

## Submission to the ERA Review Consultation 2020

The Australian Council of Deans and Directors of Creative Arts (DDCA) and the Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools (ACUADS) welcomes the opportunity to provide its combined input to this long overdue review of ERA.

Our input, provided against specific issues of significant importance to creative arts, has been obtained in consultation with DDCA's membership representing 31 tertiary creative arts providers and creative arts peak bodies. Direct responses from members has been included.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the ARC for its conscious and inclusive approach to reach out to DDCA and creative arts research disciplines in its consultations and reviews for this and other ARC activities. This is a much improved inclusiveness to previous years of neglect and exclusion.

### ERA methodology

#### **DDCA AND ACUADS DISAGREE THAT THE CURRENT METHODOLOGY MEETS THE OBJECTIVES OF ERA**

While we acknowledge that the overall methodology does confirm that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach is not particularly helpful for research evaluation, its only strengths would merely appear to be those that suit the ARC and the processes currently in train.

This contrasts with the significant number of weaknesses that the current methodology displays:

- It is incredibly time consuming and expensive as an exercise, and how it will be impacted by COVID and the loss of not only researchers, but professional research support teams, will need to be considered.
- Time frames are problematic: some artworks take time to reach their full impact. For example, in the performing arts, the *research* significance can occur in a small, insignificant venue: the larger ones are more likely to be less innovative.
- In music, the research involved in live performance vs recording is not clearly represented by the ERA categories.
- There are considerable inequalities for metropolitan centres versus regional researchers in the creative arts.
- Citation based disciplines are only judged by their journal article citations and do not need to submit other research outcomes they have undertaken for ERA assessment (eg conference papers, reports, books etc). If they were to have 30% of these items peer-reviewed too, it is likely that some FOR codes would not receive the same ratings as they currently do. Thus, this is not comparable with Creative Arts and Humanities assessment.
- Peer review is flawed as it is not suitably rigorous to ensure equity and quality assessment. Peer reviewers remain anonymous and do not need to justify their assessment as is required for ARC grant submissions. This makes it easy for peer reviewers to favour certain institutions over others. Based on the previous 3 ERA

rounds, it appears regional universities are consistently disadvantaged by this methodology.

- The scale of an institution may prevent attainment of a high ERA value. In addition, institutions can invest in attaining a higher ERA number by having the financial resources to recruit both highly ranked academic staff to be employed (even short-term) and to engineer a high level result, mustering organisational resources to manage data in highly effective ways. These issues are resource dependent.
- The definitions of nationally and internationally significant research are subject to manipulation and misinterpretation. Outputs disseminated outside Australia are often implicitly valued higher than work shown here even if the standing of the venues is comparable or less than comparable

In relation to the discipline-specific approach for evaluating research quality.

- It allows for comparable evaluation, but is not particularly robust, particularly in relation to transdisciplinarity.
- There remains ambiguity over the quantum of research being considered in the creative arts: i.e. how the scale of individual research outputs are defined, and therefore what represents '30%'.
- The peer review process of NTROs is a demonstrated failure. It has sent the rankings downward and that research is published.

## **Peer Review**

### **DDCA AND ACUADS DISAGREE THAT THE CURRENT PEER REVIEW METHODOLOGY IS APPROPRIATE FOR EVALUATING CREATIVE ARTS RESEARCH**

Although its strength recognises that peers are best equipped to comprehend significance of work in the artistic research context, its weaknesses are that:

- It is very complex and time consuming for reviewers and academics alike: much more so than the citable disciplines.
- Peer review relies on benchmarking the idea of excellence and the qualitative standards for the reviewers. The reviewer pool is too small and often out of touch with all forms of contemporary practice.
- Some of the peer reviewing done by REC committees is not based on discipline expertise. Because of the scale of the submission, panel members with expertise in creative arts can end up reviewing different areas entirely such as law or architecture.
- It is a flawed system which enables metro/regional bias.
- It draws on a competitive creative arts academic sector to make assessment of itself, which can be overly critical of research outcomes thus leading to lower than expected rankings.

