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# Supervising doctorates in creative writing: what is the lived experience?

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## ABSTRACT

Universities are increasingly focussed on the accountability, standardisation, professionalisation, completion rates and graduate outcomes of doctoral degrees. This is particularly pronounced in countries where doctoral completions count towards national research excellence evaluations or return a significant monetary value from government re-investment. As such, the supervision of doctorates is a growing field of research inquiry, including in creative writing where in some countries (e.g. Australia, New Zealand, UK) there are many doctoral candidates. While research to date explores supervisory practices from a variety of perspectives – including quantitative investigations of variables affecting completion time, supervisor management styles, and student and supervisor conceptions of supervision – the lived experience of supervising attracts less scholarly attention. Aspects such as supervisor training, candidate pastoral support, and supervisor workload and career development are real issues for supervisors and are arguably more pronounced in the creative doctorate, where thesis paradigms and research methodology are still not universally agreed upon. This article offers findings into what we call ‘the human dimension’ of doctoral supervision, drawing on a survey undertaken across Australia by supervisors of creative writing doctorates.

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Creative doctorate; PhD; creative writing; lived experience; supervision; training

## Introduction

Creative arts doctorates account for some five per cent of Australian doctoral completions annually, with creative writing making up a large proportion of this total. While much research explores candidature from the perspective of the student – documenting creative, academic, professional and personal imperatives and tensions – and broader studies focus on doctoral supervision in general, little is written to date about experiences of supervising doctoral research in creative writing.

From its early days of experimentation and, to some extent, freedom from the constraints of ‘traditional’ research paradigms, doctoral supervision within the arts and humanities is becoming increasingly regulated in terms of accountability, standardisation,

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professionalisation, completion rates and graduate outcomes (e.g. Åkerlind and McAlpine 2017; Green 2005b; Halse and Malfroy 2010; McGagh et al. 2016). This is, overall, beneficial for both candidates and their supervisors. For the candidates – researchers-in-training – there is methodical direction to navigate their candidature; milestones to complete; and a clear, if sometimes onerous, suite of forms and online modules to record their progress. For supervisors, navigating this space with their candidates lends itself to systematic recording of time spent on their research, milestones accomplished, and increasingly a focus on co-publications.<sup>1</sup> This is particularly significant in the growing area of the creative doctorate, a relative newcomer to the global suite of postgraduate degree by research offerings. It is crucial to reinforce doctoral standards within the creative PhD and demonstrate how it can contribute to these standards in imaginative yet rigorous ways (Kiley 2011; Webb, Brien, and Burr 2012). Australia has a long history of leading research into creative arts doctoral supervision, supported in part by federal investment via the Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT). This department and its predecessors ran competitive grant rounds supporting research into higher education (Kift 2016), including projects specifically focusing on postgraduate research (such as Baker, Buckley, and Kett 2009; Blass and Bertone 2013; Hammond et al. 2010; Maor and Fraser 2015; Webb and Brien 2008). This sustained investment ceased in 2016 (Pitman and Bennett 2016), with the cessation of funding for the OLT and its associated grants and fellowship schemes.

Since the publication of the Australian Council of Learned Academies (ACOLA) report on the ‘fit for purpose’ doctorate in 2016, there is increased scrutiny on the purpose and delivery of doctoral training in Australia. This scrutiny aligns with a global concern that with the growing number of doctorates, doctoral standards and qualities may be at risk (Taylor, Holley, and Kiley 2025). This emphasis, combined with a heightened focus on ‘industry readiness’ and employability for postgraduate researchers, and the labour intensive nature of doctoral supervision, created a situation in which universities are required to support increased professionalisation of supervision practice. The academic workforce is changing, with greater pressure to generate competitive metrics and outcomes. Supervisors, including and perhaps particularly early career researchers, are experiencing increased stress (Allmer 2017; Evans 2011; Krause 2018; Malesic 2016), and concerns about wellbeing and career sustainability are becoming more apparent.

Doctoral skills’ training, as opposed to supervision per se, is typically offered at a university-wide level (Hamilton et al. 2014), often generically for candidates across all disciplines. While all disciplines face similar pressures such as the need for timely completions, compliance with policy, industry readiness and employability, it is in the human dimension of supervising in the contemporary academic climate where differences are most in evidence across research projects, student demographics, and research training contexts. Creative arts doctoral students have a distinctive experience, particularly in creative writing (Brien et al. 2019; Finlayson 2012; Masson 2016; Wilson 2018). This is:

... because they often re-enter the academy after a number of years working as practitioners and/or educators in industry and/or teaching settings, sometimes without Honours or Masters qualifications – at least those completed recently – and thus enter a doctoral program with less of a research identity than those in more traditional research disciplines (Batty et al. 2020, 358).

Arts, creative arts and humanities candidates navigate a cognitive and emotional battle that is distinctive to their calling. Elsewhere, we have asked doctoral students about

the ‘invisible’ experience of their research journey (Batty et al. 2020; Owens et al. 2020) and have collaborated with students to articulate these experiences in their own voice (Brien et al. 2019). But what does it ‘feel’ like as a supervisor of a creative doctorate? What is the experience of overseeing the progression of a practice-based candidate in the increasingly complex contemporary Higher Education environment? As Han and Xu write: ‘Doctoral supervision is highly complex and demanding, which may take a heavy toll on supervisors’ emotions’ (2021, 2).

