Effective supervision of creative practice higher research degrees:

PROJECT RECOMMENDATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Through the triangulation of the literature review, contextual review, supervisor interviews, collected case studies, and open dialogue at the ESCARD symposium; and in light of the resulting analysis of institutional frameworks and principles for effective supervision, a series of recommendations have been formulated. They relate to institutional and national frameworks for managing of HDR candidature and supervision processes, approaches to academic development for supervisors in creative fields, and the production of new resources.

INSTITUTIONAL AND NATIONAL FRAMEWORKS

1. Access to contextual Data

Data on aspects of candidature and supervision in creative practice HDRs is currently not distinguishable from overall HDR figures in schools/faculties. Supervisors and managers would benefit from more fine-grained data gathering on the numbers and profiles of candidates enrolled in creative practice research degrees, including length of candidature, completions, and active supervisors. This would facilitate informed decisions to be made on intake, availability of supervisory teams, workloads, resourcing and infrastructure provision.

2. Entry into programs

Entry into PhD programs currently tends to be managed at a local level at the first stages (prior to a formal application). There is a preference amongst supervisors and schools to retain this localized process. Given the length and depth of the supervisory relationship and the resourcing and infrastructure requirements of a four-year candidature, this agency around decision making on admissions is crucial.

3. The limitations of setting national benchmarks and standards

There is considerable diversity in the institutional/faculty/school contexts–each has its own history, culture, strategic priorities, practices, and profile and quantity of accredited supervisors. There is also great diversity in candidates – in terms of their background (eg. the longevity of their creative practice and the recency of their undergraduate studies) as well as in the types of research projects undertaken in terms of disciplinary/interdisciplinary approaches and mediums, proportion of the practice and critical component, the form of presentation, and the designated role of the creative artefact in the contribution to new knowledge.

In addition, experienced supervisors–who have often supervised across disciplinary boundaries, created new systems, helped candidates to negotiate a new genre of writing and to combine practice and theory into an integrated 'thesis' for the first time–argue that the innovation of the field has not yet been exhausted. Given that the full capacity of supervisors and candidates to shape the future of practice-led research is still to be realised, and that the potential of this new area of learning and teaching is yet to be fully explored, supervisors require the agency to continue to be agile, innovative, and open to new possibilities. In light of this diversity, as well as the continued need to experiment with a variety of aspects of the emergent field, supervisors fear, and strongly caution against, a 'top-down' imposition of uniform standards, benchmarking, and proscriptive 'one size fits all' models.

ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT FOR SUPERVISORS

4. The limitations of 'training' and the need for local academic development
While some supervisors appreciate the insights into university processes and guidelines that institution-wide training offers, many are ambivalent, and some are unaware of their existence. Often they see little bearing on the realities of supervising creative practice projects. There is a clear preference for localized training at faculty level, or perhaps even at the level of disciplines (with the proviso that many projects are interdisciplinary), which addresses the unique contexts, particularities, and complexities of supervising creative practice HDRs. The preference of supervisors is workshops with peers, which look beyond matters of process to consider a range of issues such as the complexities of supervision, the academic and intellectual relationship between supervisor and candidate, academic writing and the exegesis, ethical issues, and managing 'risk' for example.

5. Harnessing the expertise of experienced supervisors in workshops and mentoring programs
Because experienced supervisors have a relatively high rate of completion, and because their experience is seen by new supervisors to be of benefit to them and their candidates, it is important to recognise and acknowledge the insights, expertise and leadership that experienced supervisors bring. This leadership should be harnessed (where experienced supervisors are willing), in workshops and dialogues, as well in mentoring programs for new supervisors. Experienced supervisors often already provide advice and support at an informal level, however some new supervisors would like to see this formalised. Formalising mentoring relationships would also provide recognition to experienced supervisors. Awards and workload allocation are other forms of recognition for the service that local leaders provide to their peers, their school, and the field.

DEVELOPING RESOURCES AND COMMUNITIES FOR SUPERVISORS

6. Increased access to a range of resources (case studies and exemplars of good practice)
While supervisors see singular and proscriptive models as inappropriate to an emergent and diverse field, they overwhelming see the potential benefit of increased access to a range of authentic resources, such as case studies and exemplars of good practices. Given the contextual variation of supervisions in the field, it is a recommendation of this project that resources are collected and disseminated that are multi-disciplinary, cross -institutional and varied in approach.

However, instead of 'models' and 'templates' this extensive range of exemplars and practices should be presented as a collection of *possibilities*, which may be adaptable to the supervisor's own context and situation, at their own discretion.

7. Local community building and opportunities for dialogue
Because supervising in a relatively new field can be an isolated experience, the majority of supervisors appreciate opportunities to work within a 'small' community to build informal and collegial support, share practices, and discuss issues that arise. According to new supervisors, academic development within local communities of practice should provide the opportunity to learn from experienced peers, but it should also provide opportunities for supervisors of all experience levels to voice practices, share experiences and strategies and to discuss in-common issues in a supportive environment. Examples include supervisor dialogues to initiate conversations around an aspect of supervision, scenarios that provide a trigger to work through risk issues together, and supervisor-to-supervisor interviews. In this, we concur with Christine Bruce's (2009) findings that facilitating conversations around supervision practice is crucial to the development of effective HDR pedagogies, and the academic development of supervisors.

8. National networking, community building and sharing frameworks
While supervisors express the desire to belong to a 'small community' of supervisory practice, this does not necessarily mean local or internal, it simply means a community in which other supervisors are working in a similar mode (however that might be defined). Because some supervisors may be the only academic in their discipline that supervises creative practice HDR projects, establishing national networks is particularly important for some disciplinary fields.

National network building is also important for another reason. Either through the literature or through their encounter with variant examination guidelines, supervisors across the universities in this study are quite aware of variations in the forms of the creative practice PhD, terminology, the length, and structure of the exegesis, and approaches to its relationship with the practice. However, this was not raised as an issue in need of urgent resolution by supervisors. Instead, they recognise a gradual emergence of common understandings of the past decade. This can be progressed by strengthening national networks of supervisors, for it is through dialogue that meaning, in-common understanding and shared language is negotiated. Such networks might also serve pragmatic purposes of course, such as facilitating the sourcing of appropriate examiners in the area of creative practice.

FUTURE WORK

In summary, recommendations that were produced out of this project include the need to extend beyond generic, formal training for supervisors to academic development that harnesses and extends distributed leadership; focuses on local, disciplinary contexts; has a strong emphasis on case studies; provides diverse resources; and facilitates dialogue between supervisors. Recommendations also include developing frameworks for mentoring new supervisors and building a national network to facilitate cross-institutional discourse, disseminate good practices, and share insights into the management of risk factors, ethical issues, and preparing candidates for examination.

The majority of the recommendations we have made are contingent upon facilitating distributed leadership. Besides establishing an important foundational understanding of the issues, challenges and roles of supervisors in creative practice HDRs, this project has commenced work to respond to these recommendations. However, more work is needed to design and realise new, effective approaches to academic development at local levels; to build and formalize mentoring programs; to collect, produce and improve access to a range of resources (such as authentic case studies and exemplars of good practice); and develop models that facilitate local community building. And, while this project has taken the first steps in establishing national dialogue and networking (through a national symposium, an initial online repository of shared resources, and a collaborative approach to publishing case studies and position papers), more work is needed to establish enduring national networks, and sharing frameworks. That is, much work remains to be done on designing and implementing new, expanded models of distributed leadership.

As a pilot investigation, the outcomes of this project lay the ground for this future work.