

# Shifting the cantus firmus: Australian music educators and the ERA

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## Abstract

Managing the teaching-research-creative practice nexus is a concern for everyone working in higher music education, particularly those involved with the supervision and mentorship of graduate students and early career academics. This paper takes as its subject the new Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA), drawing examples from research frameworks elsewhere to identify some of the pertinent issues facing music educators and their students. The findings from a series of surveys and short interviews suggest that the formal recognition of artistic research remains largely dependent on the articulation of that research into traditional academic language. Furthermore, the increasing focus on research as a form of revenue generation highlights the separation of research and teaching and the lessening of academic autonomy. The paper argues that a balance can be achieved only with a fundamental, systemic shift that recognises the new knowledge and innovative methodological approaches within artistic research and, equally, within the scholarship of teaching.

**Keywords:** Excellence for Research in Australia (ERA), music education, higher education, research.

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## Background

In fourth species counterpoint, some notes are sustained in the added part while others in the given part move against them, often creating dissonance or instability. As Australian academics add more and more parts to the roles they play, the cantus firmus – the higher education framework in which we operate – appears to be pulling further away from the fundamental objectives of education. The situation is perhaps most problematic within the arts and arts education, wherein the increasing focus on research is exacerbated by the need for creative practice to please both artistic and academic audiences. It is ironic that the age of the managed, corporate university is the same as that within which creativity and innovation have been heralded as the backbone of Western knowledge economies. Somehow, creativity and innovation need to reclaim their central place within the

university sector and prevent the “vampire academy” from draining its victims (Kroll, 2006, p. 3) of creativity, time and energy.

As Thornton suggests, knowledge within the current environment “has replaced sheep and wool as a source of wealth but, according to the corporatised university, academics, like sheep, require careful management to get the best out of them” (2008, p. 5). While the research frameworks designed to manage (or herd) research differ according to location, traditionally notated ‘scientific’ research remains the accepted norm, and most frameworks seek to “regularize creative practice – dissect, section and give acceptable academic shape to it” (Rosenberg, 2008, p. 5). Music educators, and I refer here to educators in all music disciplines, often find themselves and their students “driven by the external art world and educational agendas that rarely reflect their own artistic motives and practice” (Carroll, 2006, n. p).

In February 2008 the then Minister for

Innovation, Industry, Science and Research (the Honorable Senator Kim Carr) announced 'Excellence in Research for Australia' (ERA), a research quality and evaluation system with a 2009-10 budget of AUD\$35.8 million. Academics in Australia now work within a government-directed research environment that recognises the value of artistic research (and accepts the funded outcomes of graduate practice-based students), routinely names buildings after its well-known arts alumni (and draws on the artistic reputations of its faculty to attract students), and expects those faculty to maintain a high-level artistic practice. This paper seeks to unravel some of the implications of this new ERA for Australian music educators.

Trialled in 2009 and fully implemented in 2010, the objectives of the ERA are to:

- Establish an evaluation framework;
- Provide a national stock-take of research to identify research strengths and opportunities;
- Identify excellence in research;
- Identify emerging areas; and
- Benchmark research nationally and internationally.

The ERA undertakes evaluations in each of eight discipline clusters, and music education is one of many disciplines not to fit neatly into any one of them. There is a mind-numbing array of information around the Fields of Research (FoR) under which research activity is organised, so for clarity the two most closely aligned with music education are summarised to follow.

Cluster Four, Social, Behavioural and Economic Sciences (SBE), incorporates Education, which has the two-digit FoR code 13. Within Education there are four sub-sets:

- 1301: Education systems (including ECE, community, school and higher education);
- 1302: Curriculum and pedagogy (including pedagogy theory and development);
- 1303: Specialist studies in education (including special education and teacher education);
- 1399: Other education.

