

# Engagement and Impact Assessment 2018

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# 1 Introduction

The Engagement and Impact Assessment (EI) took place for the first time in 2018 as a companion study to the already established policy called Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA). As part of the Australian National Science and Innovation Agenda (NISA), EI assesses the engagement of Australian universities with research end-users and the translation of their research results into economic, environmental, social and other use.<sup>1</sup> Generally speaking, EI was conducted for all fields of research at Australian universities. EI aims to bring about a greater collaboration between actors from the academic sphere and research end-users.<sup>2</sup> Specifying further, the EI 2018 Framework document lists the following objectives:

- "provide clarity to the Government and Australian public about how their investment in university research translate into tangible benefits beyond academia
- identify institutional processes and infrastructure that enable research engagement
- promote greater support for the translation of research impact within institutions for the benefit of Australia beyond academia
- identify the ways in which institutions currently translate research into impact."<sup>3</sup>

The EI has a colored history of development that reaches back further than its recent launch in 2018 would give reason to expect. First detours into impact assessment were made quite early in Australia with the announcement of the Research Quality Framework (RQF) in 2004. In the course of the following three years, RQF was designed to assess research in Australian Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in relation to their academic as well as their broader impact, "i.e. the extent to which research is successfully applied" by qualified end-users.<sup>4</sup> Technical working groups were established to inform decision-makers in the Australian government of the optimal methodology with which to make this

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Research Council (2017). *EI 2018 framework*. Australian Research Council, p.3

<sup>2</sup> Australian Research Council (2018). *EI 2018 Assessment Handbook*, p.5

<sup>3</sup> Australian Research Council (2017), p.3

<sup>4</sup> Commonwealth of Australia (2005). *Research Quality Framework: Assessing the Quality and Impact of Research in Australia—Final Advice on the Preferred RQF Model*, Canberra; as cited in Williams & Grant (2018), p.94

“broader impact” measurable. As there were no established benchmarks for this undertaking up to this point, the working groups were the first ones to suggest the use of both quantitative and qualitative evidence, especially the involvement of case studies.<sup>5</sup>

Remarkably, the evolution of RQF resembles the development process of EI. RQF was anticipated to set off in early 2008, and the implementation process was fully underway through the course of 2007. Assessment panels were assembled, submission specifications were published and submission platforms were built. All this came to an abrupt end with a snap election being called in October of 2007, which saw a change in ruling party resulting in the cancellation of RQF by the new Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research by the end of the year. The cancellation was undergirded by the statement that RQF was “poorly designed, administratively expensive and [relying] on an ‘impact’ measure that is unverifiable and ill- defined.”<sup>6</sup>

The pioneer status of RQF was made explicit in the development of the UK-based REF, which itself is recognized in the Anglo-Saxon world as a forerunner of impact assessment today. In the development stages of the REF, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) commissioned an international review, how other research agencies measure impact to provide recommendations for REF's own conception. The report concluded: “It is evident from this analysis that the Australian RQF provides the “best fit” against the emergent criteria for REF [...] Hence our first key observation is that the work of the Australian RQF Working Group on Impact Research Evaluation Assessment provides a promising basis for developing an impact approach for the REF.”<sup>7</sup>

In what Williams and Grant describe as the “Australian impact Boomerang”, the concept of impact assessment resurfaces about four years after the cancellation of RQF. Again, it was the policy arena that decided the resumption of an impact assessment agenda, forming expert panels that concluded with the

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<sup>5</sup> Williams & Grant (2018). A comparative review of how the policy and procedures to assess research impact evolved in Australia and the UK, *Research Evaluation*, 27(2), 2018, pp.94-98.

<sup>6</sup> Donovan (2008). The Australian Research Quality Framework: A Live Experiment in Capturing the Social, Economic, Environmental, and Cultural Returns of Publicly Funded Research’, *New Directions for Evaluation*, 118: 47–60; as cited in Williams & Grant (2018), p.97

<sup>7</sup> Grant et.al. (2009). *Capturing Research Impact: A Review of International Practice*. [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/documented\\_briefings/2010/RAND\\_DB\\_578.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/documented_briefings/2010/RAND_DB_578.pdf) ; as cited in Williams & Grant (2018), pp.97-98

recommendation for a national impact assessment framework and the realization of feasibility studies.<sup>8</sup> The research funding system on the other hand seemed not to be entirely convinced by the governmental direction. Even until 2015 there are instances of public disagreement with the government line by ARC leadership, the same organization now responsible for the realization of EI. In a 2013 article in *The Australian* the then head of the ARC expressed doubts over the necessity and feasibility of a national impact assessment in general and called into question the suitability of case studies as a method over impact indicators such as “PhD completions, patents, commercial funding, and external research alliances.”<sup>9</sup>

