

DAP\_r

Design and Architecture  
Practice Research  
Evaluation Report 2018

Professor Gini Lee,  
University of Melbourne

The iterative peer review methodology Gini Lee brought to the evaluation program was framed by two conditions. First, the University of Melbourne was not a partner organisation in this creative research investigation; and secondly her cross-disciplinary PhD was delivered through the RMIT University model, and completed in 2006. Therefore, she has sufficient distance from the process to reflect upon the evolution of the program, while having candid knowledge of the dynamics of both the PRS event model and the supervisory and examination arrangements that candidates experience.

The Project Evaluator role was defined as a critical friend and peer, conceived of as participatory, immersive and reflective in order to observe, offer critique as necessary and provide an iterative program for evaluation by partner organisations through discussion and more formal written feedback. The mode of evaluation was to participate in the PRS and associated events and provide ongoing opportunity for partners to comment, raise issues, confirm approaches, and meet in a roundtable discussion format enabling a collaborative approach to the review of ongoing programs and events. The opportunity also arose to review the final ADAPT-r (Architecture, Design and Art Practice Training Research) Europe PRS exhibition, examination and associated events held in London in late 2016. Here, discussions with international academics and candidates were held to gain an international perspective on the transferability of the program to other regions and academic regimes.

The following evaluation takes the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) Evaluation Resource as a model for reporting, adjusted to provide critical and reflective comment on observations and feedback received from participant organisations, candidates and academics, alongside review of research programs and modes of dissemination.

### DAP\_r Objectives

The evaluation framework was informed by DAP\_r project objectives as reproduced below. These extensive objectives sought to enable examination of and reflection on the RMIT University approach to practice-based PhD research, alongside formally expanding the developing network of institutions, academics and practitioners that had been organically

engaged in the PRS program over time, either as candidates or participants, critics and examiners.

- Develop a national practice-based PhD training network. The network will enable partner institutions to share the PRS supervisory and training system, and participate fully in a collective PRS program, sharing resources and supervisor and candidate training. The network will provide all partners with critical mass. In the longer term, beyond the timeframe of this grant, the aim is to ‘hotbed’ other centres around Australia as critical mass can be achieved.
- Operationalise, populate and build a web resource and community hub. The resource will support research methods training, supervisor training, and provide access to practice-based research outcomes developed through the PhD program to other researchers and institutions.
- Deliver an exhibition and symposium series including four key events. Aiming to bring together the collective efforts of partners to showcase and discuss supervision, training, methods and infrastructure related to the program.
- Produce an impact survey evaluating PhD outcomes including sectorial penetration, employability, and implications for the sessional workforce.
- Undertake further research into the pedagogical aspects of practice-based PhDs, producing insights relevant to both academics and practitioners who teach.

Conceived of as a series of events and meetings linked to the biannual PRS program, the two-year DAP\_r project delivered a scheduled forum for collaboration supported by the necessary budget and administrative infrastructure to ensure wide participation beyond institutional constraints. Alongside convening a forum of diverse disciplines and academics/practitioners, it was possible for regional and institutional conditions to be aired and collaborations developed through the medium of the three events and the pedagogical survey. A striking visual identity and web-based program was brought online and applied to symposia held over 2017. Exploration of creative research pedagogies and the impact of the PRS practice-based research

program was undertaken by a researcher experienced in the European ADAPT-r project, as a development of the research already undertaken in that international arena. Further detail on these initiatives follows below.

### Establishing Partnerships and the Partner Network

Initial stakeholder invitations to all Australian universities which deliver architecture and other design disciplinary PhD programs elicited a wide-ranging response. The range of institutional partners ensured all states and both city and regional programs participated, as recorded below:

Australian Capital Territory:

University of Canberra

New South Wales:

Charles Sturt University,

University of New South Wales

University of Newcastle

University of Technology Sydney

Queensland:

Bond University

Queensland University of Technology

South Australia:

University of Adelaide

University of South Australia

Tasmania:

University of Tasmania

Victoria:

Deakin University

Monash University

RMIT University

Western Australia:

University of Western Australia

The motivations for accepting the RMIT University invitation varied according to institution. Some were encouraged by academics who had been or were involved in the PRS program as candidates, critics and/or examiners. The University of Adelaide has recently commenced its own allied program drawn from the RMIT model. Other regional institutions were drawn to the scale and critical dimension of the established program and the dynamics of the creative research project. Still others perceived that prospective PhD candidates could find a home for the distinctive requirements of academics/

practitioners pursuing investigations and theoretical examinations that would recognise and sponsor reflective research linked to everyday knowledge and practice.

