

Higher Degree Examination in Fine Art

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Abstract

The PhD is distinguished from other university degrees by the emphasis placed on the significance of its contribution to knowledge. The qualities associated with this contribution can differ between disciplines and fields, but there are also strong similarities. One means of identifying thesis benchmarks and qualities is to identify what examiners look for in the PhD thesis. Disciplines are not static and expectations can change over time. Moreover some disciplines, such as the creative arts, did not put forward candidates for the PhD until recently and are still developing their baseline expectations on PhD process and quality.

This paper describes an established mixed-methodological approach which was previously employed to analyse the content of 603 written PhD examination reports from a range of disciplines including the arts, social sciences and science. The results from these previous analyses will be compared to a small sample of recently acquired Fine Art examination reports. The similarities and differences between Fine Art examination reports and reports from other disciplines are investigated. Drawing on the Fine Art examination reports as well as guidelines provided to Fine Art examiners, this paper also aims to identify emerging issues and themes from the creative arts examination process that can be explored in subsequent interviews with Fine Art examiners.

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Introduction

The amalgamation of higher education institutions and a vastly more competitive and straitened funding environment in Australia has led to a rationalisation of programs at a time when non-traditional disciplines are attempting to develop a research niche and baseline expectations on PhD process and quality. There has been vigorous debate within the creative arts and design about the place held by research and the characteristics of exhibition, composition and performance as forms of doctoral outcome alongside the conventional written thesis in traditional disciplines. However, this debate also presumes the nature of the doctorate and its encapsulation in a thesis or viva in established disciplines is well documented and unambiguous. That this is clearly not the case is becoming most evident with respect to assessment (Morley et al 2002). Fundamental questions about process (Tinkler & Jackson 2000, 2001) and examiner expectations and application of standards across disciplines have only recently begun to be addressed from an assessment perspective using empirical data (Bourke 2002).

We have now entered an epoch where knowledge is a key commodity and the benefits that flow from knowledge creation, possession and use is a major force behind government higher education policies (Kemp 1999, Commonwealth of Australia 2002). A major source of new knowledge is the university sector and within that sector Research Higher Degree Students play a significant role. During the late 1980s there was a growth in interest in the structures, equivalence, processes, roles, qualities and outcomes of postgraduate study and research candidature. The PhD, one of the least examined and documented areas of education, became the subject of scrutiny and a number of major national and international comparative studies followed (Bowen & Rudenstine 1992, Clark 1992, Kouptsov 1994). By the mid-1990s interest had expanded and developed to encompass supervision practice, supervisory relationships, pedagogy, characteristics of candidature (including completion), quality assurance and benchmarking (Cullen, Pearson, Saha & Spear 1994, Holbrook & Johnston 1999, Shaw & Green 2002). Historically the PhD is one of the oldest degree types and is distinguished from other university degrees by the emphasis placed on the significance of its contribution to knowledge (Kouptsov 1994). However, the pressure within higher education to re-evaluate the contribution of the PhD and other research degrees in line with an innovation agenda, manifests within all disciplines as they react to the changing political, cultural and economic landscape. Cunningham and Hartley (2001) highlight the emergence of 'creative industries' – the service industries of the new economy requiring creative content based on individual artistic talent, linking the needs of this sector with research and teaching in the arts and humanities. There has been little opportunity in this climate for new players in the research arena to evolve and experiment, to determine what research is and what constitutes a doctorate.

Research in the Arts 'is a controversial subject where there is a lack of common agreement among key stakeholders' (Strand, 1998, p.31). Gray and Pirie (1995) suggest that within most UK art institutions research has been 'manipulated' by the

dominant models of established research in Science and Social Science. The adoption of quasi-scientific methods in an attempt to legitimise artistic research may distort both practice and research in Art and Design. Gray and Pirie argue that often the nature of artistic research is 'chaotic' and such a process should not try to emulate scientific research models nor should it be expected to conform to conventional measurable systems. With respect to doctoral programs Durling (2002) expresses concern that undue haste in establishing such programs may generate the legacy of an unreliable knowledge base and inadequate training.

