PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH IN CULTURAL STUDIES

Each academic year, the postgraduate program in Cultural Studies at the Department of Liberal Arts offers a limited number of students the option of conducting practice-based research towards their MA, M.Phil. and Ph.D. degrees. Practice-based research can currently be carried out in the fields of theatre, visual arts, music, and film.

WHAT IS PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH?

In practice-based research in Cultural Studies, questions relevant to theoretical discussions and models in the field of Cultural Studies are investigated partly by means of practice. Practical work in drama, visual arts, music, or film is an integral part of the research process. The creative outcomes of the research, such as a play, a film, a concert or an exhibition, are assessed as part of the student’s MA, M.Phil. or Ph.D. degree along with a written component. The practical and written components of practice-based degrees form a coherent whole. Both components must address the research question(s) and especially at the Ph.D. level, communicate advances in knowledge. The written thesis reflects on the creative process and provides the conceptual basis as well as the theoretical framework within which the creative product can be critically analysed and examined. More detailed requirements for these components are provided below.

WHO IS ELIGIBLE FOR PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH?

In order to be accepted to the practice-based program, applicants are required to have an undergraduate degree in drama, visual arts, film, music or a related discipline, with Lower Second Class Honours (MA students) and First Class Honours and good Upper Second Class Honours (3.3 and above) (M.Phil. and Ph. D. students). Ph.D. applicants must also have a Master’s degree in a field relevant to Cultural Studies.

Applicants who do not have an undergraduate degree in the fields in question but have accumulated substantial work experience can submit a portfolio of their previous creative work, including a sample.

All applicants must submit a research proposal that outlines the planned project. MA students write their research proposals in the course Methods of Inquiry in Culture (CLTR 6100) during their first year of studies. M.Phil. and Ph.D. students submit their initial research proposals when applying to the program and develop them further during the Methodology course.

WHAT IS REQUIRED OF THE PRACTICAL COMPONENT?

The practical component has to contribute to the production of knowledge throughout the research process. Practical, creative work generates data in response to the research question(s). Because practice informs the research process, the student has to
document the entire process of the practical work and reflect upon it in the written component.

The development of the practical work is assessed in the Graduate Seminars at the Department of Liberal Arts, in which M.Phil. and Ph.D. students present their research proposals and later, papers based on their data and analysis. Along with a written seminar presentation, students present samples of their practical, creative work. Students working on film present a first edit in their second seminar and a second edit in their third seminar. If the nature of the practical work requires more consistent assessment (for example in the case of devised theatre), the supervisory committee specifies when and how the assessment takes place.

1) Theatre
   In practice-based research in the field of theatre, the practical work can include directing, acting, or scriptwriting (MA, MPhil and PhD degrees). In theatre design, practice-based degrees are available on the MA level only. The student’s role in the production needs to be explained in the research proposal as well as in the reflective component of the written thesis. Students do not necessarily have to write or devise a new play. They can approach already existing material from an original perspective, in light of their research question(s). The Department can assist students in locating a rehearsal space and organizing the final staging where the practical component is assessed.

2) Film
   In practice-based research in the field of film, the practical work can be directing or screenwriting (MA, M.Phil. and Ph.D. degrees) or at the MA level, also editing or cinematography. The student’s role in the production needs to be explained in the research proposal as well as in the reflective component of the written thesis. The Department can provide filming and editing equipment and assists in organizing the final screening where the practical component is assessed.

3) Visual Arts
   In practice-based research in the field of visual arts, the practical work is painting, installations, drawing, design, photography, festival arts, or public art (MA, MPhil and PhD degrees). Students must source their studio or production space, but the Department can assist with the exhibition space for final thesis exhibitions. In projects based on teamwork, such as community art and design, the artist’s own role and contribution have to be carefully articulated in the reflective chapter of the written component.

