

# Integrity in planning postgraduate curriculum: developing research degrees in writing that work

Dr Donna Lee Brien  
University of New England, Australia  
dbrien@une.edu.au

## **Abstract:**

This paper outlines a possible program for postgraduate research degrees in creative and professional writing with the aim of generating further debate on the topic. Such postgraduate programs, this paper suggests, may provide a framework for not only the timely completion of research candidates' theses, but also for a broader education of students, including in professional and vocational areas. Other benefits include the potential to reduce anxiety for candidates and, by promoting a more collaborative, "community of practice" teaching and learning environment, the facilitation of a range of additional benefits for supervisors and the higher education institution as a whole.

**Keywords:** postgraduate research degrees; Creative Writing; Professional Writing; Communication; vocational and professional training

This paper outlines a possible program for postgraduate research degrees in creative and professional writing with the aim of generating discussion on the topic. Such postgraduate programs may provide a framework for not only the timely completion of research candidates' theses, but also for a broader education of students, including in professional and vocational areas. Other benefits include the potential to reduce anxiety for candidates and, by promoting a more collaborative "community of practice" environment (as described in Lave and Wenger's theory of legitimate peripheral participation situated learning, 1991), the facilitation of a range of additional benefits for supervisors and the hosting higher education institution. This exploration is grounded in my own working context as a postgraduate supervisor, examiner and designer of degrees in writing since 1999, and particularly, in developing new research MA (Hons.) and PhD courses in writing this year for the School of English, Communication and Theatre at the University of New England. While taking into account a range of candidates including experienced researchers (who are often attracted to postgraduate study in writing) and those who progress at a relatively young age from undergraduate to postgraduate work, this paper will not consider professional doctorates or coursework programs including those with a research component or portfolio. My teaching practice is Australian, but the informing research for this paper includes material from the USA where the structure and purpose of postgraduate research degrees in writing are currently provoking lively discussion.

Although in the recent past research student enrolments largely determined funding, government support for such study currently relates directly to completion rates, as does the performance-based formula that determines the allocation of research places to institutions (AVCC, 2003, p. 16). Candidates' scholarships and other sources of funding are also now tied to specific time frames, while successful completions enhance supervisors' promotion prospects. Without arguing the case for, or against, whether the allocations of time to complete these degrees are adequate (or even realistic) or if, given such timelines, already overloaded academic staff can offer sufficient supervision, current economic and other pressures dictate that postgraduate candidates complete their work within the required time. In the process of developing new research degrees in writing, however, I found that while an aim of assisting research students and their supervisors to meet the necessary goals in the available time was central, considering the wider purpose of

such degrees and what the research students I have known, or supervised, wanted from their experience could not be ignored.

The professions into which postgraduate students of writing will move upon completion of their degrees was a major motivating factor behind this thinking, and is an issue which has been of concern to writing program coordinators in the US for some time. In 1997 the MLA Committee on Professional Employment drew attention to the “disparity between the expectations ... that most graduate programs inculcate in their PhD candidates and the actual work most of those candidates will do” (p. 23). Commenting also about the US, Radavich (1999) found “no profession for which an MFA or PhD in creative writing provides direct training” (p. 112), but the situation is little different in Australia: students complete these, as many other postgraduate, degrees with advanced competency in areas in which there are few career opportunities – writers in a world in which few can survive on their creative work alone (Throsby & Hollister, 2003) and highly-specialised practice-based researchers seeking entry into an academy with not only a small number of entry-level permanent or tenure-track vacancies, but which increasingly offers contract and/or casual positions (AVCC, 2005). Although the motivations for undertaking research degrees in writing vary, I have not encountered a single candidate who did not want to achieve publication of their final work in some form and then pursue a career as a writer and/or work in a related professional sphere such as publishing, academia, teaching or the creative industries including in arts administration. In such a climate, I believe the only way of offering such research degrees with integrity is to recognise the necessity of assisting students to enhance their future opportunities as an integral component of their candidatures.

