

The Australian

Go8 backs impact measure trial

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A FRESH push by the Australian Technology Network to establish a measure of research impact has been backed by the Group of Eight universities.

Both groups appear set to participate in a trial of impact measures later this year.

The intention is to garner wide support for a measure that, like the Excellence in Research for Australia initiative, could eventually be used to allocate some research funding.

The participation of the research-intensive Go8s is a boost after a similar ATN effort in the dumped research quality framework was rebuffed by Innovation, Industry, Science and Research Minister Kim Carr. He had previously dismissed impact as "unverifiable and ill-defined".

But in the wake of Britain adopting an impact measure based partly on the earlier ATN work, coupled with a growing push for universities and industry to better collaborate, the ATN believes the time is right for another attempt. Key to that is successfully completing a trial to take place during the second half of this year and the first half of next year.

The ATN is calling it Excellence in Innovation for Australia and the group sees it as being a companion indicator to the ERA.

"We feel that at some point there will be a policy shift in this direction and the ATN wants to refine some of these mechanisms and contribute to the debate," deputy vice-chancellor (research) at Queensland University of Technology Arun Sharma said.

Go8 executive director Michael Gallagher said his members were keen to be involved. "We are working with the ATN to explore the use of appropriate indicators and case study models to make more visible the contributions of research to economic, environmental and social purposes," Mr Gallagher said.

The EIA trial is expected to draw heavily on Britain's new Research Excellence Framework, which is adopting impact measures for the 2014 assessment. Britain had drawn on the previous ATN trial of 2006.

Professor Sharma said the best way to measure impact was to have researchers make qualitative statements, such as through case studies, that could be informed by quantitative measures and then assessed by an independent panel. The panel could include relevant stakeholders such as industry.

The trial will seek to measure environmental, social, cultural and economic impacts. Such a broad measure was needed to fairly assess impact in disciplines such as the humanities and social sciences.

RMIT University deputy vice-chancellor (research) Daine Alcorn said it was important to get support for the effort across the the sector. It also could be open to research bodies such as the CSIRO. Professor Alcorn said having a measure that sat outside ERA might be more palatable to the Australian Research Council. However, it is unclear what body would administer the EIA.

Senator Carr warned that attempts to measure impact could be labour-intensive, unreliable and, in the case of the research quality framework, vulnerable to rorting. "Experience has shown that measuring impact is difficult and highly subjective," he said.

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