



Submission by the Regional Universities Network on the Engagement and Impact Assessment Consultation Paper

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation paper on engagement and impact assessment.

RUN has experienced remarkable growth in the excellence of the research conducted by our members. Compared to Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) 2012, ERA 2015 shows about a three-fold increase in disciplines rated well above world standard, a more than a six-fold increase in disciplines rated at above world standard, and a one-and-a-half-times increase in fields rated as at world standard.

RUN supports the Government's objectives of developing a national engagement and impact assessment framework which will examine how universities are translating research into economic, social and other benefits, and provide incentives for greater collaboration between universities and the end users of research.

RUN acknowledges that there are significant time lags between research and impact which will tend to favour older institutions which can draw on many decades of public investment in research. Given the Government's objectives of improving collaboration, and of maximising the benefits and value of Australia's investment in research, it is critical that the new framework not only recognises past performance but that it encourages and rewards behaviours that will improve future engagement and impact.

RUN urges caution in developing the new assessment framework as it will be a strong driver of future research behaviour. Careful modelling is necessary and any concerns identified as a result of the 2017 pilot should be addressed in the final version of the assessment framework that will be implemented in 2018.

Definitions and scope

1. What definition of 'engagement' should be used for the purpose of assessment?

RUN supports the definition of engagement developed by ATSE and cited in the *Engagement and Impact Assessment Consultation paper*, i.e.

“the interaction between researchers and research organisations and their larger communities/industries for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge, understanding and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity”.¹²

¹ ATSE research engagement for Australia report, page 7

Engagement is to be encouraged irrespective of whether funds are involved.

2. What definition of 'impact' should be used for the purpose of assessment?

RUN supports the definition of impact developed by the ARC and other research agencies in the ARC Research impact principles and framework, and cited in the *Engagement and Impact Assessment Consultation paper*, i.e.

“Research impact is the 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”.³⁴

3. How should the scope of the assessment be defined?

RUN supports an approach that encompasses the activities of university staff (researchers, teachers and general staff) and HDR students. The assessment may also encompass specific activities of coursework students at the postgraduate and undergraduate levels where the university is able to demonstrate that their activities incorporate a significant research engagement or impact dimension. Relevant examples could include programs developed in conjunction with industry (broadly defined), industry placements, the destination of graduates, etc, provided these activities or outcomes are aligned with research.

4. Would a selective approach using case studies or exemplars to assess impact provide benefits and incentives to universities?

RUN supports an approach whereby the university provides context statements or narratives (aggregated by ARC discipline cluster, or two digit ANZRC Field of Research (FoR) or Socio-Economic Objective (SEO) code - see response to question 9 below), detailing the mechanisms, processes and culture it has in place to deliver research impact. The narratives would be supplemented by a small number of recent case studies, drawn from different disciplines, which demonstrate how the framework operates in practice and research is translated into innovation.

5. If case studies or exemplars are used, should they focus on the outcomes of research or the steps taken by the institution to facilitate the outcomes?

All case studies or exemplars should focus on 'the steps taken by the institution to facilitate the outcomes' of research and in the majority of cases, a focus on the overall outcomes would also be appropriate. However, where a case study has generated limited outcomes - either because the underlying research is very recent or because of circumstances beyond the university's control - the university's performance rating should not be penalised.

6. What data is available to universities that could contribute to the engagement and impact assessment?

i. Should the destination of Higher Degree Research students be included in the scope of the assessment?

Yes, provided that this information can be obtained.

ii. Should other types of students be included or excluded from the scope of assessment (e.g. professional Masters level programmes, undergraduate students)?

² ARC/Dept of Education and Training, 2016, *Engagement and Impact Assessment Consultation Paper*, page 7

³ ARC research impact principles and framework <http://www.arc.gov.au/research-impact-principles-and-framework>

⁴ ARC/Dept of Education and Training, 2016, *Engagement and Impact Assessment Consultation Paper*, page 7

Other types of students may be included if the university can demonstrate that their activities reveal real research engagement or impact. Any metrics involving these students should be reported upon separately from those involving HDR students.

Key Issues

7. What are the key challenges for assessing engagement and impact and how can these be addressed?

A range of challenges is identified on page nine of the paper. In addition to these, it is necessary to assess on a subjective rather than quantitative basis. As such, measures used for assessment need to be robust and understandable.

8. Is it worthwhile to seek to attribute specific impacts to specific research and, if so, how should impact be attributed (especially in regard to a possible methodology that uses case studies or exemplars)?

