

More funds sought for practical research

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Joanna Mather

Key science and technology groups have stepped up pressure on the federal government to reward university research that has demonstrable real-world outcomes by measuring its impact on business, government, the environment and society.

The Australian Technology Network and Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering have approached the government separately with alternatives to the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) exercise, which has been criticised for ignoring applied research.

The ATN has written to Innovation Minister Kim Carr advising him of the group's intention to conduct its own assessment of "research benefit" alongside the next ERA exercise in 2012. The ATN's version, to be devised with input from industry and community groups, will run across five universities later this year and in the first half of 2012.

In a letter to Senator Carr, ATN chair Jeanette Hackett said the ERA was a useful exercise but failed to capture – and therefore reward and provide incentives for – research with immediate and tangible benefits for society.

"To this end, the ATN is to run a trial of a companion piece to ERA with the working title 'excellence in innovation for Australia'," she said.

The ERA ran for the first time last year. It aims to concentrate research funding in areas of excellence, rather than having many universities do the same work.

The 2011 ERA results will influence the allocation of a portion of \$620 million in funding through the research training scheme and about \$120 million from the sustainable research excellence scheme.

The ERA relies heavily on researchers' publication rates in top academic journals. Many of these journals are internationally focused and carry articles outlining discoveries that, although invariably ground-breaking, are inexplicable to the lay person. Often they are read only by other academics.

As a result, the ERA has been criticised for favouring the so-called hard sciences because publishing in top global journals is the primary output for such areas.

But in an area like applied economics, for example, a researcher might focus on Australian issues and publish in a local journal or provide government with advice on policy.

The ATN and others argue that these outputs are just as valuable to society and should be recognised and encouraged. "A key . . . is industry and community engagement in the process because it is these [end users] who benefit from research," ATN executive director Vicki Thomson said.

"At the end of the day we want to get more money for research which has benefit."

Ms Thomson and senior ATN delegates have just returned from the United Kingdom, where the national funding agency for higher education will include measures of research impact into its ERA-like national assessment in 2014.

The Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering also wants an assessment isolating benefits to end users to be run independently but concurrently to the ERA.

Former chief scientist and head of the academy, Robin Batterham, said rewarding collaboration between researchers and end users such as businesses was a must for Australia to remain innovative.

"Research aimed at solving problems and creating opportunities must be encouraged, as well as research primarily focused on advancing knowledge," he said.

The government acknowledges some of the ERA's shortcomings and Senator Carr has announced changes aimed at removing disincentives to publish in local journals by scrapping rankings.

The peer review aspect of the ERA will also be strengthened and assessments will be extended to capture more applied and inter-disciplinary research activity.

But Senator Carr has strongly rejected any muddying of the ERA waters by incorporating a measure of impact, as was proposed under ERA's predecessor, the Research Quality Framework.

The Australian Financial Review

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