Supervisors need to balance myriad contradictory responsibilities and roles, such as developing students’ autonomy while helping them reach academic milestones efficiently. As noted by Batty and Holbrook, ‘while there is a clearly understood expectation that PhD research will be original, understandings of what this looks like can vary across disciplines and subject areas’ (2017, 2), which can lead to confusion and additional work (justification of methodology, articulation of contribution in creative work, etc.) from both candidates and their supervisors, particularly ‘if the discipline is to further move forward in the direction of quality research outcomes’ (Batty and Holbrook 2017, 13). However, it is also the case that currently in Australia, creative arts and humanities departments are facing challenging pressures as creative degree offerings around the country are closed (Artshub 2024)<sup>2</sup> and universities face job losses (Toomey 2024). When this is considered alongside the ongoing impact felt globally through the arts and cultural sectors in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the negative impact on employability, working conditions, and creative development (see, among many others, Barnett 2022; Pennington and Eltham 2021), it is perhaps unsurprising that creative arts and humanities doctoral students and supervisors are facing specific challenges: the transitioning from artist to scholar (Kroll and Finlayson 2012; Shaw and Holbrook 2018; Simmons and Holbrook 2013); working collaboratively (Kroll 2013); what constitutes ‘a contribution to knowledge (Batty and Holbrook 2017); and highly personal, trauma-based narratives (Joseph & Latona, 2017).

Creative doctorates are typically iterative: they are either practice-led or research-led (i.e. there are differing terminologies;<sup>3</sup> see Batty and Zalipour 2024) and move between the two domains of practice and theory fluidly throughout candidature, each informing the other. Some students also move in and out of the academy as they undertake their research, for professional reasons (e.g. industry work or placements) and personal reasons (e.g. additional part-time work to allay cost-of-living pressures). There is thus a growing canon of candidate experiences and emotional expenditure in undertaking a doctorate, both the highs and the lows. But this project sought to discover what the parallel experience is for supervisors; the lived experience of travelling with candidates from the beginning to the end of their creative candidature. Creative writing was chosen specifically as the field of research practice because of the sheer number of students currently enrolled in creative writing doctorates in Australia, and the availability of a large pool of supervisors. With one of the largest completion rates both in Australia and internationally, creative writing was also chosen because of its maturity within the domain of the creative doctorate, with a large number of early- and mid-career researchers who themselves undertook a creative writing doctorate, and who are now working in ongoing academic positions at universities across the country (and elsewhere). What does this new generation of doctoral supervisor have to say about the lived experience, and how does this compare with those who have been supervising for a long time?

## Research design

In 2020, a 68-question, 30–40-minute survey was circulated via creative writing research mailing lists and personal e-mail contacts for three months to creative writing supervisors across Australia. Both qualitative and quantitative questions were asked, and this article focuses on the qualitative responses to garner a snapshot of what it ‘feels like’ to supervise PhD candidates in creative writing. Concurrent to issuing the survey, a systematic literature review was conducted, tracing scholarship to date about the state of supervisory experience and affect in the doctoral sector, focusing on Higher Education journals, Creative Arts and Creative Writing journals, and education and training journals. The literature review was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and re-reviewed more recently to gather more current scholarship.

Previous academic literature explores supervisory practices from a variety of perspectives – including quantitative investigations of variables affecting completion time (Seagram, Gould, and Pyke 1998), supervisor management styles (Gatfield 2005), and student and supervisor conceptions of supervision (Åkerlind and McAlpine 2017; Baptista and Huet 2012; Doloriert, Sambrook, and Stewart 2012; Franke and Arvidsson 2011; Halse and Malfroy 2010; Lee 2008). However, as Delamont, Atkinson, and Parry (2000) write, research into doctoral supervision often relies on *post hoc* interview data as supervisors and graduates are asked about their experience of the doctorate after completion, rather than systematic data collection during candidature. As a result, research into doctoral supervision is typically characterised by qualitative, case-study style investigations, which, while certainly valuable, can obfuscate broader themes in the literature, making it difficult for supervisors to inform their own practice. This issue becomes even more pressing when considering two key themes frequent in the literature: (a) the lack of training for supervisors; and (b) challenges unique to the Creative Arts (and creative writing in particular).

The original scope of this project intended to somewhat extend data collection by undertaking an online survey about the lived experiences of supervisors, which would then be used to complement and inform a two-day workshop with a selected, representative group of Australian-based supervisors. This more dialogic style of working was envisioned as a way of moving beyond the discursive, individualised approach noted above. However, this project was conceived and developed in late-2019, before the global pandemic. While the project team continued with the survey and paused the workshop, it became clear by 2022 that we would not be able to complete the project as we had originally hoped. While travel restrictions and lockdowns had mostly eased, the working conditions and locations of the original team had shifted and the ability to support the project financially was lost. As such, we chose to analyse the online survey as a single data collection tool.

## Findings

The survey asked 68 questions. Forty-nine responses were received, with 28 fully completed and 21 partially completed. Of the forty-nine academics undertaking the survey, 17 had ongoing positions, six had fixed-term contracts and one was Adjunct; five lecturers, eight Senior Lecturers, five Associate Professors and six Professors. They were

working across a range of universities, from the Group of Eight through to regional, with 70% employed at metropolitan universities. One of the academics had worked for 40 years in the sector; the shortest amount of time was four years. Not all were qualified yet as principal supervisors, although some of the principals were also co-supervisors. The average number of students supervised at the one time was seven. Almost 37% of supervisions were undertaken face to face; 35% via Zoom, phone and email; and 28% a mixture of these modes.

Most participants (55%) felt moderately prepared to manage the administrative aspects of supervising, including milestones, progress report and ethics clearance. While 22.22% felt extremely prepared, 11.11% felt extremely unprepared. A particularly startling statistic is that 88.24% of participants believe there is no consistency of supervision quality at their university (11.76% believe there is).

