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Talking Arts Research With a British Accent

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Abstract

This paper reports upon contemporary arts research in Britain, taking as its main focus the research practices in seven Universities judged either 'excellent' or 'internationally excellent' in the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) category Drama, Dance and Cinematics.

Visits to academics representing research at Aberystwyth, Brighton, Bristol, Manchester, Nottingham Trent, Royal Holloway and Warwick Universities provided a range of perspectives and information that challenge the manner in which arts research is conceived and funded in Australia. This difference in research cultures partly reflects the workings of the United Kingdom's RAE quality drivers, and the paper asks whether recent DEST policy initiatives may have positive implications for practice based arts research.

The present debate in Australian research circles is one focussed on the quality of research outputs. This is of growing importance because – to some extent – Australian research outputs hitherto have been more sensitive to quantitative measures rather than qualitative ones. Judged on a quantum of research generated, the institution annually records and tabulates: the number of 'higher degrees by research' (HDR) awarded; the dollar amount of competitive grants won and the value of all grant income; and the number and categories of refereed and professionally published publications – from books through to conference paper proceedings. This manner of measuring output has two effects of relevance to this debate: firstly it privileges quantity rather than quality; secondly it valorises the written word – especially in terms of publications and successful grant proposals.

The implications of a bias towards quantity rather than quality means that researchers are better rewarded by three short papers in three less prestigious publications than one excellent paper in a top-quality international refereed forum with three elements intertwined. The extra work required to create a world-class paper might instead be channelled into the writing of several lesser papers for a range of (comparatively) also-ran publications. Nonetheless, the implication of the emphasis upon publication and bids for competitive grant funding means that non-written research outputs fail to trigger the 'research detection' radar. This point will be returned to shortly: firstly this paper will concentrate upon the issue of quality versus quantity.

A new focus on quality

Over the past few years Australia has found itself increasingly out of step with many of its 'benchmark' academic cultures. The British research evaluation

system, for example, funds research institutions according to a notion of research excellence. Indeed, the mechanism for evaluating the future research funding for an organisation such as a university is via the RAE – the Research Assessment Exercise. Instead of asking – and counting – ‘how many?’, the RAE sets out to answer the question ‘how good?’ This task is approached in two ways. Firstly, the number of ‘items’ to be assessed is restricted to the best four research elements since the last RAE round (which so far has been every four or five years). Secondly, an expert committee assesses the quality of the four different items submitted by the individual for assessment, to arrive at an estimation of quality for that academic’s output: in broad terms this assessment classifies output in relation to international excellence, nationally excellent, very good, good, not demonstrated etc. The quality of the research coming out of the HEI (higher education institution) is assessed on the combined quality of the output of individual researchers involved in the RAE round. (Not all academics participate.) About GBP 5 billion in research funds was distributed as a result of the 2001 RAE, and the website (RAE n. d.) explains the purpose of the exercise as being:

to enable the higher education funding bodies to distribute public funds for research selectively on the basis of quality. Institutions conducting the best research receive a larger proportion of the available grant so that the infrastructure for the top level of research in the UK is protected and developed.

New Zealand has recently followed in the footsteps of the UK’s RAE, introducing a government-directed higher and further education income stream linked to the New Zealand Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF 2003). Australian policy is clearly following suit with a 2004 announcement that “Over the next two years the Government will develop Research quality and Accessibility Frameworks for Publicly Funded Research”. (DEST 2004). Academic researchers can be confident that while quantity will continue to be a significant driver in terms of grant income and the successful graduation of HDR students, the number of publications will increasingly be less important than the status of the journal in which a paper is published and the impact of the individual researcher upon their field.

At the same time, a new emphasis upon quality – hand in hand with a restriction upon the number of items to be considered by an assessment panel – requires a changed approach to (and engagement with) the process of submitting research outcomes for assessment. For example, each research project should clearly have a projected future beyond the current funding cycle to motivate a continuing funding commitment into future research cycles: it should embrace a dynamic involvement with the field of enquiry. Similarly, active researchers seek ways in which to combine a variety of research elements into an overarching single research output to count as ‘one of four’ items. Thus eight conference papers and journal articles arising from one research project might be conceptually linked to be presented as a single output while a range of curatorial activities might be placed under an umbrella investigation into ‘the nature of contemporary performing arts’ in order to be

assessed as one single curatorial activity with a number of interim manifestations.

