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University departments need a broad range of active performing artists

Without practical teaching at their heart, many departments of music technology, drama and dance could face closure, says Ian Pace

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Ian Pace

In the wake of the REF results, thoughts are already turning to how the next exercise should be configured. In that context, it is welcome that the issue of how practice-based submissions should be handled is receiving a wide airing.

Victoria Kelley ([“The REF does not disadvantage practice-based subjects”](#)) writes thoughtfully in response to my earlier article arguing for a broadening of the means of assessing practice ([“Performing arts need a research and practice excellence framework”](#)), which leads me to some further thoughts.

Kelley writes extensively about the experience at her own institution, the University for the Creative Arts. I prefer not to focus primarily on my own, not only because some of the issues concerned are just as, if not more, vivid in other departments, but also because the inevitable promotional demands relating to one’s own institution can conflict with a more critically distant appraisal of the issues at stake.

Kelley and I appear to think similarly about the problems in assessing practice-based outputs on the basis of existing REF criteria (in particular “rigour”), and also about some tendencies for institutions to opt for “safer” choices when selecting outputs. Where we appear to differ is on the relationship between the types of practice-research academics undertake and the interests and desires of students.

Here, it is worth noting that Kelley writes from the perspective of an institution focusing on *creative* arts, in which (from a look at the undergraduate courses offered) the *performing* arts are a relatively small component. I believe my critique is especially relevant for the latter, in which discipline those who are engaged in live performance have long had to battle for academic recognition.

In the case of music, traditionally composers (mostly of notated scores) were accepted as undertaking ‘academic’ activity through their practical work; performers rarely so. While this situation remains the case in many countries, the modified criteria for the 2001 Research and Assessment Exercise sought to accommodate a wider range of practice-based submissions. This shift to a common framework also affected composers and has fuelled much of the subsequent debate on composition-as-research.

In Oxbridge and a few (by no means all) other Russell Group departments (which in total now recruit around 20 per cent of music students), performance, sound engineering or creative music technology form, at most, small parts of undergraduate courses. But the situation is very different in other universities (which account for around 59 per cent of students, with around 21 per cent going to conservatoires).

For better or worse, the major expansion of the sector over the last three decades has been fuelled in large measure by the growth of new courses centred around professional training. The importance of this to students cannot be underestimated; one department chose to remove provision of one-to-one instrumental and vocal teaching to students and had to close very soon afterwards. Without practical teaching at the heart of their programmes, many departments of music technology, drama and dance might face the same fate – especially in the face of intense competition from high-recruiting private providers who are generally less concerned about the REF.

But this teaching is not often the realm of research-active academics. The distinction between “experimental” and more “mainstream and commercial” approaches is probably starker in music than in other arts, to the extent that many whose research is in the former realm are unable to teach a fair amount of the latter. Experimental music theatre, in the tradition of the work of the likes of John Cage, Mauricio Kagel, Sylvano Bussotti and others, is so far away from the world of Broadway or the West End as to be a wholly separate sphere.

Even the status of university composition is far from undisputed. One of its founding credos is a notorious 1958 essay, “[Who Cares if You Listen?](#)” by the American composer Milton Babbitt (who did not supply the title). Babbitt argued that “serious” and “advanced” contemporary music should undoubtedly be pursued in universities even if rejected by most performers and the general public. He appealed to the idea that lay people should no more be expected to appreciate such work than they would the results of advanced scientific enquiry, and he appeared to prioritise certain ideals of musical “progress” being supported.

Babbitt’s essay has often been criticised on grounds of wilful elitism, as well as for reflecting and deferring to a narrow 1950s US quasi-scientific positivistic culture, but similar thinking continues to inform many university composers in the UK. His arguments are also hard to justify in terms of wider impact (in the REF sense of the term), as the work of Babbitt and those of a similar persuasion remain very small niches.

Nor was his view necessarily shared by all others of a modernist persuasion: in 1959 [Igor Stravinsky](#) cautioned young composers against submitting to the “academic” and “theoretical” requirements of universities. Furthermore, in a 1969 interview, French avant-garde composer [Pierre Boulez](#) sharply criticised the whole phenomenon of US university composers, dismissing their claims to be “great scientists”, and claiming they inhabited an ivory tower aloof from practical musicians and demands of invention, imagination and expression.

It would be unfair to tar all of today’s UK university composers with the attributes Boulez claimed of their US counterparts in the late 1960s. But the primacy of REF criteria of “significance”, “originality” and “rigour” might be thought to push them in that same direction.

The REF's terms of reference are more flexible and sophisticated than the arguments put forward by Babbitt. But I believe we still need to go further to support a broad range of active performing artists in university departments.

Ian Pace is professor of music at [City, University of London](#), and co-convenor of a conference on [Music and the University: History, Models, Prospects](#), which will take place at City on 7-9 July 2022.