




Evaluation of the arts in performance-based research funding systems: An international perspective

Kamila Lewandowska ^{1,*}, Emanuel Kulczycki ² and Michael Ochsner ³

¹The Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw, ul. Miodowa 22/24, 00-246 Warsaw, Poland, ²Scholarly Communication Research Group, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, ul. Międzychodzka 5, 60-371 Poznań, Poland and ³FORS, Swiss Center of Expertise in the Social Sciences, University of Lausanne, Géopolis, 1015 Lausanne, Switzerland

*Corresponding author. Email: kamila.lewandowska@e-at.edu.pl

Abstract

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the evaluation of the arts within performance-based research funding systems (PRFSs). Previous literature on PRFSs has overlooked the arts and focussed primarily on outputs in relation to the sciences and humanities. We develop a typology of how artistic outputs are evaluated within 10 countries' PRFSs, operating in Australia, the Czech Republic, Italy, Lithuania, New Zealand, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, and the UK, and identify three different types of artistic evaluation systems. The study compares evaluation methods and provides a classification of quality criteria used by evaluation panels. We conclude with a discussion of the challenges specific to different types of systems.

Key words: performance-based research funding system; research evaluation; the arts; artistic research, research quality criteria

1. Introduction

Performance-based research funding systems (PRFSs) have been studied extensively (Hicks 2012), but we still know surprisingly little about the evaluation of the arts in the context of PRFSs. Although evaluation in artistic disciplines has been examined from different perspectives—for example, scholars have analysed assessments of practice-based doctorates (Dally et al. 2004; Kroll and Webb 2012; Nilsson, Dunin-Woyseth and Janssens 2017), grant applications (Hellström 2010) as well as formal and informal university-level assessments which impact scholars' academic lives (e.g. Wilson 2016), those perspectives do not include PRFS evaluations.

In this article, we intend to address this gap by shedding light on the evaluation of artistic outputs within different PRFSs. Specifically, we follow three sequential research questions. First, we review systematically the literature and identify the knowledge gaps linked to the evaluation of the arts within PRFSs. Second, we analyse 10 national PRFSs and develop a typology of how the arts are evaluated using the information the countries provide on performance-based research

evaluation systems. Finally, we analyse how those systems evaluate the arts, focussing particularly on 'artistic outputs' as PRFSs are linked to outputs submitted for the evaluation exercise. We also compare the methods used to evaluate artistic outputs and develop a typology of evaluation criteria for the arts in use in those systems.

Thus, the overall aim of this study is to improve understanding of PRFSs by focussing on the unexplored area of artistic disciplines. This is relevant for several reasons. First, learning how the arts are evaluated within research funding systems helps better understand some more general contemporary changes in the higher education sector. One of those current trends is academization of vocational education—the emphasis on making vocational education more 'scientific' through linking professional training to research (Ek et al. 2013). Academization is closely connected to large-scale higher education reforms such as the inclusion of post-secondary programmes into the system of higher education and absorption of specialized vocational schools into university structures (e.g. Rust, Mottram and Till 2007). As a result of those reforms, there have been increasing demands that academics in the fields hitherto dedicated to

