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# The 'Academic' Qualities of Practice: what are the criteria for a practice-based PhD?

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**ABSTRACT** *This article explores the nature of the criteria which would be appropriate for evaluating a report on practice development submitted for a doctoral thesis—a significant issue in the various professional contexts where 'action research' or 'evaluation' is increasingly being adopted as a basis for PhD work. The practice-base of this article itself, and the urgency of the problems, are presented by means of reflections on the examination of particular cases of action research PhDs undertaken by practitioners, and reflections by one of the presenters, who was herself completing a PhD at the time of writing. Illuminative data have been collected from a questionnaire to PhD examiners from a wide range of disciplines in order to establish the scope of the problem by collecting a core vocabulary of terms. The key issue examined is the relationship between criteria derived from clearly 'academic' research and criteria which would be appropriate for the evaluation of practice.*

This article addresses the question of practice-based PhDs (doctorates) in the context of higher education institutions (HEIs). Our starting point is that an important practical problem facing students and tutors in higher education is how to produce and judge practice-based PhDs. (We are concerned specifically with doctorates awarded for a 'thesis' reporting an inquiry, rather than the collection of reflective exercises which may constitute, for example, a doctorate in Education (EdD) or in Business Administration (DBA), although in practice this distinction may not be absolutely clear-cut.) In the first section, we suggest that this problem is becoming increasingly widespread and pressing, for reasons which can be analysed and understood in relation to wider issues affecting higher education. The second section explores this practical problem by drawing on evidence from the practical experience of the three authors in turn. The third section reports on evidence from a survey of staff working at, or in association with, Anglia Polytechnic University who have experience of supervising or examining PhD theses. The fourth part analyses and comments on the evidence, drawing out the theme of innovative practice and its relation to the criterion of 'originality'. The article is intended to solve some problems, but it is also intended to be a

contribution to formulating better questions which, as is argued by one of us (Kath Green in Part 2), is a proper outcome of practice-based research [1].

### 1. Practice-based Doctorates and the Current Context of Higher Education

A practical problem facing students and tutors in higher education is how to produce and judge practice-based doctorates, that is doctorates which represent inquiries by professional practitioners (e.g. teachers, nurses, civil servants, police, doctors) into an aspect of their own practice. It is a particularly interesting practical problem because it is one specific example of the much wider issue of dealing with large-scale changes in higher education—and of how they are experienced and theorised. Thus, on the one hand, it is a specific problem affecting a minority of students and teachers. On the other hand, it is an issue which has much wider implications which could both illuminate the broader issues facing all of us concerned with higher education and also suggest some ways in which to analyse and deal with them.

It is the business of HEIS to research, analyse and comment on social and political changes, and indeed they do. But to analyse is not to transcend. The process of research and analysis, however insightful and illuminating, does not render HEIs immune to the effects of change. They are part and parcel of the society they study, and are therefore subject to its pressures, constraints and perceived opportunities. In other words it is rather confusing and difficult carrying on everyday work in higher education just as it is in other areas of life. Working in higher education is itself a practice and way of life, which sometimes overlap, sometimes contribute to and sometimes work in contradistinction to other practices and ways of life—all of which make up the society we live in. Thus, to research and comment on these practices is a reflexive act, especially for those of us who research the area of education. This research must itself be in some sense practice-based. This issue is addressed in the format and content of the argument.

There are two features of the changing social and political landscape to which we draw attention.

1. Higher education is being brought into closer cooperation with a wide range of other work places—workplaces which are themselves seeking closer links with higher education.
2. Both the content of the taught curriculum and also research methods and methodologies are embroiled in uncertainty about the value and foundations of knowledge. This uncertainty is related to what is sometimes called the ‘crisis of representation’ (Hammersley, 1997) or the ‘epistemological crisis’ of higher education (Scott, 1995, p. 174).

The latter feature is apparently abstract and philosophical, while the former is more obviously the stuff of practical and pragmatic policy-makers. However, in spite of these apparent surface differences, the two are interestingly interrelated. Indeed, we hope to illuminate this relationship by a consideration of practice-based doctorates. Therefore it is useful to consider each of these issues in turn in order to point up some of the reasons that practice-based doctorates are significant in ways beyond the immediate issues facing individual staff and students in HEIs.

