

Institution: Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh		
Unit of Assessment: UoA 34 Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management		
Title of case study: 'The Best It Can Be': Redefining and enhancing quality in participatory arts		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: October 2013-December 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Rachel Blanche	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Senior Lecturer in Arts Management and Cultural Policy	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: August 2009 to present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: February 2014 to November 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact <p>Blanche's research produced a model that opened the door for the creation of innovative frameworks and practical toolkits to support quality outcomes in participatory arts in three countries profiled in this case study – 'participatory arts' referring here to work engaging (often vulnerable) people as creative or co-creative participants for a range of therapeutic, social or educational outcomes. A "<i>threshold moment</i>" (corroborating source 5.2) for the sector, Blanche's model provided the "<i>missing piece</i>" (5.1) that has since enabled completely new systems for supporting quality to be created in Scotland, Wales and Portugal, credited by the respective policymakers to Blanche's work as having a "<i>direct</i>", "<i>profound</i>" and "<i>instrumental</i>" impact (5.1, 5.2, 5.3).</p> <p>Impacts include visible shifts in funders' quality management and evaluation approaches, and a significant refocus on quality processes at the planning stage. Empowered by new frameworks to define their own excellence, practitioners enjoy increased agency in relationships with funders and feel professionally validated and equipped for the first time. Artists confirm that the new approach enhances the quality of their practice, their outputs, their delivery partnerships and the quality of what is experienced by participant end-users.</p>		
2. Underpinning research <p>In 2013 Creative Scotland commissioned Blanche to review the existing body of knowledge on quality in participatory arts and creative learning to underpin an updated quality framework in Scotland (Blanche 2014a (output 3.1 below), p23), arising from a longstanding need for clear indicators of what represents quality in this field (5.2, 5.3). Funders and sector leaders had highlighted an urgent need to assure quality of engagement with participants in arts-led work and "create a more professional and confident sector whose work is validated and valued" (dha 2015:2), supplement what was known about quality "through the examination of tangible and less tangible contributory factors" and translate these into "solutions further down the line" (Schwartz 2014:5).</p> <p>Blanche's analysis fulfilled all of these requirements. The publication of her findings and model in <i>Developing a Foundation for Quality</i> (3.1) was hailed by the Director of ArtWorks UK, a nationwide research and development programme for participatory arts, as "<i>close to the holy grail</i>" (5.5). ArtWorks immediately commissioned Blanche to produce a sector-facing summary report to bring her recommendations to the wider attention of policymakers and funders of participatory arts (5.5). A peer-reviewed academic paper was also published in a special journal edition dedicated to ArtWorks (Blanche 2014b, 3.2). The three policy stakeholders in Scotland, Wales</p>		

and Portugal have since engaged closely with Blanche's ongoing research to study the implementation of her model and explore sectoral impacts, resulting in further academic publications **Blanche 2018** (3.3) and **Blanche 2020** (3.4).

The value of Blanche's research lies in generating **new insights and understanding** about quality in participation, **translating knowledge from non-arts disciplines** and sectors into a roadmap for funders and policymakers showing how to support artists in delivering the best quality outputs, experiences and impacts for arts participants. This **original and innovative research approach** is credited by ArtWorks as having finally "*cracked something we have all been searching for for years and yet have failed to conceptualise*" (5.5). Creative Scotland noted the rigour in the way Blanche's analysis "*brought a quality of breadth, depth and new thinking to the subject*", "*interrogating it sensitively and in depth*" to produce "*a well thought through and articulated philosophical framework*" (5.5).

Blanche's original research (3.1, 3.2) made a unique **material contribution** by **identifying and explaining dysfunctions in existing systems** evidenced to undermine quality and, going significantly beyond a conventional literature review, **devising a holistic model** incorporating the measures and operational conditions required to create the optimal environment for participatory artists to achieve their highest quality work.

Testimonies from policymakers and funders (5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4) pinpoint the key **original contributions** of Blanche's research and model as:

- Generating a set of guiding **quality indicators ('Principles')** for participatory arts - adopted almost verbatim by policymakers with endorsement from their sectors
- Highlighting factors beyond artists' control for fulfilling core quality pre-conditions, recognising the **influence and therefore shared responsibility of partners** 'outside the room' where participation takes place
- Rationalising that meaningful **quality can only be 'built in'** at the start through partnership, rather than retrospectively captured
- Showing that quality must be **defined in context by artists** for each project through **multiple stakeholder lenses**, encouraging a focus on what it 'looks and feels like'.

The academic rigour and quality of the research was instrumental in the reception of the model by policymakers according to testimonies 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.5:

The connection to an academic institution gave the report value and authority. It came from a different place but was instrumental in focusing the insights into quality that arts organisations were putting forward from a practice-based point of view (5.2).

The fact you are an academic also gave weight to it. And, especially with an organisation like Gulbenkian, it's very important to back up all the proposals with proper research and proper evidence (5.4)

External references cited in section 2:

- Dha (2015) *Paul Hamlyn Foundation ArtWorks Evaluation Final Report*, dha & the Institute for Cultural Practices, University of Manchester March 2015
- Schwartz, M. (2014) *ArtWorks: Quality, Because We All Want to Do Better* (Working Paper 8), January 2014, London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation

3. References to the research

We consider the quality of the underpinning body of research submitted meets the minimum 2* criteria. The original output (Blanche 2014a) is significant in scale and scope, has been widely lauded for its originality, significance and rigour (see testimonies 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.5) and deemed notable enough to merit a full-length policy review article in the international cultural policy

journal *Cultural Trends* (Jancovich, 2015, 24:4). All of the other underpinning research was subject to a process of peer review prior to publication.

3.1 Blanche, R. (2014a) [*Developing a Foundation for Quality Guidance for arts organisations and artists in Scotland working in participatory settings: a report commissioned by Creative Scotland*](#). Creative Scotland, Edinburgh – the original research output, published as a sector-facing consultancy report

3.2 Blanche, R. (2014b) [*Towards a shared responsibility for quality in the participatory arts: Key insights into conditions underpinning quality*](#). *Journal of Arts and Communities*, 6 (2-3). pp. 145-164. ISSN 1757-1936 – a peer reviewed publication presenting Blanche’s model from 3.1 as an academic output

3.3 Blanche, R. (2018) Redefining notions of Quality in UK Participatory Arts: a Dimensional Shift unfolding from Scotland and Portugal, *Arts Management Quarterly*, (online) [Issue 128](#), January/February 2018 – academic output in a peer edited journal publication capturing interim policy impacts

3.4 Blanche, R. (2020) [*A holistic approach for quality in participatory arts: impacts on practice experienced by artists in Scotland, Wales and Portugal*](#). QMU Working Paper Series 2020/No3, December 2020, QMU: Edinburgh - peer reviewed research output

4. Details of the impact

A number of **new sector-led quality frameworks and toolkits now exist in the UK** as a direct result of Blanche’s report *Developing a Foundation for Quality* (5.1, 5.2, 5.3). Creative Scotland’s Toolkit ‘Is This The Best It Can Be?’ was built on Blanche’s findings, conclusions and model: “*Blanche’s insights and model became fundamental principles for developing the toolkit*” (5.1). This is reinforced in a film [Behind the Research](#) produced by Creative Scotland for the toolkit webpage and acknowledgements in the toolkit [Guidance Notes](#) (p26).

ArtWorks Cymru’s Director credits Blanche’s report with “*put[ting] me in a position to go to the Arts Council with a new way of looking at this and to move forward our journey to make participatory arts more professional and valued*” resulting directly in the creation of Wales’ Quality Principles framework (5.2). It visibly mirrors Blanche’s quality principles, uses Blanche’s language and implements her recommended quality approach, following expert briefing by Blanche to the Welsh steering committee in 2015. The published [toolkit document](#) acknowledges Blanche’s contribution (p20).

Blanche’s report *provided answers to questions that “the sector has been wrangling with since at least the 1990s”* (5.3), enabling the Traditional Music Forum to present its own Code of Practice framework in 2018. Acknowledging Blanche on p29, [this framework](#) directly applies key principles and concepts from her research as the foundation for the first sector-wide code of practice used by traditional musicians in Scotland working with at least 23,500 participants (5.3).

Additionally **Portugal’s main funder of participatory arts, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, applied Blanche’s quality approach in its participatory arts programme PARTIS** (5.8: p78-79. 5.4). Since 2017, all projects funded through PARTIS have been supported by the programme’s artistic evaluator to use tools from Scotland’s toolkit translated into Portuguese (5.7.3, 5.8: p84) with the aim to *positively imprint best practice “in the dna” of the “embryonic participatory arts sector”* in Portugal (5.4). The new approach has become mainstreamed in PARTIS resulting in changes in the programme’s structure and evaluation format (5.4, 5.8: p84).

All of these policymakers in the UK and Portugal have adopted the list of quality principles defined in Blanche’s research. Their new approaches each incorporate core elements from her recommended quality model discussed in section 2 above.

Through these frameworks a **visible shift in quality management has occurred emphasising early conception and planning stages of work**, a phase previously deprioritised in the funding culture (5.6). In all three countries this application of Blanche's model has **enabled glitches and weaknesses to be identified and fixed** in planning before they undermine quality for participants (5.6, 5.4, 5.8:p81-82) and has **strengthened project delivery partnerships** (5.6). In Portugal this refocus resulted in the creation of a **new funded 'R&D phase'** in the first months of the PARTIS programme, enabling projects to roadtest and refine their plans to establish the best conditions for quality (5.4, 5.8: p83-84).

Implementation of Blanche's model has led to positive changes in evaluation conventions. In Scotland and Wales 4 in 5 practitioners say the new quality approach **helps shape more meaningful evaluation** (5.6, films 5.7.2 and 5.7.3), enabling them to place their values at the core of their work (films 5.7.2 and 5.7.4) and to *"hold projects accountable for delivering well for participants"* (5.7.5, 5.6). This **has empowered practitioners to advocate more definitively** for their work **and to lever funding** (5.6) while feeling more ownership of evaluation (5.7.3): *"As an artist one of the main benefits is a reassurance that our values are embedded in the project and that's what we're being asked to evaluate it by"* (5.7.2).

In Portugal **the formal evaluation structure for PARTIS now includes an additional strand** dedicated to artistic quality based around Blanche's quality principles that recognises each project on its own merits while enabling programmes of work to be cross-evaluated (5.4, 5.7.3). Final reporting now captures not only strengths but reflective learning from what has impeded quality in the projects; **a new evaluation paradigm** filling a gap in Portugal (5.4).

The implementation of Blanche's quality model has produced deep and potentially permanent changes in sector practice characterised as *"a real change in outlook"* (5.3). Arts practitioners and managers surveyed in Scotland, Wales and Portugal are consistently embedding the new approach in their practice: all but two artists surveyed on the toolkits had already applied the new tools in their work multiple times, with 1 in 4 having used them *more than ten times* (5.6). The toolkits are valued highly as **professional development** resources by artists at all career stages (5.6) and are regarded as **fundamental for training** and supporting emerging practitioners (5.6, 5.3). *"As a freelancer it is the tool that I have been looking for and never had"* (5.6).

All sector users have reported positive impacts ascribed variously as *early impact*, *noticeable and important impact* and in some cases *transformational impact*, specifically in how they: understand the quality of their own work • engage with partners and participants • evaluate and report externally on the quality of their work • reflect internally for continuous quality improvement (5.6).

Artists have been empowered in defined ways as a result of the new operating environment promoted by the frameworks. Being able to define the quality of their own work has turned the debate around and *"changed the conversation"* with funders (5.2), moving it forward and granting practitioners *"greater ownership of excellence and evaluation"* (5.7.3, 5.6) - loaded issues characterised as "battlegrounds" before (5.2). The frameworks make **artists feel professionally validated, mandated and equipped** (5.2, 5.6). Blanche's framing of terms and concepts has **given the sector and policymakers a common language** for the first time; this stands out as a major theme across the testimony gathered, singled out by one artist as *'a large and transforming impact'* for her practice (5.6).

Responding artists confirm that the new approach embodying Blanche's model has **enhanced the quality of their practice, their outputs, their delivery partnerships and**, most importantly, **the quality of what is experienced by their beneficiaries** (5.6). The policymakers/funders in Scotland and Portugal believe their new approach **supports continual improvement** in their sectors (5.1, 5.4, 5.8). The value of this flexible, reflexive quality model has been appreciated by practitioners **during the Covid crisis** to consider what quality looks and feels like under radically adjusted circumstances, supporting them to recalibrate their practice to be 'the best it can be' in any context (5.6, films 5.7.4 and 5.7.5).

Testimonies from those involved with operationalising the model strongly suggest that these impacts would not have been possible without Blanche's research providing *the missing piece* (5.1): "*ArtWorks Cymru wouldn't have been able to move on with such confidence without Blanche's report*" (5.2).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Personal testimony from key policy stakeholders

5.1. Testimonial letter from Creative Scotland in relation to *Is This The Best It Can Be?*

5.2 Testimonial letter from Director of ArtWorks Cymru in relation to the *Quality Principles* framework and toolkit developed for Arts Council of Wales

5.3 Testimonial letter from Director of Traditional Music Forum (Scotland) in relation to new *Quality Framework and Code of Practice* developed by and for their own artform

5.4 Impact statements excerpted from recorded interviews conducted during 2017-2019 with the Artistic Evaluator of PARTIS, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (Portugal), attesting to impacts on the PARTIS programme and the significance of the research for Portugal, prefacing several points published in 5.8 (below) in 2020.

5.5 Testimonial comments received upon publication of original research, capturing immediate reactions in 2014-2015 from a senior manager at Creative Scotland and the Director of ArtWorks UK [by email]

Corroborative Sources in the public domain

Evidence of impact gathered from participatory arts practitioners:

5.6 A holistic approach for quality in participatory arts: impacts on practice experienced by artists in Scotland, Wales and Portugal, [QMU Working Paper Series 2020/No3](#), December 2020, QMU: Edinburgh - survey and interview evidence from 44 artists applying tools and approaches in Scotland, Wales and Portugal operationalising Blanche's model, presenting extensive voluntary testimony demonstrating the nature of impact on artists as users

5.7 Films: Artist case studies profiling how artists/organisations have used and benefitted from Scotland's *Is This The Best It Can Be?* toolkit – this [set of five 3-minute films](#) was produced jointly by QMU and Creative Scotland during March-November 2020 to evidence impact and share sector practice

- **5.7.1 Programming and participant voice:** Edinburgh International Festival
- **5.7.2 Supporting artists' practice:** Edinburgh International Festival/Leith Academy
- **5.7.3 Evaluating Quality:** PARTIS, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (Portugal)
- **5.7.4 Communicating Principles:** Sanctuary Queer Arts
- **5.7.5 Defining practice:** Laura, freelance socially-engaged artist

Corroborative independent publication:

5.8 Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (2020) Art and Hope: PARTIS Initiative Trajectories 2014-2018 - legacy book about PARTIS programme. It foregrounds the contribution of Blanche's research and model on pp78-79 while outlining the new quality and evaluation approaches taken by this funder in Portugal. Valuable impacts and outcomes from the new approach are reported on pp83-84. An annotated version has been submitted in electronic copy; view an online [version in English here](#).