

2023 ERA Submission

1. Introduction

The Australian Academy of the Humanities welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the *2023 Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) Benchmarking and Rating* Consultation Paper. Our feedback responds directly to the consultation questions and options presented. We also wish to put on record our support for a review into the ERA process itself to determine whether it is now the most effective means to ensure that Australia's research system is delivering world class research outcomes for the nation, and if it is the most efficient use of public resources given the scale and magnitude of the process.

2. Preferred option

Of the two options presented, the Academy is strongly in favour of Option A, which we believe is easier to implement and provides more opportunities for reconciling citation-based and peer-review disciplines, a stated aim of the Consultation Paper. We support the decision to revise the designated standards employed in the peer review disciplines. The choice of expanding the granularity possible at the upper levels of the rating system is sensible, and acknowledges the difficulties that have emerged in relation to the current rating levels of 4 and 5.

The proposal for Option B, however, calls for a degree of distinction that is not well suited to peer review. Distinguishing three levels of performance under the broad rating of 5 is problematic; it will exacerbate the existing difficulties in generating consistent and robust ratings given the qualitative nature of the peer-review discipline assessment process. We do not support the A-D lettering; other aspects of Option B's wording are also loaded terms.

We are concerned with one aspect of Option A: that despite research being high quality, there is a risk that few humanities, arts and social sciences (HASS) units will achieve the top rating, because it is not *uniformly enough* top quality. This is an institutional reality, rather than a comment on the nature of research in most units in HASS. The research output in almost every HASS unit of evaluation has a long tail, for a variety of reasons. When creative research outputs (non-traditional research outputs – NTROs) are factored in, the likelihood of a uniformly high-quality rating drops further. NTROs have, by and large, tended to be documented less well than critical work.

Further, the HASS codes tend to comprise research from a broad cross section of an institution, unlike many science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) codes. Education and History are just two disciplines which tend to include outputs from researchers well outside any Education or History department or school. There is a risk not only of reputational damage to HASS

but a deepened divide between STEM and HASS within institutions, unless there is some sense of attainability of the top scores, across a full range of disciplines.

3. Assessment process

3.1 Advice to peer reviewers

The proposed changes to the advice given to peer reviewers are well designed and are welcome. They are likely to result in a more consistent structure to their reports which, in itself, will assist greatly in making comparative judgements. However, the primary difficulty that Research Evaluation Committees (RECs) have found with peer reviews – that is, the wide variation in expertise and experience among peer reviewers themselves – remains. While many universities have nominated peer reviewers that are early in their careers as a means of building their experience and capacities, the consequence of this has been that many of the more junior peer reviewers lack the experience to make the kind of high-level distinctions required of them. It is important that universities nominate senior and experienced staff to take on these roles, there is strong evidence that this is not happening consistently. The ARC must play a strong hand in assessing whether candidates proposed by institutions possess the necessary experience and seniority to undertake the role.

The Consultation Paper notes: “The ARC intends to revise the existing questions to prompt reviewers to consistently identify high performing and world leading research.” This will need to be clarified so that researchers have confidence that their disciplines can even be considered to have qualities towards the top end of the rating scale. Essential here is detailed training for both peer assessors and REC members – what is proposed in the Paper as well as additional in-person guidance and examples.

3.2 Research Evaluation Committee resourcing and workload

The role of the RECs in peer review disciplines is the backbone of the process, and a high level of expertise is needed to exercise judgement. We welcome changes to ensure RECs can override miscoded outputs. We would also suggest a citation dashboard for peer-reviewed disciplines (for the RECs) would be valuable to place disciplines into context and evaluate ‘wayward’ assessor reports.

A perennial and serious issue impacting the ERA exercise is the disproportionate workload carried by REC members in the peer review disciplines, and especially in those humanities and creative arts (HCA) disciplines where books have remained the gold standard for research quality. While this is not directly addressed in the Consultation Paper, it needs to be among the changes considered as a means of improving the design of the process and the integrity of the outcomes for ERA in the future, as well as ensuring greater equity in terms of the time commitment required of REC members across the panels.

4. New Fields of Research / Units of Evaluation

The rubric under FoR 45 Indigenous studies requires further work; including discussion with those working in Indigenous studies to better determine how work in the FoR might be adequately and appropriately assessed. We are concerned about practical implementation, specifically:

- There is some confusion as to how (or if) the work of non-Indigenous scholars within FoR 45 will be included, as well as the manner in which scholars' Indigeneity will be calibrated within a system that does not focus on individual researchers.
- It is important for these scholars that ERA both monitors and drives increasing quality in Indigenous studies, meaning the focus of this assessment is firmly on the quality of the work itself as the primary factor. The guidance currently given to peer reviewers of FoR 45 is about ethics and ontologies, not about quality (see p.21 of the Consultation Paper).
- Most outputs that end up in FoR 45 will be research related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (rather than the other parts of the ABS definition – i.e., research undertaken by Indigenous researchers or research undertaken using Indigenous worldviews. The proposed guidance (pp 21–22) only relates to the latter two elements of the ABS definition, i.e. "This division covers research that significantly:
 1. relates to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Māori, Pacific, and other Indigenous peoples, nations, communities, languages, places, cultures or knowledges and/or
 2. incorporates or utilises Indigenous methodologies/ways of knowing, theories, practice and/or
 3. is undertaken with or by these peoples, nations or communities."
- The entirety of FoR 45 will be peer reviewed, despite many of the 4-digit codes sitting under it being traditionally assessed via citations (e.g. health). This will have repercussions for workload and resourcing and will require strategies to mitigate the extra burden on Indigenous assessors.
- An additional complication for smaller disciplines at some universities (e.g. archaeology, anthropology, history etc) is that they now need to split outputs between their 'home' 4-digit code and a 4-digit code in FoR 45, presenting some challenges to reach the low volume threshold in either.

Finally, little has been said of the changes to the FoR codes and the effects on disciplines in HASS, beyond the changes to the new FoR 45. While the more granular nature of the new FoR codes is helpful in many ways, that granularity has a direct effect on the threshold for assessment. In an environment when so many smaller disciplines are already at risk (and not just because of the effects of the pandemic), failure to reach a threshold could well be 'death knell'. A change to the 'threshold' rules is vital to prevent many more disciplines effectively being invisible and 'going under', a situation that could be even more pronounced in the next ERA after 2023.

On this point, we also wish to raise for consideration the weighting of outputs in NTRO-rich disciplines, which is of relevance to the low-volume threshold issue. In the Academy's consultations for this submission, we have been discussing the potential for a rating scale to

acknowledge and weight 'book-length' equivalent NTROs, specifically in creative and performing arts fields.

5. Timing and further consultation

This consultation process is occurring very late, for reasons beyond the control of the ARC or the sector. The decisions are yet to be made on a model that is to be implemented next year. These changes will need to be communicated more widely and thoroughly socialised beyond just the Consultation Paper. Key among this messaging needs to be that the new version of ERA (whatever option is chosen) is not punitive but a means to detect excellence. It is too easy to see the new guidelines as seeking to dismiss or diminish research quality. Rather, they need to be presented so that they clearly aim to identify excellence. This is an important opportunity to rebuild trust between the ARC and the sector.

We would welcome the opportunity to be involved in further improvements to process and specifically to a broader review of ERA and its fitness for purpose into the future.