Edith Cowan University

Andrew Taylor

Creative Work and the Research Quantum

Introduction

This paper focuses only on postgraduate writing programs, on what DETYA classifies as Higher Degrees by Research (HDR). To qualify for classification as a Higher Degree by Research two thirds of the degree has to be considered research. The exact nomenclature is immaterial - some institutions may officially designate such a degree a PhD, an MA., or a Doctor or Masters in the Creative Arts, rather than specifying Writing in the name of the degree. Whatever the name, many postgraduate writing degrees would fall into this category of Higher Degree by Research, though by no means all.

Despite some inevitable shortcomings or inaccuracies, the recent *AAWP Guide to Australian University Writing Programs* is an invaluable directory of what is on offer in this area. It lists seven PhDs, and two Doctorates of Creative Arts offered at the thirty-six universities surveyed (this includes the Victorian College of the Arts). At least one more PhD., at Edith Cowan University, should be added to that total. Thirty Masters degrees of varying kinds (Creative Arts, English, Writing, etc) are also listed. While it can be assumed that the PhDs would be HDRs, it is not clear whether the DCAs are. And among the Masters degrees, only two cases are specified as Research Masters, but it can be assumed that more than that number are.

My contention is that in a number of universities, specifically the poorer or the newer (and they are usually the same), these programs face a threat as a result of changes recently made by the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA). I shall be looking at these changes and their consequences later in this paper. First, however, in order to give some indication of what I think is being threatened by them, I need to look at several success stories in the Creative Writing field.

Because one of these stories involves my own university, Edith Cowan University, I want to emphasise that my reason for discussing it is not so that I can praise its success in relation to other institutions. Quite simply, although I have some figures of a general kind, information is not available in sufficient detail to enable such a comparison to be made with regard to Writing, even should I want to make one. (This lack of detail is a shortcoming of the picture of our 'discipline' which needs to be addressed.) Rather, I have chosen to look at my own university for two fairly obvious reasons:

> 1) It is the institution in which I work, and therefore about which I have the most, and most detailed, information; and, more importantly,
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> 2) It is an institution similar in history and configuration to many others that sustain a writing program, and the success and threats it is facing are not unique to it. What is going to impact on ECU will impact on all institutions, though in somewhat different ways.

The First Success Story

I came to ECU in the middle of 1992. It had become a university only the year before, and had no history or tradition of research or postgraduate supervision and training. As an agglomeration of Teacher Training Colleges, its former manifestation, WACAE (The WA College of Advanced Education), was not funded to conduct research and few of its academic staff had PhDs or - obviously - experience in postgraduate supervision. ECU also lacked the infrastructure required for a successful research ethos. There were very few experienced researchers, funding and supervisory expertise were hard to find, expertise in attracting external research funding was lacking, the new university was experiencing difficulties in tracking postgraduate research progress and ensuring prompt completion rates, computer facilities and office space for postgraduates were minimal; and so on. Most particularly, the new university, staffed almost entirely by people with little current experience of a research environment, had to learn how to cope with its new status as a research institution. Probably a familiar story to some of you, and very different indeed from what I had experienced during my twenty years at the University of Adelaide.

ECU worked very hard at overcoming these problems. I was one of the first two professorial appointments to be made from outside the institution. Others came in due course. One of the jobs of these new appointees was to plan, develop, and guide the development of the university's research activity. I can define this job now with some confidence, but at the time it was never spelled out, and I am sure that despite our best efforts we were less effective than we could have been if it had been made clearer. But of course it couldn't be clearer - it was our job to make it so, and we were pulling the whole operation up by the bootstraps. Not surprisingly, because ECU lacked a Strategic Plan, senior appointees often worked at cross purposes, lacked transparent means of communication, and were constantly re-inventing the wheel. I can recall having to participate in, I think, three separate efforts at developing a Faculty Strategic Plan which involved, basically, the scrapping of all previous work which had taken the better part of a year, for each of them, to develop. The morale was not bad, because there was a sense that we were creating something - a university. And in my own particular field I had some excellent staff with high qualifications - though, as one must expect within a small group subject to the pressure of rapid change and the consequently high level of insecurity, personality clashes occurred.

