**Proposal for BAM MKE Conference – Teaching and learning for impact**

Chris Procter c.t.procter@salford.ac.uk, (with assistance from Alex Fenton a.fenton@salford.ac.uk)

**Agile Research and the PhD journey**

**My role, subject area and context for the practice**I am a lecturer in project management and in professional development at the University of Salford Business School. Like many academic staff I am also a PhD supervisor.

Whilst contemporary data is slightly hard to get, a substantial proportion of PhD students fail to complete. A report published by the Higher Education Funding Council in 2013 (HEFCE 2013 & Times Higher 2013) estimated that 72.9% of doctoral students would complete within 7 years. Less than 60% complete within the target duration of 4 years, and in some Universities the majority of those enrolled were unlikely to ever graduate.

The research approach and process taken by the postgraduate research student is fundamental to the success of their work. University processes typically expect student research to follow a sequential pattern of enquiry irrespective of the underlying epistemological assumptions that drive the research. This pattern is enforced by the assessment regime prescribed by Universities. The reality for interpretive scholars sits uneasily with this pattern however, as the research destination emerges as the work progresses rather than at its commencement. The nature of an interpretive approach is such that researchers are engaged in a cycle of influence; both in influencing and being influenced by the research. The interpretive researcher is thus susceptible to continuously looping between research questions, literature, method and data. This problem is exacerbated as new understanding and perspectives emerge causing delays, eroding motivation and potentially ending the research journey prematurely.

**What is the practice? Why have you found it helpful?**

In light of this, we propose a more agile approach to research, akin to the Agile philosophy (eg Highsmith 2009, Sandberg et al 2010). Agile has been widely adopted across many areas of project management (PMI 2017). However, it has gained little recognition as an approach to the management of research and is not visible at all in relation to the management of doctoral research. Not only does agile fit much better with an interpretive paradigm, it is also a much more natural process model for a constructivist philosophy of education. It allows the research student to build their learning in an iterative way and, most importantly, to realise their potential throughout their journey. This is illustrated in the diagram below. The diagram recognises that the doctoral research journey is frequently iterative. This is particularly relevant where an interpretive or phenomenological approach underpins the research, and where grounded theory, action research, netnography and other methods are used. The duration of the cycle and deadlines accompanying the journey are a matter of negotiation between student, supervisory team and University.

Initial problem

Completed work

Figure 1 Agile Research Approach

**How does the practice address the conference theme of ‘impact’?**

I will reflect from my own experience as supervisor on the efficacy of this innovative practice and suggest that is a more effective way of improving the PhD completion rate than the simple tightening of the assessment regime or restriction of entry, which has been the response of many institutions. The product of this innovation can be significant improvement in retention.

**References or website links (if relevant)**

Agile Manifesto (2001) available at: <http://www.agilemanifesto.org/> accessed 7/1/19

# HEFCE (2013) Rates of qualification from postgraduate research degrees: Projected study outcomes of full-time students starting postgraduate research degrees in 2010-11

<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2013/201317/> accessed 7/1/19

Highsmith J., (2009). Agile project management: creating innovative products. *Pearson Education.*

Ika L.A. (2009) *Project success as a topic in project management journals* Project Management Journal 40:4 pps 6-19

PMI (2017) *Success rates rise* <https://www.pmi.org/-/media/pmi/documents/public/pdf/learning/thought-leadership/pulse/pulse-of-the-profession-2017.pdf> accessed 7/1/19

Sandberg A, Pareto L, Arts, T (2011) *Agile Collaborative Research: Action Principles for Industry-Academia Collaboration* IEEE Sofware 28:4 pps: 74-83

Times Higher (2013) <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/phdmpletion-rates-2013/2006040.article> accessed 7/1/19