Definitions of research are emerging that provide some equivalence with traditional research but this is more imposition than evolution – a 'mechanism' for recognising the kind of creative arts research which is not accompanied by substantial documentation, or which is 'focused on research *in or through* the arts rather than about the arts' (Strand 1998, p. 46). So, while forms of equivalence may have temporarily solved the problem of defining creative arts activity as research for funding and auditing purposes, the deeper issues and confusion in interpreting what is being judged and by what standards persists (Durling 2002).

This paper reports some early findings from an investigation into research higher degree examination that illuminate the differences between the structure and emphases in examiner reports in Fine Art with those in other disciplines. The project constitutes the first phase of a pilot study that explores examination processes and assessment objectives in Fine Art. The intention of the pilot is to develop and refine methods that will be used in an international comparative study of research higher degree assessment in the visual and creative arts. Such a project is significant in several ways. First there is very little empirical research in the area of the assessment of research degrees, particularly the processes of judgement that are applied, yet understanding such processes are crucial to improving research training and identifying research quality. Second, the opportunity to study research training and assessment objectives virtually from the outset is rare given most disciplines have long established research traditions. Third, there are unresolved issues within Fine Art, and in Art and Design generally about the nature, role and contribution of the doctorate (Durling 2002). The ultimate aim of this research is to inform the debate at the level of assessment practice and contribute to the development of benchmarks that are consistent with the achievement of high quality and discipline-sympathetic outcomes

The research design

The (Fine Art examination) pilot project reported here is anchored to the findings of a different and larger study of PhD examination in Australia (Bourke 2002, Holbrook *et al.* 2001, Holbrook *et al.* 2002, Lovat *et al.* 2002). The initial stages of the latter produced a set of five core coding categories (and additional sub-categories) that captured the content of, and emphases in, PhD examiner reports across a wide range of disciplines.

In phase 1 of the pilot project the abovementioned core categories and findings provide an initial framework for comparing the thrust of Fine Art examiner reports with those based on conventional theses in established research disciplines. Both Fine Art Masters

and PhD thesis reports are included in the pilot sample, not just PhD reports. This was desirable because Masters research is more established in Fine Art than doctoral research which is quite new. A total of 30 examiner reports on Fine Art candidates (50% Masters and 50% PhD) from 10 different institutions are compared with a total of 600 PhD reports from two institutions across eight broad fields of study, namely Agriculture, Architecture, Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, Business, Education, Engineering, Health and Science.

The research questions addressed in the first phase of the pilot project are:

- What do Fine Art examiner reports reveal about the process of Research Higher Degree examination in Fine Art including the degree to which university guidelines shape the process?
- What themes and emphases are most evident in examiner reports in Fine Art, and to what extent do they reflect themes and emphases in other disciplines?
- More specifically, what differences, if any, exist between evaluative comment in Fine Art reports and evaluative comment in other disciplines and what can be said about the nature and consistency of assessment practice?

Phase1 data collection

Institutional documents: Guidelines for examination and descriptions of Fine Art examination process for a cross-sectional sample of 15 Australian institutions (at least one from each state) were collected, and the comparable elements summarised and entered into a spreadsheet.

A Brief Survey accompanied a request for examiner reports and interviews. The survey provided basic information about the volunteers' examination experience, and the reports they forwarded (with all identifying information removed).

Reports: Examiner reports were word-processed, standardized, entered into QSRN6 software and coded using existing coding categories. The proportion of the text in each category was determined (as described by Anderson 2003) and provided the basis for comparison between reports using independent samples t-tests.

