

We need a statutory qualification for practitioners in higher education

Some research presentations by practitioners are more akin to sales pitches than free enquiry, says Ian Pace

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[Ian Pace](#)

It is not always necessary that an academic possesses a PhD. In earlier times, many did not, and that situation is arising more frequently again as increasing numbers of practitioners are employed on teaching and research contracts in some parts of UK academia.

In my own field of music, practitioners form a clear majority of academics in the post-92 sector (not to mention private providers): mostly composers, sound producers and engineers, popular musicians and musical theatre practitioners. There is nothing wrong with this. Indeed, in previous articles for *Times Higher Education*, I argued for the importance of the [integration of active practitioners](#) into university departments of the performing arts.

Historically, Dartington College of Arts – since 2010 part of Falmouth University – operated the principle that *all* academics should be practitioners. With this came an intense concentration on the concept of practice-as-research, involving regular theoretical contextualisation and critical self-reflection. The field of performance writing, for instance, was as far away as one could imagine from conventional “creative writing”, focusing on the act of writing and its interactions with other art forms. But Dartington’s utopian ideals would be hard to replicate across the sector at present.

It is noteworthy that fewer than half of relevant post-92 institutions, and no colleges of higher education or private providers, submitted to the [Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies sub-panel](#) of the 2021 Research Excellence Framework. I have [noted in THE](#) the difficulties relating to practice and the format of the REF, and I acknowledge that it is possible to undertake research without entering it – albeit with limited time and resources. Nor do I believe it is necessary that every academic engage in research. However, I question the “university” credentials of a department in which almost no-one apparently is.

Beyond this, there are deeper issues at stake when integrating practitioners who lack familiarity with wider academic culture, values and issues, including critical thinking, dispassionate analysis of subjects independently of personal interests, and, above all, academic freedom.

These concerns extend even to some academic staff with practice-based PhDs, which can (though by no means always do) consist of ordinary practical work accompanied by a commentary applied retrospectively. There are practice-research projects that involve clearly articulated research questions that are critically explored through practice and whose outputs utterly embody the knowledge generated. But other work involves appended commentaries to “spin” practical work as “research-like”, through liberal references to approved intellectual figures, employment of jargon, or maximisation of any superficially “scientific” elements.

Attendance at various recent academic events has amplified to me how much of a disjunction of values exists between practice-researchers and other academics. Some research presentations by practitioners are more akin to sales pitches. Even where their work involves some self-critical thinking, there is often much less questioning of wider basic assumptions that underlie projects.

For example, a research question for a literary figure concerning how to write a text, promote it and oneself, and network with agents and publishers can be considered a form of “soft critical thinking” compared with deeper questions about the nature of literature, its aesthetics, technical devices, social function and relationship to wider culture. Earlier in my academic career, I began work on a module on “music and the marketplace”, which in other hands morphed into “how to get ahead in the musical marketplace”.

Many practitioners have worked in environments where free critical thinking and independent thought are constrained by the demands of institutional or brand loyalty, or the need to please powerful individuals. Many such environments are in part sustained by networks and sometimes conformity to some imposed norms. Academia is, of course, not immune to these factors, but at least the principles of wider intellectual freedom continue to exist.

As an active practitioner and scholar, I have personally encountered more than a few tensions about this in conversations with others. Practitioners can be, perhaps understandably, unsympathetic or even hostile towards a culture that places under regular critical scrutiny their own ideological and other assumptions, or the mechanisms at play in the environments where they have built their reputations.

In this context, government rhetoric linking academia more strongly to the needs of industry has the potential to threaten academic independence and autonomy. Robust legal measures are required to ensure this type of academic freedom is protected as strongly as others in the [Freedom of Speech Bill](#) currently going through Parliament.

Beyond this, there should be a statutory qualification for those without a PhD or equivalent demonstrable academic prowess who wish to work in academia. Perhaps it could be incorporated within practice-based PhDs. This would not simply be identical with a teaching qualification (PGCHE), nor exclusively about teaching. It would be about the values of the university, which should feed into all types of activities, including administration, tutoring and so on.

It is vital that academics engage with external practice, but practitioners should also engage with the values of academia. Some may fear the uncertainty afforded by open

freedom of inquiry, but they need to understand how this is one of the greatest strengths of scholarly inquiry.

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