

DIVERSITY IN CULTURAL LEADERSHIP IN THE POLICY OF ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND



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Diversity in cultural leadership in the policy of Arts Council England¹

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Abstract

In the following case study, we explore diversity in cultural leadership in the policy of Arts Council England and examine the views of both ACE and the media on the leadership component of ACE's diversity strategy. We focus on two timeframes that occurred within a period of political and social instability and ideological fractures in Britain, following the Brexit referendum of June 23, 2016. ACE's actions in those years occurred in the context of economic and socio-political instability reflected in a relative lack of trust in state institutions and their leadership, as evidenced by newspaper articles cited here. Official reports, documents, and news media from *The Guardian* and the *Daily Mail* are analysed to show that the emancipatory potential of diversity in cultural leadership has not been realised, ACE's moral legitimacy has declined over the years, and trust in ACE's strategy has declined as well.

Keywords: Arts Council England, Brexit, Daily Mail, Diversity, The Guardian

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¹ This case study is based on a master's thesis written by Yeala Hazut-Yanuka at the University of Haifa in 2021-2022. This is an abridged version prepared by Tally Katz-Gerro. Copies of the original thesis are available upon request.

Diversity in cultural leadership in the policy of Arts Council England

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1. Introduction: Cultural policy in the UK - The arm's length principle

The cultural funding system in the UK is based on the arm's length principle. This means that in order to ensure freedom of expression in art and culture, the government determines the amount of funds that it will provide, and an arts council determines how funds are distributed. This allows distancing the arts from politics and bureaucracy (Hetherington, 2017; Hillman Chartrand & McCaughey, 1989).

The main body that carries out cultural policy is Arts Council England (ACE). ACE is the national agency sponsored by the DCMS, Department for Digital Culture, Media & Sport (Arts Council England, 2013). The organisations supported by ACE for multi-year periods are part of the NPO "National Portfolio Organisations" (Arts Council England, 2020a).

This case study is focused on ACE's strategy on diversity, and in particular diversity in cultural leadership. We analysed various strategy documents, in particular two 10-year frameworks. In 2010, ACE released a 10-year framework called '*Achieving Great Art for Everyone*,' which set ambitious goals to ensure the sustainability of the arts in light of anticipated changes, such as funding cuts and technological developments (Arts Council England, 2013). Other goals of the strategy included engaging more people in the arts, attracting wider audiences, encouraging talent and artistic excellence, increasing the diversity of the workforce, and developing leadership in the arts sector. In January 2021, ACE launched its new strategy for 2020-2030, '*Let's Create*'. This strategy is an outcome of discourse with more than 5,000 people from around the country – including members of the public, arts practitioners, professionals, and policy makers. Based on this study ACE identified national and global challenges that the cultural sector will face. ACE's strategy for 2020-30 addresses three outcomes and four Investment principles and the overarching goal of the strategy is to "address the persistent and widespread lack of diversity and inclusivity in the leadership of cultural organisations, governance, workforce and audience. This will promote equality and fairness, as well as ensuring that cultural organisations are more effective businesses (Arts Council England, 2020:53). The fourth principle specifically is "Inclusivity & Relevance - England's diversity is fully reflected in the organisations and individuals that we support and in the culture they produce." This shows that diversity in general and diversity in cultural leadership in particular continue to be high priority for ACE. In fact, this reflects the sentiment of the wider public as well, since the strategic framework was designed using extensive public participation processes.

2. Methodology

To gauge public reactions to the way ACE addresses diversity in cultural leadership we explore newspaper articles published in *The Daily Mail*, associated with a right-wing political agenda and *The Guardian*, associated with a left-wing political agenda. We focus on two periods: December 2016 to February 2017 vs. December 2019 to February 2020. ACE's 2015-2016 Annual Report, published in December 2016, included first-time data on key leadership positions within NPOs. For this reason, we scanned the news media between December 2016 and February 2017. To reflect on how the diversity in cultural leadership policy was framed over the years we compare the earlier period with the most recent ACE reports published between December 2019 and February 2020. Both periods were characterized by political and social instability and ideological fractures. These include Brexit, socio-political instability, and economic austerity.

