

Enhancing the Australian Peak Discipline Body for Screen Production Academics

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ASPERA Evolution

The peak discipline body for academic screen producers in Australia is the Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association (ASPERA). On its webpage the Association is described as follows:

ASPERA is the peak discipline body of Australian tertiary institutions teaching and researching film, video, television and new media as screen based production practices. It was established in 2004 at an initial conference at the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne attended by 16 institutions.¹

ASPERA Membership

The ASPERA membership is defined by member institutions that nominate representatives to the Conference:

Full membership of ASPERA is open to Australian Universities, AFTRS, or academic units within a University (faculty, school, department, institute or college) responsible for the teaching and management of screen production and/or research programs where the central objective is the education and advancement of screen practitioners. A University or academic unit as defined above can join ASPERA if one third of their subjects are production based. Each institution or academic unit nominates its representative for ASPERA.²

ASPERA's Early Days: Functioning sub-committees

In the formative days of ASPERA the member-delegates were heads of schools, deans, directors and leaders of academic units. These delegates were also members of various sub-committees that were established by the annual AGM Conference. One such conference established 9 sub-committees and the conferences themselves were mostly made up of reports and presentations arising from the work that these sub-committees did during the previous year. The work of the sub-committees was directly relevant to the participating institutions and often led to organized collective lobbying. Some early ASPERA AGM Conferences had festivals associated with them – fitting celebrations of the sector's output.

Then something changed. The change came innocently enough at first and can be attributed mostly to the good intentions of the ASPERA executive committee, whose members diligently set out to improve the quality of the AGM conferences. The paradigm for a good academic conference is well known and the scholarly conference template became the central measure of the ASPERA AGM activities. Well-polished written presentations became the order of the day. A-category text journals were sought for publishing the conference papers. These enterprises dovetailed perfectly with the research outputs demanded by the university research coordinators, even though such output was the very inverse of creative arts output – in both form and methodology. The screenings/festivals and exchanges of creative works became rare. Around the same time the ASPERA sub-committees were discontinued and with their dissolution went the institutional relevance of ASPERA.

With most of each year's conference preparation falling on a small number of the Executive Committee members, ASPERA could do little else during the year except to undertake token representations by the Executive members at a range of functions and meetings. The outcomes of these meetings were often not immediately communicated to the sector.

Screen Production Community

Overall the shift of the AGM Conference towards the more conventional template of scholarship resulted in a decrease of ASPERA activities except for the Conference activities. The change did not stop here. It could be argued that the function of ASPERA itself changed. The new conference format shifted the AGM Conference from being a small circle of delegates representing member institutions to a gathering of a community of scholars. Each year the conference organizers set out to conscript as many screen production academics from the wider ASPERA community as possible. While there was much value in having such a collegial community of scholars, nevertheless, such a one-off collection of academics, in itself, does not guarantee an efficient way of dealing with the pressing needs of the sector. Instead of acting on behalf of the institutions as was previously done through the work of specific sub-committees, the ASPERA AGM Conference participants came to the conference primarily because of the conference's philosophical theme. In time, this larger community of scholars came to be considered unofficially as the primary membership of ASPERA, even though this was at odds with ASPERA's constitution. At the same time the AGM business of ASPERA became something of an aside to the main conference presentations. The constitution of ASPERA amplified this tendency still further by the manner the ASPERA Executive was elected.

Executive Committee

The intention of the original ASPERA constitution was for ASPERA to be an inclusive and representative body, and these attributes were built into the membership of the Executive Committee by convention and through the following clauses in the ASPERA constitution:³

- 14(7) Each year the AGM decides the venue and convener of the next Annual conference and where possible this location is to be rotated amongst participating institutions and amongst states and territories.
- 14(9) Where possible that the role of Vice President rotates throughout the states and territories.
- 14(4) Each year the Vice President succeeds the President

These collegial and inclusive clauses had some unexpected consequences. Some states had only one or a small number of ASPERA member institutions. Consequently the representatives from these states became permanent members of the Executive Committee for no other reason than a lack of activity in that particular state. The rotation of the Executive membership also limited the range of candidates available for the Executive. With the shift of ASPERA's function away from sub-committees and mostly towards the hosting of the AGM Conference, this rotating membership of ASPERA gave rise to Executive Committees that were generally made up of energetic junior academics who had limited institutional clout or links with their institutional managers. Many institutional leaders of ASPERA institutions no longer attended the AGM Conference.