To begin with the first feature, higher education is being brought into closer cooperation with a wide range of other workplaces. This can be seen happening in a number of different (though related) ways.

- (a) There is the opening up of higher education to a much broader range of people, who then become (or are already) engaged in a broader range of employment.
- (b) At the same time the public funding of higher education is becoming more tightly bound

- to the fortunes of the economy. This was apparent in the 'Dearing Report' which reported to the UK Government in 1997 (National Committee of Inquiry, 1997). It focused closely on the uses of higher education as serving wealth creation. In this it was picking up on the trends over the last couple of decades to accredit work-based learning and to bring vocational qualifications and academic qualifications into closer alignment.
- (c) Accreditation and lifelong learning are watchwords of UK government policy in relation to higher education as much as to the rest of the education system. Higher education is urged to value work-based learning. To underline how closely these apply to all aspects of higher education, The Researchers' Lead Body has been set up to regulate work-based based research degrees, and statements are already available [2]. It is now possible to accredit work-based research for a research degree through the accreditation of prior learning.
- (d) At the same time, workplaces are themselves moving towards encouraging academic credentials, often through closer partnerships with HEIs. 'Corporate degrees' and industrial schemes for academic accreditation in partnership with HEIs are being launched, with the warm approval of the Dearing committee, and in line with both Conservative and Labour Party policies.

The previous paragraph employs the terminology of 'cooperation' and 'partnership' between higher education and the fortunes of the economy. This terminology masks what is widely perceived within HEIs as a crisis in terms of changing expectations, fast-changing and contradictory pressures, and decreased access to resources. Struggles over the nature of appropriate links between education, vocationalism and wealth creation are as old as universities. The troubled history of opening up university education to wider sections of the community can be traced back for centuries. In our own time, likewise, changes are variously welcomed, resisted, contested and encouraged. Practice-based doctorates might be seen as one example both of cooperation and, simultaneously, of crisis management.

The second feature of social and political change to which we draw attention is epistemological. In the social and human sciences there are deep divisions about the nature of knowledge: what is variously termed a crisis of representation (Hammersley, 1997); an epistemological crisis (Scott, 1995); engagements between proliferating paradigms (Stronach & MacLure, 1997; Stronach *et al.*, 1997); or, from a more historical perspective, 'a constellation of uncertainties arising from the search for secular certainty' (Hamilton, 1992). These phrases refer to the widespread difficulty of getting agreement about what should count as 'knowledge'. All this has been widely discussed and debated and is, of course, particularly relevant to doctoral students and their research.

All research, including doctoral research, is about getting knowledge, and indeed getting better knowledge (see Griffiths, 1998). This is 'better knowledge' in two senses of 'better': knowledge which is reliable and unbiased; and knowledge which can be used wisely, to a good purpose. The current crisis of representation and knowledge has meant that the salient terms here, 'reliable', 'wise' and 'good' are always in question. All three terms are linked through the concept of 'reflexivity'. It is one that is often invoked to resolve issues of reliability and bias in particular. It is, itself, a concept which is both ambiguous and contested. Different versions can be found in: Winter, 1989; Elliott, 1991; Gore 1993; Altheide & Johnson, 1994; Riddell & Vincent, 1997; and Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford, 1997. However, all of them share a critical epistemological stance towards the objectivity that science claims for itself. Lennon & Whitford explain this model of objectivity (1994, p. 2):

The objectivist paradigm which these criticisms appeared to undermine was that frequently identified in critical writing as associated with Enlightenment thinking.

Within that framework knowledge is referential—it is about something (the object) situated outside the knower. Knowledge is said to mirror an independently existing world, as that world really is. Genuine knowledge does not reflect the subject who produced it.

