

Assessing Engaged Research

Recommendations for assessing engaged PhD level
research

Contributors

Zoe Williamson, Head of Services, NCCPE

Ann Grand, Research Fellow and Policy Analyst, NCCPE

Emma Bailey, Research Associate, NCCPE

Rachel Handforth, Senior Lecturer in Doctoral Education and Civic Engagement,
Nottingham Trent University

Sophie Duncan, Co-Director, NCCPE

Bethany Rex, NCCPE Associate (Research)

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Executive Summary

Engaged research is becoming an increasingly significant feature of the UK doctoral landscape, as more students, supervisors, funders and communities collaborate to co-produce knowledge that is socially relevant, ethically grounded and mutually beneficial. Yet while doctoral education has diversified substantially in structure and purpose, **assessment practices** have remained **largely unchanged**. Current systems overwhelmingly privilege individual academic contributions and traditional written outputs, with limited recognition of the relationships, processes and collaborative labour that underpin engaged research.

This briefing explores how engaged PhDs are currently designed, supported and assessed, drawing on a mixed-methods research approach including desk research, a small-scale survey, and follow up interviews and focus groups with students, graduates, supervisors and engagement practitioners. The research highlights a persistent mismatch between what engaged research values: reciprocity, shared authority, equity, and reflexivity, and how doctoral work is assessed.

Key insights include:

- **Assessment frameworks do not yet reflect the realities of engaged research.** Institutional criteria still prioritise originality as an individual achievement, overlooking the contributions of community partners and undervaluing co-produced knowledge.
- **Power imbalances shape who is considered to be a legitimate assessor.** Despite their investment and expertise, non-academic partners are typically excluded from formal assessment, even in collaborative or industry funded doctoral models.
- **Students and supervisors face institutional barriers,** from rigid ethics and finance processes to lack of training, to absence of clear guidance on how engaged research should, or could, be examined.
- **Engaged research generates distinctive forms of learning and impact,** including relational, ethical, methodological and societal contributions that are not well captured in conventional viva and thesis formats.
- **Assessment practices in adjacent practice-based disciplines offer inspiration** for more flexible and reflective models, including portfolios, co-assessment, group critiques, and real-world outputs.

The briefing sets out two complementary pathways for change:

1. **An ideal vision of engaged PhD assessment**, in which universities recognise multiple forms of contribution, diversify panels to include engagement and practice expertise, embrace flexible outputs, and evaluate not only the final product but also the processes, relationships and transformations underpinning the research.
2. **Practical, incremental steps universities can take now**, such as revising criteria to acknowledge engagement, involving partners in formative assessments, providing dedicated training for supervisors and examiners, and enabling a wider range of reflective and collaborative evidence within doctoral submissions.

Finally, the research identifies a clear need for further participatory work with those who have completed engaged PhDs and those involved in supervisory roles, both academic and non-academic partners. Their experience and insight should shape what meaningful, ethical and inclusive assessment looks like in practice.

Transforming assessment is not just an administrative task; it requires rethinking the purpose and values underpinning doctoral education, recognising diverse knowledges and contributors, and aligning assessment with the principles of engaged research. Doing so will better support students, strengthen partnerships, and ensure that the PhD remains a credible and relevant route to generating knowledge for public good.

Introduction

Engaged research is increasingly recognised for its potential to generate socially relevant knowledge through collaboration with communities and non-academic partners. In response, doctoral training programmes focused on engaged research are emerging, aiming to support a new generation of researchers to undertake research with these values at the core. However, the appropriate assessment of engaged research remains a challenge. Conventionally, the assessment of PhD research is focussed on the individual student's contribution to knowledge, which doesn't consistently account for the perspectives and contributions of community partners in engaged research.

For the purpose of this briefing, we describe engaged research as:

“Engaged research encompasses the different ways that researchers meaningfully interact with various stakeholders over any or all stages of a research process, from issue formulation, the production or co-creation of new knowledge, to knowledge evaluation and dissemination.” (Grand et al., 2015)

And engagement more broadly as:

“Public engagement describes the myriad ways in which the activity and benefits of higher education and research can be shared with the public. Engagement is by definition a two-way process, involving interaction and listening, with the goal of generating mutual benefit.” (NCCPE, n.d.)

Evolving Modes of Knowledge Production

Traditionally, the award of a PhD reflects the contribution of the research student to the creation of new knowledge. Novel knowledge – again traditionally – could be in the form of a new method, protocol or approach, as well as new facts, information or understanding. For most PhD students, the creation of this novel knowledge will take place in a mono-disciplinary, academically-driven, university-located context. This has been termed ‘Mode 1’ knowledge production. In Mode 1, engagement is primarily an add-on to research, with publics and communities as receivers of expert knowledge.

However, in the twenty-first century, modes of knowledge production have evolved, primarily in response to changing social contexts. Mode 2 knowledge production (Nowotny et al., 2001), whilst still largely university-located, positions publics as

interest-holders who are consulted about research priorities and processes, mode 2 processes are inter-disciplinary, problem-focussed and context-sensitive. Mode 3 knowledge production (Carayannis et al., 2016), emphasises the co-creation of knowledge in a social context, the social impact of research and the positioning of publics and communities as core contributors to knowledge production. Finally, Moleka (2024) has proposed the concept of Mode 4 knowledge production, which emphasises transdisciplinarity, co-creation and inclusive engagement, which embraces publics and communities as fully engaged co-creators and co-designers of research.

These developments challenge traditional academic hierarchies by recognising that knowledge is not produced solely within universities, nor only by academic experts, but is shaped by collaborative processes across multiple settings and actors.

