

UNIVERSITY OF
WESTMINSTER 

Handbook for Practice-Based PhDs



Iram Ghufuran, film still from *A Terrible Beauty* (2021)

Contents

Introduction	3
Admissions	4
Supervision	4
Annual Progress Reviews	5
Data Collection and Storage	6
Submission and Examination	9
Who to Contact	10

Introduction

The University of Westminster has pioneered practice-based PhDs in the visual arts. The School of Arts continues to be pioneering in this area, and more recently other schools have begun to supervise doctoral candidates who wish to include their own practice in their work towards a doctorate. Doctoral students in, for example, the School of Architecture and Cities and the School of Humanities are working on practice-based PhDs. At Westminster we recognise the benefits of practice in improving our understanding of creativity and adjacent subject domains, acknowledging such work as extending our knowledge of culture.

It is the case, though, that practice-based PhDs may be carried out by practitioners wanting to do practice-based research in any field; for instance, as well as in the visual arts, art history, curating, design, architecture and creative writing, practice-based PhDs may be done in musical composition, film, dance, and performance, as well as in engineering and technology.

While practice-based PhDs share the fundamental characteristics of more conventional PhDs and are framed by the same expectations around research quality and rigour (see p. 4 below), they include methods, practices and expectations in addition to those fundamental ones.

The aim of this handbook is to clearly explain those additional elements that make up practice-based PhDs and to set out the UoW's expectations and principles around them. The handbook should be particularly useful for doctoral students, doctoral coordinators, supervisors, APR assessors, chairs of vivas and external examiners. It should be read in conjunction with the [Research Degree Academic Regulations 24/25](#) and the [Research Degree Handbook 24/25](#).

As with more conventional doctorates, no two practice-based PhDs are the same, and each will need to be thought about, designed and carried out slightly differently. There are key principles which underscore all doctoral work, however. The two key principles that must be adhered to by practice-based PhDs, as with all doctoral theses, are originality and coherence.

The final submission for practice-based PhDs will normally consist of two elements:

- a critical written piece, normally a maximum of 40,000 words;
- and a substantial practical component (see below, 'Submissions and Examination', p. 9, for more detailed guidance on each of these).

The research outcomes of each must together form a coherent whole and it must be clear how this final output demonstrates an original contribution to knowledge.

The thesis (i.e., both the critical part and the creative part) should reflect a coherent research process across its parts, demonstrate a critical appreciation of the context of the research, demonstrate its relationship to existing literature and cultural practice, and show how the research has produced an original contribution to knowledge. The relationship of the critical part of the submission to the other forms of material submitted must be clearly articulated so that the work forms a single coherent body, considered collectively as the thesis.

Admissions

As with our admissions process for all doctorates, our commitment is to inclusivity and openness to new ideas and ways of working.

However, the University is also mindful of its responsibility to protect the quality and standing of its doctorates, and as such it acknowledges that the doctorate is a distinctive qualification, with its own standards, frameworks and expectations.

In considering applications for practice-based PhDs, these principles and expectations should be followed:

- The creative work must be undertaken as part of the registered research programme and must not have been done before registration or be tangential to it.
- The nature of the substantial practical work must be specified in the proposal for the practice-based PhD.
- The admissions process should assess the suggested quality and quantity of the proposed work, to ensure it meets the equivalent expectations for conventional doctorates.
- Applicants for admission to undertake a practice-based PhD must be able to provide evidence of the requisite skills, knowledge and experience to enable them to carry out the project or the capacity to acquire them to the appropriate standard within the scope of the project.
- Applicants must indicate as part of the project proposal an outline of the balance of the elements that will make up the final submission.
- Any assessment of the project proposal should take account of the facilities and resources required and ensure the award is possible on the basis of the outcomes proposed and the resources available.
- The provision of appropriate resources for any practice-based PhD project must be agreed upon at the admission stage.

Supervision

Supervisory teams for candidates for practice-based PhDs should normally include colleagues with relevant experience in a field cognate with the practical work. Their role will be to guide

the candidate in the development of the project, ensuring that the creative practice is integral to the research itself and that there is a close relationship between the practical work and the critical element of the project.

In addition to the University's standard guidelines on supervisory responsibilities (which can be found [here](#)), for practice-based PhD theses Directors of Studies will be expected to ensure that the balance between practice and critical elements of the thesis are discussed with the student and agreed upon and recorded in supervisory logs on the VRE. Any revisions to the agreed structure should be further reviewed by the Director of Studies, and any changes agreed must be recorded.

In the section 'Submission and Examination' below (p. 9), expectations are set out around the examiners' access to exhibitions or performances of the practice element of the thesis. In order to meet these expectations – i.e., to ensure as far as is possible that examiners can attend these events in situ at or close to the time of the viva -- it is likely that Directors of Studies and candidates will have to begin to plan both these events and exam arrangements relatively early on.

