

REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES NETWORK (RUN) SUBMISSION

Assessing the wider benefits arising from university-based research: Discussion paper response template

1. Introduction

Please provide any comments you have in relation to the issues raised in Part 1 of the paper, addressing if possible the following questions raised in Section 1.5:

- How might the above definitions be improved or supplemented?
- Are these definitions sufficient to describe the relationship between research, research engagement and benefits?

(Please limit responses to one page)

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) is supportive of assessing research impact as defined by the Australian Research Council (ARC) as “a demonstrable contribution that research makes to the economy, society, culture, national security, public policy or services, health, the environment, or quality of life, beyond contributions to academia in the Australian research excellence framework”.

The definition of benefits in the discussion paper (“positive economic, social and environmental changes that can be attributed to university research”) should clarify in more detail what is meant by “positive” changes. Any definition of “good” or “positive” is relative to the time of enquiry, and commonly also set in a cultural or geographical context e.g. adoption of certain financial economics research before 2007 would have been perceived as effecting a “positive” change; then the Global Financial Crisis came and facilitated a different interpretation of some of the research. It might be better simply to refer to benefits rather than “positive changes”.

2. Aims, outcomes and principles

Please provide any comments you have in relation to the issues raised in Part 2 of the paper, addressing if possible the following questions raised in Sections 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3:

- Are there alternative or additional aims that should be included?
- Are there additional purposes or uses that should be considered to assist the design of the assessment?
- What are your views on the draft principles? What other principles or considerations should be addressed?

(Please limit responses to two pages)

RUN agrees with the reasons provided in the report as to why research benefits need to be measured. We suggest that cultural change should also be included. Impact assessment should stimulate and increase the current low level of engagement and collaboration between universities and industry.

We support the draft principles described in the paper.

3. Methodological considerations

Please provide any comments you have in relation to the issues raised in Part 3 of the paper, addressing if possible the following questions on research engagement metrics, research benefit case studies, and use of collected information.

Research engagement metrics

- What considerations should guide the inclusion of metrics within the assessment?
- What are the lead indicators for research benefits?
- What information do universities currently collect that might form the basis for research engagement metrics?
- What metrics are currently available (or could be developed) that would help to reveal other pathways to research benefit?
- Noting that the Higher Education Staff Data collection is currently being reviewed, are there any research engagement metrics related to university staff that should be considered for inclusion?
- In addition to ERA, NSRC, GDS, AusPat and HERDC data, are there other existing data collections that may be of relevance?
- What are the challenges of using these data collections to assess research engagement?
- What is your preferred unit of evaluation for research engagement and why?
- What are the issues related to using FoR codes?
- Is there a need to use four- or six- digit FoR codes or will the two-digit code suffice?
- What are the opportunities and costs of breaking down analysis to the more detailed level?
- Given an interest in “outcomes”, would it be better to use the ABS’s Socio-Economic Objectives for research (SEO) codes? Why/why not?

Box 1 – Approach to metrics

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the model?

Research benefit case studies

- What considerations should guide the inclusion of research benefit case studies within the assessment?
- How should the number of case studies provided by each university be determined?
- Are there any issues with institutions being able to submit joint case studies? If so, what are they?
- What information should be included within a case study?
- How should a case study be assessed? Should it be scored or rated in some way?
- Are reach and significance useful concepts for an assessment of the benefits arising from university-based research?
- What would make useful criteria for assessing the benefit of university research?

- Are there data/evidence collection standards that you consider best practice within the university research context?
- Is there data regularly collected by universities that could be employed to provide a picture of research benefits? If so, how is this information captured and validated?
- Should timeframes be used to limit what is reported on through case studies? If so, what timeframe(s) should be used?
- What is your preferred unit of evaluation for the assessment of research benefits and why?

Box 2 – Approach to case studies

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the model?

Use of collected information

- How might case studies and metrics be combined within the assessment?
- Should outputs of the assessment be included within compacts and/or the research block grants calculation methodology?
- What other existing instruments might they be integrated within?

(No limit to response length)

RUN considers that a combined approach to assessing research impact incorporating both case studies and metrics will provide breadth and flexibility of options for assessment across all research disciplines, and enable a multi-disciplinary approach.

We appreciate that the inclusion of quantitative measures of research impact such as patents, licences, breeders rights, number of start-up companies etc. are useful in gauging impact of research (preferably with other metrics), but we are strongly of the view that the utilisation of case studies, as performed in the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) as well as proposed by the ATN/Go8 Excellence in Innovation for Australia (EIA) trial, are equally important in assessing the impact of research. Hence, we support a combination of qualitative and quantitative measures, a standard methodology of data analysis in the social sciences, in the evaluation of research impact.

