University of Canberra, CQUniversity, Australia, and University of Canberra

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Leading the leaders: enhancing the examination of creative arts doctoral degrees

Abstract:

The creative arts disciplines constitute an important growth area for research higher degrees and they have built a body of knowledge and a set of practices associated with research and research higher degrees. However, there is virtually no empirical work in, or across, the creative arts disciplines that investigate how HDR examiners arrive at the commentary presented in their reports. This article reports on a current project that, based on a process of national benchmarking, data analysis and through extensive consultation, is investigating current assessment practices, processes and standards in creative arts higher degrees by research.

Biographical notes:

Jen Webb is Professor of creative practice at the University of Canberra, and Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Design. Jen holds a PhD in cultural theory, focusing on the field of creative production, and a DCA in creative writing. She has published widely in poetry, short fiction, and scholarly works: her most recent book is *Understanding Representation* (Sage 2009), and she is currently completing a co-authored book on the work of Michel Foucault, a co-authored book on embodiment, and a textbook on research for creative writing. Jen is co-editor of the Sage book series, Understanding Contemporary Culture, and of the new journal *Axon: Creative Explorations*, an online journal being published out of the University of Canberra. Her current research investigates representations of critical global events, and the use of research in and through creative practice to generate new knowledge.

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Introduction

Over the past decade an impressive number of theses have been examined in creative writing, dance and theatre, visual arts, new media arts and music in Australia. By 2003 more than 425 theses in, and about, the creative arts had been completed and examined in Australia (Evans et al. 2003) and, in the decades since the so-called Strand Report (1998), creative arts disciplines have built a body of knowledge and set of practices associated with research and research higher degrees (HDR). This paper engages with a particular aspect of this field—examination of the products of creative arts higher degrees—and asks how well the current combination of policies, procedures and practices serve the needs of candidates and their disciplines, and how we might better employ insights from leadership theory to establish systems and networks that will serve, and improve, our domain.

This issue is of growing importance. Not only are HDR students central to the work of universities—as sessional teachers, as (often) fulltime researchers and as future scholars and leaders—but also, in the creative arts disciplines, their numbers are growing rapidly. Finding efficient ways to manage the sheer volume of these new knowledge workers in the creative arts; finding effective ways to evaluate the quality of their work and its outputs; and finding equitable ways to strategise the future of the disciplines and their members: this is the work of leadership.

There is currently little consensus on what the term 'leadership' means; as Richard Bolden writes:

> There is no widely accepted definition of leadership, no common consensus on how best to develop leadership and leaders, and remarkably little evidence of the impact of leadership or leadership development on performance and productivity (2004: 3).

Leadership is not alone in being so under-defined. Ernesto Laclau wrote extensively on what he called the 'empty signifier', which refers to the notion, drawn from semiotics, that no signifier has meaning in itself; rather, 'its meaning in society is going to be given only by a hegemonic articulation' (1988: 255). For those of us in the academy, such articulation is typically 'given' by vice chancellors, heads of teaching and research, and government policy statements, which may or may not serve the needs of creative arts academics. We suggest that academics in the creative arts take the initiative to define and delimit the term in a way that is productive for at least one aspect of our work: leadership in, and the management of, the process of examining HDR theses.

The term 'leadership' is not intuitively associated with the role of the PhD examiner. Descriptors such as gatekeeper, reviewer or mentor are more typically found in the literature on examination (Kroll 2004). However, the task of reading, critically evaluating and providing both formative and summative commentary on the work of students who are completing the highest level of university-based training necessarily involves an element of leadership. It is, after all, these doctoral examiners, who as part of the team of candidate, their supervisor/s and institutional research directors and administrators, are significantly involved in shaping the field of higher education and its future.

