



Helsinki Conference Discussion Paper 04

The Australian model of PhD by practice in creative arts as implemented at the Tasmanian School of Art at the University of Tasmania

Workpackage 1 SHARE Network 24th October 2011

What this paper does?

This is a short discussion paper (one of several prepared for the www.sharenetwork.eu conference in Helsinki 4th and 5th November 2011) based on structured and semi-structured interviews, meetings and discussion groups with staff and research students at the Tasmanian School of Art, University of Tasmania, Australia. The purpose of the paper is to indicate the general outlines of the doctoral level model of studies. The paper also seeks to identify the issues that arise in local discussion among supervisors and candidates for the award. The preparation of this paper was made possible by the Visiting Scholar programme at the University of Tasmania, hosted by the Tasmanian School of Art in Hobart (September /October 2011). (A longer paper is being prepared for use by the Workpackage # 1 Group.)

Why Tasmania?

The School of Art at the University of Tasmania was selected as a site for study because of the role of the School in the early implementation of postgraduate level studies in Australia (from the mid-1980s) and the early implementation also of the PhD in Fine Art by studio practice (from the late 1990s). Furthermore, this School of Art is the first to have offered the MFA (coursework / taught programme) in the 1980s; one of the first to have introduced the studio-based MFA research; and one of the first to have joined with a University in Australia. An important developmental strategy for the School in building a PhD system was to create an “honours” year – essentially an advanced undergraduate year that was supplemental to the 3 year undergraduate BFA. This provided a pathway into research and gave preliminary research training to students. (This can be construed as roughly equivalent to the Ordinary Bachelor Degree and Honours Bachelor Degree distinction employed in some European countries.) The model appears to have been taken over from the other university disciplines and it has been described, by most of those respondents who are staff members, as an important enabler of constructing doctoral level studies in the arts.

What is the context?

Tasmania has a small population (500,000 approx. in a landmass similar to Ireland) but has a very active local art scene which has recently been greatly enhanced by the arrival of a private museum – the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) – established by a prominent businessman with familial ties to the state. There was among the interviewees a consistently articulated sense that the development of postgraduate studies in the School from the 1980s onwards had been a key driver of the local art scene on Tasmania. Among the notable spaces in Tasmania for contemporary experimental work in the visual arts are: Tasmanian Museum and Gallery, CAST, InFlight, SawTooth and the Plimsoll.

Who are the students?

Currently the doctoral students at the Tasmanian School of Art comprise just over 20 students. There is a great degree of variability in terms of profile of the doctoral level students. Some are established artists with commercial gallery-based practices, some are very active in the independent and artist-run-initiatives (ARIs) in Tasmania. Some are active as teachers in UTAS or in other higher education institutions. Some are artists with a modest history of exhibiting who have

pursued their art practice primarily within the art school system itself, both in Tasmania and elsewhere in Australia. More than 50% of the doctoral cohort are from out of state (i.e., not native to Tasmania but from other parts of Australia). There is an increasing presence of European – especially Eastern European students – as well as Asian students at the School of Art. There are both studio-practice and traditional model PhD students (pursuing art theory type projects) in the same cohort. However, there is a predominance of studio-based PhD students. Among the other practical disciplines catered for at the School are: paint, print, e-media (audio/video/performance), furniture-making, and photography.

What is the form and duration of studies?

The predominant model of PhD by full time study is of a 3 to 4 year duration (3 years being the preferred specification by the University) which culminates in a combined submission of an exhibition (typically a short term – 3 to 7 days – display in the University's Plimsoll gallery) and an "exegesis" (typically 20,000 words). (The theory students typically submit the traditional thesis of up to 80,000 words). Historically there was no "viva" (live examination by external examiners of the candidate who must defend the work in response to questions from the examiners.) However, this is now being introduced as part of a University-wide renewal of practices around doctoral level studies. Two external examiners were typically employed and while in the past there was a requirement to source examiners internationally, now it is typically a matter of sourcing these from outside the state of Tasmania. Historically, it was considered essential that examiners see the exhibition as well as have access to the exegesis, and this continues to be the case. The combined submission is examined as the "thesis".

