

2024/25

DARE Impact Report



opera
north


UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

DARE
THE PIONEERING COLLABORATION
OPERA NORTH & UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

“Over the past 18 years, the DARE partnership between Opera North and the University of Leeds has made a significant contribution to our regional landscape and beyond in terms of its cultural, academic and civic impact. In collaborating together, our two organisations have demonstrated how we can contribute to a thriving society by providing experiences and opportunities that promote creativity, develop skills and add value to our communities.”



Laura Canning
General Director
Opera North

“Opera North is one of the University’s most established cultural partners. DARE has a national and international reputation as a model of excellence for partnerships between higher education and the cultural and creative sector. True to its name and heritage, the DARE partnership supports pioneering, interdisciplinary collaborations between our staff and students, and supports our growing civic engagement agenda. It showcases brilliantly the vital role of arts, culture and education in addressing some of the most complex questions of our time and in capturing what makes life worth living.”



Professor Ben Walmsley
Dean of Cultural Engagement
University of Leeds

Introduction

The past year has been challenging in many ways for both the Higher Education and Cultural sectors. **As our shared landscape continues to evolve and we adapt to challenges** such as reduced funding, a national decline in arts & humanities student numbers and more selective audiences, **partnership is more important than ever**. With new leadership, both the University of Leeds and Opera North have **reaffirmed the commitment to work together**.

Through the long-standing DARE partnership, the University of Leeds and Opera North are able to **expand reach, maximise resources, and deliver impact**, while also **fostering creativity, innovation, and community engagement**. These efforts **enhance the cultural and educational spaces** we inhabit and **contribute to a more vibrant society**.

DARE **enables students and staff to explore and enhance creative and artistic careers** through practice-based learning and professional development such as the DARE Internships, career insight talks, employer challenge briefs and student projects, CPD workshops, access to the University library and the Pettman DARE Fellowship scheme.

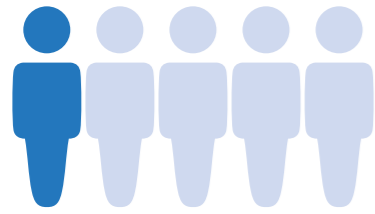
DARE **provides exceptional cultural experiences for students, staff and the wider community** to connect and simply enjoy what it means to be human. This includes dedicated musical performances on and off campus as well as opportunities for students to attend Opera North’s dress rehearsals and performances for free or at reduced cost. In addition, the DARE More scheme offers exclusive discounts on Opera North performances and Howard Assembly Room events to University of Leeds staff.

DARE **supports creativity in education and research** underpinning one of the University of Leeds’ core research pillars and bolstering Opera North’s development and knowledge-base.

DARE has contributed to research bids, held research-focused sandpits and collaborated with the DARE Academic-in-Residence (as well as continuing to work with previous ones) and DARE Art Prize recipient.

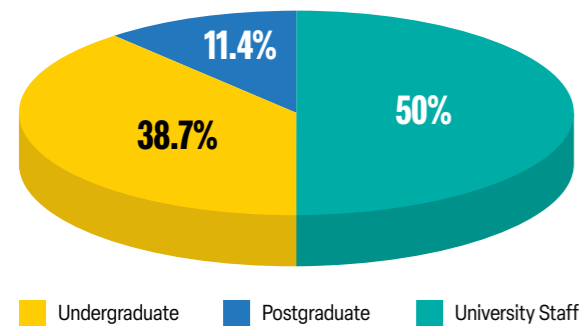
Following a period of reflection and realignment, plans for the development of the partnership include **expanding engagement to shape DARE’s educational and experiential activity**. There will also be an **increase in on campus events and performances** to support Opera North’s visibility and mission of **‘Making Opera Vital’**, as well as contribute to the University’s new **‘Open Up’** cultural programme aimed at opening the campus, dialogue, conversations and experiences. Furthermore, DARE remains committed to **creating new knowledge and practice in the arts by connecting academic research with cultural ambition and maximising the convening power** the partnership brings towards supporting safe and courageous conversations for those in the Higher Education and Cultural sectors alongside members of the communities we engage with and serve.

Becky Smith
Head of Academic Partnerships
Opera North



1583 interactions

Over the 2024/25 academic year the DARE Partnership has seen 1583 interactions with students, staff and cultural partners. There were 603 University Staff engagements, which is **an increase of 20%**.