Moving beyond perceiving the successfully completed thesis or dissertation as the sole outcome can, moreover, assist candidates and staff to work together towards a set of outcomes that benefit not only students, but also the teaching staff and other personnel involved. Of course, the candidate’s work will be original and their own, but the learning process to that end can be one of Lave and Wenger’s “co-participation” (1991, p. 13) where both supervisors and candidates are “co-learners” (p. 15). The Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee’s “Guidelines for maintaining and monitoring academic quality and standards in higher degrees” (hereafter, AVCC Guidelines) in their December 2002 policy statement, *Universities and their students: principles for the provision of education by Australian universities*, offer some direction about shared responsibility:

Research training at a university involves the active participation of both staff and students. The responsibility to ensure that it is conducted in the most efficient and effective manner is shared by all parties: the university, its academic units and staff, and the students, all have obligations to each other. (p. 19)

Co-participant co-learning can, however, move well past this sense to real joint cooperation and provides a useful model for the sometimes-problematic relationship between writing student and teacher at the postgraduate level. Dibble and van Loon (2004) characterise this complex and, at times, awkward relationship as a “three-legged race”, acknowledging that “[w]here it is most exhilarating is when they become equal partners with different learning and production goals” (n.p.). Nightingale (2005) has even suggested that the term “advising” be utilised in preference to “supervising” as the latter term implies an

unequal power relationship. But equality between partners is not a necessary part of productive collaborative work (Brien & Brady, 2003) with a recent study suggesting the most successful postgraduate supervisory relationships are those in which the obvious power differentials are openly acknowledged (Neumann, 2003, p. 139). I would add, “but valued equally” (Winer & Ray, 1994, p. 25), as in the apprenticeship systems discussed by Lave and Wenger.

While research students may, for instance, leap-frog their supervisors in terms of content-related knowledge during the candidature, supervisors continue to have much to offer candidates at a time when these students are attempting to join scholarly and/or professional communities as entry-level members. Postgraduate writing supervisors, for example, usually have personal and/or professional relationships with some or all of the following: publishers, printers, editors, agents, manuscript assessors, journalists and other members of the media, translators, indexers, multimedia producers and bookshop owners, as well as individuals in a range of positions in arts administration from their local writing centres to funding bodies and politicians. Supervisors are usually also experienced undergraduate instructors, conference participants and job applicants, as well as writers of peer-reviewed, professional and mass circulation articles, grant and other funding applications and published creative works. They are also often seasoned performers at festivals and other public airings of their own work, editors and publishers of others’ texts, and members of peer review and other expert panels. This substantial list is certainly not exhaustive, but includes much experience and expert knowledge that many postgraduate students of writing would like to gain throughout their candidatures. Most of this more future-relevant knowledge is not, however, examinable, and therefore, the sharing of such information and experience is not seen as a necessary part of many postgraduate research degrees in writing. The lengthy AVCC Guidelines (2002), indeed, mention the candidate’s future only once – the final of supervisors’ ten responsibilities that of “providing career advice and assistance as appropriate” (p. 21).

Given that many higher degree students already feel under pressure to complete their theses in the available time (Elphinstone & Schweitzer, 1998), it may validly be asked how a research program can realistically include any of the above, however worthy. The central rationale underlying the program outlined below is that everything required of the candidate relates to his/her final thesis and/or any employment (paid or otherwise) the student is already undertaking (or plans to undertake), so that all requirements directly assist the timely completion of that thesis while enhancing each graduand’s portfolio of professional skills, achievements and knowledge. Many of us know, anecdotally, that busy people are often the most productive, but the suggestion that a wide range of activities is associated with higher levels of accomplishment is also supported by well-known studies that show involvement in a wide range of projects, activities and hobbies relating directly to scientists attaining more significant outputs in their scientific work (Finkelstein, Scott & Franke, 1981; Root-Bernstein, Bernstein & Garnier, 1995).

### **Outline of a possible program for a research PhD in writing**

Many Australian universities, faculties and disciplines provide only a brief (and often generic) statement of the standard and/or type of work a research degree in the creative arts requires students to complete. This is understandable on one level, as there is no mention of curriculum in the AVCC Guidelines (2002). However,

it is also accepted that a clear understanding of what is expected of students and academic staff, at whatever stage of their university careers, is a basic contributor to learning and teaching success (see, for example, Ramsden, 2003; Toohey, 1999) although this is not always taken up in practice, even in undergraduate courses. I believe, therefore, that at the very minimum, a postgraduate program should include an unambiguously expressed inventory of responsibilities, hurdles, milestones and the quantity and quality of work required by students, their supervisors and other staff involved, although I have not attempted this in the following brief outline.

