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Creating A Framework for Equity in Higher Degree Research

Equity, Higher Degree Research, UNSW Sydney, University Strategy

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Abstract

Higher degree research (HDR) in the fields of art and design is rapidly transitioning to meet the international socio-cultural shifts and recent changes to funding models. Brexit for example, is limiting the participation of British art and design researchers in EU collaborative grants, while funding cuts in Scandinavia are resulting in the closure of influential HDR art and design programs. In Australia, similar structural changes and demands for greater accountability are transforming HDR programs. Due in part to these shifts, major reviews of HDR at The University of New South Wales (UNSW Sydney) have resulted in nuanced variations of the university's PhD scholarships and challenges to the perceptions of the qualification as a one-size-fits-all model. This paper will outline new PhD scholarships and frameworks that UNSW is developing in response to the emerging stakeholder needs identified by the university: the UNSW Scientia PhD scholarship for applicants with industry experience; the iPhD scholarship developed with the federally funded research organisation CSIRO; and the development of an equity framework for meeting the needs of Indigenous Australians, local disadvantaged communities, and international communities in Africa and Asia in the university's PhD programs. This paper will focus on the differentiated PhD scholarships at the university, recommendations of two university-wide working groups on equity in HDR at UNSW, and observations of informal HDR pre-admission preparation at the Faculty of Art and Design for practice-led and non-traditional research outputs (NTROs). While early pilot-testing of a new approach to developing the framework for geo-politically relevant NTROs is promising, the paper also identifies several burning questions requiring careful consideration within a research-intensive university.

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Creating a framework for equity in higher degree research

This paper, and my focus on equity in higher degree research (HDR), stems from a workshop at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, in the week of the North American elections in 2016. The workshop was part of a long-term research project titled *Myths of the Near Future* where I lead participants in the co-creation of images that test the limits of co-design (Brandt 2015) guided by the principles of surrealist ethnography (Clifford 1981, Judice, Judice and Koskinen 2015). The workshop aimed to defamiliarise the participants with their assumptions about data while exploring image-making with data technology, such as mobile media, CCTV and 360° cameras. *Myths* was both a work and a workshop in the exhibition 'Climactic: Post Normal Design' in which the curatorial team sought to decolonise design exhibitions by featuring designers from Kenya, Australia, India and Pakistan alongside designers from Britain, North America, and Denmark. The workshop participants were Higher Degree Research candidates from India, Pakistan and Central America. The original intention of the workshop, to explore surveillance technologies in urban settings within a co-design framework, was reframed by the participants as an opportunity to express their concerns over their precarious status given various statements during the election campaign by the newly elected president. As a result of the *Myths* workshop in Pittsburgh, my understanding of the significance of the divergent cultural expectations and the lived experiences of data technologies, was expanded by the experiences of HDR candidates in volatile geopolitical contexts. The workshop changed my approach to HDR – where differing cultural conventions can occlude clear perceptions of the changing research landscape – and changed my priorities as the current Associate Dean Research Training in the Faculty of Art and Design at UNSW Sydney. Since the *Myths* workshop in Pittsburgh my priority has been the identification and development of emergent research trajectories with practice-led approaches that lead to non-traditional research outcomes (NTROs) which respond to local contexts.

In 2018, the University Higher Degree Research Committee's (UHDR) Working Group: Equity in Higher Degrees by Research aimed to build on the work of the group in 2017 and develop the framework for equitable access to HDR at UNSW Sydney. Many questions emerged during the discussions of a university-wide approach. For example, what does the available UNSW data on HDR candidates reveal? What resources can the UNSW UHDR working group engage to better understand the complex issues with which each group is contending in a volatile

global landscape? What resources emerging at UNSW can provide advice and training for reasonable adjustment for best practice in meeting the diverse needs of the three groups the working group was tasked to address: Indigenous Australians, local disadvantaged communities, and international communities in Africa and Asia?

As background, the Graduate Research School, which oversees working groups at UNSW, had identified nuanced variations of PhD scholarships to challenge the perceptions of the qualification as a one-size-fits-all model. The differentiated PhD scholarships provide a range of customised doctoral pathways according to the specific strengths of the university and the identified needs of potential candidates who contend with significant and historically entrenched barriers to HDR admission: the UNSW Scientia PhD scholarship (2017); the UNSW Industry PhD scholarship, known as the 'iPhD' (2018); and the UNSW Equity PhD framework currently in development (2017-2019).

