re-flections
on the challenges facing arts institutions

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Foreword

Following the success of the first ELIA Leadership Symposium in Los Angeles hosted by the Getty Center in 2003, the University of the Arts in London hosted the second ELIA leadership symposium for chief executives and senior management in art education institutions in November 2005. Sixty-five people from twenty-four countries participated in an active programme of site visits, keynote presentations and facilitated discussions.

After the symposium, the steering group continued to reflect on the discussions, and to consider how to build on them in the preparation for ELIA’s next event in Hong Kong. Keen both to ensure continuity and to respond to some of the London participants’ suggestions about content, the group commissioned François Matarasso to draft this paper.

Rather than simply report on past debates, we have taken the opportunity to look more broadly at some of the challenges that face arts education institutions today. This paper therefore brings together a variety of issues that were touched on in 2005, and some that were only hinted at (though a brief report of the London symposium themes is included as an appendix). It begins by looking at the current purpose and practice of the art school, then considers what the renewal of that mission requires, and concludes by looking outwards at its place in society and the partnerships on which it depends. It takes the form of a series of propositions followed by a few short questions: a starting point for debate, not a resolution of complex issues.

Clearly, such a brief overview cannot hope to cover every question in detail; there are important issues that are not mentioned here at all, while others will appear different according to national or disciplinary perspectives. But our intention has been to offer a sketch map of the territory to be crossed: it will be for colleagues to add the detail of local knowledge and to identify new directions. It is in the journey to and beyond Hong Kong that the answers to these and other questions must be found.

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Purpose and practice

Teaching

The fundamental purpose of all arts schools and conservatoires is to educate the next creative generation. But what are they being educated to do (or be) – and why? The answer is not as self-evident as once it was.

As the arts have changed, so have the needs of students and the demands they place on their teachers. The techniques and concepts of artistic practice have evolved alongside teaching methods and theory. Successful art institutions reflect those changes in refreshing their curricula, teaching offer and pastoral care, while preserving a continuity of practice and values that connects with a long tradition.

New working and tutorial ideas will reflect the new media, techniques and concepts that now drive the arts. The spaces and facilities of art academies may have to be reconfigured to meet the needs of a generation of students whose expectations are shaped by experience of a modernising primary and secondary educational sector. Distance and off-site learning methods offer opportunities that were not imagined a generation ago. The complex activities through which art institutions deliver their deceptively simple mission change are in continuous evolution.

How should art institutions review and develop their teaching to ensure it meets the complex and varied interests of today’s students?

How can they strengthen the teaching practice of staff who may have been trained in a very different educational context?

Research

Art school research is growing in importance, internally and externally, alongside the growing economic and social importance of the arts themselves. A wide range of inquiry is
being undertaken in technical fields, practice-led research, policy studies and more, sometimes in association with other university disciplines and departments. Its funding is equally diverse, as research councils, industry, public agencies, government, foundations and others invest in knowledge creation. Apart from its intrinsic interest, research is becoming more important to the reputation and the funding of art schools.

But the purpose, value and methodology of research are contested. Some artists see an enquiring and innovative creative practice as synonymous with research; others argue in contrast for a distinctive form of practice-based research unique to the arts. Research opens new post-graduate opportunities for students, but may also divert them into work dictated by funding or other imperatives.

– What can arts institutions gain from developing a strong research base and what do they have to offer others through it?

– How do students benefit from the research undertaken by their institution?

– Do research contracts place the academy at the service of clients with conflicting values or intentions?

The purpose of education

At the start of the 21st century, Western economic liberalism has established an almost hegemonic global position (though ‘the end of history’ remains elusive) and culture has inevitably been drawn into its orbit. In the past twenty-five years, the arts have increasingly been seen (and seen themselves) as part of what is now called the creative economy, so that past distinctions between art and entertainment appear old-fashioned or elitist. Artists who disdained or actively opposed commercial values have been largely, but not exclusively, followed by a generation who relish economic success almost as much as critical esteem. At the same time, different priorities have led others to develop new practices based on social engagement that challenge authority (in every sense) and conventional distinctions between artist and audience.
How comfortable they are with these developments varies between art institutions, shaped as they are by their own ideals, histories and practice. Most, however, value education for itself, and the development of the individual as a goal in its own right. They stand within but apart from society, prizing the right to critique, even to oppose, ideas in the mainstream. They recognise the need to prepare students for an active life, not just a productive career, and see the risks of serving current political or social fashions without questioning them.

