

Film Inquiry
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The Secretary
House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Communications, Information Technology and the Arts
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Submission to Inquiry into the future opportunities for Australia's film, animation, special effects and electronic games industries.

This submission addresses items e), f), g) and h) of the *Terms of Reference*.

Introduction/background

Despite our relatively small population, the creative skills of Australian filmmakers have long been recognised, not only by the international success of Australian films and TV programs, but also by the high demand throughout the world for our filmmakers' services. Directors such as Fred Schepisi, Peter Weir and Phil Noyce are making more films overseas than here in Australia, where their creative voices are much needed.

The artistry of Australian cinematographers has been recognised by the peak international awards, the US Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, with three practitioners having been awarded the Oscar for Best Cinematography in recent yearsⁱ.

The downside of this international prestige is the "brain drain" that is depriving our culture of some of its leading contributors. Many of our filmmakers are (more or less unwillingly) based overseasⁱⁱ, because at this time the Australian industry simply cannot provide gainful employment for them.

I hope that this and successive governments can address this problem and create incentives for our filmmakers to exercise their skills in a truly Australian manner, to the benefit of our culture and to Australia's export balance.

Responses to Terms of Reference:

e) the skills required to facilitate future growth in these industries and the capacity of the education and training system to meet these demands

As the screen production industry becomes more dependent on digital media, education and training need to keep pace with both technological and systemic changes and future innovation. The present system is not filling these demands.

There are presently only two major institutionsⁱⁱⁱ responsible for screen production education and training in Australia. Both are of world class and have excellent reputations throughout our region.

The Australian Film, Television and Radio School (AFTRS) in Sydney (which also runs part-time courses in other capital cities) has the benefit of Commonwealth funding, which enables AFTRS to conduct one to three year courses in specialist areas, such as cinematography, editing and screenwriting - as well as the most sought-after direction courses.

AFTRS is currently the only source of advanced training in the so-called "craft" areas (as someone who has taught most areas of filmmaking^{iv} at many levels, I prefer to call them "specialisations") and has established a reputation for technical excellence.

AFTRS is preparing talented people to contribute to our industry, but demand each year far exceeds those places available. There is also a major problem in that would-be specialists from throughout our nation are forced to leave their community and familial support groups and move to Sydney to attend longer AFTRS courses. This displacement has undesirable economic and cultural consequences.

The Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) School of Film and Television^v in Melbourne has managed, on minimal (but dedicated) staffing and very basic resources, to train some of our most distinguished practitioners^{vi}.

The VCA's concentration on screen storytelling has ensured that writer/director graduates from animation, documentary and narrative streams have contributed much to our genuinely Australian culture.

However, the VCA's lack of specialist courses has meant that during their time at the College many talented cinematographers, editors etc have had to mainly learn by working on other students' productions, rather than from the challenges of expert tuition.

The recently introduced (state government funded) VCA course for producers is a step in the right direction, but training in **all** specialisations needs to be catered for in Australia's second-largest city.

Recommendation e 1:

Commonwealth government funding for full-time training in all specialist areas of screen production at the VCA Film and Television School should be provided as soon as possible.

This would take greater advantage of the talent available to our industry and enable more – and more relevant to today's media - innovation.

During the last few years the VCA has also been running *Foundation Year* part-time courses to prepare potential entrants, of all ages, for continuing participation in screen industry training.

This has not only sorted out those who are actually suitable for the rigors of the industry, but has also been very successful in providing new talent in both graduate and post-graduate full-time courses.

Recommendation e 2:

That commonwealth government funding, either directly to the VCA Film and Television School, or in the form of scholarships or bursaries for students, be provided for Foundation Year training, as preparation for entry into both specialist education and basic, entry-level participation in the screen production industry.

The training, practical experience and career paths previously provided by such organisations as the ABC and Film Australia – the latter of which I and many other internationally recognised filmmakers^{vii} are products of – are no longer available, hence it is important that replacements are provided for future generations.

