
**The Value of Art and Design Research with
recommendations on REF Good Practice.**

**Policy briefing for Vice Chancellors, Pro Vice
Chancellors Research and Research Staff.**



**Produced by the Council for Higher Education in Art
and Design (CHEAD)**

March 2025

Arts and Humanities Research

In UK Higher Education, we need to act strategically to ensure we sustain a national capability for arts and humanities which contributes to and underpins the broader science agenda. This requires sustaining a broad ecosystem of curiosity driven research alongside a strategic focus on the most pressing issues of our time. UK Arts and Humanities research is a globally leading sector. In 2020, UK Humanities research activity was 49% higher than the global average, outperforming all other disciplinary research areas in the UK.

Arts and humanities lie at the heart of research and innovation in the UK. The work that we fund underpins health, happiness, well-being and thriving places; it creates the space for research and innovation to make a difference to society and the economy, and it is ever more powerful when combined with expertise from other disciplines, sectors and contexts. We place our values, creativity and imagination at the heart of UKRI and intend to be at the centre of its success in the coming years.
2022 -2025 AHRC Strategic Plan

Arts are central to Humanities research. The UK also has 19 universities in the global top 100 in the Times Higher Education 2023 rankings for Arts and Humanities, including four in the top 10, and 19 in the top 100 in the 2022 QS World Rankings. This is underpinned by research from regional HEIs of all size, scale and intensity.

There is a strong correlation between the skills of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS) graduates and key skills valued by employers. The number of UK students choosing Humanities subjects suggests they continue to recognise the value of degrees that prepare them not narrowly for any one career, but which develop the talents and skills needed for a wide range of opportunities.

Place Art and Design research at the epicentre of interdisciplinary research and encourage multidisciplinary collaboration across faculties and research centres

Professor Christopher Smith, UKRI Sector Champion for the Creative Industries and Executive Chair, Arts and Humanities states that it is essential that the Arts and Humanities sustains motivation to address ‘the challenge of complexity and engender open constructive debate, in our own subjects, across science and across communities.’ The REF 2021 Final Overview Report welcomed the **creativity, innovation, diversity, and quality of the research** submitted in all Art and Design fields. These included an expanded range of monographs, edited books, special editions, journals and papers, confidential reports, curated exhibitions, creative artefacts and practices, films, screen-based media, online and digital installations, performances, programmes, and events.

REF 2021 saw **outstanding practice research** that was socially engaged, including applied work situated in a wide range of contexts, and work co-created with community partners or professionals. The sub-panel also **identified world-leading practice research that demonstrated originality, rigour, and significance in aesthetic** or formal terms alone.

So, what next for REF 2029?

What must Executive Teams and Research Leaders do to ensure that best practice in Art and Design REF submissions, research environments, people and cultures is sustained and developed?

8 Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions:

1. Demonstrate more explicitly the contribution made by practice research to society, industry and to the wider creative industries, one of the eight priority sectors in the Industrial Strategy (worth £125bn in 2024), by prioritising the field and leading the HE sector's preparation for REF2029.
2. Champion and encourage a greater range of methods, methodologies, practices and outputs beyond the predominating monographs, book chapters, and journal articles. Educate research support staff on the wide criteria and acceptability afforded to practice-based outputs. Support Early Career Researchers to develop practice-based research methods.
3. Recognise the esteem, investigate and account for the significant non-HESA related income from the wider civic and knowledge exchange activities that is generated and contributes to HEBCIS returns. Recognise the esteem brought to HEIs through such external income generation, as well as the highly competitive nature of relevant schemes, which often have significantly lower success rates than HESA-related schemes.
4. Understand the complex and synergistic relationships across the ecosystem of cultural organisations, charities, freelance communities and the general public where Art and Design research enable soft power, knowledge exchange, civic engagement and placemaking.
5. Represent the full scope of Art and Design research and environments within institutional level and discipline level REF 2029 statements particularly where art and design is at the epicentre of interdisciplinary research and collaboration.
6. Investigate the effectiveness of institutional infrastructures to collate, curate and celebrate expanded forms of outputs and all forms of research endeavour. Current HEI repositories (Pure, Converis, E-Prints) do not currently offer this facility, so inadvertently creating a representation of Art and Design research that is primarily textual which obscures the considerable research contribution of significant sections of the visual and performing arts, architecture, design and media communities.
7. Provide studio, practice, laboratory, experimental and exhibition space and access to technical/technological facilities for Art and Design researchers. Recognise that these hidden costs are regularly supported by the individual artist/researcher, in contrast to other discipline areas whose researchers are provided with relevant infrastructure and equipment at institutional level.
8. Reform recruitment, retention and career progression frameworks to develop inclusive professorial selection criteria to ensure that diverse, practice-based, creative, experimental and speculative forms of research undertaken by Art and Design researchers are rewarded.