Since then ECU has achieved things for its postgraduates - university-wide - which have not only made their lives more conducive to effective and timely research, but have actually served to attract potential postgraduates to us from among graduates from other universities and from other countries. For example, we are developing a corpus of staff experienced in research and postgraduate supervision, as well as those capable of attracting outside research funding. Also, all ECU's postgraduates now have access to computing/internet facilities both on campus and from home, and (limited) research funds. Graduate students are also fully rewarded for publications through the university's three research outcome programs on a par with all other members of the university. These programs are:

> **1. Research Activities Index**: rewards are directly tied to DETYA Quantum distribution in terms of Weighted Publications, Research Degree Completions and Competitive Grants gained (Research Income).
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> **2. Creative and Performing Arts Index** - like the RAI, this is a University-wide scheme, developed at ECU in 1998 and now in its second year of paying rewards.
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> **3. Research Development Index**- this is Faculty based, and at the discretion of Faculties to determine whether the scheme operates, and how much is allocated to the pool for distribution among researchers.

I can give you figures for what has been achieved. Weighted publications, as classified by DEETYA/DETYA, have risen since the 1996 total of 181.8 to 354.6 in 1998 (the latest figures available.) This is a rise of 95% - in three years we almost doubled our research output. Over the period 1996-1999 - one year later - our Higher Degree by Research load in EFSUS rose by 20%, but our completion rate rose only by 7.8% - most likely due to the fact that the rising enrolment rate meant that students were not yet able to finish their degrees, as they still had some years of their candidature before them.

These figures show clearly that ECU has managed to encourage its staff and postgraduates to research, and to work towards the publication of their research in venues that enable a comparison of their activity to be made with other tertiary institutions. (For DETYA purposes, this publication in recent years can be in only four categories: Books, Book Chapters, Refereed Journal Articles and Refereed Conference Proceedings.) We have achieved a great deal. But no matter what we do, we are not overhauling other institutions. ECU has selected a group of 10 comparable universities for benchmarking purposes, and comparative figures show that for all our gains, the other universities have been making comparable gains. Our national ranking in such matters as earnings from National Competitive Grants, Publications, our share of Research Quantum and Research Infrastructure Block Grants, HDR Enrolments and completions is virtually unchanged. We may be moving ahead, but so is everyone else. This is why I am arguing that ECU can be considered typical of universities of its kind – i.e. the Dawkins universities which occupy the third band of the Higher Education sector.

On the face of it, this would seem to be a good thing. It seems to indicate that the Government has got it right: if it tightens the screws on funding, wields a big stick about productivity when it comes to decentralised Enterprise Bargaining, the system does the proper thing. It becomes leaner, it consumes less public money, and produces more in terms of research output and Higher Degree completions. More people are getting higher degrees, and more quickly. They cost the public less, and the universities are contributing more and more to the world's stock of knowledge and Australia's potential productivity in the new Knowledge Economy.

But of course that is not the whole picture. There have been huge rises in workload, student/staff ratios have expanded, and the inability of universities to meet justified claims for salary increases is in danger of producing a new brain-drain - not necessarily out of the country, but out of the tertiary teaching sector to other sources of employment. Postgraduate employment rates are also uncertain and by no means uniform - and although this is not a matter I can examine here, it should be borne in mind when I turn to look at the apparent demand for postgraduate credentials.

To meet the productivity challenge - i.e. to produce more with less - universities are also undertaking massive restructuring, both financial and organisational. For example, the Department of English I was appointed Professor within, in 1992, has disappeared, and is a segment of the School of International, Cultural and Community Studies. I have nothing against multi-disciplinarity, and I am happy with the School I am now in as a result of the University's abolition of Departments two years ago. But all these changes take time, promote insecurity, and need constant management. The increase in productivity has had to be matched by a substantial increase in work - only a bit of it actually involved with research and research training. Universities are becoming something like the armed forces, where for every frontline combatant there are many more support staff. In today's university system in Australia, for every hour's increase in research time, there are many more hours' increase in work to make that time, and the research, possible. Writing Grant Applications is only a part of it. I am talking also about the proportion of non-research staff whose role is to find - or, at least, to search for - research funds, organise revenue-producing activities and manage an increasingly complex research environment. With the shrinking proportion of Government spending on Higher Education, these people are, in reality, being required to find their own salaries from non-Government sources before their employment even brings a cent of income to the University. In addition, an increasing proportion of academic and administrative staff time is taken up with Quality Assurance procedures demanded by DETYA, to the point where quality itself is threatened.