Recommendation e 3:

That the Charter for the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) be amended to ensure provision of some form of ongoing traineeships or apprenticeships in the principles and practice of television production, including present and future opportunities for on-line, interactive programs.

Training of this and future generations in a practical, productive setting will ensure that our television programs can utilise creative skills and technology to penetrate more of the export market.

f) the effectiveness of the existing linkages between these industries and the wider cultural and information technology sectors

The craft guilds^{viii} have also contributed greatly to education and training of screen production practitioners, through mentoring, seminars, Q&A screenings and technical up-date events.

The coming together of craft guilds, equipment hire, studios and post-production companies (in the *Screen Services Association of Victoria - SSAV*), the employers' organisation, *Screen Production Association of Australia (SPAA)* and the relevant union, the *Media and Entertainment Alliance of Australia (MEAA)* in my state as the *Victorian Film and Television Industry Working Party (VFTIWP)*, has been very productive.

During the last six years the VFTIWP, as the peak body representing the screen production industry's organisations in Victoria, has been effective on behalf of our more than 6,000 members. This has contributed to state government's policy, resulting in millions of dollars being put into development, infrastructure and production funding to increase cultural and economic benefits for both our state and the entire nation.

Recommendation f) 1:

Federal support, whether directly financial, or through provision of accommodation/office/communication facilities, should be provided for a national screen industry peak body, which should also include relevant training and educational organisations.

This would help integration between these organisations and industries with both local and international cultural and information sectors.

g) how Australia's capabilities in these industries, including in education and training, can be best leveraged to maximise export and investment opportunities

With our nation's unquestioned talent and innovation in these areas, the export and overseas investment opportunities are gigantic. Not only film and television screen production, but also encouragement of greater royalty, copyright etc equity in the interactive training and computer games industries, can help maximise the industry's export contributions and improve our national balance of payments.

Recommendation g) 1:

Federal government should either modify an existing organisation or inaugurate and support a new overseas marketing arm to represent and promote all Australian screen production, education and training organisations working within the terms of this Inquiry.

This initiative, presumably through the Department of Trade, would encourage more investment in Australia and bring in overseas income to local training and educational establishments. More promotion of our schools would permit upgrading of facilities and staff to better serve the needs of overseas students^{ix}, particularly in our Asia-Pacific region.

h) whether any changes should be made to existing government support programs to ensure they are aligned with the future opportunities and trends in these industries.

The greatest danger in this area is the threat to Australian culture (and our native industry) posed by overseas pressure in the current round of "Free Trade" negotiations.

Australian film and television program makers consistently produce world-class, very competitively-costed material. But we cannot compete with what, in any other industry, would be considered "dumping" of product. American producers, in particular, having already gone into profit within their vast domestic market, regard income from Australian audiences as "the icing on the cake". So our television networks can purchase US programs for a tiny percentage of their production cost.

With our relatively small population, there is no way we can compete on a so-called "level playing field" – which realistically means "survival of the biggest." Australia is only one of many nations suffering from this problem. Even the United Kingdom, with a population almost four times that of ours, has long suffered from the economic and cultural effects of a relatively small domestic market, as per the following statement from 1983:

"It is almost impossible for a country of our size to maintain a genuinely indigenous character for their film industry unless they do have some subsidy. We need something – tax concessions or a levy – which in effect boosts the home market."^x

Sir Richard Attenborough^{xi} said in 1991 - "Government support is necessary if we are going to compete on an even footing with other countries."

This is from a nation which then had more than 58 million residents!

This year^{xii}, the British Film Council's CEO, John Woodward, said that "*without the support of the national lottery (which is a key source of funding) and the tax incentives, which are essential to building a truly sustainable UK film industry, the vast majority of the UK films featured in this report would not have been made.*"

If Britain takes these global pressures so seriously we, with a fraction of the population and audience, should be even more concerned about the swamping of our unique screen culture.

