Engagement and Impact Assessment Consultation Paper
Australian Academy of the Humanities
June 2016

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Engagement and Impact Assessment Consultation Paper. Before addressing each of the consultation questions, the Australian Academy of the Humanities (AAH) has some brief comments on the overarching principles, rationale and scope of the exercise:

- An assessment exercise of the kind envisaged in the Consultation Paper will have a major impact on the way research is conducted in universities. Already the proposed exercise is influencing institutional behaviours and strategies – even before the scope of the assessment is agreed. It is imperative to ensure that there are no perverse outcomes. The pilot exercise in 2017 will be a testing ground for any adverse consequences for institutions, researchers and disciplines, as well as an opportunity to examine the robustness of available data.

- As the Consultation Paper notes, the policy impetus for this new exercise is the National Innovation and Science Agenda (NISA), which is committed to improving research-industry collaboration and developing "improved metrics on engagement and knowledge transfer with industry, as well as research outcomes and impact".[1] It is essential that an Engagement and Impact exercise is broadly defined from the outset by adopting an expanded conception of industry, and designed to encourage economic, social, cultural and environmental benefits to the nation. Translating research into social and economic benefits will involve multiple partners and beneficiaries. A narrow focus on private business will limit Australia's capacity to reap the full benefits of publicly funded research.

- While the Consultation Paper identifies the risks of short-term, business-focused agendas, the engagement and impact metrics referenced in the paper are very specific to science knowledge transfer and commercialisation. A clear omission is the equivalent for community engagement.

- The Consultation Paper rightly expands the definitions of engagement and impact to encompass the breadth of research partners, end-users, beneficiaries and disciplines. In particular the AAH agrees with:

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- a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches;
- attention to identifying and minimising perverse institutional impacts of the exercise;
- minimising reporting and data collection burden on universities, although we have some reservations (detailed below) about whether existing data collections are sufficient for the task;
- the use of existing Australian Research Council (ARC) systems and expertise; and
- accounting for disciplinary difference so that no discipline is advantaged over another.

- The assumption that a research income metric is a proxy for impact is not proven, and we question the extent to which research income metrics are indicative of the quality, depth and value of engagements. Research income data is only one piece of the puzzle. The UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF) demonstrates that the chief impacts of publicly-funded research are societal. [2]

- The AAH encourages the ARC to explore how the exercise will serve as an index of future capability – it has the potential to include more "forward-looking strategic elements".[3]

- While the Government has made a commitment to trialling an Engagement and Impact Assessment, there are other ways to incentivise and/or encourage greater uptake or research and collaboration between universities and research beneficiaries and end-users that would have less bureaucratic impost – such as the better diffusion of knowledge by working towards an open access agenda.

- The AAH welcomes the approach taken thus far by the ARC by way of the establishment of the three expert working groups, to include a range of expertise and disciplinary input.

There is very little information in the Consultation Paper about the assessment process itself; we look forward to more specific details about the implementation process, and in particular the development of discipline-specific indicators, and would welcome the opportunity to be involved in further consultation on these matters.

Definitions and scope

1. ***What definition of 'engagement' should be used for the purpose of assessment?***

Any definition of engagement must reference 'communities' alongside 'industries' in recognition of the social aspects of research engagement. The AAH supports the use of the definition of research engagement developed and endorsed by a committee of Publicly Funded Research Agencies (PFRAs) in 2012 as follows:

> the interaction between researchers and research organisations and their larger communities/industries for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge, understanding and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity.[4]

The AAH was involved in the ATSE research income metric exercise and expressed concern that while that same definition of engagement was used – a definition that captures the full range of

engagement activities and audiences – the research income metrics developed (and trialled) did not match that definitional breadth.

The Consultation Paper references the OECD's definition of knowledge transfer, which, primarily understood in the context of research commercialisation, is transactional. It is when "knowledge from universities and public research institutions … can be exploited by firms and researchers themselves so as to generate economic and social value and industrial development" (p.6). The use of the word "exploitation" seems a direct contradiction to the definition of engagement above (and cited in the paper) which specifies that mutual benefit and collaboration are fundamental tenets of engagement. The AAH would encourage the ARC to develop a working definition of knowledge exchange (encapsulated in the definition above), rather than 'transfer'. A commercialisation focus is one-way and only a fraction of research effort.