So Where Is the Success in This 'Success Story'?

At this point I need to narrow the focus to concentrate on my own field of English - actually now designated English, Drama and Writing at Edith Cowan - and, ultimately, only on Writing. Our success at ECU, I would argue, is to be found in the *quality* of postgraduate enrolments. In the general field of English, since I arrived in mid-1992, we have graduated three PhDs in English and Drama. Another completed her PhD last year but delay with examiners' reports means she will officially graduate in 2000. (Another PhD student close to completion has, for family reasons, recently deferred submission, but is currently in the process of submitting research articles resulting from the PhD research to refereed journals.) Currently we have a total of 15 PhD enrolments, and 7 MAs in the general discipline area of English, Drama and Writing. If we pull these figures apart, we find that 7 of those PhDs and 4 of the MAs are Writing candidates: i.e. half of our Higher Degree by Research students are doing their degrees in Writing.

We also have a substantial undergraduate writing program - in fact we offer a full Major in Writing. But although some of these undergraduate Writing students progress to Honours, few will enter the Higher Degrees program. The reason, I think, is that the Honours and Postgraduate program is pitched well above the undergraduate level - or at least that is how it has become perceived by those who want to enter it. Our undergraduate Writing program seeks to impart valuable writing skills, knowledge and theoretical understanding to those who are usually beginners or amateurs when they come to us. They may or may not become creative writers, though some want to be. In contrast, those who are now enrolling for an MA or PhD in Writing have a different history. This year we enrolled three MAs in Writing and three PhDs. Among those enrolling for a Masters for the first time in 2000: one has had three books of poetry published, and works by teaching writing and by being a professional writer. Another, who several years ago won a fellowship from the Australia Council, has had two plays professionally performed. The third has a high level of organisational and research skills (as has the previous one, by the way), a lifetime of experience to draw on, and a compelling desire to write about it. As first year MA students they are all required to take taught units in which their capability for postgraduate work is assessed and any gaps in their knowledge remedied. With results just to hand, they have proved to be excellent students. Two other MA candidates are currently writing their major projects, a novel. They have both had several books published already.

Of those who this year have enrolled for the first time to do a PhD: one has just had her second novel published this year, and has recently won a major fellowship which enables her to spend the better part of a year at the University of East Anglia in the UK. During that time she will work on her third novel, the PhD project for ECU. Another, working on a novel for young adults, already has books published in that field. We also have four other Writing PhD candidates previously enrolled, but they lack the publishing record of the new enrollments. Although it may be too early to detect a firm trend in this, it is clear from these figures that now we have established professional writers seeking academic accreditation coming to us - probably as many as we can presently accommodate, given our other postgraduate commitments. Why?

What Does a Higher Degree in Writing Mean?

I think the next twenty or so years for graduates - and universities - will be very perplexing. We are told that we are today living in the Knowledge Economy. Knowledge, rather than Capital is, it seems, the cutting-edge of human endeavour. It is not entirely clear to me how what is now being called Knowledge differs from what Americans seventy or eighty years ago called know-how, or what savvy Italians seven hundred years ago thought might be a useful thing to harness if they were going to produce the Renaissance. In fact, if we look back and take the time to

read Plato's *Dialogues*, we might find something of a Knowledge Economy at work there: those who had the knowledge had the power; the rest, in ancient Athens' much vaunted 'democracy', were the slaves.

Whatever today's knowledge economy is - or whatever tomorrow's will be, since we are living in an environment with an almost exponential rate of change - one thing is clear. Credentials are important - and as important to writers as to anyone else. Of course this is common knowledge - those involved in university Writing programs are in the business of providing them, and sometimes acquiring them, and are all committed to making sure that those provided are robust enough to stand up to scrutiny. (The external examination process for higher degrees is of paramount importance here.) Some examples from our own ECU Writing program will illustrate the usefulness of these credentials. Of our four MA Writing graduates to date, all had prior publications before coming to us, though only for one - the most recent - were they substantial. Graduate A has been able to teach various workshops on the basis of her degree. Graduate B used the Masters to bring about a complete shift in career, which had previously been in small business. I do not know what Graduate C has done recently. However, since she was of an age at which she could be expected to retire - from a career which had depended on her professional writing skills - it could be argued that she undertook the degree for reasons that were more personal than employment-related.