They explain further that critics of this position argue that, on the contrary, ‘Knowledge bears the mark of its producer’ (1994, p. 2)

Crucially, the producer is not only an individual subject, but is also constructed and constrained by the politics of perspective; positioned in relation to race, gender, class, disability, nationality, and the rest. Thus, for most critics of the claims of traditional scientific objectivity, their emphasis on the mark of the producer is linked to an emphasis on his or her values, be they personal or perspectival. So questions of value—of what is ‘wise’ and ‘good’—are also approached through reflexivity.

Practice-based doctorates link the two features of the changing social and political landscape of higher education to which we have drawn attention: the increasingly close cooperation between higher education and other workplaces, and the deep divisions in the social and human sciences about the nature of knowledge. Indeed, practice-based doctorates would appear to be simultaneously symptom and cause of both of them. That they are practice-based means that there is a clear link with other workplaces (or, indeed, with higher education as a workplace). And the focus on particular contexts of practice means that the concepts of ‘reliable’, ‘useful’, ‘good’ and ‘wise’ are all tightly bound to the context in which the practitioner is producing knowledge. A claim to practice-based knowledge is an obvious example of a claim to knowledge which is context-bound, and in which the subjectivity of the producer of the knowledge cannot be eliminated. Thus, practice-based doctorates are more than a way of bringing about cooperation between higher education and other sectors, and they are more than a manifestation of a bridge between economic activities and academic learning. They are a bridge which is being constructed from both ends simultaneously, in response to the needs and standards of both communities. The attempt to make the bridge meet draws into focus what ‘being a doctor’ might mean in the context of the need for cooperation and the felt crisis in the relationships between universities and other workplaces. Therefore, practice-based doctorates have a significance beyond themselves in relation to the possibilities of cooperation and the handling of the crisis.

What kind of bridge is being built? This is an urgent question in relation to practice-based doctorates. It is a question which faces examiners, supervisors and students in regard to what might count as appropriate standards to judge such a doctorate, and whether they are significantly different from standards used to judge ‘traditional’ doctorates.

## 2. Three Practical Viewpoints

### 2.1. *Morzenna Griffiths: questions of examining*

This article has arisen as a direct result of the practical problems of assessing practice-based PhD work, some of it formally presented as ‘action research’, but some of it presented in other terms, such as ‘evaluation’. The problems arose for me because three of the doctorates which I was asked to assess seemed to me to be problematic.

Precisely because I had been faced with what appeared to me to be problematic, borderline cases, I badly needed some criteria to judge non-traditional, practice-based doctorates. The issues would not have been thrown up with the same clarity by submissions that were clear fails or clear passes, so long as the other examiner had come to the same conclusion. Clear passes are easy in a sense, for both traditional and nontraditional submis-

sions. For instance, a clear judgement can be made that: ‘Whatever reservations there might be, the material is so original and good that we have to pass it’. The actual criteria used to make this decision can remain implicit. I once found myself thinking, ‘Well I might fail it but she really ought to publish it’—and realised there was probably something wrong either with my implicit criteria, or with the weight I allow them to carry. As a result, in spite of the criteria by which I thought (still think) that there were weaknesses in that particular thesis, I judged it to be a pass. There was no need at that time to be any clearer about these thoughts because the other examiners agreed with the judgement.

The real problems arise in borderline cases, in which the examiner is being asked to weigh up something which is not uniformly excellent, but which might just pass at PhD level. It is at this point that I feel a serious need for criteria. I do not want to disadvantage people who are doing something new by requiring that a thesis has got to be clearly very good before it can pass at all. Criteria become crucial in discussion with the other examiners, the candidate and the supervisor. For instance, I might say, ‘The criteria by which I made the judgement were x, y and z’. This leaves the judgement open to proper challenge by the candidate, or other examiners, or by the supervisor, who would be able to say, ‘Well what about a, b and c? Why didn’t you consider those?’ To give the reason simply that the ‘gut feeling’ was for pass or fail is to mystify the procedure so much that candidates have little hope of improving at rewrite stage. They are being asked to second-guess how an examiner’s gut might feel.

