



The Graduate School

**Research Degrees at BU:
A Guide to Practice-Led Research Degrees**

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1. Introduction

This guide has been compiled by the Graduate School in consultation with the Media School, the Graduate School Academic Board and those involved in such research at BU and draws upon similar arrangements in place at other UK and overseas HEIs.

Practice-led researchers make original contributions to the store of knowledge about their discipline through a rigorous investigation of practice. This research is both initiated in practice and then pursued through practice. This commitment to place practice at the centre of the design, conduct and reporting of practice-led research separates it from conventional research approaches.

BU recognises that while the outcomes of practice-led research can parallel the range of outcomes found in many different academic approaches, the presentation of those outcomes differentiate practice-led research from other approaches. As such, the outcome (or thesis) is defined as a practical element and an exegesis, which addresses, elucidates and contextualises the work, and which will be examined as an integrated whole. BU also recognises that the nature of the practice-led research may require flexibility in the approach to monitoring, progression and examination and this document sets out to clarify where and how this may differ.

This guide has been compiled to provide those undertaking a practice-led research degree, their supervisors and examiners with information, guidance and advice. It sets out the regulations and arrangements in place for undertaking a practice-led research degree (Master or Doctor of Philosophy). In all aspects of these arrangements, where appropriate, they should align with those arrangements already in place for the other research degrees to ensure parity of standards. This guide expands relevant BU Regulations and should be used in conjunction with the BU Code of Practice for Research Degrees and Code of Practice for Examiners and Chairs of Research Degrees (herein referred to as the Codes of Practice).

This guidance document will be revised annually to reflect changes in BU policy and national guidelines and in order to

continuously improve the practice-led research degree experience. **All those involved in practice-led research degrees must abide by the current Code and Guidance at all times.**

2. Principles of practice-led research

Practice-led research is defined by the process undertaken and not by the form of the finished element. The goal of all research is to add to the store of knowledge and understanding. Practice-led research is a proven method of inquiry in which the contribution to knowledge and understanding is embedded in practice.

There is a fundamental difference between “practice” and “practice undertaken as part of a research programme”. Most practitioners undertake research as part of their practice but this research is very often focussed on realising a specific practical goal without communicating the findings of the research to others. In some areas of traditional research, the aim is similarly to meet a specific practical objective. The distinctive nature of practice-led research is however that the researcher’s practice is fundamental to the journey of investigation with the aim of rendering significant aspects of the practice process communicable to add to humanity’s shared knowledge and understanding.

The practice-led research degree must define a series of research questions or problems that will be addressed in the course of the research. It must also define its objectives in terms of seeking to enhance knowledge and understanding relating to the questions or problems to be addressed. It must specify a research context for the questions or problems to be addressed. It must specify why it is important that these particular questions or problems should be addressed, what other research is being or has been conducted in this area and what particular contribution this project will make to the advancement of creativity, insights, practice, knowledge and understanding in this area. It must specify the research methods for addressing and answering the research questions or problems. In the course of the research project, how to answer the questions, or advance available knowledge and understanding of the problems must be

shown. It should also explain the rationale for the chosen research methods and why they provide the most appropriate means by which to answer the research questions.

Contributions of practice-led research may include:

- the realisation of new design solutions
- aesthetic development
- new subject specific methods or techniques
- generic methodological innovation
- new understanding of practice-led processes
- new models of practice
- new theoretical development
- new critical positioning of praxis

3. Regulations

The following practice-led research degrees are awarded to candidates who successfully complete the following approved programmes of supervised research at BU:

Practice-Led Master of Philosophy (MPhil)

The MPhil is awarded to a candidate who, having critically investigated and evaluated an approved topic and demonstrated an understanding of research methods appropriate to the chosen field, has presented and defended a practical element and accompanying exegesis, by viva voce, to the satisfaction of the examiners.

Practice-Led Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

The PhD involves a more complex and advanced project and 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 practical element and accompanying exegesis, by viva voce, to the satisfaction of the examiners. Because of the extended nature of the research project, most candidates register initially for an MPhil and subsequently transfer to a PhD, once sufficient progress has been made.

The fundamental principle of a practice-led research degree is the same as that of other research degrees and so a candidate for a practice-led research degree must also follow the Codes of Practice. However, the nature of the practice-led research may require flexibility in the approach to monitoring, progression and examination.

