

**Institution: The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London**

## 1. Context and mission

**1.1.1.** The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama (Central) is a single-faculty specialist HEI (SSI) within the University of London (UoL) with an **institutional mission** to develop practitioners and researchers able to shape the future of drama, theatre, and performance (DTP). Central's vision is a hybrid conservatoire where the creative industries and the academy engage with civic stakeholders, maximising the benefits the institution can generate for wider society. This hybridity ensures the sustainability and outward-facing relevance of the three interlocking areas of the School: its research, its impact and knowledge exchange (KE) strategy, and its teaching and training provision. Rooted in the broader context of a civic university, core values — sharing, listening, and enquiring — shape what we do and how we do it: nurturing creative citizens embedded in intersecting local, national, international, and disciplinary communities. In 2016, Central became the only DTP conservatoire designated 'world-leading' by the 2016 HEFCE review of Institution Specific Targeted Allocation (ISTA).

As a single unit, our institutional-level and UoA-level strategies and activity are mapped across REF5a and REF5b, cross-referencing where appropriate.

**1.1.2.** Central's **overall size and structure** comprises the largest contracted academic faculty of DTP specialists in Europe (67.35 FTE). Of those staff, 31.6 FTE are on a Teaching and Research<sup>1</sup> (T&R) pathway and 35.75 FTE on a Teaching and Scholarship (T&S) pathway (see 1.1.3). Central has dedicated professional services (1.6 FTE) for staff engaged in KE activities and 3 FTE research support, a specialist Technical and Production Support Department (13.4 FTE), and an Outreach and Enterprise team (6.5 FTE).

Central has a student body (2019/20) of 691 undergraduates (62.8%); its cohort of 389 MA/MFA students and 21 PGR students (37.2%) is the largest postgraduate population in the European DTP sector. 32.4% of students are international (20.3% non-EU international, 12.1% EU).

In 2019/20, Central's total income was £19.8m, with 6% derived from research activities, including: Research England grant 4% and awards 2%. Undergraduate and MA student fees accounted for 58%; short course fees 4%; the OfS recurrent and ISTA grant 24%; donations, trusts, and foundations 1%; government capital grants 2%; investments and endowments 1%; and other income 4%. Central invested 61% of its total income in staffing (plus 4% on visiting professionals).

**1.1.3.** Serving as a hub where diverse methodologies are developed, tested, and disseminated, Central mobilises its research and maximises its impact through ongoing KE with industry partners, SMEs, and public-sector stakeholders. This hybrid approach encapsulates the **balance between research, teaching, and enterprise activities** and is key to Central's impact strategy, where research informs and is reciprocally informed by Central's vocational teaching contexts. For example, the 'Wonder VR: Interactive Storytelling through VR360 video with NHS Patients Living with Dementia' project, developed out of BA/MA teaching activities, led to a KE Student Engagement grant from OfS/Research England (£566.26k) and the *Guardian's* 2020 Teaching Excellence Award. Academic staff engage with, or are embedded professionally within, applied, creative arts, or heritage sector contexts, informing our research, impact, and KE strategy, while promoting productive dialogue with industry and increasing our capacity to benefit stakeholders.

<sup>1</sup> This includes research assistants/associates.

This is reflected in the T&R and T&S pathways (introduced 1 August 2017), whose border can be fluid — with four staff subsequently transferring to T&R. Dedicated time is given to each category of staff within the work allocation model for research and/or KE activity, with sabbatical and project support funded from QR and ISTA funds respectively. A HERA and peer-review-based promotion scheme leads to professorial title and grades for each pathway (see 3.1).