2. What definition of 'impact' should be used for the purpose of assessment?

The AAH supports the definition of impact cited in the paper and endorsed by a committee of PFRAs in 2012 as follows:

> the demonstrable contribution that research makes to the economy, society, culture, national security, public policy or services, health, the environment, or quality of life, beyond contributions to academia (p. 6).

The comments at question 1 above regarding the range of beneficiaries, end-users and research partners apply equally to the definition of impact. We would ask the question about the types of impact within scope of they exercise, noting that one of biggest impacts of university research is tertiary education itself – for example on curricula and research training.

We also see the value of including additional reference to the fact that "impact includes the reduction or prevention of harm, risk, cost or other negative effects" (i.e. the definition used in the REF). This would signal the value of research on key social issues, which can reap significant savings for the nation (through, for example, reductions in the burden of health care) as well as enhance the wellbeing and productivity of the broadest possible population.

In its submission to the Stern Review of the REF, the British Academy argued strongly that the definition of impact should be broadened

> "in order to recognise the different kinds of research impacts and the non-linear nature of the relationship between research and impact. Impact is often achieved through a web of influence rather than linear progression. Impact as defined in REF2014 implied a 'but for' model of causation which is not applicable to the whole range of benefits of research, particularly in HSS [humanities and social sciences]". [5]

The AAH agrees with the British Academy's position that "it must be possible for impacts achieved by researchers that are based on a body of research, knowledge and expertise, rather than on discrete outputs, to be recognised".[6]

The AAH would be concerned if an Australian exercise attempted to focus on narrow impacts or (controversial) measures that sought to prove causal links. General consensus internationally is that engagement is much more amenable to measurement than impact. Our strong preference is for

focus on the substance of research engagements – such as the duration and sustainability of relationships, underlying institutional systems, and indicators of future capacity.

3. How should the scope of the assessment be defined?

The assessment should be broadly scoped, in consultation with the sector, to capture the richness and diversity of engagement activity and be attuned to different disciplinary practices. The drivers should not be about quantity but about quality, substance and the public good.

A broad-scope exercise focusing on university facilitation of engagement and impact has the benefits of limiting transaction/compliance costs.

The AAH favours reference to 'beneficiaries' as well as 'end-users' of research to capture the full scope of the exercise as these are two distinct categories. For example, an end-user of the research may be a government agency who takes up the findings of the research in order for communities to benefit from it.

The AAH agrees that Australian researchers should be encouraged to collaborate more effectively with a range of end-users and beneficiaries: including private sector, not-for profit, community groups, and public sector organisations. As currently conceived, the focus on 'end-users' and 'impact pathways', however, emphasises a one-way, linear approach which is at odds with actual practice (see above). This is also not reflective of disciplinary practice in the humanities, where knowledge exchange and translation involves an iterative and reciprocal process between beneficiaries, end-users and researchers.

The current proposal for a retrospective assessment raises some concerns about how this will set the system up for the future, and the extent to which the exercise will be focused on developing capability. We strongly agree with scoping in 'environment' and 'capability' 'measures. The proposal for impact case studies to focus on university facilitation processes (instead of getting bogged down in causation) is a step in this direction. Impact is a retrospective focus, whereas engagement and environment are about the 'here and now', and capability measures would be focused on the future.

A clear distinction needs to be made between engagement and impact. At times these are conflated in the paper. The AAH sees value in separate/distinct assessment exercises. It is not yet clear how these would relate to each other or to Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA). While ERA is an audit, and it is possible that engagement activities might be more amenable to similar system-wide coverage, a more selective approach to assessing impact by way of case study approach is advisable on the grounds identified in the paper (see p. 7).

The ten principles which will guide the development of specific indicators of engagement and impact (pp. 3-4) are sound. We suggest that the reference to indicators which are "sensitive to a range of research types" should be a stand-alone principle. This is a separate, albeit related, principle to "internationally recognised".

