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Prior to the early 1990s and the imperatives of the Research Assessment Exercise, the quantity and quality of research within departments of Art & Design was very variable, ranging perhaps from very good research through to a large number of departments with no discernible research culture at all. Among design practitioners, there was practice, consultancy and exhibitions, but very little work that centred on design science, the building of theory, or the reporting of empirical results. The legacy of this situation is that there are residual confusions about what constitutes high quality research and scholarly activity. Perhaps the most contentious debate has centred on the role of design practice and whether it can be considered to be research.

Research seeks primarily to extract reliable knowledge from real or artificial worlds, and tries to articulate that knowledge in such a way that that others may reuse it. This supposes that the results of research will have been sufficiently abstracted and generalised. Research therefore has goals quite different to practice. It asks questions, selects appropriate methods, tests the questions, analyses the results objectively, and disseminates the conclusions unambiguously. It lays down reliable knowledge that future researchers may follow, and methods that may be repeated if necessary. These are research goals. Practice does not have these goals. Practice, if part of research, must therefore be grounded in clear research intentions.

The PhD is a training in research and admits the successful candidate to the ranks of professional academic researchers. The form of the PhD necessarily follows these research intentions. There is as yet little tradition of doctoral study in design, and there are lessons to be learned from problems with existing programmes.

Before design can really begin to build a corpus of reliable knowledge, it will be necessary for us to clear away these confusions about the nature of research. A focus on the requirements of the PhD is one way to help us in this task.