The UNSW Scientia PhD

In summary, the UNSW Scientia PhD is designed for honours degree graduates who have achieved immediate employment rather than enrolled in a higher degree. Typically, the Scientia PhD candidates who the university seeks to recruit have attained significant industry experience since graduation, and they have identified a gap in the knowledge of their professional spheres that aligns with the university's research expertise. For example, of the nine Scientia PhD candidates in the Faculty of Art and Design at UNSW Sydney, two are exploring neuro-diverse art and audiences and speculative-critical approaches to democratising data in medical visualisation. In part, the Scientia PhD scholarship addresses the expectations of HDR candidates and the changing realities of employment on HDR completion. These realities are reflected in the alarming statistics that show a 200% increase in the number of PhDs awarded and graduate anticipation of academic employment, despite the decrease in the academic positions available for employment (Haide, Strensom and Jones, 2018). Although sometimes frustrated by these contextual shifts, the expectations of graduates are changing. The UNSW Scientia PhD scholarship is structured to address the larger proportion of the candidates, for whom industry relevant research is necessary, given that roughly half of all PhD graduates leave academia within 10 years of graduation (Haide, Strensom and Jones, 2018). The advanced levels of skills that are necessary for navigating the employment opportunities on graduation include professional career planning and the

development of responsive research methods early in the candidature. The Scientia PhD scholarship thus allocates resources to proactive research career planning through professional mentoring and the online modules in Extend Your Career, a researcher career development resource developed by the Research Office at the university.

As a creative art and design faculty in a university anchored in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), the name of the Scientia PhD scholarship has caused some consternation for the faculties of Law, Arts and Social Sciences, and Art and Design. When HASS and creative art and design academics have advised that Scientia is typically associated with science it is often pointed out that *scientia* is Latin for knowledge based on demonstrable and reproducible data, rather than science. Despite these concerns, the Faculty of Art and Design has built momentum over the last three years and has increased successful applications, from two for 2017 and 2018, to five for 2019. In the rigorous assessment procedure for the Scientia PhD scholarships, the Faculty of Art and Design has implemented a filtering system by which applicants are proactively advised, midway through the process, to further develop their applications for the following year if their primary supervisors deem their proposals uncompetitive for their cohort. In a competitive environment this approach has resulted in the faculty achieving a high ratio of Scientia scholarships without individual coaching by the HDR coordination team.

The UNSW-CSIRO Industry PhD (iPhD) Program

The UNSW-CSIRO Industry PhD (iPhD) scholarship program was developed by the Graduate Research School at UNSW and launched in 2017. According to the Deputy Director of the Graduate Research School, Lena Caruso, the iPhD is an 'industry-focused, applied research training program that aims to produce the next generation of work-ready research and innovation leaders with the skills to work at the interface of research and industry in Australia' (Caruso, 2018, np). It is based on a pilot program developed between the university's Faculty of Engineering, the CSIRO (the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation funded by the Australian government), and five industry partners. A condition that the iPhD scholarship shares with the Scientia PhD scholarship is that applicants must articulate and address an industry problem within the framework of their PhD research. Both the Scientia PhD and the iPhD scholarships are structured to produce knowledge exchanges, defined by the university as 'the translation of our work to

advance social progress and economic prosperity', and to transform societies worldwide by sharing research and resources with external partners in industry, government and local and international communities (UNSW 2025, p. 21).

What differentiates the iPhD scholarship from a traditional Research Training Program (RTP) PhD scholarship is that the supervisory teams must include a UNSW supervisor, a CSIRO supervisor and an industry mentor. Five iPhD scholarships were awarded to candidates across the university in 2018 that were deemed to meet the key aims of the scholarship: 'to support the National Innovation and Science Agenda (NISA) by taking a more integrated and co-created approach to bridging the research-industry divide. (Caruso, 2018, np). While the iPhD program has encountered occasional issues in the development of a framework for reasonable adjustments for the support of candidates in acclimatising to the demands of international relocation, it has succeeded in structuring pathways for the timely identification of research priorities in tertiary education that respond to industry shifts.

The Framework for Equity in PhDs at UNSW Sydney

The framework for Equity in PhDs at UNSW Sydney is currently conceptualised as a range of structured PhD models that support equitable access to HDR within the coordinates of the pillars and aspirations of the UNSW 2025 strategy. These include 'A Just Society', based on equity, diversity and inclusion (UNSW 2025, p.18), and 'Global Impact', defined as 'internationally engaged education' and partnerships that support 'contributions to disadvantaged and marginalised communities' (UNSW 2025, p.23). The development of these aspirations in a research-intensive university means increasing the participation of Indigenous Australians in HDR training and the academic workforce (Fabian, 2018). While the Admissions Policy and Procedure at UNSW allows for the addressing of past educational or other disadvantage, and aims to broaden access to research training from under-represented or disadvantaged groups, the framework for Equity in PhDs articulates the necessary supports for reasonable adjustments at the university.