The DARE Working Group is a dynamic assembly that convenes three times annually, bringing together a diverse group of individuals from Opera North and various university disciplines. This collaboration is designed to foster innovative partnerships and strategise on future plans and desired outcomes.



1041 live performance attendees

With 1041 members of the university community attending live performances delivered by Opera North, it's clear that these events hold significant appeal. 154 students attended seven dress rehearsals, **a 66% increase year-on-year**.



3 DARE internships

3 DARE internships were hosted at Opera North with roles as Facilities and Reception Support, Opera North Youth Orchestra Assistant Conductor and Assistant Director for the Youth Company's production of *The Secret of the Black Spider*.



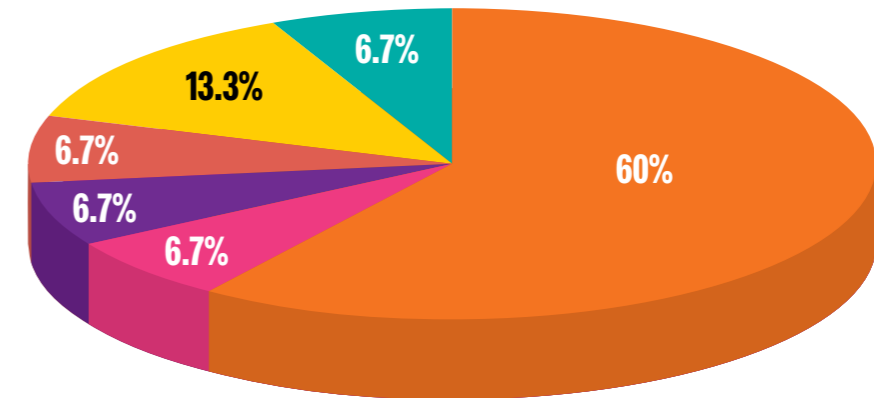
4 student challenges

Working closely with students studying Global Creative Industries, Arts Marketing and those exploring careers in the arts, heritage and creative industries, 4 student challenge projects focused on aspects of Opera North's business were set for 68 students to engage with.

MORE DARE MORE!

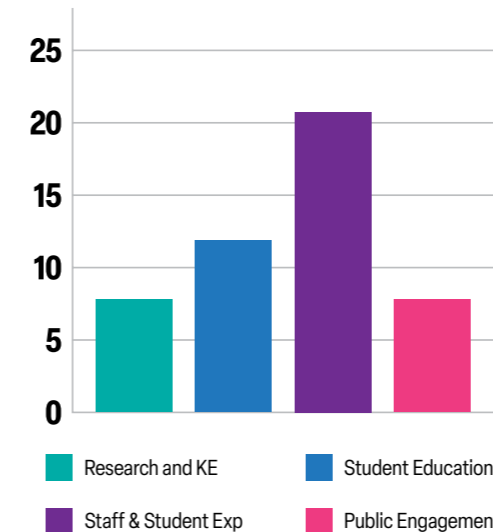
The DARE More staff offer scheme mailing list has grown by 10% year-on-year.

University department engagements



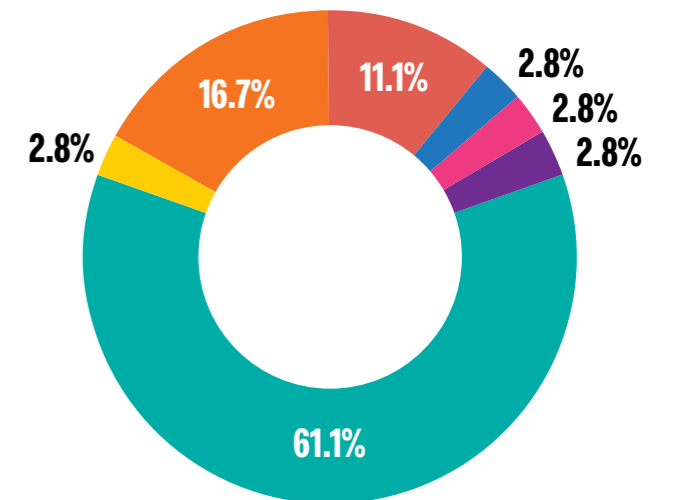
Art, Humanities & Culture | Engineering Physical Sciences | Medicine & Health | Education, Social Science & Law | Cultural Institute | Library & Galleries