## 2.2. *Richard Winter: what should a practice-based PhD look like?*

This recently became an urgent question in my professional life in two different contexts. In the first context I was acting as a supervisor. The PhD I was supervising presented a very careful narrative of an enquiry into practice which was at the same time the narrative of how a series of ‘experimental’ changes had been introduced and evaluated. The writer gave us the questions posed, the possible angles that sprang to mind, the arguments surrounding decisions to do first this and then that, and an evaluation of what, in the end, had been achieved. What this text really did, it seemed to me, without any doubt, was to embody the thought processes of a rigorous researcher. What it evoked was a very responsible, committed practitioner caring enough about teaching and assessment to carry out an extremely rigorous analysis of it. It was very personal, but, in a sense, it was very obviously ‘research’ in a way which seemed quite traditional. But I was haunted by the question (which I imagined others raising), ‘Is there a sufficiently broad “theoretical” analysis here?’

In the other context, I was acting as examiner [3]. This thesis was quite different, because the most powerful and persuasive quality that came over from the text, as I read it, was an evocation of practice at its most intense. It seemed to describe the thought processes of an inspired teacher thinking inspirationally about the relationships of teaching and learning and about the curriculum which mediated those relationships. It documented the extremely impressive pupil insights that had been provoked and stimulated, and the whole text seemed to move towards pushing back the boundaries of interpreting what teaching is about, in ways which were both practical and highly theoretical. On the one hand it seemed to be a brilliant description of a brilliant series of English lessons; on the other hand, it brought out and theorised the way in which this had been an intense existential, aesthetic, spiritual experience for all concerned. But the text was also, in many respects, disorganised and it left many ‘obvious’ questions (of method, for example) unanswered. So my questions here were: ‘Is this “rigorous”? Is this “research”?’

### 2.3. Kath Green: how do I want my work as a PhD student to be judged?

In any consideration of suitability of work for a PhD the notion of 'expert' appears to be crucial. In researching my practice as a supervisor of student action research projects, I didn't want to become an 'expert' in a particular discipline, for I wanted my expertise to lie in the field of my practice. I set out, not to discover 'new knowledge' within a traditional framework, but to seek fresh insights to support me in improving my practice. In doing this I can make connections with Polanyi's view of philosophic reflection as 'bringing to light, and affirming as my own, the beliefs implied in such of my thoughts and practices as I believe to be valid; that I must aim at discovering what I truly believe in and at formulating the convictions which I find myself holding; that I must conquer my self-doubt, so as to retain a firm hold on this programme of self-identification' (Polanyi, quoted in Allen, 1978, p. 267).

For me, at the heart of all good action research lies the search for better questions and, once found, these form part of the outcome of research rather than its starting point. As Jostein Gaarder remarks, 'An answer is always the stretch of the road behind you. Only a question can point the way forward' (Gaarder, 1997, p. 31). My research is always concerned with the particular. Any generalisations come from understandings about the way a very particular context can be recognised and explored. My research outcomes will not appear in the form of neat conclusions that can be applied across a variety of contexts because the whole rationale of my work is based on the uniqueness of particular students, children and learning situations. It is this emphasis on the uniqueness and complexity of each particular context that lies at the heart of my research. As I research my practice, I am not trying to 'solve' problems but, rather, I am trying to uncover some of that web of complexity. As Stephen Ball argues, 'complexity and interrelatedness rather than simplicity are the endpoints' (Ball, 1991, p. 189). Because I am at the centre of my research process, any account I produce must necessarily show the way in which I have come to understand myself and some of the distorted lenses through which I view my practice.

