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Quantifying the ineffable? The University of Sydney’s guidelines for non-traditional research outputs (2014)

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Ever since the Australian Research Council (ARC, 2009) first recognized “non-traditional research outputs” (NTROs) as valid expressions of research, developing benchmarks to measure the quality of artistic research has been of increasing interest to the Australian higher education sector. Because research quality (as measured through the triennial Excellence in Research Australia exercise) is a driver for block funding to higher education institutions, decisions about the quality of artistic research need to be transparent, based on peer review and justifiable to government auditors.

With these requirements in mind, in 2014 the University of Sydney adopted *University Guidelines for Non-Traditional Research Outputs*, developed by a University working party led by Professor William Christie (then Associate Dean (Research) in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences). Extending a previous set of guidelines developed by the Creative Arts Working Party in 2012, the guidelines follow the framework and terminology developed by the Australian Research Council (2014). The Guidelines recognize that:

[r]esearch output may consist of any form of publicly available, assessable materials embodying research, whether produced by writing, making, composing, designing, performing, or curating. (The University of Sydney, 2014)

Artistic research, defined as “creative work as research” by Borgdorff (2012), is thus placed within a conceptual framework embracing not only standard print research outputs (“traditional” research outputs including books, journal articles, book chapters and published refereed conference papers) but also other “non-traditional” outputs of traditional research (scholarly translations, critical editions, technical standards, exhibitions of archaeological or scientific objects, and research reports for external bodies). Complementing the

general criteria and principles, the University Guidelines also include specific criteria and output weightings for each type of NTRO.

Recognizing the inherently unsatisfactory nature of any system of quality metrics (Wilson, 2015), this chapter will discuss issues arising from the development and implementation of the guidelines within the Sydney Conservatorium of Music (SCM). After reviewing definitions of the various terms used in the document, we will show how they have been implemented in practice within SCM, illustrated by a case study of a particular output, the performance of *Brundibár* produced and directed by Joseph Toltz in 2014. The chapter will conclude with consideration of various challenges and issues raised.

Definitions

Acknowledging that the principal function of the University's Guidelines is to guide researchers and research administrators in reporting valid research output data for both the Higher Education Research Data Collection (HERDC), administered by the Department of Education and Training, and Excellence in Research Australia (ERA), administered by the Australian Research Council, both the 2012 and 2014 versions of the Sydney Guidelines follow the definitions articulated in the ERA Guidelines. Building on the ERA (2014, p.12) and OECD (2002, p. 31) definitions of research, the Sydney Guidelines (p. 2) define research as:

the creation of new knowledge and/or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way, so as to generate new concepts, methodologies, and understandings in the relevant discipline area(s) ... undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge (including knowledge of humanity, culture, and society) or to use this stock of knowledge to devise new applications.

The Guidelines' general requirements for research contribution and significance, placed at the beginning of the document (pp. 1-2), seek to apply these broad principles in a systematic way, taking into account the modes of research practice of the creative arts and other disciplines producing NTROs. Research contribution relates mainly to the works' intrinsic properties of innovation or advancement of knowledge, while research significance, as defined in the ARC ERA guidelines, is mainly concerned with significance of the research within the community of scholars (evidence of external recognition of excellence or peer review).

The *contribution* of the research is to be demonstrated either by evidence of the advancement or extension of knowledge or by innovation. In summary,

there must be evidence that the output has either enhanced, or is likely to enhance, knowledge, thinking, understanding, and/or practice in the relevant field or it has developed new ideas or new data, and/or initiated new methods and forms of expression. In either case the output demonstrates intellectual precision and/or systematic method and/or formal integrity.

The *significance* of the research is to be demonstrated either by evidence of research excellence or by peer review. Evidence of research excellence is demonstrated by proxy, including distinguished locations and venues, or the participation of distinguished personnel in leading roles, on the assumption that these are ‘industry’ endorsements of quality. Evidence of peer review—which can occur either before or after the performance—can take a number of forms, including: acknowledgement of the output in critical or scholarly essays, articles, reviews or conference papers (print or electronic) written by peers; recognition of the output through short-listing, prizes, awards, or honors, reviewed and judged by a panel of peers; commissioning of the output through a peer review process; or funding of the output through competitive grant schemes.

One of the more contentious and subjective judgments that researchers are required to make relates to the weighting of their output as either standard or major. Table 6.1 summarizes the criteria for output weightings articulated in the Sydney Guidelines (p2-3). There are many reasons (including workload weightings and researcher pride in their work) that lead researchers to self-report their works as major. On the other hand, due to the audit requirements around proper use of Government funds that will eventually flow from the output reporting, the University is very cautious not to over-claim in this area. Accordingly, the University guidelines attempt to provide clear criteria against which researchers can provide evidence of major status if such is claimed (pp.2-3).

