

Practice as Research: Regulations, Protocols and Guidelines

A short report by Professor Robin Nelson (MMU) and Stuart Andrews (PALATINE) on the regulations and protocols governing 'Practice as Research' (PaR) in the performing arts in the UK leading to the award of PhD. The report includes: Draft 'best practice' guidelines on PaR PhDs and 'Ten Steps to a 'Perfect' PaR PhD'

Responses to the calls for information were received from more than twenty HEIs in the UK. Most were from Theatre and Drama departments but a significant minority were from Music (or Music/Drama) departments and schools. Responses from Dance departments and schools was poor. No attempt was made to draw upon the Visual Arts domain since that sector has its own established networks. The findings of this investigation having been provisionally drawn up, it is hoped to cross-refer to other related sectors involved in arts or media practices.

It can reasonably be asserted at the outset that regulatory practice varies widely. Some HEIs have developed clear guidelines specifically to address PaR for PhD applicants. A significant number, however, have no specific guidelines at all on PaR and general regulatory frameworks which do not admit it at all. Several openly acknowledge living from 'hand to mouth' and it is evident that this report is eagerly awaited in some quarters.

In some HEIs in the UK (and commonly in Australia) Professional Doctorates (e.g. DMus) are awarded for a substantial and high level creative practice, typically bearing a close relationship with professional achievements. Some of these require an 'action research' methodology whilst others are based substantially on professional practice in a conservatoire milieu, requiring at most a 10 000 word contextualizing essay by way of written submission. Avowedly avoiding the niceties of philosophical distinction, this study focuses on PhDs on the premise that research questions in the performing arts can be rigorously worked through in a range of practices (of which writing is only one) to produce new knowledge or substantial new insights equivalent to the requirements of PhDs as traditionally established.

In presenting the findings of this inquiry, it would be invidious to name specific HEIs since the purpose of this short report, and the draft guidelines derived from it (see below), are intended to support the performing arts community in encouraging PaR. Acknowledgements are due to colleagues who have shared established regulations and protocols with this project and thanks are hereby duly given to all who have contributed. Some will indeed recognise phrases in what follows though, as noted, no individuals or HEIs have been specifically credited. It must also be acknowledged, however, that the subsidiary dimension of this report, a survey of the experiences of those students who have undertaken PhDs involving PaR, has yielded some very unhappy experiences. These range from students' sense that the host institution had no clue about PaR, and frequently no interest in accepting it as research-worthy, to completions wherein the practical dimension of the research project was completely ignored by the examiners. Problems in finding suitable examiners and appointing them appropriately with the opportunity to access process were common in the responses received.

Draft 'best practice' guidelines on PaR PhDs

The following draft guidelines are offered to assist HEIs in establishing their own versions in a fuller awareness of the particular issues involved in PaR PhDs. It is assumed that HEIs will apply versions of the protocols offered within their own broad regulatory frameworks. Whilst a loose regulatory formulation affords flexibility and one department even cautions against drawing up detailed regulations, the experience to date of the students cited above from across the range of HEIs, suggests that a framework which pays attention to the detail of different stages of PaR procedures will assist, at least by way of a guideline.

The findings of the research are thus presented as a set of draft guidelines with notes bringing out areas of wide difference in practice and some contentious issues. Feedback is welcomed on the draft and a refined version will be more formally published in due course.

1) Applications and Admissions

- Applicants for PaR PhDs should normally hold at least a good honours degree (2.1 or 1st) and preferably a Masters degree (or equivalent postgraduate qualification) in a relevant subject and/or substantial experience of appropriate arts practices evidencing a record of achievement at a high level. [i]

- Candidates are required to submit a written statement (c. 1000 words) indicating: a) the topic or area to be investigated; b) the research questions and aims of the project; c) the methodologies to be used to address the questions; d) the conceptual framework; e) the relationship to current practices;) the proposed outcomes (specifying balance of practical and written/documentary outcomes).
- Interviews should include wherever possible the proposed supervisor for the project. Candidates will be expected to articulate the contribution of practical processes and/or outcomes to their research project (including indicative scope/duration of components for submission) and the spaces in which a contribution to knowledge might be made.
- At interview, learning resources to be made available to the student by the HEI (including times of year and prospective duration of access to facilities) should be established. Particular attention should be paid to spaces (both performance and book-based written work) and media technologies (both for the practice itself and for documentation). Where a student is proposing to supply her/his own resources, the adequacy of these to the fulfilment of the project should be established. The availability of any production budgets should be established.
- At interview, the level of institutional support for a PhD student to attend conferences or relevant short courses should be established.