What is the right balance between teaching marketable skills and nurturing independence of mind and practice?

Should an art school judge its success by its graduates who find places in the creative industries, or by those who innovate, question and find it difficult to be absorbed into the market place?

What can art schools offer society, besides productive workers?

Renewal

Curriculum development

The curriculum of art schools has always evolved, alongside art itself. Sometimes that evolution has been driven by changing values in society, as in the rise and decline of Modernism. Sometimes, it has been the result of new technology: computers are merely the latest transformation in how art is made, distributed, consumed and criticised. Sometimes, it has been led by passing fads into dead ends out of which art has extricated itself with difficulty. Sometimes the pace of development has been revolutionary, rather than evolutionary; sometimes it has been glacially slow.

In a globalising world where cultural interaction is constant and rapid, though not always profound, and which can prize novelty
above integrity, art schools are buffeted as never before. What should they be teaching their students? What skills, practical and conceptual, will best equip them to meet their own goals? And what should those goals be – commercial or professional success, breaking new ground or challenging dominant assumptions? And, as ever, underlying these difficult, abstract questions are a series of more straightforward management issues.

– How should art schools review and develop their curricula?

– Against what standards and principles should they test their practice?

– How do they define their distinctive offer in a vast educational market?

Leadership development

The importance of continuing professional development is well recognised within higher education, and a variety of mechanisms exist to support it. But there is a crucial gap where leaders are concerned, with insufficient investment in their professional growth. It can be difficult for leaders to recognise that their own skills and ideas could benefit from renewal, or to risk being perceived as weak by the staff or boards in acknowledging their own needs. It may also not be obvious what kind of professional development is appropriate for managers at the most senior level, nor where it might be obtained. Leadership is necessarily lonely, but much more could be done to support those on whom the future of their institutions depends so heavily.

– What kind of professional development does academic leadership require?

– How can leaders work creatively with peers who may also be competitors?

– What support might be available from beyond the sector?
Institutional change

Institutions, by their nature, tend to be stable. Indeed, it is part of their essential value that they remain fixed points among shifting sands, representing deeper principles unaffected by passing fashions; but there is a risk of over-valuing continuity and using it to resist legitimate arguments for development. Academic tenure is a vital safeguard of independence, but it can become an excuse for complacency and allow people to avoid innovation, challenge or growth. Boards of trustees provide a long perspective, but they can also find it difficult to distinguish between necessary change and necessary continuity. It is essential to distinguish between the irreducible core of the arts academy’s work, and the accretions of habit and ease.

How can an art school develop a culture of courage and experimentation?

How can the institution refresh itself and remain flexible, and yet maintain its corporate memory and standards?

Investment

Art education is not a well-resourced field, despite a steady growth in demand by students. What resources are available are directed, naturally enough, to core services of teaching and research. Most institutions succeed in balancing their accounts year on year, but this can be at the cost of the long-term investment in infrastructure, staff and development. Immediate demands inevitably tend to push future needs – however important and however well understood – to one side when resources are scarce.

Maintaining and improving the estate, investing in staff development, reviewing teaching practice and experimenting with innovative courses or delivery structures are all essential to the future of art academies. Without the resources to renew and develop the core business, it is hard to resist institutional conservatism, intellectual and artistic sclerosis, market fragility and, eventually, decline. Yet, in a target-driven management culture, raising funds for innovation and development can be very difficult.
It is surely time to review the assumptions on which the financial structures of art schools are based to find more effective and secure models for the 21st century.

- Are there new models through which schools can secure the resources for current stability and future investment?

- Is there a role for endowments in protecting funds for innovation from short-term demands?

Facing outwards

Partnership

The changing environment within which art schools and education institutions now operate both requires and facilitates increasing levels of cooperation. Through partnership, they can share good practice, disseminate new ideas, minimise the negative effects of competition and strengthen their voice in a world which is not always ready to listen. Partnerships can build projects in research, course development or marketing that individual schools would not be able to resource. Professional and student exchanges are one way of using the opportunities of global communication to enrich the thinking of institutions directly.