Table 6.1. Criteria for Output Weightings University of Sydney

	STANDARD	MAJOR
Endeavour <i>and</i>	Few months to a year	1-5 years
Scale of work <i>plus evidence of 1 or more of:</i>	Substantial	Extensive
• Complexity/sophistication	Moderate	High
• Concepts, repertoire etc	Synthesis or extension of existing	Novel or highly innovative
• Cultural significance	Moderate	High
• Influence on peers	Moderate	High

Output weightings

At the University of Sydney, NTRO data is collected annually by Faculties alongside data on traditional publications. All data that will be eventually required for evidence under ERA—including recordings, programs, research statements and authorship declarations,—must be uploaded (normally by Faculty research services staff) to the University’s central Integrated Research Management Application database (IRMA). After checking by central research portfolio staff, outputs (with verification materials) are then sent out to anonymous external assessors, who may either approve that the output meets the requirements of the guidelines, or require additional evidence to be supplied. Results of the assessment are communicated to staff, who may contest negative decisions. Contestation statements are considered by a central committee. Once assessments are completed (before 30 June), researchers are advised of the final outcome of their submission. The University Academic Profiles system takes a feed from IRMA to automatically update researchers’ web profiles. An internally devised system of research performance points (used for annual staff performance reviews) takes into account weightings for both traditional and non-traditional research outputs. The University’s internal distribution of research support funding also takes into account both traditional and nontraditional research outputs, despite the fact that only traditional publications actually contribute to calculation of government funding.

Implementation of the researcher’s perspective

We will now consider the application of the Guidelines from a researcher perspective, taking as an example the production that was successfully claimed as a major non-traditional research output in 2014 by Joseph Toltz. This NTRO consisted of two performances of the children’s opera *Brundibár*, held at the City Recital Hall, Angel Place, in August 2014. Having first-hand experience of working with submissions for the 2013 data collection, Toltz was cautious about writing a suitable submission for this research output. Survivor friends from the Czech Jewish community in Sydney had been pressing him to stage a production of the opera from 2004. Professor Konrad Kwiet (Emeritus Professor of Holocaust Studies in the Department of Jewish Studies, University of Sydney) introduced Toltz to a group of individuals who were prepared to give seeding money for the project on the understanding that the production would involve the Sydney Jewish Museum. Serendipitously, Sharna Galvin,

Sarah Penicka-Smith and Melanie Penicka-Smith, directors of a small new arts organization, Opera Prometheus, approached Toltz around the same time, expressing interest in staging the opera. They all felt that *Brundibár* would be a perfect fit for their nascent company, and together with Toltz they worked to include the Sydney Jewish Museum and the Council of the City of Sydney in the roles of auspicing body and venue sponsor, respectively. Toltz took the role of musical director, and later co-producer. Opera Prometheus acted as co-producers, supplying director, chorus master, production manager, stage manager and set builder. Independent consultants were hired or suggested for set and lighting design and choreography.

Research or Professional Practice?

Having begun the project in fulfilment of a ten-year promise to Terezín survivor friends living in New South Wales, Toltz did not immediately approach the project as research. However a conversation with the Associate Dean of Research at the beginning of the project helped him realize not only that the project was intimately informed on multiple levels by the ethnographic research from his doctoral thesis (interviews with twenty Terezín survivors who had witnessed or participated in the opera in the Terezín ghetto), but also that pursuing and realizing performances of the work was in line with his post-thesis philosophical and theoretical interests, allowing his scholarly approach to be informed directly by the performative experience. His doctoral work brought detailed ethnographic perspectives on the original performances, traced and analyzed the rehabilitation processes from the 1970s that raised awareness and interest in *Brundibár*, and assessed the aesthetic decisions made by modern presentations. Active artistic involvement (in the role of Musical Director, and later co-Producer) in his own interpretation of the work would offer entirely new perspectives beyond those gathered through traditional ethnographic and research means.

What is the most effective category for the output?

Toltz then had to select an appropriate NTRO category in which to report the research. In its criteria for evaluating live performance of creative works as research (CW2), the ERA guidelines list the following categories:

- *Music* (standard or major): Musical performance embodying research and undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge and/or advance understanding in the context of the arts and humanities;
- *Play/Drama/Theatre* (standard): Theatre or other dramatic performance embodying research and undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge and/or advance understanding in the context of the arts and humanities;

- *Interarts* (standard or major): Live performance of original work or a demonstrably new or innovative interpretation/production of an existing work embodying research and undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge and/or advance understanding in fields across the research spectrum, primarily in the creative arts, design, and the humanities;
- *Dance* (standard): Dance performance embodying research and undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge and/or advance understanding in the context of the arts and humanities.