As an added bonus, any program (if clearly expressed) will provide an opportunity to minimise one source of anxiety commonly experienced by higher degree students. Although there is research that maintains a manageable level of stress is motivational and productive (University of Cambridge, 2004), it is also commonly accepted that excessive stress (however one perceives this) is destructive. A formal statement of exactly what is expected, and when, from students and all those involved in their learning can do much to help create an environment where successful learning and teaching can occur.

Although the ultimate outcome of this program is the externally-examined thesis, a progressive program of formative assessment urges candidates towards completion in a structured manner while encouraging the accumulation of professionally-focused skills and experiences. As, under time pressure, many students will strategically focus their energies on assessed work, these formative tasks are “milestone” or “hurdle” requirements. That is, students cannot progress beyond that stage of the course until the requirements are successfully completed. While some of the below elements are already elective or compulsory components of research degrees in writing at a number of universities, this combination and its mandatory progression stages is unique. Due to space constraints the below focuses on the PhD, but I have a corresponding program of progression for a MA (Hons.) program in writing as well as part-time students in both degrees.

Three commencing PhD students have expressed interest in undertaking such a program from the beginning of 2006, forming a valuable case study and a basis for future evaluation and refinement. The students and I have discussed the pilot nature of this program and have agreed to progressive reshaping as necessary.

### **Introduction to Postgraduate Study Module**

This module outlines the responsibilities of all those involved in each candidature. Course administration, assessment tasks, supervision arrangements and reporting procedures are discussed and negotiated, as are the roles of candidates, supervisors and other staff. Candidates and supervisors jointly determine a set of milestones for the production and giving a workshop of the thesis and begin to discuss possible components of the Professional practice module (detailed below). Candidates will also receive the detailed guidelines by which their theses will be examined, and agree on responsibility for tracking any changes in these. Although this sounds obvious, many candidates and supervisors in the relatively new creative arts disciplinary areas have experienced the regrettable situation of having examination guidelines only developed when a thesis was ready to be examined, or finding that guidelines had changed significantly since they enrolled.

Writing students often unrealistically expect their supervisors to be therapists, personal writing mentors, close editors and/or agents. Although Lepore and Smyth (2002) show how writing can be therapeutic in the hands of the psychologist, such curative skills are highly specialised and lie outside those which can reasonably be expected of the writing supervisor. Similarly, although Krauth and Baranay (2002) have identified some students as strongly motivated to apply to work with a famed writer primarily because they are seeking the “focused experience” provided by mentorships outside the academy (n.p.), most supervisors are not willing to engage in such an intensive process over the life of a postgraduate degree. This module stresses that postgraduate degrees are structured, formal programs of research and writing, and how a range of feedback and support mechanisms are an integral part of the program.

### **Confirmation of candidature seminar and report**

Confirmation of candidature should be completed within the first semester of candidature. At a one-hour seminar, candidates present a statement of their research question, description of methodology to be employed, plan of the research program for the remainder of the candidature, ethics clearances obtained, work already completed, and answer questions regarding their project and progress. This material should be produced by candidates in association with their supervisors and student peer group (see below). Candidates also prepare a written report including a literature review and completion timeline. The seminar should be open to the university community and the public, and presented before a review panel selected with a view to their ability to offer useful feedback. The purpose of the seminar and report is to provide a forum, relatively early in the candidature, for candidates to present thought-through statements of their projects and work plans to an audience, gain experience in presenting their research in public, and receive detailed formative feedback on the above.

### **Research paper and thesis workshops**

At least once a year, each candidate produces a paper for the academic area’s regular postgraduate research seminar, research conference or equivalence. This paper should contribute to the final thesis as well as being suitable for external conference delivery and publication in a peer-reviewed journal. In preparation for this presentation, a workshop is held in which the papers are critiqued by candidates’ peers, at which time all supervisors present can also offer comments. If required, there can also be a workshop on presentation and public speaking strategies and techniques. In the same manner there will be regular workshops by peers/supervisors on other components of the candidate’s thesis.