The academic standards required at each level are stated in the National Qualification Descriptors for Masters (M) Level and Doctoral (D) Level degree (set out in Appendices 4 & 5 of the Codes of Practice).

Candidates may register to study for a practice-led MPhil or PhD on a full or part-time basis.

The eligibility criteria for registration on to a research degree are set out in the Codes of Practice. However, a candidate for a practice-led research degree will also need to provide demonstrable knowledge and understanding, prior practice-led research or equivalent experience.

4. Academic Support

Supervision for candidates for a practice-led PhD (or MPhil) will be provided in line with Codes in which full details of eligibility requirements for supervisors and their roles and responsibilities are set out.

The differing needs of candidates beginning programmes of practice-led research must also be considered. As such, it is important that supervisor/student relations allow time to define the specific issues raised by practice-led research in the specific area of enquiry, to establish a shared vocabulary, to identify what is invariant in practice and to initiate the candidate into the practice/research debate.

For example, in creative practice, process and method tend to be emergent following periods of experimentation and critical reflection and motivation for the research is likely to have arisen around 'an enthusiasm of practice' rather than from a commonly recognised problem or question to be answered. The framework agreed between candidate and supervisory team should not be viewed as prescriptive. It is a tool that allows supervisors to assess progress and a safeguard to ensure that material exists that will allow the thesis element and

exegesis) to be judged by appropriate examiners. It is expected that practitioners engaged in critical research will see goals and methodologies change, and it is important that these changes are consistently documented.

5. Process

The process for undertaking a practice-led research degree must align as far as possible with that set out for other research degrees. However, it is acknowledged that these 'major milestones' often impair progression for they impose the protocols of problem-led research on practice-led researchers. As such, in addition to the requirements stipulated in the Codes, candidates developing practice-led research are also expected to provide appropriate evidence of progress with their practical element.

It is expected that the **initial supervisory meeting** will contain discussion on appropriate methods for documenting the practice-led process sufficient to justify the award at examination. It is also expected that supervisors and candidate should agree a timetable for certain stages of the practical element.

The **initial review** may need to address different questions than those posed for other research degrees. As such those embarking on a practice-led research degree should be advised to consider:

- the *planned practice-led research project* - the project planned for examination, the scope and scale of the project, when and where the research will be undertaken.
- the *context and rationale for the research project* - indicate the 'enthusiasms of practice' that are informing the project, outline the larger theoretical landscapes which ensure the practice has a larger significance than individual 'enthusiasms of practice', how these contextual reviews inform the project.
- the *methodology or practicalities* behind the practice-led research project - account for the broad paradigms (cultural, aesthetic or philosophical frameworks) that are informing both the research and the

researcher, explain the techniques and strategies of practice you will use to document your research.

- *any collaboration* - explain what IP and copyright arrangements are in place, representing and reporting knowledge claims – balancing the practice-led output with the exegesis.
- the *costing of the practice-led research project* - provide an approximate budget for the project, account for any external funding which has been secured, clearly state any university resources which will be required and state if they have been approved and allocated.
- a *timeline for completion of the project* – including the research, production of practical element, production of exegesis, final seminar and the project event (if relevant) which will require examiners to attend.

The candidate should undertake a **contextual review** which includes the literature but also influential practitioners, periods and works. This may not come early in the process. Materials and methods are likely to arise from the 'techniques and strategies of practice' and will be used to document the research.

For candidates wishing to submit for a practice-led PhD, the process and outcome of the **transfer stage** should parallel that of other research degrees. As with the initial review, the transfer stage for candidates undertaking a practice-led PhD may need to address additional areas such as:

- further analysis and discussion of the areas identified at the Initial Review stage;
- details, and good quality documentation, of the practice-led research events (e.g. prototypes, practical development intensives, sketches, models, designs) undertaken in the first year of study;
- explanation of how these events have informed the emerging examination project;

- an outline of the postgraduate researcher's participation in other scholarly activities;
- plans for the thesis (practical element and exegesis) to be submitted for examination, including the weighting between the two.
- an account of the purpose of the exegesis and an explanation of how the practice-led outcome and the exegesis are connected.

