Business Researchers: Have You Helped Society Lately?

AUSTRALIA RECENTLY ADOPTED A NEW METHOD TO ASSESS THE IMPACT AND ENGAGEMENT OF ACADEMIC RESEARCHERS. THIS CHANGE HAS FORCED THE NATION'S UNIVERSITIES TO RETHINK THE WAYS THEY INCENTIVIZE THEIR FACULTY'S SCHOLARSHIP.

DAVID GRANT AND ANDREW O'NEIL • JULY 01, 2019

IMAGE FROM ISTOCK

In Australia, the overwhelming majority of research is publicly funded, but with the government research dollar shrinking, verifying the return on investment in research has increasingly become the name of the game. "What has university research contributed to society lately?" has become the question that vexes both government funding agencies and university chancelleries alike.

As a consequence, it has never been more important for universities to demonstrate to Australian taxpayers the value proposition of their research. Researchers now must not only break new scholarly ground in their respective disciplines, but also show how and why their projects benefit nonacademic stakeholders in industry, government, and the not-for-profit sector.

For academics in the U.K., the notion of demonstrating research engagement and impact beyond the ivory tower is nothing novel. Since the mid-1980s, various incarnations of the U.K.'s Research Excellence Framework (REF) have strengthened universities' focus on measuring the social impact of academic research. The REF has stoked fierce debate about the role of academic research, but one of its undeniable outcomes has been that universities must evaluate more closely whether the research they support has social value.

Australia, however, is still coming to grips with lessons learned from its first experience with a formal engagement and impact exercise called the Engagement and Impact Assessment (https://www.arc.gov.au/engagement-and-impact-assessment) (EIA). Here, we provide some background on those lessons, describe the environment for academic researchers in Australia, and explore the implications of the country's renewed focus on the social impact of research.

RESEARCH DOWN UNDER

As the single largest funder of research in Australia, the government is ramping up expectations that federally funded research yield practical benefits for society and the economy. This expectation became especially clear last year, when was revealed that Simon Birmingham, Australia's former education minister, had vetoed 11 grant projects in 2017 and 2018. All from the humanities, these projects had previously been approved by the Australian Research Council (ARC), the country's peak research funding body.

When questioned, Birmingham defended (https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/former-education-minister-vetoed-4-2-million-in-recommended-university-research-grants-20181026-p50c3a.html) his previous actions by saying, "I make no apologies for ensuring that taxpayer research dollars weren't spent on projects that Australians would rightly view as being entirely the wrong priorities."

The revelation over this ministerial veto and Birmingham's subsequent comments triggered widespread condemnation. Academic bodies across science, humanities, and social sciences called out political interference in research. For its part, the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) urged the government to "clearly repudiate political interference in research funding outcomes that is based on prejudice against certain themes and specific disciplinary areas."

ARE LIVING IN AN ERA WHEN POPULIST POLITICS FANS LIC SUSPICION THAT ACADEMIC RESEARCHERS IN IVORY 'ERS ARE MORE CONCERNED WITH INDIVIDUAL PURSUITS N IN CONTRIBUTING TO SOCIETY.

The government responded to the outcry by introducing a new "national interest test," (https://www.arc.gov.au/news-publications/media/media-releases/funding-world-leading-research) which would apply to all research grants submitted to the ARC. This test requires researchers who apply for ARC grants to spell out "the extent to which the research contributes to Australia's national interest through its potential to have economic, commercial, environmental, social or cultural benefits to the Australian community." Dan Tehan, the current education minister justified the introduction of the new measure in an op-ed in the national newspaper, *The Australian*. "If you're asking the Australian taxpayer to dig into their wallet and pay for your research," Tehan writes, "you should be able to articulate clearly to them how that research will benefit the nation."

This reaction is perhaps not surprising. We are living in an era when populist politics fans public suspicion that academic researchers in ivory towers are more concerned with individual pursuits than in contributing to society. Tehan presents the national interest test as a filter to ensure governments do not fund research lacking applied value.