REF 2021 UOA 32: Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory

- 86 UK HEIs submitted
- 2,607.19 Category A FTE staff returned (3,169 headcount)
- 6,388 research outputs
- 269 impact case studies
- 392 early career researchers submitted

**Total research income:
£246.61 million (2013/14-
2019/20)**

The sub-panel for unit of assessment D32 welcomed the very significant increase in **double-weighted outputs** from 87 in REF 2014 to 609 in REF 2021. This included **all output types**, subjects, and forms, from monographs through to **multi-component and practice research**.

REF 2021 identified an increase in **practice research outputs** with a **compelling interdisciplinary dimension**. Research in all fields of Art and Design has become increasingly interdisciplinary by virtue of the character of contemporary research practice, accentuated by **significant growth in thematic and interdisciplinary research funding**.

There was a significant increase (1000 FTE) submitted to Sub-panel 32 for REF 2021. This represents an **increase of over 62% since REF 2014**. It was the highest increase in Main Panel D and suggests that a high proportion of researchers were submitting to REF 2021 for the first time.

Internationally excellent, vital and highly innovative in approach, 72% of the Art and Design research submitted to REF 2021 was judged to be world-leading, demonstrating vitality, creativity and innovation in its global reach and content, in its interdisciplinary engagement and in the **variety of media and forms** with which research resides in the public domain. The volume, quality, **diversity, and originality** of research in fine art and socially engaged arts practice were impressive.

72% of the Art and Design research submitted to REF 2021 was judged to be world leading or internationally excellent

REF 2021 UOA 33: Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies

- 84 UK HEIs submitted
- 1523.27 Category A FTE staff submitted (1,712 headcount)
- 3,707 research outputs
- 197 impact case studies submitted
- 226 early career researchers submitted

Total research income: £95.4 million (2013/14-

The outcomes for REF 2021 sub panel 33 also demonstrate that the **quality of HEI research in Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies is higher than ever**, showing a notable increase compared to REF 2014, and laying claim to be amongst the **best in the world**.

The sub-panel recognised the **substantial volume of research that was facilitated by non-HESA income** and that effectively enabled dissemination and impact. Art and Design communities have long sustained **complementary symbiotic relationships with cultural and community collaborators** through their ability to attract and to balance auditable funding for research and non-HESA income from an array of sources such that it supports and augments **civic and public engagement**.

The sub-panel appreciated the **investment in technical personnel and development of both digital and analogue studio provision for making, screening, editing and performance** as well as **investment in gallery and innovation spaces** to facilitate research and development, dissemination, knowledge exchange, business, and industry liaison.

For more information, please contact Sandra Booth, CHEAD Director of Policy and External Relations: sandra@chead.ac.uk

Sources:

[AHRC strategic delivery plan 2022 to 2025 – UKRI](#)

www.chead.ac.uk

www.ref.ac.uk

[The-Humanities-in-the-UK-Today-Whats-Going-On.pdf](#)

HEPI/ Russell Group's Pro-Vice-Chancellors / Deans of Arts and Humanities Network 2023