But working together requires time, resources and intellectual energy. How can art institutions invest effectively in building partnerships in the face of other demands? What is the right balance between cooperation and competition?

Future strength also depends on making connections beyond the academy – with other professional groups, with industry and business, with the media, with local and national government and with the community. Few art schools can count today on the value of their work being self-evident to others. Their capacity to function creatively and effectively depends on securing legitimacy within a widening social context. At the same time, such
engagement can offer opportunities to work with professional, community and commercial partners to develop practice in real situations. The experience for students and staff, and the demonstration of the institution’s distinct expertise, are equally valuable.

Which external partners do arts institutions need most to work with?

What can these partnerships offer all sides?

What strategies might help institutions develop creative cooperation?

External relations and advocacy

In some parts of the world, art schools have been part of the fabric of education services since the 19th century, if not before; in others, however, they are more recent creations, brought into being as a result of an identified need. All, however, need strong arguments to justify their cost and value in societies whose increasing demands place ever-greater pressure on public finances. Where their income depends principally on student fees, the reasons for investing in an arts education are both more varied and more personal: but the need to the institution to articulate clearly the value of its offer is equally urgent.

To date, the sector’s approach to advocacy has been piecemeal and uncoordinated. It has lacked both a clear and consistent expression of the worth of an arts education, and an effective strategy of influence. As a result, and exceptions notwithstanding, there has been limited impact on government or on society at large. The current role and future potential of art institutions is still not well understood: though there may be a broad acceptance of their place in modern society, it cannot be said that this runs very deep, nor that it has a very solid intellectual basis in public discourse. In a highly competitive environment, art schools have to make their case much more strongly.
What are art schools’ principal contributions to society?

How can they articulate the value of their work to government, students and other partners?

Can they work better together to communicate a consistent but distinctive vision of their role in society?

International connections

Globalisation is a continuing process rather than an accomplished fact, and one that is paradoxically effective at creating and exaggerating difference; it also has much older roots than is often acknowledged. The interconnections between the world’s various economies, societies and cultures are growing in number and speed, and bringing with them complex and often unforeseeable consequences.

One of these is the emergence of shared cultural space, owned and shaped by graduates of the world’s art schools, who may find that they have more in common with their peers in other countries than they do with many of their compatriots.

Art schools are deeply affected by this process – and they also contribute substantially to it. Their student body, which was once drawn from the immediate location, may be composed of people of many nationalities, with widely different experiences and cultural values. Their graduates may wish to work in equally diverse parts of the world, and will need much broader professional skills to do so. Their staff may come from, or be attracted to, competitor institutions in other continents. Their partnerships, artistic, educational or commercial, may span several continents.

Underlying all this is the rapid exchange of artistic ideas, so that building expertise in any field of contemporary practice requires a much wider range of knowledge than in the past.

How should art institutions respond to globalising pressures?
– How do they define and respond to their competitors?

– How do they retain a staff and student body that will secure their leadership position nationally and internationally?

Appendix: Reflections from London

Introduction: The London Leadership symposium

The 2005 London Leadership Symposium built on a Senior Managers’ Symposium in Los Angeles held in 2003. There was a similar number of participants (sixty-five in London, sixty-seven in Los Angeles), but a wider participation, with delegates from twenty-four countries attending in London. Two thirds of them responded to the post-event evaluation, in itself a positive sign of engagement with the event and its future development.

The delegates’ overall response was very positive. In particular, all the respondents felt that the participants’ profile was appropriate to the event, and that the value of the networking opportunities was therefore very high: they had much in common, but also different experiences to share and learn from. The event organisation was much appreciated: the venue, the registration process, the information provided, the website and the catering all scored highly, along with general contact with the organisers.

Views of the content were more mixed. While some were happy with the presentations and workshops, others felt that the material was too general, or that it was not pitched at the appropriate level. The themes were considered important and interesting, and three quarters of the delegates felt that the exposure to new ideas was good. However, substantial minorities wanted more attention to international change, and to new
ideas and practice. It was also suggested that there was too much focus on business challenges at the expense of issues such as the importance of art education.

