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What is ERA really measuring?

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Biographies

Lyndall Adams is a contemporary artist and Senior Research Fellow in the School of Arts and Humanities and the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts at Edith Cowan University. Lyndall is an arts practice-led researcher drawing influences from the interface between post-structuralist and new materialist feminist thinking. Her arts-practice articulates the female body; the lived body that is determined and specific though paradoxically in a state of flux, defined and redefined by changing practices and discourses. Lyndall has participated in solo, collaborative and group exhibitions within Australia and internationally.

Clive Barstow's exhibition profile includes forty years of international exhibitions, artist residencies and publications in Europe, America, Asia and Australia. His work is held in a number of international collections, including the Musée National d'Art, Paris. Clive is Professor and Dean of Arts & Humanities at Edith Cowan University, Honorary Professor of Art at the University of Shanghai for Science & Technology China and global faculty member of Fairleigh Dickinson USA. His recent exhibitions include "Giving Yesterday a Tomorrow" at the Hu Jiang Gallery in Shanghai and recent publications include "Encountering the Third Space" at the University of Oxford UK.

Paul Uhlmann is a senior lecturer and coordinator of Visual Arts, Arts and Humanities, Edith Cowan University, Perth. Paul studied art in Australia at the ANU, in Germany (1986-87 DAAD scholarship) and in the Netherlands (International Samstag Scholarship 1994-95). In

2012 his practice-led PhD on painting was conferred at RMIT. He has recently exhibited at Impact 9 in Hangzhou, China and has written on embodied aesthetics. Exhibitions nationally and internationally since 1983; his work is held in many collections including; National Gallery of Australia; Art Gallery of Western Australia; Art Gallery of New South Wales and National Gallery of Victoria.

Abstract

How successful is Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) in measuring creative research? The ERA (2015) results would appear to advantage citations over peer review, traditional research over Non Traditional Research Outputs (NTROs) and certain geographical locations over others. If indeed this is true, what are the implications for the future development of NTROs in this country given the recent article published by the National Association of the Visual Arts (Winikoff, 2016), presenting the debate about the state of play of our art schools as one of survival and loss. The case for survival is one that needs to be closely examined where local and geographical factors are at play.

Art and design schools across Australia navigate a range of cultural and economic forces. The pedagogical and research agendas of the university environment create pressures that art schools need to adapt to—along with concomitant financial and administrative constraints. External industry structures and commercial aims create another set of compulsions. The art and design school is continually asked to define itself against and adapt to the conditions of these environments, a pressure that often runs against the spirit and value of studio enquiry as a pedagogical space. In the context of these complex forces, what is the morphology of the art and design school for the 21st century? This paper examines a survival strategy at ECU, a vibrant contemporary Arts hub with an international and national focus in a period where universities are attempting to define their individual identity while at the same time measuring the immeasurable.

Keywords: Art and Design School, Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA), Impact, Non Traditional Research Outputs (NTROs), Peer review

What is ERA really measuring?

How successful is Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) in measuring creative research? The ERA (2015) results would appear to advantage citations over peer review, traditional research over non-traditional outputs and certain geographical locations over others. If indeed this is true, what are the implications for the future development of Non Traditional Research Outputs (NTRO) in this country given the recent article published by the National Association of the Visual Arts (Winikoff, 2016), presenting the debate about the state of play of our art schools as one of survival and loss. This paper closely examines the case for survival where local and geographical factors are at play.

Art and design schools across Australia navigate a range of cultural and economic forces. The pedagogical and research agendas of the university environment create pressures that art schools need to adapt to—along with concomitant financial and administrative constraints. External industry structures and commercial aims create another set of compulsions. The art and design school is continually asked to define itself against and adapt to the conditions of these environments, a pressure that often runs against the spirit and value of studio enquiry as a pedagogical space. In the context of these complex forces, what is the morphology of the art and design school for the 21st century? This paper examines a survival strategy at Edith Cowan University, a vibrant contemporary Arts hub with an international and national focus in a period where universities are attempting to define their individual identity while at the same time measuring the immeasurable.