There is a high likelihood that this test will further disadvantage disciplines that privilege basic research over applied research, including those that primarily contribute to the extension of ideas, as distinct from practice. But even if we put that to one side, we must face its broader challenge: To receive federal funding, academics must validate that their scholarly output engages with, and achieves impact among, nonacademic communities.

IMPACT AND ENGAGEMENT: THE AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE

Last year, Australia introduced its national Engagement and Impact Assessment, which signaled a shift in the government's priorities regarding the value of academic research. The EIA is an initiative closely linked to the 2015 National Innovation and Science Agenda (NISA), which was itself the result of policymakers' deep concern that Australia was losing ground to other countries with respect to

research collaborations between industry and universities.

The NISA highlighted (ps://w .in ust /strategies-for-the-future/boosting-innovation-and-science) a series of incentives and exercises aimed at rein co borati , with the underlying assumption that universities needed to work harder to engage industry in partnership at wo pr luc ademic research with real-world benefits. But NISA officials overlooked the fact that countries where university-industry research networks are strongest (such as South Korea and Israel) have histories of significant government investment in building internationally competitive research strengths. No previous Australian government could claim to have done the same.

As a byproduct of NISA, the EIA challenges universities, and business schools, to think more strategically and integrally about how they are engaging industry to create more pathways for research impact. As is the case worldwide (https://bized.aacsb.edu/articles/2018/09/can-b-schools-rethink-research), business schools in this country are being challenged to demonstrate the value proposition of their research. Put bluntly, everyone knows that business schools have impact through their education programs and vast alumni networks. But the enduring impact of their research is often less apparent.

WHERE DO WE STAND?

In the second half of 2018, the Australian Business Deans Council's research network conducted an online survey of its members to gauge their experiences with the EIA firsthand. Undertaken by UNSW Business School at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, the survey was sent to members of the ABDC's Business Academic Directors of Research Network (BARDsNet). These directors reported that the EIA exercise, which requires a detailed data and longitudinal analysis, poses a major challenge to the workloads of their academic and professional staff.

Even more challenging: Universities must complete their analyses for the EIA soon after they've had to prepare their submissions for Excellence in Research Australia (ERA). The ERA, Australia's own national research evaluation framework, is designed to rate the inherent quality of each field of research across Australian universities.

Other themes raised in the BARDsNet survey included a perceived lack of clarity from government and, in some cases, from universities themselves. Members noted confusion about how to complete the EIA assessment and meet specifications on detailed items like word counts and reference periods; they also were uncertain about what quantifiable evidence schools could submit to verify engagement and impact.

Furthermore, they reported finding it difficult to get the information they needed from academics. One respondent noted that "as some of our researchers were in the field, the asynchronous communication made it difficult to communicate with all stakeholders." Another reported that it was difficult to get "academics to come and speak about their projects—thinking we were going to give them a whole lot of extra work to do—when really we just needed to hear what they are involved in." Without the direct input of academics, said another, "looking at external income and not knowing what the projects were about was hard."

ROBLEM WITH DEMONSTRATING IMPACT IS THAT OFTEN YOU
ONE PART OF A LARGER PUZZLE," SAID ONE RESPONDENT.
U CANNOT CLAIM THAT IT IS ALL DUE TO YOU."

The EIA requires universities to submit one qualitative statement for *engagement* and one case study for *impact* in each of 22 disciplines. Researchers in some countries might envy Australian universities for having to submit only one statement and one case per discipline, but BARDsNet members believe that the small number of case studies permitted by the EIA limits their ability to showcase the breadth of work happening in the business disciplines. Many expressed frustration that the piecemeal—and, in some respects, vague—nature of the EIA undermined the claim that it was a truly comprehensive research engagement and impact exercise.

"Only having one impact case study means that the depth of what is available from an institution is not revealed," wrote one respondent. "A problem with demonstrating impact is that often you are one part of a larger puzzle. For example, you may be working on a big issue and playing an important role, but you cannot claim that it is all due to you. This is challenging context for making a compelling case about impact, but it is pretty normal for a lot of research involving impact."

Others found it problematic drawing a relationship between indicators such as income from industry for research and verifiable impact outcomes. Still others said it was "extremely challenging" to explain the impact of their university's scholarship within the word limits that the EIA imposed.

