

# THE PSYCHOLOGY FOUNDATION OF AUSTRALIA

(Incorporated in New South Wales)

c/o School of Psychology, University of New South Wales, Sydney 2052, NSW, Australia

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Via email: ARC-EI\_consultation[[@](mailto:ARC-EI_consultation@arc.gov.au)]arc.gov.au

24 June 2016

## TO: ARC-EI Consultation

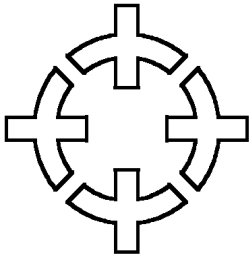
## RE: Australian Research Council Engagement and Impact Assessment Consultation Paper

The Psychology Foundation of Australia is a grouping of research-oriented schools of Psychology dedicated to the maintenance of high standard in teaching, research and professional training within the discipline. We also see, as one of our central aims, the need to highlight the broad utility of Psychological knowledge to the many areas in which human behaviour is a central element of performance. We are grateful for the opportunity to provide input on the Engagement and Impact Assessment Consultation Paper of the National Innovation and science Agenda. We do believe that there are specific issues relevant to Psychology that should be considered when evaluating methods for assessing impact and a pleased to be able to comment on those matters below. More generally, while we do accept that an important role of universities is to ensure the translation of knowledge in to the community, we wish to emphasise that translation may take many forms, including the production of informed graduates and appropriately skilled professional staff in addition to research publications, contributions to society and culture, changes to industrial processes or production of commercial products.

We also share the view that any assessment of performance is likely to modify the behaviour of institutions and their staff, as noted on p.3 of the consultation paper, but do not accept the assertion that such modifications inevitably lead to improvements in behaviour. To obtain a desired outcome it is essential to clearly articulate what that outcome should be and then design procedures to obtain it. That clear goal seems to be missing from this call for input and is likely to be contentious when attempts are made to specify it. Secondly, most staff at research institutions are extremely busy and adding an additional goal can easily reduce activity on current goals. It is important to be certain that the balance of aims truly reflects their desirability in sensible proportion. Finally, the outcome of an evaluation process needs to produce more of the desired outcome than it costs to conduct the assessment. This is not always easy to establish but international benchmarking is not always the most appropriate method. For example, on p.11 it is noted that the impact

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element of the REF 2014 was about 0.2% of the total investment in UK research, approximately GBP 55 million (nearly \$AUD106 million).

The implication was that this 0.2% sounds like a small amount and therefore could be accommodated but with ARC and NHMRC research grant success rates between 10 and 20% and many excellent unfunded projects in each year, this amount represents an enormous lost opportunity. In 2015 ARC Discovery project average grant sizes were \$376,000 and so if we could assume that Australia could spend half of the amount the UK spent on impact assessment then an additional 141 grants of average size could be funded. It is, of course, uncertain what would be returned from 141 extra grants but it is certain to be more than will be returned by having those same staff unfunded, but employed, or instead having those staff primarily occupied on assessing the outputs of those who do have research grant support. Indeed the amount is nearly equivalent to the entire 2015 ARC budget for Early career researchers and so double the number could be supported if the funds were directed in that way.

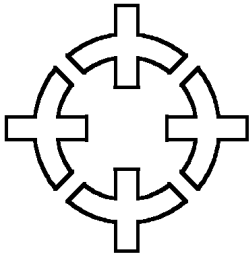
The difficult challenge is to determine the additional benefit of documenting the evidence that universities already have significant translation of research into practise and products? If the aim is to divert attention from current outputs to more short term commercialisable outputs then the government needs to decide whether they are willing to accept the possibility of lower international rankings for the major contributors of this sector which, in turn, would jeopardise international education income. The risks need to be delicately balanced against the benefits.

Many of the points in the previous paragraphs are alluded to in the preamble to each section of the consultation paper itself. Our initial response is to say we share the concerns and wonder why, given the seriousness, the process continues when no clear specification of the goals is provided. What follows are responses to individual questions intended to minimise the possibility for such an evaluative process to damage current performance.

