

# Advocacy Document on Collaborative Research



Midlands Higher Education & Culture Forum  
Collaborative Research Working Group

# Introduction

The Midlands Higher Education & Culture Forum (MHECF) was initiated in late 2017 in Nottingham as a dynamic network aiming to bring together and build partnerships between Higher Education and the cultural Sectors across the Midlands.

At our launch conference at Nottingham Contemporary, 150 stakeholders from Higher Education and Cultural Sectors convened to identify common strategic challenges and opportunities. As a result of the event, five working groups were formed in order to address specific areas of shared interest: placemaking; talent and employment; cultural education; collaborative research; and health and wellbeing. Starting in the summer of 2018, our working groups have delivered a series of events and hosted conversations to decide on future steps related to the scope of the Forum. Those discussions have allowed us to explore how we can collectively address our common challenges, and where we could more effectively collaborate to provide mutual benefit. Since the foundation, our work has investigated ways of enabling a stronger voice for our sectors in the Midlands and influencing policy. The Forum hosted a second conference in Coventry, in early 2019, during which the outputs of our work were presented and discussed.

# Collaborative Research Working Group

The Collaborative Research Working Group focuses on identifying the challenges and opportunities in a shifting landscape of collaborative research between cultural and Higher Education sectors. Cultural and academic partners acknowledged an increasing investment in collaborative forms of research, including collaborative grants (e.g. ACE and AHRC), and Collaborative Doctoral Awards.

Research Councils are also invested in encouraging research to be developed in dialogue with partners and to be embedded in society at large. For this collaboration to be fruitful, partners identified the need to better equip the cultural partners, to give them the confidence and tools to engage in the design of the research brief from the beginning, sharing research questions and, in dialogue, identifying the research priorities.

We believe that collaborative research has the potential to identify new research methods and innovative outputs. The cultural sector and cultural practitioners can highly contribute to expand the ways in which we think of research and collaboration. Most of the projects funded are based on the case-study model and social sciences methodologies. This approach situates the cultural practitioners and their activities as the object of research, and not as actively informing the research itself. The increasing appetite in furthering collaborations is an opportunity to shift the paradigm, encouraging new modalities of practice research<sup>1</sup>.

The collaborative research working group is working to provide a cohesive view of the regional landscape in order to advocate effectively, both regionally and nationally, and indicate practical ways forward for funding opportunities, research methods and practice research.

We understand that there are three routes:

- Shifting research culture in a cultural context and in Higher Education, into a collaboration that brings sectors together from the outset when defining research questions and methods.
- Identifying and implementing new modalities of practice research informing the nature of collaborative doctoral awards, research methods, among others.
- Advocating accordingly to the ACE and funding bodies, including Research Councils.

The advocacy document was devised by Dr Carolina Rito, Professor of Creative Practice Research at Coventry University (formerly: Head of Public Programmes & Research at Nottingham Contemporary) and Collaborative Research Working Group Chair; and Dr Bill Balaskas, Director of Research, Business & Innovation, School of Art & Architecture, Kingston University (formerly: Associate Professor in Visual Communication & Research Coordinator at Nottingham Trent University) and Collaborative Research Working Group Co-Convenor.

1. By practice research the authors understand: the knowledge produced by research conducted via means and methods of practice, i.e. artistic, curatorial and performance, among others.

# Areas of interest

Through a series of open events and working group meetings, the working group identified the key areas of interest of our stakeholders and participants:

- The creation of more initiatives where sectors can share methodologies (PhD funding, postdocs, impact cases.)
- The collation and sharing of innovative case studies in the field of collaborative research.

→ The exploration of how collaborative research can be successfully and meaningfully reported to Higher Education research assessment exercises (Research Excellence Framework – REF2021).

→ The contribution towards a general glossary of terms to foster a broader understanding of research terminology and language in both cultural and Higher Education sectors.

→ The inclusion of local groups to guarantee a rich research ecology, where each locality is reflected in the priorities of research projects.

## Outputs

In response to the key areas of interest that were identified, the Working Group proposed and actioned the following:

- An online glossary to foster a broader understanding of research terminology for both the cultural sector and Higher Education institutions ([www.midlandshecf.org](http://www.midlandshecf.org)).
- An online archive of regional case studies of successful collaborative research projects ([www.midlandshecf.org](http://www.midlandshecf.org)).
- An edited publication featuring accounts of: 1. research-led cultural organisations; 2. cultural programming in collaboration with HE; 3. research-led

curating. The publication entails case studies of national and international collaborative research projects. Publish by Sternberg Press. See publication blurb below (appendix).

→ An advocacy document on collaborative research to Arts Council England and Research Councils (e.g. AHRC DTP Midlands4Cities) based on the conferences, the discussion events, and the reception of the first three outputs by both HE and the Cultural Sectors.