The Changing Role and Purpose of the PhD within This System

As modes of knowledge production have diversified, so too has the purpose of the PhD. Historically, the doctorate has been conceptualised as an academic apprenticeship (Park, 2005), preparing future academics by inducting them into disciplinary norms, research traditions and scholarly skills. The emphasis was on individual mastery and the production of original, academically situated knowledge.

However, major critiques in the late 1990s, most notably the Roberts Review (2002), highlighted concerns about doctoral graduates' preparation for a wider range of careers and the limited development of transferable skills. In response, doctoral education broadened in aim and structure. More recent approaches position the PhD as an opportunity to acquire advanced research capabilities applicable across the labour market, not only within academia (Boud & Tennant, 2006; Park, 2007).

The sector has also seen a rapid expansion in the types of doctorates available (Taylor & Wisker, 2023), including:

- structured or cohort-based doctorates;
- professional doctorates;
- doctorates by publication;
- collaborative doctorates involving universities and partners in industry, public sectors or the voluntary sector.

Many of these models involve varying forms of partnership, co-production or applied research, meaning that doctoral work increasingly spans institutional boundaries and involves multiple contributors with different kinds of expertise.

In this evolving landscape, the PhD becomes both:

- a site for creating new knowledge with partners, communities and stakeholders; and
- a site for developing capacities in collaboration, reflexivity, ethical practice and societal engagement.

These expanded purposes complicate traditional ideas about originality, authorship and individual contribution, especially for engaged research where knowledge emerges relationally and collectively.

How the PhD Is (Still) Assessed

Despite profound shifts in how knowledge is produced and how doctoral education is structured; assessment practices have remained static. All PhDs in the UK are assessed within current quality assessment frameworks (QAA, 2020), with academics working to assess candidates against the criteria set out by the institution. The PhD in the UK continues to be assessed primarily through:

- a substantial written thesis, and
- an oral examination (viva voce) conducted behind closed doors by academic examiners (Stephenson & Jackson, 2025).

Public defences in other European contexts offer greater transparency, yet they remain rooted in the assumption that academics alone hold the authority to judge doctoral-level knowledge (Kumar, Taylor & Sharmini, 2023).

Crucially:

- Non-academic partners, despite often co-designing or co-producing the research, are usually not permitted to participate in formal assessment, even in jointly funded industrial or collaborative doctorates (Taylor & Humphrey, 2021).
- Institutional assessment criteria rarely account for engaged, participatory or co-produced methodologies (Horta et al., 2022), making it difficult for examiners to interpret relational or community-based contributions.

- The focus on individual originality conflicts with the collaborative nature of engaged research, where expertise, labour and intellectual contribution are distributed across partners.
- While some practice-based disciplines have introduced more flexible formats (e.g., creative portfolios, performances), these remain the exception rather than the norm (Taylor, 2022).

As a result, doctoral assessment practices remain aligned with Mode 1 paradigms, even as doctoral research increasingly operates with Mode 2 and 3 routes to knowledge production. This creates a structural misalignment between what engaged research values and what universities are equipped to assess.

Bringing It Together

Understanding the evolution of knowledge production and the diversification of doctoral education helps explain the tensions uncovered in assessing engaged PhDs. The modern PhD is situated in a landscape where knowledge is collaborative, relational, contextual and socially embedded. Yet assessment frameworks remain rooted in individualistic, academic, and text-based traditions.

This mismatch underscores the need for new models of doctoral assessment, models that recognise the plurality of knowledge forms, the legitimacy of non-academic expertise, and the value of co-creation, while preserving rigour, fairness and accessibility.

Research Approach and Methods

This briefing draws on a mixed-methods approach designed to explore how engaged PhDs are currently undertaken and assessed, to identify challenges experienced by students, supervisors and partners, and to surface possibilities for more meaningful, ethical and participatory assessment models.

Purpose and Focus of the Research

The overarching aim of this work was to understand the lived realities of those involved in engaged doctoral research; students, supervisors, recent graduates and non-academic partners, and to explore how assessment processes could better align with the values and practices of engaged research. The focus was therefore both descriptive (what is currently happening?) and exploratory (what could or should change?), with attention to how power, partnership and institutional structures shape assessment practices.

Desk Research

We undertook desk research (Appendix 1) to review existing assessment practices that might offer transferable insights for engaged PhDs. This included:

- A rapid review of Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) 2023 provider submissions, focusing on assessment in practice-based and collaborative disciplines (e.g., art, design, performance, music).
- Supplementary searches of university websites, blogs and grey literature where TEF submissions did not contain relevant detail.
- Targeted purposive searching for materials on engaged research assessment, collaboration, reflective practice and co-production.

Although TEF submissions relate primarily to undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes, many of the assessment approaches identified, such as portfolio assessment, group critiques, co-assessment with partners and reflective documentation, offer conceptual and practical insights relevant to rethinking assessment in doctoral education.

Survey

To understand experiences across a wider group, an online survey was disseminated via:

- The NCCPE website,
- The NCCPE newsletter, and
- Direct outreach to academics and PhD students known to be involved in engaged, participatory or community-based research.

The survey focused on:

- Experiences of designing and undertaking engaged PhD research;
- Perceived barriers within institutional systems;
- Experiences of supervision and support;
- Assessment and examination practices;
- Views on what meaningful assessment of engaged research should include.

Eleven respondents completed the survey, representing a mixture of current PhD students, recent graduates and academic supervisors.

Interviews and Focus Groups

To develop richer qualitative insights, we undertook semi-structured interviews and focus groups with academics, PhD students and recent graduates. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to capture a range of disciplinary contexts and levels of experience with engaged research. Two of the participants also completed the survey.