With these statistics in mind, which arguably point to the lived experience in and of themselves – most supervisors do not feel confident about what they are doing; most are not confident that there is shared understanding of academic standards – we present findings from the survey in the form of topic areas that can be interpreted from the responses. From a lived experience point of view, these topic areas not only highlight the ‘state of play’ for supervisors of creative writing doctorates, but they also suggest areas where research training may be developed to enhance the experience of supervision; and by proxy, improve candidate and thesis outcomes.

Findings from our quantitative analysis are grouped into seven topic areas: the value of supervisor training; feelings of responsibility; feelings of being a supervisor; supervisor anxiety/stress; feelings about successes; workloads; and ideal and nightmare supervisory scenarios. Within these topic areas, overriding concepts of the lived experience of doctoral supervision include the importance of a peer community of other supervisors and mentors; feelings of pride, joy and exhilaration intertwined with feelings of anxiety and stress; the difficulty of reconciling time allocated to supervision with a commitment to supporting candidates and developing the field; and wanting to be part of a dynamic, intellectual space at the highest end of formal learning. As the findings reveal, there is much emotion connected to doctoral supervision, positive and negative, which in creative fields is arguably exacerbated because by and large, projects/research areas drawn from passionate individuals who see the world in a particular way and want others to share this. When shared, such as through PhD supervision, the stakes of vision and execution are raised.

## The value of supervisor training

As highlighted above, supervisor training is often ad hoc and generic, the research to date consistently telling us that most supervisors draw on their own experiences of *being* supervised. Increasingly, institutions typically provide suites of training to supervisors to professionalise supervision, either face-to-face, online, or a combination. From our survey, 68.4% of respondents said they undertook formal training through their institution, while 31.3% did not. More interestingly, 89.47% declared they have been part of some form of informal training, mostly in a mentoring capacity (e.g. a more senior supervisor helped them in a supervisory panel situation). Training was accessed across the spectrum of Graduate Research School/area, through to Faculty, School and even discipline

offerings. Only 17% found these trainings useful while 11.76% found them not useful at all.

Participants were asked about what they found most valuable in this training, and what aspects were missing. There is a clear consensus in the responses that what is most useful in supervisory training provided by institutions is meeting other supervisors, hearing from them and sharing stories. Responses on this question included: 'Hearing about experiences of other supervisors'; 'Meeting with other supervisors'; and 'The opportunity to discuss supervisory practices and approaches with other supervisors'. Another response was qualified: 'The most useful thing was meeting other supervisors, but this may have been because the sessions I went to did not end up being particularly relevant'.

Supervisor training was considered less valuable when it felt removed from creative discipline norms. A recurring sentiment addresses attempts to fit creative doctoral work within a framework derived from science disciplines. As one respondent said: 'it did often involve being too prescriptive about supervision practices derived from STEM'. Attendant to this, another response cites a missing component: 'Focus on creative practice research', with one respondent wanting 'Real life, intensive, hands-on experience of working with student writers of creative theses. The training I undertook seemed to be entirely geared towards novice supervisors in non-humanities disciplines and addressed very basic aspects of the process'.

Participants identified a number of things missing from their training experiences. Specific support with administrative requirements was noted by two respondents. One response also echoes the value of peer mentor guidance: 'I wanted to know what were the expectations at the university around key milestones, regulations, etc – none of this was in the training and I had to learn from talking to more senior colleagues'. One respondent wrote: 'Record keeping, supervision practice examples [how to conduct a meeting, initial contract with student, practical ways to monitor/record progress and tools to overcome poor progress]'. The importance of understanding and knowing how to work with difficult candidates and/or candidates with difficulties was also apparent. This can include managing progress as well as concerning behaviour:

Dealing with difficult students (practical steps and resources as applicable in specific university circumstances) would be useful - i.e. there is quite a lot discussed regarding student progress, but not a lot about what to do when a student has a breakdown and becomes paranoid, rings you obsessively etc. Being told simply to 'not give your phone number' and other such advice is not helpful, nor realistic.

Another response highlighted the complexity of the student cohort this respondent had encountered:

There are two 'groups' of students I feel especially unprepared for supervising and which I find particularly difficult to manage: students with PTSD, and students who have been accepted into the program but do not have the required intellectual rigour/aptitude and/or emotional maturity.

The survey asked a broad question about the extent to which respondents' training experiences focused on the human aspect of supervising. Responses were more mixed, with some seeing this as completely overlooked: 'Not enough'; 'Not that I can remember'; 'No'. Other participants found adequate, or even too much, emphasis on this topic, the latter clear in this response: 'That was about all it focused on'. More positively, responses

range from: 'Yes, dealing with problematic situations and maintaining good relations with the student', to 'Though not often covered in the training, sessions do frequently include input from experienced supervisors (myself included) with advice about human aspects – managing expectations and experiences of candidates which include stress, life experiences, work, etc.'

Again, the notion of a peer mentor is valued:

Most of the time, the feedback that you receive from colleagues is anecdotal and often prefaced by a qualifier or an explanatory note such as, 'This isn't the university's policy, but this is what I do ...' or 'Here's what I have done in the past ...' or 'I'm not sure how others handle this, or what the official stance of the uni/faculty/school is, but this is how I would manage the situation ...'

