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## Valuing and evaluating musical practice as research in ethnomusicology and its implications for research assessment

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### ABSTRACT

In this article, we argue that ethnomusicology holds valuable epistemic insights for considering how to measure and evaluate research for academics, as well as for research policy and management professionals. We focus on two notable instances of standardised national research assessment frameworks: the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF), and Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) and identify the advantages of practice as research models for music research by considering the benefits of ethnomusicology's reflexive and relativist methodologies to formal research assessment processes. To support our argument, we refer to published case studies of ethnomusicological research that reach beyond Western practice and thought to highlight the advantages recognising practice as research as a more inclusive modality of original knowledge production. We call upon ethnomusicologists to pro-actively engage with the formal processes of research assessment to make them more equitable and representative of our discipline's broad commitment to decolonising academic practice.

### KEYWORDS

Research assessment;  
practice as research;  
ethnomusicology

Across the global higher education sector, *research excellence* and its assessment are designed to ensure that public funds and jobs are distributed equitably and according to merit. However, standardised measures of *quality* and *merit*, as defined within academia globally, often disadvantage certain disciplines, ethno-linguistic groups, modes of knowledge production and media of research dissemination. Within academic institutions globally, text-bound forms of knowledge production and dissemination informed by Western epistemological and empirical methods are conventionally valued more highly than others. This occurs even when a critical mass of scholars within a discipline argues for more equitable approaches to valuing and evaluating the generation of new knowledge through other media, such as music and dance performance.

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In this article, we argue that ethnomusicology holds valuable epistemic insights for considering how to measure and evaluate research for academics, as well as for research policy and management professionals.<sup>1</sup> In so doing, we focus on two notable instances of standardised national research assessment frameworks: the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF), and Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA).<sup>2</sup> We identify the advantages of practice as research models for music research by considering the benefits of ethnomusicology's reflexive and relativist methodologies to formal research assessment processes. To support our arguments, we refer to published case studies of ethnomusicological research that reach beyond Western practice and thought to highlight the advantages recognising practice as research as a more inclusive modality of original knowledge production. We further ask what insights can be lost to global knowledge when music and culture experts from outside the academy are excluded from participating fully in research knowledge production.

Through consideration of the REF and ERA frameworks, as well as relevant observations by other music researchers, we explore how ethnomusicologists have articulated the value of music as a medium through which knowledge can be generated and transmitted and ask how ethnomusicological approaches might inform more refined processes for valuing and evaluating non-textual research outputs. Ultimately, we propose that ethnomusicology's conceptual and practical engagements with different music cultures, and its established reflexive and relativist methods for theorising and incorporating practice as research, can inform more equitable frameworks for assessing and valuing a fuller spectrum of research outputs and impacts across a diversity of media. We further call upon ethnomusicologists to pro-actively engage with the formal processes of designing, implementing and reviewing research assessment frameworks to make them more equitable and representative of our collective research and our discipline's broad commitment to decolonising academic practice.

### **Research assessment and *practice as research***

Today, ethnomusicologists in universities, like all scholars in higher education institutions, work in a sector that is constantly measured and guided by research metrics. University rankings are now a ubiquitous and integral facet of how higher education institutions perceive themselves and are perceived in the global marketplace.<sup>3</sup> Studies in sociology, cultural studies and research policy and management have shown that, far from being solely a Western concern, practices of research assessment, authorship and citation are heavily influenced by enduring colonial dynamics of Anglophone knowledge hegemonies in both the sciences and the arts, humanities and social sciences (Connell 2019; Moore et al. 2017; Neylon 2020; Wilsdon et al. 2015). Connell (2019: 76–7) contends that Anglophone and European universities comprise the core of the global knowledge economy, and that most other higher education institutions in the world follow their models for teaching and benchmarking research quality. Nowhere are such ranking regimes more important to the careers of researchers and sustainability of disciplines than in countries like the UK and Australia, where national research assessment exercises operate cyclically every few years via their respective REF and ERA frameworks. The outcomes of these exercises significantly influence global university rankings and, in doing so, establish research norms and benchmarks that are emulated all over the world.

Global publication trends suggest that many researchers whose first language is not English, across various disciplines, are acutely aware of the need to publish in English to meet normative global research assessment expectations. Most, however, are unable to address this challenge effectively. Such researchers often struggle against imposed globalised evaluative research norms, yet in doing so, put at risk their own career progression.<sup>4</sup>

We argue that ethnomusicologists, given our specific array of disciplinary approaches and concerns, can contribute novel perspectives to what is understood as normative research, and combat the academy's global overreliance on citation metrics and bias towards sole-authored hard-copy textual outputs published by established Anglophone university presses. Music researchers have argued that music, in itself, can be a medium of knowledge production and transmission that exists independently of text (Barwick and Toltz 2017; Cook 2008, 2015, 2018; Corn 2018, 2019; Doğantan-Dack 2015; Evans et al. 2011: 25–8; Schippers 2015; Schippers, Tomlinson and Draper 2017). It is therefore important to understand how the production and dissemination of music, as a sonic medium, can inform more inclusive and reflexive approaches to valuing and evaluating research overall. This concern is well aligned with the ways that ethnomusicologists in Australia have sought, since the 1970s, to democratise research and knowledge creation through applied approaches in response to their collaborations with Indigenous Australians (Corn 2011: 21–5).

In this article, we advocate for practice as research as a more inclusive modality of original knowledge production. Within the context of ethnomusicological research, practice as research raises the need for more equitable ways of valuing and evaluating research outputs in response to the world's diverse knowledge systems, and alternative ways of producing and disseminating knowledge beyond text as a dominant academic medium. Established definitions of practice as research, and related terms such as *practice research* and *artistic research*, are many. For the purposes of this article, we use Nelson's definition of practice as research as 'the possibility of thought within both "theory" and "practice" in an iterative process of "doing – reflecting–reading–articulating–doing"' (2013: 32). We further address *practice* here as a musical research method aimed at producing creative research outputs either as independent works or alongside corresponding textual ones.