In terms of construction, the exegesis typically follows a regular 5 part structure whereby the student indicates: **(i)** a general introduction of the enquiry; **(ii)** the context in terms of other art practices; **(iii)** the development of the project over the period of study; **(iv)** the interpretation of the work produced; and **(v)** the conclusions reached. The exegesis is stored in the School's library and available to library users. Typically PhD researchers are advised to look at some of these during their programme of study, particularly where there is relevance to the student's own research topic.

How is progression assessed during studies?

Within the first 12 months of study there is a "confirmation" process whereby the candidate must present to the satisfaction of the supervisory team and the broader academic community of the School that they have a defined doctoral project. Passing the confirmation is not automatic and on occasion the student can be advised: **(i)** to change register and submit at masters' level or **(ii)** re-submit a confirmation presentation or **(iii)** if they have already achieved an MFA, and if the 12 month period is concluded, they can be asked to withdraw if they do not satisfy the assessors at the confirmation point.

What are the practical arrangements?

PhD researchers typically are provided with a studio and 24 hours/7 days (i.e., uninterrupted) access to the School's facilities. Doctoral students meet at a weekly one-hour graduate forum where they each present at least once per annum – typically a 30 minute presentation followed by question and answer with an audience comprising several members of staff (typically 6 or more) and PhD and Masters level researchers (who are working for the award of 'MFA' by research through studio practice). Both the practical studio work and the written "exegesis" can be delivered for discussion at these presentations. Participation levels vary in these sessions with normally a core of 50% of the cohort attending weekly. Students are expected to attend these weekly sessions throughout the 3 years of study.

What are the supervision practices?

Supervision is usually by a team of two but sometimes three members of staff and they each are allocated a percentage of the supervisory time (e.g., 50% each for two supervisors; or 50%, 25%, and 25% respectively for a first, second and third supervisor). In terms of teaching load the supervision of a PhD researcher is typically a half-hour to one-hour per student per week in a teaching load of approx. 12 hours per week for a full time staff member.) Where there is a team of more than 2 supervisors typically students meet them individually for the most part, with some full team meetings. There is a wide variety of practice with regard to two member supervision teams with some teams adopting separate roles (one supervisor addressing the written work; another supervisor addressing the studio work). However, among several respondents there was an indication of a strong wish to avoid a separation of roles and for the team to focus on supporting a single cohesive thesis that comprises both practical and written work. Historically, supervisors did not

always have to have the PhD award, however, this is increasingly becoming a requirement for newer and younger staff members.

What are the pathways into doctoral studies?

In terms of the pathways into doctoral level studies there are variant routes possible:

- (i) 3 year undergraduate bachelor degree BFA; followed by a one year “honours” programme which is an advanced undergraduate bachelor level of study; followed by admission to the masters register (MFA); followed by an upgrade to the doctoral level if the project warrants this.
- (ii) Alternative routes include direct admission to PhD register from honours level.
- (iii) Alternatively, students may proceed to complete the MFA after honours and then commence a new body of work at PhD level.
- (iv) Alternatively, students may complete the 3 year BFA and then proceed to a masters by “coursework” (i.e., an MFA that is by a taught programme and curriculum rather than a major research project).

At each major exam level (honours, master by coursework, masters by research, and PhD) there is a standard format of submission for the final award that breaks into two elements: exhibition and exegesis. There is thus an established model of submission that is familiar to the student from undergraduate through to postgraduate level studies.

What are the funding and fee arrangements?

Doctoral level students automatically apply for funding as part of their application to do doctoral level studies. (The key element of an application is a project proposal.) There are several funded PhD positions provided by the university through both national funding and through direct funding by the university itself.

The University only receives funding from government in recognition of doctoral students retrospectively (i.e., after successful completion). This can mean that the institution only receives funding in respect of a doctoral level student up to 2 years after they have completed.

What kinds of student mobility are there?

It is common for students within the art schools to move through 2 or more institutions and often to move between individual states. Thus several of the people that were interviewed described changing their institution when they changed from 3 year undergraduate to 1 year honours and again when they switched from honours or masters’ level studies to PhD level.

How are doctoral studies and research coordinated?

In terms of the local management and coordination of doctoral studies there are some key organisational measures:

- (i) a postgraduate co-ordinator
- (ii) a research co-ordinator
- (iii) a research sub-committee within the School (with the postgraduate and the research coordinators as members).

