

# Australian Catholic University

## **Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Training**

*Inquiry into the Efficiency, Effectiveness  
and Coherency of Australian  
Government Funding for Research*

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# **Submission to the Inquiry into the Efficiency, Effectiveness and Coherency of Australian Government Funding for Research**

## **Overview**

Australian Catholic University (ACU) appreciates the opportunity to make a submission to the Standing Committee's inquiry into the Efficiency, Effectiveness and Coherency of Australian Government Funding for Research.

ACU underscores the significance of undertaking research to national innovation and progression. The research activity undertaken by Australia's universities, in particular, makes an enormous contribution to the research base of Australia, which underpins and enhances the economic, social and cultural capital of our nation.

Moreover, the pursuit of research at Australian universities informs and enhances the quality and currency of teaching and learning within universities.

To ensure that research funding is effectively invested and targeted to support and foster research excellence in Australia, ACU believes that Government should be guided by the following principles.

The Australian Government should:

- Strongly affirm that meaningful research activity is an essential characteristic of an Australian university. This is vital to ensuring that Australia maintains a world class and internationally competitive university system.
- Recognise the vital connection between university research, teaching and learning, which underpins scholarship and innovation. To this end, Government must protect the Commonwealth Grant Scheme funding structure, which enables universities to pursue research objectives to the benefit of the quality of teaching and the development of a culture of knowledge.
- Support a diversified research landscape:
  - where universities are funded to undertake quality research, particularly in their areas of research strength; and
  - which encourages concentrations of expertise, accepting that concentrations of research strength can occur in a variety of locations. In this respect, Government should promote a large and diverse university research sector, not a binary system where only a select few universities research while others engage only in teaching.
- Facilitate active engagement in strategies to build international research engagement and collaborations. There is significant advantage to be gained from tapping into research talent and advances overseas by collaborating with the world's leading researchers and research institutes.

With respect to specific matters concerning the efficiency, effectiveness and coherency of Australian Government funding for research, ACU makes the following recommendations to Government to improve the assessment and administration of research funding, to foster and support research excellence in Australia.

The Australian Government should:

- Focus on research quality over quantity in research assessment and administration, particularly with respect to Research Block Grant funding.
- Maintain the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) scheme, which currently provides the best assessment of university research quality in Australia.
- Require the Australian Research Council (ARC) to place a cap on the number of grant applications universities can submit each year; perhaps for example, having reference to the number of successful applications from the previous year(s).
- Facilitate greater alignment between institutional research strategies and strengths, and the funding provided for research. This can, in part, be achieved by allocating dedicated funding to university research that achieves ERA ratings of 4 (above world standard) and 5 (well above world standard).
- Better streamline – and increase efficiencies in – research assessment processes by:
  - extending the use of citations in the ERA assessment process to all disciplines; and
  - raising the minimum threshold for ERA assessment from 50 publications to 100 publications.
- Ensure the assessment of research impact and engagement recognises that:
  - achieving impact and engagement extends beyond generating ideas or designing products to create profits in a commercial sector sense, and encompasses research that generates service delivery efficiencies or other outcomes that can save government and industry money, whether in the immediate or longer term; and
  - metrics should be used in conjunction with case studies, as metrics alone are insufficient to assess research impact and engagement, and are not sufficiently sensitive to disciplinary differences.

## **Reform the Research Block Grants: Reward research quality, not quantity**

ACU submits that there should be greater focus and promotion of research quality over quantity in the assessment and administration of research funding in Australia, particularly with respect to Research Block Grant (RBG) funding. This would better serve research excellence in Australia and more effectively advance the objective of high quality research, particularly by freeing up additional resources for better investment in high quality research and researchers.

The current research assessment systems, which underpin the measurement and funding of research, are skewed by quantitative measures. The Federal Government distributes nearly \$2 billion through the RBG on the basis of quantitative measures, rather than for the achievement of high quality outcomes. This occurs because ‘research income’ is a key measure in determining the quantum of RBG funds awarded to each university.

‘Research income’ includes money spent by a university on:

- staff who conduct or support research (including technical, professional and administrative staff);
- travel related to research; and
- stipends for research students.