Measuring Research in the Arts

These are volatile and uncertain times; over recent years there have been many closures to regional art schools around Australia while at the same time art schools everywhere are undergoing constant and continual change (Passant, 2012, Steven 2012, Strong 2012, Westland and Legha, 2012, Finlay 2014, Forrer 2015, Lindley 2015, Small, 2016). Many competing internal and external economic factors cause these changes. Nevertheless, an art school or creative hub has to be relevant to the community and to the university it belongs to, while creative centres must also be strong contributors to research. It is at times a problem for leadership within university to measure creative research and to weigh up the cost of delivery of a course against the needs of the many competing disciplines. ERA is considered an important measuring standard for universities in relation to these existing pressures and tensions however, a poor performance here can effectively close a research centre or even an art school before it has had time to develop. National measurement and standards in this respect have an overriding effect on the viability of regional institutions in particular, even

when they might have strong and proven links with local communities. It is a concern of this paper that, if the way research is measured is inadequate, then it is possible that we will collectively and unwittingly diminish emerging voices from the far corners of this young country.

We have already witnessed the kind of economic rationalist thinking, which cripples creative institutions by comparing disciplines that require entirely different learning environments. For example, such lines of argument played out during the downsizing of the Canberra School of Music in 2012 (Passant, 2012, Westland and Legha, 2012, McDonald 2015). By highlighting the expensive nature of one-to-one teaching delivery of musical instruction and comparing that to traditional lecture delivery to packed auditoriums, a sense of devaluing of cultural integrity was enacted on an international stage, which still has wide ramifications beyond the economic savings of the cuts (McDonald 2015). While such comparisons are odious, other concerns are perhaps easily missed as they suit the concerns of the majority. In order to find an appropriate way of measuring NTROs against traditional citation based research, ERA takes note of the venue of the creative project as an important indicator of value. This seems much like the four tier journal ranking system which was eventually abandoned (officially) due to improper use of the ranking as a management tool (Bell, 2015, Bowrey, 2013, Thelwall and Delgado, 2015).

A citation-based paper is imminently portable, however to successfully convey the meaning of a performance or an exhibition an audience must be present—it must be an embodied experience. Research in the arts, which is arguably assessed more in terms of its contribution to knowledge (Stock, 2010, Australian Research Council, 2011), however, becomes a bone of contention given the onus on peer review. Context becomes the significant and differentiating gauge in assisting us to meaningfully evaluate quality and/or reception of the work and possibly places additional responsibility on the need to find strategies to adjust our aesthetics to the framework in which the creative work is placed (Stock, 2010). Context is vital to the meaning-making of the work and at times this can be delivered to a relevant small audience, the ramifications of which can be vital for sustaining and defining an identity relevant to place and location. It is possible that metro centres, which are rich in high ranking well-known and regarded venues will increasingly become the preferred outlet for creative researchers wanting to ensure that they are contributing to the research targets within their university sectors. In seeking highest-ranking venues, creative researchers may have less incentive to exhibit in regional and remote centres.

A researcher may certainly work on projects that intertwine the research question with the geographic location, however, it would seem that the publication output would immediately hold greater value if it was exhibited in a metro centre. This approach ‘relies heavily on the identity of the artist, who is involved in a complex web of social relations, rather than the work alone’ (Pedersen and Haynes, 2015). If such logic is valid then there is a cause for concern that this way of measuring research potentially leads to metro-centred, mega-centres of learning for art schools leaving behind smaller enterprises which are located in regional areas or zones where the population is less dense. To raise such a concern can lead immediately to being labelled as holding ‘victim’ status, however one wonders about the link that is rapidly being made between success and failure in terms of research. The example of the sale of the art school by the University of Sydney, which despite achieving above world class ranking through ERA, was labelled as a third rate performer (Baker, 2016) in terms of research does little to assist devising successful strategies for research for other art schools across the country. It also gives pause to wonder how art is best pursued through the university sector—the responsibility of the university to the community it serves and the role of research and value of where it should be shown. Does such a model of measuring research in ways that are understandable to other disciplines inadvertently destabilise the project of delivering art to the community and raises the question of who an art school is for, what does it aim to do, and what are the implications in terms of wider impact (Thelwall and Delgado, 2015)?