These discussions explored:

- How engaged research is designed, including the negotiation of relationships, roles and expectations;
- Institutional supports and barriers;
- Experiences of supervision, ethics processes and partnerships;
- How assessment criteria are interpreted in practice;
- Possibilities for alternative or more participatory assessment;
- Tensions around legitimacy, power and whose expertise counts.

To analyse the data, we used deductive thematic analysis, informed by prior work on co-production, doctoral assessment and participatory research. Themes from the survey and qualitative data were integrated with findings from the desk research to inform the insights and recommendations presented in this briefing.

Why This Approach

This multi-layered approach was chosen because assessing engaged research is itself a relational and context-specific endeavour. Understanding assessment challenges requires understanding:

- The institutional structures shaping doctoral assessment;
- The everyday realities of conducting engaged research;
- The perspectives and wisdom of those who have recently undertaken engaged PhDs; and
- Examples of assessment innovation in adjacent fields.

The methods therefore combine evidence of what is currently done, lived experience of those directly involved, and precedents from related disciplines, providing a rounded and practice-informed foundation for rethinking assessment.

This quote from an interview illustrates the ways in which one graduate's research evolved and changed due to its engaged nature and shows the contribution of engagement to the direction of the research:

“...it has been invaluable because that lived experience -- I just can't emulate [that] as a researcher and working alongside the group has meant that our research priorities slightly shifted... I could kind of get a sense of what's going on at the moment and how we can kind of improve that” [recent graduate]

Desk Research Insights

A rapid review of Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) submissions looking at assessment approaches in practice-based disciplines (e.g. art, design, performing arts) revealed several transferable insights for engaged PhD research (see appendix 1 for more details).

- **Collaborative Assessment Models:** Some institutions, e.g. Anglia Ruskin and Pearson College, embed non-academic partners in assessment teams.
- **Reflective Practice:** Goldsmiths and University for the Creative Arts use reflective journals, blogs, and critiques to assess learning, not just research outputs.
- **Portfolio-Based Assessment:** Leeds Arts University and Royal Northern College of Music assess portfolios that include creative work, critical reflection, and evidence of learning.
- **Frameworks for Collaboration:** Falmouth University's "9 Domains of Collaboration" and Pahl & Facer's lexicon offer tools to evaluate and understand the partnership element of engaged research and value the contributions of all partners in the research.
- **Diversified Formats:** Institutions are experimenting with formats such as podcasts, policy briefings and mock auditions to assess real-world relevance.

These practices suggest that engaged PhDs could benefit from more flexible, reflective, and collaborative assessment models, moving beyond the traditional thesis and viva. However, they also raise questions about power dynamics, how non-academic partners are trained in applying marking criteria and whose opinions can count in assessing a PhD.

Insights from Survey, Interviews and Focus Groups

Twelve participants (current academic supervisors (9), PhD students (2) and recent PhD graduates (1)), shared their experiences of designing, supporting, assessing and undertaking engaged PhDs in focus groups and interviews. Eleven participants answered a survey. Key themes included:

Designing Engaged Research

- **Time and Planning:** Early design phases are crucial. Academic staff, community partners and students need time to build relationships and shape research collaboratively. This also includes understanding how the research can be effectively assessed and designing appropriate assessment pathways.
- **Expectation Setting:** Clear communication between students, communities, and supervisors is essential to navigate tensions between funders, feasibility, and ethics. Fundamentally supervisors and partners need to understand that this is a different type of PhD and that they should not follow the usual processes:

“The key to success was in addressing the research design: ontology, philosophy, axiology, epistemology, theories and methodologies. The combination of these inform every aspect of the research.” (Supervisor)

Support Structures

- **Supervision:** Expertise in engaged research, engagement and the methods that support it is vital. Co-supervision across disciplines and organisations requires negotiation and flexibility. It is the responsibility of supervisors to provide leadership in epistemology, method and rigour and to ensure the scope of the research project is manageable within the time and resources available.
- **Institutional Barriers:** Ethics processes, financial processes and rigid systems such as rules around paying contributors, accessing spaces or resources, and the siloed nature of universities can often hinder iterative, community-led research. Support to understand and navigate the systems and rigid processes of a university, where boundaries can be nudged or processes tweaked, is needed for both students, supervisors and partners:

“I struggled with buy-in from other senior staff in my institute - I would often mention the engagement at seminars and get sceptical questions.” (PhD student)

“However it was hard to coordinate lots of different stakeholder views that were sometimes competing and facilitate multiple sessions of engagement with limited funding.” (PhD student)

- **Training in Engaged Research Approaches:** Justifying the appropriateness of an engaged methodology (Carr et al., 2024) not only frames who will be engaged and how they will be engaged, but also why they will be engaged. Engaged research uses a range of methodological approaches; the involvement of others in defining the purpose of the engaged research can be different across these approaches. Typically, the scope of research is defined in reference to existing literature, but for engaged research the views and insights of communities or other invested partners could also play a role. While some of these requirements will be met from standard doctoral training programmes, the specific demands of engaged research means that supervisors may need to look beyond the university, for example to third sector and voluntary organisations who have extensive experience and tried and tested approaches for involving and engaging people and communities. Typically the skills and knowledge of engaged research approaches are not provided by the university, and students need to seek these opportunities out elsewhere:

“Training and workshops from the NIHR on co-produced examples of research and health studies. Workshops from my university on co-production and public engagement in research. YouTube videos from charities and organisations such as the patient's association about the importance of patient voices in research.” (PhD student)

Assessment Challenges

- **Recognition of Co-produced Knowledge:** Participants called for assessment criteria that acknowledge community contributions. For those completing the PhD, there is a clear acknowledgement of their work, but acknowledgement might look different for other contributors:

“... if you're doing participatory work or work in collaboration between different parties -- each has their own knowledge system... what's the knowledge contribution to their knowledge, and how do

they get that reward in an appropriate system for that... Everyone should be getting the credit within their own knowledge system.”
(Supervisor)

- **Assessment Panels:** There’s a need for interdisciplinary panels that include expertise in engaged research:

“...because my PhD is multidisciplinary... my supervisors are kind of debating where we go for external examiners and even who's best internally...really trying to figure out where my PhD sits and ... the best way for me to showcase all of the things that we've been doing and I think that is quite difficult.” (PhD student)

- **Creative Formats:** Innovative contributions to knowledge are emerging, but institutional regulations lag behind. A recent example is the shift to a willingness to hold vivas online; something many universities refused to allow until the Covid pandemic forced the change. As well as greater flexibility, online vivas have allowed examiners to be drawn from a wider geographical spread.

Wellbeing and Inclusion

- **Psychological Support:** Engaged research can be emotionally demanding. Students can be put in a position of holding the relationship of an institution with a community organisation when they have no power to manage how the institution behaves. Additionally, students may end up carrying the expectations of their partners to solve many challenges which aren’t directly related to their research. Institutions need to support students holistically, and recognise the additional work required in navigating and managing community relationships:

“one of the main challenges... they have come up with [areas] or they see a need somewhere, that my PhD can't fulfil... it's very much the sense of ‘I would like to fix that for you. And that is a system barrier and I completely understand where you're coming from with that lived experience, but unfortunately the scope of my PhD is this. And I I'm trying to target this.’... then it always feels a bit weird to kind of ...

you don't want to palm someone off just trying to validate that, but also balance with we're not really addressing that in this research.”
(PhD Student)

- **Non-traditional Pathways:** Students from diverse backgrounds, with lived experience or practitioners in the field of their research, may need tailored support and more flexible structures.

The Engaged Thesis

Broadly, a successful defence of a PhD comes from demonstrating that the candidate has made an original contribution to knowledge.

‘Original’ is often equated to mean the PhD is entirely the work of one person. However, in an engaged PhD, where collaboration is a necessity, claiming the research was only about the work of the PhD student would be inaccurate as well as disrespectful of the contributions of partners (Klocker, 2012). Moreover, the traditional thesis is unlikely to offer an authentic representation of an engaged PhD (Danner, 2023). Engaged research is more likely to be demonstrated by a range of outputs, for example considering the engaged PhD research as separate but overlapping bodies of work – the collaboratively-produced outputs of the participatory research (e.g. a creative piece, a report, a presentation) alongside the PhD thesis (Taylor-Bower et al., 2024) or adopting a portfolio approach (Spronken-Smith, 2023) in which the thesis sits alongside other outputs. Outputs could take a range of forms – a Citizen Science project, an artwork, a product, a new process (cf. [the REF guidelines](#) for types of outputs and products). However, examiners would still need to be satisfied that they can recognise the PhD candidate’s contribution, such as the use of a recognised credit taxonomy (e.g. CRediT) to verify contributions.

Engaged research is also more likely to be written up in a reflective way, which can create tensions for supervisors and students from disciplinary or work backgrounds where this approach is not traditionally practised:

“The programme was partially assessed through reflective writing elements. However, the programme management team would not provide example of good reflective writing as they didn't want us to 'copy it', but coming from a scientific background this was incredibly challenging.” (PhD student)

Similarly, ‘contribution’ is often equated with ‘of new knowledge’. While it is possible that the contribution can be new knowledge, it’s important to recognise that that contribution can come in many forms: re-classification of existing knowledge, new methodology, social impact, enhanced equity, etc. Determining the form of the contribution could be part of the research design, co-developed as part of the engaged research process.

Examining an engaged thesis in an engaged way

If the PhD research has been engaged, and the outputs from it are engaged, then it is logical and appropriate to reflect this in the assessment model. The first step must be to ensure that the university’s regulations permit the variety of outputs, methods and acknowledged collaborations that build an engaged PhD:

“If an unusual/novel assessment method is being used, ideally this should be clearly defined beforehand and plenty of support should be given to adapt to it ... One of the concerns I and my supervisor shared was that despite the programme being called 'integrated', the research and engagement had to be assessed completely separately, and the engagement could not be mentioned in the viva. We are waiting to see how this will be received by my examiners. Ideally it should all be assessed together.” (PhD student)

“It would be useful to understand how engagement and impact do or could factor into assessment of my thesis, such as chapters on these activities or presentation at viva.” (PhD student)

Furthermore, the thesis should be examined by people who understand engaged research (Wendling, 2023). This knowledge might come from academic expertise but it could equally be found in people with interesting practice outside academia. Broadening and diversifying examination panels would expand perspectives and support engaged examination. Unfortunately, whether universities allow examination by professional staff or external partners is inconsistent (Holliman et al., 2023).

While one route would be to gather a cadre of examiners with acknowledged academic expertise, another would be to ensure that the university’s regulations permit the involvement of examiners with a range of relevant backgrounds, although some training might be needed – either to support academics to

understand the qualities of engaged research, or practitioners to understand the rigours and requirements of academic assessment.