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There is a considerable body of literature on leadership in the business, organisational management, psychology and education disciplines (among others), but very little has emerged from the creative arts. Perhaps this is not surprising, given the associative meanings of 'leadership'—as something that belongs to the corporate, political or military world; and a practice that is imbued with managerialism. However, leadership incorporates many qualities valued in the creative field. Abraham Zaleznik, in his seminal (though contestable) 1977 paper 'Managers and leaders: are they different?' cites imagination, creativity and ethics as qualities associated precisely with leadership, and specifically not with managerial practice (1989: 297). Subsequent writers name equally attractive qualities such as charisma, empathy, integrity and the capacity to inspire others (Bass 1985; Burns 1978; Ciulla & Forsyth 2011; Parker & Begnaud 2004). And nearly everyone, it seems, uses the term 'art' or 'artist' when describing the qualities of a leader; perhaps because art is a domain associated with high levels of creativity and innovation, and the work of making something fresh, of capturing the imagination of others, and of illuminating social situations.

Our project, *Examination of Doctoral Degrees in Creative Arts: Process, Practice and Standards*, which we describe and account for below, begins with the premise that however one defines 'leadership', those involved in crafting and nurturing a discipline, developing and maintaining its standards, and planning for its future, will necessarily act, however briefly or intermittently, as leaders in that discipline. Doctoral examiners contribute to leadership in these ways, and our concern is how to develop, tap into and mobilise their leadership for the benefit of the creative disciplines as a whole.

Background

Recent commentators have identified a range of criticism about the quality of HDR outputs in all disciplines, with ongoing questions relating to content, rigour and assessment standards (AVCC 2002; Neumann 2003; McWilliam et al. 2005; Jolley 2007; Carey, Webb & Brien 2008), high attrition rates (Halse 2007; Lovitts & Nelson 2000) and lengthy completion times (Berger 2008). Under the current Australian performance-based funding model, increased numbers of PhD candidates complete within the required time (Cuthbert 2008) but, as yet, the quality of the outputs produced under this regime has not been evaluated, and nor is there evidence that improvements in completions are matched by improvements in either thesis standards or thesis assessment standards.

This is a particularly important issue in creative arts higher degrees because innovation depends on high-level creative aptitude. Without equally high standards for what constitutes quality work, it is difficult to plan on a local or national level. As Jennifer Bott, then CEO of the Australia Council, pointed out in 2004, 'we're seeing worldwide that economies ... that encourage and emphasize creative talent are winning, and those without creative talent are slipping behind'. Yet one of the key generators of this creative talent—the higher education sector and, in particular, the disciplines that explicitly foster creativity—remains largely unexplored in regard to

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describing the standards to which creativity and related skills are learned in those programs, and then examining RHD theses against those standards.

There has been considerable recent research undertaken into creative arts in universities, particularly into creative pedagogies (Boulter 2004), practice-led research methods (Carter 2004; Haseman 2007), the relationship between the critical and creative products (Fletcher & Mann 2004) and the epistemological status of non-traditional theses (Harper 2005). Some recent research has investigated what standards are applied to creative research products or what is expected of examiners: the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC)-funded project *Dancing between Diversity and Consistency* (Phillips, Stock & Vincs 2009) interrogates forms of assessment in the dance discipline and recommends best practice; our own ALTC project *Australian Postgraduate Writers Network* (Webb & Brien 2008) on research education in creative writing addresses standards and practices; Su Baker's ALTC project *Future-proofing the Creative Arts in Higher Education* broadly scopes issues of teaching creative arts, including assessment; and Josko Petkovic and Linda Butcher's ALTC project *Assessing Graduate Screen Production Outputs in 19 Australian Film Schools* investigates assessment criteria for honours level research outputs in screen production. All these projects are designed to build capacity in the sector, but there is virtually no other empirical work in, or across, the creative arts disciplines that investigates how examiners arrive at the summative commentary presented in their reports.

The creative arts are not alone in this: as Powell and Green show, comparatively little attention has been paid to the assessment processes and standards applied to research degrees in general (2003). Scrutiny of research theses assessment did not begin in earnest until the 1990s, as a sector-wide study of examination procedures for higher degree theses (Mullarvey 2003) revealed. What the existing research has exposed is uncertainty about the process and the outcomes, and the absence of established standards for thesis examination (see, for instance, Bourke et al. 2004; Denicolo 2003). No other ALTC project reports have engaged with this issue, nor is there significant research from the UK, Canada or USA on this important part of the postgraduate landscape.

