

Build 1000 centres

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THE upcoming Excellence in Research for Australia initiative has resulted in apprehension and debate in every university across Australia, and understandably so, as few things focus university administrators' minds more than policy that has funding outcomes attached to it.

But perhaps the most important thing ERA has done is to make us take a serious look at how Australia will best build its research and innovation capacity over the course of the next few decades.

The sector agrees that the historical snapshot approach of ERA could well result in focusing Australia's research efforts in the past, rather than where we should be going in the future. Exactly what that future should be is where we tend to diverge, of course.

The fact is that world-leading research takes time to grow. It is worth reflecting that a 1970 ERA evaluation of the 21-year-old University of NSW, when compared to its then-119 year old state counterpart, might not have resulted in the emergence of UNSW as the powerhouse of research and innovation it is today.

What is important to understand is that in their earlier years universities must increase the volume of research they undertake; preceding a more mature phase resulting in work of high quality, which attracts attention from international peers, resulting in the recognition of world-class concentrations.

There is no question, for instance, that China is the country to watch when it comes to rapid research growth.

Over the past 11 years, it has been growing explosively, increasing from just over 20,000 research papers in 1998 to nearly 112,000 in 2008, doubling its output since 2004 alone. It now stands second only to the US and at this pace is forecast to overtake it within the next decade.

Yet with all that growth, how many universities does China have in top 100 of the oft-cited Shanghai Jiaotong Academic Ranking of World Universities? None.

How many in the top 200? None.

But would we argue that with six Australian universities in the top 200, we will comfortably compete with China by maintaining the status quo through the next decade? Of course not.

The Australian Technology Network of Universities comprises a group of universities all hitting at or well above their weight in relation to research performance when referenced to institutional age.

We consider that Australia's research funding strategies and ERA should align to support the development of at least 1000 world-class research centres and to build the next generation of such centres.

This is critical to ensure that Australia's international research engagement is not carried by relatively few groups or organisations with a limited age or geographic distribution, and will ensure the sustainable growth required to maintain Australia's international reputation and profile.

Development of measures of sustainability as well as excellence are important to ensure that the Sustainable Research Excellence Fund supports the renewal and the building of world-class research concentrations.

Recent changes to the ERA ratings scale, criticised by some as a move towards mediocrity, are supported by the ATN. There is little to be gained and much potential damage to be had, by underselling our research strengths internationally particularly when academic workforce shortages face us with increasing pressure to recruit world-class staff and students in a highly competitive global market.

However, the issue of ERA ratings is perhaps dealt with best by an independent group to provide considered advice on the calibration of the proposed ratings of research excellence to be used by ERA with those of existing internationally accepted rating schemes, such as Britain's Research Assessment Exercise.

If we are going to put in place an initiative that will shape the direction of Australia's higher education sector for years (or decades) to come, it is imperative that we ensure we get it right.

Vicki Thomson

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