

12 October 2020

Online submission

<https://www.arc.gov.au/excellence-research-australia/era-ei-review>

Dear ERA/EI Review Panel,

Re: Review of Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) and the Engagement and Impact Assessment (EI)

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Australian Research Council's review of Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) and the Engagement and Impact Assessment (EI).

This submission was prepared on behalf of the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC). The ABDC is the collective voice of 38 of Australia's business schools. Business schools graduate one-third of all students, and more than half of the international students, at Australian universities. Researchers in Australian business schools contributed seven per cent of research outputs in ERA 2018, primarily across field of research 15 (Commerce, management, tourism and services) and 14 (Economics).

In our submission, we have focused on key questions that align most closely with the ABDC's mission of representing the interests of Australian business faculties and schools. Given the different views among universities in relation to ERA and EI, we have not sought to frame the submission as reflecting a consensus among members. Rather, it should be seen as flagging issues of significance to those business disciplines pursued at our member Schools and providing disciplinary context around those issues.

The ABDC thanks the Review Panel for its consideration and welcomes further opportunities to engage in the inquiry as it progresses. Requests for further information may be made to the ABDC c/o Caroline Falshaw, Executive Officer: office@abdc.edu.au



Professor David Grant
President, Australian Business Deans Council

Q3.3 What impacts has ERA had on:

a. the Australian university research sector as a whole

As the paramount external research validation exercise in Australia, ERA has substantial impact on internal research investment decisions made by universities. For this reason, it is important that there is some degree of cross-disciplinary standardisation to ensure that certain disciplines (e.g. social science disciplines, of which business is a part) are not disadvantaged relative to other disciplines.

More generally, while the benefits of ERA are summarised well in the ARC Consultation paper, there remains concern about the net benefits of ERA relative to the effort that individual universities put into data collection and submission processes. Moreover, given that the exercise defines FoRs within universities (rather than researchers, or even research teams) as single entities, there is a risk that it increases competition, rather than collaboration, between disciplinary colleagues in different institutions.

Q3.6 Do you have any suggestions for enhancing ERA's value to you/your organisation?

- Automation of data collection through ORCID
- Use of normalised citation impact to control for differences in citation practice across disciplines, including the social sciences.

We submit that providing written feedback to institutions about their FoR ratings would be highly beneficial in terms of transparency and accountability. At present, institutions receive ratings but little else as a result of the process, which entails significant preparatory work. We suggest considering public sharing of submitted data sets so as to increase accountability and provide further opportunities for benchmarking.

Peer review methodology

Q3.15 The peer review methodology for evaluating the quality of research is appropriate.

There is a significant risk for the social sciences (including business disciplines) in completely moving away from a peer review methodology towards a citation analysis methodology. If such a move is contemplated as a result of this consultation process, we submit that careful consideration must be given to the type of discipline normalised citation analysis that would be used to ensure social sciences are not disadvantaged in relation to STEM disciplines and which also takes into account outputs such as books and refereed conference papers. This consideration notwithstanding, there may be an important and potentially robust role for citation analysis of social science disciplines in a

revised ERA assessment method. The ABDC's view is that citation analysis alone is no substitute for peer review of the quality of scholarship. Rather, that objective citation metrics could play a supplementary role in informing the overall quality rating, alongside the traditional peer review method. We further submit that key stakeholders — including the ABDC — be consulted on any proposed citation methodology should a decision be taken to employ this in previously wholly peer reviewed FORs.

Q3.17 What are the weaknesses of the peer review methodology?

- What is meant by “world standard” is not robustly defined in any of the guidance provided potentially laying it open to misinterpretation. For instance, does below world standard mean below what other advanced economies are at, or the mean world standard taking into account different countries? Some reviewers may consider Australian standards as the benchmark rather than world standards.
- There is no international representation on the peer review panels which would enable better benchmarking with “world standard”.
- The process is labour intensive, its robustness highly contingent on committed external assessors, and it reviews only 30% of all submitted publications in an individual Unit of Evaluation.

Q3.18 Can the peer review methodology be modified to improve the evaluation process while still adhering to the ERA Indicator Principles?

Yes.

a. If you answered ‘Yes’, please describe how the peer review methodology could be improved.

- By including international reviewers on research evaluation panels.
- Better definition of what is world standard for that discipline
- If citation analysis were to be used as a supplementary indicator to the core peer review methodology, it is essential to apply normalised citation analysis for all disciplines, including the social sciences.

ERA rating scale

Q3.24 Noting that 90% of units of evaluation assessed in ERA 2018 are now at or above world standard, does the rating scale need to be modified to identify excellence?

Yes.

A five-tiered rating system does not have the level of detail required for a nuanced assessment of the Australian publicly funded research system. Assessments could be accompanied by written reports on each FoR within institutions and a percentage band analogous to the reporting of the outcomes of ARC applications (e.g. top 10% of ERA 4).

a. If you answered, 'Yes', please explain how the rating scale can be modified to identify excellence.