Number of activities in key focus areas



Research and KE | Student Education | Staff & Student Exp | Public Engagement

Opera North department engagement



Learning & Engagement | Artistic Administration | Development | Audiences | Finance | Facilities | Music

3rd party organisations engaged with



Leeds 33; Leeds Museums & Galleries; Thanda Gumedede; The Art House; Northern Broadside; Leeds City of Sanctuary & Asylum Matters; Ushingi; Rommi Smith; Smeaton 300; New Zealand Opera; Royal Ballet & Opera; Northern Ballet; WRoCAH; The Science and Media Museum; Bradford 25; Yorkshire Contemporary

Experiential learning

In our rapidly changing world, we need creative and flexible talent in our workplaces. DARE is nurturing that talent by providing opportunities to develop skills, acquire knowledge and provide experiences for both students and staff to support employability and professional development.

Gaining skills for employment

Three DARE Interns joined Opera North this year to each undertake a bursaried 20-day internship. Fifty-six students applied for the three positions advertised exclusively to University of Leeds students. Twelve of the students were interviewed, gaining useful real-world interview practice and feedback. Bea Derrick, a second year BA Music student was appointed as an Assistant Conductor for Opera North's Youth Orchestra. Max Kemp, a third year BSc Psychology student who embedded with the Facilities Team and Ellie-Rose Amit, a second year BA Theatre & Performance student was appointed as Assistant Director on Opera North Youth Company's production of *The Secret of the Black Spider*, the 2025-26 autumn season opener for Opera North. These roles provide valuable experience in music education, mainstage productions and arts company operations.

"My time at Opera North under the DARE internship scheme has been such an incredible and rewarding experience. It has been such a great opportunity to develop my conducting skills under the talented work of Olly Rundell as well as gaining valuable insight into the behind the scenes of the wonderful music making that Opera North produces each year. I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity, the skills that I have developed and all the amazing people I have met along the way."



Bea Derrick - 2nd year BA Music
DARE Intern: Opera North Youth Orchestra – Assistant Conductor

Developing research skills

DARE provided a Researcher Employability Project for a PhD student supported by the White Rose College of the Arts & Humanities (WROCAH) doctoral training partnership in which the University of Leeds is a consortium partner. Between mid-October to mid-November 2024, Opera North and the University of Leeds Library jointly hosted Julie Williams, a PhD candidate in Nigerian Literature at the University of Sheffield School of English. Supervised by Karen Sayers, Senior Archivist from the University of Leeds and Becky Smith, Head of Academic Partnerships at Opera North, Julie worked on cataloguing the Opera North programme archive held in Special Collections and conducted specific research on Opera North's *Madama Butterfly* programmes. Her research explored and made recommendations in relation to:

- Image-making, use of images & aesthetics
- Casting choices & ethics
- Narrative & pedagogy
- Community focus & support



"I have thoroughly enjoyed my time as an intern at Opera North. Not only did my team make me feel instantly welcome, but they were also incredibly supportive in helping me adjust to my new role. With the same being said for the rest of the members here at Opera North, the warm environment at the Howard Opera Centre made me feel comfortable and confident enough to have a chat with anyone no matter the department. My two managers, Michala and Cheryl, were incredibly supportive throughout my entire internship, always checking in and making sure I stayed busy, in turn helping me develop core corporate skills further such as effective communication and time management skills when dealing with multiple tasks at once."

I also had the chance to meet with some of the different department heads, which I found incredibly interesting learning about the contributions of the different departments in a large company, that I otherwise wouldn't have had I not taken full advantage of this opportunity... One of my highlights was my conversation with the Head of Finance, Thom. I really appreciated the time he took to meet with me and explain at the most basic level what a finance job is like in such a large organisation. He sounded genuinely passionate about his role and the organisation as a whole which made me reflect on how lucky I was to be a part of it... Finally, I would like to thank the DARE partnership team for providing a smooth and supportive application process that made it helpful to understand each stage of applying, which is all too often forgotten about in large organisations."



Max Kemp - 3rd year BSc Psychology
DARE Intern: Opera North Facilities



2024–25 Fellow, Zane Berghuis, with members of the Opera North Learning & Engagement team.