Phase 2 data collection

The results from Phase1 of this investigation will help to identify emerging issues and themes from the Fine Art examination process that can then be explored in a subsequent phase of the study in which Fine Art examiners will be asked to reflect on the judgements they make during examination. The purpose of the interview phase is to gain greater insight into Fine Art research degree assessment and how examiners define 'research'. Those examiners of Fine Art research in Australia who indicated a willingness to be interviewed at the survey stage will be interviewed by telephone. The interviews will be transcribed and entered into N6 software for analysis on the basis of themes. The themes will partly reflect the questions that emerge from the analyses of the reports but will extend well beyond these to identify the ways in which disciplinary knowledge is applied, what range of factors play a role in allocating a final rating, and

how the examination process is perceived. It is anticipated that there will be further and extended coding of the reports to explore and test the findings from the interview analyses.

Guidelines and the Fine Art higher degree examination process

There is considerable variation among Australian institutions in the criteria employed for higher degree research awards in the Creative Arts and in the guidelines provided to examiners. A survey of criteria from 15 institutions across the states reveals that Masters and PhD degrees in Fine or Visual Art are generally, but not always, comprised of both an exhibition and a written component. The written component is typically referred to as the 'exegesis' and most institutions indicate that this document should be treated as providing 'explanation, exposition or interpretation' of the works produced. The role of the exegesis as a medium by which the meaning and/or significance of an exhibition is conveyed receives support from the United Kingdom Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) report *Practice-Based Doctorates in the Creative and Performing Arts and Design* (1997) which regarded the written component of a Creative Arts doctorate as giving legitimacy to the artwork.

Some institutions (a quarter of those surveyed) give candidates the option of presenting a written thesis only (referred to in this paper as a 'conventional' thesis) instead of a thesis consisting of a combined exhibition and exegesis. While there is general agreement that a conventional thesis should be examined along the same lines as theses in any other discipline, there is less consistency among institutions regarding the form that an exegesis should take and how a thesis that consists of both a visual and a written component should be evaluated.

Regulations about the length of the written component in Fine Art Masters Degrees varied from 5,000 to 20,000 words, while for PhD Awards the length varied from 20,000 to 50,000 words. The purpose of the written component was seen as supporting and/or complementing the exhibition in a number of ways, including: defining the purpose and theoretical basis of the project work; demonstrating the advance or innovation made by the creative work; elaborating and elucidating the artworks; placing the exhibition in a discipline context; and explaining the contribution of the visual work to human cultural endeavour and knowledge.

Although some institutions provided specific criteria for the written component of the award (as described above) the majority of institutions indicated that in the case of both Masters and PhD awards there should be an '*integral* relationship between the creative work and the documentation'. Typically the term 'thesis' is used to describe the combination of exegesis and exhibition and examiners are asked to consider both the studio works and the written component as being 'mutually' essential to establishing the quality, strength and originality of the research. However, because the examination criteria do not require separate assessments of each of the written and practical components, it is not clear how examiners are balancing their judgements between these two components.

In the examination reports in the current investigation, Fine Art examiners devoted almost as much comment to the written component as they did to the exhibition (about 40% of total report). However, there was substantial variation among the reports with some examiners focusing on either the exegesis or the exhibition almost to the exclusion of the other component. Moreover, originality and contribution were not mentioned significantly more frequently in text relating to the exhibition compared to examiner comment on the exegesis.

There is also considerable variation among Australian institutions in the manner in which the examination process is conducted. Some differences include the sequence in which the written and practical components are examined, whether examiners of the same thesis form judgements collaboratively or independently, and whether or not candidates are invited to be involved in discussions with examiners about their work. In the majority of institutions surveyed, the examination process required that the exegesis be submitted to examiners *prior* to their viewing of the exhibition. The period of time between submission of the exegesis and examination of the visual component ranged from one to three months. Less common was the practice of providing the exegesis to examiners at the time they viewed the exhibition. In these cases, examiners were able to view both components simultaneously and take the exegesis away with them for further reference during the writing of their reports. Whether or not these different procedures may be responsible for influencing examiner perceptions of the studio works or influencing final recommendations has yet to be explored.