The intent to establish a network of like-minded academic/practitioner colleagues developing new models for practice-based research in institutions which had not previously supported such a model was nominated as a reason for participating. The focus on creative practice research and national engagement was also regarded as important. Partners were drawn to DAP\_r as a forum for discussion and sharing of techniques for supervision and examination, and mechanisms for delivering PhD programs in university regimes often unsupportive of creative research programs and their modes of delivery and assessment.

RMIT University as the lead investigator and promoter of the practice-based research program was initially regarded by partner organisations as the critical leader of the pedagogic model in a program well advanced and potentially as not open to change or recognition of regional and cultural differences in the delivery of PhD research. Over the course of the two-year project, and especially through the medium of the collaborative events based in Sydney, Gold Coast, Brisbane and Melbourne (Monash), the distinctive cultures and methods of partners appeared to embrace evolving modes of both programming and pedagogical approaches to practice-based research.

### Key Evaluation Questions and Criteria for Analysis

The following questions framed the evaluation process:

- Is this project engaging with the key stakeholders central to the project aims?
- Is an ethical and equitable framework for engagement and participation being realised in the project?
- Are there adequate means for participants (students, institutions and industry) to voice their individual concerns, contributions and variance, thereby ensuring a robust culture of peer review and development is being realised?
- What are the parameters for best practice within this research and its outcomes? How are they measured, and how are they disseminated?
- Is there a sustainable and transferable model of doctoral education being established that can be

During the course of the DAP\_r project, particularly through the three partner evaluation meetings, additional questions were posed to the group to promote discussion and elicit further written and/or oral reflections on the PRS program, the practice-based research PhD model and creative practice regimes within universities more generally. The following prompts were first provided to each partner mid-way through the DAP\_r project during the October 2016 PRS evaluation meeting, with subsequent follow up in early 2017:

- Information about what's happening at your institutions in the area of creative practice research;
- Feedback about your motivation for/aspirations in being involved with DAP\_r; and
- Your experience of the project so far.

Responses confirmed that institutional adoption of this model was deemed more effective in universities with visual arts programs already in operation, as studio-based and exhibition outcomes are already recognised as accepted PhD outputs. Many participants felt the strength of the RMIT PRS model and its evolution, successes over time and international transferability was important to aid in the development of their own programs in more academically conservative institutions.

Candidates and academics from partner universities also expressed support for the intensity of the PRS program, the documentation and presentation of the multidisciplinary research being undertaken, and the panel critique and feedback in the presence of peers. The sense that there is an open invitation to participate in and contribute to the PRS encourages collaboration, knowledge sharing and exposure of candidates' research methods and focus at critical stages of their PhD.

This ongoing conversation has already elicited a range of activities and outcomes, which reflect the diversity of approaches across regional institutional and academic proclivities. It is clear that advocacy at institutional managerial policy level is necessary to confirm and expand support for practice research programs. Developing a critical cohort from potentially smaller pools of interested candidates is an ongoing issue for some partners. In terms of growing

an identifiable practice-based research program for each institution, models do exist and are in development, however the necessary resources are not always readily available in-house, suggesting ongoing academic collaboration and expertise sharing will be necessary.

### DAP\_r Project Outcomes

As noted above the DAP\_r project established four areas of activity as drivers of the research project framed to develop dialogue, expression of creative research practices and identity, and potential for establishing ongoing national networks. The following discussion briefly examines critical aspects of each area: biannual PRS events, DAP\_r events and partner programs, impact and pedagogical approaches research, and the Practice Research Portal.