Drawing on his previous experience as research administrator within the Faculty, Toltz realized that his creative input as musical director and producer did not seem to fit neatly into the ERA category of Music (musical performance). To count as research during the assessment process as administered at the University of Sydney, musical performance NTROs need to demonstrate innovation—evidenced either through the repertoire (typically world premiere performances), or a completely new interpretation of the musical content (for example, historically informed performance based on intensive research). Since its initial revival in the 1970s, *Brundibár* had been performed thousands of times (hence the repertoire would not be a world or even national premiere), and Toltz judged that his interpretation of the music would be unlikely to bring sufficient new musical features to the performance to qualify as innovative interpretation of the score. Another option to consider was classifying this NTRO as an event (CW3: Curated Event) but after careful consideration this option too was discounted, because substantiating Toltz’s role as a curator in the creative process would be difficult to achieve within the 2000-character limit allowed for the ERA Research Statement. In the end, after an extensive conversation with experts in the University’s central research office, the category of theatrical performance (CW2: Live Performance Play/Drama/Theatre) was selected as the most appropriate. The choice made sense not only in terms of the theatrical form in which Toltz was working (opera), but more importantly, the category definition allowed for Toltz’s roles of executive producer and music director to be considered as creative (i.e. innovative) ones, thus leaving scope for an articulate justification of the aspects of the work that constituted research.

The next administrative question was whether to classify the scale of the endeavor as ‘standard’ or ‘major’. As mentioned earlier, the Sydney *Brundibár* project had begun in 2011, with clear documentation of ongoing effort from that period up to the performance in 2014. With such clear evidence of the extent of the project on the part of all participants, Toltz decided

to report the work as a major output. The submission duly passed verification and external blind assessment. The following section gives the verbatim submission from Toltz's full Research Statement, giving background, contribution and significance details for the output. A character limit of 2000 applies to the entire statement, in order to comply with requirements for consideration in the next ERA round.

Research Statement: Background

Brundibár is a small children's opera written in 1938 that came to prominence through its performances in the Jewish ghetto of Terezín (1943-1944). This performance was informed by 17 years of research with Jewish survivors of the Terezín ghetto, who discussed detailed musical memories of the performances. These discussions formed the basis for my 2004 honours thesis, and inspired further research for my doctoral dissertation (2011). These performances were the first to take place in Sydney, thus the first opportunity for many survivors of Terezín to see the work in 70 years. My intent in presenting a Sydney reading of *Brundibár* was to proceed from an historical reading informed by survivor testimony, but to do so in a way that suffused a spirit of collective action, the message at the heart of the work itself.

Research Statement: Contribution

Interest in *Brundibár* was sparked by its rediscovery in the 1970s, but the Velvet Revolution really prompted an intense re-examination of cultural material from Terezín. Since the 1990s, *Brundibár* has been performed thousands of times across the world, including three Australian productions (Canberra 2000, Adelaide 2003, Melbourne 2004). Many of these productions have used written survivor testimony to inform aspects of the performance, but none with as much detail as our production. Our reconstruction of the fence was guided by Jaroslav Rind, who, as a 19-year old carpenter, had assisted in procuring wood for the set of the original Terezín production. Personal testimonies gathered with twenty Terezín survivors informed decisions regarding the production: from the shaping of costumes, choreography of dance movements, tempo selections, even to a quasi-extemporaneous setting of the town cries to traditional Czech songs. Children in the cast interacted with survivors, were coached by a survivor for singing the lullaby in the original Czech language, and came to understand the complexities of this work beyond its reading as 'commemorative'. The concert program detailed all of

these processes, linking the history of the survivors pre-war to their post-war settlement in Australia. To contextualize the opera for the audience, I translated and adapted a monologue from the writings of Rudi Franěk (Freudenfeld), the conductor of the Terezín production, who survived Auschwitz and became an educator after the war.

