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Embedded research(ers)

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By Professor Jen Webb

In the mid-1990s I embarked on a doctorate, deploying social research to study the field of artistic production. In the mid-2000s I embarked on a second doctorate, deploying creative writing to study questions of embodiment. The motivation for each project was similar: I wanted to investigate a phenomenon with the intention of finding answers to questions I had, which I thought had value beyond satisfying my own curiosity.

It seems to me that the Engagement and Impact (E&I) agenda, and the policies and regulations that undergird it, make explicit and reportable what many researchers and research students – like me – have been doing anyway

During my first candidature I was deeply embedded in the arts sector; during the second I was pretty much ensconced in the ivory tower. But during each, if asked “whose project is it, anyway?”, I would have responded “Mine”. If I were beginning my doctoral education now, it is likely I would pursue pretty much the same engagement process; but my university would be more concerned to ensure the relationship was

appropriately established, and my supervisor would need to report on it.

It seems to me that the Engagement and Impact (E&I) agenda, and the policies and regulations that undergird it, make explicit and reportable what many researchers and research students – like me – have been doing anyway. Given this, the focus on end-user engagement could be viewed as a sort of Heath Robinson contraption: elaborate and complex machinery delivering a whole series of actions but producing not very much. Alternatively, it can be viewed as an expression of the government's commitment to knowledge transfer, and the delivery of theorised, tested answers to real-life problems.

It's difficult to know with any clarity what proportion of candidatures have involved end-user engagement, because there has not been any formal mechanism to record it. But if I think of those I have supervised or mentored, examples of end-user engagement quickly come to mind:

- a candidate investigating an aspect of manuscript illumination, who was embedded within the National Library and working closely with library specialists
- a candidate researching the politics of oral communication in Africa, who spent part of his candidature in his country of origin, embedded in the local political system
- a candidate interrogating the popular narrative of the relationship between women and horses, who was deeply immersed in the local and national equestrian community.

In each case, these candidates organised their own placements; and in each case, they would have confidently stated that their project was their own.

I have also been involved more proactively in organising placements. In 2012, with Mitchell Whitelaw, I designed a flagship PhD program we called “**Digital Treasures**” to connect HDR candidates with key cultural institutions. Each candidate in the program would work with an institution's digital collections to render them accessible and aesthetically innovative. The program satisfies the E&I agenda – being applied, practical and industry-linked – while also being underpinned by creative practice research. And the candidates entered the program not as interns, but as researchers who designed and owned their own project.

Now that E&I is government policy and therefore has become university policy, it is something we must address; formally, explicitly. If, as researchers and supervisors, we respond grudgingly, doing the bare minimum necessary to satisfy the HDR End-User Engagement reports – if formalised engagement becomes an imperative for HDR candidature, and particularly if a candidature becomes a variant of work-for-

If, as researchers and supervisors, we respond grudgingly, doing the bare minimum necessary to satisfy the HDR End-User Engagement reports – if formalised engagement becomes an imperative for HDR candidature, and particularly if a candidature becomes a variant of

the-dole – there are serious risks. But if we apply innovative creative thinking, and if the candidates involved are enthusiastic and have a project fit for end-user purposes, there are likely to be real benefits.

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Take it discipline by discipline, project by project. Creative writing, for example, is not immediately or obviously useful to anyone outside the creative field (Auden: “poetry makes nothing happen”; Blanchot: art is “useless even to itself”). But at my institution, for example, there is a growing cohort of HDR candidates who are addressing social problems through engaged, embedded research into how creative writing practice can support members of at-risk groups to build resilience and wellbeing.

These candidates comprise only a fraction of our cohort; and I suspect that, particularly in humanities and creative arts disciplines, such candidatures will always be the minority. But if university policies are crafted to accommodate difference, provide flexibility and account for the legal, financial and equitable imperatives of end-user engagement, there will surely be better opportunities during and post-candidature – and this can surely only be good for us, our candidates and our disciplines.

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Jen Webb is Distinguished Professor of Creative Practice, and Dean of Graduate Research at the University of Canberra. Recent publications include *Researching Creative Writing* (Frontinus, 2015) and *Art and Human Rights: Contemporary Asian Contexts* (Manchester UP, 2016); and the poetry collections *Stolen Stories, Borrowed Lines* (Mark Time, 2015), *Sentences from the Archive* (Recent Work Press, 2016) and *Moving Targets* (Recent Work Press, 2018). She is Chief Investigator on the ARC Discovery project ‘So what do you do? Graduates in the Creative and Cultural Industries’ (DP160101440).

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