People valued the facilitated sessions, and would have liked more time for ‘sustained conversation’ and ‘open discussion’. The cultural programme – which included visits to a range of venues and organisations – was judged very good.

A number of suggestions were made about future events. There should be a better connection between keynote speeches and the workshop themes, so that discussion was fuelled by the presentations. These workshops would benefit from more time, smaller groups, and more consistent facilitation to enable participants to shape the issues to be addressed. Among the topics suggested for the next Symposium were recruitment, fundraising, future developments in the arts and the role of research.

**Reflections from the discussions**

The following pages set out some of the most salient points from four themed workshop sessions, intended principally as an _aide-mémoire_ for those present.

**WHAT MAKES A GOOD LEADER?**

Leaders have a clear and compelling vision, and the ability to get others to see and support it. While their ideas are naturally different, they share an unwavering commitment to their institutions achieving the highest standards, and being acknowledged leaders in their field.

Good leaders can manage distance and engagement at the same time: they care about the detail, the personal, and yet never lose sight of the big picture. They do not dominate, but invest themselves wholeheartedly in the shared enterprise and its values. Leaders understand when to support and when to challenge their staff; they delegate effectively, and trust appropriately. They recognise and nurture potential in younger colleagues, encouraging innovation and managed risk-taking. They are loyal
and have personal charm and persuasiveness. Above all, good leaders maintain a balance between positions, qualities and situations. As a result, they make good judgements, quickly and transparently.

**POWER, INFLUENCE AND AUTHORITY**

Power is acquired with the job: influence and authority are achieved. Although leaders in art institutions have power, they must be careful in its exercise: without authority, it is a dangerous commodity. Power brings responsibility, and the inevitable isolation of leadership: peer networks are therefore an essential support for leadership.

Well-used power builds a leader’s influence and authority within and beyond the institution: the reverse is also true. Ultimately, influence is more important than power. It is the influence of inspirational leaders encountered in the past that continues to shape how people act in the present, not their power.

Power can bring about change; influence secures it. What people have been convinced to do, rather than made to do, is owned by them and becomes a stable commitment. Influence makes change sustainable. Leaders often give it insufficient thought, perhaps seeing themselves as stronger internally and weaker externally than they really are. They need a personal strategy of influence, founded on clear values, to secure the future of their institution.

**IMAGINATION AND REALISATION**

There is no shortage of new ideas within art institutions. The challenge is to filter the best from the good, the bad and the unrealistic. It can also be difficult to stay open to ideas that come from outside the institution, including those from peers and competitors, yet openness to such external influences is vital. But if innovative ideas are plentiful, why are they not more often implemented? There are two principal obstacles to realising change: institutional and human.

Art schools are conceived and established as institutions. Unlike organisations, that are created to achieve other aims, they see their social continuity as an end in itself. Their autonomy is
intended to protect core values from short-termism or external pressures. This is essential in a world where fashionable ideas and practices come and go with increasing rapidity.

But this culture can also encourage conservatism and stifle innovation in the name of ‘eternal’ values. It can be difficult to judge when standing by core principles is an essential resistance to fashion or political pressure, and when it is merely stubborn self-interest or fear of change. The structural rigidity that can come with institutional longevity prevents some schools from adapting themselves to changing demands and opportunities. At best, they risk losing connection with the needs and interests of students and of society at large; at worst, they risk irrelevance and closure.

This institutional inflexibility can also manifest itself in the people who work in the systems. Tenure is essential to academic freedom, but it can result in staff who refuse to update or develop their teaching, despite developments in arts practice. Thus an innovative and creative artist can become a conservative tutor over the course of two or three decades. It is essential to foster a culture of continuing professional development throughout the institution as an essentially artistic value.

Strategies for achieving institutional change need to be based on encouraging innovation, good risk management and openness to the interests of outside partners. Questioning and debating practice, resourcing experimentation and investing in staff development are all crucial. In some cases, supporting new independent or external initiatives can be an effective way of building confidence in new ideas.

Above all, leaders must understand the environmental and cultural evolution that affects their institutions, and communicate not just the changes but also the reasons behind them, and the anticipated benefits. They must be actively engaged in the process: doing is better than describing, and policy statements are not the most effective way of securing support for change.

