GUIDELINES FOR PROSPECTIVE HIGHER DEGREES RESEARCH APPLICANTS COMMENCING 2020

RESEARCH OF THE SCHOOL OF DESIGN

Research in the School of Design represents the breadth of contemporary design research and scholarship across the disciplines of communication design, industrial design, and digital design. Our work includes enquiries in and through material practices, digital technologies and environments, and social innovation. The School comprises a vibrant community of researchers and practitioners, including PhD communities, located in RMIT's global locations – Melbourne, Australia; Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, Vietnam; and Barcelona, Spain. We extend our global reach through actively engaging with our Adjunct Professor appointments and international collaborators.

Research in the School contributes to discourses in both applied and exploratory contexts, and has, for the last two Excellence in Research in Australia (ERA) rounds in 2012 and 2015, been assessed as being at or above world standard. Our research is supported by competitive funding including ARC grants, competitive and contract research, and arts and cultural grant schemes. While maintaining a focus on traditional professional practice areas, there is also an innovative approach to interdisciplinary work in the School, which will see the development of programs, research and engagement in digital and human interface design, co-designing with users, design for social innovation and design strategy. Our research is often collaborative and undertaken with end user communities, including specific industry sectors and local communities, and collaborations with colleagues from other disciplines, RMIT schools, and universities.

HIGHER DEGREES BY RESEARCH

RMIT University has a three-decade-long, internationally renowned higher degree program of creative practice research undertaken through practice-led and project-based approaches, whilst also supporting a thesis mode of research. Our leadership in Practice Research higher degrees includes an EU-funded ADAPT_r program that has established our innovative PRS model for design education in Europe, and a national government funded DAP_r program that has deepened this approach with partner Australian Universities. Higher Degrees Research (HDR) activity is central to the intellectual life of the School of Design. HDR scholars work in close collaboration with their supervisory teams, each other and School colleagues to advance the pursuit of new knowledge and ways of practicing and thinking about design activity and its potential. Research activities in the School are characterised by both the field of research and the mode of undertaking the research. HDR candidates work with a supervisory team to choose the mode and the field of research most suitable to the research being undertaken. The PhD program is usually completed in three years full-time or six years part-time, and a Masters program usually completed in two years full-time or four years part-time. Our candidates are supported by at least two supervisors, a research strategies coursework component and, importantly, a rich community of researchers sharing their work twice yearly.

BIANNUAL PRACTICE RESEARCH SYMPOSIA

The School's Higher Degrees by Research (HDR) program culture is underpinned by an iterative process of twice-yearly Practice Research Symposium (PRS) presentations, review panel discussions and candidate reflection. These biannual Symposia are held in each of three regions – Australia, Europe & Asia -– serve as the unique format and process for fostering the critical development and evaluation of HDR candidate research progress, as well as for the examination of completing candidates' research undertaken through practice. Candidates present their research to a review panel at every PRS in order to support the steady progress of their research. This process prepares practice research candidates for conveying the knowledge contribution of their research under examination via the unweighted combination of elements, usually including an exposition of creative work, a dissertation, and a live presentation and discussion with examiners. Candidates researching via thesis mode benefit from the rich culture of exchange at the symposium, and develop robust capacity to convey and review their work.

FIELDS OF RESEARCH

HDR scholars in the School engage with fields of research within existing disciplinary terms – Communication Design, Industrial Design, Digital Design – as well as drawing from multiple disciplines in cross disciplinary cluster/lab settings and/or in terms of specific research investigations, issues or problems. The School regularly advertises our HDR Program's available places and projects in particular fields of research on our website. Applications from prospective HDR scholars are welcome both within and across these fields of research.

MODES OF RESEARCH

Two primary modes of research are available within the School. These are (i) Practice Research, and (ii) Thesis Research.

1. Practice Research

Practice Research involves three approaches which are often undertaken singularly, but sometimes in combination. These are: reflective industry practice, generative practice, and applied practice. A practice research submission for examination may comprise a short dissertation, artefacts of research, and an experiential presentation; but sometimes is conveyed by a larger dissertation or thesis alone.

