Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) Initiative

Making a Submission in Response to the *ERA Consultation Paper*

June 2008
EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH FOR AUSTRALIA (ERA) INITIATIVE: CONSULTATION PAPER

Submission Cover Page

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation Name (if applicable)</th>
<th>Flinders University</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Address</td>
<td>GPO Box 2100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>Bedford Park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>SA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postcode</td>
<td>5001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Name of Contact Person           | Jenny Smith        |
| Position                         | ERA Liaison Officer|
| Phone                            | 08 8201 2525       |
| Email                            | jenny.smith@flinders.edu.au |

Does the organisation consent to having its submission identified in a report on the outcomes of this submission process to be prepared by the ARC, which could be made publicly available on the ARC’s website? (Y/N) Yes

| Name of Authorising Person       | Professor Chris Marlin |
| Position                         | Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research) |
| Phone                            | 08 8201 2683           |
| Email                            | chris.marlin@flinders.edu.au |
| Signature                        | (required for hard copies only) |

Flinders University: response to ERA Consultation Paper Submitted 4 July 2008
It would be preferable to collect the data once only at the four-digit level, and then to aggregate to the two-digit level as required. We do not believe that 2-digit level will provide sufficient granularity for internal reporting purposes.

The coding of all research outputs will be a significant resource burden for the University. Whilst IAP and ASHER funding has been provided for 2008, this funding was allocated based on the RQF requirements when retrospective FoR coding was not required. Thus, this new reporting burden is unfunded.

We estimate the coding load for the University to be 502 days of effort; this estimate is based on 14000 in the publications in the current (and future) census period and a minimum of 10 minutes per publication.

It is also the case that institutions will need to implement new systems to capture FoR codes.

We do not believe that the choice of the 2- or 4-digit level for reporting purposes has any significant impact on the span of the reference period.

As made clear in previous submissions, in relation to the RQF, Flinders University strongly advocates that Academic Status holders be permitted as eligible researchers under the ERA, counting not just their FTE effort but also all of their research activity. They should be seamlessly integrated into the ERA assessment process as they are into our research community.

Flinders University has always operated an integrated research community, covering both those who are employed by Flinders University and those who have Full Academic Status with the University. This is especially true of those working in medical and health areas, where we established the first integrated Medical School and hospital in Australia in 1976. It is equally true of areas such as the School of Theology, where the University employs no academic staff directly.
At Flinders, we pride ourselves on the seamless integration of our Academic Status holders into our research community and they are supported for their research in precisely the same way as those staff paid through the University. These valuable members of the Flinders community are completely embedded in University activities, including those pertaining to administration, teaching, research and community engagement. Academic Status holders are able to utilize the same University resources which are provided to our salaried staff, including: internal research funding schemes; access to research facilities and infrastructure; and administrative support for their research activities.

These Full Academic Status holders make a highly significant contribution to the University’s overall performance. This performance is currently reported to Government alongside that of staff employed through Flinders University and contributes to the funding support from Government for research. A failure to include these invaluable researchers in any assessment of our research profile will lead to division within our research community and has the potential to severely dislocate our relations with the Flinders Medical Centre and other affiliated hospitals and health services. This, in turn, would have a very negative impact on the willingness of such staff to continue to contribute strongly to our clinical and other teaching activities.

In the context of the RQF, it was suggested that the research performance of Australian universities without the inclusion of Academic Status staff under an RQF can be used as a proxy for the research performance of those same universities with the inclusion of Academic Status staff. This would only be true if the relative contribution of Academic Status staff to university research performance was consistent across all Australian universities, which is clearly not the case.

Thus, an ERA excluding such staff has the potential to give a distorted picture of research across the Australian higher education system. If there were to be a link between ERA assessments and funding at some point, universities whose relative position has suffered from the exclusion of these staff are likely to withdraw research support from them, with a consequent reduction in the number of research active staff in areas such as health. It is difficult to believe that this reduction in the number of active researchers in the country is an intended consequence of the ERA.

Jointly with the University of Newcastle, during the RQF consultation process, we supplied possible criteria for inclusion of Academic Status holders in the RQF context. We would be pleased to work with the ARC in refining these criteria in the context of ERA.

In summary, Flinders University strongly advocates that academic status holders be permitted as eligible researchers under the ERA, integrated seamlessly into the process (as they are, for example, under the RAE in the UK), consistent with the way that they are included in our research community.
Overall comment

At the moment, the suggested indicators of research quality appear to imply an over-reliance on publications. As noted below, there are also a number of problems with the current state of assessing publication-based output, especially with the journal rankings exercise. The assessment process would be made more robust, and more inclusive of the broad range of disciplines being assessed, if the collection of indicators were to be widened considerably.

Publications

Very serious concerns have been raised regarding the legitimacy and hence appropriate utility of the draft journal rankings which have been released for consultation and proposed as a basis for the evaluation of publication output quality in the impending trial of ERA processes involving Cluster 2.

