Higher Education Engagement in Arts, Culture and Conflict Transformation: summary

The discussions in this learning exchange aimed at creating a collective overview of our understandings of universities’ involvement in the field of arts, culture and conflict transformation to date. Participants were invited to describe and reflect on their own experiences, as well as share insight into existing or emerging needs and visions for the field. We had excellent participation in the discussions, with 43 participants joining in from across the globe! Participants have added some 190 comments so far (and counting).

All participants have raised very important issues, and in an effort to summarise today’s discussion we have pulled together some of the key points raised to give you an idea of the conversations that are currently taking place. We apologise in advance if we could not incorporate everyone’s insights. You can still continue to review and add comments to each of these threads until the learning exchange closes for comments in the next few hours. Many thanks to our moderators for their active role in facilitating the discussions.

What is happening now?
In the first thread, we invited participants to share their current work within higher education organisations and the intentions behind this work. The focus here was on sharing current knowledge and practice that relates to higher education involvement in field globally.

Key points

“When a colleague (an "applied theatre" specialist and researcher of international standing) and I tried to interest our line managers in the possibility of developing a Masters program here at USyd, they were only interested in the "business case" — how much fee-income from international students would we be pulling in? Having spent a fair bit of time in my younger years reading the work of Paulo Friere, I don't think the offer that we make to international students is at all equitable: in order to teach, you have to be have to be ready to learn (and vice versa)... I have learnt so much from the international students I have been able to work with
and I'm disgusted at the way the universities and government see them as a "cash cow". **Paul Dwyer**

"Paul, the way in which business interests are compromising the integrity of higher education is horribly disconcerting, perhaps even dangerous. What might be effective responses to this, I wonder. As individuals we really have little power to influence university policies, but I wonder if we were able to strengthen an advocacy arm for the acct field, we could be effective in addressing the issues you raise. You are saying that financial pressures lead to policies and practices that are very hurtful to our work: both because of how international students are perceived and treated; and also because the courses we might teach in the acct field are not seen as core." **Cynthia Cohen**

"I agree that the way universities tend to treat international students as a "cash cow" is an issue. I'm in a conflict resolution program, and while international students are often asked to tell stories about conflict back home, many of them have a background in poetry, storytelling, debate, or arts around peace, conflict, or trauma-informed work - and the curriculum doesn't tap into these skills/talents." **Ona Wang**

"I teach theatre studies both at undergraduate and postgraduate level and feel that our programmes do not challenge enough with regards to becoming artists and cultural operatives who are conscious of the problems and injustices of the world around them and who will go out and want to change things. We generally shy away from political content (hardly discuss feminism, only introduce basic concepts of postcolonialism in the last year of the first degree, and then only in an elective). I strongly believe that the reluctance to engage directly in content that will make students (and faculty) uncomfortable is in itself a choice to keep the status quo." **Marco Galea**

"I work with but not necessarily in educational and research institutions and would like to offer some perspectives from "the outside" or "the periphery" in a sense. I've been thinking a lot about dismantling silos and how to connect and work in more meaningful, equal (honouring different knowledge) and more empowering ways with researchers, educators and higher learning institutions, across the board. What I'm increasingly finding is that a lot of folks just aren't in the same room so don't necessarily know the benefits of the ACCT field, much less, how this intersects with their work." **Refilwe Nkomo**

"Refilwe, this observation resonates so much with my own experience. For me, a constant challenge is finding ways to share/explain/articulate the arts and its integration with conflict transformation in terms that are not about communicating or as a 'vehicle in the service of', but as a way of knowing and being. The diverse language/terminology around this is interesting and
I'm constantly curious about the ways this is interpreted in interdisciplinary environments. When it comes to research funding, for example, I see far more projects succeed in the funding stakes if the arts are used to "elicit participants' responses" rather than be integrated as you've described. So every funding application or course endorsement becomes a responsibility to educate and advocate ... which brings up a whole lot of issues in itself!” Mary Ann Hunter

“My latest experience, looking into funding for the practice-based project I want to initiate next year [...] is that I have all the time to 'quantify' the 'results' for my interlocutors: target groups, numbers of potential audiences and concrete outcomes. [...] Having to frame artistic practices in CT into quantifiable (market) terms is a very slippery slope - it leaves no space for failure, misunderstanding, friction... in short, life. And it radically alters the process at so many levels.” Stephanie Benzaquen-Gautier

“In our work with vulnerable communities we are also asked to measure the impact of our work. We do it because it is the language of the donors. But after 30 years of work I can assure that what we can measure in short time are some minor changes but we can't measure transformation. I can tell now life stories that give proof of a deep transformation but to see it took 10 years, 15 years. I can also tell stories that show that with the same conditions of possibilities the transformation process did not developed.” Carmen Olaechea

