

The impact of the Commonwealth Government's Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) framework on Australian Indigenous Studies

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Abstract *The Commonwealth Government has recently introduced a new measurement for research quality in Australian universities called the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA). The ERA will critically influence university research priorities and funding in the coming years. In this paper, I discuss the development of the ERA framework and analyse this framework in relation to the discipline of Australian Indigenous Studies. In particular, I discuss the impact of the ERA on Australian Indigenous Studies and Australian Indigenous Studies journals.*

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Introduction

In 2008, the Rudd Government announced an initiative to develop a new research quality and evaluation process for Australian universities. This initiative is called the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) framework. This ERA framework is currently still in the development and trial stage.

In this paper, I will explore the impact of the ERA upon the academic discipline of Australian Indigenous Studies, and, in particular, upon Australian Indigenous Studies journals. I argue that even though the ERA has not been fully implemented by Australian universities, it has already significantly and detrimentally impacted upon Australian Indigenous Studies in two main and interrelated ways. First, Australian Indigenous people and organisations have generally not been included in the broad consultations undertaken during the development and trial stage. Second, Australian Indigenous Studies journals have generally not been sufficiently recognised by the ERA framework.

ERA framework

The current method that the Commonwealth Government uses to determine research funding to Australian universities is the Institutional Grants Scheme. This Scheme allocates funding by measuring three broad research categories for each university: numbers of publications produced; numbers of research student enrolments and completions; and financial amount of research grants awarded. Under this Scheme, all publications are assigned a specific value, regardless of the quality of the publication, with five points being awarded for books and one point being awarded for journal articles, book chapters and conference papers.

In 2008, the Rudd Government announced a new approach to determining research quality and evaluation for the Australian university system, the ERA framework. Currently in the development and trial stage, the ERA framework is being primarily organised and conducted by the Australian Research Council (ARC). The ERA is an attempt to measure research quality through ranking research publications, such as journals and conference papers. This ranking process will be undertaken through using both metrics and expert reviews. This approach allows for different values to be assigned to publications, depending on what journal or conference collection they were published in.

On announcing the ERA in early 2008, Senator Kim Carr, the Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research argued the Rudd Government's rationale for the introduction of the ERA: "The Commonwealth invests billions each year in research. The ERA model will provide hard evidence that taxpayers are getting the best bang for their buck in this critical area" (Carr 2008a). It is likely that when the ERA is fully developed and implemented, it will replace the Institutional Grants Scheme in determining research funding to the university sector (Carr 2008a).

The ERA will evaluate research quality and activity across the eight ARC discipline clusters: Physical, Chemical and Earth Sciences; Humanities and Creative Arts; Engineering and Environmental Sciences; Social, Behavioural and Economic Sciences; Mathematics, Information and Communication Sciences; Biological Sciences and Biotechnology; Biomedical and Clinical Research; and Public and Allied Health and Health Services. This evaluation will be reported by institution and discipline. In the second half of 2009, the ARC organised a trial ERA with just two clusters: Physical, Chemical and Earth Sciences and Humanities and Creative Arts. From July 2010, the full ERA evaluation will be implemented across all eight clusters (ARC 2009a).

Measurement

The units of measurement that ERA will employ to evaluate research quality are the Australian and New Zealand Standard Research Classification (ANZSRC) Field of Research (FoR) codes. The ANZSRC was developed over 18 months by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), in consultation with Statistics New

Zealand, ARC, Department of Education, Science and Training, CSIRO, National Health and Medical Research Council, New Zealand Ministry of Research, Science and Technology, Universities Australia, Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies and the Council for Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (Carr 2008b).

All research in Australia that is funded by the ARC is grouped into FoR codes. The FoR codes used in the ERA are two-digit codes (22 divisions, such as mathematical sciences and physical sciences; see Appendix One for the full list) and four-digit codes (157 groups, such as policy and administration and specialist studies in education) (ABS 2008a).

However, many specialist disciplines are categorised by six-digit FoR codes, or sub-codes of four-digit FoR codes. The ERA process has significant implications for specialist disciplines and journals categorised by six-digit codes. For instance, Peters (2008) has written of the difficulties of assigning an ERA ranking to the journal *Educational Philosophy and Theory* due to the placing of the specialist discipline of philosophy of education (six-digit code) into the broad four-digit FoR code of philosophy rather than the four-digit FoR code of education.

