

DASSH Response to the Australian Research Council, Department of Education and Training's *Engagement and Impact Assessment Consultation Paper*

The Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH) welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Australian Research Council's consultation paper.

Feedback Questions

Definitions and scope

1. *What definition of 'engagement' should be used for the purpose of assessment?*

DASSH recommends a broad and inclusive definition of 'engagement'. This is important in order to sustain the diverse disciplines and forms of expertise and basic research that flourish in the higher education sector. End-user-led problem-solving needs to be able to draw on expertise and basic research, in interdisciplinary combinations, depending on the problem to be solved. We also need to foster longer-term processes in which academic expertise informs broader debate and thought, sometimes by challenging the terms in which problems have been framed. Definitions of engagement therefore need to include not only directly commissioned applied research, but also instrumental advice, advocacy and influence. They should also include the impact of non-traditional research outputs, including broadcast, performance and design.

DASSH welcomes the statement in the consultation paper about 'overemphasis on industry engagement and income measures', and notes that current proposals relating to Category 2-4 income as a proxy for engagement/impact are problematic for the arts, social sciences and humanities (ASSH) disciplines. The ASSH sector's engagement with external partners (including engagement through Category 1 grants) is underpinned by significant in-kind support from external partners: the most valuable contribution made is the time, expertise and informed advice of both the academic and end-user partners. Failure to recognise in-kind contributions will disadvantage our sector.

The ATSE definition provides a useful starting point, provided that 'communities' are understood to range from local through regional/state and national to global and that the benefits of research include both direct economic benefits and those that may be more indirect or more accurately understood as contributing to the public good. Given the strong record of ASSH researchers in working productively with socially disadvantaged communities, non-government organisations, and governments in the design, conduct and dissemination of research, DASSH would seek a definition of engagement that encompasses the active involvement of communities in the identification of research questions and methods, in the conduct and in participation as research subjects and in the communication, policy responses and communication of research findings. These kinds of engagement provide the wider Australian community with access to the globally recognised expertise that exists within public universities.

2. *What definition of ‘impact’ should be used for the purpose of assessment?*

We recommend the existing definition of research impact in the ARC’s *Research Impact Principles and Framework* (2012), on the basis that it is appropriately inclusive, and there is benefit in maintaining a consistent definition already in use in the higher education sector.

3. *How should the scope of the assessment be defined?*

Where data is already collected within universities such as the number of research contracts and agreements, then all of the relevant data should be assessed. However, where new data is to be collected (such as in case studies), then DASSH recommends that the scope of assessment should be restricted to a relatively small selection of researchers/projects from each university. Implementing a broader or a universal approach would impose major burdens on the higher education sector and heighten the likelihood and impact of perverse unintended consequences.

4. *Would a selective approach using case studies or exemplars to assess impact provide benefits and incentives to universities?*

There are costs and benefits in using case studies and exemplars. On the one hand, a metrics approach focusing on income, citations and commercialisation will miss more indirect processes by which end-users partner with researchers and are influenced by research and its translation into discussions and activities that have impact. On the other hand, a case studies approach will impose a burden on universities, given the complexity of the ways in which research and its translation affect end-users, audiences and publics.

Accordingly, we support a selective use of case studies chosen to demonstrate patterns of direct and indirect impact on end-user benefits.¹ The benefits for universities would include strengthening commitment to partnerships and engagement that involve multiple commitments, including in-kind exchange of information, expertise and co-creation; this is preferable to setting the incentives to reward only cash commitments.

5. *If case studies or exemplars are used, should they focus on the outcomes of research or the steps taken by the institution to facilitate the outcomes?*

The focus should be on the outcomes of research, which aligns with the general emphasis on outputs rather than inputs (for example, industry funding) for assessing higher education sector performance in Australia. Steps taken by researchers and their institutions to support the development of relationships and processes for engagement between researchers and communities toward particular collaborations should be considered: for example, the degree to which the researchers worked with communities in identifying the research question, in designing and conducting the research, as well as

¹ See for example, “20 of the best EIA Case Studies”. EIA Trial–ATN–Go8 (2014), *Final report: ‘Excellence in Innovation: Research Impacting our Nation’s Future- assessing the benefits’*, Appendix 7; Marks, K. (2015) *The Power of the Humanities*. Australian Academy of the Humanities, Canberra.

in sharing the benefits of the research would indicate the potential for engagement to translate into meaningful impact.

6. *What data is available to universities that could contribute to the engagement and impact assessment?*
 - i. *Should the destination of Higher Degree Research students be included in the scope of the assessment?*
 - ii. *Should other types of students be included or excluded from the scope of assessment (e.g. professional Masters level programmes, undergraduate students)?*

DASSH recommends excluding data on the destinations of HDR students and those of other students. Collecting information on this index would be costly and burdensome and is unlikely to produce a reliable measure.

Key Issues

7. *What are the key challenges for assessing engagement and impact and how can these be addressed?*

Engagement and impact must be assessed over time and in terms of both direct and indirect benefits and influences. The difficulty for assessment is that, although it is possible to track evidence that shows a pathway to influential advice, analysis and data, many other factors may also have exerted influence. In some cases, the initial response to a challenging new finding or analysis can be negative, as the research and its implications are debated and adapted, or challenged in subsequent studies. Information sciences are increasingly able to trace the network of influence and the spread of attention, download, reference and citation. It is easier (although not easy) to track a program of work than it is to track a single project, piece of work or submission. Such a program of work, pursued by a group of people, may have been conducted in multiple institutions and disciplines. At their most successful, such influential research programs are embedded in several networks.