One of our members explained:

'As a peer reviewer in FOR19, I found it difficult to make statements assessing the quality of a set of outputs across institutions of differing scales; I felt that the criteria for assessment were biased towards larger institutions with a larger 30% sample, where consistency and

coherency of research effort were more easily evident than with a small sample. Larger samples are also difficult to fully assess as a reviewer, given time limitations. With regard to NTROs, the 30 megabyte limit on research output samples is restrictive, as it requires splitting video outputs into multiple files for example, or just submitting one brief excerpt of a larger work. The result is that different institutions deal with this limitation in different ways, meaning that reviewers can be presented with a wide range of volumes and types of evidence for a given FOR.’

Our members believe that the peer review methodology can be modified to improve the evaluation process while still adhering to the ERA Indicator Principles. Indeed, we believe that it MUST be improved.

- The scrutiny of individual assessors is demonstrated to be far too rigorous ensuring that outputs cannot attain a high rating. This seems to be a consequence of individual reviewers wishing to actually ensure and demand rigour, which proves to be in fact over-rigorous, exerting a harsh scrutiny if you consider the research on institutional attainments of 4 and 5.
- Cross-disciplinary and hybrid practices, which characterise much of creative arts research, tend to be diminished when parsed into separate FoR codes by assessors with hyper-specific expertise. There is limited opportunity to assess them holistically.
- Cross-disciplinary and hybrid practices should be assessed by those with similar transdisciplinary backgrounds, or (less favourable) passed to several examiners in order to obtain a more well-rounded assessment
- Rather than a 30% sample: given the ambiguity in defining volume of research outputs, we suggest a fixed number of exemplars in proportion to headcount of staff.
- Clearer guidelines for peer review assessment are needed to enable a strong understanding of what constitutes a 2, 3, 4, or 5 (plus minor, major, etc outcomes). There is a necessity for peer reviewers to defend their assessment to a panel and for peer review assessments to be provided to institutions to help them to improve their ranking in the future. At present it is a guessing game as to why particular FOR codes receive the ranking they do. This isn't in the spirit of raising quality.

## **Context indicators**

### **DDCA AND ACUADS DISAGREE THAT THE CURRENT VOLUME AND ACTIVITY INDICATORS ARE RELEVANT TO ERA AND PARTICULARLY THAT THE RESEARCH INCOME INDICATORS ARE RELEVANT TO CREATIVE ARTS RESEARCH**

- Given the limited funding in the arts sector, artist academics are disadvantaged by research income indicators. This often sees academics competing with artists for funds.
- The current indicators risk distorting research activity across the sector, from intrinsic excellence, to successful grant outcomes that are biased towards funding criteria. In the creative arts, this can be a particular disadvantage ECRs and mid-career researchers.
- Regional universities are also disadvantaged in the external income category where there is simply less opportunity and funding for local industry and government partnership.

- Can DOI systems be applied and engaged for better tracking of artworks – i.e. when they are cited in the range of forms typical for artworks, usually (but not always) different than in other academic disciplines
- All of the four contextual ratings, not just income, should be considered at all time, including in any final decision. That there is not even a question above on 'volume and activity' is telling. Also, the definition of 'publishing profile' needs to clearly include the standing of a venue where a creative arts output is held/exhibited.

## **ERA low-volume threshold**

### **DDCA AND ACUADS DISAGREE THAT THE ERA LOW VOLUME THRESHOLD IS APPROPRIATE**

The volume threshold is disadvantageous to rural and regional universities, who cannot operate at the scale of metropolitan universities. Further, in the post-COVID environment, the volume threshold should be reduced for all peer-review disciplines. With many arts venues closed or going out of business, and entire annual programs postponed at major venues (e.g., state run galleries), the entire cultural sector will be impacted, and this will echo into the next 3-5 years as part of economic downturn. The 2023 ERA needs to take these extraordinary circumstances into account.

Research has found that female academics have been especially impacted by COVID. Opportunities to moderate low-volume in this regard would enable a more accurate measure of research performance.

## **ERA interdisciplinary research and new topics**

### **DDCA AND ACUADS DISAGREE THAT ERA ADEQUATELY CAPTURES AND EVALUATES INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH**

In relation to this aspect of ERA, some concerns have been raised by the sector that in evaluating and reporting research quality by discipline, ERA is discouraging interdisciplinary research.