2) Registration and Supervision

- Where the practice of an HEI is to enrol students prior to formal registration, the timescale and likely acceptance of the project under the HEI's over-arching regulations should be established.
- The need for external Examiners to be appointed at an early stage should be explored.
- The number of supervisors (including a Director of Studies where relevant) and the relation between them should be established at an early stage. [ii]
- Supervisors will see, and give feedback on, process and practice in a manner parallel to the tutorial process established with regard to written drafts. Candidates are required to give supervisors (and examiners where appropriate) reasonable access to their working processes.

3) Scope and Components of Project

- The admission of creative practice in a PaR PhD context is premised on the notion that research questions in the performing arts can be rigorously worked through in a range of practices (of which writing is only one). Where creative work forms a significant outcome of the research project, references to 'thesis' are understood to denote the totality of the submission without privileging any of the submitted components. [iii]
- Any prescriptive model of creativity and reflection is avoided in order to enable students to develop their own praxis. The specificity of each project, its scope and the location(s) of its examinable presentation(s) in terms of PhD submission must be established in the applications and admissions procedure above. [iv]
- The balance between written and practical outcomes will be determined by individual students with their supervisors under the auspices of regulatory frameworks of the HEI concerned. Normally, a written submission of 40 000 words will constitute 50% of the project and there will be a minimum of 20 000 words or 25% of the project. [v]
- The practical component must demonstrate a high level of skill in the manipulation of the materials of production and involve a research inquiry. [vi]
- Practice should be accepted as methodological process of research inquiry and a mode of dissemination of research in its own right.
- The written outcome will contextualize the project and include a retrospective analysis of the process and outcomes, reflecting on chosen research methodologies and production processes and the relation between them.

4) Submission

- The presentation of formally examinable practice should not normally be more than one calendar year in advance of the final written submission. [vii]
- Where process is to be formally examined, the times and places of access by examiners (see below) must be broadly established at the outset. [viii]
- Collaborative work may be accepted for submission for a PaR PhD and, normally, the specific individual contribution of each participant to be examined should be clearly indicated in the written submission. It is recognised, however, that the processes of creative collaborations are dialogic and that it is not always

easy to demarcate contributions. In such instances, the written submission should clearly indicate the working relationship of the collaborators.

- A permanent record of the research practice must be submitted by the candidate in whatever format (video/audio cassette, CDROM, DVD, scores, drawings, photographs) and must be bound into the document deposited with the HEI library. [ix]
- Models, sketchbooks or other exhibition materials too bulky to be included in the permanent record should be presented to the examiners immediately prior to the viva voce examination. The status of such submissions in the process of examination needs to be clearly understood in advance by all concerned.
- In addition to other forms of recording, the written submission will normally include a short descriptive account of the examined process/practice.
- The written thesis will be of a standard of presentation commensurate with established HEI protocols for PhDs.
- The submission as a whole will be the subject of a viva voce examination.

5) Examination and Examiners

- It may be necessary to appoint External Examiners much earlier than is customary for traditionally written PhDs. If process or product (perhaps presented well in advance of the written submission) is to be examined, an external Examiner will need access to that process and/or product.
- Remuneration and expenses of External Examiners for visits in addition to that for the final viva voce examination should be at established HEI rates. Normally such visits would not exceed one per year of registration. [x]
- External and internal examiners are required to see any examinable component of the submission.
- Where External Examiners meet candidates prior to the final viva, care must be taken to ensure the maintenance of an appropriate professional distance. Where work seen is processual and not formally examinable, examiners will not normally offer formal feed-back for fear of influencing subsequent process. [xi] In the event of a post-presentation discussion of an examined practical outcome, the examiners may wish to confine their questions to points of clarification about the process leading to the outcome and issues concerning the practice itself, reserving more challenging conceptual questions for the final viva voce.
- If necessary, the examiners can request the revision and re-submission of either the practical component or the written submission or both.

6) Criteria

- PhDs involving PaR should meet the established generic criteria of 'making a contribution to knowledge' or 'affording substantial new insights'. In some cases, though by no means all, the practice itself may be original (in the sense of unlike anything which has gone before, rather than in the simple sense of the product of the maker's creative imagination). In other instances, new knowledge or substantial new insights will be afforded by ideas in practice (writing being just one of several practices in this context). As with PhDs in other disciplines, including across the Sciences, Humanities and Arts, the requirement is for a modest, but new, contribution to a body of knowledge. Examiners should take care not to require more of PhD candidates by PaR simply because PaR is a relatively recent phenomenon [v].