Particular concern – if not outright incredulity – has been expressed in several institutions across the sector regarding the rankings for Law, which have variously been described as “shambolic” and “an embarrassment to the ARC on any measure”. Similarly, the credibility of the rankings and of the processes used has been seriously questioned by senior academics from a number of other disciplines in the humanities, including those in Film Television and Digital Media, Communication and Media Studies and Creative Writing. Others have expressed serious concerns regarding the lists for Literary Studies and Linguistics which would appear to undervalue journals published in languages other than English, both by omission and by ranking. Similarly, undervaluing of on-line journals has been identified as an issue.

The quality of the rankings list provided is so poor in some areas that it is difficult to regard as a serious starting point for discussion. Accordingly, there is a widespread view that the lists have simply not yet been through a sufficiently extended and rigorous collection and evaluation process that enables, ultimately, a credible ranking which can be used for the assessment process.

Other indicators

The proposed indicators of research quality mention research income, but only “peer reviewed research income”. The ARC will have to broaden its view of research income in order to fairly judge research quality across a broad range of disciplines. There are many forms of research income which attest to the quality of the research being funded, without formal review by other researchers. Examples include being invited by industry or government to conduct contract research because of research reputation, previous work done (“return business”) and for other legitimate reasons.

The list of indicators of research quality would also benefit from the inclusion of some esteem factors, such as membership of learned academies, prestigious
fellowships, membership of editorial boards and keynote speaker invitations for significant international conferences.

**Indicators of Success in Applied Research and Translation of Research Outcomes, page 8**

4. What other discipline-specific measures of excellence in applied research and translation of research outcomes should be considered by the Indicators Development Group, and how should they be benchmarked?

The suggested indicators of success in applied research and translation of research outcomes are a reasonable starting point, but would be strengthened by other indicators such as:

- invitations to conduct contract research and return business in contract research (see item 3, above);
- contract research, in general, and its impact on the partner organisation;
- research-based consultancies, especially over an extended period with the same organisation.

5. We would welcome suggestions regarding types of practitioner-focused outlets that may indicate excellence in applied research or translation.

This is a discipline-specific matter will require significant attention by the IDG, in consultation with individual disciplines. There are many practice-focused journals and practice-focused peer reviewed conference publications; these are suggested in this university as a means, for example, of corroborating the quality of applied research and specifically research with industry, for the purposes of academic staff promotions.

**Research Income Data, page 9**

6. How feasible is it to collect category 2-4 research income data at four-digit FoR? Are there specific issues for each category for retrospective collection? Are there specific issues for future collections in Category 3?

We believe that it is feasible to collect research income data at the 4-digit FoR code level. We see no specific issues in terms of retrospective collection, apart from the effort required. We believe that data collected over a 6-year period is likely to be more stable and thus provide a more reliable picture of research income success. Data should be indexed (say, using CPI) to current dollar value.

We have no particular issues to raise in relation to Category 3 data.
7. Are all the income categories necessary or appropriate? What additional income streams could be collected under Category 5?

Given that there is already a lot of inaccuracy in the collection of research income data and hence doubts about its validity as a true indicator of research activity (as a result of “game playing”), it would be a pity to increase this inaccuracy further by widening the definition of research income too far.

Perhaps Australia Council grants to individuals to conduct research, corroborated by potential or realised research outputs, could simply be included in Category 2.

It may be useful to include a new category for research infrastructure funding (e.g., LIEF and NCRIS), but this raises some difficult issues around sharing of these grants, which are invariably multi-institutional.

In any case, given the inaccuracies built into all research income data, it is important that those carrying out the assessment have an understanding of these inaccuracies, perhaps through appropriate training activities.

8. What would the most useful research income reference period be for ERA, considering this does not need to be the same as the six-year publications reference period (see page 10)?

On the one hand, a 6-year period would provide a more stable indicator of performance. However, this needs to be balanced with the more accurate assessment of current performance for those institutions whose performance is changing rapidly, which would result from a shorter period. (But note the comments above about the inherent inaccuracies in this indicator.)

Overall, it would seem that a shorter period – say, three years – would be sufficient and would better reflect current performance. This would also assist with the workload involved in retrospective analysis against 4-digit FoR codes.

9. How practical is it to request numbers of successful grants in addition to research income?

Such a measure appears practical and sensible, but the term “grants awarded” (in the Consultation Paper) or “successful grants” (in the question above) would need to be defined appropriately for all relevant categories of income. Specifically, is not clear whether it is intended that such categories would include research contracts, consultancies and similar kinds of income.
Research Publications Data, page 10

10. A list of other possible publications types is provided in Appendix B of the Consultation Paper. We are seeking feedback on whether there is support for these types to be included for individual disciplines and whether these categories are appropriately identified.

