

“Moving Towards Common Criteria: Assessing Creative Works in Universities”

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This paper is situated in the new climate brought about by the Australian Government’s Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) framework, where finally the creative work of artists, dancers, filmmakers and the like is to be formally recognized as research. This climate is of benefit to artists working in universities. Discussion has recently centered on whether it is possible to have a common set of criteria by which to assess creative works, even one that would span the different disciplines within the sector. It is argued that by comparing and analyzing the current criteria for creative work being used to assess work submitted for research qualifications, we can see that some basic significant criteria are already commonly used across disciplines. Thus it would seem possible to arrive at common criteria. This is a preliminary study across some of the criteria used in six universities. Further research could be undertaken to better evidence this argument.

Definitions of Research

3.1. Definition of Research

For the purposes of ERA, research is defined as the creation of new knowledge and/or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way so as to generate new concepts, methodologies and understandings. This could include synthesis and analysis of previous research to the extent that it is new and creative.

This definition of research is consistent with a broad notion of research and experimental development (R&D) as comprising ‘creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of humanity, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise applications.’¹ This definition should be read as consistent with that used in the *Higher Education Research Data Collection Specifications*.²

This definition of research should be used by institutions when assessing the acceptability of research outputs for submission in ERA.¹

There is no problem with this definition of research being applied to creative works made for the screen. This paper argues that whatever criteria academics working in creative production areas decide to apply to undergraduate, honours, Master of Arts (MA) Coursework, Master of Creative Arts (MCA) or Doctor of Creative Arts (DCA) ‘research level’ screen projects there are advantages to staging our criteria towards the ERA definition of research excellence. This definition does not exclude the creative media productions of our students and our peers.

What follows is a list of criteria (by institution) for honours projects (some specifically designed for screen or creative works and some not so). After that some of the criteria used by different universities for undergraduate project, Masters by coursework and research degree level work is listed and analyzed to see what is essential or important to them. Some of these criteria are specific to creative projects; even specifically screen projects and some are of a more general nature.

In relation to the criteria being used to assess creative projects there are a number that emerge as common and repeating across the institutions and awarded qualifications reviewed here. While this is a preliminary study, this research shows it may be possible to arrive at a simple short list of criteria that are the most useful to apply in the university context in relation to creative projects.

Throughout the rest of this paper, the bolding of text is mine (except for headings) and is not in the originals.

Creative Theses at Honours Level

Honours at Macquarie University

From the letter sent out to examiners of honours theses at Macquarie University comes the following:-

Examiners should take into account the specific methodology, theory or formal requirements of the type of project in which the student is working — and the student should be judged on those grounds.

Criteria applied to the Thesis, whether submitted as a thesis, script or media production, are:-

1. Subject Content:

- Adequacy of candidate's **conceptual understanding** of/and approach to the topic.
- Evidence of **critical awareness of previous material** in the field

2. Competence in Research and Execution:

- Delineation of the topic, or question, and its implications
- Execution and fulfillment of objectives of the project
- Development and discussion of ideas and arguments

3. Presentation:

- Formal aspects of thesis including: organization of the text, layout, clarity of expression and style (including spelling, grammar and syntax), correct referencing techniques
- OR Formal aspects of script including organization, layout and clarity of expression and presentation.
- OR *Formal aspects of a production including technical proficiency, competence in design, editing etc.*²

This is a simple system with three criteria. First, Second and Third Class and Fail levels are determined by in order, excellence in all three, competence in all three, competence but with inadequacies in at least two of the criteria. A Fail thesis does not fulfill the criteria. Essentially the criteria can be seen as referring to: -

- literary review/context/conceptual understanding
- competence in research and execution
- ability to present using craft skills/professional abilities

Honours at University of Western Sydney (UWS)

A letter to examiners of Honours projects at UWS contains the following: -

Examiner's reports should address the following where relevant

- Identification of the **project within context**
- Methodology/process
- **Originality**
- Conclusions
- Significance, including the extent to which the project offers **new insights**
- Technical ability and **facility with craft** (including written and practical work)
- Quality of documentation and planning
- Comments on other matters³

Here 'originality' and 'new insights' have been added to the criteria outlined by Macquarie University, but the other criteria at UWS also refer to identifying the 'project within context' so we can assume the student's understanding of context, or what we might think of as the 'literature review', is relevant here as well. 'Facility with craft' is worded this way for first time but can be seen as similar to Macquarie's interest in 'craft skills and professional abilities'.