3. Context

Ace has been operating within an environment of a crisis in cultural leadership in the UK, evident in the failures, some of them high-profile, of leadership in some flagship arts institutions. This crisis was attributed to a number of different factors, some financial and others associated with the connection between the arts and management (Nisbett & Walmsley, 2016). Managerial challenges have made it difficult to recruit potential leaders for arts organisations, as many were unwilling to enter a field characterized by stressful conditions due to significant budget cuts. Since 2011, the cultural sector has faced considerable challenges because of austerity, leading to significant reductions in public funding at both the national and local levels. Between 2010 and 2014, Arts Council England saw its grant-in-aid from government fall by one-third (Fisher & Neuditschko, 2020).

Within this context, discussion of ACE's policy in the news media can be analysed vis-à-vis the concept of legitimacy. Specifically, we refer to *pragmatic legitimacy* that arises from an organisation's capacity to achieve practical outcomes in its immediate environment - in terms of organisational structure, characteristics and work practices. We also use *moral legitimacy* that pertains to the actions undertaken by an organisation beyond the level imposed by law or other exterior regulations, representing 'the right thing to do' (Suchman, 1995).

4. Research Questions

Several questions are addressed will be addressed in this case study:

- I. What can we learn from ACE's policy documents about its position regarding diversity in cultural leadership and how it has changed in recent years?
- II. What can we learn about news media perception of ACE's diversity in cultural leadership strategy?
- III. What are the possible implications of such gaps for ACE's legitimacy to implement its strategy?

5. Description of concrete cultural policy instrument

5.1. ACE's Equality and Diversity Strategy

Since early days, cultural policy in the UK had an interest in diversity and inclusivity. The Arts Council's Royal Charter (1967) contains an explicit pronouncement of the Council's obligation to increase the accessibility of the arts to the public throughout Britain and across social classes (Belfiore, 2002). As recognized by ACE itself, "England is one of the most diverse societies in the world" (Arts Council England, 2013). However, minorities have been underrepresented in the arts sector, with British, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) individuals accounting for only 11% percent of the staff in National Portfolio organisations, despite constituting 16% of the population (Arts Council England, 2018). The 2010 Equality Act required ACE to exercise its Public Sector Equality Duty and advance equality in the arts sector.

In 2011, ACE launched the *Creative Case for Diversity*, which aimed to give voice to practitioners who have been overlooked in the past, with an emphasis on disability, gender, race, and socioeconomic background (Arts Council England, 2020a).

5.2. Diversity in cultural leadership

ACE defines leadership positions as follows: Chief Executive, Artistic directors, Chair, Boards, dividing them into "four protected characteristics, as defined in the Equality Act 2010: race (referred to here as ethnicity), disability, sex (referred to here as gender) and sexual orientation" (Equality, Diversity and the Creative Case, Data Report 2018-2019). ACE expects that the leadership and workforce of the arts and cultural sector reflect the diversity of the country, indicating that there are fair routes to entry and progression (Arts Council England, 2013 p. 39). ACE aims to achieve diversity in cultural leadership by using data from an annual survey of funded organisations and other sources and compare this with census data to track changes in the diversity of the leadership.

The *Equality, Diversity and the Creative Case Data Report 2012-2015*, was the first ever report published by ACE on workforce and leadership. The report breaks down the workforce and leadership positions at NPOs (National Portfolio Organisations) and MPMs (Major Partner Museums) according to protected characteristics: BME, Disability and Gender. The report shows that there has been an increase in the number of BME staff working in NPOs from 12.8% to 13.7%; there has been a slight increase in the number of disabled staff working in NPO (from 1.8% in 2012-2013 to 1.9% in 2014-2015); and the proportion of women did not change. In this report, ACE recognised the need for more targeted action and consequently introduced 'Change Makers', a £2.1 million fund "designed to develop a cohort of diverse (Black and minority ethnic and disabled) leaders who will participate in a senior leadership training and development programme" (Arts Council England, 2016a).

Another report, published in 2018, *Equality, Diversity and the Creative Case, Data Report 2016-2017*, relates specifically to positions of chief executives, artistic directors, and boards. Findings show that individuals from BME backgrounds are under-represented across all three leadership roles; the proportion of women in key leadership positions has increased since 2015/16, but leadership women are still under-represented in the roles of Artistic Director

and Chair; and the representation of disabled people is roughly in line with the overall workforce (Arts Council England, 2018).

In 2020, ACE published *Equality, Diversity and the Creative Case, Data Report 2018-2019*, which introduced LGBT representation as a separate criterion. Findings indicate slight improvement in representation across the different categories, but a comparison to previous years was not possible because the figures in the report focus on the new NPO group. (Arts Council England, 2020c:6).

