


Union of scholarship and industry brings mutual benefits

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Business schools around the world are being challenged to demonstrate the value of their research to industry, government and the not-for-profit sectors.

The education programs and the vast alumni networks of business schools have genuine reach deep into society, but the enduring impact of business research is often less obvious.

The size of business schools, which graduate one-third of domestic tertiary students and more than half of the higher-fee-paying international tertiary students in Australia, means they are typically regarded as cash cows that subsidise research in other parts of universities.

But many business schools in Australia rightly continue to push back against this narrative and promote business research performance as equal to teaching excellence.

In the inaugural engagement and impact assessment ratings released last month by the Australian Research Council, business schools performed strongly in the key research areas of commerce, management, tourism and services.

The EIA rated the overwhelming majority of institutional submissions in these areas as having “effective or highly effective” levels of engagement with research end-users and research impact - beyond academe.

However, a survey last year of the Australian Business Deans Council’s research network members found that the detailed reporting demands of the EIA exercise posed a significant challenge to academic and professional staff workloads.

In our online survey, members of the Business Academic Directors' Research Network noted that the detailed data and longitudinal analysis requested for the EIA came hot on the heels of university submissions for the Excellence in Research Australia exercise, which rated the quality of each field of research across Australian universities.

The survey analysis concluded that among respondents there was a perceived "lack of clarity from the government and, in some cases, their own university on how to complete the EIA assessment while meeting specifications on detailed items like word counts, reference periods and what was permitted as evidence of impact".

While British researchers no doubt would envy Australian universities having to submit only one qualitative statement for engagement and one case study for impact in each of 22 disciplines, our survey respondents found the small number of case studies permitted in the EIA limited their ability to showcase the breadth and depth of research in business.

Governments and some universities argued that EIA was analogous to Britain's Research Excellence Framework but the piecemeal and vague nature of the EIA undermined the claim that it was a truly comprehensive research engagement and impact exercise.

The EIA also provided limited scope to evaluate the engagement and impact that takes place through interdisciplinary research, which is ironic given the widespread consensus that many of the social, economic, and environmental challenges we confront can be addressed comprehensively only through interdisciplinary research teams.

Federal opposition innovation, industry, science and research spokesman Kim Carr has questioned the value of the EIA, in particular the time and money spent on it as well as the utility of the outcomes, and has foreshadowed a review if the ALP is elected at the May 18 federal election.

While the EIA has set a generic framework of expectations, the ABDC survey highlighted several of the senator's concerns where it surfaced flaws that needed to be addressed, including the unanticipated transaction and compliance costs for institutions (aside from the ARC-related base costs). Still, for business schools, an important side payment of the EIA has been the promotion of deeper thinking on the wider impact of research beyond universities.

Most business schools continue to prioritise fundamental academic measures of excellence such as publishing in highly ranked scholarly journals, winning competitive grant income from national and international funding bodies, and graduating PhD students.

But there is a rapidly growing realisation that research by business schools also needs to incorporate a greater emphasis on demand-driven projects in collaboration with partners outside universities.

Paradoxically for an area of universities that is traditionally associated with applied expertise, business schools sometimes have been slow off the mark in realising research collaboration opportunities with industry stakeholders.

The trick is ensuring that business academics avoid the trap of feeling they should strive to be glorified consultants. Academic research brings a degree of rigour and independence that is unrivalled in the marketplace, and how we interact with industry must be on that basis.

Studies of high-performing academic units around the world underscore their capacity to produce research that is in high demand from industry and has major scholarly impact. From this perspective, a case could well be made to merge elements of the scholarship-focused ERA assessment with the more applied EIA exercise, rather than keeping them separate as is the case now.

Ultimately, it's not a choice between attaining academic excellence and achieving impact among end users — it's about achieving both.

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