' about their creative writing PhDs, but this was explained as confusion to be blamed on the uncertainty of the national research agenda. Also I was aware from personal contacts that several of these universities were struggling through internal wrangles over recognition of creative research, such debate made all the more urgent by the rapidly changing national agenda.

Conclusion

Briefly stated, the survey and associated information confirms that:

- the availability of creative writing doctorates in Australia is still under pressure from a variety of sectors, but is a resource of international significance;

- the creative writing PhD is weathering the current trials in the national debate over creative research and appears to have strengthened its position, supported by the fact that several successful examinations and conferrals have now been completed around Australia;

- current enrolment procedures can be confusing for entry into the creative PhD (but far less so with entry into the DCA) and individual universities need to address fuller and more accessible publicity for requirements in submission and assessment of the creative PhD;

- there is no nationally-identifiable unitary practice in the requirements for submission or examining of creative writing doctorates, and while this state of affairs is unlikely to change there also appears to be little informative communication between universities at the supervisor and examiner levels and minimal networking of ideas on these matters.

All in all it seems unlikely that any university will soon tear up its creative writing doctorate if it already has one; and it is probable that more universities will strive to establish these doctorates as the national situation is clarified. The status of both the creative PhD and the DCA is not assured, but is currently on 'an upward note'. Submission and assessment requirements for creative doctorates vary across Australia, but while this is a danger for students wanting to be certain that they will pass, it is not currently affecting the award's academic or research viability.

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Appendix

The 9 universities originally included in the survey were taken from the AAWP Guide to university creative writing courses website <www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/cwcourses.htm> accessed in March-May 2000. They were:

University of Ballarat
Deakin University
Flinders University
Griffith University
La Trobe University
University of Queensland
Queensland University of Technology
University of Technology, Sydney
University of Wollongong

The University of Ballarat was incorrectly advertised on the AAWP website as offering a creative writing PhD. Currently three more universities advertise creative writing doctorates: University of Adelaide, Edith Cowan University, and Victoria University. [return to article](#)

Notes and Debate

Jeri Kroll *The Exegesis and the Gentle Reader/Writer*

Nigel Krauth is head of the creative writing program at Griffith University, Gold Coast campus. A version of this paper was first read at the AAWP Writing 2000 Conference, Gold Coast, June 2000. Research assistance for the survey was undertaken by Inez Baranay. Grateful thanks to Dr Patricia Wise for her support in the development of this paper.

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