Reflective Industry Practice:

A Reflective Industry Practice mode of research involves practitioners operating largely in a professional environment, generally with a peer-reviewed and award-winning body of work developed over 10 years or more. These practitioners have already developed recognised mastery in their field. They reflect upon the nature of that mastery within a critical framework that invites reviewing the nature of their mastery, defining its enabling structures, its knowledge bases, and the implications of the nexus between these for emerging forms of research-led practice. They conclude by speculating through design on the nature of their future practice. They demonstrate their finding publicly, through an exhibit, a presentation to the examiners, and a written dissertation.

Two kinds of knowledge are created by this research. One concerns the ways in which designers marshal their intelligence, to construct the mental space within which they practice design. The other reveals how public behaviours are invented and used to support design practice. This research model extends and develops the knowledge base of their profession, and thus its ability to serve society.

Generative Practice:

A Generative Practice mode of research crosses boundaries between professional and academic/university-based research practices, and often between disciplines. This practice research approach enables practitioners to generate new kinds of practices, whether this remains within a discipline, or establishes new fields of practice in response to challenges and concerns emerging in a changing world. Candidates might be early in their careers, seeking to enter into a period of deep enquiry that transforms a set of practice-based interests into a more developed practice with a well-articulated emphasis, set of agendas and approaches. They might equally be mid- or later-career practitioners seeking to generate a new practice trajectory through a transformation of their established mastery. They demonstrate their findings publicly in ways most appropriate to the particularities of their practice research. Most often this occurs through an exhibit, a written dissertation, and a presentation to examiners.

This mode offers new knowledge in the form of previously unarticulated approaches to practice, informed by specific issues and challenges that direct their generative action. These new articulations contribute to both established and emerging communities of practice, and offer new possibilities concerning approaches to the emerging challenges society face. Streams within the generative practice mode pertain to either disciplines or research clusters/laboratories.

Applied Practice:

An Applied Practice mode of research pertains to specific research projects and problems, where practitioners generally work toward new ways of enabling creative practices. This often involves working with a larger team

through the vehicle of a defined research project, leading to the development of new techniques, technologies and capabilities that will benefit professional practices beyond that specific project vehicle.

Candidates are often early in their careers but may come from all career stages. They generally offer particular kinds of expertise needed within a specific research project, developing that expertise as they establish new ways of enabling creative practices.

This mode enables the practices of others by offering new knowledge of relevance to specific problems, as exemplified through its application to specific research project/s. These contributions can be applied to related situations, opening up new possibilities, questions and capabilities for others, and/or offering new ways to solve particular problems. Streams within the Applied Practice mode pertains to specific projects and/or research clusters/laboratories.

2. Thesis Research

Thesis Research is the traditional mode of enquiry through which philosophical, historical, experimental and field studies are undertaken and is characteristic of much research in the social sciences and cultural studies. Thesis Research is examined by submission of a thesis alone.

Thesis Research is based upon the critical analysis of a question, issue or problem within or across a field of knowledge and seeks to make new and original contributions to ways in which the topic may be understood. A detailed literature review problematises and analyses what is known about the topic and develops a specific set of research questions, aims, and objectives for the study. A tightly conceived research design is then developed based upon qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods. This research design is implemented and the resulting data analysed and interpreted in the light of existing literature in order to uncover new findings and make recommendations for both future professional practice and research in the field. The research results in a written thesis that is examined by international assessors in relevant fields.

Practice and Thesis Research may be integrated, however. For example, in the context of a community of researchers engaged in Practice Research, Thesis Research may also involve practice-based research approaches, forming a hybrid between practice and traditional forms, and offer practice-led research findings in the context of a more broadly scoped research enquiry. Equally, the thesis model may offer new knowledge about creative practices, or for creative practices.

