

# Open Door on Research in Art and Design

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Research in art and design traditionally has had a low profile. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council's recently published report *Research in the PCFC Sector*, based on the survey carried out by Touche Ross confirmed this by showing that the volume of research in art and design was the lowest of all the nine programme areas in the sector. This ranking is important because, although quantity is only one indicator of research effort, it is likely that the programme statistics given in the PCFC report will be taken as some measure of levels of research activity and potential on which decisions regarding future funding can be made. Because some of the research work in art and design is carried out and presented in ways which are different from those in other disciplines, it may be that the PCFC report gives a less than representative picture of the whole research effort in the field. However, it was clear that the PCFC Committee recognised that research takes different forms by adopting the Frascati typology, which categorised research as Basic (or pure), Strategic, Applied, Scholarship, Creative Work, Consultancy and Professional Practice and it could be argued that these categories provide a wide enough range to have embraced any kind of research in the art and design field. If the PCFC picture of research in art and design is inaccurate, then it would seem that researchers in the field might need to be more communicative about their work if they are to raise their profile as well as to be in a more favourable position to compete with other disciplines for resources.

Art and design, particularly design, increasingly is being seen as an important element in the recovery of the UK as a major industrial force and this view has been reinforced by government interest and support, which included high level discussions chaired by the former Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. Research is an essential part of any development in art and design if it is to realise its high potential as a contributor to the national economy but, on the basis of the PCFC

report, it would seem that, so far, its presence and effort has been little in evidence in any coherent way. The problem is not a new one and the issue was addressed in three national conferences organised in conjunction with the Council for National Academic Awards — the first in 1984 at Middlesex Polytechnic, the second in 1987 at Manchester Polytechnic and the third in 1988 at the London Institute. A further conference is planned for late 1991.

Initiatives are now underway to provide a national picture of the range and volume of research in art and design which will not only support the work of researchers in the field and provide an informed basis for policy decision-making about future directions but will also help to raise the profile. As a contribution to those initiatives, six major national bodies concerned with art and design — the Arts Council of Great Britain, the Chartered Society of Designers, the Conference for Higher Education in Art and Design, the Council for National Academic Awards, the Design Council and the National Society for Education in Art and Design — are collaborating in the development of a comprehensive database of research in art and design, the *Index of British Research in Art and Design* (IBRAD). The database has been compiled with the co-operation of ASLIB and the National Foundation for Educational Research. A measure of the national significance of the database is the substantial funding which has been provided by the Department of Trade and Industry, for which the CNAA is acting as the funding agency.

It is important to recognise that, whilst the majority of disciplines are pursued in both University Funding Council and PCFC institutions, provision for art and design, including research, is almost entirely in the PCFC sector. Notable exceptions are the Royal College of Art, which is funded directly by central government, and a small number of universities which have long traditions in studies in Fine Art and art and design history. Nevertheless, although it is now

becoming well established, systematic research in art and design is only a fairly recent development for a number of reasons, some of which provided the focus for intense debate and discussion in the conferences referred to earlier.

Firstly, for most of its long history, art and design education was provided in specialist colleges with a system of academic awards, administered by the then Ministry of Education, which were not nominally of degree level or status. Although the colleges made provision for some advanced level work, the technicality of not being able to award first degrees meant that it was not possible to offer higher degrees including, of course, research degrees, and this inhibited the development of the kind of research traditions found in other disciplines. The creation of the National Council for Diplomas in Art and Design (NCDAD) in 1965 was the first stage in raising the academic standard of art and design courses in a large number of colleges approved to offer the DipAD. The second stage came in 1975 with the merger of the NCDAD into the then newly established CNAA, after which not only did it become possible to offer first degree courses in art and design, under the CNAA Charter, but also higher degrees. At the same time, many of the art and design colleges became founding institutions in the newly created polytechnics and, later, in colleges of higher education (CHEs). There is no doubt that one of the consequences of art and design studies being embedded in multi-disciplinary institutions has been that research in art and design has derived a great deal of benefit from contact with the wider constituency of research activity.

Secondly, as a primary basis for research development and training is through the registration of students for research degrees, the lack of a research tradition in art and design created difficulties in identifying appropriately qualified and experienced tutors to act as research degree supervisors, which the CNAA, quite rightly, has rigorously required.



Various strategies, including collaboration between institutions, were adopted to overcome these difficulties, although the achievement of an experienced supervisory base has been a long process.

Thirdly, there have been problems in defining what constitutes research in art and design, as established and accepted models of research have been drawn, almost invariably, from the sciences. A general characteristic of these models of research, and a conception of research to which the CNAAL subscribes for the registration of research degrees, is that of systematic enquiry into an identified problem or issue, applying methodologies through which primary source material is gathered, tested and evaluated. A corollary of this conception is that the research is required to be reported in such a way as to allow critical examination to be made of the problem identification and analysis, the methodologies adopted and the conclusions reached and that it is presented in a form which is accessible to the field. It has been strongly argued that creative work, such as that carried out in Fine Art, is essentially research and that the resulting products, in themselves, manifest all the elements of research included in the definition but they are most appropriately able to be presented in visual form. A counter-argument of this view is that it is often difficult, solely on the evidence of exhibited work, firstly, to identify the problem being pursued, secondly, to judge the appropriateness of the method of enquiry adopted, and, thirdly, to identify if the outcomes are adequate conclusions to the enquiry or a solution to the problem. It may also be difficult to determine if the exhibited works are essentially part of a long-term (or, even, life-long) pursuit of an artistic idea or problem for which there can be no defined end. As one way of reaching a compromise in the argument, the CNAAL research degree regulations, which were framed to take account of all disciplines, allow creative work, such as in art and design, to be presented as an accompaniment to a written thesis. The

1989 CNAAL regulations (G3.3.1.3) state that 'Candidates may undertake a programme of research in which the candidate's own creative work forms, as a point of origin or reference, a significant part of the intellectual enquiry ...The creative work must be clearly presented in relation to the argument of a written thesis and set in its relevant theoretical, historical, critical or design context. The thesis must itself conform to the usual scholarly requirements and be of an appropriate length' (i.e. MPhil 15,000 — 20,000 words; PhD 30,000 — 40,000 words). The question of what constitutes research is, of course, wider than that relating just to Fine Art and a great deal of work has been done in defining not only the range of activities in art and design which can justifiably be called research but also in developing methodologies appropriate to research in the field. There is still much work to be done on this but, nevertheless, there is a growing volume of literature and experience to support the development, as was made evident in the 1988 CNAAL/London Institute Conference.

A fourth reason has been that there has been no adequate knowledge base about research in art and design to support researchers and, as a consequence, many researchers have, of necessity, had to work in virtual isolation. Not surprisingly, the strongly-held perception of almost any work in art and design as being 'original' and essentially 'personal' has also meant that the need to make reference to the work of others has not figured as a high priority in much research practice. However, it can be strongly argued that it is the lack of an adequate database of research which has inhibited the development of what may be termed a 'professional attitude' to research. A 'professional attitude' to research, in this context, may be characterised as one which accepts, on the one hand, that any research project needs to build upon and acknowledge earlier research and, on the other, that information about the research projects and their outcomes needs to be made

available to the field. The latter is important not only to disseminate research findings but also to enable the research to be subjected to critical appraisal and evaluation. The provision of such a database, of course, is the matter to which the IBRAD is addressed but it is interesting to note that, whilst there is an increasing enthusiasm by researchers and research supervisors to have access to an art and design research database, there is still reluctance on the part of some of them to accept that they themselves are essential contributors to that database and that the work they have done is the *content* of the database. However, this is an attitude which is rapidly changing and one of the significant contributors to that change is the recognition of the political values of institutional research visibility.

Of course, these are not the only matters which have affected the development of research in art and design. However, a consequence of all these factors has been that research in art and design, whilst having increased over the years since the formation of the CNAAL, has still formed a very small proportion of the total of completed research degrees. It is interesting to note that over 5000 CNAAL research degrees have been awarded since the Council was granted its charter of which, up to 1990, only 187, that is, less than four per cent, have been on topics related to art and design.