Honours criteria for Media Arts and Production (MAP) theses at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS)

Honours criteria at UTS for creative screen and sound based work has been extracted from the following guide to students, *Honours MAP Guidelines FASS 2008* :-

2. A creative production plus exegesis

Students undertake a significant media production project, which demonstrates the **relationship between theoretical research and creative media production practice**. Projects can take the form of a media production in any of film/video, sound/radio, new media, exhibition, installation or performance.

Projects must be original and display a **creative** and **technically competent** approach toward the production.

Criteria for assessment

The honours thesis will demonstrate the candidate's

- a. ability to plan and carry out **original, independent research and creative production**
- b. demonstrate **technical proficiency and production management skills** appropriate to thesis
- c. demonstrate critical **knowledge of professional standards and major trends** within the respective field or fields of the thesis
- d. ability to communicate effectively about the intent and realization of the thesis⁴

This can be boiled down to extract the following main criteria for the creative production thesis in Media Arts at UTS as: -

- originality, creativity (contribution to knowledge)
- craft skills
- knowledge of the ground (or literature review)
- academic ability to communicate

Honours at University of Canberra

At Canberra University the *Guidelines for the Creative Communication Dissertation in Honours* provides some interesting arguments about the creative thesis. What follows is from a document sent to supervisors.

Description of the creative communication dissertation

Honours dissertations in any discipline represent a **substantial intellectual effort in research and argumentation. They involve application of theories and research methods in a practical, professional or creative context.**

Honours dissertations are generally taken to be an indicator of whether a student could be expected to proceed with reasonable confidence (on the part of both student and staff) to a higher research degree. (Italics mine)

The Creative Communication Dissertation at UC is assessed for its capacity to stand as ‘a work of imagination and intellect’. It comprises 1) a substantial creative work, and 2) a critical exegesis.

It is not the case that imagination is assessed through the creative work, and intellect through the exegesis. To the contrary, the creative work must demonstrate both imagination and intellect in its own right. As a theoretical annotation of the work, the exegesis should serve to underline the work’s relation to research, as well as to locate the work in relation to other creative works in the field. (Italics mine)

This document continues on in a very interesting way to argue about the density of a creative work and how different lengths or projects do not necessarily equate to different densities of work or imagination.

The document continues: -

Breakdown of Marks:

As stated above, the Creative Communication Dissertation at UC is assessed for its capacity to stand as a work of imagination and intellect. It will not be possible for a student to achieve a high mark in the unit without demonstrating that the creative work bears a significant relation to knowledge and/or research. The exegesis carries some of the weight of that demonstration, but it must be apparent within the work itself. By the same token, creative excellence is a virtue to be rewarded in its own right. The breakdown of marks for 7538/7539 reflects these considerations:

50% of the marks will apply to the aesthetic properties of the creative work. By aesthetic we do not mean pleasing or pretty, though that may contribute. The real question is whether the work has genuine creative power. For this component of the mark, the examiner will approach the work with the same critical eyes he or she would apply to any other prose work, short film, poem, web-site, visual installation he or she might encounter in any gallery, magazine or other professional environment, and will expect a standard of presentation appropriate to the relevant art form. By the same token, the examiner will keep in mind the level of artistry that can reasonably be expected at honours level. (Italics mine)

The other 50% of the marks will concern **the relation of the dissertation package to knowledge and/or research**. 25% of these marks will apply to the creative work alone, and will serve to assess the **creative work’s function as a vehicle for identifying and exploring gaps in knowledge, and/or performing existing research**. The **final 25% will assess the exegesis, for its capacity to perform the exegetical and annotative functions articulated in the 7538/7539-unit outline.**⁵

This document was harder to boil down because of its interesting complexity but we can see that 50% of marks are for

- aesthetics/creative power/ability to be publicly exhibited
- professional skill
(albeit the dissertation’s required “exegetical and annotative functions” (25%))
- contribution to knowledge/research (25%)

That is the end of this preliminary round up and reduction of honours criteria but now I turn briefly to the Masters by Coursework assessment criteria from UTS for the Masters in Media Arts and Production Project course projects.

For the project UTS uses these criteria quoted from the *Subject Outline for 57119 Media Arts and Production Project* :-

The production project will be required to demonstrate work of a high standard with the possibility of being publicly exhibited.
It will also need to be innovative and critically challenging, showing that students have engaged in a lively dialogue between theoretical ideas and production practices.
The project needs to demonstrate the student's creative expertise and professional skill.⁶

This can be reduced to :-

- quality/high standard/creative expertise
- professional skills
- Innovative/challenging (and thus a contribution to knowledge?)
- grounded in theory/ (knows it's theoretical context?)

This survey now turns itself to the assessment criteria for Creative Work at the Research level in Universities.

Creative Theses at Masters and PhD level.

