

## Central Queensland University and University of New England

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### Supervising the Creative Arts Research Higher Degree: Towards Best Practice

Those who teach in the creative arts in the higher education sector in Australia, New Zealand, the UK and elsewhere will be sensitive to the current emphasis on doctoral enrolments and completions, and to ongoing debates around the quality and impact of creative work in national research environments. Supervisors of creative arts research higher degrees (RHDs) will also acknowledge the value of having an intellectually and creatively engaged cohort of postgraduate candidates who complete their degrees on time, capably and without undue stress. Research postgraduate students enliven and enrich our academic communities, and helping them to gain their degrees and embark on new or enhanced careers can be a high point in academic working lives. Against this background, competent supervision of research higher degree students, informed by knowledge of disciplinary best practice, becomes increasingly important.

Yet the supervisor-student relationship today faces many pressures: workload demands; internal and external competition; conflicting individual needs; new modes of communication; an increasingly client-focused, customer-normed higher education sector; and a growing emphasis on metric evaluative mechanisms for measuring research quality, which includes the number of research degree completions. Exacerbating these may be unclear or differing expectations of supervisor-student roles and relationships, a factor that seems especially prevalent in the so-called 'non-traditional' discipline areas. As a consequence, many supervisors and educational researchers are considering how to strengthen the supervisor-student relationship and make it more successful and productive, as well as how to establish practical and pedagogically informed strategies and systems that are conducive to timely and successful student completion. While the above concerns are shared across the higher education sector, many are magnified when dealing with newer academic discipline areas such as the creative arts.

This special issue of *TEXT* responds to the challenges faced by supervisors in the creative arts today. It identifies and investigates aspects of best practice in the supervision of research higher degrees in the creative arts internationally, and brings together diverse experiences and perspectives to give an overview of contemporary practice. One of our aims has been to present this range of voices in order to prompt further discussion and scholarship in this area of enquiry. We therefore invited supervisors, examiners, educational researchers and others involved in developing and supporting creative arts higher degree programs to contribute to this issue, and have been able to include authors from the UK and Australia, in practice-based fields

including writing, and the visual and performing arts (dance and music), as well as discussions of research higher degree supervision from cross-disciplinary perspectives. Some of the resulting themes that emerge in this collection are also prominent in the scholarly literature on RHD supervision more generally. These are, however, supplemented in this selection of articles by themes arising from the distinctiveness of RHDs in the creative arts; that is, those that follow the creative work plus dissertation model – the latter is widely known as an ‘exegesis’ in Australia – and that are conceived of as ‘practice-led’ (although Biggs and Büchler constructively prompt us to move beyond the practice-based/non-practice-based divide to consider, instead, the notion of relevance within the research community).

Abstracts for potential articles were due for this special issue over a year ago, and during that time, as editors, we have worked collaboratively with our authors to address a series of matters in relation to the creative arts that we believe will be of interest to many in the sector, whether these readers be research students, supervisors or the administrators of these degrees. From the genesis of this project – in our initial calls for papers, discussions with potential authors and refereeing of abstracts – we were open to working around the interests of our authors, but we did insist on narratives that moved beyond reflection on personal experience and were firmly situated within the small, but growing, body of scholarship on postgraduate supervision and cognate matters. This is not to denigrate the value of personal experience in any way – the recording of personal experience builds a valuable disciplinary archive of best practice examples that should be shared – but was because we believe that situating this experience within theory and scholarship takes that experience to another level in terms of what it can contribute to pedagogy and educational theory more generally. We are, therefore, pleased to present as a feature of this collection, a series of articles that present the findings gleaned through supervisors’ ‘hands-on’ experience focused through a consideration of theory and/or scholarship. Another feature of this collection is a relatively large percentage of articles that are co-authored, perhaps a reflection in itself of the collaborative nature of the research higher degree enterprise that a number of authors identified, and that Evans and Gandolfo in particular focus on.

Michael Biggs and Daniela Büchler contextualise supervision within an understanding of research higher degree study as preparation and training for professional practice as a researcher, rather than the culmination of tertiary education. Within this frame, they focus on the uniqueness of practice for researchers in the creative arts, and propose a template for a seven-chapter thesis that can be utilised across creative arts disciplines. Helen Yeates and Susan Carson continue this multidisciplinary approach in their discussion of the supervision of the honours research training year in creative arts. This year of study additional to a bachelor degree, made up of a project and coursework, is a traditional entry point for doctoral study in Australia, but the way it is supervised in a multidisciplinary, creative industries context provides a model for flexible and collaborative postgraduate supervisory practice in the creative arts. Megan Evans and Enza Gandolfo focus on the collaborative nature of research higher degree study, particularly on the collaborations between supervisors, between supervisors and research students, and

between the students themselves, and find that some of the elements of, and processes used in, successful artistic collaborative projects can be applied to enhance the supervision of practice-led postgraduate research projects in the creative arts.

In reflecting on writing and visual arts as both practice and practice-led research, Evans and Gandolfo also introduce another of our aims in this special issue: to provide a series of individual and differing disciplinary perspectives on postgraduate research supervision, but to present these in a single journal issue in order that both the similarities and discipline specific complexities can be compared and contrasted. Using both quantitative and qualitative data drawn from her recently completed Australian Learning and Teaching Council funded research project, *Dancing between diversity and consistency: refining assessment in postgraduate degrees in dance*, Cheryl Stock provides valuable insights into the challenges that embodied and experiential knowledges in disciplines such as dance present for supervision. And, indeed, for the university itself, as such emergent research practice seeks to legitimise alternative forms of knowledge production that do not always sit comfortably alongside accepted norms of research. Drawing on the discipline of writing, Jeri Kroll uses a sporting metaphor to suggest the postgraduate supervisor functions as a manager, coach and trainer all in one: these multiple roles further complicated by the multiplicity of theoretical and structural pathways available to shape the hybrid thesis. Kroll posits that there cannot, therefore, be one supervisory model. Scott D Harrison and Stephen Emmerson report on research with both supervisors and research students in music to interrogate such supervisory models including both face-to-face and distance supervision. This is in order to gauge both the success and the sustainability of such models in terms of the work-life balance of the project team (supervisors and student) and institutional imperatives. Delving further into the student-supervisor relationship, Dominique Hecq reports examples of, and assesses the potential usefulness of, the Lacanian notion of transference in PhD supervision, positing that this may be crucial in some creative arts disciplines. Using a series of supervision case studies from the discipline of creative writing – examples in which transference was particularly problematic – allows Hecq to identify a series of factors that are critical to the positive outcome of the supervisory relationship, and the successful completion of doctorates.

Some of these distinctive themes are not new; they flow from the challenges faced by those working in, to use Biggs and Büchler's term, an 'alternative paradigm'. We acknowledge, moreover, that these themes have been, and are, the subject of an ongoing scholarly conversation in *TEXT* and elsewhere. But we present this special issue to readers as a rare, concerted effort to interrogate and address these challenges across a range of specialist areas within the creative arts.

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