Assessments of quality are notoriously subjective, however, and the use of 'objective' evidence – such as citation indexes – is very controversial in terms of its applicability across disciplines and the range of materials from which the indexes are derived. The discipline panels in New Zealand and the UK, however, have many parallels with the locally-accepted Australian Research Council practice of the Expert Advisory Committee (EAC: which in the case of ECU's Faculty of Communications and Creative Industries is most likely to be the Humanities and Creative Arts EAC).

The constitution of such discipline panels is self-evidently a highly political issue of critical relevance when it comes to accepting and assessing ways in which the conduct of research through practice and performance yields outcomes. In the UK, the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB n. d.) is about to be promoted to a 'Council'. Notwithstanding the comparative absence of the words 'creative', 'performing' or 'practice', the AHRB includes an explicit commitment to such research, commenting that its remit extends "from traditional humanities subjects, such as history, modern languages and English literature, to the creative and performing arts'. This commitment is also evident in the funding decisions made by the AHRB and their recognition of nationally and internationally excellent research practices.

What does the AHRB recognise as excellent in the creative and performing arts?

The purpose of this paper is to 'talk arts research with a British accent': to interrogate what it means to be an active and effective researcher in the creative and performing arts in the British context. This enquiry is a rhetorical device: an attempt to open up a dialogue about different ways in which we might imagine Australia recognising research in the context of creative and performing arts. As we look at what is happening in the British arena we might also ask why something similar – or something different – is/is not happening in the Australian research environment.

Firstly, however, is the matter of locating where recognition of research in the creative and performing arts might be found. Such location is neither simple nor self-evident, and is implicated in the discussion about what constitutes an appropriate 'discipline panel'. The ARC nexus of the 'Humanities and Creative Arts' is no more a given than the UK equivalent conjunction of the 'Arts and Humanities'. Both differ, for example, from the well-established research field indicator of the Australian RFCD (2004) codes and classifications (which are themselves differentiated from the SOE tables [2004]). A trawl through the subject areas identified by the 2001 RAE indicated that the heading of 'drama, dance and cinematics' (DD&C) included more recognition of the creative and performing arts than did any other category.

Given a tight budget, a short time-frame and a powerful interest in picking the eyes of talking arts research with a British accent, the DD&C category was seized as the key index to be investigated. Within DD&C two universities were

recognised as internationally outstanding (Warwick and Bristol) and 8 others were judged to be of top quality in a national (British) context. A majority of these universities were to be approached with a view to being included in the data gathering. While in an ideal world it would have been good to interview a range of academics from each of the excellent institutions, and talk to all of them about their research outputs and their perceptions of research in practice and performance, this ideal was not immediately realisable. Instead, the research design was limited to an attempt to locate a key academic from each of these institutions willing and able to meet me for an interview at a time and place of mutual convenience.

Ultimately I was able to meet and interview academics who were part of the relevant faculty at Aberystwyth, Brighton, Bristol, Manchester, Nottingham Trent, Royal Holloway (London) and Warwick. Naturally, there is no sense in which these conversations represented more than individual views of researchers working at the coal face of academic inquiry into the contemporary and performing arts. Even though many of those who participated are recognised as working at the highest levels of their profession, they were not speaking on behalf of their entire departments – far less on behalf of the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Board. Nonetheless, as a starting point for research into differences that might exist between recognition of arts research in the UK and Australian contexts, these conversations provide one way forward. In particular, three of the institutions included in this preliminary research operate projects which serve as resources for the wider UK arts research community. These projects indicate ways in which the discussion about UK arts research is developed and progresses.