Cluster Two, Humanities and Creative Arts (HCA), incorporates Studies in Creative Arts and Writing (FoR code 19), in which music sits. This FoR code is broken down into the following four-digit sub-sets:

- 1901: Art theory and criticism;
- 1902: Film, television and digital media;
- 1903: Journalism and professional writing;
- 1904: Performing arts and creative writing (including music performance, composition and music therapy);
- 1905: Visual arts and crafts; and
- 1999: Other studies in creative arts and writing.

The history and philosophy of music education fit most logically within Philosophy and Religious Studies, which is Division 22 within the HCA cluster. However, as shown later at Table 1 they could also be considered part of History and Archaeology, coded 210399. While the 99 (not elsewhere classified) categories may appear an attractive option, particularly for those engaged in interdisciplinary research, it is important to note that many universities are utilising the 99 categories as a depository for the various bits and pieces of research that do not fit elsewhere. Using this category is unlikely to result in the alignment of a researcher's output with a university-defined area of research strength.

The recognition of a wide range of research outputs is not new in Australia, which until the 1990s funded twenty categories of research output, including artistic research, until an independent audit identified inconsistencies in 45% of claims. There followed a decade in which only authored books, peer reviewed journal articles, refereed conference papers and book chapters were recognised as research. The ERA formally recognises traditional research alongside artistic research in four categories of creative work:

- Original (creative) works in the public domain;
- Live performance works in the public domain;

- Recorded (performance) public works; and
- Curated or produced substantial public exhibitions, events or renderings. (ARC, 2008)

The inclusion of artistic research aligns with an international trend. In the UK, artistic research became eligible for funding with the implementation of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in 1992 (Frayling, 1993). While the inclusion of artistic research was applauded, it was not without its problems. Niedderer and Roworth-Stokes (2007) found that by “opening research to the inclusion of [creative] practice, the need arose to legitimise the use of practice within research and with regard to its contribution to knowledge, because the requirements for research remained the same, and any submission was and still is judged against the conventional criteria for rigor and validity of research” (p. 5). The UK is currently developing the new Research Excellence Framework (REF), which will replace the RAE in 2013. The REF will focus on research output, research impact/significance, and research environment: quality, dissemination and application (HEFCE, 2009).

Coinciding with the re-introduction of artistic research, interviews conducted during the ERA trial and reported here reveal that the previous lack of recognition has resulted in the demise of much creative practice within the university sector. Re-engagement, suggest the respondents, will take time, mentorship and institutional support.

## Method

In 2009, twenty-one full-time arts academics from all Australian States and Territories were sent a written invitation to participate in the study. The sample was drawn from faculty lists and professional networks, using purposeful sampling to identify academics working in the arts. The lists were then divided into States and Territories, from each of which three potential participants were invited to participate. The thirteen respondents

worked in popular music (r1 and r2); new music (r5); classical music (r3, r4, r6, r10); music education (r7, r8 and r9); world music (r11); ethnomusicology (r12); and visual art (painting) (r13). The visual artist managed a School of Arts that included music. Eleven respondents held administrative positions, which enabled them to represent a broad range of experiences.

Respondents were sent background information on the ERA and the study, together with a survey comprising six open-ended questions:

1. In 2008, Julia Gillard [then Australian Minister for Education] said: “For the first time in many years, Australian Universities will have a Federal Government that trusts and respects them. A government which understands the formation of knowledge and skills through teaching and research is the indispensable – absolutely indispensable – precondition for the creation of a stronger economy and a more confident and equitable society”. How do you respond to Julia Gillard’s remark?
2. What changes (if any) have there been to the ways in which you and/or your faculty are thinking about creative practice?
  - 2.1 Have the processes of collecting information about creative practice changed?
  - 2.2 Is there a new or increased interest in creative practice from the institution?
  - 2.3 Are artist academics likely to engage more with the research framework now that creative practice is recognised and rewarded?
3. Is ERA impacting your creative practice? If so, please explain how.
4. How prepared are you to meet the requirements of ERA?
5. How prepared is your institution?
6. If you write for academic journals, what are your views on the current journal rankings? Will the rankings influence your choice of journal?