There are similar concerns with the discipline of Australian Indigenous Studies. Australian Indigenous Studies is not represented by a two or four-digit FoR code, but rather by a number of six-digit FoR codes. For example, 'Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Policy' is a six-digit FoR code and a sub-code of 'Policy and Administration', a four-digit FoR code. Similarly, 'Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander education' is a six-digit FoR code and a sub-code of 'Specialist Studies in Education', a four-digit FoR code. This practise increases the likelihood that Australian Indigenous Studies is not recognised as a specific academic discipline but rather as a collection of minor, specialist, niche areas within broader disciplines. Further, there are only fifteen Australian Indigenous six-digit FoR codes that are supposed to cover the significant breadth of Australian Indigenous Studies (ABS 2008b; see Gunstone 2008 for a discussion of the breadth of the discipline of Australian Indigenous Studies; see Appendix Two for the full list of Australian Indigenous six-digit FoR codes).

Consultations

There have been three consultation periods concerning the ERA. The first period occurred in late 2007, when the ARC consulted with a number of bodies regarding the development of draft rankings for journals in their relevant disciplines. The consultations were held with the four Australian Learned Academies and twenty-three discipline national peak bodies (ARC 2009c; see Appendix Three for the full list). However, there were no consultations with either of the two Australian Indigenous Studies national peak bodies, the National Indigenous Higher Education Network or the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council.

The following consultation periods were more open processes. The second period occurred following the release of the draft ERA journal rankings, when the ARC sought feedback from academics regarding the ranking and FoR codes (ARC 2009c). The third period occurred from September to November 2009, when sector-wide feedback was invited for the 2010 ERA Journal list to check omitted journals and ISSN's (international journal numbers) (ARC 2009c).

ERA tiers for journals

To determine the quality of journals, the ERA has devised a four-tier system, ranging from A* (highest) through to A to B and eventually to C (lowest). Approximately the top 5% of all journals in a discipline should be ranked A*, the next 15% should be ranked A, the next 30% should be ranked B and the rest (50%) should be ranked C. The criteria for the tiers are as follows:

A* - "Typically an A* journal would be one of the best in its field or subfield in which to publish and would typically cover the entire field/subfield. Virtually all papers they publish will be of a very high quality. These are journals where most of the work is important (it will really shape the field) and where researchers boast about getting accepted. Acceptance rates would typically be low and the editorial board would be dominated by field leaders, including many from top institutions".

A - "The majority of papers in a Tier A journal will be of very high quality. Publishing in an A journal would enhance the author's standing, showing they have real engagement with the global research community and that they have something to say about problems of some significance. Typical signs of an A journal are lowish acceptance rates and an editorial board which includes a reasonable fraction of well known researchers from top institutions".

B - "Tier B covers journals with a solid, though not outstanding, reputation. Generally, in a Tier B journal, one would expect only a few papers of very high quality. They are often important outlets for the work of PhD students and early career researchers. Typical examples would be regional journals with high acceptance rates, and editorial boards that have few leading researchers from top international institutions".

C - "Tier C includes quality, peer reviewed, journals that do not meet the criteria of the higher tiers" (ARC 2009b).

There are several concerns with these four tiers. First, the description of the tiers is often very subjective, with phrases such as 'where researchers boast about getting accepted' and 'would enhance the author's standing'. Second, the criteria is not clearly distinctive between the tiers, such as tier A* stating 'acceptance rates would be typically low' and tier A stating 'lowish acceptance rates'. Third, the criteria for tier C, which is supposed to represent 50% of all journals in the ERA list, is very vague, simply stating 'do not meet the criteria of the higher tiers', although still requiring C ranked journals to be 'quality, peer reviewed journals'.

Fourth, these tiers seem to consider that regional journals are less significant than international journals, with the criteria for tier B stating ‘typical examples would be regional journals’. While this approach might be acceptable for those disciplines, such as several science-based disciplines that have an international scope, the approach discriminates against those disciplines, such as Australian Indigenous Studies, that are regionally based.

Australian Indigenous studies journals

Gunstone and Foley (2009) have argued that Australian Indigenous Studies journals should have two particular criteria. First, they should not just occasionally publish an article that relates to Australian Indigenous Studies, but rather should consistently publish articles on Australian Indigenous Studies and promote the academic discipline of Australian Indigenous Studies. Second, the governance structure of the journals, including but not limited to, the Editors, Editorial Boards and Advisory Boards, should have significant involvement from Australian Indigenous peoples, organisations and communities.

At the conclusion of the first phase of the ERA consultation process, there were over 19,500 journals from Australia and overseas on the initial ERA journal list, the *Research Journal Ranking Review List* (ARC 2008). This list illustrated several concerns regarding the ERA and Australian Indigenous Studies journals, which were largely caused by the lack of consultations with Australian Indigenous Studies peak bodies and the placement of Australian Indigenous Studies disciplines in six-digit FoR codes.