If the university's regulations are not amenable and can't – or won't – be changed, then one possibility is to bring community partners and non-academic supervisors into the mid-point assessments (Jones and Hunt, 2022). For example, they could review outputs, attend community presentations for first year reports or be part of the panel for a mock viva or an upgrade viva. PhD students reported the value of a mock viva with community partners present. In many PhD programmes, students have a short viva towards the end of their first year, an upgrade viva, as a check on progress before their candidature is confirmed;

“An upgrade viva was good practice.” (PhD student)

Key insights

Bringing both strands together reveals a tension between **institutional norms** and the **realities of engaged research**:

- **Exclusivity of knowledge:** in engaged research, the novel knowledge or contribution cannot be owned only by the PhD student or their university
- **Assessment as Learning:** Engaged research focuses on transformation and knowledge acquisition (Kemmis, 2019) whilst assessment methods tend to favour the latter. How can reflexivity play a role in the assessment?
- **Power and Participation:** Who assesses, and how, matters. Including non-academic partners requires clarity, training and a shift in traditional hierarchies, which must be reflected in assessment criteria and processes
- **Potential Legacy and Impact:** Assessment should ideally consider the long-term value of collaboration, not just the final thesis.

Recommendations

For Institutions

- Develop flexible assessment formats (e.g. portfolios, reflective journals, co-authored outputs).
- Include engagement experts and non-academic partners in assessment panels, providing support and remuneration for non-academic partners.
- Provide training for supervisors, academic examiners and non-academic examiners in assessment protocols and in collaborative, engaged and participatory methods.
- Adapt ethics and administrative processes to support iterative, community-led research.
- Design agile regulatory systems and assessment criteria and processes that resonate with the institution's ambitions for engaged research.
- Create safeguarding, supervision and support processes tailored to the practice of engaged PhDs.

For Supervisors

- Consider the nature of the engaged research in the design of the PhD.
- Support students in articulating their engagement journey.
- Encourage reflective practice throughout the PhD.
- Negotiate interdisciplinary supervision with clear roles and expectations.
- Outline assessment procedures early to give time to navigate university systems.
- Advocate for the involvement of partners at all stages of the research process, including assessment, even where traditional research cultures may make this more challenging.

For Funders and Policy Makers

- Recognise the time and complexity of engaged research in funding structures; include extra time for partnership development.
- Support innovation in assessment models; recognise plurality in the PhD research's contribution to knowledge.
- Promote equity in attribution and intellectual property.

Implementing Recommendations

Transforming university systems and processes can be a process of incremental change. Using the [NCCPE EDGE tool](#) we have developed a maturity matrix to describe the journey of embedding changes to assessment processes to acknowledge the additional complexities of undertaking engaged research. This could be used as a quick diagnostic tool for students, partners and academic supervisors to assess where they see a universities current practice and identify areas for development.

Dimension	Embryonic	Developing	Gripping	Established
Purpose	Engaged research is mentioned but not yet integrated into the doctoral programme's strategic aims. Assessment of engagement is informal or absent.	The rationale for engaged research is acknowledged in some doctoral pathways. Assessment practices begin to reflect engagement principles.	Doctoral programmes include engaged research as a distinct pathway. Assessment criteria and programme design align with high quality engagement practice.	Engaged research is embedded in the strategic vision of doctoral training. Assessment is aligned with programme goals, recognising approaches like co-production, community value and reflection.
Process	No formal mechanisms for assessing engagement; institutional processes are barriers.	Some flexible processes exist; ethics and supervision begin to adapt to engaged research needs.	Assessment criteria include a range of approaches e.g. co-produced knowledge, creative outputs are accepted; ethics processes are more responsive.	Assessment systems are co-designed with engaged partners; iterative, inclusive, and aligned with ethical principles.
People	Students and supervisors lack support or training in engaged methods; non-university voices are absent.	Some supervisors have engagement expertise; non-university input is informal	Supervisory teams include engagement experts; non-university partners are acknowledged in assessment.	Non-university partners co-supervise and co-assess; interdisciplinary panels include lived experience and engaged research expertise.

Conclusion

Assessing engaged PhDs requires more than adjusting existing regulations or adding new criteria. It calls for a fundamental rethinking of who creates knowledge, who is recognised as a legitimate assessor, and what forms of knowledge count. As different modes of knowledge production become necessary and valued in academia, there is a need for all forms of academic assessment to develop likewise.

At present, universities largely retain exclusive control over assessment, shaped by long-standing academic hierarchies and the assumption that only academics can judge doctoral-level work. This persists even when non-academic partners have helped shape the research from the beginning, contributed intellectual labour, or—particularly in industrial and civic collaborations—funded parts of the work.

Our findings highlight a clear misalignment between the collaborative, relational and transformative nature of engaged research and the individualised, output-focused model that currently dominates doctoral assessment. Progress requires shifting emphasis: from evaluating only the final product to understanding how the research was done, the quality of relationships, and the contributions made to and by communities, partners and wider society.

Based on the insights gathered, we suggest two routes forward.

1. Articulate an ideal for assessing engaged PhDs

To encourage and challenge change, providing an ideal assessment model enables the approach to be developed and critiqued before being implemented. It provides an opportunity to test the thinking with partners and communities working on engaged research projects, challenging assumptions about if and how they want to be involved in student assessment. It offers a guiding light, providing inspiration and insight into how to improve current practice. Situating this within other future focused work, such as the [Engaged Futures programme](#) of the NCCPE, aligns the need for changes in doctoral assessment to be considered alongside other necessary changes to how universities engage with and alongside society.

Drawing on this research, an assessment model aligned with the values of engaged research would:

- Recognise co-production as a legitimate scholarly contribution.
- Create meaningful roles for community partners and practitioners in assessment, and support them to undertake these roles effectively.

- Accept multiple forms of output (portfolios, creative work, reflective materials, co-authored artefacts), such as those recognised in the REF2029 assessment guidelines.
- Include examiners with expertise in engagement, participatory methods and community-based research from both within and beyond academia.
- Emphasise learning, ethical practice, mutual benefit and transformation — not only originality.
- Learn from established assessment processes in disciplines where engagement is a research methodology e.g. arts-based practice.

