

Screen Production Research Reporting: An ASPERA Scoping Report

June 2017

Commissioned by the Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association
(ASPERA) Executive Committee

Undertaken by the ASPERA Research Sub-Committee

Researched and written by:
Associate Professor Craig Batty and Dr Smiljana Glisovic
RMIT University

With support from:

Dr Marsha Berry (RMIT University), Dr Kath Dooley (Curtin University), Dr Bettina Frankham
(University of Technology Sydney), Dr Susan Kerrigan (University of Newcastle), Dr Margaret McVeigh
(Griffith University), Associate Professor Michael Sergi (Bond University), Associate Professor James Verdon
(Swinburne University of Technology), Ms Sarah Stollman (Independent), Dr Simon Weaving (University of
Newcastle) and Dr Alison Wotherspoon (Flinders University)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report was commissioned by the Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association (ASPERA) and conducted by its Research Sub-Committee, for the benefit of the ASPERA community in Australia and other screen/media education and research communities internationally. It provides an overview of current working environments of screen production practitioner-researchers in Australian universities, and how the frameworks for research reporting and evaluation within them impact on these working environments. The project was conducted through analysis of national research reports and guidelines (e.g., Excellence in Research for Australia, The Watt Review), and interviews conducted with staff working either directly in the screen production research discipline, or in broader research reporting, evaluation and mentoring roles.

The report highlights that environments for creative practice research vary greatly across universities. Despite concerted effort and attention given by universities to develop better processes for reporting and evaluating non-traditional research outputs (e.g., films and screenplays), the results of these efforts vary greatly across the sector. The project also found that the extent to which these variances impact on the practice of the screen production researcher varies: some have changed the way they conduct their research, while others have found a way to comply with university requirements yet still work on projects that may not clearly sit within the 'research' parameters set by the government.

The report concludes that communication involving all stakeholders in the process of conducting and reporting screen production research is important to the future of building research in the discipline. This incorporates a range of people, from the researcher, to administrative staff working in research offices, to those involved in ERA submissions within universities. This would serve to develop frameworks and processes specific to the practice of screen production, while also complying with the requirements of research as set by the government. The report makes recommendations on how some of the main issues and concerns raised in the project might be addressed, namely:

- The report found the frameworks for ERA were relatively non-stringent, and that universities could develop tighter parameters around their approaches to evaluating non-traditional research outputs. The report recommends that these approaches be standardised where possible, with instruction from disciplinary peak bodies.
- Strong and transparent communication between research offices (data entry and evaluation staff, mentors and leaders, etc.) and researchers is important to nurture, to empower those working in the discipline, not disable them.
- Research cultures within universities could be better designed to support practitioner-researchers through the process of reporting their non-traditional outputs, particularly in relation to writing research statements and collating material that serves as evidence of peer review (or its equivalence).

- Discipline-specific peak bodies are an important source of information and support, and as such these organisations are encouraged to provide resources and/or mentoring for practitioner-academics (especially early career practitioner-researchers).
- As the peak body for screen production, ASPERA could lead the development of a framework / set of guidelines for assessing quality in (creative practice) screen production research outputs, to enhance the standing of the discipline in research evaluation exercises (e.g., ERA).

INTRODUCTION

This scoping project and report were commissioned by the Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association (ASPERA), and undertaken through its Research Sub-Committee. ASPERA, which began in 2004, comprises a community of screen practitioners and researchers from universities and specialist institutions across Australia. In addition to this, the association has relationships with The International Association of Film and Television Schools / Centre International de Liaison des Ecoles de Cinéma et de Télévision (CILECT) and the Deans and Directors of Creative Arts (DDCA), as well as connections to similar peak bodies such as the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) and the UK's National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE).

The scoping project was conducted with the participation of members of ASPERA and the report has been compiled with this particular community in mind. The intention of this project and report is to address agendas relevant to members of ASPERA, with the view to support the growth and development of the screen production research discipline. The project foresees that this local focus will put us in good stead to influence positive change in Australia, and to contribute to the broader discourse around screen production research in the international context.

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ASPERA hosts an annual conference for academics working in the screen production discipline, which in line with ASPERA's name focuses on teaching, learning and research. Recent such conferences have been hosted in Canberra (University of Canberra, 2016), Adelaide (Flinders University, 2015) and Newcastle (University of Newcastle, 2014). With support from the ASPERA Executive, RMIT University has also developed Sightlines: Filmmaking in the Academy, a hybrid film festival and conference for the same community of academics¹. There have been two Sightlines Festivals to date (2014, 2016), both of which have drawn in international academics and screen practitioners. While research has always been on the agenda for ASPERA, Sightlines was created as a specific response to ongoing debates about the state and status of research in the discipline, especially of creative practice research².

Certain issues are perpetually voiced by academics working in screen production, which hinge on the difficulty of validating their creative practice works as (non-traditional) research outputs. In short, this is due to a difficulty in conceiving and communicating what they do – i.e., what screen production research is, and how it contributes to a broader research community and to knowledge. The difficulty appears partly to do with the very different research cultures these researchers work in when compared to a number of other academic disciplines, and how their works are perceived 'as research' by their institutions, if at all.

1 Sightlines was conceived of by RMIT's Dr Leo Berkeley, a former ASPERA Executive member and regular contributor to projects and publications.

2 Creative practice research here means an overriding methodology where the production of a 'creative work' (e.g., film, screenplay, web series) sits at the centre of the research enquiry. Elsewhere this is also known as practice-led research, practice-based research and research-led practice.

One hypothesis for the variance in the experiences of academics accounting for their non-traditional outputs, is that the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) frameworks set by the Australian Research Council (ARC) are being interpreted variously – and perhaps without transparency – across institutions, impacting on how creative practice research outputs are being validated (and thus valued) at the local level, before even being submitted for ERA (if at all). Could it be that the way we apply and interpret the frameworks of ERA is inconsistent across our institutions? Ways of reporting and evaluating research at school, department and/or university level seem to vary, but to what extent are ERA frameworks open to interpretation?