Leaders are themselves liable to institutionalisation, so investing in continuing professional development and peer networks is
essential to ensuring vitality at the head of art schools. There is a need to develop an appropriate scholarship of cultural leadership, and perhaps an arts equivalent of the MBA. In all these areas, trans-national networks like ELIA have a major role to play.

**SOCIAL INCLUSION: PERCEPTION AND IMPLEMENTATION**

Social inclusion relates to how institutions operate fairly in society, and particularly to how they ensure that all potential students and staff have equal access to their services. It is not a universally understood concept, either in general, or in the context of the arts. It is a concept of particular importance in Europe, although, with different language a commitment to fair processes is widespread among art institutions. It is also an idea rooted in specific values, which can therefore be related clearly to western concepts of art.

But social inclusion is not a helpful term, since it is hard to define what ‘inclusion’ might be, whereas exclusion, and the processes which produce it, can be identified within and beyond arts institutions.

Social exclusion exists as a complex series of processes within society, which result in individuals or groups facing different kinds of barriers to participation. There is no reason to think that arts institutions are immune from these processes, and they may exclude many people, without intending to do so. However, the processes of exclusion vary enormously between countries and institutions: there is no standard approach to solving its challenges.

Art institutions should address exclusion because a diverse student and staff population is key to stimulating creativity and innovation: a narrow intake will lead to an equally narrow institutional culture. Since exceptional talent may be found anywhere, a genuinely open admissions process is needed to identify and attract the best: it is also important for wider ethical and political reasons.

Reducing social exclusion means reviewing institutional practice thoroughly, including admission procedures, the curriculum,
teaching and support. This is hard, since it often questions basic cultural values and beliefs; but it should lead to clarity about what is important and what is not, rather than a reduction in standards. It should also lead to concrete changes in management and administration, including areas such as fees, marketing, admission criteria, etc.

In responding to social exclusion, different institutions have tested a variety of approaches initiatives, including offering high profile, high-value bursaries to signal the standing of a career in the arts and cross-subsidising students from economically deprived backgrounds. Some have used student satisfaction surveys to challenge teaching and support services; others have supported staff performance with postgraduate training in teaching theory and practice, and through participation in reviewing the institutional offer, including courses, teaching styles and outcomes. Better understanding of local and national markets, of student interests and of the experience of other institutions with very diverse student bodies have also played an important role.

Central to tackling social exclusion is a commitment to understanding and removing unfair barriers faced by some individuals or groups. Doing so is right in itself, and absolutely in the interest of art institutions and of wider artistic life.

**STRATEGIC ALLIANCES AND COOPERATION**

Alliances strengthen art institutions; alliances enable them to share knowledge, achieve their aims, extend their influence and provide mutual support. They are essential to the work, security and sustainability of art schools.

Priorities for partnership include the arts and cultural sectors, business and the professions, the wider education sector, the political world and international peers. Most of these alliances are natural, and develop effectively around shared interests. But in some cases, such as the arts and education, competition for resources can put pressure on both sides, especially where the national market is small.
Partnerships with business provide students with real world experience, keep teaching up to date, and challenge practice. They can also bring in valuable resources, and build institutional credibility.

There are areas where partnership could be improved, such as the museums sector, primary and secondary education and the wider community in which art schools are situated. Alliances between arts schools, nationally and internationally should also be stronger. This would not only support more international exchange of students and staff, but also encourage sharing of information, knowledge and support; access to problem solving, peer advice and mentoring; and a shared approach to advocacy and engagement. The input or expertise of a foreign advisor can carry substantial credibility among an institution’s partners, including government.

Such networking would help arts schools become more visible – a recognised partner in a wide range of educational, economic, industrial and social forums. Institutions should also be more permeable, for instance by involving eminent or creative outsiders – not only as governors, but in task forces working on curriculum or business development, or as visiting professors.

Institutions need to be less introspective and less complacent. They are not as good at alliances and partnership as they would like to think, nor as effective in exercising influence as they should be. There is a need to build capacity to achieve real, lasting change. In doing that, there is no substitute for personal experience. Research, policy papers and advocacy material are valuable, but are most effective alongside actual experiences of seeing and hearing at first hand.
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