Over the years, the link between the ASPERA delegates and their departmental managers became diffused, as did the effectiveness of ASPERA. From a number of statements made at the SPARC Colloquium it was evident that some delegates had limited connections with their school deans or research coordinators. The project

leader often found that discussions with heads of schools were at odds with positions expressed by the ASPERA delegates. This had consequences for the effectiveness of ASPERA as a peak discipline body and its status as a reference group for this project.

Screen Production Research Sector and ASPERA

At the start of the SPARC project the project leader established links with the heads of academic units from around 18 institutions that had active screen production programs and were known to be ASPERA members in previous years. These participants represented the ASPERA reference group and they were consulted either directly or through the state coordinators on all issues that that were relevant to the project. In addition there were another 4 institutions where screen production was emerging or where there were screen production researchers. As indicated previously, these two groups made up the 22 strong SPARC Reference group (plus AFTRS). The 2010 ERA and 2012 ERA audits reported research activity in the 1902 category from another eight institutions.⁴ These ERA ratings (1–5) are depicted in Table 1 with an additional 8 institutions depicted in rows 23–30:

	University	ERA 2010	ERA 2012	ASPERA	OTHER	SPARC
1	Bond					
2	Canberra					
3	Curtin	3	2			
4	Deakin	3	3			
5	Edith Cowan					
6	Flinders	3	3			
7	Griffith	3	3			
8	Macquarie	3				
9	Melbourne/VCA	4	3			
10	Murdoch	3	3			
11	Newcastle					
12	QUT	3	4			
13	RMIT	3	3			
14	COFA/UNSW	5	5			
15	UTS	3				
16	UWS	3	3			
17	Swinburne	2				
18	South Australia					
19	Adelaide					
20	Notre Dame					
21	Tasmania					
22	UWA					
23	CQU	1				
24	CSU		2			
25	La Trobe	3	2			
26	Monash	3	4			
27	Sydney	3				
28	Queensland	3	4			
29	Wollongong	3				
30	Victoria	1				
31	AFTRS					

Table 1 Research Profile of the SPARC participants according to ERA 2010 and ERA 2012 audit

The research activities of these 31 institutions suggest a very active screen production sector. A somewhat different picture arises when one looks at ASPERA's actual membership. The annual ASPERA 2012–2013 Treasurer's report gives only 13 (paid-up) members of ASPERA: Bond, Canberra, Curtin, Deakin, Edith Cowan, Griffith, Macquarie, Melbourne (VCA), Murdoch, RMIT, NSW (COFA), UWS and AFTRS. Of these, four were absent or abstained from the 2013 AGM meeting.

Of the remaining nine paid-up members, only 5 appear in ERA 2012 for the 1902 category of Film, Television and Digital Media, as indicated in the shaded ASPERA AGM entries in Table 2.

	University	ERA 2010	ERA 2012	ASPERA MEMBER	ASPERA AGM
1	Bond				
2	Canberra				
3	Curtin	3	2		
4	Deakin	3	3		
5	Edith Cowan				
6	Flinders	3	3		
7	Griffith	3	3		
8	Macquarie	3			
9	Melbourne/VCA	4	3		
10	Murdoch	3	3		
11	Newcastle				
12	QUT	3	4		
13	RMIT	3	3		
14	COFA/UNSW	5	5		
15	UTS	3			
16	UWS	3	3		
17	Swinburne	2			
18	South Australia				
19	Adelaide				
20	Notre Dame				
21	Tasmania				
22	UWA				
23	CQU	1			
24	CSU		2		
25	La Trobe	3	2		
26	Monash	3	4		
27	Sydney	3			
28	Queensland	3	4		
29	Wollongong	3			
30	Victoria	1			
31	AFTRS				

Table 2 2013 Research profile of 2013 ASPERA AGM membership

Curiously, according to the ASPERA Treasurer's 2013 report it appears that three members of the Executive Committee were not paid up members of the Association by the prescribed period.

ASPERA Recommendations

In recent years ASPERA has developed some admirable and worthy characteristics of inclusiveness and a sense of scholarly community within the screen production

sector. However, these attributes have come at the cost of ASPERA's active disengagement from the leadership of the sector and the discontinuation of its subcommittees. This is unfortunate, for the sector still has a marginal existence within academia and much needs to be done collectively by an effective peak discipline body to rectify this situation. In particular, the ASPERA sector urgently needs active leadership to direct its research activities.

