

Screen Australia – Guidelines

Response by the Independent Producers' Association (IPI)

The Independent Producers Initiative (IPI) is an association of Australian feature film producers. IPI's members and supporters include many of the most experienced and successful feature film producers currently working around Australia, and some of its most promising emerging producers. Members have at least one feature film credit, and associate members have a demonstrated commitment with production credits*.

IPI thanks Screen Australia for the opportunity to respond to the Draft Guidelines. IPI is strongly supportive of the overall direction signaled in the Guidelines, in particular:

- The boldness in creating flexibility and quick turn-arounds by breaking down the number of existing programs and abolishing rounds.
- The introduction of the Enterprise program which recognises the need to build sustainable businesses.
- The devolvement of decision-making from Screen Australia to the Industry in relationship to development.
- The new industry fellowship program.

Anecdotally, there appear to be two areas of industry contention: the reduced opportunities for emerging producers and the future funding of shorts production.

An additional area that we feel is in need of further attention and elaboration is the assessment/evaluation process and in particular the definition of 'industry specialist'.

As an organisation of feature film producers we will focus on issues relevant to the feature film sector.

1. Peer assessment

The draft guidelines in our view do not sufficiently spell out how the assessment process will work and what the criteria for selecting the 'industry specialists' will be. The brief reference to assessment does not suggest that the process will be significantly different to current practice.

As stated in our previous submission, IPI strongly favours devolution of the decision making process and the implementation of a fully-fledged peer assessment process. Devolution of decision making to the greatest extent that is feasible is the corollary to a changed role for the Screen Australia Board from one of making funding decisions to one of setting policy and strategic direction.

We note that peer assessment is a fundamental tenet in the Australia Council's structure and decision-making processes and that the Council has many years experience in this form of decision-making. While we would not

suggest wholesale replication of the Council's processes, there are a number of elements that could be adopted to guarantee fair and informed decisions that are the essence of peer assessment. These include:

- Clear definition of a peer. The Australia Council defines a peer as "anyone who by virtue of their knowledge or experience, is equipped to make a fair and informed assessment of artistic work and grant applications". In Screen Australia's case "industry specialists" needs to be further defined. IPI suggests that a true peer must have expertise and experience which is at least comparable to, and possibly greater than, that of the applicant they are assessing. Their expertise and experience also needs to be relevant to the format and genre they are evaluating.
- In the case of the Australia Council a majority of peers are required to be practitioners (artists or artworkers). In Screen Australia's case the majority should be filmmakers – producers, writers and directors, with categories such as distributors supplementing filmmakers where relevant. The names of peers used should be reported publicly each year.
- Assessment panels should be the usual form of decision-making. In our previous submission we suggested that assessment should be undertaken by panels operating on fully-fledged peer assessment principles. The panels should be convened on a flexible basis, allowing for maximum turnover of peers. Whether panels should be independently managed or be advisors to SA needs to be addressed within the organisation, bearing in mind the twin pillars of flexibility and quick turn-around of projects. While there may be a case for simply using external assessors and a Screen Australia executive on some occasions, the use of panels as a general rule would allow for a wider range of input and would address any concerns about the concentration of decision making in a single agency.
- A register could be established with a wide field of peers with a choice of assessors who are experienced in specific areas. This would allow peers to be selected on the basis of the best match of expertise and experience for the assessment at hand. Whenever the register doesn't reflect the format and genre experience required Screen Australia could draw on the knowledge of its executives and industry bodies to proactively address this.

In order to ensure a pool of true peers who are suitable in a range of formats and genres we suggest:

- Allowing overseas peers to be part of the process.
- Lifting the bar by significantly increasing the amount that is paid to assessors so it reflects a genuinely professional fee level.

Applicants should be advised of the names of the peers on an assessment panel.

2. Development - Enterprise Program

2.1 Recoupment

In addition to the observations on peer assessment we make the following recommendations:

- Where Screen Australia does provide production funding for projects developed by recipients of Enterprise Program grants, Screen Australia must recognise that not all funds granted can be considered recoupable and that there must be a delineation between funds expended on development and funds expended on other Enterprise activities particularly in the area of professional development. There is an argument that the success of the Enterprise programs will only be fulfilled when companies are able to take full advantage of all income-derived from the success of their businesses.

2.2 Application Timing

The current timing of rounds would result in a seven month period of the year where no applications would be considered. IPI would recommend Screen Australia add another round in the later part of the calendar year.

3. Development - project by project programs

3.1 Eligibility – emerging producers

IPI does have concerns that the definition of experienced producer in relation to feature films could exclude capable filmmakers with other relevant experience. It is important to acknowledge that there are multiple development pathways into feature film especially from other areas of the performing arts such as theatre, opera and multimedia. While the guidelines do allow for non-feature producers without the minimum 10 commercial screens in one territory to qualify if they have exceptional credits in television, this exception needs to be interpreted liberally. (IPI understands that there are similar concerns in the writing and directing community about the recognition of experience in documentary or TV drama for writers wishing to move into features).