In terms of the larger University structures there is a Faculty research sub-committee and a senior University-wide position for developing research at the University of Tasmania.

A key national process is a triennial assessment of research performance by the higher education sector as implemented by the Australia Research Council. The School of Art has participated in this process and achieved among the highest results for art and design in Australia. This process does not drive allocation of resources directly, but is an important indicator of status and a key performance measure. The process of preparing the returns for this process is an important driver of discussion and reflection on research and take up a considerable volume of work by the research coordinator and the research sub-committee. (See http://www.arc.gov.au/era/era_2009/HCA09_trial.htm) A key national forum for debate and analysis of doctoral level studies in the arts (as well as art and design education issues in general) is the Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools – ACUADS. It self-describes as “the peak body of university visual arts, crafts and design. ACUADS represents over thirty Australian higher education art and design faculties, schools and departments. The Council undertakes leadership, advocacy, policy development, research and community service for the sector. ACUADS also hosts an active conference and seminar program.”

What are the issues that are being discussed currently by people active in doctoral level studies?

Among the issues that came up repeatedly in discussion with students and supervisors:

- (i) The perception that the PhD route was now a norm having been originally seen as an innovation requiring justification in the 1990s.
- (ii) The perception that there was still some contest over the legitimacy of the PhD for art within the university but outside the art discipline itself (i.e., some people in other disciplines still questioned the idea although otherwise it was widely seen as a normal part of university practice.)
- (iii) The perception that the tendency, in some instances, to split the studio practice and the writing practice between supervisors was to be avoided.
- (iv) The perception that while recent appointments of staff had been made in the School to people without the PhD award, there was an expectation that having a PhD would be a key requirement in applying for teaching positions in education.
- (v) The perception that three key individuals had collaborated in the construction of both a research culture and a PhD system at the School of Art since the 1980s and that this represented a long-term strategic project to build the institution as a whole.
- (vi) There was a strong sense that the prestige of the Tasmanian School of Art had historically come from it being an early adopter of innovations in terms of: **(a)** introducing the “honours” programme; **(b)** developing coursework and research master; **(c)** early-on implementing the PhD in studio art; and **(d)** linkage with the university system.
- (vii) The perception that the different routes into the PhD represented a transitional stage in the model of doctoral studies. There is a strong sense that the co-existence of both the “Honours” and taught masters (“coursework”) routes creates anomalies in terms of duration of studies and the relative standing of “Honours” undergraduate and “coursework” postgraduate studies. There was also a sense that the future of postgraduate studies depended on the re-consideration of where the coursework masters fits within the network of future relationships with industry and the society beyond the academy.
- (viii) The sense that while historically the postgraduate studies of the School had seeded a dynamic local scene, that there was a new challenge to be addressed in terms of fostering a greater culture of critical debate both within the local scene and through the School’s own historic “artforum” series. (The “artforum” series is a continuous programme of weekly lectures and discussions by visiting artists, critics, designers, theoreticians and critics that has featured a wide range of national and international artists. See: <http://eprints.utas.edu.au/view/collections/artforum.html>)

What are the key sources of information to find out more?

See also the University of Tasmania website for further information on the specific programme.
(See: www.utas.edu.au/tasmanian-school-of-art/)

An important study has recently been concluded by the national ACUADS (with support from the Australia Research Council). This study examines the future needs and quality assurance of teaching and learning for doctoral studies in the creative arts. Described as: “A scoping project for quality in tertiary creative arts research training, **CreativeArtsPhD** provides an opportunity for vision and strategic leadership in the creative arts sector, leading to improved curricula, supervision and research outcomes, in essence future-proofing preparation for creative arts professional life.” (See: www.creativeartsphd.com) **NOTE:** This project is discussed in another of the discussion papers in this series’

The Australian Research Council operates a Creative Arts sub-committee which was active in piloting an evaluation of research in the arts in line with the standard protocols used for mapping research performance in the other disciplines. For more information see http://www.arc.gov.au/era/creative_arts_membership.htm

We have made every effort to ensure that the information presented in this short paper is: **(i)** correct at the time of circulation; **(ii)** a fair and reasonable representation of the perceptions of a diverse range of staff and students at the institution; and **(iii)** primarily of a descriptive and not evaluative nature. We welcome suggestions for improving the quality of information provided here.



Funded under the Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions