

IRU Response to the Assessing the wider benefits arising from university-based research discussion paper

16 August 2013

Overview

Innovative Research Universities (IRU) members are eager to further the discussion on research impact and to contribute to the development of a national approach to communicating the benefits of Australian research and the development of any impact assessment exercise.

The *Assessing the wider benefits arising from university-based research* discussion paper responds to the question of how we should recognise and assess the benefits of university research. While advancing the discussion, the paper does not make a convincing case for any of the specific approaches outlined within. The IRU:

- agrees with the need for universities to clearly and confidently communicate the benefits that arise from their research, while paying close attention to the many different groups this information is communicated to;
- recommends that greater consideration be given to the potential of linking assessment outcomes to funding programs. Any linking of impact assessment to funding programs should be established in consultation with the sector well in advance of embarking on any assessment, or pilot exercise;
- suggests the Department should be more upfront about the significant resource implications of any assessment exercise. This will allow a more forthright discussion as to the merits of various approaches weighed against resourcing implications;
- appreciates the value of the case study approach in communicating research benefit while cautioning against any suggestion of institution level assessment of case studies and any attempt to link case study assessments to funding outcomes;
- does not believe a strong case has been made for the collection of research engagement metrics at this time. It will first be necessary to demonstrate the direct link between any individual indicator and eventual research benefit before undertaking an assessment exercise that may influence future university activity; and
- suggests the creation of a steering committee with membership from universities, research users and the department to more fully explore the outcomes, design and implications of any assessment exercise before proceeding with any trial.

Definitions

The department should reconsider the use of the term 'research engagement' as a definition as this distracts from the primary purposes of assessing the benefits arising from research and describing pathways to research benefit.

Research engagement implies the range of activities and supporting policies and investments that allow universities to collaborate with colleagues in government, industry and other publicly and privately funded research institutions. While a necessary feature of research practice for multiple reasons, none of the activities listed in the discussion paper has been adequately demonstrated to be an actual pathway to research benefit.

The discussion would be better served by referring to 'pathways to research benefit' where 'research engagement' has been otherwise used to better focus on the issue.

www.iru.edu.au

Aims

Clearly defined and agreed aims and outcomes are necessary to determine the specific approaches to assessment taken, and indeed to justify an impact assessment exercise at all.

Demonstrating the broader benefits of university-based research is important and universities already dedicate resources to this task. Universities must assure governments and the general public that public investment in research provides benefit to individuals, communities and the nation. Partners in industry and the not-for-profit sector must also be assured that their investments in universities are worthwhile.

An exercise in assessing the benefits of university-based research may provide a means to better demonstrate research impact to the wider community, but it must also be flexible enough to effectively communicate research impact to various constituencies.

The second and fourth listed aims refer to identifying the successful pathways to research benefit and developing an evidence base upon which to facilitate future engagement. Certainly such knowledge would be valuable to universities and research end-users, but it is not clear how a research impact assessment exercise, particularly one based on the collection of standardised datasets, would achieve these aims.

Common pathways to research benefit may emerge from the analysis of case studies, but they also may not, or may be industry or discipline specific. The identification of the pathways to research benefit is an important objective of this process but the exercise should not presuppose what these pathways are or that they are common or relevant to the broad spectrum of research and engagement undertaken in Australia's universities.

Outcomes

To provide an evidence base for universities, government and others is a relevant outcome against the first aim. The focus on identifying the research benefits and the pathways to achieving them would likely promote interaction with research users and promote the value of Australian universities' research, the second and third outcomes listed.

The last two outcomes, of providing the basis for university level benchmarks and linking to funding allocations, are unlikely to be achieved in any viable sense based on the proposals in the discussion paper and considering the datasets currently available. The ability to achieve either outcome would depend on whether a much more nuanced set of data that reflects accurately all relevant research activity can be created and whether the effort involved would be justified.

Linking funding allocations to any assessment of case studies would be particularly problematic. Case studies cannot offer a comprehensive assessment of the impact of university research or research within a specific discipline. Case studies are not suited to comparison within or across institutions, precluding the reduction of case studies to ratings that could be further aggregated or ranked. A link to funding, or even attempts to present relative information about universities, will not work.