This scoping project therefore looks to the ASPERA community to try and understand the root of these problems, and in so doing starts to address them in a targeted, productive way. It hopes to encourage stakeholders to move towards practical solutions that will give researchers in screen production higher levels of confidence about their (non-traditional) research. This is with the hope that they can then leverage institutional power in order to grow the discipline and creative practice research more broadly.

Theoretically, the project is situated within the broad literature on creative practice research (see, for example, Barrett & Bolt, 2010; Davies, 2004; Gibson, 2010; Haseman, 2006), and the specific literatures on screen production research (see, for example, Batty, 2015; FitzSimons, 2015; Kerrigan et al., 2015) and the impact of ERA on creative disciplines (see, for example, Kerrigan et al., 2016; Krauth et al., 2012). It also builds on the work of Glisovic, Berkeley and Batty (2016), which considers the problems of peer review for screen production research outputs, with the intention of further highlighting the various environments that practitioner-academics work in, and how and why they vary.

As a driving assumption of this project, what might be hampering the research activities of many in the ASPERA community is the lack of a survey that scopes and describes the range of universities and environments that screen production researchers are working in – in effect, a baseline from which we can all begin to understand the issues and problems we face, in order to move forward and grow research in the discipline. With the aim of coming to a common understanding about how the discipline can think, speak and write about its research practices, and further, how it might conceive of consistent evaluation frameworks for such works, this project attempts to firstly glean a sense of the lay of the land, and secondly provide a set of principles and frameworks for how the formal requirements of universities reporting research might be positively met.

BACKGROUND

In 2016, Kerrigan, Leahy and Cohen published a paper based on their ‘Burning Issues’ study (from events in 2013 and 2015), which looked at the main issues facing the Australian screen production research community. The study was based on a number of symposia and interviews with members of the ASPERA community – academics working in the screen production discipline. The study revealed that practitioner-researchers in screen production are working in very different research environments across their respective institutions. The validation of screen production works as research is a major source of contention, leading to feelings of angst, unfairness (compared with other academic colleagues), and even anger (see Kerrigan et al., 2016). This is especially the case when aspects such as workload allocation and academic promotion come into play.

This project builds on the foundational work arising from the Burning Issues study. One theme arising from that study is that in order to grow this discipline, the ASPERA community of practitioner-researchers need to gather and contribute to debates relating to some of the issues identified. The ASPERA community is changing – there are now far more early career researchers (ECRs) and higher degree by research candidates (HDRs) who are active members of the organisation; many of ASPERA’s more established members now have PhDs and are becoming skilled researchers; and there is a (slowly) growing professoriate. Governmental research requirements are also changing. For example, we have seen a major shift in the way research funding will be organised and in the way that research quality will be assessed. For these reasons, this scoping project intends to further the debates initiated by the Burning Issues study, taking into account the ground that has shifted. Of particular interest to this study is the relationships that exist between ERA, university research offices and individual academics, to inform how we might practically move some of the issues faced by the ASPERA community forward.

The central issue driving this research project is the ‘validation’ of research outputs. This is important at an institutional and individual level as it is tied to university funding from the government, academic promotions and individual work plans. Until very recently ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ research outputs were ‘measured’ by two different systems: Higher Education Research Data Collection (HERDC, traditional outputs only) and ERA (which includes non-traditional outputs). Following a review of research assessment commissioned by the Australian Government (Watt Review, 2015) and its consequent recommendations, a new model has been implemented where all funding will be based on quality measures rather than quantity measures. What this means is that HERDC is no longer instituted, ERA will be a more focal point of validation, and other measures and procedures are yet to be determined.

With these changes we can see a clear shift away from quantity, towards quality measures, where ‘validation’ becomes a more complex and nuanced exercise. With this change we might see traditional and non-traditional research outputs entering a more ‘equal’ playing field. For the non-traditional research output, validation means not only a simple question of whether or not a work is a research outcome, but also includes questions of quality – assuming that an institution recognises this type of output at all. The measures for traditional research outputs, which

evaluate the parameters for what constitutes research (e.g., is it peer reviewed; is the publisher a commercial one?) and the quality of publication outlets, have long been established (if not contested). So while traditional research outputs still have to undergo internal ‘checks’, the process is much more defined than in the case of non-traditional research outputs (NTROs)³. It is here that the problem for many appears to arise, because although the government provides guidelines for this type of research (as drawn up in the ERA guidelines), these guidelines are vague and easily open to interpretation.

The lack of clarity and definition around quality measures for NTROs is to be expected for a number of reasons, one of which is the still-developing area of creative practice research in general. It is also a very diverse area, which would potentially not benefit from a more stringent approach. But perhaps it is important for a single discipline within the creative arts and humanities, such as screen production, to address issues that are specific to it and to begin to articulate slightly more defined measures based on its particularities, such as its unique position in relation to its industrial, educational and scholarly contexts. Research validation frameworks across these different environments vary and do not always align with the understandings of universities.

As it stands, the discipline seems to be on different footings (Kerrigan et al., 2016), speaking in slightly different languages, and arguably stalling the growth of screen production research⁴. This matters for the ASPERA community because if it does not agree on a certain set of parameters for the discipline, it is hard to argue for changes that might benefit the kind of work the community wants to be doing. This project unpacks these specificities in an attempt to understand how best to move forward to establish consistent frameworks of evaluation for the discipline. In order to contribute to this larger debate, the project looks at ‘best practice’ ways that non-traditional research outputs are reported, and the ways that researchers communicate within their institutions (e.g., between research offices and/or evaluation panels).

As highlighted, a central aspect that informs these relationships, policies and procedures is the ERA framework for research evaluation. In 2009 the ARC replaced the Research Quality Framework (RQF) with ERA, a new system for evaluating the quality of research outputs from Australian universities. Of great importance to ERA is the inclusion of non-traditional research outputs, which are more commonly known as ‘creative practice research outputs’ or ‘creative works’. Following its pilot in 2009, ERA has been conducted in 2010, 2012 and 2015, with the next round scheduled for 2018. The frameworks set by ERA are intended to standardise how we evaluate NTROs. Screen production research outputs fall within this framework; however, it is apparent from the various gatherings of the ASPERA community and the publications highlighted, that the ERA framework does not necessarily provide a clear, standardised or even particularly satisfactory environment within universities.

