

IRU Workshop on ERA and the CREATIVE ARTS
16 & 17 November 2009
WORKSHOP SUMMARY

HOSTED BY:
Griffith University
South Bank Campus
Cnr Stanley and Sidon Streets
Southbank Parklands, Brisbane

The Ship Inn Function Room
Building (S06)/Room 2.02

Charles Darwin University
Flinders University
Griffith University
James Cook University
La Trobe University
Murdoch University
The University of Newcastle

Does ERA help the Creative Arts?

Panellists from each of the IRU universities represented considered a number of questions, followed by debate and comment from the floor on these issues.

Does the ERA definition of research work for creative arts?

ERA was seen as a time consuming process but overall was welcomed. Participants acknowledged the value of ERA in promoting compilation of creative arts outputs across each university, and the opportunity this provided to showcase the range of academic endeavour and achievement both within the university and the more broadly. There was recognition that greater visibility coupled with an increasing degree of official recognition of creative work as research output is likely to increase funding support both within universities and from external bodies. Participants recognised that the line between professional practice including performance and research remains unclear in many cases, but acknowledged that ERA had forced clarification of these boundaries to a significant extent.

There was a degree of over-arching concern that nowhere else in the world are journal rankings used in the way proposed for ERA, and a good deal of concern about the prospect of equating “outlets” such as venues in the creative arts with outlets such as scholarly journals. Some participants felt that the ERA model fitted the visual arts more easily than it did music. Some felt that definitions provided for the creative works categories need more work and considerable clarification.. Similarly, the boundaries between fields of research (FoR) may not be clear for many types of creative outputs, and future definitions should offer examples.

Does it exclude any important categories of research endeavour?

There was a view that ERA pushes performances into categories where they do not readily fit, and for which they were not intended. Most participants however were comfortable on the distinction between research and performance,

and felt that ERA had helped to take the debate about the difference forward.

How easy is it to ‘fit’ creative research outputs into the four ERA categories?

Overall participants felt that the ERA categories were a good start, and provided a very positive step towards official recognition of creative arts research as a valid scholarly endeavour.

There were however examples of problems arising when attempting to fit specific outputs into the categories provided. One example mentioned was of a DVD compilation of various interpretations of a particular Mozart rondo, with commentary by the researcher/author/performer. It was not clear whether this should be considered an electronic book or a performance work. While some felt that the categories do not work for straightforward performances of existing works, others argued that routine performances should not be considered research at all.

There was a widespread concern about the need to second guess the peer review and quality evaluation process in selecting the subset of items for peer review. A related concern about lack of transparency in the peer review process saw many researchers questioning the credibility of peer review if not undertaken by specialists in each quite specific sub-discipline. Participants called for publication of the names of all peer reviewers or, at the least, a listing of the areas of expertise available for peer review.

A number of speakers raised the problem of providing documentation for repositories on transient works such as performances or exhibitions from up to six years ago. There was no knowledge at that time that such documentation would be required and many such outputs no longer exist in tangible form.

Does ERA help the Creative Arts?

What problems were encountered in choosing the 20% of research outputs for peer review?

Most universities encountered problems in choosing the 20%, though in principle this was considered reasonable. Many referred to difficult decisions about whether to make the 20% representative of depth and breadth or whether to choose the best works regardless of output type. There was a strong request for more transparency about the peer review process and what the ARC or the panels were expecting. The lack of information about this part of the process also made participants uncertain how they would interpret results for the HCA Cluster. Some problems were encountered with file size limitations for repositories, though this was addressed where necessary by use of DVDs.

Some universities had found the 1904 FoR problematic as a number of outputs did not fit neatly in any category.

What problems were encountered in preparing the 250 word statements? Will 100 word statements make this easier or harder?

There was frequent reference to the value of the 250 word supporting statements as a means of forcing researchers to focus on whether a creative output was genuinely research. There was strong and almost unanimous opposition to cutting the 250 word supporting statements to 100 words. Most participants felt this would make articulating the research content of outputs much harder, and some felt that even 250 words was insufficient. Some referred to the difficulty of explaining the significance of works outside their original context (eg performance venue or circumstances).. .

Are the 4 digit FoR codes 'right' for creative arts?

There was general agreement that the current FoR codes are not yet right for creative works, with particular concerns about the 1904 code. Researchers would like the opportunity to give more detailed

feedback to the ARC on this matter, and all were keen to be reassured that the codes would be reviewed in the foreseeable future..

Will ERA help creative arts be seen more widely as a credible research activity?

Many referred to the value of the ERA collection in showcasing the range of creative work within particular universities, and more broadly. Regional campuses found this particularly valuable. The introduction of the four official categories for creative outputs was particularly applauded as providing the first formal recognition of creative works as genuine research output.

There were concerns about some types of outputs having multiple FoR codes allowing some individual outputs to be counted multiple times. This is certainly the case for journal articles, but there is less capacity for creative works to be counted multiple times.

Some were worried about the long term impacts on disciplines if ECRs don't accept ERA standards and some of its unintended implications. Others were more concerned that established researchers may skew disciplinary focus and output in attempts to game the system.

Judging the Quality of Research in the Creative Arts

Break-out groups commented on a number of questions about the most appropriate methods for assessing research excellence in creative arts disciplines.

Can or should creative arts research quality be assessed in the same way as other kinds of research?

The general consensus was that creative arts research quality should not be assessed in the same way as for other kinds of research – journal publications and associated citation analysis were not seen as appropriate indicators of research quality in these fields. However, determining a broadly acceptable alternative approach to assessment was more problematic. Questions debated included:

- What are the criteria for good quality?
- What is the role of aesthetic judgement?
- Who are appropriate “peers”?
- Is the audience part of the assessment process?
- Could impact be used as a measure?
- Does the 250-word statement measure impact?
- How could research quality of creative arts outputs be rated quantitatively?
- Can the quality of individual outputs be compared without using a quantitative approach?
- How important is the use of specialised professionals and/or professional associations in evaluation?

How effective is peer review in isolation as a measure of research quality in the creative arts?

While peer review was originally used to judge research quality in the sciences, creative artists are very accustomed to the idea of being reviewed and criticised. Most felt that there is no point in opposing peer review; but, the composition of the REC was considered to be extremely important in ensuring the peer review was seen as credible. Questions debated included:

- How should assessors be chosen?
- Should the identity of assessors be made public?
- What criteria should assessors use in determining quality?
- Will the ERA process involve “blind” review?

Attendees pointed out that peer review criteria are currently being explored by some professional associations such as ASPERA (the Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association), and suggested that the ARC should liaise with these bodies, including them in the peer review process if possible.

Could traditional bibliometrics act as a proxy for overall research quality?

Even ignoring the fact that bibliometrics are not yet proven as a valid measure of research quality for the sciences, the workshop felt that a bibliometrics approach to judging research quality is not relevant for the creative arts;. Journal articles comprise a small proportion of the total output of creative artists, and hence the use of journal citations to measure research quality would result in only a tiny sample of work being assessed. Journal rankings also take no account of the target audience. There was a strong view that ERA was yet to gain the confidence of the creative arts community and that employing metrics as the basis for quality assessment would not help this situation. Peer review was strongly favoured as the most acceptable – and most practical – approach.

Should performing or visual arts outlets or venues be ranked? Might ranking have unwanted side effects?

There was almost universal opposition to the ranking of venues. In particular, if it is genuinely research quality that is being judged, rather than professional practice, comparing large or well-known venues with smaller or lesser known ones is meaningless. There were related concerns that choice of venue would sway peer reviewers in assessing research quality.

Judging the Quality of Research in the Creative Arts

A venue ranking list would also devalue site-specific or site-related work as well as the importance of research context in influencing the choice of venue. Regional universities underlined the importance of supporting regional venues even though these are not necessarily high-profile venues. . None considered that ticket sales provide any valid comment on research quality.

Could the outputs of creative arts groups or institutions be credibly benchmarked against one another?

The majority view was that this would be possible but participants questioned its value. Participants wondered what such an exercise would really reveal or prove in relation to creative arts. . Community engagement and impact of the work were considered important aspects not currently measured by ERA.

How much value would be added by the supporting information suggested for inclusion with each individual creative output in ERA 2010?

Most felt that a single format for all types of creative works would create difficulties. Examples included the use of pre-production peer review for film (which would have limited application in other areas), and post-production peer review for digital works (which was seen as more difficult for the research component of exhibitions). The research component of a creative work is rarely currently assessed by its intended audience; professional organisations may be able to play a role here.

Other points raised by participants included:

- the dichotomy between the intrinsic value of art and the value of art as a research outcome;
- the need to distinguish between research and professional practice for ERA, while recognising that there is often a continuum between the two;
- the need to recognise that University academic staff are paid to be “knowledge workers” and that teaching and research (and not just

professional practice) are an integral part of their professional role.