Ethnomusicology's stance concerning decolonisation of the academy and authorship generally is an important one in relation to research assessment that distinguishes ethnomusicologists from musicologists. While it should be noted that maintaining interdisciplinary bridges between musicology and ethnomusicology has long been debated by music researchers (Born 2010; Nooshin 2011; Platt 2000), we nonetheless hold that ethnographic approaches to theorising the personalised and contextual nature of performance can help to inform the evaluation of practice as research outputs in research assessment exercises in ways that have not yet been adequately appreciated.

### **Practice as research and research assessment in the UK**

We now turn to the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK, followed by Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA), which alongside U.S.A. and European university league tables contribute to setting the benchmarks against which other nations are

measured in the global higher education marketplace. Outcomes from these cyclical research assessment exercises feed into league tables that are used internationally to determine quantitative university rankings, which greatly influence academic recruitment, student numbers, publication patterns, academic promotions and dissemination behaviours worldwide.

In the UK, REF results determine the value of government spending on research and quality related (QR) income via the public peak body, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). Scores are allocated to various aspects of a university's activity, such as its research environment (15%), research impacts beyond academia (25%) and research outputs (60%). For our purposes here, we will discuss the research outputs section of REF assessment alone, while acknowledging that impact is an increasingly important area where ethnomusicologists are making important positive contributions.

Scores for all areas of research are allocated by Unit of Assessment (UoA), which very roughly map onto disciplinary areas. Various UoA's are grouped within different REF assessment panels. There are thirty-four UoAs and four academic panels in total, labelled A to D. With few exceptions, panels use only peer review during the assessment process. Academic panellists are joined by persons who are *users* of research, often from non-academic backgrounds, to review the impact elements of REF assessments.

Music falls into UoA D33, which assesses research from all areas of music, drama, dance, theatre, performance, live and sonic art, film, television and screen studies. In D33, a range of artefacts, creative practices, curatorial outputs, edited publications, recordings and writings can be submitted. Research that encompasses analytical, applied, ethnographical, historical, interdisciplinary, pedagogical, practice-based and theoretical approaches to understanding music can be entered for REF assessment. Research within, between and across any cultural, geographical or historical contexts can be entered. However, oddly, formal REF2021 guidance for the REF2021 exercise only explicitly mentions ethnomusicology in relation to UoA B22, which covers anthropology and does not match established ethnomusicological research practice. By and large, ethnomusicologists in the UK submit to UoA D33 regardless, because they are mostly employed within departments or schools of music and performing arts and many have sat on REF D33 panels as assessors. Notably, most ethnomusicologists in the UK research musical traditions outside the UK, with several notable exceptions who work on local,<sup>5</sup> or English, Scottish, Welsh or Irish folk music traditions.<sup>6</sup>

The REF2021 definition of research is extremely broad and designed to accommodate the many forms that research takes in the UK. It defines research as 'a process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared' (Research England 2019: 90). The REF submission guidelines state explicitly that research includes work of direct relevance to the needs of culture, society and the public and voluntary sectors, including scholarship, as well as the invention and generation of ideas, images, performances, artefacts and designs where those lead to new or substantially improved insights. Teaching materials that are not based on research, however, are excluded (Research England 2019: 90), as are performances where there is no clear link to a research question, method, theory or agenda.

The musicologist Nicholas Cook (2015) has discussed developments in research assessment over the past two decades in the UK, which have included the absorption of practice as research into research assessment exercises. This absorption, Cook argues, fuelled debates in musicology concerning the need to include written descriptions

of the research content of practice as research outputs to assist processes of research assessment, as opposed to considerations of aesthetic merit, and/or music's inferred and experienced meanings as an art form. Written texts, initially optional, were added to research assessment exercises to identify any new knowledge created through practice as research. These explanatory texts were designed to empower practice as research specialists by offering them an opportunity to clarify the value and rigour of their research to assessment panellists. The 300-word text boxes have now become widely used to direct reviewers explicitly to the *research* value of practice as research outputs and how they make a contribution to new knowledge.

This textual element of practice as research is also what sets it apart from performance practice. The ethnomusicologist Huib Schippers (2007: 2) argues that 'although much music making involves research, the latter does not necessarily qualify all music as research. Much of what musicians do may certainly be high-level professional practice, but all does not necessarily constitute research'. Cook (2015: 25, 27–30) describes the comments received when explanatory written sections to research assessment exercises in the UK were introduced. Academics objected that practice as research outputs were often experiential, embodied and emotional in nature and that the new knowledge generated by such outputs might not be designed to be captured in writing specifically. While Cook himself had some sympathy for these arguments, he proposed that a certain amount of pragmatism is required in the UK research assessment context where institutional research funding is allocated on a competitive basis through what is now UKRI.

... the financial returns [of the UK Research Assessment Exercise]<sup>7</sup> were immeasurably greater in the hard sciences than in the arts and humanities, and there was a constant sense that we were adapting, or subverting, a system that had been primarily designed for particle physics or medicine to serve purposes for which it had never been intended. Our aim then was to exploit the system as we found it in order to influence the distribution of research funding in a way that would reflect a holistic concept of our discipline ... (Cook 2015: 28)

Cook seems to suggest that financial pragmatism in the face of competition with the sciences can override any epistemological or philosophical considerations of what is valuable in evaluating practice as research outputs. Consequently, then, there is a distinct difference between what is thought to be valuable and how value is translated, since value may be economically tied to research funding, but might also be cultural, applied and/or intellectual. Valuing and evaluation processes are also informed by disciplinary variances. Hierarchies in university settings, and different approaches to valuing and evaluating research, can manifest themselves in financial and contextual differences and biases, while different concepts of value can be interrelated (Graeber 2001). These are artefacts of varying traditions in academic and performance practices that, in the higher education setting, emanate from Western thinking and musical practices, which are now increasingly examined and critiqued by Indigenous theorists, such as Nakata (2007) in Australia and Tuhiwai-Smith (2012) in New Zealand, who seek to decolonise the academy.