“I think that traditional measuring tools simplify reality and impoverish it. That is why one of the biggest challenges we have is to develop tools that allow us to evaluate the complexity of the work in the ACCT field. Tools that assimilate public and instrumental value of culture. At this point, I think that communities mostly have a better training to deal with complexity, since the categories they use, many times come from tradition and life, unlike the categories we handle in universities that mostly come from the modern cosmogony that tended to segment ideas.” Victoria Gandini

“I share the frustrations stemming from a disheartening administrative "culture" that brings a corporate vision to academia. We need to address that point, and share what has been working to resist and reframe. Much good going on too. We are involved in projects making strong connections with indigenous practitioners, activists and issues, as many of you have shared, which is an interesting common thread.” Roberto Gutierrez Varea

What are your insights?
The second thread aimed to build our collective understanding of how work with the higher education sector has enabled, enhanced and inhibited partnerships with other organisations and individuals in ACCT.

Key points
“I am still working with many practice based PhD students and am collaborating on research projects with ex-MA and PhD students, but my fear is that more and more universities are going for rather bland Applied Theatre courses, in preference for something like mine which was very politically engaged. Personally I do think we need to situate our work and not dodge political and/or ideological issues or, as is already happening, our work gets co-opted for corporate, capitalist aims.” Jane Plastow

“@Jane Plastow This is an extremely important observation. As academics we cannot be coherent unless we are politically engaged, but how do we work against the "corporate, capitalist aims" when the institutions we teach in are themselves part of this corporate world and indeed actively engaged in renewing it and making it ever stronger?” Marco Galea

“I’m thinking about the role of the university in this time? I also wonder what the role of "research centres", "think tanks", think and do tanks" are within this context? I understand many are located within universities with the ability to connect to that structure but still possess some level of autonomy and agency. Do you think spaces such as the above can play a role in expanding the notion of the university and its connection to society?” Refilwe Nkomo

“In my experience, there is something very paradoxical about how universities CAN create spaces where local, arts-based knowledge is lifted up. Refilwe brings up an interesting point that there are some spaces (perhaps both within and outside of universities) like institutes or think tanks that allow more flexibility and creativity than many traditional academic departments.” Cynthia Cohen

“I operate astride university and civil society ecosystems and what you say about universities loosing knowledge ownership can’t be truer. In many ways, the civil society has always been many steps ahead of universities but had had the misfortune of relying on universities to legitimize their leadership. ACCT should and indeed must harness the welcome knowledge chaos that technology has spawned to work with universities is a more equitable way.” Kitche Magak

“Ernest Boyer, in his vision of the "New American College" highlighted the fact that if universities are to continue advancing forward, a new vision of scholarship is required. Research alone will not secure the future of higher education. The scholarship of application demands the university to assist with societal problems. Boyer’s “New American College” argued for the university to connecting to the world beyond the classroom and to create a campus community.” Madhawa Palihipitiya

“[D]oes the university’s role in ACCT have to take the form of programs, curricula, and courses? I’m really moved by the stories of closures of such programs, already shared here; and I know
we face the same pressures even at Brandeis. [...] Faculty in the sciences and social sciences secure course releases for their lab work, project implementation, and other research by securing grants to buy them out of teaching and service. Would the larger goals of ACCT be met (and I say this with sadness, since I'm committed to undergraduate teaching but am exhausted by the struggle) if university faculty, staff, and student researchers & collaborators could be funded for their work outside of the classroom and curricular structure?" Tom King

What is emerging?
In our third thread, we intended to spark our imagination about what is emerging. What are the bigger picture ideas here about the ways in which higher education can contribute to expanding and deepening the field of ACCT?

Key points
“Affordable Professional development for those outside the academic spheres is highly problematic as conferences preach to the converted, talk about decolonising spaces and yet let no other voices in - how can we bring the outsiders in? [...] The gap in research about ACCT is from Indigenous perspectives in Indigenous languages from Indigenous communities from Indigenist agendas. Learning opportunities in the field may be that all academics involved in the field commit to be mentored by an Indigenous Elder, community, artist or perspective.” Sarah Jane Moore

“I've had the great good fortune in the last couple of years to have done some theatre-making with an Elder from the Dharug and Yuin nations who lives in Sydney and we are just starting to work on an academic publication together. There is definitely an element of me being mentored and the generosity of that offer is huge. The work unfolds very slowly but I really appreciate that too... allows the space for silences, other voices, perspectives... allows for the boundaries between "doing research" and "hanging out together" (sharing meals, time, resources, getting involved with each other's everyday concerns...) to become blurred in useful ways.” Paul Dwyer

“I am increasingly finding that in order to work effectively we need to be able to work across a range of arts disciplines. For example, if the need is to reach mass audiences radio might be most effective, whereas for in depth discussion participatory theatre can work well, and sometimes things like poetry or art enable better free flowing opening out of thinking, aspirations, etc. I don't know of anywhere that is trying to teach ACCT related activity across a broad arts spectrum but i do now think it is the ideal.” Jane Plastow