## 2 How does the EI 2018 work?

Universities are assessed on three components: *engagement*, *impact* and *approach to impact*. As defined in the Australian and New Zealand Standard Research Classification (ANZSRC), the Unit of Assessment is a singular, two-digit field of research at a university. EI employs a so-called “low-volume threshold”<sup>10</sup>, measured in the number of research outputs by a field of research. Every field of research in a particular institution that clears this threshold must subject itself to assessment. Only if a valid reason is given, why a particular field of research cannot participate is it possible to be excused from assessment, but not before submitting a strategy and timeline to make that field of research suitable for assessment in the next round of EI instead. A field of research can also apply to be assessed even if it does not meet the low-volume threshold. Additionally, a university can opt to submit an interdisciplinary and/or a Torres Strait Islander<sup>11</sup> research impact study, regardless of the volume of research at the particular institution. These will not receive an assessment on engagement, but on impact and approach to impact only.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Williams & Grant (2018), pp.98-100

<sup>9</sup> Trounson (2013). *Putting case for Research Impact. The Australian*, p.27; as cited in Williams & Grant (2018), p.100

<sup>10</sup> E.g. Australian Research Council (2017), p.4

<sup>11</sup> The Torres Strait Islander people are indigenous peoples inhabiting islands to the north of the Australian landmass.

<sup>12</sup> Australian Research Council (2017), p.4

**Engagement:** *Engagement* is defined broadly by the Australian Research Council as “[...] the interaction between researchers and research end-users outside of academia, for the mutually beneficial transfer of knowledge, technologies, methods or resources.”<sup>13</sup> This definition leaves the type of research product to be shared broad and open. This becomes even clearer in the definition of a research end-user as “[...] an individual, community or organization external to academia that will directly use or directly benefit from the *output, outcome or result of the research*”.<sup>14</sup> Some organizations, such as publicly funded research organizations or other higher education providers (international or domestic) and similar institutions are excluded from the definition of a research end-user for the purpose of the assessment.<sup>15</sup>

Ratings for the engagement aspect are comprised of a qualitative engagement narrative and quantitative indicators of engagement. The engagement narrative is somewhat loosely defined as a summary of a university’s overall engagement activity in a particular field of research, including their corresponding strategies and potential objectives. It allows the addition of any qualitative or quantitative information the institution deems relevant to bolster the narrative.

The quantitative indicators of *engagement* contain measures of cash support from research end-users, basic funding, the proportion of specified government grants to all government grants, and revenues from research commercialization. Some of this data is drawn from the institutions’ submissions to ERA.<sup>16</sup> To mitigate the difficulties of some disciplines to show meaningful results on these quantitative indicators, it is mandatory to additionally submit an engagement indicator explanatory statement to contextualize one’s own results on the indicators.

***Impact and approach to impact:*** *Impact* is defined as “[...] the contribution that research makes to the economy, society, environment or culture, beyond the contribution to academic research.”<sup>17</sup> Universities are asked to submit a single impact study for the assessment of both the *impact* of a given unit of assessment as well as its *approach to impact*. In the *impact* sections of the submission,

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<sup>13</sup> Australian Research Council (2017), p.5

<sup>14</sup> Australian Research Council (2017), p.5, own emphasis added in italics.

<sup>15</sup> Australian Research Council (2017), p.5

<sup>16</sup> Australian Research Council (2017), p.6-7

<sup>17</sup> Australian Research Council (2017), p.5

institutions are asked to detail the impact made by a field of research in a qualitative case study, indicating who benefitted in which way.

