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Need for specific measure

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RESEARCH impact measures must be specific to the aims of the endeavour, whether it is technical or scientific, according a paper by the Group of Eight universities published ahead of a trial planned for next year.

"You have to negotiate a set of measures based on what the research was intended to achieve," principal author and Go8 policy adviser Les Rymer said.

"It's not much use applying indicators for technological research, which is about changing the world, to scientific research, which is about understanding the world, although they are related of course."

Dr Rymer said the impact issue had settled in the higher education agenda after the first round of the Excellence in Research for Australia audit this year. "There is a lot of discussion around it, for something to complement ERA, and it's been raised in other contexts," Dr Rymer said.

The trial of research impact will be staged by a group of universities in March next year as part of a project backed by the Australian Technology Network universities and the Go8.

"By pulling together a group of universities of different types you can test different types of measures in different disciplines," ATN executive director Vicki Thomson said.

She did not name the participants in the trial because the list had not yet been finalised, but said it would also include some unaligned institutions.

Dr Rymer's paper argues the difficulties in identifying and applying a measure.

Research aiming to achieve impact would often have a high risk of failure, he said.

He also cautioned that attempts to measure impact, especially if they were sustained, would have a distorting effect that might prevent the research reaching its maximum effect.

"Even though it is difficult, it is still necessary to try to measure the impact that research has, partly to meet the general accountability that applies to all investments and especially to government funding, but also as an aid to making investment decisions in the first place and to improving the effectiveness of the national innovation system," he said.

"It is necessary to recognise that different kinds of research aim to produce different kinds of impact and to assess research projects within their own boundaries of intent and the purpose for which they received funding. This requires a careful choice of the available methods and even more care in interpreting their results."

One of the difficulties with research impact in Australian higher education has been its inclusion in ERA's predecessor, the Research Quality Framework, which was dumped when Innovation Minister Kim Carr took office at the end of 2007.

He described the RQF as poorly designed and administratively expensive, and dismissed the impact measure as "unverifiable and ill-defined".

There was no specific research impact measure included in ERA.

Since then, Britain's Research Excellence Framework audit has decided to include a measure in its next round in 2014.

Ms Thomson said a previous ATN trial for the RQF had been conducted across five universities based on the case study approach, but that may not be appropriate any more. The ATN still thought there was a need for a measure.

"We have ERA and that's an important for measuring quality, but what's missing is about how we identify research impact."