The Consultation Paper's argument for data transparency is well made, but we would emphasise the need for consultation on how to treat culturally sensitive data. Commercial-in-confidence material will also be in this category.

4. ***Would a selective approach using case studies or exemplars to assess impact provide benefits and incentives to universities?***

Yes. The AAH agrees that a comprehensive submission of research impacts may be impractical and costly for universities, so see the value of a selective case study approach. The AAH has been supportive of a case study approach in past submissions on this issue. Case studies are an effective mechanism for assessing impact, whereas metrics-based approaches can be more readily applied to engagement activities. In comprehensive assessments of the REF – HEFCE's independently commissioned assessment, *The Metric Tide* (2015), and more recent call for comment on the REF (Lord Stern's Review, March 2016) – it is clear that case studies are vital to reveal the pathways and depth of the contributions, particularly in the humanities. This holds true for engagement as well as impact.

In order to demonstrate the breadth of research benefits, end-users and beneficiaries of Australia's research efforts, universities must be required to submit case studies or exemplars across a range of fields, to avoid a limited focus on high-income attracting disciplines or those for which other metrics provide an easier solution. It is worth mandating these cover the main two-digit codes. Recognising that research benefits may vary by reach and significance, the AAH would also advise developing criteria for assessment that are context specific. In the Excellence in Innovation for Australia (EIA) trial, for example, there is some indication that projects with international research and influence scored highest. Consideration must be given to adequately recognising locally or regionally-bound research for the significance of benefit relative to reach.

5. ***If case studies or exemplars are used, should they focus on the outcomes of research or the steps taken by the institution to facilitate the outcomes?***

The AAH supports the focus on the steps taken by the institution to facilitate the outcomes. These are, to a significant extent, a function of institutional investment, commitment and capacity building (infrastructure, environment, researchers). Many researchers consider that universities are not rewarding and/or focused on engagement and outreach activities as these are often seen as individual service activities rather than collated and rewarded as research engagement.

The AAH's concern with a fully-fledged impact exercise is that causality and attribution are notoriously difficult to pinpoint. The proposal the ARC is developing seems a smart compromise. Focusing on universities' facilitation processes would not only be more manageable, but, importantly, it would also serve to highlight the distinct stages of research pathways to impact: result of research process; outcomes of research; and coverage of the research (e.g. through media).

We would also emphasise the fundamental role of accessibility of research to a range of audiences. One of the most effective ways of achieving this will be to remove barriers to open access. For research to have use, influence and benefit it first needs to be discoverable and accessible.

6. ***What data is available to universities that could contribute to the engagement and impact assessment?***
    i. ***Should the destination of Higher Degree Research students be included in the scope of the assessment?***

ii. Should other types of students be included or excluded from the scope of assessment (e.g. professional Masters level programmes, undergraduate students)?

The concern here is that universities do not uniformly, systematically or routinely track engagement or impact, so it is difficult to gauge how robust the data will be. It will be important to separate out engagement from impact data as these are also two different forms of assessment. In terms of engagement activities, we agree that adapting ERA 'engagement' measures will be a first step. We do not, however, agree that current ERA data collection (patents; research commercialisation income; grey literature; HERDC category 2-4 income) will be sufficient to capture activities in the humanities. In the ATSE pilot AAH specifically requested in-kind contribution data and audience numbers, but these data are not collected in a systematic way by the participating institutions.

HDR destinations data may have some potential, but not in the form currently collected and reported (i.e. the current Graduate Destinations Survey). These data are not robust. We would observe that more qualitative enquiry is of value in this context. Similarly, the AAH does not consider that the data available on other student outcomes are sufficiently robust or relevant to be used in an assessment regime of research impact or engagement.

Key issues

7. What are the key challenges for assessing engagement and impact and how can these be addressed?

The key challenges will be recognising different disciplinary practices, minimising the data collection burden and mitigating against adverse consequences. In the case of impact assessment, the big issue is time lags and effects.

One of the key issues that the AAH raised in its contribution to the ATSE exercise was that while research income metrics might be a low cost form of assessment, income data is not reliable across all disciplines, nor has it been demonstrated that research income is a proxy for impact. Additional measures are required.