Although it might be argued that research in art and design is different in some ways from that in other disciplines, it clearly needs to be seen within the broad context of research in higher education generally. It is, perhaps, a truism that research is an academic and financial investment, both as a means of clarifying present situations and problems, on the one hand, and for identifying new possibilities, particularly those with commercial potential, on the other. However, like all investments, research can be very expensive in both time and money and, whilst there is always the possibility that any research may be



unproductive, those putting up the money for research need to be convinced that there is more than an even chance of a return of their investment. This has always been a problematic situation as far as *Basic* or 'pure' research has been concerned and that *Basic* research has had so much support in the past has more often than not been due to either liberal attitudes of funding agencies or to confidence in the academic quality or standing of the researchers. *Applied* research, by definition, has more commercial possibilities and, consequently, has always been able to attract funds more readily. For fairly obvious reasons, therefore, research in the fields of science and technology has a long record of support whilst research in the humanities and social sciences generally has had to struggle with low levels of support and, indeed, credibility. Research classed as *Creative*, which is how much of the work in art and design might be categorised, has received relatively little funding and there may be many reasons for this, not least being those relating to problems of definition of purpose, outcome and application as indicated earlier.

The funding of research in art and design is part of the whole national pattern of research funding. It has been consistently argued that the state investment in research has been too little for the best national interest and, although the government has sponsored research through the allocation of funds administered by the Research Councils, such allocations, almost inevitably, reflect government priorities. The priorities given to different fields of research is evident both by the remits of the Research Councils, on the one hand, and the levels of funding made available to them, on the other. Within the allocations of monies for research through the Research Councils, the PCFC sector received only 4 per cent of total grant money awarded. It can be inferred from the PCFC statistics on the volume of research in the different programme areas, which showed research in art and

design to constitute only 5.9 per cent of the sector's total, that very little, if any, Research Council money supported research in art and design. The continual reduction in funding in real terms to all the Research Councils and the concomitant expectation of raising necessary funding from industry and other non-public sources has been characteristic of the government's application of the notion that priorities in almost any field of endeavour should be determined, to a large extent, by market forces. Given the minimal public funding to date, it may well be that art and design research in higher education will need to examine both its policies and directions if it is to secure the support necessary for its continued development and extension. The PCFC report is encouraging in that it recommends that any additional funding secured for the sector should be made available across all programme areas. However, it may be that some pump-priming money would need to be ear-marked for research in art and design if it is to realise its potential.

The values of research to the provision of higher education were clearly enunciated in the PCFC report and were supported by evidence confirming views about its values which have been long-held on both sides of the binary line. It is interesting to note that, whilst the universities always had an important function as teaching institutions, they have always given high priority to research, in which they have distinguished and long established traditions. Until recently, they have also enjoyed a fair degree of autonomy as to the fields of research to be pursued and, whilst often seen as principally being concerned with pure research (the PCFC report estimates this at about 60 per cent of the total), they have also been responsible for an enormous amount of applied research relating to industry and other areas affecting the national economy and security. In contrast, the development of higher education in what was previously defined as the 'maintained sector' (that is, in

polytechnics and colleges of higher education) was seen initially as being primarily, if not exclusively, concerned with teaching. Inevitably, research very quickly became part of the work of the polytechnics and colleges which, under the aegis of the CNAA, developed a variety of research activities, including registrations for research degrees. Research in this sector has become an important element and achieved a high level of quality although, for a number of reasons, mostly to do with academic orientation and funding, the largest proportion, about 65 per cent, has been applied research.

As indicated earlier, it was clear that the PCFC Committee saw the level of research activity as being an important criterion in assessing the quality of an institution and, as an extension, that of a department or programme area within an institution. Although directed at the whole sector, the views have particular implications for art and design. The PCFC report noted that the 'evidence submitted to the Committee highlights eight key benefits of research in general and scholarship in particular to the teaching function' (p.15). These included, for example, the point that teachers who were involved in research were more likely to be up-to-date on subject matter and, therefore, more able to make the curriculum relevant. Research training programmes were seen to add significantly to the intellectual climate which underpinned lively teaching environments. It also noted that the 'CNAA and professional bodies pay close attention to research ethos ...when considering institutional accreditation and course validation' and that 'HMI play close attention to research and training when assessing quality assurance'. (para 3.3). The Committee also reiterated the value of research activity in terms of individual teacher's career development and, indeed, academic credibility (para 3.4). Reflecting on the point made earlier about higher education being driven by market forces, the Committee noted the contribution research programmes make



to the institutional profile and reputation and these were elemental in attracting and recruiting students as well as enhancing the institution's income potential (para 3.5). In the present climate, the importance of extending research activity in the field of art and design at institutional as well as national level and, equally importantly, ensuring the visibility of the endeavour, would seem to be self-evident, not only to sustain and enhance the quality of teaching but also to ensure that art and design maintains its place in the higher educational structure.

