

# **External evaluation of the Programme on Arts-based Research (PEEK): Statement of the Austrian Science Fund FWF on the evaluation report**

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## Context of the Evaluation

The main aim of the FWF is to foster and sustainably support excellence in research in Austria. One component of the FWF's portfolio is the support of *arts-based research* through the PEEK programme (*Programm zur Entwicklung und Erschließung der Künste*, PEEK). The FWF introduced the programme in 2009 in response to arts universities being given the status of universities as postulated in the amendment to the 2002 Higher Education Act, which is anchored in the Research and Technology Act of 2007. In order to provide adequate research services that correspond to the character and scope of the arts universities, arts-based research (ABR) was identified as a promising approach.

In using the term *arts-based research*, the FWF wishes to emphasise that the research project must be integrally related to artistic practice. Still, PEEK is understood as a basic-research and not as an application-driven research programme. Artistic practices are intended to increase and advance societal knowledge. With its focus on aesthetic and artistic processes, ABR differs fundamentally from disciplines in the arts and cultural studies, such as literary criticism and history, art history, and musicology.

The PEEK programme funds clearly defined research projects of high artistic and academic quality in the field of ABR. The funding includes capacity-building arrangements as well as new strategies for the dissemination of artistic productions. However, it is neither a programme for the promotion of artistic practice per se, nor a scheme to develop teaching or training.

Since its launch in 2009, PEEK has followed a consistent bottom-up principle. Proposals can be submitted once a year at a set deadline, and the budget of each call is roughly fixed. The proposals are evaluated by at least two international reviewers. The FWF also relies on an expert board (PEEK Board) of six international researchers in the field of ABR during the decision making. The PEEK Board ranks the applications on the basis of reviews from international experts. As in other FWF programmes, the final funding decision is made by the FWF Board (*FWF-Kuratorium*).

PEEK is not restricted to arts universities. Researchers from all Austrian research institutions as well as individuals involved in arts-based research who hold the necessary qualifications are invited to submit proposals. This includes artists affiliated with a university or non-university institution in Austria in order to ensure the necessary infrastructure, documentation, and institutional support.

### Key data

- From 2009 to 2021 the FWF allocated €34.6 million (1.5% of its total budget in 2020) to PEEK projects.
- During this period, 102 projects (out of 692 applications) were funded. The average project lasts for 36-48 months and has a budget of approx. €350,000.
- In the twelve calls since 2009, the funding success rate increased from 11% up to 20%, but varied over the years.
- 50-60% of the successful projects are carried out by arts universities, with technical universities also being strongly represented in PEEK.
- Most projects cover multiple disciplines; in almost 75% of the projects, the arts make up at least 50% of the project.

## Evaluation Commissioning and Goals

In 2019, following an international call for tenders, the FWF commissioned the Zentrum für Soziale Innovation (ZSI) to evaluate PEEK. The ZSI team, formed by Barbara Glinsner and Klaus Schuch, cooperated with Felix Stalder from the Zurich University of Arts. The evaluation centred around three main goals:

- to critically review the PEEK programme in order to identify strengths and weaknesses, and to quantify and qualify output, outcome, and impact;
- to obtain evidence-based recommendations for the FWF and its supervisory bodies on whether and how PEEK should be continued, improved, or restructured; and
- to explore how the FWF's overall funding strategy for artistic research should be further developed.

The focus of the evaluation was on three levels: First, the achievement of the programme objectives was analysed. A distinction was made between goal achievement in terms of supporting high-quality and innovative *arts-based research*, building research capacities, increasing public and academic awareness of arts-based research, and raising the profile of arts-based research at universities and other research institutions. On the second level, the evaluation investigated the appropriateness and efficiency of the programme's management over the different stages of the funding cycle. The third level concerned the standing of PEEK in the FWF's portfolio and in the Austrian research landscape.