3 These measures are always evolving for every discipline and every kind of output. This is positive and is to be expected. Even as we write there is a strong move at RMIT University, in its College of Design and Social Context, to develop measures for quality that reflect the current state of our disciplines. This is being undertaken both for traditional and non-traditional research outputs.

4 In comparison with other disciplines such as art and design, architecture, creative writing and performance, research in/on/about screen production is very under-developed. While there are numerous books on the market dealing with media production, very few focus on the practice of developing, making and exhibiting content for all types of screen. There are very few books that combine theory with practice.

In an attempt to understand how the ERA framework is being applied across universities, and how this is influencing the academic research environments, this project began with the following broad questions:

1. How are ERA frameworks being interpreted variously across institutions? Is this impacting on how NTROs are being validated at the local level; and if so, does this impact on the work of the screen production practitioner-researcher?
2. Are particular research cultures and reporting processes responsible for the concerns that are continually being relayed? Do ERA guidelines satisfactorily address the needs of those working in the field of screen production?
3. Are the problems facing screen production researchers general ones for creative practice researchers, or are there particular problems that screen production practitioner-researchers are facing?

A suitable research design was developed to explore these questions, as described below.

METHODOLOGY

Empirical research for the project was approved by the RMIT University Human Research Ethics Committee, application number DSC CHEAN B 0000020093-04/16.

The project was conducted in two phases: phase one was a top-down approach in order to establish a picture of the expectations from government around what researchers do; phase two took a bottom-up approach to understand how the experience of undertaking screen production research compares with these expectations. A summary of these phases is as follows:

Phase 1:

At the National Level: Frameworks for Research Evaluation and Funding

This phase included a review of ARC publications on the topic of evaluation and validation of non-traditional research outputs. In addition we conducted a literature review of critical material and evaluations pertaining to these primary sources, the most comprehensive being the Watt Review of Research Policy and Funding Arrangements (Watt, 2015). A brief overview of other literature in this field is offered, but the report identifies that there is a dearth of critical writing in this field.

Phase 2:

At the Local Level: The Lived Experience

An invitation to participate in a semi-structured interview was sent to 11 academics from eight ASPERA-member universities. From these requests, five interviews were conducted with five individuals from five different universities. Participants were asked to a) provide any documentation pertaining to policies and procedures, should this not breach any confidentiality agreements with their institution; and b) participate in a short interview/discussion on the topic of their experience of these policies and procedures. These interviews occurred in person, via Skype and via email. Interviews were conducted with academics who are on panels involved in the assessment of NTROs, and/or who are involved in university ERA submissions for the Field of Research (FoR) Codes that are usually weighted towards creative practice research: broadly, at the two-digit level, 12 (Built Environment and Design) and 19 (Studies in Creative Arts and Writing); and for ASPERA specifically, at the four-digit level, 1902 (Film, Television and Digital Media).

With this same sample we then interrogated how the differing institutional climates affect how practitioner-academics conduct research in/for their institution. For example, does the research climate affect the nature of the work pursued and the types of research question asked? Are there things researchers feel they can and cannot interrogate? These are crucial questions for the project because they help us to understand how the sector is or is not shaped by external factors, which also assists us in thinking about screen production research in general: what it can and cannot do; what it should be and do; and what the scope of current screen production research is.

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This sample size was relatively small and certainly a larger sample may have garnered more complex and perhaps more varied results. However, at this stage it has proved a large enough sample to demonstrate the diversity of approaches to the issues raised by the study, and also to begin to develop a set of ‘best practice’ recommendations. Similarly, some documents that could have informed this project, such as individual university guidelines for reporting research outputs, were not available for analysis. Understandably, many of these documents are kept confidential within individual universities.

FINDINGS

PHASE 1:

AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL: FRAMEWORKS FOR RESEARCH EVALUATION AND FUNDING

Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) is administered by the Australian Research Council (ARC). ERA is an evaluation framework for excellence in research across all disciplines in Australian higher education institutions. For creative practice research, the evaluation frameworks centre on outputs that result from research activity, and that are subjected to peer review or equivalent. In some areas, such as journalism and creative writing, portfolios of short/small works are curated around a research theme or project. Known as ‘non-traditional research outputs’ (NTROs), or more often ‘creative works’, these outputs comprise the work itself (or a sample of) and an accompanying 2000-character research statement with three sections: research background, research contribution and research significance. Supporting materials are also often submitted to validate peer review or its equivalent (i.e., a measure of quality/gatekeeping), such as invitations, commissions, contracts, reviews, awards and prizes.

It is the task of Australian universities to collect publications data (books, book chapters, journal articles and refereed conference proceedings), and material pertaining to NTROs for peer review (such as the work itself or documentation of it, and the research statement). During any given ERA assessment round (e.g., 2012, 2015, 2018), universities chose the best 30 per cent of works in each of the categories listed, sorted by discipline as identified by Field of Research codes⁵. These works are then peer reviewed by external experts, resulting in a score that characterises research in the discipline at the institution. These scores range from one (well below world standard) to five (well above world standard). These scores formally impact governmental funding, and informally impact the institution’s reputation which has a range of impacts at many levels. An individual academic’s career is not necessarily impacted by these ratings, which includes whether or not their work was chosen for the top 30 per cent peer review; however, many universities do use the data collected for ERA to inform internal measures for KPIs and similar.

Throughout ERA’s eight-year history, approaches and frameworks have been revised⁶. The process was subject to the Watt Review of Research Policy and Funding Arrangements (Watt Review) in 2015, which encompassed a broad evaluation of all research policy and funding, with the intention of building the quality of research conducted in Australian universities and translating this research into economic, social and cultural benefits (i.e., impact). The results of this review and its recommendations have been published, and will be analysed in the next part of this report. While the Watt Review makes recommendations for change to the current ERA model, the new guidelines and approaches are still (at the time of writing) under development.