British arts research (edited highlights)

The UK recognises the issue of research in practice and performance as one of significant importance. In this, researchers are careful not to ignore the requirement to create documentation which future investigators might use to locate an academic debate and build upon it further. Researchers were careful to stress, in particular, that it was important that research through arts practice and performance included expository evidence and a theoretical rationale: as with creative and performing arts doctorates (that would, conventionally, include a minimum of a 30,000 word exegesis).

The British research community recognises that arts practice and research exist in a complex relationship and explore that relationship through an investigation of that complexity. For example, the AHRB has funded the Bristol University-based PARIP project (practice as research in performance) to the tune of GBP 374,539 over the 2001—5 period. PARIP's website comments that:

Three interwoven strands of activity will be undertaken during the course of this project in order to address the key questions surrounding practice as research. PARIP seeks to:

- identify the range of PARIP in the UK and selected European Union higher education institutions and produce a database of PARIP activities in UK HEIs;
- investigate key issues raised by PARIP and develop knowledges about appropriate criteria for evaluation;
- consult on a series of creative projects — focusing on fields of concern which engage with questions of historiography — to advance potential uses of new digital technologies for the documentation and dissemination of best practices. (PARIP n. d.)

This rationale makes it clear that the British funding body is investing money to inquire as to the possible relationship – or range of relationships – between practice, performance and research. Both Australia and the UK recognised this inter-relationship as an issue in the mid-1990s. Arguably, Australia denied the validity of the problem by defining research outputs as measurable in terms of papers, graduations and grant incomes while the UK recognised the existence of an interesting conundrum – that in the creative arts some research is necessarily carried out through the medium of practice and performance – and funded a debate into how to recognise research outputs arising from inquiry via practice.

By default the Australian research community – through its recognition of PhDs in the Creative and Performing Arts – also recognises that practice and performance can result in new knowledge and in research outcomes. The difference in accent and speaking position is that while the British funding context recognises research outcomes generated through practice and performance as grant-aidable, the Australian context does not.

Two other British practice-based resources are also notable. While PARIP is directly funded by the AHRB, the Nottingham Trent University-based Live Art Archives (n. d.), and the Aberystwyth-based Centre for Performance Research (n. d.) have less obvious funding links to the AHRP. Nonetheless, both institutions are recognised as being nationally excellent in the context of the DD&C subject area and these projects are their departmental flagships and consume and generate much of the research activity of the staff involved in arts research in those institutions. In essence, even if the projects are not directly funded, the work on the projects is recognised as contributing to excellent quality research outputs and the institution is funded in a way that recognises this excellence in arts research.

The Live Art Archive website comments that it “currently holds records and entries from the beginning of the audit which commenced in 1994 up to 31st December 2000. A 21st Century archive is currently being developed with records from 1st January 2001.” In this way the archive positions itself with future relevance beyond the 2001 RAE cycle and sets up a dynamic engagement with the development of the field. Similarly, the CPR – Centre for Performance Research – positions itself “for the curious ... opening up worlds of performance”, going on to describe its main aims as being

- To develop and improve the knowledge, understanding and practice of theatre in its broadest sense, to affect change through investigation, sharing and discovery and to make this process as widely available as possible.
- To focus upon contemporary practice, to investigate the sources and context of current experimentation and the relationship of innovation to tradition.
- To integrate theory and practice.
- To dig to discover origins and roots, to push and pioneer, to extend boundaries, perception and possibilities. (Centre for Performance Research n. d.)

In investigating how to talk arts research with a British accent, these three projects seem to have national significance and some international currency. However, they are simply one indication of ways in which the British arts research establishment is engaging with the issues of recognition of research quantity and quality – they are not an exhaustive representation of the outcomes of the data gathering trip which was itself a tiny sampling of what is going on in UK arts research. Nonetheless, they offer a starting point for a comparison with contemporary and performing arts research in Australia.

