

SUBJECT OVERVIEW REPORT

1. Introduction

1.1 This report summarises the findings of the Assessment Panel for Art and Design following completion of the Research Assessment Exercise 2001. The Chair of Panel was Prof. Norma Starszakowna and Panel Members were Prof. Bruce Brown, Ms. Kate Burnett, Dr. David Durling, Dr. Paul Gough, Prof. David Hamilton, Mr. Michael Hose, Prof. Alistair MacLennan, Prof. Ian McLaren, Dr. Jane Prophet, Prof. James Roddis and Panel Secretary, Ms. Rachael Wix and Assistant Secretary, Dr. Elizabeth Westlake. The panel received 75 submissions and collectively examined in detail over 80% of the cited outputs during the assessment period, using the criteria outlined in the Assessment panels' criteria and working methods. The panel wishes to provide comment to the sector on some of the main issues arising from the research assessment process, in particular within the profile and landscape of the sector, the research submitted and the research infrastructure and environment.

2. Profile and Landscape

2.1 The panel noted significant change in the general landscape and profile of the art and design sector during 2001 Research Assessment Exercise period. There was evidence of some noticeable shifts in the range and nature of research conducted within the sector. In particular there had been some migration of boundaries between media and fine art, with an emergence of multimedia, intermedia and digital media. These comprised a high proportion of all work submitted and played a key role in many of the strategies adopted by institutions. There had also been a marked decline in the critical mass of some areas of design, notably those areas which were essentially practice based and/or of direct relevance to industry. This was particularly so in graphic, glass, ceramics, textile, fashion, theatre, environmental and product design, much of the latter being centred on design engineering and ergonomics. As there was little evidence of pedagogic research, it was assumed that much of this work had been submitted to the Unit of Assessment for Education. In general, that work which was submitted to Art and Design reflected the pedagogy of teaching and course development, rather than the pedagogy of learning.

2.2 The range of areas submitted to the Art and Design unit of assessment was indicative of the interdisciplinarity of the sector as well as the desire by institutions to maintain coherence within submissions. In some cases, an academic and/or management rationale had been given for the inclusion of staff more closely related to another unit of assessment. In others, however, the degree of coherence amongst a wide number of areas contained within a submission was not clear to the panel. The panel referred a large number of outputs to other appropriate panels and to external advisors.

2.3 There was a great variation in breadth of provision between submissions, with evidence of an increased focus or specialisation in some small or very specialist submissions, while other institutions had maintained research activity across the broad spectrum of art and design. The panel noted that the research context and foci identified within RA5 statements supplied by some institutions was not always consonant with the focus of the researchers selected for inclusion in the RA2.

2.4 In terms of the qualitative profile, the overall quality of research as evidenced both in the research outputs cited and in other parts of the submissions, generally showed some enhancement. There was evidence of a large body of outstanding work within all areas of art and design. Some submissions demonstrated significant progress since 1996; both in terms of a maturing, supportive research culture and in the contribution to the further development of research within particular fields or within the sector as a whole. There were clear examples of submissions moving from strength to strength and playing a lead role in the further development of areas within the sector. Other submissions however had not maintained earlier trajectory and the degree of progress which might have been expected or appeared to be in stasis and in a few

instances, in decline. The panel was concerned to note that the maintenance of leading research within the practice based areas may require resource levels which are currently unavailable to the art and design sector.

3. Research Outputs

3.1 There was a significant range of research submitted. The scale and level of dissemination of many of the research outputs was substantive, considerably less so in others. In general, there was a noticeable shift from research embedded in practice and products towards text based outputs. While some of these outputs were clearly the primary outcome of substantive research, a high proportion of such outputs were not. There were a number of exemplars of practice based research which both clearly articulated the research content and which contributed to cultural understanding or impacted on industry at national and international level. However, the panel was concerned to note that in some of the design areas in particular, there was a relatively small percentage of practice based outputs compared with the large volume of text based outputs submitted, the latter being mainly in the form of journal articles and conference contributions.

3.2 There was a considerable degree of variability both between submissions, in the understanding and development of a research culture, and inconsistency between staff and institutional understanding of the nature of research and the requirements of the RAE. The panel noted that whilst there had been an overall level of progress within the sector, the research culture appeared to be still emerging in some institutions and there is therefore still a wide variation of strengths and weaknesses within and between submissions. The panel also noted that not all institutions had been as selective in the inclusion of staff as they might be, but recognised the dichotomy that institutions may have faced in balancing the research activity ratio and FTE staff selected.

3.3 To assist the assessment process, the panel had requested in its published criteria that individuals provide an succinct statement for all outputs submitted. This was intended to facilitate the articulation the individual creative process, thus clarifying the investigative content, methods, context within the field, means of dissemination and potential significance of the work. Many institutions apparently did not perceive this to be a potential development tool and these statements were not always provided. Where they were provided, such statements were helpful to the panel, particularly when these articulated the research cited by the individual and its wider context within the field.

3.4 The panel wished to indicate that while there were many outputs which clearly could not be defined as research, it also wished to commend those submissions which clearly articulated the distinction between the maintenance of practice *per se*, and that research which was embedded within practice.