This vision resonates with the “Established” end of the EDGE-informed maturity matrix: co-designed, inclusive and ethically grounded assessment. Further research and co-development of ideal assessment models would be needed to develop this approach further.

2. Identify practical steps universities can take now

While the ideal assessment model provides a direction of travel, institutions can start taking action now. Easy steps could include:

- Making engaged research practices visible and valid in existing assessment criteria.
- Broadening viva panels to include practitioners or engagement specialists.
- Involving partners in formative processes such as upgrades, project reviews or mock vivas.
- Accepting diverse forms of evidence and reflective practice as legitimate doctoral outputs.
- Equipping supervisors with training in engaged and participatory methods.
- Providing support and/or training for examiners from in and beyond higher education to understand the nature of assessment for engaged research practices.

These incremental steps build confidence and capability while moving assessment closer to the values of engaged inquiry.

Finally, this study highlights the need for further participatory exploration with engaged PhD graduates themselves and the partners and communities they have worked alongside. Those who have participated in engagement-rich doctorates hold insights into what fair, meaningful and ethical assessment looks like in practice. A co-designed process with graduates and partners would allow the

sector to evolve assessment models rooted in lived experience rather than institutional habit.

Ultimately, transforming assessment means recognising that engaged research is not only about producing knowledge. It is about changing relationships, practices and systems. Assessment frameworks must therefore honour not only the outputs but also the collaborative processes and societal contributions that give engaged research its distinctive value.

As a provocation: an imagined Case Study

Imagining the future of engaged PhDs using practice from Goldsmiths, University of London.

This case study imagines the future of an engaged-research PhD, drawing on existing practice at Goldsmiths, University of London, where courses at undergraduate and taught postgraduate allow students to negotiate their approach to assessment with staff. Students are permitted to submit reflective journals, blogs, portfolio and exhibitions, as well as assessments which replicate professional practice.

The case study is based on an imagined PhD looking into the experiences of young people alongside the youth workers that engaged with them. It is a collaborative PhD where the supervisory team involves a university academic and a youth worker.

How are assessments designed?

In the first six months of the PhD, the supervisory team meets to discuss the intended contribution of the thesis to knowledge(s), and how assessments can be tailored accordingly.

This discussion is underpinned by a broader schematisation of knowledges rather than the conventional contribution to 'scholarly' knowledge. For example, the thesis might envisage contributing to academic knowledge of the counter-productivity of government youth policy (a form of propositional knowing, suited to the existing conventions of a solo authored thesis). But it might also want to produce new 'practical' knowledge ('how to' do something, expressed in a skill, knack or competence) for the researcher on how to negotiate interpersonal relationships developed during an extended period of fieldwork where their role shifts from that of a conventional researcher to a team member who wants to offer a practical contribution to the setting (e.g., offering tutoring at a homework club run by the youth workers).

The team decide that a reflective journal and a podcast series based on conversations between the researcher and the youth workers they are engaging with is the most appropriate way to assess the learning that is taking place here. The purpose of the journal and podcast is to assess what the student is learning about engagement, and this is assessed by the supervisory team who co-design the criteria together. The journal and podcast do not form part of the formal

assessment of the doctorate, but the student is required to use extracts from them in the chapter on 'learnings on engagement' which now forms part of the standard thesis format.

During their supervision meetings, the student and the supervisory team find themselves talking about relationships and forms of contribution to the research setting that were not envisaged when the project began. Given the time spent in 'the field' and the time offered to them by young people and youth workers, they have developed a desire to give back to the community in a meaningful way that cannot be captured by a journal, blog or thesis.

Based on the original commitment to negotiating assessment formats, how can these contributions be assessed? The team feel this is useful learning for future PhD students and ask the student to collaborate on the design of a peer-to-peer learning circle where later-stage engaged PhD students are paired with students just starting their projects. As a requirement of the thesis is now to include contributions 'beyond the research', there is scope for the student to register this work as a legacy of the project.

Appendix 1: Desk Research

Approach

To inform our thinking about assessment methods for engaged research, we carried out a rapid review of existing assessment practices in practice-based disciplines such as art, design and performing arts. Our primary data source was provider submissions submitted by universities or colleges for TEF 2023. As not all institutions submit to TEF (e.g. Glasgow School of Art), we also reviewed websites of individual institutions. For those institutions known for practice-based disciplines (e.g. University of the Arts London) whose TEF submission did not contain detail about assessment practices we sought further information via the website. We also conducted some purposive searching for blogs, articles and other content relating to how to assess engaged research. TEF submissions cover taught undergraduate and postgraduate courses and so transferable insights take into account the differing nature of PhD level research.

Institution	Assessment practices	Transferrable insights	Questions
Anglia Ruskin University	“Live briefs embedded in compulsory modules. Employer partners present real-world challenges directly to students and later give feedback on students’ submitted work, alongside feedback and formal marking by academic staff.”	Embed non-academic research partners in assessment teams	Does involving non-academic partners change assessments and marking criteria or are they contributing feedback on existing models?