Rather than reduce the entry requirements for HDR, the Equity in HDR framework aims to assist the applicants to meet the requirements for admission to UNSW HDR programs. Ensuring that the framework for Equity in HDR sufficiently engages and supports the diverse groups of candidates in the structured development of their skills and networks in order to return to their home country, either locally or

internationally, and to contribute research leadership relevant to their community, raises significant challenges. The 2018 working group, chaired by the author, built on the report of the 2017 working group chaired by Dorottya Fabian, who continued to contribute to the 2018 working group. The working groups for 2017 and 2018 both articulated the Equity in HDR framework as a contribution of the HASS and creative art and design disciplines to UNSW as it builds on their leadership and research strengths in social policy, diversity, creative engagement and global development.

The 2017 report of the UHDRC Working Group: Equity in Higher Degrees by Research

A key recommendation of the 2017 report of the UHDRC Working Group: Equity in Higher Degrees by Research was that the Equity framework should initially aim to recruit candidates from selected countries in, for example, Myanmar, Uganda and the South Pacific. The program was envisioned to include a preparation period of 6-12 months for academic and cultural adjustment, either at UNSW or in their home country, before relocating to Sydney for four years of research training, including a structured first year program. During their candidature, each student would spend at least one to two terms in their home country applying their research under local supervision mentored by UNSW staff (Fabian, 2018). It was suggested that the Equity in HDR framework could be opened up to other faculties from 2021 and it was anticipated that linkages could also be forged with the recent initiatives outlined in the university's strategic plan titled *UNSW 2025*.

The 2017 working group report also recommended that the criteria for selection should firstly include a deep commitment from the candidates to *making a contribution* and to the application of socially relevant research outcomes in their home country. Candidates who could demonstrate high academic potential with leadership qualities, with reasonable adjustments for the candidates' relative disadvantages, was deemed the second criterion for selection. The third criterion was for professional know-how demonstrated in at least two years of relevant employment since graduation from an undergraduate degree, and an active commitment to culturally relevant development agendas through volunteer activities. Other aspects of the Equity in HDR framework identified in 2017, included the funding of Master of Philosophy enrolments, explication of reasonable adjustments and the augmentation of pre-admission preparation programs.

The 2018 report of the UHDRC Working Group: Equity in Higher Degrees by Research

Building on the reflective practices in HDR supervision in the Faculty of Art and Design at UNSW, the 2018 working group made five recommendations and further suggestions with which the Graduate Research School might develop best practices in supporting university-wide equity in HDR. To ensure the viable development of an Equity in HDR framework the working group's first recommendation was for the Graduate Research School to revise the business models developed to date for the equity framework and associated scholarships, so that they are aligned with the pillars and aspirations of the university's 2025 Strategy, including Just Society, Global Impact and increased participation of Indigenous Australians in Higher Degree Research Training and the academic workforce. The second recommendation was for the establishment of a framework that is sufficiently flexible to address the distinct needs and desires of the three identified equity groups, including clearly articulated, in-country preparation, reasonable adjustments, and a review of living costs for families who are relocating interstate and internationally. Consultation with UNSW Philanthropy to recruit contributors to particular scholarships and with UNSW Equity, Diversity and Inclusion to coordinate the estimation of numbers for scholarships based on statistics from the university's Research Office comprised the remaining recommendations.

As the working group discovered during 2018, the development of the Equity in HDR framework so that it is structured in alignment with the UNSW's expansive mission and the HDR priorities of a research-intensive university is complex. The following section describes some of the complexities, recommendations and suggestions that were discussed in relation to the further development of the Equity in HDR framework by the Graduate Research School. To recruit to UNSW promising students and professionals from under-represented groups and to advance their capacity to contribute to their communities demanded a focused critical reflection on the needs and desires of these diverse populations. For this purpose, the 2018 working group requested data on the university's stakeholders, the diverse communities of candidates enrolled in HDR, and identified a number of existing UNSW resources with which the Graduate Research School could consult to better understand the needs of diverse communities at UNSW. In discussion it was agreed that the Graduate Research School develop a network of emerging UNSW resources with which the university can develop the framework for equity in HDR and

provide supports for reasonable adjustment. Some UNSW resources are described as emerging, because the university has adapted and initiated a number of new initiatives in the last three years.

The following provides an overview of the available UNSW data regarding HDR candidature, existing resources for the support of reasonable adjustment to HDR study, and suggestions for the development of a network of units and stakeholders who currently provide supports for reasonable adjustment to HDR candidature. The paper will conclude with some burning questions about further development of a framework for Equity in HDR.