First, the list only mentions seven Australian Indigenous Studies journals, with another four international Indigenous Studies journals (ARC 2008; see Table One for a full list of the seven Australian Indigenous Studies journals). I located these journals (out of over 19,500) by searching for any journals with the words ‘Indigenous’ or ‘Aboriginal’ in the title. I realise this will exclude any journal without these words in the title, however, given the above discussion regarding the defining of an Australian Indigenous Studies journal and the enormous number of journals in the list, I viewed this approach as being both reasonably accurate and timely. There were several significant journals, such as the *Journal of Indigenous Policy* and the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit Research Report Series*, which were not on the ERA list. Further, the seven journals were located in only seven four-digit FoR codes, another illustration that the breadth of the discipline of Australian Indigenous Studies was not recognised by the ERA list (see Table One for a full listing of the FoR codes for the Australian Indigenous Studies journals).

Second, the list largely ranked those Australian Indigenous Studies journals that were on the list in the lowest ranking of C (ARC 2008; see Table One for the ranking of the seven Australian Indigenous Studies journals). Further, the ranking of the Australian Indigenous Studies journals did not adhere to the ARC’s own guidelines concerning the distribution of the four ranking tiers, as the

Australian Indigenous Studies journals were underrepresented in the ranking tier A* and overrepresented in the ranking tier C (ARC 2008; see Table Two for the comparison between the ERA guidelines for the distribution of journals in a discipline in ranking tiers and the ranking of Australian Indigenous Studies journals).

Table 1: Ranking of Australian Indigenous Studies journals following Phase One of the ERA Consultation Process

Journal	Rank	FoR
Aboriginal and Islander Health Worker Journal	C	1117 (Public Health and Health Services)
Aboriginal History	A	2103 (Historical Studies)
Australian Aboriginal Studies	B	1699 (Other Studies in Human Society); 2101 (Archaeology)
Australian Indigenous Health Bulletin	C	1117 (Public Health and Health Services)
Australian Journal of Indigenous Education	B	1303 (Specialist Studies in Education)
Indigenous Law Journal	C	1801 (Law)
Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues	C	1605 (Policy and Administration); 1699 (Other Studies in Human Society)

Table Two: Ranking of Indigenous Studies journals

	A*	A	B	C
ERA Guidelines	5%	15%	30%	50%
Actual Rankings	0%	14%	28%	57%

Indicators

In mid-2008, Carr announced the establishment of a body, the Indicators Development Group (IDG), which would advise in the development of discipline indicators for the ERA, including metrics (Carr 2008c).

As with the consultations, there was significantly little involvement of Australian Indigenous researchers in this process. The IDG contained 12 members, with no Australian Indigenous member (ARC 2009e). Likewise, the two sub-committees that were also established – the Creative Arts sub-group with six members and the Humanities sub-group with eight members – also contained no Australian Indigenous members (ARC 2009e). Further, only four of the 84 researchers who

assisted in the development of the ERA indicators were Australian Indigenous researchers (ARC 2009f).

The consequence of this failure to adequately consult with Australian Indigenous researchers was illustrated with the release in December 2008 of two key ERA documents that discussed indicators, *ERA Indicator Descriptors* and *ERA Indicator Principles*. There was no mention of any indicators that specifically related to the discipline of Australian Indigenous Studies in either of these key documents (ARC 2009g). Only in September 2009, with the release of the *ERA Indicators Consultation Paper*, was there any reference to indicators that related to Australian Indigenous Studies, with the inclusion of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in a list of Learned Academies and a brief mention of Australian Indigenous fellowships from the Australia Council (ARC 2009h: 8, 10).

Evaluations

Another illustration of the lack of consultation with Australian Indigenous researchers during the ERA process occurred with the work done in regard to developing evaluation guidelines. The ERA established Research Evaluation Committees (REC's) for the two trial clusters, Physical, Chemical and Earth Sciences and Humanities and Creative Arts (ARC 2009i). Each REC "comprise distinguished researchers with expertise in research evaluation" (ARC 2009i). Despite there being 17 members in the Physical, Chemical and Earth Sciences REC and 22 members in the Humanities and Creative Arts REC, there are no Australian Indigenous members in either REC (ARC 2009i).