Principles for design and implementation

Principle 2: Minimise administrative burden

The principle of minimising the administrative burden is acknowledged as a priority for both government and universities, but the approaches to assessment in the discussion paper run contrary to this principle. IRU network members that participated in the Excellence in Innovation for Australia (EIA) trial found it a valuable exercise, though extensive resources were required to produce the small number of case studies submitted.

Any creation of a national assessment using case studies will therefore involve considerable work by universities. This should be stated upfront and considered in developing any assessment system.

Principle 3: Encourage research engagement and collaboration, and research that benefits the nation

This further confuses the distinct ideas of research engagement and pathways to research benefit. Research engagement and collaboration is already very well incentivised through research block grants and various competitive grant schemes. This principle would make research engagement and collaboration an end in itself, presupposing that engagement of whatever kind is a pathway to benefit, when in fact the objective of the process is to identify what the pathways to research benefit actually are. The problem goes back to the discussion paper's definitions, with the conflation of research engagement and collaboration and pathways to research benefit weakening the cases made for an impact assessment exercise throughout, particularly so for the proposed research engagement metrics collection.

Principle 4: Involve research users

This is a necessary principle for the effective assessment of research benefit and its value has been clearly demonstrated through EIA.

Principle 5: Collect and assess at the institution level, with some granularity by discipline

This principle is concerning, specifically for the assessment of case studies. The benefits arising from research can only be sensibly assessed at the level of the individual case. Ongoing analysis of assessed case studies may be useful to determine trends across disciplines or institutions, but undertaking assessments at this level risks reducing cases to singular ratings or rankings which would not serve the aim of communicating the benefits of research.

Research engagement metrics

The discussion paper argues that engagement activities are central to realising research benefits, listing several which are the subject of current data collections for potential inclusion as indicators in an assessment exercise. However, the link between any listed activity and eventual research benefit is not convincingly demonstrated. The kind of metrics cited have considerable weaknesses that hamper their use as anything but very general indicators of potentially useful activity. It is important not to build an assessment on indicators that may or may not be relevant simply because these indicators are already available. This carries risk of creating perverse outcomes, where engagement and collaborative activity is not directed at realising research benefit (or any other reason), but rather in line with anticipated national assessment of this activity.

Flexibility of approach is essential to effective engagement with diverse partners in wide-ranging industries, from small business to multinational corporations and national governments. There are also significant differences in the approach to engagement across specific fields of research within institutions. It will be a significant challenge to develop a suite of standardised research engagement metrics that acknowledge and reward flexibility, and account for variations in approach across disciplines.

In contrast to acceptance of the work involved in developing case studies, collection of data items about engagement does need a very clear justification which to date is not provided.

Case studies

The EIA trial has demonstrated that case studies are a viable and powerful method of showcasing the benefits of Australia university research.

However, as discussed above, case studies cannot offer a comprehensive assessment of the impact of university research and for this reason, it would not be appropriate to link case study assessment to funding allocations of any kind.

This then raises the question of what incentives would exist for universities to participate in case study assessments, at least beyond any required minimum. As noted, universities already seek to communicate the benefits resulting from their research to stakeholders in government, industry and the general public. A sector wide coherent means to do this might raise the profile of this aspect of university research.

Use of collected information

The most appropriate option for the use and assessment of collected information will be heavily dependent on what form case study submissions take and what metrics should, and can be collected.

As the case has not been made to link any specific research engagement activity to eventual benefit it would be premature to collect or assess any indicator at this time.

Next steps in the consultation process

While workshops involving a broad spectrum of academia and research users will be useful for providing advice as to the design and development of key aspects of the exercise, a more formalised steering committee is warranted to ensure that the concerns of universities, research users and the department are properly addressed as the aims, outcomes and content of the exercise continue to be developed.

This steering committee should bring together leaders from universities, industry, the not-for-profit sector and senior members of the department. Sub-committees could be formed with individuals with specific expertise in, for example, the collection and construction of case studies and relevant datasets.

The overarching purpose and underpinning principles for assessing the benefits of university-research must be more fully developed and agreed to before commencing any pilot exercise. To start a pilot exercise now would risk the final process being determined by what can be currently collected and assessed rather than what should be collected and assessed.