Participating Institutions

Birmingham Conservatoire
Bishop Grosseteste College Lincoln
Brunel University
Central St Martins College of Art and Design
Colchester Institute
Goldsmith University of London
Guildhall School of Music and Drama
King Alfred's College, Winchester
Kingston University
Lancaster University
Leeds College of Music
Liverpool Hope University College
Royal College of Music, London
Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama

Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama
School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London
University College Chichester
University College Northampton
University of Birmingham
University of Brighton
University of Exeter
University of Glamorgan
University of Glasgow
University of Hull
University of Kent
University of Leeds
University of Nottingham
University of Plymouth
University of Sheffield
University of Surrey
University of Warwick

Draft Ten Steps to a 'Perfect' Practice as Research PhD

1) Agree terms of research with department

- Students should agree the final form of the PhD with the department when submitting their application. While details may change during the course of the research, it is important that both parties understand the terms of the proposed work and the extent of their commitment.
- While PhD applications have tended to involve informal arrangements, these are less suitable for a PaR PhD as the work is likely to depend on the allocation of departmental resources, the form of institutional guidelines and the support for PaR in the department/school/faculty.

2) Ensure relevant institutional guidelines

- Students should be aware that institutional guidelines may be vague, lack detail and differ widely between institutions. While detailed guidelines indicate the department has created structures for PaR work, however, they may be more constraining than more open guidelines.
- Students must consider whether their proposed work fits within current guidelines and, if not, whether or not revisions of these guidelines are possible. [xii]
- Students need to check the detail of guidelines early on to prevent any 'surprises' surrounding the submission of practice later in the research process. [xiii]

3) Select appropriate supervisors

- Students should consider the ways in which supervisors can focus the PhD. They need to decide whether two supervisors would aid their work by bringing different perspectives to bear. Students should ensure that one supervisor has experience of practice as research work and an awareness of current debates. [xiv]

4) Research a basic grounding of PaR issues

- New students must quickly familiarise themselves with PaR and, where relevant, with the different forms of PaR (this project identified the following forms in operation: Practice as Research, Practice based Research and Practice through Research). This would allow students to clarify precisely why and how they are using practice as part of the research
- It was suggested that institutions set up a preliminary course on forms of PaR. This would not merely introduce PaR to those who find it unfamiliar, it would also emphasise the precise institutional interpretation of PaR and emphasise the key tenets, which may be different from PaR as used at other institutions.

- Students should contribute to departmental understanding of PaR and recognise that definitions are often vague. Students should be aware that the lack of solid definitions may be disconcerting and that, until the mode of research becomes more established, they may feel dislocated from the department. [xv]
- As new researchers in an emerging field, it is likely that, during (and even late in) their research work, students will find new perspectives on PaR. Students should try and work both within departments and with connections to other fields to limit exclusion from developments in the field. [xvi]
- Students will approach PaR with varying levels of knowledge. [xvii] While most students were able to make adjustments to their work once they developed new understandings of PaR, some students encountered difficulties. Where problems did emerge, they seemed to relate to the lack of frameworks on which to develop practice as research work and also a lack of departmental familiarity with practice as research.
- Students should be aware that departments are likely to be unfamiliar with the new support needs for postgraduates that accompany PaR. This may mean that other local, regional, national or international networks need to be established early on the work. [xviii]

5) Be a proactive student

- Given the broad base of developments in PaR, students need to work proactively to perceive changes in the field. They may wish to be aware of individual and collaborative practice; institutional and departmental procedures; organisations and agencies (specifically PARIP and PALATINE); and through conferences, workshops, seminars and research groups.
- Students should identify for themselves the wider PaR context in which they are working. This may well include forging connections between other PaR students and sharing practice with newer postgraduates. It may also involve students feeding back their findings to their supervisor and/or department and assessing how these findings affect their project.

6) Identify how practical enquiry will relate to the research

- Students should consider how their practice will shape the course of their study and how this will then be assessed. [xix]
- The connection between practical and written components of the PhD must be clearly laid out from the beginning of the research. Students need to demonstrate that this interrelation is clear and consistent at every stage of the work. They should be clear about the function of practice as research and the extent to which their work informs the field. Specifically, they must demonstrate the connections between the practical and written elements. [xx]
- While PaR offers new opportunities for collaborative PhDs, students must be clear on the ownership of work. [xxi]

