

Issue number: 15

Issue: What's more use – institutional money or knowledge?

Convener(s): Andrew Jones

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Summary of discussion, conclusions and/or recommendations:

As a British Council representative, I asked the question because I was curious to know how aware arts practitioners both in and outside the UK are of the actual policies / strategies that are currently driving the agendas set by cultural agencies like the BC and / or national funding bodies; and beyond that whether they are aware of the knowledge that these agencies hold and may or may not be prepared to share with their local arts constituencies.

The main points raised were:

- That the selection processes used to decide where the money that cultural agencies / funding bodies hold is distributed isn't transparent enough for artists who generally don't have the time to undertake research to get this information themselves – particularly in more developed markets like Germany where there may in principle be numerous potential avenues to follow in order to secure support but it's very difficult to know how to prioritise these opportunities strategically
- That at the same time, artists may need to be encouraged to undertake more pro-actively independent research in order to get a better understanding of the cultural agencies / funding bodies' policies and programmes
- That the relationship between the cultural agencies / funding bodies and the artistic communities they serve should be more mutual, and that as part of this a more balanced and transparent flow of information and feedback from both sides should be encouraged in order to ensure more synchronicity between the funders and artists' objectives and a greater understanding of their aspirations, concerns and pressures
- That access to knowledge related to the above is key for practitioners
- That in many cases there doesn't appear to be any clear strategy or rationale behind the decisions made by national cultural ministries / funding bodies and that information is sometimes withheld by these bodies as a misinformed strategy to retain power
- That a professional knowledge of the arts sector/s many of the officials in these organisations doesn't appear to be a fundamental requirement of the post-holders and that this lack of experience

- That officials within these national agencies 'know best' and often don't trust / value the advice and opinions of the people operating within their local artistic communities regardless of their professional and entrepreneurial experience
- That funding structures in some countries are not up to date and don't reflect the diverse nature of current artistic methodologies, where many artists' work is cross-art form and may therefore not fit neatly into traditional funding categories
- That in some cases it may be better to devolve power / knowledge from central funding / support organisations to more flexible agencies working regionally within individual countries as in countries where this model is in place, it's clear that the people with the power / knowledge are able to maintain closer, more sympathetic and more flexible working relationships with the local arts community and provide a better service in terms of information transfer in particular

Recommendations:

- That sessions could be built into future IETM events where representatives of cultural agencies like the British Council, Danish Arts Agency, etc could make short presentations to the membership explaining their current policies and programmes so that practitioners are more aware of the strategies required to attract their support; so that the language these organisations use can be demystified and that greater transparency about their policies is engendered and encouraged
- That more knowledge is disseminated internally between the cultural agencies about their policies so that common objectives and more complementary systems of support for the international arts constituency can be developed
- That the above organisations could develop a joint strategy and take a more pro-active lead in training staff from national cultural ministries / funding bodies about the opportunities, artistic and economic benefits, and working practices of the wider international cultural sector
- That these agencies could also provide more 'help in kind' support to individual artists regarding artistic and managerial practice in an international context through the provision of tailored mentoring programmes
- That traditional funding categories need to be redefined to better reflect the diverse nature of current artistic practice

Conclusion:

There appeared to be a general consensus within the group that the knowledge held by international cultural agencies is invaluable and that in a situation where a simple choice had to be made between gaining their financial support or their knowledge, the latter would really be the more valuable commodity.