5 (e.g., 1902 is Film, Television and Digital Media; 2001 is Communication and Media Studies).

6 ERA began as a pilot in 2009, replacing the Research Quality Framework (RQF).

It has, however, been confirmed that a trial for a new model of research evaluation will be implemented across Australia in 2017. Known as the Research Engagement and Impact Assessment trial, specific details of this trial are yet to be released; for now, the project is still working with the existing version of ERA, which is likely to remain with some additions to account for impact. It could well be that this is in the form of case studies such as those used by the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF).

Throughout the changes to the evaluation frameworks, it is the definition of 'research' that is consistent and that underpins all models. Research is defined by the ARC as:

The creation of new knowledge and/or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way so as to generate new concepts, methodologies, inventions and understandings. This could include synthesis and analysis of previous research to the extent that it is new and creative (ERA 2015).

How this definition figures in the ways researchers undertake and communicate their creative practice research, and how peer reviewers of this type of research interpret this definition, is not without complexity. However, for the main part these definitions and resulting frameworks determine the environments that researchers work in. Yet while this is the very intention of such frameworks – to establish standards across Australian universities – the way in which these definitions and frameworks function for creative practice research, and further to that, for specific disciplines, can vary widely. While variation can be a source of richness, the problem of such variation is what underpins this project.

The frameworks are both stringent and flexible. They are stringent in regard to the ways in which research needs to be framed: bound by a very specific discourse (e.g., research background, contribution and significance), privileging on the one hand the verbal and written, while the wordcount is small and requires the peer reviewer to be intimately informed of the very specifics of the research field of the work. For creative practice research, the medium of the work seems to determine anyone working in that medium to be an expert in that field. This is highly problematic and the diversity of practice in each medium needs serious consideration when looking for 'experts' in the particular 'field' to which the researcher is contributing.

The flexibility of the frameworks means that universities can strategise their submissions and how they curate the top 30 per cent of works that go out for external peer review. Universities can also make their own policies in regard to which works they accept as legitimate research outcomes, which, while should be based on the definition of research as highlighted above, can also include size/scale/duration and venue prestige.

Critical Literature on Evaluation Frameworks

Literature on creative practice research and how it is undertaken within institutional models has been gaining some prominence in the last decade. This includes a strong focus on the research degree and effective research training environments, for both candidates and supervisors, that build capacity in this 'new space' (see Hamilton et al., 2014; Hamilton et al., 2015; Webb et al., 2013). Some extant literature can be found which focuses on evaluation metrics for Humanities disciplines in general (see Ochsner, 2016); and issues in disciplines outside of creative practice (Vanclay, 2011; Haslam and Koval, 2010, Crowe and Watt, 2016). There is far less written on the specific policies

and procedures that determine how creative practice research is being recognised by universities and what this means for the kind of creative practice research being undertaken.

Some work has been undertaken specifically for the screen production research discipline in the Australian context. ASPERA has been at the forefront of mobilising these conversations, such as a 2011 special issue of *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Programs* (ASPERA: New Screens, New Producers, New Learning), in which selected papers delivered at the 2010 conference (held at the University of Technology, Sydney) were published. In their editorial, Broderick and Leahy demonstrate how ERA approaches to validating creative practice research directly impacts on the development and recognition of screen production researchers in particular.

Other more recent publications have sought to extend some of these inquiries, moving further afield with attempts to define the field, to offer examples of ‘best practice’, and to consider effective environments for creative practice research training (see Batty, 2016; Batty and Kerrigan, 2017; Glisovic et al., 2016; Kerrigan et al., 2015.) However, the literature is preliminary and scarce. Continued engagement with these debates is crucial, as the climates that researchers work in are continually changing. Understanding how the screen production research discipline responds and adapts to these changes is a necessary and ongoing conversation.

One valuable resource is Adams’ work (2013), and the follow up paper by McDougall (2015), which addresses issues for creative practice researchers as they pertain to the UK REF. In the UK study the issues and concerns expressed by practitioner-researchers, such as a lack of confidence in defining and defending creative practice as research, resound with the issues identified in the Burning Issues study (Kerrigan et al., 2016). The additional aspect covered by McDougall is the perspective from peer reviewers working for the REF panels, and how they evaluated not only the outputs themselves, but also how they had been curated and contextualised. The authors were able to make the following five recommendations for improvements of practice work in future REF rounds:

1. on-going portfolios of works (including reflections and documentation) should be kept, according to a standardised template;
2. include impact evaluation;
3. practice research groups should be utilised for works-in-progress, in order to discuss and address broader issues in practice-based research through specific works;
4. national seminars and workshops to be held;
5. in tandem with the above, a mentor system to be set up.

There are aspects of the above study that are pertinent to the Australian context. However, it also points to the benefit of conducting a similar survey of panel members in our own local context – especially reviewers involved in the FoR Codes relevant to screen production research.

In 2015 the Australian Government commissioned Dr Ian Watt AO to conduct a review of research policy and funding. After four months of consultation with universities, industry and government, a set of conclusions and recommendations were made. The following section will outline the recommendations made in this report and speculate about what the future climate might look like.

The Watt Review

The Watt Review was commissioned to review research policy and funding arrangements across all disciplines in Australian universities. This was with the view to strengthen the research systems, which in this case focuses on collaboration between universities and businesses, and the ‘outcomes’ of research. The review responded to all kinds of research, including creative practice. How the review translates to practical consequences for the screen production research field is still up for debate/interpretation.

According to the Watt Review, Australia performs poorly compared to other OECD countries when it comes to connecting publicly funded research with industry. The focus of the reform suggested by the review is a model that acts as an incentive for collaboration between universities and industry. The end-user in this report is identified as belonging to the industry and business sector. Universities are expected to take on the recommended changes immediately, with a four-year transition period.

