ERA Opening Speech – Colin Steele

I’d like to briefly highlight the issues which will be explored in more depth by the speakers and the thoughts that led to this seminar. I’m grateful to the Emeritus Faculty for providing the framework for today’s discussions.

John Molony, in correspondence with the new Vice Chancellor of ANU, Professor Ian Young, received a comment from him last week, “the ERA process will be critical to the whole sector and particularly to a university as research intensive as the ANU”.

The issues underpinning ERA are ones which need national attention but often get compartmentalised within individual universities and subject disciplines. The National Academies Forum last September, which included the four learned Academies, CHASS, FASTS, The Australian Publishers Association and other interested bodies, was one attempt to address the issues in a holistic sense, - under the title, “Excellence in Research Evaluation. Impacts on scholarship, research funding and publication”.

Unfortunately, several of the leading figures, such as Presidents of the Academies, then changed and the momentum for coordinated action from the renamed NAF – now the Council of Learned Academies – has stalled somewhat.

Now, more than ever, however, given the large amount of data submitted for evaluation by the ARC panels, we need to maintain a collective overview of both short and long term consequences for the nations scholarship, research output and the effective distribution of knowledge.

In context, I understand that there were 333,119 total outputs, of which 206,816 were journal articles and 13,000 creative works. With Only 149 REC members, some task ahead here, and therefore quantitative measures will figure in the ARC dashboard. Outcomes are apparently due early 2011.

Issues such as changes in scholarly communication patterns, fundamental to the academic enterprise, often get overlooked by universities in 24 x 7 environments but research evaluation exercises of which university league tables are one manifestation have short and long term knock on effects in the above context which permeate the whole of the academic endeavour.
There is no time to go into the whole issue of University League Tables, but global rankings expert Richard Holmes recently highlighted on major anomalies in the recent THES university rankings, analysing in detail that the problem “lay with one indicator, citations, which accounted for 32.5% of the total weightings”, thus taking issue with the methodology adopted by Thomson Reuters.

Professor Malcolm Grant, President of UCL, incidentally ranked between 4 and 81 in five major global rankings, says that research citations aren’t “easy territory” and that while “global rankings have afforded annual light entertainment, they are now seriously over-reaching themselves. They do a disservice if they influence student choice or come to be treated as a performance measure” by leaders and Governments.

Why research evaluation in the first place? Clearly in the contemporary environment, evaluation of research excellence, particularly by Governments, is an increasing factor and not an unreasonable issue to address. David Sweeney, Director Research, Innovation and Skills, HEFCE, speaking at the NAF Forum said that the process should however ensure that quality assessments that “are comprehensible, produced by a transparent process, and benchmarked against international standards and which identify the very best HE research, wherever this is carried out”.

He further suggested that Research Assessment Exercises, such as ERA, must deliver or address objectives such as:
- Does it unite society and the academy?
- Does it discourage successful outcomes?
- Does it reward games-playing?
- Does it deliver change while respecting, even reinforcing, academic freedom?
- Does it encourage a unified academy?”

In relation to some of Sweeney’s questions, one would have to say that it doesn’t encourage a unified Academy and certainly game playing follows the money trail, not just by universities, but also by the major publishers themselves on behalf of their product and their profit margins. In Britain, the RAE process has been a significant factor in shaping researcher and institutional behaviour, as evidenced by the major academic user study undertaken by Professor Dick Hartley, in the UK in 2009.
The crucial issue is to ensure that ERA rewards research excellence and in a manner that reflects expert peer review and is not simply reliant on quantitative indicators such as bibliometrics and journal rankings. As mentioned in the NAF Communiqué, “some participants already had doubts about the accuracy and impact of bibliometrics, which were seen to provide quite crude data of limited value. Reports from those involved in the recent UK assessment exercise served to intensify such doubts”. There are many ways that citations can be manipulated both consciously and unconsciously not least by publishers.

A recent analysis from the Royal Society of Medicine Journal involved a study in which the number of citations was positively correlated with the length of the title, the presence of a colon in the title and the presence of an acronym. “The data suggests that the construction of an article title has a significant impact on frequently the paper is cited. We hypothesize that this may be related to the way electronic searches of the literature are undertaken”.

Subsequently There has been a BMJ study showing that more medical journal papers now have colons in them – so citation manipulation is more than a gut feeling! The authors conclude “Perhaps this represents further evidence of the British obsession with matters intestinal, a variant of inflammatory vowel disease. With respect to the printed page, though, we must challenge this colonic surge and ask whether it is time for a washout”.

We need some washouts in the global academic publishing world – if it was to be reinvented in the digital era, would its structure and economics be the same? One doubts it. But the academic world of evaluation and publishing is very conservative. The research undertaken by Professor John Houghton, starting in Australia but not extended to Europe and America, at least provides a methodological framework for discussing the system and the economic benefits returning to the universities who largely give away free their research to the STM multinational publishers. The need for improved access to knowledge funded largely by taxpayers underpins a major conference by Universities Australia at Parliament House on October 28.

It’s surprising that there has almost been more media comment in the British THES on ERA than here in Australia, although the Australian is evidencing a renewed interest in the topic. Paul Jump, writing about ERA, in the THES on September 30, quotes Lyn Yates, the Pro Vice Chancellor of Research at Melbourne that “a hierarchy of journals makes
little sense in many non-scientific fields”. Graeme Turner of the University of Queensland agreed with Lyn Yates that the real battles will be between University Departments over how much of the funding for particular disciplines should come to them.

Margaret Sheil, the CEO of the ARC, is quoted in a recent Campus Review as saying that the journals ranking list for the purposes of ERA was “on the margins” and it is only one component of one element of rewarding research and research quality, but I fear as do many others, that the consequences of the journals ranking, which have already been the subject of massive disciplinary debate, will have a profound effect beyond ERA.

Andrew Calder from the ARC will provide an overview of where the ARC is at. John Wellard will overview the ANU experience, while Professor Andrew Cockburn, who has had a long interest in citation analysis, will provide another ANU perspective.

Dr Danny Kingsley will look at possible wider framework required if we are to use metrics. Margaret Sheil speaking at the ARMS conference in Fremantle recently, apparently said that “applied measures is "an area where we want to do further work in the future".

Dr Claire Donovan, sadly to leave ANU next week to take up a Readership at Brunel University, will remind us that perhaps research impact, in the wider sense, needs to be re-examined in Australia in the process of research evaluation.

Where do we go from here? We welcome your input. One would hope that there would be a major research evaluation covering some of the issues today, of the impact of ERA on Australian universities and scholarship. Can ARC evaluate ERA with a neutral eye? We have no semi–independent bodies like the UK JISC or RIN, since the break up of DEST, that have the brief and funding to carry out such evaluative methodological studies.

Questions that could/should be addressed include:

How is ERA likely to affect the behaviour of Australian researchers and publishers;

What financial rewards and difficulties for Australian universities will ensue, and on what basis;
To conclude, I can echo Professor Lesley Johnson comments after the NAF seminar about having “a robust and thoughtful ongoing discussion in Australia about how best to shape an outstanding national research culture as well as how to measure this”. Hopefully today’s seminar will contribute to that debate

Thank you.