A more robust definition of “world standard” would make the peer review methodology more rigorous. An issue for disciplines such as management, accounting, finance and economics is that the rating scale rewards publication in international journals, some of which do not appear to be as receptive to submissions based on Australian data as they could be. This raises the question of the extent to which the national interest is served where research based on domestic inputs effectively is discouraged. One option may be to require relevant evaluation panels to consult with the ABDC’s highly reputable Journal Quality List (JQL) to “control” for Australian and international outlets. The ABDC JQL uses citation analysis as well as peer review to arrive at rankings across all relevant business and economics fields. As such it could potentially be a useful additional proxy of quality for ERA evaluations panel members.

ERA staff census date

Q3.27 What is the more appropriate method for universities to claim research outputs — staff census date or by-line?

Were census dates to be retained, this approach may require further refinement; for example, taking into account where staff were employed previously and the length of employment at their current institution.

Q3.28 What are the limitations of a census date approach? Please describe.

Limitations might include the lack of time series information about how a discipline has fluctuated from census date to census date. We also note that there are often lengthy publication review periods in the disciplines that the ABDC represents. Finally, the approach has been identified as creating a perverse incentive to poach researchers and research groups prior to the census date.

Q3.29 Would a by-line approach address these limitations? Yes/No. Please explain your answer.

Q3.30 What are the limitations of a by-line approach? Please describe.

The introduction of a by-line approach could potentially circumvent some of the complexities surrounding staff census dates and who qualifies. It could be argued that such an approach might better reflect where research has been done and institutional investment over time.

At the same time, however, there are limitations with the by-line approach. Many academics publish with multiple by-lines which could be problematic. Also, business disciplines have some of the longest journal review periods of all the academic disciplines (and double the length of the health disciplines; see Huisman and Smits, 2017), so adopting a by-line approach would mean that ERA is slower to detect institutional improvements in research quality among some business disciplines, whether through organic improvements or as a result of changes in staff profiles. Moreover, the most prestigious business journals – and by extension, the journals most indicative of quality – tend to have the longest review periods (see, for example, the analysis conducted by Holden, 2017, which found that the median acceptance time among the top five finance journals varied between 9.9 and 19.8 months). Adopting by-lines could therefore provide an outdated representation of the research performance of staff employed at each institution.

References

- Holden, C.W. (2017). Do acceptance and publication times differ across finance journals? *Review of Corporate Finance Studies*, 6, 102–26.
- Huisman, J., & Smits, J. (2017). Duration and quality of the peer review process: The author's perspective. *Scientometrics*, 113, 633–50.

EI Overview

Q4.3 What impact has EI had on:

a. the Australian university sector as a whole?

EI has had a broadly positive impact in accounting for breadth of valuable research outside of the STEM disciplines that is not adequately captured by the ERA evaluation. It is worth noting that Australian business faculties/schools have performed strongly in the two-digit FoR codes 14 and 15.

Q4.10 Are there other key terms that need to be formally defined?

The criteria used by EIA to evaluate impact should be made clearer, particularly with a view to calibrating the sector's understanding of what activities constitute high, medium, and low impact.

Engagement indicators

Q4.17 The cash support from research end-users indicator using HERDC data is appropriate for the assessment of research engagement?

This data is informative but may give an incomplete picture. For example, income contributions from the NGO sector might not be large due to the limited availability of funds within the sector, yet projects may still deliver valuable/worthwhile engagement. Other information, such as number of researchers and the institutional type of end-user would assist the ARC to interpret this data.

Engagement narrative

Q4.24 The narrative approach is suitable for describing and assessing research engagement with end-users.

Agree that the narrative approach is suitable, but it is not sufficient for assessing engagement with end-users. The approach limits the ability to supply other forms of supporting evidence regarding research engagement.

Q4.25 One engagement submission per broad discipline is sufficient for capturing the research engagement within that discipline.

Disagree. This approach may give a misleading picture of the depth of research engagement in a particular discipline. At some universities there may be no further engagement, while at others there may be high levels of engagement that are not captured. ABDC would recommend a per capita normalisation approach to allow for the provision of additional engagement narratives based on the number of staff within each discipline. There would appear to be some merit in looking at the approach adopted to assessing impact in the UK REF.

Q4.27 Additional evidence is needed within the narrative.

Agree.

a. If you agreed, what evidence should be provided?

Testimonial statements from end users or other forms of evidence that corroborates the information contained within the narrative (used in the UK REF).

Q4.37 Would there be benefit in combining engagement and approach to impact?

No.

EI indicators

Q4.38 The engagement rating scale is suitable for assessing research engagement.

Yes, although the ARC should consider aligning EI with ERA rating scales (i.e. 1–5).

Q4.39 The descriptors for the engagement rating scale are suitable.

Strongly disagree. For instance, the threshold between medium and high is unclear.

Q5.10 ORCID iDs should be mandatory for ERA.

Agree. ERA should utilise technological advances and pre-existing data sources.

Q5.11 The automatic harvesting of output data using ORCID iDs would streamline a university's submission process.

Agree, but there would still need to be detailed cross-checking as ORCID does not capture everything.

a. What are the advantages and/or disadvantages?

The level of publication detail captured by ORCID might be limited.