The evaluation employed a multi-method evaluation design. It comprised document analysis and database research, content analysis, expert interviews, artefact-based interviews with grantees (principal investigators and team members), an online survey with funded and non-funded applicants, and a focus group with representatives of arts universities and other research institutions. The evaluation also provided a comparison of PEEK to funding schemes for *arts-based research* in Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Norway.

## **Response of the FWF to the Recommendations from the Evaluation**

### **The evaluation recommends recognising ABR as a research paradigm, opening it up to other FWF programmes, and developing it further.**

There is a lot of merit in the suggestion to approach ABR as a research paradigm and to open up other programme categories by means of a “tick box” for ABR. The FWF recognises that over the past years an increasing professionalisation within the field of ABR has taken place and that there is a need of funding for career development. In a first step, the FWF will evaluate the specific processes in order to open up its “career programmes” (such as Schrödinger and ESPRIT) to *arts-based research*. If this transition is successful, other programmes could follow.

### **The evaluators suggest the full mainstreaming of ABR in about ten years.**

As has been detailed in the evaluation, the ABR community in Austria largely depends on PEEK as other funding opportunities are not available due to its specific approach and formal characteristics. Thus, there is a clear commitment to maintaining PEEK as a separate programme for the foreseeable future.

The FWF shares the opinion that PEEK would profit from the possibility of flexible submissions. The FWF will evaluate how the transformation from fixed deadlines to rolling submissions can be achieved best, as rolling submissions would have many potential benefits for the community (i.e., shortening of the time to decision) as well as for the programme’s administration. To secure a fair decision-making process, it must be ensured that there are enough applications in the competition per board meeting. It is planned to implement rolling submissions with two to three decisions per year by March 2023.

### **The FWF should promote ABR projects more strongly and initiate communication and exchange between organisations, including an increased outreach of the programme.**

Once PEEK works on a rolling submission basis, the PEEK Board will meet three times per year. Two of these meetings will be held virtually, one should take place in Vienna. Since it is expected that these meetings will take less time, the time saved during the meeting in situ can be spent on additional communication efforts and increased measures to further promote the outreach of the programme.

### **The role of the PEEK Board needs to be clearly and transparently communicated to (potential) applicants.**

This is an important point which will be tackled from multiple sides. Regarding the PEEK Board: (1) The FWF will update the application guidelines and the general document detailing the FWF procedures in order to make sure to communicate the role of the PEEK Board within the decision process as comprehensively and clearly as possible. (2) The FWF will seek to offer additional training sessions to the PEEK Board where the role of the Board is to be addressed clearly. (3) The FWF will offer additional training and clear guidelines

specifying the selection criteria for ABR reviewers and will continue to raise awareness that reviewers should mostly come from ABR. These processes are already in motion but are to be further intensified as a follow-up of the evaluation.

The suggestion to give the PEEK Board the power to overrule reviews, thereby changing the process so that additional reviews are obtained beforehand, will be examined by the FWF. In any case, a balance must be ensured between external reviews, the PEEK Board, decision-making time, and administrative effort.

Regarding ABR reviewers, the FWF will evaluate whether it is necessary to further adapt the reviewer letters for PEEK in order to raise awareness of the specifics of a review in ABR.

**The quality of the reviews should be increased by using reviewers more often and to ask them to review several proposals per call.**

As a general rule, the FWF does not ask reviewers more than twice within twelve months to provide reviews. Asking reviewers to evaluate more would put an additional burden on the individual researchers, which the FWF considers too high anyway. This holds true especially for the ABR community, since its members often do not have fixed university positions, rendering their situation even more precarious.

If PEEK reviewers were to be asked to review more applications per year, they would have to be compensated for this extra work. Currently the FWF does not financially compensate its reviewers as this task is seen as a service to the profession. If this general principle changes, this suggestion should be evaluated and could potentially be implemented. However, long-term effects must be taken into account. On the one hand, there is no international evidence so far that the financial compensation of reviewers increases the quality of the reviews. And on the other hand, financial compensation can also lead to price-driving competition among funding agencies.