Supporting early-career professionals

The Pettman DARE Fellowship scheme, generously funded by Mrs Maureen Pettman and her late husband, Professor Barrie Pettman, supports early-career professionals from Aotearoa New Zealand to gain a Postgraduate Diploma in Performing Arts Education at the University of Leeds and undertake applied research within Opera North's Learning and Engagement team and the Participation team at New Zealand Opera (NZO).

In 2024-25, Zane Berghuis was the 20th recipient of the Pettman DARE Fellowship.

Reflecting on his time at the University of Leeds, where he was able to explore themes of cultural identity after drawing on his mixed Māori and Pākeha (European) heritage, he noted, "There was a richness there; the libraries, the space for relationships to grow and access to people doing incredible things. It was a privilege to be part of that ecosystem." Zane also said, "The University has done a good job at maintaining partnerships with the creative industry and giving students a direct way to connect. It's been a huge privilege to study there."

Alongside his studies, Zane was engaged in supporting the development and delivery of the 'Sing Dance Leap' project, part of Bradford 2025 UK City of Culture which brought together more than 2,000 primary school pupils across Bradford with professional artists from the Royal Ballet and Opera, Northern Ballet, and Opera North.

In June 2025, Zane began the last stage of his Fellowship at NZO working on Jonathan Dove's community opera, *Monster in the Maze*.

"Being from New Zealand, I had no expectations of what Bradford would be like. We were working with students who didn't have much experience with curriculum music, let alone opera, and so it was a pleasure to see them find their voice with the help of our expert deliverers at Opera North."

Zane Berghuis
Pettman DARE Fellow

During his Fellowship, Zane also worked with Becky Smith, Head of Academic Partnerships at Opera North to review the Fellowship scheme in order to ensure it continues to be relevant and achieve its aims. This involved interviewing key stakeholders including former Fellows and producing a report highlighting the Fellowship's impact with key recommendations for future development as the scheme enters its next stage.

Engaged learning

A number of real-world employer challenge projects were set for second-year students on different modules. Students on the Performance & Cultural Industries (PCI) Arts Marketing module engaged with Lydia Hutton from Opera North's Audiences Team to explore promotion of the Howard Assembly Room. Four students taking the module Developing Your Professional Identity: Preparing for a Career in Within the Arts, Heritage and Creative Industries investigated how to increase student engagement with Opera North and its Under30s scheme. This topic was also explored by a group of students on the PCI Creative Enterprise module.



Industry insights

In addition, students benefitted from a number of talks provided by Opera North staff. Thirty MA students taking the PCI Arts Management & Cultural Leadership module visited the Howard Opera Centre to hear from Opera North managers and directors about aspects of the company's work including Finance & Operations, Audiences and Artistic Administration along with insights into career journeys.

Five MA Music students on the Applied Professional Practice Module were given a talk on Opera North's Learning & Engagement activity by the department's Director, Jacqui Cameron. A group of second year BA Global Creative Industries students also heard from Becky Smith about her career path to gaining her current position at Opera North. Students from the PCI module, Directing and Introduction to the Musical also benefitted from the opportunity to view a performance by Opera North of Kurt Weill's *Love Life* linked to their curriculum.

Professional development opportunities

As well as being able to benefit from access to the University of Leeds Library, staff at Opera North have gained valuable professional development opportunities. In April, two Opera North staff members were invited to join a workshop on evaluation for the cultural sector organized by the Cultural Institute and led by Professor Leila Jancovich, Dr Emma McDowell and Kate Wafer.

"It was really fascinating to learn about recent evaluation research and how those methods can inform how Opera North works at an organisational level. Really looking forward to implementing the Failspace toolkit in our work."

Kathryn Gašić
Projects Producer, Opera North

Spotlight on DARE

A key aim for 2024/25 was boosting communications and raising awareness of the DARE partnership through improved digital and targeted campaigns across all stakeholder communities as well as increasing engagement with DARE activities such as student attendance at rehearsals and the DARE More scheme for University of Leeds staff.