Historical data on UNSW HDR candidature

The difficulties of mapping the research training needs and ambitions of HDR candidates were evident in a survey of the available university data. During 2018 only baseline data that has not yet been cross-referenced with previous qualification data, was available. The extraction of previous qualification data that is reliable is currently under development. More readily available was data that showed the patterns of admission by gender, as these statistics have been recorded at UNSW over a number of years – it proved useful for the comparison of gender ratios at the undergraduate and HDR levels. Notably, two faculties with male-dominated undergraduate populations have a higher percentage of women enrolled at HDR, than at undergraduate levels. Admissions by residency is another data set that has limitations due to the parameters of recording methods and the variable factors in residency status. What the statistics do convey however, is a general observation that STEM subjects and Law have maintained their HDR admissions, while those in HASS and the creative disciplines have slightly dropped overall. The UNSW statistics on admission for Indigenous undergraduate students and HDRs are based only on students who self-identify as Indigenous Australians. These figures have been noted as under-reported. Anecdotally, the reasons for not declaring cultural backgrounds are attributed to the fear of stigmatisation and discrimination. Finally, the UNSW statistics on admission by disability is at the undergraduate student level rather than attached to HDR enrolments. What this means is that anyone who has self-disclosed as having a disability in their student personal record, regardless of how long ago and to what program they were attached, is picked up in these statistics regardless of their current health status. Currently, Professor Eileen Baldry Deputy Vice-Chancellor Equity, Diversity and Inclusion is leading the development of a clearer overview of

disability at UNSW and the Graduate Research School plans to liaise with her over this aspect of equity in HDR. In regard to the admission of local disadvantaged communities, UNSW Sydney does not capture low-SES data as it is complicated by the benefits and social mobility that an undergraduate degree confers. While current statistical admission records reveal some trends they require development with supplementary focus groups and interviews so that the university can develop a more finely-grained understanding of stakeholder perceptions about safe disclosure as it relates to stigmatisation and discrimination at a number of levels.

Resources to support the development of the Equity in HDR framework and supports for reasonable adjustment

The Graduate Research School has estimated the costs anticipated for the establishment of three pathways that address student social equity: pre-admission preparation, in-country research training program and UNSW Master of Philosophy (MPhil) candidature prior to the PhD application. Of particular note in the current estimated costs is the identification of the advantages that pre-admission preparation would provide. These include: an intensive period to attain the language requirements for an HDR program; an opportunity to manage settlement issues for candidates prior to PhD admission, and thereby the mitigation of disruption when the PhD commences in full; and for candidates who have demonstrated potential, an intensive introduction to the research culture in UNSW faculties. The second alternative of an in-country research training program for potential candidates means that HDR applicants undertake a recognised master's degree in their home country with joint-supervision of the research component by UNSW academics. In-country research training provides several advantages. These include structured supervision arrangements between institutions to mediate and contextualise the introduction to the research culture of UNSW. In addition, it provides an incentive for potential PhD applicants to do well in their home country degree, including a demonstrated ability and responsiveness to the expectations and conventions of the research culture at UNSW. The third alternative of a structured MPhil prior to PhD application also offers advantages and constraints. Similar to the in-country research training program described above, potential applicants could apply for admission into the MPhil program at UNSW. MPhil candidates must complete 18 to 24 Units of Credit in advanced coursework, undertake an original research project and produce a thesis. These candidates would thereby become familiar with UNSW research culture and, upon satisfactory completion of the MPhil, could apply for admission to the PhD

program. The advantages of this model include a longer period of research training within the policies and guidelines at UNSW and by building on the existing MPhil program, the structured coursework components could be tailored to include aspects of research language and culture.

As well, existing and emergent supports for HDR were identified at the university. Existing UNSW resources for the collaborative development of insights about the needs of diverse communities at UNSW, include academic researchers in HASS, creative disciplines and STEM faculties that are already engaged in local and international communities. In addition to the stakeholders identified by the 2017 working group, other participants identified by the 2018 working group included the Institute of Global Development at UNSW, and HDR candidates who have been recognized by UNSW for their insights on diversity based on their lived experiences, for example, the UNSW sponsored representatives at the annual conferences of the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS).

