

For the Academic Policy &
Regulations Committee
03 February 2011

University of Birmingham

Request for Exemption for the proposed PhD in Practice-based Research – Playwriting

Topic and Purpose of the Paper

1. APRC is invited to **consider**, and if thought appropriate, **approve** the following request for Exemption from Regulation 7.4.2 (d) for effect in 2011/12 for the proposed PhD in Practice-based Research – Playwriting, Performance, Dramaturgy, which would replace the standard thesis (with a maximum of 80 000 words) with a shorter thesis (with a maximum of 40 000 words) and a practice-based component (see Appendix 1 for details).

Consultation

2. Consultation has been undertaken with the drama department staff team, including production staff, and the head of School, Professor Susan Hunston, and School head of Research, Professor Katherine Newey. Consultation has also taken place with recent and current postgraduate students on the MPhil in Playwriting, and the MPhil in Directing and Dramaturgy: it was clear from these discussions that there is strong student support for the proposal; a number of students have expressed interest in returning to Birmingham if it were approved.

Proposals/Recommendations

3. That the proposed PhD in Practice-based Research – Playwriting, Performance, Dramaturgy be exempted from Regulation 7.4.2 (d), which states:

(d) The maximum number of words in the thesis or report, excluding supplementary material such as tables, diagrams, appendices, references, the bibliography and any bound published material is as follows:

College	One-year Mres	One-year MPhil (Mode B)	One-year MPhil (Mode A)	Two-year MPhil	Profess- ional Doctor- ate	PhD	PhD with Integra- ted Study	Eng D DDS MD
Arts and Law; Social Sciences	20,000	20,000	40,000	60,000	50,000	80,000	80,000	NA
Dentistry, Health Sciences and Medicine; Life and Environm ental	15,000	15,000	30,000	40,000	40,000	50,000	50,000	50,000

*Sciences;
Engineeri
ng and
Physical
Sciences*

4. That instead of a standard thesis, the PhD in Practice-based Research – Playwriting, Performance, Dramaturgy should be assessed in two ways: on the basis of a shorter thesis (of a maximum of 40 000 words), and of a practice-based component (see Appendix 1 for details).
5. That this exemption shall continue unless there is regular adverse comment, from External Examiners, about imbalances between the two types of assessment, or, if that situation should not occur, as long as the PhD in Practice-based Research – Playwriting, Performance, Dramaturgy is offered.

Background

6. In September 2010, the Drama and Theatre Arts department offered a practice-based MPhil programme in Directing and Dramaturgy. With a cohort of 12 students, this new programme has strengthened the department's existing practice-based research provision at MPhil level (long established by the MPhil in Playwriting). Such is the success of both the new and existing practice-based research MPhils, that the department receives many requests, arising from these programmes, for continued doctoral study. In particular, there is considerable demand for a practice-based doctoral programme, which would also provide a progression route for students on completion of either MPhil. Currently, students wishing to pursue practice-based doctoral research are forced to look beyond Birmingham to our competitor institutions. (For further details of the growth of practice-based research at doctoral level, see Appendix 2: Practice-based Research - Context.)
7. Given the nature of practice-based research, a standard thesis of 80 000-words is deemed to be an inappropriate means of assessment. Instead, it is common practice at HE institutions offering practice-based doctoral programmes to assess candidates both on the strength of their critical writing, and the quality of their practice. University regulations governing the assessment of degrees at doctoral level have not yet, however, taken account of the different kinds of assessment required for practice-based research degrees.

Arguments to Support Proposals/Recommendations

8. Practice-based research cannot meaningfully be assessed by means of a standard 80 000-word thesis alone. In a practice-based research programme, where a principal research output is a work of theatre rather than a piece of critical writing, it is self-evident that assessment must include some evaluation of the quality of that work of theatre.
9. It is argued, furthermore, that the academic aspect of the doctoral programme is, to experts in the field, partially manifest in the production of an original play, production, or work of theatre, and is recorded in the accompanying thesis.
10. The thesis, which is to be of maximum length 40 000 words, will set out the thought processes and methodologies used to justify the choices made in the researcher's practice. This fulfils the requirements of research in a practice-

based field as established in the United Kingdom Council for Graduate Education report *Practice-Based Doctorates in the Creative and Performing Arts and Design*.

