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Accounting for creative arts research

June 07, 2019

By Professor Jen Webb and Professor Ross Gibson

In 2017 the Deans of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences agreed to survey decision makers in creative arts disciplines about the perception that “While every other FoR has increased its average score in each of the ERA rounds ... FoR19 is the only code in which the average score across the sector has decreased in each ERA round” (McKee 2018).[1] We turned to the ERA Outcomes data[2] to test this, and to review how FoR19 (Studies in Creative Arts and Writing) stacks up not only against closely related disciplines but also against the very different (scientific) disciplines selected for the 2009 ERA pilot.

Australian arts researchers are ... accustomed to generating well-evidenced theses alongside their creative outputs, they publish widely ... and shine in international journals and essay collections on the topic. The global scene-setting that commenced in the 1980s continues. The question, then, is why FoR19 appears so lacklustre in successive ERA cycles.

The results give pause for thought, since the outcomes for FoR19 are distinctively different from those of the other codes. For example:

- 18 of FoR19 units of evaluation[3] (UOEs) have received exactly the same rating in each cycle, while in other codes, results show some or significant variation.
- Only three of a possible 42 UOEs have improved their FoR19 ratings over the period, compared with eight UOEs in FoR20 (Language, Communication and Culture).
- Worryingly, only two of the FoR19 UOEs have been rated at 5 (well above world standard) at any point in the review cycle, while 18 in FoR02 (Physical Sciences), and 7 in FoR21(History and Archaeology), have been so rated.

The third impediment is the creative academic community itself, which either ... fails to make compelling claims for the knowledge potential of NTROs, or simply judges one another's outputs and methodologies too harshly ... We are perhaps inordinately tough on ourselves.

This is surprising, given that - at least in Anglophone nations - Australian creative practice-led research is recognised as world-leading. Indeed, from the outset Australia has been a global scene-setter in the relatively new academic field of creative practice-led research, with UTS, the University of Wollongong and the University of Tasmania all winning trailblazing arguments for ratifying Doctorates of Creative Arts and/or creative-practice-led PhDs during the early 1980s. Most distinctive (and sometimes

contentious) has been the Australian stipulation that, at HDR-level, an examinable exegetical text must resonate alongside the examinable created work. (The late, lamented journal *RealTime* issued an overview of the Australian version of creative-practice-led pedagogy in Issue 122, 2014.) By contrast, in both the UK and the USA, the focus of HDRs in creative arts is to a large extent the production of quality art and craft objects, rather than the explicit delivery of new knowledge. Australian arts researchers are therefore accustomed to generating well-evidenced theses alongside their creative outputs, they publish widely on the topic of creative research, and shine in international journals and essay collections on the topic. The global scene-setting that commenced in the 1980s continues. The question, then, is why FoR19 appears so lacklustre in successive ERA cycles.

We suggest there are three impediments that lead to this situation.

Failure to address case for research

Artist academics focus primarily on the aesthetic outcomes of their practice and therefore inadequately make the case for why their work is a research output. Often, it seems, the drama of creation receives more attention than the trials of cognition and knowledge-transfer, and thus they inadvertently default

to delivering the generic Artist's Statement, rather than reporting on their research. We speculate that this dodging of the knowledge-quest blurs the focus of the knowledge-generation that genuinely does emerge in the creative arts sector. While the Artist's Statement is a legitimate genre, it pointedly does NOT deliver what the ERA Research Statement requires. Artist-scholars may balk at the extra chore required to explicate embodied understanding and translate its qualia into the communicable terminologies of knowledge. True, this IS extra and a chore, but once performed, and beans are counted in bureaux such as the ARC, the explication of knowledge is applauded and ratified.[4]

Evaluation measures remain science focused

A second impediment is that most of the Australian academic environment seems to be captured by a vision of knowledge production evidenced by measures that are more appropriate to the natural and physical sciences than what is axiomatic in FoR19. University VCs and executive teams in Australia include very few representatives from Humanities and Creative Arts, which means there is little effective steerage of HCA interests and concerns, or understanding of creative-practice-led[5] research's tendency to deepen an internalised sense of ***understanding*** before well-defined, externalised or explicated ***knowledge*** is produced. The Australian Government definition of research does endorse the enhancement of understanding but, in practice, espoused knowledge is more positively evaluated than is sensed understanding.

Overly critical assessment by discipline

The third impediment is the creative academic community itself, which either (as noted above) fails to make compelling claims for the knowledge potential of NTROs, or simply judges one another's outputs and methodologies too harshly. For what it's worth, both authors can recall participating in judgement panels where FoR19 scholars' critique of submitted FoR19 works has strongly over-ridden any proselytising of those works. We are perhaps inordinately tough on ourselves, while scholars from other FoRs are more strategic in recognising when active and eloquent affirmation can bring benefits to a discipline.

We can do little but lobby for a clearer government and management understanding of research in FoR19; but for the rest, is it as simple as saying that sometimes, strategically speaking, we need to get out of our own way?

Results 2010-2018	For02 Physical Sciences	FoR03 Chemical Sciences	FoR04 Earth Sciences	FoR19 Arts, Writing	FoR20 Comm, Culture	FoR21 History, Archaeology
No change over period	5	4	4	18	15	8
Improved overall by 2018	9	12	4	3	8	9
Declined overall by 2018	1	3	5	2	1	4
Erratic across period	8	8	7	12	9	6
Never submitted	16	10	16	4	5	7
Submitted only in 2010	0	0	3	2	2	5
Ceased submitting by 2018	1	2	0	1	2	2
Submitted only in 2018	2	3	3	0	0	1
Number of units rated 5 (at any point in the cycle)	18	16	10	2	5	7
Number of units rated 1 (at any point in the cycle)	2	2	1	3	3	3

[1] Alan McKee 2018 'Analysis of the criteria used by key decision makers in Australia to judge the academic quality of NTROs', report for DASSH

[2] Australian Research Council 2019 'ERA Outcomes',
<https://dataportal.arc.gov.au/ERA/Web/Outcomes#/for/>, accessed 20 April 2019

[3] 'Unit of evaluation' is the term used in the ERA guidelines for each field of research at an institution. Thus UOEs in FoR19 means the submissions in that field made by each university, including all publications, staff data, research income data et al.

[4] If space permitted we could expend another thousand words arguing that there is great cognitive benefit in translating implicit, embodied understanding into explicit, linguistically communicable knowledge. In doing so we would also argue against an old "common-sense" view that is still a little too prevalent, namely the view that artistic savvy is revelatory, overwhelmingly intuitive and ineffable and is therefore inimical to explication and prosaic "knowledge-transfer".

[5] We use the term creative-practice-led research (CPLR) to distinguish the work of artist-academics from that of other practice disciplines, such as engineering, education or health, because the methodologies, intellectual traditions and trajectories of outputs are different in the art field.

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