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Beyond Equivalency: Repositioning artistic research within the Australian university sector

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The notion of 'research equivalency' by which artistic research can be equated with scholarly text-based outputs was a central feature of the Strand Report recommendations (Strand 1998). It was hoped that equal acceptance of these outputs within national and university research evaluation frameworks would introduce a more inclusive environment for artistic researchers.

The inclusion of non-traditional research outputs (NTRO) alongside traditional scholarly publications in the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) from 2010, represents the most recent example of the adoption of research equivalency measures at a national level. Acknowledging that ERA retains exclusionary features in other evaluation categories, this paper concentrates upon NTRO to explore whether research equivalency has influenced recognition and inclusion of artistic outputs in the university.

It draws upon interviews with Deputy Vice-Chancellors, 'expert commentators' on artistic research in Australia and 27 artistic researchers, together with survey responses from heads of visual and performing arts schools, gathered as part of a larger study on artists in the Australian university research system.[1]

Acknowledging that a variety of terminologies are used, this paper uses *artistic research* to denote: 'that domain of research and development in which the practice of art . . . and the works of art that result – play a constitutive role' (Borgdorff 2009, p. 21).

The promise of inclusivity
The inclusion of artistic research outputs in ERA was heralded as a positive move towards the acceptance of arts-friendly research methods (O'Toole, 2010); as a way

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[1] To preserve the confidentiality of contributors to this study in accordance with ethics requirements, University survey respondents are allocated an alphabetical pseudonym (University A to S). Interview respondents are referred to by their role DVCR, or Expert Commentator, and artistic researchers by the stage in their career trajectory Senior Career Researcher (SCR); Mid Career Researcher (MCR); or Early Career Researcher (ECR)

for artists to shape their own disciplines (Schippers 2007) and create 'new and exciting avenues for research' (Schippers 2004, p. 26). It raised recognition of artistic outputs from 'this funny little category just for writing about your practice' to one where 'practice counts' (Expert Commentator2). In 2010, 4% of all research outputs submitted to ERA were NTROs (ARC 2011a). By the 2012 exercise, this had dropped to 2% of total research outputs submitted (ARC 2013) reflecting the 'significant increase' of outputs being included in portfolios (ARC 2013, p. 16)[2].

The inclusion of NTRO has been more important for the recognition of research in some disciplines than others. (ARC 2013). Analysis of the four-digit field of research (FOR) codes reported for ERA 2012, shows Visual Arts and Crafts (FOR1905) submitted the highest number NTROs, and the highest number of original creative works, curated or exhibited events. This compares to other artistic disciplines where text-based scholarly outputs were strongly represented. In Design Practice and Management (FOR1203) the largest number of outputs were conference papers and journal articles; in Film, Television and Digital Media (FOR1902) journal articles represented the largest number of outputs submitted; and in Performing Arts and Creative Writing (FOR1904) the numbers of creative works were only slightly higher than journal articles. (Table A).
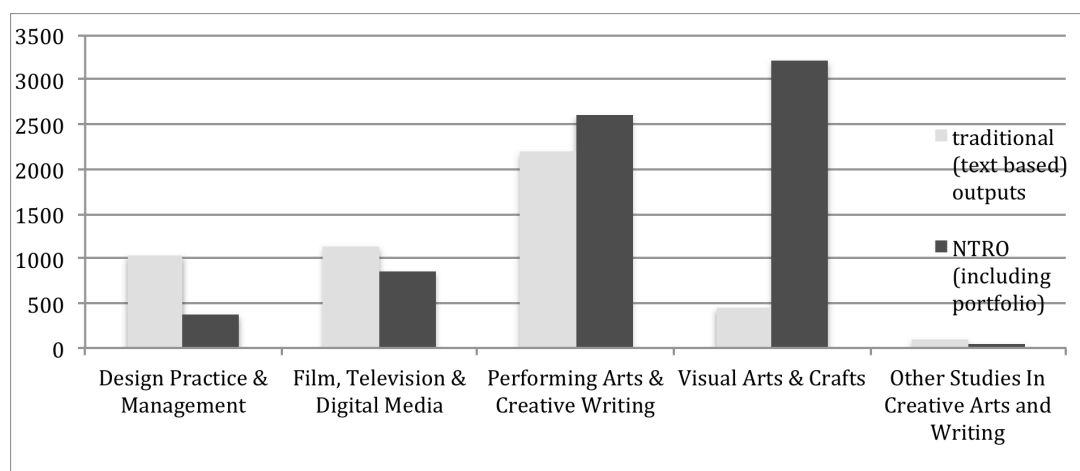

Table A: Traditional and Non Traditional Research Outputs. ERA 2012: FOR codes 12 (Built Environment & Design) and 19 (Studies in Creative Arts & Writing)

Although some universities already collected data, government support to establish data collection systems able to accommodate artistic research as part of the introduction of ERA means that all universities now have the capacity to collect this

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[2] Portfolio is defined as 'a group of individual works submitted separately which together constitute a single 'non-traditional research output' (ARC 2011b, p. 82). The combination of individual research outputs are 'counted as one output and may be apportioned accordingly' (ARC 2011b, p. 14).

