

GUIDELINES FOR PHD, MPhil or RMT WITH A CREATIVE / PRODUCTION COMPONENT

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1. Purpose of these guidelines

Murdoch University Postgraduate Research Degrees Regulations allow for HDR candidates to submit a creative or production component as part of their PhD, MPhil or RMT thesis. The regulation states, a thesis:

36. (3) may include non-text materials, such as performances, exhibitions of works of art, musical compositions, films or videos subject to the approval of the Dean; and
(9) must not exceed 100,000 words...

Beyond this, the advice provided to students in the Graduate Centre's *Signposts* booklet asserts:

In addition to the written component, which must always constitute the major part, a thesis may incorporate other materials such as exhibitions of works of art, films, videos, performances or musical compositions. Special approval is needed from the Research Degrees and Scholarships Committee for this.

These guidelines¹ are intended to offer more specific guidance to candidates, supervisors and examiners within the terms of the current higher research degrees available at Murdoch.²

2. Definitions

In developing these guidelines the definitions of terms "thesis", "dissertation" and "exegetics" generated considerable debate, in part because of diversity in usage and in part because of particular disciplinary traditions. In order to keep the definitional issue from deflecting us from the intent of these guidelines the following definitions are offered:

Thesis refers variously to the totality of the work submitted for examination, the written component alone, and the particular "thesis" or argument being advanced in both components. For these guidelines we use *thesis* to refer to the first of these meanings.

¹ These guidelines have been adapted, with permission, from those prepared by the School of Media, Film and Theatre at UNSW and entitled "Proposal for a PhD in Practice-based Research" (21st November 2006). Murdoch gratefully acknowledges the UNSW for allowing us to work from their policy.

² These guidelines apply to creative work undertaken as part of the Doctor or Master of Philosophy or Research Masters with Training. Murdoch University *does not* offer a D. Creative Arts or equivalent qualification that would be by creative work only.

The written component of the thesis that accompanies/complements the creative work may take the form of either a dissertation or an exegesis.

A *dissertation* is a substantial written text, which addresses the research questions and advances the argument of the thesis.

An *exegesis* is a formal written exposition or explanatory essay in which a student critically examines their creative product in the light of contemporary theory and practice.

Whichever term is used, it is important that candidates and their supervisors appreciate that the written component *will not* simply be a description of the creative work and how it was undertaken, a production diary or a reflection piece. While it may often include information on the materials and methodology used and elucidate the creative work and place it in an artistic, intellectual and/or cultural context, the written component must answer to the requirement of every research thesis that it makes a significant contribution to knowledge.

More important than the name for the written component, is the *relationship* between the creative/production and written components addressed in the next section.

3. A ‘Creative or Production-based Thesis’

At Murdoch, a “Creative or Production-based thesis” is:

- i. Research that is initiated in creative practice, and explores conceptual and theoretical questions, problems, or challenges that are identified within and formed by the needs of creative practice and practitioners;
- ii. Research that is carried out through both creative practice and the practice of scholarly writing (i.e. a thesis) using methods familiar to both practitioners and scholars;

This approach to higher degree research extends the notion of research beyond conventional scholarly discourse to include other kinds of production, such as: a performance; exhibition or installation of works of art or digital art; musical compositions; films or video productions; a piece of creative writing (novel, novella, short stories); a script; experimental media, multimedia artefacts, CD Rom, other media technologies and modes of presentation, or other creative piece. The form of research can thus be physical or virtual, textual or non-textual, visual or sonic, static or dynamic, digital or analogue, or a combination thereof.

Where other institutions award higher degrees in creative work under, for example, the badge of the Doctor of Creative Arts (seeking to give practitioners in the various arts the means to develop their technical and creative skills and allowing such practitioners the opportunity of submitting *only* a creative work or production for examination), at Murdoch the creative/production work is submitted *in part fulfilment* of a PhD, MPhil or RMT degree and is *always* accompanied by a written dissertation or exegesis.