Graduate D came to us with a number of books commercially published and a high reputation, but no formal university degree. He was admitted into the MA program on the basis of his publication record and his reputation as a reviewer, critic and the editor of a significant literary journal. I do not claim to have taught this particular candidate much about writing during his candidature - he was a mature writer when he came to me - but the very lively and extended debate about the nature of his submission was extremely fruitful for both of us and resulted in a submission which won the highest praise from the examiners. As with most candidates at this level, my role was closer to that of editor than of teacher or supervisor. My point is, however, that for this very talented writer, as for the others, the degree has been the key which opens academic career opportunities which would otherwise - at least for the foreseeable future - have remained closed. This graduate has now had an academic fellowship at a major university confirmed, and has been appointed a Visiting Professorship at a very prestigious Writing School in the USA. Both appointments were conditional on his obtaining a Higher Degree.

Others can, no doubt, adduce similar instances from their own Writing Programs. In today's Knowledge Economy - whatever it is - a Higher Degree in Writing is of value. It is undoubtedly of more value to some than to others. One's reputation as a writer - and as a teacher - has to be taken into account as well. But whereas not so long ago this was all that counted, it is now only part of the picture. Perhaps this has contributed to the thinking behind DETYA's changes to the method of distributing Research Quantum.

Another Success Story

At the AAWP conference, *Lighting the Fuse*, in Adelaide two years ago, I presented a paper which dealt, among other things, with research funding in relation to the Creative Arts. I will briefly give a resume of what I said there, and which was subsequently published in *TEXT*.

Research funds from the Commonwealth Government are allocated to universities in two ways. The first is by the competitive research grants program of the Australian Research Council and the National Health and Medical Research Council. The second source of funding is known as the Research Quantum, amounting to about 5% of total Operating Grant. This portion is withheld from the Operating Grant and then distributed separately to universities in proportion to how well each university performs on what is known as the Composite Index. The Composite Index is determined by three factors: HDR completions, Publications, and each University's research income from other sources.

Several things are immediately obvious. First, a high completion rate is desirable, with minimal attrition. This is clearly a good thing. One would have thought that a high publication rate was also a good thing, but what DETYA considered as eligible for inclusion excluded all Creative Writing. Since 1998 only (scholarly) books, book chapters, refereed journal articles and refereed conference papers were deemed eligible. (DETYA had previously allowed many more categories of publication but, due to the apparent impossibility of universities providing reliable data, from 1998 on it narrowed eligibility for Composite Index to these four only.) It is worth pointing out that DETYA considered these categories as *proxies*, that is they stood in for, and were to be considered an indication of, *total* publications of a far wider kind, and were therefore not to be considered the only publications rewarded in a university's *internal* distribution of research funds. But in practice they became the only ones that mattered, since they were the basis for the allocation of Research Quantum to each university. Thus a refereed article on David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life* would attract Quantum, the novel itself would not. A university such as mine, with a large Academy of the Performing Arts, was under great pressure to ignore research output in terms of choreographies, symphonies, films, novels, plays, etc. as being irrelevant to the pressing business of attracting Commonwealth research funding. To its credit, it resisted. I will say a little about this in a moment.

The third element in the Composite Index is research funding income. This effectively rewards expensive research, regardless of the quality of its outcomes. The justification for this is that the research income will not be forthcoming unless there is a previous history of high quality outcomes, and my experience as a Panel Member for the Australian Research Council backs this up. The researcher's track record is crucial in deciding whether an application is successful or not, even for a Young Career Research or a Postdoctoral Fellowship. But it also means that good expensive research has been rewarded at the expense of good cheap research, and this particularly impacts on the Creative Arts. It costs far less to write a novel than it does to run a particle accelerator, yet a novel's contribution to a nation's culture may be enormous. Some will argue that a novelist will get his/her reward from royalties. But some scientific researchers can capture astronomical research funding rewards from their intellectual property by means of patents, while the average income of writers in Australia from writing and writing-related activities is still below $5000 p.a.