#### Biannual PRS Events

As a long-standing feature of the RMIT School of Architecture and Design PhD research program, the PRS examinations, reviews of candidature and associated events held in June and October each year are arguably the most visible aspect of the practice-based research regime. The DAP\_r project enabled participant academics and candidates to present research for critique and offer up their supervision through an integrated panel based on peer review to a public audience. Feedback from partners confirmed the importance of this access to review and reflection for shared development of creative practice models and scope of enquiry. Over the course of the two years, while there was some drop off in participation due to budgetary constraints at partner institutions, particularly for candidates, nonetheless a substantial number of partners participated in each PRS, both in research review and in partner meetings and evaluations. Where partner candidates participated, the value of attending was noted.

The structure afforded by the biannual PRS program and its associated research training and event schedule provides a focus for students and supervisors alike to attain progress throughout candidacies and ensure a critical response to work in progress through peer assessment. Training sessions in research methods and supervision provide critical pedagogical and research methods rigour to the PhD program. This mobile and collaborative arena,

facilitated by the DAP\_r project, confirmed the maturity and strengths of the RMIT University program but also demonstrated that the model could be applied elsewhere and be cognisant of regional or research focus difference. The issue will be for RMIT to engage in self-reflection on the evolution of their model, as others come into the arena through the development of allied but stand-alone projects, both in Australia and internationally.

### Candidate/supervision/review

Invitations to external candidates, academics, practitioners and industry provide a fertile ground for open exchange of ideas and research themes and practices, thus providing an arena for critical and ethical delivery of programs and associated feedback. There are increasingly sufficient training and organisational structures in place to ensure students receive timely feedback from a range of people experienced in their research area or in research methodologies and communication strategies. This area of research methodologies and supervision expectations has, in the past, been regarded as requiring further development. The opportunity for sharing supervisory and methodological knowledge enabled by the DAP\_r network was confirmed as an important benefit of the program.

### Westminster ADAPT-r exhibition and London PRS

The skillfully mounted ADAPT-r exhibition in November 2016 collated the creative practice of completed PhD's broadly undertaken through the European, and was indicative of the rich variety of practice-based research particularly with regard to communication of this work in material form. For completed or prospective candidates, this expansive survey enables an immersive understanding of the outcomes of PhD enquiry within a supportive practice-oriented regime.

The November 2016 Europe PRS followed the structure familiar from Melbourne with the incorporation of academic/practitioners involved through the ADAPT-r project. In side meetings regarding the aims of practice-based research academic programs, discussions with European partners uncovered both supportive and divergent perspectives in terms of approach rather beyond acceptance of the larger creative research project.



Three collaborative forums/symposia and a pedagogical archive project constituted the event series devised early in the DAP\_r project. Facilitated by planning meetings undertaken at the first and second PRS' of the project, partner universities joined together to develop programs suited to their creative research proclivities and/or regional opportunities.

1. The Language of Practice Research, 5 May 2017

By all accounts this Sydney forum delivered a very pertinent, well-attended and lively event, enabling presentation of critical and multidisciplinary material. Multidisciplinary in focus, the event was conducted and hosted by the University of Technology Sydney together with the University of New South Wales, University of Canberra and the University of Tasmania. The event demonstrated the need for a shared language to express the value of practice research, enabling advocacy for research through examination of design projects, and encouraging the breadth of design practice strategies.

2. Practice in Research <> Research in Practice, 27-28 July 2017

Conducted by Bond University in collaboration with QUT and the University of Adelaide, this was a two-day symposium held between the academy on the Gold Coast and m3architecture's Brisbane architectural practice studio. The focus on research in practice was demonstrated through immersion in the architectural office on the second day, contrasting with the shared academic and candidate presentations the previous day. International perspectives regarding future practice and research themes complemented topics critical to everyday practice and the value of research regimes, all valuable references to take from the event. Feedback suggested it would be worth further analysing presentations and unpacking what modes or value structures can be applied within the overall framework of the PhD by practice.