Thus the decision to pursue a creative/production thesis does not relieve the candidate of the responsibility to design and undertake a project that endeavours to achieve a standard of research comparable with projects undertaken in conventional academic research modes. Most importantly, at the PhD level, it must aim to ‘constitute a significant and original contribution to knowledge’. Proposals that cannot demonstrate in their Programme of Study what this intended contribution will be, may not be approved.

A useful way to think about this is to consider the relationship between the two components, or to consider the relationship of each to “the thesis” as a whole. As the following excerpt suggests, identifying “a research question” can be a practical way forward:

Both the exegetical [written] and creative components of the research thesis hinges on a research question posed, refined and reposed by the student across the several stages of a research program. Both the written and creative component of the thesis are conceptualised as *independent answers to the same research question* – independent because each component of the thesis is conducted through the “language” of a particular discourse, related because each “answers” a single research question. Thus the two components of the research thesis are neither ambiguously related, nor does one undermine the language – the autonomy - of the other. The creative or production piece does not form an illustration of the written document; the exegesis does not form a commentary on the creative work or production piece. In this way the two components of the creative or production-based thesis are substantively integrated, form a whole. (Milech and Schilo, 2004 p.7)

For a PhD the written component will normally be in the vicinity of 40,000-50,000 words, to a maximum of 60,000 words; and reduced accordingly for the MPhil and RMT. Where the creative/production component is a piece of creative writing, the combined maximum word length is 100,000.

In summary, the creative/production-based research project thus entails a major research question, or set of questions, investigated through two different means (creative work and scholarly writing), both aspects of which address the same question. While the research project necessarily embraces two components, they must be regarded as, and examined as, an integrated and coherent whole.³

4. Eligibility

Candidates wishing to undertake a creative/production-based research project must meet the eligibility criteria for admission into the relevant degree (i.e. Honours or its equivalent), and have relevant prior experience and skills in the creative work they intend to undertake.

The University will NOT accept applications for a research proposal where the artistic component is a group-devised production/object. Applicants must be the single or lead practitioner in their proposed creative component, i.e. primary artist, director, dramaturg, choreographer or writer for performance. Moreover, they must have sole responsibility for the research-relevant aspect of the work if it is a collaboratively achieved production, and must be sole author of the written component.

5. Application Procedures

Application processes are the same as for other HDR applicants: however, applicants intending to undertake creative/production-based theses would be well advised to discuss thoroughly the feasibility of the proposed project prior to submitting an application for admission. In assessing the application, consideration will be given to

1. Evidence of relevant professional experience, including grants and prizes;
2. Creative works produced either as sole author or contributor. The nature and extent of such contribution must be specified precisely;
3. As with all HDR students, evidence of research capacity and outcomes.

6. Candidature Processes

Candidature and project management obligations are the same as for other HDR candidates. The candidate, in consultation with their supervisor, is responsible for developing a suitable Programme of

³ That is, students and supervisors will not be able to nominate a “weighting” for each component, and examiners will not be asked to “rank” each separately.

Study and reporting progress throughout candidature (e.g. via Confirmation of Candidature and Annual Progress Reports).

In respect of a creative/production-based proposal, the Programme of Study should pay particular attention to:

1. Articulating how the research project manifests itself in both the written and practical components of the work, and the relationship between the two components of the research project.
2. Identifying the facilities, technical and human resources required for the research project, and how these are to be secured. Where relevant, the appropriate technical staff must be consulted and the likely impact on their time and/or facilities identified and agreed to.
3. Identifying the required budget and, if this exceeds the standard maintenance allowance provided to HDR students, indicating where additional funding will be sourced.
4. Planning the time-line so as to ensure, unforeseen circumstances notwithstanding, that both components of the proposed research project can be completed in a timely fashion (normally 3 years FTE for a PhD; 2 years FTE for an MPhil and 18 months for an RMT).