Part of the reform is the simplification of the allocation of the Research Block Grant by combining the current six schemes: Research Infrastructure Block Grant (RIGB), Sustainable Research Excellence (SRE), Joint Research Engagement (JRE), Research Training Scheme (RTS), Australian Postgraduate Awards (APA) and the International Postgraduate Research Scheme (IPRS); into two schemes: Research Support and Research Training. These were introduced in early 2017. This aspect of the reform emphasises the importance of improved research training and Higher Degree by Research (HDR) completions, and again stresses the importance of building industry connections at this early stage of a researcher’s career. For example, all PhD candidates are encouraged to undertake some form of industry placement or experience within candidature⁷, and in 2017 a rollout of a scheme to this effect will take place.

Other recommendations, such as a continuous round for ARC Linkage grants applications, again is intended to enable a more attractive model for business and industry research collaborations. As part of this aspect of the reform, the recommendation is that industry and business professionals are included as peer reviewers of grant proposals to ensure that proposed research projects will meet their needs.

Another aspect of the reform that is likely to significantly impact the creative practice research community, is the implementation of the aforementioned ‘engagement and impact framework’. This will be based, in part, on the UK’s Research Excellence Framework (REF), which assesses the impact of research, and will sit alongside ERA, which currently only measures quality. The framework will likely include quantitative and qualitative measures, based on case studies and expert review, and also on the Research Engagement for Australia model developed by the Australian Academy of Technology and Engineering. The Watt Report concedes that concerns were raised that the engineering model is not appropriate for the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (2015, p. 72), but it makes the recommendation nonetheless. This approach will be piloted in 2017, and the reporting conducted every three years. It is proposed that 10-20 per cent of university research funding will be based on results of the engagement and impact assessment.

7 The assumption here is that all PhD candidates are young, recent Honours graduates. For screen production, in fact, many PhD candidates come back to the academy after time working in the industry.

PHASE 2: AT THE LOCAL LEVEL: THE LIVED EXPERIENCE

In order to gather data for this part of the project, an invitation to participate in a semi-structured interview was sent to 11 academics from eight ASPERA-member universities. From these requests, five interviews were conducted with individuals from five different universities. All of the interviewees hold academic positions at their respective universities, and the majority of them are involved in screen production research⁸. The positions these individuals hold varies: some are on review panels, others are Early Career Researchers and new to their institutions. This data will be presented under the themes that emerged across the interviews for this phase:

- The research statement
- Reporting systems
- Assessment: research, quality, and workload
- Support provided to academics (knowledge transfer)

The results from these interviews are very preliminary. What was reported to us was bound by subjective experiences, privileged positions (of knowledge around processes), and people in roles that were invested in the task with their own personal and professional agendas. As such, the ‘results’ are not intended to provide any definitive statements about university climates. Rather, they serve as useful points of conversation and discussion around the most effective approaches to the task of recognising, reporting and evaluating creative practice research, and in some cases, screen production research in particular.

The two broad guiding questions for the interviews were:

1. What processes do individual universities implement for the reporting and evaluation of creative practice research outputs?
2. What is your experience of these processes? Do they determine the kind of research you undertake?

The following sub-questions were posed to interviewees, depending on the role they held at their institution:

- Are there documents available to staff that outline the process for reporting non-traditional research outputs?
- Who compiled these documents/processes?
- What individuals are involved in the process?

⁸ Others were in allied creative arts disciplines, and have experience of ERA through the 19 FoR Code (Studies in Creative Arts and Writing).

- What aspects of the process are successful?
- What would make the process easier?
- What kind of support, if any, do academics receive from the university during the process of compiling their ERA reporting?
- Can you envisage any other support that would be useful to academics?
- Can you envisage any revisions to the current processes that would benefit academics in this process?
- Who is involved in writing the Explanatory Statements for ERA, which contextualises the data? Are these openly shared by the institution?
- How familiar are you with the ERA reporting guidelines with regard to evaluating research?
- Are you aware of the process of reporting your creative practice research outputs required by your institution?
- Could you please describe the process of reporting you are required to do.
- What aspects of the process are successful?
- What would make the process easier?
- Does your understanding of ERA and other research frameworks influence the creative works you produce or the manner in which you approach your research/practice?

As these questions suggest, the project proposed was an ambitious undertaking. It was nevertheless important to cast widely to help determine the scope of the ongoing issues being experienced by the ASPERA community. The many questions asked were intended to provide launching points from which the conversation can be moved forward. As the results below show, the sample size for the interviews was ultimately not large enough to address all of the above questions. This points to the need for more work to be undertaken by the discipline, in consultation with this project, so that academics can take up the issues and recommendations within their own institutions.

Nevertheless, here we offer a summary of what emerged from the interviews conducted for this project. Participant identities and their institutions have been kept anonymous so as to protect their professional integrity.

The Research Statement

Consistently, interviewees expressed that a 2000-character statement cannot do enough to articulate the research background, contribution and significance of a creative practice work. The current process, as dictated by ERA, also relies on individual peer reviewers knowing the field that the work is contributing to. This is felt not to be a realistic expectation, and for this reason the short statement cannot do the work it needs to in order to garner ‘proper’ evaluation. For one interviewee this amounted to an act of ‘interpretation’ performed by the reviewer (both at institutional level, and ERA level), as opposed to the researcher identifying the research contribution: ‘you’re relying on the peer reviewer to make the research plausibility, not the artist. The artist can’t do this in 250 words’.

The contextual statement was consistently deemed a very crucial aspect of articulating creative research works as research. We might observe here that this is somewhat a shift in perspective amongst the community members,

where historically, screen production researchers at events such as the annual ASPERA conference persistently expressed a resistance to contextual statements. For one interviewee involved in the peer review process for the *Sightlines* journal⁹, the experience shaped how she thinks about the significance of the statement. One reviewer of her work noted that they needed more written context in order to review the film submission. Since this happened, this interviewee has been conscious of the need to 'write more' and give a more explicit research context to the film submission.

