

## **Australian Universities Engagement and Impact Performance Evaluation to be Remodelled: How?**

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The Australian Government response to the Review of the Australian Research Council Act 2001 was released in August 2023 (1,2). The Minister for Education Jason Clare agreed with nine of the ten recommendation and agreed in principle with the tenth. The tenth recommendation related to the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) and Engagement and Impact (EI) exercises. The Government announcement stated that they *'will not continue ERA and EI in their current form'* whereas the review team led by Professor Margaret Sheil recommended that the exercises *'be discontinued'*. The Minister for Education has directed the Universities Accord Panel, led by Professor Mary O'Kane (3), to make by December 2023 recommendations on a new model for *'measuring impact and engagement in university research'* BUT seemingly not for assessing excellence.

The Terms of Reference (ToR) for the ARC Review focussed on the legislated role and purpose of the ARC, while the Australian Universities Accord ToR are broad, including *inter alia*, a direction for the panel to consider current and future skills needs for research and innovation. Hence, the reviews are focussed principally on advice to government and have not given in-depth consideration to the benefits to universities, industry bodies or other community stakeholders.

The ARC Review Panel (2) acknowledged that the four ERA rounds and the one EI exercise had played a valuable and important role in raising the quality and relevance of research in Australian universities but concluded that the ERA and EI initiatives had *'largely fulfilled their purpose of demonstrating and enhancing the excellence and impact of research undertaken in Australian universities.'* One would have expected that demonstrating excellence and impact in some form would have been an on-going necessity to justify future investments by multiple investors.

Key factors, drawn from submissions, that influenced the review panel's discontinuation decision included:

- The excessive administrative burden on staff in preparing submissions outweighed the benefits.
- The adverse impact of ERA and EI exercises in driving institutional comparisons and competition.
- The belief that the time and resources involved may be better re-directed to other evaluation needs.
- The exercises were retrospective rather than prospective.
- The definition of research quality for the various fields of research (FOR) and the somewhat arbitrary notion of a world standard for a FOR were deficient.

The ARC Review Panel stated that they did not recommend that ERA and EI be replaced by a metrics-based exercise because such metrics can be biased or inherently flawed in the absence of expert review and interpretation.

It was their judgement that the ARC had a rigorous, world-class evaluation capability that could be utilised in a variety of different ways to evaluate excellence, impact and research capability within Australian universities to the benefit of the whole of government and the national research enterprise. In particular, ARC resources devoted to the ERA and EI exercises could be more effectively deployed to guide current and future design of the National Competitive Grants Program (NCGP) and to identify future research priorities. This is a narrow view of the benefits, but consistent with the terms of reference.

In requesting that the Accord panel recommend a new model that panel noted that research performance evaluation was essential to demonstrate that investment in university research leads to strong outcomes for Australia. Opportunities exist to use new technology developments for data collection and performance assessment that are less labour-intensive. It was also acknowledged that some peer review and expert analyses will still be required to adequately evaluate Australia's research outcomes. This is an encouraging perspective.

In the past the ARC has been criticised for lack of transparency and for being rather secretive in how it has conducted the evaluations. In particular, the determination of fields of research 'world standard' metrics have not been available to universities. This should change with any new model.

The ERA EI Review Conducted in 2020-21 with Emeritus Professor Michael Brooks (4) as chair made some 22 recommendations that contain valuable content when considering a new model even though their advice to proceed with a 2023 ERA round or the 2024 EI round was not accepted by the Government of the day. In particular, the Accord panel would do well to acknowledge that the vision statement proposed by Michael Brooks and colleagues has considerable merit. Namely,

*'That rigorous and transparent research assessment informs and promotes Australian universities' pursuit of research that is excellent, engaged with community, industry and government, and delivers social, economic, environmental and cultural impact.'*

They also highlighted the central role of the ERA and EI in informing decisions by providing *'a rich and robust source of information on university research excellence and activity to inform and support the needs of university, industry, government and community stakeholders.'* What is important to recognise in any new model is that despite serious deficiencies the outcomes of the previous exercises were of considerable benefits to various communities as well as to the Australian government.

In my submission to the 2020 ERA EI Review (5), based upon several ERA studies since 2011, (6) a number of recommendations were made including:

*.....there is a strong case for the ERA and EI reporting to be merged into a single exercise with a frequency interval of five-year at a minimum. Accountability to government for the research investment being made is necessary, but more streamlined and less labour-intensive methodologies are available and should be implemented using the publicly available data bases and search engines with some refinements. Reducing the administrative burden on*

*universities leading to a reduction in reporting costs and staff time commitments should be a priority.*

It is to be hoped that the Accord panel will head such advice with any new model enabling the publication of as much research performance data as possible, preferably at the field of research level, that will underpin impact and engagement assessments. A credible Data Portal managed by the ARC is essential for transparency.

Benchmarking the performance of Australian researcher against their international peer is vital to justify the present R&D investment and to build the case for future investments to fund national priorities in a broad range of disciplines. World standards are dynamic and continuing to evolve. It is essential that they be identified and continuously reviewed to assess Australia's competitiveness across a range of research activities from basic to experimental development. Consideration of the benefits of performance outcome assessments to bodies beyond government should be integral to the design of any new model.

#### References

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5. Larkins, F. P. Response to ERA EI Review Consultation Paper 2020, October 2020, <https://franklarkins.files.wordpress.com/2020/10/fpl-era-submission-october-2020.pdf>
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September 2023