

University of Canberra, Central Queensland University

Sandra Burr, Jen Webb, Donna Lee Brien

Ethical examiners: authority, power and the ethics of examination

Abstract:

When creative writing research higher degree (HDR) candidates emerge from several years of dedicated, rigorous and often difficult research and writing and finally submit their thesis for examination, they do so with the expectation that the examination process will be fair, transparent and consistent, regardless of their discipline of practice. Existing research, however, has exposed uncertainty about the processes and outcomes of examination of higher-degree theses across all disciplines, as well as an absence of established standards for thesis examination (Bourke et al. 2004; Denicolo 2003). The situation in the creative arts is no different and the dearth of investigation into examination raises significant questions about how HDR examiners arrive at the commentary presented in their reports and how they match their own examination practice and standards to university policies. An investigation into creative writing research higher degrees (Brien and Webb 2007) revealed generally held uncertainties about examination standards, widely held perceptions of erratic assessment practices 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.

Drawing on data gathered from an ALTC-funded project interrogating examination practices across the broad sweep of creative arts disciplines, this paper attempts to address these uncertainties by discussing existing processes, practices and standards implemented by current examiners of doctoral degrees in the creative arts. With so much power and authority invested in examiners and the examination process questions of ethical practice will always arise. A significant goal of this project is to overcome such uncertainties by developing a nationally agreed set of examination standards aimed at achieving that consistency, fairness and level of excellence that creative arts candidates have not only come to expect, but are entitled to.

Biographical notes:

Donna Lee Brien, BEd (Deakin), GCHighEd (UNE), MA (UTS), PhD (QUT), is Professor of Creative Industries at CQUniversity, Australia. Widely published in the areas of writing pedagogy and praxis, creative nonfiction and collaborative practice in the arts, Donna has an MA and PhD in creative writing. Donna is Special Issues Editor of *TEXT: Journal of writing and writing courses* and Past President of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs. In 2006 Donna was awarded a Carrick Institute

Citation, and last year completed work on an Australian Learning and Teaching Council funded project, *The Australian Postgraduate Writing Network*, under the project leadership of Professor Jen Webb, University of Canberra. Donna is currently a Chief Investigator on two ALTC-funded projects: *Create.Ed* to form a network of leaders in teaching and learning in the creative arts in Australian universities and the *Examination of doctoral degrees in creative arts: process, practice and standards*, again under the project leadership of Jen Webb. d.brien@cqu.edu.au

Sandra Burr, BA (LaTrobe), Grad Dip Prof Comm. (UC), PhD (UC), is an Adjunct Professional Associate at the University of Canberra where she also teaches writing and practice-led research. She is a member of the Faculty's Writing Research Cluster, a member of the editorial panel for the new online journal *Axon: creative explorations*, and is a regular reviewer for *M/C reviews* and *TEXT: journal of writing and writing courses*. Her research interests include exploring relationships between humans and animals, particularly the horse-human bond, and how creative work, especially writing, is taught and assessed. Sandra is the Project Officer for the ALTC-funded grant *Examination of Doctoral Degrees in Creative arts: process, practice and standards*. sandra.burr@canberra.edu.au

Jen Webb is Professor of creative practice at the University of Canberra. She has published widely in poetry, short fiction, and scholarly works: her most recent book is *Understanding representation* (Sage, 2009), her co-authored book on the work of Michel Foucault (*Foucault: a critical introduction*, Allen & Unwin) is in production, and she is currently writing 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. Jen.webb@canberra.edu.au

Keywords:

Doctoral study – Examination – Ethics

Creative arts in the academy have been settling more firmly into their place within faculties and schools, and making claims about their relevance as scholarly (and not purely aesthetic) domains of practice. One effect of those claims is the ever-growing number of research students enrolled in creative arts disciplines at research masters and PhD levels, in universities across the country. This has led in turn to a focus on how effectively the creative arts disciplines manage higher degrees by research (HDR). A body of research has recently been – and is still being – conducted within the various creative arts disciplines as they attempt to determine the effectiveness, rigour and fairness of institutional policies, supervisory and examination practices and standards relating to HDR degrees in their disciplines. This paper adds to that research, reporting on the findings to date of our current project on this topic, and contributes to the knowledge generated by recent research into HDRs in creative writing (Webb and Brien 2008), dance (Phillips, Stock and Vincs 2009) and the visual arts (Baker 2009).

