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STRENGTHENING ARTISTIC RESEARCH IN SECOND CYCLE FILM EDUCATION

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Introduction

Artistic research has become an increasingly significant mode of knowledge creation within European higher education, particularly in fields where creative practice constitutes the primary form of inquiry. In film, media, and audiovisual arts, creative processes frequently function not only as modes of expression but also as structured investigations into aesthetic, technological, social, and cultural questions relating to how we create art, what art can mean for society and the individual artist, how to improve our understanding of art, and how to improve the artist's understanding of their own process.¹

While much work has been done to valorise and implement artistic research in film, media, and audiovisual art in third cycle education, in second cycle education (i.e. Master of Arts) the implementation remains inconsistent. This matters because without a robust second cycle education within the methodological paradigm of artistic research, the pipeline from second to third cycles remains indirect and imbalanced. Meanwhile, for the majority who are not desirous to peruse a doctoral degree, the concept of artistic research with all its possible enrichments is never introduced.

From second to third cycles, the most common routes take post-graduate students into equivalents of vocational training or degrees focused on methods more commonly found in the humanities. While both have merit, the former most often reinforces what the student already knows and promotes conservation and repetition of existing methods while the latter teaches critical perspectives without deepening understanding in a practitioner-focused way. This is why a number of FilmEU partner institutions are, to varying degrees, implementing artistic research in second cycle education.

To better understand the integration of artistic research in second cycle education and ground the current position paper in the realities of FilmEU, we conducted a survey across all partner institutions. This survey, that is discussed in the following pages, reveals that among FilmEU partner institutions, the implementation of artistic research in second cycle remains uneven and often lacks clear institutional frameworks creating an overall negative impact on the field.

Informed by our survey, this paper argues that artistic research should be recognised and strengthened as a legitimate and integral component of second cycle education in film, media, and audiovisual artistic disciplines. Doing so will improve educational quality, strengthen research capacity, and support the development of innovative creative practices within European higher education.

Three areas of development appear as strategic priorities:

1. the development of assessment criteria that are rigorous yet responsive to the diversity of artistic research practices;
2. supporting the dissemination and informed evaluation of artistic research outputs through frameworks attuned to their specificity;
3. investing in staff development initiatives to equip supervisors, students, and administrators with a shared understanding of the methodological landscape of artistic research.

¹ Teemu Mäki (2014) 'Art and research colliding' in *Journal for Artistic Research* Issue 5.
<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/49919/49920>

Artistic Research Benefits Europe's Creative Sector

Strengthening artistic research at second-cycle education has broader implications for Europe's cultural and creative sectors. Film and audiovisual arts are among the most dynamic fields in contemporary culture, shaped by rapid technological change and shifting modes of production which the European Commission aims to support through the challenges of the 2020s.² Artistic research provides a framework through which filmmakers and creative practitioners can critically engage with these transformations rather than simply adapting to them.

Through practice, artistic research can generate novel approaches to storytelling, new production methodologies, innovative forms of audience engagement, etc. These developments contribute not only to broadening artistic innovation but also to the sustainability and diversity of the European audiovisual arts and culture which remains a priority in the European Union.³

Moreover, strengthening artistic research aligns with broader European priorities, including the integration of research and innovation in higher education, the promotion of interdisciplinary knowledge production and the recognition of cultural and creative sectors as drivers of innovation.⁴ Artistic research is particularly appropriate in second cycle education because this stage of education marks the transition from skill acquisition toward independent critical and creative inquiry.⁵

In film and audiovisual disciplines, creative practice is often the primary means through which new knowledge emerges. Filmmaking processes involve experimentation with narrative forms, technologies, production methods, and aesthetic strategies. When these processes are combined with systematic reflection and contextual analysis, they produce insights that are both academically and artistically valuable and potentially strengthen the field.

Embedding artistic research in second cycle education therefore serves several important functions:

1. deepens learning by encouraging students to move beyond technical mastery toward reflective practice and critical investigation;
2. prepares students for doctoral research pathways, particularly as practice-based or practice-led PhD programmes expand across Europe;
3. strengthens the relationship between education and innovation, allowing creative practitioners to engage critically with emerging technologies;
4. positions film schools not only as training institutions but also as sites of knowledge production within the wider research ecosystem.