Interview transcripts and survey responses were coded by the researcher and by an independent observer, following which codings were compared for consistency. In two cases, responses were followed up with a telephone interview in which responses were clarified and new themes further explored. The following section presents and discusses the findings.

## Results and discussion

The questions opened with the statement made by the Minister for Education. In general there was a positive reaction: "I accept the sentiment that the Government values education and look forward to seeing how that might apply to higher education" (r13). However, respondents perceived a lack of understanding about education and research, both in practical terms: "the contrast between what the government as a system can understand and the researcher's understanding" (r7), and in cultural terms: "a simple survey of all cultures that have done well over history shows a balance and synergy between technical, economic, social and artistic development" (r11). Aligned with this was uncertainty: "the sentiments expressed are laudable but as yet there is little evidence of tangible support" (r1). One music educator, well aware that the recommendations of a National Review of School Music Education had still to be implemented, added: "rhetoric does not always meet reality" (r8). Described by one respondent as "political speak" (r10), the timing of the proposed initiatives also prompted scepticism: "most of it is to come closer to the next election. It is easy to be sceptical about this approach" (r2).

The arts could benefit enormously from formal research recognition. In line with this, responses to the second question focused on changes to the ways in which music academics and faculties were thinking about creative practice and research. As the visual artist explained, "the inclusion of the creative arts in the data collection of research outputs is critical for the arts sector of higher

education to feel fully franchised and not always having to argue the case" (r13). However, she went on to warn:

*This ERA trial will test the ARC [Australian Research Council] and the Government's commitment to the inclusion of Creative Arts in the higher education system, and it will test the creative arts academics in their capacity to step up and make a sound and rigorous system for evaluating quality. Having said that, this mania for auditing is putting huge imposts on universities and individual researchers, and if the Government really trusted us they would not put us through so much of this micromanagement.*

The process of making creative work eligible for funding under ERA was shown by the trial to be far from simple. Reminiscent of the RAE, each creative work submitted for evaluation within the ERA has to be accompanied by a written narrative that articulates the research background, contribution of new knowledge, and research significance (Gye, 2009). While this recognition of creative work is welcome, the degree to which it influences long-standing attitudes to arts practice as research remains to be seen. In the UK, the Edinburgh College of Art (ECA) joined many other institutions to argue that creative practice is in itself research "and was so before many academic disciplines existed" (ECA, 2002, p. 1). A difficulty articulated by the ECA was that creative practice "is new to articulating what it does and to mapping such creative research by practice onto currently accepted assessment criteria" (p. 1). On this point, the ECA and Niedderer and Roworth-Stokes agreed that one of the most difficult aspects for artist academics is the retrospective justification of creative practice as research.

Australian academics were faced with the challenge of collecting evidence for all creative works produced since 2003, "after the period that is being assessed" (r11). The difficulty of retrospectively applying research parameters to creative work was similar to that experienced in the early days of the RAE, in that "the post

rationalisation of work submitted and evaluated through the peer review process confused the previously held status quo of research operating within strict scholarly conventions" (Niedderer & Roworth-Stokes, 2007, p. 5). Survey respondents also expressed doubt as to how ERA would evaluate creative practice, with a sense of "awaiting the evaluators who come around and make decisions about its worth" (r10). The consensus was that "without knowing what kind of recognition will be given to creative practice outputs it is difficult to get over-excited" (r2), and respondents were suspicious about whether the inclusion of creative work would change the status-quo: "there is a degree of negativity about whether it will ever come to anything concrete in the way of funding for creative work within universities" (r2).

In terms of the immediate impact of assessing artistic research within the research framework, two distinct pictures emerged from the survey. The first included institutions that had not previously recognised artistic research, and where musicians had "been completely demoralised by the many years of non-recognition of creative outputs" (r2). This had often resulted in a creative practice separate from academic life, or the abandonment of creative practice to focus on traditionally notated research: "I have neglected my arts practice in favour of written research because I never thought anything would change" (r2). Many of these institutions had "no systematic approach" (r13) to the collection of evidence required for ERA. Some respondents revealed that creative practice had yet to be understood within their own institutions, adding an internal battle to the national one. The issues of establishing repositories, often dark, have only added to the complexity.

