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***ASSESSING THE WIDER BENEFITS ARISING FROM UNIVERSITY-BASED RESEARCH  
DISCUSSION PAPER, AUGUST 2013***

The Australian Academy of the Humanities welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Department's discussion paper, *Assessing the Wider Benefits Arising from University-Based Research*. At this stage in the consultation process we provide general feedback on the underpinning principles of public research investment and make some observations about the proposed model. The Academy would welcome the opportunity to be involved in further consultation.

Australia's current research assessment system (and funding allocation, by way of the competitive grants process) recognises and rewards quality research but our Fellows report that it does not sufficiently recognise publicly-engaged research (such as outreach programmes, community engagement, industry-linked research) or significant innovative and/or emerging research.

Whether a retrospective research benefit assessment regime will achieve desired results in this area requires further consideration and it will be worth examining possible incentives such as cost-effective ways to encourage the dissemination of research, changing the way we communicate results and engage potential beneficiaries, as well as overcoming obstacles to the uptake of university-based research by communities, the public and private sectors, etc.

The discussion paper focuses on the mechanics of how a research benefit assessment exercise might be introduced, but needs to be more explicit about the rationale both for conducting the exercise and why it should be introduced in the form proposed in the paper. The paper is mindful of minimising administrative and reporting burdens, but it does not adequately address concerns that the research sector has expressed about the cost of introducing a research assessment regime. The Academy is supportive of the principle of cost effectiveness but any exercise needs to be methodologically sound – the sector will need to have faith in the robustness of the exercise for it deliver value within and beyond the university sector.

## **1. Foundational principles**

The Academy strongly supports the principle that public research investment should be guided by delivering cultural, social, economic and environmental benefits. The breadth of the definition of research benefit in the discussion paper is welcome. Our recommendations for this section are:

- In addition to the economic, social and environmental benefits, include ‘cultural’ benefits – the terms cultural and social are not interchangeable but distinct dimensions.
- The importance of basic discovery-driven research needs to be strengthened in the discussion of the benefits of research. Basic research gives the system its core capacity and is foundational to the overall health of the research ‘ecosystem’. It underpins discovery and innovation, and ultimately enables Australia to prepare for and respond to societal challenges and changes. We must take a long-term view of the public good benefits of basic research.
- Australian research contributes to a larger international research effort; the networks of benefit and influence extend beyond our national boundaries.
- An additional ‘category’ of research should be considered: scholarly reviewing and re-investigation of established research positions, which is especially useful in public engagement. This is a notable basis to a range of research benefit activities in the humanities, such as performance, museum work and cultural interpretation.
- An important additional outcome of a research benefit assessment exercise will be to develop systems beyond the University for welcoming and evaluating the processes of research benefit in operation.
- We would observe of Principle 3 ‘Encourage research engagement and collaboration, and research that benefits the nation’ that the implementation of the Strategic Research Priorities is aimed at guiding forms of research that will address societal challenges of national and international scale and importance.
- In regards to research training and research careers, we would suggest a broadening of the current wording to include ‘public-activity-linked research training’, so: ‘develop industry-linked and public-activity research training and research careers’.
- It is not clear in Principle 5 how the assessment will be condensed to the level of the university from separately reported areas. If this is to be by aggregation, how will that process avoid benefitting larger institutions?

## **2. Proposed methodology**

There have been a number of exercises over the last year to determine whether it is feasible to assess the benefits arising from research. At the Academy’s own forum in February this year, ‘Valuing the Humanities’, a range of options was discussed, including international examples (the UK’s Research Excellence Framework (REF) exercise) and the Excellence in Innovation for Australia (EIA) trial.

In the summary of discussions (provided earlier to the Department), one of the key areas of considerations was that any research benefit assessment exercise would need to develop discipline-specific indicators. We were encouraged when the Australian Research Council (ARC) and other research agencies developed a ‘Research Impact Principles and Framework’ which endorsed the principle to “respect the diversity in research disciplines/sectors in demonstrating research benefit”.<sup>1</sup> The discussion paper makes brief mention of disciplinary differences: one of the criteria for engagement metrics is “be sensitive to disciplinary differences”. The Academy would expect that this criterion applies equally to case studies, and should be one of the principles underwriting the development of indicators, the collection of data, and processes of assessment.

As demonstrated by Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA), the development of discipline-specific indicators will be critical for any research benefit assessment exercise if it is to gain the confidence of the sector.

