

Time to think about meritocracy and precision-madness

Mark Robinson

Mark Robinson is the founder of Thinking Practice and the author of the book, [Tactics for the Tightrope](#) (Future Arts Centres, 2021) as well as several collections of poetry. His poem 'The Infinite Town' is carved on a large plinth on Stockton High Street, from which emerges a steam train at 1pm every day. He has been an individual applicant as writer and small press publisher, a member of many panels, and a decision-maker working for Northern Arts/Arts Council England.

Mark [tweeted positively](#) about the experiment when it was announced in September and has since been in email correspondence with Lilli. Mark's text was written after the 1:1 FUND opened for applications.

It is hard to disagree with the starting point of the 1-1 FUND's design: that arts funding for individuals is broken. Open programmes have failed to respond to massive competition. Jerwood Arts' own success rates have plummeted, and other funders report similar patterns. Yet this competition – or choice, to look at it another way – has not made the funded much more representative. Disparities around race, gender, disability and class persist.

Such low levels of success are a massive 'hidden' cost to the sector. Jerwood Arts' Live Work Fund received 1,283 applications in 2020, with 1 in 40 successful. Let's estimate each application took two days. That's 2566 working days – over 10 working years. Let's then say assessment and decision-making processes took two days per application. That makes 20 working years spent on unsuccessful applications. To one fund. Now multiply that by the numbers of funds individual artists might apply to. The sector is spending centuries on applications that never get funded.

Now, of course, these are rhetorical and challengeable calculations. But the system damages through its inefficiency. What could we do with that time if it wasn't spent developing detailed applications and often even more detailed assessments and feedback? How much more could artists do? How much stress and strain could funders remove from the system to everyone's benefit? These are urgent matters given the lack of 'slack' in the system, the exhaustion and burn-out. So I welcome this experiment.

Research in the science field suggests traditional methods are flawed in finding the best ideas. Nobel Prize-winning scientist Sir James Black has suggested peer review has two main drawbacks. It favours 'well-advanced', fashionable or 'endorsed' practice over the speculative and new. It also teaches people how to successfully play a broken system.

Too much well-intentioned effort goes into justifications for choosing between a surfeit of good bids whilst maintaining the status quo. These justifications are, if not fictions, often codes for 'too many good applications, try again later'. Our illusion of control, choice and meritocratic 'excellence' makes us reluctant to say or hear this. Deliberative decision-making leads to ever-finer distinctions, what I have seen described as '[precision-madness](#)'. I have seen and felt this in action, from both ends.

The use of a random number generator is, in some ways, not much more random than the processes of selection and diary availability that lead to a particular group of people making decisions about eligible applications against a particular budget. Replace one or two people with others, and decisions easily end up different. Random selection could lead to more representative selections across any set of characteristics, over time, as it would be less prone to bias. It would also be more transparent and perhaps even fairer than group decision-making.

[One study looking at science](#) describes grant-giving as an example of a merit system that is essentially a lottery. But many in the arts are reluctant to accept this applies to us. Grant receiving has a 'status-endowing' function, for individuals and organisations: a grant from certain funders serves as a quality kite market as well as cash. It is often said to be as valuable for the confidence it gives as for the money. (Conversely a rejection can knock confidence.)

But it also plays into the myth of meritocracy in the sector highlighted in recent years. As [a paper by Dave O'Brien and Mark Taylor](#) puts it, the belief that 'Culture is a meritocracy' may reinforce social inequality, especially as the more successful you are, the more likely you are to believe it. Being part of panels, part of grant-giving, may deepen that feeling.

Such panels bring current, practice-informed insight. People take their roles seriously, in my experience. They feel the responsibility for their choices. [Long, intense, deliberation is often a point of honour](#). But panels can also have a normalising, mainstreaming effect. The panel can work as a store of the social and cultural capital of its members.

Often it boosts it – I know this was part of my own experience as a young member of the Northern Arts Literature Panel. There was an exchange of 'legitimacy', and I gained new networks, alongside genuine learning. But we also know that such networks tend to exclude or marginalise people from certain backgrounds. Be that bit too awkward, and you may not be asked back. (I've had that experience, too.)

The panel process can be part of fitting into a broken system. Just as hiring is, to quote O'Brien and Taylor, sometimes 'a form of cultural matching rather than a meritocratic exercise', so is grant-making.

Being selected by one's peers can boost confidence but feeds the meritocracy myth. Will being selected by the random number generator from a set of equally deserving people lead to less confident artists, not as thrilled to be funded? Will it lead to a lack of the endorsement effect in commissioners or even the public, who studies show have less faith in randomised decisions?

Time will tell: but at least more people may have time to think about it.