- the practical element (including a permanent record) possibly, but not limited to, an artefact, performance or exhibition, which must have been undertaken as part of the research programme.
- appropriate good quality documentation of both the practical process and the finished element.

It is now accepted that outputs for practice-led research may take any number of forms, may be ephemeral and may depend heavily on unpredictable audience interaction. Research has been evidenced, for example, through outputs on permanent public display, community schemes, temporary exhibitions, performances and forms that are experienced by a public and are then published, critiqued and publicised through various media, for example garment designs. However, though the practical element of the PhD thesis may be temporary or transitory in nature, good quality documentation of the completed practical element must be included in the submission. This documentation should be appropriate to the nature of the practical element and the form, quantity and quality should have been discussed and agreed with supervisors at appropriate times in the PhD journey. The body of original work shall be documented together with any necessary textual material, including labels or notes of explanation written in English. The documentation must be in permanent form and shall be to a standard whereby a future researcher may recognise the new knowledge represented or embodied within the portfolio, as determined by the Examiners.

6. The Full Submission

*"Students may undertake a programme of research in which their own creative work forms, as a point of origin or reference, a significant part of the intellectual enquiry. In such cases, the 'thesis' is understood to mean the totality of the work submitted for the degree, which will include the creative work itself (or its adequate documentation) and a written text. **Such creative work may be in any field within the competence of the staff, and commensurate with the mission statement, of the University.**"*

(University of Arts)

The full submission for the practice-led MPhil or PhD should include the practical element and a supporting exegesis. Together, the practical element and exegesis should be of a standard equivalent to that of a conventional PhD (or MPhil) in the relevant academic area. A full appreciation of the originality of the work and its contribution to new knowledge should only be possible through reference to both.

The exegesis should set the practice in context and should evaluate the contribution that the research makes to the advancement of the research area. **The exegesis must be of an appropriate proportion of the submission and would normally be no less than 20,000 words or the equivalent.**

As with a conventional research degree thesis, the full submission should be submitted in accordance with the University rules as set out in the Codes. For a practice-led research degree, this must include:

8. Assessment

Assessment of a practice-led research degree should align with the same standard as those that operate for other research degrees as detailed in the Codes of Practice.

Appointment of examiners must meet the requirements set out in the Codes and will be approved following the same procedure. In addition, the examining team of a practice-led research degree should normally have prior experience of similar works and may also include an active practitioner or professional who is not an academic.

The *role of the examiners* must follow the guidance set out in the Codes. As with other research degrees, the assessed work should demonstrate an independent and original contribution to knowledge and an understanding of relevant research methods. The purpose of the practical element is to provide a coherent demonstration that the candidate has achieved the intentions of the research program and in doing so has made a substantial original contribution to the discipline.

In the case of the practice-led research degree, the new knowledge is represented or embodied within the practical work and its accompanying exegesis. The assessment will include independent examination of the “thesis” followed by a *viva voce* examination.

The requirement for comparability of standards presents different challenges to the examiners and in the case of the practice-led research degree the examiners’ main tasks are to ensure that the work has the following attributes:

- it represents the candidate’s ownership of the work and provides an appreciation of the state of knowledge within the candidate’s research area;
- it demonstrates a professional level of familiarity with and understanding of contemporary work in the field;
- it demonstrates a sufficiently comprehensive investigation of the form and practical content;
- the methods and techniques applied in the execution of the work are appropriate to the subject matter and are original and/or effective;
- it evaluates the appropriateness of the methods employed in the research and the correctness of their application;
- the practical work is presented in a sufficiently professional manner;
- the practical work demonstrates a sufficiently high standard of literary, visual, digital, musical or performance literacy and quality;

- the research question/s has/have been identified and tested through the practical work;
- the documentation of the work (including catalogue/program material where appropriate) is sufficiently thorough and is of a standard that will ensure the work provides a reference for subsequent researchers;
- the practical work and the dissertation together constitute a substantive original contribution to knowledge in the subject-area with which it deals;
- there is an appropriate and substantiated interface between the practical work and the exegesis

9. Outcomes of the Viva Voce

The outcome of the examination of a practice-led research degree will align with those in place for other research degrees, as detailed in the Code of Practice.

