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EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH
AUSTRALIA (ERA) AND
ENGAGEMENT AND IMPACT
ASSESSMENT (EI) REVIEW
CONSULTATION PAPER 2020

ACADEMY OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES
IN AUSTRALIA RESPONSE TO:

AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH COUNCIL

Response to the Australian Research Council Excellence in Research Australia (ERA) and the Engagement and Impact Assessment (EI) Consultation Paper 2020

12 October 2020

The Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (the Academy) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Australian Research Council (ARC) *ERA EI Review Consultation Paper 2020* (the Consultation Paper). The Academy is an independent, not-for-profit organisation that actively promotes understanding of the social sciences and champions excellence across its many fields of learning.

The Academy recognises that the assessment of research outcomes is a valuable and essential feature of publicly funded research in Australia. Both ERA and EI are important in this regard, providing a transparent and comprehensive examination of Australian research quality, engagement, and impact.

With four rounds of ERA and the first round of EI now complete, the Academy welcomes the opportunity to reflect on whether the current objectives and methodologies of ERA and EI will meet the needs of stakeholders and Australia as a whole.

This submission responds to selected questions posed in the consultation paper with particular reference to key issues for the social sciences.

Australian research excellence relies on a strong research ecosystem

In order to realise the significant social and economic benefits that flow from university research, Australia requires a world-class research and innovation ecosystem which includes a diverse pipeline of highly skilled professionals and appropriate research infrastructure. In short, Australian research quality and impact cannot be considered in isolation from research funding and resourcing.

Australia's research capability has been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which is estimated to lead to a collective research funding shortfall of up to \$7.6 billion and the loss of up to 20,000 full-time equivalent positions including at least 6,100 research related roles by 2024.^{1,2} While the Academy welcomes the announcement of \$1 billion in extra research funding under the 2020-21 Budget, it falls short of addressing the current revenue and jobs crisis, which the Academy is concerned will detrimentally impact the future pipeline of highly-skilled researchers.

While this broader context is outside the scope of this review, the Academy suggests it will have implications for both the 2023-24 evaluation period and research excellence more generally going forward. The Academy therefore strongly encourages the ARC to carefully consider the timing of the next round of ERA and EI, and to be willing to make changes to this timing if necessary. If the current schedule does proceed, guidance³ will be required to assist universities

¹ Available: <https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/lh-martin-institute/fellow-voices/individual-university-research-funding-challenges>

² Available: <https://www.science.org.au/covid19/research-workforce>

³ See for example: 'Guidance on revisions to REF 2021' [here](#), and the 'Advice on contingency planning' [here](#).

take into account the effects of COVID-19 on ERA and EI submissions. This should be informed by further engagement with the university sector.

Recommendation 1: The Academy recommends that the ARC consider the implications of COVID-19 on the 2023-24 ERA and EI submission timing, and that if the 2023-24 data collection proceeds as planned, contextual guidance be issued to help universities account for the impact of COVID-19 and minimise further disruption.

The ERA and EI processes should be commensurate with the purpose of the evaluation and informed by a cost-benefit assessment

Reduce the cost: The Academy strongly supports the emphasis in the review on simplifying and streamlining administrative processes

Regarding Q5.5 – 9 of the Consultation Paper: Streamlining and simplifying ERA and EI

The Academy strongly supports the aim of the review to *simplify and streamline* ERA and EI whilst maintaining a robust and reliable process. Care needs to be taken to ensure that the administrative burden imposed on the research workforce and others is commensurate with the value of the information delivered about the quality and impact of university research.

This is consistent with the internationally recognised principle that the design of an evaluation framework should depend on the purpose of that evaluation, which may include a combination of advocacy, accountability, analysis and/or allocation of funding.⁴ While ERA was initially envisaged to influence funding allocation, the purpose for both ERA and EI has been refocused primarily on accountability and ranking, as noted in the Consultation Paper:

“While the first three rounds were tied to funding, ERA and EI have been primarily reputational, not financial, drivers of University behaviors” (p.6).

Feedback from Academy Fellows and individual universities⁵ highlights a belief that the reporting burden and financial cost of ERA and EI are high relative to the benefits of the exercise, particularly when it is not used to determine funding allocations as initially envisaged.

Since ERA commenced, Australian universities now also participate in numerous other comparative exercises across institutions,⁶ scholars and disciplines. Internationally the research quality assessment conversation is also continuing to evolve, with lessons learnt and new quality measures emerging which will likely present improvement opportunities for Australia.⁷

Recommendation 2: The Academy recommends that the ARC seek to identify any areas of duplication between ERA and EI and other assessments in which universities engage to support further simplification and streamlining.