7. Support

Support from the University will be equivalent to the support provided to other HDR students in the school and faculty to which the student belongs. Students will be eligible to apply for:

- A stipend - through the range of domestic and international scholarships available at Murdoch;
- Grants for research and conference travel in Australia and overseas;
- Standard maintenance funds. (Students who need more money to bring their creative/production-based project to fruition must seek independent funding, and must be able to demonstrate in their Programme of Study that they will have sufficient external funds to carry out the work, or provide a contingency research plan in the event that they do not secure sufficient production funds);
- Dedicated work space (a desk and computer);
- Access to seminar courses provided by the University/Faculty/School at post-graduate level;
- Opportunities for part-time teaching.

Students may also be able to access, through the School in which their Principal supervisor is located, additional technical and practical support (equipment and facilities) to assist with their production, although it cannot be assumed that such access is unrestricted and permanently available. Some spaces, for example, are overburdened during teaching periods and some equipment is also under greater demand at such times. It is important that prospective candidates are aware of such limitations and consult with their supervisors and technical staff early in their candidature to ascertain the availability of equipment and facilities, and the scheduling of access.

Students must continue to consult with production and technical staff at regular intervals during the period of their candidature. Production and technical staff are not assigned to the work of particular individuals but assist students at all levels, and this must be borne in mind. Ultimate responsibility for all technical aspects of the thesis rests with the candidate.

8. Submission Guidelines

The written component of the thesis must conform to the format and physical specifications set out in the relevant regulations and guidelines for postgraduate research theses.

The practical component, where it is not in written form (e.g. creative writings, scripts etc), should be appropriately documented in a suitable digital format. In such cases, candidates and their supervisors should give consideration to how the work can be adequately and appropriately captured for examination and for posterity.

Following examination, and once the thesis has been approved, both examined components will be submitted to the Library as part of the Australian Digital Thesis Project.

9. Examination Guidelines

These are offered in addition to the standard guidelines. Examiners should consult the latter in relation to the written component of the thesis.

Murdoch University allows HDR candidates to submit a creative work or production component as part of their PhD or MPhil. This approach to higher degree research extends the notion of research beyond conventional scholarly discourse to include other kinds of production, such as experimental media, multimedia artefacts, CD Rom, other media technologies and modes of presentation, digital art, filmmaking, video production, dance choreography, composing and performing. The form of research can thus be physical or virtual, textual or non-textual, visual or sonic, static or dynamic, digital or analogue, or a combination thereof.

For the purposes of examination of theses including a creative/production component, research is defined in accordance with the way it is understood for a conventional PhD or Masters. That is, research ‘constitutes a significant and original contribution to knowledge’. It involves creative work and experimental development, is characterised by originality, and has investigation as its primary objective. As outlined in the Australian Qualifications Framework⁴ such activity must be undertaken on a systematic basis and have the potential to produce results that are sufficiently general for humanity’s stock of knowledge (theoretical and/or practical) to be recognisably increased.

Whereas other institutions award higher degrees in creative work under the badge of the Doctor of Creative Arts and seek to give practitioners in the various arts the means to develop their technical and creative skills, the work being submitted to you for examination is for a research degree and thus the particular emphasis is upon practice *as research*. The candidate is a media, film or theatre or creative writing practitioner who has sought to develop their creative work in an academic context.

In addition to the practical component, a substantial written dissertation investigating the research problem posed in the practical work is intended to consolidate and/or supplement the practical component of the inquiry. The written component is not simply to be an exegesis of the practical work but a rigorous piece of theoretical investigation evidencing research skills of equivalent sophistication to those of the conventional PhD or Masters. It should be assessed in accordance with the guidelines for a conventional PhD or Masters.

The research project thus entails a single topic investigated through two different means—one practical, the other written—both aspects of which should address the same question. Because the research project necessarily embraces two components, examiners should give equal weight to each component in determining the final recommendation.

