

# **Pushing practice**

## **Evaluation of the AA2A scheme**

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## **Artists Access to Art Colleges**

Supported by Arts Council England and CHEAD, AA2A is a national project that provides selected visual artists and designer-makers with the opportunity to undertake a period of research or realise a project using the workshop and supporting facilities in selected university and college fine art and design departments in England. Artists are given up to 100 hours access to specialised equipment and, in turn, institutions benefit from the new ideas and techniques that artists bring. Typical supporting facilities include college lending libraries and access to lecture programmes or life rooms.

Artist and arts consultant Wendy Mason is part-time National Coordinator responsible for the scheme's sustainability and development including communications, frameworks for delivery and evaluation, reporting and briefing sessions and promotion, and supporting local coordinators and administrators.

Between 2003-06, 21 institutions have participated in the scheme, each handling their own applications, monitoring and documentation of the scheme whilst taking part in national briefing and feedback sessions.

**"AA2A is a unique and worthwhile scheme which allows the artist to push a little further those ideas which may have been fermenting in their studio practice, which because of the lack of specialist equipment have nowhere to go."**

From Artists' evaluation report on AA2A website

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## Key achievements

AA2A provides a combination of resources that encourage artists to 'be artists' and research new work and experiment in their practice. It is a welcome contributor in an environment that is often more preoccupied with funding work that provides audience or public benefit.

AA2A has derived great benefit from the continuity provided by Wendy Mason, National Coordinator of the scheme from the beginning, whose knowledge of artists' needs and circumstances are informed by her own professional practice as an artist and by her awareness of and contribution to artists' networks and professional development training initiatives in her region and beyond.

By 2006, 580 artists and makers will have participated in the scheme, currently operated through 18 institutions.

Overall, AA2A has sustained a rate of approximately two applicants for each opportunity.

The project aims to ensure that all artists are encouraged to take part in the scheme, regardless of gender, race, nationality or ethnic origin, religion, disability, marital status, sexual orientation, class or age.

In the AA2A scheme, selection is delegated to the institutions, giving them greater ownership of the scheme. This would seem to compare favourably with that of Next Move, where the Coordinator and colleges collectively shortlist and the interview panel for all candidates contains representatives from all colleges and the Crafts Council, undertaken over an intensive one or two days

AA2A supports good practice in contractual arrangements, with the Artist's Terms of Access Agreement proforma provided to institutions in the AA2A 'toolkit' of key documents.

Evidence collected in 2004 of demand at college level was demonstrated by a waiting list of six colleges wishing to host schemes and all current colleges applying to continue.<sup>1</sup>

In 2003/4, the scheme exceeded targets set for cultural diversity, with 7% of artists of Asian or African origin. For the first time however, it fell short of its target of 5% of participants considering themselves disabled. However, AA2A has taken proactive steps to address this shortfall by: “profiling the scheme in relevant publications to bring our figures back up to our previously impressive numbers in this target area”.

In 2003/04 the average artist rating for the overall importance of the scheme rose to 92.5% (from 80% the previous year) and artists rated their college’s hosting of the scheme at 87.5%/10 (80% the previous year).

In the surveys undertaken for this evaluation, several Coordinators cited “having the role model of a professional artist” within the department as a key benefit for students undertaking art and design courses.

Students gained benefits such as: “a sense of the outside world”, “opportunities to enhance their skills and experience”, “exposure to a range of artistic disciplines”, “access into the artists’ community”, “awareness of the arts industry”, and “direct access to artists in the region”.

Institutions recognise that involvement in AA2A directly contributes to their policies for “improving and building relationships with practitioners”, “getting the creative industries involved” and “informing our curriculum”. In some institutions, AA2A has had the added benefit of preparing or encouraging artists to apply for MA and post-graduate courses. AA2A also makes a valuable contribution to institutions in terms of delivering against QAA assessment criteria.

National Coordinator Wendy Mason is the key communications point for the scheme, overseeing marketing, promotion and national visibility. Interviews with institutional

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<sup>1</sup> See **Appendix 4** for a list of participating universities since 1996.

coordinators confirmed her to be a fount of wisdom and support on all matters to do with the scheme.

AA2A has built up an impressive portfolio of monitoring and evaluation tools, used across the scheme by coordinators, administrators and technicians recording resource usage and the views of artists and organisations.

AA2A has sensibly made its website a core resource for the scheme and is justifiably proud of what has been achieved to date.

## Recommendations

AA2A should investigate formal participation in the enhanced APD network, as this offers both a mechanism to promote access to the scheme by artists and opportunities to share knowledge and good practice within professional development.

AA2A's future role and function should be informed by the growth of professional networking amongst artists that is focused on artistic interests through peer positioning and critique and that complements and extends schemes more specifically concentrated on training and professional advice.

Institutions that have 'personalised' the application process by 'reminders to apply' and targeted word-of-mouth promotion of the opportunity linked into complementary professional practice activities within the institution seem in 2005 to have received greater numbers of applications. This approach may therefore be beneficially adopted in future by all institutions.

Interviews with institutions suggested that an amendment to the wording in the Selection Criteria as follows would better reflect the current age-range accessing art school courses: "Although the project is designed to appeal primarily to artists and makers who are not yet well established (it is expected that the majority of artists and makers taking advantage of the opportunity would be *within xx years of graduation*), applications from artists and makers *at a later career stage* who can show how their work will benefit from this opportunity will be *given proper consideration*."

Consideration will also need to be given to Arts Council England's stated policies and requirement for racial equality action plans from arts organisations, as regards increasing future provision for culturally diverse practitioners.

Given the increased emphasis on peer assessment and increased awareness of the value of including practitioners in decision-making processes, AA2A might consider as a matter of course the inclusion of an artist on institutions' section panels.

Detailed guidance, that encourages individuals to assess their development needs as a whole, could be made available to all applicants for AA2A through the application information pack. It may also be valuable to 'signpost' potential applicants to agencies and organisations where one-to-one guidance to undertake a Development Needs Analysis (DNA)<sup>2</sup> is available in their area.

The AA2A Access agreement might usefully be reviewed in the light of the changing environment for visual arts practice and arts education prior to a future scheme. This would determine whether additional clarification may be required on, for example, copyright and ownership of work produced and reasons why the institution or artist may decide to terminate the agreement.

Consideration may be given to providing additional 'good practice' material to coordinators through the Briefing and feedback sessions, such as guidance on current professional terms and conditions for artists including on rates of pay, copyright, contracts, etc, to inform both students and AA2A artists.

Whilst there is no direct evidence that the value of the materials fund per artist is limiting applications or take-up, it would be sensible prior to budgeting for a future scheme to review the value of the materials fund against the specific costs of a wide range of art and design materials, to ensure the figure offered is appropriate. It is also good practice for artists' schemes that operate over a period of years to 'index' link the cash element to ensure that the figure can keep pace with inflation and responds to changing contexts for artists' support.

If AA2A artists are recognised by colleges as providing 'role models' to the next generation of artists, who will graduate with even larger levels of student debt than their predecessors, it would be good practice in the guidelines in future AA2 schemes to make a clear distinction between the studio interaction that is an integral part of the scheme and the specific provision of lectures, presentations or teaching by the artists concerned, that would be more reasonably defined as a paid-for service.

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<sup>2</sup> Examples that exist of online DNA material include The artist's development toolkit, available through all APD organisations

It would perhaps be useful at this stage of AA2A's life to review the scope and nature of the evaluation framework and how data might in future contribute to national advocacy campaigns around support to artists. This would include additional consultation with institutional coordinators and with current and past artist participants.

Costs for reviewing and revitalising the aa2a website would be reasonably included in the capital costs for a new scheme.

**Consideration should be given in future AA2A schemes to methods of increasing exposure for the artists who are selected, through generation of regional and national opportunities.**

