



Submission on Screen Australia's Draft Statement of Intent 2008/09

The Australian Writers Guild (AWG) is the peak professional body representing performance writers in Australia.

On behalf of its 2600 members the AWG works to improve professional standards and conditions, to protect and advance creative rights, and to promote the Australian cultural voice in all its diversity, including supporting our members to succeed in the global marketplace.

With affiliations extending across the world AWG is recognized internationally as being the voice of Australian performance writers.

- **AWG members are fundamental to the success of the Australian film, television and new media industries.**
- **Without the script and the creators of the script, Australian film and television would cease to exist.**
- **In the current climate the majority of Australian performance writers struggle to make a living wage.**

Executive Summary

Although the Draft Statement of Intent (SOI) paints in broad brush strokes, the AWG welcomes the enhanced focus on script development and consideration of the track records of applicants when making assessments.

It is a fact of the Australian film and television industry that for professional writers to make a living wage, they must work almost exclusively in television. The AWG believes it is essential for Screen Australia to facilitate increased ease of movement for practitioners between the film and television industries and that track records in both should be considered when applying for feature film funding. This will ensure feature film makers can draw on practitioners with a wealth of experience in reaching audiences far beyond the reach of short film makers who comprise the bulk of current applicants.

There is an almost unprecedented opportunity to reform the industry with the new Agency, offset and leadership, and the AWG supports considerable change where it is considered, targeted and meeting the needs of the industry.

SOI

3. Revised Program Structure

Enterprise and Professional Development

The AWG welcomes the focus on script development. This must be backed by a firm commitment to a fair and reasonable proportion of development funding being attached to script development. Further, for the industry to mature based on high quality scripts which can reach an audience, it is essential that in the majority of cases those scripts should be written by experienced scriptwriters, and that those scriptwriters receive a fair living wage to develop them.

It is imperative that scripts receive the time, money and attention to properly develop. Scripts must be “production ready” before the project goes into production. Too often scripts are still in a development stage when projects are green lit and there is a furious and premature polishing that takes place ahead of production. The current shortcomings of script development are only too obvious on screen and in box office receipts.

In terms of actual investment, achieving the necessary level of script development means not funding a single draft for meager amounts of money – often split with producers costs and script editors – but properly funding the writer so that they can focus all their energy on writing and developing the script. To produce a quality script requires time and dedicated focus.

In terms of Screen Australia’s intention to nurture and develop professional talent, the AWG thinks it is essential that development and nurturing is not limited to new talent but also develops and nurtures experienced practitioners, be they writers or directors. It is time for the principle funding body to encourage experience, rather than constantly trying to unearth the “next big thing” and the AWG is encouraged by an apparent willingness on the part of Screen Australia to do so.

The AWG generally supports the slate funding model but believes there need to be checks and balances to ensure that writers get their due and that an appropriate proportion of the money is being injected into script development in accordance with Screen Australia’s stated aim. There needs to be a mandated percentage of script investment in each tranche of funding and then transparency and accountability in the reporting of production companies to ensure that money earmarked for script development is being spent as intended. As we are dealing with taxpayers money, fair industry minimums must be observed when contracting.

As integral to that process, the AWG strongly supports the focus on rigorous assessment of track records, programs of production and general industry support as determining factors when assessing applications for slate funding by production companies.

Production Financing

The AWG encourages Screen Australia's feasibility study of increasing industry input into funding assessment. In particular the AWG thinks that the current funding agency "reader" system requires thorough review. Readers too often lack the requisite industry experience and skill and in many cases are less experienced than the writers of the scripts they are charged with assessing. Our research indicates the current process is a disincentive to many of our best writing talents.

The AWG strongly endorses industry wide script assessor training to ensure a consistent, professional and informed response can be made to the scripts coming to Screen Australia. Overhaul of the funding agency reader system with requirements for clear, transparent and trained assessments from industry are required in conjunction with input from external industry practitioners such as reputable creative producers, directors and fellow writers.

Further the AWG strongly urges that projects are selected based on the experience of the applicants and the merit of the application. Ongoing 'training' or mentoring by Screen Australia employees should not form part of the selection or development process. Training/mentoring should be kept very distinct from development or production financing. Screen Australia must back talent, not micro-manage it.

5. Reward Achievement

The AWG is encouraged by a move to reward track record and achievement. However, the AWG strongly believes that rewarding achievement should not be limited to the producer but must also apply to the key creative team, incorporating writers and directors also.

When assessing the track records of writers, the AWG believes that consideration must be given to the fact that the Australian film and television industries are inextricably linked. Yet whilst the television industry is commercially viable and successful, the film industry currently is not. It is the AWG belief that there can be no talk of a sustainable film industry without real and material links to the television industry.

It is currently the case that in all but the rarest of cases, to make a living wage as a performance writer in Australia you must work in television. Many of our finest writers for television have exactly the talent, skill and experience the film industry needs yet is so lacking.

It makes no sense to continually fund first time writers (usually writer/directors) often with no experience in writing, let alone in entertaining an audience, and expect polished scripts and box office success. Writing is an extremely technical craft and a skill; it is improved with experience. Our best writers have long been ignored by the film industry and the AWG believes there is now an opportunity for Screen Australia to recognize television writing success as a consideration when determining funding in film applications.

There must be an acknowledgement, that while the short film circuit is a tremendous training ground for some practitioners and some genres, as far as honing the skills necessary to reach an audience as a scriptwriter television is a far more fertile training ground.

Conclusion

The AWG is generally supportive of and encouraged by the content of the SOI with three important caveats:

1. Television and Film must be brought together in a more open dialogue by promoting greater fluidity for writers between the two industries to ensure that our best and most experienced talent can be utilized across both forms;
2. Minimum investment levels for script development must form part of any slate funding allocations; and
3. The reward for experience and track records must not be limited to producers but include key creatives also.

The AWG looks forward to the development of the SOI and to contributing in further detail to the final document and to Screen Australia directly.