

Submission to Screen Australia Documentary Revision 2019

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IMDB/Screen Guide Link: <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm1079562/>

File Attached:

What feedback, if any, do you have regarding the proposed changes to the Development Program?

The proposed increase in development funds is welcome as is the sub-division into three new categories.

Rather than capping the amount available for low budget productions Screen Australia should stipulate that at least 20% of the General Development allocation will be intended for projects under \$500,000.

What feedback, if any, do you have regarding the proposed changes to the Producer Program?

We note that the amount allocated to this program has been increased with a new cap of \$500,000. The enhanced support for lower budget documentaries under this program as outlined by Screen Australia is an important measure.

What feedback, if any, do you have regarding the proposed changes to the Commissioned Program?

The removal of quotas and the opening up of platforms as indicated in the discussion paper seems sensible. However, there is a gaping hole in the Australian landscape where producers are currently unable to lever funds from local broadcasters for major feature documentary productions. The larger scale grander and superb feature length documentaries such as those recently screened at the Antenna Film Festival, for example For Shama (Ch 4) or The Advocate (various Israeli TV) are beyond our reach in Australia.

For the most part the broadcasters, including both of our public broadcasters, are driven by the TV hour format whether it be one off or more often factual overseas formatted series repackaged for the domestic market and parochial in their interests. Similar to other public broadcasters in Europe, the UK and North America, both the ABC and SBS should be required to support a small number of these films each year. As the major government agency for documentary financing Screen Australia must take responsibility for influencing government on policy. It should be lobbying government, both public broadcasters and streaming services on behalf of Australian filmmakers and audiences -- and on other matters too such as quotas on streamers (perhaps a proportion of local revenue) and getting documentary initiatives going through the commercial networks now that unscripted is of appeal across the board. Regarding a variable minimum license fee, expecting producers who are working with lower budgets to negotiate anything beyond Screen Australia's minimum license fee is unrealistic due to their lack of market power.

What feedback, if any, do you have regarding the introduction of the Completion Fund?

PEP has been the only Screen Australia documentary program that has not required creative assessment by the agency. It was introduced to provide documentary makers the same certainty that producers of higher budget productions were able to lever under the Producer Offset Scheme for budgets under \$500,000. In that regard it has been very successful for a large number of productions that have fallen outside of the main Screen Australia Documentary financing schemes. We understand the reasons behind the proposed cancellation of the PEP program – largely the uncapped nature of the scheme has led to a blowout of the budget of approximately \$600,000 over 3 years - however we believe the existing PEP scheme has real strengths and it would be a shame for these to be lost as a result of the changes being proposed.

- Cancellation of the PEP scheme impacts both emerging filmmakers as well as more established documentarians and the risk is that more innovative, daring, and risk-taking projects will fall over as a result.
- PEP has facilitated at least an element of independence in the documentary industry.
- Access to PEP has encouraged new entrepreneurial voices using a range of often non-traditional funding sources.

We urge Screen Australia to identify and focus on preserving the strengths that existed within PEP. In particular we are very concerned about losing the certainty that this scheme offered to a very significant number of projects. Any new guidelines will need to be responsive and carefully designed so as to make it possible for those filmmakers whose projects fit Screen Australia's criteria to still have some certainty. Typically a low budget documentary is funded by a combination of funds sourced from a mix of government sources, philanthropy, and either TV pre-sale or acquisition and/or exhibition and distributions arrangements including advances and PEP. How will it work if the producer has sought and secured funding from a variety of such sources and the 20% completion funding their finance plan relies on is denied at the final hurdle by the agency? The criteria for determining the 20% gap has not been outlined.

Do you have any further feedback?