Adding to the confusion was a lack of relevant information stored at the university level and a lack of consensus among researchers about "what constitutes engagement and impact," according to one member. "Researchers had varying levels of relevant information readily available."

Survey respondents highlighted one last shortcoming of the EIA—despite the EIA including a category for interdisciplinary research, they felt it provided limited s pe ro. iversities to articulate the engagement and impact of interdisciplinary research, be it across business disciplines or across bu STEMM, d HASS umanities, arts, and social sciences). This discrepancy is surprising given the growing recognition that many c he wor s cial, e omic, and environmental challenges an be addressed only through interdisciplinary research teams.

(/)

Nevertheless, we at ABDC believe that there has been at least one major benefit of the EIA exercise—it has encouraged SUBSCRIBE (/SUBSCRIBE) think more deeply about their impact beyond their universities. The EIA has compelled business schools to document instances when collaboration between academic and corporate partners has shaped industry practice. They have had to identify commercial and consultancy projects that have resulted in the direct transfer of knowledge to specific sectors, as well as PhD projects that became more relevant to business because they were co-supervised by academics and practitioners. These activities are already happening in Australian business schools, but there is no doubt still significant scope for growth.

WHAT MORE CAN WE DO?

The BARDsNet survey revealed several well-developed ideas about ways that business schools can verify their research impact more strategically. For example, members suggested that business schools consider doing more to highlight or encourage research projects that do one or more of the following:

- Influence public policy or the performance of an organization.
- Change government policy, public conversation on an issue, and/or business behaviors.
- Come into being at the request of an industry partner that provides significant cash and in-kind support.
- Receives external validation via financial support or testimony from end users.

More generally, the BARDsNet survey also asked members to rank engagement activities as “high,” “medium,” or “low/no impact.” The activity that the greatest number of respondents—73 percent—noted as having high impact is the preparation of reports commissioned by government, industry, or community organizations.

The following activities were rated as having either high or medium impact (the percentages represent the combined totals in both high and medium categories):

- Reports commissioned by government (95%)
- Public reports commissioned by industry or community (95%)
- Service on a government body/commission (86%)
- Contracts for research or consulting outside academia (86%)
- Co-funding of research outputs with end users (86%)
- Service on a standard-setting body (82%).

At the other end of the spectrum, the following activities attracted the greatest concentration of low/no impact ratings:

- Assessing social media followers (91%)
- Creating podcasts (86%)
- Using social media by academics to share research (86%)
- Producing articles via an in-house research news outlet (82%)
- Hosting hackathon events (82%)
- Participating in online video/YouTube series (82%)
- Visiting other schools (82%)

The release of the Engagement and Assessment 2018–2019 National Report (https://www.arc.gov.au/engagement-and-impact-assessment/engagement-and-impact-assessment-2018-outcomes) in March confirmed strong performance by business researchers (in the category of “Commerce, Management, Tourism, and Services”). Furthermore, according to the report’s section on research engagement, 29 of the 36 institutional submissions were found to have produced research that demonstrated “effective or highly effective interactions with research end users outside of academia.” These institutions made “highly effective and well-integrated research impact translation beyond academia” or “effective and integrated research impact translation beyond academia.”

LOOKING BEYOND THE IVORY TOWER

There’s no doubt that requiring business schools to focus on delivering research outcomes with impact beyond the academy is a global challenge. This is particularly true because many business schools continue to accord overwhelming priority to traditional academic measures of excellence, such as publishing in highly ranked scholarly journals, winning grant income from national and international funding bodies, and graduating PhD students.

Yet, as the Responsible Research in Business and Management network—a consortium of 23 university-based business schools in ten countries—notes in its position paper (https://rrbm.network/position-paper/), "the goal for researchers and their institutions should include business and society impact, not simply publish in a small set of journals with limited readership." If impact is the goal, then business schools must provide faculty with sufficient incentives to undertake research projects that produce outcomes of significant value to industry and not-for-profit stakeholders.

