

# Organising the Australian Screen Production Research Sector

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## Collaborative Research Centre

The writing below details some of the planning undertaken during the Screen Production and Research Collaboration (SPARC) project introduced in the earlier papers of this *IM* issue. The writer argues that the sector has much to gain by collaborating. The potential for collaboration has always existed in the sector – broadcast networks were early collaborators at the exhibition end of production. The emergence of the Internet and the National Broadband Network (NBN or its equivalent) have now extended this collaboration potential to all levels of communication. So much so that collaboration today may well be synonymous with the Internet and with cyber networks exemplified by the emergence of the following Australian networks and websites:

### Terrestrial Ecosystem Research Network (TERN)

This network enables ecosystem scientists to collect, contribute, store, share and integrate data across disciplines. It encourages collaboration and nationally consistent data. Federal Government funding is provided through the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy (NCRIS) and ARC Super Science Initiative.

### Interoperation and Collaboration Infrastructure (ICI)

The ICI project provides and facilitates technological services and support via interoperable and collaborative tools to Australian researchers.

### National eResearch Collaboration, Tools and Resources (NeCTAR)

This project is creating national infrastructure to provide Australian researchers with access to a full suite of digitally enabled data and analytic and modelling resources relevant to their research, at their desktop. Federal Government funding is provided through Super Science.

### National Imaging Facility (NIF)

This project has established a national network that provides state-of-the-art imaging of animals, plants and materials for the Australian research community to aid medical research and the development of pharmaceuticals. Federal Government funding is provided through NCRIS and Education Investment Fund (EIF).

### Australian National Data Service (ANDS)

This service transforms Australia's research data environment through better managing, connecting, enabling discovery of and supporting the multiple use of data. Federal Government funding is provided through NCRIS and Super Science.

## Australian Screen Academy

The paper below was circulated to all SPARC project partners. The underlying assumption in the paper is that collaboration is not only good for the screen production sector, but may well be the principal method of organising many

research activities in the future.

## POSITION PAPER ON THE NEED TO CREATE A NATIONAL RESEARCH CENTRE FOR THE ASPERA SECTOR

There are three high-end development pathways for screen producers and filmmakers in Australia.

**AFTRS:** The first pathway is the professional program run by the Australian Film, Television and Radio School (AFTRS) with an MA as its terminal degree.

**The Industry:** The second high-end pathway for screen producers and filmmakers is the grant-based “investment” scheme run by Screen Australia and a range of state funding organizations. These schemes fund the best production teams from a pool of available practitioners based on peer assessment and industry approved guidelines and criteria.

**University Sector:** The third high-end development option for screen producers is found in Australian universities (approximately 22), via their screen production undergraduate, postgraduate coursework and postgraduate research programs, the latter with PhD or DCA as the relevant terminal degree.

All these schemes are based on “excellence” and “innovation” of one kind or another but only the university sector has the broad systematic programs that start with training of a large number of undergraduate students from which the elite, generally at Distinction level or above, are permitted to go on into postgraduate and research programs. Since innovation and originality are defining features of research, the university postgraduate research programs should produce the most work that is on the cutting-edge. Hence it is in the universities where one will find the next generation of “film schools”. Future “film schools” will, logically, extend their creative innovation through post-doctoral fellowships and grant-driven research centre activities.

**The Future:** The need for such research-based “film schools” has never been higher as evidenced by the proliferation of image-based technologies, software, tablets, iPhones, Google-glasses and such. The changing interfaces across platforms and types of media, alongside the digital convergences with libraries, galleries, museums, broadcasters, cinemas, archives and individual users, will result in these developments becoming increasingly important. To complete globally, in this digital arena, it is necessary to have flexible and nuanced research programs.

Screen production institutions have undergraduate, postgraduate and institutional research teams all over Australia to work on these developments. Their programs are in great demand by students. They also operate on a group-based research training and practice-based methodology that is intrinsically interdisciplinary. This is rare in the Humanities and provides much-valued industry-ready training ideal for the emerging creative industries. As with the established science disciplines, what this sector requires to advance is a successful R&D program based on a sustainable funding model, complementary to the other high-end screen production pathways (AFTRS and Screen Agencies).

**Silos:** For all the above reasons the three high-end development programs outlined earlier should be connected and integrated with one another. Unfortunately this is not the case. Instead of seeking efficiencies by interconnections, integration and synergies, the three schemes tend to see themselves as competitors rather than as

part of a whole screen development industry.