The self-reflection evident in funded and published research into creative arts HDRs, and in conversations with colleagues about the standards and policies across disciplines and across institutions, suggests that creative arts academics are concerned about how well we are dealing with the examination of HDR students' work. Issues raised in the literature, in anecdote and in our current research project indicate that ethical practice is of particular concern: creative arts academics ask whether our institutions' standards are both fair and equivalent to those of other universities; whether our examiners act ethically; whether our students are treated both fairly and with appropriate rigour. We have also observed, in Australia and abroad, an interest among creative academics in how the various creative disciplines measure up against each other, what our degrees are worth in both intellectual and professional terms, and how our graduates are perceived in the relevant creative and scholarly fields. This growing curiosity, and an evident willingness to examine our own practices, may herald a trend towards increased collegiality between the creative arts disciplines in solving these problems.

It is in this climate that we embarked on an ALTC-funded project to investigate both policies and expectations associated with the examination of creative HDR dissertations, and to consider what impact these differences have on the processes and practices of candidates, supervisors and examiners. There is a paucity of knowledge in all academic disciplines about HDR programs: comparatively little research has been published into how they are organised, what the pedagogical bases are for such degrees, the standards that are applied by examiners, and the policies that frame and direct the whole process. The situation in the creative arts is even less transparent. Famously, art is 'messy', being very reliant on material contexts, methods and traditions, and committed both to autonomy of thought and practice, and to a high degree of variability. This same 'messiness' allows academic creative theses to be rich and varied in their forms, their content and their trajectories, but it also generates the need to develop a vocabulary to explain creative arts research – what we do, why we do it and how we do it – so that our candidates, supervisors, examiners, university administrators and government can have confidence in the outcomes of the process. Our research attempts to generate such a vocabulary, one shared across the creative

arts disciplines, through an approach that is holistic, collaborative and consultative, and built on both empirical evidence and the knowledge, experience and perspectives of the community of creative arts scholars in Australia. The planned outcomes, therefore, include a repository of information on the current state of policy and practice, and also – after determining, negotiating and implementing agreed standards of best practice in examination – the establishment of a National Creative Arts Examination Board that will reflect, preserve and respect the diversity and dynamism of creative arts HDR in the academy.

The project commenced in January 2011 and at the time of writing (August 2011) is nearly halfway through. To date we have hosted two roundtable discussions with senior academics who are engaged in both the administration and the examination of creative arts HDRs, and will be hosting two more, along with focus groups, surveys and archival research designed to elicit information and opinions about this domain of practice. The first two roundtables were held in Sydney and Melbourne, with participants representing creative arts programs in 14 metropolitan and regional universities. Interestingly, initial findings from these roundtables and the related questionnaires reflect those from research that investigates similar issues in doctoral degrees more generally (see Kumar and Stracke 2011). Like those reported in the literature, our participants commented on the huge variations in institutional policies relating to admission, examination, and the types and quality of programs across the creative arts at doctoral level. This variation was considered to have a negative impact on the ability of candidates, supervisors and examiners to function efficiently and effectively. Supervisors and examiners considered that, in some cases, various universities' HDR policies constrained candidates in the creative arts, making it difficult for them to succeed in producing quality and innovative dissertations. A range of ethical concerns were also voiced: a number of our interlocutors commented that there is a perception in academic circles that universities may be accepting unsuitable or underprepared candidates, because of the financial benefits of doing so. On this final matter, to date, we have not found evidence of this; however, it is clear from our discussions so far that several examiners and supervisors felt that some candidates were ill prepared for doctoral studies. This is particularly the case now that creative and other professional disciplines are opening doctoral programs, and accepting candidates who may have high level professional experience, but do not have conventional scholarly backgrounds.