→ A series of events on collaborative research.

# Findings

As a result of the Working Group's meetings and events, and the Forum's two conferences, we have identified the following areas of opportunities and challenges for collaborative research:

→ Both sectors have identified the lack of time and resources as two major factors that hinder sector and inter-sector research and collaboration.

→ There is a lack of common understanding of the terminology and structures of research employed in each sector.

→ There is a lack of access to knowledge exchange and collaborative initiatives for smaller cultural organisations, which have no prior connections with HE institutions.

# Proposals

As a result of the findings, the Working Group is proposing the following policies, actions and areas of investigation to Arts Council England and research councils:

→ Establish funding opportunities for collaborations based on practice research between sectors, drawing from curatorial and artistic practices and the figure of the 'practitioner researcher' (Pringle, 2019):

→ Secure access to cultural partners to research seminars and courses delivered by Higher Education institutions, such as Research Methods workshops and PhD training.

→ Establish an official lexicon-glossary of research terms that covers both sectors. This can be based on the glossary of the Midlands Higher Education and Culture Forum.

→ Support cultural partners to find suitable opportunities within Collaborative Doctoral Awards. This can be based on the matching opportunities and partners application of the MHECF website (in development).

→ Include practice researchers and cultural practitioners in collaborative research grants selection committees, e.g. Collaborative Doctoral Awards, ACE research grants.

# Publication

## **Institution as Praxis – New Curatorial Directions for Collaborative Research**

*Institution as Praxis* is a research project initiated by Dr Carolina Rito as Head of Public Programmes and Research at Nottingham Contemporary. The project aims to identify and advocate for a multiplicity of practices taking place across the cultural sector that do not only engage with the quest to deliver cultural activities (e.g. exhibitions, events), but generate new modes of knowledge production and research in the field of visual culture, art, and the curatorial.

The project acknowledges that universities are not the only sites where knowledge is produced – a fact that is as unavoidable as it is exciting. Although the development of these methods is not new in the cultural field, *Institution as Praxis* aims to articulate how these practices contribute to new modes of knowledge production and research methodologies in non-academic and academic contexts. This project aims to engage with current debates around collaborative research across the HE and cultural sectors; advocating for a more collaborative dialogue where cultural partners also contribute to the development of research questions and advance methods to further new modes of research.

In line with Universities increased interest in widening the impact of academic research, this moment marks an opportunity to ask how this situation affects the ways in which research is

conducted in collaboration with the cultural sector – e.g. Collaborative Doctoral Programmes, Research Councils funds, and Arts Councils research grants. The impact of academic research should not only value the benefits to the industry and the general public, but also consider how to learn from advanced practices that are already in operation in the cultural sector. *Institution as Praxis* investigates the ways in which we can propose alternatives to the traditional case-study research and identify investigative practices in the curatorial, art and visual cultures.

Nottingham Contemporary holds a research unit on curatorial methodologies. This unit is based on the principle that artistic and curatorial 'events' activate research questions and advance new knowledge and evidences on the subject matter. Between 2017 and 2019, the Public Programmes and Research at Nottingham Contemporary developed an array of initiatives to contribute to the debate / practices on new curatorial directions for collaborative research. As part of these activities Dr Carolina Rito developed long-term research strands and explored new modes of knowledge production and curatorial practices. These include CAMPUS (Independent Studies Programme), The Contemporary Journal (online journal), *Institutional as Praxis* Publication, Postdocs, Collaborative Doctoral Programmes (AHRC and ESRC), among others.

*Institution as Praxis – New Curatorial Directions for Collaborative Research*, edited by Carolina Rito and Bill Balaskas,

## Further work

explores current debates and experimental practices across the HE and cultural sectors, indicating new curatorial and artistic directions for institutional research. This exploration inquires curatorial and artistic practices that have contributed to the expansion and invention of manifold research methodologies — institutional, practice-based, and collaborative, to name a few — and contributed to think of strategies to de-universalise and de-neutralise the mechanisms of knowledge. The contributions take the form of essays, interviews, and accounts.

This document will be enriched following the publication of the book that has been commissioned by the MHECF.

Dr Carolina Rito

Dr Bill Balaskas

<b>Contributors</b>	<b>Publication date</b>
Bill Balaskas	March 2020
Michael Birchall	
Mélanie Bouteloup	<b>Publisher</b>
Carolina Céron	Sternberg Press
Anthony Downey	
Pujita Guha and	
Abhijan Toto for the	
Forest Curriculum	
Joasia Krysa	
Vali Mahlouji	
Je Yun Moon	
Andrea Phillips	
Emily Pringle	
Carolina Rito	
Ruangrupa	
Manuel Segade	
Nora Sternfeld	
Sian Vaughan	

[www.midlandshecf.org](http://www.midlandshecf.org)

