

The Future of Journalism Research in Australia: Addressing the 2010 ERA Round

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Location: University of Technology, Sydney

Host: Australian Centre for Independent Journalism

Presentation: What ERA Means for Journalism Research

Chair: Prof Lesley Farrell, Associate Dean (Research & Development), Arts and Social Sciences, UTS

Speaker: Liz Visher, Director, Outreach, Research Excellence Branch, Australian Research Council

Ms Visher's powerpoint presentation on the ERA is available at the following link:
http://www.arc.gov.au/media/arc_presentations.htm

While giving her presentation, Ms Visher made the following key points –

Regarding the ERA model:

- the ANZSRC 4-digit Field of Research (FoR) codes is the base Unit of Evaluation (discipline in the institution) – not the department or individual.
- The ARC is currently in the process of setting up eight research evaluation committees and the selection of members will be ensuring there is adequate broad coverage of the disciplines in each cluster.
- Research Evaluation Committees (RECs) will provide expert review, and where relevant this will include peer review of research outputs;
- a minimum level of research outputs will be required in order to be considered 'research-active' – the trial showed that the threshold needed to be increased in HCA;
- the approach to evaluation and the metrics based methodology for ERA (via a "dashboard") is very different from the model used to assess prospective research project grant applications from individuals; and
- when the ANZSRC coding from the Australian Bureau of Statistics will be reviewed in future and it is important that the Humanities and Creative Arts disciplines engage in such a review when it occurs to help improve their FoRs.

Regarding the ERA trial:

- the consultation process included 900 academics in addition to two major public consultation papers;
- the trial included the PCE and HCA clusters due to the breadth of methodologies used by each Cluster;

- all 41 institutions within the HCA cluster submitted data; 47,000 HCA research outputs were submitted (7,000 creative works);
- ARC undertook an extensive consultation of all disciplines in the eight Clusters and asked ‘What indicators works for your disciplines?’;
- ARC then went back to the public with those indicators for feedback in 2009;
- the ARC has now finalized the ranking of journals and conferences for 2010;
- In the development of the ERA methodology the ARC obtained advice from international experts in bibliometrics including from the UK and the Netherlands;
- esteem measures were selected on the basis that they that are good proxies for quality;
- The Trial research evaluation committees provided important feedback regarding what worked and what didn’t work which informed a number of developments for 2010;
- a new ratings scale has been released recently by the ARC and was revised based on feedback from the Trial;
- in the Trial the assessments of average performance were made using expert judgment by the HCA research evaluation committee of the range of indicators; and
- the ARC imposed no bell curves, quotas for ratings nor adopted any metric- based formulae

Regarding outcomes from the ERA trial:

- During the Trial outputs with a number of FoRs were whole counted. For 2010 research outputs Field of Research Codes will be apportioned by the institution. For journal articles the codes will be the FoR codes of the journals, other outputs will be at the discretion of the institution;
- ERA plans to have a soft close and also develop an early “dashboard” which is to be made available to institutions to verify submission data within Units of Evaluation for 2010;
- Books, book chapters can be included in multiple FoRs and coded by institutions;
- research statements which will accompany creative works will remain will remain at 250 words max;
- single works of journalism (eg., newspaper articles) can still be submitted on their own (if they meet eligibility requirements of research outputs), but in 2010 institutions have the option to use portfolios to bundle smaller works together (REMEMBER TO ATTACH A RESEARCH STATEMENT to the portfolio – not a research statement for each smaller work within the portfolio); and
- the ARC is working with institutions to prepare for 2010 for improving access to research outputs located in repositories.

Regarding how researchers can best prepare submissions:

- research statements – look at the ARC/ERA definition of research and what the research component is for the creative work;
- integrity – when you have bulk load approach to submission, make sure all authors are there, correct years are listed, and all other information is as correct as possible;
- work with the university research office to get the apportionments for FoR codes right – does output belong in one code or across three codes?;
- choose best works for peer review for the discipline;
- choose best field of research (FoR) for each output for the purposes of peer review;
- write good background statement using the early submission “dashboard: of all indicators;
- for books institutions can electronically provide cover and first chapter, or digitize the full item;
- if, for example, you have lots of newspaper articles, carefully consider whether they are best submitted as individual outputs or as part of a portfolio;
- clearly state your case for any portfolio (attach research statement 250 words max);
- works not included in a portfolio and are submitted as single works also require a research statement of 250 words max; and
- research themes and institutional codes are not mandatory and are available for institutions to use for re-aggregation of outputs (for example, climate change or Centre of Excellence). Research themes and institutional codes are not used for evaluation purposes.