**The evaluators recommend a flexibilisation of the budget for PEEK.**

As noted in the evaluation report, the professionalisation of the PEEK community and the overall quality of PEEK submissions has significantly increased over the years. Thus, the suggestion to promote the flexibility of the PEEK budget and, in particular, the call to implement a relatively stable approval rate will be pursued by the FWF once the programme moves away from set deadlines towards rolling submissions.

**The evaluators suggest a division of labour between the FWF and the (currently) main universities in PEEK in order to reduce the audit burden.**

Once we move PEEK towards rolling submissions, the programme will also be switched over to PROFI.<sup>1</sup> This administrative change will facilitate the division of labour between the FWF and the research institutions hosting PEEK projects.

## **Statement of the PEEK Board**

The Chairman of the PEEK Board provided the following statement on behalf of the Board:

“The PEEK Board understands the need to make clearer its role within the decision-making process and ensure that this is consistent with the messages that are sent to rejected proposals. One way in which the Board itself could facilitate this process of clarification would be to address the Board’s role in the specific decision in the Board’s statements which are, in more controversial cases, included with the official letter of rejection. The FWF’s approach to Board statements as well as full transmission of the respective reviews is seen as being very generous but opens the FWF to the critical discussion reflected in the reviews. This last point about the collegiate nature of the feedback should thus be emphasised.

The idea to provide potential reviewers with references to definitions of arts-based research is met with caution. This could be counterproductive in the sense that the recommended work is seen to have its own agenda regarding the relationship between arts-based research and artistic practice, which may not always be consistent with PEEK and is not the sole interesting contribution to the discussion of art-based research.

The concept of ABR as a research paradigm in its own right is warmly welcomed, but regarding the recommendations made in this part of the evaluation, the Board would caution not to conflate artistic research and arts-based research.”

## **Closing Remarks on the FWF's Cooperation with the Evaluators**

The FWF is committed to the standards of evaluation developed by the Austrian Platform for Research and Technology Policy Evaluation (fteval).<sup>2</sup> In addition, the FWF has adopted its own quality and transparency rules that formed the basis of this evaluation.<sup>3</sup> These sets of rules provide a clear line with regard to the relationship between the evaluators and the client. The cooperation with the team led by Klaus Schuch was characterised by professional distance, accepting and adhering to these different roles. In a kick-off meeting we elaborated together the details and focus points of the evaluation, and the mid-term presentation served as a countercheck for the evaluators and the FWF. This meeting gave the evaluators the opportunity to gain an even deeper understanding of the programme, and the FWF to learn about the first preliminary results. Together we identified further aspects of analysis, for

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<sup>1</sup> In 2018, the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) started to change the project funding in selected programmes from *ad personam* project funding to project funding via research institutions (referred to internally as the [PROFI system](#) and corresponding to a change from §26 to §27 in the Universities Act).

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.fteval.at/content/home/standards/fteval\\_standards/](https://www.fteval.at/content/home/standards/fteval_standards/), accessed 25 January 2022.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.fwf.ac.at/en/research-funding/decision-making-procedure-evaluation/evaluation-standards/quality-and-transparency-rules-for-evaluations/>, accessed 25 January 2022.

which the FWF provided additional data. Overall, the evaluation benefited from a productive and appreciative collaboration, which is the basis for the development of a common understanding of the nuances of the FWF's Programme for Arts-based Research PEEK.

## Appendix

### Key Results of the Evaluation

#### *Participation*

The evaluation found that the PEEK programme has achieved its main objective of promoting and expanding arts-based research and researchers in Austria. Its important role is reflected in the fact that applicants participate only marginally in other FWF programmes, but repeatedly in PEEK, reflecting the fact that there are few alternative funding schemes specifically for *arts-based research*.

