Practice-led research as changing practice: aspiration and identity in doctoral education (0255)

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Outline:

There has been a national growth in 'practice-led' research in Art & Design since the Millennium in which practice is recognised as a significant part of research in the UK (Mottram, Rust & Till, 2007). In the context of Art & Design the term 'practice-led' research itself is a fluid and complex term that varies with the individual researcher, research project and discipline. This new species of research and generative enquiry (Barrett & Bolt, 2007) may incorporate practice as the research itself, as related to professional practices and in which the thesis may - but not necessarily - include creative outputs in addition to the textual component that result from this practice. Practice-led researchers can be perceived as bricoleurs who appropriate available methods, strategies and empirical materials or

invent or piece together new tools as necessary (Stewart, 2007) through a variety of creative design and artistic practice methodologies. Such research is often underpinned by discussions on what constitutes research, theory and knowledge in this emergent and highly fluid doctoral terrain.

We had assumed that growing numbers of 'practice-led' students and practitioners undertaking research meant career aspirations are not necessarily located solely 'within' academia. In addition to shrinking budgets due to the current economic climate, there are growing numbers of researchers, making employment in Higher Education (HE) more competitive and it is also unlikely that the academy can employ them all.

The first stage of the research was a career-tracking study that followed the career destinations of the 71 former research students who had completed their research degree at our Institute of Art & Design (now part of the Faculty of Arts, Design & Media) since 2000. Somewhat counter-intuitively given assumptions about the general growth in PhDs in Art & Design, it revealed that over 70% of these former students whose current employment could be identified were working in Higher Education (a still impressive 61% of all the students).

Intrigued by this unexpected result, we undertook a qualitative research project entitled 'Investigating and increasing the employability of research students in Art & Design: understanding the student experience' which examined the aspirations and motivations of our current Art & Design PhD students alongside the experiences of our former research students. The focus on employability was informed by the growing emphasis on doctoral training that both develops the skills of postgraduate research students (PGRs) and supports

their employability (AHRC 2011; QAA 2013; RCUK 2011; Vitae 2012). Using a combined methodology of questionnaires, small focus groups and follow-up interviews, we obtained rich narrative results.

The key finding was related not so much to employability as to the students' sense of identity. The nature of doctoral student identities and identity formation has received growing attention in higher education research (eg. Barnacle and Mewburn 2010; Crossouard & Pryor 2008; Hopwood 2010; and McAlpine & Amundsen 2008, 2009). Our research evidenced that the creative identities of our Art & Design doctoral students are multi-layered, fluid, amorphous and ambiguous and are continually negotiated by traversing multiple roles: for example, academic, professional practitioner and student. Central to this is their position as professionals in multiple arenas. Darke and Heath (2011) have explored the tensions of being an insider-outside that Professional Doctorates students encounter. For our students, as creative practitioners these tensions could also manifest (Hockey 2008; Wilson & Van Ruiten 2014), however they also demonstrated an impact on their career aspirations.

Our research revealed that our PhD students aspired not just to work inside or outside the academe in dualistic terms. Rather, they have more nuanced aspirations that actively combine academic, professional and practitioner roles both inside *and* outside. This is something that we have argued can be usefully considered as para-academic aspirations (Whitchurch 2008). In contrast to MacFarlane's negative connotations (2010), the para-academic is a positive position in relation to professional identity - working with the academe but not defined by it. We elaborate this as based on an acute awareness of employability through students undertaking multiple paid and unpaid roles alongside their study (even if full-time and funded) in a variety of academic, creative and professional contexts to actively build their skills and experience beyond the thesis that align with para-academia.

We have grounded our research through a co-researcher participatory approach to doctoral community initiatives, working in partnership with research students to initiate and develop peer-mentoring and to reconceptualise our PGR training as pedagogy (Blaj-Ward 2007). This aims to acknowledge creative outputs and methods, and the complexity of relationships between practice, theory and knowledge in a purposefully diverse and fluid range of critical workshops, skills training and more creative and social activities, alongside efforts to build a supervisory community that reflects these same values.

We conclude that the growth of practice-led doctoral research in Arts, Design and Media is changing practice but not in the way anticipated. These changes are not an oppositional challenge to traditional conceptions and understanding of academic careers, but a broadening and nuancing. It is changing cultures to recognise fluid and multiple hierarchies

in place of a narrower apprenticeship model. The notion of convergence provides a way to conceptualise the perhaps expanded sense of pedagogy that seems to underpin doctoral education as encompassing academic practice, employability, training, psycho-social support and enables the development of creative and para-academic cultures to be considered holistically. Whilst convergence implies the merging together of various things in a move to form a uniform whole, for us it is essential that convergence is seen as encouraging multiplicity and heterogeneity as underpinning pedagogy where identities that are becoming and nuanced aspirations are enfolded into the doctoral experience.

Whilst rooted in Art & Design, we anticipate that our paper will stimulate timely and lively debate from those across multiple disciplines and education contexts about changing career aspirations amongst doctoral students and the changing practices that we might therefore need to imagine and instigate.

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