The issue that needs to be resolved is whether the publication measure is trying to capture everything that represents a "quality" publication or whether it is intended as a proxy for the quality of publications overall for this institution in this cluster. The current four categories were intended to be a proxy for publication performance at an institutional level; even if the new measure is also a proxy – in this case for performance at a cluster level – it is clear that the categories will have to be expanded to ensure reasonably accurate assessments at the cluster level.

A suitable set of publication categories would be the following:

- Book - Authored Research
- Book - Edited
- Book Chapter - In Research Books
- Journal Article - Refereed, Scholarly Journal
- Journal Article - Other Contribution to Scholarly Reviewed Journal
- Journal Article - Letter or Note
- Conference Publication - Full Paper Refereed,

representing an expansion on the current HERDC categories, but not as wide a collection process as that represented by the list in Appendix B.

In addition, we believe that consideration should also be given to: awarded patents (noting the issues that will arise with regard to length of the reference period), exhibitions, major original creative works (created, recorded, written or performed), translations and some forms of research/technical reports.

Publication Reference Period(s), page 10

11. Should all non-publication data be collected over a shorter reference period? If so, what would that period be?

As noted in relation to Question 8 above, three years would be appropriate for research income.

Higher degree load is relatively stable for most institutions and so three years would be an appropriate period here as well.

Higher degree completions tend to vary a great deal for most institutions (because of the small numbers often involved) and so integration over a longer period – say 6 years – would be needed to give a more accurate result.
Please provide comment on the above approaches for attributing publications.

Approach 1 – staff affiliation at census date

Flinders University is opposed to the use of a single census cut-off date to define eligible staff for inclusion in the ERA process. There is no doubt that this will encourage a “transfer market” in researchers, with wealthy institutions being able to buy researchers and the track record that they will bring with them from institutions that have supported them through most of the reference period. If this is the government’s intention, this should be made explicit – certainly, it is a forth of research concentration – rather than denying that it will occur. It has occurred elsewhere with a similar approach and we can expect it here.

Approach 2 – institution affiliation based on HERDC

Flinders University strongly endorses the use of “institution affiliation based on HERDC” as the appropriate approach for inclusion of staff in the ERA. This allows the inclusion of research outputs of staff who have retired or who are on secondment but were employed at the census date. In addition, it ensures the inclusion of research outputs of staff who have been supported by the institution for the census period and discourages staff poaching close to a census date. What ERA should be measuring is the research carried out at an institution, not who is at an institution when the music stops.

Which citation data suppliers in your experience result in the most meaningful citation analysis for each of the disciplines?

Both Thompson Reuters Scientific and SCOPUS are both useful in covering all relevant domains.

We eagerly anticipate the outcome of the data testing and cleaning being managed by the ARC.

Broadly, we are comfortable that we can provide this data. It should, however, be noted that the research interests of a student (and indeed many researchers) may be broader than a single FoR code and therefore multiple coding of a student's research areas may be required.
15. Do you see value in tagging research outputs as authored by HDR students and value in the analyses this will produce?

It is not clear how the (external) assessment process will be facilitated by this tagging. There may be some utility for internal analysis, but we can do this if we find it useful.

Submission, page 13

16. Institutions are invited to comment on the ease or otherwise of meeting any of the data requirements outlined in this document in addition to the specific questions addressed under particular headings.

We have no additional comments to make beyond those made elsewhere.

Reporting, pages 14 and 15

17. We propose there is considerable value in having maximum flexibility and utility with respect to reporting, however, we also recognise the workload involved for institutions in assigning reporting codes. We welcome feedback on this issue in respect to both the feasibility and value of such an approach.

For the last couple of decades, the Australian government has encouraged universities to nominate areas of research strength and to promote these; the government has also developed schemes, such as the CRC program, to drive universities to identify research concentrations of various kinds. The result is a rich and complex array of research aggregations which differentiate universities and address real industry problems, frequently ignoring discipline boundaries as they do so. No other country has had quite the same policy environment leading up to a research quality evaluation exercise as Australia has in this regard.

The proposed ERA assessment process operates on a discipline basis, through the discipline clusters. There is thus a clear mismatch between the Australian research landscape and the research quality evaluation exercise proposed to assess it.

Allowing institutions to associate other codes with the data being provided – say for a multidisciplinary CRC crossing more than one ERA cluster – may be of some value, but does not address a fundamental issue with the proposed ERA framework.

Examples of Indicators Outputs – Research Training, pages 16 and 17

18. Institutions are invited to comment on the feasibility or otherwise of institutions identifying student authorship in previous HERDC collections.

In principle, we see this as feasible. However, as noted above in relation to Question 15, it is not clear how the (external) assessment process will be facilitated by the proposed identification of student authorship.
Other comments

It is noted that the ERA Consultation Paper is principally a specification of desirable characteristics of ERA, rather than an indicator of how these will be achieved. Notwithstanding the IDG process to develop cluster-specific indicators, the University looks forward to the opportunity to review the draft Submission Guidelines (due for release in August), as we anticipate that these will describe the mechanisms by which the ERA objectives will be achieved.