11. There is also a practical reason for bringing assessment methods of practice-based research degrees at Birmingham, in 2011-2012, into line with competitor institutions. Over 50% of the applications for doctoral study which the department has received in the previous year (including a high number of applications from Eastern Asia) have identified some form of practical application as fundamental to their study. At present this practice cannot be recognised within the current PhD regulations. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that if it were to be recognised as a core aspect of the research, this would enable us to attract additional numbers of students who are currently applying to our competitor institutions (specifically: the Universities of Manchester, Exeter, Leeds, Kent, and Royal Holloway College, University of London).
12. Practice-based research is now well established in the REF research submissions of Drama at Birmingham, at undergraduate level throughout the curriculum, and at postgraduate level through the MPhils in Playwriting and Directing and Dramaturgy. The provision for practice-based study at doctoral level is the logical next step for the department in its development of this area of research. It is vital to enable us to keep up with our competitor institutions where such provision is already well established and flourishing.

Appendix 1: Practice-based Components:

Models:

For the Playwriting strand, the component would most commonly be one full-length playtext (playing time up to a maximum of 3 hours); or a combination of shorter pieces of total comparable length.

For the Dramaturgy strand, the component would most commonly be a dramaturgical casebook which collated and documented the dramaturgical practice undertaken on one full-length production. Traditionally, the work presented in a casebook would include character biographies, production histories of the play, relevant research materials, images used for image boards, rehearsal diaries, programme, and lobby displays. In this context it might also be appropriate to offer a series of shorter casebook submissions focusing on distinct aspects of the usual dramaturgical process, or previously uncharted aspects of dramaturgy, as applicable to a series of productions.

For the Performance strand there would be a range of possible models depending on the role taken by the graduate student, and the nature of the research itself. Possible models might include:

- Direction of a site-specific or studio-based theatre production of a maximum of 3 hours long (or a series of shorter pieces of comparable total length).
- Performance in a site-specific or studio-based theatre production of a maximum of 3 hours long (or a series of shorter pieces of comparable total length).
- A series of work-demonstrations of actor-training research to a maximum of 3 hours long.

Assessment

In all of the models above, the length of time and word counts would be guidance parameters only. The criteria for assessing a play, casebook project or production are based around whether it works to the rules it has created for itself in conjunction with the research imperative.

Expert judgement in assessment

Staff in the Drama department at Birmingham are well qualified to assess the validity of practice-based research at all stages of PhD study: application to study, supervision, and examination. Dr Liz Tomlin has a significant practice-based research profile and experience in supervision and external examination of practice-based PhDs. She also headed up the practice-based research RAE staff submission under Professional Robin Nelson at Manchester Metropolitan University, is a peer reviewer on the practice-based research panel of the AHRC, and has been invited to speak to staff and students on the criteria and evaluation of practice-based research at a number of institutions including Royal Holloway and Oxford University. Dr Adam Ledger holds a practice-based PhD in from the University of Exeter, and is committed to pursuing practice-based research through his teaching and research. A number of other members of staff – Dr Caroline Radcliffe, Professor Russell Jackson, Dr Kara Reilly, Dr Jaq Bessell (Shakespeare Institute) – are engaged in practice-based

research and professional practice and would be competent to supervise in areas related to their specialisms.

Assessment Criteria

A practical component deemed worthy of a PhD in practice-based research will be required to display all of the qualities below:

