

REVIEW OF RESEARCH ASSESSMENT

THE COLLEGE RESPONSE

Dartington College of Arts

THE CENTRE FOR RESEARCH IN CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE ARTS

1. Preamble

1. Dartington College of Arts welcomes the Review since we feel that it could lead to a more generous view of the nature of research leading to assessment methods that take into account an increasingly complex and diverse research culture in this country. We believe that a number of the issues will take some time to address fully. We regret that the focus is exclusively on **assessment of quality** that it thereby bypasses crucial questions of strategy and value. We also feel that it does not provide useful working definitions of research, scholarship and excellence.
2. Dartington College of Art is a monotechnic, one in which both a single-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary research culture is at work. This response is made from that perspective though we have also attempted to take a global view of national research quality and needs.

2. The responses

Group 1: Expert Review

- 7a The College believes that the most effective form of assessment should be driven by a responsibility for future research; completed research should be taken with due care as an indicator of future potential in relation to other contextual factors.
- 7b We think it best to answer this question by referring you to our list and commentary in 10b below. It is not clear in definitive terms what is to be understood by the expression 'data' as opposed to 'metric'. In an institution where much of its core research is concerned with performance arts in action, it is not easy to rationalise objective data without producing a considerable list of suitable assessment materials for such an activity. We think it best to answer this question by referring you to our list and commentary in 10b below.
- 7c At the level in each case which corresponds to the strategic organisation of research within an institution; in the case of a monotechnic like Dartington College of Arts, there is a strong argument for this being at the level of the institution **provided** that this does not result in 'eloquent absences' in information that goes out in the public domain (for example, being absent from league tables constructed on the basis of 'subjects'.).
- 7d See 7c above. This is more an issue about the use made of assessment scores in league tables and such-like, rather than about assessing quality. This, as a matter of principle, should be assessed in relation to the strategic aims and organisation of an institution.
- 7e Given the perhaps inevitable rarity of multi-discipline expertise in one individual, there is a possibility that assessment by a group of experts in different fields, may lead to unfortunate dispute or misunderstanding in regard to a cross-disciplinary submission. However, this does not mean that given appropriate criteria and guidelines, such a body could not work effectively in this kind of assessment.

Group 2: Algorithm

- 10a This is a complex question, particularly in respect of research in performance arts. A simple answer is, 'no'.
- 10b Referring back to 7a above, we would list the following, and would want to take more time over considering more relevant metric for emergent performance arts practices. In many forms of new research activity there is a problem of time-lag between completion of research and recognition of its value:-
- number of publications

- status of publication context (though this is contentious in relation to emergent forms and contested notions of prestige and status)
- reviews and citations
- evidence of peer assessment and acknowledgement (possibly another form of citation).

10c We believe this would need to be tested **before** decisions are made. It so much hinges on the above. The combination referred to would probably be some system of weighted scoring, because by definition an algorithmic approach would exclude narrative.

10d The effect would undoubtedly be to 'chase the metric' – in other words, to produce the data used for calculation rather than promote research for its own intrinsic strategic value. Given, in our case, a continuing evolution of new kinds of disciplines, we add for noting the possibility of a need for more flexible metric in the future.

10e Its strength would only lie in its apparent 'objectivity'. Its weaknesses would be:

- the weakness of individual categories of data (metrics?)
- data-chasing (games playing)
- the need for number crunching
- tactical manipulation of statistics.

(see also 10d above).

Group 3: Self-assessment

13a We list the following:

- strategic statements on research at institutional, subject and individual level
- outcomes during period (no number limit) presented against proposed aims
- evidence of peer esteem.
- external funding
- number of research students in process and completed during a period
- contribution to the building and maintenance of research contexts through, for example, journal editing, curation, conference organisation, etc.

The data required from a self-assessment exercise should presumably be virtually identical with data expected for assessment by external bodies. Since our research culture is concerned equally with theory and practice, we repeat that there is a need for the creation of a few new metrics by which to assess how we perform. This might include ways in which the interface between teaching and research are applied to measurable outcomes.

13b We believe the assessments should be both prospective and retrospective with the emphasis on the prospective, together with the provision of data applicable to work being undertaken at any particular moment (i.e. not only completed outcomes).

13c There could be sets of criteria which relate to:

- a typology of strategies (e.g. in relation to established quality – national, international, etc.)
- a strategy to support the emergence of new fields of knowledge and practice
- a strategy to address questions of disciplinarity (i.e. inter or cross-disciplinary research)
- a strategy aimed at a research/teaching, or research/knowledge transfer symbiosis.

What, for example, if an institution declares that its research strategy is determinedly regional in its conception? To answer the second part of the question: each institution should have a single explicit framework within which sub-sets of criteria sit. (see above).

13d. Verification of data through sampling and selective visits to test elements of narrative and qualities of the research 'culture'.

