



Roundtable Dialogue on the Impact of a PhD in Design in practice (E2)

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Erasmus+ project DoCS4Design (Doctoral Courses System for Design)

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| | |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|
| Topic & Need | 2 |
| Goal | 3 |
| Method (how we worked) | 3 |
| Results | 7 |
| Outcomes | 9 |
| Materials..... | 9 |
| Round table dialogue..... | 10 |
| Participants..... | 10 |
| Feedback/Evaluation..... | 10 |
| Credits | 11 |

Topic & Need

The activity - a roundtable dialogue at Aalto University, organised during the 15th International Conference of the European Academy of Design (see figure 2) - and its outcomes described in this document are about the **relevance of the PhD in Design degree**: The social impact that people with this degree can make beyond academia, in various organisations. The roundtable dialogue was also part of the DoCS4Design Training Event week in Helsinki.

Design doctoral research and education are increasingly tackling bigger societal problems in the public and private sectors and within other organisations capable of social innovation, such as NGOs, think tanks, research institutes, social enterprises, citizen action, and community organisations. Understanding the social impacts of design research in today's world and evaluating the implications of applying design research outcomes in diverse contexts is a concern. Furthermore, the value of design research is not often understood by organisations that could benefit from it, including those in the public and private sectors.

Goal

The goal of the roundtable dialogue was **to develop capabilities for design researchers that want to make social impact beyond academia** and to allow space for reflection on the practices of design researchers and their social impact.

More specifically, in the training, participants offered the opportunity:

- To reflect on how the competencies PhD in Design candidates acquire during their doctoral studies can be applied in different contexts beyond academia.
- To network and interact with professionals from different contexts and sectors.
- To develop understanding of impact as a capability of design researchers.
- To speculate on the future of design research.

Through this we aimed to learn about impacts of doctoral research beyond academia and young designer researchers' experience with social design. We were also interested in how doctoral programs can prepare students and practitioners to benefit from design research. The results provide an opportunity for the institutions involved in the project to think about doctoral programs in design in new ways to better communicate their importance to employers, policymakers, other academics and civil society.

Method (how we worked)

The central question for the roundtable dialogue at Aalto University was 'How can we position doctoral education in design and share its value outside of academia?' or in other words 'Why engage with a designer with a PhD degree?'. Five leading professionals who work with design researchers with a PhD degree attended. Together with 29 PhD students, members from the DoCS4Design consortium and staff members from Aalto. Everyone was sitting together and not divided by seniority or position to stimulate all people to join the conversation.

The whole section took two hours. The structured format of this roundtable included:

Round 1 (exposition)

'Getting to know each other' in which with an exchange of vignettes (names and backgrounds) among participants sitting next to each other;

Round 2A (initiation)

'Why hire a designer with a PhD in Design degree?', in which the added value of working with a person with a PhD degree was discussed;

Round 2B (initiation)

Devil's advocate, in which reasons for not hiring a designer with a PhD in Design was explored;

Round 3 (Catharsis, resolution)

What should be done? In which what academia and companies/organisations could do to improve their relation was discussed.



Figure 1: Impression of the set-up of the roundtable dialogue: with five leading design practitioners, 29 PhD candidates and 15 design researchers.

Multiplier Event Workshops

During the week of the Multiplier Event, two specific activities expanded on the above research.

Inclusion Workshop. Led by Aalto University doctoral student, Anukka Svanda, this drew on her research on inclusion for employment with Espoo Municipality. Participants developed proposals and scenarios that analysed the skill-sets required in working with public sector organisations.

Speculative CV. Led by Professor Guy Julier of Aalto University, participants developed speculative personas and job descriptions for 10 years' time. This helped surface emerging trends and challenges for social impact as to how doctoral graduates might adapt to these and build new competencies. The outcomes were presented as speculative elevator pitches at the end of the EAD conference.



Figure 2: Overview of the full program.



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The event held included:

- 3 keynote presentations (public sector and academia).
- 4 panel discussions, among others a roundtable dialogue on the relevance of the PhD in Design in practice.
- 16 accepted peer reviewed paper submissions which will be published in the proceedings of the European Academy of Design 2023.
- 2 workshop presentations from PhD students (Critical inclusivity in design research and Speculative CV for design researcher).
- 74 registered attendees + the DocS4Design team.
- 3 guest workshoppers on diverse topics related to the practice of design research.
- 8 guests from industry, public sector and non-profit organisations.