There is even less certainty about examination standards for creative research theses, and this is of special concern as there is not a neat fit between the creative and other Humanities' disciplines, particularly at research level (North 2005). Investigation into assessment practices in non-traditional research degrees has been principally reported by researchers from the visual arts (see, for instance, Dally et al. 2003; Dally et al. 2004; MacArthur 2004), but there is little from the performance arts (apart from the previously named ALTC projects) or creative writing beyond papers that elucidate views on the exegesis, its shape and what functions it should perform, and those that offer speculations about how disciplines might move toward a more consistent set of examination standards. This dearth of investigation into current practices of examination in the creative arts raises significant questions about how examiners match their own examination practice and standards to university policies (Carey, Webb & Brien 2008).

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Similar issues were raised at the ALTC-funded *Creative and Practice-led Research Symposium* held at the University of Canberra in October 2010. Participants expressed concerns about the current small pool of HDR examiners in the creative arts, their competency to examine the diversity of theses presented to them and the lack of training afforded examiners. There was also a great deal of discussion about differences in examination standards and in supervisory practices across Australia. The lack of clarity surrounding the roles and responsibilities inherent in the supervisor/student relationship continues to be worrying, as is the perceived fuzziness of the what is nevertheless seen as 'standard' exegetical/creative artefact model (Burr 2010). It was clear from this discussion, which was attended by more than thirty senior creative arts academics at the cutting edge of doctoral level assessment and practice in the creative arts, that such issues are disturbing and will continue to be so until national frameworks and guidelines are investigated and established to direct institutional polices and practices in such matters.

The establishment of the new national regulatory and quality agency for higher education, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) may change the landscape somewhat. The role of this Agency is to 'register providers, carry out evaluations of standards and performance, protect and assure the quality of international education and streamline current regulatory arrangements' and to adopt a 'national approach to regulation and quality assurance' (DEEWR 2011). In response, the creative arts disciplines need to be able to understand and articulate what it means to have a degree or a doctorate in our areas; it is time to ask what it means for our graduates to have knowledge about, and across, creative practice and if that knowledge is defensible. We need to know what our shared principles of meanings are and how it is that we know, do and think in certain ways. What, for instance, are the threshold knowledge skills and investigative skills in the creative arts sector? We in the creative arts need to be confident that comparable standards apply across the country and across HDR creative arts sectors, and that these are appropriately equivalent to standards in other disciplines.

Examination of doctoral degrees in creative arts project

Against this background, we have established an ALTC-funded project, the *Examination of Doctoral Degrees in Creative Arts: Process, Practice and Standards*. This project builds on *The Australian Postgraduate Writers Network (APWN)* project funded by the ALTC in 2007, in which we investigated creative writing research higher degrees from student and supervisory points of view (Webb & Brien 2008). Analysis of data from that project showed that HDR examination in the creative arts is an area of higher education that urgently needs improvement. In particular, the important findings from that project that are relevant to examination standards are: generally-held uncertainties about examination standards; widely-held perceptions of erratic assessment processes; and a pervasive lack of clarity about the extent to which formal examination processes deliver the best outcomes for both graduates and the professional fields for which they are being prepared.

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This project started with the issues regarding examination identified in the *APWN* project, but also brings together cognate work already completed or in progress from the creative arts disciplines of film, dance, visual arts and writing, and the Reference Group established to guide the project includes, among others, investigators from the three ALTC projects cited above. This project builds on and extends their artform-specific research to provide a sector-wide focus on doctoral level assessment practices and standards. It, therefore, provides opportunities for leadership in higher education practice in the creative arts disciplines by creating a forum where the ongoing process of interrogating and improving examination practices, processes and standards can be established, actioned and monitored.

Approach

Two main theoretical threads inform this project and the research design. The first is the theory of knowledge; the second is the theory of pedagogy. Together they provide a solid theoretical foundation for the project.