In essence, the current system rewards universities for spending money, including wasteful expenditure. The more money universities spend on a research activity, the more reward they receive from government through the RBG, irrespective of the need for, or quality of, the research. This drives an incentive for each university to churn money through the system for the sake of generating money, rather than for a strategic purpose.

To provide a simple illustrative example: University A and University B conduct the same research project and deliver the same outcomes. University A spends \$1 million and University B spends \$2 million. Under the RBG, the government gives twice as much money to University B as to University A.

While RBG funding plays a significant and important role in supporting research in Australia, the basis of allocation of funding under the scheme needs to establish greater incentive for institutions to achieve quality research. Grants should be allocated for the real cost of the research. Furthermore, the RBG should not be used to compensate for inadequate grant allocations.

The current focus on quantitative data, rather than the quality of the research, also runs counter to the policy driving the Excellence in Research for Australia scheme, which is designed to encourage quality research.

## **Maintain the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) scheme**

ACU believes that the ERA scheme, which assesses the quality of research conducted in Australian higher education institutions, should be maintained. ERA is currently the best assessment of university research quality in Australia.

The ERA scheme provides a powerful incentive for universities to concentrate on high quality research and innovation, rather than merely high volume output. It seeks to “evaluate the quality of

the research undertaken in Australian universities against national and international benchmarks”, with ratings determined by committees of highly reputed domestic and international researchers.<sup>1</sup>

ERA identifies the research strengths of individual universities and highlights disciplines in which there are opportunities to develop research capacity. A five-point rating scale is used to identify an individual university’s research performance in each of its assessed research areas, with the ratings as follows: 5 (well above world standard); 4 (above world standard); 3 (at world standard); 2 (below world standard); or 1 (well below world standard).

The ERA scheme provides an independent and dedicated assessment of the quality of research undertaken in Australian universities. The scheme is focused on research quality and identifies how universities are actually performing.

Unlike some international or world rankings of university research, ERA rankings do not take institutional reputation(s) into account. Such a consideration is a subjective measure, based on survey scores, which bears no relationship to the actual quality of research.

ERA rankings and results therefore rightly do not duplicate (nor necessarily correlate with) world rankings of research. If research funding policy is to effectively support and incentivise high quality, internationally competitive research, funding must be allocated on the basis of the quality of actual research output by universities, rather than on the basis of historic reputational advantage that some universities may unduly benefit from.

### **Refine the Australian Research Council (ARC) grant application process**

The ARC grant application process is currently swamped by an excessive number of applications, many of which are not strong.

To illustrate, applications for ARC Discovery Projects had a success rate of just 17.8% in 2017. Out of 3,540 applications, only 630 were successful.<sup>2</sup>

This is costly and wastes a large amount of time, especially that of expert assessors. The system needs a significant change. The money and resources currently directed towards the onerous administrative burden of the existing assessment system would be better invested supporting research activities and providing additional research grants.

The ARC should place a cap on, or otherwise limit, the number of grant applications submitted each year. Universities could, for example, be permitted to submit no more than three times the number of successful applications from the previous year – or they could average the number of successful applications from the last three years. This could be subject to a minimum – or floor – number of permitted applications so as not to disadvantage smaller institutions, which may have greater fluctuations in success rates from year to year.

This would encourage all institutions to more carefully scrutinise and screen applications that are submitted to the ARC, and to discard weak applications. That is, it would promote better quality control or ‘self-regulation’ of applications by institutions at the pre-lodgement stage. Currently, there are too many ‘isolated’ applications. Universities would thereby be incentivised to cull applications

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Research Council – Australian Government, ‘Excellence in Research for Australia 2018 Update’, at [http://www.arc.gov.au/sites/default/files/filedepot/Public/Media%20&%20Resources%20Centre/Presentations/Standard Slides/ARC-ERA-EI-2018.pdf](http://www.arc.gov.au/sites/default/files/filedepot/Public/Media%20&%20Resources%20Centre/Presentations/Standard%20Slides/ARC-ERA-EI-2018.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> For further details see Australian Research Council – Australian Government, ‘Selection Outcome Reports’, at <http://www.arc.gov.au/selection-outcome-reports>

internally, which could also improve the alignment between individual research grant applications and each institution's research strategy.