<p>Arts University Bournemouth</p>	<p>“Creative outputs are by definition ‘visible’ and ‘external’, which requires the creator to see their work through the eyes of others. In itself, this forms an important aspect of learning. As part of an iterative process, courses provide interim feedback to students using group critiques, where work in progress is shared with tutors and peers for discussion and challenge.</p>	<p>Use group critiques with non-academic partners and accompanying piece of reflective content (written, audio, video) as a component of assessment. Potential for this component to be co-written with partners with an emphasis on impact and shared learning.</p>	<p>What is being assessed? Ability to embed non-academic feedback in research design? A critical understanding of one’s research in relation to context of practice?</p>
<p>Falmouth University</p>	<p>Mentions ‘9 Domains of Collaboration’, a collaboration with Advance HE which attempts to ‘offer colleagues in higher education a tangible evaluative aid for provoking, tracing and documenting collaborative practices’, suggesting that collaboration is a ‘teachable skill that can be measured and developed’ with the 9 Domains ‘gives the educator and learning a way to evaluate these domains in isolation and measure their</p>	<p>Edgerley (Edgerley et al., 2025, p.4) considers whether ‘learners’ perception of collaboration is potentially a better measure of collaborative group work’ – so for engaged PhDs this might look like using the framework, or something similar, to support students to chart changes in their collaborative skills before, during and after their doctorate.</p>	<p>How to mitigate risk that collaboration is instrumentalised into an inflexible framework? The 9 domains (mediation, reciprocity, awareness, motivation, participation, innovation, knowledge, reflection, engagement) are highly subjective – naming</p>

	development longitudinally as a result'. (Pahl and Facer, 2017a)	A different starting point for this is Pahl and Facer's chapter 'Understanding collaborative research practices: a lexicon' (2017) – this chapter attempts to offer a language on which we can discuss what constitutes high-quality collaborative, interdisciplinary research. The framework (although they would likely refute that naming) is much more grounded in theory than Edgerley and Crawford's domains. (Edgerley et al., 2025)	these domains offers little detail into how we might use them to evaluate.
Guildhall School of Music and Drama	"acting and production arts students are assessed individually and on their performance within an ensemble or production team, with continuous notes from the director and summative feedback given at the end of each production. Visiting professionals involved in productions and live	The 'notes' contributed by visiting professionals being used by module assessors is interesting. While it's not clear how these 'notes' feed into final marking, that they are used as part of this process is significant as other institutions often report professional/industry bodies giving	In an acting course, students are assessed on multiple performances across their degree. What would it look like to break down an engaged PhD in this way, instead of assessing the final thesis only?

	<p>events...give students 'notes' at the end of rehearsals and performances. Students reflect upon their learning in facilitated review sessions, and teaching staff review each student's work and progress in staff assessment meetings with notes available to all markers as relevant, supporting the final marking and feedback undertaken by the module assessors'</p>	<p>feedback to students but not how it is used in assessment. To what extent is feedback given by non-academic partners drawn upon by examiners?</p>	<p>What would it mean to assess different 'roles' with a PhD?</p>
<p>Goldsmiths' College</p>	<p>'We set assessments which are open and allow students to negotiate their approach in collaboration with staff, potentially disrupting subject norms and traditions. Based on consultation with students, and to better reflect skills needed in employment, we have diversified permitted assessment formats, including reflective journals, blogs, portfolio exhibitions, as well as assessments with replicate professional practice'</p>	<p>Does an engaged-PhD differ from a 'conventional' one and if so, what assessment formats might apply? For example, could policy briefings or evidence submissions form part of PhD assessment, alongside or instead of the traditional thesis?</p>	

Pearson College	'The assessment methodology continues the ethos of academic rigour combined with industry relevance, with marking involving tutors, peers, the students themselves and, for some modules, industry'	Including non-academic partners in examination teams	What would a non-academic partner be examining, and based on what criteria?
Leeds Arts University	'Assessment is holistic in that, for summative assessment, students demonstrate their learning through submission of a single portfolio of work...at the end of each module that they study. Portfolios typically include a combination of resolved creative work, critical engagement with context and further evidence of and critical reflection on the process of learning and making'	There is already a portfolio element to the PhD with the documents submitted as part of annual reviews, yet the final submission is not portfolio based. Could the thesis and viva format be adapted to include a broader range of types of work.	How to standardise across engaged-PhDs?
University for the Creative Arts	'Crits' are iterative individual and group meetings throughout a project and include self, peer, and tutor reflections	Traditional thesis formats and viva processes are focused on the thesis, as an artefact, representing an	Do university regulations allow this? What training would be

	<p>in a dialogue with the student. In addition, our assessment is focused on authentic tasks which often mirror the 'live briefs' from the students' development projects and our Assessment & Feedback Policy states that constructive feedback is...balanced between valid criticism and appropriate positive commentary on the student's learning not the artefact'</p>	<p>original contribution to knowledge. Could engaged PhD assess learning, as well as the 'artefact' itself?</p> <p>'Crits' often include feedback from industry professionals on the process not just the product of the task or project. Perhaps there is a role for non-academic partners in assessing impact, reflexivity and collaboration?</p>	<p>needed to ensure consistency, fairness?</p>
<p>Leeds Conservatoire</p>	<p>'The assessment process promotes real-world and industry-relevant tasks, academic integrity, reflective learning and timely and effective feedback that enables development. External examiners consistently commend the industry-relevance of assignment briefs, the use of a variety of assessment methods that give students a diverse 'toolkit' of skills and the connection</p>	<p>A broader range of assessment methods, beyond the conventional thesis/viva, might enable skills associated with collaborative research to be assessed more systematically.</p>	<p>Who decides what the skills of collaborative research are? Are these standardised or are these outlined at the beginning of projects as a collaborative process itself?</p>

	between theory and practice in assessment’		
Royal Northern College of Music	<p>‘A key objective of our Education Strategy 2021-26 is to strengthen the connections between curricular and co-curricular learning. We have done this through incorporating co-curricular work into credit-bearing modules through a reflective assessment on a portfolio of co-curricular activity’</p> <p>‘The nature of our real-life assessment and the robust processes surrounding these give us confidence that our awards are not only credible, but they are authentic and enable students to produce assets to take them into their careers (such as released recordings, PR materials etc.)’</p>	Explore what a portfolio assessment would offer to engaged research PhDs. At present what is assessed is a thesis which has – largely – a limited readership. The PhD by publication offers an interesting model – what different forms of publication and ‘outcome’ could combine to a portfolio model for engaged research.	Are there models of a PhD where a conventional thesis is redundant or needs re-thinking?
The Liverpool Institute for	‘As part of our commitment in preparing students for work, assessment and	Traditional thesis formats and viva processes seek to prepare students	These questions link to a much broader issue about the