Preliminary comparison of Fine Art examination reports with reports from other disciplines

The core coding categories including sub-categories, are fully described elsewhere (Holbrook *et al.* 2001, Holbrook 2003) but are also briefly defined in the discussion below. Before other comparisons are considered, it should first be noted that there were no significant differences in the categories of comment of PhD and Masters reports in Fine Art.

The proportions of text coded in the Fine Art and other discipline reports at four of the primary or parent core coding categories (examiner & process, assessable areas, dialogic elements and evaluative elements) were compared and, of the 28 sub-categories examined, there were significant differences for 12 categories. Categories where there was no difference in examiner emphases included the scope of the thesis, coverage of the literature review, discussion of significance and contribution, publications arising and summative evaluative elements. The categories where the proportions of text differed significantly ($p < .05$) between the two groups are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Proportions of report text sub-categories that differed significantly ($p < .05$) between Fine Art examination reports (N=30) and reports from other disciplines (N=600)

CATEGORIES/ Sub-categories	FINE ART REPORTS Mean% (SD)	REPORTS FROM OTHER DISCIPLINES Mean% (SD)
Length of report (text units)	96.6 (56.4)	134.3 (123.3)
Examiner and Process		
Specific and anticipated criteria	10.6 (9.3)	6.3 (9.0)
Assessable Areas		
Inaccuracies in literature review	0.1 (0.5)	1.8 (4.9)
Approach/methodology	6.4 (5.7)	9.1(11.3)
Analysis and reporting	57.6 (21.4)	38.5 (24.4)
Topic related issues	1.1 (3.2)	9.2 (16.4)
Editorial issues	0.9 (1.6)	9.0 (14.5)
Dialogic Elements		
Use of first person	27.8 (20.4)	15.7 (14.3)
Evaluative Elements		
Formative instruction	8.3 (16.0)	27.1 (25.3)
Instructional commentary	15.7 (14.8)	9.7 (13.9)
Prescriptive instruction	1.3 (2.7)	7.9 (11.4)
Other Judgement	34.8 (17.3)	16.1 (17.4)
Positive Judgement	27.4 (18.7)	12.8 (16.4)

Despite the fact that Fine Art examiners are asked to comment on both a written and a practical component, their reports are significantly shorter than reports on traditional theses (a mean of 97 lines as compared with 134 lines of text).

As shown in Table 1, Fine Art reports contained a significantly greater proportion of text addressing '*specific and anticipated criteria*' than reports from other disciplines (11% compared with 6%). It was common among the small sample of Fine Art reports included in the current investigation, for examiners to preface their report by referring to the examination criteria they had been given, for example:

I have read the University Doctoral Examiners' Information Booklet carefully before attending to the task of evaluating the contribution made by X to the field of knowledge in his PhD submission.

Similarly when passing judgement on the quality of a candidate's work, the examination criteria were often cited as the basis for determining the examiner's final recommendation. Fine Art examiners exhibited a greater tendency than examiners from other disciplines to clarify the rationale for the substance of their report and to verify the reasons for their overall evaluation.

'Assessable areas' comprises coding categories that capture key elements in research such as the literature, approach and analysis and reporting of findings. Compared to reports from other disciplines Fine Art examiner reports contained significantly less text concerning the research approach, topic related issues, inaccuracies in the literature review and editorial issues but proportionally more was written about analysis and reporting of findings. Since approximately only 40 per cent of examiner comment in Fine Art reports addressed the *written* component of the candidate's work, it is not surprising that there was less comment about areas associated with traditional theses, such as editorial input, where an examiner's focus is directed solely to a literary product.

Although there was no difference between Fine Art reports and reports from other disciplines in the amount of text addressing *coverage*

In responses to conventional theses the research 'approach' category captures comments on the nature of experiments, instruments and the mechanics of analysis. In Fine Art reports there was little reference to specific research methods in connection with the exegesis but there was what might be classed as an equivalent form of comment that addressed approaches to producing the art works such as technical processes, practices or techniques:

His direction is subtler and works back into the process of making the images. He does that by allowing the hand of the artist to become evident

The technique, which is basic, works well with the wood and adds to the movement.