1. The component demonstrates originality in research. The research to be assessed, as indicated in RAE/REF criteria for practice-based work, must be an addition to knowledge to experts in the field. It should not, therefore, simply be content-oriented (e.g., a play about the history of Iraq); nor should it be of a personal nature (e.g., a production where a student researches and applies skills new only to her, such as video projection). A play might be of first-class standard for professional production, but if it is merely executing known skills, forms and models to a level of excellence, without offering the field of playwriting studies new insights into what a play can be/do in relation to form, audience, structure, aesthetics, etc., then the research will be considered deficient for the purposes of doctoral assessment. Likewise, the casebook submission(s) for the dramaturgical strand, and the work undertaken as a basis of those submissions, would be required to go beyond excellent dramaturgical practice, and offer new insights to the field of dramaturgical studies. The criterion of originality is a clear differentiator between practice which would suffice at MPhil level, where the requirement for scholarly originality would be required only for distinction level work, and practice which would be passed for PhD, where originality, or innovation in the field, is essential.
2. The component demonstrates rigour in research. The practice-based research component must be able to withstand interrogation in relation to the research questions asked, the knowledge of context which enables the student to offer original insights, and the appropriateness and coherence of the research methodology chosen. There must be an artistic and intellectual coherence which can be discerned from the rules, structure, form, content and context of the submission.
3. The component demonstrates an expert knowledge of the form in which it is presented, and the student's ability to execute to a high level the skills required to communicate the intentions of the research to its chosen audience. Just as the thesis must master the rules of language and academic discourse, so must each practice-based component master the appropriate rules of its own dissemination – whether that be the techniques utilised by the performer, the placement and management of audience in a site-specific production, or the ability to evoke a three dimensional world of performance through a playtext.

Appendix 2: Practice-based Research - Context

The concept of practice-based research within academia began historically in the visual arts and music, and has been developed within drama, theatre and performance subjects areas since the early 1990s. The concept of practice-based research has been recognised in the previous three Research Assessment Exercises, and is now understood as an accepted, significant and vital strand of theatre research. Practice-based research is peer-assessed within the Research

Assessment framework in line with the same criteria as conventional publications under the headings of originality, rigour and significance. The AHRC has recently withdrawn its specific funding stream for practice-based research as it now considers such practice as no longer 'emergent' and in need of targeted support, but as a central and established methodology which can now take its place alongside all other research methodologies within its application process.

In the previous RAE the drama submission from Birmingham was particularly praised for its practice-based research elements, which were recognised as being of 'international excellence and significance'. PARIP (Practice as Research in Performance) was a five year AHRC research project, led by Professor Baz Kershaw at the University of Bristol, and charged with consolidating the importance of practice-based research in the discipline of theatre in the UK. Partly as a result of PARIP and other pioneers in the field, such as Professor Robin Nelson (Central School of Speech and Drama), the UK is now a recognized world-leader in the field of practice-based research in performance, with countries like Canada and Germany looking to the UK for specialist advice on establishing the concept within their own traditional academic structures.

The term refers to academic research which is conducted through practical experimentation; whether that be through investigation of processes of theatre making or actor training; or practical application of particular aesthetic theories or educational/political imperatives. The distinctions between professional or creative practice (which itself always involves research processes) and the requirements of practice-based research within an academic setting have been well rehearsed for two decades now. It is now well established that production of knowledge through practice-based research should be an addition to the knowledge base of the expert community, rather than merely to the individual artist/researcher..

The introduction of practice-based PhDs, in line with the growing research community, has expanded exponentially over the past two decades. Whilst there is no definitive model there are three distinctive kinds of PhD commonly offered:

1. PhD in Performance Practice / PhD in Practice as Research . This kind of PhD is assessed predominantly through the practice itself, with a much less significant written element, sometimes as few as 10,000 words, to accompany and clarify the research questions and objectives of the practice.
2. PhD by portfolio. This kind of PhD is addressed primarily to professional practitioners who can offer a selection of existing practice, always underpinned by research imperatives, as the PhD project which is then retrospectively examined.
3. Practice-based PhD. This kind of PhD **(which is being proposed for Birmingham)** offers the student the opportunity to present for examination both practice-based research and accompanying critical writing (usually around 40000 words, although the percentage of practice to written thesis varies from university to university). A comparable PhD is already in operation at Birmingham in the Music Department, and in theatre departments of competitor institutions (see Arguments to Support Proposals/Recommendations (11)).

Useful references

*Allegue Fuschini, L. (ed.), *Practice-as-research: in performance and screen* (2009)

Freeman, J., *Blood Sweat and Theory: Research Through Practice in Performance* (2010)

Smith, H. and R. T. Dean (eds), *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts* (2009)

*recommended for its appendix which offers brief accounts over 50 examples of post-doctoral practice-based research projects.