This process delivers a range of benefits. The candidate has a progressive series of production deadlines to meet and a wide range of feedback to help improve and refine this work (which is an integral part of his/her thesis), while workshop participants learn assessment and editing skills of wide use in scholarly and industry contexts as well as in their own work. These workshops also set up, and encourage the maintenance of, invaluable peer support groupings, while supervisors see each candidate in the context of the larger postgraduate cohort, have the opportunity to offer their expert knowledge to a range of candidates and, by meeting regularly, can readily share supervision strategies and other information.

### **Research paper delivery and submission for peer-reviewed publication**

The delivery of research papers should mirror the practice of academic and professional conferences with formal panels of presenters, question time, public audiences and a firm deadline for written paper submission following delivery. To these submissions, candidates append a list of at least 2 conferences and 3 peer-reviewed publications for which the paper is suitable, with contact addresses and submission guidelines. This paper will be returned with suggestions for improvement and recommendations for the most suitable conference and publication submission. Following this process, candidates submit at least 2 papers for peer-reviewed publication during their candidature. While this submission is the hurdle requirement, students whose work is not accepted will be urged to seek publication elsewhere. The benefits of publication for candidates and institutions in terms of research output are obvious, but other elements – such as the psychological boost successful candidates will gain and the increased knowledge of a range of publication and conference possibilities for supervisors – are more subtle. The above-noted benefits of feedback and networking for candidates and supervisors also apply but, for the vast majority of writing students who want to publish their final work with a mainstream or academic publisher, and continue to work and develop as a writer, building a CV of publications in their area of expertise is essential.

### **Professional practice module**

This module can comprise an internship, study elsewhere in the institution and/or research in a professional area. Two elements are important here: that the learning/work in this module enhances candidates' prospects upon graduation while also providing research and/or other material for their theses. The main goal is to focus the effort candidates are already expending on thinking (and worrying) about their futures into their postgraduate working schedules. The benefits for undergraduate students of internships or otherwise gaining professional knowledge are persuasively argued (Tovey, 2001) but such knowledge and experience is often of even more relevance to postgraduate students in writing. As well as gaining resume-improving experience, pinpointing transferable skills gained through education and other work, and gaining organisational/institutional knowledge that can only be accessed in the workplace, interns have access to industry-based contacts and knowledge which not only directly increases their publication and/or employment prospects but is also valued (and rewarded) by universities and funding bodies. The workplace benefits from the accumulated skills, maturity, advanced education level and cutting-edge knowledge of the postgraduate intern, and gains access to university staff and other students in programs in its professional area. Supervisors make (or maintain) industry contacts and gain up-to-the-minute knowledge of a range of professional contexts, while also increasing their access to possible future guest lecturers, research partners, consultancy work and other opportunities, while the institution benefits by meeting strategic goals in the areas of professional/industry linkages and the enhancement of work-readiness in their graduates. Dual recruitment pathways are also formed whereby the intern may progress to more lasting work arrangements with a particular workplace, and individuals from that workplace may be attracted to study at the intern's university because of their personal contact with the intern.

Supervisors and their higher education institution's career advisors will help candidates identify the professional areas for which they are most suited and qualified. Just how the professional experience, learning and research from these experiences are incorporated into theses will involve students, supervisors and the other individuals involved in collaborative, and sometimes lateral, creative thinking processes. A student who wants to work in publishing, for instance, could complete a study of some aspect of the industry involving an internship (perhaps regarding the possible market for, or genre of, their creative work) the results of which would then become incorporated into his/her thesis. Others may want to set up a small business as a literary consultant, manuscript assessor, editor, indexer or agent and would benefit from taking units in the Business and/or Law areas and mining information from these experiences for their theses. The student presentations detailed above could be combined into conference-type events, assisting with which would provide candidates with hands-on experience (which could be supported with other study) in professional areas such as events management, professional writing, marketing and publicity. Many postgraduate students fulfill casual teaching roles at their universities with little, or no, discipline-specific training (Ritter, 2001), and such a module could provide teaching mentorships or other professional teacher training through the institution's infrastructure. Arts administration attracts many graduates from writing programs and a honing of skills and increasing networks in this professional area will benefit these candidates. All writers aspiring to publication benefit from gaining a working knowledge of the publishing industry and building industry-based networks.