Trial ERA

In late 2009, the ERA released the journal lists for the Physical, Chemical and Earth Sciences (PCE) and the Humanities and Creative Arts (HCA) trial (ARC 2009d). The journal lists for the other six ARC clusters have not yet been released. Using the same approach I used with the draft list, I identified no Australian Indigenous Studies journals on the PCE list and just six Australian Indigenous Studies journals on the HCA list (ARC 2009d). Further, these six journals were located across only three four-digit FoR codes. Notwithstanding that there are a number of Australian Indigenous Studies journals that were not included in this HCA list due to their FoR codes not being associated with the HCA cluster, there are still some Australian Indigenous Studies journals, such as the *Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues*, that do relate to the HCA cluster, that are also not included on this HCA list. It is interesting to compare the two ERA lists. The HCA list contains three Australian Indigenous Studies journals that were not on the original draft list. Of the other three journals on the HCA list, two retained the same ranking they were allocated on the draft list while the third journal had their ranking increased from C to B.

Table Three: Australian Indigenous Studies journals listed in the Trial Humanities and Creative Arts (HCA) list

Journal	Rank	FoR
Aboriginal History	A	2103 (Historical Studies)
Australian Aboriginal Studies	B	2101 (Archaeology) 2103 (Historical Studies);
Australian Indigenous Law Review	B	1801 (Law)
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit Research Report Series	B	2101 (Archaeology)
Indigenous Law Bulletin	C	1801 (Law)
Indigenous Law Journal	B	1801 (Law)

Conclusion

Although the ERA is still in its development stage, a number of commentators have expressed concerns regarding the ERA framework (see Genoni and Haddow 2009; Graham 2008; Ozolins 2008; Peters 2008; Redden 2008; Sharpe 2008; Watson 2008). These concerns include: the privileging of high-profile journals with four-digit FoR codes over specialised journals with six-digit FoR codes; the emphasis on international measurements and the consequent devaluing of local, regional, place-specific journals; the subjective content of the description of tiers; the lack of transparency in the ERA process; and the use of metric indicators (even if this is not the main approach) which is problematic for social sciences.

In addition to these concerns, the discipline of Australian Indigenous Studies and Australian Indigenous Studies journals are significantly impacted by the ERA framework in two interrelated and negative ways. First, the situating of Australian Indigenous Studies into a number of separate six-digit FoR codes rather than into broader four-digit or two-digit FoR codes substantially contributes to Australian Indigenous Studies being categorised as a range of specialised research areas rather than as a broad discipline of study. Second, the significant lack of consultation with Australian Indigenous academics, organisations and peak bodies at nearly every stage of the ERA process has contributed to the ERA being developed with little, if any, understanding of Australian Indigenous Studies. These concerns need to be addressed in order for the ERA framework to be more genuinely reflective of the discipline of Australian Indigenous Studies.

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Appendix One: Two digit FoR codes

Division 01 Mathematical Sciences
 Division 02 Physical Sciences
 Division 03 Chemical Sciences
 Division 04 Earth Sciences
 Division 05 Environmental Sciences
 Division 06 Biological Sciences
 Division 07 Agricultural and Veterinary Sciences
 Division 08 Information and Computing Sciences
 Division 09 Engineering
 Division 10 Technology
 Division 11 Medical and Health Sciences
 Division 12 Built Environment and Design
 Division 13 Education
 Division 14 Economics
 Division 15 Commerce, Management, Tourism and Services
 Division 16 Studies in Human Society
 Division 17 Psychological and Cognitive Sciences
 Division 18 Law and Legal Studies

Division 19 Studies in Creative Arts and Writing
Division 20 Language, Communication and Culture
Division 21 History and Archaeology
Division 22 Philosophy and Religious Studies

Appendix Two: Indigenous six-digit FoR codes

210101 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Archaeology
200201 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Studies
130301 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education
050201 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Environmental Knowledge
111701 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health
210301 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander History
080601 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Information and Knowledge Systems
080701 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledge Management
200319 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages
180101 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Law
200501 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Literature
190401 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Performing Arts
160501 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy
169902 Studies of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Society
110403 Traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Medicine and Treatments

Appendix Three: Organisations consulted in October 2007

Academy for Technological Sciences and Engineering
Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia
Asian Studies Association of Australia
AusStage
Australia New Zealand Society of Criminology
Australian Academy of Science
Australian Academy of the Humanities
Australian Association for Research in Education
Australian Association for the Advancement of Pacific Studies
Australian Council of Heads of School of Social Work
Australian Council of Professors and Heads of Information Systems
Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools
Australian Journalism Education Association
Australian Library and Information Association
Australian Network of Academic Public Health Institutions
Australian Psychological Society
Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association
Australian Society for the Study of Labour History
Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association
Business Academic Research Directors Network
Computing Research and Education Association
Council for Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences

Council of Deans of Nursing and Midwifery
Deans of the Built Environment
Industrial Relations Researchers of Australia and New Zealand
Sports Medicine Australia
The Economic Society of Australia