

## **Examiner Reflections on the Fine Art Higher Degree Examination Process**

**Allyson Holbrook, Kerry Dally, Anne Graham & Miranda  
Lawry**

**The University of Newcastle**

### **Abstract**

Because higher degrees in Fine Art are a relatively recent phenomenon, this field provides a rare opportunity to study research training and assessment objectives virtually from the outset. The findings reported in this paper draw on the interview phase (N =15) of a study that explores examination processes and assessment objectives in Fine Art in Australia. The findings reported in this paper explore examiner encounters with Fine Art RHD examination procedures and are divided into four themes loosely based on the interview questions relating to examination processes. The first section of this paper encompasses examiner responses to institutional guidelines, the second examiner selection, the third explores the roles examiners assume and the fourth, the nature and forms of engagement with other participants in the examination. These themes have been explored in recent studies into doctoral examination in traditional disciplines which have been conducted primarily in the United Kingdom. The examiners perceived that their role was an evolving one and that examiners need to demonstrate flexibility in order to cope with the variations in institutional requirements and to demonstrate empathy with candidates. They valued achieving understanding, whether that understanding be of the student's work or the processes necessary to reach a judgement about it.

Refereed paper presented at AARE 2004 International Educational Research Conference,  
Nov 29-Dec 2, Melbourne.

## Examiner Reflections on the Fine Art Higher Degree Examination Process

There is still very little empirical research in the area of the assessment of research degrees in Australia, yet understanding such processes are crucial to improving research training and identifying research quality. Because higher degrees in Fine Art are a relatively recent phenomenon, this field provides a rare opportunity to study research training and assessment objectives virtually from the outset. The findings reported in this paper draw mainly on the interview phase (N =15) of a study that explores examination processes and assessment objectives in Fine Art in Australia. The main aim of the study is to provide initial detail about current assessment practice in Fine Art that can be employed to inform debate at the level of assessment practice, especially with respect to the development of benchmarks that are consistent with the achievement of high quality and discipline-sympathetic outcomes.

The findings reported in this paper explore examiner encounters with Fine Art PhD examination procedures in Australia and are divided into four themes loosely based on the interview questions relating to examination processes. The first section of this paper encompasses examiner responses to institutional guidelines, the second examiner selection, the third explores the roles examiners assume and the fourth, the nature and forms of engagement with other participants in the examination. These four themes have been explored in recent studies into doctoral examination in traditional disciplines which have been conducted primarily in the United Kingdom.

The release of the United Kingdom Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) report, *Practice-Based Doctorates in the Creative and Performing Arts and Design* (1997) stimulated vigorous debate both within the UK and internationally, about how the forms of doctoral outcome in Creative Arts, including components such as an exhibition, composition or performance compare with the conventional written thesis in traditional disciplines (Candlin, 2000). The UKCGE report suggested that in order for Creative 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'. However, the idea that an artwork requires a written exposition (or exegesis) to clearly communicate and reveal its research base and thus give it 'legitimacy' has been challenged by numerous artists, academics and researchers (McLeod, 2000; Gray and Pirie, 1995). The issue of whether or not an artwork alone can adequately represent its research focus is one of practical, not just philosophical importance. Durling (2002) notes that in the UK there are wide variations in the requirements for PhDs in both art and design and that some institutions accept an exhibition of artefacts accompanied by only a 'thin text' or with no requirement for any written documentation. However, the concerns about varying requirements are not confined to doctorates in the fields of art and design. A lack of consensus and consistency among examiners as to what PhD programmes are attempting to achieve appears to be evident across all disciplines (Denicolo, 2003; Powell & McCauley, 2003; Shaw & Green, 2002). Shaw and Green suggest that these inconsistencies contribute to difficulties in determining benchmarks and ensuring equity in standards.

In addition to the variation in requirements for the degree there may also be differences in the institutional guidelines provided for examiners. In the UK, Tinkler and Jackson (2000) conducted a review of institutional policies governing the PhD examination process in 20 British Universities and found that there was considerable consistency regarding the key criteria for the award of a PhD but the examination

process was 'operationalized in diverse ways' (p. 129). In Australia, it has been suggested that the criteria for the written evaluation of PhD theses and the guidelines provided to examiners are similar across Australian universities (Pitkethly & Prosser, 1995). However, the impact these guidelines have on examiner responses is not clear. Johnston (1997) found examiners tended to follow university guidelines about how to report on a thesis, whereas interviews with experienced examiners conducted by Mullins and Kiley (2002) suggested the opposite. They found that these examiners had established their own criteria, and that they noted, but did not use, any guidelines that might be provided.

A pressing issue in RHD assessment practice is whether assessment criteria across disciplines are being used consistently and comparably. The doctoral degree in the field of Visual Arts differs from traditional PhDs because a creative work is submitted along with a written thesis. In the US this type of research is referred to as arts-based research (Eisner, 1995) while in the UK the term practice-based research refers to degrees which include creative works (Hoddell et al., 2002). In order to investigate whether criteria already current in existing academic communities can be used to evaluate practice-based degrees Winter et al. (2000) surveyed 31 PhD examiners from 9 British Higher Education Institutions covering 21 different traditional disciplines. The survey questions were designed to address the central issue of what categories examiners identify as crucial to judging the quality of acceptable PhD work. The responses were grouped under broad headings and indicated common agreement among examiners from different disciplines about both 'positive' and 'negative' features of doctoral theses. The positive features included candidates having an intellectual grasp of the subject matter and the methodology as well as a critical engagement with the literature. Common criteria for the thesis included coherence of structure and appropriate presentation as well as meeting the requirements for originality and publishability. The authors concluded that these 'implicit' criteria could legitimately be re-interpreted to evaluate practice-based doctoral work. Although the issues of whether an artefact can be judged by the same criteria as a written thesis and whether arts-based research has equivalency with traditional forms of research have received considerable attention since the publication of the UKCGE report, there has been little investigation of the actual processes involved in the examination of the exhibition component of a Visual Arts doctorate.