The state and federal funding agencies, in particular, are quite protective of the funds they reserve for the producers they select to fund. They do this with rules that tend to exclude the postgraduate candidate from having access to what is a very limited pool of funds. For example, most Screen Australia application forms for funding demand that the applicant declare they are not a film student.

**ARC:** The university screen production researchers face additional difficulties because the Australian Research Council (ARC), the traditional source of university research funding, generally do not fund creative projects that involve producing “art” – even when this art is research based. They leave artistic activities of this kind to the Australian Council for the Arts. The Australian Council for the Arts, in turn, generally does not fund screen-based work other than work that would fit in a gallery or as part of an installation.

**Text-based research:** The few brave postgraduates that persist with their lowly funded postgraduate research programs are generally forced to work within the conventional research paradigm based on a single author and a written thesis – the very antithesis of what most group-based screen producers aspire to do. Something similar can be said for the research activities of the screen production academics as well.

**Status quo:** As a consequence of these funding restrictions, postgraduate research programs in screen production tend to be small and are often treated as costly academic oddities rather than as programs that have innovative research methodologies of great potential value.

Ironically the anaemic state of ERA research outputs in screen production only serves to support the established and the narrowcast forms of screen production undertaken by state and federal film funding bodies. In turn, this is supported solely by the modest AFTRS MA program and by the TAFE-trained crews. It could be argued that, by excluding innovative engagement with the university research sector, the screen production “industry” has been structurally organized to remain static. It could further be argued that the non-existent film industry is the evidence of this stagnation even after billions of dollars have been invested in it.

Individual universities can do little about this situation. Almost every university with a screen production program in Australia has attempted to engage creatively with state and federal film funding agencies to argue for co-operation in the funding of screen research. They have done this with little success, even when administrators of these schemes have seen value in such co-operation.

If the university screen production sector is to find solutions to these problems it will have to do something that has not been tried before, and do it in a way that gives it new strength. One strategy offers itself as a solution to the problems described – collaboration.

**Network Collaboration:** The potential for collaboration has always existed in the Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association (ASPERA) sector. However the Internet and the National Broadband Network (NBN) have made this potential into a reality. Collaboration may well be synonymous with the Internet and with cyber networks. This is valid for all disciplines. However, no other Humanities sector is as suited to exploring the potential of this cyber network as is the ASPERA sector.

**National Network:** A proposed collaborative research centre/“network” hub can

dovetail directly into the NBN development (or its equivalent). If the staff in the screen production sector were to collaborate, collectively they would be able to create a research-based super-university network in screen production with super research capacity including lobbying influence.

Collaboration does not exclude other (previously mentioned) funding alternatives (ARC, Screen Australia); rather collaboration makes it more likely for the sector to tap into these funding sources. For example, the two high-end grant schemes, the Cooperative Research Centre and the ARC Centre of Excellence, are almost defined by institutional collaboration. Application for either of these two schemes will be greatly enhanced by collaboration of researchers in the sector, and greatly reduced by not having such institutional collaboration. Establishing an ongoing collaborative research centre will provide an excellent foundation for such future grant application options and a win-win outcome for those involved.

**Global–Local Network:** By collaborating in this fashion it is possible for the sector to become big and small simultaneously. It can operate as a national collaborative network – a super university research centre – and also be “small”, by directing the local groups towards local end-user issues and clients.

**Synergies:** Through research collaboration ASPERA institutions will gain all the advantages that come with collaboration. Collaboration is intrinsically productive and creative for all the reasons outlined already.

**Consciousness-raising:** Collaboration increases awareness of research issues and this in itself leads to new research projects.

**Innovation:** Collectively the sector can give rise to projects at a higher level of conceptualization than could not be conceived previously.

**New Research Terrain:** collaboration introduces new research territory unlikely or impossible to be undertaken by a single institution.

**New paradigms of research:** Collaboration makes it possible to explore new paradigms of research in screen production especially those associated with the emerging cyber networks and digital data mining.

**National importance and priority:** By working collaboratively the ASPERA sector will be able to identify important areas of research that have local, national and international importance.

**Funding:** The collaborative partners should be able to obtain funding for these staff-led research projects if these are deemed to be socially important.

**Postgraduate places:** Projects that are staff-led and grant-funded can be allocated funded postgraduate places and in doing so grow the postgraduate research sector.

