

331 Creative contagion – what can we learn from the REF about doctoral education?

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Research Domains

Postgraduate scholarship and practice (PGSP)

Abstract

Prompted by the continued growth in practice research in creative disciplines and in creative methods across disciplines at doctoral level (Vear et al 2021, Kara 2017), this paper reports on work in progress to test the potential of a significant data set in the United Kingdom to reveal the extent to which creative practice is influencing change in the practices and structures of doctoral education. As a periodic quality audit of research in higher education in the United Kingdom, the Research Excellence Framework has been examined and contested from multiple perspectives (e.g., McNay 2015, O'Regan & Gray 2018). My concern here is not with the process or politics of REF, but with the potentiality of the online archives of submissions for researching changes in doctoral education. What evidence and indicators can be found of creative practice's influence on the structures, practices, and discourse of doctoral education?

Full paper

Prompted by the continued growth in practice research in creative disciplines and in creative methods across disciplines at doctoral level (Vear et al 2021, Kara 2017), this paper reports on work in progress to test the potential of a significant data set in the United Kingdom to reveal the extent to which creative practice is influencing change in the practices and structures of doctoral education.

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is a roughly seven-year audit and assessment of research in higher education institutes in the United Kingdom which requires the submission of data around research outputs, research environment and impact. The REF has been examined and contested from multiple perspectives (e.g., McNay 2015, Murphy & Sage 2014, O'Regan & Gray 2018, Siversten 2017). My concern here is not with the process or politics of REF, the problematics of bureaucratic quality audits and concepts of excellence, it is with considering the latent value of the resulting aftermath – the archives of submissions published online – for other forms of research. Is it possible to find alternative forms of value in REF returns as sources for researching trends in doctoral education?

Specifically, it is the corpus of environment statements at subject level (unit of assessment) that form the data for this project. In the most recent iteration, REF2021, 157 institutions submitted across 34 units of assessment, a total of 1,878 submissions. Each of these includes a statement on the environment to support research and enable impact, documents between 8,000 and 12,000+ words depending on the size of the submission (REF21 Guidelines). In REF, these were assessed for sustainability and vitality alongside data on research income and completed doctoral degrees to produce quality profiles against a starred system. This research explores what this vast data-set might reveal about changes in the doctoral landscape, taking as its focus the potential spread and influence of creative practice in research, whether as practice research in creative disciplines or as creative methods used in other disciplines. As such the focus of analysis is not on the number of stars achieved, but on what the data might reveal about the structures, processes, and discourses of the doctoral landscape in the UK.

For the pilot stage, four units of assessment have been selected: UoA32 Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory and UoA33 Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies as subject areas where practice research is firmly established, and UoA23 Education where the use creative methods might be expected to be found, and finally UoA12 Engineering. In each of these UoAs, ten submissions out of the top 20 ranked submissions were chosen to try to obtain a sample across the range of types of institution. This pilot phase is also testing different approaches and methods to analysis and interpretation of the REF environment statements including content analysis, thematic analysis, discourse analysis, and linguistics.

Environment statements are required to comment explicitly on support for research students and infrastructure and facilities, which would enable explicit mention of creative practice, and for example of workshop, exhibition, or studio facilities, and/or of specific researcher development in relation to creative practice (Taylor 2019, Vaughan 2021). Can inferences be drawn as to the significance ascribed to enabling creative practice in where and how such references are found, and can a response to creative practice be identified in doctoral provision beyond traditionally creative disciplines? My research is also in exploring whether subtler indications of change in the doctoral landscape in response to creative practice might be found, for example in relation to the use of terminology to describe what is submitted for examination (Vaughan 2021). What influence if any, has creative practice had on the terminology and discourse of doctoral education?

At this pilot phase, the research is also questioning the potential value of the large REF environment statement data set as a resource for further research into doctoral provision, and potentially comparative work across the data sets from previous iterations of REF and its predecessor Research Assessment Exercise which would enable longitudinal analysis. How might data from REF (and RAE) be used alongside other sources to research changes in doctoral education? For example, might REF data be triangulated with and enrich analysis of EThOS, the UK's national online thesis database and repository. What might we learn from the REF about changes in doctoral education?

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