The way to ensure metrics are in service to expert assessment is to use a mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches. In the research sector, the growing use of metrics has highlighted the need for international standards in research evaluation. In April 2015, a group of academic and professional research evaluation experts released the 'Leiden Manifesto' best practice guidelines for metrics-based research evaluation. These principles should guide the development and use of metrics:

1. Quantitative evaluation should support qualitative, expert assessment
2. Measure performance against the research missions of the institution, group or researcher
3. Protect excellence in locally relevant research
4. Keep data collection and analytical processes open, transparent and simple
5. Allow those evaluated to verify data and analysis
6. Account for variation by field in publication and citation practices

7. Base assessment of individual researchers on a qualitative judgement of their portfolio
8. Avoid misplaced concreteness and false precision
9. Recognise the systemic effects of assessment and indicators
10. Scrutinise indicators regularly and update them.[7]

The ARC has indicated that case studies are used for impact assessment, but the AAH also sees the application of such qualitative approaches/statements to assess and contextualise engagement metrics.

8. Is it worthwhile to seek to attribute specific impacts to specific research and, if so, how should impact be attributed (especially in regard to a possible methodology that uses case studies or exemplars)?

As noted earlier, impact is notoriously difficult to attribute. We are not confident that a comprehensive impact assessment exercise in the order of the REF should be attempted. We would reiterate the point made by the British Academy in its feedback on REF 2014: humanities "research that generates and critiques ideas can be long-term and quite diffuse, and not conducive to demonstrating that an outcome happened 'because of' a particular piece of research".[8]

Case studies are a workable methodology, and we agree that the emphasis should be on elucidating universities' impact facilitation processes.

9. To what level of granularity and classification (e.g. ANZSRC Fields of Research) should measures be aggregated?

If seeking to align to ERA then four-digit FoR granularity would be preferable. While two-digit will give a broad picture of benefits, an account of discipline-specific activity will only be possible at the four-digit level.

10. What timeframes should be considered for the engagement activities under assessment?

We would suggest that engagement activities within the last five years would give the most accurate account of effort. It may be useful to draw out (via narrative statements) the ways in which engagement activities are interrelated and their value cumulative.

11. What timeframes should be considered for the impact activities under assessment?

There is often a major time lag between research and its impact which is why REF has opted for 15 years, as did the EIA trial. This will need to be balanced with a focus on current and future capacity.

12. How can the assessment balance the need to minimise reporting burden with robust requirements for data collection and verification?

Working with available discipline-specific data and using methodologies such as network mapping to bring data together to track pathways, flows and nodes. For the humanities, more work is needed on the appropriate methods and standards for data collection and on developing reliable discipline-specific indicators.

13. What approaches or measures can be used to manage the disciplinary differences in research engagement and impact?

The most important approach will be to develop fit-for-purpose indicators that are appropriate to different disciplinary practices. As with ERA, a matrix of indicators is warranted, as is the use of expert panels, and discipline-based assessment of exemplars. We would also encourage clear guidance for universities and research offices to demonstrate research which delivers on a variety of social benefits, and with a broad range of end-users and beneficiaries so that industry (traditionally defined) is not privileged over community engagement or social impact.

One of the design principles of the ATSE exercise was that disciplines were compared like-with-like, which the AAH strongly endorsed.

14. What measures or approaches to evaluation used for the assessment can appropriately account for interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary engagement and impacts?

Arguably, some of the most innovative, engaged and beneficial research is going to be multi- or inter-disciplinary in nature. There is evidence that ERA has encouraged a 'retreat' to disciplines; we need to ensure that multi- and inter-disciplinary research is visible in any engagement and assessment exercise.