The intersections of textual outputs with practice as research are therefore key when it comes to the UK REF's impacts on equity and ability to evidence research. In Borgdorff's view:

Art practice qualifies as research when its purpose is to broaden our knowledge and understanding through an original investigation. It begins with questions that are pertinent to the

research context and the art world, and employs methods that are appropriate to the study. The process and outcomes of the research are appropriately documented and disseminated to the research community and to the wider public. (2012: 43)

This definition is aligned with those of the REF and comes close to the one of practice as research we use in this article. It shows there is a difference between vocational artistic practice, and artistic research or practice as research. This difference lies in intent, originality, documentation methodology and dissemination *beyond the artistic community of practice*. Dissemination beyond the artistic community is critical for ethnomusicology. Many ethnomusicologists work in musical fields that are unfamiliar to other ethnomusicologists or music researchers. For something to count as research, be evaluated successfully and thereby help to produce research income, it is essential that key research findings in ethnomusicology are clearly communicated to those unfamiliar with any given artistic practice or genre through their writing. So, essentially, the problems with the UK research excellence framework for ethnomusicological practice as research lie not so much in accepting that practice can be or contribute to research. Yet, as recent discussions preceding the REF2021 exercise have demonstrated, ethnomusicological practice as research outcomes are often valued very differently and inequitably from those based in Western art music practice, such as compositions or performances.

The dominant model developed over previous iterations of Research Assessment Exercises in the UK in 2014 and in 2018 has established that new compositions and interpretive performances can largely be assessed by expert assessors against a canon of known musical works within the established canon of Western art music. Yet, UK-based ethnomusicologists typically submit practice as research outputs for which REF-assessors are unlikely to possess a working aesthetic knowledge. The absence of a working knowledge, combined with the absence of an established canon, influences peer review outcomes of how innovation and value are attributed to such ethnomusicological practice as research outputs. This has entrenched within REF assessments a narrowly defined conception of what constitutes *music*.

For example, the now infamous article by John Croft, 'Composition is not research' (2015), led to a range of academic responses in UK music studies. David Pocknee (2015) argues strongly against Croft's conception of composition and its relationship to/as research. Ian Pace (2016) attempted to defend the text-based rigour of a traditional musicology of Western music against more liberal phenomenological arguments for composition or performance as equivalent forms of research output. These responses debated the nature of how to understand music research within a very narrow Western understanding of what constitutes music. A Western musicologist or composer may understand what Stockhausen sounds like, but how could they be expected to have any informed knowledge of, say, Sliabh Luachra fiddle traditions or Mexican charanga?

For these reasons, as well as the continuing dominance of Western art music in UK music departments, ethnomusicologists have tended to fall back on their own training and reflexivity. We contend that by explicitly adopting some of these methodologies into the UK REF for all practice as research music outputs more, this process would become more equitable. Ethnomusicological practice as research methods could indeed provide a template for a more inclusive and representative evaluation of music

research overall. The British Forum for Ethnomusicology's (BFE) submission to the REF2021 consultation made this clear:

The key problem on practice research for ethnomusicology rests in the level definitions on p.48-50 of 'consultation on draft panel criteria and working methods' document where descriptions of a 3\* or 4\* output are potentially problematic: Practice research in ethnomusicology differs in some important respects to other sub-disciplines of music studies in that there is no central canon of repertoire against which to be evaluated given that UK ethnomusicologists work within very different communities of practice around the world. Therefore, unlike the situation in respect of acousmatic, or art music or mass mediated popular musics, it may be *more* difficult for the REF sub-panel members to adjudicate the quality or significance of an ethnomusicological practice research output than in other sub-disciplines of music studies (given that they are not able to benchmark against a canon of pre-existing musical material). Furthermore, there is the additional complexity that some research in ethnomusicology uses practice, or 'learning to perform' as a key fieldwork method in service of a research question which might be more socially or culturally significant than sonic. For instance, ethnomusicologists have routinely used music tuition with expert performers of different musical traditions around the world as a means to uncovering coded and culturally symbolic information about the value and function of music in society. One can therefore imagine a situation where a practice research output is a) difficult to assess and/or b) sits in service of a more socio-cultural research question or aim in and of itself but forms an important part of a combined submission either as supporting material or as part of a portfolio output itself. We would welcome more discussion about these complex issues between members of panel D and sub-panel members in advance of the submission period. (British Forum for Ethnomusicology's response to REF2021 consultation October 2018)

The answer to this, of course, is to ask that all practice as research submissions contextualise the research value of their practice. This is supposed to be the function of the 300-word text boxes that accompany research output submissions in panel D. However, clearly, the brevity of these mitigates against the unfamiliar non-Western musical traditions, and even local folk traditions, with which many ethnomusicologists work. This could potentially be improved by increasing this contextual explanation to around 3000 words. Albeit more time-consuming, this would bring the REF more into line with practice as research submissions as within research degrees across the UK academy, where exegetical textual elements play a crucial role in explaining the research value of practical outputs. It would also allow space for ethnomusicologists to explain to assessors the ethnographic value of their practice as research submissions, and how this usually differs greatly from Western art music notions of complexity and novelty. This would align with an existing call from within the REF music subpanel for more specific contextual data about the research content of submissions (Delgado and Thewell 2015). An expansion of text-based explanations for practice as research submissions might also encourage ethnomusicologists to experiment more with performative and compositional research outcomes involving the communities with whom they work and bring greater emphasis to performance practice as research.