3. Interdisciplinary Impact of Creative Practice Research, 26 September 2017

Adopting an interdisciplinary thematic model, this meeting became a forum for research interests across spectra of allied difference. Hosted and curated by Monash Art, Design and

Architecture together with Deakin University, University of South Australia, University of Tasmania and Charles Sturt University, the event explored the themes of Environment and Ecology; Medical Health and Wellbeing; and Community Change and Social Behaviours. This event not only confirmed the possibilities for expanded research areas but also encouraged alternative languages to be explored between sciences, the humanities and design.

Each of the three events confirmed the critical and forward-thinking nature of creative research across platforms, whether academia or industry, and across disciplinary boundaries. Importantly audiences for these programs were drawn from within the academy but also included an expanded range of interested researchers, students and practitioners. Critical agendas were presented, published and recorded for the DAP\_r website so the thinking and projects presented are accessible for future development.

### Pedagogy and Practicality – Implementing the Creative Practice PhD

The final partner outcome for the DAP\_r project is a research investigation and interactive online program intended to elicit ‘understanding of the frameworks and mechanisms that enable the pursuit of practice-based higher education.’ Managed by the University of Adelaide in collaboration with University of South Australia and University of Western Australia and intended to be undertaken over the first half of 2018, the project involves data gathering through conversations, online forum discussion and the production of an archive of approaches to practice-based research representing the state of play. This project assumes ongoing management of and access to the DAP\_r website.

### Design Research Training: Impact Research

Alongside the PRS’ and event series, an experienced researcher Dr Cecilia de Marinis, who had been involved in the European ADAPT-r project, undertook pedagogical research and review into the nature of practice-based and creative research. Interviews with PhD candidates and supervisors at RMIT and some partner universities together with a partner workshop ‘Mapping Impact in Creative Impact Research’ ensured that the evolutionary and theoretical

underpinnings of creative research were a part of the formal agenda. Advancing peer reviewed and critical publication of creative research themes, theories and practices is a necessary expansion of the PRS based PhD program, to confirm the academic rigour and quality of research outcomes beyond and including traditional scholarly outputs.

### Modes of Dissemination: Practice Research Portal – Web Resource and Community Hub

The [Practice Research Portal](#) is the realisation of the web resource and community hub planned at the inception of the DAP\_r project. Web-based and digital strategies developed by RMIT University for dissemination of PRS programs, events, candidate research and feedback are very well developed and presented with clarity and depth. Potential candidates are able to fully investigate the suitability of the PRS system in line with their research interest, and understand the cohort of researchers and supervisors and the nationwide accessibility of the program. The archive of research projects and events amassed over the years is readily available and reveals the breadth and depth of practice-based research in the creative industries tied to the built environment and associated creative arts over time.

Through the medium of exhibition and public examination, the outcomes of PhD research are showcased to stakeholders, whether internal or external to the institutions and drawn variously from industry or personal associations. The demonstration of practice-based research through installation, production of creative outputs and writing, and informed through public presentation, ensure the relevance and currency of PRS research is open to both critical review and celebration by a wide audience of peers. This public review advances the degree to which a rigorous approach to PhD research and evaluation is devolved to many through exhibition and web-based archival production.

### DAP\_r Project Website

A critical aspect of the DAP\_r project is to ensure collaborators and a wider audience are kept informed of the scope and outcomes of creative practice research, and all facets of the ongoing program. A project website was established to support this, managed by RMIT and including the work of partner institutions over the course of the two-year project. The original intent of the communication

project is reproduced below:

- Profile all DAP\_r partners
- Provide a platform for publications and articles
- Provide a repository of abstracts for DAP\_r PhD candidate
- Confirm a calendar of events
- Develop a visual identity and style guide

The resultant [DAP\\_r website](#), which was realised towards the end of the project, acts as a lasting archive or profile of DAP\_r outputs through text, images and video.

The DAP\_r communication project is accessible and is a current snapshot of the intensity of the two-year program seen alongside the extensive web-presence of the RMIT PhD program on the Practice Research Portal. If the network is to continue the ongoing maintenance and management of the DAP\_r website will require further commitment from partner organisations, should the desire to continue the collaborative research project be confirmed.

