

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF LEARNED ACADEMIES (ACOLA)

Submission to the Australian Research Council Review of the ERA and EI assessment frameworks

The Australian Council of Learned Academies (ACOLA) is pleased to respond to the Australian Research Council's review of the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) and the Engagement and Impact (EI) assessment frameworks. Our response draws on input from our members, Australia's four Learned Academies and our associate members the Australian Academy of Health and Medical Science (AAHMS), a number of which have made separate submissions to the review.

Overall, ACOLA and its members support the ERA and EI assessment frameworks as a way to understand the quality and outcome of Australian research. We agree that, in the main, the frameworks achieve their objectives, and provide a crucial mechanism for evaluating and publicly assessing and presenting Australia's research outputs and outcomes. We also appreciate that the process helps to highlight excellence in Australia's research ecosystem, and can promote collaboration, productivity and competition. This submission provides a range of high-level suggestions to further improve the measurements, their impact and their benefits to government, the research community and Australia as a whole.

- **Objective and aims.** While the ERA's aim of providing measurement is being met, it is not clear that this continues to have optimal strategic relevance and impact for stakeholders, and for the burden of the activity. We are aware of suggestions for the frameworks to inform future policy and program decisions and investments. Prior to any such decisions, impact modelling and improvements to the performance of the framework are needed to increase its use-value. Caution is advised to ensure these suggested uses do not have perverse consequences, including in funding allocations to universities.
- **Industry relevance.** It is not directly clear to ACOLA what value industry places on these frameworks to guide their investment decisions, including collaborations. We encourage the ARC to engage with industry bodies and R&D investors to determine how the frameworks should be refined to best support them improve or focus their investment decisions, including the necessary frequencies, metrics and detail.
- **Simplifying and streamlining the processes.** Consistent with views across the sector, ACOLA agrees that streamlining the ERA and EI process would increase efficiencies and reduce the regulatory burden on all stakeholders. This could first be addressed by identifying areas of duplication between ERA and EI and other assessment systems to focus the ARC's efforts. Many universities have developed their own criteria, definitions and standards for measuring excellence and impact over time, as well as participating in a number of different assessment systems – of which ARC is one. Finally, there is a need to ensure that the efforts to produce quality indicators such as peer review can be protected, by providing sufficient time for expert assessment.
- **Determining quality and excellence, including peer review and citation methodologies.** ACOLA supports the process of peer review, and this should remain a fundamental element of the process. However, we note the concern within the sector for incommensurability between citation and peer review disciplines, and the subsequent path to ratings outcomes. The goal of capturing 'excellence' is being met for some disciplines, but this currently risks disproportionate emphasis, and consideration should be given to better reflecting the diversity of knowledge. The growing divergence in ratings for peer review and citation disciplines may also be related to differing interpretations of what constitutes 'world standard'.
- **Interdisciplinary research.** ACOLA strongly encourages the ARC to consider changes to ERA to encourage and measure the quality of interdisciplinarity collaboration and research areas. While the current process enables up to three disciplines to be acknowledged, this can be limiting. In addition, ERA provides no analysis of outcomes or commentary on the quality or quantity of interdisciplinary research, and how this occurs across institutions. Interdisciplinary research is becoming increasingly important, especially related to emerging technologies, health and the environment, and should be explicitly encouraged.

- **Flexibility and appropriateness.** To ensure the system remains useful and comprehensive, improvements and adjustments are needed to reflect disciplinary needs and the context of research quality and excellence in regional and remote universities.
- **Regularity.** ACOLA supports more responsive data collection and reporting of the frameworks. However, this needs to be balanced against regulatory burden and the benefit to universities. Subject to needs of potential future government processes and needs of industry, ACOLA sees merit in reducing the frequency of the ERA and E&I assessments, for instance to every four or five years with a two year stagger. Consideration should also be given to combining the process for ERA and EI, to assist the assessment burden placed on peer reviewers.
- **Publishing of ERA data.** ACOLA encourages the ARC to consider separating data collection and reporting from the evaluation phase. This would allow the data to be available for analysis, and be compared with other international metrics. In addition, the ARC should consider the opportunities of new technologies, such as: artificial intelligence (AI) to automate analysis and reporting; improving the repository for storing and making research outputs (including data) immediately accessible; and integrating tools to enable the interrogation of data.
- **Publishing of EI data.** Unlike the United Kingdom's Research Excellence Framework, from which the EI drew learnings, there is currently more limited publishing of the results from the EI. We would welcome a more comprehensive release of this data and related communication activities.
- **Combat misinterpretation.** ERA outcomes and data are open to misinterpretation by media and other stakeholders. The current ERA report structure can invite such blunt comparisons, especially between HASS and STEM disciplines, which is important to address in the context of recent higher education reforms. The ARC should provide authoritative commentary to accompany the release, potentially from the ERA Research Evaluation Committee chairs. This could include a high-level overview of the results within domain areas and commentary that contextualise the results, for example with respect to different funding sources, staffing profiles, different infrastructure, and publishing patterns.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me on 0484 814 040 or ryan@acola.org.au.



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