The Department’s discussion paper presents a range of options as to how a research benefit assessment exercise might be implemented in Australia, based on a twofold model – to collect research engagement metrics and research benefit case studies.

Although the Academy agrees with the need to reduce the administrative/reporting burden on universities, and make “the maximum possible use of data that is already being collected”, the sector’s faith in any new system will be contingent on the adequacy of the data collected and assessment processes in place. Below we comment on three key elements:

*(i) Research engagement metrics*

The discussion paper lists possible research engagement metrics such as Graduate Destination Survey data and Higher Education Research Data Collection (HERDC) income data. We note that there has also been some discussion of the use of ERA data – the 2012 National Report included pathways to impact and research engagement data. While these data may have some potential, the Academy is concerned that the suitability of the data already collected may be over-stated. Certainly in the case of bibliometric data (on collaboration) these are not an applicable measure for the full range of publication output in the humanities.

It is difficult to see how any engagement data can be ‘existing data’ or ‘proxy data’. More work is needed on the appropriate methods and standards for assembling data and on developing reliable discipline-specific ‘lead indicators’.

The National Research Investment Plan (NRIP) notes that “at present, two proxy indicators of research impact are available in the form of the frequency with which the findings are cited in further research, and the number of patents that flow from the research” (p. 34). Neither of these measures is fit for purpose for measuring research flows and benefits in the humanities. Quantitative metrics based on existing data sources are by themselves incapable of capturing the outputs and benefit of much work in the humanities.

Reception data will be critical to determine the benefits of research for both research engagement metrics and case studies (see below).

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Research Council et al (2013), ‘Research Impact Principles and Framework’ <http://www.arc.gov.au/general/impact.htm>

### *(ii) Case studies*

The UK's REF pilot exercise and the EIA trial demonstrate that a case-study approach is workable. Case studies are called into question in the discussion paper chiefly on the ground that there can be significant delays in the visibility of any impact. This difficulty surely applies to all fundamental research, as well as for some applied research, and so hardly seems to be a consideration of particular significance for the assessment of the benefits of university research via case studies.

The discussion paper proposes that a limited sample of research benefit case studies be collected. While others will advise what constitutes a robust sampling methodology, the Academy would just at this point observe that if too few case studies are selected there is a risk that there will be an insufficient range of models or areas for universities to demonstrate benefit.

It is important that case studies be based on reception-driven evidence rather than solely on delivery-based accounts of research benefit. Such data might include numbers of people receiving benefit, numbers of activities conferring benefit, repeat requests and take-up. With proper sampling and evidence, the case study methodology is effective.<sup>2</sup>

### *(iii) Assessment*

The paper proposes four possible options for assessing collected information (both metrics and case studies): we think that panel assessment of both metrics and case studies is warranted. We therefore would not support the first option which would see metrics "transformed into performance measures using appropriate volume measures without other interrogation or analysis".

In disciplines where metrics are less reliable measures of research benefit, peer review is important. An understanding of discipline-specific research practices is going to be needed to contextualise any volume data.

Option 4, combined assessment, is preferable though this will be dependent on identifying a set of metrics that the various disciplines have confidence in. It is not yet clear what these metrics would be and therefore not clear how they would combine with case studies.

In terms of unit of evaluation the Academy can see the value in data at the Field of Research (FoR) 4-digit level for research engagement metrics, whereas Socio Economic Objective (SEO) codes could work for case studies, as they did in the EIA trial. However it is difficult to see how these separate units of evaluation would combine in panel assessment. It is difficult to comment further at this early stage – if the plans for a research benefit assessment exercise progress, we would seek more expert advice from Fellows and wider humanities sector.

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<sup>2</sup> On this point, see RAND Europe's review of the EIA exercise, [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR200/RR278/RAND\\_RR278.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR200/RR278/RAND_RR278.pdf). Also refer to Stephen Knight's presentation at the Academy's 'Valuing the Humanities' forum which compares the case study approach in the EIA trial with the UK pilot exercise, of which Knight was a panellist, [http://www.humanities.org.au/Portals/0/documents/News/NewFolder/Valuing\\_the\\_Humanities\\_Knight.pdf](http://www.humanities.org.au/Portals/0/documents/News/NewFolder/Valuing_the_Humanities_Knight.pdf)

### **3. Next steps**

We would be very pleased to elaborate on any of the observations contained in this submission. The Academy would also welcome being involved in informing the pilot exercise and advising on developing discipline-specific indicators.

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Yours sincerely,

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