Compared to reports on conventional theses Fine Art reports contained more text in the *analysis and reporting* category (58% compared with 39%). The *'analysis and reporting'* category which covers the 'Results and Discussion' sections in traditional theses appeared the closest to representing the part of a report where the examiner was responding to how well a candidate displayed their own ideas and produced evidence of the originality and significance of their work. The text on studio works tended to be coded at this category in the light of the absence of a category for comments concerned with the 'product' of a thesis, and that in turn proved to be a substantial proportion of Fine Art reports.

Evaluative comment

To reiterate what has been explained above, the coding categories for evaluative comment are based on conventional research theses. For conventional theses comment that is evaluative or that contains judgement in some form constitutes, on average, most of the examiner report. Some evaluative comment is summative in structure, and some formative. The category *summative evaluative comment* captures comment that succinctly identifies the strengths and weaknesses of the whole or major elements of the thesis. *Formative evaluative comment* is more complex – the examiner engages with the ideas and subject matter of the research communicated in the thesis, provides instruction for the candidate and treats all or some elements of the work as able to be improved or in need of improvement. In formative comment assessment intersects with instruction in the form of *instructive comment*, that is examiners teach or instruct.

However, not all instructive comment is formative, some of it being quite *prescriptive*. There is also a significant amount of comment that can be defined as editorial, and a category of instruction which is more in the form of commentary (*instructional commentary*). Finally, there is a category that captures all the remaining evaluative comment that is neither summative nor formative, and does not include instruction. Much of it is completely separate from the instructive comment, often at the beginning or end of the report, and subjective in tenor, veering more to the personal than the objective, such as 'I thoroughly enjoyed reading this thesis', or 'I am amazed by the attention to detail'.

Proportionally more *instructional commentary* was written on Fine Art theses, and there was proportionally less *formative* and *prescriptive* instruction compared to theses from other disciplines. Both formative and prescriptive instruction captures text where the examiner provides information, assistance or advice as to how to improve the thesis. Such comments indicate that the examiner regards the thesis as a 'work in progress' and that improvement is either desirable or essential before the thesis is of an acceptable standard. The fact that these types of comments occur less frequently in Fine Art examination reports may indicate that Fine Art examiners more often regard the thesis and especially the exhibition component as a 'finished product'. The finding that there is a greater proportion of *instructional commentary* in Fine Art reports also corroborates this theory. *Instructional commentary* captures text where the examiner speculates on aspects that they consider 'may' have added to the quality of the research process or the production of the thesis, but it is now too late for the candidate to act upon the advice. For example,

I would have liked the shadow to be dominant in some relationships – and all of the mapped experience to have had a lighter feel or touch.

Obviously Fine Art examiners couch their criticisms in a way that acknowledges the difficulty that candidates would face if they were required to alter an artwork in order to satisfy examiner recommendations.

The category *other judgement* includes both positive and negative judgement, as well as judgement that was neither positive nor negative. The higher proportion of *other judgement* in Fine Art reports reflects the higher incidence of both positive judgement and judgement that was neither positive nor negative. Typically, this latter type of comment was directed at the exhibition component of the thesis. In these instances the examiner appeared to be making a judgement about the exhibition but used a discourse that, as yet, has not been observed in reports on conventional theses. These comments reflect the language of an art critic or art reviewer where the qualities of the work are explored in regard to the impact they have on the reviewer - the examiner provides an explanation as if interpreting the artwork for an audience:

The spirit of this voice however, is conjured by soft, translucent pillows as a frame or context for the opacity of the letters, which are further obscured in a sound piece in which the voices tumble over each other in a palimpsest of impenetrable narratives.