Concluding comments on ERA submissions:

- Dashboard indicators – For journalism, there will be a range of indicators including research outputs, income, staffing etc, so communicate what the discipline-specific context in a way that best informs committee members.
- Peer Review – This is only one indicator on the dashboard. Peer review is undertaken by REC Members and peer reviewers, but Peer reviewers do not see metric profiles on the Dashboard, only peer review items.
- Esteem – The esteem measures that were selected for ERA are metric-based (eg., membership of Learned Academy) but other esteem measures such a Nobel Prize can be mentioned in the Background Statement.)
- Repositories – Don’t forget that each creative work output needs its own research statement unless it forms part of a portfolio of works.
- What’s Next – ARC has released the documentation for submission 6 months in advance to help institutions prepare. ARC Outreach activities are helping improve the sector’s understanding of the ERA objectives.

Q & A with Liz Visher

Q: Referring to the rating scale with the value “3” as the world standard – how do you determine that, and what does it mean?

A: At the end of the day, these world standards are determined by the research evaluation committee’s experts’ judgment, not by a single metric (eg a citation benchmark) but a holistic evaluation of the indicators, with a focus on the majority of outputs matching the level of quality in the rating scale.

Q: What is the definition of research?

A: The ARC uses a definition of research which accommodates all disciplines including the creative work of practitioner-focused research.

For the purposes of ERA, research is defined as the creation of new knowledge and/or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way so as to generate new concepts, methodologies and understandings. This could include synthesis and analysis of previous research to the extent that it is new and creative.

The definition aligns with the OECD.

Q: What happens in the case of public relations academics who want to be seen in 1903 category, but because their journals are clustered with marketing they find it difficult to move across?

A: In this case the coding of the journals will be the determinant. So if their journals are in marketing, that’s where they’ll go. There was a recent case in one university, where there was an academic who considered himself a pure physicist but when his outputs were coded against the journals he was 80% mathematics. So the codings might tell you something completely different from an academic’s perception of their expertise. The ERA is interested in what the research outputs do as the outputs are what are primarily being evaluated.

Q: How do we apportion our research out to different FoRs?

A: You advise where the research outputs are most appropriately apportioned. In the case of journal articles, the FoR codes will be of the journal. For other outputs it is at the discretion of the institution. Additionally, if the output is tagged for peer review, institutions can determine which FoR it is most appropriate for the output to be peer reviewed.

Q: With journalism and professional writing, how do we know we are choosing the right works for assessment? Where can we look for guidance?

A: ARC won’t provide advice on discipline strategies for submissions; it is up to institutions to submit the best of the research work of a discipline. Ask yourself - Is there sufficient new work involved in that output to justify it standing as a quality item on its own, or should smaller items be put within a portfolio to contribute to a larger work? You make those judgments.

Q: How do you perceive ‘world standard’? Is this really a Western standard or would you include countries such as Chile, India, Sweden...?

A: The ARC does not have a list of countries that constitutes “world standard”. The term world standard can depend on the discipline. In the case of Mass Communication,

experts on the research evaluation committees will be making judgments based on their expert judgment of the discipline.

Q: Will the ARC allow the 1903 category to be used by academics from other disciplines who publish pieces in newspapers and magazines?

A: Yes. The reason for using multiple coding and the dashboard is that they allow for research outputs, especially multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research, to be coded where they belong yet apportioned appropriately.

Q: Can an institution count all outputs during a given period regardless of whether people still with us? This could affect our counting of associate researchers.

A: You can only count people who are/were eligible on the census date and that person is listed on an eligible research output in the reference period.

Q: Publishing in A journals is not critical in all discipline areas, for example, journalism. So how does the ERA grading system work for us?*

A: Don't confuse the tiers used for the ranked journals with the ERA rating scale. Ranked journals is only one indicator of several used in the ERA Dashboard. Research evaluation committees will look at a range of indicators, including the research outputs (peer review, volume data with bibliographic information). They may for example, in the case of books, form a view about the publishers, what the trend publication data shows, and the amount of income received in that area. When it came to HCA cluster for trial, some disciplines were shown to publish primarily in the form of books and book chapters, with journal articles sometimes accounting for only 15-20% of outputs. ERA's methodology accommodates flexibility of evaluation using discipline-specific practices and expert knowledge, so there is no formulaic way of enforcing the use of ranked journals to each discipline. In creative arts, for example, journals are just not relevant as the majority of outputs lie elsewhere. We ask 'Where is the publication activity, and why?' We recognise that there discipline-specific activities. Each institution's submission will be allowed to tell its own story in the background statement.

Q: What criteria are used to determine the ranking/grading of journals – for example, what makes an A journal? Correct*

A: The A* journals have a peer review panel and international members on their review panels. These journals are highly regarded within their fields as well. However, the criteria doesn't say anything about the importance of those journals to the discipline nor importance of regionality. There are more details on the ARC web site regarding the criteria used for the ranking of journals (location of criteria - http://www.arc.gov.au/era/tiers_ranking.htm)

Q: It seems that there is a tension being created by ERA – for many of us, our journalism research might fit better into a different category, although our principal goal is to advance journalism research.

A: Prior to ERA, the main issue for HCA in many cases was that many research outputs (particularly creative works) were not even on the radar. ERA has broadened the outputs involved and shows more clearly the multidimensional aspect of research outputs for these disciplines. This will enable a more complete evaluation to be done on these disciplines, and can also be used to better inform discussions within institutions regarding the research outputs of such disciplines.