Another way that ethnomusicology can help to refine research evaluation exercises is by informing the ways through which performative research outcomes are captured in writing as well as through creative outputs. Ethnomusicologists have developed novel ways of interpolating performative experiences in writing that acknowledge the ephemeral, contextual and cultural nature of musical experiences. Combining critiques of



anthropology and academic authorship (Clifford 1988; Marcus and Fischer 1999) with experimental forms of ethnography and auto-ethnography (Hagedorn 2001; Kisliuk 1998), ethnomusicologists have written insightfully about the multifaceted nature of musical experiences and knowledge creation through music.

What is clear, therefore, is that, in the UK, new knowledge must be effectively communicated to assessors. Ethnomusicology can assist with this if it were to share its theoretical, methodological and ethnographic toolbox more widely. New ways must be found to engage with approaches to valuing knowledge that transcend the fiscal and familiar. Such approaches must, to some extent, reflect the pragmatism to which Cook refers or risk being misunderstood or ignored by those allocating research budgets. Consequently, perceived tensions between aesthetic and intellectual quality, as well as equity and what this means for practice as research outputs in research assessment contexts, remain in the UK.

### ***Research assessment in Australia***

A similar system for evaluating and incentivising research presently exists in Australia. It comprises two cyclical evaluation schemes: Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA), which was introduced in 2010 to identify and promote ‘excellence across the full spectrum of research activity in Australia’s higher education institutions’ (ARC 2015a), and Engagement and Impact (EI) Assessment. EI was introduced in 2018 to show how well researchers engage with end-users of research and how universities translate their research into economic, social, environmental, cultural and other impacts (ARC 2015b). Both ERA and EI Assessment schemes are administrated nationally by Australia’s peak research-granting body, the Australian Research Council (ARC). Ethnomusicologists have been centrally engaged in positioning practice as research methods and musical research outputs within the overarching frameworks of ERA (Barwick and Toltz 2017; Corn 2018) and have responded constructively to the epistemological challenges that this presents.

Since its commencement in 2010, the ERA scheme has recognised two main categories of research output: Traditional Research Outputs (TROs) and Non-Traditional Research Outputs (NTROs). The TRO category encompasses six types of research output that are predominately literary and generally considered to be conventional: Authored books, Edited books, Book chapters, Refereed journal articles, Papers in fully-refereed conference proceedings, and Additional research outputs. Alternatively, the NTRO category defines six additional types of research output that were largely identified to recognise outputs published in other media: Original creative works, Live performances of creative works, Recorded or rendered creative works, Curated or produced substantial public exhibitions and events, Research reports for an external body, and Portfolios that allow for related works demonstrating coherent research content to be submitted and reviewed as a single output.

Senior ethnomusicologists working in Australia at the time of the ERA scheme’s initial 2010 round fulfilled influential roles in advising the ARC to recognise NTROs as valid research outputs (Barwick and Toltz 2017; Evans et al. 2011: 25–28; Schippers 2015). The introduction of NTROs as assessable research outputs marked a radical disjuncture from the pre-existing Higher Education Research Data Collection (HERDC) scheme

which, until then, had recognised only Books, Book chapters, Journal articles and Conference publications as reportable research outputs for which universities received financial dividends from the Australian Government. Under the HERDC scheme, all academics working in Australia whose research outputs were non-literary had been definitively cast as non-researchers. By extension, all modalities of music scholarship that generated non-literary outputs were not considered to be research endeavours. This reflected the way that some established music academics in Australia saw themselves, as it was only in 1991 that most state conservatoria amalgamated with universities upon the Australian Government's categorical dissolution of their more vocational status as Colleges of Advanced Education (CAEs) (Corn 2019: 25).

While the recognition of NTROs under the ERA scheme has greatly benefitted tertiary music schools in Australia by providing opportunities for them to forge expansive new research missions and showcase the fuller spectrum of their research outputs, there nonetheless remain systemic inequities in the ways that TROs and NTROs are perceived and reported within Australian universities. Every three years on average, ERA outcomes are rated on a scale of 1 (Well below world standard) to 5 (Well above world standard) for research outputs self-selected for submission by each university. These are grouped into the Field of Research (FoR) codes identified in the Australian and New Zealand Standard Research Classification (ANZSRC) framework (ARC 2020).

Australian universities typically maintain their own internal ranking lists of book publishers and refereed journals that are mapped against the ERA scheme's 1–5 rating scale and strongly suggest where academics should publish TROs for the best quality outcomes. These internal lists are maintained despite the ARC having formally abandoned its own after 2012. In response, some Australian institutions have become a signatory to the internationally recognised San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA 2012), which explicitly encourages higher education establishments, funders and publishers across all disciplines to value a variety of contributions to research cultures in addition to written publications and research income.<sup>8</sup> Internal lists are further problematic as they tend not to include newer and open-access publication outlets, which consequently stifles the ability of research outputs to circulate freely and equitably among end-users.

Equivalent internal ranking lists are rarely kept, however, for NTROs, nor is it assumed that all non-literary outputs will qualify as research outcomes. So, paralleling the UK's REF scheme, each NTRO submitted for ERA must be accompanied by a compelling Research Statement of no more than 300 words that explains its Research Background, Research Contribution and Research Significance. This requirement is generally perceived as an onerous, yet necessary, impost upon academics who chiefly engage in practice as research approaches.