In contrast, institutions that had recognised artistic research despite its exclusion from the national research agenda appeared ideally positioned, with fewer academics searching for long-lost reviews and programs with which to

create a 'permanent record' of ephemeral works. Internal recognition had long enabled academics to integrate their creative practice into their academic profiles, prioritising it as one might any other form of research. One musician noted that since his university had formally recognised creative practice as research, "the engagement of staff members with research has increased significantly" (r11).

There is, of course, a need to question why creative practice has to be justified as equivalent to traditional scientific research rather than being recognised in its own right; aside from the fact that writing about one's creative practice can contribute positively to that practice, "not all creative artists want to view their practice as research". There are obvious artistic as well as practical reasons behind this: for example, a reluctance to over-analyse the creative process, or protection of the specificity of the artist experience. While participation in university based research schemes had been mostly voluntary for survey respondents, linked with opportunities for funding or promotion, respondents noted that the arrival of the ERA had brought about "an increase in interest in the university and a growing discussion in the music department" (r10). Voluntary participation was becoming a thing of the past: "now the faculty is scrambling to make all lecturers engage with this process" (r5). It will be interesting to observe what constraints are experienced now that artistic research has the attention of the wider academy. As one respondent wrote: "For me, it has just meant more documentation and explanation" (r3).

A further issue is the ranking of academic journals, which is contentious across almost all disciplines. The Australian Research Council (ARC, 2008, p. 21) defines the Australian rankings criteria as follows:

*A\* Typically an A\* journal would be one of the best in its field or subfield in which to publish and would typically cover the entire field/subfield. Virtually all papers they publish will be of a very*

high quality. These are journals where most of the work is important (it will really shape the field) and where researchers boast about getting accepted. Acceptance rates would typically be low and the editorial board would be dominated by field leaders, including many from top institutions.

A The majority of papers in a Tier A journal will be of very high quality. Publishing in an A journal would enhance the author's standing, showing they have real engagement with the global research community and that they have something to say about problems of some significance. Typical signs of an A journal are low acceptance rates and an editorial board, which includes a reasonable fraction of well-known researchers from top institutions.

B Tier B covers journals with a solid, though not outstanding, reputation. Generally, in a Tier B journal, one would expect only a few papers of very high quality. They are often important outlets for the work of PhD students and early career researchers. Typical examples would be regional journals with high acceptance rates, and editorial boards that have few leading researchers from top international institutions.

C Tier C includes quality, peer reviewed journals that do not meet the criteria of the higher tiers.

With news of the European equivalent in 2008, the European Reference Index for the Humanities (ERIH), the editors of 55 European journals published an editorial in which they described "putatively precise accountancy ... entirely defective in conception and execution" (Andersen, Ariew, Feingold, Bag, Barrow-Green et al., 2008, p. 1). "Great research", they argued, "may be published anywhere and in any language. Truly ground-breaking work may be more likely to appear from marginal, dissident or unexpected sources" (p. 2). The editors predicted that ERIH will lead to "fewer journals, much less diversity and [will] impoverish our discipline" (p. 2). They asked the compilers of ERIH to remove their journals' titles from the list, concluding: "we want no part of this dangerous and misguided exercise" (p. 2).