In making connections with 'the literature', the traditional PhD normally includes a definition of the boundaries of the field in which the literature is to be located. However, just as it is important not to predetermine the central issues that might emerge from an exploratory inquiry, then I think it is equally important not to predetermine the literature which might be 'relevant'. I think good quality action research will show the way in which the writer has engaged with the literature and how the literature, whatever its source, has challenged the writer's views. The literature, therefore, can be defined in terms of its personal relevance to the practitioner. This relates to Ely's concept of the 'field-as-internal' as opposed to the 'field-as-external' (Ely *et al.*, 1997) So, in writing up my work, I want to report on the literature that has really made a difference to my thinking, that has challenged my assumptions and supported me in exploring new ideas and finding new ways of looking at different aspects of my practice. In a traditional study, an 'expert' in the area would be able to look at the accompanying list of references and make a decision about whether the works consulted could be regarded as adequate and appropriate for the focus of the study (albeit with the proviso that the candidate would need to engage with that literature in a suitably rigorous way). In the more personalised identification of literature to which I have referred, however, decisions about its adequacy can only be made in the light of the use made of it. Did the chosen literature support me in achieving sufficient academic rigour in the presentation of the thesis? The case needs to be argued—but after rather than before the event.

It seems to me that one of the great problems with all qualitative research is the constant need to seek its justification within someone else's language game and in relation to someone else's definition of suitable criteria. Maybe we ought, as Lyotard (1991) suggests, to allow the

criteria of judgement to emerge from the process of marking. Perhaps we ought to worry far less about constructing criteria by which to mark (and there seems to be considerable evidence that these criteria are not always used in practice other than to defend decisions to fail) and devote much more of our energy into looking at the way in which we make that judgement of worth.

### 3. Some Empirical Evidence—the semantics of PhD examining

Even accepting the ‘epistemological crisis’ of higher education, a paradigm shift is not like selling a horse and cart and buying a helicopter: there will be continuities as well as ruptures; and this is the focus (and the eventual conclusion) of this section. In order to throw light on the issues described so far, a survey was conducted, at Anglia Polytechnic University, of the vocabulary used by examiners of conventional ‘academic’ PhDs to indicate the satisfactoriness or otherwise of doctoral work. The purpose of the study was to find out, in a sense, the scope of the problem, i.e. how far the categories used to appraise academic theses might also turn out to be equally applicable to practice-based theses (inquiries by professional practitioners into an aspect of their own practice).

Examiners were given the following questions.

1. Thinking back to recent PhD work with which you were concerned, what was it that made it clear to you that it should pass (describe two or three specific features)?
2. Describe one or two aspects of recent PhD work with which you were concerned that made you worried that it might not pass—that in some sense needed to be compensated for by other, positive features.
3. Apart from mere length, how would you explain the difference between a ‘good’ MA/MSc dissertation and a ‘sound’ PhD, in the sort of work with which you are concerned?
4. If you have used the terms ‘original’ or ‘publishable’ above, please elaborate on what this ‘looks like’ in the sort of work with which you are concerned?

Altogether, 31 responses were received, from staff in nine institutions, covering 21 different disciplines. Most of the respondents are based at Anglia Polytechnic University, but 11 work in other universities (e.g. Cambridge, Bristol, Middlesex, Imperial College London, The Open University) and independent scientific research institutions. The disciplines covered include the sciences, Music, English, Philosophy, Sociology, Information Technology, Art History and Women’s Studies; ‘professional’ disciplines such as Law, Nursing and Education were also included, but the theses in these areas also were ‘academic’ in format and method, rather than accounts of practice-based inquiry and development. There is no suggestion that this was a ‘representative’ sample, merely that it covered a sufficient range to permit some preliminary thoughts on our central question: what is the nature of the frequently perceived discrepancy between criteria appropriate for ‘academic’ and practice-based doctorates? The questions were designed as a series of approaches to the same basic idea: ‘What categories do we invoke in judging the threshold quality of acceptable PhD work?’ So there was inevitably a lot of overlap in the replies to the different questions. In this summary, therefore, the responses have been grouped roughly under headings, including as much as possible of the detail, removing obvious repetition, and making grammatical adjustments to improve readability, especially where the original was in ‘note form’.

Almost all of the comments made seemed, at face value at least, to be just as applicable to practice-based work as to the academic theses to which they originally referred. Out of a total of 109 statements collected, only three seemed to be inapplicable because they referred to a form of thesis which would exclude a practice-based study.



A collection of published material which lacks development.

Going through the motions in a way that a technician could undertake.

Lack of experimental controls.