**1.1.4. Central's local economic and demographic context** places it as one of 11 HEIs based in London's Borough of Camden, with a local profile as a performing arts venue. A founding member of the Cultural Camden network (alongside The Roundhouse, British Museum, Hampstead Theatre, and JW3), its campus forms part of Swiss Cottage's Theatre Square development that serves local communities with eight performance venues (six at Central — ranging from a 250-seat proscenium arch theatre to a variety of flexible studios — contributing over 30 annual public productions). Central offers public-facing research events, evening classes, children's classes, festivals, film screenings, exhibitions, public lectures and seminars, and conferences, with 12,100 visitors in 2019/20. Socially engaged projects (see 2.3.2), realised with local stakeholders, intersect with the priorities of Central's Engagement and Enterprise team in delivering an Access and Participation Plan through a national programme of school and community outreach, 34% in areas of significant economic deprivation.

Central's position within London's wider theatre ecology provides the platform upon which it builds relationships with industry and wider society, underpinning its impact and KE Strategy. Currently, Central has established partnerships with 10 local and 525 organisations within the wider London and South-East region, 215 bodies operating within Britain, and 500+ internationally.

**1.1.5.** Through engagement with our wider network of **peer groupings and affiliates** (see 2.1, 2.3.2; REF5b.4.2–7), industry connections orient both our research and teaching, while ensuring Central remains responsive to shifting social needs. As a member of OfS TRAC peer group F, Central sits alongside other high-cost specialist arts institutions with stakeholders represented on its governing body, including Goldsmiths' former Pro-Warden (Research and Enterprise), Netflix's Vice President (Original Series), two presidents of BAFTA, and a former president of the Association of British Theatre Technicians. In addition to disciplinary research associations and industry collaborators (see REF5b.4.2, 4.10), Central's active involvement in specialist **affiliations** includes the Society of British Theatre Designers, Association of British Theatre Technicians, and Stage Sight (working for EDI in off-stage careers), as well as sector-wide bodies (see 2.1; REF5b.4.6).

**1.2.1. Central's institutional research focus** is concerned with contemporary practices of theatre- and performance-making and their cultural histories and lineages — including: sonic and scenographic landscapes; applied, political, and social theatres; acting and directing; and performance dramaturgies. Our research promotes theatre's public relevance and the positive impact of the arts on communities (see 2.1, 2.2).

**1.2.2.** Founded in 1906, Central's history lies in training actors, drama teachers, stage managers, and therapists. Its provision underwent significant growth with HEI status in 1992, expanding its specialist performance technology, craft, and design courses. Gaining TDAPS in 2004, Central received a Royal title during the Diamond Jubilee in 2012 and TEF Gold status in 2017.

Central has submitted to all research excellence exercises since 1996, demonstrating steady growth: RAE2008 (submitting 11.2 FTE), REF2014 (21.25 FTE), REF2021 (30.5 FTE) (see

REF5b.1.2.1). This expansion has diversified intellectual engagement, methodological approaches, and expertise, with research across an extensive range of projects from transnational stages to environmental performance practices. Central today not only promises but delivers what a 21<sup>st</sup>-century conservatoire-research institution can contribute to the wider discipline and society (see REF5b.4).

## 2. Strategy

**2.1.** In 2015, Central formulated a key **strategic research aim**: to integrate research in all academic activities as realised through the following goals:

- A sustainable staffing strategy to build capacity (see 3.1);
- Institutional-level investment in research infrastructure, support services, and facilities (see 4; REF5b.3.1, 3.4, 3.6–7);
- Consolidating and expanding existing partnerships with international HEIs and cultural bodies (see REF5b.4.1, 4.10, 4.13);
- Developing and consolidating stakeholder partnerships that extend research beyond HEI contexts to deliver wider industry, civic, societal, and cultural benefits (see 2.3.2, 2.4.3; REF5b.4.11).

Impact is at the core of our research strategy, used as a measurement of how effectively we engage with non-academic partners and as a commitment to pursuing socially relevant research, from capturing the voices of Filipina migrant workers to encouraging public discourse on bereavement (see REF2 outputs).

Central's **future goals** include sustaining our expanding research culture, deepening our engagement with challenge-led research, addressing historical and present underrepresentation in the field, and consolidating our increasingly visible position in the sector by providing a civic model of research leadership (see REF5b.1.2.4–6, 1.2.1). We understand advocacy as fundamental to this, articulating the importance of the SSI as a crucial part of an inclusive UK HE sector. We are actively involved with GuildHE Research, Conservatoires UK (CUK) Research, London Higher (Research), and the Practice Research Advisory Group (PRAG-UK), highlighting the challenges facing SSIs (e.g., London Higher Delegation to the European Research Council, 2016) and in roles serving disciplinary organisations, professional associations, funding and expert bodies, charities, and industry governance (see REF5b.4.2, 4.6, 4.14).

**2.2.** Central's approach to industry and community engagement ensures our research is relevant to different stakeholders and is vital to **enabling and facilitating impact**: from theatre-making to training, facilitation, and advisory work, academic staff engage with over 1,250 external bodies, including NHS Trusts, arts venues, advocacy groups, charities, and schools. Developing the intersections between research, KE, and scholarship, institutional investment (see 4) has led to impactful projects, including two OfS/RE awards in 2020 — Wonder VR (see 1.1.3) and entrepreneurship development in the creative industries with the Royal Northern College of Music and the University of the Arts London. Targeted funding schemes, facilitating impact, demonstrate the ways in which we respond to national priorities (see 2.3.2; REF5b.1.3, 2a.5). Central's participation in the 2019 KE Pilot enhanced institutional understanding of areas where we have excellent pathways to impact given our size — KE partnerships, collaborative research, graduate entrepreneurship development, and public and community engagement. It also enabled us to identify areas for improvement, such as 'local growth and regeneration' and 'IP and commercialisation'.

**2.3.1.** Central is committed to **open research**, through downloadable articles and project reports on our Institutional Repository, more expansively through dissemination in and through practice research, and contribution to national fora (see REF5b.1.5). Central authored its first Open Research Policy in 2016 and signed DORA in 2019, with a Repository Advisory Committee (2018–19) and a Plan S Working Group (2019–20) responding to sector developments.

To increase public access to our research, in 2018/19 we revised and expanded the subject headings in our open-access Institutional Repository and invested £6.9k in updating the front-end theme to create a more inclusive user interface for the Repository, better supporting practice research. Our multimedia template is now used by the UoL's Co-Sector team for other institutional repositories. In 2014, only 9% of Repository materials were indexed appropriately for penetration by aggregators such as Google Scholar; now, almost 70% of the Repository is findable.

**2.3.2.** At national level, we engage in framing **research policy priorities** (open research, digital infrastructure, research integrity, sustainable change and social cohesion, 'levelling up', and widening access) in relation to arts-based research and the SSI perspective. **Engagement with UK-wide** (GuildHE, CUK) and **regional** (London Higher, AHRC LAHP consortium) HE bodies provides the means for influencing sector-wide policies, as does invited staff membership of policy fora (see REF5b.1.5, 4.6).

Central's links to industry partners, public bodies, and third-sector stakeholders inform its engagement with a number of national research imperatives realised with regional partners. Our research mission is fundamentally driven by our belief in the importance of culture in promoting social cohesion and integration. Our research in the applied field evidences a longstanding and extensive involvement in Arts Council England designated areas of low cultural engagement, including Salford, Slough, and Tower Hamlets (e.g., a 2019–20 playwriting residency with Little Fish Theatre in South London schools explored racism, identity, and Englishness, with participants subsequently awarded a Bronze Arts Award).

Our applied research also supports stakeholders in the NHS, care sector, and criminal justice system (see REF5b.4.11, 4.15). Engagement includes: training for medics and social workers; collaborations on children's care with four London boroughs and the GLA Peer outreach team, leading to presentations at the DfE for the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families, and the Participation and Engagement team at OfS (2015–19); rehabilitative and crime prevention arts practices in prisons (HMPs Doncaster and Belmarsh with partners Second Shot and Unlock Drama, 2014–16); and with at-risk London youth around gang affiliation and knife crime with Pan Intercultural Arts (2016–19).

**2.4.1.** Staffing appointments have extended our **interdisciplinary** reach (see REF5b.1.4). Support mechanisms to strengthen interdisciplinary collaborations include pump-priming funds for project development and support around organising interdisciplinary conferences (see REF5b.2a.2, 3.7).

**2.4.2. Research integrity** is part of Central's Ethical Policy Framework, which sets out the values, policies, procedures, and standards that guide how we work. A Research Ethics and Integrity Subcommittee (REISC), established in 2016, provides institutional leadership of research integrity and incorporates sector-wide initiatives relating to good research governance. Our membership of CUK's Research Ethics Committee since 2018 (which the Chair of REISC now chairs) allows further benchmarking of our research activity against the 2019 Concordat to Support Research Integrity while providing a sector-wide space for the discussion of principles and practices relating to ethics and integrity. The Chair of REISC presents updates on UUK's Concordat to Support

Research Integrity and UKRIO's Code of Practice for Research annually in institution-wide staff meetings, ensuring cross-institutional engagement with ethical conduct in research. Research Ethics and Integrity is now a standing agenda item on key committees (including Sabbatical and Awards, Research Degrees, and KE and Partnerships), further embedding a culture of research integrity among staff and PGRs. Central has published an annual statement on Research Integrity since 2017/18.

**2.4.3. Research collaborations, networks, and partnerships** are developed through a range of mechanisms (see REF5b.2a.5). Institutional investment in subscriptions to disciplinary bodies and research organisations support individual researchers in network-building activities (see 1.1.5). Practice research in the creative industries is sustained through QR investment in collaborations with regional, national, and international bodies (from London's National Theatre to Opera North and Centre National de la Danse Paris). These investments ensure the delivery of projects realised with partners from performing arts venues, the charity sector, and local authorities (see 2.3.2; REF5b.1.3, 2a.5, 4.9, 4.11). 63% of the outputs submitted to REF involve collaborations with artists, companies, venues, or HEI researchers (staff and PGRs). External networks increase the resonance of our research with communities beyond HE, involving all those who seek to engage with us through the expanded field of performance practice.

### 3. People

**3.1.** Institutional hybridity shapes Central's **staffing strategy**: in addition to the expansion of research, the distinct value of scholarship is recognised (see 1.1.1). Consultation with staff on contract pathways (T&S/T&R) in 2016 led to the development of an inclusive new system designed to ensure parity (see 1.1.2–3). EDI is a core value of this strategic approach (as articulated in our REF Code of Practice, pp. 2–8) and of our civic mission. EDI recruitment initiatives have seen a 11.5% increase in Black and Global Majority representation on the academic staff body since August 2013.

**Staff development strategy** incorporates training, investment in externally delivered skills development, and sabbaticals overseen by a Sabbatical and Awards Committee established in 2015 (see REF5b.2a.2). Fixed-term staff have the same development funding and training opportunities as permanent staff. The Conferment of Academic Titles Committee introduced a revised template for all promotion applications in 2017 in line with recommendations made in Wilsdon's HEFCE Metric Tide report (2015), ensuring a fair, transparent, and consistent process for all **career pathways**. Of the 22 promotions made since 2014, 23% were staff on part-time contracts, 18% had one or more periods of maternity leave, and 23% identified as neurodivergent.

**3.2. Staff wellbeing** is supported through mentoring and management, HR services, and staff training. The Health and Safety Management Committee takes responsibility for monitoring staff wellbeing, recommends training provision, and reviews institutional stress-risk assessment procedures in liaison with HSE guidance and through institutional participation in national awareness-raising campaigns. In the 2016/17 academic year, Central introduced the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), a 24-hours-a-day, 7-days-a-week, 365-days-a-year service to support staff with personal, health, and wellbeing issues. REF5b.2a.4 delineates the **support for staff diagnosed with learning differences, returning from periods of ill health or parental leave, or managing long-term illness**. LGBTQIA+ staff are supported through a research advisor system sensitive to their needs. Staff wellbeing training is delivered through termly faculty days in areas from mental health to trans awareness. Unconscious bias training,



delivered to all staff and governors (AdvanceHE's Equality Challenge Unit, 2018), was followed up by anti-racism training (Dr. Muna Abdi, 2020), constructing a more inclusive and self-aware institutional culture. Black and Global Majority staff members are supported by Central's staff-led Global Majority Staff Network.

**3.3.** The implementation of the **Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers** governs Central's research culture, and employment and career development practices. The Research department works closely with our six postdoctoral researchers on implementing aspects of the Concordat directly relevant to them — negotiating manageable workloads, contributing to policy through participation in committees and working groups, mentoring and monitoring progress and wellbeing to promote good mental health (see REF5b.2a.3), industry placements, and collaborations (see REF5b.1.3) — cultivating well-rounded and multi-skilled researchers working at the interface of academia, social advocacy, and the creative industries.

**3.4.** Central's strategy for developing ECRs involves a package of support to help individuals sustain ethical and civically responsible research trajectories and encourages their proactive engagement in their career development (see REF5b.2a.3). In addition to financial support offered to all researchers (see REF5b.2a.2), the assignment of mentors ensures ECRs on both permanent and fixed-term contracts benefit from the advice of established researchers who read work-in-progress, assist with the development of one-year and five-year plans, and provide support and guidance in grant writing (see REF5b.2a.3). ECRs are represented on all School committees including the REF2021 Strategy and Delivery Group.

**3.5.** In 2014, the **PGR** programme was brought within Research Services in order to oversee training provision and liaise with institutional services more robustly on PGR support mechanisms (see REF5b.2b). Our pursuit of a research-focused recruitment strategy has widened and deepened the quality of Central's supervisory expertise (27 academics have seen projects to completion compared with six in the previous census period).

**3.6.** Since 2014, Central has significantly developed its support systems for staff through a series of initiatives targeting **EDI**, with £74.14k invested in EDI training and programmes since 2018. A strategic institution-wide Single Equality Scheme (2015) brings together all policies regarding equality of opportunity and inclusion. All School committees have standing EDI agenda items to promote best practice and make recommendations for staff development and training. Central's Gender Pay Gap statements (2.5%, 2018; 1.1%, 2019; 4.95%, 2020) are significantly lower than the English sector average over these years: 14.1%, 14.75, and 17.3% — noting that our small staff base means changes in one or two staff members at senior level has a disproportionate impact, as reflected in the change from 2019 to 2020.

In 2018, Central's Board of Governors commissioned a report on race equality (the Halpin Partnership Report) which acknowledged 'positive activities taking place across disability, gender, race, and LGBTQIA+ equality', and 'that many of these had improved and/or expanded in recent years'. Good practices were identified in unconscious bias training, EDI engagement in staff appraisal, a range of race and ethnicity PGR initiatives, and research to identify obstacles to Black and Global Majority PGR study.

The Halpin Report's recommendations, including the appointment of an EDI specialist (in January 2020), have been supplemented by work related to repairing the curriculum, instituting a process for far-ranging pedagogical change and attending to School-wide structures, including academic recruitment processes. A new committee structure was established in summer 2020,

comprising management (Inclusion Committee), governance (Governing Body Diversity and Inclusion Committee), and external consultation with industry and other HEIs (Independent Equity Committee). An anti-racist action plan published in June 2020 (reworked in 2020/21 as part of an EDI Policy Network) demonstrates Central's commitment to working with staff, students, and alumni to achieve its overall goal of an inclusive environment.

**3.7.** Central recognises the different working patterns and levels of productivity present in our research environment. There has been no expectation that all staff contribute equal numbers of outputs to the submission pool, thus ensuring **inclusivity in the selection of outputs**. Balancing quality as a key criterion with inclusive practices that recognise fractional positions, ECR status, disclosed disabilities, periods of parental leave, and other applicable circumstances has shaped the **construction of this single UoA REF submission**.

#### **4. Income, infrastructure, and facilities**

**4.1.** As a single UoA, Central delegates institutional responsibility for generating research **income** entirely to Research. Following REF2014, and a 79% increase in QR allocation (£377k 2014/15 to £673k 2015/16), the School made a strategic decision to commit 100% of all QR funds to Research with the aim of increasing research activity through increased external research income (REF5b.3.5) and creating a sustainable departmental infrastructure for Research leadership (see REF5b.3.1). Research Committee takes responsibility for the institutional Global Challenges Research Fund strategy and allocation of funding (£96.98k, 2017–20) and makes recommendations on spend of capital funds. Central does not receive HEIF.

**4.2.** Since 2014, Central has made significant investment in **facilities and infrastructure**. The refitting of offices (£35.9k) has supported new and existing appointments, including a specialist hub for a full-time Director of Research (appointed in 2015) and an administrative centre for Research Support Services in 2019 (see REF5b.3.1). £9.5k has been invested in **enhancing disabled access** to our spaces. The involvement of the Head of Research Services and the Chair of REISC on the Working Group of the new £16.7m North Block building demonstrates how the requirements of Research informed its design and the equipping of its facilities. The new fully DDA compliant building includes specialist studio and performance spaces (with Infra-Red **systems for the hearing impaired**), equipment to support Practice Research (see REF5b.3.6), and office space for 26 academic staff. The decision to strengthen Central's **infrastructure** for Research post-2015 has also seen investment in support for visually impaired and neurodivergent researchers (see REF5b.2a.4), impact and KE operations (see also REF5b.1.3, 3.4), and the Institutional Repository (see 2.3.1).

Strengthened capacity in our Dyslexia and Disability Service (17% increase since 2013/14) screens researchers for neurodivergent conditions to facilitate reasonable adjustment. Access to Work has also provided five assessments (2015–20) to assist in acquiring specialist equipment and software (£2.5k) to complement the **EDI** support packages delineated in REF5b.2a.2, 2a.4.

To **facilitate impact** and KE activity, Central recruited an Impact Manager in 2017, responsible for collating impact resources covering research and scholarship, KE, public engagement, policy impact and impact evaluation, and for gathering impact data from all academics through our Annual Achievements survey, feeding directly into the Higher Education Business and Community Interaction survey and informing future strategy. Since 2018, KE and Partnerships Group (KEPG) ensures a strategic approach to the School's development of partnerships. Strengthening reporting and oversight, KEPG acts as a steering mechanism to increase

connectivity between staff networks, including pooling resources, sharing expertise, and ensuring that information on KE — including the KE Strategy developed in 2017 — and impact developments flow to Central's community. Impact resource packs, published internally in 2018, attracted 980 visits in the first two months and c.40 visits per month subsequently.

This KE Strategy has enabled Central to unlock the benefits of institutional collaboration by championing, demonstrating, and delivering the impact of our research both to and with a variety of industries, audiences, and communities. It articulates our commitment to building, maintaining, and delivering strong relationships through which pathways to impact are created and maximised, as evidenced in our Impact Case Studies and REF5b.1.3, 4.9. Institution-wide activities introduced to cultivate networks include one-to-one surgeries (accessible for neurodivergent staff) to support pathways to **impact** and 16 'brown bag' lunches on Impact and KE (since May 2019), the latter including external speakers: Research England's Head of KE Data and Evidence, and the Executive Director of the Independent Theatre Council.

Central's federal membership of the UoL extends our **infrastructure** to Senate House's world-class Library (two million books, 50 special collections, 1,800 archive collections, 365 electronic databases), significantly enhancing resources for PGRs and researchers. In addition to Central's annual contribution of c.£40k for use of Senate House, investment in our own bespoke Library (with 61 study spaces and 29 workstations for PGR use) represents a 136% rise in institutional funding since 2012/13. This investment has enhanced our Repository (see 2.3.1) and holdings (currently 47,655 books, 449 DTP journals, key performance databases including Drama-Online and Digital Theatre+, and five specialist archival collections).