The Australian journal rankings have been similarly criticised on many fronts, such as rankings supplanting peer evaluation of individual articles (Rosow, 2009); the use of bibliometrics, which will undoubtedly place Humanities and Social Sciences research at a disadvantage (Donovan, 2005); inaccuracies and inconsistencies; and opaque (at best) criteria for the rankings themselves (Genoni & Haddow, 2009). Of particular concern is the poor ranking afforded to many e-journals, open access journals, and journals incorporating creative work. Elizabeth McMahon, editor of Australia's oldest literary journal, *Southerly*, bemoaned the low rankings of journals that feature creative work: "if we were to take these measures at the letter, we would be better off to get rid of all the creative material and just keep the peer-reviewed material" (Howard, 2008, p. 1). Only one of the eleven literary journals maintained the same ranking in the various iterations that led to the final list. Two of the journals, *Meanjin* and *HEAT*, were ranked highly in the final draft: *Meanjin* ranked as an A journal, and *HEAT* ranked A\*. However, the journals were delisted prior to the release of the final list. An appeal made to the ARC by the editor of *HEAT*, Ivor Indyk, was met with the response: "During the development of the list, the ARC received information that *HEAT* and *Meanjin* did not meet the peer review criteria for inclusion in the list" (personal communication, May 2010). Indyk was not made aware of the delisting, had no opportunity to respond, and was not permitted to see the damning information.

While the US does not currently rank journals (although league tables have relevance here), many of the journals ranked within other systems are published in the US or have US contributors and editorial board members: hence they are swept into the debate along with everyone else. Craig Howes, co-editor of *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*, observed: "I can watch the lights go out. ... The rankings systems in these various countries never asked us whether we wanted to be ranked or not. ... They're going

to do it anyway" (in Howard, 2008, p. 5). Similarly concerned about the ranking of Humanities and Social Sciences journals, the Canadian SSHRC warned in 2004 of the problems facing these disciplines if subjected to citation-based ranking (Genoni & Haddow, 2009).

Many of the same concerns were expressed by the study participants, who felt that "the consultation was too short and not wide enough" (r5), leading to "reputable journals missing from the list entirely" (r1) and bias towards particular areas of research. One respondent described the rankings as a "seriously vexed problem" (r13), and questioned "the enormous waste of effort that these processes have to exert". Asked whether the rankings were already influencing respondents' choice of journals, one participant wrote: "I am largely defiant ... and publish where I think what I have to say will best reach its intended audiences" (r11). For the others, however, rankings were already influencing journal choice.

Both the RAE (UK) and the Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) in New Zealand rank individual researchers. In New Zealand, for example, academics are awarded a rank that is communicated to the individual and to the institution. Although the ERA is not ranking individuals, endogenous individual ranking at the university level is inevitable. Direct university pressure at the individual level was felt by study respondents even prior to full implementation of the ERA: for example, some universities had already announced they would only acknowledge articles published in journals ranked B or higher, some had mandated A or A\*-ranked journals. One contributor commented: "I have applied for study leave next year and have been advised that if I don't say that the work I produce will be submitted to A or A\* journals then my chance of getting study leave will be greatly diminished" (r2). Even small university grants increasingly require publication in 'highly ranked' journals as universities scurry to raise their research profiles.

Aligned with this, ERA funding will eventually

be awarded for esteem, which is defined as "recognition of the research quality of eligible researchers" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. 33). Esteemed activities are defined as a contribution to a prestigious reference work, curatorial contribution to a prestigious event, elected fellowship to a learned academy, receipt of a nationally competitive fellowship or a prestigious award, or membership of an editorial board. Editorial board membership is recognised only if the board relates to a journal ranked A or A\*. It is not possible here to debate the logic of ranking journals, the transparency of the process, or the effectiveness of the resulting list, so I will merely suggest that this will become apparent from the inevitable flood of articles on the subject.

Table 1 illustrates the FoR codes and ranking for all ERA-listed journals with music education in the title, including the rank initially assigned to the journals included in the first draft list. Each article within a journal will be automatically assigned one or more of the FoR codes of the journal. The implications of this on individual researchers, who can have at most three individual FoR codes, are far-reaching. With the almost certain demise of many unranked or lower-ranked journals, including many 'regional' journals, publishing will be much more difficult for people new to traditional research, including practice-focussed academics and early career researchers, and for those publishing in new, interdisciplinary or emerging research areas. As many academics find their practice attracting attention for the first time, and "people who haven't submitted their creative works over the years are encouraged to do so" (r10), so too will come increasing pressure to produce academic papers.