As with the UK's Research Excellence Framework, impact case studies should be accompanied by supporting evidence and be peer reviewed.

9. To what level of granularity and classification (e.g. ANZSRC Fields of Research) should measures be aggregated?

Possible measures should be highly aggregated and could be based on the ARC's discipline clusters, two digit ANZSRC FoR codes or SEO codes. In selecting the preferred approach, the advantages and disadvantages of each should be taken into account. The highest level of aggregation (the ARC's eight discipline clusters) could help to minimise the effort required by universities to develop their responses, better support cross-disciplinary and multidisciplinary research and also align with the ARC's existing administrative arrangements. Alignment with two digit FoR codes would enable direct comparison with the ARC's ERA outcomes and also align with the ARC's administrative arrangements. Alternatively, it could be argued that alignment with SEO codes would be more appropriate for a mechanism which is intended to foster collaboration with end users and improve the translation of research.

10. What timeframes should be considered for the engagement activities under assessment?

As a general principle, the reference period should align with ERA requirements where appropriate. Most engagement metrics should align with the reference period for research income, applied measures and esteem measures, i.e. for the 2018 ERA assessment, this will mean the period 1 January 2014 - 31 December 2016.

The staff census date should also align with ERA, i.e. 31 March 2017 for the 2018 assessment.

11. What timeframes should be considered for the impact activities under assessment?

The primary focus of the impacts section should be on the framework and processes to enhance the translation of research to impact. Case studies are a secondary consideration and demonstrate how these arrangements work in practice. In order to ensure that a clear link is established between the research and its impact, minimise problems of attribution, and ensure the overall relevance of case studies to the university's current circumstances, RUN considers that case studies should be restricted to research conducted within the past six years or so.

12. How can the assessment balance the need to minimise reporting burden with robust requirements for data collection and verification?

To minimise the reporting and verification burden, RUN considers that the number of case studies submitted by each university should be capped, probably in the order of 4-6 in total.

Likewise, in determining which metrics to include, consideration must be given to the workload associated with collecting and verifying the data.

13. What approaches or measures can be used to manage the disciplinary differences in research engagement and impact?

Disciplinary differences may be managed by:

- Adopting broadly based definitions of research engagement and impact that recognise the full range of benefits that research can deliver;
- Incorporating a narrative-based approach so that disciplinary differences can be explained;
- Allowing some flexibility with respect to timeframes for case studies to accommodate any disciplinary differences;
- Incorporating peer review in the assessment process;
- Adopting metrics that have been moderated by discipline;
- Ensuring that a range of disciplines is included in the pilot program in 2017 and adjusting the framework for 2018 as necessary.

14. What measures or approaches to evaluation used for the assessment can appropriately account for interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary engagement and impacts?

Some of the approaches outlined in response to question 13 would also help account for interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary engagement and impact, as would moderating performance by SEO code or ARC discipline cluster rather than FoR.

Types of engagement and impact indicators

15. What types of engagement indicators should be used?

As noted, it will be important to moderate for engagement measures for scale and discipline and to model their potential impact to minimise the risk of adverse outcomes. Industry is broadly defined to encompass small-medium enterprises (SMEs), big business, the professions, the not-for-profit sector, local and state governments and community organisations. Possible measures that could be considered include:

- Industry sourced research income, including RDC, ACIAR and partner sourced CRC income, as a share of total research income;
- The percentage of research active staff who are engaging with industry;
- Consultancy and contract income as a share of total research income;
- Activities such as repeat business with industry, partnership agreements, heads of agreement, conjoint appointments, and extension work, engagement with SMEs, citizen science or public communication of science activities, moderated by the number of full time equivalent staff;
- The proportion of HDR students (and coursework PG and UG students if appropriate) who engage with industry by addressing industry problems, by participating in internships or placements, or who are in receipt of industry scholarships;
- The destination of HDR students (and of coursework PG and UG students if appropriate).

Consideration could be given to including a set of core engagement metrics to be reported upon by all universities and allowing individual universities to report on a small number of additional metrics of their own choice.

16. What types of impact indicators should be used?

Assessment should be undertaken by peer review of the narrative submitted by the institution. Assessors should consider the quality and capacity of the institution's approach to transferring and translating knowledge into impact. Institutions need to demonstrate that they have the policies, procedures and culture in place to drive the translation.

Other

17. Are there any additional comments you wish to make?

This engagement and impact assessment will drive behaviours. In selecting the measures, we must be mindful of the need to drive universities to want to work with SMEs, including the regional SMEs which are critical to the prosperity and sustainability of regional Australia.