The differences in institutional policies across the sector reflect very differing notions of what is expected of doctoral level work. What constitutes doctoral level study in creative practice is surprisingly variable (even within individual institutions) and this is perhaps one of the more contentious areas for our research participants. The range of awards being offered, their nomenclature, admission requirements and the way they are structured, varies widely (Carey, Webb & Brien 2008); there are doctorates by both research and by coursework, PhDs, named Doctorates of Creative Arts, Creative Industries and Visual Arts, Professional Doctorates, Doctorates by publication and a Doctorate of Fine Arts (see Baker 2009: 28-31). One university offers four versions of a PhD depending on the proportion of text to creative practice, and on the industry experience of the candidate. Some institutions allow work to be submitted that was

completed before enrolment, such as a published novel, while others forbid this. This lack of consistency is challenging on several levels. When potential candidates are attempting to find the best place to undertake their research, such variations pose difficulties for them: how can they determine the equivalency of the various doctoral awards? Once they have enrolled and embarked on their research, and begun to build peer networks from across their city or across the country, we have found anecdotal evidence that candidates are acutely aware of the differences and inconsistencies in degrees being offered (see discussion in Carey, Webb & Brien 2008). This may lead to concerns about what their degree is going to be worth and how they will be able to position themselves within the scholarly and creative communities after they graduate. Although we do not have the space in this paper to discuss the following at length, it is of real concern, for instance, whether all of these higher degrees are preparing candidates to work as creative practitioners or as scholars; or are they attempting to provide training within and across both modes? As one participant pointed out, creative arts doctoral graduates are pulled between these two forces/fields: the industry and the scholarly imperatives may coincide, or they may pull in different directions.

Another area of intense discussion and debate that can be followed, for example, in *TEXT* and the conference discussions of the various creative arts professional bodies, focuses on the ways that doctoral degrees are structured. Participants note variations in the length of the exegetical component, the depth of scholarship expected and the relationship between the textual and the creative works (see Carey, Webb and Brien 2008). The model varies substantially between institutions, with universities requiring anywhere between 10,000 words and 50,000 words for the textual component of the doctoral level dissertation, though most require about 30,000 words (Baker 2009: 41-6). It appears that Australia is not alone in this dilemma, with similar variations occurring in the UK (Butt 2009). Further variations occur in expectations surrounding the intended relationship between the textual and creative components of a creative thesis: some institutions require total integration of the two parts while others see them as being only loosely related to each other. It was a revelation for many participants to discover, for example, that some institutions allow (or even demand) that the two components be supervised and examined separately and that or that, in performance arts for example, there is sometimes a time lapse, sometimes as long as six months, between the performance and the presentation of the exegesis. This approach challenges notions about the way in which some universities currently expect creative candidates to conceptualise their work, with the unspoken assumption that – unlike their supervisors and/or examiners – they are competent in, and able to critically engage with, both practice and theory.

Examination is, of course, central to the formal requirements of the doctoral process, and a great deal of discussion centred on the problems posed by the different institutional rules particularly in terms of: the selection of examiners; their roles and responsibilities; and the values examiners bring to the examination process. The selection of examiners was seen as problematical for a number of reasons including the perceived small pool of examiners available, willing and with the appropriate expertise and qualifications to examine. This issue was also raised in Baker (2009: 56)

and at a symposium on practice-led research held in Canberra recently (Burr 2010), particularly addressing the lack, first, of a viable register of examiners¹ and, then, of university policies that exclude experienced professionals from examining candidates in their area of expertise. The realities of doctoral level supervision and examination are often at odds with the institutional policies. For example, some university creative arts departments have considerable numbers of high-status academics who lack doctorates but who are supervising doctoral candidates; similarly, there are highly regarded industry professionals who examine at doctoral level, but have no academic experience. This situation poses real questions about the overall standard of assessment in some disciplines, and over the relevance of the academic *and* the professional knowledge of supervisors and examiners to the final outcome of a candidature.