DARE Open House

Initiatives included a DARE Open House event for staff at both the University of Leeds and Opera North. Held at Kino in October 2024, 57 attendees including University staff from Development, Careers, the Library, the Business School and Schools of Fine Art, Music, Earth & Environment, and Performance and Cultural Industries joined the event to discover more about the partnership activities and opportunities to engage as well as enjoy a musical performance by Opera North's Resonance artist, Rory A. Green.



DARE communications

The DARE Communications Group collaborated to increase promotion of DARE events and offers to staff via the University of Leeds eNews and Opera North's staff newsletter. In addition, the Group have worked collaboratively to enhance on campus promotions of opportunities for students to attend dress rehearsals for free using digital screens. Student attendance at dress rehearsals increased by 66% from 93 in 2023/24 to 154 in 2024/25.



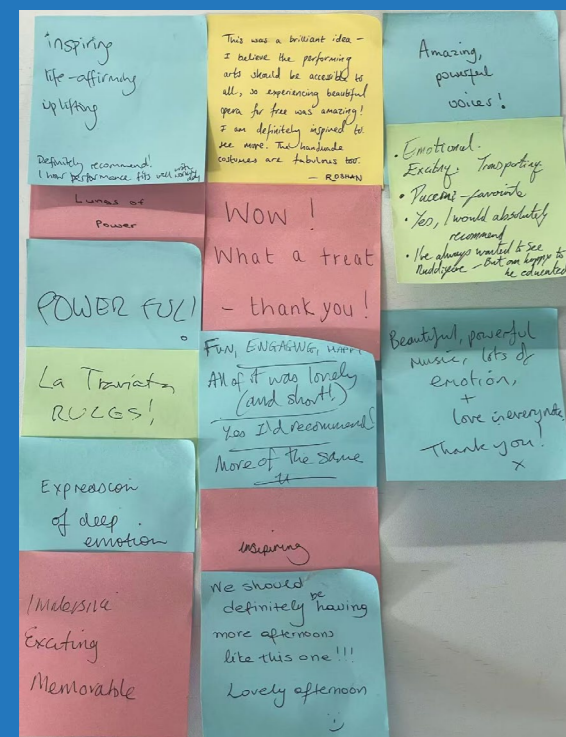
In addition, the old DARE website was archived and a new DARE page launched on the Opera North website along with a dedicated page on the refreshed University of Leeds staff intranet.

Opera North also participated in *Culture@Leeds* in October 2024 and the Staff Benefits Fair in June 2025 to promote the Under 30s and DARE More staff offer schemes.



DARE More revitalisation

In order to raise awareness of the DARE More staff offer scheme, Opera North worked with a group of seven BA Global Creative Industries students who, as part of their final-year projects, were set the challenge of raising awareness of the scheme and growing the DARE More mailing list. As well as surveying staff, the students worked collaboratively to organize, promote and host a special opera recital with performers from Opera North held in the Clothworker's Centenary Concert Hall in March 2025. Over 70 staff joined the free lunchtime concert which received positive reviews. Over the period the students were engaged with the project the DARE More mailing list saw a 10% growth in membership.



“I haven’t enjoyed my lunchtime as much as I did last week for many a year. Thank you for making this available and brightening my week.”

Professor John Ladbury
School of Molecular & Cellular Biology,
University of Leeds

“Many thanks for your continued great support! We organized a very meaningful event together!”

Youqi Xu
3rd Year BA Global Creative Industries



“Opera North has been a vital partner for the BA Global Creative Industries in the 2024-25 academic year supporting two modules: PECI2901 Creative Enterprise and EPCI3901 Final Year Project. In both cases, the students’ learning and their project outcomes exceeded expectations. The DARE More project, in particular, provided a group of international final-year students with an opportunity to work with a wider range of university staff and to strengthen the Opera North/University of Leeds partnership through direct engagement, increasing DARE More membership by greater than the target number. This result increased the students’ confidence and transferrable skill levels in ways that traditional learning cannot. We are very grateful to Opera North for this opportunity.”

Dr Hugh Brown
Programme Leader, BA Global Creative Industries, PCI

Fostering a vibrant culture on and off campus

In addition to the lunchtime opera recital for staff and opportunities for students to observe dress rehearsals, members of the University of Leeds were able to benefit from a number of cultural offerings at no cost to them. These included a performance by Young Artists of the National Opera Studio as well as ‘The Italian Songbook’ concert at the Howard Assembly Room.