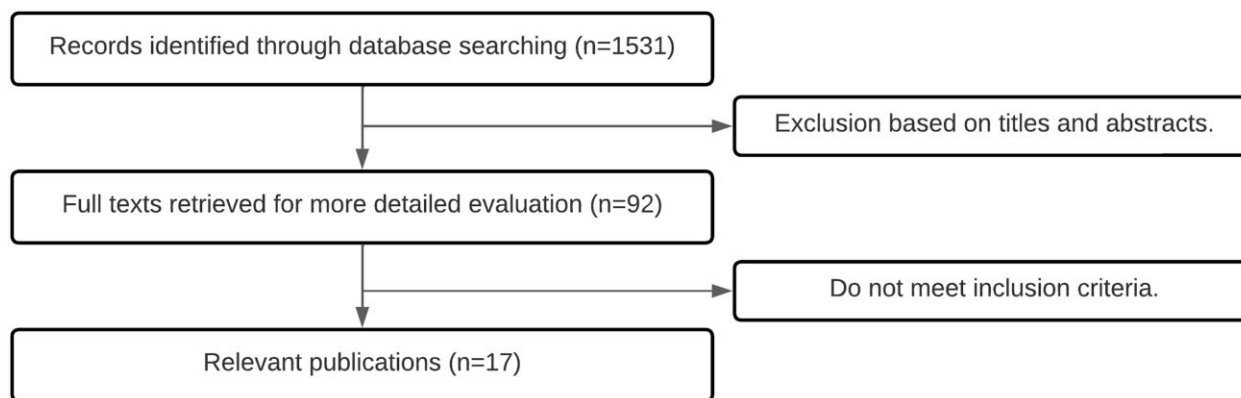


Figure 1. Flow diagram of the literature review.

This result draws attention to the fact that the evaluation of artistic outputs within PRFSs is an overlooked and under-researched topic. In particular, we identified three relevant gaps of knowledge. First, the majority (14 out of 17) of studies focus on the Anglo-Saxon country context (Australia and the UK, i.e. [Green 2006](#); [Rust, Mottram and Till 2007](#); [Bennett, Wright and Blom 2009](#); [Wright, Bennett and Blom 2010](#); [Wilson 2011](#); [Bennett and Franzmann 2013](#); [Harrison and Draper 2014](#); [Barwick and Toltz 2017](#); [Butt 2017](#); [Schippers, Tomlinson and Draper 2017](#); [Brook 2018](#); [Wilson 2018](#); [McKee 2020](#); [Toltz 2020](#)). Second, while the studies discuss many important aspects of PRFSs—for example, the process of integrating the arts into PRFSs (e.g. [Green 2006](#); [Rust, Mottram and Till 2007](#); [Bennett and Franzmann 2013](#); [Butt 2017](#); [Schippers, Tomlinson and Draper 2017](#); [Sivertsen 2018](#)), the ways universities organize data collection and submission ([Harrison and Draper 2014](#); [Barwick and Toltz 2017](#)) and the challenges evaluation systems create for artist-academics (e.g. [Bennett, Wright and Blom 2009](#); [Wright, Bennett, and Blom 2010](#); [Wilson 2018](#))—they generally do not provide a detailed analysis of evaluation procedures and criteria. Third, studies comparing different countries' models are entirely lacking.

4. PRFSs taking into account artistic outputs: an overview

Using the results of the literature review and by analysing the documentation of PRFSs, we identified 10 countries that include evaluation of artistic outputs in their PRFSs. The identified systems are presented in [Table 1](#). Countries, the name of the PRFS (or agencies, if the name of the system is not specified), types of artistic outputs (how artistic outputs are called or defined in the evaluation documents), the arts (research), fields, and sub-fields (how the arts field is called, categorized and subdivided within the classification of research and development fields used in a specific PRFS) are listed in [Table 1](#).

The categorization of artistic outputs and the accommodation of the arts within the remit of research funding differ strongly across countries. We distinguish two dimensions that are relevant for the analysis of the evaluation of arts in PRFSs. First, a PRFS might evaluate artistic research or artistic activity. Second, types of outputs are treated equally, or scores depend on the type of outputs.

4.1 Dimension 1: artistic research versus artistic activity

In some country systems, artistic outputs submitted for evaluation are assessed as ‘research outputs’. Only artistic outputs that qualify as research are considered eligible for evaluation. Those systems are based upon a distinction between artistic research and professional art practice—only the former can be assessed within the PRFS and contribute to the final evaluation score. This practice has its foundation in theories that view some artistic productions or practices as a form of research because the artistic productions contribute to knowledge through a process of investigation; at the same time, not all art has a research component and should be included in research funding systems (Strand 1998; Biggs and Karlsson 2010). We call these ‘artistic research’ systems (see Figure 2). Other PRFS designs are based upon a distinction between research and artistic activity. Artistic disciplines are included in the assessment process, but artistic outputs are not required to meet the criteria of research and are evaluated on the basis of their artistic merit. We call these ‘artistic activity’ systems.