² European Commission (2020). *Europe's Media in the Digital Decade: An Action Plan to Support Recovery and Transformation*. COM(2020) 784 final. Available at: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/media-and-audiovisual-action-plan>

European Commission. "Creative Europe MEDIA — Supporting a Holistic European Audiovisual Policy." *Shaping Europe's Digital Future*. Available at: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/european-audiovisual-policy>

³ European Commission. "Greening the European Audiovisual Landscape." *Shaping Europe's Digital Future*. Available at: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/green-audiovisual-landscape>

European Commission. "European Film Forum: The Transformation of the European Audiovisual Ecosystem: Towards a More Sustainable and Digital Industry." *Shaping Europe's Digital Future*, 2021. Available at: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/european-film-forum-transformation-european-audiovisual-ecosystem-towards-more-sustainable-and>

⁴ European Commission. "Higher Education Initiatives." *European Education Area*. Available at: <https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/about-higher-education>

⁵ Joint Quality Initiative (2004). "Shared 'Dublin' Descriptors for Short Cycle, First Cycle, Second Cycle and Third Cycle Awards." Available at: https://www.aqu.cat/doc/doc_24496811_1.pdf

Despite artistic research's benefits to artistic education and to the European cultural and creative sectors, much work remains to be done to integrate it in second cycle education. The following sections discuss the results of a survey conducted for this paper which highlights the inequality of implementation of artistic research in second cycle education across the FilmEU consortium.

Methodology

A survey was conducted in February 2026 which elicited responses from 13 heads of studies or heads of Master of Arts study programmes in the fields of film, audiovisual and dramatic arts, and media studies from all eight of the FilmEU consortium higher education institutions from diverse EU Member States: Belgium (LUCA School of Arts), Bulgaria (National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts), Denmark (VIA University College), Estonia (Tallinn University), Ireland (Dun Laoghaire Institute Of Art Design and Technology), Lithuania (Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre), Portugal (Universidade Lusófona - Centro Universitário de Lisboa), and Slovakia (Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava).

The resultant data proved invaluable for identifying common trends, problems, and building our recommendations.

State of Affairs

Our survey data indicates that artistic research is already emerging as a significant element within several FilmEU MA study programmes. In some institutions it constitutes a central part of programme identity (Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre, for example), while in others it appears in specific modules, thesis projects, or research-oriented studio work.

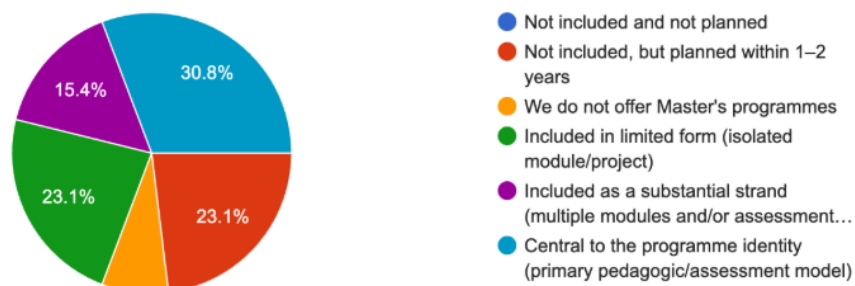
Despite this growing presence, implementation remains heterogeneous. Some programmes provide explicit definitions and structured frameworks for artistic research, while others rely on implicit understandings or informal practices. Assessment methods, supervision structures, and documentation practices vary widely, reflecting both the experimental nature of the field and the absence of widely shared pedagogical standards.

1. implementation / maturity

The survey reveals four broad levels of implementation.

Which best describes the status of artistic research in your Master's programme? (If answers 1-3 are selected you may end the survey here.)

13 responses



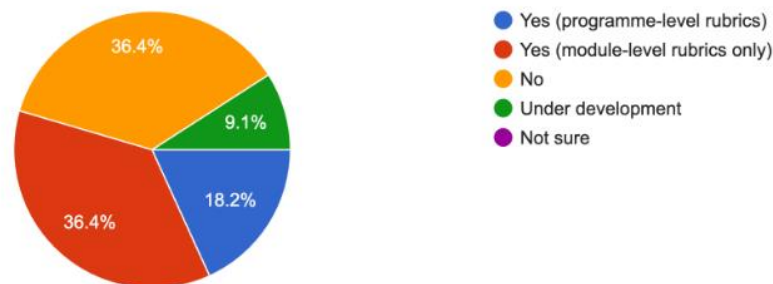
Roughly half of the programmes treat artistic research as structurally embedded. The other half are either experimenting with it or planning implementation. This indicates that FilmEU programmes are collectively transitioning toward artistic research but remain heterogeneous in maturity.