Impact through engagement

While peer reviewing offers an alternative model of measurement to the scientific citation based assessment grounded in STEM based research, it is often impossible to measure or demonstrate the socio-economic impact of the arts and humanities because its true value is often more embedded as a longer term contribution to our society and wellbeing. Helen Small (2013) points to the five primary functions of arts and humanities research as being: ‘insights into meaning making and knowledge; their distance from the practical applications; their contribution to happiness; their contribution to democracy; and for their own sake’ (Thelwall and Delgado 2015, 819). The increasing use of evidence-based policy therefore risks marginalising the highly subjective experience of engaging with the arts (Belfiori and Bennett 2008, 5-9). As the recent Research Excellence Framework (2014) process in the UK suggests, ‘impact can only be subjectively assessed rather than objectively measured’ (as cited in Universities Australia, 2016, 4).

Increasingly the government, industry and the research sectors are looking towards multi-disciplinary research to solve complex problems (ERA National Report: *State of Australian Research 2015-2016*, [1], 38). As an assessment of this complex form of multi-modal research ERA are flagging a new approach to assessment with a focus on esteem factors, generated income, and the impact of creative works through engagement. While metrics may say something about reach, they would be highly contestable in their capacity for providing a meaningful insight into impact (Universities Australia: *Consultation paper*. 2016, 1). Meaningful impact is often long and deep, and in some respects immeasurable. Research impact according to the Australian Research Council (2016b, 1) 'is the demonstrable contribution that research makes to the economy, society, culture, national security, public policy or service, health, the environment, or quality of life, beyond contributions to academia'. It is the subjective nature of the arts however that removes it from traditional forms of measurement and particularly when the impact is diverse and seemingly unrelated to the primary research goals.

It is the rarely acknowledged contribution of the arts to democracy where we focus the following case studies as examples of the inability of measurement to truly capture its significance beyond the tangible and the immediate.

Case Study 1

The School of Arts and Humanities (SAH) at Edith Cowan University (ECU) has responsibility for administering the University art collection of more than 3000 artworks. The collection has been valued at over 14 million dollars with major holdings of Aboriginal art—700 of which are of high international significance¹ (Bromfield, 2009). Following on from a number of works on loan to Parliament House in Canberra during 2013, SAH initiated a loan scheme with the West Australian Parliament in 2015 whereby a large number of Aboriginal works from West Australian artists were displayed in the Aboriginal meeting spaces and throughout the Parliament buildings (Figure 1).

¹ The Collection's Indigenous holdings include works by Paddy Jaminji, Hector Jandany, Ian Abdulla, H. J. Wedge, Butcher Joe Nangan, Janagoo Butcher Cherele, John Wawundjurl, George Milpurrurru, Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Rover Thomas, Queenie McKenzie, Julie Dowling, Sandra Hill, Chris Pease, Cliff Ryder, Bella Kelly, Ronnie Tjampitjinpa, George Ward Tjungurrayi, Helicopter Tjungurrayi, Kathleen Petyarre, and Gloria Petyarre (Russel, 2013, 22).



Figure 1: ECU Curatorial Project Parliament House, 2016. (With kind permission of the WA Parliament)

The cultural impact and significance of this engagement was not realised until the evening of the official opening, which was attended by a large number of Aboriginal elders from remote communities in the north west of Australia. Coincidentally, the opening fell on the same evening as the late sitting to debate the intended closure of 150 remote communities, a contentious situation made public by the now famous speech by the then Prime Minister Tony Abbott in which he referred to the situation of these communities as being a result of

*lifestyle choice*². Understandably, emotions were running high at the opening, in which vigorous debate ensued spurred in part by the spiritual presence of the many of the artworks. It was a poignant moment where images spoke louder than words and where the power of the collective spirit expressed the true meaning of the word *impact* well beyond the boundaries of our academic reference. As Barney states, engagement in politics can be 'exceptionally disruptive, antagonistic, risky and dangerous'³ (2010, 383). The situation reminds us of the power (and value) of the image in a cross-cultural and socio-political sense. Measuring the numbers of visitors that pass through Parliament House over the preceding months, or attempting to measure the significance of the West Australian Parliament as a venue seems inadequate in conveying the real influence of this curatorial project. Numbers alone are insufficient and must be interpreted in context in order to be translated into evidence regarding the level of engagement or transformation within the audience (Holden, 2005, 21). This approach at its core aligns with Thelwall and Delgado's suggestion that 'Reaching a smaller engagement might therefore count as more significant in terms of wider impact than a larger audience in a metropolitan centre or area judged as having a more pronounced level of cultural engagement' (2015, 820).

