



**National Campaign for the Arts:
Making the Case for the Arts in Ireland**

NCFEA Position on Research

Introduction

Every day, all across the country, people make a compelling case for the arts by actively getting involved with a huge variety of creative, artistic and cultural activities. The NCFA aims to amplify this positive message by communicating on the value of the funded arts sector in Ireland.

The NCFA believes that a programme of dynamically planned research with practical policy goals is urgently needed to ensure the funded arts sector continues to serve its social, economic, and cultural function. This is desirable as soon as possible. Everyone should know how the funded arts sector is governed, what it achieves, and who benefits.

Against the current backdrop of far reaching change in people's lives and society's fortunes, consolidating existing research and instigating long-term research can reveal the complexity of individual experiences and protect against the loss of organisational knowledge. In our view, the mandate to government to represent the public interest puts government at the centre of any prospective research partnership across the cultural, educational, and political spectrum.

Moreover, those working in not-for-profit or non-profit contexts typically struggle to afford to commission the kinds of sectoral research that are needed to properly inform policy and underpin decisions. We see an opportunity for a new approach to this challenge: a programme of research projects of unprecedented ambition that is capable of showing how the work of the funded arts sector functions in a modern democracy and how it contributes to society.

'The Measure of Success'

Research is a complex thing at the best of times. At the worst of times, actively advocating for resources for research on how cultural value is determined is especially challenging. Nowadays, the meaning and value of cultural experience is regularly represented in economic terms. This approach normally favours measurements and definitions associated with quantitative methods of evaluation above all else. That is, research methods that normally prioritise computable, statistical data - the representation of information through percentages and so on. This view is often perceived to be somehow better because it deals in so-called 'hard' data.

However, the strengths of this approach are also often considered limited when used alone. Used in isolation, this can lead to a belief that only 'what gets counted, counts'¹. The simple inference is that what doesn't get counted, or measured in a certain way, doesn't count. As a consequence of this certain values may not be articulated at all.

The mechanisms of mainstream evaluation most typically used by cultural policy makers in Ireland exclude values that are outside from the mainstream language of evaluation.

¹ New Economics. www.neweconomics.org.

We must challenge the current mechanisms of evaluation. The intertwining of culture with profitability is now common. By combining funding with results, we have been led to what has been called a 'crisis of legitimacy' in the arts.² A perception of the arts very much couched in these terms has become the norm since the 1990s. The legacy of this view has deeply affected discussions of value in the arts ever since.³

Impacts and outcomes that cannot be explained, described, or measured solely in terms of having an economic function, still struggle for authority within the wider policy arena. Slowly, this is being recognised by cultural policy makers and governments as a problem because the economic function is an insufficient lens through which to view and evaluate the totality of work in the arts and cultural experience.

Other research methods that seek to record and evaluate qualities and effects that are hard to capture by statistical measurement do exist. They thrive when well supported. But these approaches are time consuming and require researchers to have certain additional skills that will allow them to elicit information and analyse it well.⁴

Ongoing prejudices also exist in the language of research culture and can be a superficial distraction among policy makers when commissioning research; for example, data produced under these conditions may be described as 'soft data' rather than 'hard data', inferring that it is less stable, less solid. But this limited level of engagement is very unsound.⁵

The NCFA believes that Ireland can be at the leading edge of better research about the arts. The research culture that has recently been fostered in Ireland has been substantially supported directly or indirectly by the state, or through the mechanisms of the state, so it fair to expect that the resources and the will to use data better, and support a truly outstanding example of longitudinal research are available in Ireland.

We are advocating for research fully realising that current research concepts and definitions can seem unrecognisable to the 'reality' or 'experience' of key stakeholders that the research describes. As a consequence, those who daily make and work in the arts, and to whom this research matters a great deal, often feel alienated from the results. Nonetheless, expectations

² John Holden. 2006. "Cultural Value and the Crisis of Legitimacy." UK: Demos.

³ Kevin McCarthy, Elizabeth H. Ondaatje, Laura Zakaras, and Arthur Brooks. 2004. "Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate about the Benefits of the Arts," commissioned by The Wallace Foundation. USA: RAND.

⁴ Dave O'Brien. 2010. 'Measuring the Value of Culture: a report to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport,' UK: Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

⁵ Alan Bryman. 2003. "Quantitative and Qualitative Research", ed. Clive Seale, *Social Research Methods: a Reader*. London: Routledge.

within the sector do demand that research underpin decisions that affect policy and the implementation of policy.

While previous research on expenditure and sentiment shows that government support for the arts continues to be high and public opinion is positive, the lack of a shared language on value and the arts artificially limits the depth of any discussion about why the arts generally matter so much to people. It also limits debate.⁶

Aiming to break down such barriers, the NCFA urgently advocates for new approaches that connect long-term evidence-based research to a systematic process of policy development. We realise that communication about the meaning and value of the proposed activity must connect with all members of society, in Irish public life and in private.

The NCFA is confident that a more confident and imaginative approach to measurement can be a shared endeavour that does reflect mutual intentions and aspirations. On this basis, the NCFA aims to improve policy and decision-making in the funded arts sector by promoting more appropriately designed and adequately maintained research.

We will seek truly innovative ways to do this. The NCFA believes that measurement is a useful and vital tool. It is worth recalling that with a long history of exposure to criticism the arts are accustomed to judgement. But the place of policy is not the same as criticism.

We need better research questions and ways of gathering information and interpreting data that really connects public life with the arts. The publicly funded arts sector can galvanise its strengths to steer itself through the current crisis, but the sector *must* be allowed to do this and to contribute to recovery.

The NCFA is a non-partisan grouping. We support the complementary goals of other advocacy groups and membership organisations in the arts. We support transparency in lobbying.

⁶ Tessa Jowell. 2004. "Government and the Value of Culture," UK: Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

Next Steps

There are clear data deficits and the NCFA has specifically identified an urgent need for:

- (1) the annual profiling of the funded arts sector and the better use of existing and collected data;
- (2) a biennial survey of cultural participation;
- (3) a longitudinal study into the arts and the lives of individuals in Ireland.

The NCFA is meeting with potential research partners in the arts, higher education, professional research groups, and partners specialising in non-traditional research practices and more radical consultation approaches. To start with, a review of the existing literature and data about cultural participation and 'value' in Ireland needs to be done. We will seek to act as a catalyst in devising future partnerships. Research completed, it is our ambition that the new data and examples of research methodologies will be made public and available to all stakeholders.

Please see our NCFA Strategy on Research, for examples of how other research has been done in Ireland and abroad, in the arts and other sectors; these examples are given to stimulate discussion and action on research and to help all those with a stake in the funded arts sector communicate on what the arts mean to us all.

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This position paper is complemented by our NCFA Strategy on Research also available on our website.