Theory of knowledge, or epistemology, is at the heart of much of the investigation into what it means to conduct research in, and by means of, creative practice. This requires a different perspective to research and its evaluation from that deployed in conventional research. Under the creative practice paradigm, there is typically less order and less clarity (Carter 2004: 9). While there are concerns about this—particularly in relation to validity and rigour—it does reflect the messy, multiple space of most forms of research: a space that, as Barthes writes, cannot be 'deciphered', but only 'disentangled (1977: 147). In addition, the creative research paradigm avoids the problems associated with methodological positivism that have been identified by many critics: a dependence on facts and laws, an assertion of objectivity and disinterest, a lack of attention to context, interpretation, self-interest and uncertainties (Boyte 2000; Stienmetz 2005). It also allows for serendipity in research and for the emergent nature of research, an approach to the generation of knowledge that is in keeping with the creative function of the human brain (Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1999; Ramachandran 2004).

The conduct of research in, or through, creative practice is associated with the acknowledgement of uncertainty and contingency, the denial of grand narratives, a tolerance of complexity and confusion and both willingness and capacity to be led by the data rather than by a predetermined point of view. Outcomes typically encompass research products that make an original contribution to knowledge in the field, and create products that satisfy relevant aesthetic standards. This project builds on the body of work already conducted into modes of creative practice research (for example, Carter 2004; Gray & Malins 2004) and aims to deliver clarity about the terms within which a creative research project can be seen to have delivered defensible knowledge, and what might be effective interpretative strategies in such an undertaking. It seeks to develop shared understandings about what counts as knowledge, interpretation and analysis, within creative practice HDR theses, and in terms of the mandated Australian Quality Framework standards and practices.

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The second theoretical line emerges from pedagogy, and the intention to embed the 'communities of practice' model of collaborative interaction (Lave & Wenger 1991) across a project team who become a community, learning with, and from, each other throughout the project in a cycle of discussion and reflective action-research. To do this, the project team utilises input from the community of potential users through all stages of the project design and implementation. This approach aligns with the Australian Universities Quality Agency's (AUQA) recent statement that the work defining higher education academic standards will 'draw heavily on the disciplinary communities, including the relevant professional groups, and build where possible on the work of the ALTC' (2009: 3). A theoretically informed community of practice approach allows the refinement, communication and shared use of knowledge that is essential to 'the kind of dynamic "knowing" that makes a difference in practice' (Wenger 1998) and ensures sustained viability and the embedding of the project aims (Lesser & Everest 2001: 38). In this, we are undertaking the usual 'knowledge archive building' function of investigative research in a group setting, and then integrating this with the task of embedding new knowledge and improved practices in the sector, ultimately aiming to build capacity, skills and better practice.

Current thinking suggests that Mode-2 knowledge production and transfer—as found in cooperative ventures between university, government and the profession (Gibbons et al. 1994:1), wherein social networks act as mediators of new knowledge (Nowotny et al. 2001:19)—is the most productive approach to facilitate and mobilise the research knowledge accumulated in this project (see, for elaboration, Graham & Brien 2010). Our methodological framework is designed to ensure Mode-2 generation of new knowledge in ways that are not only rigorous and defensible, but are also fully embedded in the community of users and can be put to work to improve standards, build capacity and change practices. It does this first by involving individuals and institutions across the user community in ways that allow triangulation of perspectives: across examiners, supervisors and students; across university policies, government initiatives and the traditions of knowledge production.

Beginning with a process of national benchmarking and then proceeding through extensive consultation, we are investigating assessment practices, processes and standards in creative arts HDR, as well as the beliefs and expectations of HDR students, supervisors and examiners, in order to establish a shared understanding of standards within this field of study. Archival research is allowing us to identify and analyse existing policy documents, and publications such as examiner's reports (into policies, publications); field research using surveys and focus group discussions is determining not only what creative arts academics expect postgraduate dissertations to accomplish, but also their views on appropriate standards. We are also investigating the assumptions and expectations that supervisors have of examiner's practice, the expectations that examiners have of creative HDR theses, and how that informs the completion, quality and evaluation of creative arts dissertations. Through emergent and collaborative practice and process-based research using roundtables, workshops and meetings with the members of our Reference Group, we are also seeking to augment and consolidate those views. All of these data gathering methods are leading to the generation and analysis of both empirical and qualitative data about current

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practices, processes and standards in creative arts HDR examination that are also of use more widely in the sector and we are, thus, seeking to disseminate our findings as widely as possible.