Interdisciplinary research will never be assessed as a whole when parsed to different experts for assessment. In addition to the separate expert reviewers used, the ERA should engage scholarly experts with interdisciplinary experience for peer review of these outcomes. Also, it is important to be able to appropriately identify outputs for this type of review. It should not just be left to the Chair, who may or may not be versed in interdisciplinary forms.

In evaluating research narratives and portfolios, disparate FoR outcomes may need to be brought together e.g. Design. This 'multi-disciplinary' approach is also not easily accounted for currently.

## **Engagement and Impact Assessment (EI) - EI low-volume threshold**

## **DDCA AND ACUADS DISAGREE THAT THE EI LOW-VOLUME THRESHOLD SHOULD CONTINUE TO BE BASED ON THE NUMBER OF RESEARCH OUTPUTS SUBMITTED FOR ERA**

Consideration should be given to enhancing the enhancing the role/significance of the portfolio category of NTRO output as a way of better capturing inter-disciplinary practice. The separation of performance and visual art in different categories and with different reviewers makes it very difficult for researchers who operate between these categories.

As for the non-EI entries, the low volume threshold is disadvantageous to rural and regional universities, who cannot operate at the scale of metropolitan universities. Further, in the post-COVID environment, where the volume threshold should be reduced for all peer-review disciplines, for EI, the threshold should be as it is for interdisciplinary and ATSI research impact studies, wherein Universities should be able to opt-in for either or both impact and engagement.

### **Engagement indicators**

## **DDCA AND ACUADS DISAGREE THAT THE INDICATOR SUITE IS SUITABLE FOR ASSESSMENT OF CREATIVE ARTS RESEARCH ENGAGEMENT PARTICULARLY CASH SUPPORT FROM END-USERS AND RESEARCH COMMERCIALISATION INCOME**

Cash support from end-users and research commercialisation income completely overlooks the important gains peer-review research has made in gaining Linkages with non-cash partners in the last few years. It is apocryphal and counter-productive that the four Engagement indicators are limited to being financial in nature.

In the creative arts, in-kind and non-financial indicators of value and therefore engagement are essential; for example, end-user testimony; wellbeing indicators; societal change.

DDCA suggests that ARC may wish to undertake further research to explore the potential relating to creative arts to be better included in this suite.

### **Streamlining and simplifying ERA and EI**

## **DDCA AND ACUADS DISAGREE THAT ERA AND EI SHOULD BE COMBINED INTO ONE ASSESSMENT**

There is a sense that the process conflates Engagement and Impact (already much overlap and duplication which leads to lack of clarity; and that 'ERA is (or should be) all about impact and it feels a bit like it kicks the can down the road by then having a separate IE process.' The EI is an important improvement for peer review disciplines, however, it is an entirely different exercise to the ERA itself. Both are labour intensive, and much of the ERA work can be used as the blueprint for the EI submission, so it is useful for ERA to precede EI by one year, providing some consolidation time between the two. It should also be noted that annual reporting does not suit the longitudinal outputs of the HCA or the HASS sector.

### **Utilising technological advancements and existing data sources**

## **DDCA AND ACUADS DISAGREE THAT DOIS SHOULD BE MANDATORY FOR ERA**

It is not possible for most NTRO outputs to gain DOIs; DOIs focus on traditional publishing outcomes and do not provide proper data for assessment or NTROs. ORCID IDs, however, are useful and for streamlining data gathering.

DDCA suggests further work to explore developing upon DOIs so that they can focus on other outcomes that may better capture and reflect creative arts research.

We also wish to make an additional observation that sits outside the consultation response format:

The metrics used to publicise the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) results are of interest to some ACUADS members. All results, Overall, Outputs, Impact and Environment, give “percentages of the submission meeting certain standards”, that is the portion of submissions meeting agreed standards are seen as a gradation. The results are nuanced (2018 ERA Impact and Engagement did use a graded scale) and provide the potential for a subtly graduated perspective over a range of measures rather than the current ERA nomination of a single number for FOR codes and that single number is seen to be solely emblematic of the Research Performance. That method of providing outcomes of ERA analysis is far less nuanced than REF percentages and gradations.

***We thank the ARC for this opportunity to contribute to improvements in ERA and welcome further discussion.***