According to this interviewee, this is simply the stage we are at in the discipline, where we need 'a bit of both [the creative work and the contextual statement]. Once we're better versed in the field, we wouldn't need so much explanation, we could just reference other academic works. We're building the case studies now, so we need to do the work of writing'. What this interviewee seems to be suggesting is that the discipline is at a nascent point in its development of creative practice research. The 'case studies' are the current works, which are paving the way for best practice in terms of screen production research, and in this way they need to be more explicit in terms of their research agendas and how they are achieving them. For this interviewee, the 2000-character limit for the research statement was not substantial enough to do this work.

Reporting Systems

Different reporting systems are used at different institutions for collecting research statements, evidence of peer review, illustrative materials and other forms of publication 'data'. The interviews revealed how important the reporting systems used for reporting can be, in regard to validating creative works as research, providing a user-friendly experience which is not daunting for the researcher, and creating a level-playing field when it comes to works being assessed at ERA time by the government and their proxies. The material required for reporting creative works can vary widely, depending not only on the discipline, but also the work itself. This poses a challenge to universities in terms of how to best present creative research works in a way that an external reviewer can effectively assess those works.

One interviewee had been actively involved in developing a user-friendly online reporting system that was felt could be implemented across all universities. The reporting system was an attempt to 'curate' all of ERA's requirements, such as the research statement, examples of peer review (or its equivalence) and excerpts/samples of the work itself. The information available for evaluation would be standardised in this reporting system, and it was felt that assessment would occur on a more level playing field. This project was supported to a certain stage of development and then, according to the interviewee, rejected by the government. According to the interviewee, the government changed the guidelines in order to make the reporting system defunct.

At another institution, the research reporting system does not have an option for entering the collateral evidence required for ERA. For this reason the exercise of entering non-traditional research outputs was deemed tokenistic as these works could never effectively be submitted to ERA. It was the view of this interviewee that this places non-traditional outputs as less relevant/important.

⁹ *Sightlines: Filmmaking in the Academy* was developed as an online moving image journal after the inaugural *Sightlines: Filmmaking in the Academy* conference/film festival in 2015.

At another university a new system had been adopted for traditional publication outputs, while the old, and apparently cumbersome system was still in place for NTROs. It was the view of this academic that this put people off reporting their NTROs, and that it was not an even playing-field for creative practice research academics.

In a third university, recognition of non-traditional research outputs has only just begun, however the reporting system to formally report these works has not been implemented. Effectively this means these works are not yet being captured, despite the willingness to do so.

Assessment: Research, Quality and Workload

This section is concerned with how screen production research works are being assessed at university level. There are three main issues here: a) does this work satisfy the definition of ‘research’; b) how do we evaluate the quality of the work; and c) what does this mean in terms of workload allocations?

While many of the interviewees claimed that there was work to be done in regard to how works were being assessed (and by whom)¹⁰, and what this means in terms of their workload allocations, they all also said that they had witnessed a consistent improvement under the influence of academics working in the creative practice research field. Here assessment is directly linked with value, meaning that an academic’s performance hinges on who, how and by what means the creative practice work is judged as research.

At one institution, the ‘points system’ for allocating workload in relation to output was not transparent, which raised issues of clear processes and objective value. According to the interviewee:

People get a total figure but not breakdown. Points are used for active researcher status. It’s about workload and not much else. It doesn’t measure quality, it is just metrics. But also moving image takes many forms so equivalences are hard. It’s hard to work out how to value this stuff. Metrics are important because they help with equity in terms of research allocation.

As an example, some concerns were expressed regarding the relationship between the script and the film, which for a writer and a director would equate to two separate outputs (claimed individually), but which for a writer-director might be more problematic. As the interviewee said, ‘usually it doesn’t “count” twice, however, often it has to be vetted twice’.

If, for traditional publications, a book is equivalent to five journal papers or book chapters, then what are the ramifications for what one might call a ‘major’ creative work, such as a feature film, TV series or large installation work? While some universities have explicit policies regarding ‘major’ and ‘minor’ creative works and workload/points allocation¹¹, for the ASPERA community this is still a debated issue. In one institution, for example, the counting of a feature film did not equate to the publishing of a book. In another institution, however, where quality measures are increasingly being used, the ‘size’ of a creative practice research work would be considered by workload committees.

¹⁰ While the argument around whether the length of a work should be used as a metric for significance or workload allocation, is ongoing, the interviewees also acknowledged this argument is difficult, if not impossible, to resolve. A number of interviewees also stressed there was some progress to be made in regard to engaging discipline experts to do the assessment of works at all stages of the process.

¹¹ See, for example, the University of Melbourne and the University of Sydney.

That being said, the role undertaken by the researcher and the quality of the work's screening venue would also be part of this 'value' conversation.

Funding is another particular difficulty for this sector. As one interviewee said, 'to make a film you have to get the money, a lot of it'. Unlike with some traditional publishing, especially that which is theoretical as opposed to empirical, 'a filmmaker can't just go out there and make a film. It costs money, it's hard, [and] that's the struggle'. In this way, while funding is a means to an end for many filmmakers, in the academy, funding is also given a 'value' judgement in the sense that it counts towards measurements of research activity.

At one university, according to an interviewee, Screen Australia income is not counted as research income because it is 'impossible to put through the books'. Questions of research aside, this is an interesting situation because being the federal screen agency with a national remit, much like the ARC, for the discipline it could be argued that Screen Australia is the equivalent of a high quality, competitive funder (i.e., Category 1) whose applications undergo a rigorous process of peer review.

Regarding the effect that the research imperative has on the type of creative work produced, one interviewee said that the models and frameworks do not influence their work, 'but for other people, yes, I see this with some of the other ASPERA people'. Many of the academics interviewed did not feel that the films they were writing/making had changed because of the research environment they worked in. That being said, they had varied interest in whether or not their institutions would count their work as research: they were all determined to keep making the work they wanted to make.