This distinction is relevant for the evaluation of the visual and performing arts within PRFSs because they have different practical implications for the evaluation exercise, as we will describe in more detail below.

4.2 Dimension 2: treatment of different types of outputs

Whereas all PRFSs define different types of outputs eligible to the evaluation exercise, some PRFSs explicitly treat all types of outputs equally. They start from the premise that the quality of research does not depend on the type of output or that the type of output is not a consequence of the quality of research. Rather, all types of outputs can be of higher or lower quality or reflect better or less good research. We call these ‘equality of outputs types’ systems (see [Figure 2](#)). Other PRFSs attribute different scores to different types of outputs. The underlying idea is that some outputs take more time and effort to produce than others. For example, preparing a solo exhibition takes more time and more effort than participating in a group exhibition. It also implicitly assumes that the effort is somehow linked to the audience it can reach. Furthermore, a differential scoring of outputs leads to transparency as everything is more clearly defined. It may be more practical in cultural contexts characterized by lower trust in public experts, where such transparency of evaluation criteria and methods is particularly valued. We call these systems ‘differential score of output types’ systems.

Table 1. Performance-based research funding systems in which artistic outputs are evaluated

Country	System/Agency	Output category of artistic outputs	Field and sub-fields in which performing arts are classified
Australia	Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA)	‘Non-traditional research outcomes (NTRO)’ (Australian Research Council (ARC) 2017)	Studies in creative arts and writing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Art theory and criticism • Film, television, and digital media • Journalism and professional writing • Performing arts and creative writing • Visual arts and crafts • Other studies in creative arts and writing
Czech Republic	Evaluation of research, development and innovations (‘R&D&I’) (2017+)	‘Other [research] results: artistic research’ (Government of the Czech Republic 2018)	Humanities and the arts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arts (arts, history of arts, performing arts, and music)
Italy	Evaluation of Research Quality (VQR)	‘Other scientific outputs: Compositions; Drawings; Design works; Performances (art, theatre, music)...’ (Italian National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes (ANVUR) 2020)	Ancient History, Philology, Literature, and Art History (i.e. performing arts are evaluated with their ‘closest relative’ in the humanities)
Lithuania	Research and Experimental Development of Lithuanian Research and Study Institutions and Evaluation of Artistic Activities	‘Works of art’ (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania (SMM) 2017)	Art, design, architecture, media art, theatre, cinema, dance, music or interdisciplinary art
New Zealand	Performance-Based Research Fund	‘Non-traditional research output types’ (New Zealand, Tertiary Education Commission 2018)	Creative and performing arts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design • Music, literary arts, and other arts • Theatre and dance, film and television, and multimedia • Visual arts and crafts
Poland	Evaluation of quality of scientific and artistic activity	‘Artistic achievements’ (Poland, Ministry of Science and Higher Education 2019, 2020)	The Arts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theatre and film • Music • Fine arts and conservation
Portugal	The Portuguese Science and Technology Foundation (FCT)	No specific category for artistic outputs (Portugal, Portugal, Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) 2018)	Arts and humanities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arts and Design, Artistic and Musical Development
Slovakia	The Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education	‘Artistic activities’ (Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education 2018)	Artistic group: Arts
Spain	Sexenio—Retrospective research evaluation system (RES)	No specific category for artistic outputs (all outputs must meet the criteria of research) (Spain, National Commission for Evaluation of Research Activity (CNEAI) 2020)	History, Geography, and the Arts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fine arts • Music
UK	Research Excellence Framework (REF)	No specific category for artistic outputs (all outputs must meet the criteria of research) (Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2019b)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Art and Design: History, Practice, and Theory • Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film, and Screen Studies

4.3 Typology of PRFSs taking into account artistic outputs

Combining the two dimensions leads to a four-field scheme with which we can classify PRFSs according to how they include the arts into their

system ([Figure 2](#)). On the *x*-axis, we differentiate systems that evaluate artistic research versus systems evaluating artistic activity. On the *y*-axis, we distinguish systems applying the principle of ‘equality of output types’ from systems based on the principle of ‘differential score of output types’.

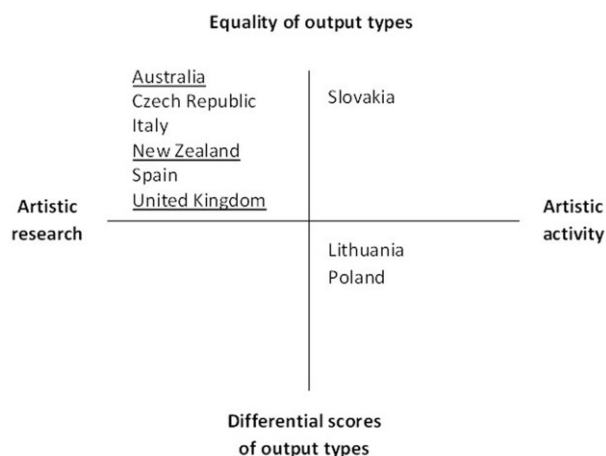


Figure 2. Two dimensions of artistic outputs' evaluations within PRFSs. Note: Countries are sorted in alphabetical order in each cluster. Underlined names represent countries in which research statements are used.

Theoretically, four types of PRFSs' way of including the arts are possible, but we only identified three types in our selection of PRFSs. First, we have PRFSs evaluating 'artistic research' and applying the principle of 'equality of output types'. Australia, the Czech Republic,³ Italy, New Zealand, Spain, and the UK belong to this type. Second, we identified one PRFS evaluating 'artistic activity' and applying the principle of equality of output types', Slovakia. Third, two PRFSs evaluate 'artistic activity' and apply the principle of 'differential score of output types', Lithuania and Poland.

Having systematized how the arts are included in PRFSs, we can use the types to describe how the arts are evaluated in PRFSs. First, we will focus on artistic outputs and their classification in PRFS, then we will describe the evaluation methods used to evaluate artistic outputs and then we will analyse the evaluation criteria used to evaluate artistic outputs.

5. Evaluation of artistic outputs within PRFSs

5.1 Types of outputs

Contemporary art encompasses a substantial diversity in format, technique and medium. This is why in all selected PRFSs, a wide diversity of outputs can be submitted for evaluation. Eligible outputs may include original works of art (e.g. artefacts, objects, compositions, designs), live performances, exhibitions, portfolios, etc. However, the way how artistic outputs are classified depends on how PRFSs evaluate them. In systems applying the principle of 'equality of output types', it is not necessary to have a detailed list of types of outputs. Accordingly, art units in some countries are allowed to submit also the achievements not fitting directly into the pre-defined outcome categories listed in the guidelines. The REF system, for example, even recognizes explicitly that one output may encompass different output types, for example, an artefact can also be a subject of an exhibition. Thus, the REF accepts submissions that 'can include but are not limited' to the pre-defined output forms.

The PRFSs based on the principle of 'differential score of output types' on the other hand provide a closed catalogue of outputs eligible for evaluation because each type of output needs to be assigned a score or range of scores. Poland has probably the most stringent model based on a detailed classification of artistic forms. This

approach may seem less appropriate for the evaluation of contemporary art, which transgresses borders of artistic formats and is difficult to capture in traditional artistic divisions (Lundén and Sundén 2015). At the same time, a pre-determined catalogue of art forms and activities seems more practical for systems that, like the Polish PRFS, combine peer review-based assessment with the evaluation based on quantitative metrics. In Poland, faculties obtain points for submitted artistic outputs and the number of points depends on the output type (see [Supplementary Table S1](#) presenting eligible artistic outputs in the Polish PRFS).