Developing such leadership within ASPERA is likely to clash with its governance and its existing *modus operandi*, which foregrounds the sense of scholarly community rather than creative practice leadership. Unless this situation is resolved quickly ASPERA will lose relevance and the sector itself will suffer. Arguably the 2013 Treasurer's Report on membership suggests that this critical situation may have set in already.

To rejuvenate ASPERA the following actions are recommended:

- (i) ASPERA delegates should be leaders of the academic units they represent.
- (ii) The ASPERA AGM invitation should go to the departmental heads/deans in the first instance. If unable to attend, he or she should nominate the ASPERA delegate and should advise the delegate how to represent the institution.
- (iii) ASPERA should reconstitute its sub-committees. The work of the sub-committees should be the focus of the ASPERA AGM Conference.
- (iv) The constitution of ASPERA should be modified to enable the election of ASPERA executive committee members according to ability and not according to the representation of the states. The representation of the states should be considered only if it is relevant to ASPERA functions.

Higher Education Research Data Collection (HERDC)

For the screen production sector to be properly recognized as a research discipline it needs to properly document its research output. At the present moment, screen production research output is not collected by the Higher Education Research Data Collection (HERDC) annual round. In part this is because the only recognized publication format is text-based and no formal mechanism exists for comparing text-based publication output with other publication output formats such as screen texts. This situation ought to change as it has a bearing on how the sector is regarded and funded. Research outputs of screen producers need to be documented for both staff and postgraduate students. This is especially so if the research output of both is intertwined. The comparison between this non-traditional research output and text-based output should be formally established.

Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA)

The ERA scheme has helped evaluate the sector's research output – not by any specified measures but simply by requiring that creative works be assessed by peers. However ERA's audit also has shortcomings. Some of these include the following:

- FoR 1902 ERA 2012 output for Film, Television and Digital Media was made up of the following outputs:⁵

Book	3 per cent
Book Chapter	15 per cent
Conference Paper	11 per cent
Journal Article	28 per cent

Non-traditional Research Output 43 per cent

The presence of such a large proportion of conventional research outputs (57 per cent) in the ERA's FoR 1902 category brings into question the nature of this category that so readily conflates creative works with conventional publications. These are different types of output in kind, size and quality, and should be kept separate. Comparing pieces of writing with group-based creative works is not only inappropriate but generally works against creative works – if only because the creative work label hides rather than discloses the work that goes into its production.

- Screen productions should be assessed solely by peers. It is possible to question if ERA assessors are real peers or token peers as the process is often not very transparent.
- The relationship between the ERA audit and institutional disciplines is somewhat unclear. Filmmakers are often moved across research categories and groupings in a way that is mostly beyond their control. It seems as if the ERA audit is a kind of a game which aims at optimizing the ERA ranking.
- The relationship between the ERA rating and the funding of the rated programs has not been finalized, hence the relevance of the ERA rating is not entirely clear at the institutional level.

Until these ERA problems are clarified and resolved it is doubtful the sector's research output will be properly assessed.

In these circumstances the sector itself will need to arrange the evaluation of its research output. Specifically it will have to do the following:

- (i) establish a national network of peers to assess creative works produced by screen producers
- (ii) establish a comparative measure for creative works in terms of conventional publication values
- (iii) confirm that the assessment process is valid
- (iv) document these works with the relevant institutions and agencies (such as ERA and ARC).

All the above issues were addressed in great detail by the previous OLT/ ALTC project.⁶

Notes and References

1. Source ASPERA website: <www.aspera.org.au>, accessed 13 Sept. 2013.
2. Source ASPERA Constitution, page 3-4: <www.aspera.org.au>, accessed 13 Sept. 2013.
3. Source ASPERA Constitution: <www.aspera.org.au/documents/constitution.pdf>, accessed 13 Sept. 2013.
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ERA 2012 http://www.arc.gov.au/era/outcomes_2012/FoR/1902, accessed March 2014.
5. ERA 2012 Output for 1902 accessed March 2014:
<http://www.arc.gov.au/pdf/era12/report_2012/ARC_ERA12_Section2_19.pdf>
6. See ALTC Priority-funded project Assessing Graduate Output in 19 Australian Film Schools Report at:
<www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/nass/altc/projectone/news.html>, accessed 13 September, 2013.