

RESPONSE TO AHRC CONSULTATION ON DOCTORAL AWARDS

This response was written in consultation with TaPRA though submitted separately.

Q1

This response has been written by Emeritus Professor Stephen Lacey (University of South Wales) in my capacity as Chair of the Standing Conference of Drama Departments (SCUDD), which is the professional body representing drama and performance departments in UK HE. It has been written after consultation with our membership.

Q2

One theme that will underpin SCUDD's responses to these questions is that the proposals under consultation will have the effect – no doubt unintended – of favouring larger and more established departments and institutions. Departments of drama and performance tend to be located in small, discrete units, sometimes in 'smaller, specialist and regionally-located' universities (to adopt the nomenclature of a recent report by Guild HE). There are such HEIs in current DTPs and CDTs, but not many, and anecdotal evidence suggests that they do not always fare well in the internal competition for studentships. Such departments and institutions, may well be disadvantaged by a requirement for 50-50 matched funding, since it will be harder for them to act strategically to spread costs across departmental, school and HEI budgets. If this happens, it will run counter to the expressed wishes of the Secretary of State, who earlier this year asked, in a letter to HEFCE, that spending in 'small and specialist institutions' be protected (July 21). This echoes the comments of the Chief Executive of HEFCE, Professor Madeleine Atkins, who commended the 'economic and cultural importance' of such institutions in her announcement of the 2015 funding settlement in March.

Q3

It is worth stating at the outset that the proposals will simplify a complex and confusing funding system, and this is to be welcomed. Additionally, the decision to open the DTPs to a new round of bidding, in which new HEIs will have the opportunity to enter the system, is correct in our view. However, we have reservations, some serious, which are detailed in the following.

The consultation document states that neither a reduction nor a concentration of access to provision is planned; however, it is proposed that there be 10, and not 11, DTPs and that the CDTs be folded into them. That would seem to be a clear concentration of resource in larger DTPs, which will privilege larger HEIs and existing networks and consortia. Emerging HEIs and partners from outside existing networks will find it hard to edge in unless explicitly encouraged to do so. Although there is a theoretical freedom to join a consortium, this ability is constrained by existing relationships and connections: HEIs will go first to those they know, and this will disadvantage those outside the charmed circle. Drama and performance departments are under-represented in existing DTPs, yet they often score highly in terms of some of the stated objectives of the AHRC doctoral programme – eg

supporting collaboration with non-HEIs, developing applied research that has impact beyond the academy and practice-as-research. **Indeed, many researchers active in practice are located in specialist institutions, as several of the case studies contained in the recent report for Guild HE makes clear** (Paul Kleiman, *Excellence in Diversity*, 2015), **and many successful AHRC-funded PhD graduates find employment in such institutions.** It would be retrograde to undermine diversity and innovation in this way.

Size does not always equal efficiency, and the exhortation to collaborate will not always be heard; there is anecdotal evidence, expressed by SCUDD members in private, that a great deal of effort is going into competing with partners for allocations of awards, and that competition between institutions in an increasingly marketised HE sector dominates. If true, this would be exacerbated by larger partnerships.

The strength of the UK university system lies in its diversity; as the Guild HE report argues persuasively, diversity produces innovation, especially in relation to collaboration with non-HEI partners: 'the creativity, diversity and impact of research across the sector demonstrate the importance of funding excellence whenever it is found' (Kleiman, 2015: 32). AHRC is right not to interfere directly to direct the focus of the new round of DTPs in advance, but it could help by encouraging and rewarding diversity.

The issue of whether larger DTPs will be more adept at collaborating with non-HEIs is crucial. We oppose the ending of the CDA scheme, and the folding of this model of collaboration with non-HEIs into DTPs. This is based on questionable assumptions: where is the evidence that current DTPs have better relationships with non-HEIs? That incorporating them into DTPs will lead to an improvement in applications? Surely they can already apply – what is the logic here? Is it also possible that the CDA model will be sidelined by DTPs that have other priorities? What is meant by increased 'flexibility' in the range of possibilities of 'mainstreamed' DCA-type awards? There is no evidence provided of this. **There is also a danger that earlier AHRC-funded training and expertise in industry-facing research will be lost if these changes go ahead.**

We note the claim that DTPs have improved supervision, and do not dispute it. It would be helpful, however, to include some evidence of this improvement.

A great many drama and performance departments have good relationships with non-HEIs – as one might expect, given the discipline – and this is true of many that are outside existing DTPs and likely to remain so. Departments and HEIs outside DTPs have had some success in the CDA competition to date: a quick trawl of the figures of past awards provided on the AHRC website indicates that since 2005 some 35 non-DTP HEIs have secured 81 awards, 17 of which are in the drama and performance area. Such departments and HEIs also have a good track record of developing relationships over time, which is crucial to bringing new partners into the scheme, and it would be a pity to waste, or marginalise, this expertise.

Q4

It is possible that the removal of the cap on the number of studentships will exacerbate the problem of centralisation noted above, and privilege further existing DTP partners. Frankly, new DTPs, however they are configured, will feel encouraged to bid for as many as they can, rather than act in accordance with a considered target. Given that the total number of

studentships, and consortia, is fixed, then it makes sense to retain a cap, and to think carefully at what level it should be set.

Q5

This is a difficult question to answer in the absence of detailed information on the criteria for allocating studentships to consortia (as is Q4). The important thing is to ensure there is equality of opportunity for all HEIs that offer appropriate postgraduate research support and training, and that the AHRC acts to protect the diversity of the system.

Q6

There is a certain logic, in the interests of simplicity and directness, in phasing out CDTs. However, if priority areas remain, as the consultation document says they will, then how are they to be fostered and protected if there is an open call for DTPs to propose subject networks? The performing arts have not figured highly in the current arrangements, and if the result of the proposed changes is indeed that existing consortia members win out, they are unlikely to emerge as a new priority. The rationale for subject networks seems to be to remedy possible supervision issues resulting from geography (p.8 paragraph 1): could they also be used as a mechanism for supporting priority areas (such as the performing arts) and ensuring diversity? Given the value of the performing arts to the creative economy, and the AHRC's aim to support research and study that reaches out beyond academia, it is odd that they are not more present in the current CDP consortia.

Q7

The paragraph that precedes this question deals with ways in which the involvement of non-HEIs in the new-model DTPs might be increased – it does not refer to funding arrangements, and there is no rationale provided for why/how funding levels might be arrived at, fixed or otherwise. Increased representation of non-HEI partners on advisory boards is broadly to be welcomed, but there are dangers in setting fixed targets for leveraging external funding. The ecology of arts funding, especially performing arts funding, might exclude smaller arts organisations and favour larger ones, which would be a pity. Also, in-kind support and assistance can be of considerable value to research projects, and these should be allowed to feature in any new system.

Q8

The areas, from which metrics will be derived, are relevant, but a note of caution needs to be entered about the use of metrics per se. The application of metrics relating to funding and completions will tend to favour larger departments and institutions. Metrics should be balanced against other, more evaluative, criteria that acknowledge the wider ecology of the HEI landscape, and the diverse demands of different disciplines.

Q9

This is a welcome development, and we support the proposal to extend funding to cover the full research period.

Q10

Yes

Q11

Yes