There was more consistency about what we expect of examiners. Participants in both roundtables said that they expected examiners of their students' work: to be informed as well as intellectually rigorous and generous; to have a good understanding of the field; to be sensitive to the direction of the thesis; to be good readers; and to write a comprehensive report that gives information and direction not just to the student but also to the supervisor and the research director regarding their evaluation of the thesis. They expected that examiners: would approach the work with an open mind, a generosity of spirit and a flexible attitude; would be prepared to engage with the student as a scholar, a writer and a creative practitioner; would be prepared to participate in developing the project through the provision of informed feedback. Several said that the examiner is, in fact, the ideal reader of the text – is the person who completes the thesis by reading it and seeing how the components work together.

Most examiners claimed they approached the task of examination with a sense of responsibility, privilege and anticipation. Indeed, when describing their practice it was clear that this was the case: they almost universally stated that they ensure they have the time, the space and the facilities to think about the work and their responses to it. Several examiners said that they devote an entire weekend to reading the thesis, or they take a whole day shutting off the phone and making sure they do not have any interruptions, while others reported that they make time to read the thesis from beginning to end over several days or even weeks. Many said they feel they are entering into a pact with candidates who are junior scholars, coming into the field as potential academics and teachers. One very apt comment was that the doctoral process is about producing 'scholar-artists', a new category of artists who teach and transmit knowledge. Most of the examiners said they start from the premise that the thesis will pass; and they agreed that examiners are generally reluctant to fail a thesis (this is true in the academy beyond the creative arts; see Mullins & Kiley 2002: 376). Similar conclusions about the dialogic nature of the examination process and the formative, developmental role of examiner feedback have been noted in studies of traditional research theses (Mullins and Kiley 2002; Kumar and Stracke 2011). The roles and responsibilities of examiners are, therefore, many. They are the gatekeepers of traditional doctoral standards for the universities; they provide benchmarks that satisfy government scrutiny; and they have a role as industry arbiters. Examiners also

see themselves as mentors who, through the examination process, play a pivotal role in developing the next generation of creative practitioners and scholars.

If the examination is effectively a contract (a pact) between examiner and candidate to ensure the best possible outcomes from the research, then both parties have ethical responsibilities to meet. We have discussed the expectations on examiners, above; for candidates, the expectations are not only that they comply with the intellectual and professional standards, but also that they meet the guidelines set out by their institutions in terms of the length, structure and presentation of their thesis. This is important for examiners, most of whom reported that they require the textual component of a dissertation to be edited and proof read to a professional standard, with no distracting errors of spelling, grammar or punctuation. However, requirements and length of examination reports required varies from institution to institution and this was named as a source of frustration for examiners. Su Baker's observation was echoed by those at the Roundtable discussions:

the guidance provided to examiners was varied. Often guidance was solely about the length of the report as opposed to the content, other schools provide the examiner with some broad areas to consider such as a critical reflection on the work, the standard and rigour of the work. More specific guidance was less usual (2009: 56).

Of course, examiners bring to the process what they consider appropriate (if perhaps under articulated) expectations of what a doctoral level creative thesis should produce. For dissertations where the creative work takes the form of an exhibition, examiners said they would expect gallery quality hanging and presentation. For dissertations where written language is the artistic medium, examiners expect a suitably high standard of expression. Candidates in creative writing should, for instance, exhibit a control of language: a real capacity to use and bend language appropriately. Regardless of artistic form, however, it was expected that all textual material be engaging and reader friendly, with both the creative and scholarly texts demonstrating high levels of creative and critical thinking. In addition, for one participant at least, candidates are expected to show that they have found their own voice, and not be ventriloquising other scholars in a sort of 'death by citation'. There should also be strong evidence of academic rigour, and a formalised discourse developed in a candidate's work: an engagement with scholarly ideas, together with a clear presentation of new knowledge or an enhanced understanding about the subject being interrogated.