Otherwise, all comments have been included except for somewhat tangential observations ('There is a sort of "apostolic" succession involved in good PhD work—a melding of supervisors' and students' ideas'), so basically what follows is a presentation of the examiners' responses as a whole, except for the exclusion of repetition. Altogether, the following list comprises approximately 85% of all the statements made, except that repeated occurrences of a phrase or an idea are not recorded, so that the amount of detail included under the different headings does not necessarily represent exactly the relative emphasis in the responses. What is presented here, then, is what might be called a 'semantic elaboration' of the field of PhD criteria. Obviously, no single PhD study would be described by all of the statements, but a successful piece of work would illustrate several statements under each of the 'positive' headings and would ideally be free of the weaknesses described under the 'negative' headings. However, one or two negative features could be compensated for by a wide range of positive features.

The original purpose of the summary of the responses presented here was to provide a starting point for candidates and supervisors concerned with doctoral work derived from practice-based research. Underlying the work is the following question: can we legitimately reinterpret the concepts (implicit criteria) already current in existing academic communities to evaluate practice-based doctoral work? And our proposed answer is, on the whole, yes.

There is, of course, a separate issue concerning what other qualities practice-based documents might need to display in addition to those listed here. For example:

- contains innovative insights into practice;
- of value to help other practitioners improve their performance;
- shows clear evidence of professional development and innovation;
- contains evocative, detailed description of a very high level of professional creativity, sensitivity and responsibility;
- articulates clearly the relationship between the research role and the practitioner role.

However, the survey reported here does not claim to present a list of 'criteria' for practice-based PhDs; it merely indicates that what examiners of academic research seem to be looking for is a form of intellectual rigour, which is, in principle, by no means alien to the qualities we would be hoping for in a practice-based doctorate. A further important question is, of course: how might/should this rigour be displayed in different forms of inquiry?

### **Section One: 'negative features'**

This section is a list of commonly identified weaknesses which a PhD study should try to avoid. By indicating what qualities are judged as weaknesses, this section is intended to indicate what might be meant by a minimum, threshold standard.

#### *Lack of intellectual grasp*

- lack of a clear distinction between objective and subjective material;
- lack of clear idea of 'data';
- conclusions stated too early and not brought together;
- dogmatic presupposition of issues;

- failure to follow up and evaluate alternative lines of argument;
- failure to defend properly the validity and generalisability of innovative research methods;
- apparent unawareness of the limitations of the work undertaken;
- description rather than theoretical analysis;
- lack of background knowledge (the candidate should demonstrate a knowledge of the subject which is broader than the actual topic area).

#### *Lack of coherence*

- lack of focus, stated aim, ‘tightly managed’ structure or coherent argument;
- lack of integrity in research design;
- lack of clearly formulated conclusions;
- ill-justified changes of direction;
- lack of initial focus/conviction;
- pursuit of ‘originality’ at the expense of control over the material.

#### *Poor engagement with the literature*

- uncritical use of references;
- misrepresentation of texts;
- lack of rigour in referencing and bibliography;
- lack of up-to-date knowledge of other research in the field.

#### *Lack of originality*

- no original contribution to knowledge;
- no theoretical contribution;
- ‘encyclopaedic’ knowledge but no ‘personal spark’.

#### *Lack of generalisability*

- no discussion of how findings are applicable to other situations;
- does not move beyond questions and findings to making suggestions.

#### *Methodological weakness*

- inappropriate statistical analyses.
- ‘prejudice’ (e.g. gender, class, racial, regional), i.e. unexamined social stereotyping;
- lack of a ‘robust’ methodology.

#### *Poor presentation*

- disjointed, unstructured writing;
- badly written, ‘with no concern for the reader’;
- style too discursive, prolix, obscure or too anecdotal.