Strategic framework

Higher education and research practice have come under the microscope in recent years through a range of government initiatives including the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) program, AUQA, TEQSA, the Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley 2008) and Venturous Australia (Cutler 2008). Each provides an analysis of current practice and offers recommendations to improve higher education, research outputs and innovative practice in a framework of auditing and accountability. This project works with, and within, this audit/accountability context, understanding the present as a strategic moment in which to research practices, processes and standards in the examination of creative arts theses, and to set in place systems that will ensure that the creative disciplines generally not only improve student learning and outputs but also satisfy government imperatives.

Despite the specialisation inherent in each of the creative arts disciplines, we are working across these disciplines to treat the creative arts as one broad field. Our argument is that arts academics should work not under the neoliberal logic of individualism, but as a community of scholars acting together on shared issues and concerns, for a range of reasons but especially as the individual creative arts cadres in the academy are too small to change policy and practice independently. The project draws, therefore, on the Executive leaders, members' networks, and strategic and operational plans of the peak bodies that have strategic, consultative and developmental roles within the Australian creative arts sector in higher education. Key in this approach are the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP), National Council of Tertiary Music Schools (NACTMUS), Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools (ACUADS) and Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association (ASPERA). The senior Reference Group with whom we are working closely is similarly drawn from both key Australian as well as international university programs and research groups, and from peak bodies including The Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH) and others previously mentioned.

At our initial Reference Group teleconference in March 2011, the discussion was both encouraging and promising. The Reference Group unanimously agreed that there are obvious deficiencies in current practices and a real need for generic creative arts guidelines for examiners, students and supervisors and university research offices in order to achieve a level of certainty, consistency and transparency. However, a major area of concern—and one of which we are very cognisant—is the need to establish guidelines that are sufficiently flexible to recognise and allow for the diversity of creative arts practices. While recognising that one size will not fit all, this group also concurred that the establishment and implementation of agreed standards and guidelines is crucial to the creative arts in higher education. The Reference Group also felt that guidelines were needed to elucidate the relationship between the exegesis and

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the creative work and the relationship between students and their supervisors. There was a call for a level of uniformity in the guidelines for HDR processes and practices issued by universities and, indeed, preliminary findings drawn from our survey of the publicly available creative arts doctoral polices from twenty-nine Australian universities, show a high level of variation between institutions.

A series of roundtables held in Australian capital cities, and including representatives from both metropolitan and regional universities from most Australian states, has confirmed the currency and urgency of these concerns. In both the Reference Group and roundtable discussions, the supply, availability, suitability and education of examiners were among the issues raised, suggesting that these are ongoing matters of importance in the creative arts sector that require attention.

Project outcomes

The major outcomes emanating from this project include contributions of knowledge in the areas of creative arts epistemologies and pedagogy associated with the 'communities of practice' model of collaborative interaction. The gathered collective understandings are being used to develop a nationally agreed set of examination standards through close and sustained consultation with the sector. Providing there is general agreement on the need for a continued forum for this work, we will establish a creative arts examinations committee to monitor standards and provide space for communication, consultation and the institution of a continuous improvement cycle in creative arts HDR. The value of this approach is that research projects in higher education are often developed in a flurry of enthusiasm but then, due to time constraints or reliance on too small a group of people, produce outputs that are not embedded in ongoing enhancements of processes or practices. The establishment of a national body to oversee examination standards will avoid this dilemma, ensuring that discipline members not only continue to utilise, review and refine the knowledge produced by the project, but also persist in generating new knowledge and courses of action, and direct the future elaborations of this work.

Conclusion

Postgraduate degree programs in the creative arts have built a body of outputs that we can celebrate as a significant achievement. However, we cannot afford to be complacent: sectoral problems certainly exist in the examination of HDR in the creative arts. But as the creative arts disciplines jointly and collaboratively address such problems and develop solutions to them, it will be possible to see evidence of significant leadership in the area of examinations, and significant enhancements of the quality, depth and extent of knowledge and best practice in this important field of higher education.

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