



Arts and
Humanities
Research Council

Dance Research Matters

Executive Report





With thanks to

Vipavinee Artpradid, Dance Research Matters Programme Lead
Sarah Whatley, Professor of Dance and Director of the Centre
for Dance Research, Coventry University

Photography

Dance Research Matters network members

Foreword

The publication of this insightful report is an important milestone for Dance Research Matters. It is a great example of the power of connecting ideas, practices and people with intention. Across these networks, we see creativity used not only as expression, but as inquiry, care, community-building and profound cultural insight. Their work demonstrates how dance research listens, adapts and leads, shaping conversations about wellbeing, equity, innovation and the future of creative practice. Supported through AHRC's commitment to creative research, this programme stands as a reminder of what a sector can achieve when it is trusted to define its own needs and imagine its own possibilities.



Professor Christopher Smith
Executive Chair, Arts & Humanities
Research Council and UKRI
International Champion

In December 2022, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) launched the **Dance Research Matters Network and Programme Lead** funding opportunity to establish five dance research networks. This initiative aimed to explore current issues, generate change, and create a lasting legacy for the dance research sector. It marked the first dedicated programme for dance developed in collaboration with the sector and overseen by an Advisory Board of leading dance researchers.

The outcomes from the networks strongly align with the priorities of the Creative Industries Sector Plan and the new UKRI vision demonstrating how dance research contributes to **economic growth, innovation, and improving lives**. The programme showed how dance research drives **skills development, digital innovation**, and international collaboration, reinforcing the UK's global leadership in creative research.

“**Dance research has wide-ranging impact, from helping individuals with conditions such as Parkinson's to shaping the development of intelligent systems.**”

As highlighted by **Professor Sarah Whatley**,
Director of the Centre for Dance Research

Dance Research Matters

Impact Stories

Doing a Lot with a Little: The Dance Research Matters Networks Programme

The AHRC-funded Dance Research Matters (DRM) programme demonstrates the significant social, cultural and economic value that arts and humanities research can generate through relatively small-scale investment. With a total programme value of £500,000 – and up to £100,000 awarded to each individual network – the initiative supported more than 210 researchers, artists and sector partners across over 30 countries and five continents, creating an international platform for collaboration, exchange and innovation in dance research.

The programme generated substantial reach and impact. Across five interconnected networks, spanning; dance pedagogy ([Critical Dance Pedagogy Network](#)), Black dance ([Digital Black Dance Ecologies](#)), South Asian dance ([South Asian Dance Equity : The Arts that British South Asian Dance Ignores](#)), inclusive and pluriversal practice ([The Dancing Otherwise Network](#)), and the future of producing dance ([Future Ecologies: Producing Dance Network](#)). More than 80 events, meetings and engagement activities took place, alongside thousands of in-person and virtual learning interactions involving universities, schools, cultural organisations, freelance creatives, policymakers and members of the public. The programme showcased how arts and humanities research can unlock extensive collaboration, international connectivity and public engagement far beyond the initial funding value.

Importantly, Dance Research Matters showed that dance research is not simply about performance, but about people, participation and lived experience. Research across the networks explored how creative and embodied practices can support wellbeing, self-expression and social connection, while also addressing wider questions around equity, representation, identity and belonging. By amplifying underrepresented voices and challenging barriers to participation, the programme contributed to broader conversations about inclusion and access within both education and the cultural sector.



The programme also highlighted the role of creative research in strengthening communities and supporting healthier societies. Through hybrid and online formats, the networks widened participation and created opportunities for dialogue across geographical, social and disciplinary boundaries. This helped foster new communities of practice and enabled more people to engage with research and cultural activity in meaningful ways.

DRM also reinforced the importance of the creative industries as a space for innovation, skills development and economic resilience. The networks connected expertise across academia, education, technology, producing, choreography and community practice, reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of dance research and creative work. In doing so, the programme supported new professional relationships, international partnerships and future-facing approaches to creative practice.

Through relatively small amounts of funding, Dance Research Matters catalysed new collaborations, partnerships and communities of practice, demonstrating how dance research can drive innovation, widen participation and strengthen connections across the cultural sector and wider society.