Universities are generally reluctant to submit NTROs for ERA in most FoR codes. In the most recent 2018 ERA round, the most NTROs, totalling some 5950 outputs nationally, were submitted under FoR Division 19 (Studies in Creative Arts and Writing), which encompasses all music research, including ethnomusicology, within FoR Group 1904 (Performing Arts and Creative Writing). Attitudes among universities towards submitting NTROs are also inconsistent with some opting to submit only TROs on grounds of their more clearly determinable high quality. This general bias in favour of TROs is

reflected in the othering qualifiers that the ARC itself uses to describe NTROs as ‘non-traditional’, ‘applied’, ‘creative’ and ‘practitioner-based’ (2019). These qualifiers serve to reinforce prevalent assumptions that the written word is the native medium of scholarly communication to which other forms of human expression come second, due to their inherently applied, creative and/or practical nature. This Western bias can be traced at least as far back as René Descartes’ philosophical theory of mind–body dualism published in 1641 (Cunning 2014; Manley and Taylor 1996).

Consequently, even though NTROs generated through practice as research are natural outcomes of many kinds of music research, including ethnomusicology, some universities are nonetheless reluctant to submit them for ERA, even within FoR Group 1904 (Performing Arts and Creative Writing), due to assumptions that peer reviewers and evaluation committees will perceive them to be of inherently lesser quality than TROs. Official ERA outcomes in no way reflect any presumed bias between FoR Group 1904 submissions that include NTROs and those that do not (ARC 2019). It is nonetheless an expected norm that all FoR Group 1904 submissions will include TROs regardless. Moreover, as NTRO submissions are not widespread beyond FoR Divisions 19 (Studies in Creative Arts and Writing) and 12 (Built Environment and Design), they are not widely understood within Australian universities and are often regarded with suspicion. To some extent, this works to marginalise practice as research in music. As such, ethnomusicologists in Australia typically focus on publishing TROs, while sometimes maintaining a lesser focus on generating NTROs. For the many ethnomusicologists and allied researchers working with Indigenous communities in Australia and elsewhere, this overtly contradicts the vastly greater value vested in music as a classical knowledge medium within Indigenous cultures.

Whether the ARC’s new EI Assessment scheme, which was introduced in 2018 to gauge research engagements and impacts among research end-users, will raise the prevalence and status of NTROs longer term is as yet unknown. However, early indications show that, come what may, monetary investments in research, whether through university support, external grants or industry contributions, will be the most concrete measure through which research engagement and impact among end-users can be demonstrated. This shift in the Australian research evaluation system is also unfolding alongside the ARC’s current implementation of a revised ANZSRC framework and FoR codes that now distinguish distinct fields of Indigenous research across a full gamut of recognised disciplines (2015c). There is no guarantee that this change alone, however, will arrest the asymmetrical value placed on TROs over NTROs or solve the multifaceted educational inequities between Australia’s cities and regions that feed into them. This is therefore a key moment in Australian research that necessitates wider debate about the fundamental value of NTROs in Australian and global context.

### ***Practice as research in engagements with Indigenous Australians***

Eschewing the colonial power imbalances inherent in researcher–informant relationships and research assessment, most ethnomusicologists who research Australian Indigenous music cultures today seek to collaborate with Indigenous musicians as equals in research endeavours. Collaborative approaches require the significant investment of time and resources and are not always aligned with research funding and assessment processes,

the latter being typically time and resource sensitive in terms of sustainability. In the Australian context, interpersonal relationships with Indigenous researchers and the desire for positive changes are often what drive and bring value to practice as research endeavours.

Such collaborations recognise that seasoned Indigenous musicians are leaders of their own intellectual traditions in which songs transmit significant knowledge across generations spanning millennia, and that those traditions are not to be misappropriated as raw materials towards generating new academic knowledge of its own sake. Rather, the aim of these collaborations is to bring the academy and its research endeavours into more equitable and respectful dialogues with Indigenous knowledge traditions to generate new intercultural understandings for mutual benefit. Ethnomusicologists are often recognised by close Indigenous collaborators as adopted kin within traditional Indigenous legal systems, and Indigenous musicians are now offered academic visitor status and employment opportunities within universities with increasing regularity. In theorising these developments, Corn and his Yolŋu teacher, Joe Gumbula, described such collaborative research approaches as being inherently 'bi-intellectual' (2006: 190).

Accepting that Yolŋu leaders have been and still are equal, if not leading, partners in research that draws on their hereditary knowledge, rather than casting them as mere sources of data without the capacity to think and engage with others theoretically, is a necessary part of decolonizing and humanizing the academic project so ownership of research processes and outcomes can be shared by all contributors. (Corn and Gumbula 2006: 190–191)

Today, new ethnomusicological research with Indigenous musicians is typically co-designed to ensure that it meets local community needs and interests. Ethnomusicologists and Indigenous musicians often form mutually beneficial research teams that perform music together, deliver presentations together and publish outputs together that span both TROs and NTROs to meet both academic and community interests and priorities (Corn 2014; Corn and Gumbula 2006; Corn and Patrick 2014). This allows Indigenous researchers to be recognised in academic circles for their contributions to scholarship and ensures they are also able to ethically inform and vet any knowledge created about them and their communities.

In Australia, ethnomusicologists have also developed novel ways of capturing performative experiences in writing together with Indigenous Australians that acknowledge the ephemeral, contextual and culturally-specific nature of musical experiences. Corn's articles (2013a, 2019), for example, began as primarily performative pieces incorporating recorded and live musical co-performances by Yolŋu (Yolngu) musicians from northeast Arnhem Land.

Swijghuisen Reigersberg, in turn, documents her performative symposium workshop with the Indigenous Australian musician, Jessie Lloyd, who identifies both as a performer and researcher. Lloyd favours practice as research over authorship as a means to research, collect, learn, perform and disseminate Indigenous Australian secular mission songs. This re-inserts them into the current musical repertoire whilst high-lighting Indigenous diversity, mission histories and resilience through her poignant performances across the Australian continent and beyond (Swijghuisen Reigersberg and Lloyd 2019). While operating as an independent researcher, Lloyd has successfully captured and shared new knowledge about

hidden Indigenous Australian histories through music using a practice as research approach that challenges the need to complement her practice as research outputs with written ones.