3.5 The additional factual information supporting each non-textual output for example, the scale, degree of contribution by any collaborators, names of co-exhibitors, dates and other documentation details, were not always provided. Consequently, the longevity of and access to this research for future generations was not always apparent. Moreover, in the absence of appropriate peer reviewed journals there appeared to be some confusion surrounding the need for equivalent means and mode of dissemination, the means by which practice based work is tested as research.

3.6 While the geographical location and critical mass of the institution, in terms of availability of academic resource, may have influenced the research undertaken in some instances, these factors did not appear to be of significance in the case of other institutions. There was, however, evidence of some confusion between geographical location and status, with a concomitant conflation of 'foreign' and international, and of 'regional' and national. The panel also noted a significant amount of self publication, use of University galleries, etc. rather than adherence to normal peer review process.

3.7 The panel was also concerned to note that the supporting documentation requested from institutions by the panel via the HEFCE RAE Team were of variable quality. In the majority of instances institutions had clearly emphasised the need to document research activities and these materials had been regularly collated and subject to audit over the assessment period. In many instances however, the materials supplied merely

indicated that the event took place, rather than supplying a fuller range of documentation, transparencies, conference paper, etc. which might help further clarify the nature of the research output, thereby assisting the assessment process.

4. Infrastructures for the Management and Support of Research

4.1 Although reflecting different trajectories of development, throughout the sector maturing infrastructures for the support and management of research had clearly benefitted from substantial investment, particularly in research staffing and support mechanisms. Director/Dean of Research posts, Research Fellows and Assistants, Research Offices, Research Committees and other fora for debate, together with administrative, technical and income generation support staff were now an established feature in virtually all institutions. Other factors which appeared to impact on the nurturing and further development of a supportive research culture included a sense of an overall philosophy, alongside a structuring of groups or individuals which facilitated collaboration, rather than being overly complex or rigid. A further factor was an overarching self-questioning critique that enabled key issues to be identified and then addressed as part of the strategy for post 2001.

4.2 The panel noted that the provision of other support mechanisms, such as appropriate workshops and research facilities, resources to support travel and materials, etc., were also significant. The panel did, however, recognise the resource implications attached to the provision of such infrastructure support for the conduct of research in some areas, particularly within the practice based areas.

4.3 Submissions varied greatly in their response to the RA5. Some submissions demonstrated strong critical reflection in the narrative and clearly articulated the intellectual territories developed through their research, but such rigour was not applied universally. There was also a substantial variation in the quality of response to the self assessment and SWOT analysis invited by the panel. Strengths identified in these were sometimes inconsistent with the quality and volume of research cited elsewhere in the submission and weaknesses, potential threats or opportunities were not always identified. The panel was concerned to note that policies and mechanisms which might foster the strengths and address the weaknesses or imbalances were not always identified in strategies for post 2001.

5. The Research Environment

5.1 The staffing policies and mechanisms for new and existing staff varied greatly across the sector. While few made specific reference to the Concordat Agreement, there were some good exemplars that institutions may wish to note; in particular the appointment of staff at no less than 0.2 FTE, and in one instance 0.5FTE, mentoring schemes for new staff and the integration of visiting and part-time staff, with appraisal systems, career structures and access to research support mechanisms which encompass all staff. There were also some very poor examples that the panel did not consider to be conducive to the further development of the research culture. For example, some submissions indicated a high proportion of staff on very low fractional appointments or very recent short term appointments, or suggested that research might be undertaken exclusively outwith the individual contractual commitment.

5.2 Research degree provision varied considerably in its profile across the sector. Some submissions indicated a very small critical mass with little evidence of specific support systems, research or supervisory training or sense that research students were inducted into the academic community. Others indicated a stable or steadily increasing critical mass, effective support systems and training programmes and sense of an integrated and thriving community of scholars, usually reflected in good completion rates. The majority of institutions had provided studentships over the period, but few had achieved more than a handful of externally funded studentships, including the recently available AHRB studentships. The panel noted that in order to ensure the future academic viability of the sector, the research environment and infrastructures for the support of research degree students need to be strengthened and further opportunities for funding made available.

5.3 Institutional provision in terms of the core infrastructure required for research, such as research accommodation and a level of appropriate specialist facilities and equipment which is comparable with that of other disciplines, appeared to be generally lacking across the sector. The panel noted that unlike most other areas within Higher Education, the art and design sector had benefited very little from investment in such research infrastructure. In the absence of specific Government initiatives or a Research Council, research within art and design was, and essentially still is, dependent on QR funding. Much research is performed off-site, within self-funded studios and workshops and unlike the traditional atelier system or the disciplines such as the sciences, there is an attendant risk of isolation from the research student body. The panel therefore noted the resource implications underlying the difficulties faced by institutions in the development of a coherent research culture and integration of the research student body.

5.4 The panel also noted that the advent of the AHRB in 1997 had provided a much welcomed source of alternative funding for art and design and that a number of individuals had subsequently benefited from research grants and project funding. Combined with more recent availability of research student scholarships, this has clearly had considerable impact on the development of the research culture. However the panel noted that AHRB funding has generally been directed towards the humanities oriented, rather than the practice based areas of art and design, creation of art and design, which suggests that the AHRB in its present form may not be an appropriate mechanism for identification, funding and delivery of strategic change within the sector. Nor indeed, should it be the means by which practice based research in art and design might be better enabled to contribute to industrial competitiveness and cultural well being at the highest level ; that can only be accomplished through multiple funding streams, including an adequate stream based on rigorously selective audit.