4) Music
   In practice-based research in the field of music, the practical work is composition, adaptation, arrangement and/or performance of a significant and innovative musical work (MA, MPhil and PhD degrees). In productions including other musicians, the student’s own contribution must be clearly outlined in the reflective chapter of the written component. The Department
can assist students in organizing the final concert where the practical component is assessed.

At the Ph.D. level, both the practical and written components have to make an input to existing debates in the subject area by introducing new knowledge. The theatrical productions, art exhibitions, and musical works should be innovative and original in technique and presentation. The language of the film has to be complex, original, and innovative.

WHAT IS REQUIRED OF THE WRITTEN COMPONENT?

The written component in practice-based degrees is a shorter, modified version of wholly written MA, M.Phil. and Ph.D. theses in Cultural Studies. It consists of a conceptual frame and reflective process. The conceptual frame includes the basic elements of postgraduate theses:

Introduction: statement of the research problem and question(s), introduction of the theoretical and methodological approaches to answering these questions

Literature Review: a critical review of relevant scholarly literature. This review provides the foundation and context for the student’s own research. Instead of a list of summaries, the literature review should be organized thematically around questions and arguments that are integral to the student’s own research question. The student can identify an angle from which her or his research project can contribute to this existing body of knowledge.

Methodology: a discussion of selected research methods in light of relevant literature.

This chapter can include the reflective process, in which the student documents and analyses the creative, practical process of knowledge production that has gone into the thesis. This process should be presented as part of the Methodology chapter. Alternatively, the reflective process can be presented as an independent chapter.

The length of the reflective component should be 2000-2500 words out of the total 6000-10 000 words (MA), 7500-8500 words out of the total 20-30 000 words (M.Phil.) and 14 000-15 000 words out of the total 40-50 000 words (Ph.D).

Discussion and analysis: analysis of the data produced in the research process in conversation with relevant conceptual models and theoretical debates. In M.Phil. and Ph.D. theses, this section can be divided into two or more different chapters.

Conclusion
EXAMINATION OF THE WRITTEN AND PRACTICAL COMPONENTS

The examination of practice-based theses, like other Cultural Studies theses, follows the University of the West Indies’ Regulations for Graduate Diplomas and Degrees, Section Three. Practice-based MA theses are awarded a mark and a grade (Regulation 8), whereas practice-based M.Phil. and Ph.D. theses are awarded a passing grade. The examiners may also recommend the award of high commendation to M.Phil. and Ph.D. theses of high standard. See Regulations 19-35 for further details on the examination of theses.

Requirement for components to be examined:

MA: The written component is weighted at 30% and the practical component at 70% of the overall mark. The length of the written component is 6000-10 000 words. The creative product examined should be either
1) A full-length theatrical production (90 minutes+)
2) A medium-length film (45 minutes+)
3) An exhibition of paintings, installations, drawings, design, photography, festival arts or public art. The number of items will be specified at a meeting between student(s), their supervisory committees and two well-established practicing artists.
4) A musical performance (45 minutes+), excluding an intermission.

Together, the practical and written components amount to 12 credits.

M.Phil: The length of the written component is 20 000 – 30 000 words. The creative product examined should be either
1) A full-length theatrical production (90 minutes+)
2) A medium-length film (45 minutes+)
3) An exhibition of paintings, installations, drawings, design, photography, festival arts or public art. The number of items required is specified at the second Departmental seminar by the supervisory committee and two well-established practicing artists.
4) A musical performance (45 minutes+), excluding an intermission.

Ph.D: The length of the written component is 40 000 – 50 000 words. The creative product examined should be either
1) A full-length theatrical production (90 minutes+)
2) A full-length film (70 minutes+)
3) An exhibition of paintings, installations, drawings, design, photography, festival arts or public art. The number of items required is specified at the second Departmental seminar by the supervisory committee and two well-established practicing artists.
4) A musical performance (60 minutes+), excluding an intermission.
After the successful examination of the practical work and the written thesis, practice-based Ph.D. candidates are examined orally (Regulations for Graduate Diplomas and Degrees, Section Three, regulations 30-35).