Critical Dance Pedagogy Network

**CRITICAL
DANCE
PEDAGOGY
NETWORK**

The [Critical Dance Pedagogy \(CDP\) Network](#), is helping to build a more sustainable, inclusive and representative future for dance education in the UK. At a time when the sector faces declining participation, workforce instability and reduced educational provision, the network is addressing barriers linked to race, gender, disability, caring responsibilities and access to progression routes and widening participation to support a more diverse pipeline of creative talent. In doing so, it contributes to a healthier and more resilient cultural sector that better reflects the diversity of contemporary UK society.

The network also demonstrates the wider social value of arts and humanities research. Drawing on embodied approaches that view the body holistically, socially, emotionally, cognitively and physically, it highlights how dance can support wellbeing, confidence, self-expression and social connection. These approaches align with growing recognition of the role creative and cultural activity can play in preventative health, community cohesion and reducing isolation, while creating spaces where people feel seen, valued and able to participate fully.

Led by Professor Angela Pickard (the first Professor of Dance Education in the UK) with co-investigator Dr Kathryn Stamp, the network brings together academics, educators, artists and industry partners to challenge entrenched inequalities and power imbalances within dance education and training. Through artist labs, symposiums and international exchange, participants have explored inclusive, culturally responsive and anti-racist pedagogy, and practices that better reflect the lived experiences and identities of learners and communities.



Since its launch, the network has grown into a nationally recognised movement with international reach, connecting more than 400 members across the UK with peers in Canada, Australia, the US, China, Indonesia, Brazil, India and across Europe and the Nordic countries. Its artist labs have provided transformative spaces for experimentation and reflection, leading to new performance work that challenges traditional aesthetics and expands understanding of who dance is for and whose stories are represented.

By connecting universities, freelance practitioners, cultural organisations and advocacy groups including [People Dancing](#), [PiPA](#), [Parable Dance](#) and [Advancing Women's Aspirations in Dance](#), the programme is helping to strengthen collaboration across the dance ecosystem and drive long-term cultural change. The Critical Dance Pedagogy Network shows how arts and humanities research can increase opportunities and support communities for fairer and more inclusive futures.

“ I was struck by how I had taken so much of what I do for granted without thinking that I might be excluding rather than including. I found thinking about race and ethnicity inspiring and this is the catalyst for change that I needed. I am reflecting carefully on what I will implement. ”

The Dancing Otherwise: Exploring Pluriversal Practices Network



The Dancing Otherwise: Exploring Pluriversal Practices Network, explored how dance can help build more inclusive, collaborative and socially responsive ways of working and creating. Led by researchers from Bath Spa University and Kingston University, the network brought together artists, educators, producers, researchers and communities to examine how dance can better reflect the diversity of people, cultures and lived experiences that make up contemporary society.



Through workshops, performances, retreats and public events, the Dancing Otherwise network created spaces for people from different backgrounds and disciplines to exchange ideas, challenge assumptions and develop new approaches to creative practice. It responds to wider societal concerns around exclusion and inequality by using embodied practice to imagine how people might “live otherwise” - creating more equitable cultural spaces and linking directly to debates on representation, access and social cohesion. The network also connects

dance research to environmental and sustainability thinking, drawing on ecological and “more-than-human” approaches to explore how movement can reshape relationships between people, nature and systems of production and consumption, positioning dance as a way of imagining more relational and sustainable futures.

Importantly, the project demonstrates the wider value of arts and humanities research beyond the cultural sector. Movement-based practice supports wellbeing, empathy and reflection, strengthening social connection at a time of increasing isolation and fragmentation. By bringing together expertise from dance, environmental humanities, sociology, education and social justice, the programme shows how interdisciplinary collaboration can generate new ways of understanding and responding to complex challenges. Dancing Otherwise ultimately challenges the idea that there is a single way to create or participate in culture, instead showing how creative research can help shape fairer, more connected and more sustainable dance ecosystem.