In Australia, one of the processes that distinguishes examination of higher degrees in Visual Arts from examination practices in other disciplines is the conduct of a 'viva' or a discussion either among the examiners or between the examiners and the candidate or supervisor during or following the viewing of the exhibition. Although this practice is not universal across Australian institutions (Dally et al., 2003), the way this process is conducted and the prospect of a potential collaboration among examiners gives rise to questions about the independence and impartiality of the assessment outcomes. In the UK, Tinkler and Jackson (2000) explored institutional guidelines to determine how the conduct of the viva may impact on the validity of the examination process. The British PhD examination process typically involves a viva where the examiners meet and discuss their views of the candidate's work with the candidate and each other. Tinkler and Jackson's review revealed that there was unanimous agreement among the institutions that the 'independence' of examiners was crucial to ensuring that the examination process was impartial and objective, however, there were two opposing views regarding the timing of the submission of an examiner's final recommendation and report. Some institutions required examiners to provide an 'independent' formal report prior to the viva fearing that the interpersonal relations during the oral examination may 'contaminate' an examiner's judgement. However,

other institutions invited examiners to submit joint reports after the viva and examiners were under no obligation to submit any recommendation prior to the viva.

The role of the viva in the PhD examination process was also addressed by Powell and McCauley (2002) in their report on discussions emerging from seminars on research degree examining organised by the UKCGE during 2000/2001. These authors reported that although the viva presented an opportunity for candidates to demonstrate their individual learning, the examiners prioritised the thesis as the medium for assessment. Furthermore, examiners indicated that the nature of the viva often depended on the quality of the thesis. If the submitted thesis had been viewed as acceptable then the viva functioned as a summative process in which the examiners commented on the strengths of the work. If, on the other hand, the thesis was judged to be inadequate the viva functioned as a formative process in which the examiners would give guidance as to how the candidate could amend the weaknesses in their work. Although the informal meeting that occurs between examiners and candidates during the examination of Fine Art PhD exhibitions in some Australian institutions cannot be equated with the British viva process, the reflections of the British examiners provide some insight into their views on the purpose and outcomes of the process.

Another issue addressed by Powell and McCauley (2003) in their subsequent survey of a small sample of PhD examiners that has particular relevance to the Creative Arts field is the issue of examiner training. Because the doctorate in the Creative Arts field is a relatively new phenomenon, it is difficult to obtain 'experienced' examiners who can make judgements about artistic practice as well as academic research and writing. In response to the question of whether 'formal training' could adequately prepare examiners and what kind of training may be desirable or useful, the majority of respondents indicated that the best way for inexperienced examiners to gain an understanding of their task was for them to gain training 'on the job'. It was suggested that examining 'teams' could be constituted and new examiners could learn from their more experienced colleagues. The issue of what qualities or skills examiners should ideally possess was also explored by Denicolo (2003) who reported that institutional regulations in the UK do not stipulate that examiners should have a PhD themselves, 'though it is often assumed they will have.' (p.86).

The remainder of this paper reports the perspectives of a small sample of Fine Art examiners on the impact that institutional guidelines, the qualities and experience of examiners, and the opportunity for collaborative discourse with either the candidate and/or the other examiners may have on the examination process and their response to it.

## **The Study**

### ***Method***

In Phase 1 of the current study, 54 Fine Art examiners from a range of backgrounds, including academics, practitioners and curators were invited to participate in either Phase 1, Phase 2 or both phases of the research project. In Phase 1, examiners were asked to provide copies of up to three recent Fine Art Higher Degree examination reports that they had written. In Phase 2 of the study examiners were asked to participate in a telephone interview exploring the Fine Art examination process and particularly the examiners' perception of their role in that process. Initially, 17 examiners consented to participate in the interview process, however, due to unexpected commitments, only 15 interviews were conducted. As noted by Powell and McCauley (2003) in their small scale survey of 29 research degree

examiners, the value of these relatively 'informal' types of data gathering is not to provide evidence of national trends but to gain an understanding of examiners' views and their underlying beliefs.

An interview schedule was devised and piloted and after minor adjustments, was employed to elicit discussion on a range of themes and questions that emerged from the Phase 1 analysis of Fine Art examination reports. Although the sample could not be considered 'representative' it does cover a broad range of individual perspectives. There were nine male and six female respondents representing three eastern Australian states. The occupations and backgrounds of the examiners included four curators and eight current and three retired academics. The academic positions comprised two heads of school, three professors, one associate professor and four senior lecturers. Most had examined in more than one institution and about one half had been an examiner at least 12 times, and had examined PhD work across several Australian states. The latter group we will refer to as 'very experienced' examiners. Where an informant is very experienced this is noted when direct quotation is used.

