



Editorial: the foundations of practice-based research

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editorial

This conference has been convened to discuss practice-based research in art and design, and the relationship of doctoral degrees to professional practice in the discipline. Back in the 1980s conference delegates were thirsting for completed examples of doctoral degrees in art and design to use as models of research. In the last couple of years there have been conferences using completed degrees as models on which to base the philosophy and methodology of art and design research. This development has been very welcome, and I thank the London Institute "Matrix" conferences, for example, for their contribution in this area. But this approach brings with it a number of disadvantages: in practice, how comprehensive has the range of methods used actually been? are these models creating precedents that risk fixing art and design methodology within a particular range?

We wanted to step back from the pragmatics of

"how do I get a research degree given the regulations, etc.?",

to

"what is [a] research [degree] in art and design?"

In this introduction I would like to provide a brief context for this problem as it has developed in the UK. I shall refer to five key documents:

Harris Report

Dearing Report

UKCGE paper on Practice-based Doctorates in the Creative and Performing Arts and Design

Council for National Academic Awards handbook

Arts and Humanities Research Board definition of research

We should perhaps begin with a careful description of the degrees to which we are referring. Doctoral degrees are of two main types: the PhD, and awards bearing titles such as DMus, EdD, DDes, etc. The former are exclusively research degrees, in which the student may undertake a programme of research training but is mainly working independently on a research project with a supervisor. The latter are taught or professional degrees, in which the student will be taught for at least one-third of the programme (Harris

Report, annex G). In parallel with this distinction, but frequently confused with professional degrees, are practice-based projects or submissions.

doctorate
research degree
PhD
taught/professional degree
DEng
traditional thesis
traditional thesis
practice-based
practice-based

Practice-based projects are those which include as an integral part the production of an original artefact in addition to, or perhaps instead of, the production of a written thesis. They are naturally of great interest to practising artists and designers, but they are not confined to these disciplines. One may find examples in music, in software design, in engineering, in law; in fact in any subject where the result might be an artefact generated in the laboratory or workplace. So one key issue in the international debate about doctorates is: can one fulfil the requirements of both the research (e.g. PhD) and the taught (e.g. DDes) degrees by the practice-based route.

The UK government's so-called Harris Report (annex G) also differentiates between the research PhD and the taught/practice doctorate. One of its recommendations is the description of the doctorate (and other higher degrees) according to its aims rather than the means by which these may be achieved. It classifies four main "aims" for a postgraduate degree (§4.17) and three "types of study". What the Harris Report does not say is whether one can satisfy any aim by any type of study.

taught
research
practice/creative
research and scholarship
?
yes
?
preparation for research and
deepening subject knowledge
yes
yes
?
conversion
?
?
?
professional and practice-related
yes
yes
?

Some of the international discussion about doctorateness that has been conducted recently has tried to avoid finding too much common ground by advocating a series of individually titled awards that can be tailored specifically to the educational and professional needs of specific subjects, e.g. Doctor of Design, etc. In order to stimulate rather than suppress discussion for this conference I have not proposed such a route, but rather that we should address the common ground of doctorateness that is embedded in many university degree regulations, and in so doing, to unpack what we mean by certain terms and qualities when they are applied to practice-based disciplines. This non-proliferation approach is also the one recommended by the UK government's so-called Dearing Report (§42).

It was identified in the UKCGE paper that most new universities in the UK adopted the CNA definition of research/PhD (1991, §G1.5). Key points from this definition of a PhD include:

The PhD is awarded to a candidate who, having critically investigated and evaluated an approved topic resulting in an independent and original contribution to knowledge and demonstrated an understanding of research methods appropriate to the chosen field, has presented and defended a thesis, by oral examination, to the satisfaction of the examiners. The written thesis may be supplemented by material in other than written form (§G1.3)

The UKCGE paper went on to identify broad consensus in the UK about certain qualities that a doctorate would demonstrate:

- an original contribution to knowledge and/or understanding
- and would include the demonstration of certain competencies:
 - undertake a systematic enquiry
 - apply methods appropriate to the subject
 - a grasp of context
 - documentation and communication in a permanent form
 - sustained and contextualised logical argument
 - justification of actions in relation to process and product
 - valid and original work of high quality

In parallel with these educational debates, and in relation to the broader context of research, the Arts and Humanities Research Board has published its definition of research. The AHRB is the UK research funding agency that covers art and design. Key terms that arise from their definition of research (Guide §6) include:

- it must define a series of research questions that will be addressed or problems that will be explored in the course of the research. It must also define its objectives in terms of answering those questions or reporting on the results of the research project
- it must specify a research context for the questions to be addressed or problems to be explored. You must specify why it is important that these particular questions should be answered or problems explored; what other research is being or has been conducted in this area; and what particular contribution this particular project will make to the advancement of knowledge, understanding and insights in this area
- it must specify a methodology for addressing and answering the research questions. You must state how... you are going to set about answering the questions that have been set, or exploring the matters to be explored.

Our suggestion to contributors was to go back to some issues that arise from the definition of a doctorate and some that arise from other definitions of research, e.g. the definitions provided by AHRB; and to see what these mean when compared with art and design practice, so as to more clearly understand what would satisfy these criteria and therefore

to determine what could constitute a research degree in art and design even if there were as yet no examples of students doing this that could provide a worked-out model. Several key terms emerge from these definitions and descriptions and it is the task of this conference to both problematize their meaning and contribute to their interpretation. For example:

what is the relationship of a systematic enquiry to creativity and serendipity

does a contribution to knowledge imply the discovery of "objective facts"

does stating how one is going to set about the research restrict creative development?

does framing a research question imply a research answer?

can appropriate methods be identified prior to their use in a new situation?

what is the role of the artefact in reporting the results?

can artefacts present arguments?

is experiential knowledge precluded from documentation?

does textual justification make the artefact redundant?

does original mean unique?

References

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