“ Since participating in the workshop I have incorporated the idea of kinship and other ways of knowing in my own practice. Also how to approach otherness with a spirit of fun and curiosity. ”

– Participant, Choreographing the Pluriverse workshop,
Bath Spa University, April 2024

Digital Black Dance Ecologies



The [Digital Black Dance Ecologies \(DBDE\) network](#), led by Dr Tia-Monique Uzor, explored how Black dance artists can shape the future of digital creativity and performance on their own terms. Addressing longstanding barriers to access and representation within both the cultural and technology sectors, the project created opportunities for artists to experiment with emerging technologies, develop new work and build professional networks through residencies, mentorship and international collaboration.

For many participants, the impact was both personal and professional. Artists gained confidence using digital tools within their creative practice, developed technical skills and found supportive communities in sectors where Black creatives are often underrepresented or isolated – creating spaces of belonging, collaboration and mutual support that extended beyond the life of the programme itself. The network also invested in the next generation of researchers, providing mentorship and development opportunities for Black early-career researchers and postgraduate students to help address longstanding underrepresentation within academia. This activity contributed to the creation of a fully funded PhD

scholarship opportunity through the Centre for Performance, Technology and Equity, helping to strengthen future pathways into research and higher education. The programme also expanded visibility for Black creative voices through partnerships with organisations including the Serendipity Institute for Black Arts and Heritage and presentations at Riverside Studios and Barnard College.

More broadly, DBDE demonstrated how arts and humanities research can contribute to a more inclusive creative economy by widening participation in digital innovation, strengthening pathways into the creative industries and helping diversify the talent pipeline across both the arts and technology sectors. At a time when representation and equitable access remain major societal challenges, the project showed how creative research can help ensure new technologies and cultural spaces reflect a wider range of experiences and perspectives.

“The residency has given me confidence to explore tech in my practice and helped me to reconnect to the embodied performative research elements to my practice, something that I have found more difficult to do since working outside of academia. I’ve learned lots about digital technologies and I’m very excited to carve out space to learn more. On a more personal level it was valuable for me to share space with other Black and Brown creative practitioners as this is not something that happens often for me in my base in Cheshire.”



Future Ecologies: Producing Dance Network (FE:PDN)

FE:PDN

The [Future Ecologies: Producing Dance Network \(FE:PDN\)](#), sought to address a pressing challenge facing the UK's cultural sector: how to build a more resilient, inclusive and sustainable future for dance in a period of economic uncertainty, workforce pressures and rapid social change.

Bringing together universities and arts organisations, the network explored the often-overlooked role of producers and other cultural professionals who connect artists, audiences, organisations and communities. By examining how these relationships operate and exist across the wider dance ecosystem, the project helped identify practical ways to strengthen the sector and support its long-term sustainability.

One of the network's most significant outcomes was its focus on talent development and career pathways. Through its Early Career Group, FE:PDN highlighted the growing contribution of independent researchers working outside traditional academic institutions. This directly informed the creation of an Independent Researcher Network by the [National Centre for Academic and Cultural Exchange](#) (NCACE),

helping to address gaps in support for freelance and independent research careers. Similarly, dance theatre and project partner The Place has begun developing an Associate Producer Programme, creating new routes into producing and cultural leadership roles.

Strong cultural sectors depend on strong infrastructure and by supporting researchers, producers and creative practitioners, the network is able to help retain skills, develop talent and create opportunities for the next generation of cultural leaders. Ultimately this contributes to a more diverse, adaptable and sustainable creative workforce at a time when many arts organisations continue to face significant challenges.

FE:PDN demonstrates how arts and humanities research can help sectors navigate change. By strengthening connections between research and practice, and identifying new models for collaboration and career development, the network has helped lay the foundations for a more resilient cultural ecosystem. Its impact extends beyond dance, offering insights into how creative sectors can adapt, innovate and continue to enrich communities.