### ***The telephone interview***

The interview protocol had been sent ahead and in the majority of cases the informants had made notes to refer to, or had generally reflected on the questions beforehand. While the interview questions were structured, the questions allowed each informant's ideas to build and depth of response to be obtained, moreover there was the flexibility to probe (Appendix: interview schedule attached). The interviews ranged from forty-five minutes to an hour.

The interviews ran particularly smoothly and achieved the degree of 'naturalness', warmth and sense of 'community' the team aimed for. The literature points to the asymmetry of power during the telephone interview event. However, research into telephone interviews has not addressed how talk 'naturally' takes place on the telephone, and does not extend to the analysis of conversations between professionals of equal status who are used to sharing information under the pressure of time restraints and discussing complex concepts at a distance. One positive way for an interviewer to promote equality according to the literature is to use casual, conversational language rather than formal interview language because this elicits the best feedback. Moreover, it has been found that telephone interviewers who manage to share power and to take the perspective of the respondent are able to elicit the necessary information faster and more competently (Shuy 2001).

Senior academics tend to be used to dealing with telephone conferences so we felt the telephone interview would not necessarily disconcert our informants, nonetheless we were entering new territory in the subject matter, and so devised a strategy that would enhance conversational tone, and ensure a smooth flow. The team consisted of three individuals, two handling the questions and one monitoring proceedings and handling the taping and technical aspects. There were always two of the team engaged in active listening and the two Fine Arts academics who were interviewing shared the questions. The fact that the interviewers were from the same field and shared the same technical discourse and could empathise with the experience was important here and partially mitigated the need for the gestures, nods and other physical cues that usually accompany, and play a key role in eliciting; 'a contextually natural' response, in a face-to face interview (Shuy 2001). The interviews were fully transcribed and entered into QSR NVivo 2.0 and coded by question and by emergent themes. The current paper focuses on the examination process, and the acceptable and unacceptable qualities of the exhibition and exegesis components of Fine Art Higher degrees are reported in Lawry et al. (2004).

## Examiner response to institutional guidelines

Masters and PhD degrees in Fine or Visual Art generally include an exhibition and a written component and the examination by two or three examiners usually marks the endpoint of candidature. 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. Some institutions provide the option of presenting a written 'thesis' only and there is a general indication in the guidelines that a conventional thesis should be examined along the same lines as theses in any other discipline. There is considerable variation among Australian institutions, however, regarding the form that an exegesis should take and how the visual and written components of a Visual/Fine Art research higher degree should be evaluated.

Although some institutions provide specific criteria for the written component of the award, most require 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 instructed to consider both the studio works and the written component as being 'mutually' essential to establishing the quality, strength and originality of the research. The examination criteria do not require separate assessments of each of the written and practical components, however, there is the expectation that judgements of the two components be balanced, and sometimes a weighting for each is specified, but rarely is it 50:50. The weighting is typically more toward the exhibition. In the 30 reports collected in Phase 1 of the study we found the examiners devoted almost as much comment to the written component as they did to the exhibition (around 40% of total report on average). 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 (Dally et al., 2003).

There is also 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 same time that 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 (Dally et al., 2003).

In regard to the sequence and conduct of the examination process, according to the interviews, most examiners prefer, or are at least used to, receiving the written component before the exhibition. Those who preferred it noted the 'useful', 'contextualising' thought-provoking background it provides, although many explained there was the potential for disparity between the expectations built-up from reading that document and the experience of first seeing the exhibition. For one informant the potential for the exegesis to colour one's thinking was seriously worrying, but most volunteered that they dealt with the exhibition on its 'own terms' and that they could distance themselves from early impressions.

In regard to the criteria by which a thesis should be judged, generally the examiners regarded institutional guidelines as important, not least because they vary between institutions:

*The other thing I think that's important too is the guidelines change, vary, you know, you draw on the guidelines that are established by the institution as well as the standards that you yourself have established over the years of your work. And they vary from institution to institution. I mean the guidelines that you receive in terms of how you would conduct an examination ...vary in emphasis on thesis requirements in contrast to how the exhibition or studio [work] will be evaluated...(Informant 12, very experienced)*

Most Fine Art examiners in the light of this variability seek greater uniformity particularly based on 'best practice' – 'the really good examples', but also because there is a concern that variability in approach can also lead to issues with respect to judging comparable quality. One notes that it should be possible to be very clear about what is expected:

*...what the process is, what the degree is, what the student topic is, what the procedure is going to be, what the criteria is that they should be looking for, what standard you expect the work to be at. I think all of those things can be spelt out. I don't think that just because it's Art it has to go into the blandest mumbo jumbo – the 'unspoken'. You can be very quantitatively clear about what the examiner is required to do. (Informant 7)*

However, the guidelines are not necessarily clear. In some institutions the newness of Fine Art as a research field has meant that the generation and articulation of expectations for Fine Art Research Higher degrees is in the early stages of development, and existing examination documentation may exacerbate the problem:

*The provision of information varies from very well thought out guidelines to guidelines that make sense to the institution but actually don't make sense to the examiner...I think some of the issues were probably to do with adapting existing terminology and processes to this particular field and often they need re-thinking and new guidelines. People are at varying stages of clarifying this I suppose. (informant 11, very experienced)*

Whether they are new or experienced, the examiners in Fine Art tend to seek out examination guidelines and utilise them:

*[the institution] is telling me through their guidelines the level at which they expect students to be, so a respect for that because they supervise within those guidelines and got the candidate to where they believe they need to be within those guidelines. (Informant 2)*