<p>Performing Arts</p>	<p>feedback is framed as part of the landscape of work. We encourage students to understand how in a professional context achievement is measured and critiqued is used. This perspective brings to the fore the importance of what people say and how to listen and the standing of work in the context of a peer environment.</p>	<p>for academic work. However, those undertaking collaborative PhDs may have a different career path in mind. Additional research may be necessary to assess this, but it could be useful to map the desired professional contexts/career paths of those undertaking engaged PhDs and consider the question of ‘how...achievement is measured’ in those environments. In a traditional PhD, a student progresses, partly, through demonstrating an ability to listen and act on the feedback of a supervisory team. Even within a conventional PhD, the learning and development that ensues from this feedback is not necessarily visible in the final thesis. Again, this suggests a role for reflective practice as part of the assessment.</p>	<p>diversification of career paths for PhD students. How can the design of PhDs in general continue to design and implement learning and assessment that supports diverse career pathways? Are we interested in engaged research PhDs as a means to a career in an increasingly engagement-focused HE context, or a PhD as training for a broader range of careers?</p>
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<p>Royal College of Music</p>	<p>'In addition to public recitals, other examples of professionally aligned assessment include mock-auditions (mirroring professional orchestral recruitment), group projects, business pitches, funding proposals and podcasts'</p>	<p>Suggestive of a broader range of assessment methods.</p>	<p>These approaches are more familiar in UG/PG contexts where continuous assessment methods are more common. How compatible is this to a PhD which has, to date, tended to require a different type of learning journey?</p>
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Key observations

Methodological

- We need to keep in mind that TEF submissions are documents written *about* the student experience of assessment rather than the outcomes of research *with* students and graduates about their experiences of assessment.
- There is scope for further research to understand the experiences of individuals undertaking collaborative PhDs as well as partner organisations.

Reflections on findings

- Involving non-academic staff in assessment is common in practice-based disciplines. What is less clear is the role of their perspectives in the marking process. Are they an equal partner? Do they have a say in the final mark? And the marking criteria? Or does the academic retain the power to use implicit standards to make a judgement as to the role assigned to non-academic input? It does seem to make sense that non-academic partners would be involved in assessing engaged PhDs but their role needs to be clarified.
- Refining practices of reflective learning *about* engagement, the socio-political contexts it takes place within (and other characteristics of collaborative research –glossing over a substantial question regarding what competences or dispositions would be assessed here) seems important to exploring assessment practices for engaged PhDs. Likely, reflective writing forms part of annual progress reviews but not formal assessment. Could reflective writing in the form of diaries, blogs, or even co-written materials (danger of burdening community and civil society organisations) be a useful part of PhD assessment? Or formalised as a necessary part of the thesis, in the same way as a literature review/methodology? There is a question here about whether the traditional thesis format can (or should?) accommodate forms of assessment more suited to engaged research or whether a different approach is required, perhaps based on submitting a portfolio of evidence. This would require further thinking about what exactly is being assessed. As Facer and Pahl outline, ‘the challenge is to create a

means of reflecting on and understanding what has happened in the research process that is not instrumental and performative, complicit with the worst excesses of accountability regimes, but authentic, embedded and able to enhance our understanding of what has happened'. (Pahl and Facer, 2017b)

- The idea of self-assessment or assessment of collaboration comes up above. A framework is an attractive idea, but a one-size-fits-all set of qualities may be an uncomfortable fit with the diversity of forms of collaborative research. As Facer and Pahl observe, different traditions or approaches to collaborative research are underpinned by different theories of change. This means that different projects will be trying to achieve different things. They outline four forms of collaborative research with different end goals. For example, 'mutual learning' desires empowerment of participants to know and think differently, and to inform future capacities for thought and action whereas 'correcting the record' aims to bring the distinctive expertise of excluded groups into the mainstream knowledge base. (Pahl and Facer, 2017b) Collaboration in these contexts requires different skills and competencies. Would it be possible to identify a core set of collaboration competencies which can be used by supervisory teams as the starting point for reflective conversations/assessments?
- The reflection embedded in practice-based disciplines is orientated towards refining a student's creative practice. Encouraging PhD students to refine their practice as collaborators is important, but it is surely only one component required in rethinking assessment practices. What about the legacy of these collaborative endeavours? As Facer and Pahl astutely point out 'there are...very different measures of value against which these research collaborations might be judged', (Pahl and Facer, 2017b).
- The assessment practices above can be seen as an example of what Kemmis writing in the context of education argued: that there needs to be a change of sensibility so learning becomes less about 'what you need to know' but about 'how you should be', focusing on learning as a process which transforms individuals. This is a potential helpful framing for thinking about the underpinnings of assessment in engaged research, (Kemmis, 2019)

- There is a tension between neoliberal higher education policy which strongly links the value of degrees with employment and thinking about what counts as a valuable 'outcome' in the realm of collaborative/engaged research – if assessment approaches are to be redesigned, it would be useful to think about whether the aim is to assess learning/skills for the world of work or a broader contribution to society.

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