The regulations for all doctorates state that exam arrangements must be approved at least three months before the submission of the thesis, but Directors of Studies of and candidates for practice-based PhDs should begin to think about and plan for both the exhibition/performance and the exam arrangements probably by the end of the third year (for full-time students).

Annual Progress Reviews

Annual Progress Review stages (1-4) monitor the progress of the research for all doctoral students. This is no different for those working on practice-based PhDs, but the makeup of the submissions for each APR may be slightly different in these cases.

As during the admissions process, the relationship between the practical component of the research and the critical part must be reviewed during each APR. It is expected that both critical work and practical work (or evidence of progress with it) will make up the submission for each APR.

A review of the resources needed for a successful and timely completion of the research should be part of the assessment at each APR. It would be best practice for the Directors of Studies' report, the candidate's report on progress and the assessor's report to comment on this.

In terms of the practice work itself, submissions may include any type of 'work in progress', film clips, photographs of work, storyboards, planning processes, evidence of rehearsals, writing in progress, audio files, and so on. As with the critical written work submitted for APRs, the work will inevitably be a work in progress, but it nevertheless must demonstrate progress and be appropriately presented for its audience (i.e., the Director of Studies, the APR assessor, the doctoral coordinator and the Graduate School).

In terms of evidence of progress in practice where the practice work itself is not yet ready for APR submission, this could include correspondence, interviews, bookings of venues, etc. This should be uploaded to the VRE as part of the submission.

As the practical element is as important as the critical in assessing progress throughout each APR stage, it will also be included in the viva that is part of APR2 (upgrade from MPhil to PhD). The place played by the practical element during the viva will vary across disciplines and academic schools. For example, in some schools, a presentation on the practice is a mandatory part of the viva. It is important that both Directors of Studies and students are clear about the requirements in their school. For guidance on this, doctoral coordinators should be contacted in the first instance (for contact details, see p. 10).

Data Collection and Storage

Documenting practice

Throughout doctoral research, the practice and the research journey, method, process, or narrative should be captured as clearly as possible. Documentation and evidence of practice will need to be submitted for Annual Progress Reviews, and it may be needed for the presentation on practice that is a requirement of the viva in some disciplines. Examiners will also find it useful to see images that illustrate the development process of the research. Documentation of the practice research process can include sketches, plans, diagrams, photographs of archival documents, documentation of workshops, fieldwork, the production or construction of installs for performances or exhibitions, unedited films, screenshots, etc. Images and/or audio-visual material that document the final exhibition or performance or practical element that is examined should also be captured to an agreed standard, to accompany the permanent record of the practical element that will be deposited with the written thesis in the university repository.

The images and/or audio-visual material collected to record the practical element of the thesis should demonstrate the quality and coherence of the work.

It is important that these digital files are organised and labelled, and properly documented so a selection of the files can be shared on Westminster's institutional repository. It is good practice to document all files during the course of the PhD. Each practice-based PhD is different and will capture different information, but it is likely that it will be necessary at least to record the date of the file, the title of the practical element it documents, and any relevant copyright or credit information (name of photographer if that is someone other than the candidate, for example). The medium of the element and an exhibition, performance, or screening venue, for example, may also be recorded. An easy way to do this is to include the information in the file name; it is a good idea to make sure files are renamed soon after creating them while the information is fresh. Here are a few examples of useful file names:

YYYYMMDD_Title of work_Name of Exhibition_Venue_medium_photo credit

YYYYMMDD_Title of work_Relevance to practice_photo credit

YYYYMMDD_Archival catalogue call or manuscript number_Name of Archive_copyright/licensing information

20231023_ Untitled (1)_Final show_Ambika P3_oil on canvas_Kevin Cummings ©

20230929_ Untitled (1)_Materials testing (Year Two)

20220203_MS 69060_British Library_CC-BY-NC-ND British Library

Many more files will be generated than will eventually be shared in the critical element and used to illustrate the practical element on the repository, so it may be helpful to create a curated folder of the best evidence. The relevance of the images/files to the practice should also be clarified with good captions. Captions should be clear and succinct and articulate the relevance of the file to the research process or practice. Short descriptions should be used that explicitly describe each image, and, where relevant, use centimetres for spatial dimensions and hours, minutes, and seconds (00:00:00) for time-based work.

It will be helpful to create a captions list (in a Word/ Google Docs/ Excel/ Sheets document or similar) that is stored in the same place as the image/ AV files. The captions list could include the name of the file plus its caption. For example:

File name/type	Caption
20230929_ Untitled (1)_Materials testing (Year Two).jpg	Halfway through the process, I tested the structural resilience of potential materials for the final exhibition piece.
20231023 Final show Ambika P3_install1.jpeg	Installation of the exhibition by the artist at Ambika P3. October, London, 2023.