Finally regarding value, at most universities it appears that at least a mix of traditional and non-traditional research outputs is encouraged, which helps to give research credibility to creative works as well as helping to meet publication targets. A strategy some academics talked about is to always think of writing journal articles that can accompany their creative works. This is helpful to a number of interviewees because it enables them to think about what they are doing as they are doing it (e.g., research intentions and contributions). For one interviewee, writing about their creative work is important in terms of sharing thinking and practices with the ASPERA community, as a way of helping to grow the discipline's research capabilities.

Support Provided to Academics (Knowledge Transfer)

While the majority of the universities represented by the interviewees seem to be putting time, energy and money into understanding ERA, and into developing policies and procedures that serve both university strategies and individual researchers working in the creative practice space, it also became apparent that different universities are at different stages of this process.

For example, while one university reported that it had an academic working in a school-based creative practice research leader role for three years, another university has only recently started to recognise NTROs. Sometimes these discrepancies are within universities: one department, faculty or school may have this kind of support, while another equivalent department may not. Some universities have worked hard to put together

information sheets for their staff, which explain, simplify and guide them through the process of contextualising and reporting their work as research. While one interviewee claimed their own model was informed by another university's metrics for measuring the quality of publication venues, other documents are confidential and were not available for analysis for this study.

Most interviewees identified that these procedures were continually being revised and developed. While this can be frustrating and can mean that academics are often not abreast with current policies, it does suggest that people are working towards establishing best practices in this area. It was the view of some of the interviewees that these changes were also about institutional strategies, which changed often and were not transparent or communicated effectively with staff.

Communication between research offices and personnel involved in the setting up and execution of evaluation frameworks, and the academics themselves, varies greatly from one institution to the next. Similarly, who the personnel are that sit on panels that make these decisions are also varied. There is a general consensus that assessment panels should comprise discipline experts, and that the processes conducted by these panels, and the measures used for assessment, should be transparent and communicated to all staff.

A number of the interviewees said that they relied on their research offices to assist them on a needs basis, and that these departments were extremely important in terms of providing the support they needed. A strategy taken by a number of institutions is to run seminars and create opportunities to find out about ERA statements, which is another way they provide support, as well as one-on-one assistance. The relationship between the creative practice researcher and administrative support was expressed thus by one of the interviewees: 'it's a team effort, they have to understand art, and we have to understand research'.

Some universities provide templates to aid with the writing of the research statement. Staff members often find these very helpful, but one of the interviewees said: 'this is sometimes very rigid, and often in the end you look at it and it doesn't really reflect what the work actually is. The template does not allow for expressing the complexity of the work'. One academic said they were 'always at a loss'. How researchers have to communicate what they do 'changes a lot depending on who you talk to and on opinions: what is points, what is research, what isn't publishing... the whole world is still so underdone'.

From a number of the interviews it also became clear how important ASPERA was as a source of knowledge and community building. One interviewee said they found out what they know from ASPERA and not their institution. Others found out information in a haphazard way. They say these are things that should be learnt 'as a process, like with other procedures when you start at a uni'.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Following the interview process, the report can conclude that all of the interviewees involved had seen positive changes occur at their institutions in regard to the broad issues discussed in this report: the processes around

reporting NTROs, and the assessment and evaluation frameworks implemented at their universities, as guided in part by ERA frameworks. It was noted that these changes were partly achieved through lobbying, and partly from a genuine interest and effort made by research offices. The majority of the interviewees said that they are relatively happy with their current situations, however they can see there is certainly more work to be done.

Despite the small sample size, the results clearly suggest that people's experiences within their institutions vary. There is also a shift in attitude and practice taking place in regard to the main issues discussed in this report: the research statement, the systems reporting, assessment of works, and support. In this discussion we would like to draw attention to some patterns, consensus and questions that arose as a result of the interviews and their analysis.

In regard to the research statement, given that other creative practice disciplines are required to use the same research statement for ERA reporting, could it be that the screen production discipline is less confident about what the statement needs to achieve? Is there consensus about why the statement is needed, therefore what it needs to say/do? However, the positive shift towards using the statement as an opportunity to be explicit about the research dimension in a creative work, might be a marker of a developing field.

Some of the support offered academics are the templates for writing the research statement. On the one hand templates appear too rigid, and on the other hand people feel that there is not enough consistency in the approach to understanding creative practice research outcomes. Could this be a symptom of the different approaches across universities, or could it be that different academics have different experiences and expectations of what the environment should look like, and the kind of support they should be receiving?

The interviews also point to a variance regarding the degree to which the frameworks and requirements of 'research' set by universities and the government impacted on the kind of work being produced by screen production research practitioners. The question arose: is this difference in how we conceptualise and practice in the university (how we reconcile the academy/art debate) partly generational? Might this academy/art dichotomy be less of an issue for researchers who have been conditioned by the academy in this contemporary climate where having a PhD is a requirement of working in the university? It would be interesting in further research to compare the views and practices of Early Career Researchers with those of more experienced practitioners who entered the academy under different circumstances. This might reveal that the academy has 'conditioned' practitioner-academics differently at different times; hence their understanding of 'practice' and 'research' varies.

It is clear that the processes taken in the reporting of NTROs is an important area to investigate further, and that it is much more than simply an administrative question. In order to further this conversation, communication between academics and all personnel involved in these processes, including the administrative support from university research offices, is paramount. This area is perhaps less to do with the conceptualisation of research, but certainly it impacts on how the researcher conducts their research, the kind of support they have for the collection of materials required by research offices and ERA, and the time and effort required. For already time-poor academics, the process of documenting and evidencing their work can be onerous.

In regard to the assessment of works, the report suggests that quality and quantity measures are differently defined across institutions, and have different consequences for the researcher in regard to their workload allocations, promotions, and also potentially the kind of research work they pursue. Part of this equation is the amount of funding a researcher acquires. While many practitioners might seek financial assistance from relevant screen and arts agencies, it is not clear if and how universities value this type of funding as research income. While ‘research income’ has to, by definition, be used to conduct research, when practice is used as the mode of research, things become muddy. This is even more complex if/when such funding applications do not frame the practice as research.