Given the variety of responses that make it difficult to define the lived experience of doctoral supervision, it is perhaps not surprising that there is no consensus either on the lived experience of supervisory training. While some universities invest heavily in it, others do not (or cannot, in terms of resourcing). Likewise, some universities rely on internal mentors and resources, while others engage the services of external training providers. But one thing is consistent in supervisory training – supervisors would not say no to more, especially that which is targeted to discipline specifics.

## Human dimension of being a supervisor

The 49 respondents to this survey were incredibly generous with their free-text responses, and perhaps as is befitting those working in creative writing, were often evocative and poetic in their responses. While there was a great amount of distinction in the responses to questions focussed on the lived experience of supervision, it is possible to see these through a lens of four key concerns: (1) the weight of responsibility; (2) navigating emotions; (3) the impact that workload allocation has on supervisory experience; and (4) the importance of individualisation to make sense of supervision (learning on the job).

### *Weight of responsibility*

This topic varies in response to the question 'How would you describe the responsibility you have as a supervisor?', depending on the status/role of the participant in the panel as a whole; for example, principal supervisors carry most of the responsibility and co-supervisors, often early- and mid-career researchers, carry less. Responsibility appears to emerge slightly differently through these responses – for instance, responsibility may mean leading the supervisory team and process, or it may instead refer to bearing the burden of quality and rigour of the research outputs and potential career pathways for candidates.

Responsibility as process was often influenced by role as either Principal/Lead supervisor or Associate/ Secondary/Co-supervisor. The composition of a supervisory panel can vary across institutions, from one supervisor to there being a panel of supervisors, which can create inconsistent opportunities for supervisors, especially early-career academics. As one principal supervisor noted about their responsibility: 'Enormous. People's careers, confidence, skills, etc, will be affected by our guidance'. Further: 'There is a lot of responsibility which I certainly take seriously (though I think others do

not). You are responsible for being a support, a critical eye, to send the student in directions for research'. It is interesting to note here the respondent's sense of responsibility is pitched in direct opposition to that of others, suggesting that their lived experience of supervision is that they do more or better than their colleagues, when the effort should be shared.

Overwhelmingly, the responses suggest a cohort of people who recognise that supervision has a significant impact on someone other than themselves, and who take that seriously. Recognising the pastoral role that supervisors have long connected with in supervision (see Kroll 2009), many participants homed in on their role in supporting an individual through the doctoral process and the importance of their role in that success. For example:

It is a big responsibility. I wish I could leverage it more, for example publishing with the students. This is something I am trying to change when selecting/accepting new candidates. In Creative Arts, students often remain fixed into thinking it is their project, and I have begun to work more directly with attitudes that suggest the candidate is challenged to think beyond their own research activity, to think of the way the PhD is a collaboration.

Looking at the research ecosystem more broadly, beyond the doctoral qualification, one respondent commented:

It's a delicate balance between providing enough scaffolding to give the students a sense of security and then pulling it away so that the students provide their own scaffolding – encouraging them to write articles and to submit their work to conferences, and festivals is part of my responsibility and part of their research training.

Another respondent also flagged a more holistic consideration: 'It's enormous! As we are dealing with the *highest educational qualifications and programs*, plus human beings as they undertake these intense courses over a number of years and experiences' (our emphasis).

One of the most incisive and telling responses received from a supervisor goes to the heart of what we aimed to unearth with the study. It was in answer to the final open-ended question, urging respondents to provide further comments regarding the 'human dimensions' of doctoral supervision.

I tell new students that with their thesis and the whole supervisory process, I am their best friend and their worst nightmare – this to me encompasses all the dimensions of support and rigour that a supervisor needs to provide. I am 100% on their side and 100% looking out for gaps, mistakes or places where they might fall. Probably no one else in their lives is doing that, not even their mothers who as wonderful as they may be, are blinded by their love.

In this response, the supervisor succinctly positions themselves on a spectrum of responsibility – from 'best friend' to 'worst nightmare'. This is a see-sawing standpoint for the supervisor, nevertheless it sets up clear boundaries. It paints an image of clarity for the candidate while also being self-effacing and sardonically playful. It also sends a sense of safety and transparency of supervision style – the candidate gleans aspects of the supervisor's way of supervising from this description from the very beginning of their relationship. This response evidences the experience of this particular supervisor, of longevity, confidence and also successes; a pedagogical philosophy built on time and commitment.

## Navigating emotions

While some previous research has identified the relational nature of supervision (Buirski 2021; Fullagar, Pavlidis, and Stadler 2017; Hamilton and Carson 2015; Frick, Albertyn, and Brodin 2014), it was revealing the breadth of the spectrum of emotions or feelings participants identified. In answering the question ‘How would you describe the feeling of being a doctoral supervisor’, a common word repeated by several supervisors was ‘exhilarating’ or ‘exhilaration’. One respondent wrote: ‘Exhilaration – a privilege to be able to work with people who are producing cutting edge new work from first concept to fully formed dissertation and potential publications’. Two others qualified their responses: ‘interesting and exhilarating. A lot of work. Sometimes overwhelming’; and ‘Mixture of exhilaration in facilitating students and profound exhaustion in dealing with free-reading by colleagues and difficult students’. Another word used by several respondents was ‘satisfaction’, with one participant writing: ‘Satisfaction in the ability to provide support I sought and never received’. There was also a mix of emotions revealed by one respondent: ‘I feel satisfied with the role of assisting HDR [Higher Degree by Research] students successfully complete their theses, along with the mentoring involved. At times, I feel frustrated by the amount of work involved, especially in responding to drafts of theses when I am very busy with other work’. Another mixed response was:

There really is not a feeling for most of the supervision – it’s just another part of the job of teaching and working with students. There is certainly a feeling of satisfaction when a student has a breakthrough and when they complete. And difficult supervisions generate feelings of frustration.

