JOINT FUNDING BODIES’ REVIEW OF RESEARCH ASSESSMENT

Response from the Royal College of Art

Introduction

The Royal College of Art is delighted to have the opportunity to participate in the review and has responded below to key issues for Art and Design and for History of Art, Architecture and Design. This response follows wide consultation with the College research community and also represents the management view.

Research in most of these areas is relatively recent and highly dynamic. The Subject Overview Statement UOA 64 for the RAE 2001 noted ‘significant change in the general landscape and profile of the art and design sector in the 2001 RAE [and]… migration of boundaries’ even in the four years since the previous RAE. Key issues in the development of research in this sector include:

- the relationship of research to professional practice
- the relative importance of research process and product
- the interaction between ‘academic’ art and design and the wider ‘user’ community
- the relative advantages and disadvantages of adopting or adapting methodologies from the Humanities and the Social and Hard Sciences and/or developing new methodologies
- the most appropriate forms of dissemination and how to assess these (exhibitions, curatorial activity, consultancy reports, prototypes, design briefs and so on)
- the relationship between research and creativity/intuition/core vision: what are the parameters of research? (the question of detachment)
- the relationship between research and teaching and learning: can research be embedded in the pedagogy of learning?
- the relative weighting of individual and group research
- the problems of assessing emergent and/or multi-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary research areas.

How would you define 'quality' or 'excellence' in Research?

Definitions

- A communicable contribution to knowledge and understanding in the field of study concerned, following a critical enquiry.

- Originality (in output as well as methodology) and intellectual distinction/enterprise which contribute to academic and cultural understanding and/or impact on industry at national and international levels.
• The articulation of the individual creative process and its research content, which clarifies the investigative content, methods, context within the field, means of dissemination and potential significance.

**Components of ‘quality’ and ‘excellence’**

**insight:**
creative expression of the researcher's awareness of the field and his/her acuity in seeing a 'gap' which has research potential, and which inspires the researcher to formulate a research question for investigation.

**the quality of the research question:**
the quality of the research question – how it is isolated, defined, articulated and contextualised – will significantly affect the quality of the resulting research.

**the 'awareness of ignorance':**
awareness of the boundaries and constraints within a research project to be used in a positive sense in two ways:
• to be specific about 'non-deliverables' - i.e. the questions that the project definitely won't answer.
• to generate, as an output of research, new questions which cannot be answered in the context of the research project but which should be the starting-point for new research.

**the creation of appropriate methodologies:**
development of new research methodologies in the absence of a heritage of research methodologies in art and design (since methods derived from the Humanities and the Sciences are often not appropriate) to answer current research questions. As more and more skills and knowledge are integrated across research projects, tools for reflection and integration of multiple perspectives based on an awareness of complexity need to be developed.

**influences noted through feedback:**
production of evidence that the research is having a conceptual impact on ‘real world’ organisations - for example, by cultural commentaries or the formation of new paradigms.

**the ability to make an impact in the real world:**
production of evidence that research can lead to practical application or a change of behaviour in the market (e.g. new products by companies or a shift of approach by voluntary sector organisations) – either as a spin-off, or by direct intention.

**institutional research organisation on a directional basis:**
direction and management of a coherent research strategy rather than a haphazard mix of various individual projects. Projects should fit a framework or general direction on the basis of intellectual energy and activity evident within and across a group, which in turn fits with the overall strategy of the institution. It is an indication of quality to see how one project or research stream can act as an 'illustration' or 'highlight' of issues within an
overall strategy. Overlaps and synergies are to be encouraged and are indicators of quality, even though the 'centre of gravity' of different skills and approaches may be different. The institution's ability to be flexible and improvise within a research domain or direction is critical.

strength of postgraduate culture and provision
The postgraduate culture should be integral to the research infrastructure as a whole and actively contribute to, and be a constituent part of, the wider research culture.

What are the most important features of an assessment process?

For the Art and Design sector it is crucial that assessments should be appropriate to and made on the basis of the discipline being assessed rather than carried out through the application of a ready-made template of opinion. Key aspects of assessment should ensure:

knowledge and understanding
a contribution to knowledge (new discoveries, materials, facts) and a contribution to understanding (new perspectives, approaches, insights), both to be placed within the context of earlier contributions.

comprehensiveness:
that the assessment process takes account of what the research involves rather than merely concentrating on the number of outputs which are judged according to hierarchical criteria.

inter-disciplinarity and multi-disciplinarity:
that assessment criteria can allow for projects that cross over the notion of boundary, which is so often imposed by the definition of ‘subject’ or theme.

relationship between research, teaching and learning:
that assessment should take into account whether the learning environment encourages a contribution to the advancement of the discipline/specialism.

outputs and applications:
that in addition to traditional and accepted forms of output and dissemination, assessment takes into account industrial response (e.g. testimonials from those in the marketplace who have adopted and applied design research), as dissemination is not necessarily to an academic community but to a community of practitioners and to business and industry.

networks:
that assessment should also take into account research networks which extend outside institutions. There should be some mechanism for assessing the added value of the network as a whole and attributing that proportionately to institutions and groups. Given that the research councils are moving in this direction and clearly see added value in the process, this becomes an important extra-institutional issue. There is recognition that although consortia grants are to be paid to a single institution prior to distribution, it is the distributed funds that the individual institutions can claim for RAE and other purposes.
Preferred Mode of Research Assessment:

In the light of the issues raised above, the Royal College of Art favours a form of research assessment derived primarily from Expert Review, containing restricted elements of Self-Assessment and Metrics (as in previous RAEs).

**expert/peer review**
This would be a combination of prospective and retrospective, would look at process as well as outcome, and would take account of the issues raised in the Introduction above.

Panel members would be drawn from Business and Industry and from Museums and Galleries as well as from academic peer group, and the review process would place more evaluative weight on the results of research collaborations with the public sector, business and the community than in previous assessments. The Panel would also permit a more diverse range of outputs for assessment (as indicated above).

**metrics**
Calculations based upon the number of research staff and students, and external research funding etc, would continue to be included.

Institutions would also be required to produce hard evidence of external esteem through the presentation of a diversity of outcomes which together substantiate their individual claims to the significance of the research. It should then be the duty of the Panel to assess the validity of these against the supporting evidence and subsequently to adjust relative positions and gradings.

**self-assessment**
Each institution would present a clearly articulated research strategy identifying key areas and strategic aims. Research Assessment is then measured against this strategic plan (which should include quality of infrastructure and investment in people).

**census date**
The Royal College of Art questions the need for a single artificial census date, which creates distortions in the system. A mixture of annual research reports and a periodic gathering of those reports – say, every five years - would be preferred. At present there is too much emphasis on the ‘moment’ of assessment – which also penalises ongoing projects. Our preferred method matches the current HEFCE system: a five-year plan with annual operating statements.

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