Although PEEK is not limited to arts universities, they do make up a significant proportion of the number of applications and funded projects. In the period considered, a relatively high percentage of applications came from other research institutes and technical universities, particularly from those with faculties of architecture and construction—disciplines frequently involved in PEEK.

Approval rates of PEEK projects were low in the initial years of the programme (around 11%), have since increased (to almost 20%), but still remain under those of stand-alone projects. This can be attributed to two factors: First, the largely fixed budget of PEEK causes above-average oversubscription rates, and second, that the arts universities, research institutions, and researchers were not used to the FWF's practices and procedures in the early years of the programme and partly needed to build up specific support structures for applicants.

#### *Project Outputs*

Using content analysis, the evaluators compared PEEK projects to a sample of stand-alone projects with an art content of at least 40%. These stand-alone projects focused on the description, analysis, and historic contextualisation of art and artistic artefacts. In contrast, the PEEK projects incorporated some form of artistic practice as a central element of their research; they produced fewer (peer-reviewed) publications but gave rise to a variety of outputs, including performances, concerts, installations, and videos. The PEEK projects were more open to ambiguity and research avenues that only opened up during the course of the project. Furthermore, these projects were conducted more often by multi- and transdisciplinary teams.

The evaluators found that PEEK has facilitated a new quality of ABR and innovation in Austria. The FWF's definition and understanding of artistic research as an alternative research method for gaining new insights and advancing existing knowledge reflects well the specifics perceived by arts-based researchers. The content analysis showed that the characteristics of PEEK projects differ significantly from stand-alone projects, such that simply mainstreaming PEEK projects into stand-alone projects would be difficult.



### *Research Capacities and Career Effects*

Over the past decade, the field of ABR has become established in Austria, and a growing number of artists have gained experience in research as principal investigators (PIs) or as researchers in projects. The introduction of PhD programmes in ABR has also contributed to this development. Overall, considerable research capacity has been built since the introduction of PEEK. However, this does not mean that a clear job description of an *arts-based researcher* has emerged. Most PIs see themselves primarily as artists, with *arts-based research* being only one field of activity.

### *Programme Implementation and Management*

The surveys, interviews, and the focus group showed that the PEEK programme was perceived to be well and professionally managed. Compared to the evaluation results of other FWF programmes, PEEK applicants receiving funding reported similarly high levels of satisfaction with the services provided by the FWF.

The main criticism regarding the programme implementation was the fixed submission deadline, which allows applications only once per year. Given the lack of alternative funding opportunities and the rather low approval rate, rejected applicants were at risk of losing a lot of time if they wished to resubmit proposals. Focus group participants also criticised the FWF's "time to decision" and the relatively short timeframe for resubmissions.

### *Project Review and Evaluation*

According to the views expressed by the focus group, the competitive nature of PEEK with a peer-review process has clearly contributed to the recognition and improved quality of ABR.

The institutional representatives mentioned some dissatisfaction with the quality of the reviews and their handling by the PEEK Board, which serves as the quality assurance body. The specific disciplinary background, the composition, and the role of the PEEK Board were perceived as lacking transparency. It was not clear whether the Board's function was also to review PEEK applications, and how much power the Board had and actually exerted in following or overruling the reviews.

One discussion point in the focus group concerned the quality of the reviews. Although inadequate reviews were few in absolute numbers, they did have an impact due to PEEK's prominent role in ABR. Critics alleged that reviewers exhibited a lack of understanding of ABR and artistic processes, as well as insufficient expertise in the discipline or specific area of contribution. The respondents noted that some reviews applied standards characteristic of other disciplines and did not entirely understand the artistic research process.

ABR as a relatively young research field is challenged by the vagueness of what *arts-based research* means in the context of very specific projects. For the project evaluation, this raised the question of what constituted the state of the art in ABR and what requirements an ABR

project had to fulfil. Another point was the impression that proposals from more experienced researchers were favoured.