Recommendation h) 1:

*The Australian government, its representatives and negotiators, should ensure that **all** cultural industries, including, film, television, animation, special effects and electronic games, are totally and permanently excluded from international trade and services treaties to which the federal government (now, or in the future) become signatories.*

We should insist on preserving and promoting our own, uniquely Australian culture, our stories and our idiom. Sharing a common language with the largest film producing and exporting nation exposes us to risk of losing our own screen culture.

Recommendation h) 2a:

*That present levels of both direct state and federal governmental support and regulatory control (through such organisations as the Australian Broadcasting Authority) should not only be maintained, but **increased** in future, in order to keep pace with technological, cultural and global pressures.*

Recommendation h) 2b:

*That the government acts **urgently** to ensure an increase in the presently required proportions of prime-time screen exposure of Australian made programs on both free-to-air and pay television.*

Our audiences expect to, and deserve to, see their own stories on their screens, told in an Australian way. These actions would ensure that our public's expectations can be met on an ongoing basis.

The second part of the recommendation is a safety net, in case "standstill provisions" (as in the US/Canada Free Trade Agreement) become part of the agreement to be reached at the US/Australia Free Trade negotiations. Unless *Recommendation h)1* is implemented immediately, this action is most urgent, as the next round of talks happen in July and negotiations are expected to conclude by the end of this year.

It is not only feature films and television programs, but also our television commercials (TVCs) which are important in this context. In the past TVC production was one of the major training grounds for filmmakers (many of whom have gone on to international success^{xiii}) and enabled investment in facilities and new technologies.

The regulatory diminution of Australian content requirements in TVCs screened here has had a negative effect on our balance of trade – as well as disastrous consequences for our industry.

In order to retain and develop a skilled domestic workforce and to justify the expenditure (and constant technological upgrades) on production facilities used by the entire industry, there needs to be a continuity of quality local TVC production.

Recommendation h) 3:

That the government urgently acts to ensure the Australian Broadcasting Authority has adequate facilities to monitor the countries of origin of television commercials (TVCs) and their components, and to ensure that all networks comply with Australian content regulations.

Since the broadcasting regulations were changed to allow a percentage of complete overseas commercials, rather than of content in any one commercial, there appears to be an ongoing increase in noticeably foreign commercials, particularly at the top end of the market.

The networks rely on advertising agencies to be honest about the source of the TVCs and there are great temptations to make use of overseas material, mainly supplied by multinational corporations. Authorities need extra resources to ensure that both economic and cultural objectives are met.

Culturally, Australian adults may be able to adjust to seeing left hand drive vehicles being sold on their screens, but our children accept what they are exposed to during children's airtime. No wonder that our children put on American accents when nagging their parents to buy expensive imported toys they have seen in TVCs.

Economically, the drastic loss of TVC work for local studios, equipment suppliers and post-production facilities has weakened the entire film and television industry, which depends upon the same infrastructure as commercials for their operation.

Income for production companies and their workforce has also been reduced by what is, effectively, a reduction of the amounts paid by TV networks for locally produced programs. Production and infrastructure costs have risen much more than the returns gained from screenings on television

Recommendation h) 4:

That the government acts to ensure that the television licence fees paid by Australian TV networks to local production companies are increased, consistent with CPI and ongoing analysis of specific industry costs.

Such a move would better offset present and future production costs and also encourage investment in all aspects of this export market – which has great potential.

From the earliest days of film making^{xiv}, Australia has had a great, ongoing tradition of making effective and influential documentaries, including those made by government bodies such as Film Australia.

Australians, such as the multi-award-winner David Parer^{xv}, have also established an enviable reputation for wildlife films. Such universal-interest subjects can be sold all over the world, but truly relevant local documentaries depend on income from Australian television.

Unfortunately, commercial networks are presently reluctant to pay enough to cover the long periods of research, production and post-production which the making of serious documentaries entail.