In the *approach to impact* section, institutions are asked to produce a qualitative case study that draws a clear image of how they designed and executed research processes and how research outputs proved beneficial outside of academia. For both the *impact* and the *approach to impact* assessment, institutions are required to link provided impact to specific research activities.<sup>18</sup>

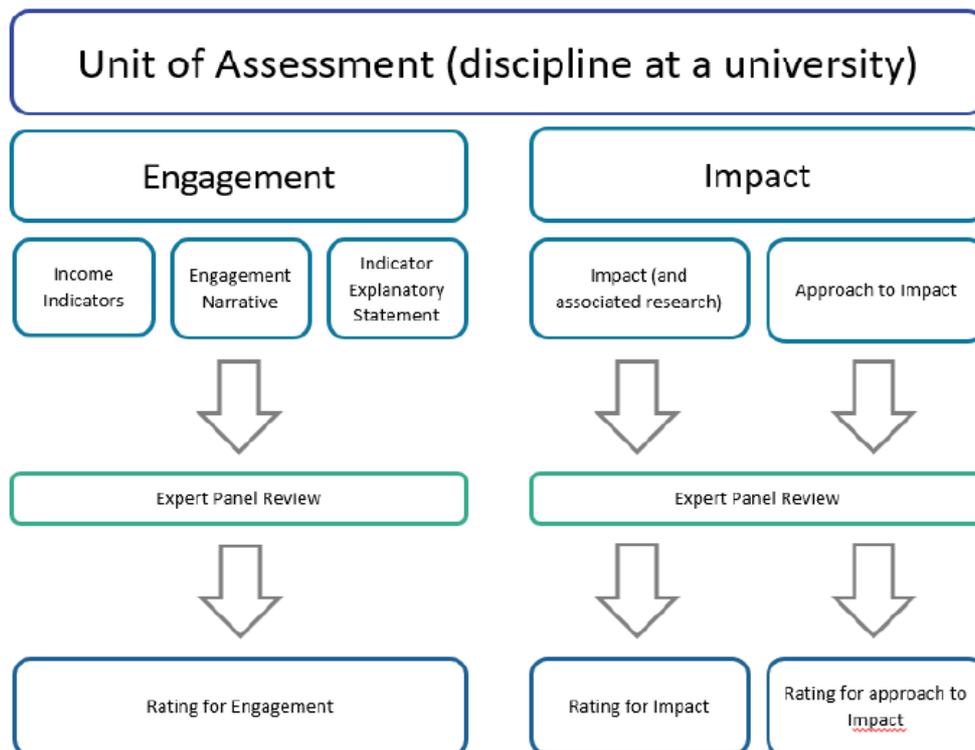


Figure 1: Components of the Engagement and Impact Assessment 2018<sup>19</sup>

EI is retrospective, i.e. it assesses engagement and impact in a period leading up to the point of measurement. The periods of reference for each data type were specified as follows:

<sup>18</sup> Australian Research Council (2017), p.8

<sup>19</sup> Australian Research Council (2021). *ERA EI Review Final Report 2020-2021*, p.39

Data type ^	Reference period v	Years v
Associated research	1 January 2002–31 December 2016	15
Engagement	1 January 2014–31 December 2016	3
Impact	1 January 2011–31 December 2016	6

Figure 2: Periods of reference for different data types<sup>20</sup>

EI employs three-point rating scales with the values "High", "Medium" and "Low". All three assessment categories (engagement, impact and approach to impact) were rated separately.<sup>21</sup> Since every rating point includes a wide variety of performances and cut-offs between rating points that are not defined, EI results are not particularly suitable for comparison across disciplines.<sup>22</sup>

### 3 Critique & Reactions

Former heads of the Australian Research Council (ARC) were not the only source of critical feedback to the inception of EI 2018. The ARC itself commenced a review process for EI 2018 calling for feedback, in which it invited all stakeholders to contribute. This review received a total of 112 submissions from institutions and individuals.<sup>23</sup> This case study analyzes feedback submissions that were advanced by three of Australia's largest university networks, the Group of Eight (Go8), the Innovative Research Universities (IRU) and the Regional Universities Network (RUN). These have pooled their feedback into joint viewpoints and thus represent multiple Higher Education Institutions. In the following a short synopsis of the major critiques will be laid out.

The majority of feedback towards EI is critical. Most notably, a significant share of criticism is raised by both IRU and RUN. Both fundamentally call into question whether EI satisfyingly reaches any of its objectives. Collaboration isn't further encouraged and EI does not sufficiently identify processes that enable

<sup>20</sup> Australian Research Council (2018), p.8

<sup>21</sup> Australian Research Council (2018), p.32 ff.