I mentioned that ECU resisted the temptation to reward only DETYA-weighted categories (those recognised for Composite Index purposes) in its internal distribution of research funds. To have succumbed to this temptation would have been seen as effectively degrading or ignoring the creative output of its Academy of the Performing Arts, one of the country's best Performing and Visual Arts schools, as well as those others who were specifically employed, on the basis of their quality as creative artists, to teach the Creative Arts, including Writing, and indeed other academics who were artistically productive. After a massive amount of work, a Creative and Performing Arts Index was established, based on Dennis Strand's excellent report, *Research in the Creative Arts* (DETYA, 1998) Now in its second year, this year a CPAI budget of $30,000 will be distributed to 36 people. This is very small in comparison with the RAI budget of $645,000 (which in itself is tiny in comparison with equivalents in older, more affluent universities), but it is certainly something, and several applicants have received substantial sums.

However a significant change has now been adopted by DETYA, which is that 'Major Written or Recorded Original Creative Works' be included in the Composite Index. These would include novels, published playscripts, books of poetry, as well as substantial works in other artforms. This is a real breakthrough, in that it recognises that the Creative Arts are a is a genuine domain of research, or even its true model - something which some outstanding science researchers have been quietly admitting for more than a century.

But there may still be problems in application. By insisting that such creative works be 'commercially available' it leaves unclear the status of, for example, a major creative work written and broadcast by the ABC. Does it only become eligible to attract Research Quantum if the ABC records it and makes it available as a tape or video for sale in an ABC Store, where it might sell a few hundred copies compared with the thousands who might first have watched or listened to it? Certainly, for all legal purposes such as copyright or defamation, broadcast by the ABC is considered publication. If DETYA's objective is iterability - the capacity to go back and experience it again, as in traditional academic publishing on paper - how is this reconciled with the fact that very scholarly books, few novels, and almost no individual books of poetry, ever get reprinted and almost always go out of print? Would the ABC's willingness to provide a tape or CD of the program for a small fee satisfy the 'commercial' requirement? There is also the whole matter of continuous and unlimited access to creative - and scholarly - material on the WWW, often without commercial charge. In a scientific context - which might serve to focus on some of the difficulties - consider this. Would research findings into the Human Genome, made outside the Celera context, and mandatorily published on the WWW within 24 hours so as to minimise commercial exploitation and maximise the benefit to humanity, attract no Research Quantum? Clearly there is more thinking required as to what publication means in the application of the Green Paper's use of the terms. Basically, the thinking there is about twenty years out of date.

A second possible good news item is DETYA's proposal to widen the acceptable categories of research funding to include such sources as the Australia Council (this has been lobbied for energetically for some years), State Arts Ministries, etc. But it is impossible at present to determine the impact of this, as many previously ineligible sources of research funding are also recognised with respect to other disciplines. While the Creative Arts will undoubtedly gain something in dollar terms, they may ultimately still be at the bottom of the heap. As with ECU's research performance, they may be advancing, but everything else may be advancing too, and possibly faster. At this stage, figures are not available to determine what this means. Nonetheless, both DETYA initiatives signal that the Creative Arts are becoming accepted as a research area with validity equal to the Humanities and Social Sciences, as well as other traditional academic disciplines.

Now For the Sting in the Tail

Earlier this year the government adopted a White Paper on Research and Research Training, to be implemented from the beginning of 2001. Under new changes to DETYA's method of allocating HDR places - and funds - universities will not be advancing at the same rate. In fact, in this particular area things are much worse than that. While the same set of rules will apply to all universities, some universities will actually be going backwards, while others will forge ahead. It is not difficult to foresee a split in the tertiary sector as a result of this deliberate policy, whose purpose is clearly to concentrate research in currently research-strong universities by removing and limiting research funding

from those in the lower third of the sector. Many of these institutions have established Writing programs and possibly have postgraduate stories much like ECU's.