Recommendation h) 5a:

That legislative and regulatory changes are made to increase the presently required proportions of prime-time screen exposure of Australian documentary programs on both free-to-air and pay television and that licence fees are realistically increased to meet production costs.

Recommendation h) 5b:

That broadcasting regulations are changed to include stricter definitions as to which types of programs can qualify as "Australian documentary" material.

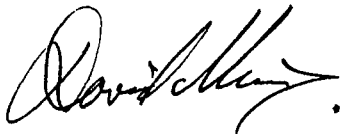
Australian documentary makers are good at telling our real stories, in our own voice – but their work needs to be seen more widely.

We also need more precise definition of what constitutes a qualifying "documentary", in order to exclude from the Australian quota the culturally negative (and relatively cheaply produced) so-called "infotainment" and "reality TV" programs.

I hope this submission makes some contribution to informed debate, which in turn leads to positive action.

I would be pleased to respond in person to any queries raised by this submission.

Yours sincerely,



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Representative on the Victorian Film and Television Industry Working Party,
Director, 2003 Australian Screen Directors National Conference.

ⁱ Cinematography "Oscars" went to Dean Semler ACS for *Dances with Wolves*, John Seale ACS for *The English Patient*, and Andrew Lesnie ACS for *Lord of the Rings*.

ⁱⁱ As well as Oscar winners Dean Semler ACS and John Seale ACS, those living more or less permanently in America include Rob Draper ACS, and Steve Mason ACS.

ⁱⁱⁱ As well as introductory courses as part of Media and Communication studies at many universities, there are a number of full and part-time training courses (some mainly profit-based) throughout Australia, but these are not contributing greatly to the industry's skills base.

^{iv} Apart from an extensive career (and many awards) in filmmaking, my teaching experience ranges from the London international School of Film Technique and the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts (Harvard, USA) in the 1960s to LaTrobe, Macquarie and Melbourne Universities, as well as AFTRS and VCA courses in the last decade.

^v Formerly the film course within the Swinburne Technical College Art Department.

^{vi} Successful Swinburne/VCA graduates include (amongst many others) documentary makers Don Featherstone, Monique Schwartz and Veronica Iacono, feature directors Anna Kokkinos, Gillian Armstrong, John Ruane and Richard Lowenstein, producers such as John Hipwell, cinematographers like Andrew de Groot, Ian Baker and Ellery Ryan, editors such as Jill Bilcock, animators such as Dennis Tuppicoff and Adam Elliot, scriptwriters such as Kathy Mueller - and industry organisational and funding body administrators such as Gregory Smith and Richard Harris.

^{vii} Prominent filmmakers such as Peter Weir, Don McAlpine and Oscar winner Dean Semler all worked for Film Australia early in their careers.

^{viii} Relevant craft guilds include the Australian Cinematographers Society (ACS), Australian Screen Composers Guild (ASCG), Australian Screen Directors Association (ASDA), Australian Screen Editors (ASE), and Australian Writers Guild (AWG).

^{ix} For example, the *Six-day intensive cinematography workshop* that I have run at the VCA in recent years has, solely by exposure on the VCA's website, attracted students from both Europe and Asia, contributing to Australia's balance of payments.

^x Simon Relph, *The Guardian*, 21 April 1983.

^{xi} Sir Richard Attenborough, distinguished filmmaker and at that time Chairman of the British Film Institute, quoted in *Take Ten – Contemporary British Film Directors*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1991.

^{xii} British Film Council report quoted in *The Age*, Melbourne 12 June 2003.

^{xiii} Internationally acclaimed filmmakers who developed their skills by working on television commercials include Alex Proyas, Fred Schepisi, Ray Lawrence and Oscar winning cinematographer John Seale ACS.

^{xiv} Early Australian documentaries which received international acclaim include the many films by Frank Hurley and John Heyer.

^{xv} Australian-made wildlife films, such as David Parer's *Dragons of Galapagos*, (from the ABCTV Wildlife Unit) have been shown and earned awards – and export income - all over the world.