

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Learning from Practice: Maintaining Practice-Based Doctoral Research Remotely

Sian Vaughan¹

¹*Birmingham City University, Birmingham, United Kingdom*

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Abstract: The impact of the pandemic on doctoral research in the UK has been recognised (QAA 2021, Vitae 2021). Research-specific impacts have included the closure of archives, reduced access to scientific laboratories, and constraints on working with participants. This paper takes as its focus doctoral researchers engaged in practice-based research in the arts to learn from their experiences. Based on a small-scale interview study, I examine how these practice-based doctoral researchers have faced and responded to challenges including the lack of access to specialist on-campus facilities, constraints on performance and collaboration, remote supervision, as well as finding and adapting material practices of making to the scale and nature of domestic environments. In discussing these challenges and the adaptations, mitigations and survival tactics adopted as a response, I speculate on how we might learn from their experiences to reconceptualise and better support hybrid or remote modes of doctoral study in the future.

Paper: The impact of the pandemic on doctoral researchers has received significant recognition (Vitae 2021) and attention, particularly through the vocal campaigns of groups such as Pandemic PGRs and community support interventions like the weekly #VirtualNotViral¹ chat on Twitter. As well as the social and human challenges of living and being during a global pandemic which cannot be underestimated, research-specific challenges in doctoral study have included the closure of archives in humanities research, reduced access to laboratories in the sciences, and constraints on interviewing, focus groups and participant-observation in the social sciences. The expectation however, has been that doctoral supervisors will support their doctoral researchers to adapt and mitigate pandemic effects on their study will adapt and mitigate (QAA 2021). This research takes as its particular focus doctoral researchers engaged in practice-based research in the arts. In exploring and reflecting on their experiences, the research aims to draw out learning more broadly to inform rebuilding and transforming doctoral education for a hybrid future.

Practice-based doctoral research is a growing area widely accepted at doctoral level, and it is recognised that creative practice can be the mode, method, tool, object, subject and/or embodiment of research in the doctorate (Vaughan 2021). It has also been recognized that the nature of creative practice entails specific support needs at doctoral level (Candy & Edmunds

2018, Newbury 2010) and that this group of doctoral researchers have distinctive doctoral experiences (Brien et al 2019, Collinson 2005, Wisker & Robinson 2014). It is not surprising therefore that practice-based researchers faced particular challenges during the global pandemic of 2020 and 2021 related to the maintenance and support of their creative practice in their research.

Based on a small-scale qualitative study, this research examines how practice-based doctoral researchers have faced and responded to the challenges in maintaining their creative practice and research when forced to study remotely by the pandemic. Semi-structured interviews were carried out across 2021 with doctoral researchers in art, design, jewellery, music, and performing arts in one university in the United Kingdom (n<10). The interviews reveal how the lack of access to campuses entailed not only interruptions to library access and desk space, but also inability to access specialist on-campus facilities such workshops, specialist equipment, software and technology, studio, exhibition and performance spaces. Lockdowns and social distancing have placed considerable constraints on performance and collaborative research practices as well as on engagement with arts organisations and a cultural sector itself facing serious survival and adaptation issues. Doctoral researchers who are artists and designers have had to find and adapt material practices of making to the scale and nature of domestic environments. Examination submissions had to be rethought for online viva-voce in which examiners could not physically or materially engage with the outputs and processes of creative practice.

Whilst acknowledging the frustrations and personal challenges faced by participants, my focus in this paper is in how we might learn from their experiences. The resilience and imaginative solution-finding is impressive, and highlights new digital areas where professional development and training support for doctoral researchers could be beneficial. The importance of sociality and community in supporting the remote doctoral experience is evident, prompting considerations about how this might be blended across real-life and online provision in ways appropriate to the activities of practice-based research, but also to benefit doctoral researchers with health concerns, caring responsibilities or other life circumstances which restrict their ability to come on to campus. It is as evident from the findings that online and remote doctoral study is not a panacea for practice-based research. Some practice activities simply cannot be translated to domestic, or individual online spaces, or the research redesign to exclude those practices whilst remaining practice-based research. This reaffirms for institutions that enabling space for the messiness of practice is sometimes essential for practice-based doctoral research and that access to specialist on-campus facilities can be crucial. In discussing the adaptations, mitigations and survival tactics adopted in by practice-based doctoral researchers in response to having to study remotely during a pandemic, I speculate on how we might conceptualise and better support hybrid or remote modes of doctoral study in the future.

¹#VirtualNotViral is a weekly tweetchat that has run since since March 2020, initiated and hosted by Dr A. Cabraal and Prof P. Thomson via the twitter account @PhD-VirtualNotViral.

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