7) Be aware of practical constraints on a PhD

- Practice as Research involves time and resources that may both be limited for postgraduate degree students. The project may demand an extended period of planning, rehearsal sessions and funding from the specific department. Where possible, students should ensure that resources are ring-fenced at an early stage to secure them from being used to support other departmental work. [xxii]
- Students must take into account the financial context of the work. They may need to work alongside the PhD to support themselves and, in the case of professional practitioners, to maintain their position in the field. Lack of time has been a particular problem for several students and specifically those who were required to work to fund their course of study. [xxiii]

8) Beware of submission demands

- Institutions tend to treat PaR PhDs cautiously and so can over-compensate by demanding excessive additional work for PaR PhDs over and above the criteria for a traditional PhD. This may include new policies of reporting back and/or additional writing and examination processes to compensate for the perceived uncertainty of PaR degrees. [xxiv]
- Supervisors and students should become familiar with the demands used at other institutions, to ensure some degree of parity. However, in the short term, it is unlikely that standard guidelines will emerge across institutions and any such guidelines may not necessarily benefit the diversity of practices in specific disciplines.

- Students should carefully consider the form of their work and ensure they produce work that will be accessible to examiners. [xxv] Access to new technology may allow for new approaches to the form of thesis submissions. [xxvi]

9) Ensure that examiners recognise the definition of PaR being used by the institution and the student

- Students must make clear the precise form of PaR that is being used within an institution and select an examiner who is familiar with this approach. Clearly, the different approaches to PaR will be particularly acute at the examination stage.

10) Demonstrate effective documentary practice

- Where supplementary material is presented, it should have a clear purpose in the thesis and its relation to any previous performance should be clearly marked.
- Students should consider the audience for their work, which will include those who have seen examples of the practice and those to whom the work is new. This will have an effect upon on the form and framing of the documentation.

Participating Students

The material in this report on PaR PhD students is based on the responses of current and completed PhD students at the following institutions:

Bristol University
 University College Chichester
 Queen Margaret University College (Edinburgh)
 University of Exeter
 Lancaster University
 University of Leeds
 Manchester Metropolitan University
 University of Nottingham
 University of Plymouth
 Royal Holloway (University of London)
 University College Worcester

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[i] Some institutions do not specify an entry level. Others require a professional standard of practice.

[ii] Where a PaR project comprises more than one element or outcome, it may be necessary to draw on differing supervisors' skills and experience.

[iii] As noted of experience of PaR to date, even where creative practice is admitted, the written component is often privileged in terms of the weighting of words and/or the attention given to it by examiners.

[iv] Some PaR regulations include 'original creative contribution' in referring to PaR appropriate to PhD. Given the established notion of 'an original contribution to knowledge' for PhDs generally in a particular science-based, progressive tradition, this is understandable but 'original' in a poststructuralist context is a contested term. If it were taken in a PaR context to imply that the sole criterion for the admission of creative work is that no-one has done anything like it before, the requirement to establish a completely new performance idiolect, if not language, would seem more stringent than is customary for established PhDs. In the latter, the making of a small contribution to a body of knowledge is established practice and the RAE phrase 'affording substantial new insights' might be appropriate. The

creative practice is likely to yield original product in the sense that it is the individual or group's own imaginative project but it is equally likely that the work is locatable within a genealogy of performance practices. In exceptional cases, it may be that the claim to PhD-worthiness is the absolute originality of the practice but it is perhaps better to avoid regulations which might be taken to indicate this approach to be a norm.

[v] There is wide divergence of practice in this aspect. Some institutions who appear not to accept PaR as research-worthy require a full (typically 80 000 word) traditionally written submission, grudgingly accepting any practical submission as supplementary evidence of the ideas and arguments put forward in the thesis. In one instance a PaR candidate appears to have been required to write an additional 20 000 words for having the temerity to submit a practical outcome. The tendency is to lace more weight upon the traditionally written 'thesis' than on practical outcomes though there is evidence that the situation is changing quite rapidly. Other than in Visual Arts, there is no evidence of 100% practical submission. The current norm of a 50/50% balance is thus used here.

[vi] A number of HEIs specify a 'professional standard of practice'. This requirement begs a number of questions both about restrictions on applicants and whether it is a notional attainment in practice under conditions beyond the Academy or research aims and objectives which best define PaR. Accordingly 'professional' is perhaps better avoided in a PhD context.

[vii] In cases where more than a calendar year has elapsed between presentation of practice and viva, the examiners are hard-pressed to have a clear recollection of their experience of the live presentation, notwithstanding any notes they may have made at the time.

[viii] Examiner access to process may serve merely to inform assessment of the overall project but it is important to be absolutely clear where the process itself - perhaps in terms of innovative methodology or practice - is itself to be examined.