*I think it is essential to look at the rules of degrees as they are set out in the research degrees handbook. You have to examine under those guidelines. If there is any further information presented by the School as to, you know, the relative weightings of the components in the course then I think you need to take that into account, I always check that. (Informant 14, very experienced)*

*You've got to follow the ground rules of the institution...if the local rules don't put a lot of sway on methodology and its all about the ideas well I look at that...I really try and come to terms with the local rules. (Informant 10, very experienced)*

For this same informant it is specifically pertinent to follow the rules when 'weighting' the exegesis and the exhibition

*If something has a small weighting...the exegesis might only be worth 15% ...a conclusion that reflects the degree of the weighting in the institution is very important...I*

*think rightly or wrongly that I'm capable of coming to terms with that in the context of [my] conclusion. (Informant 10, very experienced)*

However, there is some scepticism in the responses that weighting can be isolated in the process of judgement, because the process involves too much movement 'back and forth' between the elements. No one used the word 'holistic' but that was the impression given in descriptions of how the process of judgement actually worked. Several talked specifically about 'bringing all the information to bear' in the decision. The bottom line in adhering to process, including weighting specific elements, was whether or not the student would be disadvantaged if the examiner was not using the guidelines. This awareness extended to the nuances of institutional culture. One informant noted that the 'language' of process shows what the institution 'values'.

The adherence to guidelines is not universal across disciplines and that would appear to be because there is greater uniformity within Australia between disciplines in the case of the traditional written research thesis than within the discipline of Fine Art. Some studies (Mullins & Kiley, 2002) have found that examiners in other disciplines do not pay much attention to guidelines and are fairly relaxed in that they know what is expected of them. However the range of 'thesis' permutations in Fine Art has resulted in the extreme opposite response. In Fine Art, the thesis can be a combination of one or more of an exegesis, an exhibition and an oral examination, in one or more forms of sequence, and possibly involving formal or informal meetings between examiners and/or between examiners and supervisor and student.

### **Selection and self-selection of examiners**

One of the well-established difficulties in Fine Art is the small examiner pool, and many feel that this needs to be approached through effective training of supervisors. Some informants reported they brought their 'teaching' skills and experience of supervision to bear into the examination. That examination and supervision are two sides of the same coin has been reported elsewhere (Mullins & Kiley 2002, Holbrook et al. 2003) and in most situations examiners will have been supervisors, but this does not necessarily hold at present in Fine Art contexts where examiners may well be artists but not academics or they may be other professionals such as curators. One informant who was used to chairing examination committees and selecting examiners explained:

*You need to consider a mix of people, if you like because you frequently cannot get three highly skilled examiners [in a particular area of art]...and also I would always try to get a range of people examining so that it wasn't just three theoreticians or three curators, or certainly at the PhD level, not three artists because at the moment - how can I put it? - in the future that would be fine, but at the moment it often helps to have some sort of academic respectability strongly represented if you think there is going to be some difficulty or conflict...so it is the old question, how do you become an examiner? - only by examining. So you've got to have the opportunity to examine. (Informant 9, very experienced).*

The point also being made here is the importance of having those who are experienced academics among examiners. 'Academic respectability' has two shades of meaning - the first reflects the newness of research degrees in the field, the second the importance of credible outcomes. That Fine Art examiners have to accommodate multiple roles as well as expectations in relation to examination is picked up more fully in the next section.

Some examiners speaking as 'selectors' of examiners point out that while not all examiners might have a PhD they believe an examiner should have breadth of experience and appropriate specialist background and ideally a background that includes 'practice'.

*I think they should have a deep commitment, a deep understanding of art, art practice, art theory, art history. I think they need to be exemplars...I don't think many people do, by the way, have a deep enough understanding to undertake the task. (Informant 13)*

*I think an examiner needs to be broadly experienced, although obviously examiners are chosen for their discipline expertise, however a breadth of experience, say across more than one studio discipline, I think is an advantage. You need the same sort of high academic standards in Fine Art as you would in examining in any discipline, you need to know your discipline, have a good academic grounding and a broad understanding of your discipline. I find that where examiners are very experienced in their practice, they're much more relaxed about making judgements. (Informant 2)*

In addition to having 'broad experience' and 'developed judgement' in their field it is clear that 'balance', 'fairness', 'reasonableness' and being prepared to deal with the unexpected are expectations. Another examiner also specified 'courage':

*I think they need to be objective beyond their own personal preferences. I think they need to have discretion and sometimes there needs to be courage. I think there needs to be an understanding of various circumstances and I think people need to be able to deal with the process quickly...I think in the interests of fairness it needs to be dealt with quickly. (Informant 11 , very experienced)*

Others noted the visual and literary skills required of, and possessed by, examiners, as well as the perseverance and patience necessary to do justice to the work:

*An understanding of grammar, an understanding of language, an ability to read and judge what is being read. But they are degrees in visual arts and so the visual ability is paramount...I think sometimes the work itself is challenging, sometimes I've examined work and I'm not sure I do get it...so it takes quite some time for me to assimilate myself to the work so I can understand the qualities properly (Informant 15)*

Such qualities are summed up by one informant as 'a mature visual judging capability'.

The word empathy was used often as an examiner credential:

*I think a certain amount of empathy can be had from having had professional practice. I would be against a situation for instance, where people with a purely theoretical background are the only judges of practical work. So that is relevant experience I think. The fact of having spent lots and lots of hours doing it [practical work] I think is very relevant. And an open mind I think. (Informant 5)*

Those interviewed would not take on examination if it was not in an area they felt confident about, given the importance they placed on their own experiences and internal benchmarks as assessors. This was equally the case for the very experienced and the less experienced.