## **ACTION PLAN**

For all the above reasons it is proposed that the ASPERA sector creates a collaborative research network that:

- operates as a national collaborative Research Centre with the aim of proactively seeking collaborative projects, and national and international collaborative grants
- supports MA (research) and PhD programs and postgraduates in screen production whenever this is possible

- hosts a Learned Academy: the ASPERA sector needs the same type of Learned Academy as scientist have in the Australian Academy of Science (AAS) and social scientist have in the Academy of the Social Science in Australian (ASSA). The membership of these learned academies is made up of the most successful researchers with self-evident national and international reputations. Collectively such a group would provide effective representatives for the ASPERA research sector.

**Name:** The simplest label for the proposed research entity is the Australian Screen Academy. The acronym ASA is sufficiently different from the AAS of the Australian Academy of Sciences. The ASA acronym also invokes sentimental reflections on the ASA rating of film stock, which seem appropriate.

Accordingly it is proposed that a collaborative research entity entitled the Australian Screen Academy (ASA) be established. The establishment of ASA would be initiated by the following Memorandum of Understanding once it is signed by deans of academic units that offer screen production programs or by academic staff with similar institutional authority.

## Memorandum of Understanding

for the establishment of the

### **Australia Screen Academy**

#### **(ASA)**

The academic unit in this University is a host to screen production programs and in principle we agree to participate in the formation of the National Australian Screen Academy (ASA) with like-minded institutions and under the following conditions:

#### **1. MEMBERSHIP**

- 1 (i) ASA will consist of eligible member institutions.  
Eligible institutions at this date are: Bond University, Charles Sturt University, Curtin University, Deakin University, Edith Cowan University, Flinders University, Griffith University, Macquarie University, Murdoch University, QUT, RMIT University, Swinburne, The University of Adelaide, University of Canberra, The University of Melbourne, University of NSW, The University of Newcastle, The University of Notre Dame, University of South Australia, University of Technology, Sydney, University of Tasmania, The University of Western Australia, University of Western Sydney.
- 1 (ii) The member institutions will consist of those institutions that sign this in-principle Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).
- 1 (iii) This MOU needs to be signed by the Dean of the academic unit offering screen production programs or by academic staff with similar institutional authority.

- 1 (iv) The content of the this MOU will provide the initial guiding principles for the ASA.

## **2. THE GOVERNING BOARD**

- 2 (i) The MOU signatories or their delegates will constitute the ASA Governing Board.
- 2 (ii) The function of the Board will be to support the principles enshrined in the mutually agreed MOU principles.
- 2 (iii) The ASA Board can change the initial ASA MOU principles by a simple majority vote from the total number of governing members.
- 2 (iv) For the purpose of governance each member institution will have one vote.

## **3. EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE**

- 3(i) The Governing Board of deans will elect a five person Executive Committee.
- 3(ii) Members of the ASA Executive Committee should have an established track record in practice-based research (publications, grants and PhD completions) and with PhD qualifications or formally recognized equivalent qualifications.
- 3(iii) The Executive Committee must comprise members from at least three different states and/or territories.
- 3 (iv) The current President of ASPERA will be the sixth member of the ASA Executive Committee.
- 3(v) The Executive Committee will elect its own Chairperson and any other position it considers necessary for the running of the Board.

## **4. ASA AIMS**

- 4(i) ASA is established to be an autonomous research arm of the Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association (ASPERA). It is expected that the members of the ASA Governing Board are all members of ASPERA.
- 4(ii) The principle aim of ASA, as described by this MoU, will be to facilitate and support research and postgraduate research in the ASPERA sector.
- 4(iii) Specifically, ASA will do this by hosting under its umbrella label:
  - (a) a collaborative Research Centre, and
  - (b) a Learned Academy

## **5. ASA RESEARCH CENTRE**

- 5 (i) As a Research Centre ASA will be an inclusive community of ASPERA researchers working on collaborative research projects.
- 5 (ii) The Centre will proactively seek collaborative research projects and in this way strengthen and lobby for the ASPERA sector.
- 5 (iii) Eligible ASA Research Centre membership will be: all screen production staff, postgraduates (those pursuing research MAs and PhDs), screen production

post-doctoral fellows and other research centre staff, artists-in-residence, distinguished scholars, adjunct and emeritus staff whose primary research focus is practice-based research in screen production.