Four further words commonly found in the responses were ‘precious’, ‘privilege’, ‘pride’ and ‘relief’: ‘Precious: it feels like the only place in the university where the meetings are unstructured and enable free, open discussion’; ‘It is a great privilege’; and these two mixed responses ‘Some days, a heavy weight; others, I have a sense of pride. When students complete – relief and a sense of achievement’. ‘Anxiety’ is another term experienced: ‘A level of anxiety similar to that I felt as a candidate – that I don’t know enough. Pride when a candidate produces a beautiful piece of work’.

It is clear from the following two responses that they are written by supervisors with deep experience, the first colourfully metaphorical:

Being a doctoral supervisor sort of feels like being a life-saver – you’re always on patrol. You’re trying to guide your student to shore, deter them from rips and other dangerous parts of the ocean where they shouldn’t be. You’re trying to make sure they don’t drown – sometimes, in their fear or frustration, they try to pull you down with them. It’s incredibly challenging but rewarding, especially when they find their way.

And the following response, with a mixture of insights:

Ideas blossom within this conversation which is the perfect combination of intimacy and trust, along with scholarly rigour, collaboration and support. And it is almost magical (no wonder this is never properly recognised by academic bean counters!).

This final response clearly describes the see-sawing space of doctoral supervision:

At times uplifting, enabling another, facilitating learning and opportunity. At times just hard work, reading drafts, working through practice problems, listening to the same thing over

and over. At times futile, working with un-engaged students or colleagues. At times exciting, stronger students with interesting projects, and at submission and graduation.

### *Feelings of being a doctoral supervisor?*

This following response again depicts a supervisor of long experience, again using a metaphor colourfully:

I really enjoy supervision – it is the best part of being an academic. It is wonderful to see students grow as researchers and pursue careers in universities. I see the process of supervision as akin to midwifery – our role as supervisors is to encourage, cajole and push our candidates to be the best they can be but at the same time, to have the courage to dare to be good enough. One of my current PhD candidates is a mature aged practitioner who wasn't interested in theory and writing about theory when he started. I persevered suggesting various theorists he might find useful – in the end, I succeeded and now we have a problem of having to edit down his dissertation because he has gone well over the word limit for his dissertation. And that is a nice problem to have.

I feel proud about this status.

A sense of pride, joy, achievement and reward for being a supervisor was also reported, yet with some mixed responses that mainly around cognitive workload and exhaustion. Winning awards for outputs created during the PhD clearly also adds to supervisory feelings of accomplishment. This supervisor writes: 'A student of mine completed last year and won a major industry award for their creative practice work which was undertaken for their PhD, this was extremely rewarding'. Another response is qualified:

It is only ever great joy and pride when a student has a success. Most students are totally grateful but there have been a few who have had successes, for example books published, shortlisted for awards, and by the time that happens they have forgotten that it was me who found a way for them to continue when they just wanted to give in and withdraw from the degree altogether.

There is added emotional expenditure for supervisors as their candidates approach submission and examination. The next supervisor includes commentary around examination results in answering:

I have recently had four completions in succession, over a 6-month period ... I was fatigued by the projects/students. But the biggest joys come when candidates are awarded a 1, no amendments – and two of these four achieve this, which made me extremely happy. Since graduating, one has three publications already, and hopefully a post-doc (waiting on news).

The question asked to tease out notions of anxiety and stress in supervisors was a simple one: What characteristics, in your view, contribute to supervisor anxiety/stress? Responses circulate causes ranging from the candidates themselves to institutions. One response to the question is straight to the point: 'Under-confidence. Lazy candidates'. And this: 'Students who can't take feedback and work to timelines or write, make or create!' This respondent writes a list:

Feeling that a student isn't a right fit for HDR, feeling that the quality of their writing is not up to scratch; supervising a student with extremely poor grammar; essentially rewriting student work to make it passable; students who undermine a supervisor's authority; students who

drop off the radar for weeks or months at a time; feeling responsible for students who don't take responsibility for themselves.

And this: 'When a student does not prepare for supervision, misses deadline to submit work in advance of supervision sessions limiting the supervisor's scope to prepare. Students who just do no work. Anxious students or students who are not coping'. The following response reflects a problematic work culture with their institution: 'Soft stuff – facilitating smart but stressed students, maintaining professional boundaries, coping with faculty infighting where students are regarded as tokens in the Hunger Games'. The following blends institutional and candidate causes of stress and anxiety:

In the supervision arrangement, lack of communication from grad research school (notices to candidates but not to supervisors, for example), a tendency to "feel" the stress of the candidate (empathy is good for the supervision but can be detrimental to the supervisor), and pressure to provide quick turnaround on feedback (measured in days) on material that took months to write.

Some responses were mainly concerned with institutional practice: 'Too many supervisions. Poor team dynamics. Lack of clarity around university research systems. Lack of confidence. Lack of appropriate training and resources/support'; 'The administration involved in supervising the thesis'; and, more concerning: 'the sense that one's university may largely take successful supervisions for granted but, if there is a supervisory problem, may not always be as supportive as one would wish'.

Interestingly, this response does not blame candidate interaction at all, rather institutional matters:

Nothing students have ever presented me with have caused anxiety or stress. That has only ever come from the faculty/admin side, for example not recognising the supervision process adequately. Or having a difficult and unsympathetic person in charge of higher degree students (some of these people have a combative personality and belligerent approach, which is totally unhelpful). The stages of assessment can also be stressful but that could be managed better by the university.