Informants also volunteered the information that poor examiners – examiners defined as 'opinionated', with an agenda or an 'axe to grind' were detrimental to the future of the discipline:

*So you do have to look for a balanced point of view and somebody who wants to further the discipline, not just wax forcibly about their own views on what art may be. So I think you have to have a measure of objectivity in looking to the bigger picture. (Informant 4, very experienced)*

*...I don't go in as a cynic. I go in ready to be positively impressed by the work...I have run across the odd examiner who comes in so full of themselves, so sure that they are the only person capable of operating successfully in a particular area and they're already negative about the work. I think that's counter productive...I won't appoint examiners like that. (Informant 10)*

From another angle one noted that those who are experienced and 'time-worn' could also inhibit the field:

*Assessors with a long history in education, and often difficult to argue against...I sometimes wonder whether such assessors are defending the system rather than thinking purely objectively about the work in front of them (Informant 3, very experienced)*

The issue of the small pool of examiners was also raised as a challenge because of 'familiarity', a 'closed circle', and the possibility of preconceptions entering the examination.

### **Examiner roles**

Examiners bring far more to the examination than a set of criteria to judge work by. As indicated above they may have the field and its future in their minds, or as many do, a lifetime of experience that will mean they take on more than a straightforward assessment role. Not all the informants had been conscious of taking on roles, but the question resonated with their experience. As one curator pointed out:

*I think sometimes the roles are slightly edgy – bringing the knowledge of professional practice to that arena of assessing students' work...but one has to be humble at the same time and to be learning to be completely objective...There might be some criteria where you've got to realign your assessment – not that it gets any less dynamic, or any more critical – but you've got to play it a little by ear (Informant 3, very experienced).*

The culture of examination has to cross boundaries with the culture of review and the culture of practice. Whereas examiners might be easily trained in good assessment practice as defined in terms of both educational assessment and art critique, the resolution of the 'groundedness of practice' provides a particular challenge, the examiner may need to be the consummate academic in one situation, the understanding practitioner in another:

*On the absolute level I think you are an assessor, and you are looking across-the-board...I have looked at things where you've got a 120,000 word exegesis and they [the institution] require a scholarly response, and then at other institutions where you've got a document where it is really about contextualising the art event...it's more an art-world experience and even though I'm obviously an academic and I'm socialising and acting in an academic manner, the requirement of the assessment experience is that you act in a more worldly-wise artistic way. So I think there are nuances in performance along those paths...you've got to understand what everybody's doing here in this particular place...(Informant 10)*

*Quite often one assumes that a post-graduate award will necessarily put forward candidates who are quite sophisticated, established artists and I think that there's a sort of notion that you go to an examination with that expectation instead of realising that it's part of an educational process and that there's more to come perhaps. So I think there needs to be a level of empathy for the kinds of differences amongst students and the variations*

*in attitudes and the aspirations that they represent and the work they're putting forward both in the written piece or the studio based work. I think the examiners need to be capable of dialoguing with the applicants...I think the examiner is part of the education process. We're not just testers – it's not like a road test or something...the examiner and the people involved should know what's going on much earlier and work towards graduating the student. (Informant 10, very experienced)*

This examiner is one of the informants who favour dialogue throughout the process rather than an end-on exam. Another refers to 'bringing the student out'.

The notion of playing an active, direct and visible role is not uncommon in the interviews. Indeed, most examiners indicated they had the chance to talk with students at examination, and a few had never engaged in the process where this had not occurred. While a few examiners stated that the work being examined (exhibition and exegesis) should 'stand on its own', most favoured having the opportunity to talk to the student as well, although not necessarily in the sense of a formal 'viva' or oral examination. It was seen as 'useful' and 'valuable' to be able to ask the student, not necessarily scholarly questions, so much as questions grounded in the examiner's interest in their intentions, feelings and motivations. This could provide 'greater insights', and also practical information especially about the presentation of the exhibition:

*A really good idea of what the student is actually thinking about when they're making the work and writing the paper. And if there are any anomalies from the paper to the actual work that is exhibited...so yes it's just getting them to speak in an open manner about what they are doing. (Informant 8)*

Talking to the student was noted by one informant as having the potential to lead to a 'more informed and generous response' by the examiner. The notion of a formal process that could turn into a too 'heavy' 'interrogation' was not favoured by those who raised it, however changing the overall process to include the opportunity to talk with the student and 'bring them out' prior to examination was volunteered by a few. With respect to the latter it was argued that examiner input in a 'formative sense' could be valuable and also that an early meeting or two could encourage a student toward completion.

*I think they [vivas] are very useful in internal progressive assessments. I think it's helpful to students to have thoughtful critique of their work from their peers and to be able to account for themselves and their work, in words as well as in their work. But I personally don't find it helpful at the end, at examination, unless there's a real problem that needs discussion (Informant 11, very experienced)*

One examiner did note a formal viva could possibly speed up the process of making a judgement at the end point.

