

Non Traditional Research Outputs—Standards and Deviations

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Warning: the opening of this article includes a number of Australian acronyms—please persist beyond the necessary tedium for broader discussion about the way ‘Aussies’ are handling the practice of assessing creative writing as research.

In February 2018, the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP), the peak body for tertiary creative writing programs in Australia and New Zealand, was approached by the Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH), the authoritative agency on research, teaching and learning for the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities in Australian and New Zealand universities. The DASSH Associated Deans of Research (ADRs) Network was investigating which criteria are most important in judging the quality of Non Traditional Research Outputs (NTROs)—that is, creative works. AAWP, along with other peak bodies, was asked to nominate key decision makers, and to provide feedback about the survey instrument that would be used to collect information. Note: end of acronym dance.

When the request arrived I offered to collate responses from the AAWP executive and feed these back to DASSH. I was unashamedly keen to attend as closely as possible to this conversation—not only as it played out within the executive body I am committed to, but also with a view to investigating what might be learned from cross-disciplinary conversations about the language used to ascribe value to NTROs: how is value ascribed and how does this ‘play out’ within the context of individual institutions?

There is a great deal to say about the findings of this DASSH survey. Due to the brevity of this article, I will focus on the relationship between literary pursuits and ascribable value; and on two key observations. Firstly, the DASSH initiative was guided by the realisation that, across the sector, it is not clear how key decision makers involved in scoring submissions to ERA (the Australian version of the UK’s REF), or assessing Australian Research Council funding applications, ‘are actually judging the quality of NTROs as academic research (as opposed to their quality as works of art, for example)’ (DASSH 2018: 2). Pertinently, for creative writing practitioners and researchers, DASSH identifies the following anomaly:

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In particular the experience of the Field of Research [FoR] 19 (“Studies in Creative Arts and Writing”) over the last few ERA rounds has been instructive. While every other FoR has increased its average score in each of the ERA rounds – as universities better understand what is expected of them, and as the ERA exercise drives changes in practice – FoR19 is the only code in which the average score across the sector has decreased in each ERA round. The ADR network was concerned that this speaks to a continuing uncertainty as to how these judgments are being made in practice.

This is such crucial work: interrogating the manner in which the language of ascribable value relates to judgement in practice, when assessing creative writing as academic research. What specific language constitutes the criteria for ascribing? What factors contribute to the application of the criteria?

Secondly, the design of the survey instrument was based on an earlier DASSH project revealing that humanities researchers are less comfortable than are social science researchers with five-point Likert scales, encouraging respondents to rank criteria for judging NTROs from ‘Very unimportant to Very Important’ (DASSH 2018: 2-3). On this basis, respondents were given the opportunity to opt out of that scale, instead nominating ‘It depends’, with the opportunity to ‘provide more extensive qualitative feedback’ (DASSH 2018: 3).

Unsurprisingly, many experts selected ‘it depends’ rather than choosing a point on an empirical scale. To my mind this is implicitly tied (not only) to their role as humanities researchers (the *this qualified by this* nature of the thinking) but also to the nature of the task—the element of contingency in judging creative writing as academic research. What qualifiers are at play when assessing research background, contribution and significance? What language is capable of contextualising the research, of illustrating impact, of avoiding the idiosyncrasies and bias implicit in preferential value judgements about works of literature?

The experts’ preference for ‘it depends’ insists on uncertainty qua openness and plurality, rather than on empirical and prescribed certainty. For the purposes of the study, it also meant that the ‘opt out’ answers were examined from a qualitative perspective—excluded from statistical analysis about Standard Deviation and Adjusted Standard Deviation (DASSH 2018: 3). Metaphorically, rather than statistically, I am interested in the ‘it depends’ responses as a form of deviation that relates to both the overarching inquiry—What specific language constitutes the criteria for ascribing? What factors contribute to the application of the criteria?—and the question of how specific language attends to the problem of uncertainty—circling uncertainty through the

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question of judgement in practice—What does it look like? How can universities, and academic practitioners, together, better understand what is expected, so that the ERA exercise drives changes in practice?

Recently, an academic colleague in creative writing said to me—‘I didn’t do too well with the NTROs so I’m sticking to traditional research’. I was reeling. What a waste. *What’s the point?* I was shattered—for him, yes—but for the bigger picture, for the force field of engagement through practice, for students. It is a travesty—we are employed because we are active practitioners and then, in the most awry of deviations, some of us stop practising because it doesn’t ‘count’. Are we fighting hard enough to articulate, in language that is attentive to the issue of uncertainty, the value of our practice, as writers and thinkers operating within an academic context?

Thank you DASSH, for probing the minds of our key decision makers, for facilitating open discussion about gaps and anomalies. Thinking about the relationship between language and best practice puts me in mind of Toni Morrison, who discusses ‘language partly as a system, partly as a living thing over which one has control, but mostly as agency – as an act with consequences’ (Morrison 1993). Morrison champions language that is capable of the ‘mutual exchange of ideas’ (ibid). This idea is at the heart of a discussion about uncertainty qua openness, an idea that underpins the relationship between non-traditional and traditional research in academia. The DASSH inquiry promotes transparency in ascertaining how judging criteria is applied, in practice. In this way it engages with creative writing as research as an act with consequences, rather than a statistical anomaly, or a form of academic deviation.

Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH) 2018, Report of findings—Survey of experts about the criteria they think are important in assessing the quality of NTROs as academic research.

Morrison T, Nobel Lecture December 7 1993 in *Nobel Lectures, Literature 1991-1995* (ed. Sture Allén 1997), World Scientific Publishing Co.: Singapore.

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1993/morrison-lecture.html

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