## **Section Two: positive features**

#### *Intellectual grasp*

- grasps the scope and possibilities of the topic;
- shows diligence and rigour in procedures—catholic and multifactoral approaches to problems;
- shows readiness to examine apparently tangential areas for possible relevance;
- grasps the wider significance of the topic—how the analysis is related to its methodological and epistemological context;
- shows iterative development, allowing exploration and rejection of alternatives;

- possesses an internal dialogue—plurality of approach/method, to validate the one chosen;
- a broad theoretical base is treated critically;
- demonstrates a coherent and explicit theoretical approach fully thought through and critically applied, i.e. noting its limitations;
- gives a systematic account of the topic, including a review of all plausible possible interpretations;
- demonstrates full mastery of the topic, i.e. that the candidate is now an expert in the field;
- indicates the future development of the work;
- maintains clear and continuous links between theory, method and interpretation;
- presents a reflexive, self-critical account of relationships involved in the inquiry and of the methodology;
- connects theory and practice;
- displays rigour.

#### *Coherence*

- displays coherence of structure (e.g. the conclusions follow clearly from the data);
- skilfully organises a number of different angles (required by the extended length of the work);
- is cogently organised and expressed;
- possesses a definite agenda and an explicit structure;
- presents a sense of the researcher's learning as a journey, as a structured, incremental progress through a process of both argument and discovery.

#### *Engagement with the literature*

- displays comprehensive coverage of the field/secure command of the literature in the field;
- shows breadth of contextual knowledge in the discipline;
- successfully critiques established positions;
- engages critically with other significant work in the field;
- draws on literature with a focus different from the viewpoint pursued in the thesis;
- maintains a balance between delineating an area of debate and advocating a particular approach;
- includes scholarly notes, a comprehensive bibliography and accurately uses academic conventions in citations.

#### *Grasp of methodology*

- the methodology is clearly established and applied;
- the methodological analysis indicates the advantages *and* the disadvantages of the approach adopted;
- uses several methodologies for triangulation.

#### *Presentation*

- the thesis is clear, easy to read and is presented in an appropriate style;
- contains few errors of expression;
- displays flawless literacy.

### **Section Three: 'originality'/'publishability'**

These two terms are often used as the fundamental 'criteria' for a PhD. This section attempts to give more guidance on how to interpret them.

*Originality*

- pushes the topic into new areas—beyond its obvious focus;
- makes an original contribution to knowledge or understanding of the subject, in topic area, in method, in experimental design, in theoretical synthesis, or engagement with conceptual issues;
- solves some significant problem or gathers original data;
- reframes issues;
- is imaginative in its approach to problems;
- is creative yet rigorous;
- goes beyond its sources to create a new position which critiques existing theoretical positions;
- uses the empirical study to enlarge the theoretical understanding of the subject;
- contains innovation, speculation, imaginative reconstruction, cognitive excitement: ‘the author has clearly wrestled with the method, trying to shape it to gain new insights’.
- is comprehensive in its theoretical linkages *or* makes novel connections between areas of knowledge;
- opens up neglected areas or takes a new viewpoint on an old problem;
- something new must have been learned and demonstrated, such that the reader is made to rethink a stance or opinion;
- shows ‘a spark of inspiration as well as perspiration’;
- shows development towards independent research and innovation;
- is innovative in content and adventurous in method, obviously at the leading edge in its particular field, with potential for yielding new knowledge;
- makes a personal synthesis of an interpretative framework;
- shows depth and breadth of scholarship—synthesising previous work and adding original insights/models/concepts;
- argues against conventional views, presents new frameworks for interpreting the world;
- applies established techniques to novel patterns, or devises new techniques which allow new questions to be addressed.

*Publishability*

- demonstrates publishable quality or potential for publication;
- publishable in a refereed journal with a good scholarly reputation;
- written with an awareness of the audience for the work;
- stylishly and economically written.

**4. Originality and Publishability**

As we have indicated, the purpose of collecting the evidence was to provide a starting point (for candidates and supervisors concerned with doctoral work derived from practice-based research) in answering the question: how far can we legitimately and helpfully use the concepts (criteria) currently used in existing academic communities, and thereby minimise the potential controversy surrounding an innovatory enterprise—the accreditation of the practice-based doctorate? Our use of the terms ‘helpfully’ and ‘innovatory’ are suggestive of a political and epistemological position. The social and political changes to which we drew attention in the first section could be viewed as mere turbulence: a kind of value-free chaos leading nowhere and unaffected by intention. Alternatively—and this is our position—they can be seen as a kind of uncertain, fitful progress, which is towards an appreciation of the complexities of, rather than towards a linear accumulation of knowledge; this progress is affected by the joint analysis and activities of the agents caught up in the upheaval.