Measures that would contribute to the better recognition of interdisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary engagements and impacts would include multiple FoR attribution; range of indicators; case study based accounts which provide context; and the use of multidisciplinary assessment panels. Again, issues with the REF are instructive here. The British Academy's submission to Lord Stern's review suggested that evidence gathered from REF 2014 suggests "that institutions flagged outputs as interdisciplinary only erratically"; it was also evident that there is a widespread perception "that interdisciplinarity is not treated well in the REF" is seen as "a major disincentive to undertaking interdisciplinary work".[9]

Types of engagement and impact indicators

15. What types of engagement indicators should be used?

A range of discipline-specific indicators will be needed: a focus on research income data alone will not sufficiently capture how research delivers economic, social and environmental benefits to the nation and risks the unintended consequences of encouraging researchers to pursue the dollar rather than the engagement.

In the humanities these include event participation statistics (public lectures, cultural events, exhibitions, etc); outreach activities (public lectures, policy engagements, media engagements, community engagements); committee membership; non-traditional academic outputs (research-based websites, e.g. Founders and Survivors, or the Prosecution Project; research and policy reports, etc); in-kind contribution from partner organisations; readership.

We suggest that social network analysis methodologies and indicators could be explored as measures of national and international reach and intensity of research engagement. The AAH has done some work on this in relation to international research collaboration (*Measuring the Value of International Research Collaboration*, report forthcoming).

16. What types of impact indicators should be used?

As noted above, it is vital that diverse, discipline-specific indicators are developed that are relevant to different types of research impact.

The difficulty of quantifying the impact of research translation in the humanities does not mean it should be discounted. Lessons from the REF and *Metrics Tide* report include:

- Metrics are mistrusted by academics cf. peer review; they give "significantly different outcomes" particularly in arts and humanities.
- Metrics are useful in enhancing data for impact and environment studies, but not replacing narrative case studies.
- There is a need for greater specification of precise criteria and data for research assessment and promotion.[10]

17. Are there any additional comments you wish to make?

Australia is often considered an under-performer in research-industry collaboration – at least as is judged by the conventional indexes (such as OECD). This exercise has the potential to expand our thinking about end-user collaboration and give us a much richer picture about the range and potential of research engagement.

On this point, we would observe that humanities researchers collaborate with industry on areas such as community engagement, social impact assessment, native title and resource management and sustainability. This kind of industry engagement does not generally result in commercialisation or significant monetary investment but is nonetheless critical to business.

Recent work undertaken by the AAH for the Department of Industry, Innovation and Science has examined the need for more nuanced qualitative and quantitative measures in order to better understand the complex networks involved in international research collaboration. One key area of focus of this project is what can be learnt from other sectors, especially around ideas of social and cultural value.

We would be happy to elaborate on any of the feedback in this submission. Please direct your initial enquiries to our Executive Director, Dr Christina Parolin.

Professor John Fitzgerald FAHA
President

NOTES

[1] Department of Education (2015) *Review of Research Funding and Policy Arrangements – Report*, p. 3.
[2] See http://impact.ref.ac.uk/CaseStudies/Search1.aspx
[3] Gillies, Malcolm (2015) 'Research Assessment: Beyond Excellence?' Presentation at Australian Academy of the Humanities' *Research Assessment and the Humanities Workshop*, Australian National University, 26 August 2015. See also CHASS (2005) *Measures of Quality and Impact of Publicly Funded Research in the Humanities*, *Arts and Social Sciences* http://www.chass.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/PAP20051101JP.pdf
[4] Australian Research Council (2012) http://www.arc.gov.au/sites/default/files/filedepot/Public/ARC/Research%20Impact/Glossary_for_research_impact.pdf
[5] British Academy (2016) 'Lord Stern's Review of the Research Excellence Framework – A Response from the British Academy', p.5 http://www.britac.ac.uk/sites/default/files/British%20Academy%20Full%20%20Response%20Lord%20Stern%27s%20Review%20of%20REF.pdf
[6] Ibid., p. 5.
[7] Hicks, D., Wouters, P., Waltman, L., de Rijcke, S., and Rafols, I. (2015) 'The Leiden Manifesto for Research Metrics', *Nature*, 520: 429 –431. http://www.nature.com/polopoly_fs/1.17351!/menu/main/topColumns/topLeftColumn/pdf/520429a.pdf
[8] British Academy, op.cit., p. 5.
[9] Ibid., p. 7.
[10] Gillies, op.cit.