Q: How will the recruitment process for Research Evaluation Committees (RECs) ensure that their composition reflects the range of disciplines and research outputs they consider?

A: The ARC asked institutions to nominate researchers according to a list of selection criteria to make sure they have the required expertise on committees to broadly cover the disciplines involved. Following submission the ARC may also revisit the membership and how representative the RECs are in that context. The ARC will train REC members so they know how the ERA dashboard works, what the indicators are, and how discipline-specific practices appear. In training, the ARC also includes examples from other disciplines so they are aware of the diversity of disciplines before each REC.

Q: Will the RECs then be reporting back to the disciplines?

A: ARC will send out reports to institutions giving the outcomes, and the Government has indicated it will publicly release the results. The ARC will also review the ERA process to improve the processes in future. Much of the Trial feedback was incorporated into the submission guidelines for 2010. After the release of the ERA outcomes, conversations between the government and the institutions will commence. Through the ERA outcomes, institutions will know their research strengths and their emerging areas and what you need to work on, and that will figure into funding negotiations. Institutions and government may develop views on setting the research priorities for the future.

Q: If ERA is about developing a new funding model then this will be a competitive process within the discipline, but if it's about developing our research area it will be more collaborative. Which is it more of?

A: ERA contributes information to all of the above. ERA is about stock take of retrospective research which will be used as part of the new funding model. The ERA outcomes gives a baseline dataset for institutions as well as for government. Specifically for HCA the outcomes are likely to bring back to the table information about research quality that may help, for example, with respect to future investments by the institution, bringing these disciplines back onto the radar.

Q: There are already strong indications that the 4-digit code for journalism will not have an adequate voice and representation within the umbrella 2-digit code. Many senior administrators tend to under-value journalism research; there is even some antipathy towards the field. Recently, the Australian Journalism Review lost it's A ranking and many of us suspect that that was due to the influence of academics from outside the field. What mechanisms will there be within the ERA framework to ensure that journalism has an effective voice and adequate representation?*

A: It is the institution's responsibility to ensure that the 2-digit Units of Evaluation background statements sufficiently reflect the range of research quality in corresponding 4-digit codes beneath it. So make sure that you are fully engaged in this process. We designed the methodology so that if you look at the 2-digit code you can still drill down for journalism and see the research outputs even if the journalism code did not make it across the threshold at the 4-digit level.

The ARC is trying to ensure that there is a sufficient breadth of expertise on the RECs, although getting every 4-digit areas represented would be difficult. The ARC will publicly announce the committee chairs and members. The intention is to have broad discipline coverage in REC memberships, and in the case of HCA peer review where appropriate.

The ARC has worked hard in its outreach capacity to advise people that ranked journals is only one indicator on the “Dashboard” and expert review by RECs allows for a discipline-specific approach to evaluation. This is done to diminish the incorrect view that journals have an all-important status for ERA evaluation. The ranked journals were designed to be fit for purpose – for a national evaluation. It is understood by the ARC that in some quarters in the sector, people are using ranked journals for different purposes, eg., advising academics to publish in A* journals rather than publishing in books or book chapters. The ARC will continue its outreach message on the holistic evaluation of ERA, including the use of ranked journals in that context. ERA is about the quality of the research nationally and in that context it is institutions putting their best foot forward in submissions.

Q: So if we don't have A journal publications, should we concentrate on practice-based research?*

A: ERA allows for diversity of these disciplines including practice-based research in journalism and creative arts. ERA evaluation is built to encompass discipline-specific publication and income practices. Publishing in A* journals is not the name of the game, there are other forms of publishing and the tier ranking of journals does not serve as a secret rating scale. It is the quality of the work that matters so present your case as such.

Q: Is there a way to include work by multiple authors within the same portfolio?

A: I will need to get back to the group on that specific question. Subsequent advice - the answer is that multiple authors can be included.

Q: Can we include magazines that we've edited?

A: No, because that is not authorship.

Q: Do we put our practice-based work in a portfolio or separate them out according to different elements and across media platforms?

A: Over to you. The tools are there for you to put the outputs where you think they belong. ERA has tried to be flexible to include non-traditional research outputs both as single items or packaged in a portfolio.

Q: It seems naïve to think that the five metric profiles will not have different weightings. Many senior academics will now only publish in A overseas journals and junior academics will abandon their focus on studies of local Australian media in an effort to get published in lower ranking international journals.*

A: It was a pre-existing perception that ranked journals were placed above other forms of outputs because we consulted on ranked journals first. ERA is modelled to address diversity of outputs and discipline-specific practices. We worked really hard in outreach, especially with respect to discipline-specific practices, with university executives so they know how the ERA methodologies work. The ARC will continue to try to help people understand the ERA model. We concentrate our outreach activities mainly at translation points – university executive levels – so the strategy is to provide ongoing education with key people at the institutions and to produce ERA documents that enable transparency.