Several examiners emphasised that meeting with the student could be a disadvantage, not least that the student could disadvantage themselves by 'putting their foot in their mouth' in ways such as being 'arrogant', or indicating a paucity of knowledge or revealing poor understanding. One noted the potential also for the examination process to become compromised

*It [a viva] can... become a congratulatory exercise before the result is actually known and I think it can become misleading or confusing and even if it is not a congratulatory exercise it sort of opens up to be that, where people are sort of searching for something useful to say [to the candidate] and end up saying 'well it's all very wonderful', or something. So I don't feel comfortable with that. I think submissions in the end should stand or fall on the way they're presented. (Informant 11, very experienced)*

Under such circumstances the student may leave with an impression that may not be supported in the examiner reports. One examiner noted that avoiding socialising with the student after the on-site viewing was important for that reason.

### **Independence with confirmation**

As the last and several other quotations have indicated, experienced examiners can enter the examination, and especially the exhibition, with preferences and expectations about how the process is to be played out.

Examiners may meet on site, they may be asked to come to some level of decision on the day. Under such circumstances Fine Art examiners are generally relieved that most of the time it becomes clear during their exchanges that they are in agreement, because on the whole they prefer to come to a decision independently:

*So whatever subjective response might be [in examination] there it is diminished by the experience and openness of the examiners toward the work ...I usually like to go around and have a look at the presentation by myself so that I am able to reflect upon the work in solitude rather than in discourse, so that I make up my own mind without having to deal with someone's opinions or comments. Then come together with the other examiner and compare notes. So, that's usually the time when you realise that the other person is pretty much thinking along similar grounds. (Informant 7)*

*I know there are some occasions where some institutions agree on the outcome at the time and tell the student, but I haven't been involved in very many of those. I feel mostly it's an independent judgement, sometimes with collaboration, and the recommendation of the examiner is part of a process after all, which then has to be dealt with within the institution later... (Informant 11, very experienced)*

They look for initial individual space to view the exhibition or talk to the student until a point when sharing of information and impressions will prove most helpful. That space is associated with 'objectivity':

*I always want time on my own. I don't mind being with the other examiners when we're talking to the candidate...before I start to confer with my colleagues – I've been in situations where the other examiner wants to start talking right away, and I kind of subtly as I can, make it apparent that I want to arrive at some sort of confidence with my own judgement before I enter into discussions. (Informant 6)*

That the procedures could generate pressures for examiners was raised in one way or another by all informants, these extended to the range of different procedures including the sequence of events, to unsolicited 'contact' with staff and other examiners and time pressure.

With respect to pressure of time one informant summed it up as follows:

*I think that sometimes the process is a bit rushed...some colleges tend to marshal you – get you in and want to get you out by a certain time...personally I would often like to spend more time with the candidate and just sit down and talk, you know and find out more than one is able to in the time period allocate. I found a couple of times...where things were a bit rushed and...slightly regimented, perhaps a bit over regimented. I think it is a fairly important thing to an examiner. It is a much more important thing to the PhD candidate to get it right... (Informant 13)*

Talking or engaging more with the student and their work was a common theme raised by examiners, whereas the response to discussing the work with other

examiners drew forth more negative or hedged responses, unless the dialogue was seen to be one of 'verification'. Several examiners were critical of processes whereby,

*Some people can attempt to sway other people or even their enthusiasm their disdain might be sort of visible...I sort of prefer to just really try to engage with the work as if there was no one else around. (Informant 5)*

Having to face a student who is not meeting the standard 'being put on the spot' presents tremendous pressure and no small amount of annoyance that the institution or supervisor has not picked this up or done a good job. Examiners seek accountability from supervisors and institutions. Also having to make a decision on the day the exhibition was viewed when this was not anticipated and in less than ideal circumstances is also cited as a problem, for example:

*...looking at two or three people on one day and then suddenly being required to give a percentage mark without warning when I'd expected to be able to go back and re-read the papers. That was, I felt caught on the hop there - compromised. There was one occasion where the co-ordinator went off to get the candidate for the viva. We found that he'd relayed all the examiners' concerns to the candidate. (Informant 11, very experienced)*

Some linked problems not to poor procedures, but to the variety of different procedures, as one noted they could become 'a blur'. Unusual forms of presentation, especially the totally unexpected were also cited as having the capacity to discomfort examiners...eliciting a 'how do I deal with this?' response.

Frustration can also emerge, particularly where the examiner feels that the student has been disadvantaged, or that the processes are incomplete, shoddy or baffling

*The other week I was down there and I never saw anybody. I just wandered into the exhibition, I didn't speak to the student. I didn't speak to anybody, I didn't even know who the other examiners were. (Informant 12, very experienced)*

*There was one instance in particular where I turned up and the coordinating person wasn't there but the student was and I actually didn't know whether I was meant to speak to the student or whether the student was meant to know who I was or that I was there or exactly what was to happen from then on. So those sorts of things are difficult. That's just unfortunate...certainly there hadn't been any clear outline of the process of the examination in that particular case. (Informant 11, very experienced)*

The occasional 'discourtesies' that were encountered took the form of the lack of cordiality toward the examiner or little evidence of concern for, or quality control of, the process. One examiner reports that upon arrival at the exhibition the staff member left quickly but not before requesting that the examiner turn the lights off upon leaving. Others report not being met at all. There are some reports of significant gaps between receiving the exegesis and viewing the exhibition, also of poorly housed exhibitions. Given that the process can be prolonged and many-faceted the paperwork can also be a cause for annoyance:

*To be honest I find [examination] absolutely wearing. They take up a huge amount of time...I will probably will never do one at [X institution] again simply because of this dreadful bureaucratic system of paying - we have to fill out half a sheaf of forms for two or three hundred dollars. (Informant 13)*

While examiners in Fine Art are paid the same token fee as academics in other disciplines the cost of mounting an examination is expensive in resources, time and goodwill. Nonetheless there is a commitment to maintaining the system of external

examiners and expanding the pool in order to reinforce and support the culture of independent judgement. Many of the examiners made the point that they can not be 'coerced'.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

This final section will re-visit the key themes on process and procedures addressed in the interview questions, that is, the impact of institutional guidelines, qualities important in the selection of examiners and engagement with candidates and other examiners.