Examiners are advised that they may ask for practical elements to be represented or re-documented if they do not meet the set criteria. In addition, the examiners are able to ask for modifications to the accompanying exegesis. As with all research *viva voce*, examiners need to be satisfied with the candidate’s defence in the oral examination. As such, the following recommendations will be available to the examiners:

- that the award be made;
- that the award be made subject to corrections being made to the practical element and/or exegesis;
- that the appropriate award be made subject to amendments being made to the practical element and/or exegesis;
- that the candidate be permitted to re-submit for the degree and be re-examined;
- that the candidate be not awarded the degree and be not permitted to be re-examined.

Any amendments must be made to the satisfaction of the examiners and then the recommendations of the examination team

should be passed to the Graduate School to be considered for the formal award. If Graduate School recommends the award, a formal letter signed by the Head of the Graduate School will be sent to the candidate. The candidate's award will bear the date on which the degree was ratified.

10. Further Reading

This is a non exhaustive list of the available literature published on research degrees with a practice-led or practical work output

- Biggs, Michael (2004) Editorial: the role of the artefact in art and design research. Working Papers in Art and Design 3 ISSN 1466-4917
- Collinson, Jacquelyn Allen (2005) Artistry and analysis: student experiences of UK practice-based doctorates in art and design. International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, Volume 18, Number 6, November- December 2005, pp. 713- 728(16)
- Davis James, D. (2002) A Working Model For Postgraduate Practice Based Research Across The Creative Arts. http://www.love.com.au/3DED/d_final_paper/d_02.pdf
- Durling, D, et al, (2002) Editorial: Debating the Practice-Based PhD. International Journal of Design Sciences and Technology, Volume 10, Number 2, ISSN 1630-7267
- Gray, C., & Malins, J. (2004) Visualizing Research: a guide to the research process in Art and Design. Ashgate, Aldershot (ISSN/ISBN: 0 7546 3577 5).
- Hockey and Allen-Collinson (2005) Identity Change: Doctoral students in Art and Design, Arts and Humanities in Higher Education; Vol. 4, No. 1, 77-93, SAGE publications (DOI:10.1177/1474022205048759)
- Hockey, J. (2003) Art and Design Practice-Based Research Degree Supervision: Some empirical findings. Humanities in Higher Education 2003; 2; 173
- Humphreys, M (2005). Getting Personal: Reflexivity and Autoethnographic Vignettes Qualitative Inquiry, Vol. 11, No. 6, SAGE Publications
- Lycouris, S. (2000) The documentation of practice: framing trace. Working Papers in Art and Design ISSN 1466-4917
- Newbury, D. (1996) Knowledge and research in art and design. Design Studies 17 (1996) Elsevier 215-219 0142-694X
- O'Shea, M. (2004) AHRC Case Studies <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/awards/casestudies/mosace.asp>
- Quality Assurance Association (2004) Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education ISBN 1 84482 168 4
- Quinn, M. (2006) The whole world + the work: questioning context through practice-led research. Working Papers in Art and Design. ISSN 1466-4917
- Schwartz, L. (2003) Parallel experience: how art and art theory can inform ethics in human research J Med Ethics: Medical Humanities 2003;29:59-64
- Scrivener, S. (2000) Reflection in and on action and practice in creative-production doctoral projects in art and design. Working Papers in Art and Design 1 ISSN 1466-4917
- Scrivener, S. (2002) The Art Object Does Not Embody a Form of Knowledge, Working Papers in Art & Design <http://www.herts.ac.uk/artdes1/research/papers/wpades/vol2/scrivenerfull.htm>
- Smith, M. K. (2001) 'Donald Schön: learning, reflection and change', the encyclopaedia of informal education, www.infed.org/thinkers/et-schon.htm
- Tellefsen, B., & Love, T. (2002) Doctoral Research in Design: The Future of the Practice-based Doctorate. International Journal of

Design Science and Technology,
10(2), pp. 45-59.

- Thomson, C. (2006) Art Practice as Research: A Review Essay International Journal of Education & the Arts. ISBN 1529-8094
- UK Council for Graduate Education (1997) Practice- based doctorates in the creative and performing arts and design ISBN 0 9525751 2 4
- Wilson, M. (2008) Summary of the 'state of play' in practice-led research in Art, Design and Architecture for AHRC/CHEAD joint initiative