Narrowly, what is at stake is how to proceed with our own practice, but more broadly, there is more: how (and how far) can we expand the key concepts of the academic culture to include a new category of work and a new body of potential students, without compromising what is valuable in that culture? Conversely, from the other end of the bridge being constructed between higher education and other workplaces, how far can those concepts be expanded without compromising what is valuable in practice? Using the evidence collected, we draw out the theme of innovation, something that is clearly related to practice; but which is also related to the central criterion applied to traditional doctorates, originality.

Usually, the only explicitly stated criteria for PhDs are ‘originality’ and ‘contribution to knowledge’, understood in relation to each other, even though, as the survey makes clear, examiners are conscious of using other criteria in order to contribute to an assessment of originality and contribution to knowledge. Links with the crisis of representation are clear. If the nature of knowledge is in question, it follows that the idea of a ‘contribution to knowledge’ or a ‘claim to knowledge’ must also be in question. Happily, the evidence from the survey indicates that examiners of traditional doctorates think that the practice of getting knowledge is part of the judgement of originality of that knowledge. It is notable that the two of the statements under ‘Lack of originality’ make it look as though practice is irrelevant. However, when the respondents were asked to unpack ‘originality’, a different picture emerges; the resulting statements appear quite easy to fit in with practice-based work. They refer to inspiration, responsibility, cognitive excitement, personal synthesis and to the candidate ‘wrestling’ or being ‘adventurous’ with the method.

How, then, shall we set about assessing ‘originality’ in relation to practice-based research? If all knowledge is deemed new and useful only within a context, rather than adding to the sum total of what is universally known, then practical knowledge need only be original in relation to the context (which can be drawn reasonably widely) rather than it having to be judged against all practice in all history. However, as a doctoral thesis it needs to demonstrate its relevance beyond the immediate context and in our experience this is not difficult, requiring precisely the sort of ‘theorising’ which universities generally wish to promote.

Finally, it may be helpful to remark on the etymological roots of the term ‘doctorate’ in the verb *docere*, to teach. A doctorate can be interpreted as suggesting that the successful candidate has something to teach (i.e. something new, something worth passing on. Such a person teaches particular audiences in particular contexts. Further, the relation of the person to the knowledge taught is always relevant precisely in terms of inspiration, responsibility, cognitive excitement, and personal synthesis. Publishing in refereed journals is, of course, one form in which knowledge can be passed on to others. However, we then need to consider the whole spectrum of activity to which this ‘doctoral’ role might apply, beyond the traditional institutions of academic journal publishing (especially since these are currently distorted by the Research Assessment Exercise procedures in U.K. higher education.) ‘Publishable’ and ‘originality’ are (or ought to be) linked concepts. Of course, we need to ask, ‘Original for whom? Publishable where? Perhaps we can suggest, minimally, that a PhD ought to:

- be a report of work which others would want to read;
- tell a compelling story articulately whilst pre-empting inevitable critiques;
- carry the reader into complex realms, and inform and educate him/her;
- be sufficiently speculative or original to command respectful peer attention.

A modest proposal, to be sure, and one which merely attempts to open up the question included in our title, indicating on the one hand its scope and on the other hand its practical importance.

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## NOTES

- [1] The article was written collaboratively, with the exception of section two. Morwenna Griffiths took the lead in the writing of section one, and Richard Winter is largely responsible for section three. Section four was jointly written by Morwenna Griffiths and Richard Winter.
- [2] <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/service/sd/rlb/RLBhome.htm>
- [3] The thesis in question was Dr Moira Laidlaw's. It was examined at the University of Bath by Morwenna Griffiths and Richard Winter. It is her wish and right to be identified explicitly, although in other cases we preserve confidentiality.

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