Resonance artist platform performances

Students and staff were also invited to watch residency showcases by Resonance artists - artists of colour from the North of England supported by Opera North. In addition, three Resonance artists gave four special performances for members of the university community. Guitarist Rory A. Green performed for those attending the Culture@Leeds event and the DARE Open House in October 2024, Thanda Gumedde sang alongside pianist Simeon Walker at the Cultural Institute’s Summer Gathering in June 2025 and Aayushi Jain, a contemporary folk singer, gave a performance alongside Visual Vernacular artist Adam Bassett at the Sustainability Awards in July 2025 attended by around 180 staff. Visual Vernacular is a dynamic form of visual storytelling that combines elements of sign language, mime, and physical theatre.



Performances in shared venues

DARE also presented various events open to the wider Leeds community adding to the city’s rich cultural offering.

In November 2024 and in collaboration with Smeaton300, The Marsyas Trio, the University of Leeds’ Ensemble-in-Residence and one of the UK’s foremost mixed chamber ensembles presented an immersive journey celebrating pioneering women engineers who followed in the footsteps of Leeds’ own John Smeaton at the Howard Assembly Room.

December 2024 saw a seasonal celebration performed by the Opera North Youth Chorus at the Clothworker’s Centenary Concert Hall.

In January 2025, for the fourth year in succession, the Howard Assembly Room, in association with the University of Leeds, presented a public concert commemorating Holocaust Memorial Day. This year, on the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, the concert highlighted ‘The Orchestras of Auschwitz’ with musical compositions and arrangements by holocaust prisoners unearthed in the archives of Auschwitz-Birkenau.



Expanding creative thought

A core component of the DARE partnership involves supporting and undertaking joint research and knowledge exchange. In addition, by building creative connections, the DARE partners seek to leverage their convening power to engage with colleagues from across the Higher Education and Creative sectors as well as the wider Civic sector in the formation of, and discussions on, select projects to strengthen our regional, educational and cultural environment.

Research support has been provided in a number of ways throughout the year including engaging in research bid development to explore, for example, Community Arts Partnerships and Ethical Listening in Cultural Production. Opera North has provided industry contacts for University of Leeds researchers and encouraged the participation of Opera North staff and audiences with research into Music and Grief, and Music Identity in secondary school students as well as providing one-on-one support for student dissertations. This is in addition to some more focused activities to promote creative thought.

DARE Academic-in-Residence

Dr Katie Gardner, Lecturer in Arts-based Pedagogical Practices in the Schools of Music and PCI, is the current DARE Academic-in-Residence. Dr Gardner is researching Opera North's approach to using digital and immersive technologies in live performance, while also developing a community experience connecting Opera North's technological past with possible immersive futures.



Dr Gardner explored the Opera North Archive to present a paper in April 2025 on 'The Opera North Special Collection: Locating Physicalities of the Chorus of Opera North in the Archive' at a Symposium on Music Collections in Leeds held at the School of Music. In addition, in May 2025, she worked with soprano Amy Freston from the Opera North Chorus to explore extended reality (XR) possibilities of operatic choral singing via a practical experimentation workshop.

The Creative Case for Sanctuary Sandpit

Opera North's winter production of Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* contained thematic elements referencing migration. This coincided with the University of Leeds and the City of Leeds actively developing cases to become a University and a City of Sanctuary respectively. Opera North gained Theatre of Sanctuary status in 2018. This prompted a sandpit event in February 2025, facilitated by Dominic Gray, exploring the roles that creativity and access to culture can play in the offer and experience of Sanctuary.

Thirty participants joined 'The Creative Case for Sanctuary' sandpit discussion which included people with lived experience of forced migration; researchers and university staff; artists; policymakers and civic representatives; and colleagues from a range of different arts organisations. Some participants had previously joined Opera North's dress rehearsal of *The Flying Dutchman*. The variety of provocations and rich discussion generated a number of ideas which are being taken forward including a potential research bid being developed by Dr Ariana Phillips-Hutton and supported by Professor Edward Venn of the School of Music.

Sandpit participant reflections:

"Thank you once again for such a thought-provoking morning last Friday. I'm still processing all of the beautiful and challenging provocations put forwards by the group and the various sessions."

"It was wonderful to see such a diverse group of people so engaged in the discussions and to hear their stories and rich reflections."