Her performative approach is also far more effective at communicating Indigenous histories and knowledge to a wider, non-academic audience than written academic texts designed to inform more esoteric research enquiries. In many ways, practice as research is, therefore, more equitable. Its outputs can be delivered in ways that empower Indigenous performers such as Lloyd to tell and perform their stories on their own terms, using formats that are more accessible and readily understood by diverse audiences. Lloyd's work provides an excellent example of how the *status quo* might be challenged and her research and contributions have been recognised through awards such as the Australian Women in Music Award and research focussed fellowship support, including the State Library of Victoria Fellowship Award (2016) and the National Library of Australia Folk Fellowship Award (2017), which have allowed her to continue her enquiries in archives and Indigenous communities across Australia. Her innovative initiatives have produced valuable new insights from an Indigenous Australian perspective, adding to our stock of knowledge. Under current research assessment systems, however, these are valued less for having fewer written outputs. An adjustment of these uneven assessment practices would allow researchers such as Lloyd to participate on a more equal footing.

For Indigenous performers in Australia, song is typically understood to be a primary medium for new knowledge creation and its intergenerational dissemination. Ethnomusicologists in Australia have increasingly come to share this understanding through decades of productive collaborations with Indigenous colleagues and now commonly question the primacy of writing as the normalised medium of scholarly communication, and this is reflected in increased frequency of their publications of co-authored TROs and NTROs.<sup>9</sup> Here, we argue that in research assessment schemes overall there is an unhelpful emphasis on sole-authored texts and monographs which privileges the *lone genius* over collaborative co-created efforts (see also Swijghuisen Reigersberg 2019). In ethnomusicology and other practice as research disciplines, new knowledge is more often co-created than not. A shift away from valuing sole-authored outputs more highly than co-authored ones could move us towards more equitable and inclusive ways of assessing research outputs and widening more meaningful international research collaborations.

### ***Reflexivity, relativism and research assessment***

The influential Indigenous engagements in the Australian context highlight how ethnomusicology can contribute to improving the ethics of research assessment through its disciplinary relativism. Although ethnomusicologists and musicologists in the UK and Australia participate in similar research assessment schemes, ethnomusicology itself is materially and performatively different to studies in Western art music or musicology. This is due to ethnomusicology's formative concerns with diverse musical practices from around the world and lack of a defined core canon of musical repertoire. Since the 1950s, ethnomusicologists and folklorists have applied reflexive and relativist approaches to defining ways of studying and assessing the qualities of music across cultures. This relativism recognises that what is defined as music and considered to be *original* in music can vary in disparate communities of sonic practice. Similarly,

ethnomusicologists understand that originality and *music*, because they are defined variously across the globe, are also valued differently, both socially and in monetary terms. This ability to take a relativist reflexive stance, we suggest, is more equitable. It allows research assessment exercises to move beyond narrow, culturally-defined conceptual frameworks that feed into research assessment outcomes, and become more inclusive and responsive to research contributions by intellectuals, such as Indigenous knowledge holders in Australia, from outside the Western academy. This, in the longer term, could lead to academia being able to better address its structural inequities and develop sustainable mechanisms through which to interrogate the enduring exclusionary colonial practices of research and its assessment.

Scholars like Steven Feld (2013), for example, research the *epistemology of sound* and consider sound itself to be a medium of knowing and knowledge production. Consequently, it is difficult to determine what content in ethnomusicology might be regarded as canonical. In other strands of music research that focus on specific musical repertoires, the musical canon is more easily defined. In acousmatic or electronic music, for example, the canon spans from modernism to *musique concrète* and *Elektronische Musik*, and includes key figures such as Varèse, Schaeffer, Boulez and Stockhausen.

Due to its willingness to embrace a broader definition of what music might be, how it might be assessed, and on whose terms, the relativist ethnomusicological stance also challenges concepts of *originality* and *value* that are inherent in systemic evaluation practices for music research. Cook (2015: 23) describes this conundrum in UK REF assessments of compositional outputs, writing that REF panel experts reached their decisions on research quality and originality ‘on the basis of deeply internalised and generally shared experience’. Cook rightly acknowledges that this raises questions of transparency if internalised concepts of excellence are not carefully and reflexively examined. We suggest that ethnomusicologists have much to offer researchers and research assessors because of the relativism and reflexivity in engaging with widely different understandings of intellectual and aesthetic value across a multitude of cultures globally. We suggest, therefore, that ethnomusicologists take a more active stance in institutional and national discussions relevant to research assessment and value globally. Ethnomusicologists understand that music is highly situated and culturally relative. Bringing this mindset to discussions of research value and aesthetic value in research evaluation can be of great benefit to further refining research assessment processes and making them more inclusive and equitable.

This underscores the need for a wider definition of *practice* in research itself that moves beyond Western musical traditions of virtuosity and compositional originality to inform notions of musical and research value. Key challenges for ethnomusicologists engaged in standardised research assessment schemes such as the UK’s REF and Australia’s ERA are, therefore, to demonstrate how music traditions can have value beyond their original communities of practice and can be valued as research outputs that translate across wide cultural divides.

This means that practice as research, if it is to achieve its fullest potential for musicians and music researchers worldwide, must be constructed as an *ethnomusicology of translation* through which ethnomusicologists enable the translation of cultural values in performance for those beyond any given musical tradition or innovation. The methodological aspect of ethnomusicological practice as research can be understood both in terms of its translational power to explain value across cultures, and ability to

communicate the affective value of diverse traditions through multi-media practice as research portfolios and submissions (see McKerrell 2021).

Insofar as the UK's REF is concerned, assessing originality in Western art music is relatively uncomplicated, as this is done against an accepted musical canon and access to reference materials concerning its core repertoire and musicians. In many cases, an accepted chronological narrative about the development of a canon is also available. In the case of electro-acoustic music, for example, details about the various relations between technology and musical sound are easily obtained, and expert peer reviewers can be called upon to evaluate such musical works as research outputs with reference to their expert knowledge of previous creative works in that canon.