Results

The roundtable allowed for the sharing of views, consideration of diverse perspectives, and engagement in conversations that spanned the boundaries between academia and industry.

The following insights were identified.

The value of a PhD in Design was recognised by all parties; they referred to general academic competencies that the employee with a PhD in Design brings in as well as specific capabilities such as building bridges between research and practical realities, dealing with various stakeholders, visualising complex contexts, and taking a human-centred perspective.

Quote from practitioner: *'I would hire a PhD for their independent thinking. They can look at the entire picture, they can deep dive in their specific area of expertise.'*

Quote from practitioner: *'The reason would be the methodological competence: the toolboxes of a PhD.'*

Quote from practitioner: *'PhDs summarize well what they have heard, and they are able to ask relevant questions.'*

Quote from PhD student: *'Design has a second (and also third) order effect on society. A PhD in design has a better understanding of this.'*

Quote from practitioner: *'I work in an impact driven organization. The most rewarding part of my work is when our clients finally see the 'elephant in the room'. To accomplish this, we need someone to be critical and to challenge the mainstream views.'*

Some concerns to hire a PhD in Design in practice were general about the question if the theoretical and reflective professionals are able to bridge with practical realities. They are not necessarily more expensive. The dichotomy of theory in academia versus practical reality in 'the real world' was questioned since all design researchers in academia work in close cooperation with other organisations (profit, and non-profit).

Quote from practitioner: *'The PhD students are too theoretical and disconnected from practice. Do they really understand the 'real word'? This is our fear.'*

Quote from practitioner: *'Try to see the world with the eyes of your potential employer. And then, try to translate your knowledge into the language of your employer.'*

Quote from PhD student: *'In my PhD project I manage a lot of stakeholders, I deal with bureaucracy and politics. I have never been in the dark room with my computers. I am well aware of how the 'real word' works.'*

Quote from academic: *'Non-academic outputs, e.g. magazine articles or interviews, are often not recognized at the university.'*

Answers on the question **What both academia and practice can do** for the PhD in design were among others:

Give more clear definitions of what design research entails; Communicate the value of design and of PhD research in design (to PhD students, to intended clients, in company vacancies, in ...); develop labs for transdisciplinary cooperation. Professionals in practice express the need for good decision makers. Furthermore, next to the expressed need to anticipate changes, for example, to study the influence of AI on societal trust, various desired competencies were addressed: a mindset to unlearn (what and who? e.g. jargon); language development in practice; writing a good first application letter; training in adult education (facilitate change in others); analysis, visualisation on your own work; holistic skills; negotiation skills; brokering knowledge between disciplines; alliance building; and crisis awareness (e.g. planet, social issues, democracy).

Quote from practitioner: *'You need to create your own space, also founding your own start-up, if you think you cannot find a space for you in the market as it is today. You must strive to change the current situation and create that space yourself.'*

Quote from PhD student: *'Universities should more and more involve industries and private companies to enter in a dialogue with PhD programs.'*

Quote from PhD student: *'It seems that a lot of problems [about understanding the value of the PhD in Design] come from mismatch of communication. So, the university can help us in developing the soft skills related to mediation and communication.'*

Outcomes

The whole week PhD students were actively engaged in discussions and dialogues and expressed their interests in the offered topics.

The collaboration between academic and non-academic stakeholders provided a rich tapestry of perspectives, laying the groundwork for future developments and cooperation in design education and research leadership. Researchers from different institutes exchanged ideas for visiting professorships.

Materials

For the roundtable dialogue at Aalto University in Espoo

- Invitation letters for participants
- List of invited guests
- Vignettes, designed to exchange names and backgrounds
- Posters for note taking



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Round table dialogue

- List of invited guests
- Vignettes, designed to exchange names and backgrounds
- Posters for note keeping
- photos

Participants

Across the three roundtables, a comprehensive engagement involved:

- 23 PhD students
- 9 for-profit organisations (7 in NYC + 2 in Aalto)
- 3 not-for-profit organisations
- 7 external academics (outside the Docs4Design network)

All these stakeholders actively participated in discussions centred around the value and impact of a PhD in Design education.

Feedback/Evaluation

The roundtable at Aalto University purposefully integrated PhD students, introducing a valuable and enriching dimension to the discussions. This intentional inclusion not only bolstered the diversity of perspectives but also provided candidates with a firsthand understanding of how non-academic organisations perceive them.