2. assessment criteria / methodology / staff development

Importantly, the survey also highlights strong interest among institutions in expanding and strengthening artistic research at second cycle education. Respondents identified staff development, clearer methodologies, and shared evaluation frameworks as key priorities for future development. However, assessment frameworks for artistic research also remain inconsistent.

Are there explicit assessment criteria/rubrics for artistic research outputs?

11 responses



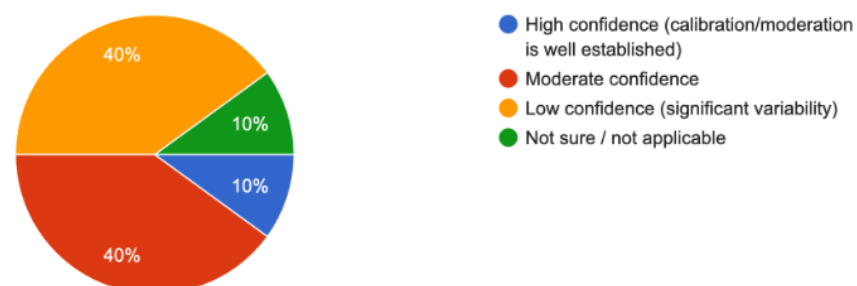
Almost half of the programmes lack explicit assessment rubrics. Where they exist, they are often module-specific rather than programme-wide. This creates potential challenges for the consistency of evaluation, transparency of expectations, and comparability across institutions.

3. assessment confidence / legitimacy

Critically, and relatedly, our respondents were bleak in their assessment of how confident they were that assessors applied consistent standards with only 10% indicating high confidence.

How confident are you that assessors apply standards consistently for artistic research projects?

10 responses



This chart indicates the extent of work which needs to be done to standardise the assessment of artistic research in second-cycle education. Without this foundation there is a critical lack of confidence in assessment which may, consequently, undermine the legitimacy of the field.

Key Challenges

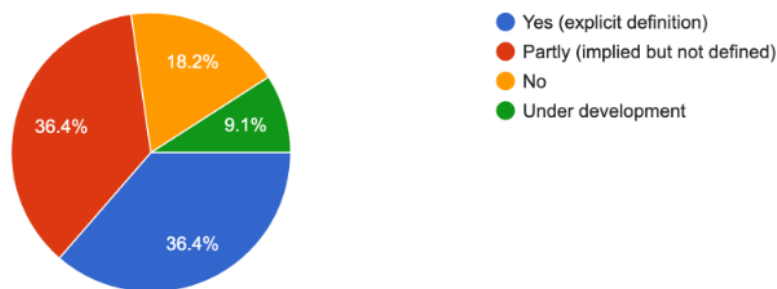
While the survey demonstrates that there is some momentum for integrating artistic research in second cycle education, it also reveals several structural challenges that must be addressed.

1. conceptual clarity

Many programmes currently lack explicit definitions or shared frameworks for artistic research, leading to variations in how it is taught, supervised, and assessed.

Is artistic research explicitly defined in programme documentation (specification/handbook/module descriptors)?

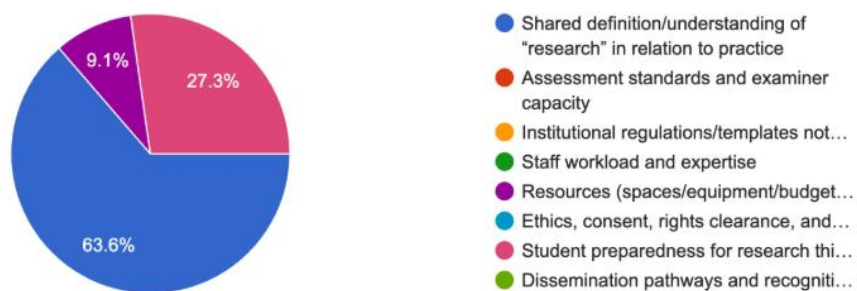
11 responses



It appears that many programmes rely on implicit or semi-implicit understandings of artistic research. This lack of conceptual clarity may lead to inconsistent teaching approaches and assessment along with uncertainty among students and staff. Respondents listed it as the number one challenge for implementing artistic research in an MA Programme by an overwhelming margin:

What is the most significant challenge for implementing artistic research in your Master's programme?