6. Analysis of challenges

Articles published in *The Guardian* in 2016, indicate an interest in ACE's efforts to increase diversity in cultural organisations and generate public discussion around this issue. The articles voice two opinions: on the one hand, moral justifications for public policy to increase diversity in cultural organisations, and on the other, in response to the data published by ACE in 2016, dissatisfaction with the pragmatic aspect, the operational functioning, and the formulation and implementation of the strategy.

Articles published in *The Guardian* and the *Daily Mail* in the first timeframe indicate perception that ACE has low pragmatic legitimacy within different sections of the population. Following the 2016 report revealing first-time data on diversity in cultural leadership, *The Guardian* challenged ACE's definition of diversity and the way it is being implemented by ACE's strategy. Dr. Julia Pascal's (Playwright and theatre director) open letter, published in *The Guardian* on December 7th 2016, argues that over the years ACE did not manage carefully gender equality and did not devote the necessary attention to addressing the issue.

*"The status quo, where male experience dominates British theatre, will continue as long as the unelected quango, the Arts Council, refuses to challenge this sexual apartheid. For decades, the Arts Council has dumped gender equality into a category called "diversity". Its publications on equality perpetuate the trope that women are "other", suggesting that the majority is a minority."*²

In an article published a few days later, on Dec 12th, 2016, Abid Hussain, ACE Diversity Director, is interviewed responding to these poor results and to the criticism towards ACE:

*"Hussain said the report was a blizzard of figures and, from them, change may come... Data published for the first time last year really "captured people's imagination," said Hussain and led to direct action. For example, Hull Truck Theatre, which was listed as a 100% white workforce, and Sheffield Theatres, listed as 97%, entered the ACE's new Change Makers programme supporting BME and disabled leaders."*³

The following quote expresses another interesting view regarding the way diversity is perceived by the press. The writer expresses concern over the decrease in cultural diversity due to a process by which Britain is becoming less international and recommends finding ways to strengthen UK's image. Why is this important? The article explains:

² Pascal, J. (2016). Equality for women in theatre and the arts, *The Guardian*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/dec/07/equality-for-women-in-theatre-and-the-arts>

³ Brown, M. (2016) Number of BAME arts workers must improve, says Arts Council report, *The Guardian*.

*"Britain has long been a magnet for people who are the best in their field from all over the world, and the departure of some of them this year amid rumbles of discontent over Britain becoming less international in outlook would be worrying, were it to become a trend."*⁴

Another example of media interest in the social gaps in equality and diversity is demonstrated in the case of Karen Bradley, Secretary for Culture Media and Sport, who approved four new Channel 4 board members, all of whom were white men, but vetoed the fifth candidate, Althea Efunshile, who is Black and was put forward by Ofcom (The UK's communications regulator):

"David Abraham, the chief executive of Channel 4, sent an email to staff criticizing the rejection of the fifth candidate saying it represented the latest example of the government's "worrying and unprecedented" interference."

*"The decision by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to appoint only the white male candidates comes on the same day the government published its green paper on corporate governance which highlighted the importance of "improving the diversity of boardrooms so that their composition better reflects the demographics of employees."*⁵

*"David Lammy criticises decision to stop black woman joining all-white board and calls for reasons to be made clear."*⁶

"Ms. Efunshile was told that DCMS believed she did not meet the requirements specified in the job advert. DCMS officials have yet to say precisely how. The broadcaster specifically conceived to represent minorities, then, currently has an all-white board of 10 men and three women.

*"Tin-eared at best, this decision by Ms. Bradley sits uneasily with the government's stated desire to improve the diversity of boardrooms so that their composition better reflects Britain as a whole."*⁷

Questioning ACE's functional capabilities and whether ACE is essential for NPOs reflects reservations with regard to its pragmatic legitimacy as well as a re-examination of the cognitive aspects of its existence. In other words: should ACE's activities and even its very existence be taken for granted? The quote above indicates that ACE's legitimacy was questioned in the press when ACE first revealed its new findings on diversity in cultural leadership, four years before it admitted that its goals in this respect had not been met.

The following article, published in the *Daily Mail* in 2016, also casts doubt on ACE's capabilities referring to a project funded by ACE described as 'bizarre', and an unjustifiable waste of the taxpayer's money, noting that an artist who has lived in the UK for twenty years, is considered

⁴ Thorpe, V. (2016) Changing of the guard at great arts venues may be end of a golden era. *The Guardian*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2016/dec/18/changing-of-guard-arts-venues-end-of-golden-era>

⁵ Sweney, M. (2016). Black woman vetoed for Channel 4 job was Arts Council England deputy chief, *The Guardian*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/dec/05/black-woman-althea-efunshile-channel-4-rejected-ex-arts-council>.