Put another way, business schools need to place greater emphasis on demand-driven projects in collaboration with partners outside the academy. Only then will business be able to compete with other disciplinary areas, in both the social sciences and STEM fields, in demonstrating the value proposition of its research.

Of course, we are not arguing that business faculty become glorified consultants. Our fundamental point is that the rigor and independence of academic research is unrivaled among "suppliers" of knowledge, including consulting firms. Moreover, recent studies (https://www.rand.org/randeurope/research/projects/characteristics-of-high-performing-uk-research-units.html) show that the most successful research units produce scholarship that is in high demand from industry *and* that achieves major scholarly impact. In other words, we do not need to choose between attaining academic excellence and achieving social impact. We can do both.

When it comes to demonstrating impact, however, business schools face their own set of challenges. For instance, business academics often work in the shadow of STEM fields, where many studies result in patents and cures for disease. This ability to demonstrate such immediate and enduring impact makes it easier for STEM researchers to attract greater attention and secure more government funding. Business schools also must fight the perception that because of their capacity to enroll large numbers of students—especially international students who pay higher tuition—they are primarily cash cows that subsidize research in other disciplines.

Many Australian business schools rightly continue to push back against this narrative. They are promoting to their faculty that excellence in research is just as important as excellence in teaching. The next frontier for this country's business schools, then, will be to move beyond academia to build a robust nexus between research and engagement and impact. The EIA exercise sets a generic framework of expectations around this objective, but the ultimate responsibility rests with the business faculty who operate in partnership with external stakeholders.

The strategies we are adopting to link business research with social impact are works in progress. What's clear, however, is that government has firmly established incentives for our schools to succeed.

David Grant is president of the Australian Business Deans' Council (ABDC) and Andrew O'Neil is chair of the ABDC's Business Academic Research Directors' Network.

#RESEARCH (/SEARCH?Q=&AUTHOR=&ARTICLETITLE=&TAGID=5B6BAA1AD7ED483C9B53FE6CFB674B19&ADVANCED=TRUE&KEYWORD=&YEAR=&ISSUE=) #RESEARCH IMPACT (/SEARCH?Q=&AUTHOR=&ARTICLETITLE=&TAGID=E6FA9B41E72846529B1622AFC0A4461E&ADVANCED=TRUE&KEYWORD=&YEAR=&ISSUE=) #RELEVANCE (/SEARCH?Q=&AUTHOR=&ARTICLETITLE=&TAGID=98E49DC4F1A24658AE75D1AB85E911BF&ADVANCED=TRUE&KEYWORD=&YEAR=&ISSUE=) #ENGAGEMENT (/SEARCH?Q=&AUTHOR=&ARTICLETITLE=&TAGID=9955D71CCFA24AF58F338F27B30A2C23&ADVANCED=TRUE&KEYWORD=&YEAR=&ISSUE=) #ASIA PACIFIC (/SEARCH?Q=&AUTHOR=&ARTICLETITLE=&TAGID=25500251D37A4959B24B81C6626A7119&ADVANCED=TRUE&KEYWORD=&YEAR=&ISSUE=) #GOVERNMENT (/SEARCH?Q=&AUTHOR=&ARTICLETITLE=&TAGID=94B1072ACECE479EB1DBEF3CC25AB3C6&ADVANCED=TRUE&KEYWORD=&YEAR=&ISSUE=) #SCHOLARSHIP (/SEARCH?Q=&AUTHOR=&ARTICLETITLE=&TAGID=6AB737BE0A8C46F686F52E5D00540095B&ADVANCED=TRUE&KEYWORD=&YEAR=&ISSUE=)

related articles

Solving for X: An Alternative Approach to Standard 15 (/articles/2018/january/an-alternative-approach-to-standard-15)
What's one way for a business school to align its faculty to AACSB's 2013 standards? Encourage non-tenure-track professors to produce impactful scholarship.

Cohorts of Change (/articles/2018/11/cohorts-of-change)
MIT Sloan gathers teams of stakeholders who want to spur growth in their regions.

Entrepreneurship in the Margins (/articles/2018/11/entrepreneurship-in-the-margins)
A European entrepreneurship program targets unemployed and disadvantaged populations.