Documenting practice-led research in pre-admission preparation at the Faculty of Art and Design

The articulation of reasonable adjustments and pre-admission preparation were high priorities for the working group in 2018. Reasonable adjustment is defined at UNSW as the modification of some features of the first year of the program in order to accommodate the needs of the individual. To assess how the Faculty of Art and Design might develop better supports for reasonable adjustments and better understand the informal processes of pre-admission preparation, several supervisors and the HDR team compared notes while mentoring candidates through initial and follow-up applications in two rounds throughout 2018. A number of informal techniques as applied in the faculty, were discussed in relation to their effectiveness in assisting applicants adjust to the expectations of the UNSW. The techniques included a flexible structure of focussed writing on aspects of the topic on a weekly, fortnightly and monthly basis. The topics around which these writing tasks circulated commenced with the clear identification of the gap in knowledge that the applicants had personally observed in their research area. In practice this meant encouraging applicants to write about what they cared and knew most about. Further writing tasks involved applicants in stepping back to scan literature on what was known about the topic, and to find the coordinates and areas of discourse in which the topic was in play. It was noted that it was often at this point, and to be expected, that applicants

meandered into multiple groups of literature and at times reported feeling overwhelmed. In some cases, depending on their location, applicants did not have access to university libraries so the literatures accessible were not scholarly texts. In these cases supervisors provided some guidance on readings, such as a list of author's names and keywords, to provide a starting point if they resonated for the applicant. The search strategies for both the literature review on the topic and for the most productive theoretical framework, took time for some applicants in 2018. It was nevertheless a worthwhile opportunity for discussions on and the development of an applicant's strategies for coping with uncertainty and the identification of resources on which they might draw in the future should their application be successful. In most cases, the challenges of these tasks assisted supervisory teams to develop rapport as a team and to evaluate the applicant's responsiveness to feedback as well as developing an understanding of the applicant's creative and professional motivations.

A key area in the informal combination of the reasonable adjustments and the pre-admission preparation, in the Faculty of Art and Design context as described above, was reflection on drawing out the definitions of practice-led research and non-traditional research outputs (NTROs). The tacit knowledge involved in the various approaches that applicants brought to the discussions was in itself significant for the applicant's insightful reflections and deserved greater scrutiny through NTROs. The development of tacit knowledge is supported sometimes counter-intuitively when applicants are challenged to explain what they mean both through the research proposal and their plans for practice-led research. Discussions of the specific cultural nuances through which applicants understand the context of their own background knowledge, and of the research environment at UNSW, often lead to another aspect of reasonable adjustments: recognition of cultural differences, and the applicant's plan for sustaining their motivation for four years in an environment that is different to that with which they are familiar.

The current understandings of the NTROs in the UNSW Faculty of Art and Design are aligned with those of the University of Sydney's *Guidelines for Non-Traditional Research Outputs* which define NTROs as 'multivalent' in fields such as art and design because of the intersections of 'academic, public service, and commercial sectors' in the fields of creative research (2015, p. 2). To define the scope of the applicant's non-traditional research outputs through practice-led research, the Faculty recommends that applicants develop portfolios of artworks, designs, and/or exhibitions that demonstrate a trajectory for substantiated and sustained endeavour,

as is defined in the *Guidelines for Non-Traditional Research Outputs* under the criteria for a Major NTRO Output - Category 4 Curated or Produced Substantial Exhibitions and Events (USyd, 2015, p. 37). Identifying the intrinsic motivations for practice-led research is paramount in building a foundation for successful HDR completions. This observation is based on the experiences of the HDR supervisors who mentored Australian and international candidates from Brazil, Canada, North America, and Qatar for the Faculty during 2018.

Conclusion and Burning Questions

In conclusion, this paper has identified the areas that require careful consideration when planning resources for Equity in HDR recruitment at a research-intensive university. The burning questions under review in the Faculty of Art and Design regarding the Equity in HDR framework focus on the following aspects of this complex and significant area: how can UNSW prioritise and be accountable for improving the student's self-disclosure and thereby improve a statistical reliability that is reliant on stakeholder trust without fear of stigmatisation and discrimination? Who are the champions at UNSW with the know-how in HDR recruitment and supervision for successful PhD completions and how can they be developed as a network for the support of equity in HDR reasonable adjustment? What resources and supervisor training can UNSW and The Institute of Global Development provide for a better articulation of the reasonable adjustments and greater resilience, when the HDR candidates are confronted by the imbalances of power that sometimes occur in HDR recruitment, training and completion? These questions and the informal pre-admission preparation techniques recorded during 2018 for the development of equity in HDR in the Faculty of Art and Design, and reported in this paper, comprise the first agenda item for the meeting of the Higher Degree Admissions Advisory Panel (HDRAAP) in 2019. The HDRAAP is the Faculty of Art and Design's reference group, which assesses all HDR admissions to the Faculty.

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