

ERA 2023 Benchmarking and Rating Scale Consultation

29 April 2022

The Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN) welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the Australian Research Council's ERA 2023 Benchmarking and Rating Scale Consultation.

ATN is the peak body representing Australia's six most innovative and enterprising universities: Curtin University, Deakin University, RMIT University, The University of Newcastle, University of South Australia, and University of Technology Sydney.

We support the Minister's statement in his Letter of Expectations to the ARC that the ERA and EI assessments must drive the quest for excellence in university research. As such, a revised ERA rating scale is necessary and appropriate so that Australia remains at the forefront of research across the world.

We also support the need for ERA to be clear in its ambition and to provide meaningful benchmarks against which the sector can measure its performance and quality and set our sights on higher and rising standards.

To do this effectively we must consider the purpose and function of ERA. Given its explicit and implicit role in shaping the research sector and guiding university and researcher behaviour, it is important that it be directed at the right priorities and strategic outcomes.

ERA has been successful in focusing Australian research on excellence and quality and strengthening Australia's global research standing. However, there remain fundamental disparities between citation and peer review disciplines – it is important we understand why this has occurred and how it can be addressed.

As part of a first principles approach, we must clearly understand and communicate the purpose and function of ERA. It is well understood the research community, but there is little apparent impact outside of the sector. If we want people or organisations outside of academia use ERA to inform decision making or to foster innovation then they will need to be included in this review and consultation process.

Recommendations

1. Re-establish the purpose and function of ERA and consider how it connects to the commercialisation and translation agenda
2. Investigate and address the disparities between citation and peer review disciplines
3. Ensure any new ratings system can account for longitudinal drift in benchmarks and ratings
4. Use extant data to model the impact of the proposed changes in a pilot
5. Re-evaluate guidance on Indigenous research after implementation

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Key points

- ATN supports measuring Australian research excellence and quality against world standards and high performing institutions
- ATN supports re-calibrating ERA ratings to better encompass the higher performing end of the scale to give greater granularity and meaning to the results
- ERA should be focused on the right priorities and strategic outcomes and we should consider those along with the potential uses and end-users of ERA
- ERA should be evaluated to ensure it is functioning as an accurate and valid measurement of research quality across all disciplines

Recommendation 1: Re-establish the purpose and function of ERA and consider how it connects to the commercialisation and translation agenda

Given that the Minister has requested “fast-tracking development of more efficient and robust assessments of the quality and impact of Australian research” and that the “performance information generated by the ERA and EI assessments must drive the quest for excellence” it is timely to re-establish the purpose and function of ERA.

ATN acknowledges that this work has already begun with the review of ERA and EI, but also notes that the emphasis on commercialisation and translation has developed substantially since that review was conducted.

The current objectives of ERA are:

- Promoting excellence: rigorously assess research quality to promote pursuit of excellence across all fields and all types of research
- Informing decisions: provide a rich and robust source of information on university research excellence and activity to inform and support the needs of university, industry, government and community stakeholders
- Demonstrating quality: provide government and the public with evidence of the quality of research produced by Australia’s universities
- Enabling comparisons: allow for comparisons between Australian universities and against world standard for all discipline areas.

It is timely to reassess these objectives, the progress that has been made towards achieving them, and what changes are needed ensure the relevancy and usefulness of ERA in the future. In particular, evaluating how well ERA has been functioning as an accurate and valid measurement of research quality.

The relationship between ERA and EI and how they are connected to the commercialisation and translation agenda must be considered.

Recommendation 2: Investigate and address the disparities between citation and peer review disciplines

The proposed changes to the rating scale and benchmarks do not sufficiently and explicitly address the disparities between citation and peer review disciplines. The proposed changes to ERA represent an opportunity to engage in a more thorough and fundamental reform of the present system to address apparent and widening disparities.

Extant data and evaluation should be employed to understand the scale of the disparities, the extent to which they reflect actual differences, and the efficacy of any proposed changes in remedying the disparities.

The potential for using citation-based methods as a supplementary and supporting data source in peer review disciplines should be investigated. There are disciplines and universities already conducting these types of analyses independently that would be willing to participate in pilots of new methodologies.

This is fundamental in ensuring ERA assesses and demonstrates quality fairly and accurately across all disciplines.

Recommendation 3: Ensure any new ratings system can account for longitudinal drift in benchmarks and ratings

ATN supports measuring Australian research excellence and quality against world standards and high performing institutions and re-calibrating ERA ratings to better encompass the higher performing end of the scale to give greater granularity and meaning to the results.

We should use this opportunity to ensure that any new ratings system adopted is robust and able to cope with ongoing longitudinal drift in benchmarks and ratings. Ideally, we should aim to minimise any 'breaks in series' and avoid further fundamental shifts in the ratings scale.

End-users of ERA ratings – including government and industry - will need further support to understand and use the ratings appropriately in their decision making. It is important that these end-users understand Australia's research performance in the context of the altered rating scale and shifting world benchmarks.

Recommendation 4: Use extant data to model the impact of the proposed changes in a pilot

Before adopting a new rating scale, which will be presumably be used for multiple cycles of ERA, it is important to understand and model the impact of any changes first. This will not only assist in making an informed and data-driven choice about which scale to adopt, but it will also assist in explaining and demonstrating any changes to end-users.

ATN recommends that the ARC use the extant data at its disposal to model the impact of the proposed scales and (at the least) circulate this analysis to key stakeholders.

Recommendation 5: Re-evaluate guidance on Indigenous studies after implementation

ATN supports the ARC's intention to:

- include Indigenous studies in the next rounds of ERA in 2023 and EI in 2024 using the same overall methodology as other disciplines, with a review to follow
- work with universities on leadership in implementing the new discipline in both programs.

In particular, ATN recommends that the guidance be thoroughly reviewed and re-evaluate in light of the experience of its initial implementation. The proposed guidance should be considered as a good start and a work-in-progress, with the scope to make improvements post-submission.

Further enquiries should be addressed to:

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