To show the differences in how to include different artistic output types into PRFSs, we present in more detail how the British REF—an 'artistic research' system based on the principle of 'equality of output types'—and the Polish PRFS—an 'artistic activity' system based on the principle of 'differential scores of output types'—define artistic outputs and integrate them into their system. Accordingly, [Table 2](#) illustrates differences in defining and scoring outputs between the British REF and Polish PRFS (please note that the table presents just a few examples of output types; for complete lists of outputs see [Supplementary Tables S1 and S2](#)). In the British REF, the guidelines contain examples of outputs, but a submission does not have to represent one of the listed artistic formats even though the definitions are quite detailed. The same definitions apply for all art disciplines. In Poland, eligible outputs are precisely defined and each output is assigned a specific range of points. Submissions not fitting into one of the listed output types are not eligible. Moreover, in the Polish PRFS, output types are defined per artistic disciplines. Lists differ thus between 'music', 'film and theatre' and 'fine arts and art conservation' faculties (see [Supplementary Table S1](#) for the output definitions for 'music' faculties).

In 'artistic research systems', besides evaluating the content of non-traditional research *outputs*, the research *process* that led to the output needs to be specified and verified that it actually includes aspects of research. To make the research component evident authors must attach a 'research statement' explaining the investigatory dimensions of the submission. The reason behind this requirement is that the research component of an artistic output may not be evident within the product itself. The product of artistic research is not necessarily different from the product of non-research art practice—it is the research process that makes the former different from the latter (Strand 1998; Vanlee and Ysebaert 2019) and therefore needs to be explained to the evaluators.

For example, submissions to the UK REF are expected to be accompanied by a 300-word description of the research process (research questions, methodologies, and referenced literature), research insights (findings and outcomes) and dissemination (where the insights were effectively shared, see [Research Excellence Framework \(REF\) 2019b](#)). The Australian ERA and the New Zealand PBRF require descriptions addressing research background, contribution, and significance of outputs (Australian Research Council (ARC) 2017; New Zealand, Tertiary Education Commission 2018). In other systems, research statements may not be required but non-traditional outputs must meet the definition or criteria of research specified in the PRFS guidelines.

Slovakia, as the only system evaluating 'artistic activity' with 'equality of output types', follows indeed the characteristics of the two dimensions mentioned above. Types of output do not play a role and, as artistic activities are evaluated, no research statement has to be submitted. However, detailed information is asked to guarantee a holistic evaluation. This not only includes information

considerably in how this is done. In Lithuania, some outputs including works of art, artistic performances, awards and artistic research are assigned with a range of Points (2–7), whereas others, such as art reviews or curation of art shows are awarded only one point. In Poland, each output can be assessed as ‘excellent’, ‘significant for the discipline’, or ‘other’ and receive a number of points corresponding to each of those quality levels. However, the numbers of points vary depending on output type, for example, a leading part in a ballet performance can receive 200 (excellent), 100 (significant), or 50 points (other), whereas a supporting role—200, 75, or 40 points (see Table 2). Reviewing panels determine the quality level of each output—however, due to the pre-determined scoring, reviewers have less freedom in assigning points than panels in ‘equal treatment of output types’ systems. Panel evaluations are also more formal and less qualitative, as panellists do not have access to the actual content of outputs—they are not provided with audio, video, etc.—and evaluate them primarily for the received awards and recognition of the artistic community (see the definition of ‘excellent’ work at the bottom of Supplementary Table S1). Again, Slovakia as the sole representative of an ‘artistic activity’ using ‘equal treatment of output types’ system combines the characteristics of the two systems described above. Similar to the ‘artistic research’ using ‘equal treatment of output types’ systems, outputs are graded according to a five-level qualitative statement resulting from a holistic evaluation. From the single scores, each unit is given a quality profile by calculating the percentage of outputs listed in a submission that are assigned at each quality level. The final overall score is calculated by multiplying the percentage with the score (Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education 2018: 45).