13e Experience suggests that this is difficult to answer before procedures have been specified. (see notes in the Preamble, above). 'Burden' is one measure: enhancement effect is another. Self-assessment procedures could be valuably angled towards self-enhancement.

- 13f Main strengths are that it can be related to institutional strategies and can be carefully inflected to institutional strengths and aims; and that it eschews claims to objectivity. A weakness is that such an approach is much more open to challenge.

Group 4: Historical Ratings

- 16a The answer is 'no'. This is an argument for the status quo; that others can only get into the game (or slip out of it), slowly.
- 16b This matter is still under active debate and consideration. We are unhappy with notions of setting 'baseline ratings' on an institutional basis alone. At this stage we prefer to address the issue in collaborative debate with affiliated or associated institutions in our research fields. We expect to be able to report on these debates in the near future.
- 16c See 16b above. We are not, however, in favour of a 'value for money' element. The answer to the second part of the question is 'no'.
- 16d Variable and probably difficult to determine. The likeliest effect would be for big institutions to anticipate and internalise likely judgements. This could cut/reduce the amount of venture capital put into research, and therefore work against 'the new'.
- 16e The strength of this approach might lie as much in the question being asked at all rather than at this time setting criteria in a fixed manner. Since the questions have already instigated active debate, it might be desirable to postpone any definite decision for the time being. However, we would add that a strength of this approach is that it continues to invest where investment has taken place, with some fluctuations at the margins. Its strength is also dependent on the prior identification of quality and on the assumption that where quality has been, there it will remain. These, however, are also some of its weaknesses.

Group 5: Crosscutting Themes

- 17a Answer to the first question. To ensure that investment in research is fully strategic, taking a long-term view of the national and international value of research. It should also complement an explicit and consultatively arrived-at research strategy. Such principles should be understood and applied equally by both institutions and funding authorities.

Answer to the second question, yes, and this should include:

- apposite funding guidance
- the facilitation of institutional enhancement
- information appropriate to both a single discipline and subject-communities.

Answer to the third question, yes.

Answer to the fourth question, yes, but that won't cover the problems.

Answer to the fifth question, ideally, yes.

Answer to the sixth question, we don't really know.

- 17b Answer to question 1, 6 years.
Answer to question 2, this is not really important or relative, especially for a monotechnic like Dartington.
Answer to question 3. The same as for question 2 above.
- 17c Answer to question 1. As already mentioned, we would have appreciated more focussed guidelines from HEFCE, but we offer the following. We see excellence and quality as concomitant, and certainly that excellence and quality is assessable by means of its capacity to:
- refresh and extend the academic community (not just HE)
 - contribute effectively to the 'progress ethic' and ensure that it is projective of new technologies, new forms and new knowledge
 - ensure that each 'branch' of knowledge is concerned with epistemological and cultural shifts, including the provision of appropriate critiques.

Answer to the last two questions in this section. Yes, there are different aspects of research activities. No, the 2001 RAE did not capture this.

- 17d Taking account of the bullet-pointed list, we attach the greatest importance to 'a strategic judgement on the importance of the area to the UK'. Given aforementioned shortfalls in clear definitions for quality and excellence in research, the question is almost impossible to answer. However, given our own ongoing debate on these issues, we expect to be able to report on outcomes in the near future.
- 17e A qualified 'yes'. However, there is clearly a need to ensure both specificity and difference in every institutional model.
- 17f This too is not something we are able to answer at this time. With respect to the second paragraph, we feel this is well worth exploring.
- 17g We agree with much that is stated in the first two paragraphs. We also agree with much that is written in the third paragraph. We would like to add that a more objective process of assessment in future could include the submission of **all** outcomes (and incomplete processes) under two headings;
- funded explicitly
 - not funded
- 17h We are not aware of any specific examples of discrimination in our own institution. We note, however, that the more research assessment relies on its own history, the more it will perpetuate any discrimination which may have taken place in the past.
- 17i Whilst all bullet points are agreed as being significant, we list the following two from your list, and add one of our own (number 1), namely:
- explicitly contribute to research development in relation to strategy.
 - fair to individuals and institutions
 - flexible (so that changes in policy can be accommodated without redesigning the entire process)

Group 6: Have we missed anything

Apart from what we perceive to be a lack of required contextualisation for this document, we repeat our appreciation for and enthusiasm about the debate itself. Given the complexities of the issues being addressed, we are well aware of the tremendous difficulties to be encountered in attempting an overall equitable and viable strategy for future research assessment. It is perhaps characteristic of the creative artist, that he/she frequently addresses issues like 'quality; excellence; effect; scale; technique; method and context'. We very much hope that our expertise and insights in the field of performance arts research will ensure a continuing and consultative interaction with HEFCE in general, and the review body in particular.