

RESEARCH IS NOT A CONTEST

We are moving towards a new formula for measuring the quality of Australian research. As we do so, many new terms and ideas are being thrown into the mix.

One of the latest is the notion that the model being developed, known as the Research Quality Framework, will result in a three-tier system. According to some, the Australian Technology Network of universities will fall within the middle tier, implying that this group will be second-ranking research universities.

All researchers across the higher education sector are working hard to secure their places at this uncertain time. Uncertain because we know the future will be replete with quality assessment but we also know it will still be lacking in resources.

Given this, notions that further entrench competition - rather than drive the development of institutional research missions - are not at all useful.

Building diversity across the sector is the best way to enhance Australian research excellence and this must be a key characteristic of the Australian RQF once it is developed. The ATN is encouraged by recognition that the impact of research must figure prominently in any such framework.

We are suggesting a range of measures of the impact of research that should be taken into consideration alongside more traditional measures such as research income, publications, patents and peer review. We also believe impact measures must include repeat business with research partners, and the ability to influence change in industry.

An Australian RQF must inspire our researchers to strive for quality within their institutions. Our collective research effort still stems from the passion and energy of our individual researchers.

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Research in the ATN has come a long way in its short history and it has continuing performance characteristics that promise future growth.

The RQF will give a snapshot of research performance. But had it been applied in, say, 1960, the University of NSW, for example, would not have been on the map. But by 1985 UNSW was the highest income earner of any Australian university.

Given our own rate of growth over 15 years, the ATN expects its growth to similarly register on the national scale. As a national network with members in each of the mainland state capitals, the ATN is uniquely placed to build Australia's research capacity across the length and breadth of the nation.

Australia is a small research player on the global stage. The RQF must encourage collaboration and partnerships between research agencies and their clients to ensure critical mass on a national scale.

It should be remembered that the existence or otherwise of medical faculties skews inferences about research quality based on income. With the National Health and Medical Research Council total funding exceeding that of the Australian Research Council, the RQF has the potential to give a more accurate picture of the quality and impact of Australian research across its full range of fields.

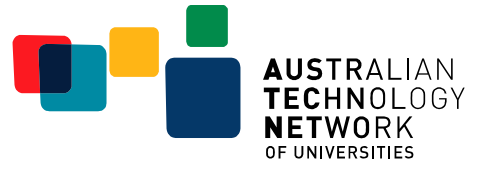
Under such a research assessment model, we expect that the ATN's contribution to health and wellbeing will be more clearly evident as quality and impact is drilled down to the level of research fields or groupings.

Similarly, we expect that the RQF will find high-quality and high-impact researchers and groups across all Australian universities.

Let's stop inventing unnecessary and counterproductive terms as we move towards new research quality measures and a new research environment.

Our RQF must not be about stratifying research into tiers within Australia. It should be about the nation's strategic investment in the highest-quality research endeavours across our diverse system.

To rush down a path leading to research money being allocated to the privileged few will undoubtedly encourage and lock in complacency and narrowness of approach.



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