The process of assessing practice as research outputs in ethnomusicology is more difficult, however, as assessors may not be musical experts in the music cultures to be assessed. As Cook (2015: 23) observed, this is also a concern for composition in other genres of music, which have presented similar difficulties for expert reviewers:

We asked ourselves: isn't it a sign of excellence in commercial music that it is accepted by the marketplace? But doesn't it imply it can't be very original? But then how would any composition succeed without being accepted by its peer group and other gatekeepers? Was the point that it should be original but not too original? Or was the basic problem that the RAE<sup>10</sup> was built on an outmoded concept of originality understood as a creation *ex nihilo*? Maybe, but that fell outside the panel's remit. (Cook 2015: 23)

What Cook describes here is an ethnographic experience, where a research assessment panel tasked with evaluating the creation of new knowledge through research reflexively struggles to form an opinion on the merit of a research output based on its novelty and its peer acceptance. The panel seems to resolve the issue by deciding that it was not within their remit to question such matters.

It is in such cases where ethnomusicology might help. We suggest that our understanding as ethnomusicologists of what constitutes *originality*, and according to whom, is very much at the reflexive core of assessment practices and must be within an assessment panel's remit of discussion and assessment. Since peer review is fundamental to evaluating music research outputs and should always be approached reflexively, we argue that music research assessment should be approached from more relativist stance that embraces questions of originality and its value to ensure that they are adequately addressed in relation to the unique qualities of any music research output being assessed. Originality in musical performance and practice may therefore be located not simply in the performance of *new* works, but also in the novel, curated and arranged manner that older traditional music is performed, or in the significance of a traditional musical performance to the continuity, reclamation and/or extension of its source community or culture.

Consider, for example, performances of traditional songs representing endangered cultures and languages. This again stresses the need for a wider and more relativist view of what constitutes *originality*, *quality* and *merit* through musical practice as research for the purposes of research assessment. It also places a burden upon academics to ensure that signposting for the research value of a practice as research output clearly indicates how the criterion of originality can be assessed and understood within a wider research assessment exercise. The same argument also holds for research contributors

from outside the academy. A greater sense of explicit reflexivity on behalf of research evaluators and reflexive explanation in the communication of practice as research outputs could markedly expand inclusivity for a much greater diversity of intellectuals from outside Western academic traditions.

### **Practice as research and the assessment of cultured embodiment, universalism and translation**

Ethnomusicology's focus on studying music in and as culture has led to taxonomical, organological and anthropological objects of study that define music as an activity that one can know through performance and ethnography, either as a cultural insider or outsider. This positionality is critical to ethnomusicology, since it informs how ethnomusicologists represent musical knowledge to those beyond their community of study. It has also meant that at least some ethnomusicologists have tried to steer away from applying universalist statements and Western philosophy to contexts where this might not be culturally appropriate, such as in cases where cultures might have their own concepts and philosophies related to musical and intellectual value. Instead, we argue that ethnomusicology employs a process of what could be described as translation.

Some music researchers in the UK, who are not engaged with core ethnomusicological questions of how musical practices of different cultures can be understood, have adopted as their principal method and ideological perspective the European model of *artistic research*, as opposed to practice as research. *Artistic research* has emerged as a European movement that examines three domains of knowledge: 'the artistic, the embodied, and the discursive ... [and how they emerge from the] ... embodied processes of the creative work' (Östersjö 2017: 89). Practice-led research in other areas of music has focused on topics such as social dynamics or somatic-sonic nexus in performance, organological innovations in relation to performance, early music and its contemporary sound world, and topics particularly around the phenomenological position and experiences of performers. But as Henk Borgdorff notes in a wide-ranging examination of *artistic research*, '... the field is in a continuous state of flux and turmoil' (Borgdorff 2012: 7). The epistemological problems are not problems of a shared language or object of study, they circulate around the binary between professional practice and research, usually embodied in music's lack of materiality and the semantic ambiguity of performance.

*Artistic research* and its value are still controversial, as can be seen in the variety of responses to the twentieth anniversary of the Orpheus Institute and published in Jonathan Impett's edited volume that celebrated it (2017). Some contend that artistic knowledge and research knowledge are different but complementary domains, thus placing new knowledge beyond the reach of *artistic research* that does not involve textual communication. Esa Kirkkopelto (2017: 143) enticingly suggests that 'art is basic research in aesthetics'. This, ethnomusicologists would argue, inevitably means an act of translation, contextualising musical practices and explicating what might be unfamiliar practices to research assessors, even those from within the same culture. The act of translation itself can lead to new insights.

Other artistic researchers rely heavily on somatic or kinaesthetic knowledge as the basis for *artistic research* and stress the importance of a system of understanding such as Lacan's 'enigmatic language' (in de Assis 2017: 31) or Roland Barthes 'geno-song'



(Barthes [1972] 1977 trans. Heath: 188) to place that knowledge in a communicable frame. Ethnomusicologists, by contrast, argue that while the body may be a universal, cultured bodies are not. Cultured bodies are shaped by life experiences and physiological make-up, gender, sexual orientation and musical entrainment. To think of music as research, therefore, necessarily involves another act of translation, even in Western contexts. *Artistic research* needs to formulate how the somatic knowledge gained through musical practice shifts and alters our understanding of the world in space and time using cultured bodies as conduits.