**Examiner responses to institutional guidelines:** the importance of following guidelines is a strong theme and is a finding that is not reflected in Australian research about examination in other disciplines. Clearly the adherence to guidelines is a reflection of the newness of, and consequent experimentation in, research process and philosophy within the field. To ignore the guidelines or ground rules would be to disadvantage the student, and it emerges very strongly that support for the student is paramount even at examination stage. Examiners do not appear to be put off by the variety, but would opt for more uniformity based on best practice. They also have strong preferences for one sequence over others, with most preferring or accepting that the exegesis should arrive before the exhibition, and most preferring the opportunity to talk with the candidate, and for clear instructions about who they can talk to, in what sense, and with what legitimacy during the exhibition.

**Examiner selection:** the main criterion for examiner selection is appropriateness where appropriateness can range from skills, experience and expertise through to a sound understanding of process. Personal qualities are also rated highly alongside practitioner status. Empathy for practice stands out in particular, as well as fairness and reasonableness. Given the small pool of examiners there is concern about the dangers of a 'closed circle' and a determination to share examining wisdom. At this stage the skills and expectations of examiners are not yet closely aligned with the skills and expectations of supervisors as they are in traditional research disciplines, because both groups are on a steep learning curve and inexperienced supervisors are the norm.

**The roles examiners assume:** Examiners for the most part do not delineate assessor and supervisor roles and they certainly do not focus on the need to be expert or gatekeeper. Their main concerns are the desire to achieve legitimacy in the examination context within both academe and art practice and to be flexible and responsive enough to deal with the unexpected fairly and efficiently.

**Forms of engagement during examination:** It is worth noting that examiners only raised supervision as an issue in relation to the quality of the student outcome, engaging with the supervisor in person was rarely mentioned and sometimes negatively. The main targets of engagement were the student and other examiners, and the latter by preference primarily in a confirmatory way. As discussed further below, examiners usually sought space for independent judgement, and their major concern was being forced into forms of engagement that jeopardised or compromised this.

The interviews revealed that Fine Art examiners perceived that their role was an evolving one and that examiners need to demonstrate flexibility in order to cope with the variations in institutional requirements, to demonstrate empathy with candidates, to have openness and wisdom in their judgement and should strive to be 'fair and reasonable' assessors. What did not surface to any major extent in the interviews was the debate in the literature and policy on 'academic expectations' and structures.

The implicit undercurrent was the fluidity and flexibility required to allow the variations in process, the evolution of expectations and the flow of learning experiences in examination in Fine Art to run their course.

What none of the examiners sought was a collaborative judgement. They sought rather to come to independent objective judgement, and to treat discussion with other examiners in a confirmatory, exploratory and information sharing light - they sought community over consensus, and clear, shared understandings about research quality over uniformity of structures.

The medium of the extended telephone interview allowed the examiners to 'talk it through'. Several remarked that the interview served to develop the dialogue on process and that they were eager to tap into the range of ideas and opinions of their colleagues. They also welcomed the opportunity to tackle questions about assessment and judgement in forms that were challenging, and this was another theme - the informants welcomed challenge, even complication and doubt, in search of understanding. They valued achieving understanding whether that understanding be of the student's work or the processes necessary to reach judgement. What seemed to be developing out of the discussion on the process at least, was the desire to extend the opportunity to 'talk' personally with the student about their work if this option did not exist. For some this idea was also mooted in relation to the earlier phases of student candidature. They conceived a formative engagement with the student over time, almost a traditional supervisory role in its potential for guidance. The latter may not be surprising when it is also considered that many informants commented that supervision is still in a very developmental phase in their field. The desire to 'get it right' for the student was of paramount concern.

## REFERENCES

- Candlin, F. (2000). Practice-based doctorates and questions of academic legitimacy. *Journal of Art and Design Education*, 19 (1) 96-101.
- Dally, K., Holbrook, A., Bourke, S. Graham, A. & Lawry (2003) Higher degree examination in Fine Art. AARE Mini Conference: Defining the Doctorate, Newcastle 2-4 October. <http://www.aare.edu.au/conf03nc/da03032z.pdf>
- Denicolo, P. (2003). Assessing the PhD: a constructive view of criteria. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 11 (2), 84-91.
- Eisner, E. (1995). What artistically crafted research can help us understand about schools. *Educational Theory*, 45 (91), 1-6.
- Gray, C. and Pirie, I. (1995). 'Artistic research procedure: Research at the edge of chaos? Proceedings of Design Interfaces Conference vol.3, The European Academy of Design. Salford: University of Salford. Available from URL: <http://www2.rgu.ac.uk/criad/cgpapers/ead/ead.htm>
- Hoddell, S., Street, D., & Wildblood, H. (2002). Doctorates- converging or diverging patterns of provision. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 10 (2), 61-70.
- Johnston, S. (1997). Examining the examiners: an analysis of examiners' report on doctoral theses. *Studies in Higher Education*, 22 (3), 333-347.

