

Porchlight Films welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Screen Australia draft program guidelines.

In general we welcome the spirit of the guidelines with the focus on creating more viable development funding for experienced practitioners; a more streamlined development path for projects; more autonomy for producers through the Enterprise Program; and the emphasis on quicker turnaround time for production and development funding. All of these strategies will allow independent production companies to more effectively develop a diverse slate of projects and respond to the changing marketplace. We believe that the more targeted development strategy proposed will also benefit the writers and directors of these projects, whilst providing benefit to the previously ignored area of mid-career support.

## **1. Development Programs**

### **i) Eligibility**

Although we support the shift to experienced producers and entities achieving greater support, we share concern that all project-by-project feature development is only available to “experienced” producers.

Part of this concern rests within the current definition of ‘experience’. We believe that eligibility should also take into consideration track record and innovation as part of the measure, with the bar remaining relatively high. For example the criteria that a producer must have at least one producer credit on a feature film that has been released on a minimum of ten screens in one territory will disqualify innovative producers who may have successful projects distributed in a more multi-platform way. Whilst at other points in the guidelines, innovation and use of multi-platform distribution is encouraged, it seems inconsistent that Screen Australia insist that a traditional cinema release on a specific number of screens be the benchmark for an ‘experienced producer’. (Under the current guidelines the producer of an \$8million dollar film that fails on 15 screens is an ‘experienced producer’ but an innovative producer with a low budget film released across a range of platforms and reaching a greater audience is not).

In addition, the alternative criteria of ‘exceptional credits in other genres’ is too vague to be considered as an acceptable measure for judging the experience of a producer. These measures of “experience” prohibit access for many practitioners who do indeed have relative experience perhaps in a parallel formats and genres of production. This also crosses over to the Non Offset feature production area, and we refer to this below.

### **ii) Industry Development**

Whilst we support the guidelines’ focus on the development of projects, we have concerns regarding the lack of professional development for emerging practitioners, and the funnelling of all development funding through the Enterprise Program to ‘experienced producers’ only.

There has been much comment on the skills afforded the industry through the former AFC’s short film fund. The proposed guidelines do not acknowledge the function that this funding has served for the industry and offers no explanation of how it plans to foster the future development of new practitioners in this industry (We do not believe Enterprise companies will or should be making short films.) The expectation that state bodies will fund short film production or that learning institutions and self-funded ‘backyard’ shorts will fill this gap is perhaps inadequate. There needs to be some co-ordination between Screen Australia, learning institutions, organizations such as Metro Screen and Open Channel and

the state bodies to ensure that emerging talent have an opportunity to produce short drama content in a professional environment. And whilst Screen Australia may not be the best organisation to administer short funding in the 'new world' it has some obligation to ensure that there are alternative viable avenues for the professional development of emerging talent.

In completely cutting short drama production in any form (with the exception of animation) the agency is also limiting the ability of the industry to engage with different formats for drama production. In an environment where genres, formats and methodologies are rapidly changing, but where producers, directors and writers still need to develop within professional criteria. It is discouraging talented emerging producers from being able to independently reach the 'experienced producer' benchmark that is essential to access feature development and production funding.

Intrinsically linked to this, and following on from our concern regarding eligibility, we believe emerging producing talent needs to have some choice as to where and how to develop a project in order to encourage innovation. The proposed model runs the risk of giving a great deal of power over the development slate of all Australian films to a relatively small number of 'experienced' (Enterprise) producers and executive producers. While we do support the shift towards this model we believe it has moved too far and left a dangerous gap whereby filmmakers will be stampeded into rushed marriages (as was the case with the UK franchises) with little or no incentive for emerging producers or teams to develop their own projects,

Even if an emerging filmmaker has a great project, they have no bargaining power, simply because they are offered very limited options. Whilst the 'Enterprise Program' aims to 'increase the development of Australian projects and talent', there is little or no incentive for 'enterprises' to team specifically with emerging producers. Providing more choice for development avenues would increase the competition for the best projects. If an emerging producer had the choice of (competitive) draft funding through Screen Australia or to partner with an experienced 'enterprise' producer/company, or to attract an executive producer then there is some healthy competition.

