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# A design research framework to inform policy in Irish higher education

The landscape of higher education in Ireland is changing. In 2011, the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 was launched providing a blueprint for its future development. Part of this ongoing process will see the implementation of performance funding in the sector. Performance funding directly links state institutional funding to institutional performance as indicated by performance outcomes in key predetermined areas. This may impact significantly on design research funding and inquiry in higher education. As a practice which has developed to a significant extent outside of the university; design values, methodologies and requisites fundamental to its progression do not always align well with those of traditional academia and may not be reflected within the current strategic discussions. The focus of this research article is the implementation of performance funding within the Irish higher education sector, and its potential impact on design research funding and development, with the ensuing need for designers to articulate clearly the value of design research and its methodological approach.

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The landscape of higher education in Ireland is changing. In 2011, the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 was launched providing a blueprint for its future development (Higher Education Strategy Group 2011). As part of this ongoing process, in May 2013, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) made recommendations for “system reconfiguration, inter-institutional collaboration and system governance in Irish higher education” (Department of Education and Skills (DES) 2015). Currently, important decisions are being formulated regarding the future of Irish higher education and research. These decisions, when implemented, will also impact on the future development of design education and research. As a practice which has developed to a significant extent outside of the university, design values, methodologies and requisites fundamental to its progression do not always align well with those of traditional academia and may not be reflected within the current strategic discussions. This, combined with the relatively small representation in the wider educational arena, creates a situation where conditions necessary for its positive development may not be understood or met in this changing environment. The focus of this research article is the implementation of performance funding within the Irish higher education sector, and its potential impact on

design research funding and development, with the ensuing need for designers to articulate clearly the value of design research and its methodological approach.

At present, “Ireland is one of the few developed European countries which does not employ a formal comprehensive performance management” system in higher education (Mazars cited in HEA 2013). However, this is about to change. The Department of Education and Skills website states in its overview of Irish higher education development that a key element “will be the implementation of performance funding in the sector” (DES 2015). The planning of this process is evidenced by government publications such as the Higher Education System Performance Framework 2014 – 2016 (DES 2013), *Towards a performance Evaluation Framework: Profiling Irish Higher Education* (HEA 2013) and the *Report of the Research Prioritisation Steering Group* (Research Prioritisation Steering Group 2011). These reports indicate that performance evaluation will be introduced and that its final configuration is in development.

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Performance evaluation is in itself a positive development. It may be used to demonstrate the benefits of public investment in research while also making higher education institutions accountable for investments made, thus ensuring that funding goes to those who deliver at the highest level. The challenge is to design a performance evaluation system which rewards all research in a fair and equitable manner. An overview of the literature relating to performance evaluation systems in place internationally reveals some of the difficulties. For example, as outlined in the recently commissioned HEA report, much of research assessment historically has had an *“inbuilt bias in favour of hard sciences and bio sciences”*. This bias is partly due to dependence on bibliographic databases of peer reviewed journals, such as Thomson Reuters Web of Science and Elsevier’s Scopus, as an empirical basis for research assessment. These are *“prime vehicles for knowledge dissemination in the natural sciences, medical sciences and life sciences. This is to the detriment of disciplines with more disparate publication cultures”* and varied research outputs, such as the creative arts (HEA 2013). The complexity of funding evaluation exercises and the necessity of producing metrics to evaluate research for the purpose of funding can lead to the use of a more quantitative metric which may fail to identify and value more qualitative and contextual research. Also, new or emerging research disciplines are at an immediate disadvantage when seeking funding based on past successes. This raises some potential challenges for Irish design researchers seeking research funding should an Irish performance evaluation framework follow international practice. Hence the importance of Irish design researchers engaging with public sector policy makers and communicating clearly their research approach, its intrinsic value and an appropriate framework for its evaluation before performance funding is introduced. Initiatives such as Irish Design 2015 (ID2015) a year-long programme promoting Irish design which supported both the launch of Iterations Design Research & Practice Review and Faultlines-Bridging Knowledge Spaces; Ireland’s inaugural design research conference are highly beneficial for providing a platform for this type of discussion and others relating to design research in Ireland. Engagement with these platforms

to disseminate research which contributes to the understanding and development of design research is particularly important as the nature and effectiveness of design research methodologies can prove difficult to rationalise and communicate.

The challenges associated with articulating the intrinsic value and approach of design research within academia stem from its historical development. The foundational intentions and beliefs of designers stem from a craft tradition. This is evidenced in education by a practice based studio approach, emphasis on tacit knowledge and learning by doing. Research is an intrinsic element of design practice and design researchers intuitively bring the tacit and experiential knowledge acquired in design practice to the research process. However, the positivist discursive frameworks of traditional academic research often render this element of research invisible. There are few mechanisms, if any, to evidence this implied and experiential knowledge despite the role it plays in design scholarship and expertise. As outlined by Niedderer *“[...] tacit knowledge plays an important role both in the research process and in evaluating and communicating research outcomes. [...] tacit knowledge seems important for the generation and application as well as the experience and judgment of research and its results, and for creating new experiences, abilities, and knowledge”* (Niedderer cited in Mareis 2012).

Yet, this form of knowledge often remains undetectable in *“the epistemology of modernity”* (Jarvis 1999, p.13). The theoretical development and communication of tacit and experiential knowledge is the subject of much debate (Polanyi 1966; Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1980; Benner 1982; Schon 1983; Dreyfus 1992; Lawson 2004; Hutchings and Jarvis 2012) and is far from resolved. Polanyi, a most influential contributor to tacit knowledge theory, states *“we can know more than we can tell”* (Polanyi 1966, p.4) but he also suggests that *“we can communicate [what we know]...provided we are given adequate means for expressing ourselves”* (Polanyi 1966, p.11). Polanyi’s theory suggests that it may be possible to understand and communicate a designer’s approach to design and research in its entirety given adequate tools.

The goal of this current research is to investigate the area further, to explore the research practice of designers, their understanding of and approach to research and to develop a grounded theory to explain this process. The second stage is to articulate and communicate the value and credibility of this approach with a view to creating a framework to understand and guide academic design research enquiry. To achieve the goals outlined, a dialogue with practicing design researchers is fundamental. Should you have any comment to make relating to design research practice or if you would like to participate in the research project interviews, please email me at [carmel.maher@itcarlow.ie](mailto:carmel.maher@itcarlow.ie).

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