

RAE 2001 - UoA66 Drama, Dance and Performing Arts - Overview Report

1. Research assessed

The Panel assessed 40 departments (compared to 42 in 1996) ranging from established universities to training colleges offering degree courses. The largest department submitted over forty researchers, the smallest sub-unit just three. Compared to 1996, the submissions represented increases in the number of researchers (16% to 518), outputs (3% to 1495) and types of output submitted. The majority of outputs were print publications, but practice as research of various kinds submitted by circa 200 researchers amounted to approximately one-third of the total, and there was a small but significant growth in digital outputs. There were also increases in the numbers of research assistants (110% to 21), current research students (37% to 312), studentships (128% to 445), and research income (400% to over £5million).

2. Method of assessment

The Panel met seven times and the Film/TV sub-Panel four, and both followed the working methods as published. The Panel collectively read over 50% of outputs, selected to give best assessment of quality in light of whole submissions. A high proportion of cross-referrals was made between Panels, between the main Panel and the sub-Panel, and to Specialist Advisors, as appropriate, reflecting the interdisciplinary and collaborative nature of the disciplines in UOA 66. Reports from the non-UK advisors were received commenting on departments with provisional 4-5* gradings.

3. Quality of research and submissions

The submissions showed an overall increase in research quality compared to 1996, with relatively little sub-national work submitted, and this produced a general improvement of grades. There was also improvement in the overall quality of submissions, which often demonstrated a clearer sense of identity and purpose in the development of research cultures, sometimes through specialist focus of whole departments or units, sometimes through thematic organisation of research groups and collaborative projects. Most institutions appear to have been more selective over which researchers/outputs to submit, an important aspect of the general rise in quality.

The submissions overall demonstrated an impressive diversity of types of research culture, partly through increasing specialisation. In many departments - even very small ones - there was an encouraging plurality of complementary approaches. Many departments showed a strong awareness of international research cultures and standards, gained through an increasing internationalism of projects, conferences, editorial work, exchanges, etc. There were significant increases in levels of research funding overall, with the AHRB (but also ACE, RABs, etc.) having an important impact nationally. Some departments had developed especially innovative links with the cultural industries.

The Panel noted a significant number of new researchers producing mature work, often through PhDs (increasingly incorporating practical elements), plus a growing body of experienced researchers building on past projects in a generally more research-supportive environment. Stronger departments were alert to the importance of integrating postgraduate research into their overall research culture, and there were some excellent and innovative schemes for support of postgraduate research, suggesting a need to share best practice. There was a general improvement in methods for targeting resources (where available) at areas of research strength, and in some institutions there had been very important strategic investment in buildings, equipment and other physical resources.

4. Characteristics of the research communities of drama, dance and performing arts

The research communities of drama, dance and performing arts show significant strengths in their range and combination of research fields and methodologies. In many departments scholarly and creative research reinforce each other, and research is enhanced overall by the variety of disciplines involved, including the recorded media. Research outputs across these disciplines often evidence extensive social and cultural relevance. Overall the quality of traditional scholarship is impressive, with world-class research being undertaken in a significant proportion of departments, and indicating the importance of enhanced provision of traditional library/archive holdings for the development of international class scholarship. There is also an impressive volume and range of practice as research across the disciplines, but especially in live performance, with particular potential relevance to the cultural industries. However, the quality of these projects was very variable and there is a lack of clarity for a significant number of researchers about what constitutes practice as research: consequently there is an urgent need for continued national debate about practices and criteria. There is evidence of significant resources coming into the disciplines from non-RAE recognised sources, such as ACE, SAC, WAC, RABs, trusts, etc., especially for practical research projects, indicating a supportive diversity of policies between funding agencies at national and regional levels.

There are some strong signs of international-class use of new digital media for scholarship and creative projects, but low levels of resource in this area are severely hampering overall development and dissemination, suggesting significant potential for advanced research collaborations with computing, and some science and engineering fields. The new digital media are significantly blurring traditional distinctions between live drama, theatre, dance, etc. and the recorded media such as film, television, video, radio, sonic arts, etc., raising crucial inter-disciplinary questions and promising highly innovative practices, but also posing problems about how this is best addressed by the research communities at national level. More specifically, these developments raise issues for the further integration of recorded media in the research programmes of many departments, and for their place in any future RAE. The important growth of innovative links with the cultural industries in part rests on the incorporation of practising professional artists into research cultures (often on a part-time or temporary basis), but sometimes this produces problems of integration with a consequent loss of clarity in research aims and functions; there is a need for sharing of best practice in this area.

There are signs of widespread concern about the balance of load between research and teaching (given successful growth, especially in undergraduate student recruitment in the assessment period). However, many departments argue for their interdependence, raising issues about appropriate models for different types of research culture and for the dissemination of research findings through non-traditional means. There has been very variable success in postgraduate recruitment and the creation of postgraduate cultures across departments, despite the positive effect of AHRB scholarship schemes, suggesting the need for a review of provision.

Overall, there has been strong and healthy progress in research in drama, dance and performing arts during this assessment period, but there is continuing major concern about general resource levels and patterns, particularly in relation to emergent research areas in which the UK could establish an international lead. These include practice as research and its articulation to traditional scholarship, advanced uses of new digital technologies in live and recorded media research, and research collaborations with the cultural industries.

5. Addendum on practice as research:

The Panel welcomed the significant increase in practice as research projects submitted, which confirms that the inclusion of this area in RAE 1996 was an important step. Practice as research clearly is now an established and increasingly important aspect of the research programmes of many departments in drama, dance and performing arts. However, while some submissions provided excellent documentation/supporting evidence for practice as research, overall the level of presentation was not strong, making for some difficulties in assessment. There were frequent shortcomings in using the framework provided by the Panel's criteria to best effect, indicating, perhaps, a need for greater rigour, but also diversity, in ways of presenting/validating practice as research. The requested 300-word succinct statements often did not clearly indicate research content or imperatives in the work, suggesting some lack of awareness that, through appropriate documentation and other discourses, practice as research requires its own versions of scholarly apparatus for self-validation. Linked to this, there were signs from some researchers of resistance to developing related discourses and outputs, raising the redundant question - in the context of HE research programmes - of creative work constituting research in its own right. However, there were also very strong signs of world-class innovations, indicating that UK researchers may be leading internationally in this area. This raises extensive implications about the relationships between this research and the development of the creative industries, and about the role of the AHRB and other funding agencies in stimulating structural developments at national/international level.