Talking arts research in Strine

Arts research in Australia is necessarily divided into funded and unfunded activities. Some research is funded via the ARC Discovery and Linkage grants, and these are listed on the ARC website (ARC 2004). In the main, however, these funds are almost exclusively won by researchers who have produced conventional research outputs in terms of papers, books and grant income relating to arts research. Arts practice and performance is more generally funded by the Australia Council (n. d.), which sees its major priority as funding artists rather than research. Further, academics who are artists are constructed by most arts funding bodies as being comparatively well-resourced (given that they are in receipt of academic salaries) and arts practice and performance carried out as part of an educational or academic research agenda is generally excluded from the Australia Council funding parameters.

The result of this dynamic is that practitioners are not funded to research, and researchers are not funded to practice and perform – unless such practice and performance also results in written texts, HDR completions or research income. In short, while practitioners and performers might have a recognised place in some Australian higher education institutions their contribution as researchers is generally unrecognised and almost always unfunded with the consequent implications this has for academic promotion and department and financial advancement. While some funds have been made available for research into the arts and new media, most areas of arts practice and performance fall outside of these parameters and are consequently unfunded by external grant agencies and unrecognised as output by government performance indicators.

There are some indications of a possible Australian engagement in the international debate about arts research through an investigation of practice and performance, however. Most promising of these indicators was the initial success of the Live Events Research Network (LERN 2004). A 2003 call for expressions of interest to develop research networks across a range of research fields garnered an initial submission from LERN that subsequently received significant encouragement with a (comparatively) large seeding grant. Initially, fifteen networks were to be funded: this was ultimately to increase to the financing of twenty-four networks: only three of which were apparently core business for the Humanities and Creative Arts. Two of the three HCA-related networks had at best a tangential connection with arts research: neither the ARC Research Network for Early European Research (University of Western Australia), nor the Asia-Pacific Futures Network (Australian National University) are positioned to research the creative and performing arts.

The Cultural Research Network (University of Queensland) might have included consideration of research in practice and performance, but scrutiny of the website indicates that this is not envisaged as core business by the network co-ordinators. Instead, the network is set up as a collection of 'nodes' to investigate the:

four areas of the research portfolio:

- cultural literacies
- cultural technologies
- cultural identities and communities
- cultural histories and geographies
- In addition, there will be a fifth node devoted to the professional development of postgraduates and early career researchers. (CRN 2004).

In the absence of centrally-funded arts research activities, arts researchers seek funds from their institutions and from local benefactors and professional associations in the knowledge that their work in this area is unlikely to do much to progress their careers, to win them grant income or to improve their recognition as researchers. Thus, recent arts research initiatives and forums include those generally funded by states (such as BEAP'04 [2004] itself), by institutions (such as ECU's funding for the Arts Research Network [2004]), by professional associations (such as the Australian Association for Research into Education's mini-conference into Doctorates in the Creative and Performing Arts, AARE 2003) and local initiatives such as South Australia's The Hawke Research Institute's (2004) support for the Talking Bodies programme, in which "four South Australian-based dance artists speak about their approaches to working with the body: a free public forum".

Conclusion

Australia's national research funding bodies have relinquished to other agencies the financing of research into (and debate about) the nature and

efficacy of arts research in practice and performance. This reliance upon the vagaries of ad hoc and intermittent funding of the research debate means that – at best – the Australian response to these important issues of policy and practice are likely to be partial and piecemeal. In effect, the Australian research community is yet to take seriously the issue of interrogating research in practice and performance.

Until the research community in Australia does take these issues seriously, arts practitioners and performers are denied full participation in academic and research debates. Further, given that these debates are being taken seriously in Britain – and are being legitimated, funded and recognised as academic research – the lesson from history is that when the existence of research in practice and performance is recognised by Australia the model that will be adopted to interrogate this in the local context will be that which has been painstakingly developed to reflect British culture and practice. There is no guarantee that such a model will be transferable to the Australian context or in other ways culturally appropriate to Australian arts research. Effectively we have no recognised voice at present to talk about Australian arts research and the likelihood is that when we find an acceptable speaking position we will only be able to discuss these issues by talking arts research with a British accent in terms refined through a British debate.

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