

Go8-business to gauge research value

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Business and industry groups have backed an assessment of the impact of research to accompany the federal government's Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) audit.

The research-intensive Group of Eight universities is eager to take part in the initiative, which will identify academic work that delivers the most significant practical outcomes for Australia.

The ERA largely measures and rewards basic research but support is growing for a concurrent audit focusing on the type of research that fuels innovation, improves public policy and makes Australian businesses more competitive.

The Australian Technology Network's companion assessment – labelled "excellence in innovation for Australia" – has won in-principle support from the Business Council of Australia (BCA) and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI).

BCA education policy director Patrick Coleman said the proposal was consistent with the preferred approach of business.

"The ERA has provided a valuable assessment of the quality of research in Australia," he said.

"But we think it is worth going further and measuring the impact."

Alongside the next ERA exercise in 2012, the technology network will convene expert panels to judge case studies submitted by participating researchers across its five member universities – the method adopted by the Higher Education Funding Council for England.

Go8 executive director Michael Gallagher said members were keen to be involved in the pilot. "We have to be able to translate public health research, for example, into public health outcomes," he said. "We need incentives for that as well as ERA."

Spruiking the plan at an *Australian Financial Review* higher education conference in Sydney, University of South Australia vice-chancellor Peter Hoj said the interaction between research and the community should be rewarded.

"While ERA was executed really well and is useful for enhancing the quality of Australia's basic research, there needs to be another esteem indicator with significant funding attached," he said.

"Without that, behaviour will not be driven to maximise the innovation dividend from our investment in basic research."

ACCI employment education and training director Jenny Lambert agreed the transfer of knowledge from universities to the community needed to be more effective.

"We support the ATN seeking to experiment with alternative measures that focus on industry impact or outcomes," she said.

"However, whether it proves to be an appropriate, workable and effective mechanism of assessment is another question."

The conference heard examples of research making big real-world differences that were unlikely to appear in top journals and thus not be counted in the ERA.

At the University of Newcastle, for example, a \$1 million grant given to Chris Levi in 2003 to uncover better ways to process stroke patients now saves NSW Health about \$30 million a year.

Another well-known example from Newcastle is the Jameson cell, invented by Graeme Jameson.

The 1980s technology, used to extract minerals, is estimated to have added \$2.7 billion in value to the Australian mining industry.

Newcastle deputy vice-chancellor (research) Mike Calford said the "value add" of the Jameson cell could be as high as \$4.4 billion this year.

He said Australian researchers were producing tremendous results in areas such as public health and mining but these weren't necessarily recognised in the ERA.

"These are areas where research is affecting public policy but there isn't a lot of publishing in journals with high citations," he said.

"[Jameson's] is not the sort of work that cites well in chemical journals but is very important to the country."

The ERA, which will next take place in 2012, will inform processes for allocating hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of funding.

ERA results now underpin strategic investments in research by universities and are drivers of hiring and promotion. But Innovation Minister Kim Carr has announced changes to stop managers telling university researchers to publish only in certain journals that lead to good ERA scores.

The Australian Technology Network and others are worried that, without a mechanism for rewarding research impact, efforts will become too heavily skewed towards basic rather than applied research.

Professor Hoj, whose university is a member of the network, told the conference Australia needed to "drive our innovation system harder".

"I do not believe for a moment that a collection of vice-chancellors walking through Parliament House will get us extra money," he said. "For that, universities need industry and business groups to take up the cause and lobby in Canberra. But they can only be expected to do so if we have a systematic way of demonstrating and rewarding translational activities that lead to tangible innovation outcomes."

Which is why the network has struck out alone, although the Go8 looks likely to join the experiment.

Indeed, some in the research community argue measuring impact is too difficult. Nor does there seem to be any support for extensive measures of impact to be included in the ERA.

The nation's chief bureaucrat, Terry Moran, noted at the conference a "growing distance between scholars and the world of public policy".

Mr Moran, secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, said public servants should spend more time outside government offices and encouraged academics to venture beyond universities.

"Improving the working relationships between policymakers and academics, I believe, will go a long way to increase the impact of the research taking place in Australia's universities," he said. "The evidence and insight scholars produce can enrich public policy but too often it is lost in the grinding mills of scholarship and unrelated to work in other disciplines."

The Australian Financial Review

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