Our response focuses on the consultation questions in Section 5: Definition and Scope.

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## Consultation questions

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

Universities currently participate in a very broad range of activities that could be defined as engagement. The definition adopted needs to be broad enough to capture all potential forms of engagement. If not it will deter the unlisted options from ever occurring, which would be contrary to the desire to increase such engagement. It isn't clear how any a priori specification of engagement types could be comprehensive enough. It is also unreasonable to exclude impact on academia or the home discipline. Surely a central aim of any university is to advance knowledge in its core disciplines and to change the nature of future critical research questions in addition to what is taught to new cohorts of students. To exclude this role is to ignore a primary aim.

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

The same concern applies here – unless impact is defined broadly those aspects of impact not listed will be discouraged. In addition, a very long time scale needs to be adopted to demonstrate impact. Immediate impact is rare and often ideas become important long after their discovery. e.g. did Tolkein have an impact in writing Lord of the Rings? We now see a multi-billion dollar industry based around his novel but we had to wait over 60 years. An undue focus on short term impact will be a strong encouragement for work on problems that can be solved in the short term, rather than those problems which would be of most long-term value.

As shown in the recent report by the Australian Academy of Science, 30 years may be a more realistic timeline to demonstrate substantial impact of new knowledge

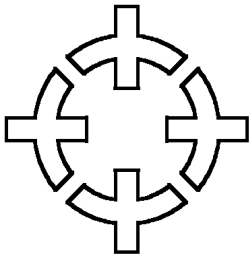
<https://www.science.org.au/science-underpins-330m-australias-economic-output-report>

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

It would be better to let researchers make the case for impact rather than trying to define it a priori as it will be easier to omit possibilities than to include them all in a list. This will make a metrics based system difficult to create and so does carry cost implications but it more important to create a system

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without negative consequences than it is to make it cheap.

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

Most universities already have publicity sections that make such cases on a regular basis. It is not clear what would be gained in having an additional partial sampling of cases from institutions. Is there to be an impact ranking? If so, then it would be very surprising if any institution failed to provide examples of impact. There may be some value in describing additional activities to the public, although the popular press already carries examples on most days. The exemplar model has the advantage of taking less time and effort away from actually conducting the pertinent activities.

*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?*

They should be based on the outcomes rather than the process. An elaborate and distracting process, no matter how well intended, will detract from the conduct of the pertinent activities. Indeed the whole process under consideration will guarantee additional paperwork in order to document the activities for this evaluation process. In times of very tight budgets distracting people from conducting the desired work seems to be a poor strategy for obtaining more of the desired outcome.

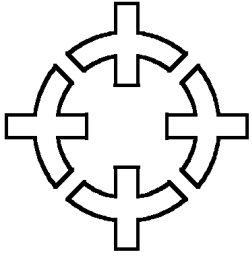
*6. What data is available to universities that could contribute to the engagement and impact assessment?*

*i. Should the destination of Higher Degree Research students be included in the scope of the assessment?*

In many disciplines, Psychology being an important example, the primary method for impact on the community is the instantiation of current scientific insight into the knowledge, methods and skills of the students who successfully graduate. To exclude an assessment of the workplace destinations and contributions of those students would risk the possibility of those disciplines being unfairly judged as having little impact.

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*ii. Should other types of students be included or excluded from the scope of assessment (e.g. professional Masters level programmes, undergraduate students)?*

If the assessment is to be implemented there seems to be no strong argument, other than difficulty of data collection, to exclude the main process by which universities transfer current knowledge and discoveries to the community. Recent graduates of high quality courses, always carry with them the most recent ideas; that is the aim of university training.

We hope these comments prove useful in your considerations. We have not addressed the questions under the key issues, listed separately, in this section as they have already been addressed in the preceding comments.

On behalf of the Psychology Foundation of Australia

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