5.3 Evaluation criteria

As PRFSs tend to emphasize transparency of evaluation methods (Hicks 2012) and comparability of assessment results, official criteria are established and publicly announced before the assessment exercise and panels are required to follow them strictly. In the following, we systematize criteria for the evaluation of artistic outputs in PRFSs. To derive the criteria, we examined official documents (evaluation regulations, submission guidelines, etc.) where the criteria are defined. We found that there are two distinct types of criteria: formal criteria and quality criteria. Formal criteria are the requirements that a submission must satisfy to be eligible for the assessment process. They are explicitly listed in the evaluation regulation and submission guidelines. Quality criteria are used to guide the quality assessment process and assignment of scores to artistic outputs carried out by expert panels. They are either explicitly listed (e.g. in statements such as: ‘the panels will assess the quality of research outputs in terms of their “originality, significance, and rigour”’) or provided more implicitly by indicating what qualities characterise outputs at each ‘quality level’, for example:

For an A to be assigned it would normally be expected that the EP contains evidence of research output of a world-class standard and research-related activity that shows a high level of peer recognition and esteem within the relevant research subject area and indicates a significant contribution to the New Zealand and/or international research environments (...). (New Zealand, Tertiary Education Commission 2018: 32)

To systematize quality criteria, the fragments of texts describing outputs’ qualities were derived from the documents and coded manually. An inductive, *in vivo* data coding was used and two

rounds of coding were conducted. The first round was focussed on summarizing bits of text using words (code names) taken from the text itself, such as ‘peer recognition’, ‘significant contribution to research’. The aim of the second round was to re-examine and reduce the number of codes by ordering them into more general categories (quality criteria).

5.3.1 Formal criteria

The formal criteria are clearly defined in the evaluation regulation and submission guidelines to facilitate the submission process. Typically, outputs must be (co-)produced or (co-)authored by one or more members of the evaluated institution’s research staff and disseminated in the public domain during the assessment period.

Formal criteria also include a minimum and a maximum number of outputs that can be submitted for evaluation. For example, in the UK, the total number of outputs must equal 2.5 times the summed full-time equivalent of the unit’s staff; rounding to the nearest integer is applied (see Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2019a: 8). In addition, each staff member with a contract of employment of 0.2 FTE (full-time equivalent) or greater must be a (co-)producer or (co-)author of at least one output but a maximum of five outputs may be attributed to an individual staff member. In New Zealand, the submission may contain up to 16 research outputs, including a maximum of 4 outputs nominated for peer assessment (New Zealand, Tertiary Education Commission 2018: 13). In Slovakia, institutions may submit 5 outputs for each eligible researcher and up to 25 per unit (Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education 2018: 39). In Lithuania, there is a limit of 30% of the outputs that can be submitted to the evaluation (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania (SMM) 2017).

5.3.2 Quality criteria

The quality criteria are developed through consultation with experts representing universities and other research institutions. The consultation procedures vary depending on the PRFS model. For example, in the REF, four main expert panels representing different research fields work together to develop a combined set of quality criteria. These can be supplemented by discipline-specific, more detailed criteria which nevertheless must be read alongside the generic criteria. In ‘artistic research’ systems, the same generic criteria apply to all research disciplines and fields, including the field of art. In ‘artistic activity’ systems, specific criteria are developed for artistic disciplines. In Poland, the quality criteria for artistic evaluations differ from those used in other disciplines, where the scoring of outputs is based primarily on the Ministry’s ratings of journals and publishers. Instead of a combined, cross-disciplinary set of quality standards, the Polish PRFS incorporates criteria developed by the representatives of higher art education institutions.

The analysis of documents allowed identifying 12 higher-order quality criteria. Table 3 shows which criteria are more universally applied across different systems and which are used only in some PRFSs. *Significance* and *originality* are quality criteria present in all PRFSs. However, depending on the type of PRFS the scope of *significance* and *originality* changes. In ‘artistic research’ systems, significance is limited to research, whereas in ‘artistic activity’ systems, significance for art is evaluated. In a similar vein, only the ‘artistic research’ systems evaluate outputs in terms of their *contribution to knowledge/understanding* in the research field. They emphasize a broad understanding of research that goes beyond theoretical

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