Research Statement: Significance

The Sydney Jewish Museum and the Council of the City of Sydney sponsored the *Sydney Brundibár Project*. An orchestra of professional musicians led by Fiona Ziegler (Assistant Concertmaster, Sydney Symphony Orchestra) accompanied the children. The production was staged twice at the City Recital Hall, Angel Place on the one night, and was close to sold out. The *Sydney Brundibár Project* received local and national coverage in print and electronic media (The Weekend Australian, Sydney Morning Herald, ABC TV 7:30 Report, Radio Australia, ABC Classic FM, Radio National's "The Spirit of Things"). Interest continues about our particular production: Radio Sefarad, an international radio station broadcasting from Madrid, recently interviewed Toltz (27 January 2015) about the *Sydney Brundibár Project* for their English-language program, as part of UN Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Supporting Evidence

Brundibár had widespread support from the Jewish community, both tangibly and in-kind. Auspicing of the project by the Sydney Jewish Museum allowed donations to be made in order to support the production. The project was fortunate in having three generous in-kind donations – the first from Mollison Communications, a well-connected and professional publicity/PR firm, who donated graphic design, press coverage and publicity. Their efforts resulted in twenty-four press articles, two national television presentations, eight radio interviews, and thirty-two online features, thus contributing significantly to the large audiences at both performances. The second in-kind donation was in the form of a professionally printed program from Playbill Communications. This 26-page booklet provided credit for all participants, and also gave crucial background material (from Toltz's thesis) on the ethnographic contributions to the production from Terezín survivors who had settled in Australia. The third in-kind donation was filming from Rod Freedman, an award-winning documentary film-maker. Freedman's company "In Focus Media" filmed the entire production, from first formal rehearsal up to and including the two

performances. The entire footage has been archived. From this Toltz was able to collate two archival films to serve as part of the evidence for the output—a performance and a 17-minute short, highlighting the process of realizing the performance. These two films provided the tangible evidence referred to in the Research Statement, allowing the external anonymous assessor to verify that this was, indeed, an original creative research output.

Challenges and issues

From this case study it is evident that administration of NTRO submissions is very demanding for staff who submit as well as the University research administration. NTRO submissions are much more time-consuming to process than are HERDC-eligible research outputs (Sydney Conservatorium of Music analysis indicates 2-3 times more research unit time is spent per record—and this doesn't take into account staff time in assembling materials for reporting). This situation arises because of the introduction of ERA requirements for more and diverse verification materials, as well as strict definition of the content and length of the research statement. Since research significance evidence (such as reviews) accrue over time, records need ongoing curation even in years subsequent to the initial reporting.

Some faculties at the University of Sydney are disproportionately affected by the administration-heavy workload associated with NTRO reporting. For example, at SCM in 2014, well over two-thirds of our research output records were NTRO, versus less than one-third HERDC. When factoring in the 2.5 times processing coefficient for NTRO versus HERDC outputs mentioned in the previous paragraph, this meant that we needed approximately double the administration time as a similar-sized faculty with only HERDC outputs. For example, with 100 outputs divided 70-30 in favour of NTROs, SCM would have a processing time of $70 \times 2.5 + 30 \times 1 = 205$ time units, versus 100 time units for a faculty with 100 HERDC outputs. After ultimately unproductive efforts some years ago to get researchers to enter their own records into the University research administration system, the SCM research unit has concentrated our efforts on streamlining data collection processes and interfaces as much as possible. In 2015 we have implemented our own system of online forms to help ensure that staff are prompted to include all verification materials at the time of reporting their research.

There has also been some frustration and confusion for staff caused by changing definitions and verification requirements (most originating from outside the University in the form of changing definitions, verification requirements and interpretations of the ARC ERA guidelines). Because the

University previously took research output data into account in annual staff performance reviews, staff have felt pushed to report even marginal research outputs. Marginal research outputs tend to be more time-consuming to document, and staff felt frustrated and even demoralized if questions were raised by the external anonymous assessors, especially in cases when an appeal led to the record being ultimately rejected from the research collection. To mitigate the cost to staff time and morale, SCM trialed a “professional practice” category for outputs that, while not likely to meet ERA definitions of research, are nevertheless of high quality and beneficial for the reputation of the institution (for example, some high quality performances of traditional repertoire may nevertheless have difficulty in demonstrating innovation as defined in the ERA guidelines). Professional practice outputs are reported through the annual staff performance review system.

Researchers in Australian Universities, as elsewhere (Wilsdon et al, 2015), are increasingly under pressure to match their research activities to government-defined categories that are operationalized within their institutions by such instruments as the University of Sydney Guidelines, as well as through internal promotion and professional development schemes. It is clear that there is still some way to go in developing appropriate metrics that reflect the nature and quality of artistic research. Continued work to develop clear guidelines is but one facet of a broader responsibility to provide “responsible metrics” (Wilsdon et al, 2015), to provide researchers with maximum clarity and to minimize as much as possible the administrative overheads involved in monitoring and evaluating research outputs. Researchers and administrators, in Australia as elsewhere, have a common interest in reducing the administrative burden so as to foster the development of new, creative and innovative research in our field. The University of Sydney’s recent publication of its administrative guidelines seeks to contribute to the development of national and international debates on such matters.

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