FoR codes, even at two-digit or four-digit level, compartmentalise research in traditional discipline groupings. This works reasonably well for tracking fundamental, discipline-based research. However, complex systems research, research that addressed major societal challenges, is thematic, highly collaborative and of a multi-disciplinary nature. Traditional FoR groupings have inherent blind spots and do not fully identify inter-disciplinary research of national importance; for example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies are being split across 15 six-digit FoR codes. Socio-Economic Objective (SEO) classifications may prove more robust for impact assessment as proposed in the discussion paper.

The discussion paper presents a linear model of research uptake, or pathways to research uptake; this concept will not always hold. Not all impact is direct, linear or immediate.

RUN recently commissioned a study “Regional Universities Network: Engaging with regions, building a stronger nation”, published on our website in late June 2013

(http://www.run.edu.au/cb_pages/news/RUN_regional_impact_study.php), which highlights the universities’ broad social, cultural, environmental and economic contribution to the regions using a case study approach. Some of the case studies are relevant to research impact, and may also provide a basis for consideration of relevant metrics.

Case Studies

RUN supports the concept of using case studies, but the potential costs associated with compiling these are an issue for RUN universities. Each institution should determine its best fit to the smallest number of case studies required, as appropriate to institutional size and focus. Consideration could be given to joint submissions (e.g. across RUN universities) and around particular themes, which may provide efficiencies and better demonstrate diversity (i.e. focus on regional issues, and impact on regional communities).

We support having representatives of the entire cross-section of end-users involved in case study assessment, including regional and remote end users.

RUN has strong partnerships with end user organizations (e.g. corporations, CRCs, State Government Departments, Local Government etc.) and the latter have a high level of accountability around contributions that research makes to the economy, society, culture, national security, public policy or services, health, the environment, or quality of life, beyond contributions to academia. Accordingly, these partners have many excellent case studies involving research they have supported through the RUN universities or undertaken through jointly appointed staff with RUN. RUN expects to utilise this useful information as part of its qualitative (and quantitative) measures within the Australian assessment to measure innovation and research impact.

Metrics

It will be important to identify a set of metrics that can be used across the full research spectrum - this will require careful consideration so that they are “fit for purpose”.

Universities prepare and collect a range of qualitative information in relation to research engagement and pathways to impact as well as standard research engagement metrics. Such information is embedded in progress and final reports in relation to publicly funded research projects and large programmes (e.g. CRCs), forms part of industry reports, and other types of reports to government, and is embedded in the compelling cases made in successful academic promotion applications as part of respective research portfolios. While such qualitative data were submitted for different purposes and audiences, there may be value in considering qualitative 'data-mining' methodologies and tools to e.g. count listed frequencies of end-user engagement, research impact projections etc. This may lead to a better understanding (and definition of) the key attributes of successful pathways to research impact.

Other suggestions for suitable metrics include measures such as the value of research to the local economy, spinning out of small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs) into the local economy, number of projects of high societal value involving non-Government organizations (NGOs) etc. We also support the use of graduate outcomes data as proposed in the discussion paper.

We advocate identifying a large range of potential impact indicators from which proponents can hand pick a set that are relevant to their case study.

4. Next steps in the consultation process

Please provide any comments you have in relation to the issues raised in Part 4 of the paper, including on the proposed pilot exercise.

(Please limit responses to one page)

RUN works within, and engages with, a unique demographic in the university sector (i.e. regional Australia), a demographic that that will also have unique issues, opportunities and challenges when assessing the benefits of research. We support a pilot program in 2014 with RUN representation in the pilot (both the working group and assessment exercise) so that the eventual model works for the entire sector (regional as well as metropolitan universities).

We suggest that only a couple of discipline clusters are used in the pilot rather than trying to cover all, and that clustering of impact outcomes might be more manageable and representative if based on SEO rather than FOR classifications.

We suggest the following contacts who could liaise with the department on the further development of a model for impact assessment:

- Mark Hochman (who is currently contracting to CQUniversity):
mbm.hochman@gmail.com
Mobile 0408 843 325
- Wendy Scott
Manager, Analysis and Data Management
Southern Cross University
T: 02-6626-9371; wendy.scott@scu.edu.au

We also agree that every opportunity should be taken to learn from the UK's REF exercise and the ATN-Go8 EIA trial when implementing the assessment of research impact in Australia.

5. Other comments

Please provide any other comments you have in relation to the discussion paper.

(No limit to response length)

Submitted by Dr Caroline Perkins, Executive Director, RUN, on behalf of the RUN DVC/PVC Research Group.