### Evaluation Program: Partner Responses at Inception and Completion

Partner responses to the practice-based research model were elicited through scheduled evaluation meetings over two years. Below is a summary of key responses selected from feedback at the initial June 2016 meeting, where participants were invited to share initial thoughts on the model and their involvement in the DAP\_r project; and at the concluding meeting in October 2017, where partners were asked to reflect upon the project and if possible suggest ways forward.

#### June 2016 – Inception

Partners were asked to reflect upon what was for many their first experience of the PRS program and the intensity of the panel review. Others were able to reflect upon how the program had changed since their last visit or since the completion of their candidature. Feedback confirmed the energy and depth of engagement in the research, and the ability to operate within a community of practice that identified with creative research. For some, communicating the model and its possibilities and benefits to their institution

was identified as a long-term project, which would include understanding the resources and space required to mount such a program. The range of disciplinary focuses of presenting candidates was regarded as an important component of the success of the PRS, yet this raised issues including appropriate supervision and a sufficient cohort of peers and audience to support the endeavour. The combination of exhibition as explication of the research outcomes along with public examination and peer review experienced in person was felt to enable understanding of both the breadth of enquiry and the mechanisms that support the PRS model.

When asked to consider how the DAP\_r project could support and facilitate new PhD and practice-based research models at partner institutions, partners appeared supportive of the development of a network of collaborators and very open to the development of a series of events that could expose academic and practice interests in the area of creative and practice-based research. There was a general consensus that institutional pressures and regulations could be more effectively challenged through the development of a working networked community of practice.

### October 2017 – Conclusion

The following questions were posed to gathered partners at the concluding session, and responses are summarised below:

- How do partners now assess the value of practice research programs to academia and practice? Have attitudes and approaches shifted? In terms of interdisciplinary and new disciplinary forms, does the PRS encourage sharing that creates practices and new endeavours?
- How could energy and outcomes achieved across two years be captured and extended?
- What is the potential for a collaborative group to develop into the future?

Exposure to the RMIT model has appeared to assist in increased acceptance at partner institutions, through demonstrating the benefits and the willingness to test the model for application outside RMIT University, and by demonstrating the rigour and expectations of the PhD format and output. Where there are visual arts or creative works programs already in operation at partner universities, these

formats are seen to usefully assist in developing local models alongside the PRS model.

Increased acceptance of research across institutions and disciplines is facilitated by collaboration with other creative disciplines in one's own institution or increasingly now through DAP\_r partners.

Dissemination of outputs, research and events through an accessible and maintained web presence is regarded as a critical aspects of sharing knowledge regarding creative practice research and encouraging research participation outside the traditional creative disciplines. It was noted that the Practice Research Portal (formerly titled the Creative Practice Research Portal) is intended to examine and present practice relevance beyond traditionally creative disciplines.

The mechanics of PhD structure and delivery requires greater examination across the different partner models that are under development or may be developed. Further collaboration about expectations for examiners and the examination process, and about the relationships between the written component and the project component, will be important in ensuring institutional procedures enable rather than confine PhD outputs. Additionally, the need to recognise and provide for professional staff expertise in the development and maintenance of programs cannot be overstated.

At smaller institutions, there are problems ensuring sufficient candidates, supervisors, resources and facilities for the intensity of the model developed and potentially emulated by other institutions. What are the possibilities for shared pedagogical and practical resources across programs nationally?

### Summary Conclusion

The DAP\_r project has enabled greater national reach of the practice research model and allowed both candidates and supervisors room to take on the RMIT model and review their own local approaches. These collaborations across institutions have been regarded by academic representatives as extremely valuable, with the potential to advance research and theoretical practice in academia and industry in Australia and beyond. The question of impact of the practice-based PhD research program is an ongoing project. The underpinning research into the impact of creative research on the academy and outside world has been examined through interviews and observations, however the metrics,

DAP\_r

where they exist, remain to be uncovered through an ongoing iterative process, supported in some part by the forthcoming DAP\_r pedagogical exploration.

Once the DAP\_r project is complete and if these opportunities are not advanced through the organised program, the challenge will be to provide the mechanism for research conversations and programs to continue, and for the useful findings and outcomes of this OLT project to endure.