We argue here, that it is debatable whether it is appropriate to apply hermeneutic Western philosophical models favoured by *artistic research* to analyses of music that is not Western in origin, when well-established local theoretical and philosophical models for interpretation are already available or musical practices are newer and more popular in style. If Western philosophical models are used, we suggest that, again, an act of interpretation and epistemological translation must occur. For ethnomusicologists to adopt *artistic research*, its discourse would need to address what other hermeneutical approaches might be employed to clarify the value of performance and related research. This, in turn, determines the nature and quality, both in terms of excellence and being, of the new knowledge created and therefore assessed through research assessment exercises. We also contend that different music cultures around the world demonstrate how Western modes of knowledge production and dissemination are not universal, necessitating more equitable and inclusive approaches to research assessment globally.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have shown how the discipline of ethnomusicology holds valuable epistemic insights for academics, as well as research policy and management professionals, in considering the opportunities and limitations of standardised measures for valuing and evaluating research. In doing so, we have examined two notable instances of standardised national research assessment frameworks: REF in the UK and ERA in Australia. We have identified the benefits of applying ethnomusicology's reflexive and relativist methodologies to formal research assessment processes and, through our diverse ethnomusicological research case studies, examined what can be lost to global knowledge when music and culture experts from outside the academy are excluded from participating fully in research knowledge production. We recognise practice as research as a more inclusive modality of original knowledge production that presents a more equitable way of engaging with diverse knowledge systems globally, and alternative ways of producing and disseminating knowledge beyond the dominance of text as an academic medium.

Through consideration of the REF and ERA frameworks, as well as relevant observations by other music researchers, we have explored how ethnomusicologists have articulated the value of music as a medium through which knowledge can be generated and transmitted and demonstrated how ethnomusicological approaches can inform more refined processes for valuing and evaluating non-textual research outputs. We have further shown how current research assessment practices in the UK and Australia still grapple with questions of how to assess the excellence of practice as research outputs, and how various models exist to describe what we have chosen to call practice as research

in this article. As established in Australia's ERA framework, we suggest that the path towards more equitable research assessment in the UK might be to require *all* future practice-based music submissions to include more substantial explanations of their research value to provide better contextual data for evaluation purposes. While requiring practice as research outputs to be supported by written statements for formal assessment purposes can be seen as a disempowering impost upon performative researchers, the opportunity to provide one nonetheless remains an effective way of communicating their value.

We have also demonstrated that the absence of a performative canon in ethnomusicology has allowed ethnomusicologists to question the concepts of *originality*, *quality* and *merit* using a relativist ethnographic approach that goes beyond the performative turn. We have shown how every contextualised act of embodied musical experience through performance may contribute to the creation of original knowledge, provided that this new knowledge is reflexively theorised and documented using ethnomusicology's ethnographic methods. This speaks to the reflexive and integrated ways that ethnomusicologists engage both conceptually and practically with diverse music cultures. We have argued that this reflexive ethnographic toolkit can help to better inform research assessment exercises and enable assessment panels to rethink the value of performative outputs as legitimate works of original knowledge creation.

We hope that this new approach can help researchers globally to transcend the enduring colonial dynamics of Anglophone knowledge hegemonies, such as in Australia, for example, where Indigenous performers from beyond the academy have long been engaged to share their epistemological insights as valued research collaborators and researchers in their own right. We hope that better recognition and integration of practice as research as a research modality into formal research assessment processes can further refine the ways the national research assessment frameworks value and evaluate the quality and merits of a greater diversity of research outputs and impacts.

## Notes

1. It is increasingly common for qualified researchers with award doctorates to be employed as research management professionals due to the dearth of stable academic employment opportunities for them in higher education. These include ethnomusicologists by training, who will be familiar with the arguments presented in the article and hold the potential to translate the issues we raise in valuable ways.
2. This article is an outcome of literary research that did not involve human participants. It adheres to the ethical principles adopted in the British Forum for Ethnomusicology 'Ethics Statement' (BFE 2016) <https://bfe.org.uk/bfe-ethics-statement> (accessed 6 March 2022).
3. There now exist ten major global university ranking systems, and more than 150 national and specialist ranking frameworks. Eighty-four percent of higher education institutions worldwide have also developed formal internal mechanisms designed to influence their standings in university rankings worldwide (Hazelkorn 2015; Wilsdon et al. 2015: 73–4).
4. Wilsdon et al. (2015) in *The Metric Tide* and its bibliography amassed a wealth of research-based literature from various disciplines suggesting that women, ethnic minorities, certain disciplines, non-English language outputs etc. all suffer in terms of citation counts, general visibility and perceived quality.
5. We use the word 'local' here to denote musical genres and practices that are found in context, in the United Kingdom, some of which include traditions that have also been labelled 'home' traditions or British folk and traditional music. These terms cover a broad spectrum of musical styles and genres, with connections across Europe and the

rest of the globe (Canada, the United States and Australia for example). Examples include sea shanties, jigs, reels, hornpipe playing and Morris dancing. Many of the contemporary musical formats have integrated elements of other musical styles that previously might have been considered ‘foreign’ or in other cases linked with past practices of the area that were revived (see also Ingalls, Swijghuisen Reigersberg and Sherinian 2018: 3 on processes of ‘localization’).

6. There has never been a category of ‘British folk music’ or ‘British traditional music’ for various complex historical reasons (cf. McKerrell 2016: 49).
7. The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) was the precursor of the Research Excellence Framework (REF).
8. <https://sfdora.org/about-dora/> (Accessed 23 February 2022)
9. There is a wealth of published collaborative research with Australian Indigenous musicians (cf. Barney 2014; Corn 2013a, 2013b, 2014, 2019; Ellis 1992; Gillespie, Treloyn and Niles 2017; Gumbula 2019; Langton 2019; Marika, Njurruwutthun and White 1989; Marett 2005; Marett and Barwick 2007; Nakata 2007; Patrick, Holmes and Box 2008; Swijghuisen Reigersberg 2010, 2011; Swijghuisen and Lloyd 2019; Yunupinju 1994).
10. Research Assessment Exercise, precursor of the Research Excellence Framework.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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