Griffith Doctor of Visual Arts (DVA)

Quoted below is a section of the *Guidelines for Examiners* from Griffith University in relation to their visual art doctorate. As before the bolding is mine to bring out what I summarise in relation to the key criteria below.

- 1.1 Inquiry into a clearly articulated **question** relevant to candidate's field of studio practice
- 1.2 A comprehensive critical discussion of **literature** pertaining to its topic
- 1.3 Clear and appropriate **methods** for obtaining, evaluating, analyzing and interpreting data
- 1.4 A rigorously substantiated **argument**
- 1.5 A potentially useful **contribution to knowledge** in its field
- 1.6 A **standard** of writing, organization, documentation and presentation **appropriate** for this level of scholarship
- 1.7 Is the research suitable for **publication** in a public gallery or as a book in a learned journal -
 - 1.7.1 in the form submitted
 - 1.7.2 with modifications⁷

And here is my reduction of these criteria.

- Question and argument, appropriate methodology (i.e. high level academic skills)
- Contribution to knowledge in the relevant field
- Appropriate standard of writing/organization (professional skills/craft?)
- Literature review
- Of exhibition or publication standard

This last, quite common, criterion is a relevant and interesting one. It often means that the work needs to be both in some way original, tightly put together or working as a whole, because that is the type of work that is usually selected for festivals or gets exhibited or broadcast.

University of Technology, Sydney, for Doctor of Creative Arts, Master of Creative Arts and Masters in Writing.

The list of criteria for these degrees is quite long.

- Rationale for the choice of topic and its significance as an **original contribution** in the creative field
- Demonstration of an awareness of the **context** in which the creative work is placed, including other examples of creative practice.
- Understanding of the key **themes** and **concepts** of the creative work in process
- Adoption of a suitable theoretical or conceptual framework for the creative work and capacity for **critical appraisal of relevant previous research**
- Justification of proposed research methods (if applicable)
- Understanding of resource implications (if applicable)
- Understanding of ethical implications (if applicable)
- Demonstration of sufficient progress to date, relative to the stage of enrolment and degree
- Demonstration of a capacity and feasible plan to complete the proposed research project within the prescribed time for the degree⁸

This is from a work in progress assessment criteria document for use in second year assessments for research students. Leaving out the last four criteria, which are more to do with managing the project legally and financially for the university, the top four are similar to that for many research and honours degrees assessment criteria dealt with above, and can be simplified thus: -

- Original contribution to knowledge
- Context/literature search/knowing the ground

But what it does not mention, that many other sets of criteria do, is the level of craft or skill or professional practice abilities.

Doctor of Creative Arts, University of Western Sydney (UWS)

The DCA aims to provide professional artists with recognition of both their practice and the **contribution** they make to scholarly **knowledge**. It is a program of advanced research embedded in professional practice and aims to develop graduates who are:

- Technical and conceptual **innovators** in their field;
- Committed to **research** and **development** as a means of solving problems;
- Familiar with new technology and its applications;
- Knowledgeable in **theoretical foundations** and **highly skilled** in the application of theory to practice and creative reflection;
- **Effective and advanced communication at all levels;**
- Able to articulate a broad vision of creative practice and its relationship to social, cultural and community needs;
- Able to contribute to the advancement of policy and practice in the creative arts.⁹

Here the assessment criteria may be boiled down to: -

- Innovation/Contribution to knowledge
- Understanding theoretical foundations (literature review idea)
- Effective and advanced communication (similar to skills/craft/professional practice ability)

And here is their advice to examiners writing assessment reports.

Each examiner is asked to provide a written report on the thesis, which would usually include comment on whether:

- the thesis as a whole makes an **original contribution to the knowledge** of the subject with which it deals.
- the candidate shows familiarity with, and critical understanding of, **relevant literature**.
- the thesis provides a sufficiently comprehensive study of the topic appropriate to the degree in the discipline area.
- the **methods** adopted are **appropriate** to the subject matter and **properly applied**.
- the research findings are suitably set out, accompanied by adequate exposition and discussed critically in the context of the subject area.
- the quality of English and general presentation are satisfactory.¹⁰

This examiner's report advice makes it clearer that the boiled down criteria argued above for UWS are justified.

La Trobe University

La Trobe University's Guidelines for Examiners for the Masters by Research lists these criteria.