Only two responses reflect that perhaps their own lack of expertise of the topic creates anxiety and stress, with an aside to difficult candidates: 'Lack of knowledge and difficult students' and 'Not knowing the topic well enough, lack of communication'.

### ***Impact of workload allocation***

Institutional workload allocation does not easily align with the necessary workload of supervision. And there is no uniformity across the sector of easy algorithmic solutions. There is hidden labour in sound creative PhD supervision, both intellectual and emotional. So many factors are dependent on the dynamic of the supervisory panel and the ability and organisational skills of the candidate, to name a few. As a general rule, supervisory panels do not split the workload amongst them – in creative PhDs as no doubt in other fields, the panel exists to provide a richness of voices and critique for the candidate – the more on the panel does not lessen the workload for anyone.

But a common scenario in PhD supervision is that the more junior the academic, the less squarely in their area of expertise the candidates are. This is partially because they are still building their track record, and partially because more senior supervisors bring

them into their teams to give them an opportunity to learn. There are also differences in these supervisors' workload profiles, which might range from a teaching-focussed lecturer with some time for research, to a research-only professor. This response was very measured about their allocated workload, suggesting someone who has built up their capacity and experience over time:

It was manageable for several reasons: the work was appropriately recognised in my workload; this was prior to our university introducing annual stages of assessment, plus these were organised at faculty, not local level, hence the administration and paperwork was a lot less than it is now; and finally all the students were well within my area of expertise.

Others view workload allocation as not enough, yet they are so committed they keep going. One response reflects a commitment to building capacity, despite a strict workload allocation: 'It is too much but has been necessary due to the increasing demand for creative writing PhDs'. Anecdotally, there are more PhD enrolments in Creative Writing in Australia than anywhere else in the world, which relates to the fact that nearly all of the literature on Creative Writing doctorates has emerged come out of Australia. Another respondent writes of a similar level of commitment, despite it allegedly not being fully recognised in their workload allocation:

A creative doctorate needs to grow slowly, and the student benefits from longer consultations and appropriate time for the supervisor to read and respond to multiple drafts of the thesis. This is teaching at its highest and most rewarding level, and also at its most skilled. It comes from many years of expertise in the practice of supervision. Almost none of this is recognised in the academic workload.

Of interest here is the sense that (good) PhD supervision requires the highest level of academic ability. Similarly, agility with timing – which may be difficult to capture in a standardised workload – is deemed important. For this respondent: 'The workload can become very intense when several students are coming up for milestones and submission'. Another respondent echoes this sentiment:

It is untenable and as a result of three different candidates all extending candidatures through intermission due to family or illness. It resulted in a pipeline issue with four due at the same time (three in delay and one on time).

Another respondent notes stress as a qualifying factor in workload allocation for supervision: 'I felt that it was manageable, but that it would have been more sustainable and less stressful if I were allocated a higher workload allocation for my supervisions'. This speaks to the fact that official time allocations vary across institutions, each with its own means of calculating time for supervision, including if it forms part of a research or teaching workload. From the responses, it appears that however structured, the time allocated is never enough. This supervisor writes:

... you get 100 [hours per] year – but this gets divided between supervisors so a co-supervisor may get as little as thirty and if the student is part time it can be 12 or thirteen hours – that's for everything! Reading the work, providing feedback, meetings.

The division of workload hours between the panel of supervisors appears to be an issue for some but not all. For example: 'Doctoral supervision is calculated at 1.5 hours per week to be split between the supervision team – this includes meetings and providing feedback

on written and creative work. I think it is sufficient'; this is a different sentiment to this respondent:

Though I lack genuine benchmark data, the allocations feel insufficient to account for all of the necessary supervision related activity (my average per principal supervision is usually around 30 hours per year). It's insufficient. At the moment, we're allocated 8.5 hours/per student each semester, which is nowhere near enough, especially when I meet with both my students weekly for one hour (i.e. 15 hours of meetings in a 15-week semester – a number that already surpasses the workload allocation, and does not take into account reading student work, providing feedback, corresponding via email, organising meetings and milestones, helping with personal and professional issues etc).

Another respondent writes:

Our current workload consideration [...] is insufficient to reflect the amount of work and time involved and [...] our university may be phasing this workload consideration out completely and counting HDR supervisions as part of the supervisor's own research work.

This accords with another respondent, who writes emphatically: 'Now there is NO allocation'. This is at the other end of the spectrum to another respondent, for whom workload allocation is 'Generous'.

Some supervisors believe time allocation is sufficient, but they report this with qualification:

... more challenging ones take more time. If we meet a student approximately once a fortnight for one hour (or less), that is 26 hours of face-to-face time in a year. If you add in reading drafts and emails, then it is well under the amount of time allocated in our workload (75 hours).

Another writes: 'Adequate, provided the co-supervisor also pulls their weight'; and another:

I think it is just and adequate when students are performing either adequate or well, when paired with other supports and training the candidate receives. For poor performing students, the allocation can feel insufficient as the supervisor is still required to be at hand for late completions, for progress panels, etc. which add to the workload.

### ***Learning on the job: ideal supervision scenarios***

Supervisors were asked to describe an ideal scenario within their supervision. The majority of responses focussed on communication and panel teamwork. For example: 'Ideally from the beginning of the supervision, the supervisors need to be clear about how they work and what they expect of the candidate and of each other. Often that's worked out clumsily as the candidature progresses'. Working together, a participant writes: 'A student whose work is aligned to mine, and we work on research together (as in other practice led disciplines) as well as alone'. And this: 'Collegial engagement by student and panel'. These responses suggest that if collaboration and collegiality represent an ideal scenario, they are, perhaps, not the norm.