South Asian Dance Equity (SADE)



The [South Asian Dance Equity \(SADE\)](#) network set out to address long-standing marginalisations of many South Asian dance forms, artists and communities within mainstream arts funding, programming and policy. Led by Dr Prarthana Purkayastha (Royal Holloway, University of London), Professor Royona Mitra (Brunel University of London) and Associate Professor Anusha Kedhar (University of California, Riverside), the network asked a vital question: whose cultural traditions, identities and artistic practices are not seen, valued or supported in the British South Asian dance sector?

SADE focused on groups minoritised within the British South Asian dance sector, including Adivasi and indigenous artists, caste-oppressed artists, disabled artists, LGBTQI+ artists, South Asian artists beyond India and art forms outside dominant Indian 'classical' traditions. The project recognised that representation is not only about visibility on stage, it also requires addressing questions of access and systemic and historic inequities that have posed barriers to participation in public cultural life.

Working with organisations including [Akademi](#), [Baithak UK](#), [Balbir Singh Dance Company](#), [Nupur Arts](#), [Sampad](#) and [The Place](#), the network created spaces for dialogue between artists, researchers, policymakers, cultural organisations and communities across the UK and South Asia. Its activities included five online webinars, four in-person stakeholder meetings and a two-day symposium, bringing together 35 speakers and engaging 470 online participants and 90 in-person attendees across the UK, Europe, the US and South Asia. Artists and researchers from a wide-range of cultural practices

came together to share knowledge, build networks and influence future research, policy and practice.

The project also had practical implications for the creative industries, offering new perspectives on South Asian dance pedagogy, training, programming, performance and research. SADE contributed to conversations about fairer arts funding policy and equitable redistribution of opportunities within the dance sector, helping to create a stronger and more sustainable cultural ecosystem - one that draws on the full breadth of South Asian creativity in the UK.



Programme impact

Beyond artistic practice, the programme delivered economic and social value:



Strengthening the creative workforce through **skills and capacity building**.



Driving **digital innovation** and new business models in immersive media.



Enhancing **public health and wellbeing** through research-informed interventions.



Expanding the UK's **soft power** via international engagement across 30 countries.



Engagement across five continents, supporting cultural diplomacy and global partnerships.



90+
events

56
open to
the public

26%
focused on early
career researchers



Key learnings



Stakeholder engagement ensured the programme reflected sector needs and fostered shared ownership.



Network integration under a single framework strengthened community connections.



Inclusive activities supported participation across the research community.



Cross-sector collaboration positioned dance as a dynamic form of social practice.



Research development sparked new ideas and directions for future inquiry.



Strategic support from AHRC provided valuable guidance and advocacy.



Challenges



Limited funding meant not all strong proposals could be supported.



High expectations placed pressure on networks to deliver significant outcomes within constrained timeframes.



Sustainability and maintaining momentum remain a concern as the programme was a one-off initiative.



Engaging champions from other disciplines to help build visibility and long-term support.



Strategic capacity is needed to respond to evolving research landscapes and socio-political pressures.

Recommendations produced by the Dance Research Matters networks

Recommendations



For Funders and Policymakers

Recognise dance research as a strategic asset

Position dance research as a contributor to the UK's creative economy, supporting skills pipelines, innovation ecosystems, and job creation.

Invest in health and wellbeing impact

Support research that demonstrates how dance improves physical and mental health, including interventions for conditions such as Parkinson's.

Commission long-term and cross-sector studies

Build evidence of dance's economic contribution, health benefits, and role in cultural diplomacy.

Embed dance in innovation programmes

Connect dance research with creative technology, health tech, and AI development.

Support international collaboration and cultural diplomacy

Simplify visa processes and invest in global partnerships.

Develop sustainable structures

Explore opportunity to create a dedicated dance research organisation and/or integrate dance into existing creative research hubs.



For the Dance Sector

Expand partnerships and outreach

Collaborate across academia, industry, and health sectors.

Champion interdisciplinary research

Engage with technology, health sciences, and social policy.

Adopt inclusive and sustainable models

Promote fairness and environmental responsibility.

Increase public awareness and accessibility

Share outcomes widely through digital platforms and open-access publications.



Arts and
Humanities
Research Council

Contact: creative@ahrc.ukri.org

AHRC Dance Research Matters programme 2022-2025