- i. Competence in the design and conduct of a research project that incorporates **methodological skills appropriate** to the discipline and makes a **contribution to knowledge**.
- ii. The candidate's ability to provide a **critical appraisal of relevant literature** review and available research, to appreciate and understand the **relationship** of the investigations undertaken by the candidate **to the wider field of knowledge** in which these investigations are located, and to draw out the **contribution to knowledge** made by these investigations
- iii. the candidate's knowledge and understanding of the **methodological techniques** used in the research and any shortcomings with these techniques
- iv. a satisfactory level of **literary presentation** reflecting an ability to communicate in a clear, concise and authoritative manner appropriate to the discipline and to the professional arena to which it is addressed.¹¹

Again boiling down we find the main criteria are: -

- Contribution to knowledge
- Appropriate methodological skills
- Literature review/relation to wider field/context
- Literary presentation skills

This last criteria, 'literary presentation skills', is not a bad criteria to apply to any academic work although not necessarily to the creative project itself, unless by it, we mean, evidence of being literate in the media format in the creative work is presented.

The ERA Guidelines has a section, which deals with creative works as research outputs.

Specifically the document lists and discusses,

- Original Creative Works;
- Live Performance of Creative Works;
- Recorded/Rendered Creative Works; and
- Curated or Produced Substantial Public Exhibitions and Events.

To be eligible under this section, research outputs must have been made **publicly available** during the research outputs reference period. For those research outputs, which are selected for ERA peer review (i.e. those outputs that are part of the sample), **a statement identifying the research component of the output** must be available in the institutionally supported repository.¹²

However an earlier section of the guidelines say the following: -

Eligible creative works research output types are listed at section 5.4.2. The required statement, known as the 'Research Statement for Peer Review of Creative Works', must be a maximum of 250 words and should address the following categories:

1. Research Background

- Field
- Context
- Research Question

2. Research Contribution

- Innovation
- New Knowledge

3. Research Significance

- Evidence of Excellence¹³

In Appendix E of the ERA guidelines the research basis of the work is heavily stressed. "When selecting works for the ERA peer review, institutions should focus on those outputs with a substantial research component."¹⁴

So the ERA guidelines stress:-

- Field and Context
- New Knowledge/Innovation (the contribution to research the work makes)
- Excellence (public exhibition is a precondition as well)

These criteria are little different from many of the lists of criteria discussed above.

Conclusion

While some have argued agreed criteria for excellence are unnecessary, and that often an experienced assessor can just view a film/video work and determine the levels of excellence, obviously there will be cases where the research base is unclear or the research context the artist imagines for their work is not obvious.

So it is generally advantageous to write an exegesis, dissertation or context statement to make the research basis clear. And without such a context statement it is often hard to judge anything other than the professional skills and quality of the work, and even harder to judge its contribution to knowledge and how it may be situated in its context.

From the preliminary survey presented above of university criteria for creative works as research, the finding is that the criteria that are being commonly used to assess honours and higher, academic creative works can be summarized as follows: -

- contribution to knowledge - originality, creativity, innovation, research based
- quality /excellence - level of craft skills shown, professional standards, ability to be exhibited or published
- evidence of 'literature survey' - that the work is properly situated in the relevant field and context.

These criteria are in line with those used by the ERA framework. It is advantageous in the present climate for both the ERA and the university sector to use similar criteria when assessing creative work. This will allow for a smoother transition from honours work up to that produced by experienced artists and academics.

¹ Australian Research Council, *ERA Submission Guidelines*, Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. 9.

² Macquarie University Department of Media, *Honours Examiners Information*, 2009

³ School of Communication Arts, University of Western Sydney, *Letter to Examiners of B.A. Communication Honours Projects*, 2008, p. 2.

⁴ Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, *Guidelines for Honours Thesis, Media Arts & Production*, 2008, p. 1.

⁵ University of Canberra, *Important Assessment Information For Units 7538 / 7539*, 2009.

⁶ University of Technology, Sydney, *57119 Media Arts and Production Project Subject Outline*, <http://www.handbook.uts.edu.au/subjects/details/57119.html>, 2010.

⁷ Griffith University, *DVA Examiner's Report Form*, 2008

⁸ University of Technology, Sydney, University Graduate School, *Doctoral And Master's by Thesis Assessment Criteria Checklist Summary DCA, MCA and MA (Writing)*, 2008

⁹ University of Western Sydney, *UWS Info for Examiners (DCA) V2 26/05/05* p.1.

¹⁰ University of Western Sydney, *Info for Research Examiners*, March 2008, pp 1 – 2.

¹¹ Latrobe University, *Guidelines for Examiners – Masters by Research*, 2009

¹² Australian Research Council, *ERA Guidelines*, 2009, p. 31.

¹³ Australian Research Council, *ERA Guidelines*, 2009, pp. 12 – 14.

¹⁴ Australian Research Council, *ERA Guidelines*, 2009, p. 69.