PREPARATION FOR PROSPECTIVE APPLICANTS

Potential applicants are expected to familiarise themselves with the School research culture. Please visit our School website to find out more about our School and our research degrees program. An outline of our creative practice research culture, including videos of past candidates' examinations, is available at the Practice Research Portal.

A limited number of RMIT Fee-Waiver Scholarships and Stipends are available by competitive application for prospective International candidates studying onshore in Australia, and for Australian and New Zealand citizens. General information on postgraduate research at RMIT University, such as scholarships, fees and more, can be found by following the links starting here. Further information about fees for our postgraduate research PhD (DR235) and Master of Design (MR235) is available for (i) international candidates studying onshore in Australia, (ii) international candidates studying offshore in our Asia or Europe cohort, and (iii) Australian and New Zealand citizens eligible for a national government Research Training Program place.

We ask serious prospective practice research applicants to attend a PRS in order to become informed of our research culture, to determine whether it suits you, and to meet prospective supervisors. Further information and dates for the PRS series can be found online here.

If you are interested to pursue a higher degree by research in the School of Design, please follow these steps.

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STEP 1. IDENTIFY A HDR PROJECT AND SUPERVISOR ALIGNED TO YOUR INTERESTS

Familiarise yourself with the School of Design's currently advertised HDR opportunities. We ask you to identify one to three of the HDR place/project opportunities in a field and mode of research that suits your interests. Each project has potential supervisors within the School listed against it.

Prospective applicants with both outstanding experience and a research proposal which does not match an advertised place/project are invited to identify a most suitable School supervisor with shared research interests.

If you are interested in applying to our Asia or Europe cohorts, you must also obtain the agreed support of the region's PRS coordinator to proceed further.
For Europe contact Associate Professor James Auger: james.auger@rmit.edua.au
For Asia contact Dr Ben Byrne: ben.byrne@rmit.edu.au

STEP 2. SUBMIT AN EXPRESSION OF INTEREST (EOI) ONLINE VIA THE RMIT UNIVERSITY APPLICATION SERVICE

Formalise your Expression of Interest (EOI) by by completing the online form on the RMIT University Application Service website. An EOI for the School of Design needs to include the following supporting documents.

1. A 2–5 PAGE RESEARCH PROPOSAL RESPONSE TO THE HDR PLACE/PROJECT OPPORTUNITY

The supervisor supporting your application can provide specific advice on how to convey your background and research interests as relevant to the field and mode of your proposed research.

This can be expected to include:

- Proposed title of study, indicating the central theme you are exploring in one succinct phrase.
- How do you intend to respond to the advertised HDR place / project opportunity, and what approach, capabilities and interests will you bring to this research?
- How will you conduct your research, in relation to the School's support for research through reflective industry practice, generative practice, and applied practice?
- A preliminary list of readings, references and precedents, that indicate existing work relevant to your research.

2. A DESIGN PORTFOLIO OR PRACTICE WEBSITE (PRACTICE RESEARCH APPLICANTS ONLY)

Please provide a portfolio of past and current work supplied in electronic/digital format as a PDF document or one specific relevant URL link. The folio will usually include:

- A minimum of 4 recent projects, including your undergraduate / master's work if relevant.
- A range of communication and presentation mediums as appropriate.
- A short text explanation for each project.
- Notes clarifying your involvement, authorship or role in presented projects.
- A sample of publications about your work, if any, and of your own writing about your work.

3. A CRITICAL REFLECTION (PRACTICE RESEARCH APPLICANTS ONLY)

Approximately 1000 words of your own written reflections on an existing practice-based project of your own, with 5–7 relevant images, drawings or other visual material.

4. A CURRICULUM VITAE (CV)

Include education, professional experience, industry affiliation and/or partnerships, creative works, exhibitions, projects and publications, etc, with full reference details. Please also provide contact details of a referee that we may contact.

5. TRANSCRIPT OF ACADEMIC RESULTS

Provide full transcripts of your past academic results, including awarding university, program, and evidence of the percentage that the research component plays in the Honours or Masters level higher degree.