The amount and nature of support given to academics through the process of reporting also varies across, and even within, universities. Sharing these experiences can work to strengthen this area for everyone across the board. The question arises, however, about how much the discipline should be sharing this knowledge and using it as part of the conversation around knowledge exchange across institutions. ERA is a competitive exercise, after all: it is a process by which universities are ranked against one another, and this ranking determines some of the government’s allocation of funding. Different universities also have different agendas and strategies, hence, it may not be relevant to standardise all of the reporting approaches. Perhaps it is important to define exactly which aspects of our approaches to reporting research should be standardised.

In terms of knowledge transfer between academics and administrative staff, it can be seen that on the one hand it is important for all staff to keep abreast with policies that determine how their research outputs will be assessed and valued. On the other hand this might feel onerous to academics, and for this reason they rely on administrative staff to keep up to date, to communicate the changes, and to be available for help when this information becomes relevant to the academic.

This relationship between academic staff and administrative staff has emerged as a crucial one to further investigate. This relationship can be tricky to negotiate as personnel that work in research offices are not necessarily (or likely) academics, nor artists; the personnel are typically data management specialists. This might further highlight the crucial need for good communication, where both parties are very good at articulating their area of expertise. It might also show that it is important to have some roles in the chain between researcher and data specialist, who does understand the research and creative aspect of works being submitted, as well as the policies binding that submission.

It became clear that people have varied knowledge of the actual requirements for ERA, and similarly, what actually happens when the top 30 per cent of outputs are selected for external peer review. Partly this is to do with interest and engagement, and partly it is to do with transparency: ‘What are the criteria? Surely this would illuminate some kind of “quality” framework used? What are they looking for?’ One researcher pointed out that once the top 30 per cent is sent out for ERA peer review, the reviewer ‘reviews’ the work but then a separate panel awards one to five points according to ‘world standard’. Further, ‘world standard’ is never defined. This leaves academics frustrated and feeling as if there is a lack of clarity and transparency around the measures used to evaluate their work at a national level, let alone within the institution.

One of the interviewees said that there needed to be much more communication between the government, those individuals involved in ERA, and universities and academics who are 'on the ground'. This might open up a dialogue between all parties involved, which is more on the hermeneutic level rather than simply treating this issue as an administrative problem. It might also act as a 'learning' and 'feedback' opportunity to the governing bodies, where issues such as the dissatisfaction with ERA's own example research statement, can be communicated. The report suggests that developing this line of communication between the researcher and the government (and everyone involved in between) will not only benefit the screen production researcher, but will work to develop the creative practice research field more broadly.

CONCLUSION

To conclude this report, it is useful to return to the initial questions that guided the project.

How are ERA frameworks being interpreted variously across institutions? Is this impacting on how NTROs are being validated at the local level; and if so, does this impact on the work of the screen production practitioner-researcher?

The project found that the ERA frameworks were relatively non-stringent, and that universities might be better placed to develop tighter parameters around approaches to evaluation of NTROs. Often this meant prescribing quantity measures such as length of work. Institutions also created their own quality measures in regard to venue or publication outlet. These measures ranged from university to university, and there seemed to be little consensus within university departments on this subject. One interviewee suggested that a universal list might be created and shared between universities.

It also found that this did impact on the way work was being validated, and there were consequences in regard to work-plans and allocations for research time. The impact on the screen production researcher seems to be in regard to workload, but not in regard to the kind of creative work pursued. For some researchers it did mean they published more traditional outputs, in part because they see this as a way to grow the discipline, and in part because the traditional outputs 'buy' them 'time' to work on their other (creative) pursuits.

Are particular research cultures and reporting processes responsible for the concerns that are continually being relayed? Do ERA guidelines satisfactorily address the needs of those working in the field of screen production?

It appears that research cultures are very important to academics, and that they do impact on the knowledge the researcher has around the concerns of this report, and that clear and transparent communication in regard to reporting processes alleviate anxieties. Strong support from administrators and research offices also appears to be fundamental. The project found that the ERA guidelines do not address discipline-specific issues, hence, there was a lot to be negotiated at university, department and school level.

Are the problems facing screen production researchers general ones for creative practice researchers, or are there particular problems that screen production practitioner-researchers are facing?

The screen production researcher faces both general and specific issues in regard to their research and creative practice within their university. The specific issues appear to be around how 'scale' is measured. There is also a particular relationship the academy has with the industry that seems underdeveloped, and even at times in tension. This area emerged as an important one to address within the screen production discipline.

Regarding best practice models for reporting and evaluating NTROs, the project is not in a position to make definitive conclusions as some of this information was not freely available for analysis. What can be said, however, is that a communicative and proactive research office that keeps up to date with changes in policies is crucial. Transparent practices around evaluation frameworks used is also very important. Documents that guide researchers through the process of reporting are also critical. Having academics from the screen production discipline on evaluation panels was also raised as a fundamental necessity.

Many of the interviewees said that there are disciplinary differences; therefore it is paramount for peak bodies for specific disciplines to develop quality measures that are relevant for that discipline. The ERA guidelines are broad: in one sense they need to be broad in order to cover the range of disciplines that it does, but for this reason it cannot act as the sole guidelines. Disciplines, and universities, need to develop further measures in regard to assessment and quality of creative research outputs.

Following these initial findings, it became clear that a particularly useful extension of the project scope could be a document/guide set by the peak body (ASPERA) that outlines various aspects of what research quality might look like in screen production. This would include details about how to understand and measure excellence in the discipline.

This led to a third phase of the project, which was conducted at the 2016 Sightlines: Filmmaking in the Academy Festival. Phase three comprised of a one-hour roundtable discussion, in which the chief investigators and co-researchers (members of the ASPERA Research Sub-Committee) facilitated a conversation with active screen production researchers around topics such as the key characteristics of screen production research, and indicators and measures of quality and esteem. This roundtable was audio recorded for the purpose of transcription, and participants were de-identified. The results of this roundtable discussion will be published on the ASPERA website in 2017.

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