<sup>22</sup> Australian Research Council (2019), *Engagement and Impact Assessment 2018-19 National Report*, p.12

<sup>23</sup> All submissions are available for download at <https://www.arc.gov.au/excellence-research-australia/era-ei-review>

engagement or impact.<sup>24</sup> RUN and IRU agree, that the narrative, which is part of the assessment, while resource intensive, somewhat delivers on this demand, even if they argue that one narrative is not nearly enough to fully show an entire fields of research effort for enabling engagement or impact. They further agree that the solely cash-driven indicators fail to accurately capture engagement and impact, missing out on a myriad of other forms of engagement, even creating unacceptable biases in favor of HEIs with larger research income and disciplines more prone to producing cash-based results. This is especially detrimental to disciplines that are characterized by less cash-focused research outputs such as HASS-disciplines (Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences). The IRU in particular finds that none of the used engagement indicators are appropriate.<sup>25</sup> RUN also lists a number of alternative indicators to reduce the role of cash-based indicators: “End-users as co-authors and listed on grants, repeat collaborations [...]”<sup>26</sup> By contrast, both RUN and IRU see value in EI as ways to identify exemplar cases and institutional performance measures.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, they find fault in the retrospective design of EI, stating that it makes it difficult to apply processes that have been found in exemplar cases to currently undergoing research projects.<sup>28</sup> RUN and IRU both respectively reach the conclusion that EI is “poorly designed. It isn’t designed to demonstrate what it is meant to”.<sup>29</sup>

Importantly, both of the smaller university networks attest a very low impact to EI itself, stating that it had little to no influence on universities, researchers and sectors beyond academia alike. In part due to resource constraints on the side of universities preventing actual large-scale changes to university approaches and in part due to lack of understanding and visibility in industry sectors.<sup>30</sup>

It is striking that most of the fundamental criticisms of EI methodology are shared by RUN and IRU, but not the Go8. This may be due to the fact that the Go8 is made up by the eight biggest, most affluent and most funded universities of Australia. They are exactly those institutions, which (according to IRU and RUN) benefit the most from EI’s design, especially the numeric and cash-driven engagement and impact indicators. Much of the criticism raised by the two

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<sup>24</sup> RUN (2020). *Submission on ERA EI Consultation Paper 2020*, p.9; IRU (2020). *ERA EI Review Consultation Paper Questions – IRU response*, p.13

<sup>25</sup> RUN (2020) p.9-15, IRU (2020) p.16-17

<sup>26</sup> RUN (2020) p.13

<sup>27</sup> RUN (2020) p.10, IRU (2020) p.2

<sup>28</sup> RUN (2020) p.9-10, IRU (2020) p.13

<sup>29</sup> RUN (2020) p.10

<sup>30</sup> RUN (2020) p.10, IRU (2020) p.14

smaller university networks are simply not mentioned in the Go8 submission. The Go8 feedback submission is much shorter in general.

That being said, there are a number of aspects that all three stakeholder groups share. For example, EI results do not yet meet their objective to properly inform the Australian public and government about the payoffs of their investments into Australian research.<sup>31</sup> The Go8 even suggests this is directly caused by the EI design.<sup>32</sup> The Go8 and IRU both suggest the use of SEO-codes (Socio-Economic Objectives) that require the explication of purposes and outcomes of research in relation to societal objectives and national agendas.<sup>33</sup>

There is also strong agreement that the costs imposed on universities was disproportionate and, at its peak, overwhelming.<sup>34</sup> All three groups advocate for a longer cycle between assessments and/or temporally offsetting ERA and EI to this end.<sup>35</sup> Another popular method to alleviate the pressure on universities was the partial automation or streamlining of data collection through publicly available datasets like HERDC funding data or ORCID IDs. RUN and IRU even repeatedly advocate for the combination of the *engagement* and *approach to impact* sections of the assessment, stating that they served largely the same purpose and needlessly inflated workload.<sup>36</sup>

The academic literature on EI 2018 shows that EI is criticized for attaching more weight on engagement than impact measurements.<sup>37</sup> This criticism does not seem to bear on sufficient justification, as the EI focuses on both engagement *and* impact. Bolingford (2017)<sup>38</sup> is one of the authors levying this criticism during

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<sup>31</sup> Go8 (2020). *Enabling Australia's Economic Recovery through supporting research excellence*, p.1-4, RUN (2020), p.9, IRU (2020), p.13

<sup>32</sup> Go8 (2020), p.4

<sup>33</sup> Although RUN directly opposes this, stating that SEO-codes are not widely understood by the public.