It has been suggested that the Fine Art examiner assumes the role of a discerning viewer whose purpose is to provide both a responsive and an analytical interpretation of the work being examined in order to judge the effectiveness of the work's communicative resonance for other viewers (a comment by one of the participants in this study that will be followed up). The current comparison revealed that this responsive element is more evident in Fine Art examiner reports where first person dialogue comprised almost one third of the total text compared to only 16 per cent in reports on

conventional theses. Despite the fact that Fine Art examiners provided more positive feedback to candidates, they appeared hesitant to give a universal endorsement on the merit of a thesis and tended to qualify their evaluation by the use of phrases such as 'I personally thought that...', 'This is how it appears to me' ; These are my opinions of, and responses to ...'

Discussion

The investigation of how guidelines and/or criteria provided to Fine Art research degree examiners inform and shape the examination process revealed that there is considerable variation among Australian institutions not only in the criteria provided to examiners, but also in the examination process itself. While there is common agreement that a Fine Art research 'thesis' should include both a written and an exhibition component and that the thesis should make a significant and original contribution to knowledge, there is less consensus about what form the written component should take and which element of a Fine Art thesis (that is, the written or practical component or both) should demonstrate originality and significance. Although the results from the small sample of reports in the current study suggest that Fine Art examiners devote an approximately equal proportion of their report to each of the written and exhibition components, it is still not clear which of these elements may have greater sway on forming an examiner's final judgement of the worth of a thesis.

Bearing in mind that the coding categories used here emerged from the reports on conventional theses in other disciplines, the comparison of elements of Fine Art examination reports and examination reports in other disciplines revealed that there were substantial and significant differences in several categories of text content. Fine Art examination reports contained less formative and prescriptive instruction and more

There has been considerable debate within the United Kingdom since the release of the UKCGE report which concluded that, in order for Fine Art PhDs to have equivalence with conventionally presented doctorates, the practical component or product needs to be accompanied by a written document which clarifies and communicates the research process. Candlin (2000) points out that this framework implies that:

an artwork, no matter how cognitively sophisticated and theoretically rich it is, or however much it enquires into and works through a set of ideas, cannot be deemed research without the supporting apparatus of conventionally presented academic study. (p.98)

Similarly Newbury (1997) argues that scientific approaches are not always compatible with artistic complexity and freedom of thought and that rather than trying to 'reduce' artistic research to conventional methods it is necessary to 'embrace a broader and more plural appreciation of method' (p.3)

Final comments and future directions

The present attempt to investigate assessment practices in Fine Art higher degrees has given rise to more questions than answers. The first phase has certainly raised questions about the nature of equivalence at the most fundamental level. It is clear that the emphases and content areas that emerged from examiner reports in traditional research disciplines would not have been identified independently from Fine Art reports. This suggests a need to go back to the reports and create some categories that adequately reflect the report text, especially the evaluative elements and, through interviews, try to understand further the nature of these differences. There is also a need to clarify and understand the language that Fine Art examiners use to frame their responses. The coding categories used in this pilot phase do not encompass the language of 'appreciation' or 'review' that appears to be unique to the creative arts field

It is anticipated that the interviews may reveal further insights into the Fine Art examination process including: how examiners approach assessment in Fine Art; what are their expectations, benchmarks, standards, and models for evaluation; what do they perceive to be the main role of examination; what do they perceive as the constraints of examination; what roles and functions do they perceive they assume when engaged in examining a Fine Art PhD; and what qualities do they look for in the various components of the examination (e.g. the exhibition itself, the accompanying program notes, the dissertation).

Further investigations of assessment practices in Art and Design will contribute to a growing body of research that aims to achieve a better understanding of what constitutes 'quality', 'originality' and 'contribution' in a PhD and how these can be measured. Such investigations can also inform the debate on how to achieve equivalence for the practice-based PhD without compromising or distorting artistic intentions and processes. Drawing attention to creative arts doctorates may help to broaden the debate over what constitute doctoral requirements and, as suggested by

Candlin (2000), rather than focusing on how to ensure that art practice fits traditional academic regulations 'it may be more productive to use the practice-based PhDs as a way of re-thinking academic conventions and scholarly requirements' (p.96).

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