⁶ Brown, M., Higgins C. & Sweney M. (2016). Blocking of Althea Efunshile from C4 board 'beggars belief', says MP, *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/dec/07/blocking-of-althea-efunshile-from-c4-board-beggars-belief>.

⁷ Editorial (2016). In blocking a well-qualified black woman from the board of Channel 4, the government is setting Britain back, *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/dec/07/the-guardian-view-on-channel-4-it-needs-a-diverse-board>

'Portuguese migrant'.⁸ In this, the writer not only criticizes the pragmatic aspect of distributing funds but also the moral aspect – whether the right use is being made of public money.

We see coverage that asks moral questions on how ACE should use public money, seeking to challenge existing social paradigms. Another position reflects pragmatic questions with regard to the ways in which ACE uses and distributes public money. This position seeks to challenge existing social paradigms, reflected in the institutional structure, by which NPOs do not necessarily have to stick to the belief that they are financially dependent on ACE. Thus, author Lyn Gardner is calling theatre companies to rethink their relationship with ACE in an article published on February 1st 2017 in *The Guardian*:

*"It is a good thing to bear in mind, particularly at a time when ACE must be braver than it has ever been before: we have to let go of the false belief that once an NPO, always an NPO, and that some organisations are too big, too strategically positioned, have too much brickwork or are too well-connected to drop out of the portfolio. One of the problems with core funding over the last 20 years is that there simply hasn't been enough churn."*⁹

Gardner claims that the relationship between NPOs and ACE is a system of pressures and mutual expectations. However, in contrast to ACE's documents, with regard to NPOs' dependency on ACE, it suggests that NPOs might no longer wish to continue this state of affairs. Some voices call for looking for new ways to sustain the organizations. Questioning ACE's functional capabilities and whether ACE is essential for NPOs reflects reservations with regard to its pragmatic legitimacy as well as re-examination of the cognitive aspects of its existence. In other words: should ACE's activities and even its very existence be taken for granted?

Articles published in *The Guardian* in 2019-2020, extensively discuss the subject of diversity. Some criticize ACE's operational program, but in ways different from those of 2016, indicating a decline in the moral legitimacy of ACE. This is evident in both editorials and other items that quote NPO representatives:

"Researchers say gender gap has grown in some areas and accuse Arts Council of ignoring it."

*"Asked if British theatre had an institutional problem with gender equality, Parrish said: There is, and this document underlines it because the ACE seems to not be admitting it and certainly not addressing it."*¹⁰

*"ACE has been publishing diversity data for five years but has often been accused of merely talking instead of taking strong action."*¹¹

⁸ Hugges, T. (2016). Portuguese artist is handed £10,000 by the government for a 'bizarre project' which saw her dance with migrants in the Calais Jungle, *Daily Mail*. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4077698/Portuguese-artist-handed-10-000-government-bizarre-project-saw-dance-migrants-Calais-Jungle.html>

⁹ Gardner, L. (2017). Theatre companies must rethink their relationship with Arts Council England, *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2017/feb/01/theatre-companies-must-rethink-their-relationship-with-arts-council-england>

¹⁰ Bakare, L. (2020). Sexism and gender divide ingrained in UK theatre, study claims, *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/jan/27/sexism-gender-divide-ingrained-uk-theatre-study-claims>

¹¹ Brown, M. (2020). Arts Council England aims to foster culture in every 'village, town and city', *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/jan/27/arts-council-england-culture-in-every-village-town-and-city-strategy-lets-create>

The quotes above blame ACE for failing to take the right action to meet its own strategic goals. The press gives voice to accusations against ACE for failing on both the pragmatic level of responding to constituents' needs and the moral level of "doing the right thing". ACE seems to accuse NPOs for not achieving its strategic objectives:

"An annual report from Arts Council England (ACE) paints what its chair, Sir Nicholas Serota, called "a disappointing picture" when it comes to diversity, a year after he said many organisations were "treading water."