The evaluation identified a perceived lack of coherence in the evaluation criteria. Only half of the survey respondents (strongly) agreed that the evaluation criteria were appropriate and that the evaluation procedure was transparent and consistent. The researchers would have liked the FWF to reject reviews more often and to collect additional reports. In some cases, the written reviews, the review scores, and the final rejection reason were perceived as inconsistent. This posed a problem for the universities' research services, as they felt limited in their ability to advise applicants on ways to improve their proposals.

### *Institutionalisation Effects*

The surveyed PIs of funded and declined proposals showed that 95% (strongly) agreed to the statement that PEEK has contributed to the institutionalisation of ABR in Austria and helped improve the international reputation of Austrian art scholars. PEEK was also seen as vital to the research activities of arts universities in general.

The interviews as well as the focus group revealed that the concept of ABR is not uncontested within the arts communities, due in part to the increasing institutionalisation of arts universities and the prominent stance of these universities. Independent artists perceived a growing differentiation between artists/practitioners, *arts-based researchers*, and other researchers within their institutions and beyond. While this differentiation was thought to have the potential to stimulate critical and productive discourse about art and research, it was feared that it might also create tensions.

Most public arts universities have built up research support services, which is reflected in the application and approval statistics. Other observed institutional impacts include the anchoring of ABR in specific centres or laboratories, the establishment of doctoral programmes and research schools, the provision of seed funding for the development of proposals, and the establishment of an interdisciplinary professorship for ABR. Concern was expressed in the focus group that the competition in PEEK would continue to increase in the future.

As alternative funding possibilities are limited, it was felt that a phase-out of PEEK or a downsizing of the programme would have a very negative effect on the arts universities' efforts to firmly establish ABR at their institutions.

### *Conclusions*

The evaluators concluded that, overall, the PEEK programme had achieved its programmatic objectives and made a significant contribution to high-quality and innovative *arts-based research* in Austria.

The three main objectives of (1) supporting high-quality and innovative *arts-based research*, (2) increasing research capacity, and (3) raising awareness within the academic and the arts communities as well as the general public had largely been met. However, the evaluation

found that these goals had been met somewhat unevenly, that the relationships between some of the goals needed clarification, and that there was room for improvement.

## **Recommendations Given by the Evaluators**

### **1. Recognise ABR as a research paradigm, open it up to other FWF programmes, and develop it further.**

- More PhD holders trained in ABR increase the demand for international and mobility programmes. In the long run, an exclusion of ABR from other FWF programmes cannot be justified.
- This requires the recognition of ABR as a research paradigm in the medium- to long-run (five to ten years).
- As a research paradigm, ABR with its specific evaluation and regulatory framework should be recognised in all FWF programmes (e.g., through an “ABR tick box”).

### **2. Keep PEEK as a programme for five to ten years before mainstreaming, as institutional and capacity-building processes have not yet been completed.**

- Capacity building and institutionalisation are still not completed and the research paradigm as such has not yet been fully established.
- After five to ten years, the mainstreaming of ABR in all FWF programmes should be possible (see Recommendation 1).
- As a step towards mainstreaming, the frequency of calls should be changed as soon as possible. In the long term, rolling submissions should be introduced.
- The evaluators strongly recommend introducing two annual deadlines. The additional burden on the Board could be reduced by holding the necessary second panel meeting online only.

### **3. Promote exchange on ABR and scientific community building.**

- The awareness among *arts-based researchers* of each other's activities is quite limited. This could lead to an institutional and possibly thematic narrowing.
- Efforts should be made to open PEEK to the arts universities that have shown limited participation so far, and to other universities, research institutions, museums, and major art events.
- The evaluators recommended the following activities in decreasing order of urgency:<sup>4</sup>
  1. Clarification of the submission guidelines to counteract the impression that PEEK is primarily intended for large arts universities.
  2. Special outreach events could help clarify the guidelines, increase the diversity of submissions, and support innovation in ABR.