## Closing remarks

On a more positive note, participation in a research framework has the potential to give artist academics 'more confidence to consider their work as a legitimate part of their academic jobs' (r13). It may promote "stronger links between practice and reflection" (r11), and

encourage “more activities that combine research and music-making” (r11). The fluid approaches engaged by artistic researchers are potentially of great benefit to the academy, whether or not the outcomes are documented in traditional narrative form. Thus, there exists potential to “educate others in the academy about the innovative and expansive field of art” (r13). Communicating elements of the artist experience known only to the artist will undoubtedly reveal innovative methodologies and new forms of knowledge. This is timely, because there is increasing concern that “the kind of knowledge produced by scientific enquiry, although at times useful, is limited and does not provide an adequate model for all research, including much of what is happening in the sciences” (Rosenberg, 2008, p. 4).

As discussed at the start of this paper, however, the ERA is part and parcel of the ‘managed’ university. This “typically entails an emphasis on research as a form of revenue generation, the downgrading of academic autonomy, the separation of teaching and research, and the demotion of the former” (Curtis & Matthewman, 2005, p. 1). Indeed, at the same time as the sector is under pressure to measure and improve graduate outcomes and experience, one of the likely victims of the managed university is teaching itself. As Hall and Morris Matthews note from the New Zealand experience, academic staff generally regard the PBRF to have “devalued teaching in favour of research” (2006, p. 472). Similarly, Harris (in Hannis, 2010) notes the trend of appointing ‘research-inactive tutors’ for teaching duties in

**Table 1: ERA journals with ‘music education’ in the title**

Title	Initial Rank	Final Rank	FoR/s
Action Criticism and Theory for Music Education	-	C	1302
Australian Journal of Music Education	-	B	1303 1904
British Journal of Music Education	A	A	1302 1904
Contributions to Music Education	-	C	1302
Council for Research in Music Education Bulletin	A	C	1302
International Journal of Music Education	A*	A*	1302 1303 1904
Journal of Historical Research in Music Education	C	C	2103
Journal of Research in Music Education	A	A	1904
Missouri Journal of Research in Music Education	-	C	1302
Music Education Research	-	B	1302
Philosophy of Music Education Review	C	C	1302
Queensland Journal of Music Education	-	C	1302
Research Studies in Music Education	B	A	1399 1904
Southeastern Journal of Music Education	-	C	1302
Victorian Journal of Music Education	-	B	1302

*Field of Research Codes:*

1302: Curriculum and pedagogy

1904: Performing arts and creative writing

1303: Specialist studies in education

2103: History and archaeology

1399: Other education



order to buy research time. Kroll (2006, p. 7) found the same tendency among Canadian creative writing academics, one of whom reported: "I have to make a decision about how I invest my time, and I can't do it all any more".

While there is increasing recognition of creative work as research in its own right, the work has to be translated into academic language in order to be assessed and quantified (Bennett, Wright & Blom, 2009). The skills to undertake this are often far removed from creative practice, and many arts academics require support to successfully manage the translation. Integrating analytical thinking of this kind into educational programs has the potential to empower students to articulate their emergence as artists, scholars and educators. Broad communication of "the potentially transformative nature" (SSHRC, 2010, n. p.) of artistic research and innovative teaching and learning will help to gain recognition for the valuable contribution made by the arts to the academic discourse.

One of the dangers of the ERA is that by failing to recognise research published or communicated outside of peer-reviewed publications, and by increasing the pressure to produce research at the cost of teaching, the system will further separate the academy from both society and the student body. In short, we could end up talking to ourselves. If "knowledge of the highest quality can only be produced in a free, collegial environment" (Forsyth, 2010, p. 2), perhaps we ought to consider some free counterpoint and attempt to shift the cantus firmus.

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at the 2010 Commission for the Education of the Professional Musician (CEPROM) meeting in Shanghai.

**Note:** Deakin colleague John Lamp has produced a fantastic website incorporating a searchable ERA journal list. The web address is: <http://lamp.infosys.deakin.edu.au/era/>

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