

Evaluation process of Creative Outputs Universities'/sectors' perspectives

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INTRODUCTION

- Thank-you to the organisers of the NSEF Annual Meeting for this opportunity to present on the sector's experiences of the DHET Creative Outputs Evaluation process.
- I feel fairly well placed to speak on the process, having been part of the initial DHET panels where the implementation guidelines were drawn up; and as I have been a member of the Visual Arts sub-panel for the past 3 years. I've been closely involved with submission of Creative Outputs at UJ, as I sit on the Art, Design and Architecture Faculty Research Committee who screen all applications; have presented workshops on the submission process to colleagues in the UJ Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture and the Humanities; mentor colleagues on the submission process and assist the UJ Research Office when required.
- While I speak primarily from my experiences at UJ, I have also consulted colleagues in other institutions on their experience of the process and included their feedback and have taken the discussions held at the National Workshop on Creative Research Output held on 16 November 2022 into account.
- Due to the limited time available for this presentation, I have selected 4 main points for attention.

1. TEETHING PROBLEMS

- Applicants struggle to understand the overarching criteria and guidelines for unit allocation.
- Some have difficulty in understanding what is required in the annotation: e.g., what is meant by:
 - the need to articulate the conceptual and scholarly framework in which the work should be heard or viewed;
 - how to demonstrate the contribution it makes to new knowledge.
- The drop-down boxes in the application form can be confusing as not all the Creative Output types and sub-types align. Under the Design Outputs type, the sub-types are design disciplines which are listed as discreet entities (Fashion Design, Graphic Design), but under Fine Arts, the sub-types are related to media (e.g., drawing painting, sculpture; video art); techniques (e.g., collage) and forms of presentation (performance; installation, artist's books).
- A submission can fit into two or three different output types and sub-types e.g., the applicant may be the director, the scriptwriter and the performer, under the Television and Theatre/Performance/Dance types and sub-types. Technically, this person could apply three times for each of these roles, but it would mean that they are applying for different roles in one work. In many projects where the type and subtype overlap, these elements were interlinked.
- Faculty Research Committees and Research Offices are still coming to terms with how to best handle the submission and peer-review process, and how to structure timelines accordingly. Several colleagues have noted that Alistar White (NRF) and Idah Makukule (DHET) have been particularly supportive, always offering prompt and valuable guidance.

2. PEER-REVIEW PROCESS

This is an area of major concern for many institutions.

Difficulties include:

- Reviewers not responding to invitations to write reports, or not being willing to review applications.
- Many ask if there is remuneration for writing the report, and if told there is not, they reject the invitation.
- Reviewers commit to doing the report and step down at the last minute.
- Simply do not deliver the report, despite multiple reminders, or do not deliver report on time.
- Write reports that are thin, too general, and that are not critical or rigorous. Some write about about the individual's work in general, and not the actual work being submitted for accreditation
- Do not familiarise themselves with, or focus on the DHET requirements for evaluation, as laid out in the implementation guidelines.
- Do not answer the question posed in the template or respond with one-word answers (yes/no).
- Do not take the process seriously.

PEER-REVIEW PROCESS (cont.)

- Finding suitable reviewers. Nominations by applicants are double-sided: applicants often nominate friends or associates that they know will write favourably on their work; however, it could be argued that these are the very people that would have excellent insight into the applicant's work.
- Many reviewers working in industry do not understand the concept of research in relation to practice. There is a tendency to overlook the conceptual depth or theoretical framing of the work in favour of technical expertise. However, not drawing on industry-related reviewers reduces the pool of people to draw on.
- This lack of understanding regarding why a creative work qualifies as research (or not) is not limited to those in industry. Some reviewers from institutions tend to disregard the DHET'S stated position that in order to qualify as a subsidisable research output, the work must convincingly assert artistic practice as research by:
 - Having a clear research idea/concern/thematic/intention.
 - Being located within a theoretical/conceptual framework that contextualises or positions the work in a broader context.
 - Demonstrating new knowledge or a new contribution to the discipline.
- The pool of people that are qualified and/or willing to review Creative Outputs is very small. There is a tendency to only draw on local reviewers. Often, the same people are approached by many institutions and cannot take on the workload; or certain reviewers do the majority of the reviews, leading to the privileging of one-person's opinions. Many colleagues complain of having been approached too many times and have what could be called 'reviewer's fatigue'.

SUGGESTIONS TO ADDRESS THESE ISSUES

- Renumeration of reviewers in order to provide incentive. Some universities are currently doing this, most are not. For this to work, the DHET would have to make payment mandatory across the sector and stipulate a set amount. This issue was discussed at length in the National Workshop on Creative Research Output, 16 November 2022, where It was made clear that the DHET does not support the idea of reviewers being remunerated.
- Approach and appoint three reviewers, not two. UJ has done this, and is proving effective, as it does provide a backup in case one reviewer pulls out or does not deliver. However, it does increase the administrative load.
- Cast the net wider to include international peer-reviewers. There is the possibility that international reviewers may not understand South African system and standards of work expected, but this should not be a concern, because the criteria for evaluation are clearly outlined in the DHET implementation guidelines and the reviewer's template.
- Not to approach reviewers in industry - particularly in the design disciplines – but rather those in academia or working in institutions.
- Faculty Research Committees need to to vet peer-reviewers carefully and make informed choices as to who would be most appropriate reviewer for the work.

3. TIMEFRAMES FOR RELEASE OF OUTCOMES & SUBSIDIES

- There is sector-wide dissatisfaction with the delays in outcomes for a particular years' submissions, and the release of subsidies for these.
- Outcomes and subsidies from outputs submitted in 2019 and evaluated in February 2020, were released in 2021. However, to date (end-2022), the sector has no information regarding outputs submitted in 2020 and evaluated in February 2021.
- The sector has no information as to when the outcomes and subsidies for outputs submitted in 2021 and evaluated in February 2022 will be released.
- These delays and lack of information leave applicants feeling demotivated and demoralised. Initial excitement about the submission of Creative Outputs for subsidisation is wearing thin, as the process does not seem to yield results; many feel that 'its just not worth the time and effort'; others are sceptical, and do not take the process seriously.
- Anticipated dates for release of outcomes and subsidies for each year need to be clearly stipulated by the DHET.
- Alternatively, institutions need to be provided with a clear explanation as to why these delays are occurring.

4. REVIEW OF POLICY TO INCLUDE CURATORSHIP

There is a sector-wide call for recognition of curatorial practice as a valid form of artistic research that warrants subsidisation.

Curation is internationally recognised as

- an effective methodology that generates new insights;
- a research methodology that is 'led' by art practices (practice-led research);
- a way of developing and furthering discourses and stimulating debate around topical or important issues;
- a form of research that consolidates diverse practices;
- a means by which the work can be recontextualised or decontextualised;
- a practice that can open new insights around a particular thematic, thereby prompting new or alternative or ways of engaging with the work.