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<sup>4</sup> The evaluators acknowledged that the FWF does not consider community building to be one of its tasks and that it does not have the necessary resources to support processes of this kind on its own.

3. To increase peer exchange and community building, the FWF should identify partners who facilitate conferences on ongoing PEEK projects at least once a year (following the example of the “Research Forum” in Norway).
4. Initiate a repository of project outputs to increase the visibility of ABR and its variety of outputs.
5. The publication of an internationally curated catalogue of successful PEEK projects could ensure more international visibility.
6. The FWF should advocate the promotion of ABR in the EU-wide institutional research funding landscape.

#### **4. Apply PEEK increasingly in teaching.**

- This recommendation is addressed to the universities.
- The evaluators recommended that the arts universities should push for the integration of PEEK projects into teaching to make better use of PEEK for capacity development and to broaden the ABR basis.

#### **5. Clarify and communicate the role and decision-making authority of the Board.**

- The quality, comprehensibility, and style of the reviews was criticised. An improvement in the review process was recommended.
- Approaches to improving the review process could include better definition of the selection criteria, better selection of reviewers, better training and guidance, more thorough examination of the reviews, as well as possibly moderate procedural changes.
- The PEEK Board plays an important role in the quality assurance of the review process. The evaluators found it justified for the Board to overrule individual reviews if they were deemed inappropriate. This should be balanced by seeking an additional external expert opinion before the Board conducts a substantive evaluation. If the Board overrules a review, this should be communicated clearly. Steps could be
  1. better description of the function of the reviewers, the PEEK Board, and the FWF Board to increase transparency;
  2. a revision of the evaluation criteria to make them more comprehensible and to provide clear guidelines for reviewers and applicants. The FWF could provide applicants and reviewers with references on what constitutes ABR;
  3. to pay more attention to the reviewers' training and selection (perhaps strategic cooperation with other funding agencies supporting ABR);
  4. to acknowledge that negative reviews are a source of dissatisfaction when they are viewed as unfair or uninformed. This also applies to situations when the Board overrules reviewer comments. While this lies in the nature of the process in a relatively new and dynamic field, a more thorough review (including a check of wording) of the external reviews and the Board's decisions is necessary;
  5. to increase the transparency of the role of the Board and its power; and
  6. to consider whether the same external reviewers could be used more often. The Norwegian NARP programme uses the same reviewers several times,

and they also review several applications per round to better compare the projects. NARP, however, remunerates its reviewers for their work.

**6. Increase the flexibility of the PEEK budget.**

- In most FWF programmes, the budget is adjusted to the application volumes as far as possible within the overall budget. Care is taken to ensure that the approval rates do not fluctuate too significantly and do not differ too much between programmes.
- While a largely fixed budget seemed justified when PEEK was introduced, today the FWF should consider, together with the BMBWF, making the budget more flexible.
- A way to implement this would be to set the approval rate at a level slightly below or around that of the stand-alone projects. As the PEEK budget represents only a small part of the FWF's budget, this would hardly be at the expense of other programmes.
- If such a flexibilisation is not feasible, an expansion of the PEEK budget should at least be considered.

**7. Reduce the FWF's audit workload through agreements with the arts universities on the division of labour.**

- In order to reduce the FWF's auditing efforts, which are significantly higher for PEEK projects than for other programmes, the evaluators recommended redistributing the audit workload to the universities based on a division of labour.
- As a first step, the FWF should conclude contracts with the three institutions that host most PEEK projects.
- The substantive justification of an invoice and its formal correctness should be carried out exclusively by the universities. The FWF's audit department should concentrate on spot checks or only deal with the major cost items.
- A full audit is neither expedient nor economical, since the universities must in any case guarantee flawless business conduct. After a test phase of two to three years and a review of the procedures, further agreements should be made with other organisations.