

# PhD Opportunity

Reframing Critical and Socially Engaged Arts Practices from a Creative Health / Health Humanities Perspective

## Supervisory team

Dr John Cussans, Professor Sandra Nicholson

## Director of Studies:

Dr John Cussans - Senior lecturer in Fine Art, course leader for BA Fine Art and BA Fine Art with Psychology and leader of the [Arts and Health Research Group](#)

John has an informal, collaborative and socially engaged arts practice informed by anthropology, critical theory, media studies and psychology. Since 2009 he has worked with the Haitian artists collective Atis Rezistans, most recently at documenta15 in Kassel and Rising festival in Melbourne in 2023. He is the author of *Undead Uprising: Haiti, Horror and the Zombie Complex* (2017) and is working on a long-term arts research project *The Skullcracker Suite* investigating the politics of decoloniality in British Columbia. His book *Drawing Analogies: Diagrams in Art, Theory and Practice*, written in collaboration with David Burrows, Dean Kenning and Mary Yacoob, will be published by Bloomsbury in March 2024.

## Supervisors:

Professor Sandra Nicholson- Founding Dean Three Counties Medical School, University of Worcester

Sandra received her primary medical qualification from Leicester University in 1988, MRCP in 1993 and practiced as a GP for over 30 years. She has extensive experience of working at medical postgraduate and undergraduate levels with doctors, multi-disciplinary healthcare professionals, students and patients in primary and secondary care contexts. She has served on a variety of national committees and accepted inter/national invitations to promote medical education scholarship, research and in particular widening participation. Successful funding bids include 'Supporting healthcare professionals through Covid-19: understanding how arts-based methods can support non-verbal communication', UKR, Jan 2021 £249,42 and 'Evaluation of arts-based learning in Medical Education' (Seed Funding), Wellcome Trust, August 2015- Jan 2016, £30,000

## The PhD Opportunity

### ***Background/Context***

The Arts and Health Research Group was created in 2021 in response to the nationwide increase in physical and mental health needs in the UK, particularly amongst the young, the elderly and minority groups, following the Covid pandemic and lockdown. Guided by the All-Party Parliamentary Group report on Creative Health (2017) and the emerging field of Health Humanities (Crawford 2015), which approaches the arts and humanities in the widest sense as a largely untapped public health resource and seeks out new ways to bring creativity, health and healing together. It is a collaborative, cross-disciplinary initiative combining expertise from different schools in the development of projects that investigate the therapeutic potential of the arts and humanities within traditional health and wellbeing contexts and wider social settings.

Within the recent field of contemporary arts there has been a significant shift towards collaborative, participatory and socially engaged arts practices that could be re-purposed for wider and specific public health needs. Such practices, which are often aligned with wider struggles for social justice, widening participation in the arts, increasing access for minority and marginalized groups and giving platforms for less often heard voices, also include an important critical and educational dimension that seeks to enhance the social agency of those involved in them (see for example the 2021 Turner Prize, the nominees for which were made up entirely artist collectives tackling pressing issues in society, and document15 curated by the Indonesian collective ruangrupa in 2022 which was based on the principles of communal resource sharing and creative collaboration).

The proposal grew out of John Cussans' role as course leader for BA Fine Art with Psychology at Worcester which was created in 2019 in response to a growing interest among students in the relationship between the arts, mental health and personal wellbeing. Many students chose the course to begin of a path towards becoming an art therapist, which it is. But professional colleagues working in these areas are acutely aware that the need for arts-based therapies, especially amongst the young, the elderly, marginalised and minority groups, far exceeds the current capacity of trained therapists. Teaching on the program has shown that the diversity of contemporary fine arts practices can be effectively re-purposed as modes of personal and collective reflection on personal and collective suffering and recovery, and a means to bring about better health outcomes.

### ***Aims and objectives/Research Questions/Hypothesis***

This project seeks to explore these possibilities at a larger, national scale. It will begin by exploring what can be learned from the history and practice of socially engaged contemporary art practices for creative health initiatives, and how the critical and educational dimensions of such practices can be embedded within them. It will develop practical proposals for creative, collaborative and innovate approaches to mental

health, wellbeing and recovery that combine the expertise of health professionals with that of creative practitioners.

In doing so it will address the following areas of priority of the Arts and Health Research Group:

1. The therapeutic use of arts, culture and humanities for health, mental health and wellbeing in the community
2. Research to consider how the arts and humanities are applied to enable better understanding about health, wellness and illness
3. The training of medical, therapeutic and arts practitioners in the application of arts-based approaches to mental health and wellbeing services
4. Arts led approaches towards innovative social health solutions
5. Innovations in data collection for quality of life and health outcomes through participation in arts-based activities

#### ***Indicative method / methodology***

The project will involve a survey of the field of socially engaged practice from a health humanities perspective asking what specific public health needs could be addressed using these methods.