Such an approach would reduce the resources currently expended on processing weaker applications, alleviating some of the pressures on the ARC to find suitable and appropriately qualified assessors to evaluate applications by better confining their workload to stronger, higher quality applications.

### **Align research funding with institutional research strategies and strengths**

ACU advocates the promotion of greater alignment of institutional research strategies/strengths with the funding provided for research. Currently, the alignment of research projects with institutional research strategies and priorities is not considered by assessors or the ARC in allocating research funding.

ACU recommends that funding policy and strategies should operate to support research intensification across all universities. In particular, funding policy should be geared to encourage greater concentrations of research excellence, and a competitive and strategic allocation of funding based on well-articulated research plans and assessment of performance. This can in part be achieved by using the ERA.

Some funding should be allocated to institutional research scoring ERA ratings of 4 and 5. This is likely to increase funding allocations to areas that have critical mass and an overall level of research excellence. In support of this goal, the minimum threshold for ERA assessment should be raised from 50 publications to 100 publications (see below).

### **Streamline the assessment process and increase efficiencies in the assessment system**

In order to better streamline and increase efficiencies in research assessment and administration processes, ACU submits that the Australian Government should:

- extend the use of citations in the ERA assessment process to all disciplines; and
- raise the benchmark for ERA assessment from 50 publications to 100 publications.

At present, only some disciplines are assessed based on citation analysis, while others – typically research in the humanities and social sciences disciplines – are assessed on peer review as indicators of research quality in the ERA assessment process.

The peer review process involves relevant experts (from Australia and overseas) reviewing samples of research outputs submitted for assessment. Only those disciplines where citation rates are lower are assessed by peer review, resulting in a varied approach to assessment across disciplines. Peer review is a largely subjective measure, relying on reported measures of the quality of research, rather than empirical data. Furthermore, it is labour-intensive, requiring large time commitments from experts and coordination by the ARC.

Extending the use of citation analysis to all disciplines would facilitate both greater uniformity and greater objectivity in the assessment process. It would also reduce some of the administrative burden associated with identifying and securing appropriate experts to undertake the reviews.

ACU also recommends that Government reform the research data collection requirements for publications by adopting a higher threshold (ideally 100 publications) than the current minimum threshold of 50 publications for ERA assessment. While the current ERA evaluation process

maintains a low volume threshold for individual units of evaluation (UoEs) to “ensure that ERA evaluates meaningful levels of data”,<sup>3</sup> ACU considers that the current threshold of 50 publications is too low. This threshold should be increased to ensure that there is a higher base level of research output, or critical mass, with respect to research that is being assessed. This would better promote research excellence while also reducing some of the administrative burden of considering research with a very low level of output. It would also ensure that the time spent on assessment is allocated only to those areas where universities are making meaningful investment – prompting them to focus on quality over quantity, as it will generally reduce the number of UoEs in which an institution is assessed.

### **Adopt a holistic approach to assessing research impact and engagement**

ACU recommends that Government take a holistic approach to assessing the impact and engagement of research. Assessment should particularly recognise that impact and engagement may not necessarily involve research outcomes that directly create large profits in the commercial private sector. Significantly, it may involve generating research findings that create service delivery efficiencies, more effective interventions and treatments and other outcomes that can save government and industry money or improve productivity, whether in the immediate or longer term.

ACU makes these observations as a university with specialisations and core strengths in education and health, and with key industry partners in the public sector and education and health services providers, which present unique research opportunities.

Furthermore, metrics alone are insufficient to assess research impact and engagement and are not sufficiently sensitive to disciplinary differences. Metrics should be used in conjunction with case studies. For some disciplines, for example theology, case studies may be more relevant than some metrics such as commercialisation, patents and even competitive and other sources of funding.

ACU supports an approach to the assessment of impact and engagement that, as far as possible, uses existing data collections, supplemented by well-defined and outcomes-focussed case studies to provide an accurate picture of impact and engagement.

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<sup>3</sup> Australian Research Council – Australian Government, ‘ERA 2018 Submission Guidelines’, at <http://www.arc.gov.au/sites/default/files/filedepot/Public/ERA/ERA%202018/ERA%202018%20Submission%20Guidelines.pdf>