"...a really fantastic sandpit, which I found moving, connective, insightful and inspiring. One of the reasons it could be so impactful is because of the long-term commitment from Opera North to this area of work, and therefore the trust you've created with artists and people with lived experience."

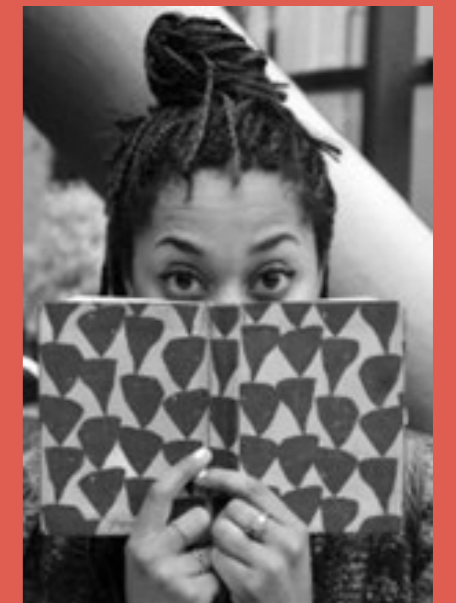
"...amazing, connective, and inspiring stuff in a world that is spinning entirely out of control in a very non-compassionate way (!)"

Creative Education Sandpit Scoping

In July, a group of nine University of Leeds academics, Opera North staff and a representative from Leeds City Council came together to explore the potential for a future sandpit around the concept of a Creative Education. The group explored the possible focus areas for discussion, how the sandpit might be structured and who could be invited.

DARE Art Prize

Writer, performer, producer and maths educator, Keisha Thompson is the fifth winner of the DARE Art Prize, a signature project undertaken by the DARE partnership in association with the National Science and Media Museum and Yorkshire Contemporary. The £15,000 DARE Art Prize is awarded to an innovative, ambitious artist with an original proposal for creative works in collaboration with scientists at the University of Leeds. Keisha has been exploring creativity in maths education. This has included engaging with academics in the School of Mathematics as well as students and staff in the School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies. In September 2025, Keisha will bring to a close this stage of her creative journey with the recording of a workshop featuring musicians and performance art.



DARE Working Group

Co-Chair: Professor Ben Walmsley Dean of Cultural Engagement, University of Leeds

Co-Chair: Dominic Gray Projects Director, Opera North (until Oct 2024) and Cultural Consultant to Opera North

Professor Matthew Treherne Pro-Dean for Research and Innovation, Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures & Professor of Italian Literature, University of Leeds

Professor Barbara Kelly Head of the School of Music and Professor of Music, University of Leeds (from Jan 2025)

Professor John Ladbury Professor of Mechanistic Biology, University of Leeds

Dr Sonja Andrew Associate Professor, Fashion Design Innovation, University of Leeds

Dr Katie Gardner Deputy Director of Student Education in the School of Music, and lecturer in Arts based Pedagogical Practice for both the School of Music and School of Performance and Cultural Industries, University of Leeds & DARE Academic-in-Residence

Emma Bowen Research and Innovation Development Manager, Leeds Arts and Humanities Research Institute, University of Leeds

Wieke Eringa Director, Cultural Institute, University of Leeds

Eddie Wright Student representative, University of Leeds

Christine Chibnall Planning Director, Opera North (until Jan 2025)

Gosha Szablowska Technical and Production Director, Opera North (from Jan 2025)

Sam Day Howard Assembly Room Technical Manager, Opera North (until May 2025)

Emily Simpson Director of Audiences, Opera North

Becky Smith Head of Academic Partnerships, Opera North

Darcy Thorpe Projects Assistant (Academic Partnerships), Opera North

DARE Communications Group

Becky Smith Head of Academic Partnerships, Opera North

Elizabeth Simmonds Communications Manager, Opera North

Darcy Thorpe Projects Assistant (Academic Partnerships), Opera North

Nichola Casse Project Manager, Cultural Institute, University of Leeds

Yasmeen Soudani Communications Officer, Cultural Institute, University of Leeds

Megan Whittaker Communications Officer, Communications and Engagement, Professional Services, University of Leeds

Anisah Arif Communications and Engagement Assistant, Media Relations and Internal Communications, University of Leeds

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