A principal task of the two funding bodies for higher education, the UFC and the PCFC, set up within the last two years, is to allocate funds within parameters set by central government and, as alluded to earlier with regard to decisions about financial investment, this inevitably will be influenced by assessments of perceived quality, on the one hand, and national priorities, on the other. However, the Secretary of State, in his inaugural letter to the PCFC chairman, said that he did not believe that the 'Council need distinguish teaching from research in its grants to polytechnics and colleges even if it is decided that the UFC should do so in its grants to universities' (p.10). He also stated that 'within the framework of what a polytechnic or college should properly be undertaking by way of research, it may compete on merit for Research Council finance' (p.10). This latter point may not seem very helpful, given the past record of grants to the sector by the Research Councils, which was described in the PCFC report as 'disappointingly low' along with the comment that 'research in the PCFC sector is topic, not discipline, led and can fit uneasily with that sponsored by the Research Councils' (p.24). The PCFC report emphasised the need for additional funding, particularly as one of the major sources of finance, the selective initiatives established by the National Advisory Body, is due to run out in 1991 and recommended 'a total of £35m be allocated selectively in 1991/2'

(p.7) to support research in the sector. The report advised that this money should be made 'available to all programme areas', that it should be 'awarded against strict criteria and would not be for specific projects' and that it should be 'subject to stringent assessment and evaluation' (p.26). Although the Committee concluded that decisions as to 'where additional research funds could be put to best use' was at the institutional level, it recommended the establishment of an 'Advisory Group on Research to the Chief Executive' to allocate funds against 'agreed value for money criteria' (p.8). A concomitant of this is that there will be increased competition between disciplines and it is, perhaps, inevitable that allocations of funds are likely to favour disciplines with established research profiles. An important ingredient in these decisions is likely to be the levels of funding which have been able to have been secured from industrial and other sources. Although, as noted earlier, the PCFC report recommended that monies should be awarded to research in all programme areas and, indeed, singled out art and design as meriting some pump-priming money (p.25), it will clearly be up to researchers in art and design to demonstrate both the strength of their activity and its rigor.

In terms of data already collected for the *Index of British Research in Art and Design*, it is becoming increasingly evident that research degree registrations are not an adequate measure of the amount of research which is being carried out in art and design as they constitute only a relatively small proportion of total research activity. Echoing the values perceived by the PCFC Committee noted earlier, research is increasingly being seen as an important element in the development of art and design theory and practice, particularly practice. Furthermore, as well as a considerable amount of research being carried out by staff, either independently or as commissioned work in conjunction with industrial and other bodies, a substantial proportion of the many taught Master's

degree courses include a research requirement and some important work is being done under this heading. What is significant about this research is that it is applied research in a very direct sense and it is worth noting that a large number of the Master's degree students are experienced practitioners on release from industry.

There are, however, some fundamental problems about research in art and design which, although some starting points have been made as already indicated, have yet to be fully addressed. That they are addressed with some urgency will be of extreme importance if art and design is to substantiate its position in higher education at a time of competing priorities. There is no doubt that the picture of art and design research will become clearer and its further development supported with the publication of the first edition of the IBRAD and its subsequent updates. On the one hand, for the first time there will be a map of research activity in art and design identifying not only the centres of research but also the directions being taken and, on the other, also for the first time, researchers and others will have ready access to the kind of information about research endeavours which is essential to their own professional pursuit. In this sense, the IBRAD will be an important contributor to the development of a much-needed 'research community' in art and design as well as to the establishment of a national professional ethos in which research can flourish. As part of the development of that community and ethos, it is expected that making sure that information about completed research is recorded in the database will, in time, be accepted by researchers as part of their professional obligations, as it has been in longer-established disciplines. Of course, the availability of such information has political as well as academic implications, not the least significant of which relates to its role in the making of

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