The mechanism for this reallocation of HDR funding is simple enough, but its working and short-term consequences are difficult to determine. Basically, all universities are currently allocated a number of HECS-exempt places for HDR students. (At ECU some of these have been awarded to Writing students.) Universities have, in addition, enrolled HDR students beyond that number, who have to pay HECS. DETYA has now determined that from 2001 onwards HECS will not be available to postgraduate HDR students, and the university will only be paid for those within the HECS-exemption quota. Each university will be allocated a quota of HECS-exempt HDR places, in many cases considerably fewer than the total number of HDR students currently enrolled. In the case of ECU, this figure is roughly half the number of those currently undertaking Higher Degrees by Research. One problem facing universities will be how to handle the so-called Gap places - i.e. those HECS-liable HDR places currently occupied by students. A university can nominate to have these converted to non-research places (roughly at the rate of two or two and a half to one) thus effectively downsizing its research profile and expanding its non-research Higher Degree or undergraduate capacity. Or it can retain them at its own expense, effectively establishing an extensive and expensive scholarship scheme. Or it can retain some, and convert others. At present, it appears that most universities are opting for conversion of these places to undergraduate places.

Whatever it chooses to do, when an HDR student - HECS-liable or HECS-exempt, it makes no difference - 'separates', i.e. completes the degree or withdraws, that particular place will not remain with the university but will go to a central pool which is to be allocated among all universities on the Research Training Scheme's (RTS) formula. This formula is HDR completions 50%, research income 40%, and publications 10%. It seems that there is no floor to this scheme, i.e. after the end of this year no university is to be allocated a minimum number of HDR places, and as some universities see their students graduate they will be unable to win back as many HDR places as they lose. They will go to universities with large research incomes, whose completion and publication rates will subsequently swell. Unable to enroll further HDR students, newer or poorer universities' completion rates may deteriorate, along with their publication rate, and their status as universities - which depends on their ability to sustain research - may be threatened, even destroyed. The quality of their publications is immaterial, simply their number. In a situation such as this, it is inevitable that research-active staff in the newer universities, many of them young, will simply seek employment in institutions where their research aspirations can be rewarded. The new universities seemed to offer that to them once. That was the hope when I came to ECU. Now it seems to be deliberately denied.

ECU, like our benchmarking comparisons, has a comparatively high research output for little cost. Given the limited fields within which we work, we are thus a relatively efficient producer. Changes to the recognition of research funding sources may help us a little; but it will not help our Writing program - nor is it likely to help similar programs elsewhere. It takes little maths to work out that if 40% of the formula for reallocation of HDR funding is based on research income, then not too much of it will be internally distributed to Writing. It is a good example of 'To those who are rich, more shall be given, because they are good spenders. And from those who are poor it shall be taken, so that the rich can prosper and multiply.'

Conclusion

I started with several success stories.

The first was meant to show that HDR in Writing is being recognised as having genuine social utility, as responding to a need which did not exist some years before, and one result of this has been a remarkable jump in the quality and professionalism of those enrolling in them - at least in my experience.

The second suggested that substantial creativity in the arts is now to be recognised by DETYA, in its distribution of Research Quantum, as a research activity and outcome equal to high level research in more traditionally academic fields. Also, research income from Arts bodies such as the Australia Council will be recognised on a par with other Competitive Research Grants.

But there’s a sting is in the new method of funding HDR. It will benefit a few Postgraduate Writing Programs, but it will undoubtedly harm most, and possibly wipe out a few of them. Looking at recent graduates and those currently enrolled in our own program, I wonder what their careers would or will be like under the new regime. Undoubtedly they could obtain a degree elsewhere, most likely over the internet, and it could well be of high quality. But would this be what they want, or what benefits them and their writing most? Would it give them the opportunity to work with the supervisor of their first choice, who was possibly one of the main reasons for their deciding to undertake the degree in the first place? Can such an environment maintain their commitment? Will the credential they gain correspond to their needs? These questions have still to be answered.

I apologise to those who know all this already. Writing programs in Australia have become increasingly professional over the last few years, and the AAWP Conference is one manifestation of that. But their relation to research funding

by DETYA is complex and often not fully grasped, especially by those whose role it is to do the frontline teaching. And it may be their jobs that are on the line.

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Professor Andrew Taylor is an established poet who lecturers in theory and writing at Edith Cowan University. This paper was originally delivered at the AAWP 'Writing 2000' Conference, Griffith University, Gold Coast Campus, 23-26 June 2000.

Debate

Jeri Kroll *The Role of the Examniner: Scholar, Reviewer, Critic, Judge, Mentor*

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http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/
Editors: Nigel Krauth & Tess Brady
Text@mailbox.gu.edu.au