This supervisor prefers face-to-face meetings to online: 'Starting with a student from the beginning, have all the sessions face to face, and the student studying an area that I have a solid background in and also a high level of motivation and dedication'. The next response reflects a methodical approach to supervision:

Meet with student regularly. They update me on what they have been working on, I read a draft in advance and comment. They go away and when we meet again, I see that they have made all the changes I have suggested and done even more independent work. They can take constructive criticism and are happy to ask questions of any nature or point out if I am missing something or if a source I sent them to was not useful. Open dialogue is key.

For some, the candidate themselves is the determinant of an ideal supervision scenario. One participant responded simply: 'Well prepared and motivated student'. Another responded:

Working with a student who is independent and capable and prepared to do the work – one who is respectful of boundaries and mindful of my time, one who listens to the feedback I offer and at least tries to incorporate that feedback or take it on board.

Putting the emphasis on a supervisory panel and the sense of teamwork it allows, this respondent writes: 'Two supervisors. At least one with expertise in the field of research. At least one with expertise in delivering a thesis. A motivated student'. Four other respondents write of solid teamwork being their idea scenario: 'My ideal would be to work in small supervisory teams that shared the work of supervision, allowing for the primary to take the lead as appropriate'; 'Where supervision is equally shared with regular meetings and both provide feedback in a transparent and courteous way'; 'Supervision team members have an understanding of their supervision allocation percentage and what that means in terms of contribution to supervising the candidate'; and 'That all supervisors also pay attention to the dissertation!'

This respondent sees ideal supervision akin to good project management:

A team-managed approach where we minimize duplication, share tasks across the duration, load share the mental labour of reading, work to a brief in sessions with the student (agreed on in advance by the Supervisors), and where the candidate writes up the meeting summary and distributes.

This respondent assumes the role of cheerleader/coach as the ideal working scenario:

Ideally a supervision is where the student simply gets on with the work and you step in to provide encouragement, guidance, advice, and so on. And where the student is receptive to ideas but still prepared to be independent and stick up for themselves and their thesis if they do not agree with you. Most of my supervisions have been a version of this scenario.

The notion of ideal supervision scenario was not shared by all, however. For this respondent: 'Sorry, but I don't believe such an animal exists – every supervision must be managed in its own way, depending on the project, the candidate, the other members of the supervision team, and the policy environment in play at the time.

### ***Learning on the job: nightmare supervision scenarios***

When it comes to nightmare scenarios, responses nearly all reflect on candidates' troublesome skillsets and behaviours. For example: 'Ill-prepared and indifferently motivated student'; 'Litigious, unwell, incompetent student exacerbated by utterly disengaged senior people'; 'A student who is disorganised, unmotivated and uncooperative and confrontational'; and 'Students who can't cope at all'. Perhaps more worryingly: 'A self-absorbed practice led candidate who just wants the scholarship money or disinterested'.

This raises the question of how the PhD applicant prepared for and was admitted into the programme in the first place, which is also evident in the following responses:

Student does not listen. I ask them to go read a few sources and make revisions, and they return with the same document a fortnight later having not made any revisions. They have some sort of excuse. But this becomes a pattern – and then the communications become less frequent and the work less frequent. It is clear that they are not following any of the advice of the supervisor and think they know everything.

Working with a student who is not at PhD level, who is obnoxious and arrogant, lazy, or unprepared for the work. Working with students who are illiterate, and/or whose first language isn't English, is also extremely difficult and stressful, especially in Creative Writing.

The following response is emotional in its tone, suggesting the nightmare scenario has very much been part of this supervisor's lived experience, and certainly on more than one occasion:

I have only had a few but they involve students who desperately crave your attention but at the same time consistently reject your advice, telling you that they know more about the topic or the thesis process than you. Alternately, a student who regards you as an unlimited 'draft dump' and loads you up with endless versions of chapters, including work that you read and comment upon, only to be told that they have revised that section and not to bother (when you already have!). Students who think that your only job is to be there for them and drop in (though not now we are working remotely) or send work whenever they feel like it, and students who think you are there for everything - advice on other work they are writing, competitions they might enter, jobs they apply for, and any aspect of their writing life - and forget that you have other students, classes, responsibilities, not mention a life of your own that might even involve a holiday now and then.

Candidates who not only do not undertake the work necessary, but simultaneously also manipulate their panel of supervisors, is reported:

Repeated meeting with a student and the entire supervision team, when the student has stalled progress, nothing changes. When supervisors meeting individually with a student at the student's request only so the student can play one off against the other.

Several responses speak more of the dysfunction of supervisory panel rather than the candidate. For example: 'Co-supervision with someone whose methods I either don't like or don't understand'; 'Where the other supervisor is pulling in another direction'; 'The other supervisor constantly cancelling their attendance at meetings, not providing much feedback to the student while you do – an unbalanced scenario, basically, can be draining and irritating'; and 'Supervisors who don't answer emails, don't have a PhD, are egotistical and rude'.

The following response is more about a candidate not getting the support they need – a student-centred approach to supervision:

I'd say any scenario in which the candidate feels that the principal supervisor is not the go-to person (whether due to lack of expertise, clash of personalities, or misconduct) – this would be made worse when the candidate then does not get any support to be moved to another supervision or is led to believe that there is no recourse.