- the focus on the exegesis rather than the creative work in the assessment of RHD students in the creative arts.

The ARC emphasised the fact that it is not the role of ERA to measure artistic merit.

Compiling a Collection of Research Outputs

Questions discussed and the view of participant groups are set out below:

How should ideas and processes about publications and data collection be communicated to academic staff?

- It is important to provide some understanding to the school or similar level.
- Schools and individuals need to understand the benefits (“pay-off”) of ERA and the associated data collection, for themselves and their university;
- An important point for creative arts schools is the ability to showcase the full spectrum of their outputs once the ERA collection is made;
- Data collection staff should be from a “neutral” support entity such as the Library .
- Researchers who need to enter data need plenty of advance notice .
- Appropriate support funding and staffing are critical.

What level of involvement should academic staff have in ERA?

- While some felt that broad communication about ERA and its implications is needed, others felt that working academics should have as little involvement in ERA itself as possible.
- Selection of FoR codes and the 20% subset for peer review is probably best done by selected (senior) academics who may check with individual researchers as required.
- University-wide education about FoR codes is vital for future ERA rounds
- Researchers need to understand the implications of ERA, both positive and negative for interdisciplinarity.
- User interfaces for data entry need to be user-friendly, simple and reliable.
- Formal mentoring of junior staff to understand how to incorporate ERA needs into their academic careers is important.

- Academic assistance will be required for the collection of esteem indicators as these have not been previously compiled.
- Background statements should be written by academics

What are the particular challenges of compiling a repository of creative arts outputs?

- Size and format are critical and must allow the presentation of 3D quality as well as appropriate atmosphere, tone and sound;
- A wide range of technologies needs to be catered for;
- Many creative artists are not particularly electronically literate and may need assistance in compiling material in appropriate formats for a repository.

What additional evidence will need to be collected and archived for ERA 2010, and what challenges might this pose?

Possibilities included:

- i. Esteem measures: impact, applied measures.
- ii. Translations from one medium into another.
- iii. Esteem measures may include residencies, fellowships, Australia Council grants, invitations to provide keynote addresses, and international collaborations.
- iv. New ranked outlets are expected from the ARC.

Challenges in collecting additional evidence or measures included:

- v. Timelines.
- vi. Systems (and the possible need to develop new systems or redevelop existing ones to accept new forms of data).
- vii. The need to resolve who collects and verifies the new data.

Compiling a Collection of Research Outputs

What resources are needed and where should they be located?

- External bodies such as professional associations may be able to assist and in some circumstances could provide funding through partnerships
- Griffith described its resourcing model comprising an Office for Research-based ERA team which works with Library staff and academic consultants who in turn check details with individual researchers
- Wherever possible, material prepared for the ERA repository has also been added to Griffith's open access repository, GRO.

Opened or Closed – The Challenges of Making Research Accessible Online

“Walking in the light” - Demonstration of Griffith Research Online by Dr Joanna Richardson, Digital Repositories Team Leader, Scholarly Information and Research, Griffith University.

A dark (closed) repository was used for the ERA trial. The extent to which the full suite of research outputs can be placed in open access repositories will depend partly upon copyright and licensing constraints. Consideration must also be given to those researchers who do not want open access. Open access repositories must also make provision for the possible need to harvest data for other purposes.

“A walk on the dark side” – Demonstration of a closed repository by Michael Wood, Digital Information Manager, La Trobe University.

An open access repository was used for ERA, with specific controls on access where necessary. A large variety of metadata was collected and entries were conceptualized as compound objects comprised of a number of different elements, including traditional metadata and supporting documentation. Access was limited for certain sections or documents, making selected information accessible to the public while also managing copyright and licensing constraints. The ARC was given specific access via the creation of an ERA user profile.

Discussion from the floor raised the following questions:

Q: Who handles requests for documents?

A: For the general public, this is usually Library staff. For ERA, most universities specified a particular contact person.

Q: How can repositories handle large creative arts outputs files?

A: Not all files must be hosted in the ERA repository; rather than can provide a pointer to other locations.

Q: Won't these systems become too data heavy?

A: Repositories are able to handle massive amounts of data; and it is not foreseen that this will be a problem.

Q: Can these systems include aliases to protect the identities of creative arts researchers where necessary?