“From my experience, mainly in English-speaking parts of Europe, there are boundaries always being put up in academia that enable academics (and to some extent students) who work in privileged universities to be much more visible, and the agendas set, both in conferences and
academic journals, help to maintain this privilege. Forms of knowledge and writing that do not fit exactly in the parameters set by privileged centres of knowledge are often discarded. It is encouraging to read here of some of the work done with indigenous artists and so on.” Marco Galea

“I'm seeing an increasing trend towards interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary approaches with the benefits of shared learning, pooling resources and strengthening tools as well as increased global partnerships and solidarity, particularly promoted through digitalization. Integrated and dual degrees for example in universities and multi-use arts spaces as a physical example, particularly in lower resourced, rural and peri-urban areas.” Refilwe Nkomo

“One of the challenges of the interdisciplinary nature of the research is finding a shared language and approaches (especially around evaluation, quality and impact) that everyone can relate to when bringing together arts practitioners and academics from very different backgrounds and disciplines and that also speaks to donors and institutions. I think the important role that researchers can play is in building bridges and the critical evidence, advocacy and learning base of practice led ACCT work. It feel impossible to do this without developing shared frameworks. But is there a danger that shared frameworks will serve to simplify and standardise plural, complex, content specific work? What role can academic researchers play to think through and negotiate this tricky balance?” Tiffany Fairey

What’s next?
In the final thread, we invited participants to share their imaginings for 2029: what it looks like and what immediate next steps might be taken by us to get there. Here, we hoped to enable participants to make new connections and potentially forge new partnerships into the future.
Key points
“If I think of an ideal scenario for 2029, I think of a very interconnected accp field, with many generative collaborations between universities but more importantly among universities, NGOs, cultural institutions, arts organizations, perhaps municipalities, perhaps donors and businesses. The single most important key factor in getting to this point, I imagine, will be breaking down barriers of mistrust -- first by ending hurtful practices.” Cynthia Cohen

“My scenario for the year 2029 I would love to see.... Is that ACCT is seen as a core area of importance and all university students, from physicians to scientists do one introductory subject to see how the arts and conflict resolution could be relevant in their work. And this then spreads greater awareness and support for the work through the community ;) That's a big dream for only 10years time, but it's not completely impossible... just not very probable ;P” Deanna Borland-Sentinella
“The equal relationships and diverse voices that you envisage is vital and I love your community-engaged scholarship and in this I imagine land based learning, Elder based consultations and Country being seen and heard as an equal research partner.” **Sarah Jane Moore**

“I love the dreaming. I absolutely agree about the need for a wider audience of academics to appreciate the potential role of the arts. All too often arts are still seen as an adjunct, a means of passing on messages determined by ‘proper’ research or NGO agendas. I do think this is changing, but far too slowly. Artists need to become proper partners in interdisciplinary research or NGO work and their potential recognised for helping a fuller realisation of peoples' humanity, as a research tool, to facilitate knowledge exchange and to bring joy!” **Jane Plastow**

“I dream of a context where higher education creates graduates who are themselves knowledgeable enough and critical enough to create their own work (I'm thinking of theatre graduates, because that's the area I know) to make a direct contribution to peace-building (which for me needs to allow for some deal of [peaceful] conflict too!) rather than relying on concepts and projects thought out by others.” **Marco Galea**

“I think we need more connection and more information. Connection in the sense of being in the same room and headspace together, too often I'm in "artist spaces" and a lot of folks I speak to want to engage with ACCT but either don't know how or attempt to do so and end up getting frustrated due to lack of resources or solidarity or an inability to communicate the work that they are doing in a language that makes sense to funders or researchers. Then sometimes I find myself in more science based and academic spaces and there is a sort of instrumentalizing of the arts due to lack of information and again not possessing the language to the extent that it feels like we are not speaking the same language at all, let alone have the same objectives, but often we do, so how do we meet and see each other?” **Refilwe Nkomo**

“I dream of (and work for) a university that works side by side with communities for social justice. Universities that value the richness of diversity. I believe in fact that, at least in Latin America, the universities that in 10 years from now on are not emphatically committed to our social reality, will not make sense at all. So, in 2029 I'd like to see at least a quarter of university communities actively involved, minds and bodies, in ACCT field.” **Victoria Gandini**

“I don't know how to fully help US universities value human beings and meaningful world and community engagement above profit, but I do think if individually and collectively we can acknowledge what-we-think-we-know-but-would-be-willing-to-let-go-of-in-order-to-learn-more, some productive steps towards a humble and caring approach to learning in and through our communities could occur.” **Candice Salyers**