- Lawry, M., Graham, A., Dally, K., & Holbrook, A. (2004). Assessing the exhibition and the exegesis in Visual Arts higher degrees: Perspectives of examiners. Research into Practice Conference, July 2<sup>nd</sup>, Hertfordshire.
- McLeod, K. (2000). The foundations of the written text in practice-based PhD submissions. Selected working paper in Art & Design. Vol 1.  
<http://www.herts.ac.uk/artdes/research/papers/wpades/vol1/macleod2.html>
- Mullins, G. & Kiley, M. (2002). 'It's a PhD, not a Nobel Prize': how experienced examiners assess research theses. *Studies in Higher Education*, 27 (4), 369-386.
- Pitkethley, A., & Prosser, M. (1995). Examiners' comments on the international context of PhD theses. In: C. McNaught and K. Beattie, eds. *Research into Higher Education: Dilemmas, Directions and Diversion*. Melbourne: HERDSA, 129-136.
- Powell, S. & McCauley, C. (2003). The process of examining research degrees: some issues of quality. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 11 (2), 73-83.
- Powell, S. & McCauley, C. (2002). Research degree examining – common principles and divergent practices. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 10 (2), 104-115.
- Shaw, M. & Green, D.H. (2002). Benchmarking the PhD- a tentative beginning. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 10 (2), 116-124.
- Shuy, R. W. (2001) In-person versus telephone interviewing in J.F. Gubrium & J.A. Holstein (eds) *Handbook of Interview Research Context & Method* (pp. 537-55). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Tinkler, P. & Jackson, C. (2000). Examining the Doctorate: institutional policy and the PhD examination process in Britain. *Studies in Higher Education*, 25 (2), 177-180.
- United Kingdom Council for Graduate Education (1997). Practice-based doctorates in the creative and performing arts and design. UKCGE:Warwick.
- Winter, R., Griffiths, M. & Green, K. (2000). The 'academic' qualities of practice: what are the criteria for a practice-based PhD? *Society for Research into Higher Education*, 25 (1), 25-37.

---

*We would like to thank the Fine Art examiners who participated in this project. We would also like to acknowledge the assistance of the other academic members of the PhD Examination Assessment Project team Professor Sid Bourke and Professor Terry Lovat, and also Hedy Fairbairn, Wendy Robson, Bonnie McDonald and Gaye Sheather for their support in transcribing, editing and entering data.*

---

## APPENDIX

### Interview Schedule

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Informant Number \_\_\_\_\_

***Introductory comments:***

*Thank you for agreeing to take part in our interviews with Fine Art examiners. We are very grateful that we can draw on your opinions and expertise.*

*We have a few sets of questions focusing on the role of examination in Fine Art, the different components of the examination process, the qualities you look for in a Fine Art thesis and any challenges you face in the examination process.*

*We will be **recording this session**, please tell us if you want us to stop the tape, otherwise it will run **for the duration**. Please feel free to use examples and illustrations in the knowledge that identifying information will be deleted from the transcripts and specific comments will not be attributed to individuals. Transcripts will be sent to you for checking and additional comment.*

*Do you have any questions or queries about this interview and its use?*

*Did you receive the interview questions prior to this interview? YES \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_*

*Thank you the interview will **now commence and we are switching on the tape recorder***

---

***Questions:***

To begin please tell us what experience you have had examining research higher degrees in Fine Art?

***First your thoughts on the process and its components***

What type of guidelines or knowledge do you draw on to help you examine?

Have you a particular philosophy about examination in Fine Art?

Are you aware of taking on a particular role or roles during the examination process?

Do they differ across different components of the examination?

What particular qualities and skills do you think an examiner in Fine Art should have?

Have you been involved in a viva? YES \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_

What specific contribution do you think a viva can make to the examination process?

Do examiners generally reach a collaborative agreement?

***The qualities you look for in the student's work***

When you accept the invitation to examine what qualities do you hope to find in the student's work overall?

What qualities do you look for in the exhibition and what qualities do you look for in the exegesis?

What do you consider as an acceptable standard for the exhibition? The exegesis?

What do you consider an unacceptable level of work for the exhibition? The exegesis?

In what ways do you balance your judgement between the exhibition and the written component to determine a final result?

Do you think that the way the examination process is conducted can influence your judgement?- for example- how does reading the exegesis before you see the exhibition influence your judgement of the exhibition?- and vice versa- how does seeing the exhibition influence your judgement of the exegesis?

***Your thoughts on originality and contribution, particularly in regard to PhD theses.***

Firstly, how do you interpret the request to judge whether a PhD makes an original contribution to the field?

Do you expect to find originality and/or evidence of a significant contribution in both the exegesis and the exhibition?

What impact do you think your written report has? (e.g. on candidate, on supervisor)

Do you feel the university committee takes full account of your comments?

***The last section deals with your feelings about any challenges or constraints connected with Fine Art examination.***

In your opinion are there particular challenges or issues connected with examination? Can you please provide one or two examples to illustrate typical difficulties or challenges you have faced.

How do you think these issues can be addressed?

From your own experience what do you believe are the main training needs of Fine Art supervisors or examiners?

Finally, there is debate in most other disciplines about whether the PhD should be regarded as an end-point or a beginning. What position would you take in this debate in regard to the Fine Art PhD?

***That concludes our list of questions. Is there anything else that we haven't covered that you would like to add or discuss?***