"ACE has been publishing diversity data for five years but has often been accused of merely talking instead of taking strong action. The language this year is significantly more robust. Hussain said organisations would have to start setting "stretching" diversity targets, to be agreed with the council, and if these were not met they could lose public money."¹²

The Guardian agrees that NPOs are required to improve their operations to meet strategic targets. Mr. Abid Hussain, ACE's Director of Diversity, is quoted conveying a very clear message: NPOs that will not meet the expectations will lose their funding. Hussain says this in response to the criticism expressed by stakeholders and NPOs, accusing ACE of 'merely talking' and doing little.

"A counter report, ACE in a Hole? will be published tomorrow by leading cultural academics. They will argue that the organisation talks too much in "vague generalisms" (I agree) and that its funding "still unjustly" favours those who already enjoy culture. It concludes that trust has been lost between the arts establishment and the people. Ouch."¹³

This is not just general criticism, but a far more severe accusation against ACE for failing to maintain the trust of its stakeholders. An accusation that trust has been lost is indication that ACE has lost its status as taken for granted, which has implications for legitimacy attributed by stakeholders or even de-legitimation of the organisation (Elsbach & Sutton 1992; Suchman, 1995; Hudson, 2008).

The press expresses an opinion that accuses ACE of ignoring the problem and failing to deliver, not only not achieving the expected quantitative results, but also failing to demonstrate a deeper understanding of the social problem of inequality. This can be demonstrated by the following quote from Larne Bakare of The Guardian:

"Asked if British theatre had an institutional problem with gender equality, Parrish said: There is, and this document underlines it because the ACE seems to not be admitting it and certainly not addressing it" (Bakare, L. 2020, The Guardian).

To conclude, examining the press's perception of ACE's strategy for cultural diversity, it is clear that ACE's pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy has gradually eroded across the two periods examined.

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ Brooks. R. (2020). Can we rescue the arts - and arts funding - from perennial elitism? *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jan/26/arts-council-england-funding-power-to-people-baltic-gateshead-national-gallery-italian>

7. Conclusions

Cultural policy in the UK since 2011 and the referendum on Brexit in 2016 faced several challenges. A significant reduction in public funding for the arts as a result of the UK government's austerity programme; international migration, unemployment and downsizing of the welfare state on the one hand but increasing attention to the need to increase diversity and inclusivity on the other hand; the process of leaving the EU, which entailed political, social, and ideological instability.

During this period, ACE sought to lead and implement its new strategy for diversity in cultural leadership, in an environment characterized by socio-political tensions between different groups in British society. Cray, Inglis & Freeman (2007) argue that “strategic planning of arts organisations depends on many different agendas and complex, potentially changing, alliances even in an environment of unpredictable political, economic and other changes” (Cray, Inglis & Freeman, 2007).

Contemporaneous to the processes described here was the rise of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) international human rights movement, which emerged in the UK in summer 2016. Black Lives Matter UK (UKBLM) was established in the wake of the June 26 Brexit referendum and the toppling of the statue of the controversial slave trader Edward Colston happened in Bristol in June 2020.¹⁴

Articles published in the press within the two timeframes indicated that ACE perceived the component of leadership in its diversity strategy in two manners. One perception is moral, namely that diverse leadership is the right thing to do. ACE also expresses beliefs that diversifying leadership will help advance solutions to complex social problems resulting from a lack in diversity and inequality; and that this will not only influence cultural organisations, but also “this country as a whole” (Arts Council England, 2020c).

ACE's second perspective is pragmatic, proposing that the diversification of leadership can increase the efficiency and success of the business, making a case to justify public funding. To quote Darren Henley in the Equality, Diversity, and the Creative Case - A Data Report, 2015-2016. Published by ACE in Dec 2016: “There is a correlation between a diverse leadership and commercial and cultural success.”

ACE continues to present both pragmatic and moral justifications in its efforts to win public support. After publishing a report expressing disappointment with diversity in leadership data, ACE finds itself in a defensive position, required to repair its legitimacy. ACE has realised that its strategy requires building trust and cooperation between Government and NPOs.

To conclude, it seems that ACE faces a great challenge as it tries to lead a new agenda, while its public legitimacy is low and trust is lost, and perhaps even a greater challenge as it attempts to develop new leadership among NPOs - a process that requires trust and public legitimacy from ACE's stakeholders. Moreover, the NPOs are also expected, to increase diversity in their respective cultural leaderships, a process that requires them as well to win the trust of their own audiences.

¹⁴ Findings of Geffen Ben David and Neta Yodovich for the UK in Holla et al. (2022).

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