[ix] Some HEI protocols require an archival standard record but, if this implies a professionally made record, it may be unnecessarily prohibitive in terms of cost. Relatively inexpensive modes of making DVD records are published on the PARIP website.

[x] Evidence suggests that some HEI postgraduate registries (or other bodies) are not prepared to pay for additional External Examiner visits. Departments need therefore to consider costs in taking on PaR projects.

[xi] Even informal feedback may ultimately be unhelpful but, if it is agreed that the examiner will watch and listen without comment, this must be made clear in advance to the candidate(s).

[v] There is wide divergence of practice in this aspect. Some institutions who appear not to accept PaR as research-worthy require a full (typically 80 000 word) traditionally written submission, grudgingly accepting any practical submission as supplementary evidence of the ideas and arguments put forward in the thesis. In one instance a PaR candidate appears to have been required to write an additional 20 000 words for having the temerity to submit a practical outcome. The tendency is to lace more weight upon the traditionally written 'thesis' than on practical outcomes though there is evidence that the situation is changing quite rapidly. Other than in Visual Arts, there is no evidence of 100% practical submission. The current norm of a 50/50% balance is thus used here.

[xii] The pace of expansion in the provision of PaR PhDs means that many students will begin their study while official guidelines are being drawn up. Students may need to ensure their project is flexible enough to alter to fit any new guidelines. The drawing up of guidelines will be beneficial in the longer term as it means that they relate directly to the context and ethos of the specific department. PaR degrees would not, therefore, be 'bolted on' to a department but emerge more organically from that department. This would then allow staff and students to reflect back on the new form of the department and the context it provides for research and teaching.

[xiii] In one institution, a student was advised that an entire performance might need to be re-staged to fit with the institutional procedure.

[xiv] Students have argued that supervisors should be drawn from different institutions, thereby bringing different PaR approaches to bear on the student's work. While this may be difficult to organise, it does demonstrate the concern that supervision be contextualized within wider debates on PaR.

[xv] Several students commented of their work on PaR that they felt they were 'learning' or 'making it up' 'as we go along'. While this may be considered part of the research process, the lack of understanding often seemed to lead to feelings of isolation from a department. It may indicate that the more usual support structures for postgraduate study were of limited value in the PaR context.

[xvi] In one instance, the perceived lack of support and engagement with PaR led a student to transfer to an alternative institution. Any such unease may be alleviated somewhat with the creation of internal departmental frameworks for discussion, that would mark a department's commitment to PaR. One department has set up a PaR research group that includes both staff and students and allows for shared exploration of the issues surrounding PaR.

[xvii] Several students had anticipated that they would submit a traditional thesis and it was only during the course of the programme that they shifted towards practice as research. With some students, the supervisor suggested this shift; with other students, it was their own discoveries about PaR that led them to change their focus.

[xviii] Occasionally this has led to students being unable to follow through aspects of their intended research or meant that they left the institution to which they had initially registered.

[xix] For some students, research questions emerged from early practical enquiries. For others, the practical work occurred later in the duration of the course. Several students commented that their interest was in process and, specifically, rehearsal processes, rather than performance. They noted that process was not directly accepted as being examinable and that this limited their ability to conduct their intended research. The effect was that they were required to determine new approaches to their subject.

[xx] There may be very few models offered in guidelines for the relationship between the two and students will need to construct their own sense of the interrelation and the extent to which this is evident in the work.

[xxi] One student commented that working with other students, in this case undergraduate students, raised problems of authorship and professionalism. These issues may need to be considered within the research process and, as a result of the process, may require alterations to the intended methodology.

[xxii] It may be that students should be assigned a mentor outside the department to ensure fair dealing. However, the more that resources are tied down, the more they are likely to be quantified, rather than allocated where available and with goodwill so a balance will need to be struck that is convenient to both parties. Effective communication will be significant.

[xxiii] Students may want to prepare the ground for their project before actually beginning the course of study as otherwise they may feel that the pressures of time impact upon the quality of their work.

[xxiv] One student with an MA had to complete an MPhil upgrade report which is not normally required by the institution for students with an MA. A dance student was not able to submit practical work but, instead, was invited by the institution to include 20 000 additional words to describe the work.

[xxv] A number of students argued that, although they had included supplementary material alongside their thesis it appeared that the examiners had not looked at this. Such supplementary material may be time consuming and costly to produce. Indeed, one student was required to mount a video within the bound thesis, which cost some £200 in binding alone.

[xxvi] One student was able to submit the 40 000 word written component on CD. As part of the project, the supervisor and candidate may need to challenge the institution guidelines early on in the research to argue for alternative submission criteria.