We would also point out that although the Low Budget Television Drama Program is encouraging of innovation, there is a need for development outside the sole Broadcaster development system. We see there are enormous possibilities to include television development (with matched finance from the marketplace), but as currently drafted the Enterprise structure of development doesn't allow this? This is prohibitive to many production companies' basic business plans for the future, and we would encourage the Agency to address this. As this sector, through future content download possibilities is also one of the more innovative avenues, the Agency should be developing this area with a view to the future.

The accessibility to workshop training and development as mentioned in the guidelines could afford considerable benefit to both mid career and establishing practitioners, but as currently drafted is vague and open perhaps to some exploitation from the non production sector.

## **2. Production**

In principal we support the changes proposed to feature production funding and support an 'evaluation' based selection criteria.

**i) Assessment**

We would like further information on exactly who will be assessing projects. How will the 'industry specialists' be appointed? What will be the criteria for their selection and the term of their appointment? As a production company the financing of our films is THE most influential factor in our viability. The process for assessment must be transparent and fair and be adequately communicated to the industry

We are concerned that assessors with lesser credentials as well as similarly credentialed professionals, (who are effectively competitors), will have access to information on applicants' businesses, and applicants would have no choice but to share commercial-in-confidence information. For this reason we prefer evaluation by specialist, possibly international, professionals with substantial experience and track record, rather than the rotating appointments of peer panels. Assessments must be done by extremely qualified personnel, and we do not want to enter into a situation whereby a system of panel decisions results in mediocrity.

It is impossible to comment further on the brief information supplied in these draft guidelines and we would like further clarification regarding the assessment criteria and assessment process. We are also concerned about the statement that "When evaluating individual projects, the desirability of having a range of genre and content within the annual production slate may also be taken into account." Who is ultimately responsible for the 'diversity of slate' across Australian productions? Is it the Screen Australia board? How is this diversity to be assessed and communicated to producers?

**ii) Non-Offset Production**

We would like further clarification on the feature film funding which does not access the Producer Offset. We see that this may be an opportunity for emerging practitioners to produce longer form projects for less than \$1 million but again the criteria for the 'experienced' producer may cut out many potential projects. Producers and Directors that have relative success measures in shorter and alternative formats should be taken into consideration in this area, as a viable first feature finance possibility (hence 10 screen release is too closed a measure).

**iii) Producer's Rebate & Margin**

We strongly point to the fact that the Producer's Rebate alone is not sufficient to finance films without Screen Australia support and that Screen Australia's retention of two thirds of the margin remains a huge disincentive for producers. The offset is a mechanism for building business and structuring finance and the margin should be the producers' to utilise in a way appropriate to their business plan.

**iv) Cross Platform allowances**

The allowances for cross platform and media are to be encouraged throughout the guidelines but as currently drafted seem arbitrary. Although we support the encouragement by the Agency, it should be left to the Producer to integrate into the budget of the particular program or feature, and that budget component should not be set by the Agency.

### **3. Marketing**

We are concerned that the marketing guidelines have not been drafted and released simultaneously with the development and production guidelines, as such a major area of the industry that really requires leverage. However, we are pleased to see its presence on the agenda of the new agency. We look forward with interest to its release as we

believe this area to be an essential but somewhat neglected part of the government policy and assistance.

Finally, if the intent of the Agency is to create an environment of "meritocracy", the indicators and measures of merit must be fully articulated, in order not to lose the very base of our future industry. Merit with fuller 'success' and 'experience' indicators must be put in place for both the development and production areas of the agency.

Sincerely,

Vincent Sheehan  
Liz Watts  
Anita Sheehan

Porchlight Films Pty Limited