



ERA 2012 Review  
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Please find attached the Australian Academy of the Humanities' response to the ERA 2012 Review.

The Academy welcomes the opportunity to contribute and would be pleased to elaborate on any of the observations contained in this submission. Please direct your initial queries to [christina.parolin@humanities.org.au](mailto:christina.parolin@humanities.org.au) or phone on (02) 6125 9860.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Christina Parolin  
Executive Director

## **ERA 2012 Review Request for Feedback**

### **Australian Academy of the Humanities April 2013**

The Australian Academy of the Humanities welcomes the opportunity to raise issues and insights of relevance to the humanities disciplines as the Australian Research Council (ARC) plans for the next iteration of Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA).

Our response to the ARC's request for feedback on ERA 2012 focuses on certain questions as follows:

#### **4. Would you consider the use of unique researcher IDs as part of future ERA**

It is not entirely clear from the ARC's paper what the rationale for and intended use of a unique researcher ID would be. It is difficult to comment without more detail; the Academy would simply observe that unlike the UK's research assessment system, ERA is a collective assessment exercise so we are unsure of the value of individual identifiers as a component of the process. If they were to be included there would need to be transparent reasons why these were included and to what uses they would put.

#### **15. Should the ARC investigate extending citation analysis to any disciplines that currently have peer review? If so, should this be instead of, or in addition to peer review?**

For the humanities disciplines, the answer is no. The Academy does not believe that citation analysis would be a meaningful or an effective way of measuring quality in the humanities.

The key issue here is that a significant proportion of humanities publishing and citation practices (including frequency of citation) are not captured by existing bibliometric analyses. Although journal publications are important outlets for research in the humanities, ERA results demonstrate that monographs still account for a significant percentage of outputs in humanities disciplines and there is currently no system which tracks data on monographs; any bibliometric analysis likely to be developed in the next few years would need to be rigorously tested before it had the confidence of the sector.

Further work is also needed to verify the link between high citation rate and quality; particularly when poor research can attract high citations if it is topical or controversial, and path breaking research in a specialised field can receive modest citations. A pure numerical figure does not reflect the quality of the research.

#### **17. What other changes would you recommend to the indicators used for each FoR in ERA 2012?**

The ARC might consider giving more weight and acknowledgement to research training and to the timely completion of Research Higher Degree Students (RHD) students.

Training the next generation of research scholars should be a quality measure in terms of time taken and contribution to scholarship.

**21. Would you be prepared to provide the gender of your researchers to the ARC as part of future ERA submissions, if it were used solely for statistical analysis and not for any part of the evaluation process.**

The Academy is very supportive of gender information being collected for statistical purposes as part of ERA. The gender gap reflected in the statistical data generated by the ARC is well known in areas such as the success of Discovery projects, Future Fellowships and DECRA's. It would be very helpful to access similar breakdowns by gender in the ERA to identify patterns of research. This data will assist in tracking disciplinary development and renewal and be consistent with other higher education data profiles.

**26. Would you have any concerns with volume information about each unit of evaluation being presented for the 2012 ERA Evaluation?**

The focus of ERA should be on the assessment of quality research irrespective of volume. That said, the Academy supports the inclusion of volume information (number of researchers and research outputs assigned to a UoE) as a way of contextualising ERA outcomes. The rationale provided in the paper is that "relative volume of research activity is still useful in understanding a university's commitment to resourcing research in a particular field and the rating achieved in a given field of research". The volume of publications produced in a given institution does not necessarily reflect that institution's commitment to research; care needs to be exercised in presenting volume information so as not to confuse publication (counts) with research. On that point, we would also note that the volume data is only part of the picture – and that the research income data would be as meaningful a way of contextualising performance especially as regards individual universities investment across the disciplines.

**27. What additional information would assist universities to understand their ERA results?**

The ARC's release of the ERA dashboard has been an effective way of overcoming some of the misconceptions about ERA within universities – opening up the 'black box', so to speak, so universities have access to outcome data beyond the simple ranking scores – and we would encourage the ARC to repeat the exercise for 2015. Full access within universities would be useful in enabling universities to develop a more nuanced understanding of their results, as this information often gets stuck at senior management and rarely percolates down to departments and disciplines where the information is generally gathered.

An area which can definitely be improved – in terms of information universities receive about their results – is in respect to peer review. The review process for 2012 sought qualitative comment under specific questions/issues and there was also scope for quantitative statements based on the searchable data provided to reviewers. These comments formed a significant part of the evidence from which the Panels formed judgements about rankings. It would be very useful for schools/departments to have

the summaries of the main points involved; for example, insufficient international linkages, too many conference papers, high profile with major scholarly publishers, etc.

Academy Fellows reported that there is an issue of ERA not being understood at local level. One improvement in this area would be to provide more information on how the assessments are made. Feedback of peer assessment directly to departments, schools, or centres would be very valuable.

**30. Do you agree or disagree with expanding the option of submitting 'non-traditional outputs' such as policy documents or commissioned research to all disciplines (this was trialled in ERA 2012)?**

The Academy agrees, on the condition that it is understood that the 'quality' of non-traditional outputs will be judged in different ways in different disciplines.

The next round of ERA must also cater for a significant and growing number of digital outputs, including web resources and databases, analogous to publications such as journal articles and monographs, which should be considered for inclusion for peer review within the HCA cluster. The digital revolution has also meant that digital journals and book publishers are increasing rapidly and by the next ERA iteration will have an even more important presence.

**31. Are the current low volume thresholds for both four-digit and two-digit units of evaluation in ERA appropriate? If not, what changes would you recommend?**

The current low volume thresholds are appropriate to capture a range of research activity.

**33. Do you have any other issues regarding the ERA 2012 process that you wish to raise with the ARC?**

*Peer review*

The AAH notes that the system of peer review was overhauled following the 2010 exercise and many improvements made. We would obviously urge the the ARC to take on board feedback from assessors of the 2012 exercise. Our Fellows have raised the following issues to consider in 2015:

- It is imperative to get the appropriate people to undertake peer review. Assessors were largely recruited by way of self-nomination; it is generally much more effective to have assessments done by research leaders who are reliable assessors and who can provide succinct, productive and authoritative assessments.
- The scope given to individual assessors to choose those items which they assessed introduced a potentially serious level of distortion, because publications closest to the interests of an assessor are not necessarily the best of those submitted by the unit.

- Assessors need clearer instructions on:
  - how to assess different types of outputs;
  - how to compare between units, given assessors were asked to evaluate a range of disciplines and a range of UoEs of different standings;
  - what specific aspects to look for in assessment.

### *Assessing LOTE publications*

The Academy's Fellows have raised concerns about the difficulty in including for peer review items written in a language other than English. We have received feedback that some institutions insisted that all such publications be provided in full translation (including monographs) for inclusion. While there is not such formal requirement on the part of the ARC, it is sometimes assumed to be – by local university administrators charged with managing ERA. Such misconceptions have the potential to be highly damaging to our multilingual capacity. The Academy asks that the ARC make it absolutely clear in its submission guidelines for 2015 that this level of translation is not a requirement under ERA.