DASSH recommends consideration be given to integrating the impact and engagement assessment into the ERA assessment, for example, through the inclusion of a statement on engagement and impact as part of or in addition to the current 2 digit FoR explanatory statements. Such consideration, however, will need to ensure that inter- and multi-disciplinary work is not disadvantaged in this assessment.

8. *Is it worthwhile to seek to attribute specific impacts to specific research and, if so, how should impact be attributed (especially in regard to a possible methodology that uses case studies or exemplars)?*

It is possible to track the impact of specific research, but to do so would miss the broader pattern of impact associated with programs of research carried out over time. Network analysis may be able to trace the spread of influence, by tracking download, readership and reference patterns, co-authorship, cash and in-kind investment. Case studies may be

able to draw on all these sources to describe impact and engagement over time. Such evidence should be used with due caution, however, considering the factors listed above.

9. To what level of granularity and classification (e.g. ANZSRC Fields of Research) should measures be aggregated?

If the assessment is restricted to tracing the impact and engagement associated with specific research outputs from a cognate group within one institution, then 6 digital granularity may be appropriate. It may however be more effective to assess the longer-term and more indirect pathways to impact and engagement of programs of research, often interdisciplinary or inter-institutional, and in that case less granularity would be more effective. One concern for ASSH disciplines is that in large interdisciplinary research programs where the ASSH element is a small portion of the overall activity (for example, assessing the social or behavioural elements of a new system or approach), the ASSH engagement and impact may be rendered invisible in the reporting.

10. What timeframes should be considered for the engagement activities under assessment?

The timeframe for engagement could be shorter than the timeframe for impact, although this may complicate the preparation and evaluation of case studies.

11. What timeframes should be considered for the impact activities under assessment?

Given the lengthy time-lags and the variability of time-lags for different disciplines, it is not clear that a single timeframe will be appropriate. In the social sciences, as a rough approximation, over a decade, it should be possible to track a pathway from research to translation to impact, as the insights and recommendations from projects have spreading influence on public debate, expert deliberation and decision-making.

12. How can the assessment balance the need to minimise reporting burden with robust requirements for data collection and verification?

The number and length of case studies should be constrained; within that principle, the maximum number of case studies that can be submitted by each university could be scaled, based on a measure of research FTE staff.

13. What approaches or measures can be used to manage the disciplinary differences in research engagement and impact?

A combination of autonomy so that disciplines can select the indicators they consider best present their engagement and impact, and a decision that the different indicators should be equally valued in the assessment, provided that they are backed with credible evidence.

14. What measures or approaches to evaluation used for the assessment can appropriately account for interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary engagement and impacts?

As above, a combination of autonomy, underpinned by genuine equal valuing of different indicators, will be important.

Types of engagement and impact indicators

15. What types of engagement indicators should be used?

While there may be a set of indicative indicators used across an institution or FoR, where case studies are provided, engagement indicators should not be restrictive. Case study authors should be able to use the indicators they consider best present their engagement.

16. What types of impact indicators should be used?

While there may be a set of indicative impact indicators used across an institution or FoR, where case studies are provided, impact indicators should not be prescribed. Case study authors should be able to use the indicators they consider best present the impact of their work.

We note that broader impact is often achieved in the longer-term process where applied research projects are adapted and translated as examples of innovative approaches to difficult problems. Much of this influence is apparently unrecorded, in conventional citations. However, new digital tools make it possible to track evidence of translation and of influence. In public policy for example, metadata and digital identifiers make it possible through metadata to trace the impact of reports, articles and open access data, via digital evidence of the long tail of downloads, citations and re-posting. This can be used to supplement conventional resources used to measure influence on public policy debate, including records of parliamentary debates and legal deliberation.

Other

17. Are there any additional comments you wish to make?

The ASSH disciplines already confront a disproportionate burden in ERA, compared to other discipline groups, given the limits of metrics to adequately represent the quality of our research and the burden on researchers and peer assessors in evaluating peer reviewed disciplines. Nonetheless, ASSH disciplines are rightly proud of their role in engaging communities and the social and cultural impact of their research. The proposed engagement and impact exercise carries similar risks as ERA, and this may, to use the Consultation Paper's phrase, create 'unintended perverse consequences'.

More broadly, DASSH has significant concerns about the cost and burden of a meaningful engagement and assessment exercise for the higher education sector. We are equally concerned by the option of a cost-effective but meaningless exercise. While we have sought to engage constructively in our submission with the engagement and impact framework, we recommend that serious consideration be given to the costs versus the benefits of the proposal in this consultation paper compared to other 'demand-side' options for achieving greater collaboration among researchers and end-users (commercial and non-commercial).



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About DASSH

The Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH) is the authoritative agency on research, teaching and learning for the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH) in Australian and New Zealand universities.

DASSH supports those within these institutions who have responsibility for the governance and management of research and teaching and learning in their universities. DASSH also supports those who aspire to these positions through a Network of Associate Deans (Learning and Teaching) and a Network of Associate Deans (Research).