For all theses with a creative/production component the following set of questions and the criteria they assume should be considered as indicators of the work’s achievements. They should thus stand as guidelines for examiners:

1. How clearly has the research question been identified and tested through the practical work?
2. Considering both the practical and written components, is the work rigorous? Does it demonstrate a high degree of intellectual precision, systematic method and scholarship?
3. Considering both the practical and written components, does the work demonstrate a comprehensive knowledge of its creative/technical/material context? Does it position the work in the relevant artistic and related scholarly fields of endeavour?

⁴ Available at <http://www.aqf.edu.au/doctor.htm>

4. Considering both the practical and written components, what contribution to knowledge does the work make in the subject area with which it deals?
5. Is the practical component of the research presented professionally? Does it demonstrate a high standard of literacy and quality in the mode in which it is presented (i.e. literary, visual, digital, musical, cinematic, computing, performative)?
6. Considering both the practical and written components, what is the work's degree of originality? Has it developed new formulations, new methods, new forms of expression?
7. How well do the creative/production and written components of the work address the same research question?

10. Examination guidelines for works entailing a live performance

- It will normally be the case that examiners will engage with the documentation (DVD, Video or CD) of the live event, rather than be in attendance.
- In the event that some or all of the examiners may be able to attend the live performance, that practical component of the thesis may be presented for examination up to 6 months in advance of the written component.
- All examiners will, in any case, be provided with the documentation of the live event, when they are sent the dissertation/exegesis.
- An examiner will *not* be asked to submit a separate report on the performance, but prepare a single report considering both the practical and written components of the thesis. Similarly an examiner is asked to make a single recommendation in respect of award of degree.
- As with the normal practice of examination, the examiners *may* consult each other in respect of either or both performance and written components, but are asked to reach an individual judgement, and report any consultation to the Manager, Scholarships and Examinations.

11. Further information

The Graduate Centre website (<http://www.research.murdoch.edu.au/gradcentre>) contains a range of useful information. Among other relevant policies (see Graduate Centre - Policies), the following should be noted:

- *Responsibilities of Postgraduate Research Candidates*
- *Responsibilities of Postgraduate Research Student Supervisors*
- *Minimum Resources Policy for Research Students*

Advice on space allocation and maintenance funding for postgraduate research students can be sought from the supervisor or the School Business Support Unit. At the time of drafting this policy, for students in the Faculties of Arts and Education, and Creative Technologies and Media, the maintenance allocation was \$2,100/candidature for a PhD student and \$1,100/candidature for research masters students.

Advice on technical and production facilities should be sought from the supervisor or School Dean.

The following keynote address and discussion papers from Australian creative practitioners /scholars are useful further references for candidates and supervisors developing creative/production research theses.

- Richards, Allison. "Performance as Research" <http://www.adsa.edu.au/research/performance-as-research>.
- Kroll, Jeri. "The exegesis and the Gentle reader/writer" <http://textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue3/kroll.htm>.
- Milech, Barbara and Schilo, Ann. "'Exit Jesus', Relating the Exegesis and Creative/Production Components of a Research Thesis", TEXT No.3, April 2004.

- Barrett, E. and Bolt, B. Practice as research: Approaches to Creative Arts. Enquiry, London, I.B.Taurus, 2007.
- Bolt, B. Art beyond representation: the performative power of the image. London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004
- Carter, P. Material Thinking. Melbourne University Press, 2004
- Gray, C. Visualizing research : a guide to the research process in art and design. Burlington: Ashgate, 2004
- Sullivan, G. Art practice as research: inquiry in the visual arts. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2005
- <http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/> in particular Illuminating the Exegesis Ed. Julie Fletcher & Allan Mann Text Special Issue Website Series Number 3 April 2004
- http://www.speculation2005.qut.edu.au/Spin_embedded.HTM. Several papers relevant to all areas of creative practice.