information. This is an important administrative step forward, as it was the university sector itself that requested the reinstatement of the four text-based publication categories for the calculation of research block grants, on the basis that data collection for creative arts outputs was unreliable and complicated. (Strand 1998, ACUADS 2003). Being able to submit NTRO has allowed artistic disciplines to demonstrate the extent and quality of their research. Universities were, perhaps, surprised by the standing of the work that was being undertaken in their schools. 'While the ERA didn't set out to highlight. . . creative work,. . . one of the unintended outcomes has been to demonstrate by using objective measures that creative arts are performing at a very high level' (SCR9). In some institutions, high rankings 'vindicated' (SCR3) the work being done in art schools and in others NTRO contributed significantly to the overall institutional ERA performance. In one university, 'a third of the university's research outputs in ERA' were creative outputs (SCR5) and in another, the NTRO submissions, 'carried' the theoretical researchers to produce a good ERA ranking (SCR3).

ERA encouraged those who did not already have internal research equivalency processes in place to consider these to guide consideration of artistic research outputs. 80% of institutions surveyed had such measures in place, however, the status of these varied from inclusion in formal policies to be applied across all evaluation stages, to a 'list' that was held in research offices and consulted on an ad-hoc basis.

Included but not quite equivalent

Unlike other research outputs, ERA requires artistic outputs to be accompanied by a written statement, implying that creative work 'must be given voice through acts of translation and interpretation' (Brien, Burr & Webb 2010, p. 3). This can reinforce uncertainty about the 'legitimacy' of artistic work without additional text interpretation, 'implying a deficit' which artistic researchers are required to address to: "show us *how* the work you do has a particular value within *our* system of measurement' (Turcotte & Morris 2012, p. 73).

> It's that whole thing . . . [about] about ex-nomination. The thing that is named is the abnormal thing. So you don't talk about traditional outputs . . . but you certainly talk about non-traditional outputs. The other stuff is just research and this is the non-traditional research. If it is labelled that way there must be a reason, and that reason is that it is somehow . . . sub-normal. (ECR9)

Including artistic research outputs in a distinct NTRO category has maintained the differentiation between research undertaken by artists and that by other disciplines. It has prompted universities to apply 'conditions' to the acceptance of artistic research

outputs that do not apply to other disciplinary research, as they try to equate artistic research in hierarchical ranking systems used for scholarly text. This has created confusion in how different types of output are equated and assessed, and concerns about the value and appropriateness of the criteria chosen.

Some universities base their evaluations on venue reputation or attendance numbers, ignoring the preference in some parts of the commercial art world, for 'tested classics' over new and innovative works as required by the research regime. Others rely upon critical review, failing to acknowledge the outside reality that often critics 'only review international artists or something in a new venue' (SCR6), or the changing arts environment: 'Albums are dead because of digital downloads . . . you don't have a review of new headlining albums' (SCR10). Other institutions apply arbitrary time periods to assess the quality of the works:

> I thought I had got everything covered but they still got me on "oh, you didn't spend five years on this.". . . They said "if you have done two CDs you obviously only spent six months on each." Well, no, it doesn't really [work like that]. (MCR6)

Institutional uncertainty and lack of understanding has led to a greater degree of involvement by non-artists in quality assessment in artistic work than is evident in other disciplines**:**

> it would be unacceptable for a Dean with a [non-related discipline] background to determine . . . what is acceptable as research output for the medical school, yet this is what has been imposed on us. (Head of School, personal communication, 2012)

While previously the decision of which outputs to include in ERA 'would have been made by faculty experts' now 'the University makes increasing judgements on those particular calls' (SCR10). This creates suspicion that that decisions are made 'along the lines of "oh, we don't know anything about all of those so just put it in [the portfolio]" '(SCR10), according the work lesser recognition than if it were included as an individual output.

Text publications are still 'king'
Despite the inclusion of NTRO and the adoption of university research equivalency measures, survey respondents report ongoing devaluation of artistic research outputs against traditional text based outputs. In some universities, NTRO are not recognised in formulae to award school funding (University L; University P) or in internal funding schemes, making it harder for researchers to compete 'if their output is only creative work' (University B). Even where institutions recognise artistic outputs as equivalent

to publications, the increasing move towards strategic funding allocation creates disadvantages by applying different criteria:

> for internal schemes – creative research outputs are counted in the same way as text publications but [we have much less access to] the special schemes [which] are based upon income and ARCs – and of course the internal schemes provide much less funding which is shrinking constantly. (University F)

In several universities artistic outputs remain unrecognised for promotion applications. Even where 'academics in creative arts are treated nearly the same as other academics. . . the exception would be in having their research recognised when they go for promotion' (University P) particularly for promotion to level C and above 'where expectation that they produce text-based outputs exists' (University P). Universities encourage artists 'to go out and pursue "real research", and 'the incredible and significant [artistic]outputs, still didn't cut it when it came to . . . promotion' (University Q).