## Conclusion

While this program proactively takes responsibility for assisting with the timely completion of the final thesis while helping prepare candidates for their futures, it also complies with Delors' (1996) stipulation that beyond "providing a skilled workforce ... [b]ringing out the talents and aptitudes latent in everyone fulfils ... the fundamentally humanist mission of education" (p. 80). Mezirow (1991) suggests transformation is one of the foundational dimensions of adult learning, whereby more mature learners reflectively transform their "beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and emotional reactions" (p. 223) but while such transformation is usually discussed in terms of student cohorts, the above outline suggests that the postgraduate experience can be transformational for all involved in the process. In such a postgraduate degree structure, everyone involved teaches, and learns from, each other and, at its most productive, this experience will be positively transformational for all involved.

## References

- Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AVCC). (2005). *University staff profile 1996-2004*. Retrieved 9 July 2003 from <http://www.avcc.edu.au>
- Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AVCC). (2003). *Advancing Australia's abilities: foundations for the future of research in Australia*. AVCC, Canberra. Retrieved 22 July 2005 from <http://www.avcc.edu.au>
- Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AVCC). (2002). *Universities and their students: principles for the provision of education by Australian universities*. AVCC, Canberra. Retrieved 2 July 2005 from <http://www.avcc.edu.au>
- Brien, D. L., & Brady, T. (2003). Collaborative practice: categorising forms of collaboration for practitioners. *Text: The Journal of the Australian Association of Writing Programs*, 7 (2). Retrieved 22 July 2005 from <http://www.gu.edu.au/school/art/text>

- Delors, J. (1996). *Learning: the treasure within*. UNESCO: The Australian Commission for UNESCO.
- Dibble, B., & van Loon J. (2004). The higher degree research journey as a three-legged race. *Text: The Journal of the Australian Association of Writing Programs*, 8 (2). Retrieved 25 July 2005 from [http://www.gu.edu.au/school/art/text/oct04/dibble\\_vanloon.htm](http://www.gu.edu.au/school/art/text/oct04/dibble_vanloon.htm)
- Elphinstone, L., & Schweitzer, R. (1998). *How to get a research degree: a survival guide*. St. Leonards: Allen & Unwin.
- Finkelstein, S. N., Scott, J. R., & Franke, A. (1981). Diversity as a contributor to innovative performance. In E.B. Roberts et. al. (Eds.), *Biomedical innovation* (135-143). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Krauth, N., & Baranay, I. (2002) Creative writing mentorship in Australia: a survey of activities and issues. *Text: The Journal of the Australian Association of Writing Programs*, 6 (2). Retrieved 4 July 2005 from <http://www.gu.edu.au/school/art/text>
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: legitimate peripheral participation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lepore, S. J., & Smyth, J. M. (2002). *The writing cure: how expressive writing promotes health and emotional well-being*. Washington: American Psychological Association.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Modern Language Association. (1997). *MLA committee on professional employment: final report*. New York: MLA.
- Neumann, R. (2003). The doctoral education experience: diversity and complexity. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training. Retrieved 20 July 2005 from <http://www.dest.gov.au>
- Nightingale, P. (2005). *Advising PhD candidates*. Canberra: Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia
- Radavich, D. (1999) Creative writing in the academy. *Profession 1999* (106-112). New York: Modern Languages Association.
- Ramsden, P. (2003). *Learning to teach in higher education* (2nd ed.). London and New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Ritter, K. (2001). Professional writers/writing professionals: revamping teacher training in creative writing Ph.D. programs. *College English*, 64, 205-226.
- Root-Bernstein, R. S., Bernstein M., & Garnier, H. (1995). Correlations between avocations, scientific style, work habits, and professional impact of scientists. *Creativity Research Journal*, 8, 115-137.
- Throsby, D., & Hollister, V. (2003) *Don't give up your day job: an economic study of professional artists in Australia*. Sydney: Australia Council.
- Toohey, S. (1999). *Designing courses for higher education*. Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.
- Tovey, J. (2001). Building connections between industry and university: implementing an internship program at a regional university. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 10 (2)225-239.
- University of Cambridge. (2004) Stress at work: policy and guidance. Retrieved 25 July 2005 from <http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/personnel/policy/stress.html>
- Winer, M., and K. R. (1994). *Collaboration handbook: creating, sustaining, and enjoying the journey*. Saint Paul: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation.