

In response to the 1:1 FUND

Jannat Ahmed

Jannat Ahmed is an occasional writer, poet, illustrator, and also editor-in-chief at Lucent Dreaming, an independent magazine of fiction and poetry based in Cardiff. She has worked for Poetry Wales where she launched Poetry Wales Pamphlet Competition, Wales Poetry Award and Wales Young Poets Award. She hopes to launch Lucent Dreaming in 2022 as Wales' first book publisher led by two full-time editors of colour.

Jannat got in touch with us via the Jerwood Arts inbox shortly after the 1:1 FUND call for entries was launched, expressing serious concerns about random selection as an approach, and particularly the ways it might dehumanise or 'gameify' a process which already has little returns for the artist. Jannat is also concerned that this approach was misguided around notions of 'equality' and represents a step backwards from important positive action work. Lilli Geissendorfer, Director of Jerwood Arts exchanged emails with Jannat. They had a meeting to discuss this further, and Jannat was invited to document her perspective through this commission. The text was written after the 1:1 FUND opened for applications.

I was angered to see that Jerwood Arts, an organisation that is lauded for its schemes for artists, offering funds and professional development to its grant recipients, would pivot so dramatically in the name of 'fairness'. The reason this pilot scheme is so disappointing is because Jerwood Arts has previously outdone other funding organisations in terms of care for the artist. Jerwood Arts is known in recent times for offering what all artists [from under-represented backgrounds] actually need: access to sustained and significant funding direct to the artist over a comparatively long period, with human-led positive action.

There are so many ways in which this pilot model for the 1:1 FUND is structurally bad; it feels like the outcome of board meetings and academia rather than conversations with artists who are already doing work about equity and access in arts funding. Let me outline two of the main issues that I've found:

1. Unpaid time, no returns.

There are two sides to this. Firstly, the fund didn't indicate on its landing page what the application form looked like, e.g. how many words are expected, what questions need to be answered, how long it might take to complete. Given the nature of the fund, it put off those who need to weigh up if they can make time to apply. This fund requested a partnership, which is a significant amount of work for the non-networked artist.

Secondly, this funding model offered no feedback to its applicants, an anomaly for Jerwood Arts applications, and implied that only lottery-selected applications are read. It suggests that for funding to be more 'accessible', and reach beyond middle-class audiences, the dramatic increase in workload for arts organisations can be addressed with a lottery-style selection process. It's upsetting that the white middle class have always been awarded funding as humanised individuals, with their words actually read, and the offer of feedback and connection. However, when 'Diverse Background' artists are given a 'fair' opportunity to apply for funding, the solution is to dehumanise as much of the process as possible. The gameification of the process, and robotic distance as a solution to bias and imitation of 'fairness' is not a good reflection on Jerwood Arts. Are arts organisations saying that other funding is so inaccessible that this volume of applications is not anticipated, or is it that they're implying other funding is more worth the person-power of the art worker? My fear is that because Jerwood Arts is doing it, other arts organisations will follow.

A lottery-style process isn't a long-term solution to bias against new, untested artists, nor against racism; a lottery-style process means art workers, who are in their vast majority white and middle class, will never unlearn their own biases. What's needed is for art workers to cultivate an ethos around giving new, untested, Black artists and non-Black artists of colour, intersectional artists and working-class artists, multiple chances to learn and develop their craft, chances that, say, a white male writer/director at the BBC for example, always has. Conscious changes behind the scenes are how we make the arts space better.

Time is finite for all, but a low-income artist cannot delegate their job nor responsibilities the way a middle-class artist might, so why is it that this model disrespects the already limited time of artists who would benefit most from funding and feedback? There is a human cost to the lottery, and instead of the paid art-worker, it is the underpaid artist who loses out. The time of low-income artists is thrown directly in the bin, never to be recovered, for the benefit of the paid staff in an arts organisation.

2. The traditional applicant is still at an advantage.

If middle-class artists have had decades of opportunities to learn about the application process, and to develop the networks that make funding opportunities available, this pilot scheme does nothing to address that imbalance.

Jerwood Arts can boast having received over 1800+ applications for this fund, but what does that mean when the new shortened application form is not the one newer artist-applicants will find elsewhere, putting them on the back-foot in terms of being able to apply for other funds? A larger quantity of white middle-class artists applying increases the likelihood that more white middle-class artists will be selected. It's not fair because there are so many non-white, non-middle class, artists who, structurally, are kept from knowledge about arts funding. If lottery-style selection must happen, it should happen after all applications are screened, feedback is provided, and conscious decisions by art workers are made about what funding is ringfenced and why, and then to draw from the hat in those categories for variety. But it cannot ever be the only model.

On the human level of respect, speaking to power, I ask: Would Arts Council England's existing 800 National Portfolio Organisations like it if they had to submit—suddenly unpaid for the whole duration, with no ability to delegate their existing work and responsibilities—a 1-in-10,000 application form—that might never be read—to be put through a lottery-style selection process, for the slightest chance of being awarded funding? I think not. Imagine, then, how it feels for the rest of us applying against all odds.

You cannot use straightforward models of 'equality' or 'fairness' in funding models when there is no equality in society. It's unworkable. Funding from all organisations must be equitable; Jerwood Arts, and other arts and funding organisations, need to engage with living artists who understand the nuances of socio-economic inequality in human terms in order to pilot future schemes, not source their models from white middle-class academia whose research and scientific approach doesn't prioritise or perceive the human cost of these games, nor meaningfully understand the intersectional, structural, affective ways that art does or does not happen. White middle-class, often ableist and racist thought, structures organisations and academic research takes priority over what artists of colour and disabled artists actually say they need long-term from arts and funding organisations to succeed, and that ultimately needs to change.