A: It should be possible to allocate multiple IDs to individual academics associated with a single underlying identifier number.

Q: Can we reduce the duplication arising from each university creating its own separate ERA repository?

A: University librarians around Australia have been working towards commonality but there is no consensus as yet. Different operating systems and policies in different universities will make it unlikely that there would ever be one single system to suit all.

Q: Are all universities consistent in their IP policy?

A: No. Most universities recognise student-created IP as being owned by the student. Different universities however have quite different policies in relation to staff-created IP. The implications of the recent Gray v UWA case are causing many universities to review their IP policies.

Summary:

There was a consensus view that open access, where possible, is preferable. Amongst other benefits, it will increase the visibility of creative arts outputs. Although copyright and licensing problems will probably always exist, many of these may be managed using controlled access repositories.

The Future of ERA and the Creative Arts

Sam Grunhard and Chris Marshall from the ARC provided an ARC perspective and updated attendees on the latest ERA thinking. Their presentations can be accessed at:

http://www.arc.gov.au/pdf/P_CMSG_17No_v09.pdf

Discussion from the floor raised a number of questions:

Q: How can creative arts researchers be confident that their work meets the definition of research?

A: The researcher and the university need to demonstrate this in the research statement which accompanies each output selected for peer review.

Q: Will the names of the peer reviewers be known?

A: No. The names of REC members will be made public. Peer reviewers will be selected from the ARC's database but the identity of peer reviewers will not be made public.

Q: Has the ARC worked with the Australia Council in developing its approach to evaluation of creative arts research?

A: Yes, and has also sought Australia Council assistance in identifying people who would be appropriate peer reviewers.

Q: Has Screen Australia been involved? Does the ARC have a way of recognising film funding?

A: Significant sources of film funding can be mentioned in the background statement.

Q: Is that inequitable if Australia Council funding can be included in the research income total?

A: Describing specific funding in the background statement will give it more prominence.

Q: Would the ARC make the peer review process more transparent, including by publishing the names of the peer reviewers? Not knowing who "peers" are generates a lack of confidence in the peer review process.

A: There are a number of reasons for not identifying peer reviewers including protecting them from outside influence, pressure and debate.

There will be five people, not one, peer reviewing each output to inform the REC, which should encourage confidence in the outcomes.

Q: What will the outcomes look like? What will the reports look like?

A: This will be apparent when the trial results are released before the end of 2009.

Q: Will the sector be able to see the guidelines given to peer reviewers, as this will help universities to choose items for peer review.

A: The ARC will consider that suggestion.

Q: How will ERA affect funding of the creative arts?

A: Funding policy is a matter for Government. There will however be very active consultation with the sector on any proposed changes in funding arrangements.

Q: Decisions about allocating outputs to FoRs can be difficult (eg professional writing) and this has not been consistent across the country and even within institutions. Will the sector receive better guidelines?

A: The next set of guidelines released will be improved based on feedback from the trial, the RECs and the sector.

Q: What types of outputs comprised the 7000 creative works submitted, and in what proportions?

A: There was a wide variety of output types. No figures are immediately available on the precise distribution across different types.

Q: Could the 100-word research statement be accompanied by a tick-box set of questions?

A: This will be considered.

The Future of ERA and the Creative Arts

Q: Might there be some capacity for professional associations to help with peer review?

A: The ARC noted this suggestion.

Q: Why was 'impact' abandoned when ERA replaced RQF?

A: The Minister considered that impact was too difficult to measure and evaluate, and that the RQF requirements placed too high a burden on the sector.

Q: The ARC has stated that indicators are not weighted. However if all measured indicators are ultimately to be collapsed down to a single score (rating) in a formulaic way, this must mean that all indicators are in fact weighted equally.

A: No, they are not all equal. There are no predetermined weightings, and weightings may vary between disciplines at the discretion of the RECs.

Q. How can we choose peer review outputs sensibly if we don't know how weightings are allocated to arrive at a final overall score?

A: This concern was noted.

Q: The current system for allocation of FoRs is quite discriminatory. If a journal of publication is allocated to only one FoR, this is all that is available for that particular output. Other types of outputs can choose up to three FoRs at the university's discretion.

A: This concern was noted by the ARC.

Q: Will we know how large the peer review sample is, in relation to the 20% of total outputs submitted by institutions for peer review?

A: The RECs will try to ensure a representative sample is peer reviewed.