Examination at doctoral level requires a certain degree of rigour, thoughtfulness and time: some of our participants stated that it takes them around ten days to produce a report, and this is consistent with other reports. Mullins and Kiley, for example, found that, despite heavy workloads, 'most [examiners] indicated that they spent the equivalent of three or four days fulltime examining a thesis, often over a period of two to three weeks' (2002: 376). There was debate about emendations; one participant commented that 'we don't have enough braveness at the bottom' – that the fail rate is simply too low. Other participants agreed, but pointed out that they often feel hamstrung by policies that do not allow them to award a lesser degree if the thesis

warrants it, and by perceptions of pressure from universities not to fail the person even if they felt failure was warranted.

Variations in institutional ethics requirements were seen as another very real area of contention for creative-arts HDR examiners. While some ethics committees were considered rigorous but fair, others have ethics approvals processes in place that, one participant said, ‘make totally unrealistic demands for a creative project’. The requirements were seen as too stringent, too rigid and tailored to disciplines other than the creative arts. The view here was that the ethics approval process is premised upon a particular model, and it has not yet adapted to other sorts of practices. Too often the forms are hugely complex, and they are designed for high-risk cases. There is a need for a less cumbersome application and approval process for the many ethically low-risk projects undertaken in higher degree creative arts projects. Equally concerning were situations where examiners felt that ethics approval should have been a requirement, and yet at the institutional level candidates have been told that their projects did not warrant the application of ethics approval. This raises question about whether students are in danger of being penalised for something that is really a university issue. As someone suggested ‘as a community of scholars we need to understand how ethics applies to the various sorts of work we do’.

Conclusion

Our findings to date point to a diversity of processes and standards across institutions, but also to a homogeneity in the values and practices that examiners bring to the examination process. This dichotomy is both worrying and reassuring; worrying because this lack of a set of standards by which creative arts HDRs in Australian universities are administered and measured leads to questions about the quality of creative arts graduates being produced; reassuring because, despite the difficulty of navigating this labyrinth of standards, policies, instructions and requirements, examiners approach the task of examination both enthusiastically and ethically. Despite the plethora of confusing guidelines and instructions and the different standards and requirements – this maze that examiners, supervisors, candidates and, indeed, Research Office staff must navigate and resolve – our findings point to examiners being extremely ethical in their approach to theses. They are caring, concerned, positive and very mindful of the current and potential status of candidates. As well, they hold and display deep feelings of responsibility towards maintaining standards at individual, discipline, institutional and industry level.

Clearly, existing examination policies and procedures in creative-arts HDR are in need of significant revision; the question is how to bring order to the chaos. The Australian Council of Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies has produced a detailed set of generic guidelines for best practice in doctoral examination in Australia (2005). While these guidelines do not specifically address the creative arts, they do provide a basis for the sector to build on in order to produce its own examination framework. Similarly, the Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee has produced a set of instructions for the examination of higher-degree theses (2003) as well as examination advice in their *Code of practice for maintaining and monitoring academic standards in higher degrees* (1998) and these too should be considered. We

will use this established material, together with the data we are gathering, to raise the possibility of establishing a method of benchmarking processes and policies associated with examination of creative arts doctorates. While we have yet to complete our data gathering and analysis, we would like to note our gratitude for the generosity and enthusiasm of so many research academics in creative arts disciplines, and hope to present a final report by this time next year.

Endnotes

1. We have attempted to establish an examiners' register; and, while all academics approached support it in principle, very few will record their details. Participants of the roundtables suggested that this is an effect of institutional imperatives: we *must* supervise (our own) students, and so our universities both require and support us to register as supervisors; but examination is typically undertaken for a different university and so, while there is general support for a register, the idea has neither institutional support nor institutional insistence that individual examiners register for the role. Instead, potential examiners are identified and evaluated in less formal ways such as calling on friends and peers, and talking to colleagues about the suitability of potential examiners.

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