⁴ Guthrie, Susan, Watu Wamae, Stephanie Diepeveen, Steven Wooding, and Jonathan Grant, *Measuring research: A guide to research evaluation frameworks and tools*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013. Available: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1217.html>.

⁵ See *Australian Government Funding Arrangements for non-NHMRC Research, Final Report*, 2018 (p.61).

⁶ For example, the annual [QS World University Rankings](#)

⁷ For example, [RQ+](#)

While the Academy notes that the costs associated with ERA and EI are variable year on year the Academy suggests that a cost-benefit assessment of the current process would also be valuable to inform decisions on any amendments proposed during this review. This should include balancing the value of automation and centralised control with the costs of lost nuance and expert input.

Recommendation 3: The Academy recommends the review of ERA and EI should be expanded to include an assessment of the costs of the administrative process both inside government and inside research institutions and their overall benefit to universities and the public. The effect of any reforms on such costs should also be part of the decision process for any revision of requirements.

Recommendation 4: The Academy recommends the House of Representatives Review of Australian Government Funding Arrangements for non-NHMRC Research (2018) proposal to extend the timing of the data collection out to five years, be implemented.

Increase the benefit: The Academy supports better strategic use of ERA and EI data including promotion of research outcomes

Regarding Q4.6 of the Consultation Paper: How else could EI outcomes be used?

While the 2018 EI highly rated case studies and engagement narratives were promoted at the discretion of individual institutions, they were not celebrated or publicised broadly by the ARC beyond release on the ARC Data Portal. The Academy suggests this was a missed opportunity and much more can be done to showcase and promote research impact.

The stories of how different research areas engage with users and deliver impact is useful information for new academics and industry and community partners. There is considerable value to Australia as a whole in promoting these narratives and case studies. Furthermore, it is important for those involved in any assessment exercise to see tangible outcomes from the considerable investment the community makes towards public research.

If the intention of assessing excellence, engagement and impact is to make university research achievements more visible across a range of audiences, then ERA and EI should be underpinned by a comprehensive ARC communication strategy of the outcomes.⁸ The Academy would welcome access to this information in its own work demonstrating the impact and value of the social sciences.

Recommendation 5: The Academy recommends ARC publish as much of the non-confidential EI material as possible to showcase the quality of Australian research

Recommendation 6: The Academy recommends that the ARC better promotes ERA and EI outcomes, equally across the knowledge disciplines, in a way that is engaging to a broad range of audiences.

⁸ For example the Universities Australia [Keep It Clever](#) campaign

Critical issues for the social sciences

The social sciences are a broad range of disciplines linked by a common objective of understanding human behaviour and our social institutions. Social sciences in the ERA analysis are well represented between the Education and Human Society (EHS) and Economics and Commerce (EC) discipline clusters along with selected Fields of Research (FoR) within Humanities and Creative Arts (HCA), Health (MHS) and Mathematics (MIC). This leads to considerable variation of outcomes for the social sciences, however there are some broadly consistent themes outlined in the following sections.

The Academy does not believe ERA captures excellence in a consistent way across all disciplines

Regarding Q3.1(c): of the Consultation Paper: To what extent is ERA meeting its objectives to identify excellence across the full spectrum of research performance?

ERA is divided into citation analysis FoR, and peer review FoR. The latter is used predominantly for the social sciences (covering approximately 90% of all four-digit FoR in the social science disciplines). Exceptions include Psychology and Cognitive Sciences (17), statistics (0104) and public health and health services (1117), which are citation-based.

Analysis by Professor Marnie Hughes-Warrington shows that while overall research performance has progressively improved in Australia since 2010, this result masks significant differences between disciplines assessed via peer review or citation methodologies. Over eight years since 2010, the proportion of ERA “5s” in citation fields grew from 17.5 per cent to 41.5 per cent, while the proportion of ERA “5s” in peer review fields grew initially between 2010 and 2012 but has remained stable under 9 per cent since then.⁹ Similarly, Frank Larkins noted that while early ERA exercises in 2010 and 2012 assisted universities to remodel their research programs, by 2018 serious anomalies in the methodology had become apparent.¹⁰

This discrepancy in both absolute performance and change over time between methodologies raises important questions about the integrity of the assessment process and warrants further investigation. This is particularly critical as ERA outcomes and data may *inform a range of policy advice and initiatives across various Government portfolios (p.9)* and holds potential for adverse resource allocation or decision-making consequences which are made on the basis of ERA measures.

