

TEXT

The Journal of the Australian Association of Writing Programs

EDITORIAL

Critiquing Societies

One of the key reasons for establishing the AAWP revolved around the fact that creative writing products published or broadcast by academic staff teaching creative writing in Australian Universities were not recognised in the competitive distribution of national funds under the Research Quantum (RQ) system.

At that time, some four years ago, visual and performing arts were strongly organised through their national associations and were major contributors to the Strand Report and other documents which made a case to the Australian Research Council (ARC) for recognition of 'research equivalence' weightings for artistic and performance products.

The pressure from the Strand Report has had a number of positive consequences:

- a) several universities have recently developed composite indices which allow creative departments to compete for internal distribution of RQ funds and which can also be used for purposes of staff promotion, etc;
- b) the ARC is now talking in a significant way about recognition of creative products in the RQ distribution at the national level.

Some universities in Australia are particularly disadvantaged by an RQ distribution which does not recognise creative production because of the commitment of those universities to the teaching of creative arts.

During the Dawkins amalgamation process some universities took on large commitments in incorporating Colleges of Advanced Education, Colleges of Art, and Music Conservatoria. Typically in these elements there was a lower-profiled orientation towards the production of academic books and articles, the graduating of research higher degree scholars, and the gaining of national competitive research grants, i.e. the very activities which attract RQ. In fact, these elements were not previously funded to be involved in these sorts of activities.

The new situation - after Dawkins - suddenly suggested that funding to these elements included a 33% component related to research output (something not included in their briefs previously). Many ex-CAE and other college elements were accustomed to much higher teaching loads (which they subsequently continued with) and the pursuit of beyond-teaching activities which targeted community-oriented activities and creative productions geared at local, national and international levels.

There was a real sense in which the newly-incorporated 'university' elements were suddenly being asked to do something they had not had experience in; they were being asked to act like universities when they had not been set up as universities. Suddenly they were asked to show that they did everything universities did.

But how could an ex-CAE, ex-College of Art or ex-Conservatorium element, where appointment of staff had not depended on possession of a doctoral qualification but rather on industry-oriented excellence, suddenly cope with an index which counted research higher degree outputs but did not count production of top-place graduates for arts and other industries?

How could these elements suddenly produce lists of refereed publications where there was no tradition of such publication and, indeed, no journals to carry them?

And how could these elements suddenly produce evidence of success in national competitive grants where the criteria for those grants made no allowance for the addressing of practical arts-related issues?

It was no simple matter to change the cultures of these elements such that they might suddenly produce the kinds of research which satisfy the ARC RQ criteria. Equally, it was no simple matter to change the understanding of the

traditional university research elements - the sciences and the humanities - such that they might recognise the beyond-teaching activities of the 'second-level' elements as genuine research.

In question time following a lecture delivered at Griffith University on 26 March 1999, Professor Vicki Sara, Head of the ARC, acknowledged the fact that the present criteria for RQ are stacked against the creative departments in universities around Australia. She also acknowledged that something needs to be done about this fact and that the ARC needed to take the issue on board.

Professor Sara said that she was uncomfortable with the notion of 'research equivalence' for the creative arts. In describing all research as those creative activities which lead to the advancement of knowledge in the context of a progressing society, she appeared to recognise the contribution of the creative arts as 'real' research towards the continuing 'general health' of the nation in terms of psychological and emotional growth and identity-building in a global context.

Professor Sara's words suggest that if the ARC does not address the issue of creative production as real research, then the nation is choosing not to support its own advancement in particularly important areas.

This means that creative production at university level must be assessed in terms of contribution to national and global well-being and the advancement of understandings of ourselves and others in an international context.

The creative arts, at the best levels in industry and in tertiary teaching, do this already. In the creative writing arena, we need to press forward with the argument that writers provide genuine critique of our own and other societies, gather up astute evidences from the past, and speculate knowledgeably on directions for the future.

Australian writers are well-placed in the global endeavour which has a need for objective critique of first- and second-world thinking, along with an identification towards third-world aspirations. We are a nation which has taken on second-world culture, is still adjusting itself towards first-world influences, and is regularly classified as a third-world entity. We cover a spectrum of understandings which possibly no other nation can equal.

When we talk about Australia and its place in the world, we talk about some of its science products (such as the thalidomide discovery) and some of its political products (such as early female franchise). But we talk equally about some of its writing products (such as Patrick White and the Nobel Prize). Creative writing has contributed too significantly to the world stage of issues to be ignored.

This is the context in which the AAWP operates. We are in the business of producing world-class thinkers and speculators who deliver their products in creative forms which will be audienced globally.

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