- 5 (iv) The Centre will define itself primarily by research activities that individual institutions cannot undertake alone.
- 5 (v) In all circumstances the activities of the ASA Research Centre will be to complement and enhance normal institutional research activities and not compete with them.
- 5 (vi) ASA researchers working on current research project that are wholly or partly designated as an ASA project will be designation as ASA Researchers as well as being researchers of their home institutions.
- 5 (vii) Outcomes of collaborative research projects will be apportioned to partner institutions in the usual manner (as in ERA stipulation).

## **6. ASA POSTGRADUATES**

- 6 (i) Whenever possible, each ASA collaborative staff-led grant project application should include some funded postgraduate places.
- 6 (ii) Postgraduates working on the ASA project will be formally designated as ASA postgraduates as well as being the postgraduate of their chosen institution.

## **7. LEARNED ACADEMY**

- 7(i) As a Learned Academy ASA will host the ASA Fellowship. Membership of the ASA Fellowship will be made up of the most successful researchers with self-evident national and international reputations. These members will be selected by nomination and election by existing Fellowship body. This membership will be designated by "Fellow of ASA" or FASA - Fellow of Australian Screen Academy.
- 7(ii) ASA through its Executive Committee and through ASPERA, will recommend ASA Fellows to other related Learned Academies – the Creative Arts Council, for example.
- 7(iii) The functioning of the ASA Fellowship can be defined and developed by its Fellows.
- 7(iv) It is expected that the Learned Academy will set directions for the ASA Research Centre.

## **8. INSTITUTION-BASED ASA RESEARCH CENTRE**

- 8 (i) Each institution will have its own autonomous ASA Research Centre, designated for example as ASA-UTC, ASA-Murdoch, ASA-Griffith, ASAVCA, etc., respectively.
- 8 (ii) Each institutional representative on the ASA Board will also be the director of their own institutional ASA Research Centre.
- 8 (iii) The activities of the local Research Centre will be consistent with those of the national Centre and as described by this MOU.
- 8 (iv) The institutional ASA Research Centre Board will be made up of its director

plus any three other full-time academic staff from the following list: research active screen production researchers, institutional screen production research coordinators, deans of screen production programs, directors of practice based research centres or a delegated representative of these.

## **9. INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT**

- 9 (i) Each participating institution agrees to provide \$2,000 in-kind support (such as teaching relief) annually for its (one) institutional ASA representative to oversee ASA collaborative research activities.
- 9 (ii) Additional funding support for each centre is expected to be found from collaborative grant-based projects, consultancies, corporate sponsorships and similar funding sources.

## **10. FINANCIAL TRANSACTIONS**

- 10(i) All financial transactions that relate to the collaborative research activities of the Centre will be processed by the host institution as with all other research grants, consultancies, corporate sponsorship and similar funding sources.

## **11. STATE-BASED ASA RESEARCH CENTRE**

- 11(i) Each state will have a state-based ASA Research Centre made up of directors of the institution-based ASA Research Centres in that state. The function of the state-based ASA Research Centre will be to pro-actively seek collaborative projects for the state ASA institutions and in this way strengthen and lobby for the state ASPERA sector.

## **12. ASA NETWORK**

- 12 (i) Through its member institutions ASA will operate as a collaborative research network consisting of hubs and nodes across all states and all screen production institutions.
- 12 (ii) When first set in place the ASA can be conceived as a research network hub connecting the five state nodes. However, once established this research network can develop “organically” as appropriate.

## **13. MEETINGS**

- 13 (i) The ASA Institution Board should meet as often as is required to carry out their research functions
- 13 (ii) The ASA State Board can meet as often as required but at least once a year.
- 13 (iii) The ASA Australia Board should meet at least once a year and ideally during the ASPERA AGM Conference.

Signed Date  
Name  
Position (\*)  
Institutions

(\*) This MOU needs to be signed by the Dean of the academic unit offering screen production programs or position of similar institutional authority.

## **ASA Recommendations**

The ASA Research Centre was formulated to deal with problems of the screen production sector and in a way that will support the ASPERA community while giving it a strong research impetus and fresh directions. This entire project has contributed greatly to the consciousness-raising in the sector and has stimulated all participants to think about the future for this discipline. For all the reasons outlined in this Report, the ASA program needs to be implemented as soon as possible to revive the sector which, for a range of reasons, is gradually being pushed into teach-only mode.

Emerging networks such as the Creative Arts Learning and Teaching Network (CALTN) can also help. So can the proposed Creative and Performing Arts Council. The establishment of ASA can dovetail easily into both of these networks.