For further guidance on documenting your research materials and organising your physical and digital materials, see the following web pages:

[‘Create and store data: Practice based research and non-digital data’](#)

[‘Create and store data: Describing your data’](#)

If secondary or third party materials are being used or re-used, it will also be helpful to understand copyright and re-use licenses, which determine how and where other people’s material can be shared. There’s an explainer on our LibGuides:

<https://libguides.westminster.ac.uk/copyrightresearchers/copyrightpermission>

Depositing and disseminating doctoral research

Adding research to the (Virtual Research Environment) VRE

A permanent record of the practical element of the thesis is required. The creator of a practice-based PhD will complete the separate components/outputs that are the practical or creative part of the final submission as they progress. These are recorded in the University's Virtual Research Environment (VRE). As well as managing the Annual Progress Review stages (see above), the VRE allows the researcher to add individual records of the research as soon as each output is complete. This should not be left until submission of the final critical element as it is time consuming and crucial data may be harder to locate in retrospect.

Practice outputs

The VRE includes a range of non-text, or practice outputs - artefact, composition, design, digital or visual media, exhibition and performance, or other (non-text).

Once complete, these records are shared openly in [WestminsterResearch](#), the University's institutional repository, containing a record of the research output of the University's academic community, including doctoral theses.

For some outputs, the data and documentation (see 'Data collection and storage/ Documenting your practice' advice above) can be shared openly. Occasionally, for example where a third party owns the copyright of material and permission cannot be obtained, any attached files would remain closed within the VRE, with a record detailing the output openly shared.

A useful example of a practice record, files, and related metadata is Julie Marsh's exhibition [2021 Venice Architecture Biennale - Three British Mosques/Assembly. Venice Architecture Biennale, May - Sep 2021](#).

'Traditional' or text-based outputs

A practice-based PhD may also include text-based outputs, the options range from articles, chapters, books and conference submissions, to data, devices and outputs, online educational resources, patents, reports, software and websites. These should also be added to the VRE at the point of acceptance for publication.

Deposit of the written critical piece (normally maximum of 40,000 words in length) and creation of final portfolio

The deposit of the written critical piece will take place as part of submission. Once the PhD has been completed, the repository team will publish it in WestminsterResearch and combine it into a portfolio record with links to each individual output, consulting if required.

[Examples of PhD by Published Work portfolios](#), which often contain non-text based elements and may be a useful guide for those involved in practice-based PhDs, are openly available in WestminsterResearch.

Submission and Examination

The national principles on which all doctorates are examined also apply to practice-based PhDs. These are set out in the [QAA Doctoral Degree Characteristics Statement](#), section 4.3:

‘Whether a candidate is being examined on the basis of a “traditional” thesis, portfolio, artefact(s), clinical practice or other output, the body of work presented demonstrates the research question and provides a critical evaluation of the extent to which it has been addressed. This, combined with the candidate's performance in the oral examination, is the point at which a decision is made, initially by the examiners, about whether he/she can be awarded a doctorate.’

The University’s general principles for submission set out in the [regulations](#), pp. 26ff, apply also to practice-based PhDs.

As stated above, the thesis for practice-based PhDs comprises both the critical element and the practice element. It is expected that these two elements together are equivalent to the expectations for research quality and length expected of conventional PhDs. On this basis, the critical element of the submission for practice-based PhDs is expected to normally be a maximum of 40,000 words in length.

It is expected that examiners will see the exhibition of the practice-based work in situ near or at the time of the viva. Given the practicalities around this, this is likely to require the choosing of examiners and the submission of the exam arrangements earlier than is usually required by the regulations (see ‘Supervision’ above, p. 4). The regulations state that exam arrangements must be approved at least three months before the submission of the thesis, but Directors of Studies and candidates for practice-based PhDs should begin to think about and plan for this probably by the end of the third year (for full-time students).

Following the viva, examiners may require amendments or revisions to either the written or practical element of the submission or to both. In cases where the examiners require amendments to the practical element of the submission, they should first be satisfied that their concerns cannot be addressed through amendments to the critical element of the submission. Where this is not possible, examiners should consider whether an additional practical arrangement could be used to address any concerns rather than revise the original practical element.

A permanent record of the practical element of the thesis shall be deposited with the written thesis in the University repository. This record may consist of photographs or audio-visual material of the final output(s) (see 'Data Collection and Storage', p. 6 above).

Who To Contact

Doctoral Coordinators in schools where there are a significant number of practice-based PhDs:

Julie Marsh (CREAM), j.marsh@westminster.ac.uk

Ozlem Koksal (CREAM), koksalo@westminster.ac.uk

Kate Jordan (Architecture and Cities), k.jordan@westminster.ac.uk

Sylvia Shaw (Humanities), s.shaw@westminster.ac.uk

The Graduate School is happy to answer any questions from supervisors, coordinators or doctoral students:

Margherita Sprio, Head of the Graduate School: m.sprio@westminster.ac.uk

For questions about the storage of data during the research:

research-data@westminster.ac.uk

For questions about the uploading of the practice-based elements to the university repository:

repository@westminster.ac.uk