It will propose a participatory arts initiative specifically designed to address the particular health and wellbeing needs of an identified group that will involve collaborations between health professionals and creative practitioners.

The initiative will be used as a test case to explore how the wellbeing effects of such initiatives can be effectively measured and assessed.

#### ***Potential academic significance and impact of research***

The project aligns with the All-Party Parliamentary Group inquiry into Creative Health published in 2017 which has advised that collaboration between different disciplines and practices is essential if we are to use the arts effectively within health and social care settings and by the growing field of Health Humanities, which sees arts and culture in the widest sense as a powerful but largely untapped public health resource and encourages innovative cross-cultural collaboration between the arts, humanities and health sectors.

The project seeks to have academic significance within these fields and to propose new initiatives by which these policy directives can be realised. We welcome applications from artists working in these areas or health professionals whose practices include arts-based therapies and/or teaching methods.

It will contribute to the debate about how the social and health benefits of such socially engaged arts practices can be better measured and evidenced and propose ways to combine evidence-based research methods from the social and medical sciences with therapeutic arts practices.

## Application Process

To begin the application process please go to [Art and Design MPhil/PhD Webpage](#) and click on 'How to Apply' in the top menu. This PhD could be carried out on a part time or full time basis so please select the relevant application link. On the application form, please make it clear that you are applying for one of our advertised projects so we can direct it straight to the relevant people.

## The Interview

All successful applicants will be offered an interview with the proposed Supervisory Team. You will be contacted by a member of the Research School Team to find a suitable date. Interviews can be conducted in person or over Microsoft Teams.

## Funding your PhD

For more information about Doctoral Loans please visit:

<https://www.worc.ac.uk/study/fees-and-finance/doctoral-loans.aspx>

During your PhD you can access the Research Student Support Scheme to support dissemination costs associated with your research, up to £500 a year.

## Research at the University of Worcester

Research is central to the University's mission to make a difference in everything that we do. We are committed to delivering excellent research which extends the boundaries of human knowledge but which also improves people's lives by enabling better health outcomes, improving food security, developing environmentally sustainable solutions for crop production and socially sustainable solutions to our ageing population, enhancing public knowledge and understanding of the past and present.

The University hence focuses its research around five high-level challenges facing society, locally, nationally and globally:

- [Human Health and Wellbeing](#)
- [Sustainable Futures](#)
- [Digital Innovation](#)
- [Culture, Identity and Social Exclusion](#)
- [Professional Education](#)

The success of our research is reflected in our continuous improvement in external research assessment processes. In the most recent Research Excellence Framework, REF 2021, the University saw a near 50% increase in the scale of its research and 12% increase in quality, building on its performance in REF 2014 when it was the UK's most improved university in terms of Research Power, a combination of scale and quality.

## Research Degrees at Worcester

Our research students are central to our overall mission for research. They are working at the cutting edge of their disciplines and driving forward the quality of our research whilst enriching our research culture. We are looking to increase our research student numbers as a strategic imperative.

Our commitment to our students is reflected in the results of the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2023 in which we ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> for overall research student satisfaction nationally. Key to our success in this area is the Research School, a focal point for all our research students.

It provides:

- day-to-day support for our students, both administrative and practical, through our dedicated team
- a Research Student Study Space with both PCs and laptop docking station
- a comprehensive Researcher Development Programme for students and their supervisors
- a programme of student-led conferences and seminars

## Research Group

### Arts and Health Research Group

The Arts and Health Research Group is a collaborative, cross-disciplinary initiative combining expertise from the Arts, Allied Health and Community, Education, Humanities, and Medicine which will develop a range of projects investigating the therapeutic potential of the arts and humanities within traditional health and wellbeing contexts and wider social settings.

Areas of focus will include the therapeutic use of arts, culture and humanities for health, mental health and wellbeing in the community; consider how the arts and humanities are applied to enable better understanding about health, wellness and illness; training of medical, therapeutic and arts practitioners in the application of arts-based approaches to mental health and wellbeing services; arts led approaches towards innovative social health solutions and innovations in data collection for quality of life and health outcomes through participation in arts-based activities.

### Widening Participation

As part of its mission statement the University is committed to widening participation for its higher degrees. Although most candidates will have an undergraduate and/or a Masters degree, the University is happy to accept applications from candidates with relevant professional qualifications and work related experience.

**For further information** or an informal discussion on this project, please contact Dr John Cussans (Director of Studies) via email at [j.cussans@worc.ac.uk](mailto:j.cussans@worc.ac.uk)