11 responses

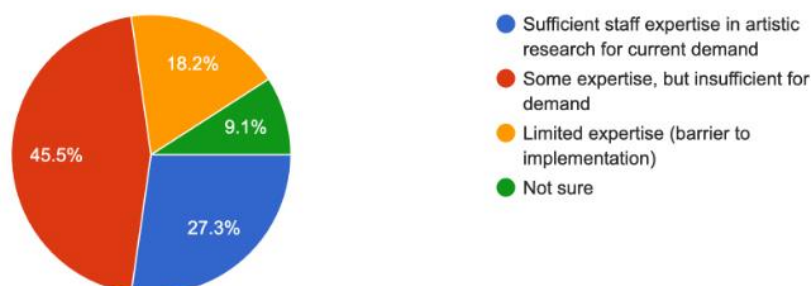


2. staff capacity

Institutions often rely on a limited number of faculty members with experience in artistic research methodologies, creating uneven support structures for students. Staff expertise emerges as one of the most significant implementation constraints.

Staff capacity: which statement best fits your programme?

11 responses



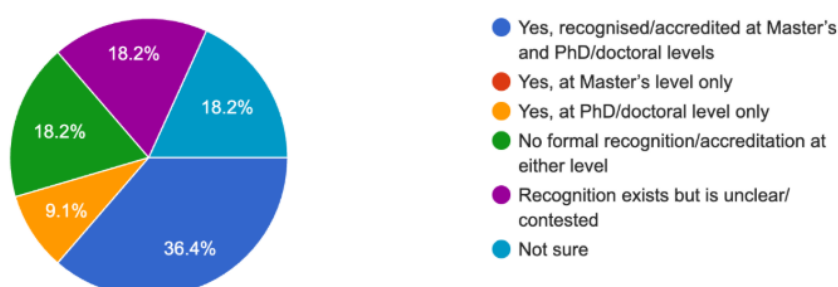
Institutions appear to rely on small clusters of experienced staff rather than broad institutional competence. This highlights the need to a clearer pathway from second to third cycle education so that future instructors in artistic research can be trained.

3. institutional recognition varies across contexts

This affects accreditation frameworks, funding structures, and the perceived legitimacy of artistic research within higher education.

In your country, is artistic research formally recognised and accredited within higher education frameworks as an eligible research basis for awards?

11 responses



These challenges highlight the need for more coordinated development at institutional and alliance levels. Artistic research remains structurally uneven across national systems and institutions even within the FilmEU consortium. This affects programme accreditation, doctoral pathways, institutional legitimacy.

Strategic Priorities for Development

To strengthen artistic research in second cycle education, several strategic priorities should be addressed. Institutions should develop clear pedagogical frameworks that define the role of artistic research within second-cycle education. These frameworks should articulate the relationship between artistic practice, critical reflection, research methodologies, and research outcomes. Strengthening these foundations constitutes the first steps towards further integration of artistic research in second cycle education:

1. programmes should establish transparent assessment criteria that recognise the distinctive forms of knowledge generated through practice-based or practice-led inquiry;
2. institutions should invest in documentation and dissemination infrastructures, ensuring that artistic research outputs—such as films, audiovisual essays, and process documentation—can be shared and evaluated effectively;

3. staff development initiatives are needed to support supervisors, teachers, and administrators working with artistic research methodologies.

Collaboration across alliances such as FilmEU can help develop shared standards, training formats and examples of best practice, strengthening artistic research in second cycle education at a European level.

Conclusion

The survey results demonstrate that artistic research is already emerging as a significant component of second-cycle education in film, media and audiovisual art disciplines within FilmEU. However, its full potential has yet to be realised due to uneven implementation and limited institutional frameworks. Recognising and strengthening artistic research at second-cycle education will support deeper learning, creative innovation, and strengthen the role of film schools as sites of knowledge creation. It will also contribute to the development of a more reflective and experimental European audiovisual culture capable of responding critically to technological and social change.

For these reasons, FilmEU institutions and the wider higher education community should actively support the continued development of artistic research within second-cycle education.