<sup>34</sup> Go8 (2020), p.1-4, RUN (2020), p.17-20, IRU (2020), p.19-20

<sup>35</sup> At the same time, all three groups oppose combining ERA and EI into one single assessment, assuming that this would not bring with it a reduction in administrative burden but simply a concentration of the workload at one particular point.

<sup>36</sup> Go8 (2020), p.1-3, RUN (2020), p.17-19, IRU (2020), p.20-21

<sup>37</sup> See for example Williams & Grant (2018) and Zardo, Pauline; Barnett, Adrian G.; Suzor, Nicolas; Cahill, Tim (2018). *Does engagement predict research use? An analysis of The Conversation Annual Survey 2016*; retrieved from:

<https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0192290>

<sup>38</sup> Bolingford, Ilana (2017). *The Research Excellence Framework and the Stern Review – Implications for Australia's Engagement and Impact Assessment Framework*. Available at SSRN:

<https://ssrn.com/abstract=3414086> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3414086>

the development stages of EI, while also suggesting an explanation in the wording of the Consultation Paper, published in the wake of the adoption of NISA by the Australian Research Council itself. This paper suggested that focusing on impact itself would not be the optimal strategy for the Australian context and instead proposed to focus on the analysis of processes.<sup>39</sup> It is unclear at what point the Australian Government and the ARC amended their views concerning the focus of EI and decided to include both aspects.

An additional issue are the fundamental debates that accompany impact frameworks. In the time precluding the inception of EI there were several authors calling into question the feasibility of measuring impact meaningfully at all, and whether fields of research with more easily measurable outputs would systemically score higher in rankings. Especially in the UK, many scholars argued that the REF actively discouraged “blue skies research” with no immediately apparent or relevant output as well as research in the humanities.<sup>40</sup> However, it is noticeable, that these debates seem to have fizzled out before the conceptualization of EI and that they seem to result from debates about the REF in the UK. This could be a result of the REF having been adopted a good number of years previous to EI and the fundamental debates having been somewhat settled by the time of EI’s adoption. That the implementation of EI faced less opposition than REF may be due to the fact that EI does not (re-)distribute research funds, while REF clearly does.

The Australian Government still defines certain desirable traits for all Australian research and ties it to a national ranking system, which can be interpreted as an incentivization for research outputs that are believed to produce more tangible results than others. Still, it is noticeable that even authors specifically comparing both countries’ development of impact frameworks exclusively cite UK-based authors in these fundamental debates and that there seem to be no similar debates happening in the Australian literature.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Australian Government (2016). *National Innovation and Science Agenda- Engagement and Impact Assessment Consultation Paper*, p.11 as cited in Bolingford (2017), p.4

<sup>40</sup> Williams & Grant (2018), p.93

<sup>41</sup> Williams & Grant (2018), p.93

## 4 Discussion & Outlook

So far, EI 2018 has gone through one round. Due to the criticism raised by various stakeholders, the framework can be expected to undergo a number of changes for the next round in the following years. In fact, the ARC has already stated how it wants to address some of the feedback in the next round in 2024.<sup>42</sup> On the basis of the feedback from stakeholders of all sectors, the ARC has developed recommendations to redesign EI to better meet its objectives, e.g. concerning the provision of insights into the translation of research into tangible results.

The ARC will work towards the development of data collections and services offering EI results for end-users and working with groups of all concerned stakeholders to "provide advice, advocacy and demonstrations on the value of [...] EI data."<sup>43</sup> Additionally, the ARC plans to adopt stakeholder recommendations and facilitate the streamlining of data-collection to at least partially automate data-aggregation processes and plans to minimize peak workload.<sup>44</sup> The issue with biased, cash-based indicators favoring STEM fields and better funded or larger universities will be alleviated by letting universities choose, which numeric indicators best suit a particular discipline's narrative.

These steps are likely to sustainably reduce concerns, but it still remains to be seen whether EI will enhance its overall impact on the Australian sphere of research and beyond. At any rate, EI is apparently settling into the Australian impact landscape to stay.

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<sup>42</sup> See Australian Research Council (2021)

<sup>43</sup> Australian Research Council (2021), p.17-18

<sup>44</sup> Australian Research Council (2021), p.19-21