STEP 3. ATTEND A PRE-APPLICATION PRESENTATION INTERVIEW

The primary supervisor or PRS Chair that is willing to support your application will invite you to make a pre-application presentation to a panel comprising your prospective supervisory team of two supervisors, and chaired by the School's HDR coordinator or PRS Chair.

We schedule pre-application interviews for practice research applicants to coincide with our Practice Research Symposia (PRS) dates in each region where possible, so as to assist you in attending and gaining an appreciation of the research culture of the School. If application or scholarship deadlines preclude scheduling pre-apps alongside the PRS, they will be scheduled for another time. While face-to-face presentations are preferred, video-conference presentations are possible where required, and are offered to thesis mode research applicants. Potential applicants should prepare a pre-application presentation under the guidance of the supervisor supporting your application.

Following advice from the potential primary supervisor, the following must be supplied via the RMIT University Application Services website at least one week prior to the presentation, which, along with the interview, provides the basis on which the School may offer you a place.

Please note that a proposed research direction is an important part of the selection process, but that approval of the proposal and an offer to enrol does not mean that the proposal is fixed. As the research evolves it is expected that the research proposal will change in response. Within twelve months of enrolling, all PhD candidates (or six months, in the case of Master by Research candidates) undergo a Confirmation of Candidature, where the revised and expanded research proposal is reviewed by the School, and, upon acceptance, the candidate's enrolment is formally approved.

PRESENTATION & INTERVIEW

You are invited to make a 10-minute presentation addressing the following questions:

1. What is your research and/or practice history, and what motivates pursuing the proposed PhD research?
2. How do you intend to respond to the advertised HDR place / project opportunity, and what approach, capabilities and interests will you bring to this research?
3. How and why is the program at RMIT's School of Design an appropriate context for your research?

You may either prepare a PowerPoint slideshow for your presentation or simply speak to the research proposal and portfolio you submitted with your EoI.

Your presentation is followed by 10–15 minutes of discussion with a panel comprising:

1. The proposed primary supervisor
2. Potential associate supervisor/s or other registered supervisor.
3. Chaired by the HDR Coordinator, the School's regional PRS coordinator, or Deputy Dean Research & Innovation, or equivalent.

Each pre-application presentation is followed by internal deliberations in the School. This can be a lengthy process, as the School PRS/HDR Executive considers the strategic alignment of the research and candidate with the School's and RMIT's research priorities. This means candidates should be prepared for a waiting period. Potential applicants will be informed of the panel's decision via email on whether the School of Design will invite a formal application to the program.

STEP 4. SUBMIT A FULL APPLICATION FOR AN HDR CANDIDATE PLACE

If your pre-application interview is successful and your online EOI has been assessed and approved, you will be invited to submit a formal application, which will be a continuation of your EOI submitted via the RMIT University Application Services website.

Please note that all International applicants will be required to submit evidence that they meet RMIT University's Minimum English Language Requirements for research programs.

Once your full application has been logged it will be forwarded to the School for a final decision on whether you will be offered a place.

STEP 5. COMMENCING CANDIDATURE

Once offered a place, a candidate formally enrols and commences the first stage of the PhD involving two critical activities:

1. The candidate develops the framework for their research under the guidance of supervisors toward a Confirmation of Candidature presentation, which is the first Milestone Review that formally approves the research to proceed.

2. Undertaking the coursework component of the PhD, usually a Creative Practice Research Strategies for practice researchers, or a social science-oriented Research Strategies course for thesis researchers, with both online and face-to-face activities. The face-to-face component may be undertaken over a semester on campus, or via an intensive 1 or 2 day seminar usually scheduled immediately prior to a PRS. Confirmation of Candidature won't be granted until requirements of the course are complete.

LINKS: the digital form of this document includes important hyperlinks. You can find this document online and access links at: rmit.edu.au/about/our-education/academic-schools/design/research#hdr