This final response speaks to institutional pressures and the ramifications this has on what is expected of a supervisor, whether real or perceived. While perhaps pronounced

through the global pandemic, it does speak to the peaks and troughs that universities go through, especially financially, where PhD supervision can become a more porous activity than comparatively more cut-and-dried classroom teaching.

... this year I have been actively supervising a number of PhD students while on extended periods of LSL [long-service leave] and recreation leave that the university asked me (and other staff) to take in order to achieve a better budget position following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The university hasn't asked me to continue supervisory work while on leave, but the reality is that there is no-one else with the available time who would have been able to take this work on and dedicate the time that at least two of the students currently require.

### Conclusion: future directions for creative writing doctoral supervision

Han and Xu tell us: 'Given the complexity of doctoral supervision, supervisors unsurprisingly experience rich and mixed emotions ... Nonetheless, empirical studies on doctoral supervisors' intrinsic emotion regulation remain scarce' (2021, 3). Their research, located amongst Chinese computer science doctoral supervisors, 'indicated that doctoral supervisors experienced a variety of emotions in doctoral supervision, both positive and negative. However, positive emotions were less mentioned and less diverse than negative emotions' (2021, 4). Accordingly, this article overtly makes attempts to align itself with the more sensory and emotional aspects of supervising the *creative* PhD; perhaps no different from traditional PhD supervisor affect except for the pressure to succeed as a newer mode of doctoral research with, typically, a different candidate cohort and different outcome expectations.

The survey findings underscore the importance of human relationship in the lived experience of creative writing doctoral supervision. Relationships between supervisor and candidate and between supervisory panel members are paramount. Equally important is the relationship between the supervisor and the institution, which is enacted through an institutional policy framework whose stipulations are far removed from the experience of doctoral supervision: the work takes longer, the requirements are more complex and the people involved behave unpredictably. The reality of supervision gives rise to a gamut of emotions ranging from exhilaration to resentment. Positive feelings are generated as a result of clear communication, reasonable expectations, and hard work by candidates, while negative sentiments primarily arise where the supervisor is treated without respect.

Research consistently highlights that supervisors learn how to supervise from their own experiences as a doctoral student – whether avoiding what they perceive as the poor practices of their own supervisors, or replicating what they perceive as good practices during their doctoral candidature (Delamont, Atkinson, and Parry 2000; Lee 2008; Stephens 2014). In other words, the majority of supervisor training comes in the form of *being* supervised as a student, rather than professional development, despite calls for greater institutional support (McGagh et al. 2016). The survey results uphold this research.

Creative writing doctoral supervision is an emotional rollercoaster. Communication and respect are significant factors in a positive supervisory experience. The level of respect with which supervisors are treated by colleagues and candidates (during and after candidature) has a big impact on their emotions. Being aware of this in advance may be helpful in managing feelings.

Doctoral supervision, despite its professionalisation, still appears to be discipline/field-specific, meaning generic training is limited at best. The variances in the lived experience of creative writing PhD supervision in Australia depends on university type, including ranking and attendant scholarship funding, and the location of each institution. Another ingredient we believe is access to 'quality' candidates with particular sets of experiences which set them up well for the type of prolonged research projects undertaken.

Supervisory training is a burning issue for creative writing supervisors; the generic nature of doctoral supervision training can undermine its effectiveness, as creative writing supervisors feel that it is simply not relevant to their experience. Many learn far more from other more senior supervisors than from the trainings provided. This can be addressed by supplementing generic supervision training with discipline specific peer-to-peer mentoring and guidance but also, the panel model of supervision has great potential here.

Everyone in the supervisory relationship is likely to experience strong emotions during candidature and this is typically not reflected in training and support mechanisms for supervisors. From the responses, it is clear there is significant variation in experiences of doctoral supervision in creative writing in Australia; the specificity of creative practice research and how it informs doctoral supervision is significant. Beyond the variety of each creative writing candidate's project and behaviour, supervisory experiences reflect a diversity of approaches to PhD programme delivery, supervisory panel composition and behaviour, institutional workload allocations and supervisor training and support. Accordingly, the expectations and needs of the institution, supervisory panel members and candidates need to be actively managed throughout candidature, particularly when unexpected circumstances affect the trajectory of the candidature. Supervisors feel the responsibility of supervising is not always shared throughout a panel and for some, this can feel overwhelming. The stakes are high for the candidate but also for the supervisory panel and individual supervisors, as reputations are often attached to successful supervision.

Overall, the lived experiences of supervisors include both anxiety and exhilaration. For some, it is a roller coaster ride, depending on variants including candidate ability and commitment. Pride and a sense of achievement also are mentioned, as are joy, frustration, exasperation, and exhaustion. The responsibility felt also varies, depending on what position on the panel the supervisor holds – principal or co-supervisor.

Workload including time allocated to supervise widely varies across institutions. But across institutions there appears common hidden workload issues – reading and editing times, particular towards the end of candidature are not adequate, but still undertaken because of the high stakes involved in submission and examination. This contributes to the ongoing justification that there is a need for mentoring, collegiality, and local level training in combination with generic training to support supervisors. It is hard, individualised and bespoke work.

## Notes

1. Historically, creative arts and humanities disciplines have been less willing to embrace co-authorship with students although this is changing in the contemporary climate (Ellison and Batty 2020).

2. <https://www.artshub.com.au/news/news/southern-cross-university-cuts-creative-arts-program-2757855/>
3. The literature uses terminology variously and often unconsciously, including practice-based, practice-led, practice as, research through, research-led, artistic research and research-creation.

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## Consent to participate

Participants were provided with information sheets and provided consent to participate through digital means through the online survey.

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