Case Study 2

As with all successful engagements with our communities, relationships should be mutually beneficial. In this respect, the relationship between the ECU art collection and the community contributes to a deeper relationship with Aboriginal artists and the School. University Australia states, 'The engagement and impact assessment should reward efforts to integrate best practice into curricula' (2016, 3). Open Bite Australia offers an embedded curriculum that operates from the printmaking studio of ECU, based on a deep and sustained relationship with Aboriginal communities from the remote Western desert regions in which these political debates were focused. Through the establishment of the Jimmy Pike fellowships and more recently the Pickett Foundation⁴, and partly because of the active position SAH has taken in supporting these communities, negotiations have taken place to establish an ongoing artist fellowship within Parliament House from 2016. The residency allows free access to Parliament buildings and the sitting politicians with total support from the speaker of the house. It is intended therefore to place artists and writers in residence who

² <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/mar/10/remote-communities-are-lifestyle-choices-says-tony-abbott>

³ This was said in the context of the politics of education but has similar resonance in the politics of local government

⁴ The Jimmy Pike Scholarship and the Pickett Foundation are funded residencies to encourage young Aboriginal artists from remote regions of Western Australia to engage in the visual arts alongside undergraduate students in the Bachelor of Contemporary arts at ECU.

will confront the political systems of government head on, giving strength to Barney’s (2010) observations of disruption and danger.

This ongoing and developing project raises further concerns about measurement. Within the 2014 UK Research Excellence Framework, a number of impacts are listed for arts and humanities research around the central notion of contributions to cultural life and economic prosperity. The indicators of measurement however seemed inappropriate in many respects in terms of engagement metrics (sales figures, business growth figures etc.). Similarly, the ARC’s recent ‘Research Impact Pathway’ (Figure 2) ‘provides high level examples from the research pipeline and indicates where they would normally sit on the pathway to impact’ (Australian Research Council 2016b, para. 3). However, for this case study, we would need to borrow from the performing arts in their assessment of hosted residencies, visitor numbers to museums and installations etcetera in order to more accurately reflect the values at play in the involvement of the creative arts within a cultural engagement project of this scope. Neither of these however comes close to acknowledging the impact and influence on our thinking, or *mind space* as Lefebvre (1991) puts it.

Research Impact Pathway				
Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes	Benefits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research income • Staff • Background IP • Infrastructure • Collections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research Work and Training • Workshop/Conference Organising • Facility Use • Membership of Learned Societies and Academies • Community and Stakeholder Engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publications including E-Publications • Additions to National Collections • New IP: Patents and Inventions • Policy Briefings • Media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commercial Products, Licences and Revenue • New Companies – Spin offs, Start Ups or Joint Ventures • Job Creation • Implementation of Programs and Policy • Citations • Integration into Policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic, Health, Social, Cultural, Environmental, National Security, Quality of Life, Public Policy or Services • Higher Quality Workforce • Job Creation • Risk Reduction in Decision Making

Figure 2: Research Impact Pathway (Australian Research Council, 2016a)

Additionally, the notion of the timing of our measurement also comes into question. Universities Australia and the ARC state that ‘impact should be determined at the point at which research is first used by the external party’ (Universities Australia 2016, 20). While this might be appropriate for some elements of STEM research, we would suggest that in this case study, the connection between the original creative research outcome and the partner

becomes stronger not weaker with time, and as such contradicts the assumption that the impact of the engagement relationship becomes more difficult to map over time. In this case, measurement becomes easier as more diverse and unpredictable outcomes occur and as a deeper and more sustained relationship is developed. Perhaps this brave and unique opportunity, which has the total backing of the Parliament of Western Australia, is where 'research translation' (Universities Australia 2016, 6) will be most influential and where the impact, or more precisely the *value* of cultural engagement will be truly witnessed.

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