Recommendation 7: The Academy recommends that the ARC either undertake or commission research into the methodology discrepancies and ensure the differences in absolute performance is contextualised in any policy advice.

⁹ See: [Marnie Hughes-Warrington on why we don't need two ERAs](#) (Campus Morning Mail, September 2020)

¹⁰ Larkins, Frank. [Anomalies in the Research Excellence ERA Performances of Australian Universities](#), 2018.

The Academy does not believe ERA adequately encourages interdisciplinarity collaboration or emerging research areas

Regarding **Q3.1(d)** and **Q3.31** of the Consultation Paper:

- To what extent is ERA meeting its objectives to identify emerging research areas and opportunities for further development?
- To what extent do you agree/disagree that ERA adequately captures and evaluates interdisciplinary research?

The importance of interdisciplinary research has been brought into sharp focus through COVID-19. What motivates people to wear masks? What are the effects of social isolation? Which pedagogies best optimise remote learning? And what economic measures will most effectively support our national recovery?

Such questions all rely on a range of social science expertise that has worked hand-in-hand with the health and medical sciences in advising governments across Australia and in many other countries around the world. Most global challenges are by their very nature complex and tackling them requires insights from across the entire research base.¹¹

It has also long been a concern expressed by government and business that specialised results on a disciplinary basis are not sufficiently integrated into holistic knowledge needed for decision-making.

However, ERA is a discipline-based evaluation where *interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research is disaggregated and evaluated in its individual discipline components* (p.17) and this raises questions regarding the assessment process and the weighting or incentives given to interdisciplinarity. As emphasised in the *ARC Statement of Support for Interdisciplinary Research Version 1.1* ERA and EI accommodate interdisciplinary research. However, the Academy recommends that this accommodation extend further to actively encourage greater collaboration between disciplines. Indicators change the system through the incentives they establish and recognising the value of applied, interdisciplinary, and emerging research in meaningful ways is central to the current national debate around technology and innovation and should be encouraged. The UK Research Excellence Framework is suggested as a useful model for consideration in such an approach.¹²

Recommendation 8: The Academy recommends the review investigate options to use ERA and EI to actively encourage and reward interdisciplinary research; particularly in areas of identified national priority.

¹¹ Leiden Statement: The role of the social sciences and humanities in the global research landscape. (November 2014). Announced by AAU, AEARU, LERU, Go8, RU11, Russell Group and the U15 Canada. Available : http://www.leru.org/files/publications/LEIDEN_Statement.pdf

¹² Available: <https://www.ref.ac.uk/about/interdisciplinary-research/>

Impact of disciplinary scale on evaluation outcomes

The Academy is also concerned about the equivalence in evaluation across universities of discipline areas that in some cases are of significantly different scale. A discipline area within a university that just meets the publication output threshold of 50 apportioned outputs across the reference period for example may be vastly different in nature and in their contribution to Australia's overall research strength and success than the same discipline area in another institution that achieves 1,500 outputs in the same period.

Recommendation 9: The Academy recommends that the ARC consider the intersection of quality and scale and either differentiate areas of scale from areas of emerging or modest strength and rate them separately.

Impact on Australian social science journals

Several Australian-based social science journals ceased operation after the ERA and associated journal ranking mechanisms were introduced in 2010, which discouraged researchers from submitting papers to Australian-based journals. The incentives were clear and there was a view that articles published in Australian journals would be rated poorly under the ERA peer review. While the rankings were formally abolished and the peer review handbook specifically instructs peer reviewers to avoid referring to journal rankings, the Academy is concerned this perception remains. The Academy is aware of anecdotal evidence that some discipline leaders advocate that academics undertake research on US issues using US data in order to get published in US journals. This is to the detriment of valuable policy discussions in Australia. To counter this, a premium should be placed on research outputs dealing with Australian issues or using Australian evidence.

Recommendation 10: The Academy recommends at least 20% of HASS disciplines research outputs submitted for ERA purposes relate to Australian issues or use Australian evidence.

The Academy and its Fellows would welcome the opportunity to discuss any of the matters raised in this submission. Please contact Andi Horsburgh, Policy Manager on 0466 123 178, or andrea.horsburgh@socialsciences.org.au .