> There is no formal bar to conducting creative arts research. . .however it is not encouraged. . . the University strongly encourages researchers to seek publication in A list journals, and at this point in time I see no ready path for creative arts research . . . in my own future portfolio. (University J)

Interviewees supported this perspective noting that to achieve an Associate Professorship 'without the traditional research outputs,. . . would be almost impossible for anyone in the . . . arts' (ECR7). One interviewee understood why some artists 'don't stir the pot', but choose to focus on 'journals': 'You know you are never going to get the grant or promotion on [the creative] basis, you are going to get the grant or promotion on the written basis. It is as simple as that' (SCR10).
Early Career Researchers (ECRs) had noticed the impact that focusing on artistic outputs had upon the careers of their colleagues:

> some of my senior colleagues who I thought that, by any stretch of the imagination, they should have been promoted beyond where they currently were. They said that "we have tried so many times and we have been knocked back so many times that we have given up" '. (ECR7)

There are indications that a continued institutional valuation of text over artistic output is causing ECRs to question the legitimacy of their own research: 'I struggle with my own internal [questions] . . . If I don't write about it, is it valid?' (ECR8); 'Part of me still thinks that if I am at home on my research day drawing . . . that this is somehow less easy to justify than if I am . . . writing a research article' (ECR9).

Several interviewees, including ERA and ARC assessors, expressed concern that a focus on the written aspects, meant the research had not included 'enough time spent in the studio' (Expert Commentator2) which in turn affected the quality of the final work that was being produced. '. . . you go "yes this is a fabulous argument, conceptually this is great" but if you are saying that the practice is equal to this, it is not' (Expert Commentator2). Another noted that work which was 'a good idea [and]. . . probably has created a new body of knowledge, but as art, it actually is not very good' (Expert Commentator4).

Despite the text-based preference displayed in some universities, it must be note that not all universities held this view:

> I don't really mind, if it is written in English on a piece of papyrus with a quill.. .on a computer and stored digitally on a tape. . . in a movie or encoded in a piece of music . . but there [must be] a message that is in a medium that . . .is retrievable, and . . .archivable. (DVCR2)

Indeed, one DVCR expressed concern that:

> There has been a lot of pressure . . . to perform in terms of traditional research outputs.. . .[are] people getting separated from the real stuff of [art]. . . is what ERA has pressed people into? (DVCR3)

Beyond Research Equivalency - greater integration as a way to achieve improved inclusion

It is 16 years since research equivalence was proposed as a way to secure greater inclusion of artistic disciplines within the research environment. At government level, equivalency is limited to recognising certain artistic research outputs which meet additional criteria and within a framework that maintains its difference. From the experiences of those working within the university sector, it is clear that, that despite considerable effort by those in the arts over many years, scholarly publications are still perceived as 'more important' to many institutional decisions. Artistic research remains subject to significant exclusion within university research management systems.

> Still the mentality is always to partition creative practitioners in some way. Anything can be justified once the ghetto has been created. Arts can be included or excluded from various university aspects for strategic reasons at will. If you are going to have inclusiveness, it has to be absolute, not just to allow the university to say that that the arts is 'in' or 'out' when [it]

happens to decide which way it wants to go, which is the situation we have now. (SCR7).

As a strategy to achieve equal recognition and support for artistic research, research equivalency has served to stress its difference from institutional expectations of traditional scholarly research. It has positioned artistic research as 'an appendage' to the university research management system, carrying the risk that it may be excised without unduly disrupting the institutional processes should institutional direction or external research circumstances change. By ongoing advocacy for research equivalency, artistic researchers have continued to communicate negative messages to their universities, which can unfortunately influence university attitudes towards the disciplines themselves.

New strategies are needed if artistic researchers are to secure equitable recognition of the value of their work. As one interviewee said 'If . . . what we do [has] the same value as [they] accept what medicine does as research, then we don't need an equivalent model' (SCR5). The challenge for artistic researchers is to devise strategies to demonstrate their equal value to the university research endeavour rather than focusing upon equating particular aspects of their research activity. Greater integration with research across the university, through increased collaboration outside arts disciplines is a strategy supported by many interviewees, particularly ECRs who see cross-disciplinary collaboration as a way to enhance their own work and forge a better relationship with the university. Across the country, artistic researchers are working with environmental, medical and social scientists, with engineers and economists and colleagues in the humanities, yet these collaborations are rarely celebrated or highlighted to demonstrate how arts contributes to the university's research agenda. Collaboration increases understanding of artistic research by those in non-arts disciplines, yet artistic researchers do not appear to engage their non-arts colleagues to support their call for equal recognition. Few positive examples of inter-disciplinary collaboration that demonstrate how communication through artistic means expands public awareness and knowledge, are shared across the university sector.

If artists can to remain firm on the values that advance their own research, yet sufficiently flexible to engage with others to achieve mutually beneficial objectives, increased collaboration may provide greater understanding and advocacy by non-arts academics and enable the arts to become embedded within the university system rather that remain as an outside equivalent.

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