IPI would be concerned if less experienced producers were required to attach an experienced producer in order to access development funds and then find the emerging producer credit diminished. One option is to allow the experienced producer to take the form of a consultant or mentor producer and be allocated a fee from the development budget. The consultant or mentor producer would then not be tied up in the ownership of the property but would simply have the function of guiding the less experienced producers through the development process. We also note the role the Enterprise Program could play.

3.2 Eligibility – writers and directors

We are aware that the more stringent barriers for entry for writers and directors (i.e. the requirement for three features credits, as opposed to only one for producers) are causing some consternation in the industry. Rather than place such rigid guidelines in this area, IPI recommend that Screen Australia rely upon peer evaluation of record, potential, and talent, rather than the requirement for a writer or director to have at least three feature credits (think of Baz Luhrmann after *Strictly Ballroom* or George Miller after *Mad Max*).

3.3 Matched funding

We support Screen Australia's insistence on matched funding being at arms length however we suggest a definition of arms length is added after 'genuine marketplace entity'.

4. Production finance – feature films

4.1 Assessment process

We note that all feature films applying to Screen Australia for production funding – including those seeking completion funding – will be assessed by 'a combination of Screen Australia executives and industry specialists as required'. We reiterate our view stated above that greater industry involvement in program selection should extend to peer assessment for production financing. Again, flexibly constituted, small, peer evaluation panels would be the preferable means of determining how much direct funding each project should receive.

4.2 Criteria

IPI supports the proposed flexible approach to level of SA funding, a single set of criteria for feature films, and the retention of a capacity to invest in higher funding for productions below the producer offset threshold.

4.3 Quarantining of fund for marketing and cross platform elements

This is supported but given that some marketing costs and cross platform elements do not currently qualify as QAPE we suggest that Screen Australia takes this into account in determining the level of direct subsidy for a project.

4.4 Application timing

The flexibility and speed of turnaround available to features over a million dollars under the guidelines is also a priority for low budget proposals. Rather than holding two rounds a year it would make better sense to bundle low budget proposals as they arise. IPI believes this is necessary to encourage innovation in low budget films, many of which are relevant to a particular time and place.

5. Shorts

We note that in the Enterprise guidelines refer to Screen Australia encouraging strategies for supporting the industry generally through 'mentorships, traineeships, opportunities for writers, etc. but that shorts are no longer included. There are many paths for the development of talent by the production of short films - film schools, independently, at State Government level, private patronage and corporate support such as Tropfest.

IPI acknowledges that shorts are one pathway to more substantial projects. IPI contends that the production of short films may have real appeal to enterprise programs and proposes that the production of shorts (be they animation or live action - at whatever length), be put up for tender, for a small number of 2 year contracts, against a business plan. Outsourced in this way, emerging producers (as well as writers and directors) may be able to develop skills, whilst, at the same time, teams will be created for the future. The FTO's Young Filmmaker Fund, for instance, is a good model for funding shorts. We also note that the FTO and other state agencies maybe required to realign their strategies to develop and maintain talent within their state.

6. Workshops

We support the flexible intent of this program and look forward to receiving further detail.

7. Further Information

We look forward to further information on:

1) The proportion of funding is to be allocated to development versus production and, to features and to low budget features. We would welcome an opportunity to comment on this, as was the case with the FFC guidelines.

2) Marketing support and distribution.

3) Finding a mechanism to encourage banks and the state organisations to cashflow the offset, particularly in the wake of the international financial crisis.

***IPI Members**

John Maynard	Arenafilm
Anthony Buckley	Buckley Film
Louise Alston	Bunker Productions
Carolyn Johnson	Carolyn Johns Films
Naomi Wenck	Dragonfly Pictures
Helen Leake	Duo Art Production
Rosemary Blight	Goalpost Pictures
Ben Grant	Goalpost Pictures

IPI Members Continued ...

Kylie du Fresne	Goalpost Pictures
Jane Scott	Great Scott Productions
Bridget Ikin	Hibiscus Films
Kerry Heysen-Hicks	Kino Films
Kent Smith	Kojo Group
Helen Bowden	Matchbox Pictures
Martin Fabinyi	Mushroom Pictures
Leah Churchill-Brown	New Doll
Catherine Kerr	Pod Film
Anthony Anderson	Red Carpet Productions
Kath Shelper	Scarlett Pictures
Linda Tizard	The Broad Picture
John Brousek	Tidepool Films
Tristram Miall	Tristram Miall Films